

WILLIAM MORRIS'S
"THE MOSQUE RISING IN THE PLACE OF THE TEMPLE OF
SOLOMON": A CRITICAL TEXT

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In the volume of Morris's juvenilia that forms part of the May Morris Bequest in the British Library (Add MS. 45,298A), the first manuscript poem is untitled. Letters in the volume show that May Morris conjectured, wrongly as it turns out, that the poem was written on the topic of "The Dedication of the Temple" with entries due on 1 December 1853. Since that competition for "a Poem on a Sacred Subject" was open only to those who had already received the Bachelor of Arts, Morris did not qualify, and so she surmises that "he thought of trying his hand on it 'for fun'" (May Morris, 2:376). In fact, Morris was writing on a quite different topic, for a different competition, and at a different date. His manuscript poem is a copy of his entry for the Newdigate Prize Poem competition for 1855, announced in July 1854, on the topic of "The Mosque Rising in the Place of the Temple of Solomon."

Morris's poem did not win the competition, for reasons that can be proposed with some plausibility. But it remains one of his earliest surviving compositions, the first of those written after childhood (May Morris, 2:517-21; Boos) when, as he said, "still an undergraduate, I discovered that I could write poetry, much to my own amazement" (Morris, *Letters* 2:228), and predates the Oxford poems of 1855 to which J.W. Mackail makes reference (1:51-52). "The Mosque Rising" also alludes to Morris's early acquaintance with the medieval chronicles and anticipates his later interest in politics by making oblique reference to a number of contemporary international disputes that provide the context for the poem. It was written at the time of the Crimean War, when, as A.P. Stanley said in the *Quarterly Review*, "the whole attention of Europe, after an interval of more than five centuries, has once more been fixed on the 'Holy Places' of the Eastern world, [and when its] 'solitary silence' ... is once more broken by the sound of the 'world's debate,' by the mighty controversies which, beginning with the wrangles of Greek and Latin monks over the key of the Convent of Bethlehem, and the dome of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, has now enclosed within its circle the statesmen of all the greatest powers in Europe" (433).