

THE WOODPECKER TAPESTRY¹

The 'Woodpecker' tapestry, woven at Merton Abbey in 1885 entirely from Morris' own design, poses a problem as to its original referent. In this tapestry two birds, one a woodpecker, perch in the branches of a strong, brown-trunked tree. The verse composed by Morris and woven into the borders of the tapestry is:

I once a King and chief
am now the tree-bark's thief,
Ever 'twixt trunk and leaf
Chasing the prey.

Given Morris's familiarity with myths from all countries, it is reasonable to suppose he was referring to the unrequited love story concerning Circe and Picus and retold in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. According to Ovid, the handsome features of Picus (Latin for 'woodpecker'), King of Ausonia, attracted the attention of Circe who implored him not to reject her love. When he failed to be moved by her entreaties, she turned him into a woodpecker and in anger he 'pecked at the rough oak trees with his horny beak, and angrily scarred their long branches.' In its own way, the 'Woodpecker' tapestry thus gains significance as another of Morris' works reflecting the theme of unrequited love so often found there.

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¹ Illustrated on page 2.

² *Metamorphoses of Ovid*, Mary M Innes, trans. (Penguin, 1959), p.321.

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