'Two Red Roses Across the Moon': Reconsidering Symbolic Implications

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'Two Red Roses Across the Moon' has attracted surprisingly little critical interest since it appeared in *The Defence of Guenevere* in 1858. As one of the so-called fantasy or romance poems in the volume, it baffled, even enraged, readers unprepared for Morris's style of Pre-Raphaelite medievalism. George Saintsbury, himself a passionate admirer of *The Defence of Guenevere*, later recalled this early reaction: 'Who could make sense of "The Blue Closet" or "Two Red Roses Across the Moon"? Indeed, this latter very harmless and spirited ditty — of which I once offered to write a symbolic defence in any required number of pages, and which I still love wildly — had the faculty of simply infuriating the grave and precise.'

Saintsbury never wrote his symbolic defence and the poem continued to baffle its readers. Most critics pass over it when discussing *The Defence of Guenevere*, but those who have considered it see it either as a perfect example of Morris at his most elusive and obscure, or as a rare if rather uninspiring example — in the context of the collection — of a poem with a happy ending. 'Scraps of wind music', grumbled Alfred Noyes in 1908 when considering this and other of the fantasy poems, 'artificial, immature, and imperfectly conceived.' In general modern critics have agreed with Noyes's assessment. Dianne Sadoff has described the poem as 'vague and hollow', while Carole Silver saw it as little more than a 'promise of wedded bliss', describing it and 'The Gilliflower of Gold' as merely poems about 'triumphant lovers who will gain their ladies after they have won their battles.'

I believe 'Two Red Roses Across the Moon' is a far more complex poem than the critics have suggested. Although a certain mystery must always surround a poem whose setting and action is so undefined, I would argue that its meaning can be illuminated by analysing the symbolic implications inherent in Morris's choice of language and image.

'Two Red Roses Across the Moon' can unquestionably be read on one level as a ballad that tells the tale of a knight who must prove himself in battle before he can claim his lady. The form of the poem is simple. It is a ballad structure of quatrains moved along briskly by the four-stress lines. The opening of the poem indicates to the reader that the poem is a traditional ballad: 'There was a lady lived in a hall'. And the beginning of the second stanza only confirms our expectation of balladic repetition: 'There was a knight came riding by'. We are not surprised, therefore, to find an almost exact repetition of syntax, as well as of regular rhyme and metre, in every stanza. With the exception of stanza four, each stanza contains one sentence that itself is composed of two parallel structures. The first couplet ends with a semicolon, and the second begins with a co-ordinating conjunction, with the result that the poem can be seen to possess a lively, plot-driven outer framework: 'There was a
lady, there was a knight, and then ... and then ... and then.' The rhyme scheme is very regular, the first couplet of each stanza ending in simple, monosyllabic rhymes that are occasionally repeated ('hall', 'tall' in stanza one; 'all', 'hall' in stanza three), and sometimes half-echoed ('hill', 'mill' in stanza five). The second couplet of each stanza is unusual only in that the word chosen to rhyme with the refrain's moon is always the same: noon. This adds to the sense of pattern, and has the effect both of drawing the refrain further back into each stanza, and also of creating what amounts almost to a second refrain. The alliteration and assonance that are obvious in the refrain are used musically, but with a light touch throughout the nine stanzas, contributing to the carefully wrought design of what appears to be a relatively traditional story-ballad.

However, lying not very far beneath the surface of the poem are elements that might prevent the wary reader from accepting too quickly the little tale at its face value. While Morris may remain true to early ballad style, 'he does not', as Robert Keane noticed (with almost ironic understatement), 'always capture the open, blunt, matter-of-factness of the old form. Symbolic innuendoes sometimes replace plain statement.' To begin with there is the refrain, 'Two red roses across the moon', which is repeated exactly at the end of each stanza, and yet is not, strictly speaking, an identical refrain. In her dissertation - and in one of the only developed discussions of the poem to date - Sister Alacoque Power presents it as exemplifying the incremental refrain that became popular in the second half of the nineteenth century after its possibilities had been demonstrated by Morris, and also by Rossetti. It is at the same time a symbolic refrain; that is, it stands in each stanza for something slightly different, and for something other than its literal meaning, so that it acquires layers of subtle richness as the poem progresses.

In the first stanza, the refrain belongs wholly to the lady singing in her hall 'from noon to noon.' In the second stanza, it acts both as an enticement to the knight to try to swerve him from his purpose, but also as a gift or favour given to him by the lady to protect him in the forthcoming battle. In the third stanza, it is the fading song of an apparently rejected lady, as 'he rode a-gallop past the hall; And left that lady singing at noon/Two red roses across the moon.' But the refrain is now carried by the knight, for it is also his memory of her, a favour tucked in his breast, and a song to inspire him. In the fourth stanza, as he reaches the battlefield, it appears to have become a part of him, so that it both describes his shield device (as Morris claimed it did in his only recorded remark about the poem), but also by extension, the knight himself astride his horse: 'He rode on the spur till the next warm noon:-ITwo red roses across the moon.' It then evolves into the battle cry that saves the day, but, yet again, this occurs incrementally. In stanza five, the knight, seeing the disarray on the field, repeats the magic words to himself as a kind of talisman; in stanza six, he uses it as a rallying cry to gather the hard-pressed gold army together; and in stanza seven, we hear it as a huge roar from his victorious side as they cut down the scarlet and blue.

His lady's favour having done its work, the symbolic import of the refrain now changes dramatically in the last two stanzas. Whereas he set out on dry roads in early spring, the knight returns to his lady 'dragged sore with the rain', suggesting subtly that the battle was not won without cost: 'And his lips were pinch'd to kiss at the noon/Two red roses across the moon.' Here, the ambiguous use of the verb 'pinch'd' (is it suggesting merely the pursing of his lips into a kiss shape, or does it also
figuratively suggest some degree of distress?) allows the refrain to become two lovers' mouths meeting in a kiss, but suggests also an attendant unease or uncertainty. In the final stanza, in spite of the other crowding, symbolic ambiguities, there is little doubt, I think, that the "Two roses red across the moon" have become not only the music played by the horns, but the lovers themselves, and the consummation of their union.

The refrain can thus be seen as an incremental and emblematic force in the poem, weaving its repeated yet constantly altering pattern to bind both the poem and the couple in the poem together. But what of the symbolism implicit in the line itself? At the very least, red roses carry with them associations with earthly love and physical passion. They also carry ambivalent, polar resonances of fertility and virginity, desire and shame, and Christian and pagan myth. The fact that there are two red roses allows for this ambivalence, but also, of course, suggests the physical bonding of two people. Whether this bonding is entirely felicitous, however, is further complicated by the fact that the two roses lie across the moon, another complex symbol, for the moon is connected with chastity and virginity, but also with fertility and maternity, and with Hecate, goddess of witches. The refrain — which we should remember is also the title of the poem — therefore sets up for us conflicting possibilities when we come to consider the relationship between the knight and the lady. Is she a chaste virgin who truly loves her golden knight, protects him through his ordeal by battle with her song (or prayer), and is rewarded with his safe return and their happy marriage? Or is she something darker — an enchantress who lures her knight with a song (a spell), so that he must return to a union with her that hints at rites neither Christian nor chivalric? Or is she something more complex than either of these questions suggest — a lady closer in type to Guenevere, whose passionate love for the knight, while not intrinsically evil, may nevertheless prove fatal to both of them? Differing interpretations of the poem would seem to rest on whether we accept the ambivalence inherent in Morris's emblem, or choose between its offered polarities.

The poem, in fact, contains several oppositions that are left for the most part unresolved, tantalising us with their presence, yet refusing easy reconciliation. In addition to the symbolic possibilities offered by the central image of the refrain, moon, as was noted earlier, is rhymed throughout with noon, a pairing that juxtaposes a symbol of the night and of the darker side of nature with a time of maximum light, thus hinting at both dark and light elements being present in the poem. (Noon, though, is traditionally the time of day when Christ began to die, and also when the devil tempts most strongly, which lends weight to the possibility that the knight is being touched by forces darker than are initially apparent.) Then, when the knight rides into battle, we learn that his foes are the scarlet and blue, an interesting pairing of colours if we consider their incongruent qualities. Morris uses both colours fairly traditionally throughout The Defence of Guenevere: scarlet or red to signify war, violence and also passion, and blue to evoke peace, heaven, or some elements of the divine. But he rarely pairs them as unequivocally as this, except, of course, in the famous choosing of the cloths in 'The Defence of Guenevere', in which the angel, at Guenevere's choice of 'heaven's colour, the blue', says immediately, "hell". In that poem and, I believe, in 'Two Red Roses Across the Moon', there is an ambiguity inherent in the association of these two colours that does in some measure suggest the complex choice that humankind must make between the two. There is, therefore, as the knight rides into battle, a symbolic ambivalence as to whom or what he is
fighting that should perhaps alert us to the problems not only of accepting that the knight indisputably has right on his side, but also of accepting the apparent happy-ever-after ending of the final stanza.

Morris chooses and juxtaposes his colours with great care, and the clean, simple lines of his poetic images are often filled and enriched by the symbolic associations, both traditional and original to Morris, of the glowing colours in which they are painted. The knight’s colour of gold has long been associated with the sun, with majesty (sun-kings), and with purity and incorruptibility, which would seem to suggest that he is indeed noble, and Morris certainly uses the colour again and again in The Defence of Guenevere to signify both higher earthly and higher spiritual states. But Josephine Koster Tarvers makes the critical point that ‘[i]n the physical world of the poems, Morris focuses chiefly on the corruption of the golden state.’7 If we allow ‘Two Red Roses Across the Moon’ to be seen as belonging thematically with the majority of the other poems in the collection (rather than viewing it as an exception), we can see that the focus here, too, is not merely on the celebration, but on the possibility of the corruption of the golden state of the knight as a result of the mortal love offered to him by the lady in the hall.

I would contend that the last stanza of the poem contains enough disturbing symbolic implications to confirm that the lady presents through her love a danger to her knight, who has become enmeshed in a passion that could prove fatal to him if he is, in truth, a knight of high spiritual state:

Under the may she stoop’d to the crown,
All was gold, there was nothing of brown;
And the horns blew up in the hall at noon,
Two red roses across the moon.

May, or hawthorn, has long been seen as unlucky. In ancient Greece and Rome, May was the month in which the temples were purified, when people abstained from sex, and when it was unlucky to marry. Hawthorn became, therefore, a symbol of enforced chastity (and of ill-fated unions). However, in Rome it also became associated with the orgiastic cult of the goddess, Flora, and it was this connection that resulted in the English custom, so widespread in medieval times, of going out on May Morning to cut branches of hawthorn for subsequent revels, danced around the maypole.8 In Oxford, the celebration of May Morning continues rowdily to this day, and Morris could hardly have escaped knowledge of the yearly festivities. Having the lady in the poem stoop to her crown under may is not an accidental or a careless choice – Morris is deliberately evoking the Queen of the May, thereby hinting that something other than a purely orthodox marriage is in progress. As she is crowned, all turns from brown to gold, implying that the brown earth of winter is once again transformed by the golden flowers of spring (Flora, the goddess of fertility and flowers), and also, by extension, that her long wait is over and she has become one with her golden knight. Finally, although the horns in the poem appear to be musical instruments, the association of the word with male sexual power, with the devil, and even with cuckoldling is implicitly present.

Something rather more than a conventional reunion and wedding thus appears to take place at the end of the poem, but there still remain doubts about the innocence
or intent of both the lady and her knight. He might honourably have rescued her from her prison of enforced chastity, or her song may have lured him from his knightly, Christian vows onto quite a different path. More enigmatically, the possibility remains that the two of them may have been inextricably drawn together by a love whose passion and danger are symbolised by the ambivalent images that both knight and lady share: 'Two red roses across the moon'. In the third line of the poem, 'And ever she sung from noon to noon', that 'ever' seems to signify a continual action on her part, a repetition or chant. But whether she is praying over and over for her knight's safety, or weaving a deliberate spell to draw him to her is not defined within the text itself. And that he rides back to her 'dragged sore with the rain', and with his lips pinched, is not quite enough to tell us whether he is returning to her through free will or enchantment, with or without some foreknowledge of his moral danger. What we might just bear in mind, perhaps, is that in all these early poems of Morris's, as Walter Pater remarked in reviewing them, 'the things of nature ... play a strange delirious part'. Nature is never neutral, but always a part of the action, and the fact that the dry roads of early spring have become saturated with rain by the end of the poem suggests not only that the knight is sore and weary from battle and in need of succour, but also that what was once sunny and clear is no longer so.

Margaret Gent makes the observation that in The Defence of Guenevere Morris so often juxtaposes the dark side of the Middle Ages with 'the ne plus ultra of courtly love' that the latter falls immediately under suspicion whenever it appears to occur. This is an important point, for to see this poem as no more than a simple tale of a golden knight returning to his true love after battle to pursue wedded bliss is to ignore other, less propitious signs that accompany this particular consummation. Morris's early biographer, J. W. Mackail, interestingly saw the influence of Poe upon the fantasy poems such as 'Two Red Roses Across the Moon', and as we know Morris was reading Poe's stories as an undergraduate, this view has some force. The apparently motiveless obsession of several of Poe's characters is echoed in Morris's inclination to write tales that come upon us with the suddenness of a disturbing dream - dark and unexplained. Yet to see the events in this poem as entirely maleficent any more than entirely positive, would be to do Morris an injustice.

What holds The Defence of Guenevere together as a collection of poems is not only the window it opens on a medieval world, but the coherent quality of the view, and also the complexity of what is revealed. This is not merely a world of courtly love and chivalric knights, illustrating tales of romance in some static tapestry; this is also a world of rounded, complex, often tortured human beings, playing out their lives amid the constant threat of war and premature death, and, above all, trying to transcend the brutality and suffering of life through love. Love is presented again and again by Morris as a force to fear because of the cost it imposes, a force that can destroy, and yet may not be denied. And 'Two Red Roses Across the Moon' is not a poem that lies thematically outside the rest of the collection, but one that is firmly embedded within it, and that has its own part to play in the cohesive nature of the whole. The characters in it do appear flatter than in some of the other poems because we know so very little of the circumstances that surround the knight and his lady, but the thorny complexity of the love they grasp is there nonetheless, given to us largely through the ambivalence of the symbols. Darkness and light, death and life, physical and spiritual states all co-exist in the poem, as does the sense that the love
between these two is predestined, dynamic, but also perilous. We are shown a knight riding away from his lady, upholding his honour and fulfilling magnificently his duty to his golden brethren, yet the charged, erotic uplift of the final stanza leaves us with a sense of having witnessed something of far more value and danger.

Ultimately, what Morris seems to be showing throughout The Defence of Guenevere is that even though earthly love so often proves fragile, fearful, even fatal to those who commit themselves to it, yet love must transcend all else, for it is the sole means by which we will rise above the sordid nature of the corporeal world. And he shows this also in ‘Two Red Roses Across the Moon’. The sense that the lady has drawn her knight into some joyous yet intrinsically pagan ritual in the final stanza suggests not that she is necessarily evil, but that she symbolises both the fatality of love (as Guenevere does) and also its rich transforming power. This is a poem beneath whose engaging ballad tones lie covert forces and symbolic implications that tease with possibilities, yet whose central concerns seem recognisably a part of the light from his medieval landscape that Morris was trying to shine on his contemporary world in this early volume of poetry.

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