

William Morris's "The Defence of Guenevere" (1858)

Commented [MOU1]: PM: a creative, psychologically rich elaboration of an event in Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*

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,

Commented [MOU2]: Rhyme scheme: *terza rima*

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,

5

She must a little touch it; like one lame
She walked away from Gauwaine, with her head
Still lifted up; and on her cheek of flame

The tears dried quick; she stopped at last and said:
"O knights and lords, it seems but little skill
To talk of well-known things past now and dead.

10

"God wot I ought to say, I have done ill,
And pray you all forgiveness heartily!
Because you must be right, such great lords; still

15

"Listen, suppose your time were come to die,
And you were quite alone and very weak;
Yea, laid a dying while very mightily

"The wind was ruffling up the narrow streak
Of river through your broad lands running well:
Suppose a hush should come, then some one speak:

20

"One of these cloths is heaven, and one is hell,
Now choose one cloth for ever; which they be,
I will not tell you, you must somehow tell

"Of your own strength and mightiness; here, see!"
Yea, yea, my lord, and you to ope your eyes,
At foot of your familiar bed to see

25

"A great God's angel standing, with such dyes,
Not known on earth, on his great wings, and hands,
Held out two ways, light from the inner skies

30

Commented [MOU3]: wot = knows

“Showing him well, and making his commands
Seem to be God’s commands, moreover, too,
Holding within his hands the cloths on wands;

“And one of these strange choosing cloths was blue,
Wavy and long, and one cut short and red;
No man could tell the better of the two. 35

“After a shivering half-hour you said:
‘God help! heaven’s color, the blue,’ and he said, ‘hell.’
Perhaps you would then roll upon your bed,

“And cry to all good men that loved you well, 40
‘Ah Christ! if only I had known, known, know,’
Launcelot went away, then I could tell,

“Like wisest man how all things would be, moan,
And roll and hurt myself, and long to die,
And **yet fear much to die for what was sown**. 45

“**Nevertheless** you, O Sir Gauwaine, lie,
Whatever may have happened through these years,
God knows I speak truth, saying that you lie.”

Her voice was low at first, being *full of tears*,
But as it cleared, it grew full loud and shrill, 50
Growing a windy shriek in all men’s ears,

A ringing in their startled brains, until
She said that Gauwain lied, **then her voice sunk**,
And her great eyes began again to fill,

Though still she stood right up, and never shrunk, 55
But **spoke on bravely, glorious lady fair!**
Whatever tears her full lips may have drunk,

She stood, and **seemed to think**, and wrung her hair,
Spoke out at last with no more trace of shame,
With passionate twisting of her body there: 60

“It chanced upon a day that Launcelot came
To dwell at Arthur’s court: at Christmas-time
This happened; when the heralds sung his name,

Commented [MOU4]: admission that she fears to die given punishment in afterlife?

Commented [MOU5]: Does the poem provide a portrait of a lady who is indeed brave, glorious, and fair (l.56)?

“‘Son of King Ban of Benwick,’ seemed to chime
Along with all the bells that rang that day,
O’er the white roofs, with little change of rhyme. 65

“Christmas and whitened winter passed away,
And over me the April sunshine came,
Made very awful with black hail-clouds, yea

“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, 70

“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, 75

“To my unhappy pulse, that beat right through
My eager body; while *I laughed out loud*,
And let my lips curl up at false or true,

“Seemed cold and shallow without any cloud.
Behold, my judges, then the cloths were brought; 80
While I was dizzied thus, old thoughts would crowd,

“Belonging to the time ere I was bought
By Arthur’s great name and his little love;
Must I give up for ever then, I thought,

“That which I deemed would ever round me move, 85
Glorifying all things; for a little word,
Scarce ever meant at all, must I now prove

“Stone-cold for ever? Pray you, does the Lord
Will that all folks should be quite happy and good?
I love God now a little, if this cord 90

“Were broken, once for all *what striving could*
Make me love anything in earth or heaven?
So day by day it grew, as if one should

“*Slip slowly down some path worn smooth and even*,
Down to a cool sea on a summer day; 95

Commented [MOU6]: What does “‘I grew white with flame’” connote, and why might this state prompt Guinevere to bow her head (ll.70-71)? Is she referring to becoming white hot with uncontrollable passion/desire—or mesmerized by her own beauty (as in l.109)?

Commented [MOU7]: Is this wrong?

Commented [MOU8]: What did Guinevere think would always revolve around her (ll.84-85)? Passion? Love? Adoration?

Yet still in slipping there was some small **leaven**

Commented [MOU9]: Leaven = something that modifies or lightens. [Why use this metaphor here?]

“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* 100
Sweat of the forehead, *dryness* of the lips,
Washed utterly out by the dear waves o’ercast

“In the lone sea, far off from any ships!
Do I not know now of a day in Spring?
No minute of that wild day ever slips 105

“From out my memory; *I hear thrushes sing,*
And wheresoever I may be, straightway
Thoughts of it all come up with most fresh sting:

“**I was half mad with beauty on that day**,
And went without my ladies all alone, 110
In a quiet garden walled round every way;

“I was right joyful of that wall of stone,
That shut the flowers and trees up with the sky,
And trebled all the beauty: to the bone,

“Yea right through to my heart, grown very shy 115
With wary thoughts, it pierced, and made me glad;
Exceedingly glad, and I knew verily,

“**A little thing just then had made me mad**;
I dared not think, as I was wont to do,
Sometimes, upon my beauty; if I had 120

“Held out **my long hand** up against the blue,
And, looking on the **tenderly darken’d fingers**,
Thought that by rights one ought to see quite through,

“*There, see you, where the soft still light yet lingers*
Round by the edges; what should I have done, 125
If this had joined with yellow spotted singers,

“And startling green drawn upward by the sun?

But shouting, loosed out, **see now! all my hair**,
And trancedly stood *watching the west wind run*

“With faintest half-heard breathing sound—why there 130
I lose my head e’en now in doing this;
But shortly listen—in that garden fair

“Came Launcelot walking; this is true, the kiss
Wherewith we kissed in meeting that spring day,
I scarce dare talk of the remember’d bliss, 135

“*When both our mouths went wandering in one way*,
And aching sorely, met among the leaves;
Our hands being left behind strained far away.

“Never within a yard of my bright sleeves
Had Launcelot come before—and now so nigh! 140
After that day why is it Guenevere grieves?

“Nevertheless you, O Sir Gauwaine, lie,
Whatever happened on through all those years,
God knows I speak truth, saying that you lie.

Commented [MOU10]: PM: instead of splitting with a comma, runs together, driving towards accusatory you.

“Being such a lady could I weep these tears 145
If this were true? A great queen such as I
Having sinn’d this way, straight her conscience sears;

“After afterwards she liveth hatefully,
Slaying and poisoning, *certes never weeps*,—
Gauwaine be friends now, speak me lovingly. 150

“Do I not see how *God’s dear pity* creeps
All through your frame, and trembles in your mouth?
Remember in what grave your mother sleeps,

Commented [MOU11]: accused of infidelity by her son, Agravaine, and murdered by him.

“Buried in some place far down in the south 155
Men are forgetting as I speak to you;
By her head sever’d in that awful drouth

“Of pity that drew Agravaine’s fell blow,
I pray your pity! *let me not scream out*
For ever after, when the shrill winds blow

Commented [MOU12]: Agravaine = Gauwaine’s brother, who accused his mother of infidelity and murdered her.

Commented [MOU13]: What indirect threat is Guinevere leveling at Gauwaine when she cries out, “let me not scream out / For ever after, when the shrill winds blow / ‘Through half your castle-locks!’” (ll.148-60). Indirect threat to haunt him as a ghost—see also following lines, through l.164

“Through half your castle-locks! *let me not shout*
For ever after in the winter night
When you ride out alone! *in battle-rout* 160

“*Let not my rusting tears make your sword light!*
Ah! God of mercy, how he turns away!
So, ever must I dress me to the fight, 165

“So: let **God’s justice** work! Gauwaine, I say,
See me hew down your proofs: yea all men know
Even as you said how **Mellyagraunce** one day,

“One bitter day in **la Fausse Garde**, for so
All good knights held it after, saw— 170
Yea, sirs, by cursed unknighly outrage; though

“You, Gauwaine, held his sword without a flaw.
This Mellyagraunce saw blood upon my bed—
Whose blood then pray you? is there any law

“To make a queen say why some spots of red 175
lie on her coverlet? *or will you say:*
‘Your hands are white, lady, as when you wed,

“‘Where did you bleed?’ and must I stammer out, ‘Nay,
I blush indeed, fair lord, only to rend
My sleeve up to my shoulder, where there lay 180

“*A knife-point last night’: so must I defend*
The honour of the Lady Guenevere?
Not so, fair lords, *even if the world should end*

“*This very day, and you were judges here*
Instead of God. Did you see Mellyagraunce 185
When Launcelot stood by him? what white fear

“Curdled his blood, and how his teeth did dance,
His side sink in? as my knight cried and said,
‘Slayer of unarm’d men, here is a chance!

“‘**Setter of traps**, I pray you guard your head, 190
By God I am so glad to fight with you,
Stripper of ladies, that my hand feels lead

Commented [MOU14]: Does Guinevere indeed “hew down” (l.167) the proofs presumably brought against her by Gauwaine? **[No, refuses to defend her honor (ll.181-82), instead threatening them w/ vengeance from Lancelot]**

Commented [MOU15]: Mellygraunce = Mellyagraunce once charged Guenevere with adultery after finding blood on her dress while she was staying at his castle. The blood was actually Lancelot’s, who had cut his arm climbing through Guenevere’s window, but Lancelot defended her honor, saying it came from wounded knights who had been placed in her rooms.

Commented [MOU16]: *La Faussee Garde* = the False Castle, a name Guenevere concocts to express her contempt.

Commented [MOU17]: Evokes, though does not explore/push, the idea of menstruation.

Commented [MOU18]: In the past, Mellyagraunce had set a trap for Launcelot, trying to prevent him from defending Guenevere’s honor via duel by causing him to fall through a trapdoor and into a dungeon.

“‘For driving weight; hurrah now! draw and do,
For all my wounds are moving in my breast,
And I am getting mad with waiting so.’ 195

“He struck his hands together o’er the beast,
Who fell down flat, and grovell’d at his feet,
And groan’d at being slain so young—‘At least,’

“My knight said, ‘Rise you, sir, who are so fleet
At catching ladies, half-arm’d will I fight, 200
My left side all uncovered!’ then I weet,

“Up sprang Sir Mellyagraunce with great delight
Upon his knave’s face; *not until just then*
Did I quite hate him, as I saw my knight

“Along the lists look to my stake and pen 205
With such a joyous smile, it made me sigh
From agony beneath my waist-chain, when

“The fight began, and to me they drew nigh;
Ever Sir Launcelot kept him on the right,
And traversed warily, and ever high 210

“And fast leapt catiff’s sword, until my knight
Sudden threw up his sword to his left hand,
Caught it and swung it; that was all the fight;

“*Except a spout of blood on the hot land,*
For it was the hottest summer; and I know 215
I wonder’d how the fire, while I should stand,

“And burn, against the heat, would quiver so,
Yards above my head; thus these matters went,
Which things were only warnings of the woe

“That fell on me. Yet Mellyagraunce was shent, 220
For Mellyagraunce had fought against the Lord;
Therefore, my lords, take heed lest you be blent

“With all his wickedness; say no rash word
Against me, being so beautiful; my eyes,

Wept all away to gray, may bring some sword 225

“To drown you in your blood; see my breast rise
Like waves of purple sea, as here I stand;
And how my arms are moved in wonderful wise,

“Yea also at my full heart’s strong command,
See through my long throat how the words go up 230
In ripples to my mouth; how in my hand

“The shadow lies like wine within a cup
Of marvelously colour’d gold; yea now
This little wind is rising, look you up,

“And wonder how the light is falling so 235
Within my moving tresses: *will you dare*
When you have looked a little on my brow,

“To say this thing is vile? or will you care
For any plausible lies of cunning woof,
Where you can see my face with no lie there 240

“For ever? am I not a gracious proof?—
“But in your chamber Launcelot was found’—
Is there a good knight then would stand aloof,

“When a queen says with gentle queenly sound:
‘O true as steel, come now and talk with me, 245
I love to see your step upon the ground

“Unwavering, also well I love to see
That gracious smile light up your face, and hear
Your wonderful words, that all mean verily

“The thing they seem to mean: good friend, so dear 250
To me in everything, come here to-night,
Or else the hours will pass most dull and drear;

“If you come not, I fear this time I might
Get thinking over much of times gone by,
When I was young, and green hope was in sight: 255

“*For no man cares now to know why I sigh;*

And no man comes to sing me pleasant songs,
Nor any brings me the sweet flowers that lie

“So thick in the gardens; **therefore** one so longs
To see you, Launcelot; that we may be 260
Like children once again, free from all wrongs

“**Just for one night.**’ Did he not come to me?
What thing could keep true Launcelot away
If I said, ‘Come?’ there was one less than three

“In my quiet room that night, and *we were gay*; 265
Till sudden I rose up, weak, pale, and sick,
Because a bawling broke our dream up, yea

“*I looked at Launcelot’s face and could not speak,*
For he looked helpless too, for a little while;
Then I remember how I tried to shriek, 270

“And could not, but fell down; from tile to tile
The stones they threw up rattled o’er my head
And made me dizzier; till within a while

“My maids were all about me, and my head 275
On Launcelot’s breast was being soothed away
From its white chattering, until Launcelot said—

“**By God! I will not tell you more to-day,**
Judge any way you will—what matters it?
You know quite well the story of that fray,

“How Launcelot still’d their bawling, the mad fit 280
That caught up Gauwaine, all, all, verily,
But just that which would save me; these things flit.

“**Nevertheless** you, O Sir Gauwaine, lie,
Whatever may have happen’d these long years,
God knows I speak truth, saying that you lie! 285

“**All I have said is truth, by Christ’s dear tears.**”
She would not speak another word, but stood
Turn’d sideways; listening, like a man who hears

Commented [MOU19]: When Guinevere wrap up her defense with “All I have said is truth” (l.286), is she perjuring herself? [Not really, as she *kept on* (unwittingly, or strategically) *admitting to details of her affair.*]

His brother's trumpet sounding through the wood 280
Of his foes' lances. She lean'd eagerly,
And *gave a slight spring sometimes*, as she could

At last hear something really; joyfully
Her cheek grew crimson, as the headlong speed
Of the roan charger drew all men to see, 285
The Knight who came was Launcelot at good need.