

“The Deep Still Land of Colours”: Color Imagery in *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*

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FROM the beginning of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, bright and vivid color was a striking feature of the pictures produced by members of the Brotherhood. For example, artists such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Holman Hunt, by the use of a white wet-ground¹ for their paintings, went against the prevalent French technique, so deplored by Ruskin,² of toning colors with grey, and created instead brighter, more intense effects.³ Meanwhile, unlike their paintings, the poetry of the Pre-Raphaelites, while laden with exotic, sensuous details, can be better described as “studies in light and shade” than “works in colour.”⁴ Individual Pre-Raphaelite

¹ Timothy Hilton, *The PreRaphaelites* (1970; NY: Praeger, 1974), 56, has a clear discussion of Pre-Raphaelite technique; see also Richard D. Buck, “A Note on the Methods and Materials of the Pre-Raphaelite Painters,” in *Paintings and Drawings of the Pre-Raphaelites and their Circle* (Cambridge, MA: Fogg Museum of Art, Harvard University, 1946).

² John Ruskin, *Academy Notes, 1858*, in *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1904), 14: 178. There is no good modern study of Victorian color psychology or color theory, although there are many studies of the technique of individual artists. Alice Edwards Pratt gives a useful statistical and lexical survey of color references in English literature from Chaucer to Keats in *The Use of Color in the Verse of the English Romantic Poets* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1898), but much work remains to be done with color in the works of the Victorians and their predecessors from a critical point of view.

³ Any collection of color reproductions of Pre-Raphaelite paintings will illustrate this point. Perhaps the classic example of color functioning as an element of meaning is found in Rossetti’s *Ecce Ancilla Domini* (1849–50), in which the whiteness of the painting is relieved only by the blue drape behind the Virgin and the embroidered red stole in front of her.

⁴ John Ruskin, *Pre-Raphaelitism*, in *Works*, 12, 366.

poems contain vivid color imagery, but the use of color as a literary device is not characteristic of their work as a whole.

The most notable exception to this generalization is the early poetry of William Morris. Probably because of his famous remark about his art—"Well, if this is poetry, it is very easy to write"⁵—it has become traditional to pay little attention to his literary craftsmanship. Many critics have noticed in passing the vividness of Morris' imagery,⁶ but only a few have grasped the complexity which Morris created in his "deep still land of colours."⁷ A careful examination of *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems* (1858), in which Morris' use of color is most frequent and intricate, shows how carefully he employs color as a means of manipulating readers' emotional responses to the characters and situations in his poetry.

A perceptive artist like Morris is bound to have been aware of the importance of color, and his writings, early and late, reflect his attention to the subject. In an 1855 letter to Cornell Price, Morris expressed his disappointment with some reproductions of a Fra Angelico painting: "the loss of colour makes of course a most enormous difference, where the colour is so utterly lovely as in the original."⁸ His observations of other medieval art forms also reflect this interest: of stained glass he wrote, "Whatever key of colour may be chosen, the colour should always be bright, clear, and emphatic," and of thirteenth-century English manuscripts, "Nothing can exceed . . . the loveliness of the colour found at this period in the best-executed books."⁹

⁵ J. W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris* (1899; rpt. London: Longmans, Green, 1911), I, 52.

⁶ See, for example, the essays by William E. Fredeman and Dennis R. Balch in the special Morris double number of *Victorian Poetry*, 13, iii-iv (1975): xix-xxx and 61-70; and Jonathan F. S. Post, "Guenevere's Critical Performance," *Victorian Poetry* 17 (1979): 317-327.

⁷ See, for example, passing mention of the subject in Margaret A. Lourie, "The Embodiment of Dreams: William Morris' 'Blue Closet' Group," *Victorian Poetry* 15 (1977): 193-206; Wendell Stacy Johnson, "Style in Ruskin and Ruskin on Style," *Victorian Newsletter* 59 (Spring 1981): 1-6, esp. n. 6; Carole Silver, *The Romance of William Morris* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1982), xii, 13, 18, 21, 25, 33, etc.; and Robert Keane, "Rossetti and Morris: 'This Ever-Diverse Pair,'" in Carole Silver, ed., *The Golden Chain* (NY: The William Morris Society, 1982), 115-48.

⁸ Norman Kelvin, ed., *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, I (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 14. Morris' letters to his business associates are full of references to color; cf. especially his letters to Thomas Wardle and Catherine Holiday about the colors of dyes and tapestry materials.

⁹ May Morris, ed., *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1936), I, 359, 341.

There are several reasons why a young poet, living in the artistic community of Oxford in the mid 1850's, might become interested in color. First, Goethe's early and admittedly unsystematic speculations about color and Greek color terms had led, in England, to a lively philological debate over color terms in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. This culminated in William Gladstone's 1858 book, *Studies in Homer and the Homeric Age*, which asserted that Homer had been color-blind.¹⁰ In addition, Goethe's work had sparked a great deal of interest in France, especially in the artistic community. Works such as Frédéric Portal's *Des Couleurs Symboliques dans l'antiquité, le moyen âge et les temps modernes* (1837), and, in 1854, an English translation of Chevreul's *de la Loi du Contraste Simultané* (1839) became available, to the great interest of the English art world on whose fringes Morris resided.

Second, Oxford was also home to an interest in color on another front—the liturgical. The rise of the Tractarian Movement, in which Morris was interested,¹¹ had fostered research into church ceremonial and symbolism, and in particular into liturgical vestments. As a result, a great deal of research was done on the origins of the colors of vestments, particularly red, gold, green, and white, tracing the use of these colors through medieval manuscript citations and illustrations back to their biblical and patristic sources.¹² Finally, the great Victorian vogue for matters medieval had affected Morris ever since he was a boy,¹³ and Mackail tells us that the student Morris spent hours in the Bodleian Library while at Oxford poring over manuscripts, both insular and continental, and that he studied Middle English poetry closely.¹⁴ Here Morris could see instances of traditional, religious-based color symbolism employed by consummate artists such as Dante and Chaucer to give depth and texture to their

¹⁰ William E. Gladstone, *Studies in Homer and the Homeric Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1858), III, 457 ff.

¹¹ See Mackail, I, 38 ff. Raymond Chapman, *Faith and Revolt: Studies in the Literary Influence of the Oxford Movement* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1970), presents (Chapter 9 passim.) a thorough account of Morris' involvement with Tractarianism and the Broad Church Movement.

¹² Some forty years of liturgical controversy over color are summarized in E. C. G. F. Atchley, "On English Liturgical Colours," *Essays on Ceremonial, The Library of Liturgiology and Ecclesiology for English Readers*, 4 (1904), 89–176.

¹³ Mackail, I, Chapter 1 passim.

¹⁴ Mackail, I, 38–39, 61, 81.

poetry.¹⁵ An examination of the colors most frequently used by Morris in *The Defence* volume shows that, using them in an emblematic manner much like that of his favorite medieval authors, he employs their full range of connotation to elicit various emotional responses in his readers.

In *The Defence* volume, gold and red are the most frequently mentioned colors. The traditional interpretations of the color gold associate it with spiritual union and revelation, and this is the meaning given to it by Dante in *Paradiso* XVII [Beatrice's smile] and XXI-XXII [the golden ladder] and, in ironic fashion, by Chaucer in *The House of Fame* 529-30 [the golden eagle].¹⁶ Frédéric Portal in 1837 wrote of gold: "Les langues divines et sacrées désignaient par l'or et le jaune l'union de l'âme à Dieu, et par opposition l'adultère spirituel. Dans la langue profane, cet emblème matérialisé représente l'amour légitime et l'adultère charnel qui rompt les liens du mariage."¹⁷ In *The Defence*, Morris employs all of these possible meanings. Chiefly, gold represents an advanced spiritual state—if not redemption, then at least achieving a higher state of the soul. Thus, when the dying Ozana le Cure Hardy in "The Chapel in Lyonesse" lies within a golden screen, he is not only within the physical sanctuary of a church, which as Morris knew in medieval times was customarily surrounded by some sort of carved screen or parclose, but also within the embrace of spiritual union. For Ozana, "the sunlight slips . . . And night comes on apace" (ll. 10-12),¹⁸ and he sees "With inward eye . . . the sun / Fade off the pillars one by one," and his "heart faints when the day is done" (ll. 21-23) until Galahad revives him with the dew of a rose.

¹⁵ Keane (op. cit.) would have us believe (e.g. p. 128) that the symbolism in *The Defence* volume is largely a product of Rossetti's influence. While this is a possibility, Morris was certainly exposed to color symbolism elsewhere and used it in works written before his association with Rossetti had begun.

¹⁶ Citations from Dante are to *The Divine Comedy* in 3 vols., edited by Charles S. Singleton, Bollingen Series XXX (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970, 1973, 1975); citations from Chaucer are to F. N. Robinson, ed., *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1957). Hereafter references to Dante will be made by section, canto and line number in the text; references to Chaucer will be made by title and line number in the text.

¹⁷ Frédéric Portal, *Des Couleurs Symboliques dans l'Antiquité, le Moyen-Age et les Temps Modernes* (1837; Paris: Editions Niclaus, 1938), 56.

¹⁸ All citations from Morris' poetry will be taken from *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*, ed. Margaret A. Lourie (NY: Garland, 1981) and will be cited by title and line number in the text.

Then he is again bathed in golden light, signifying his elevation to higher spiritual status through Galahad's agency.

In the physical world of the poems, Morris focuses chiefly on the corruption of the golden state. In "King Arthur's Tomb," Launcelot recalls that he and Guenevere used to sit in the sunlight "among the flowers, till night" (l. 25) when their love was in its initial, most Platonic state; but once their relationship has been physically consummated, they fall from these spiritual heights. Their meetings move indoors "ere the sun grew high" into a "cool green room" (ll. 85–86) as their emotional stability lessens and their spiritual level sinks. (Morris was no doubt aware that yellow had, in medieval terms, associations with avarice and deceit; Chaucer's pardoner has hair "yellow as wax" [*General Prologue* 675] and Avarice in *Piers Plowman* wears a "tawny" tabard in the version of that poem available in Morris' day.)¹⁹

Guenevere reflects her fallen spiritual state in "King Arthur's Tomb" when she recalls that in church, where one would expect her to sense the presence of the divine, "Launcelot's red-golden hair would play, / Instead of sunlight, on the painted wall" (ll. 306–07). The visual image conjures up not only the memory of the beloved's appearance, but also the substitution of the earthly for the divine. We become aware of her fallen spiritual state by the suggested comparison of her to the painting of the repentant Mary Magdalen. Like Mary's, Guenevere's eyes are "dimmed . . . scorch'd and red at sight of hell," and there is "no gold light" on her hair (ll. 315–16). The queen's golden hair, once emblematic of her beauty (l. 137), is now veiled in colorless white; divinity is no longer seen in her.

Yet, although neither Guenevere nor Launcelot in their fallen states are able to perceive it, Morris ensures that we remain aware of the possibility of their return to the golden spiritual state. The characters see the world only in terms of dust and greyness, but we are told repeatedly in "King Arthur's Tomb" that the sun still shines on

¹⁹ The version of *Piers Plowman* available in Morris's time, edited by Thomas Wright and published in 1842, reads "tawny" for B V 195. Although this reading is supported by 9 manuscripts of the poem (George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson, eds., *Piers Plowman: The B Version* [London: Athlone, 1975]), it is actually a scribal variant of the heraldic color "tenné," orange brown (cp. *OED* 'tenné, tenny,' a., sb.). Whether Morris' knowledge of heraldry at this time would have allowed him to distinguish between the terms is not certain. I am indebted to Professor Kane for pointing out this distinction.

this world; it makes "the Glastonbury gilded towers shine" (l. 10) and night lets "the sun flame over all" (l. 105). To Guenevere Launcelot appears to be a "black-bended shield / Sinister-wise across the fair gold ground" (ll. 368–69), but Morris reminds us by the presence of the sun that in Malory's story, both Launcelot and Guenevere join religious communities and die in a state of grace.

In the Froissart poems, by contrast with the Arthurian ones, the color gold is almost entirely absent. This is consistent with the apparent absence of spiritual values and elevation there. Only in the conclusion of "Concerning Geoffray Teste Noire" does Morris give gold its usual emblematic spiritual meaning, when the gilded hair on the effigies of the long-dead lovers replaces their once-golden hair and armor. On the other hand, the so-called "fantasy" poems which constitute the rest of the volume are rich in gold imagery, mainly associated with something that inspires men to nobler action. Ladies with golden hair inspire the knightly heroes of "The Gilliflower of Gold," "The Little Tower," and "A Good Knight in Prison." Gold symbolizes the motivating love of the hero in "Two Red Roses Across The Moon"; it is used ironically in "The Eve of Crecy," where Margaret, who wears "Gold on her head, and gold on her feet, / And gold where the hems of her kirtle meet, / And a golden girdle," becomes the ideal for which the doomed and impecunious banneret will give his life (ll. 1–3).

In the two fantasy poems where gold appears most often, Morris plays the various meanings of gold against each other to elicit ambivalent responses from us. In "Rapunzel" the heroine's golden hair drives Sebald to free her from her tower and rejuvenate his kingdom, but we are not permitted to forget that it has also been fouled by witches' rites. The witch's final curse (ll. 339–41) indicates that Guendolen's golden beauty is more dangerous than it seems. In "Golden Wings," Jehane du Castel beau casts a spell by using gold wings and gold hair to make her lover come back and restore her to full participation in the romantic world of Ladies' Gard. When he does not come back, she kills herself in the golden light of dawn, hoping to be reunited with him in death; the perversion of the divine golden state causes the total destruction of this charmed world. In both poems, gold seems not only appropriate to but also fatal to those who want it, and in both poems the association of the color with witchcraft and sorcery suggests its devaluation as a symbol of spirituality.

Gold is the color which indicates the spiritual state; red indicates

the state of the heart. This follows the traditional interpretations of the color red, which associate it not only with love, fervor, holy zeal, and youth, but also with blood and martyrdom. Portal writes: "Le feu du sacrifice . . . est le symbole du feu céleste qui repose dans le coeur. . . . Ainsi le troisième attribut divin ou le Saint-Esprit, l'amour de Dieu, et le culte ont le même symbole, le feu, qui se traduit dans la langue des couleurs par le rouge."²⁰ Morris could have found many references to these symbolic meanings in his reading: young Hugh of Lincoln in Chaucer's *Prioress's Tale* 610 is "of martirdom the ruby bright;" and the martyrs Valerian and Cecile in the *Second Nun's Tale* 20ff. are given crowns of roses. Similarly, *caritas*, the virtue of love, is described in *Purgatorio* XXIX 122-23 as "l'una tanto rossa / ch'a pena fora dentro al foco nota," and the river of love in *Paradiso* XXX 66 gives off drops "quasi rubin che oro circunscrive."

Red, significantly, is the color Morris mentions most often in the four Arthurian poems. He uses many of its various shades and hues: not only red, but crimson, blood, rust, roan, scarlet, blush, and flame, to name a few. The color red is not in and of itself an unfavorable emblem, or necessarily the opposite of gold's spirituality. It is the color of love and lovers, whether earthly love like Guenevere's and Launcelot's, or divine, like that of Galahad for the deity in "Sir Galahad: A Christmas Mystery." Red can be the color of the physical "cheek of flame" ("Defence of Guenevere," l. 9); it can color the red robe of Launcelot "strange in the twilight with many unnamed colours" ("King Arthur's Tomb," ll. 46-47); or it can clothe God "With raiment half blood-red" and his angels in "white, without a stain, / And scarlet wings" ("Sir Galahad," ll. 88, 139-40). Appropriately, the angelic blazon adorning Galahad's surcoat is "white, with a red cross" ("Sir Galahad," stage direction after l. 152). This evokes not only the Cross of *Paradiso* XIV 66 ("ché con tanto lucore e tanto robbi") but also Spenser's Redcross Knight, reminding us that love can be holy as well as profane.

The redeeming power of love is also suggested in the red imagery in "The Chapel in Lyoness." Ozana, dying of love, cannot bleed, but lies under a "samite cloth of white and red" with a red rose across his face (ll. 7, 15-16). He is trapped between the mortal and divine worlds, paralyzed by fear of the profane nature of his love, and not until Galahad breaks the spell by placing "a faint wild rose" on his

²⁰ Portal, 73.

lips can Ozana see the divine nature of his love and die. It may also be significant that in the poem's last line Galahad sees a vision of Ozana and his lady "against the jasper sea," because jasper, which in classical times had signified a green stone, was by Morris' time used to refer to a number of stones red-gold in color.²¹ If the sea has indeed turned red-gold (as it might at sunset), then what Galahad sees may be Ozana and his lady in the perfect fusion of love and spiritual grace—the very state longed for by the characters in many of these poems.

Red need not, therefore, necessarily impute any fault or moral flaw to the person with whom it is associated. But levels of love vary, and Morris carefully employs the different shades of red in the poems to direct our responses. We have already noted how Launcelot's "red-golden hair" has prevented Guenevere from seeing the light, either figuratively or literally. Likewise his shield in "King Arthur's Tomb" turns to "flame" (l. 260) as he fights for Guenevere's favor and honor. Launcelot's love, symbolized as a "great snake of green / That twisted on the quartered white and red" in Morris' original version of "The Defence," becomes increasingly passionate and transmuted into hotter flame.²² The silver lilies to which "lily-like" Guenevere has been compared are transformed into "scarlet lilies" after she and Launcelot become lovers ("King Arthur's Tomb," ll. 57, 79). Her snow-white bedsheets, as she recalls, became sprinkled with blood as a result of the pair's intemperance ("Defence," ll. 173–178). Mary Magdalene's eyes are red because of her sins of passion ("King Arthur's Tomb," l. 315). And the queen uses vivid color images to remind her accuser, Gauwaine, of how passionate acts (including his murder of a maiden and conspiracy to commit matricide) have stained his life: "my eyes / Wept all away to grey, may bring some sword, / To drown you in your blood" ("Defence," ll. 224–26). Clearly the colors mentioned by the queen, whom Jonathan F. S. Post calls a "surrogate artist,"²³ are designed by Morris to express her passions and emotions; her recollections of her abduction are that Mellygraunce's blood curdled at the thought of a duel with Launcelot, and that this duel—provoked by the bloodstains on her sheets—ended in "a spout of blood on the hot land" ("Defence," ll. 187, 214). In fact,

²¹ OED s. v. *jasper*, sb. 1. b.

²² Printed as an Appendix in the Lourie edition, 257–58.

²³ Post, 321.

when her emotions are strongly moved, Guenevere's usual response is to turn red ("Defence," ll. 9, 179, 293; "King Arthur's tomb," l. 220). It is worth noting too that in Morris' one surviving oil painting, *Queen Guenevere*, the queen's sleeves and tunic embroidery are scarlet, and her bed is hung with a rich red undercover and red-embroidered draperies. Clearly the color and the character were connected in Morris' perception of her, and he uses these hues to direct our response to her.

Of course, the most famous and problematic association of red with Guenevere in the poems is her parable of the red and blue cloths ("Defence," ll. 16-41). Most critics make the assumption that because the blue is simply "Heaven's colour" (and therefore that the red is Hell's, a far from traditional association), Guenevere's choice of the blue cloth brings her divine condemnation for her hypocrisy. Others associate the blue cloth with Launcelot, and argue that she is condemned for her infidelity. One recent critic has contended that her choice of the blue cloth proves Guenevere's infidelity to Arthur and that her marriage is a hell.²⁴ But Morris' constant association of red with Guenevere in these poems suggests yet another interpretation.

Both Guenevere and Launcelot, as shown above, are strongly linked with the color red in Morris' poems. Thus, the affirmative suggestions that the blue cloth represents Launcelot or that Guenevere's choice represents a defiant act of rebellion against a hellish marriage seem contradicted by the actual evidence of the poetry. Instead, Guenevere seems to be condemned for not being true to herself. Her instincts and emotions lead her to ally herself with red time and time again. Yet at this moment, possibly the most crucial time of her life, she attempts to make a rational choice, picking the color she thinks she ought to choose ("God help! heaven's colour, the blue") instead of the one all her instincts and emotions must pull her toward. Red signifies not only her guilty passion, but also the death of her marriage—a martyr's color. She laments "If only I had known!" but finds that knowledge cannot replace love. She is condemned for trying logically to decide an event that is predicated on chance. We cannot know what fate would have befallen her if she had chosen the red cloth, for after all her love is morally tainted, but we do

²⁴ Criticism of this episode is neatly summarized in the Balch article cited above, 61-62.

know, as sympathetic readers, caught up by the strength of her emotions, and conditioned by Morris to associate her with red, that the choice of blue is a mistake.

In the Froissart poems, the associations of red with love and passion are also clear. In "Sir Peter Harpdon's End," the besieged knight envisions his reunion with his lady, who "changes from pale to red"; subsequently, after Sir Peter's betrayal and murder, it is the Lady Alice who finds her dream of reunion with her lover "among the poppies" transformed into a nightmare of mice "all about my feet / Red shod and tired" (ll. 91, 538, 541-42). In "Concerning Geoffroy Teste Noir" John of Castel Neuf is struck by the clarity of the red wine (ll. 58-59) and the red lion on the banners (l. 54) as he muses on the passion of dead lovers while waiting to ambush his enemy. In "The Haystack in the Floods," Godmar's red pennon and flushed face are emblematic of his passion for Jehane. In all three poems red is an ominous color, reflecting both the intensity and the destructive power of passion.

The fantasy poems share this ambiguous red imagery. In most of them, red signifies dangerous and perhaps polluting passion: the witch's red cloak in "Rapunzel"; the blood-spouting heart as a device on an opponent's shield in "The Gilliflower of Gold"; the bloodied lover's corpse in "The Wind"; Ellayne's golden girdle, held together only by red silk after her ravishment by the red-pennant-bearing Robert in "Welland River"; the "tatter'd scarlet banners" of "Near Avalon." The strangest of all these red images is that of the mysterious red lily in "The Blue Closet," which appears when Arthur, possibly having been strangled with a scarlet scarf, returns from the otherworld to reclaim Queen Louise in a curious perversion of the Orpheus myth. There are favorable red images as well—the red hair of Mary in "A Good Knight in Prison"; the red roof and ripe apples of "Golden Wings"; the war cry in "Two Red Roses Across The Moon"—but these have neither the power nor the haunting evocativeness of their ominous counterparts.

In Morris' early romances, green has its traditional associations with growth, hope, trust, and life; but in *The Defence* volume, its function is largely ironic, associated with destroyed hope, broken faith, and betrayal, as Morris once more exploits the range of symbolic connotations associated with the color. Again, according to Portal: "Le vert, comme les autres couleurs, eut une signification néfaste; si elle était le symbole de la régénération de l'âme et de la

sagesse, elle signifia, par opposition, la dégradation morale et la folie. . . . Dans la langue sacrée, le vert était le symbole de l'espérance dans l'immortalité; dans la langue populaire, le vert était la couleur de l'esperance dans ce monde."²⁵

Here again, Morris manipulates a wide range of traditional meanings to control the reader's response to his poems. The "green hope" of Guenevere's love for Arthur is only a memory, as is her fidelity to him ("Defence," l. 255). In the heat of her passion, she betrays her husband in a "cool green room" of his castle ("King Arthur's Tomb," l. 86); and the once-golden stars and moon (which, curiously, is described as a star the queen has shed along with her divine status) grow pale against the green sky. But green, Morris reminds us, can represent more than ironic fidelity, for the four virgin martyrs in "Sir Galahad" are dressed "in gowns of green and red" (stage directions following l. 152, a close echo of Dante's first vision of Beatrice in *Purgatorio* XXX 32-33, "sotto verde manto / vestita di color di fiamma viva"), reflecting both their hope that Galahad will achieve the Grail and ascend to their spiritual level, and their roles as his spiritual lady-loves. And the jasper sea at the end of "The Chapel in Lyonesse" may represent the green and eternal spiritual hope of men for redemption as well as a fusion of earthly and divine love.

This fluctuation between straightforward and ironic use of green is also found throughout the Froissart and fantasy poems. Sebald in "Rapunzel" wears green; faithful Alicia in "The Sailing of the Sword" carries a holly branch; the damozels in "The Blue Closet" wear purple and green gowns; the friends in "Riding Together" pass along a "green-banked stream"—all symbolizing fidelity. In some cases Morris deliberately makes us see double meanings: the green grass in "Rapunzel" is the setting where lovers pledge undying love, but also where brother kills brother; in "The Little Tower" the doomed retainers wear green; the tomb for the slain lovers in "Concerning Geoffray Teste Noire" is "in a green nook pure"; and fair Ellayne in "Welland River" is both "pale and green"—not only because of her fidelity to Robert, but also because, pregnant outside of wedlock, she is suffering from morning sickness. In some cases the color seems to evoke almost entirely unfavorable responses: the green-surrounded, moss-covered castle of lovers in "Golden Wings" degenerates into a world of sour green apples and green weeds; and the weird green banners

²⁵ Portal, 132-33.

decorating the barge in "Near Avalon" bear Guenevere's portrait on the sails. These mixed images and the mixed associations they evoke seem to reinforce Morris' theme of the impossibility of fidelity in the mundane world.

White is the most problematic color in the poems, for it seems to have several meanings. Portal sums it up succinctly: "Le couleur blanche devait être le symbole de la vérité absolue, de celui qui est; elle seule réfléchit tous les rayons lumineux; elle est l'unité . . . [des] mille nuances qui colorent la nature."²⁶ In Morris' poems, it represents not only traditional purity and innocence, both real and ironic, but also intensity; and while the degrees of these states vary, the interpretation does not. Everything in the poems that is white is starkly, vividly, and connotatively white. In some cases Morris gives the color its traditional association with the purity of faith, as Chaucer used it with "the White Lamb Celestial" of the *Prioress' Tale* 581 and Dante for the Mystic Rose of *Paradiso XXXI* 1. For example, there is the purity of the deity and of the angels' clothing ("Sir Galahad," ll. 88, 139); and the purity of Galahad's white hand ("King Arthur's Tomb," l. 331). There is the purity of passion, such as Palomydes growing pale for love of Iseult ("Sir Galahad," l. 29) or Guenevere's growing "white with flame" for Launcelot ("Defence," l. 70). There is the natural purity of the world, reflected in the snow-covered roofs of winter ("Defence," ll. 66-67) and the snow outside the chapel door in "Sir Galahad." There is the supposed purity of "lily-like Guenevere" ("King Arthur's tomb," l. 57) and the intensity of Launcelot's recognition of their sin and her repudiation ("King Arthur's Tomb," l. 362). Finally there is the pure and intense terror which strikes both Mellygraunce ("Defence," l. 186) and the guilty lovers ("Defence," ll. 226, 269, 276).

The other poems in the volume share this interpretation. We see it in Roger's vision of pale Ellen in "The Judgment of God," the pure beauty of the ladies in "A Good Knight in Prison" and "In Praise of My Lady," the frigidly pure ladies whom Lord Roland exchanges in "The Sailing of the Sword," and the moonlight and white ghosts of "The Tune of Seven Towers." It seems clear that Morris uses white as an intensifying color, to bring out more sharply or more strangely his other effects, as well as for its symbolic value.

Of the half-dozen or so other colors mentioned in *The Defence* vol-

²⁶ Portal, 23.

ume, the most significant seems to be grey. Again Portal's remark is particularly appropriate to Morris' poetry: "Je trouve encore un vestige de la symbolique des couleurs dans le mot *gris* pris dans le sens d'une demi-ivresse; la raison et la sagesse étaient représentées par le blanc, comme les passions honteuses par le noir."²⁷ In the first two poems, "The Defence" and "King Arthur's Tomb," it is clearly a replacement color, appearing when all other colors are exhausted. Guenevere's eyes have been leached of all other color by her tears; thus the eyes she turns on Sir Gauwaine are "wept all away to grey." The roan charger which once brought Launcelot to Guenevere's rescue ("Defence," l. 294) is replaced in "King Arthur's Tomb" by a "lone grey horse . . . on the grey road" (ll. 99-101). For both lovers, the red images are no longer vital but memories. It seems for a while that, no longer ruled by either their reason or their passions, they have no emotions left. But in fact, previous feelings have been replaced by a new emotion—guilt. In Guenevere's case "the grey downs bare / Grew into lumps of sin" ("King Arthur's Tomb," ll. 139-40) as she realizes the enormity of her passion's consequences. Launcelot is so overwhelmed by events that he collapses on the grey stone of "a tomb / Not knowing it was Arthur's" ("King Arthur's Tomb," ll. 125-26). There is no longer heat, or the color which connotes it; there are only the cold grey downs for Guenevere and the cold grey stones for Launcelot. These are the only objects they can still perceive. Grey here does not seem to have its symbolic connotation of repentance, although Lancelot as he sits on the tomb may echo the Angel of Penance on the steps of Purgatory (*Purgatorio* IX 115-16): "Cenere, o terra che secca si cavi, / d'un color fora col suo vestimento."

Grey in the other poems seems to signify a similar absence of spiritual or emotional sensibility. Arthur in "The Blue Closet" and Robert in "The Haystack in the Floods" are incapable of using their "grey lips" to kiss their lovers; Oliver's lady in "The Tune of Seven Towers" dispatches her doomed suitor to a grey castle which reminds her of a row of grey tombstones (l. 39); and there are frequent references to grey light, grey rain, and grey night—to a world devoid of life and beauty—in situations of futility, despair, and certain death. The color grey in Morris' poems is the negative antithesis of his other symbolizing shades; he uses it when aspiration, passion, fidelity, and purity are no longer possible.²⁸

²⁷ Portal, 178.

²⁸ Silver, *Romance* (p. 66), notes the increased use of grey as a counterpoint to other

To assume that Morris' intention was to use colors as symbols systematically in these poems would be fallacious. Like the other Pre-Raphaelite poets, he was not as much concerned with painting symbolic pictures as with creating vivid, compelling images. But his use of conventional color imagery and its associated values to direct response to the poems, very probably influenced by his reading and the temper of his surroundings at the time the poems were written, seems too careful and consistent to be merely casual, notwithstanding his remarks about the composition of poetry. The visual quality of his early poems, which makes them stand out from the body of Pre-Raphaelite verse, was the product of a characteristically calculated effort of design. Like Keats' descriptions in "The Eve of Saint Agnes" and Tennyson's careful use of red and white flowers to add depth to the portraits in *Maud*, Morris' exploitation of the traditional range of color imagery adds texture and vitality to his poems, both in this volume and throughout his work. He strives for—and often achieves—what he called in an 1891 lecture one of the most important qualities of Pre-Raphaelite art: "definite, harmonious, conscious beauty."²⁹

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color references in *The Earthly Paradise*, in most cases agreeing generally with the interpretation presented here.

²⁹ "Address on the Collections of Paintings of the English Pre-Raphaelite School in the City of Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, on Friday, October 24, 1891," in *May, Morris*, I, 302.