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**“THE HAYSTACK IN THE FLOODS”: AN
UNCHARACTERISTIC PRERAPHAELITE POEM**

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Presumably, the average reader when (or perhaps it would be better to say “if”) he or she thinks of William Morris it is as the kind of poet Morris himself described in the Apology to *The Earthly Paradise*, written between 1868 and 1870. The reader classifies Morris correctly as a PreRaphaelite, for indeed he embodied in his writings, and in the many arts and crafts he practiced with such genius and energy, the best ideals of that remarkable Brotherhood of the gifted and perhaps, therefore, one thinks of him as a poet, painter and craftsman who exemplified in his work those picturesque aspects of the Middle Ages which comprise rather the splendour, glory, charm and magic of that vanished world, than its harsher realities. The average view of PreRaphaelite medievalism is of a flight to a more beautiful and more true age than the then-iron age of industry, commercialism, imperial expansion and general uglification: in a word, escapist use of an idealized past. This is indeed true of Morris in many of his poems, and even where, as for example in “Sigurd the Volsung” (1877), he does dwell on the ferocious rather than on the romantic or the picturesque; nevertheless, he is a poet whom we associate with the heroic rather than the merely grim.

Yet, as early as 1858, when he was only twenty-four, Morris composed his short narrative poem, of only 162 lines, “The Haystack in the Floods.”¹ A close reading of the poem reveals textures of irony and symbolism added to a stark realism that makes the poem both a study of the darker aspects of the Middle Ages, a psychological drama, and also a strongly prophetic, even apocalyptic, work, comparable, in fact, to such dark poems as Browning’s “Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came” (1855), Arnold’s “Dover Beach” (1867) and Thompson’s “City of Dreadful Night” (1874).

The poem is set in the 14th Century, after the resounding English victory over the French at Poitiers in 1356. There, the victorious general was Edward, the Black Prince, a favorite in Victorian history books for children and in art; a colorful and dashing soldier (though apparently also an incompetent administrator), Edward died untimely at the age of 46. Thus, the historical background of the poem is in key with the militant sentiments of much of the Victorian reading public (and with the boastful imperialism of such political figures as Lord Palmerston [*“Civis Britannus sum!”*]) and with popular historical

iconography. Yet, we ought not to forget that the poem was written not long after the Pyrrhic victory of the Crimean War (1854-1856) and after the shaming horrors of the Indian Mutiny (1857). Perhaps these blows to Britain's imperial pride partly explain the somber tone of the poem and certainly provided (and still provide) ironical historical resonances. After the battle of Poitiers, Sir Robert de Marny, an English knight (though from his name he is seemingly of Norman or other French descent), is riding with his mistress and a small band of followers through French territory towards the safety of Gascony, then in English hands. Robert should be exultant and victorious, but he is a victor who is also a victim.

The first five lines of the poem arrest our attention and introduce important realistic and symbolic elements. Morris here focuses on the as-yet-unnamed Jehane. The centering of interest on a woman, is, of course, frequent in PreRaphaelite poetry and painting. But the landscape is not colorful and romantic. The rain-sodden countryside, with the soaked bulk of the haystack seemingly the only prominent feature in the drabness, with its brown and gray tones implied, under a lowering leaden sky, is at once the opposite of the jewel-like tones of Medieval landscape miniatures and of some of the most characteristic pictures of one of the more dreary aspects of rural experience and at the same time ironically symbolic. Rain, of course, obviously symbolizes tears, but there is also ambivalence here. The rain loosens and nourishes the soil; it brings fertility and plenty. The haystack, too, is susceptible of many possible symbolic interpretations. It is a storage place of food and bedding for livestock; of bedding and warmth for people; its shape and the thatch that covers it suggest the snugness of the archetypal country cottage. It is the piled-up evidence of past and future fertility and nourishment, and, above all, it is the traditional site for rural trysts and love-making. All of these realities and symbols of fertility and life are subsequently negated by the cruel events of the poem.

In lines 6-31 Morris continues with images of physical and emotional distress, as Jehane's misery is at once partly caused by and also projected on the landscape through which she rides. We notice that here there is none of the elegance depicted in such scenes of elegant ladies and gentlemen of the Court riding through jewel-like terrain so familiar to us from the illuminations in the "*Très Riches Heures*" of the Duc de Berri. (The picture of the hunt from this enchanting work was used for the cover of the paperback edition of Oldenbourg's *The World is Not Enough*, for example.) Here there is mud, and that harsh discomfort of riding astride, with skirts sodden with rain, "kilted to the

knee." As Jehane rides along, the tears and rain mingle on her face: thus does Morris unite the personal misery, the physical discomfort and the symbolic import. He begins in this passage to depict Jehane for us. She has "heavy hair": the crowning glory of the medieval lady and of the ideal PreRaphaelite beauty. One recalls the hair of Elizabeth Siddal, Fanny Cornforth and Jane Morris (whom Morris first saw in 1857 and whom he married in 1859), as depicted by D. G. Rossetti, Morris and others. All of these women could be described as having "heavy" hair. Jehane has "eyelids broad and fair," and is thus typical of the ideal of Medieval beauty. One can see such eyelids, and the contrast of smooth face and heavy hair on countless statues of the Blessed Virgin and in paintings of the Virgin, of androgynous angels, of female saints and of ladies of the court. Jehane also has "slender fingers"; her hands are of that exquisite narrowness that to many distinguishes the aristocrat from the peasant. Here, too, Morris stresses the anxiety and the sense of dread of Robert and Jehane, and uses the ordinary features of the road, of any road, for symbolic effect. Robert must watch at every crossroad for an ambush, and he must try to placate his discontented followers. We are left to imagine details and to fill in blanks, while all the time Morris understates the poignancy of these last hours of life. Morris alludes to and hints at much, rather than telling a full story. The section ends with the futility and waste conveyed by the last few words, of

...all for this,/To part at least without a kiss/
Beside the haystack in the floods.

Soon, in lines 32-38, the little band reaches the haystack, "that old soaked hay," where Robert's enemy and rival, Godmar, lurks with his men. Here, Morris stresses the universality of treachery by calling Godmar "Judas," and by giving the number of his men as "thirty," a link with the blood-money paid to Judas: thirty pieces of silver. Every betrayal is in a sense a reenactment of Christ's betrayal, and every sin is a reminder that Christ died for our sins, a religious resonance in keeping with the poem as an evocation of the Middle Ages and as addressed to an audience of (even if only nominal) Christians. One of the few splashes of color in the entire poem occurs here: "...the three/Red running lions dismally/Grinned from his pennon." In this brief point of color, Morris at once reminds us of the colorful aspects of Medieval life, and its ceremony and panoply, contained in the mention of a heraldic device; of the red lion emblem of England; of the idea of

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hunting down a prey; of the cruel smile on the face of a human raptor; and of the sardonic smile, the death grin of a skull.

When, in lines 38-48, Jehane tries physically to tear off her coif (another PreRaphaelite touch of accuracy) to mask the horror of the "wretched end" which she foresees and knows is inevitable, Robert tries to cheer her with words that ironically recall at once the triumphant victory at Poitiers and the tantalizing nearness of the Gascon frontier, beyond which lies safety. The last phrase, "Nought after this," is especially ambivalent. Robert means that their ride over the frontier, into safety, will be as nothing after the hardships they have already endured, but Jehane and we can construe it as meaning, "This is the end."

Now we begin to learn something of Jehane's past, and of her relationship to Godmar. She has been accused of witchcraft, and will, if Robert is killed, be taken captive back to Paris, to be tried by the judges, imprisoned in the Chatelet prison and swum as a witch in the Seine. The terrifying order that she envisions consisted of binding a suspected witch, left hand to right ankle and right hand to left ankle, behind her back and of throwing her into water. If she sank, she was innocent; if she floated (as she might, buoyed up by air under her skirts) she was guilty. In either case, her death was almost always inevitable. This hideous ordeal is, of course, a correlative to the impossible choice put before Jehane by Godmar. She can escape this fate only if she becomes Godmar's mistress, for which she will also "be damned at last." Here Morris touches on several dark aspects of medieval life. The fear of witches and witchcraft led to hideous mob scenes and the equivalent of lynchings. Ecclesiastical and other courts were harsh, and penalties extreme. Here, too, the misogyny expressed in so many medieval sermons, satires and anecdotes appears. He hints also at the archetypally horrifying idea of the dungeon or oubliette with its iron gratings, its dank stones, and its rats. And also, too, there is the horrible futility of Jehane's vision of herself frantically scrambling for life, though to save herself from drowning would be to condemn herself to the fire. Lastly, the exquisite cult of Courtly Love, expressive of the elegant and playful side of medieval culture, is shown as, in essence, a cult of the damned. Since courtly love is outside marriage it is always sinful, especially if it is physically consummated. We remember that in "Aucassin and Nicolette" the lovers would prefer to be damned to Hell than to be blessed in Heaven, for in Hell they will be with all the famous lovers of the past, as well as with each other. But, though Jehane would presumably prefer Hell with Robert to Heaven without him if she became Godmar's mistress against her will, she would suffer

Hell on earth, and Hell after death without the consolation of true love. She would have sinned against both God and St. Venus.

Robert takes the rein of Jehane's horse (lines 59-68), to emphasize his role as her protector, and raises his battle-cry. This ironically recalls the cry of the victors at Poitiers; St. George was the chosen patron of English soldiers. No one among Robert's followers takes up the cry: Godmar is not the only traitor. Morris here focusses on a tiny movement expressive of Robert's rage and frustration at this betrayal: "...his thumb beat fast/Upon his sword hilt." This is again a touch of realism. And in a supremely sinister moment of action and anonymous violence "...someone cast/About his neck a kerchief long,/And bound him." Robert is dishonored and humiliated by a faceless man who uses a trick common to skulking thugs and footpads.

"They," still faceless and nameless, drag Robert and Jehane to Godmar, who threatens her with what she has fearfully imagined. For the first time, almost half-way through the poem, we learn her name. "Jehane" (Joan) is a common name, of queens and of peasant girls, almost an archetypal name, but with powerful resonances of tragedy. Here again, in these lines, 68-88, we have Jehane at the center. Her actions are true indicators of her pain and bewilderment. When she stares at the damp palm of her hand, as though it were covered with blood from a cut on her forehead, Morris again is stressing the connection with the sufferings of Christ, the prime tragic figure of Medieval drama. Is not Jehane's brow reminiscent of Christ's brow bleeding from the Crown of Thorns? Her stark "No!" is the central negation in the poem and elicits the second splash of red, as Godmar flushes with fury. Now he utters a threat of rape, as opposed to the earlier request that she yield as his paramour. In this image of the helpless woman, bereft of her protector, Morris makes Jehane the personification of the defeated and the conquered, of all the helpless victims of war and conquest anywhere, at any time.

Then, surprisingly, in the next section of the poem, lines 88-99, we see Jehane as having the potentiality for evil, as hatred and loathing transform her into a witchlike creature: "A wicked smile/Wrinkled her face, her lips grew thin,/A long way out she thrust her chin": she threatens to strangle Godmar or bite him to death: threats that are at once gruesome and unreal, because while we believe in her hatred, we cannot believe in her strength. But her agonized cry, "I cannot choose but sin and sin," points up the reality of her situation and the paradox of courtly love. Her last refuge would be to commit suicide in the resolute mode of ancient Roman patrician ladies, by starving herself to death. Again, of course, suicide is a mortal sin, and she knows that

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suicide would damn her to Hell, since she is not apparently conscious of the merciful, only the punitive, aspect of God.

Godmar threatens to destroy her if he cannot have her for himself. He would reveal all he knows (or may have fabricated) about her witchcraft. These lies will be eagerly believed by the cruel Paris mob, and we hear in his words the howls, the bloodlust: "Jehane the brown! Jehane the brown!/Give us Jehane to burn or drown!" We now learn that Jehane (like Jane Morris) is a brunette, not the blond beauty more admired in the Middle Ages or the redheaded women admired by the PreRaphaelites. She has the magical darkness of Hugo's Esmeralda, another accused witch. Godmar's callous and brief aside, "Eh!—gag me Robert!—" is a dramatic and understated touch, whereby Morris suggests Robert's impotent strugglings, and futile attempts to call for help. It is an aside as Godmar gloats over the beauty he will destroy if he cannot possess it: "This were indeed a piteous end/For those long fingers and long feet./And long neck, and smooth shoulders sweet."

Now comes one of the most psychologically telling passages of the poem, lines 116-127, where Jehane is so numbed by sorrow, fear and exhaustion that she falls asleep in spite of the rain and the cold. She wakes, still resolute, and says, "I will not," and Godmar reddens again. His head turns "As though it hung on wires", he is dehumanized by his hatred and frustration. So inhuman has he become that, when the lovers strain to exchange a last farewell kiss, lines 128-136, Godmar thrusts them apart and cuts Robert's throat as he would slit the throat of an animal, and Robert's end is at once an indignity and a desecration: lines 145-151. He "moaned as dogs do, being half dead./Unwitting."

Godmar turned grinning to his men,
Who ran, some five or six, and beat
His head to pieces at their feet.

The callousness of this and the deliberate ambiguity of "their" (does it refer to the feet of Jehane and Godmar, or to those of Godmar's men?) add to its horror, and we note that Godmar's grinning unites him to the beasts on his pennon.

The terrifying episode ends with Godmar's reiteration of his threats and with the implication that Jehane has, at any rate temporarily, retreated from the horrors of the world into madness. The last two lines of the poem recall the first five:

This was the parting that they had

Beside the haystack in the floods.

This reiteration reminds us that the cycle of the world continues, and that the ugliness and cruelty like the beauty and kindness of the world are repeated in these world cycles.

So then, this poem, though in it Morris uses some archaic language, "the first fitte is read," "gag me Robert," and so on, and is accurate in his use of details of medieval life, is not a characteristically PreRaphaelite poem, in that it dwells on the harsh rather than the picturesque aspects of medieval life. However, it has indeed a universality in its depiction of an almost Hardyean irony of life, the universality of suffering and the horrors of war. Because its setting is the rain-sodden fields of France, it is inevitable, too, that a reader of the 1980's will see the poem not only as an expression of the darker side of the Victorian imagination, but also as actually prophetic of the coming horror of the World Wars I and II, as an apocalyptic poem of the kind mentioned earlier, and as one of the earliest examples of a growing series of such poems, to be found not only in English but in other European literatures, in the latter part of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries.

NOTE

¹I cite Morris's poem as it appears in *The Pre-Raphaelites and Their Circle*, ed. Cecil Y. Lang. 2nd, rev. ed. (Chicago and London, 1975), pp. 263-266.