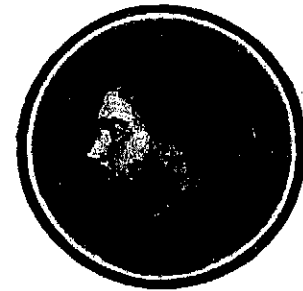


# Victorian Poetry

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An issue  
Devoted to the Work of  
William Morris



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# Refocillations

(Continued from page 60)

## HOW TO MAKE A MODERN PRE-RAPHAELITE POEM

Take a packet of fine selected early English, containing no words but such as are obsolete and unintelligible. Pour this into about double the quantity of entirely new English, which must have never been used before, and which you must compose yourself, fresh as it is wanted. Mix these together thoroughly till they assume a colour quite different from any tongue that was ever spoken, and the material will be ready for use. . . .

This kind of composition is usually cast in shapes. These, though not numerous—amounting in all to something under a dozen—it would take too long to describe minutely here: and a short visit to Mr. —'s shop in King street, where they are kept in stock, would explain the whole of them. A favourite one, however, is the following, which is of very easy construction. Take three damozels, dressed in straight night-gowns. Pull their hair-pins out, and let their hair tumble all about their shoulders. A few stars may be sprinkled into this with advantage. Place an aureole about the head of each, and give each a lily in her hand, about half the size of herself. Bend their necks all different ways, and set them in a row before a stone wall, with an apple-tree between each, and some large flowers at their feet. Trees and flowers of the right sort are very plentiful in church windows. When you have arranged all these objects rightly, take a cast of them in the softest part of your brain, and pour in your word-composition as above described.

This kind of poem is much improved by what is called a burden. This consists of a few jingling words, generally of an archaic character, about which we have only to be careful that they have no reference to the subject of the poem they are to ornament. They are inserted without variation between the stanzas. . . .

## HOW TO MAKE A NARRATIVE POEM LIKE MR. M\*RR\*S.

Take about sixty pages-full of the same word-mixture as that described in the preceding; and dilute it with a double quantity of mild modern Anglo-Saxon. Pour this composition into two vessels of equal size, and into one of these empty a small mythological story. If this does not put your readers to sleep soon enough, add to it the rest of the language in the remaining vessel.

(Mallock, W. H. *Every man his own poet; or, the Inspired singer's recipe book*. London, 1877, pp. 21-24)

# Motifs from Nature in the Design Work and Prose Romances of William Morris (1876-1896)

K. B. VALENTINE



ANY CRITICS of William Morris' work have noted, without elaboration, that a central ideal dominated both the visual and the verbal art that came from Morris' hand. John W. Mackail, his first biographer, put it this way: "[Morris] turned from one kind of art to another with complete ease, because to him all the arts were one, being applications to certain materials for certain purposes of a single motive to make things different from what they were by bringing beauty and pattern into them."<sup>1</sup>

The following pages treat manifestations of Morris' central ideal of bringing nature's beauty into his design work and writing. Since K. L. Goodwin's 1969 dissertation<sup>2</sup> admirably covered interrelationships between Morris' art and poetry before 1876, this discussion is focused on the designs and prose romances produced between 1876 and Morris' death in 1896. Identifiable motifs—topics or principal features—are woven repeatedly into the fabric of William Morris' late decorative designs and prose romances. Most of Morris' controlling motifs can be grouped under three headings: the natural world, handicraft, and human characters. Of these, the most pervasive is that of the natural world with its flowers and trees, its animals and birds, and its water in all forms, from woodland pools to palace fountains.

Morris' delight in bristling nature stemmed in part from his acceptance of the ideas in Ruskin's essay on the "Nature of Gothic," which had a life-long influence on him. In this essay Ruskin praised Gothic workmanship because it was always energetic and luxuriant, "here starting up into a monster, there germinating into a blossom, anon knitting itself into a branch, alternately

<sup>1</sup>John W. Mackail. "Introduction to the *Catalogue* of the centenary exhibition of William Morris held at the Victoria and Albert museum," 1934 (London, 1934), p. 8.

<sup>2</sup>"The Relationships Between the Narrative Poetry of William Morris, His Art-and-Craft Work, and His Aesthetic Theories" (unpub. doct. diss., Oxford Univ.)

thorny, bossy, and bristly, or writhed into every form of nervous entanglement; but, even when most graceful, never for an instant languid, always quickset."<sup>3</sup> "Quick-set" growth is an easily recognizable quality of all of Morris' designs, the effect of which is a refreshing spontaneity and energy. Buds and shoots seem to spring of themselves from their branches, and the leaves curl over in a natural and luxuriant manner.

Of all the floral motifs, the acanthus-like thistle or cabbage leaf is the most frequently used. In fact, scarcely a Morris design exists without at least some small use of the acanthus leaf. In such large tapestries as "Woodpecker," "Flora," "Pomona," and "Forest," the large-leaved acanthus-like motif almost usurps the central position of the subject (Plate I and II B).<sup>4</sup> A glance through almost any book of illuminated Gothic manuscripts reveals an extensive use of the furled acanthus leaf motif to which Morris' designs bear a close resemblance, and from which he almost certainly derived his original inspiration for the designs in the Kelmscott Press *Chaucer* where they form not only the background of the decorated initial letters but also the borders of the pages.<sup>5</sup> Aymer Vallance, the first systematic cataloguer of Morris' designs, makes the following comment on Morris' use of the acanthus leaf:

But it was chiefly in the adaptation of floral and vegetable forms that he excelled. In this sphere one of Morris' most characteristic types was that "glittering leafage" which, for want of a more accurate name, it is convenient to designate as the Acanthus. "No form of ornament," says Morris, "has gone so far or lasted so long as this; it has been infinitely varied, used by almost all . . . styles . . . in one shape or another and performed many another office beside its original one. . . ." [Morris used] its grand coils of foliage turning and counter-turning this way and that, its serrated edges bent over and back again,—[so] that it seems to have been redeemed and made fertile anew with splendid vitality, before which open out possibilities wellnigh limitless.<sup>6</sup>

Since the acanthus-like leaves of the thistle and the cabbage grew in profusion in the fields around Kelmscott, it is easy to see how a new chintz pattern, or a

<sup>3</sup>John Ruskin, "The Nature of Gothic," *Stones of Venice* (1853; rpt. New York, 1960), p. 174.

<sup>4</sup>The designs discussed in this paper appear in the following places: "Woodpecker," Tapestry (1885), William Morris Gallery, Walthamstow, England, is reproduced in Ray Watkinson, *William Morris As Designer* (New York, 1967), Plate 1; "Flora," Tapestry (1885), Whitworth Art Gallery, Birmingham, England, was designed as a twin to "Pomona"; "Pomona," Tapestry (1885), Whitworth Art Gallery, Birmingham, England, is reproduced in Philip Henderson, *William Morris: His Life, Work, and Friends* (New York, 1967), Color Plate VIII, p. 188; "Forest," Tapestry (1885-1887), Victoria and Albert Museum, London; "Blackthorn," Wallpaper (1892), William Morris Gallery, Walthamstow, is reproduced in Watkinson, Plate 9; "Golden Bough," silk and linen tissue (c. 1890), William Morris Gallery, Walthamstow, is reproduced in *Catalogue of the Morris Collection* (Walthamstow, 1958), Plate III; "Orchard," Tapestry (1890), Victoria and Albert Museum, is reproduced in Victoria and Albert Museum, *William Morris* (London, 1958), Plate 25; "Brother Rabbit," handblocked cotton (1883), Victoria and Albert Museum, *William Morris*, Plate 13; "Norwich," Wallpaper (1889), Victoria and Albert Museum, is reproduced in Watkinson, *William Morris*, Plate 12.

<sup>5</sup>See *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer: A Facsimile of the William Morris Kelmscott Chaucer* (Cleveland, 1958).

<sup>6</sup>*The Art of William Morris* (London, 1897), p. 132.

passage of floral beauty, could have been inspired by an occasion such as the walk round Kelmscott village on a May morning in 1892 that Morris describes in a letter to his daughter Jenny:

The fields are all buttercuppy though the grass is not as high as it should be. The elms are mostly green up to their tops. The hawthorn not out, but the crabs beautiful, and also that whitebeam (I think they call it) with the umbelliferous flowers. In the garden we have lots of tulips out looking beautiful: the white bluebells and some blue ones: some of the anemones are in blossom and they all soon will be: they are very lovely. There are very few yellow flowers now in the garden. Fancy! these grape hyacinths are only just beginning to fade. Apple-blossom for the most part only in bud; but that cherry-tree near the arbour opposite my window is a mass of bloom. The heartseases are beautiful: very big. A few of the Iceland poppies are out: these will go on a long time. The gooseberries are not all gone; we shall have a fair sprinkling. Two of the little cherry trees on the wall by the frame have cherries on them. . . . I got to my tale last night directly after tea and worked till 11 when I went to bed like a good boy; I have been working at it all day to-day, and have done a good deal though there were intervals of duckling hunting and garden strolling as above. (CW, XVIII, xxxv)

From this letter it is obvious that Morris was more than casually familiar with the flowers he saw on his stroll. That he worked these observations into both a design and a romance is also evident, for the next day, May 19, 1892, he again wrote to his daughter, prefacing another catalogue of floral observations with the comment, "I have been working hard at my paper-hanging all day and last night I did a good bit of Well" (XVIII, xxxvi). Since "Blackthorn" is the only wallpaper he designed in 1892, he is probably referring to this design in his letter. The early spring flowers of "Blackthorn" and the flowers that Ralph and Ursula in *The Well at the World's End* see after their long winter in a cave are similar. Both works feature early spring flowers, and both have the blackthorn and the celandine blossoms. Ralph and Ursula note with delight that "the snowdrop had thrust up and blossomed, and the celandine had come, and then the blackthorn bloomed, and the Lent-lilies hid the grass betwixt the great chestnut-boles" (XIX, 51).

The sword-and-bough symbol used by Morris in *The Well at the World's End* connects verbal and visual nature motifs. Ralph, the hero, and Ursula, the heroine, must follow the sign of the sword and bough as they travel toward the magic well. At about the same time as *Well* was being written, Morris had designed a silk and linen textile titled the "Golden Bough." Usually thought to be mistletoe, the Golden Bough symbolized regeneration to the Celtic druids and was also thought to be endowed with the power to indicate buried treasure.<sup>7</sup> Book six of Virgil's *Aeneid* states that "permission for descending to earth's hidden world is never granted to any who has not first gathered this golden-haired produce from its tree."<sup>8</sup> In 1875 Morris translated the *Aeneid* into English verse and thus would have been aware of its Golden Bough symbol. The bough becomes a fitting signpost to the pair

<sup>7</sup>J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (New York, 1962), p. 202.

<sup>8</sup>Trans. W. F. Jackson Knight (Baltimore, 1956), p. 151.

who must travel, if not to the underworld, at least to a nether world at the land's end. There the pair must find the well, hidden to all but the strong in heart, which bestows fertility and regenerative powers on its discoverers. The mistletoe, or Golden Bough, is a parasitic plant usually associated with the oak tree. Built around an ogee arch, the "Golden Bough" design consists of oak branch and oak leaf motifs.

In *The Well*, the bough, together with the sword, marks the route to the well at the end of the world. The sword, in addition to being a traditional symbol of the "transcendental toughness of the all-conquering spirit" (Cirlot, p. 302), an attribute that both Ralph and Ursula possess, is often associated with a crucifix or a tree. At a significant point in their journey, Ralph and Ursula's unconquerable spirits are tested by the confrontation with the mystery of the Dry Tree. The Dry Tree incises itself on the memory of almost every reader of the *Well*. When the pair reach the huge Dry Tree, they discover men, women, and children lying dead all around the pool that surrounds its roots. They look up and see its dead branches covered with shields, helmets, swords, and hauberks. Ralph suggests that the water skins be filled from the pool, but Ursula warns him that the pool is heavy with venom. As if to confirm that observation, a raven bends down for a drink, tries to fly away, and falls dead at their feet. In design, the Dry Tree symbol can be found in the trial proofs for the unfinished Kelmscott Press *Froissart*, illustrated with shields in trees; and in a preliminary drawing for the Morris & Co. stained glass windows in Cartwright Memorial Hall, Bradford, Yorkshire.<sup>9</sup>

Nothing could be more in contrast with the heavy, lifeless atmosphere of the Dry Tree than the full-bearing trees of the "Orchard" and "Pomona" tapestries. Each of the five trees in "Orchard"—the orange, apple, grape, olive and pear—are loaded with fruit, and stand, unlike the Dry Tree, within human reach. Pomona, goddess of fruits, holds, instead of the traditional pruning knife, a loaded apple branch in her left hand, and, in her skirt, several fresh apples. In both "Orchard" and "Pomona" the fruits are ripe, the branches are "quickset" (in Ruskin's phrase), and the over-all effect is one of productivity. "Pomona" has a background of swirling acanthus leaves, vivid carnations, sunflowers, bluebells, and forget-me-nots that reinforce the theme of healthy growth.

Zoological as well as botanical motifs are frequently repeated in Morris' verbal and visual art. In a lecture on pattern designing Morris stated that the designer should make use of birds and animals in his patterns so long as the appeal to the imagination was maintained (XXII, 192-194). Birds and other animals, in multitudes of different species, decorate the scenery of the prose

romances: thrush, robin, falcon, mallard, teal, coot, blackbird, raven, and plover, as well as deer, bear, lion, hare, lynx, bull, goat, cow, wolf, serpent, sheep, and squirrel. The following passages from *The Water of The Wondrous Isles* are only two of the many representative statements about fauna in the prose romances. Of her protectress Habundia, the heroine, Birdalone, says she has seen nothing lovelier, not even "the wild-cat sporting on the little wood-lawn, when she saw me not; nor the white doe rising up from the grass to look to her fawn; nor aught that moves and grows" (XX, 18). The scenery about the lake on which Birdalone sails is described as "but wave and sky and the familiar fowl of the lake, as coot, and mallard, and heron, and now and then a swift wood-dove going her ways from shore to shore: two gerfalcons she saw also, an osprey, and a great erne on his errand high up aloft" (XX, 53). "Rabbit" has charming rabbits and birds drawn by Morris; the "Forest" designed by Morris but with animals executed by Philip Webb, shows a lion, a hare, a peacock, a fox, and a raven; and "Flora" has a background teeming with little brown birds, a peacock and peahen, rabbits, and quail. Even though his own birds and rabbits were realistic, Morris did not usually feel comfortable drawing them, and tended to leave blank spaces in the preliminary drawings for either Philip Webb or Edward Burne-Jones to fill in the appropriate animal life.

To the natural motifs of flora and fauna are added the water motifs of the designs and romances. Morris often combines plant and water motifs as he did in *The Wood Beyond the World* at the point in the plot when Walter wanders into the preternatural woods: "[He] saw below him a little dale with a pleasant stream running through it, and he bethought him of bathing therein, so he went down and had his pleasure of the water and the willow banks; for he lay naked a while on the grass by the lip of the water" (XVII, 63). At this point in the story Walter might have been sunning himself on the banks of the river Morris described in a letter written in 1888: "The river I went on was a branch of the Wensum; it was very beautiful; the water awash with the green banks, willows nearly meeting over the water; no rushes or reeds, no weeds except some kind of long grass growing up from the bottom . . . All quite different from the rivers I am used to: in fact I always feel in a foreign land when I go to Norwich" (Mackail, I, 220). The above letter was written about a year before he designed the river pattern he named "Norwich" (Plate II A). Like the description in the passage quoted above from *Wood* and the description in the 1888 letter, "Norwich" has a flowering plant motif very much like the Bay Willow common to the wet grassy places in northern England. Beneath the gently touching leaves of the "Norwich" design, the shaded and dotted ground suggests moving water.

Throughout the prose romances, water assumes immense importance to the physical and mental well-being of the protagonists. As if in emphasis,

<sup>9</sup>These designs can be seen in the private collection of Sanford L. Berger, Berkeley, California.

Morris includes water in the titles of three of the last four romances: *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, the unfinished *The Sundering Flood*, and *The Well at the World's End*. When Ralph and Ursula in *Well* reach the enchanted water at the end of the world, they celebrate their victory by swimming in the ocean, splashing each other and toasting the world with the water of the well. Frequently throughout the story, the Well is referred to as having the power to save one "from weariness and wounding and sickness" (XVIII, II), and to bring "Quenching of Sorrow, and Clearing of the Eyes" (XVIII, 168).

Morris' love for nature's flowers, animals, and water became intensified during his later years, perhaps because he was spending more time surrounded by nature in his country home, and because he, too, was experiencing a clearing of the eyes and a quenching of sorrow. For whatever reason, both the decorative designs and the literature of Morris' last period are encomia to nature. An anecdote related by Mackail reveals Morris' embracement of nature. Two years before his death, when he was walking with friends near Kelmscott Manor, he stopped to rest in the middle of the dirt road with his legs straight out in front of him. "I shall sit on the world," he declared (Mackail, I, 322-323). Mackail found the statement odd, but one has only to read the benedictory utterances that are sprinkled throughout the writings of this last period, or to look at the wealth of natural detail in his designs, to see that the statement was entirely characteristic. One of his favorite characters, Ellen in *News From Nowhere*, exclaims "O me! O me! How I love the earth and the seasons, and weather, and all things that deal with it, and all that grows out of it" (XVI, 202). Another benedictory statement is issued by Ralph when he reports the death of the Lady of Abundance to the people of her lands: "Lament, ye people! for the Lady of Abundance is dead; yet sure I am that she sendeth this message to you, Live in peace, and love ye the works of the earth" (XIX, 150-151). And Birdalone celebrates the beauties of the earth by crying out "Oh, but thou art beautiful, O earth, thou are beautiful!" (XX, 148).

In *Wood*, the Maid can make flowers bloom anew; in *Water*, Birdalone regenerates the wondrous isles; and in *Well*, the sterile Dry Tree is abandoned for the gushing of the regenerative well. William Butler Yeats correctly sensed Morris' happy revelry in nature's beauty when he wrote of Morris: "Men like him cannot be happy as we understand happiness, for to be happy one must delight like nature in mere profusion, in mere abundance, in making and doing things, and if one sets an image that draws her perpetually, it must be the image of a perfect fulness of natural life, of an Earthly Paradise."<sup>10</sup> Because of Morris' stated aim to bring nature closer to the life of man, the

natural world, in the form of vegetation, animals, and water, assumes importance in his visual and literary works.

William Morris' work from 1876 to 1896 is all of a piece—the romances with their characters living close to nature, and the creation of an ideal natural world to be woven, embroidered, papered or painted onto a flat surface—guided by the fervent belief that man could be infinitely more happy if only he learned to imitate nature's creativity.

## in the meantime . . .

THE NORTHEAST VICTORIAN STUDIES ASSOCIATION was formed during the conference on the Victorian Family held last April in Worcester, Massachusetts. The major purpose of the Association is the continuing sponsorship of annual conferences. Other projects include the possibility of a Victorian Studies news bulletin, the feasibility of a Victorian Studies summer school in Britain, and an Audio-Visual Committee to develop slide and film resources. Address correspondence to Robert Keane, English Department, Hofstra University, Hempstead, New York 11550, concerning membership and activities. For information on the next conference, scheduled for April 2-4 at Ramapo College, Mahwah, New Jersey, write Carole Silver, 180 West End Avenue, New York, New York 10023. The subject of the conference is Victorian pasts and futures.

The Association announces its intention to sponsor a bulletin serving as a clearinghouse of information for people interested in Victorian Britain. We hope that it will act as an international, in-house organ keeping Victorianists informed of the goings-on of various groups: noting exhibitions, conferences, publications, and research-in-progress; registering notes, queries, desiderata; and recording the movements of significant scholars (job changes, visits, exchanges). Its format will be interdisciplinary, covering such fields as literature, history, art, economics, medicine, architecture, science, religion, psychology, law and photography. As a bulletin, it should appear as frequently and as cheaply as possible. Intended to fill a perceived gap, it will not compete with any existing publication. Our mailing address is: Lynne F. Sacher, Editor, *Victorian Studies Bulletin*, Baruch College, City University of New York, 17 Lexington Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010.

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<sup>10</sup>William Butler Yeats, "The Happiest of the Poets," *Ideas of Good and Evil* (London, 1903), p. 71.