
The publications under review bring together papers presented at the annual meetings of the Modern Language Association of America in December 1975 and December 1976 respectively, and form an impressive record of the strength of Morris studies in the United States. Morris's lack of enthusiasm for literary criticism is well known, and his spirit may not have been immediately flattered by the spectacle of academics reading papers on his works to other academics. We may be sure that he would judge the contributions on the extent to which they could be said to help the non-specialist reader to a deeper understanding and appreciation of works which he clearly hoped would be immediately accessible. Symposia are necessarily mixed offerings, but on the whole the papers in both volumes come through this test.

*Studies in the Late Romances of William Morris* has the good sense to list on the back of the contents page the stories which the volume is grouping as *Late Romances*. Rather against usual practice, *The Dream of John Ball* and *News from Nowhere* are included with the other tales which have no overtly didactic purpose. In a perceptive introduction, Frederick Kirchhoff points to the interesting fact that during the past fifteen years there has been more published criticism on the title poem of *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems* (1858) than on all the romances put together. On the other hand, the romances are 'the one portion of Morris's literary output popular with a non-academic audience', if we are to judge from the availability of paperback reprints. Kirchhoff quotes Shaw's dismissal of the (non-political) romances as 'a startling relapse into literary Pre-Raphaelitism', and E. P. Thompson's characterisation of them as 'fairy-stories, legends,
for which the belief of the active mind is not invited'. He might also have quoted Ian Bradley's *William Morris and his World* (1978): 'Perhaps part of the explanation for their distant, detached quality is that they were mostly written in the small hours of the night as Morris wrestled with increasing insomnia'! By contrast, Kirchhoff maintains that Morris 'refined the genre into a uniquely syncretic model of human experience', in which he achieved 'an imaginative and intellectual freedom that I feel brash enough to compare with that of Beethoven's late quartets and Shakespeare's final romances. Here as nowhere else, Morris's imagination is fully liberated'. Kirchhoff's 'Introduction' and the essays which follow impressively back up this claim, but readers are bound to disagree with many of the interpretations offered. Is Kirchhoff right in claiming that Ellen in *News from Nowhere* 'is at once the woman who beckons and the woman who forbids; her promise of an intense, sexually liberated existence awakens the narrator to the sharp awareness of his erotic unfulfillment'? Rather I would agree with Norman Kelvin in his interesting contribution, 'The Erotic in *News from Nowhere* and

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**WILLIAM MORRIS**

**THE MARXIST DREAMER**  BY PAUL MEIER

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Of all the preceding Morris literature, no book has done what Meier attempts with commendable style and lucidity; in an excellently-translated study of Morris's utopianism, and most specifically of *News from Nowhere*, the author is mainly occupied with the task of demonstrating the close correspondence between the ideas of Morris and those of Marx and Engels. Meier shows conclusively that Morris's Marxism, as revealed in his mature works, was non-elitist and much more than a romantic critique of capitalist society.

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Jessie King's illustrations for *The Defence of Guenevere* were commissioned and first published by John Lane in 1904. The designs are among her finest work and are wholly successful in creating, in John Russell Taylor's words, 'a haunting and tender evocation of a fragile dream world'. Morris's poem and King's illustrations are here reissued in a form which does justice to their delicacy and charm, and which recalls the style of the original publication. The uncut pages of the book are bound in a soft cover with a blocked design. The unusual quality of the printing and binding pays quiet homage to a beautiful book which in its original form has become almost as rare as it is covetable.

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*The Well at the World’s End*, that for Guest her beauty is connected with the general felicity of the society dream, and it is the sense of loss which separation from this happiness brings, and not awareness of erotic unfulfillment which overwhelms Guest on his awakening. But Kelvin is surely wrong in claiming that when Ralph in *The Well* meets the maiden in the Burg and they show interest in one another, ‘it is clear that she, as well as Ralph, is deriving erotic pleasure from her condition as thrall’. Ralph has yet to find out that the maiden is a thrall, and it is quite out of keeping for a proud and fierce woman of the Wheat-wearers to derive any kind of pleasure from her position as a slave. John Hollow argues in ‘Deliberate Happiness: The Late Prose Romances of William Morris’ that Morris sought no static earthly paradise, but that his deep awareness of the contradictions inherent in human life and Nature led him to welcome the inevitability of change and contrasts as the only constants of the human condition. Carole Silver’s ‘Myth and Ritual in the Last Romances of William Morris’ considers the anthropological sources for Morris’s treatment of mythology and early society, whilst the papers by Charlotte Oberg and Blue Calhoun are based upon their recent books.*

*The After-Summer Seed* is introduced by John Hollow who points to the timeliness of the reconsideration of *Sigurd the Volsung* at the M.L.A. meeting held just a hundred years and a month after the poem’s first publication. His own contribution on the significance of Sinfjotli is followed by Stuart Blerch’s ‘The Craft of Revision’, in which he shows by a study of the manuscripts and the editions of Book 1 of *Sigurd* that, contrary to the view that Morris never blotted a line, he made extensive revisions here. Anthony Ugolnik’s paper ‘The Victorian Skald: Old Icelandic and the Evolution of William Morris’s *Sigurd the Volsung*’ offers much more than the sub-title suggests, and is an important contribution to the Morris literature.

After an illuminating consideration of Morris’s treatment of his sources, and of the justification for his decision to forge a new language for his translations of the sagas, and later for Sigurd, he emphasises the importance of Sigurd in Morris’s development, coming as it does ‘at a critical juncture in the saga of his life and vision’. He concludes ‘Morris did not succeed in presenting the English nation with its Great Northern oral Epic. He did, through his conscious immersion in Nordic style, syntax, and themes, write a momentous Victorian epic which articulated his sense of poetic mission and his hope. Morris’s turn to the North thus asserted a poetic independence which both brought his former work to maturity and marked his entry into a new and highly politicized future.’ Other contributions are by Emily Meredith, ‘Iceland and William Morris: In Search of the Whole’, which rather surprisingly assures us that ‘While granting God’s existence, Morris rejected the conventional means of reaching Him’; Dennis Balch, ‘ “The Lovers of Gudrun”, Sigurd the Volsung, and The House of the Wolfings: Three Chapters in a tale of the Individual and the Tribe.’; and Hartley S. Spatt, ‘Morrissaga: Sigurd the Volsung.’

Both volumes are attractively produced by photo-offset from unjustified typed originals. Misprints are few, but in Studies ‘there I end not’ on p.83 should read ‘therefore I end not’, and the reference to ‘Walter Peter’ on p.119 is unfortunate. Our fellow Society is to be congratulated on its initiative in making these papers available to a wider public, and it is to be hoped that they mark the beginning of a continuing publishing programme.

Richard S. Smith

THE CONTRIBUTORS

Biographical details of the contributors to this issue, except for those of Ms Florence Boos and Dr Richard Smith which have appeared already, were not to hand at time of going to press. It is hoped to provide them later. Ed.