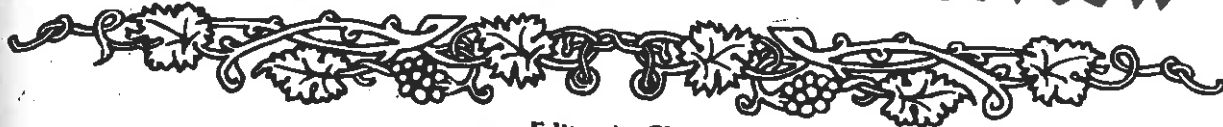




# The Pre-Raphaelite Review



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GOTHIC ARCHITECTONICS:  
MORRIS'S "TUNE OF SEVEN TOWERS"

Vignettes of Morris as old Topsy buzzing at the bench or as the Hyde Park preacher seem to discourage thorough criticisms of his poetry. To consider the burly, overalled Morris, dye-stained to his elbows, as having anything to do with the creation of intricately crafted artifacts -- an aesthetic poetry based on the most careful attention to methods of formal composition -- seems no less incongruous than the image of the bull in the china-shop. But an examination of even his simplest lyrics reveals his devotion to structural orders in which he confronts the nature of art and the function of the artist. His unusual approach to poetry is overlooked because those who read only his poetry -- those curious about its escapism ("the idle singer of an empty day") or those debating its moral issues (Guenevere's adultery) -- are unaware that their concerns cannot be reconciled with Morris's other interests, while anyone from our fragmented society of specialists who attempts to keep up with all of Morris's interests cannot help but dismiss him as a dabbler.

Records of his rising at four in the morning to compose in one sitting 750 lines of Jason and then adding another "350 lines after ten p.m."<sup>1</sup> suggest to normal mortals much haste and little thought. "If a chap can't compose an epic poem while he's weaving tapestry, he had better shut up, he'll never do any good at all."<sup>2</sup> The refusal to take this principle of Morris's aesthetic seriously is responsible for the failure of those who dismiss his poems as tapestries to pursue the analogy. Like his adopted master, Chaucer, Morris is a constructor. Morris contends that art ought to construct a formal rather than a moral order: "Swinburne is a rhetorician; my masters have been Keats and Chaucer, for they make pictures."<sup>3</sup>

A comparison of Morris's technique with Browning's illustrates the extent to which form remains at the forefront of a Morris poem. The impetus of Morris's favourite Browning poem, "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came,"<sup>4</sup> is to learn its meaning, as Browning "invites speculation"<sup>5</sup> by teasing the reader into searching for some profound interpretation beneath the literal surface. Morris avoids leaving the reader with an impression of the poet's design that might divert attention from the poem to the poet's personal intention. To avoid arousing curiosity about his meaning and purpose in writing the poem, Morris restricts design to the surface, to the form. That no one has pursued Cecil Lang's comment on the similarity of subject matter in "The Tune of Seven Towers" and Browning's "Childe Roland"<sup>6</sup> attests to Morris's ability to content us with the beauty of his tune. Despite

its disturbing content, Morris's poem begs to be sung rather than studied:

No one walks there now;  
 Except in the white moonlight  
 The white ghosts walk in a row;  
 If one could see it, an awful sight,--  
 "Listen!" said fair Yoland of the flowers,  
 "This is the tune of Seven Towers."

But none can see them now,  
 Though they sit by the side of the moat,  
 Feet half in the water, there in a row,  
 Long hair in the wind afloat.  
 "Therefore," said fair Yoland of the flowers,  
 "This is the tune of Seven Towers."

If any will go for me now,  
 He must go to it all alone,  
 Its gates will not open to any row  
 Of glittering spears -- will you go alone?  
 "Listen!" said fair Yoland of the flowers,  
 "This is the tune of Seven Towers."

(11. 7-24)

Morris leaves us confident that to be moved by this poem, its beauty is all we need to know. Thus Alfred Noyes's dismissal of the poem as nothing more than "chaotic medieval scraps of wind music"<sup>7</sup> remains unchallenged. David Staines assumes that the poem is a musical reproduction of Rossetti's painting and a psychological study in which Morris "imagines the thoughts of Rossetti's characters; in this poem, remarkable for the comparative absence of concretely visualized details, Morris curiously refrains from borrowing any details from the painting."<sup>8</sup> Such cautiously qualified words suggest that Staines has failed to pierce through "the intangible whiff of weirdness" that Lionel Stevenson finds in several of Morris's "pieces". Like "The Blue Closet", Stevenson finds that "'The Tune of Seven Towers', too, is eerily suggestive of some indefinable past disaster that has left a castle haunted."<sup>9</sup> Patrick Brantlinger is the first to directly refer to the narrative and to the characters of the poem: "It begins with the description of another castle -- this time a haunted one, where 'no one walks' except white ghosts. Oliver must go there to fetch his lady's coif and kirtle; the fact that she has left these articles in the haunted castle suggests her ghostly nature."<sup>10</sup> Fail-

ing to capitalize on Brantlinger's potential breakthrough, Margaret Lourie presumes that the dream-like essence of Morris's verse makes it "impossible to see. . . why Oliver. . . would be willing to ride toward his death." She accepts the verdict of the reviewer for the Literary Gazette who said in 1858: "It is true that something exciting happens, but, as the courier in 'Little Dorrit' has it, there is no why." Lourie concludes that it is an escapist poem which we can appreciate only from the Freudian perspective of The Interpretation of Dreams.<sup>11</sup> But to grasp the intangible and define the indefinable our reading of the poem must be focused on the manner in which Morris presents the narrative and its characters. The formal structure at once conceals and reveals the meaning of the poem.

The technical delivery is cut evenly in two, precisely in the middle of the twenty-second line. At this point our attention shifts from general commentary to the personal incident. And not until we arrive at this point, when reference to the general third person indefinite -- "no one," "none," "any," and finally "he" -- permanently shifts to the personal in the directly addressed question -- "will you go alone?" --, do we realize that the poem is a dramatic monologue. This delayed recognition is due to a change in refrain that complicates the first person narrative of the monologue. How this structural complication supports the narrative will become clear later.

The last half of the poem focuses on the speaker and her lover. By asking Oliver to fetch her coif and kirtle from the deserted but haunted castle, Yoland hopes to learn that her knight will die for the love of his lady. But the fair Yoland is no ordinary lady. The end of the poem brings the sudden jolt of awareness that her words reveal not the coyness and vanity of a fair maiden, but the sinister desires of the femme fatale. As she promises to reward him for his efforts, we alone hear the parenthetical sentence muttered under her breath:

If you will go for me,  
 I will kiss your mouth at last:  
     [She sayeth inwardly.]  
 (The graves stand grey in a row.)  
 Oliver, hold me fast!

(ll. 37-41)

Oliver is not her lover. He is but another of her many victims whose "graves stand grey in a row."

The voice of Morris in the bracketed stage direction -- "she say-

eth inwardly" -- serves as a revealing contrast to Yoland's. As the only archaism in the poem, this breaking away from ordinary speech draws attention to itself. The gentleness of such diction reminds us of the mannerisms of speech that distinguish the refined ladies of the court. It is similar to that of the "fair Jehane du Castel beau" (the dreamy love-sick lady from "The Tune's" companion poem<sup>12</sup> "Golden Wings"):

"Summer cometh to an end,  
 Undern cometh after noon;  
 Golden wings will be here soon  
 What if I some token send?"

(ll. 73-76)

This is a direct contrast to the simple, straight-forward speech of Yoland: "go there now / To fetch me my coif away."

The fair Jehane's longing for her knight is inspired by love rather than lust. Her expressions ("my tender body waits him here" l. 106; "I pray thee, kiss my lips" l. 153) suggest a more intimate and loving desire than the tough, more physical expression of Yoland ("I will kiss your mouth at last," "hold me fast"). Yoland's words suggest an erotic relationship rather than the spiritual one of the courtly love tradition to which the poem otherwise refers (as in her praying for Oliver's solitary quest on her behalf.) She speaks to Oliver as if he were a physical object, a mouth to kiss. The cumulative effect of these dialectal distinctions suggests that Yoland is not the maiden of the court that she pretends to be.

If Yoland's language exposes her as an imposter, the images on which she dwells suggest her true identity. Consecutively, from the first to the last stanza, she refers to a row of battlements, a row of ghosts, a row of ghost's feet, a row of glittering spears, a row of pearls, a row of priests headed by herself, and finally, in the seventh stanza, to a row of graves. Each is an unappealing image associated with death. Even the row of pearls becomes in this context a row of mummified grains of sand serving as an abacus of mementos of her victims. As the fiendish Yoland has no such relation to anything natural, the reference to her being "of the flowers" is deceptive. It could be a reference to either her heraldry, as in the refrain of "Two Red Roses Across the Moon," or to the orange blossoms placed on the bed sheet behind Yoland and Oliver in Rossetti's watercolour. In *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray refers to the recent custom of wearing orange blossoms ("touching emblems of female purity imported by us from France") as a spotless wreath "assumed" by women to ensnare the most eligible men.<sup>13</sup>

If we are to understand the power of the femme fatale, our realization of her nature must come only gradually. While Morris is baring throughout the poem the discrepancy between the dreamy tone of the fair maiden and the sinister mind of the femme fatale, the beautiful form in which he chooses to present his poem diverts attention from the otherwise obvious content. Like the knight who is blinded by the beautiful form of the femme fatale, we succumb to the charm of the poem and forget to heed its meaning. Yoland herself has done little to hide the fact that by embracing such a demonic femme fatale, we embrace death.

The refrain, with its two interchangeable words -- "listen" and "therefore" -- suggests the hypnotic power concealed in the form of speech. As soon as we have read only the first quatrain, in which there is nothing more than a vague rhetorical predicate, Yoland asserts her mysterious conclusion:

"Therefore," said fair Yoland of the flowers,  
"This is the tune of Seven Towers."

Once she secures our attention, she is certain of the inevitable result. She needs no answer to her rhetorical question:

For what is left to fetch away  
From the desolate battlements all arow,  
And the lead roof heavy and grey?

These are not the words of a maiden who hopes to prod her knight coyly into remembering her coif and kirtle. She is a fiend delighting in her power. What she is saying is that, although we know that there is nothing there worth going for, we will go there anyway just to please her whim. Both the knight and the reader are carried away by the beautiful form of the maiden or of the poem and are thus left careless of the consequences. "The Tune of Seven Towers" is the spell-binding dirge that the femme fatale sings for her seventh victim. Each tower is a monument to her power to imprison and entomb young knights.

That the source for Morris's poem is the watercolour by Rossetti, that the names of Yoland and Oliver play on the cliché "a Roland for Oliver" from the French romance,<sup>14</sup> and that the Yoland identifies her address as a tune is in keeping with the characteristic Pre-Raphaelite return not to nature but to the nature of art.<sup>15</sup> Morris debunks the worn-out image that the conventional romances were perpetrating. The quest is generally the back-bone of the romance, but whatever the quest is it should be something which suggests the hero's expression of some

inner vision. Oliver is slow to take up the quest for his lady's coif and kirtle because his is not a quest inspired from within his own heart, but something that he has been lured into.

Yoland herself debunks the selfish vanity of the typical young maiden who is not content with her love affair but must romanticize it. The maiden whose role Yoland mimics represents the sterility of those who refuse to be artists themselves and yet believe that they must compare their lives with creations from art. The femme fatale is not any more dangerous to men than is the naive maiden who believes that her lover must measure up to the standards set by the chivalric heroes of the romances that she has read. This blurring of life and art leaves one vulnerable to the illusions of a dream world. Because the naive dreamer is susceptible to the illusion that life and art are governed by the same laws, she continues her futile efforts to raise her love affairs to the realm of art. This can result in her naively sending a row of men to their deaths.

Art, then, provides no refuge in a dream world. In his working to express his dreams, the artist enjoys a life-style unknown to the slave who responds to orders. But it is his work that the artist loves, the act of creating rather than the creation itself. Unlike the passive dreamer, the artist is an active creator who knows that his life must remain distinct from his art.

Morris accentuates form to establish the fact that his art has its own independent order. He thereby removes himself from his poem by leaving us with the impression that the poem is self-contained. "The Tune of Seven Towers" is presented in seven stanzas with two nearly identical couplets for the seven refrains. We have seen how the perspective shifts at the very middle of the twenty-second line of the forty-three line poem. In the quatrains of the first half of the poem, Yoland seems to speak generally to the reader, as if she is the poet narrating some descriptive commentary. The refrain, then, not only identifies Yoland, but re-introduces her voice, this time, within quotations:

"Therefore," said fair Yoland of the flowers,  
"This is the tune of Seven Towers."

In the quatrains of the last half of the poem Yoland speaks of herself and specifies that it is Oliver whom she is addressing. Consequently, in this brief monologue, we seem to have two narrators -- Yoland and the poet -- and two audiences -- the reader and Oliver.

That there are two narrators and two audiences to consider in a story is usually a concept taken for granted and not specified within the text. When such a distinction between the speaker and the author or between the addressed character and the reader does appear within the text, it suggests that there are three voices and three audiences. The author interjects a masked narrator between himself and the speaker, and a public audience between his reader and the addressed character. Here Yoland's pose as a distressed maiden stands between Morris and the fiendish Yoland, and the shift from general to personal addresses (from "no one," "any" and the asides, to the "you") suggests the presence of a courtyard audience from which Yoland turns to address Oliver.

By using two mouthpieces -- one for the quatrains and one for the refrains, by shifting the stance of the speaker of the quatrains from general commentary to the personal dialogue and by then compounding this duality in the last stanza with the stage direction and the aside, Morris establishes a distance between himself and the poem that prevents the sense of his own intention from intruding upon the poem. The poem speaks for itself through the surface design of the song-like structure. The numerical factor in the poem directs the reader again to the premise that structure is the poem's source of motivation and governing principle.

That the number of stanzas equals the number of towers underlines the number seven to encourage the assumption that there are seven victims, with a round being sung for each one. That the poem is divided into quatrains and refrains, that the refrains are couplets, that two words interchange in the refrains, that the middle line of the poem is cut in half with a dash all serve to underline the number two in order to accentuate the shift in narration, the division between the artist and his art, between a lost tradition and the remnants of its surviving conventions. As well, the imagery continues this obsession with division. The reference to the ghosts' "feet half in the water, there in a row" epitomizes the notion that the continuity of generations of artists is being reduced to a row of half-submerged ghosts.<sup>16</sup>

The technical similarity between the styles of Morris and the eighteenth-century novelists is not coincidental, for the interests of both the pioneers of a new art form and the reviver of a traditional process are in the fundamental nature of art. Morris's poem and Rossetti's painting are similarly related. The importance of the relation is based not on the subject matter -- not how the personalities of Yoland and the discontented maiden of whom she sings correspond to Rossetti's visualized figures -- but on the similar manner of composition that each artist practises. Each artist concentrates on the formal arrangement of his material to establish its independent order. Just as Morris's poem



is divided in half, Oliver's lance divides Rossetti's painting in half to shift our focus to the lone angelic figure from the company in the opposite frame. Whether or not the angelic outsider's placing the orange bough on the bed sheet signifies the loss of the knight to the demonic lyrist is a matter of speculation. No further clarification of the subject matter is necessary as far as the owner and commissioner of the painting is concerned, for Morris operated according to a principle of design that is as relevant to his poetry as it is to his tapestries: "The aim should be to combine clearness of form and firmness of structure with the mystery which comes of abundance and richness of detail."<sup>17</sup>

Thus Morris returns to the most basic principles of art, the narrative roots of picture-making, ballad-singing, and story-telling that better suit the construction of a pattern of events than the rhetoric of moral orders. With the universality of art depending on the original expression of traditional sources, the artist must concentrate on the craftsmanship of form rather than the originality of an idea. Morris resists professing any message other than the social implication that each man must control his life by developing his own form of vision so that the conforming labourer may become the expressive craftsman.

David Latham

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Philip Henderson, ed. The Letters of William Morris to His Family and Friends (London, 1950), xxxix.

<sup>2</sup>J. W. Mackail, The Life of William Morris (London, 1899), I, p. 186.

<sup>3</sup>W. B. Yeats quoting Morris in Autobiographies (London, 1955), p. 145.

<sup>4</sup>The Collected Works of William Morris (London, 1910-15), I, p. 340.

<sup>5</sup>E. K. Brown, Victorian Poetry (New York, 1942), p. 798.

<sup>6</sup>Cecil Lang, The Pre-Raphaelites and Their Circle (Boston, 1968), p. 511.

<sup>7</sup>Alfred Noyes, William Morris (London, 1908), p. 21.

<sup>8</sup>David Staines, 'Morris' Treatment of his Medieval Sources in The

Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems," Studies in Philology, 70 (1973), p. 460.

<sup>9</sup>Lionel Stevenson, The Pre-Raphaelite Poets (Chapel Hill, 1972), pp. 145-46.

<sup>10</sup>Patrick Brantlinger, "A Reading of Morris' The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems," Victorian Newsletter, 44 (1973), p. 23.

<sup>11</sup>Margaret Lourie, "The Embodiment of Dreams: William Morris' 'Blue Closet' Group," Victorian Poetry, 15 (1977), p. 197.

<sup>12</sup>Cecil Lang (p. 511) and Meredith Raymond (Victorian Poetry, 4, 1966, p. 214) suggest that the first two pairs of poems from The Defence of Guenevere should be considered as "pendants" or "diptychs." Patrick Brantlinger (p. 18) suggests that this method for approaching Morris's poems should be practised throughout the volume. Years earlier, Mackail (I, p. 93) had noticed that "Winter Weather" "forms so perfect a pendant" to "Riding Together".

<sup>13</sup>Vanity Fair, ed. F. E. L. Priestley (Toronto, 1969), pp. 120-21. See also Tennyson's reference to the same custom (In Memoriam, XL).

<sup>14</sup>Oliver here coupled not with the only man who is his match, but with a deadly woman who is more than his match.

<sup>15</sup>The Pre-Raphaelites' concern with nature was not so much a concern with mimesis as it was an attempt to free the imagination from predetermined rules. William Michael Rossetti explains: "'Thoughts toward Nature' indicated accurately enough the predominant conception of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, that an artist, whether painter or writer, ought to be bent upon defining and expressing his own thoughts, and that these ought to be based upon a direct study of Nature, and harmonized with her manifestations." (The Germ, Being a Facsimile Reprint, 1901, pp. 9-10). Holman Hunt writes: "A man's work must be the reflex of a living image on his mind, and not the icy double of the facts themselves. It will be seen that we were never realists" (Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, 1913, I, p. 150). The artist's own thoughts, his own personal nature must be cultivated to establish the union of subjective and physical nature, the unified sensibility that is typical of the Edenic and the Gothic mind but is alien to the academic.

<sup>16</sup>With references to Sidney's and Shelley's defences inherent in the title of his volume, Morris's defence of Guenevere's self-expression concerns the defence of poetry. As Shelley had said in his Defence of Poetry, "the extinction of the poetic principle [leaves men] the slaves

of the will of others." Supporting the Gothic Revival as an effort "to break down the slavery imposed on us first by the Italian Renaissance" (The Gothic Revival, ed. LeMire, p. 54), Morris strove to revitalize the Gothic tradition in which the artist is concerned with the process rather than the product of his work. This revival of the Gothic spirit must be distinguished from the revival of Gothic taste. Morris turned to the Mediaeval age not to nostalgically imitate an historical style (Pugin's imitation of the outward aspects of the Gothic without understanding its spirit resulted in "an ecclesiastical style" which Morris condemns in "The Gothic Revival," p. 76), but to revitalize the principle upon which the Gothics' vision of the ideal society is founded. Thus Morris was not escaping to the comfort of an established past but was substituting for the Victorian ideal (based on a technological progress toward leisure) a Gothic ideal (based on the craftsman's unified sensibility), a vision he shared only with his ancestors yet which in actuality exists only in the future.

<sup>17</sup>William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist, ed. May Morris (Oxford, 1936) I, p. 250.