



William Morris's "Praise of My Lady"



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Abstract

William Morris (1834-1896) was probably one of the most influential men in the Victorian Era. A designer, writer, book printer, and a committed Socialist, much of his work helped shape Victorian England and continues, still nowadays, to be thoroughly studied. However, having carried out notable work in a wide selection of disciplines, some of the poems in his first poetry volume, *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems* (1858), have often been neglected by scholars. “Praise of My Lady” is one of the poems in the volume and, when considered, it has often been labelled as escapist and thought to have no meaning beyond the plain description of a lady. This dissertation, however, is an attempt to show that there is yet more to the poem “Praise of My Lady” than mere escapism and the desire to create a fantasy world. The detailed description of the lady is consistently intertwined with Morris’s love for the medieval world and strongly driven by the devotion he felt for his wife-to-be. In this light, it is suggested that, although by means of the poem Morris did actually intend to turn Jane Burden into a suitable damsel for his medieval fantasy world, this intention was, to a certain extent a way of excusing and justifying the circumstances in which he found himself during their relationship. Love is therefore one of the central themes of the poem and it could be considered one of the driving forces that commanded Morris’s life. Additionally, the poem may be understood as an anticipation of the bigger project to which Morris would commit himself for the rest of his life: the endeavour to return to a society similar to the one of his beloved and highly idealised Middle Ages. Essential to the attempted return to the Middle Ages is, indeed, a representation of love tightly connected to Courtly Love, which Morris certainly succeeded in portraying. “Praise of My Lady” is, therefore, not only the embodiment of Morris’s dreams, but an active pursuit of relief and the manifestation of the alienation produced by Victorian society.

Key words: William Morris, ballad, “Praise of My Lady”, medievalism.

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1. Introduction

“I consider the case is this: the disease is simply being William Morris, and having done more work than most ten men”: these were the words of the doctor upon the death of William Morris (qtd. in Mackail 2:336), and someone motivating such words had for sure secured himself a place in history. He was a poet, novelist, designer, translator and also a political activist engaged in the British Socialist Movement.

Morris’s work has been conventionally associated with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (henceforth PRB). The PRB was a society of English artists created in 1848 and it was formed by seven men, among which Millais, Holman-Hunt and especially Rossetti are the best known. These men were profoundly dissatisfied with the teaching they were receiving at the Royal Academy (BBC. “The Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Revolutionaries”, 00:02:50-00:03:30) and they aimed at “taking art out of the establishment and returning it to the people” (Lloyd Webber, Andrew. “1/4 A Passion for the Pre-Raphaelites: Andrew Lloyd Webber.” (00:04:04-00:04:10). They wanted to restore meaning to art and for that they sought inspiration in the works of the artists before Raphael (Graham 32). William Morris, however, was younger than these men and he can be said to belong to what many scholars have named “the second wave of Pre-Raphaelitism” (Amstrong 27; Roe xxiv). This second generation of the movement comprises principally Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris and it is linked to the original generation by the figure of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Profoundly influenced by the original PRB, these men, Morris especially, had a great desire to produce beautiful things. They felt a deep hatred for the industrial society of the 19th century and they found inspiration in the Middle Ages.

Among the extensive work of Morris, *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems* (1858) is probably the most closely related to Pre-Raphaelitism and it was even considered by contemporary critics as “the first Pre-Raphaelite work of poetry” (Roe xxiv). The poems contained in this book may be divided into three categories: the first one comprises the poems inspired on Sir Thomas Malory¹, the second one the works

¹ English writer known for writing *Le Morte Darthr*, the first prose account of the legendary king Arthur. (Britannica).

influenced by Froissart² and the last one encompasses a number of poems which cannot be said to belong to any of the other two categories. The writings belonging to this last category, which have received less attention than the previous ones, are to all appearance poems set in a medieval-fantasy world which is dominated by romance. (Staines 441-459). One of these poems is “Praise of My Lady”: “a hymn to the beauty of Jane Burden who became the living ideal of beauty for Morris and his circle” (Hugh 30) and has even been referred to as “the very type of Pre-Raphaelite Womanhood” (Thompson 75). Although Morris’s poetry has been considered to be purely escapist in multiple occasions (Berry 280; Riede 85; Lourie; Hassett 99), the present study understands “Praise of My Lady” as a reproduction of one of the human passions that command life: love. Love, thus, is the central theme of the poem and it is undoubtedly related to heartfelt suffering. The representation of love we encounter in the poem is one in which the object of love, Jane Burden, is greatly idealised, we see an impossible love, yearning for fulfilment but which is altogether unattainable. This kind of love is deeply rooted in the idea of Courtly love. But not only is Morris expressing the love he felt for his wife-to-be, this particular representation of love is also a means for him to try to come to terms both with the relationship they had and his contemporary reality, as well as an anticipation of the bigger projects he would dedicate his life to.

It is, thus, the aim of this paper to analyse the poem by William Morris “Praise of My Lady” with particular focus on the theme of love. To this end, the reader will firstly be provided with both a historical context and some relevant details concerning the life of William Morris. Subsequently an analysis of the poem will be presented which will be followed by some concluding remarks.

2. Historical context and biographical details

William Morris was a man of his time, and therefore it seems inconceivable to understand his work without considering the period he lived in. The following section will, thus, provide the reader with the necessary details, regarding both Victorian England and Morris’s life.

² Medieval poet and writer of *Chronicles*, which is still one of the most relevant texts in feudal Europe.

Born in 1834, only three years before Victoria was crowned, Morris spent his childhood surrounded by nature, in an environment that often resembled the life of the Middle Ages and which stimulated the love he felt for this period (Mackail 1:9). As Chew and Altick state, a new era had really started in England with the passing of the Reform Bill of 1832 (1279), which would lead the country to become the most powerful nation in the world, but during his first years Morris was living happily in the countryside. Born into a well-to-do family, he received an excellent education and in 1853 he entered Exeter College at Oxford University. The learning experience itself was disappointing (Mackail 1:32), but during his Oxford years he met his lifelong friend Edward Burne-Jones and he also wrote his first poems. At the same time, he learned about the effects industrialization was having upon the country and its inhabitants (Mackail 1:64). At the time Morris arrived at Oxford the city still resembled a medieval town, but changes were soon to come (Mackail 1:28).

The Victorian Era was a period of transformation for England. The industry of the country was rapidly growing, creating as a result industrial areas that contrasted with the predominant small country towns. One of the main consequences of industrialization was the migration of people from the rural English countryside to the new industrial areas (BBC, "Painting the Town", 00:03:22-00:03:27) which brought along a change in the way of life of the British. The economy of the country shifted from a system "based on the land to a modern urban economy based on manufacturing, international trade and financial institutions" (Carter et al. 271). This change had a repercussion mainly on the workers, who suffered the negative effects of factories and the new industrial areas (BBC, "Painting the Town", 00:09:20-00:09:48). At the same time the cities grew, so did the population of the country, making the cities overcrowded and forcing many people to live in terrible conditions. However, although industrialization was spreading throughout the country, social and political reforms were not being made at the same rate (Thomson 33).

Regardless of the situation of the workers, Britain was the most powerful nation in Western Europe (Thomson 26) and there was a general sentiment that progress would never stop and that England would forever continue to hold its supremacy (Carter et al. 272). An example of this is the Great Exhibition of 1851, which was an excuse to prove

to the world how great and powerful Britain was as well as the great progress that was being made.

This progress, however, had other notorious effects on the people: new discoveries were being made in science which made the basis of the previous system tremble. The publication of books such as *Principles of Geology* (1830) and *The Origin of Species* (1859) offered a new explanation for human life and simultaneously proved that the account of the creation of the world as provided by the Bible was necessarily false. These new scientific theories stirred uncertainty among the Victorians, religion could no longer be trusted, and the whole belief system on which the society was based was no longer valid (BBC, “Dreams and Nightmares”, 00:05:23-00:06:56). This shows that although the Victorian Era was “a period of economic expansion and rapid change” (Carter et al. 271) and the country was being fully reshaped, there was a certain social unrest underlying in society.

The rapid evolution of the country was a topic the young men at Oxford would assiduously discuss (Mackail 1:64). The Brotherhood, for that was the name Morris and his friends gave to themselves, were profoundly disgusted by the way society was changing and it was precisely this deep hatred towards modern society and its values what made Morris resort to the Middle Ages and worlds of Romance in his literature.

Legends and myths offered him a world full of beauty that contrasted intensely with the reality in which he lived. However, Morris did not just turn his back to reality and live in his imaginary fantasy world, he was committed to the reality of his time and he actively sought to change it (Thompson 79), as can be evidenced by the indefatigable work he did for the Socialist cause in latter stages of his life as well as in his personal artistic projects. His vision of the Middle Ages, nevertheless, was a highly idealised one. Influenced by the late Romantic movement and poets such as Keats³ and their medievalism, Morris felt a strong impulse to fight his contemporary society and regarded the medieval society as one holding values which were “finer and richer than those of profit and capitalist utility” (Thompson 9). In addition, the second half of the

³ According to Thompson, Keats was the biggest influence in Morris’s youth. His impact can be clearly observed in the whole volume of *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*. Keats was a radical who hated the repressive society of his time and often found in “The Beautiful” a remedy for the oppressions of the world.

19th century witnessed an increasing interest in the medieval, both in literature and architecture (Thompson 27), and contributed to Morris's idea that the society of the Middle Ages was a "community of human beings- an organic pre-capitalist community with values and art of its own" (Thompson 28), and, hence, a society that unmistakably diverged from Victorian England.

By 1855 Ruskin and the PRB were known to Morris and they became a source of inspiration (Mackail 1:71). Ruskin in particular played a major role in the formation of Morris's ideas in relation to art. In *Stones of Venice* Ruskin expressed his ideas on how art was a means to change society, and in order to do so it was imperative for a single man to be able to think and work at once, as happened in medieval times. Victorian society, with its capitalism and mass production, was inevitably separating both these things and, therefore, alienating men (qtd. in Thompson 37).

This same year Morris and Burne-Jones decided to abandon their studies for the sake of dedicating completely to art. Morris decided to dedicate his time to one of his biggest passions: architecture (Mackail 1:78). An important influence that came to his life during this period and would later have a great impact on his work was the figure of Rossetti. In fact, it was under Rossetti's influence that Morris temporarily took up painting (Mackail 1:105). In the mean time, Morris had started working in Mr. Street's as an architect and there he met Philip Webb who was to become one of his closest friends (Mackail 1:102).

In 1857, when Morris, Burne-Jones and Rossetti were working on some murals in the Union Society Hall in Oxford, Rossetti and Burne-Jones met Jane Burden and motivated by her remarkable and uncommon beauty they asked her to sit for them (Mackail 1:136). Morris fell instantly for her and, inspired by her, he wrote "Praise of My Lady" (Mackail 1:115). The poem was published in *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems* in 1858, and soon after this Morris and Burden were married. Morris commissioned the construction of their new house, known as Red House. This house was a special project for Morris. He wanted to have his own "Palace of Art", a place where he could live happily without having to deal with the ugliness of Victorian England (Mackail 1:137-138). The building of the house, however, also represents the start of Morris's attempt "to reform the world [...] by means of Art" (Thompson 76).

The house was completed by 1860 and it was it was fully decorated by Morris and his friends in medieval style. The years spent in it were probably some of the happiest of his life (Mackail 1:144) and here was, too, where his two daughters Jane and Mary were born and also where the firm Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. was created. Although the house had to be given up, the firm became, for the rest of his life, one of his major projects. In it he found a way of fighting against the ugliness of mass produced goods and of bringing to practice his ideals concerning medieval ways of working and craftsmanship (Thompson 108).

For the following seventeen years Morris dedicated his time to numerous different projects. Texts such as *The Life and Death of Jason*, *The Earthly Paradise* and “Love is Enough” were written during this period and translations of texts including the *Aeneid* were carried out. He started Icelandic studies instructed by Mr. Magnússon which would allow him to translate several Icelandic Sagas in the future⁴. The firm, now one of Morris’s central occupations, was dissolved in 1875 leaving him as the only manager and owner (Mackail 1:307). New disciplines, fabric dyeing and carpet knotting, were taken up by the firm during this period and were carried out to a large extent following medieval methods (Mackail 1:313).

From the mid-seventies until the end of his life Morris was politically active. This interest for politics began as an attempt at saving old buildings from restorations by means of the creation of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (Mackail 1:338) and developed into a significant commitment to the Socialist cause. During these years he was involved in different associations such as the Eastern Question Association and the Democratic Federation and he later devoted great part of his time and effort to the cause of The Socialist League (Mackail 2:140). From 1886, he resumed his normal creative work, which had been partially left aside, alongside the political action since he believed that Education towards Revolution had to be pursued (Mackail 2:163). He began writing *The Dream of John Ball*, which would develop into a series of prose romances he would carry on writing for the rest of his life (Mackail 2:168) and he also continued to work in translation of works such as the *Odyssey*. One of his best known

⁴ For more information see Mackail, J.W. *The Life of Willaim Morris*. Vol. 1, 1899.

works of this period, however, and one in fact more directly connected to Socialism, is *News from Nowhere*, published in 1890 (Mackail 2:231).

Morris's love for extremely beautiful books led him to the creation of the Kelmscott Press, used for the first time in 1891 (Mackail 2:253). He designed his own font, inspired by medieval manuscripts, to be used in the press and the books printed in it were ones of great beauty among which we can find Caxton's *Golden Legend*, a volume including his own poems and entitled *Poems by the Way*, and the famous Kelmscott *Chaucer*⁵. Burne-Jones, his lifelong companion, worked with him designing the images that were printed in the books.

In the last years of his life he retired from active political life (Mackail 2:230) but he still believed in the necessity of making Socialists (Mackail 2:238) a job that he kept doing at the same time he was working on his usual creative projects. However, during 1895 his health began to fail and he died on the 3rd of October 1896 (Mackail 2:335).

As can be concluded from the study of his life, Morris was very present in the political reality of England for the greatest part of his life. He strongly believed that "the life of Victorian England was an intolerable life, and ought not to be borne by humans" (Thompson 2). The strong hatred he felt for society, combined with his deep love for romance, had as a result a collection of works which is at the same time evocative of a fantasy world and utterly contemporary to the period in which he lived. As much as he detested Victorian England, his work is a direct product of this precise background and in it can be seen one of the greatest efforts in the 19th century to fight against the progress that he saw as an atrocity. All his work, both political and creative, was partly motivated and drastically influenced by the medievalism that was the basis of his theories and would be fundamental in the latter creation of movements such as the Arts and Crafts. Morris understood art as a tool to change society and supported the idea that, as it happened in his romanticised medieval times, artists should be workmen and workmen should be artists (Mackail 2:63).

⁵ For more information see Mackail, J.W. *The Life of Willaim Morris*. Vol. 2, 1899.

3. "Praise of My Lady"

Having placed the poem in the context that is so relevant to it, as well as shortly considering the life of its author, the following section is an attempt at thoroughly analysing the poem "Praise of My Lady", particularly focusing on the theme of love. It is pertinent, however, to briefly consider the concept of "Courtly Love", one of the ideas in which the analysis is based, as well as shortly to look at Morris's medievalism which accounts, to a great extent, for the specific representation of love in the poem.

The representation of love in "Praise of My Lady" is one greatly corresponding to the concept of "Courtly Love", which has its origin in 12th century France. Popularised by the troubadours, this conception of love arose and spread, later, to the rest of Europe, having a great influence on the literature of the following centuries (Capellanus 6).

Courtly Love obeys a series of rules which Andreas Capellanus collects in his book entitled *The Art of Courtly Love*. One of the essential characteristics of this kind of love is that the beloved lady must be of a much higher rank than the man (Capellanus 7). The superior position of the woman (who is, in addition, very often married to another man) makes her remote and unachievable. The love resulting from this, will, therefore, never reach fulfilment. It is extremely important, however, that the feeling of love will never lead the man to obtain the object of his love, "since complacency in the attainment of the beloved may lead to quiescence in the beloved object and so satiety, troubadour love must remain desire, a yearning that is unappeased" (Denomy 44). We could conclude, thus, that the very essence of courtly love is prolonged exaltation and a desire that will be almost unbearable.

On the basis that love is suffering (Capellanus 28), the courtly man will assume an attitude of humility and submission to the wishes of his beloved (de Rougemont 124). In this way, it is left to the woman to decide whether she does or she does not return the love of her pretender (Capellanus 47).

Other noteworthy aspects of courtly love that will be relevant for the understanding of "Praise of My Lady" are the ones expressed by Capellanus's rules

XIV, XV and XXII. In these he states first of all that “the easy attainment of love makes it of little value; difficulty of attainment makes it prized”. He also claims that “every lover regularly turns pale in the presence of his beloved” and finally remarks that “jealousy, and therefore love, always increases the feeling of love” (Capellanus 185).

The return to an idea of love so deeply grounded in medieval notions may be understood as a fragment of a bigger system of belief that marked Morris’s entire life: medievalism. In the 19th century, the Middle Ages “seemed distant enough to be viewed through a veil of romance” (Lourie). In a society increasingly concerned with utilitarianism, people needed to find a source of humanity and for that they resorted to poetry. Morris, by means of his medievalism, returned “to the roots of human feeling (Louire). This medievalism does, in addition, provide a legitimate framework that enabled Morris to express his ideas and concerns and worked as “an answer to a deficiency in contemporary life” (Berry 280). Although the use of medieval elements allowed him to “reach a more remote and more intense world” (Staines 463), he also “demonstrates a remarkable modernity” (Riede 85). Throughout his life he worked for the creation of a society in which all the citizens would be equal to each other and all of them would be allowed to enjoy beautiful things (Hugh 5) and, to some extent, the poem is the portrayal of his struggle to come to terms with his feelings and ideals in a world that had no room for them. This struggle is evidenced in the poem, as will be noted below.

4. The Poem

“Praise of My Lady” is a ballad, that is, it is an ancient poetic form which, in Europe, prospered in the late Middle Ages (Cuddon 64). The word ballad comes from Late Latin and Italian *ballare* meaning to dance, also related to *ballata* meaning “a dance or a song sung in dance” (Hensleigh 100). Thus, a ballad is “a poem or a song that tells a story in simple colloquial language” (Gray 39). This kind of poem usually deals with themes coming from folklore and legends, and this, together with the fact that the interest for this specific type of ballads grew in the Romantic Period, provides a likely explanation for Morris to have chosen this particular form. Among the typical characteristics of ballads, there are some which may be seen in the poem: the language

employed is simple, the theme it deals with is tragic, and it has a refrain that is repeated at the end of each and every stanza (Cuddon 65). In terms of content, ballads tend to centre in a single specific action, telling a complete short story and focusing exclusively in that particular action, without considering its context. The themes ballads deal with are usually simple, tragic and universal, in the case of “Praise of My Lady” Morris touches upon the subject of unrequited love (Cuddon 65). As the author of the poem is known and it was written down at the same time as it was composed, this poem could be classified as a literary ballad (Cuddon 65). The poem also has the typical ballad meter marked by the use of quatrains. However, the rhyme scheme is slightly different to the typical one: instead of ABCB or ABAB we get AABC, as the refrain does not rhyme with any of the lines (Cuddon 66). “Praise of My Lady” consists of 22 quatrains which make a total of 88 lines.

With regard to rhythm and intonation, the poem is mostly written in iambic tetrameter which accounts for its generally harmonious and melodious rhythm. However, the end of certain lines such as 11 and 15, which finish with words ending in “-lly” break with this overall regular melody. The intonation in these lines is falling rather than rising which is somehow related to Morris’s weakness. There are also several instances in which the refrain interrupts a sentence (between lines 15 and 17, 35 and 37, 59 and 61, 67 and 69, 75 and 77, and 83 and 85) and create a rupture with in the rhythm. This break in the rhythm become more recurrent towards the end of the poem and could be considered a direct reflection of the growing excitement of the poet.

Regarding, in the first place, the title of the poem, “Praise of My Lady”, already advances the subject of the poem. The word “praise” is defined by the *Cambridge Dictionary* as “to honour, worship, and express admiration for a God” (“praise”). Therefore, it becomes clear to the reader from the beginning that the poem will celebrate “My Lady”. Bearing in mind the moment in which the poem was written (1857) and the profound effect she had on him, this lady is arguably Jane Burden, who would later become Morris’s wife. The act of worshiping directly puts Jane Burden in a position of superiority as compared to Morris, in fact, in a god-like position. This admiration towards Jane Burden is tightly linked with the love the poet felt for his wife-to-be and illustrates one of the most basic tenets of Courtly love that have been mentioned before: she is superior and altogether unattainable.

The focus of the analysis will be now fully centred on the study of the content of the poem itself. To this end, a stanza-by-stanza analysis of the piece of writing will be carried out, emphasising particularly love and its conception. An attempt will be made at providing a consistent explanation so as to why Morris portrays Jane Burden in this specific way, establishing connections with his personal life as well as with the period he lived in.

My lady seems of ivory	A
Forehead, straight nose, and cheeks that be	B
Hollow'd a little mournfully,	A
<i>Beata mea Domina!</i>	C

The poem starts by properly introducing the reader to the subject matter: the lady who was mentioned in the title. As the title suggests Morris refers to her as “My Lady”, which is a way of addressing English noblewomen (“mylady”) and which contributes to the creation of a slightly medieval atmosphere (Skoblow 199).

The speaker of the poem, arguably Morris, immediately begins her physical description by pointing out at the fact that she “seems of ivory”. Not only does the word ivory clearly suggest paleness, but it also implies rigidity and coldness. In addition, ivory is a very expensive and hard to get material which alludes at the fact that she is valuable and precious. A relation may also be established between this reference to ivory and the expression “to be/live in an ivory tower”, meaning, according to the *Cambridge Dictionary*, “to not know or to want to avoid the ordinary and unpleasant things that happen in people’s lives” (“ivory tower”). It will become manifest, as the poem is analysed, that Jane Burden does not seem to notice William Morris’s feelings or even his presence, and so it could be claimed that rather than living in the tower of ivory, she is the tower herself.

The speaker, then, moves on to her face, which is the first specific part of the body under consideration. The very first stanza already hints at the idea of sadness that will be recurrent throughout the poem. In this first instance the sadness is evidenced in her cheeks (“mournfully”). Therefore, the woman presented in this stanza is characterised by her looks of rigidity, coldness and paleness, with scarce signs of life shown in her

body, and whose face is, in addition, sad. It may also be observed that the narrator is, to a certain extent, aware of her emotions.

It is also in this first stanza that the refrain, which will be repeated at the end of every stanza of the poem, is introduced for the first time. It is written in Latin and it means “my blessed lady”, which could be a way of addressing the Virgin Mary. As evidenced by diverse Marian Hymns, such as “O Domina Mea” or “Beata es Virgo Maria”, both the words “beata” and “Domina” are commonly used to refer to the Virgin Mary. This, together with the word “Domina” being written with a capital letter may be suggestive of William Morris referring to Jane Burden as if she were the Virgin herself. The fact that it is repeated once every three lines creates an atmosphere of echo, as if the speaker were being interrupted by someone who is reassuring him on his thoughts or who is showing agreement with what he says. Another peculiarity of the refrain is that it sounds rather church-like, as if a priest were chanting in mass and the people in the church would repeat the refrain all at the same time, which would seem appropriate as he is placing her at the same level as a divine being. Concerning form, it must be noted that the refrain is written in italics creating in this way a visual rupture that contrasts with the rest of the lines. According to Hassett, this change “displays its productive and concluding force” (Hassett 106). One last thing about the refrain is worth highlighting: the exclamation mark that closes it. This exclamation mark makes the refrain stronger and more powerful in tone than the rest of the lines. The poet, in some way, seems to alternate between intervals of relative calmness, which last for three lines, and really short but indomitable periods of high-excitement that break with the general mood of the poem.

Her forehead, overshadow'd much	A
By bows of hair, has a wave such	A
As God was good to make for me.	B
<i>Beata mea Domina!</i>	C

The second stanza introduces the idea of the lady, or at least some specific parts of her body, being a creation of God: “as God was good to make for me”. Since God created her she must be beautiful, God being the only creator of beauty and creating exclusively beautiful things (Coomaraswamy 10). Considering that strictly speaking

beauty is exactly the same as goodness (Coomaraswamy 15), she must be both beautiful and good. She is a divine creation, an ultimately superior being.

The word “overshadow’d” suggests that her face is not completely pale: a shadow is created over it by her hair breaking, in this manner, with the whiteness of her face. Thus, a contrast between light and darkness is created: Jane Burden’s face is not just purely white and pale, nor is everything in it light; a shadow that could be the direct reflection of her sadness darkens her expression.

Not greatly long my lady’s hair,	A
Nor yet with yellow colour fair,	A
But thick and crisped wonderfully:	B
<i>Beata mea Domina!</i>	C

As the face is left aside and the focus of the text is fully placed on the lady’s hair, the speaker acknowledges that despite her hair not being long or blond, it is still wonderfully defined. Morris seems to be implying that although blond and longer hair was probably preferred at that time, Jane Burden’s hair is worth no less. These thoughts about her hair can be extrapolated to Jane in general. As it has often been claimed Jane was not a conventional beauty, her physical attributes did not fit the ideals of beauty of the Victorian period. In fact, she was even described as a gypsy sometimes, which at the time was an insult (Casteras 31). Still, Morris and his circle, especially Rossetti, thought she was extraordinarily beautiful and she went as far as to becoming their “living ideal of beauty” (Hugh 30).

The darkness of the hair accentuates the contrast introduced in the previous stanza, as it contributes to the creation of an image of diverse dark elements being continuously superposed against the immaculate whiteness of the skin.

Heavy to make her pale face sad,	A
And dark, but dead as though it had	A
Been forged by God most wonderfully	B

The description of the hair continues in the next stanza, but instead of being simply descriptive Morris now suggests that it is the source of her sadness: “heavy to make her pale face sad”. Hence, at this point, the cause of the lady’s sadness seems to be external, an impression created by something superficial. He reiterates on the fact that the hair was created by God and so it has been done “wonderfully”. The use of the word “forge” to describe the creation of the hair is noteworthy, as forging refers usually to works carried on metal. The rigidity that has been observed in her body as a consequence of the fact that she seemed to be made out of ivory comes back now in her hair, since it resembles metal. Once more, her hair is described as dark which makes the contrast between it and the paleness of her skin stronger and more evident as the poem goes on.

Another remarkable feature of the hair is that it is “dead”, again suggesting stiffness, it is lacking life as is the rest of her body. Therefore, there is a general air of lifelessness to the figure of the lady. One possible cause of this absence of life is her inner state: her sorrow is evidenced in her body. It is also pertinent to mention that feminine hair is considered to be a very sensual part of the body. For the Pre-Raphaelites, “loose, luxuriant hair was an emblem of female sexuality” (Marsh 23). Hence, it could be said that, although the hair does not exhibit many signs of life, it definitely suggests sensuality.

Of some strange metal, thread by thread,	A
To stand out from my lady’s head,	A
Not moving much to tangle me.	B
<i>Beata mea Domina!</i>	C

It is now confirmed that the hair is actually made out of metal: “of some strange metal”, and due to this it does not move much. Regardless of its stillness, it does stand out and it catches Morris’s attention. However, he is not tangled in the hair, possibly because he is not close enough to touch the hair and be trapped in it.

The fact that the lady's hair was created "thread by thread" implies that a great effort was probably made by God for its creation and that it was a task very carefully carried out.

Beneath her brows the lids fall slow. A

The lashes a clear shadow throw A

Where I would wish my lips to be. B

Beata mea Domina!

The description of the hair being concluded, he moves on to the lady's eyes. He looks at the lids to begin with, and he comments upon the fact that they move slowly: "fall slow". This, together with the hair which was created "thread by thread" contributes to the achievement of a slow rhythm almost throughout the whole poem. The pace is particularly slow because each aspect of the lady's body is described with minute detail, almost as if she were being painted. The poem as a whole draws a complete image of the physical aspect of the lady's body. His way of writing, extremely detailed, could have been influenced by the principle of "Truth to Nature" that was one of the main characteristics of Pre-Raphaelite painting (Roe xix).

The shadow comes back again in these lines: "the lashes a clear shadow throw", creating the vision of some kind of inherent darkness in her face. The emphasis on the shadow produces the impression of it being a permanent dark element which has several different sources. In this particular instance the lashes create the shadow under her eyes.

In this stanza the reader encounters, for the first time in the poem, an explicit reference on Morris's part concerning the sexual desire he feels for Jane. He overtly expresses that he wants to kiss her, he wishes to do so: "where I would wish my lips to be", but it seems to be just a wish which is not likely to be fulfilled. Hence, the love expressed by the poet is not merely spiritual; there is some carnal dimension to it and it is passionate. This carnal dimension of love is characteristic of courtly love, as the troubadours accepted that sexual desire was certainly a part of love (Ackerman 82).

Her great eyes, standing far apart, A

Draw up some memory from her heart, A

I wonder if the lashes long	A
Are those that do her bright eyes wrong,	A
For always half tears seem to be	B
<i>Beata mea Domina!</i>	C

Morris questions himself about the reason for her sadness. Aware as he is of her unhappiness and despite knowing that she is waiting for that something that used to make her happy in the past, he overlooks all of this and he conjectures that maybe it could be her lashes that make her eyes look sombre: “I wonder if the lashes long/ Are those that make her bright eyes wrong”. Instead of considering her feelings at a deeper level he tries to provide an explanation by means of a much more superficial theory. There is a struggle between his trivial theory and reality. She is perpetually half crying: “always half tears seem to be”. If what troubles her is significant enough to make her cry permanently there must be a more profound concern that accounts for her affectation.

Lurking below the underlid,	A
Darkening the place where they lie hid:	A
If they should rise and flow for me!	B
<i>Beata mea Domina!</i>	C

The idea of darkness is restated yet another time in this stanza: “darkening the place where they lie hid”, again contrasting with the eminent whiteness of her body.

Although in stanza six we already saw Morris’s desire to kiss her, now we see that he wishes for her to look at him, he longs for her to acknowledge his existence: “If they should rise and flow for me”. The love he feels is clearly not reciprocal as she does not love him back and she definitely does not share his feelings and desires, yet he is eager to get some emotional response from her. But she just does not satisfy his expectations.

Her full lips being made to kiss,	A
Curl’d up and pensive each one is;	A
This makes me faint to stand and see.	B
<i>Beata mea Domina!</i>	C

Stanza eleven sets up to depict the lady's lips. They are very sensual, they have been "made to kiss" and therefore their predetermined purpose is sensuous, bodily and associated with love. This sensuousness contrasts with the sadness that was so apparent in her eyes, the lady is an ongoing illustration of contradictions. Howbeit, Morris, as he himself already stated, does not kiss her, failing to consummate the expectation.

The sight of her lips is so powerful and has such a strong impact on him that it causes him to feel extremely weak: "This makes me faint to stand and see". This reflects how big of an impression the contemplation of Jane creates on him: her presence is weakening, he is lovesick but she does not even notice him. As it has been shown, debility caused by the sight of the beloved is a sign of courtly love (Capellanus 185).

Her lips are not contented now,	A
Because the hours pass so slow	A
Towards a sweet time: (pray for me),	B
<i>Beata mea Domina!</i>	C

These beautiful, sensuous lips, the sight of which makes him so feeble, however, are "not contented now". Nevertheless the construction of the line seems to imply that they must have been so at some other moment. The reason why they are discontent, accentuating the idea of sadness as obviously discernible in her face, is that she is waiting for something. He highlights the waiting for a "sweet time", the expecting of something better, maybe happiness that is to come. Anyway, the hours do not pass quickly enough and that makes her profoundly sorrowful.

Morris then directly addresses the speaker to ask him/her to pray for him, asking, in some way for help. This line proves that he is completely aware of what is happening, but he seems to be requesting help to deal with it, to somehow return to the previous state in which he was able to justify her sadness with superficial reasons. His awareness of the situation, thus, seems to be increasing as he contemplates the lady.

Nay, hold thy peace! For who can tell?	A
--	---

But this at least I know full well,	A
Her lips are parted longingly,	B
<i>Beata mea Domina!</i>	C

The first line of this stanza continues to address the reader directly. To hold one's peace means to shut up although there is something you want to say ("to hold your peace"). At this point, then, Morris knows that the reader has probably something to say but he orders him to remain quiet. It is likely that he thinks that the reader has some personal opinion so as to what the lady is waiting for or even some theory concerning the reason for her unhappiness. Worth mentioning, additionally, is the fact that the first line takes the form of an exclamation, "Nay, hold thy peace!", which is a materialisation of the growing agitation of the speaker. The rhetorical question, continuing to show Morris's excitement, implies that he believes that no one can really tell what she waits for, a lack of communication is suggested and Morris himself seems not to be, or rather, not to want to be aware of reality. These lines reflect the anxiety Morris felt as a consequence of the thoughts concerning his relationship with Jane. It can be observed that he is trying to repress these thoughts, but since evidence that confirms them can be seen so clearly in the lady's body it is impossible for him to do so.

The one thing he knows, though, is that "her lips are parted longingly". The lady definitely has a sexual desire and for a woman to have sexual desire was unthinkable at the time when the poem was written. From this, as well as from her physical appearance, we can infer that she did not conform to the ideals of femininity of Victorian period (Harrold 106).

Likewise, as it has already been commented upon, she seems not to feel any desire for Morris, which leads the reader to infer that not only does she have sexual desire, but this desire is for someone other than her husband-to-be. In the 19th century it was completely out of the question for a woman to feel sexual desire, not to mention the consequences infidelity could have (Harrold 116).

So passionate and swift to move,	A
To pluck at any flying love,	A

That I grow quite faint to stand and see. B
Beata mea Domina! C

In addition to being parted longingly, the lips are also “passionate”, which reinforces the idea of Jane having sexual desire and what is more, they are trying to grab at any flying love. It is worth to notice that the word used is “any”, as it suggests that it is not a particular love that she desires, the word seems to imply that anyone will do, anyone who is not her husband-to-be, of course. Another important point is that he portrays her as capable of infidelity, she was her own will and she will act according to it (Attwell 117).

Seeing this makes him feel dizzy again, he feels unwell maybe as a consequence of contemplating her or perhaps because he is not able to overlook reality, as much as he is trying to do so.

Yea! There beneath them is her chin, A
So fine and round, it were a sin A
To feel no weaker when I see B
Beata mea Domina! C

God’s dealings; for with so much care A
And troublous, faint lines wrought in there, A
He finishes her face for me. B
Beata mea Domina! C

In these two stanzas Morris justifies the weakness he feels when he sees her. In fact, he believes that it would be a sin to feel any other way because this reaction is fully provoked by the way he looks and her presence, and it does not only apply to him, but to everyone, after all, it is a creation of God that he is contemplating. The creation was done very carefully, there are lines in her face which are wrought: once more she seems to be made out of metal, not just her hair, but also her face.

Another important element in this section is the exclamation that opens stanza fifteen: “yea!”. It shows the excitement, the outburst of emotions Morris is feeling and it

also marks a shift in the rhythm of the poem that was already anticipated in stanza thirteen: from this moment on the pace is accelerated, reflecting the poet's inner state, which seems to be one of great agitation. At the same time, the description becomes less detailed as he passes from Jane Burden's face to her body.

Of her long neck what shall I say?	A
What things about her body's sway,	A
Like a knight's pennon or slim tree	B
<i>Beata mea Domina!</i>	C

Set gently waving in the wind;	A
Or her long hands that I might find	A
On some day sweet to move o'er me?	B
<i>Beata mea Domina!</i>	C

With a descending motion the focus of the description is now placed on the lady's body. Morris briefly mentions the neck, another highly sensual body part, but he seems not to be able to find the right words to describe it, as it is made manifest by the rhetorical questions. Similarly he does not know what to say about the movement of her body. However, he makes reference to the fact that it sways as if it were being rocked by the wind: "gently waving in the wind", in movement but not because of her own will. This movement is compared to a "knight's pennon", a medieval reference, and with a "slim tree". Both these things are tall and very slim, as she was, and they do not have the power to move themselves, they might look rather lifeless when the wind is moving them and that is precisely what happens with the lady's body. This simile reinforces that idea that her paleness could, to some extent, represent the absence of life in her body. However, the wind rocks her gently, as if looking after her.

He then goes down to her hands, and once more he expresses his desire for some kind of physical contact, for her to touch him in particular: "Or her long hands that I might find/ On some sweet day to move o'er me?". He rhetorically asks about the future, and wonders whether she will touch him and although the likely answer seems to be that she will not, he seems to be certain that they will continue to be together.

God pity me though, if I miss'd	A
The telling, how along her wrist	A
The veins creep, dying languidly	B
<i>Beata mea Domina!</i>	C

Despite knowing that she does not requite his feelings, he prefers to have the relationship they have rather than having nothing at all. It would be a pity to miss the glorious sight: “God pity me though, if I miss'd/The telling”. Although he is aware that Jane does not love him he resigns himself to observe her.

By her hands he discerns the veins along her wrists. He must be fairly close to her inasmuch as he can see her veins and as the account of her physical appearance that he is giving is extremely detailed, he looks at every single feature. Her paleness is emphasised by the fact that the veins can be seen quite clearly through her skin. It is also worth mentioning that the veins “creep”, that is, they move with difficulty and they are dying, which literally probably means that they are merging with the flesh but might also convey the absence of life that is also perceivable in other parts of her body.

Inside her tender palm and thin.	A
Now give me pardon, dear, wherein	A
My voice is weak and vexes thee.	B
<i>Beata mea Domina!</i>	C

Finally, after having been looking at her for a total of twenty stanzas, the lady acknowledges Morris’s presence for the first time, but the response on her side is completely opposite to the poet’s feelings. Morris’s voice, which is praising her, is a cause of annoyance for her: “my voice is weak and vexes thee”, probably because his speaking forces her to respond to his presence. His reaction to that is to apologize: “Now give me pardon, dear”, and from this it can be inferred that she is cold and distant, and that she does not care about the expression of his deeply-felt love. In addition, his voice is “weak”, he probably feels inferior in comparison to her and

unqualified to talk to such a god-like creature. His attitude is submissive, he appears to be controlled by her. This posture, which resembles the archetypical attitude of the medieval poet (Lourie), is, however, what the reader would expect, since “Submission towards the beloved lady is the natural signal of a courtly man” (qdt. in de Rougemont 124) and Morris was manifestly portraying courtly love. He “assumes a supplicating and reverential posture towards his quasi-divine mistress, persistently urges his own unworthiness, and seems to expect disappointment” (Lourie).

The nature of her character, her coldness and impassivity, contrasts with the description of her hands, they are tender, of delicate nature. Once again an incongruousness is found between the beautiful body and cold and hardhearted attitude which is a representation of her inner state.

All men that see her any time,	A
I charge you straightly in this rhyme,	A
What, and wherever you may be,	B
<i>Beata mea Domina!</i>	C

To kneel before her; as for me,	A
I choke and grow quite faint to see	A
My lady moving graciously.	B
<i>Beata mea Domina!</i>	C

The tone of the speaker changes in the last two stanzas and so does the verb tense that is employed. Morris speaks in an invocative way and he addresses all the men that might ever see Jane. He commands them “to kneel before her”, to show admiration and respect in the event that they see her, for when seeing her he is weakened to such an extent that he is not able to behave in a way that is worthy of her :“I choke and grow quite faint to see”.

What has been stated above shows that the pursuit of romance that was so significant in Morris’s life was in a way realised by the creation of a fantasy world of his own (Thompson 64). However, at the time when the poem was written, he needed to

make this world as complete as possible and for that it needed a medieval damsel. This damsel came to him in the shape of Jane Burden.

Morris wanted a woman that would fit into his medieval dream world, and he tried to adjust Jane to his standards. However, he was aware, although he tried to ignore it, of what the reality was and he was perfectly conscious of her lack of feelings towards him. By means of the poem he wanted to make that ideal image of her more real, although he was somehow anticipating the future of their relationship. As Thompson states “he had married not her, but a picture, an ideal from his Pre-Raphaelite dream-world” (75). He wanted to force her, to make her fit that concept of lady that would match his make-pretend world of romance. This could only be done in his imagination, and even there Jane’s feelings, desires and “imperfections” were so real that he could not overlook them. The woman we see in the poem is physically ideal but her emotions are flawed, there is some kind of struggle between her appearance and her emotions so as to which one will overcome the other. Jane’s inner struggle is, of course, affecting Morris as well. In the poem we may observe that he asks questions about the situation, that he is aware of her feelings and that as much as he tries to make her perfect according to his ideals, as much as he tries to focus only on what he likes, her sadness is being evidenced in the physical state of her body and it is unavoidable.

A very fine line can be drawn between his desire for the ideal damsel and the need of consolation that such a relationship as the one they had could provoke in him. Despite there not being too many accounts of Jane’s personality and attitude, scholars seem to agree on the fact that she had quite a peculiar personality, characterised by passivity, moodiness and silence (Thompson 158), which suits a representation such as the one we encounter in “Praise of My Lady”. Her portrayal in the poem, regardless of how much it corresponds with reality, is highly influenced by the idea of courtly love: the lady is unattainable and Morris must resign himself. By placing her in such a high position he is creating an obstacle, and by doing so he is providing himself with a plausible reason which explains the relationship not meeting his expectations. Obstacles in the attainment of love are, according to de Rougemont essential in order to keep passion alive (286) and so Morris created his own obstacle by portraying Jane according to the courtly ideals: she is remote, “unattainable in this world” (Riede 93).

It is probably a mixture of both these things, a need for Jane Burden to fit his ideal world and his personal need to justify the relationship, that lead Morris to portray his wife-to-be in such a way.

Another important issue in the poem is lack of communication. Morris and Jane do not talk to each other, while he is focused on observing her she is absentminded, thinking about something else and probably living in her own dream world, where Morris is nonexistent. The feeling the reader gets is that Morris is painting a picture of Jane with words, an extremely detailed one, but he is just the painter, he does not belong within the picture, he is a mere observer.

Consequently, we can say that Morris portrayed an idealised love and one that is not requited. Jane does not love him, and that is precisely the reason for his immoderate and irrational love. As it is illustrated in the myth of Tristan and Iseult it was precisely the fact that Iseult was impossible to get that kept Tristan's desire alive (de Rougemont 286), and Morris finds himself in the exact same situation. His love is stronger and deeper because he knows that Jane does not feel the same way, she is unattainable, a drastically idealised woman that he sees as the result of the careful and meticulous work of God.

Worth mentioning in this respect is the painting *La Belle Iseult*⁶ painted by Morris in 1858, soon after the poem was written. The painting portrays Jane Burden as a medieval damsel, tall and slim, perfectly fitting the words of "Praise of My Lady". The fact that Jane is represented as Iseult is remarkable because, "Iseult's love is romantic although strictly speaking adulterous" (Marsh 100). Hence, there seems to be an underlying connection between the poem and the painting which ultimately reinforces the idea of Jane's infidelity, even before their marriage (Attwell 117). He is apparently unable to distance his thoughts from her unfaithfulness.

Going back to the poem, the overall tone of it is in the first place, adoring. As it has been mentioned in the discussion of the title the poem is the praise of the lady and this lady is worth of being praised mainly because of her external appearance, her

⁶ Morris, William. *La Belle Iseult*. 1858, oil paint on canvass, Tate Gallery, London. See appendix.

beauty is such that makes the poet feel weak and dizzy. Seeing her is an impressive, magnificent sight. He emphasises the idea that she has been created by God, which immediately places her in a higher position in respect to him: she is a divine creature, a superior being, and as such she must be admired.

However, there is more to her than beauty: there is a profound sadness that can be read in the lady's face and body and this is a fact that Morris fully acknowledges. The admiring tone is therefore blended with an underlying tone of consciousness which can be felt throughout the poem. He also seems to be aware of the fact that, not only is the lady sad, but she also has sexual desires for someone other than him. Nevertheless, this awareness of reality is considerably weaker than his love for her and somehow reality is pushed aside and his love is what overtakes his mind.

In the same way there seems to be a division between the lady's feelings and her appearance, there is also a division when it comes to Morris, although in this case it is a purely internal matter. As previously mentioned he is fascinated by the beauty of the lady, but at the same time he feels abandoned, neglected, and forgotten. The fact that our notion of love is connected with the idea of suffering accounts Morris's love towards her despite her indifference. These feelings, which seemed not to have a place in the Victorian society, were of great importance to Morris and by writing about them he was somehow defying and fighting the standards and ideals set by the society of his time.

The analysis of this poem would not be complete without briefly commenting upon *Pre-Raphaelite Ballads*, a volume where "Praise of My Lady" was republished in the year 1900. This book is a collection of several ballads by Morris and they are accompanied by illustrations created by K. M. O'Kane. Two issues make the volume worth mentioning: first of all the poems were considered relevant enough to be republished almost half a century after their original date of publication and secondly the image that accompanied the ballad is definitely significant. A connection has been previously established between the poem and the painting *La Belle Iseult*, in which Jane Burden was portrayed as the adulterous and cold-hearted Iseult. In *Pre-Raphaelite Ballads*, however, the image presented with the poem portrays a man and a woman, both lying on the forest and with expressions of calmness and serenity. This illustration

shows an evolution in Morris's attitude towards his relationship with Jane Burden. Thompson indicates that Morris eventually accepted that his marriage had failed (157) and as he developed his political ideals he became convinced that married people should still remain independent from one another (161), which, at the same time suggests that Morris could have reached some sort of internal peace concerning their relationship. The latter illustration then, although much less personal, shows a relationship that is more close to friendship than to romantic love and hints at the fact that the anxiety felt by Morris in his younger years dissipated, at least partially, towards the end of his life.

5. Conclusion

As has been suggested in the previous pages, "Praise of My Lady" is not simply escapist poetry. The poem, as much as it portrays Jane Burden as a "vision in a dream" (Riede 87) and as much as the atmosphere in it is medieval, serves the function of helping Morris accept and internalise the reality he was living. The poem reflects the struggle of a man to deal with a situation that was contemporary and real to him: a relationship with a woman who did not love him. The topic, thus, is a modern one and the Middle Ages, with their Courtly Love and medieval damsels, provided Morris with an archetypal framework in which he could somehow find consolation. Since the concept of Courtly Love fundamentally represents a love that is altogether unachievable and which has as its ultimate purpose its own impossibility, Morris could have found in it a way to justify his reality. It has been observed, similarly, that "the echoes of pain and suffering of the outside world are never silent in his enchanted world" (qtd. in Klaers 28) since Morris was unable to completely overlook reality and ignore its manifestations. The lady in the poem is, despite her beauty and her God-like features, as sad as she is unattainable. We see, therefore, that he was probably not completely capable of excusing his situation.

But not only is the poem a way for Morris to come to terms with himself, the poem can also be read as one of his earliest attempts at fighting Victorian society. That Morris hated his society is clear enough, and it has been shown that, somehow, Morris had, in fact, created his own fantasy world and that that world was based on his romanticised idea of the Middle Ages. It is essential to remember, however, that although this world may have served him as a refuge from 19th century England, its

primary function was a rather different one: it was an inexhaustible effort to fight industrialism and utilitarianism. He saw Victorian England as an increasingly dehumanised society, in which relationships among people were impoverished, and the pursuance of romance was his personal way of combating that.

All things considered, the representation of a love “yearning for fulfilment, but bringing with it the fear that with the fulfilment of love the ideal would be shattered” (Thompson 67) was a way of revolt against society and also the result of his search for reassurance and as Thompson argues the intensity of these feelings have their source entirely in the 19th century (71).

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Appendix

