

Defending the Indefensible: Morris, Tennyson and Arthur's Adulterous Queen

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ABSTRACT: This article looks at William Morris's early poem 'The Defence of Guenevere', highlighting Morris's sympathetic approach to Guenevere's illicit love, and comparing it with Tennyson's more conventional treatment of the queen's adultery, written in the same year, 1857. At a time when British society was sharply focused on female immorality, Tennyson upheld social norms and expectations, while Morris radically undermined the tropes on which the idea of the immoral woman depended. Rather than arguing for her innocence or guilt, Morris asks us to make a paradigm shift in thinking about morality. He disregards the relevance of fidelity or duty to Arthur, focusing instead on Guenevere's 'faithfulness' to her true self and to love.

KEYWORDS: William Morris; Alfred Lord Tennyson; 'Idylls of the King'; 'The Defence of Guenevere'; Victorian Poetry; Gender Relations



IN 1857 WILLIAM Morris, then aged 23, was compiling a book of his own poems based on Arthurian themes. He had been writing poetry prolifically for several years. Morris had studied at Oxford to take holy orders but, together with close friend Edward Burne-Jones, had abandoned religion and belief, and vowed to pursue Art. Burne-Jones told a cousin in 1855 that the study of French and German philosophy had 'shivered' (shattered) Morris's belief in religion and palsied his own, although both men continued to use medieval and Christian iconography in their work.¹ Morris had acquired the Southey edition of the Arthurian tales of Malory in 1855.² The title of Morris's collection of poems, published in 1858, was taken from the opening poem

¹ Nicholas Salmon, with Derek Baker, *The William Morris Chronology* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1990), p. 14.

² Salmon, p. 13.

'The Defence of Guenevere'. 'In Malory's tale, Guenevere, Arthur's Queen, has been caught in adultery with Launcelot and sentenced to death. Morris's version, a long, dramatic monologue, presents Guenevere responding to the accusations levelled against her by her captors.

Unbeknownst to each other, as Morris worked on his Arthurian poems, Tennyson was also writing about the same fashionable tale and adulterous queen as part of his sequence *The Idylls of the King*.³ As Mark Girouard has shown, the mythic setting adopted by these poets was popular at this time and reflected current ideals. Knightly codes of honour and quests offered a model for masculine behaviour while upholding religious and social conventions and the class system, and themes of romantic love in conflict with moral and social codes could be well understood by the contemporary population.⁴ Both Morris and Tennyson addressed the subject of the immoral woman. This article compares each author's shaping of the tale of Arthur's queen to show that Morris uniquely challenged the arguments that categorised Guenevere as immoral, and the concept of immorality itself, while Tennyson's treatment of the subject promoted the current ideology regarding the adulterous woman.

Because of its novel style, and as an example of Morris's juvenilia there have been many studies of Morris's title poem. These have analysed feminist aspects of Guenevere's situation, and the way her words elicit sympathy and evidence a critique of medieval and masculine violence. Virginia Hale and Catherine Barnes Stevenson's 'Morris' Medieval Queen: a Paradox Resolved' maintains that Morris's familiarity with Malory's version of the tale meant that his Guenevere, as a queen and an autonomous woman of the court, has no need to defend her courtly love of Launcelot.⁵ Ingrid Hanson sees Guenevere's monologue in terms of a battle, in which she uses her 'voice and her body as weapons of offence', buying time while awaiting Launcelot's rescue, but also attacking the moral and political order of her captors.⁶ Several studies also

³ Morris spells the queen's name with an e: Guenevere, while Tennyson spells it with an i: Guinevere.

⁴ Mark Girouard, *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), pp. 112-128.

⁵ Virginia S. Hale and Catherine Barnes Stevenson, 'Morris' Medieval Queen: A Paradox Resolved', *Victorian Poetry*, 30.2 (1992), 171-178.

⁶ Ingrid Hanson, *William Morris and the Uses of Violence: 1856-1890* (London: Anthem Press, 2014), p. 36.

compare this poem with Tennyson's, mentioning the variation in style, with Tennyson's 'modern' and Morris's 'medieval'.⁷

The key question of the success or failure of Guenevere's defence is much debated.⁸ Florence Boos outlines the principle question on which critics have focused their attention: 'Does the poem provide a coherent intellectual, moral or artistic 'defence' of Guenevere? Or is her monologue simply a painterly flourish of deviously emotional self-revelation?'⁹ The response would generally seem to be that the poem does not provide an adequate defence, with Boos suggesting that Morris either sidesteps or deliberately ignores the question of immorality, and others such as Hale and Barnes Stevenson leaving Guenevere's technical innocence a possibility. Guenevere can also be seen as a conventional Victorian female, trapped in her role as 'idealised male projection', or helpless victim waiting for rescue.¹⁰ In both 'Justice and Vindication' and 'Sexual Polarities in the Defence of Guenevere', Boos notes the poem's erotic intensity and its rare Victorian suspension of judgement about female sexual conduct. She argues that the Guenevere poem does provide a defence of 'female passion and sexuality', a vindication of 'a limited but admirable female psyche' struggling against the social constraints and emotional suffocation, and 'a heroine's right of self-determination'.¹¹

These studies all start with the question or paradox of the title: a 'defence'. But do these things – validating a woman's rights of self-determination against the patriarchy, using combative language, or having elevated station or autonomy – really constitute a 'defence' for her adultery? While Morris argues for all these rights and freedoms for Guenevere, and praises her beauty and agency, he also engages with the

⁷ For example, Laura Struve, 'The Public life and Private Desires of Women in William Morris's "Defence of Guenevere"', *Arthuriana*, 6.3 (1996), 15-29; and Clare Broome Saunders, *Women Writers and Nineteenth-Century Medievalism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

⁸ See for example recent articles on the subject by Florence Boos, Claire Bloom Saunders, Hale and Barnes-Stevenson, Laura Struve, and Michael Patrick McGrath.

⁹ Florence Boos, 'Justice and Vindication in William Morris's "The Defence of Guenevere"', in *King Arthur Through the Ages*, II, ed. by Valerie M. Lagorio and Mildred Leake Day (New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1990), pp. 84-106 (p. 84).

¹⁰ Florence Boos, 'Sexual Polarities in The Defence of Guenevere', *Browning Institute Studies*, 13 (1985) 181-200 (p. 182).

¹¹ Boos, 'Justice and Vindication', p. 102.

supposedly shameful concept of adultery at a time when it was seen as both a serious moral issue and a threat to society. Furthermore, Morris realised that the question of adultery would be central to the reception of the poem. As Clare Broome Saunders has pointed out: 'Morris... allows [Guenevere] to focus on her roles as queen and lover, while being aware that contemporary society would judge her only as an adulteress'.¹² If Guenevere's innocence cannot be proven by her words, actions, or beauty, wherein lies the 'defence' promised by the title? One way to read the poem that would answer this question is to interpret it as a 'defence' of the very act of adultery. This article contends that Morris asks us to make a paradigm shift in thinking about morality. By vividly depicting the truth of Guenevere's inner life, I argue, he aims to undermine the set of 'man-made' ideas that categorised women as 'immoral'.

At this time Morris and Tennyson, among other artists and writers, were focusing on morality for a specific reason. Society's concern with the sexual behaviour of women had been simmering for decades and, according to Lynda Nead, had reached a peak of intensity.¹³ In 1860, the *Saturday Review* noted that,

[W]e seem to have arrived at this point – that the most interesting class of womanhood is woman at her lowest degradation [...] and painters, preachers, and sentimentalists have kept the excitement at fever pitch.¹⁴

In July of the year these poems were written, there was an ongoing debate about sexual equality in the House of Commons.¹⁵ Contagious diseases legislation, a law against pornography, and divorce laws grew out of a society that believed itself under moral siege.¹⁶ The behaviour and proclivities of women from all classes were discussed and

¹² Saunders, p. 146.

¹³ Lynda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), p. 211.

¹⁴ 'The Literature of the Social Evil', *Saturday Review*, 6 October 1860, pp. 417-418 (p. 417).

¹⁵ Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (London: Virago Press, 1989), p. 60.

¹⁶ The *Contagious Diseases Acts* were first passed in England in 1864, after a committee had been appointed to investigate the incidence of venereal disease in 1862. See Paula Bartley, *Prostitution: Prevention & Reform in England, 1860–1914* (London: Routledge, 2000). Divorce law reform occurred from 1857 under the *Matrimonial Causes Acts*.

scrutinised. Posing a threat to society and to a woman's immediate family, middle-class female adultery was deemed particularly heinous; as one social commentator put it:

Let the "Social Evil" be made a *punishable* offence, whether it be in its rather less sinful, or its more aggravated, form of "Adultery:" the *latter* being forbidden by God's Holy Commandments as much as murder, theft, or any other offence which our laws admit to be criminal, and the *former* by His holy Word.¹⁷

Despite Christian belief in chastity and marital fidelity, and, importantly, notions of sin and damnation, it was widely accepted that, as men had strong desires, moral failures were inevitable, if regrettable, and often such failures were attributed to women.¹⁸ In 1857, Dr William Acton wrote that '[w]hat men are habitually women are exceptionally'.¹⁹ Victorian society expected that the majority of women would, by their nature conform to an ideal of purity and devotion, while no such ideal existed for men. Prostitutes (as working women) and adulteresses (who strayed outside their domestic realm) were therefore regarded as abnormal or deviant.²⁰

Less judgemental about illicit love in his earlier Arthurian poetry, Tennyson decided to adjust his treatment of Guinevere to better suit the contemporary debate. In the words of Elliott Gilbert:

[He] came to feel that only some contemporary significance in the Arthurian retellings, only some 'modern touches here and there' [...] could redeem his poetry 'from the charge of nothingness', from Thomas Carlyle's characterization of it as 'a refuge from life [...] a medieval arras' behind which the poet was hiding 'from the horrors of the industrial revolution'.²¹

¹⁷ Publicus Mentor (pseud.) *The "Social Evil"! Is there no Remedy?* (London: W.H. Guest, 1876), p. 4.

¹⁸ Martha Vicinus, ed., *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*, (London: Methuen, 1980), p. 163.

¹⁹ William Acton, *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs in Childhood, Youth, Adult Age, and Advanced Life*, 4th edn (Philadelphia: Lindsay and Blakiston, 1875 (1857)), pp. 162-3.

²⁰ Poovey, p. 14.

²¹ Elliott Gilbert, 'The Female King, Tennyson's Arthurian Apocalypse', *PMLA*, 98.5 (1983), 863-878 (p. 863).

As Morris had, Tennyson focused on human sexuality and female passion. The four idylls published in 1859 – ‘Vivien’, ‘Guinevere’, ‘Enid’ and ‘Elaine’ – were collected under the general title *The True and the False*, and focus on ‘[t]he polar extremes of feminine purity and carnality’.²² Tennyson’s emphasis is on the corrosiveness of female sexuality; mirroring current discourse about social collapse, he places the blame for the decay of the Round Table and the fall of Camelot on Queen Guinevere’s infidelity. The description of her fall is very much in tune with contemporary thought. As a Victorian woman, she is exposed and degraded through a somewhat theatrical exhibition of shame, submission, guilt, self-accusation, physical corruption, suicidal ideation and physical contamination. First Tennyson outlines the ideal woman and her attributes:

I knew
 Of no more subtle master under heaven
 Than is the maiden passion for a maid,
 Not only to keep down the base in man,
 But teach high thought, and amiable words
 And courtliness, and the desire of fame,
 And love of truth, and all that makes a man.²³ (474-479)

A failure of duty or purity on the part of women threatened not just her home and family, but society at large. Guinevere must accept blame for her failure of virtue, even taking on Lancelot’s share of responsibility: “Mine is the shame, for I was wife, and thou (I) Unwedded”. Guinevere confesses publicly - “Weep for her that drew him to his doom” - and in the face of Arthur’s forgiveness, but still ‘cast out’, renounces her affair, vowing to love Arthur until death. In renderings of the immoral woman, the adulteress or prostitute invariably expresses shame and self-loathing, apparently only realising these feelings when in the presence of a powerful man or husband.

A common view in this period, expressed by Acton, William Greg and others, was that ‘normal’ women were ‘not very much troubled (happily for them) with sexual

²² Gilbert, p. 864.

²³ Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, edited by J.M. Gray (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 356. Further references to the poem are from this edition and will be given by line number only.

feeling of any kind' and so were unlikely to stray.²⁴ William Acton opined that in the 'deviant', sexually aware woman, 'the sin of unfaithfulness is often inherited, as well as many other family diseases'.²⁵ Female children of an adulteress were considered tainted with the same sinful proclivities. Like prostitutes, their 'unnatural' sexual desire linked them with disease or even insanity.²⁶ Tennyson's Arthur outlines the course of action to deal with such a wife. The husband must drive the source of corruption from his home, or the sin will transfer, and *he* will become a public foe:

I hold that man the worst of public foes
 Who either for his own or children's sake,
 To save his blood from scandal, lets the wife
 Whom he knows false, abide and rule the house (512-516)

Tennyson likens Guenevere's sin to the visitation of disease, spreading from the queen to contaminate society:

An awful dream; for then she seemed to stand
 On some vast plain before a setting sun,
 And from the sun there swiftly made at her
 A ghastly something, and its shadow flew
 Before it, till it touched her, and she turned—
 When lo! her own, that broadening from her feet,
 And blackening, swallowed all the land, and in it
 Far cities burnt (76-83)

and

Like a new disease, unknown to men,
 Creeps, no precaution used, among the crowd,
 Makes wicked lightnings of her eyes and saps
 The fealty of our friends, and stirs the pulse

²⁴ Acton, p. 162. William Rathbone Greg was a Liberal manufacturer, and author of 'Why are Women Redundant?' *The National Review*, April 1862, pp. 434–60.

²⁵ Acton, p. 131.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 162-3.

With devil's leaps, and poisons half the young (518-522)

In Tennyson's version of the legend there is no mention of the death sentence because he concentrates on Guenevere's sin. Victorian society did not execute such women, it 'cast them out'. Augustus Egg's *Past and Present* academy triptych, painted the same year as the *Defence*, show the descent of the middle-class adulteress from her comfortable and secure home to life as a destitute mother clutching an illegitimate baby, and seeking shelter under the arches of a London bridge – now in ragged clothing, she lives a squalid existence, cut off from her two daughters and on the verge of suicide.²⁷ Under the same moon as their mother, the orphaned and downcast adult daughters are depicted living in 'reduced circumstances', now probably unmarriageable due to their mother's 'fall', and the idea of inherited 'disease'.²⁸

Like Tennyson, Morris employs the attributes of adultery exposed: shame, blame, unnatural desire, physical corruption, and self-disgust, but he subverts, or inverts them to undermine the concept of the deviant woman. Guenevere has been discovered with Launcelot in her room by a troop of disgruntled knights, who have long suspected their true relationship, and now at last they 'have' her. She faces the full weight of the medieval power structure, represented physically by a group of sword-wielding, vengeful knights, for not only has she flaunted Christian morality, but as the king's wife, she has committed treason. Though written in 1857, the opening lines sound surprisingly immediate and timeless:

But, knowing now that they would have her speak,
She threw her wet hair backward from her brow,
Her hand close to her mouth touching her cheek,

As though she had had there a shameful blow,
And feeling it shameful to feel aught but shame
All through her heart, yet felt her cheek burned so,

²⁷ Augustus Leopold Egg, *Past and Present* (1-3), 1858, oil paint on canvas, Tate Britain, London.

²⁸ Nead, p. 74.

She must a little touch it:²⁹ (1-7)

Modern critics engaged with Victorian tropes of shame and dishonour have read this first reference to 'shame' as Guinevere's acceptance of her shame in the eyes of her captors and the world, the starting point of her 'defence'.³⁰ However, a close look at Morris's first use of the word shows that it is not *Guenevere* who is shamed. Instead, the narrator's reference is to a shameful blow, the shame assigned by Morris to the violent individual who would strike her. At the outset, while raising the question of 'shame' so central to the Victorian's idea of the fallen woman, Morris transposes the shame from the woman to her male captors, the representatives of the power structures that have put her at their mercy. Morris is also hinting at the kind of physical treatment possibly meted out to such Victorian wives, rather than the pious pity of Tennyson's Arthur.

Morris establishes early in the poem that Guenevere *does not* demonstrate this expected shame. In fact, she feels it is somewhat shameful that she actually feels *no* shame for what she has done. She 'feels aught but shame all through her heart', as is evident by what she says next:

"God wot I *ought* to say, I have done ill,
And pray you all forgiveness heartily!
Because you *must* be right, being great lords – still (15-17)

Guenevere uses the word 'great' to emphasise domination rather than goodness – 'Arthur's great name', 'great lords' and the 'great god's angel' contrasting the power of Church and State with her own lack of it. She says they 'must be right' because they are great, but unlike Tennyson's queen she does not feel or see it. By contrast, Guenevere unquestioningly accepts male authority and her own abasement:

²⁹ William Morris, *Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. by May Morris, 24 vols, (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1910-1915), I (1910), 1. Further references to the poem are from this edition, and will be given by line number only.

³⁰ For example, Laura Struve, 'The Public Life and Private Desires of Women in William Morris's 'Defence of Guenevere'', *Arthuriana*, 6.3 (1996), 14-30; and Carole Silver, 'In Defence of Guenevere', in *Arthurian Women: A Casebook*, ed. by Thelma S. Fenster (New York: Garland, 1996), pp. 229-244.

My own true lord! how dare I call him mine?
The shadow of another cleaves to me,
And makes me one pollution: he, the King,
Called me polluted: shall I kill myself?
What help in that? I cannot kill my sin,
If soul be soul; nor can I kill my shame; (617-622)

Instead of appealing to Arthur or accepting the judgement of her captors as Guinevere does, Morris's queen simply tells the history of her passionate love as if that in itself is a defence. In renditions of fallen women, shame and self-disgust often resulted in suicidal thought. Tennyson's Guinevere, speaking of sin and shame, asks 'Shall I kill myself?'. Morris too raises the question of dying, but not as part of a confession of sin and shame, but from a sense of the hopelessness of this love under the circumstances: '[...] moan, (I) And roll and hurt myself, and long to die'. The concept of female suicide as motivated by moral shame, rather than other factors such as poverty, was romanticized in art and poetry. Nicoletti writes that,

Until the "black ocean" of prostitution was purified through hygiene and regulation, the nation symbolically cleansed itself of polluted and polluting urban women through their visualized —and ironically beatific — drownings.³¹

Highlighting that her marriage was not for love, Guenevere recalls how, before meeting her future husband, she wondered what her life would be like in an 'arranged' marriage:

[...] ere I was bought :
By Arthur's great name and his little love,
Must I give up forever then, I thought,

That which I deemed would ever round me move,
Glorifying all things; for a little word,

³¹ L.J. Nicoletti, 'Downward Mobility: Victorian Women, Suicide, and London's Bridge of Sighs', *Literary London: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Representation of London*, 2.1 (2004), par. 5.

Scarce ever meant at all, must I now prove

“Stone cold forever? [...] (84-90)

Commonplace in the medieval period, there were also many Victorian marriages of convenience, usually with age disparities such as is implied in the marriage of Guenevere and Arthur. Victorian women’s lack of economic autonomy meant that many women without independent means were compelled to marry, and it was accepted that love matches were a luxury many could not afford. In a fragment of a novel on contemporary life Morris began in 1872, he describes the plight of a young woman, Eleanor, abandoned by her lover who has decided to marry elsewhere for money. Eleanor becomes homeless and desperate, but eventually is able to find a home with her godfather, who ‘in spite of all’ has asked her to live with him, because ‘[he] knows and cares so little for the ways of society that [...] he looks upon marriage as quite as shocking as anything else’.³² One contemporary definition of a prostitute by Acton was: a woman ‘who gives for money that which she ought to give only for love’.³³ The logical conclusion of Acton’s claim is that if some women married for money, Eleanor’s godfather was right – marriage and prostitution are equally ‘shocking’. In 1886, during his socialist years, Morris called marriage a ‘system of venal prostitution’.³⁴

Morris has Guenevere vividly identify her growing desire for Launcelot with the changing seasons and the beauty of nature, suggesting that her passion is a blameless aspect of the natural world:

“And in the summer I grew white with flame,
And bowed my head down – Autumn, and the sick
Sure knowledge things would never be the same,

³² William Morris, *The Novel on Blue Paper*, ed. Penelope Fitzgerald (London: The Journeyman Press, 1982), p. 11.

³³ William Acton, *Prostitution, Considered in its Moral, Social, and Sanitary Aspects*, 2nd edn (London: John Churchill and Sons, 1870), p. 166.

³⁴ William Morris, *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, ed. by Norman Kelvin, 4 vols (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984-1996), II (1988) p. 584. Other Victorian radicals expressed similar views about marriage, for example, John Stuart Mill in 1869 and Eleanor Marx in 1886.

"However often Spring might be most thick
Of blossoms and buds, smote on me, and I grew
Careless of most things, let the clock tick, tick,

"To my unhappy pulse, that beat right through
My eager body; (72-79)

Her love and desire for Launcelot blend with the seasons, and this imagery is used to reject the man-made notion that such love and desire can be sinful. He made this thought clearer in later life: 'if we feel the least degradation in being amorous, or merry, or hungry, or sleepy, we are so far bad animals, and therefore miserable men'.³⁵ The 'unhappy pulse that beat[s] [...] through [Guenevere's] eager body' contrasts with Tennyson's description of the same pulse as 'Devil's leaps' or 'poison', implying an unnatural and evil origin. Through Guenevere, Morris expounds the radical view that he developed during his years at Oxford: that as love and sexual desire are natural, even sacred, they should therefore be beyond the control of society or individuals. In a passage redolent of sexual yearning and its fulfillment, Guenevere surely incriminates rather than 'defends' herself:

...as if one should

"Slip down some path worn smooth and even,
Down to a cool sea on a summer's day;
Yet still in slipping was there some small leaven

"Of stretched hands catching small stones by the way,
Until one surely reached the sea at last,
And felt strange new joy as the worn head lay

"Back, with the hair like sea-weed; yea all past
Sweat of the forehead, dryness of the lips,
Washed utterly out by the dear waves o'er-cast. (95-104)

³⁵ William Morris: 'The Society of the Future', quoted in E.P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, rev. edn (London: Merlin Press, 1976), p. 704.

Guenevere tells of a time leading up to only one illicit kiss, but these verses, with their evocation of an irresistible slipping-down, the ineffective 'catching at small stones', the anxious 'sweat of the forehead, dryness of the lips' finally quenched in union with the sea, with its 'dear waves o'ercast', form a potent metaphor for union and sexual release, while the 'path worn smooth' hints at the many who have passed that way before.

As has been noted, Morris's words about female desire here and elsewhere show that he did not subscribe to the idea that women had a different or lesser amount of amorous feeling, or that such feeling was deviant or evil. In his prose romances, and *News from Nowhere* (1891), as well as in his earlier work, his heroines' desires equal that of their men. In this he stood apart from religious and medical notions during this period, which linked strong desire in women with deviance and depravity, particularly in the case of the 'adulteress'.³⁶ Morris seems to have held opinions similar to Dr. George Drysdale. A vehement supporter of the women's movement, in 1855 he anonymously published a work defending contraception entitled *The Elements of Social Science; or Physical, Sexual and Natural Religion* in which he argued:

To have strong sexual passions is held to be rather a disgrace for a woman [...] this is a great error [...] In woman exactly as in man, strong sexual appetites are a very great virtue [...] If chastity must continue to be regarded as the highest female virtue; it is impossible to give any woman real liberty.³⁷

It is tempting to speculate whether Morris had read Drysdale's work, a reaction to current discussion on women and sexuality. It was published just at the time Morris was writing his Guenevere poems, where Morris has Guenevere argue against prevailing notions of purity and chastity: 'must I prove (I) Stone cold forever?'

While Tennyson promotes the idea that physical corruption follows from immoral love, Morris is at pains to show that Guenevere's physical presence is beautiful and vivacious, although she is an adulteress:

[...] say no rash word
Against me, being so beautiful; my eyes,

³⁶ Acton, p. 162; Nead, pp. 77-8.

³⁷ George R. Drysdale, *The Elements of Social Science; or Physical, Sexual and Natural Religion*, 4th edn (London.: E. Truelove, 1861 [1855]), p. 172.

Wept all away to grey, may bring some sword

“To drown you in your blood; see my breast rise

Like waves of purple sea, as here I stand;

And how my arms move in wonderful wise,

[...]

See through my long throat how the words go up

In ripples to my mouth: how in my hand

“The shadow lies like wine within the cup

Of marvellously colour’d gold;

[...] look you up,

“And wonder how the light is falling so

Within my moving tresses: will you dare,

When you have looked a little on my brow,

“To say this thing is vile? (415-427)

Unlike Tennyson’s queen, Guenevere is not polluted by illicit love. The movement of her arms and long hair, and the ‘waves of purple sea’ of her breast – give the impression of a distinctly erotic and radiant life force expressed through a female body. Morris’s Defence is not an appeal for leniency for the shameful immoral feelings or acts of the queen, instead he rejects the idea of immorality outright. Guenevere’s desire is natural, therefore, says Morris, it is not sinful and should not be unlawful. Morris would use the figure of a beautiful woman as both an example of, and an emissary for, freedom and liberation in love across his poetry and writing, through characters such as Mrs. Mason in his unfinished novel, Ellen in *News from Nowhere*; and the heroines of the prose romances.³⁸

Morris’s early interest in the illicit aspect of erotic love can be seen in several of his other poems and works from this time. In ‘Old Love’, a poem in ‘The Defence’

³⁸ Sue Mooney, ‘Self-Revelation in Morris’s Unfinished Novel’, *The Journal of the William Morris Society*, 10.2 (1993), 7-8.

volume, an ageing knight seems to recall a previous, adulterous relationship with his dead friend's wife:

Her eyes are shallower, as though
Some grey glass were behind; her brow
And cheeks the straining bones show through,
Are not so good for kissing now.

Her lips are drier now she is
A great duke's wife these many years,
They will not shudder with a kiss
As once they did, being moist with tears

Also her hands have lost that way
Of clinging that they used to have;
They look'd quite easy, as they lay
Upon the silken cushions brave.³⁹

A particular example of this interest is Morris's 1856 review of Robert Browning's book of poems entitled *Men and Women*, in *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, a journal written for and by the students of both universities, which Morris funded and edited. A great admirer of Browning, Morris was driven to write a review himself because of the poor reception of the work. He praised the love poetry in earnest terms, with an impassioned statement about his own views on love as central to life and art:

This and all the other [poems] seem to me but a supplement to the love-poems, even as it is in all art, in all life; love I mean of some sort; and that life or art where this is not the case, is but a wretched mistake after all [...]. And in these love-poems of Robert Browning there is one thing that struck me particularly; that is their intense, unmixed love; love for the sake of love [...] I cannot say it clearly, it cannot be said so but in verse; love for love's sake, the only true love, I must say. – Pray Christ some of us attain to it before we die.⁴⁰

³⁹ Morris, *Collected Works of William Morris*, p. 89.

⁴⁰ William Morris, 'Men and Women by Robert Browning. A Review', *Bibelot*, 4.3 (1898), p. 110.

Reviewing one poem entitled 'The Statue and the Bust' Morris went on to defend illicit love, as Browning had seemed to:

Unlawful love that was never acted, but thought only, thought through life; yet were the lovers none the less sinners, therefore; rather the more, in that they were cowards; for in thought they indulged their love freely, and no fear of God, no hate of wrong or love of right restrained them, but only a certain cowardly irresolution. So Robert Browning thinks.⁴¹

Such writing unsettled Morris's friend and fellow student William Fulford, who complained to a mutual friend: 'I did not like Topsy's review at all. You men at Oxford must not let your love of Morris carry you away to admire such of his writings as don't deserve admiration'.⁴² Morris's university friends were still Christian, and Fulford no doubt sensed the radical implications of Morris's 'religion' of love, where *failure* to surrender to true love is the sin. This ideal also appears in another early prose work of 1856, 'Gertha's Lovers', where Morris's hero says that 'the love of man and woman should go before everything, before 'all friendship, all *duty*, all *honour*'.⁴³

In her critical introduction to a 1981 edition of the Defence poems, Margaret Lourie examined the poems in depth, characterizing the works as romantic escapism, with which Morris is frequently associated:

[The Guenevere poems] refused to confront a single moral or intellectual question of their own age or any other. So far from displaying 'the powerful application of ideas to life' later recommended by Arnold, they display no ideas at all.⁴⁴

Lourie's conclusion relies upon a definition of 'moral question' as one that conforms to accepted social norms. But to approach Morris's poem assuming that the Defence will attempt to exonerate Guenevere of unfaithfulness, as many have, is to mistake Morris's

⁴¹ Morris, 'Browning's *Men and Woman*', p. 114.

⁴² Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), p. 100.

⁴³ William Morris, *Collected Works*, p. 189. My emphasis.

⁴⁴ Margaret Lourie, ed., *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems* (New York, Garland: 1981), p. 21.

Lourie's introduction is currently published on the *William Morris Archive* as a definitive discussion of the work.

aim. Morris upholds Guenevere's 'faithfulness' to her true self and love. He disregards the relevance of fidelity or duty to Arthur, which seems, by comparison, a false intellectual construct.

More so than modern readers perhaps, Victorians would have been primed to detect the radical views implied in Morris's poem, and that is probably why the *Defence* received a largely unsympathetic response – both stylistically and morally. As a *Saturday Review* critic observed in November 1858:

...he does not give us people and passions with which we can sympathise. [...] We never knew any knights or ladies of this class, but [...] though there was a great amount of kissing, both according to the chronicles and Mr. Morris, it appears that the kissers and the kissed had but little respect for the marriage service [...] if he would but consider that poetry is concerned about human passions and duties – with men of like moral nature with ourselves [...] he might win a great place [...] among his contemporaries.⁴⁵

This critic's important linking of *duties* with passions, and his implication that the morality of the *Defence* is nothing like the morals of those reading the poems, indicates his ready identification of the work as subversive.

Therefore, at a young age, and at the height of a debate on the subject, Morris publicly challenged the validity of a precept that was almost universally accepted in Britain and that punished women while excusing men; one that used the concept of sin and damnation to limit the possibility of passionate relationships. Morris would carry what Boos terms his 'reverence' for passion through life.⁴⁶ As made clear in later writings such as *The Pilgrims of Hope*, and *News from Nowhere*, Morris did not simply believe that freedom in love would always mean lasting happiness or fulfillment: 'as we exult in all the pleasure and exaltation of spirit which goes with these things, so we set ourselves to bear the sorrow which not un seldom goes with them also'.⁴⁷ However, Morris did

⁴⁵ Unsigned review in *Saturday Review*, [20 Nov. 1858], in *William Morris: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Peter Faulkner (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 46.

⁴⁶ Florence Boos, ed., *The Juvenilia of William Morris*, (New York: The William Morris Society, 1983), p. 8.

⁴⁷ Morris, 'News from Nowhere or, An Epoch of Unrest: Being Some Chapters from a Utopian Romance', *Collected Works*, XVI, p. 57.

believe that such sorrow was the price paid for 'true' love, or 'genuine unions of passion and affection'.⁴⁸

Morris and Tennyson, both couching their social comment within a popular antique setting, tackled the same themes of shame, desire, power, and women's role with very different aims. Morris's poem radically argues that desire is as natural a part of women's nature as it is men's, and for true relationships to exist, this desire should be unfettered. Upholding the status quo, Tennyson argued that such desire in women is unnatural, sinful and dangerous, an argument perhaps devalued by its entanglement with women's economic, social and political dependence upon men. The argument that desire was natural in men was used to justify male sexual transgressions; Morris uses the same argument to defend an adulteress, and by implication, all women. Morris's views on relations between the sexes before his marriage to Jane Burden would make sense of his evident tolerance of her later relationship with Dante Gabriel Rossetti. It is therefore thought-provoking to read a quote from one who only knew Morris in the 1880s: 'If I thought [Morris's] opinions on the relations of the sexes in old days were the same as he professes to hold now – why then, you might believe anything'.⁴⁹



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⁴⁸ William Morris, *Collected Letters*, II p. 584.

⁴⁹ Jack Lindsay, *William Morris: His Life and Work*, (London: Constable, 1975), p. 322.