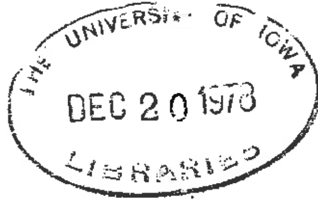

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Morris' "Haystack":
The Fate of Vision

"The Haystack in the Floods" has long been admired by readers of poetry, and is by many regarded as Morris' best short poem, but we do not really have an interpretation of it. A recent controversy in the pages of Victorian Poetry is largely concerned with Morris' misunderstanding of the "trial by water"--he erroneously thought there was no chance of surviving such a trial, and hence regarded it as a hideous example of mob-persecution pure and simple.[1] This is valuable information, but it does not tell us what the poem is essentially about. Nor do vague references to a "poetry of escape" help us much with this eminently realistic and violent poem, however well they may describe much of the content of The Defence of Guenevere volume.[2] More cogent is F. L. Lucas' comment that Morris' poetry in general shows us "an intense capacity for feeling starved by circumstance" and the more recent statements of Ralph Berry on the whole Guenevere volume as a poetry of "defeat" illustrating the basic "mental set" of its author.[3]

I would like in the following pages to deal with Morris' poem in more detail than has been afforded it so far and to develop a fuller interpretation.

To begin with, there is the title, which haunts the reader long after he puts down the poem. Although the haystack and the floods of rain beating down upon it are not full-scale images in the poem, they are highly-charged symbols. The relevant associations of the haystack-image would be those of pastoral peace and plenty, of quietness, of innocence. They are all positive associations undermined only slightly by a sense of perishability and decay. In the poem only Robert and Jehane, the positive characters, are associated closely with the haystack, while Godmar and his men, if associated with any landscape feature at all, are linked only with that "ditch" in which we first see them. The early lines of the poem tell us that Jehane will see Robert "slain/Beside the haystack in the floods" and that the two will "part at last without a kiss/Beside the haystack in the floods." Later, during her hour's dreamless sleep, Jehane lies, "Her head on a wet heap of hay." There are no other references to the haystack in the poem except the last two lines, now

established as a kind of refrain: "This was the parting that they had/Beside the haystack in the floods."[4] The haystack endures the floods just as Sir Robert and Jehane do, and is throughout the poem intimately associated with them.

The other title image, the "floods," is more prominently featured in the poem, and is almost certainly inspired by Froissart, who frequently refers to the heavy rains in which various battles and encounters took place during the Hundred Years War.[5] In the poem the word "floods" does not refer to actual flooding of the fields but only to the very heavy rains which fall throughout the poem (on the just and the unjust characters alike). The first verse-paragraphs make the "floods" a metaphor for all the hardships Sir Robert and Jehane have faced and are facing in their perilous flight through a hostile countryside. Both are spattered with "dirt and rain," and Jehane particularly is soaked through:

> And the wet dripp'd from every tree
> Upon her head and heavy hair,
> And on her eyelids broad and fair;
> The tears and rain ran down her face.

The mingling of "tears and rain" on her face, and the "heaviness" of her hair, are particularly poignant images, the latter linking up with "that old soak'd hay" beside which Robert and Jehane are abruptly halted by the appearance of Godmar "across the only way."

The title images set up for us a symbolic miniature of the dramatic situation in the poem. Like a haystack in an open field, Sir Robert and Jehane (who is, like the haystack, brown) stand naked and vulnerable before the destructive fury of Godmar, whom we later see "send/The thin steel down" on Robert's body like the pelting of a heavy rain.

Of course, the conflict in the poem, though elemental, is more complex than this. It is a conflict of human characters, not of images and symbols, and we cannot understand it until we understand those characters.

Sir Robert de Marny is simply a one-dimensional English knight, brave and silent; Godmar is pure evil, a stock villain, a grotesque. Only Jehane is complex, and the action of the poem turns entirely upon her decisions, thus making it imperative that we reach some

thoroughness in our understanding of her. The poem presents two contrasting sets of implications about Jehane; she is both mistress and visionary, both sinner and saint. She is a figure, in my reading at least, very much like Jeanne d'Arc, and it seems more than likely that Morris modelled Jehane on what he knew about the actual or fictional Jeanne.[6]

Jehane is certainly a woman with a past. The reader would like to know more about what that past is. Why is the Paris mob, for example, so eager to "burn or drown" her? Why the bloodthirsty chant, "Jehane the brown! Jehane the brown!/Give us Jehane to burn or drown!"? What has she done to deserve this call for vengeance? Given the intended punishment, her sin would appear to be either adultery or witchcraft.

But which? It is very hard to determine. The phrase "Jehane the brown" seems to pinpoint a physical quality and seems to have a physical range of associations. One thinks of Browning's "brown Dolores" squatting outside the convent wall in "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister," where the "brown" conveys a sense of earthy sexuality. Perhaps Jehane's sin is similarly nothing more than a strongly sexual disposition which has created for her a shady reputation and, possibly, a string of lovers among whom Sir Robert is the current favorite. One does wonder how the English knight, so courtly, chivalrous and "English," got involved with brown Jehane in the first place--but then the dividing line between French and English was much less clear in those days than in Morris' or ours! In any case, as critics have noted before, the poem is unusually candid (even for Morris) in its depiction of sexual feeling, and Jehane is certainly an attractive woman in physical-sexual terms.

Everything from Sir Robert's "love...sweet my love" to Godmar's drooling "Those long fingers, and long feet,/And long neck, and smooth shoulders sweet" testifies to this fact. And not only is Jehane physically beautiful, she does appear to be more than usually "free" in her ways. The early lines of the poem show how much she has been prepared to sacrifice and endure (dirt, rain, cold, "little ease" and much danger) merely for a lover, and he a foreigner. In enduring such hardships not for a husband, but only for a lover, Jehane seems, at least in the context of medieval views of men and women, more manly than womanish. She even rides a horse like a man: "The stirrup touching either

shoe,/She rode astride as troopers do." Without becoming too explicit about the sexual innuendos of this last line, it does seem to confirm the general picture of Jehane as a young woman more than usually attractive, and more than usually free, in sexual terms. Thus there is enough detail in the poem to interpret "Jehane the brown" as meaning Jehane the dark, the earthy, and the sexually free.

It seems more likely to me, however, that the sin Jehane stands accused of in Paris is not adultery but some form of witchcraft. There seems clear evidence of a capacity for "second sight" in Jehane which may remind us of Jeanne d'Arc's "voices" and which could certainly lie behind an accusation of witchcraft. At the first encounter with Godmar and his men, before a word has been spoken, Jehane sees right through to the end of the episode, Robert lying dead, herself endangered. Her accurate vision of the future is one of the bizarre features of the poem and is sharply contrasted with Robert's lack of vision:

> So then,
> While Robert turn'd round to his men,
> She saw at once the wretched end,
> And, stooping down, tried hard to rend
> Her coif the wrong way from her head,
> And hid her eyes; while Robert said:
> "Nay, love, 'tis scarcely two to one,
> At Poictiers where we made them run
> So fast--why, sweet my love, good cheer,
> The Gascon frontier is so near,
> Nought after this."

A true knight, a man of honor, he believes his men will help him and that an escape can be managed. He does not perceive, as Jehane does, how vulnerable their "sweet love" and even their existence is. Had Jehane been Robert's wife, no doubt Robert's men would have defended the two, even to the death. But since Jehane is only Robert's mistress, and is French to boot, Robert's enthusiastic rallying call ("St. George for Marny!") receives no response whatever: "Alas! no man of all his train/Gave back that cheery cry again." Neither the "good cheer" Robert urges upon Jehane, nor his own "cheery cry," counts for anything in this situation. The two are left completely alone to face Godmar and his thirty men, and, in Robert's case, to die, as Jehane had foreseen.

Other indications of Jehane's unusual visionary power appear elsewhere in the poem. Most notable is her strange behavior during the one-hour grace period allowed by Godmar after her first refusal of his proposition:

> So, scarce awake,
> Dismounting, did she leave that place,
> And totter some yards: with her face
> Turn'd upward to the sky she lay,
> Her head on a wet heap of hay,
> And fell asleep: and while she slept,
> And did not dream, the minutes crept
> Round to the twelve again; but she,
> Being waked at last, sigh'd quietly,
> And strangely childlike came, and said:
> "I will not." (116-126)

This is the most mysterious passage of the poem. No ordinary mistress, no ordinary woman, one assumes, could in these dangerous and dramatic circumstances, sleep at all. But with evident purpose, Jehane seeks out sleep, turns her face upward to the sky, does not dream, and awakes to return to the group in a "strangely childlike" way, her refusal now firmer than before ("I will not"). She has seemingly drunk some sort of visionary power in her hour's dreamless sleep; she has communicated in some way with her God here.[7] She awakes to a childlike acceptance of His will. Her quiet sigh is the only indication of her human regret for the hard choice she now knows she must continue to make. Again the reader is reminded of Jeanne d'Arc and her "voices."

Thus Jehane is a fascinating combination of opposite qualities: she is at once a childlike, mystically-inclined young woman intensely conscious of the reality of sin, and at the same time a swarthy, mannish, free-spirited companion of an escaping English knight. She is "fair" Jehane (a frequently used adjective in the poem) and "brown" Jehane at the same time. Perhaps this union of qualities adds up to Morris' feminine ideal. There certainly seems more than an accidental similarity between the name "Jehane" and the name of Morris' eventual wife, Jane Burden, whom Morris was courting at the time he wrote the poem. Philip Henderson has described Jane Burden as a "tall, large-boned girl with a pale ivory face, thick eyebrows, a neck like a tower and an abundance of black, crinkly

hair."[8] He then adds this intriguing sentence to the description: "From her swarthy complexion, it has been supposed that Jane must have had gipsy blood, but we are told that she came of Cottswold stock, though there may still have been a gipsy strain."[9] The combination of that swarthiness in the eyebrow and hair with the "pale ivory face" seems just right for the "brown" but also "fair" and "smooth" Jehane of the poem. Like Jane Burden, Jehane is tall and has a long neck (Godmar refers to her "long fingers, and long feet,/And long neck, and smooth shoulders sweet"). Furthermore, the destiny of the characters in the poem bears a prophetic resemblance to Morris' ill-fated marriage. Morris-Marny is "killed" by a rival lover, Rossetti-Godmar, and the latter is left more or less in possession of the beautiful but now "mad" Jane-Jehane. Since Rossetti was Morris' close friend, it would be entirely natural to think of the Rossetti-Godmar character in the poem as a Judas.[10]

But in saying these things about the poem we profit too much from a hindsight not available to Morris at the time of composition. A full-scale biographical reading must be rejected, but we can certainly take note of the fact that Jehane, like other fictional characters in the poetry and painting of the Pre-Raphaelite group, resembles, in physical characteristics at least, Morris' model and future wife, Jane Burden. It also seems that the loyalty and steadfast love depicted in Jehane were qualities that Morris hoped to find in equal measure in the real-life Jane.

However this may be, it does seem clear that in the created character Jehane, in the "originality" of her way of life and in her courage and steadfastness, Morris has shown us the inner strength and vitality of the person who defies convention and the mob in order to live life on his or her terms, however unconventional or "free." Jehane acts in the poem on the basis of what her intuition tells her is right, even, as I suggested above, on the basis of what her "visions" assure her is right. She is heedless of convention, of the threats and jealousies of lesser beings, and even of survival itself. Hers is the moral nobility for which Sir Robert's aristocratic courage and honor are the symbolic correlatives. Together the two characters embody much that Morris himself admired in life and in people. His great medieval poem moves us so powerfully because he has so skillfully embodied in the elemental conflict of

its realistic texture those forces for good and for evil that he himself knew quite well: originality against orthodoxy, vision against convention, the individual against the mob. Tragically, "The Haystack in the Floods" shows how all too often even the most admired and exalted human virtues go down to defeat.

James Hazen

FOOTNOTES

[1]Dougald B. MacEachen, "Trial by Water in William Morris' 'The Haystack in the Floods'," Victorian Poetry, VI (1968), 73-75; John Hollow, "William Morris' 'The Haystack in the Floods'," Victorian Poetry, VII (1969), 353-355.

[2]Oscar Maurer, Jr., "William Morris and the Poetry of Escape," Nineteenth-Century Studies, ed. Herbert Davis (New York, 1968), pp. 247-276.

[3]F. L. Lucas, Ten Victorian Poets, Third Edition (Cambridge, 1948), p. 152; Ralph Berry, "A Defense of 'Guenevere'," Victorian Poetry, IX (Autumn, 1971), 277-286.

[4]All citations of the poem are from The Collected Works of William Morris, Volume I, ed. May Morris (New York: Russell and Russell, 1966), pp. 124-128. No line numbers are used in this edition.

[5]John M. Patrick, "Morris and Froissart: 'Geoffray Teste Noire' and 'The Haystack in the Floods'," Notes and Queries, CCIII (October, 1958), 425-427.

[6]Edouard Perroy, The Hundred Years War (Bloomington, 1959), pp. 282-289.

[7]Hollow's argument, in the essay cited above, that Morris took a dim view of those who claimed to know the will of God does not seem to me to be supported by this poem. It is Jehane and not Godmar who seems to make such a claim here.

[8]William Morris: His Life, Work and Friends (New York, 1967), p. 48.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Henderson, Chapter Five.