WILLIAM MORRIS'S *A DREAM OF JOHN BALL: A STUDY IN REACTIONARY LIBERALISM*

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IT USED to be fashionable to look upon William Morris either as a reactionary dreamer who had lost his nineteenth-century identity while mooning over days which were never to return, or as an advanced liberal who had almost sacrificed himself to the world of art, but had, although at a late age, finally come to see the socialistic light.

Neither view is any longer tenable. Morris scholarship in the last quarter century has been working toward a synthesis of his many activities, a synthesis which will unify the reactionary dreamer and the advanced liberal. And when that final synthesis appears, it will pivot upon Morris's medievalism.

The great love which Morris felt for the Middle Ages is a commonplace that hardly needs documentation. So much a commonplace is it that, with the exception of E. C. Küster, Karl Litzenberg, and Margaret Grennan, scholars have largely overlooked its implications and have merely perpetuated the generalizations made about it by Mackail, Morris's first biographer. But Grennan has demonstrated that Morris's medieval interests permeate all of his work, and in so doing she has pointed out the direction which Morris scholarship must take.

In this paper I shall attempt to designate certain influences which affected Morris's *Dream of John Ball*, the work which best represents the fusion of the reactionary dreamer and the advanced liberal.

In January of 1885 Morris broke with the Democratic Federation and helped to establish the Socialist League and its organ, the *Commonweal*. Here his *Dream of John Ball* was first published, in parts running from November 13, 1886, to January 22, 1887. It was a work with a socialist message, just like his later *News from Nowhere*, but in it he allowed free reign to his love of the Middle Ages.

Morris felt that socialism was the means by which human dignity would be achieved, and he was convinced that the Peasants' Revolt
of 1881 was somewhat analogous to the revolution which nineteenth-century workers would have to fight. The speaker in this dream allegory (Morris himself) tells John Ball, the priest who was one of the revolt’s leaders, “Thou hast seen beforehand what the remedy should be, even as those of later days have seen it.”

Our first question is, where did Morris get his material? Certainly the history of the revolt was not new to him, for he had met with it at least as early as the fifties, when he and Burne-Jones read through Froissart’s Chronicle while students at Oxford. His interest in Froissart, like his interest in Chaucer, was an enduring one. In fact, at the time of his death an edition of the Anglo-French chronicler was being prepared for the Kelmscott Press. It is significant that Morris, when asked by the editor of the Pall Mall Gazette to submit a list of his favorite books, included Froissart, and did not specifically mention any of the other chroniclers who had dealt with the revolt. He says of the section of the list in which Froissart appeared: “Uncritical or traditional history: almost all these books [there are six of them] are admirable pieces of tale-telling; some of them rise into the dignity of prose epics, so to say, especially in parts. Note, for instance . . . the great rally of the rebels of Ghent in Froissart.” This list was drawn up in February 1886, at which time Morris most probably was engaged on his Dream of John Ball. The fact that he refers specifically to the uprising at Ghent, if coupled with the fact that Froissart’s few pages on the Peasants’ Revolt appear right in the middle of the Ghent material, might indicate that Morris was at the time rereading Froissart as background for his work.

In the same letter Morris spoke of another “kind of book which I think might be excluded in such lists . . . . Such books are rather tools . . . . one reads them . . . for extracting information . . . of some special kind. Among such books I should include works on philosophy, economics, and modern or critical history.” Some of these “tool” books Morris speaks of may have contained material on the revolt; certainly a number of the “critical” histories did. We can be quite certain that Morris had been reading a variety of factual studies shortly before the composition of his Dream of John Ball. For Morris had entered into the socialist cause with little more than an intuitional sentiment for it. He later commented: “When I took that step I was blankly ignorant of economics; I had never so much as opened Adam Smith, or heard of Ricardo, or of Karl Marx.” In 1884 he wrote to Andreas Schu: “I feel myself weak as to the Science of Socialism on many points . . . . I want statistics terribly.” During that year he mentions reading many books on economics in an attempt to find those statistics.

If Morris felt the need for facts and figures, and if he was reading economic studies, one would hardly expect him to pass up a work issued in 1884 by James E. Thorold Rogers, Six Centuries of Work and Wages. And he did not. In a paper which he read before the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, Morris said: “That instinct [that the medieval craftsman was to some extent well off and free] has been abundantly confirmed by painstaking collectors of facts, like Mr. Thorold Rogers, and we now know that the gild craftsman led the sort of life in work and play that we should have expected from the art he produced.” Both this and Rogers’s one other work, the seven-volume History of Agriculture and Prices in England, contain an economic interpretation of the Peasants’ Revolt, and it is possible to demonstrate that Morris used them in his Dream of John Ball.

The chroniclers, or as Morris called them, “the uncritical historians,” present very different accounts of the revolt. As members of widely scattered monastic orders, they could not readily exchange accurate information, and their reliability varies directly with their proximity to the events which they treat. One thing they had in common as members of the established order; they looked with fear at this movement which threatened their very security. Also, they had not the advantage of historical perspective to enable them to detect either the complexity or the causes of the uprising. Like historians of contemporary events in any age, they sought rather simple explanations. If they did see any explanation beyond the

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2 Works, XXII, xiv.
3 Ibid., p. xii.
4 Ibid., XXIII, 277.
6 Works, XXII, 306.
mistreatment of a man's daughter by a tax collector or the desire of
"Jake Straw & Wat Tiler / To be made dukes of Essex and Kente," it was in the preaching of John Ball, and as good conservative theologians of the time, they were more than willing to apply to him the contemporary smear word, Wyckifite. Ball is exhibited in the chronicles as a lesson in the wickedness of Lollardy, and many subsequent historians followed this interpretation.

In 1865 Thorold Rogers advanced a new theory, which was to be accepted until the nineties. Briefly, Rogers believed that the revolt was caused by the attempt of the lords to reassert their power over the peasants. Before the plague of 1347, the lords were glad to accept fealty payments in money rather than in labor, but money payments became almost worthless after the plague, when a very much reduced labor force was making, in spite of suppressive laws passed against them, demands for higher wages. The lords saw that the only way they could keep from being ruined—the law of supply and demand working for once in favor of labor—was to reestablish the practice of labor rent.

Morris accepted this view of the revolt, not only because it offered an escape from the complexity of the varying chronic accounts, but also because he was not at all interested in a doctrinal interpretation which made Ball, his central character, no more than a Wyckifite rabble-rouser. Of course, he was to attach to the cause a more noble aspiration, socialist fellowship, yet his explanation of the revolt is based on Rogers's.

In addition to accepting Rogers’s theory as to the cause of the revolt, Morris also accepts his explanation of the effects. Rogers believed that the revolt resulted in the dissolution of villeinage. He says in the History of Agriculture, "The rebellion was put down, but the demands of the villains [sic] were silently and effectually accorded; as they were masters for a week of the position, the dread of another servile war promoted the liberty of the serf." That Morris accepted this effect of the revolt is apparent in his lecture "Feudal England," where he claims that through the revolt "a death-wound was inflicted on the feudal system," and in the Dream of John Ball. In the allegory, during the long talk after the battle, Morris tells John Ball of the revolt's effects: "Yet when the lords have vanquished, and all England lieth under them again, yet shall their victory be fruitless; for the free men that hold unfree lands shall they not bring under the collar again, and villeinage shall slip from their hands, till there be, and not long after ye are dead, but few unfree men in England; so that your lives and your deaths both shall bear fruit."

This view was, of course, foreign to the chroniclers, who were too close to see and too biased to describe anything but a complete victory for the lords. Nor do modern historians accept such a view. Oman, after describing Thorold Rogers's theories, says: "Villeinage disappeared by slow degrees, and from economic causes. It was not killed once and for all by the armed force of rebellion in June, 1381."

Though Morris borrowed his overall view of the revolt from Rogers, he took many of the details from the chroniclers themselves. Froissart, of course, was his leading source among the "uncritical historians," but there are details which cannot be explained by him alone. Froissart, for example, though mentioning communications between the peasants of several counties, does not include the text of any of the letters. Henry Knighton and Thomas Walsingham, the two most reliable of the chroniclers, do print several of the letters which are supposed to have circulated among the rebels. Morris mentions no letters specifically, but there seems to be no doubt that the narrator of the dream, Morris himself, has come to Kent in response to one of the rhymed epistles. For when Will Green, a local leader in the town of Medway, meets the newcomer, he whispers in Morris's ear, "John the Miller, that ground small, small, small." Morris immediately answers, pretending ignorance of any source but intuition, "The king's son of heaven shall pay for all." These lines in Morris's work are drawn from one of the letters originally cited by both Knighton and Walsingham. A comparison of the two versions indicates that Morris was following Walsingham rather than Knighton, but there is always the possibility—in this case a good one—that Morris found the letter not in these chroniclers at all, but in a modern

2 Works, XVI, 222; XXIII, 55-56.

10 Works, XXIII, 56.
11 Ibid., XVI, 370.
13 Works, XVI, 220.
historical account of the revolt. In surveying the histories available to Morris, I was able to find only two which quoted the letter in question. Green’s *Short History of the English People* (1875) uses the Knighton version, whereas Rogers in his *History of Agriculture* cites the Walsingham. This means that Morris found the couplet either in Rogers or in Walsingham; there is no way to determine which, for there is evidence that he was acquainted with both accounts.

Another departure from Froissart is seen in Morris’s brief mention of a minor figure in the revolt. He says: “North away at Norwich John Litster was wiping the woad from his arms, as who would have to stain them red again, but not with grain or madder.” \(^{14}\) I have found in the accounts only three mentions of Litster or Lister, and in all three he is identified as the rebel leader from Norwich. Knighton presents him as Geoffrey Litster, Froissart as William Lister; neither uses the first name which Morris employs. Walsingham, however, speaks of a certain “tinctore de Norwico, cuius nomen erat Johannes Littetere.” \(^{15}\) It seems then that Walsingham, this time without competition from Rogers, is Morris’s source.

In the case of another name, that of Sir John Newton, Morris used the account by Froissart rather than the one by Walsingham, the only other chronicler in whom I found Newton mentioned. In Walsingham, Newton is a member of Richard’s retinue at the final meeting between Wat Tyler and the King at Smithfield; in Froissart he is a prisoner of and a spokesman for the rebels. Morris has John Ball, planning for the next day’s activities, say: “To-morrow we shall take the road for Rochester; and most like it were well to see what Sir John Newton in the castle may say to us: for the man is no ill man, and hath a tongue well-shapen for words; and it were well that we had him out of the castle and away with us, and that we put a word in his mouth to say to the king.” \(^{16}\) Perhaps Morris saw a reflection of himself in this fourteenth-century aristocratic spokesman for the rebels.

I have shown that Morris was indebted to Walsingham and to Froissart among the chroniclers. Another small detail in the *Dream of John Ball* indicates a debt to Henry Knighton’s *Chronicon*. When

\(^{14}\) *Works*, XVI, 228.


\(^{16}\) *Works*, XVI, 254–255.

Morris’s men of Kent gather at the Medway cross to await the arrival of John Ball, this description follows: “Suddenly from the new white tower behind us clashed out the church bells, and at the first sound of them a great shout went up from us: John Ball hath rung our bell!” \(^{17}\) Among the several letters found in the chronicles, one “exemplar epistole Johannis Balle” is unique to the *Chronicon Henrici Knighton*. It starts thus: “Jon Balle gesthyt 50e wele alle and doth 50e to understande, he hath runge 50e belle.” \(^{18}\) I could find no mention of this particular letter in any “critical history” available to Morris, although the historians did rely heavily on Knighton for other details, so heavily, in fact, that Morris could not have been ignorant of the work.

Morris’s treatment of John Ball, the rebel priest, is more complex. First, we must leave the artist some room to exercise his imagination; secondly, we must consider the demands of his purpose, and Morris’s purpose was to popularize the socialist cause. In general, Morris seems to follow Froissart for material on Ball himself. This is especially true in the subject matter and the tone of the speech at the cross, although Morris greatly lengthens that speech. There are, perhaps, good reasons for this. The rebel priest’s sermon in Morris’s work stresses the socialist ideal of common ownership of all property. Froissart is the only chronicler who directly states this communist element in Ball’s preaching, for he quotes Ball as saying, “A ye good people, the maters gothe nat well to passe in Englande, nor shall nat do tyll every thyng be common.” \(^{19}\)

Morris’s Ball demands equality on the grounds that all men are descendants of Adam and Eve: “Ye [arc] gathered here in harness to bid all bear witness of you that ye are the sons of one man and one mother, begotten of the earth.” \(^{20}\) In Froissart’s account of the Ball sermon we find: “We be all come fro one father and one mother.” \(^{21}\) Froissart also mentions several times the banners carried by the rebels, but he does not describe them. Morris does: they depict a “man and a woman half-clad in skins of beasts . . . against a back-

\(^{17}\) Ibid., p. 226.


\(^{20}\) *Works*, XVI, 285.

\(^{21}\) *The Chronicle of Froissart*, III, 224.
London; instead, he should have been in the archbishop's prison at Maidstone. Morris's Ball thanks the people of Kent: "Ye [did] take me out of the archbishop's prison but three days agoe, when ye lighted the archbishop's house for the candle of Canterbury." Actually, Ball was not released until June eleventh, when the Kentish mob under the leadership of Wat Tyler was on its way back to London from Canterbury. Certainly there was no reason for Ball to be in Kent stirring up sentiment for the cause on June fourteenth; nor was he there, for all the chronicles clearly state that he was at London during the meeting with the King at Blackheath. Morris could easily have worked his way out of this error in chronology by following Froissart, who said, "The archbishop set him [Ball] at liberty, for he could not for conscience sake have put him to death." For obvious reasons, however, Morris would rather forsake chronology in order to have the rebels release Ball, so he follows the account in Knighton. Also, by elevating Ball to the position of Kentish leader, Morris had to dispense with Wat Tyler, the actual leader of the Kentish rebels. To keep him on the scene would have detracted from the ideological appeal of the priest.

Morris's socialist purpose affected the historical section, the first part, of his Dream of John Ball to some extent; it completely motivated the second part, approximately half of the entire piece. Here Morris, the narrator, and the rebel priest go to the village church and spend the entire night talking about the state of society. Morris unfolds to Ball a vision of the future, which, as Philip Henderson has pointed out, is "close in its account of the growth and development of capitalist society, and its final overthrow by the workers, to the historical sections of Marx's Capital." During this long talk it becomes increasingly clear why Morris selected John Ball as his subject: he saw in the aspirations of this spiritual leader the nobility which is connected with the doctrine of the fellowship of men; he saw in John Ball qualities which he saw in William Morris, the socialist lecturer; he saw in Ball the same dream which he expended to sweaty workers at Hammersmith on Saturday nights. And he

22 Works, XVI, 227.
23 Ibid., p. 228.
24 Historia Anglica, I, Pt. 2, p. 32.
26 History of Agriculture, I, 84.
27 Works, XVI, 296.
29 Chronicles of Henry Knighton, II, 132.
30 Letters of William Morris, p. lvi.
assures the fourteenth-century priest that his dream will some day become reality: "The time shall come, John Ball, when that dream shall... be... and thou shalt not be forgotten." 32

William Morris was too much of an artist to step out of the framework of his dream allegory to exhort his readers to immediate action. But that he connected the revolt of 1381 with the immediate revolt he desired is clear from a socialist lecture which he published in the Commonwealth just a few months after the appearance of his Dream of John Ball. After alluding to the failure of the peasants in 1381, he says: "With us it is different. A few years of wearisome struggle against apathy and ignorance; a year or two of growing hope—and then who knows? Perhaps a few months, or perhaps a few days of the open struggle against brute force, with the mask off its face, and the sword in its hand, and then we are over the bar... Ahead of us... lies the inevitable social revolution, which will bring about the end of mastery and the triumph of fellowship." 33

I have attempted to demonstrate that Morris was well acquainted with the various chronicle accounts of the Peasants' Revolt, as well as with Thorold Rogers's economic interpretation of it. Superimposed upon this source material and shaping it was Morris's own feeling that the revolt was an early step in the direction of the ideal, socialist fellowship.

Much could be said about other aspects of Morris's medievalism as they touch this work, but these lie outside the scope of the present paper. His lifelong passion for medieval architecture, his interest in Scandinavian medievalism, his love of medieval craft objects, his continual devotion to Malory, Chaucer, and the novels of Scott all find a place in the Dream of John Ball, which one scholar has called Morris's "unqualified acceptance of the spirit of the Middle Ages." 34

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32 Works, XVI, 388.
33 Ibid., XXIII, 38.

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GNOMIC STRUCTURE IN EMERSON'S POETRY
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Despite the enormous amount of research on Emerson, no one so far has attempted to discover the source of his short verses. The primary fact to be noted is that they sound like Old English gnomes. But Emerson could not read Old English. Few translations existed, and it is probable that none was available to him. We have, conveniently, the evidence of his library withdrawals and the Journal, in which he habitually listed his reading—even prospective reading. Nowhere do we find any citation of Old English poetry. In fact, he was so unfamiliar with it that he followed the practice of his contemporaries in applying the term "Old English" to the poetry of the seventeenth century.

Perhaps the poetry of Skelton is the answer?—Again, however, Emerson, to our knowledge, was ignorant of Skelton. Then what about folk rhymes, like "Sing a Song of Sixpence"? Emerson had certainly heard many such.—But this is approaching the absurd. Emerson's verses do not sound like nursery rhymes, or Skelton, or George Herbert, but they do, often, sound exactly like Old English gnomes.

It is possible to account for this if we begin, not with the history of English poetry, but with the mind of Mr. Emerson. Let us first accept the supposition that Emerson's obiter dicta on poetry apply to himself. "The thought and the form are equal...," he says, a little after the more famous statement that "it is not metres, but a metre-making argument that makes a poem..." 1 This being so, and for Emerson it was so, let us ask ourselves, what was the nature of his arguments? To answer, the critic is tempted to go to Emerson's prose. It is more "poetic," certainly more imagistic. Still, his notion of poetry—his own, at least—was not centered about imagery.

1 All quotations of Emerson in this paper are given as they appear in Frederic L. Carpenter, ed., Ralph Waldo Emerson: Representative Selections, with Introduction, Bibliography, and Notes (American Writers Series; New York, 1934). This edition reproduces the text of the Centenary Edition, which incorporates Emerson's final revisions.

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