"A Not so Golden Age": The Genesis of Morris's 'A King's Lesson'

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On 13 January 1883, much to the dismay of many of his friends, William Morris joined the Democratic Federation, which duly became the Social Democratic Federation in August 1884. Today, such a title suggests middle-of-the road Alliances, but at the time Morris felt that he was joining "the only active Socialist organization in England". Henry Mayers Hyndman, one of the founders of the organization, emphasised in later life that Morris's decision to join the Federation was:

... a very plucky act on his part; for it was one thing to be suspected of heterodox opinions, as a genial eccentricity allowable to a man of his note, and quite another thing to be mixed up actively with an extreme organization which made no attempt to hide its revolutionary tendencies.

By December 1884, there was a deep rift in the Federation's executive committee and Morris and his followers resigned to form the Socialist League. Since that time, Morris has been described both as a Socialist and a Communist. He seems often to have used the two terms inter-changeably as both signifying a desire for equality of condition and the abolition of private property. Morris's new "faith" in what he was to refer to in almost religious terms had a profoundly reinvigorating effect on his literary work, not only in terms of its tone and subject matter but also, curiously enough, in terms of its style. In his numerous lectures on Art and Socialism, Morris found himself trying to communicate with a very different audience from that to which he had addressed his earlier literary work. The poor education of many of his listeners forced him to develop a clearer and more economical style, which is often more impressive than the flowery meanderings of parts of The Earthly Paradise or the bloodless Byzantine elaborations of Love Is Enough. Both his new-found economy of expression and the new-found belief in socialism are strikingly evident in Morris's first attempt at imaginative prose fiction since his abandonment of his unfinished novel of the early 1870s.

'A King's Lesson' was first published on 18 September 1886 under the title 'An Old Story Retold' in the Commonweal, the magazine of the Socialist League. Morris's brief romance is the first example of his newly-discovered talent for transforming a suitable "historical" incident into a tale which is both socialist propaganda and an entertaining read. Morris's choice of subject matter for his first propagandist romance is intriguing. H. Halliday Sparling asserts that 'A King's Lesson', as the tale came to be called, "sprang and flowered into poignancy and charm from a chance-met 'fill-up' at the foot of a column in Dickens's Household Words". Very little notice has been taken of Halliday Sparling's hint, but a look through Household Words reveals that the "fill-up" in question appears
to be that which is to be read in the Christmas number of *Household Words* for 1852. This account of ‘The Golden Age of Hungary’ must have made a great impression on Morris for him to have remembered it and used it as material for socialist propaganda nearly thirty-four years after its original appearance. Indeed, it would seem to confirm that his concern with social injustice dates from much earlier than the 1870s. Clearly, Morris identified the oppressed peasants of medieval Hungary described in the *Household Words* article with the oppressed working people of Victorian England. ‘A King’s Lesson’ opens with the indignant statement: “It is told of Matthias Corvinus, King of Hungary — the Alfred the Great of his time and people — that he once heard (once only?) that some (only some, my lad?) of his peasants were over-worked and under-fed” (XVI:291).4

‘The Golden Age of Hungary’ relates how, according to tradition, Matthias Corvinus was unanimously elected to the throne by the people of Hungary at the tender age of fifteen. It is easy to see why the actions of such a monarch might appeal to Morris as the subject for an egalitarian romance. The episode on which Morris’s tale is based forms only a small part of ‘The Golden Age of Hungary’, but it would be a significant part to anyone with a hatred of privilege and the injustices of a class-based society. For a king, Matthias adopts some very unconventional behaviour:

Whilst travelling through the country of Gomor he conducted the magnates in attendance on him — against whose oppression of the peasantry he had heard many complaints — into a vineyard. There he took a hoe and commenced working, desiring the magnates to follow his example; they complied, but soon left off, complaining that the work was too hard.5

The kings tells them that now they have some idea of the hard life of the poor peasant who works for them, and urges them to treat the latter with kindness and forbearance, lest they destroy the source of their wealth, and are compelled to perform the labour themselves. Morris expands on this episode in the source considerably. He brings it to life by showing his reader how the Hungarian countryside looked, and describing the dress and appearance of the king and his followers, as well as the apprehensive feelings of the peasants working in the vineyard. A touch of humour is given to the tale by Morris’s description of how Matthias Corvinus gives the job of carrying the biggest and frailest dung-basket up and down the hill to the lord who is resplendent in “a doublet of glorious Persian web of gold and silk” (XVI:293). In order to stress the social and political implications of ‘A King’s Lesson’, Morris puts a socialist “sermon” on the fate of the peasants into the mouth of the village headman.

At the close of Morris’s short romance, Matthias Corvinus gives expression to that very feeling of guilt at his privileged position in the society of his day which Morris himself confessed to in a lecture on ‘Art and the Beauty of the Earth’ in 1881:

Look you, as I sit at my work at home, which is at Hammersmith, close to the river, I often hear go past the window some of that ruffianism of which a good deal has been said in the papers of late, and has been said before at recurring periods. As I hear the yells and shrieks and all the degradation cast on the glorious tongue of Shakespears and Milton … fierce wrath takes possession of me, till I remember, as I hope I mostly do, that it was my good luck only of being born respectable and rich that has put me on this side of the window among delightful books and lovely works of art, and not on the other side, in the empty street, the drink-steeped liquor-shops, the foul and degraded lodgings.”(XXII:171)
Like Morris, Matthias Corvinus realises that the wealth and luxury in which he lives is the result of robbing the working classes. He is a king of thieves who live by robbing the poor.

Also like Morris, Matthias Corvinus anticipates, half-fearfully, half-joyfully, the time when the poor will rebel against their exploitation. The king’s “sermon” on this matter looks forward to Morris’s next piece of prose fiction:

“Carle, I thought, were I thou or such as thou, then would I take in my hand a sword or a spear, or were it only a hedge-stake, and bid others to do the like, and forth would we go; and since we would be so many, and with nought to lose save a miserable life, we would do battle and prevail, and make an end of the craft of kings and of lords and of usurers, and there should be but one craft in the world, to wit, to work merrily for ourselves and to live merrily thereby.”(XVI:296-97)

This is essentially the same “sermon” that Morris puts into the mouth of his revolutionary hedge-priest in the later prose romance *A Dream of John Ball*, but how strange that it should first find literary expression in a re-telling of an obscure story read by Morris when he was only a very young man. It perhaps suggests that Morris was always just as much inclined to take the course of active resistance to what he perceived as evil as he was to seek escape as the “idle singer of an empty day”. In 1883, Morris finally committed himself to working openly for that egalitarian golden age which Matthias Corvinus, for all his good intentions, knew to be remote from his time by many generations.

**Notes**


4 References throughout are to *The Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. May Morris (London: Longmans 1910-15) and are given parenthetically in the text by volume and page number. ‘A King’s Lesson’ can be found in Volume XVI of the *Collected Works*.