

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 (Guevere'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."¹ 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."² 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."³

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,"⁴ is to learn its meaning, as Browning "invites speculation"⁵ 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"⁶ attests to Morris's ability to content us with the beauty of his tune. Despite