

“ALS ICH KAN”:
FLANDERS AND THE WORK OF WILLIAM MORRIS

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There is a curious and funny anecdote in J.W. Mackail's biography of William Morris which tells of how Morris and his family travelled through Flanders from Ghent to Bruges on a beautifully sunny day in 1874 and then halted in the town of Eeklo in order to have dinner. There Morris, realizing that the inn-keeper could not understand either French or English (this being the Flemish-speaking part of Belgium), tried to make himself clear by using Icelandic (Mackail 1:304). Thus the idea was spread that Morris did not speak Flemish in spite of his interest in the culture and his frequent visits to Flanders. From this article, however, it will emerge that Morris had to have had at least a passing knowledge of the Dutch language (Flemish being the local variant of that language), since he was to use some well-known Flemish medieval texts as the basis of a poem concerning the themes of sharing and socialism.

The poem I wish to look at is “Mine and Thine” included in his collection *Poems by the Way* (1891). “Mine and Thine” has as its subtitle in that collection “From a Flemish poem of the fourteenth century.” The poem is, I believe, correctly identified as “socialist” by David Latham in his introduction to a new edition of the collection published in 1994, since it wants to solve the problems of the world by doing away with the words “mine” and “thine” and by encouraging people to share the riches of the world. The poem is in essence a translation of two consecutive Flemish poems written by the celebrated Flemish writer of the late-Medieval period, Jacob van Maerlant.¹

Below, side by side, I give both the text by Morris and the original poems by Van Maerlant:

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Mine and Thine

Two words about the world we see, And nought but Mine and Thine they be. Ah! might we drive them forth and wide With us should rest and peace abide; All free, nought owned of goods and gear, By men and women though it were. Common to all all wheat and wine Over the seas and up the Rhine. No manslayer then the wide world o'er When Mine and Thine are known no more.	Twee woorden in die werelt sijn, Dats allene "mijn" ende "dijn" Mochtmen die verdriven, Pais ende vrede bleve fijn, Het ware al vri, niemen eighijn, Manne metten wiven. Het ware ghemene tarwe ende wijn; Over see noch upten Rijn Ne soude men niemen ontliven. Nu benemet dat venijn Van ghiericheden dit, Martijn, Ende doet al achtre bliven, Ende ander loy bescriven.
Yea, God, well counselled for our health, Gave all this fleeting earthly wealth A common heritage to all, That men might feed them therewithal, And clothe their limbs and shoe their feet And live a simple life and sweet. But now so rageth greediness That each desireth nothing less Than all the world, and all his own; And all for him and him alone.	God, diet al bi redene doet, Gaf dit wandel aertsce goet Der menscheit ghemene, Datter mede ware ghevoet, Ende ghecleet ende ghescoet, Ende leven soude rene, Nu es ghiericheit so verwoet, Dat elc settet sinen moet Om al te hebbene allene. Hieromme stortmen menscen bloet, Hieromme stichtmen metter spoet Borghe ende hoghe stene, Den menighen te wene

Even for those readers who are unfamiliar with the Dutch language it must appear clear that Morris's lines are an almost literal translation of Van Maerlant's poems.² The difference really lies in the length of the poems and the rhyme scheme: both English stanzas consist of ten lines of rhyming couplets, whereas the two Flemish poems/strophes translated by Morris consist of thirteen lines. For the first Flemish poem, Morris decided not to translate the idea formulated at the end, which roughly translates as the following: "Now the poison of avarice hampers this and it annihilates all the other things, thus creating its own laws." And similarly he did not translate the last four lines of the second poem, which freely translates as: "Therefore some people are killed and large stone castles are built hastily, leading to misery everywhere." He may have dropped these lines to maintain a certain structural symmetry, since otherwise he surely would have been tempted by

the curious topicality of the passage, with its first line referring to bloodshed as a result of avarice, a thought that could have been interpreted as an echo to the violence which had erupted in England in 1886 and '87 as a result of the strikes and socialist demonstrations of black Monday and Bloody Sunday (MacCarthy 533ff; 569ff).³

The Flemish poems are part of “De Wapene Martijn” composed, it is generally assumed, at the end of the thirteenth century. “De Wapene Martijn” (translated as “Alas! Martin” or “Woe Martin”) are four strophic dialogues between two friends, Jacob (the author) and Martijn (his friend). The first of these dialogues – from which the above poems were taken – is generally considered to be the most successful part of this work by Van Maerlant. The issues discussed include the following: the injustice of the social system, class differences in society, the curious appearance of God rewarding evil (although villains will suffer for it in hell), the existence of hatred and murderers, the how and why one falls in love, whether wealth or poverty will lead to eternal salvation, and whether it is indeed true that woman is the reason for man’s downfall.

Morris chose two of the best-known Martijn poems in the series for his translation in 1889. This translation was published for the first time in the *Commonweal* issue of 2 March 1889.⁴ Therefore, we must conclude that he was still closely studying Flemish manuscripts at such a late date in his life, or that he remembered the poems from having studied them earlier. It is a curious fact that he did not mention the author of the poem in the subtitle to its publication in *Poems by the Way* but in the preface that precedes the poem in *Commonweal* he explains that he tried to achieve a literal translation. Also, in the political magazine, Morris is identified as not the author of the poem but as its translator.

We may wonder how someone who once confessed that he could only read “old German” with great difficulty could succeed in understanding so correctly the Middle-Dutch original.⁵ He could have made use of a Latin translation of the poems by Jan Bukelare, published in 1855 and available in the British Library. But it is just as likely that he stuck to the Flemish original, edited and annotated by Eelco Verwijs in 1857. In his introduction to this Flemish edition, Verwijs mentions the socialist creed which is very clearly elaborated in this series, as it is in some of Van Maerlant’s other works. Hence, Morris was bound to be attracted by the verses. They exemplify and underscore the Medieval inclination towards a proto-socialism with which Morris could identify, with avarice being considered one of the worst sins we indulge in. The Flemish poem, Morris writes, shows “how the men of that day longed for the simplest Communism, probably with nearly as much reason amidst the high-handed open violence of ‘kings and

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scoundrels,’ as we have for our longing amidst the fraudulent veiled violence of capitalists and scoundrels” (*Commonweal*, 2 March 1889: 67). To compound the mystery surrounding the publication there is May Morris’s reminiscence, wherein she claims that the poem was written down “after a lecture my father gave on the ‘Fourteenth Century’ at the little meeting-hall at Kelmscott House. This was done during the discussion after the lecture – a pretty and profitable way of passing the time!” (*Collected Works* 9:xxvii). May’s description leaves us wondering how such an impromptu translation could have reached such a degree of accuracy. This skill can only be explained by Morris’s continuous interest in Flanders and its history.

Morris’s travels to Flanders are well known. He went to Flanders as a young man in 1854, and he fell in love especially with Bruges and its cultural riches.⁶ He probably studied some illuminated Flemish manuscripts there and Hans Memling’s and Jan Van Eyck’s paintings, and then he must have visited Ghent and discovered the Van Eyck brothers’ altar piece. From 1856 he was to use Jan Van Eyck’s motto “als ich kan” (meaning “as well as I can”) for his own artistic endeavours.⁷ And, as David O’Connor points out, there is a definite influence of Van Eyck’s technique and composition to be traced in Morris’s one surviving oil *La Belle Iseult* and the stained glass that decorates the south side of the chancel in Selsley church (52). As in the Van Eycks’ polyptych, Morris’s glazed angel Gabriel is placed left of the virgin carrying a white lily, while Mary is on the right, and the dove – the Holy spirit – is flying between them. Morris returned to Northern Europe several times in the course of his career, and Bruges and Ghent became special favourites. He was in Bruges again for his honeymoon in 1859, and returned later in 1870 and 1874. He was in Belgium once more when on his way to Bad Ems in July 1869, yet apparently he then visited only Ghent, Mechelen, and Liège.⁸ When in Bruges he invariably stayed at the same hotel, Hôtel du Commerce, where his name is still found in the guestbook. Two letters from Bruges, written in July 1874, reveal how much he liked the place: “This is really a beautiful place so clean & quiet too” (*Letters* 1:226: 24 July 1874 to Emma Morris; see also 1:225-26: 24 July 1874 to Aglaia Coronio). In July 1869, he wrote a letter from Ghent on his way to Bad-Ems where Janey was to be treated in order to regain her health. In this letter from Ghent he says very little about his impressions of the town apart from the fact that he and Janey had visited the quays and seen the Ghent altar piece, “the Adoration of the Lamb.” The city, however, must have impressed him again, since he planned to return to Ghent on their way home and decided to stay one full day there (*Letters* 1:78).

The high point of the Bruges visits, as he recorded in his letters to home, was always the visit to the Hospital of Saint John, where he would sit for hours, admiring the paintings of Memling. The profound influence of these

visits on Morris's career and artistic vision has been commented on before (most notably by Richard Tames 12) and traces of these influences are found in the range of artefacts that he was to produce in the course of his life. But it may have been the history of the town of Ghent that served as the broad basis of his artistic-political ideology. Though the letters he wrote during his travels on the continent are curiously reticent about what he thought about the Flemish towns he visited, Ghent was a town that could serve as an example of the ideal artistic community, since it was not only the home of the well-known Ghent altar piece, but also and perhaps more importantly it boasted a history of early and successful rebellion by its artisan-citizens, followed by an effort to establish what he saw as a socialist community.

Morris's version of the history of Ghent, entitled "The Revolt of Ghent," concerns an historical episode in Flemish history which he chose as a subject for his lectures in 1888, and subsequently published as instalments in *Commonweal*. The first part of this series, published in July 1888, includes an explanation of his fascination with this particular moment in history, the source for his information, and, interestingly, a reference to the period of literature from which he picked the "Mine and Thine" poem. I have selected the most revealing passages in the series of quotations below:

The events of which an account is here given took place towards the close of the fourteenth century amongst people of kindred blood to ourselves.... Few epochs of history, indeed, are more interesting than this defeated struggle to be free of the craftsmen of Flanders whether we look upon the story as a mere story, a true tale, of the Middle Ages at their fullest development, rife with all the peculiarities of the period, exemplifying their manners and customs, the forms that their industry, their religion, their heroism took at the time; or whether we look upon it, as we socialists cannot help doing, as a link in the great chain of the evolution of society, an incident, full of instruction, in the class struggle.... Whether we look upon the Revolt of Ghent as a story of the past or as part of our own lives and the battle which is not wasting, but, using them, is one of the greatest tales of the world....

John Froissart, canon of Chimay in Hainault, was indeed but a hanger-on of the aristocracy: he was in such a position as would have prevented him on principle from admitting any good qualities whatever in those people whom he was helping to oppress....

In the popular literature of the epoch one comes across passages whose mediaeval quaintness gives a pleasant sense of surprise and freshness to aspirations and denunciations which are familiar enough to us Socialists today, and, so to say, at once make us free of the brotherhood of the old guildsmen. (*Commonweal*, 7 July 1888: 210)

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This political column from *Commonweal* may well have been developed from the lecture referred to by May Morris after which, as she recalls, her father set himself to translate the “Mine and Thine” poem.

Morris was to be more of a writer and a designer than a painter, and the Flemish medieval inheritance played a major role in both his development as an artisan and his political convictions as a socialist. This strong imprint of Flemish culture on the artist’s making may have had its start with the fact that his very first trip abroad was to Belgium and Northern France (see Braesel;⁹ Banham*) and that he spent his honeymoon in Flanders. The parallels between Morris’s artistic practice as a painter and a printer and the Flemish medieval illuminated books are well established by Thomas Coomans and Jan de Maeyer in *The Revival of Medieval Illumination* (63), who discuss “the singular similarity between women and medieval and neo-medieval miniatures in Western Europe of the nineteenth century ... superbly illustrated by the paintings of August de Châtillon, C.A. Collins, and William Morris’s ‘La belle Iseult’” (63, my translation; see also 45), and by Michaela Braesel, who points out that it is the Flemish manuscripts “in their detailed rendering of scenes [that] offered richer ideas of a medieval world,” which provided Morris with the basis for a “pragmatic use of illuminated models in his poetry as in his applied art” (49).

Apart from his love of such medieval artefacts as paintings, illuminated manuscripts, and stained glass, Morris also bought and studied medieval tapestries and medieval literature. The quotation above from “The Revolt of Ghent” and a letter of 2 February 1886 to the editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette* point to Froissart as one of the most important influences on his views of medieval history. In the *Pall Mall* letter listing his favourite outstanding books, he recommends “the great rally of the rebels of Ghent in Froissart” (*Letters* 2:516).

In conclusion, we can see that Morris valued not only medieval Flemish artisans, but that he also closely studied the work of medieval Flemish writers, possibly with a view to finding there a solid basis for his own socialist politics. “Mine and Thine” shows the extent to which he immersed himself in medieval Flemish culture, even though it must have cost him considerable time and energy. His visits to Bruges and Ghent must be explained in light of the possibilities those towns offered to the socialist artist in Morris, possibilities that allowed him to immerse himself in a culture that he saw as an ideal way of life and one that he wanted to revisit both in his decorative art and in his writings. “Mine and Thine” is one small jewel in his personal enactment of a medieval past.

Notes

1. I am obliged to Joris Reynaert for helping me trace these poems.
2. Florence Boos includes the following note in the “Morris Online Edition,” note 21, at <http://morrisedition.lib.uiowa.edu/listpoemslater.html>, a note I thank Ingrid Bieshoveel for drawing my attention to:
“‘Mine and Thine’ (Two words about the world we see, / And nought but Mine and Thine they be). Published *Commonweal*, March 2, 1889, no. 164, 67. Included in *Poems By the Way*, CW, IX, 200. HM 6427, f. 141, typescript prepared by Morris for the printer, with Morris’ subtitle, ‘From a Flemish Poem of the 14th Century.’ This poem translates two strophes of Jacob van Maerlant’s ‘Wapene Martijn’ (ca.1230-after 1291).
3. The best-known mass riot is remembered as “Black Monday,” 8 February 1886, and the police attack on the Socialist League on 13 November 1887 is referred to as Bloody Sunday.
4. I gratefully acknowledge Laurel Brake’s help in procuring a copy of the issue.
5. See Salmon 63. I should clarify that Dutch is the term now used for the official language spoken and written in Flanders and the Netherlands, those areas largely making up the low countries before their split in the sixteenth century. Flemish is often used to refer to the variant dialect of Dutch spoken in the northern half of Flanders and differing from the language spoken in the Netherlands, much as American English differs from British English.
6. See Fiona MacCarthy 82. There are no letters from that period. We have to reconstruct this episode in his life on the basis of later reflections. Few scholars refer to this first visit. Some place his first visit to Flanders in 1854 (Kelvin, *Letters* 1:li). Others place it as late as 1859 (*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*), the year he visited Belgium with Jane, as a newly wedded couple.
7. This is typically translated into French wrongly as “si je puis” or, in English, “if I may” instead of “as well as I can” or “le mieux possible,” by some twentieth-century scholars out of an erroneous but persistent assumption that the inhabitants of Flanders spoke French (Fredeman xx). This may also account for the many mistakes about the exact dates of Morris’s visits to Flanders since the region is not always clearly distinguished from France.
8. See the Chronology in Norman Kelvin’s edition of *The Collected Letters of William Morris* (1:96).
9. Braesel argues that he found nonetheless that the later Flemish manuscripts’ “detailed rendering of scenes ... offered richer ideas of a medieval world,” which Morris sought to translate “from a visual to a verbal medium” (49-50).

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