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William Morris in Apprenticeship: His Étude on the Arthurian Motif

Yoshiko Seki

1. Introduction

William Morris's first volume of poetry, *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems* [1858], offers us four different pictures of the Arthurian Romances. The title poem shows us how Guenevere defends herself against charges of adultery and how Launcelot comes up at the end to rescue her. "King Arthur's Tomb" depicts the very last moment of the Arthurian romances; that is, how Launcelot rushes to Glastonbury only to find Guenevere having entered a religious life. "Sir Galahad: A Christmas Mystery" focuses on the holy knight and shows us how he experiences the miracle of the Holy Grail. Finally in "The Chapel in Lioness," Galahad after the quest attends a feeble knight who is on his deathbed.

Besides the varieties of the scene, the tones and the styles of the poems are also diverse. "The Defence of Guenvere" is a lyric poem resembling a dramatic monologue in which the heroine makes a speech to an audience who is silent but supposed to be in the poem. The next "King Arthur's Tomb" is a narrative poem in which the final dialogue is made between Launcelot and Guenevere. "Sir Galahad: A Christmas Mystery" begins with a soliloquy by the holy knight but suddenly turns into a verse drama. And the last "Chapel in Lioness" is a pure verse drama which consists of a conversation among three knights. Because of this, the lack of unity and structure has been an acknowledged assessment of the work since it was published. Despite such

generally unfavorable criticism, some researchers dare to look for unity and coherence in Morris's Arthurian group of poems. It seems to me, however, that the claim of disunity is an inevitable evaluation although it is an excusable nature of the work.

In the present essay, I should like to offer a suggestion to read the group of poems as Morris's *étude* on the Arthurian motif. He tries on many types of eloquence in rewriting Arthurian poems in his own words, just as he and his friends tried many types of painting in depicting the Arthurian world.¹ If we neither disregard his first poems nor overestimate their unity but give a careful perusal to the untidiness in them, we may realize clearly what the young poet attempted in his first volume of poetry. In reading the poems as an *étude* of Morris in his apprenticeship, we cannot neglect two precedent poets and their influence on his versification: Robert Browning and Alfred Tennyson. As I will show you later, there are not a few reminiscences which testify that the young Morris was strongly influenced by the two poets. Because I have already made a discussion elsewhere about the impact of Browning's dramatic poems on Morris's composing "The Defence of Guenevere,"² I will now focus specifically on the last couple of poems and make an argument that, although it is well known that Morris wrote them in defiance of Tennyson's "Sir Galahad" [1842], there is still a remnant of positive influence from Tennyson which is as strong as the influence from Browning.

2. Unity or Disunity: Critical Reception of Morris's Arthuriad

The four Arthurian poems by Morris are tied together so loosely that they give the reader an impression that there is no unity among them at all. They are different in style, rhyme schemes, and poetical genre. Each poem is also fragmentary. Particularly "King Arthur's Tomb" and "Sir Galahad: A Christmas

Mystery" have an odd structure; for they begin as a lyric but suddenly change their tone to dramatic.

For all the reasons above, these poems have fallen into oblivion both in contemporary and modern criticism. J. W. Mackail reports about the publication of the volume: "On its appearance, it met with no acclamations; it did not even gain the distinction of abuse: it simply went unnoticed" (1:130). If it met critical attention, the assessment was generally unfavorable. Even A. C. Swinburne, who appreciated Morris's early poems from the beginning, detected untidiness in his Arthurian cycle:

"There is scarcely connection here, and scarcely composition. There is hardly a trace of narrative power or mechanical arrangement. There is a perceptible want of tact and practice, which leaves the poem in parts indecorous and chaotic. [. . .]" (quoted in Mackail 1:131)

Such neglect was continuing into the twentieth century.³ While critical studies and biographies of William Morris usually devote a small chapter to his first volume of poetry, they just mention each poem and do not make a full-length discussion. Except "The Defence of Guenevere," which is relatively easy to detect a unity in structure, each poem has not been given a detailed analysis.

In this critical climate, there are a few critics who made an effort to see unity in the four poems. Meredith B. Raymond was one of the first who tried to find it. In "The Arthurian Group in *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*" [1966], he proposes to regard poems "as a spiritual drama—a unit with a certain observable structure" (214). His suggestion is to read the four poems as two pairs. The first two poems should be read as the first pair, which "deals with human corruption, earthly love, frailty and sin" (214). The latter ones, which are "concerned with

the Sangreal, spiritual love and heavenly grace" (215), should be read in contrast to the first two. Launcelot, who is related to in both pairs of poems, plays a role of "the pivot, on which this spiritual drama is mounted" (218). Then he concludes his essay:

The elliptical quality of the style is increased by fleeting allusions to a whole body of legendary material. All these factors contribute in giving the reader an impression of fragmentation, but the device of seeing a set of four poems in two pairs strengthens a reading of the entire group as a unified composition. (218)

Lionel Stevenson [1972] reads the poems from a similar point of view. He explains:

Morris must have had a definite thematic purpose in juxtaposing the two poems in each pair. Just as "King Arthur's Tomb" controverts "The Defence of Guenevere" [. . .], so "The Chapel in Lyonesse" modifies Galahad's renunciation of earthly love [. . .]. (142)

"Morris' Treatment of His Medieval Sources in *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*" by David Staines [1973] offers a new perspective from source-studies. He compares Morris's Arthurian poems carefully with Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, and finds that, in going from one poem to the next, the influence of Malory weakens, and finally the world of Malory becomes just "the framework or background out of which Morris creates his own situation" (450).

From *The Defence of Guenevere* through *The Chapel in Lyonesse*, an arrangement of the Arthurian poems which Morris himself made for this volume, we can observe a decreasing fidelity to his source and an increasing sense of

invention within the framework of that source. (450)

Against this argument, C. B. Stevenson and V. Hale's essay [2000] points out a remarkable shortcoming:

What is strikingly absent from Staines's account is an acknowledgment of the other medieval material that shaped "Sir Galahad," those referenced in the poem's very title — mystery or cycle plays. (383)

They offer a new suggestion of dividing the four poems into a single poem and three related works which "constitute a miniature cycle of mystery plays which echo and complement each other while tracing out a seasonal/liturgical year" (385-86). By scrutinizing "Sir Galahad" closely in the light of the convention of mystery plays, they come to a conclusion that by blending medieval romance with cycle drama, Morris created a new Galahad, who is "emotionally complex, conflicted, and palpably human" (389).

Raymond's and L. Stevenson's readings of the poems as two pairs made a certain contribution for the interpretation of this apparently obscure group of poems; but while they diminished the difficulty of understanding the work to some extent, it seems to me that their readings were so static that they unfortunately decreased the charm of the poems, too. In this aspect, Staines's opinion that the sequence of Arthurian poems displays the increasing creativity of Morris preserves the dynamic tension which lurks in the work. However, C. B. Stevenson and Hale's argument against Staines's oversight is also legitimate. What I should like now to add to their discussion is that they still neglect another possible source which may have affected Morris while he was writing these poems: that is, the works of two contemporary poets, Alfred Tennyson and Robert Browning.

I will now introduce Tennyson's "Sir Galahad" [1842] and Browning's "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" [1855] as poems which would have affected Morris directly or indirectly in his apprenticeship as a poet.⁴ There are two reasons why I juxtapose them with Morris's Galahad poems: One is that all the three depict a solitary knight pursuing his quest and let him talk about his experience in a soliloquy; and the other that, as I demonstrate in the next section, Morris left us some comments specifically on the two poems.

3. Two Precursors: the Influence of Browning and Tennyson

The influence of Browning and Tennyson has been an acknowledged feature in Morris's early poems. For a reviewer of *The Spectator* who wrote an adverse notice [1858], the two poets appeared as an evil influence on the young poet:

Mr. Morris imitates little save faults. He combines the mawkish simplicity of the Cockney school with the prosaic baldness of the worst passages of Tennyson, and the occasional obscurity and affectation of plainness that characterize Browning and his followers. (Faulkner 31)

The similarities and contrasts of Morris's early poems with the works of the two poets also draw the attention of modern researchers. The general consensus among them is that Morris's early poems are rather Browningsque than Tennysonian. L. Stevenson, for instance, notes: "The impact of the poems was indeed largely due to the fact that many of them were dramatic monologues" (139) similar to the poems by Browning. He also insists:

"Sir Galahad, a Christmas Mystery" inevitably challenges comparison with Tennyson's monologue by the same knight, which was, of course, already familiar to the public. Morris

touches on some of the same points, but in a different tone.
(141)⁵

E. P. Thompson also says that Morris "found in Browning a realism in the treatment of medieval themes, which served as an antidote to the tendency already becoming apparent in Tennyson" (80) and reads Morris's "Sir Galahad" as "a declaration of war against Tennyson's Galahad and all he symbolizes" (81). But what I should like to assert here is that, as for the poems concerning Galahad, we can observe the debt of Morris's Sir Galahad to the description of the same knight by Tennyson.

The opinions of such critics are certainly supported by the confession of the poet himself. When asked in whose style "The Defence of Guenevere" was written, Morris is said to have answered "More like Browning than any one else, I suppose" (Mackail 1:132). Another episode tells us that he once told his friends that "Tennyson's Sir Galahad is rather a mild youth" (Mackail 1:45). But it is too hasty to judge from these statements by Morris that he was dissenting from Tennyson's way of depicting the holy knight. The problem is that many critics quote just a single sentence from Morris's comment on Tennyson.⁶ If we read it again in a larger context, we can notice that Morris's attitude toward the Poet Laureate was much more complicated.

Morris's short but well-known criticism of Tennyson's Galahad appears in Canon Dixon's recollections of his Oxford days with Morris. In an age when "the Tennysonian enthusiasm [. . .] prevailed both in Oxford and the world" (Mackail 1:44), Dixon says that Morris's evaluation was slightly different from other students':

The attitude of Morris I should describe as defiant admiration. This was apparent from the first. He perceived Tennyson's limitations, as I think, in a remarkable manner

for a man of twenty or so. He said once, "Tennyson's Sir Galahad is rather a mild youth." [. . .] On the other hand, he understood Tennyson's greatness in a manner that we, who were mostly absorbed by the language, could not share. He understood it as if the poems represented substantial things that were to be considered out of the poems as well as in them. (quoted in Mackail 1:45-46)

The "defiant admiration" would be the best way of describing Morris's ambivalent attitude toward Tennyson. In addition to this, a close analysis of Morris's Galahad poems in comparison with the poems by Tennyson and Browning will give us a new perspective on what the young Morris attempted in his Arthurian group of poetry.

Morris was right, in a sense, to find fault with Tennyson's characterization of the young Galahad; for it was the same reaction that many contemporary men of letters showed:

Tennyson's Galahad lives up to the highest ideals of chivalry and religion in his quest of the Grail. [. . .] That his heart is pure is beyond dispute, but that his "strength is as the strength of ten" as a result is much less certain. The number of parodies of this latter idea reflects the critical objection to the poem. (Marshall 102)

There are actually some critics who assert that Browning's "Childe Roland" was also written as one of such creative responses to Tennyson's Galahad. George Arms, for example, urges that "Browning wrote his poem as a commentary on Tennyson's" (258). To demonstrate this claim, he conducts textual analysis, provides biographical information that Browning often wrote his poems "as comment upon contemporary individuals and problems" (261), and finally insists that "the reading of 'Childe Roland' as a reply to Tennyson's poem was intended by

the author" (261). There are also other critics who see the Grail motif in "Childe Roland."⁷

Although it is still open to question whether Browning actually bore Tennyson's "Sir Galahad" in mind when he was writing his "Childe Roland," Morris was surely thinking of Childe Roland as well as Tennyson's Galahad when he was writing his own "Sir Galahad." In the review of *Men and Women* published in *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* [1856], he praised "Childe Roland" most highly, saying: "In my own heart I think I love this poem the best of all in these volumes" (Morris 1:340). What he finds in Roland is the ideal "brave man doing his duty, making his way on to his point through all dreadful things" (1:339). He continues:

What do all these horrors matter to him? he must go on, they cannot stop him; he will be slain certainly, who knows by what unheard-of death; yet he can leave all this in God's hands, and go forward, for it will all come right at the end. (1:339)

In truth, however, Childe Roland in Browning's poem is not as confident a man as Morris says that he is in the review. Having traveled alone for a long time, Roland's mind is filled with anxiety, disbelief, and desperation. Far from leaving all "in God's hands," he cannot trust anything and hesitates to take the direction that an old cripple man suggested (cf. stanzas I-III). Far from being confident that "it will all come right at the end," his hope "Dwindle[s] into a ghost not fit to cope / With that obstreperous joy success would bring" (CR 21-22).⁸ Morris's image of Childe Roland is slightly different from what Browning had actually written; but as I shall examine closely in the next section, his adoration of Roland as well as his "defiant admiration" for Tennyson is detected in Morris's way of describing Galahad.

4. Morris's Dissimilation and Assimilation

Let us begin the comparison of the three poems by focusing on each incipit in order to highlight the difference of the situations the heroes are faced with. Tennyson's Galahad appears in the poem with full confidence:

My good blade carves the casques of men,
My tough lance thrusteth sure,
My strength is as the strength of ten,
Because my heart is pure. (SG 1-4)

He is just sent off from the court rousingly with "The shattering trumpet" (SG 5) shrilling high and "Perfume and flowers" falling "in showers [. . .] from ladies' hands." (SG 11-12). This parade is totally different from the other two protagonists, who emphasize the loneliness during their travels.

Roland begins his soliloquy *in medias res*. He openly shows his distrust of the old man who gave him directions:

My thought was, he lied in every word,
That hoary cripple, with malicious eye
Askance to watch the working of his lie
On mine, and mouth scarce able to afford
Suppression of the glee, that pursed and scored
Its edge, at one more victim gained thereby. (CR 1-6)

The man seen by Roland's eye looks ugly and wicked; but we have to bear in mind that his description is rather the reflection of the knight's anxiety and distrustfulness than the physical appearance of the old man. This misanthropic attitude of Roland makes a sharp contrast with Tennyson's Galahad, who optimistically believes in his physical strength coming from his mental purity.

Morris's Galahad opens his soliloquy with a complaint:

It is the longest night in all the year,
 Near on the day when the Lord Christ was born;
 Six hours ago I came and sat down here,
 And ponder'd sadly, wearied and forlorn. (CM 1-4)

The knight appears on the stage "wearied and forlorn." The winter wind that "Sang out a moody tune, that went right well" with Galahad's own thoughts (CM 6) makes a clear contrast with the sharp trumpet sound Tennyson's Galahad hears.

The difference of the knights' attitudes reflects the journeys they have been enduring. Morris's Galahad recalls his hard and lonely paths in a dreamlike contemplation:

Night after night your horse treads down alone
 The sere damp fern, night after night you sit
 Holding the bridle like a man of stone,
 Dismal, unfriended, what things comes of it? (CM 21-24)

Roland's journey is the hardest. Browning's "Childe Roland" mainly consists of the description of the landscape through the protagonist's eye. The bizarre and wasted landscapes he sketches tell us more about the mind of Roland himself than about their real appearance. Tennyson's Galahad, in contrast, is never worried by loneliness. When he walks in stormy woods, a light before him "swims, / Between dark stems the forest glows," and it guides him (SG 26-27). When he wanders "on lonely mountain-meres," "a magic bark" is prepared for him (SG 37-38). This optimistic attitude, in contrast with Morris's Galahad and Browning's Roland, gives us an impression that Tennyson's Galahad is rather simple-minded, and this is one of the reasons why Morris blamed Tennyson's Galahad for being mild.

The crucial difference between two Galahads is detected in their ideas about human love. Tennyson's Galahad swears publicly:

I never felt the kiss of love,
Nor maiden's hand in mine.
More bounteous aspects on me beam,
Me mightier transports move and thrill;
So keep I fair through faith and prayer
A virgin heart in work and will. (SG 19-24)

The quoted lines make a sharp contrast with the following wail of Morris's Galahad, which seems to have been written as a response particularly to them.

In his drowsy contemplation, Morris's Galahad wretchedly calls up his failure of finding human love and have a self-examining conversation with his inner voice. He firstly compares himself with Palomydes, who suffers from the unrequited love for Iseult, saying:

And what if Palomydes also ride,
And over many a mountain and bare heath
Follow the questing beast with none beside?
Is he not able still to hold his breath
With thoughts of Iseult? [. . .] (CM 25-29)

He continues: "to fail / Is nothing to him, he can never fall" (CM 31-32).

For unto such a man love-sorrow is
So dear a thing unto his constant heart,
That even if he never win one kiss
Or touch from Iseult, it will never part. (CM 33-36)

Unto this, his inner voice responds:

Good knight and faithful, you have 'scaped the curse
In wonderful-wise; you have great store of bliss.
(CM 39-40)

Secondly, he thinks of his father Launcelot and asks to himself:

Yea, what if Father Launcelot ride out,
 Can he not think of Guenevere's arms, round,
 Warm and lithe, about his neck, and shout
 Till all the place grows joyful with the sound?
 (CM 41-44)

Then Galahad reflects on himself and expresses deep apprehensions about the contingency that he should fall down in the middle of the quest:

But me, who ride alone, some carle shall find
 Dead in my arms in the half-melted snow,
 When all unkindly with the shifting wind,
 The thaw comes on at Candlemas: [. . .] (CM 49-52)

He imagines his heroic adventure sung by the "gay-dress'd minstrels" (CM 58) and people enjoying their songs. But this does not console him at all, for he knows that "no maid will talk / Of sitting" on his tomb and it might ruin without care (CM 58-59). This reminds him thirdly that he once saw a young knight departing from his beloved, and he shows envy even toward this unnamed knight (CM 63-76).

Here as we can see, Morris is doing a careful study on the knight's frame of mind. His Galahad freely confesses the adoration of the human love. He could at first manage his longing for being in love with someone by having a conversation with his inner voice, which soothes him by saying: "you have 'scaped the curse." But as his contemplation goes on, his desire grows stronger and less controllable. His conversation with the inner voice corrupts when he answers his own question without interposing the voice (CM 49ff.). And finally, instead of urging himself to suppose what other renowned knights might do, he

begins to relate his own experience of having seen a young knight departing his beloved. In this manner, Morris successfully revives Galahad as a human figure by giving an insight into his mind.

So far, I have highlighted the contrast of Tennyson's Galahad against Morris's same knight and Browning's Roland, and it might seem that Morris is trying to dissociate himself from Tennyson's characterization. But coming to the denouement of the poem and to the next "The Chapel in Lyonesse," we encounter another Galahad figure, which is iconographical like Tennyson's. After the self-examining contemplation, he hears the divine voice console him, saying: "I will be with you always, and fear not / You are uncared for, though no maiden moan / Above your empty tomb" (CM 98-100). The voice reminds him of the mischief of Launcelot and Palomides and tells him:

"O good son Galahad, upon this day,
 Now even, all these things are on your side,
But these you fight not for; look up, I say,
 And see how I can love you, for no pride

"Closes your eyes, no vain lust keeps them down.
 See now you have ME always; following
 That holy vision, Galahad, go on,
 Until at last you come to ME to sing

"In Heaven always, and to walk around
 The garden where I am:" [. . .]
 (CM 205-14; underline added)

The underlined phrase corresponds to Tennyson's Galahad, who avows as the reverent knight:

For them [ladies] I battle till the end,
 To save from shame and thrall:
But all my heart is drawn above,
My knees are bowed in crypt and shrine.
 (SG 15-18; underlines added)

After the voice ceases, four ladies come to foretell the liturgy of the Holy Grail, and Galahad's soliloquy merges into a pure drama with stage directions. This mergence assumes a significant shift in the poem: for it is accompanied by the shift of tense from the past to the present (cf. "the bell comes near" / CM 151) and of the narrative mode literally from *telling* by Galahad of his adventure to *showing* of the miracle of the Holy Grail. Furthermore, the characterization of the knight also changes from a secular hero who encounters the inner conflict with anxiety and desire to the holy hero who blindly pursues his profession.

In the next "Chapel in Lyonesse," which inherits the mode of verse drama, Galahad plays the role of the savior who stoops and gives a blessed-kiss to Ozana, a dying young knight. Ozana, who wails at first: "Ah! me, I cannot fathom it" (CL 33) and admits: "My life went wrong" (CL 75), finally says after Galahad's blessing: "Now I begin to fathom it" (CL 80) and passes away peacefully. Here, Morris's human Galahad assimilates to Tennyson's holy knight.

5. Conclusion

In the Galahad poems by William Morris, we find a mixture of the characterizations of Tennyson's Sir Galahad and Browning's Childe Roland. Morris at first portrays Galahad as a secular knight, who feels deep loneliness and hardship in his journey, like Roland. This picture is totally different from Tennyson's Galahad, the religious knight, who believes in his strength coming from his pureness and unthinkably dedicates

himself to the holy order. However, while Browning demystifies the knight's quest by highlighting the grotesqueness in his journey, Morris does not go so far. After the self-examining contemplation and the admonition by the divine voice, Galahad appears before us as an iconographical figure which we encounter in Tennyson's "Sir Galahad." This unique characterization of Galahad by Morris is produced partly from his misreading and idealization of Browning's *Childe Roland* and partly from his "defiant admiration" toward Tennyson.

Morris later suggests the ideal method of retelling an old romance: "Read it through [. . .] then shut the book and write it out again as a new story for yourself" (17: xxxix). This idea curiously corresponds to Browning's way of creating "*Childe Roland*"; for the poet took up a single line from Edgar's song in *King Lear* (3. 4. 166) and expanded his imagination fully to create a hero who faces with the dreadful quest. The disunity and untidiness detected in Morris's Arthurian group of poems afford us the evidence that the young Morris was seeking for his own eloquence by assimilating to and dissimilating from the versification of Browning and Tennyson.

Notes

- 1 The first attempt of Morris's adaptation of Arthurian motif in his work was a fresco on the wall of the Union Debating Hall in Oxford [1857]. In the following year, he worked on his only oil painting *La Belle Iseult*. The Arthurian theme fascinated him so long that in his later years he took it up again and wove a series of tapestry on the Quest of the Holy Grail in collaboration with Edward Burne-Jones.
- 2 I read a paper concerning "The Defence of Guenevere" at the 78th Annual Meeting of the English Literary Society of Japan (21 May, 2006 at Chukyo University, Nagoya). As for the summary of the paper, see the *Proceedings* (Seki 68-70).
- 3 See Raymond (214n) for extended summaries of the early arguments which point out the lack of structure and unity in the group of poems.

- 4 All quotations of the poems are from the following editions: Morris, William. *The Works of William Morris*. Ed. May Morris. Vol.1; Tennyson, Alfred. *The Poems of Tennyson*. Ed. Christopher Ricks. Vol.2; Browning, Robert. *The Poetical Works of Robert Browning*. Ed. Ian Jack and Margaret Smith. Vol.5. Titles of the individual poems are abbreviated as follows: Morris's "Sir Galahad: A Christmas Mystery," CM; "The Chapel in Lyonesse," CL; Tennyson's "Sir Galahad," SG; Browning's "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came," CR.
- 5 C. B. Stevenson and V. Hale also point out the difference of Morris's Galahad from Tennyson's (385, 388-89)
- 6 Cf. Staines 449n; Arms 260; Kirchhoff 45; Thompson 80.
- 7 See John Mortimer's "The Three Quests: Childe Roland, Childe Harold, and the Sangrail" [1877] and Pansy Pakenham's "Grail-Themes in Browning's 'Childe Roland'" [1960].
- 8 Frederick Kirchhoff argues the same point, saying: "Childe Roland represents the heroic figure he [Morris] wishes to be. But this identification is only possible because his interpretation of "Childe Roland" is a radical misreading of the poem" (34).

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