Image and Motif in ‘The Haystack in the Floods’

by Robert Hoskins

William Morris’ accomplishments as social theorist and craftsman have generally, and perhaps justly, overshadowed his poetry. Yet, though few would argue that Morris is a great poet, he is often a very good one, and it is unfortunate that some of his best poems have failed to receive the careful scrutiny they deserve. While it is interesting to know that the conflict between Robert and Godmar in Morris’ poem may owe some details to rivalry of Louis Raimbaut and Limousin in Book VII of Froissart’s Chronicles, or that ‘in real life’ Jehane may have submitted to Godmar after all, such information tells us primarily about Morris the reader, not Morris the poet. It can be demonstrated, I believe, that Morris’ handling of image and motif in The Haystack in the Floods, reveals a poet of considerable subtlety and skill.

One of the outstanding features of The Haystack in the Floods which critics have neglected to point out is Morris’ use of hand images to unify the poem, to characterize the boldness of Godmar and the helplessness and suffering of Robert and Jehane, and thus to intensify the emotional impact of the final hour beside the haystack. Frequent images of hands not only indicate the present physical and emotional states of the characters but imply future developments as well. All but three of the ten references to hands in the 160-line poem involve Jehane’s hands. Two of these references concern Robert’s hands and one Godmar’s. Robert’s first gesture at the appearance of Godmar is to calm Jehane by placing his hand on her rein (l. 62).¹ After his men desert him, his frustrated helpless-

¹ William Morris, The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems (London, 1915), pp. 215–222. All subsequent references are to this text.
ness is indicated by his thumb which beats 'for rage' upon his sword hilt (ll. 65–66). Similarly, a gesture of the hand emphasizes the cruelty of Godmar, who, with 'his hand in Robert's hair' (ll. 142–43), beheads the knight while Jehane watches.

Jehane, the centre of interest in the poem, is characterized extensively by hand imagery. The first two images of her hands suggest weakness and inadequacy which make her powerless to save either Robert's life now or her own in the future: 'Her slender fingers scarce could hold/The wet reins' at the end of the wearisome journey to the fatal meeting with Godmar (ll. 26–27); and she realizes that when she is cast into the Seine in her inevitable trial for witchcraft, her 'weak hands' will be unable 'To recollect how strong men swim (ll. 54–55). In a third and equally prophetic image Jehane, confronted by Godmar and the choice which she knows will lead to Robert's death, places 'her hand upon her brow', then, like Lady Macbeth, gazes at the hand as if to find blood upon it (ll. 76–78). Metaphorically she does have blood upon her hands, of course, for her refusal to become Godmar's paramour brings about Robert's murder. Yet her hands are also her defence against Godmar; she threatens to strangle him if he rapes her (l. 91), and he takes her at her word. And he, in turn, comments on the sadness of Jehane's imminent death, a 'piteous end' for her 'long fingers' (l. 111). Later, as Godmar murders Robert before her eyes, Jehane's helplessness and loss are symbolised by her 'empty hands/Held out' (ll. 139–40). And finally, when Jehane is directed back toward Paris and eventual death, her characteristic reaction is to stare 'At her cold hands with a rueful smile,/As though this thing had made her mad' (ll. 157–58).

If Morris' subtle use of hand images adds a certain depth and suggestive quality to what at first seems a rather two-dimensional narrative structure, his handling of the betrayal motif adds richness and complexity. By deliberately making the ordeal at the haystack in the floods resemble that of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, Morris links the betrayal of Robert de Marny to what is perhaps the archetypal betrayal in the Christian tradition. The first conspicuous allusion to the gospel story is the narrator's introduction of 'That Judas,
Godmar' (l. 34), whose name, especially in conjunction with Judas, seems a perfect tag-name ('mar God') for the prime villain in a story of betrayal and merciless execution. Confronted by the superior force of his enemy, the 'Judas' Godmar, Robert cries 'St George for Marny!' (1.60), invoking thus the aid of his patron saint, who was also a Christian martyr. But this invocation, like Christ’s plea in Gethsemane that the cup would pass from his lips, is in vain, and like Christ, Robert is betrayed by his own men who refuse to defend him from the enemy.

The ordeal in Gethsemane is even more strongly suggested by Jehane’s responses to the meeting with Godmar. Her exclamation ‘Would God that this hour were past!’ (l. 59) recalls the scriptural account of Christ’s prayer that ‘if it were possible, the hour might pass from him’ (Mark 14: 35). Moreover, in the crucial hour in which Robert’s life hangs in the balance, Jehane falls asleep in the wet hay, reminding us of the disciples who are found ‘sleeping for sorrow’ (Luke 22: 45) during the watch in the garden. Christ’s admonition to Peter and the others—‘Couldest not thou watch one hour?’ (Mark 14: 37)—might well be applied to Jehane. In such a context it is perhaps not unreasonable to argue that one of the images cited earlier

She laid her hand upon her brow,
Then gazed upon the palm, as though
She thought her forehead bled . . . (II. 76–78).

may suggest not only Christ’s wounds from the nails and the crown of thorns, but also his suffering during the ‘hour’ in the garden, when ‘his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground’ (Luke 22: 44).

The climax of the ordeal at the haystack in the floods, like that of Gethsemane, is brought about ironically by a kiss. Judas leads the priests and elders to Gethsemane, then identifies Christ by kissing him, thus converting a traditional sign of love and affection into one of treachery and hatred—a ‘kiss of death’. Similarly, Jehane’s futile attempt to kiss Robert one last time not only answers the question with which Morris begins the poem, (‘Had she come all the way for this,/To part at last without a kiss?’), but becomes also an ironic treatment of the ‘kiss of death’. Here the kiss remains primarily a token
of love, and is in fact never really accomplished. Yet the very attempt at a kiss represents Jehane’s rejection of Godmar, which in turn makes Robert’s death inevitable. Enraged, Godmar thrusts the lovers apart, then executes Robert immediately. At the haystack, as in the garden, a kiss from a trusted companion leads to death.

In conclusion, it seems only fair to say that Morris’ loose borrowing of character, even and tone from Froissart is less important than his skilful shaping of the poem. Through the use of hand images he conveys a range of emotion quite beyond the deliberate understatement of the narrative, and through subtle allusion to the suffering of Christ in Gethsemane he makes the betrayal of Robert of Marny part of the universal tragedy of human weakness and treachery.