

JOANNA BUKOWSKA
Uniwersytet im. A. Mickiewicza w Kaliszu
e-mail: bjoanna@amu.edu.pl

William Morris's *Dream of John Ball* and the Victorian Vision of Medieval History

Abstract

The paper analyses the representation of the fourteenth century Peasant Revolt in William Morris's *Dream of John Ball*. Like many Victorian social and religious polemics Morris sets the idealised vision of the Middle Ages in contrast to the overall degeneration of the nineteenth century world. His idealisation of the medieval world is, however, very selective and he calls for more radical changes than suggested by Victorian social reformers. Morris extolls the superiority of medieval craftwork, which for him constitutes a proof that feudalism was a less tyrannical system than capitalism and, yet, exposes the oppressive character of the medieval social system. Looking at the rebellion of 1381 from a historical distance, he exposes its limitations and does not rewrite its achievement into a story of success but rather chooses to praise the very effort which the medieval non-ruling community exhibited in standing up against the powerful establishment, as well as the rebels' heroic determination and a sense of fellowship. Morris's visionary account of the major uprising of the medieval third estate brings into focus the issue of social oppression and exposes these aspects of class struggle which Morris considers desirable. Morris places, thus, the medieval events of 1381 in a larger perspective of mankind's struggle for freedom and presents the Peasant Revolt as a forerunner of the social revolution, which he considers as a necessary answer to capitalist practices of his own times.

Keywords: dream vision, the Peasant Revolt, the Middle Ages, the fourteenth century, medieval chronicles, feudalism, the medieval third estate, Victorian England, aggressive capitalism, Victorian working classes, the nineteenth century social discourse, a social revolution.

Victorian medievalism was a multifaceted phenomenon which manifested itself in multiple domains. Literature and political propaganda appropriated medieval themes, which became infused with the Victorian mindset. Reinvented in a new cultural context, medieval stories provided a vehicle for the expression of such varied concepts as the critique of materialism and commercialism or the nostalgia for idealised values of the old times. The medieval materials which the Victorians most frequently returned to included the legends of King Arthur and Robin

Hood. As Barczewski¹ indicates, these stories were repeatedly invoked to promote a sense of national identity and shared consciousness because “Britons recognized in both figures qualities considered vital to their experience as members of a national community”. Arthurian stories provided in popular contexts the models of heroism and patriotism, strong leadership, and harmonious social relations.² Incorporated into the political discourse, they also served to remind the social elite of their duties and responsibilities to the less advantaged. For such a purpose chivalric sentiment was revived in the middle of the century by young Tories, known as the Young England movement, or by the Christian Socialists, who gathered the representatives of the middle classes and clergy and advocated the defence of the poor.³ Although these societies aimed at improving the *fate of the working classes*, they employed the Arthurian stories in their discourse to express reformatory rather than revolutionary ideas, and though they encouraged positive change they still legitimised the traditional hierarchical social structures. The legends of Robin Hood, which had a comparable share in the construction of the national myth, either allowed Victorian writers to emphasise the value of British Parliamentary institutions by linking the figure of Robin Hood with a redefined version of Simon de Monford’s rebellion or to hold up his outlawry as “a heroic embodiment of freedom and independence”, being most often associated with popular rather than political radicalism.⁴ One of the largest Victorian friendly societies, the Ancient Order of Foresters, referred to the legend of Robin Hood as an embodiment of “ideals of community and the independence of working people”.⁵ Although, as Barczewski⁶ suggests, these institutions were genuinely dedicated to the idea of the independence of labourers, they were more preoccupied with class-specific duties and forms of decorum than actual social revolution.

Courtly romances and popular legends did not constitute, however, the only medieval materials which inspired Victorian socio-political rhetoric. One of the widespread arguments, which emerged early in the Catholic Emancipation debate postulated that the English law and constitution had their origin in medieval Catholicism because of the role Archbishop Langton played in the creation of the thirteenth century *Great Charter of the Liberties of England*, called *Magna Carta*.⁷ This argument was further expanded by the nineteenth century Catholic historian, Father John Lingard.⁸ The Catholic Emancipation debate also reinforced the idealisation of the Church and the laws in Anglo-Saxon England. As indicated by Smith⁹, political Saxonism was voiced in the nineteenth century by diversified

¹ S.L. Barczewski, *Myth and National Identity in Nineteenth-century Britain: The Legends of King Arthur and Robin Hood*, New York 2000, p. 53.

² *Ibid.*, p. 62–67.

³ *Ibid.*, 64–70.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 78–79.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁷ R.J. Smith, *Cobbett, Catholic History, and the Middle Ages*, L.J. Workman (ed.), *Medievalism in England*, Cambridge 1992, p. 116.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

radical groups, unlike earlier when its ecclesiastical aspect was mostly associated with Protestants. The greatest popularity of anti-Normanism and the “theory of the noble Saxon” is associated with the seventeenth century Levellers, who drew their inspiration not only from the Bible and *Magna Carta* but also from the thirteenth century *Mirroure of Justices* by Andrew Horn, who represented Saxons as the defenders of the Christian faith and just laws.¹⁰ This medieval text is identified as the earliest work representing the myth of the Norman Yoke¹¹, which “insisted that before 1066 England was a free country with self-governing institutions. The Conquest changed all that, but Englishmen have fought back ever since”.¹² *The Mirroure of Justices*, which put forward the argument for “the unbroken continuity of English Law from before the conquest”¹³ inspired not only Sir Edward Coke, who, as Hill¹⁴ indicates, read it in the House of Commons in 1621, but was also referred to in such late eighteenth and early nineteenth century publications as John Milner’s *History of Winchester* or Thomas Cobbett’s *History of Protestant Reformation*. Apart from the fact that Milner’s and Cobbett’s works supported the Catholic emancipation, they also had a very prominent social focus, that is the opposition to legislation aggravating the condition of the poor such as the eighteenth century workhouse experiments and the nineteenth century Poor Law reform.¹⁵

Milner’s critique of his own times contrasted with his idealisation of medieval architecture and social relations set an example for the nineteenth century social, political and religious polemics. Despite the fact that the contrasts between medieval and contemporary reality were so widespread they were not always related to the matters of social reform. A Catholic convert, Augustus Welby Pugin, postulated in his *Contrasts; or a Parallel between the Noble Edifices of the Middle Ages and the corresponding buildings of the Present Day, showing the Prevent Decay of Taste* (1836) and in *An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England* (1843) that the medieval architecture provided evidence of holier attitudes and fairer relationships among medieval men than among his contemporaries (Chapman 1992: 172). His deployment of the medieval Church architecture as a metaphor for the spiritual revival of England, which he perceived as desirable, had a wide appeal among Anglo-Catholics, who expressed their admiration not only for medieval architecture but also decorations, music and rituals. It was, however, not until the 1870s when the revival of Christian Socialism began that social and political ideas were combined with their medievalist discourse.¹⁶

¹⁰ D.B. Robertson, *The Religious Foundations of Leveller’s Democracy*, New York 1951, p. 112–113.

¹¹ The most vehement of anti-Norman attitudes was expressed by John Hare in his *St Edward’s Ghost: or Anti-Normanism*, published in 1647 and postulating the replacement of all legal acts introduced by Normans by the laws of Edward the Confessor (Ch. Hill, *Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution – Revisited*, New York 1997 [1965], p. 361).

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 361.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ R.J. Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 118, 127.

¹⁶ R. Chapman, *Last Enchantments: Medievalism and the Early Anglo-Catholic Movement*, “Studies in Medievalism” 1992, no 4, p. 184.

The tendency to seek in the Middle Ages examples of superior social reality existed separately from and religious movements and was associated, as Chapman¹⁷ suggests with such writers as Cobbett, as well as Southey, Carlyle or Disraeli. In his *Past and Present* Thomas Carlyle exposed the horror of the nineteenth century social relations and contrasted them with the perfect government of Bury St. Edwards under an model heroic leader, Abbot Samson, whose story Carlyle adapted from a manuscript of the twelfth century *Chronica Jocelini de Brakelonda*.¹⁸ It is possible to discern some similarities between Carlyle's social tract and Morris's *Dream of John Ball*, since Carlyle's work, as Williams suggests, also "roused thousands of Englishmen from inertia to a fresh consideration of social conditions"¹⁹ and, in addition, its structure, as observed by Stange²⁰, suggested "the penetration of the present by the values of the past, an act of realization which might bring about a better future." Yet, although both Carlyle and Morris wanted to change the fate of the Victorian proletariat, they wanted to achieve this goal by different means, and the lesson they inferred from the medieval history was different. Despite his resistance to *laissez-faire*, Carlyle called for a spiritual, rather than social, revolution, and he wanted this revolution to culminate in the choice of heroic leaders²¹, expressing, thus, his longing for "the paternal leadership of feudalism".²² Morris, in contrast, showed an awareness of both the positive and very negative aspects of the feudal system and saw in the medieval third estate's rebellion against their feudal lords a predecessor of the ultimate social revolution which he deemed necessary.

A great number of the nineteenth century radicals expressed, thus, their concern about the pauperisation of the working classes and the limitations imposed on the distribution of public charity. The social, political, and religious tracts often involved the juxtaposition of medieval and modern societies, which was aimed at pointing out the overall degeneration of the nineteenth century world. The myth of the Norman yoke was no longer as vehemently expressed as in the seventeenth century but it still persisted among radical groups and encouraged the comparison between the feudal burdens and the oppression experienced by the poor in Victorian England. This paper sets out to prove that all those well-known elements of the nineteenth century social discourse are combined in William Morris's *Dream of John Ball* (1888) in a distinctive way. In this work he sets the critique of capitalist practices against the background of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. The medieval world is idealised in a selective way. Morris depicts feudalism as a less tyrannical system than capitalism, yet oppressive enough to inspire a social rebellion. Looking at the rebellion from a historical distance, he also exposes its limitations and

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ S.T. Williams, *Carlyle's Past and Present: A Prophecy*, "South Atlantic Quarterly" 1922, no 21 [in:] *The Critical Response to Thomas Carlyle's Major Works*, eds. D.J. Trella, R.L. Tarr, Westport 1997, p. 164–166.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 167.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 173.

²¹ Ibid., p. 166–167.

²² L.C. Lambdin R.T. , Lambdin, *Camelot in the Nineteenth Century: Arthurian Characters in the Poems of Tennyson, Arnold, Morris, and Swinburne*, Westport, CT, 2000, p. x.

does not rewrite its achievement into a story of success but rather chooses to put on a pedestal the ideals and attitudes that inspired this uprising. Morris's versatility enables him to combine the imaginative adaptation of the historical events of 1381 with historical accuracy, and to mingle medieval literary conventions with the nineteenth century radical discourse to represent the Peasant Revolt as an early but laudable step in the history of human struggle for freedom, which needs to be continued in Victorian England. The contrast between the past and the present not only emphasises the disappearance of the aesthetic taste as a result of the callous exploitation of the Victorian working classes but also points out the need for a social revolution, which is to be inspired by the ideals and the heroic effort undertaken by the third estate during the fourteenth century rebellion. *The Dream of John Ball* is not a call for any partial reform of the present system but rather an instigation of the ultimate overturning of the existing power relations. If the Pre-Raphaelite society Morris belonged to preached a need for a revolution in English art, Morris in his turn perceived a social revolution as a necessary step towards the replacement of the aggressive capitalist system with a new model of social organisation based on the idea of social equality.

A man of many talents, a writer, poet, lecturer, printer, artist and designer, William Morris was able to combine his multiple interests so effectively as he was able to reconcile, as Haydock²³ suggests, his potentially irreconcilable roles of a wealthy entrepreneur, a socialist and "a democrat with a deep interest in the welfare of humanity". Protesting against the poverty of the working classes, and the destructive effects of laissez-faire economic practices as well as the propaganda of unrestrained progress, he not only expressed his views in the literary form, but he also tried to prove their feasibility in real life:

Practicing fraternalism and relative equality instead of Carlyle's paternalism, he proved that the management and labour could work together in a spirit of companionship towards a common goal. Moreover, the company could realise a profit for both labour and management.²⁴

Morris's socialist views seem to have been closely connected with the range of subjects he explored in the field of literature. As the poet grew more and more preoccupied with the ideas of social revolution, his medievalist interests wandered away from medieval courtly literature, which he rewrote in a subversive way in his *Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems* (1858)²⁵ and turned towards historical materials which yielded a glimpse at the opposition of the medieval English third estate towards their lords. It is, however, also suggested that his socialist views might have been actually encouraged by his interest in the Arthurian tradition. Lambdin²⁶ indicates, following Gaunt's²⁷ suggestion, that the poet

²³ J. Haydock, *On a Darkling Plain: Victorian Poetry and Thought*, Bloomington 2008, p. 248.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

²⁵ Although most of the poems in *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems* represent Arthurian tradition, the volume already contained also the non-Arthurian material, deriving from the translation of Jean Froissart's *Chronicle* (L.C. Lambdin, R.T. Lambdin, op. cit., p. 72).

²⁶ L.C. Lambdin, R.T. Lambdin, op. cit., p. 12.

²⁷ W. Gaunt, *The Pre-Raphaelite Dream*, New York 1966, p. 227.

directed his attention to the Marxist idea of social equality, at least partially, as a result of his early fascination with the idea of King Arthur's Round Table. Since this fascination started with his acquisition in the 1850s of the edition of Malory's *Morte Darthur* associated with Southey, who wrote to it his introduction²⁸, it is also possible that Morris was additionally inspired by Southey's perception of the medieval codes of conduct as propagating "humane social values" which became obsolete in post-industrial society.²⁹ *Dream of John Ball* could, therefore, have been equally inspired by the Milneresque comparison between idealized past and degenerate present, which was prevalent in the nineteenth century social polemics, as by Southey's nostalgia for the lost medieval ideals.

In *The Dream of John Ball* Morris depicts a vision of his sojourn in the world of the fourteenth century English Rising. Although he does not immediately rewrite any medieval literary work, he adapts for his own purposes the historical accounts of the Great Revolt of 1381. Just like medieval chroniclers, though from a different vantage point and for a contrary purpose, Morris blends historical fact and fiction, though, unlike them, he frames his representation of the rebels' actions as fantasy. The medieval chronicle materials, being a product of a courtly and clerical elite, were by no means sympathetic to the rebellion. What made these accounts problematic, as indicated by Strohm³⁰ were both their narrative properties such as "selective treatment, imputation of motive, implicit moralization" and the purpose for which they were written, that is: "to serve clerical partisanship, bolster royal authority, uphold hierarchy and vested privilege". Biased or, in Strohm's³¹ words, "historically defined" as the voice of the chroniclers was, their accounts contain a sufficient amount of "contradictory information that permits revision from within". Thus, though the rebels are presented in chronicles as mere "*rustici*", that is "the lowest orders of agricultural workers"³², or as the unruly mob, whose animalistic rage and insolence led to pointless destruction and absurd revelry, the rebels' actions depicted in that critique reveal in fact, as Strohm³³ suggests, their determination, self-discipline, purposeful approach, as much as a wider social appeal than that recorded in the medieval sources.

These positive aspects of the rebels' activity which have been uncovered by recent historical research were presented by Morris as the idealization of their conduct. To create a rational frame for his imaginary view of the fourteenth century uprising, the Victorian poet adapted the medieval conventions of dream poetry. Before the narrator of Morris's dream vision falls asleep, he is typically presented as melancholic and pensive, though unlike in medieval poems, his mood is not occasioned by any reading or unrequited love but by the consideration of the ap-

²⁸ R. Simpson, "Revisiting Cramalot": *An Arthurian Theme in the Correspondence of William Taylor and Robert Southey* "Studies in Medievalism" 1992, no 4, p. 158–159.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

³⁰ P. Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth Century Texts*, Princeton, NJ 1992, p. 33.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, p. 36.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

palling living conditions of the Victorian working classes and the ugliness of the industrialized world:

The hope of past times was gone, the struggles of mankind for many ages had produced nothing but this sordid, aimless, ugly confusion; the immediate future seemed to me likely to intensify all the present evils by sweeping away the last survivals of the days before the dull squalor of civilization had settled down on the world... (*Dream*, 15)

Horrified “by the degradation of the sordid utilitarianism” (*Dream*, 35), he falls asleep to experience first a distressing dream, in which he lectures on socialism while naked and expecting a series of anti-socialist attacks from his audience. This dream, which contains details enabling readers to identify the dreamer-narrator with the author, is succeeded by another one, which constitutes the major part of the narrative. It begins with the narrator seemingly waking up in a landscape which he recognizes as entirely unfamiliar, “though it was, as to the lie of the land, an ordinary English low-country... (*Dream*, 36).”

What is unusual about this landscape is its aesthetic beauty, which stands in sharp contrast to the unattractiveness of the modern world. Being “used to the hedged tillage and tumble-down bankrupt-looking surroundings of ... modern agriculture” the dreamer is, thus, surprised to see “the garden-like neatness and trimness of everything” (*Dream*, 37). Both the unspoiled landscape and the orderly appearance of the village houses are perceived by him as aesthetically pleasing:

Well, I came into the village, where I did not see (nor by this time expected to see) a single modern building, although many of them were nearly new, notably the church, which was large, and quite ravished my heart with its extreme beauty, elegance, and fitness... The houses were almost all built of oak framework filled with cob or plaster well whitewashed... There was much curious and inventive carving about most of them; and though some were old and much worn, there was the same look of deftness and trimness, and even beauty, about every detail in them which I noticed before in the field-work (*Dream*, 38).

The interiors of these modest houses are presented as manifesting the same sense of order and neatness as their much admired exteriors. Even when the dreamer enters a small tavern, he is overcome with astonishment: “so strange and beautiful did this interior seem to me, though it was but a pothouse parlour (*Dream*, 41).” Not only do medieval architecture and decorative art embody the principles of beauty but also the manners of the human characters appear to the dreamer as superior to the conduct of Victorian labourers:

Their arms and buckles and belts and the finishings and hems of their garments were all what we should now call beautiful, rough as the men were; nor in their speech was any of that drawling snarl or thick vulgarity which one is used to hear from labourers in civilisation; not that they talked like gentlemen either, but full and round and bold, and they were merry and good-tempered enough; I could see that... (*Dream*, 39).

Morris portrays, thus, the rebels as rough but devoid of vulgarity. The pre-industrial dream world lacks the sense of degradation, which resulted from civilization's progress. This idealistic vision is reminiscent of the worship of medieval art and values articulated in the works of Bishop Millner, Thomas Cobbett, John Mason Neale, or even in the poetry of Robert Southey.

In Morris's dream vision, his idealization of the housing, ornaments and clothes of medieval men seems to provide, however, an incongruous background for his subsequent representation of the Peasants' Revolt. This apparent clash may initially appear particularly sharp in view of Morris's³⁴ perception of the freedom of artists, or craftsmen, as an essential prerequisite for their capability of producing objects of artistic value.³⁵ In his lectures and essays on art and society Morris appears, nevertheless, to explain his reason for his simultaneous idealization of medieval craftwork and criticism of the feudal system. While not denying that the third estate was abused under the yoke of feudalism, Morris maintains that the medieval process of production was not directly interfered with and the products were intended for direct use, which had a considerable impact on the medieval craftsman's satisfaction³⁶. In other words, it was possible for medieval craftsmen to create objects of artistic value because they experienced a different form of limitations from those imposed on labourers in Victorian England. Industrial society, in Morris's opinion, made impossible the production of objects which could be both useful and aesthetically pleasing, because of the reduction of labourers to parts of machinery bent solely on the generation of profit. One of the principal tenets of the capitalist system, the division of labour, dehumanized an individual's effort by making it mechanical and reductive. Morris explains his contrast between medieval craftsmen and Victorian proletariat in his pamphlet from 1888:

You regret the art of the Middle Ages (as indeed I do), but those who produced it were not free; they were serfs, or gild craftsmen surrounded by brazen walls of trade restrictions; they had no political rights, and were exploited by their masters, the noble caste, most grievously...But I do say that it was possible then to have social, organic, hopeful progressive art; whereas now such poor scraps of it as are left are the result of individual and wasteful struggle, are retrospective and pessimistic. And this hopeful art was possible amidst all the oppression of those days, because the instruments of that oppression were grossly obvious, and were external to the work of the craftsman... The medieval craftsman was free in his work, therefore he made it as amusing to himself as he could; and it was his pleasure and not his pain that made all things beautiful that were made, and lavished treasures of human hope and thought on everything that man made, from a cathedral to a porridge-pot.³⁷

In his lecture "Art and its Producers" delivered before the National Association for the Advancement of Art in 1888, Morris praised the craftsmanship of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, extolling the egalitarian character of craft guilds as well as their ability "to check the very beginnings of capitalism and

³⁴ W. Morris, *On Art and Socialism. Essays and Lectures Selected with and Introduction by Holbrook Jackson*, London 1947, p. 84.

³⁵ Morris expressed this view in his pamphlet entitled "The Aims of Art", which was published in 1888: "I believe that art cannot be the result of external compulsion; the labour which goes to produce it is voluntary, and partly undertaken for the sake of the labour itself, partly for the sake of the hope of producing something which, when done, shall give pleasure to the user of it" (*Ibid.*, p. 84).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

competition inside the gild, and at the same time to produce wares whose test should be the actual use, the real needs of the public of neighbours".³⁸

Morris's admiration for medieval art echoes the attitudes of the writers of Anglo-Catholic revival, yet, his principal interest in the superiority of medieval craftwork, its idealization and juxtaposition with the unappealing industrial mechanical production as well as his ability to intertwine tightly the aesthetic and social focus of his arguments seem innovative. Breton³⁹ observes that the fact that Morris sets his narratives in medieval or utopian contexts (as in *A Dream of John Ball* or *News from Nowhere* respectively) manifests his conviction that the value of work could be asserted only in a system that was diametrically different from that of Victorian industrial society. Whereas Carlyle and Ruskin sought to improve the existing economic conditions, calling for necessary changes and reforms, while at the same time teaching the Gospel of Work to the contemporary working classes, Morris, being, as Breton⁴⁰ observes, "fiercely romantic" and "motivated by an artistic ideology", demanded a complete overturning of the capitalist system.

Nevertheless, even if Morris's stance on work seems to clarify his idealization of medieval craftwork, his projection of this idealization on his representation of the world of the Peasants' Revolt appears questionable and can be possibly explained as an element of his dream vision. Although Hilton⁴¹ admits that "the importance of the artisan element" was characteristic of the English Rising of 1381 and that the craftsmen could actually constitute "a substantial minority" among the participants with agrarian occupations, the overall compositions of the rebel forces was much more complex, as it "reflected the stratification of contemporary society. In other words, the rising was one of the whole people below the ranks of those who exercised lordship in the countryside and established authority in the towns..." Additionally, as Du Boulay⁴² or Hilton⁴³ make clear, there were remarkable social differences within the third estate both in town and villages. Those who were comparatively rich constituted a minority, and half of the population is estimated to have lived at the modest level (craftsmen and retail traders in towns and villagers possessing from fifteen to a hundred acres). Below them there were the poor who could often barely sustain themselves. The rights, which these groups enjoyed and the conditions in which they worked differed, therefore, considerably. The idealization of the setting in *Dream of John Ball* can be better understood, therefore, in terms of the features of Morris's style, which Boos⁴⁴ described as a rhetoric of fellowship, formed by his love for natural settings in

³⁸ Ibid., p. 211.

³⁹ R. Breton, *WorkPerfect: William Morris and the Gospel of Work*, "Utopian Studies", 2002, no 13(1), p. 50.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 51–52, 54.

⁴¹ R. Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free: Medieval Peasant Movements and the English Rising of 1381*. New York 2003, p. 184, 179.

⁴² Du Boulay F.R.H., *The England of Piers Plowman: William Langland and His Vision of the Fourteenth Century*, Cambridge 1991, p. 46.

⁴³ R. Hilton, op. cit., p. 187.

⁴⁴ F. Boos, *An Aesthetic Ecocomunist. Morris the Red and Morris the Green* [in:] *William Morris: Centenary Essays*, eds. P. Faulkner, P. Preston, Exeter 1999, p. 27.

contrast to these destroyed by civilization, his belief that the conflict between the rich and the poor “vitiates the sensibilities” of all involved in it, and finally his admiration for “a communitarian/communist strain in medieval Christianity, as represented by the teachings of Ambrose of Milan”⁴⁵. As Boos⁴⁶ sums up: “Morris sought to idealize and recreate essential elements of human experience [...] in forms that have not existed since the industrial revolution, and perhaps never existed at all.”

Morris declared himself a communist and a Marxist, and it was perhaps the idea of social revolution which provoked his fascination with the Peasants’ Revolt. The narrator-dreamer’s encounter with the mad priest of the rebellion, as the chroniclers called John Ball⁴⁷, created in him a sense of connection with a man of the past, fighting for a similar cause:

My heart rose high as I heard him, for it was concerning the struggle against tyranny for the freedom of life[...] of the taking from the rich to give to the poor; of the life of a man doing his own will and not the will of another man commanding him for the commandment’s sake (*Dream*, 45).

Morris’ imaginative portrayal of one of the instigators of the rebellion brings to the foreground the question of an individual’s freedom. Although the original English Rising of 1381 was a very complex phenomenon, “related specifically to the social and economic tensions of the late Middle Ages”⁴⁸, the question of freedom actually featured quite prominently among other demands issued by the rebels. Hilton⁴⁹ called in fact the struggle for freedom “one of the most burning issues of medieval peasant movements”. As Gellrich⁵⁰ sums up, various groups participating in the rebellion were determined to attain:

freedom from homage to the lords; an end to policing by the gentry elite (to be replaced by popular policing, supposedly established by the Law of Winchester in 1285); the distribution of church property to the commons (the clergy to have property necessary only for their own subsistence); the abolition of church hierarchy (only one bishop to rule the church); tithes to be paid to a priest only if he were poorer than the parishioner; freedom from the poll tax; freedom from all serfdom to landlords (from “villeinage”); the replacement of all old law by a new law; direct access to the king—the only lord of the land.

As the claims of the fourteen century rebels’ indicate, they sought freedom in a number of different domains. They strove to be freed from the ever increasing fiscal burdens, from limitations imposed on their mobility and the level of wages after the population fall following the Black Death, as well as from legal abuse stemming from the accumulation of judicial and administrative powers in

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 24, 27, 30, 31.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 36.

⁴⁷ J.M. Gellrich, *Discourse and Dominion in the Fourteenth Century: Oral Contexts of Writing in Philosophy, Politics, and Poetry*, Princeton, NJ. 1995, p. 115.

⁴⁸ R. Hilton, op. cit., p. xx.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 54.

⁵⁰ J.M. Gerlich, op. cit., p. 155.

the hands of the local nobility⁵¹. Nevertheless, as Hilton⁵² emphasizes: “it was serfdom and those things which flowed from the rights of lords over tenants which bulked largest in their grievances”. As the rule of the lords became more and more oppressive in the decades preceding the rebellion, there arose a general conviction that the ancient customs regulating the coexistence of the three social orders had been violated⁵³. The famous question ascribed to John Ball by *Historia Anglicana*: “Whan Adam dalf and Eve span, / Who was thanne a gentilman?” indicates, as Gellrich⁵⁴ suggests, Ball’s archaic belief in “the model of the common parent-hood of all people”. As Gellrich⁵⁵ further points out, the desire of the rebels to abolish all forms of lordship with the exception of a king and a single bishop revealed their idealization of “a model of rule from the time of ancient kings”. Like the leaders of the fourteenth century rebellion, Morris idealises the distant past, though in a more selective and discriminating manner.

It seems that despite the specific character of the grievances expressed by the participants of the Peasants’ Revolt, the general ideals underlying their claims could still appear relevant to Morris. The rioters strove not only for freedom but also dreamt of the equality of all royal subjects. Although dismissed by the chroniclers as vainglorious and presumptuous, the behaviour of Wat Taylor, another instigator of the rebellion, in the presence of Richard II, manifested in fact, according to Strohm⁵⁶, his determination to reject all forms of subservience. In Morris’s poem, John Ball’s charismatic speech also imparts to the rioters a fortifying sense of unity and shared responsibility.

I could feel that all shame and fear was falling from those men, and that mere fiery manhood was shining through their wonted English shamefast stubbornness, and that they were moved indeed and saw the road before them (*Dream*, 55).

Similarly the idea of singularity of purpose, can be also discerned in the actual letter attributed to John Ball by a fourteenth century chronicler, Walsingham, who, as Gellrich⁵⁷ points out, quotes it in his chronicle as “the provocation of insurrection.” Further evidence of the protesters desire to constitute themselves as a distinct community is provided by the historical sources recording their use of a watchword, which involved a declaration of loyalty to the king and to one another⁵⁸. Although the chroniclers referred to the peasants’ imitation of the aristocratic rituals as absurd, such gestures, as Strohm⁵⁹ claims, helped the rebels to “invent themselves as a new type of community, disrespectful of hierarchy”. Morris recreates these attitudes in his representation of John Ball’s preoccupation with the need to create the rebels’ fellowship:

⁵¹ R. Hilton, p. 151–164.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 154.

⁵³ J.M. Gerlich, *op. cit.*, p. 157.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ P. Strohm, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

⁵⁷ J.M. Gerlich, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁵⁹ P. Strohm, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

Therefore, I tell you that the proud, despiteous rich man, though he knoweth it not, is in hell already, because he hath no fellow; and he that hath so hardy a heart that in sorrow he thinketh of fellowship, his sorrow is soon but a story of sorrow—a little change in the life that knows not ill (*Dream*, 52).

Morris presents Ball as preaching the demise of chivalric ideology and the necessity of replacing the chivalric fellowship destroyed by self-interest with the fellowship of the poor, bound by mutual help.

This community constitutes itself clearly in opposition to the ruling elites. Thus, the rioters in *The Dream of John Ball* declare: “It was for life we fought!... and leave to go home and find the lawyers at their fell game (*Dream*, 83)”. As Hilton⁶⁰ suggests, “tax-collectors and lawyers, jurors were among the earliest targets of rebel hostility” in 1381. The antagonism is also reflected in Morris’s representation of the rebels’ comments on those, who were slain by them during one of their earliest encounters with lords’ forces:

two of the lawyers kind slain afield, and one hanged: and cruel was he to make them cruel: and three bailiffs knocked on the head—stout men, and so witless, that none found their brains in their skulls; and five arbalestiers and one archer slain, and a score and a half of others, mostly men come back from the French wars, men of the Companions there, knowing no other craft than fighting for gold; and this is the end they are paid for. Well, brother, saving the lawyers who belike had no souls, but only parchment deeds and libels of the same, God rest their souls (*Dream*, 75).

The representations of the unanimous feeling of hostility towards legal and administrative officials manifests Morris’s attempt to recreate these attitudes underlining the fourteenth century revolt, which were also documented in the historical records. It seems, therefore, that however idealistic and visionary Morris’s representation of the medieval rising might be, his vision of the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 faithfully recaptures the ideals of medieval rebels. Even though these ideals seem to be for Morris of primary importance, he occasionally retains also historical details, such as, for example, the great heterogeneity of the movement, which in spite of its name, included not only “in the great majority peasants, tenant farmers, and serfs peasants but also but also a certain number of townspeople, such as members of the craft guilds, laborers, poor clergy, clerks, and even some members of the lesser gentry (Gellrich 1995: 155)”⁶¹. Thus, in Morris’s vision, the dreamer-narrator observes that “the new-comers mingled with us must have been a regular armed band; all had bucklers slung at their backs, few lacked a sword at the side (*Dream*, 48)”, and he reassures John Ball that “the Fellowship in Essex shall not fail you; nor shall the Londoners who hate the king’s uncles withstand you (*Dream*, 92)”. What could unite, therefore, such a heterogeneous movement both at the difficult historical moment and in Morris’s dream were the ideals of freedom and solidarity that the Victorian writer found so inspiring.

However admirable and far-reaching the goals of the rebels were, their belief in the support of the Peasants’ Revolt declared by the king proved a limiting fea-

⁶⁰ R. Hilton, p. 179.

⁶¹ J.M. Gerlich, op. cit., p. 155.

ture of their movement. Having led them from Smithfield to Clerkenwell, Richard II ordered the execution of its leaders and, thus, determined the downfall of the rebellion. As Strohm⁶² explains, by having accepted the authority of the king and a single bishop, “the rebels committed themselves to oppositional structure rather than to an inherently evanescent anti-structure”. He adds, nevertheless that “more striking that the rebels’ failure, is, however, the distance which their improvised ideology enabled them to traverse⁶³”. Such an overview can, however, only be achieved from a historical distance such as the one also assumed by the narrator in *The Dream of John Ball*, who observes: “and we, looking at these things from afar, can see them as they are indeed; but they who live at the beginning of those times and amidst them, shall not know what is doing around them...” (*Dream*, 99). Having expressed his admiration for the heroic effort of the medieval peasants, the dreamer-narrator comments on its consequences, which could be understood only from a larger perspective:

But while I pondered all these things, and how men fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name... (*Dream*, 53)

As the dreamer concludes the struggle against tyranny for the freedom of life initiated by the Peasants’ Revolt still awaits its ultimate conclusion. A nineteenth century industrial laborer, living in a workhouse and performing a mechanical job, still needs to liberate himself from the limitations that are in his times determined by the economic relations between individuals rather than the tradition-sanctioned hierarchy of power. Morris’s dreamer explains to John Ball the subsequent ironic twists of history, which transformed one kind of abuse into another:

But thou hast told me that hardly in these days may a poor man rise to be a lord: now I tell thee that in the days to come poor men shall be able to become lords and masters and do-nothings; and oft will it be seen that they shall do so; and it shall be even for that cause that their eyes shall be blinded to the robbing of themselves by others, because they shall hope in their souls that they may each live to rob others: and this shall be the very safeguard of all rule and law in those days... Strong shall be the tyranny of the latter days (*Dream*, 109).

Having been warned by the dreamer that the Peasants’ Revolt will not produce the consequences he wished to attain, John Ball, as depicted by Morris, decides to persevere in his struggle for freedom and attributes to it a profound significance, provided that subsequent generations will continue his task: “And whereas thou askest as to whether I count my labour lost, I say nay; if so be that in those latter times (and worsen than ours they will be) men shall yet seek a remedy... (*Dream*, 101)”.

The dreamer’s response given to John Ball seems to imply that the struggle which is yet to take place has to be decisive, determined, heroic and revolutionary and commonly subscribed to as the events of 1381 are reported to have been: “... their remedy shall be the same as thine, although the days be different: for if the

⁶² P. Strohm, op. cit., p. 54.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 156.

folk be enthralled, what remedy save that they be set free? and if they have tried many roads towards freedom, and found that they led no-whither, then shall they try yet another (*Dream*, 101).” The Peasants’ Revolt, despite its ultimate failure, is thus set up by the dreamer as an example of a unified, heroic action. Morris apparently believed that by gaining sufficient knowledge concerning their position and their potential, the Victorian working classes could, like their medieval predecessors, move on from passive to active opposition:

And yet indeed thou sayest it: they also shall have one will if they but knew it: but for a long while they shall have but a glimmer of knowledge of it: yet doubt it not that in the end they shall come to know it clearly, and then shall they bring about the remedy; and in those days shall it be seen that thou hast not wrought for nothing, because thou hast seen beforehand what the remedy should be, even as those of later days have seen it (*Dream*, 102).

Morris holds up, therefore, a medieval mirror to his Victorian reality. The encounter between the dreamer and John Ball is presented as mutually enlightening. Thus, the dreamer-narrator humbly admits to John Ball: “if I know more than thou, I do far less; therefore thou art my captain and I thy minstrel (*Dream*, 92)”. John Ball, in turn, expresses his trust in the narrator’s words: “I trust thee for a seer; because no man could make up such a tale as thou; the things which thou tellest are too wonderful for a minstrel, the tale too grievous (*Dream*, 101)”. Before setting off for London, John Ball bids his farewell to the narrator-dreamer, expressing both his sympathy for him as well as his ambivalent emotions concerning the newly gained knowledge of the proximity of failure and death:

...thou hast been a dream to me as I to thee, and sorry and glad have we made each other, as tales of old time and the longing of times to come shall ever make men to be. I go to life and to death, and leave thee; and scarce do I know whether to wish thee some dream of the days beyond thine to tell what shall be, as thou hast told me, for I know not if that shall help or hinder thee; but since we have been kind and very friends, I will not leave thee without a wish of goodwill, so at least I wish thee what thou thyself wishest for thyself, and that is hopeful strife and blameless peace, which is to say in one word, life (*Dream*, 112).

The intertwining perspectives of the past and present are symbolically represented by Morris as a blend of the narrator’s and the fictitious character’s dreams. The narrator has a dream about the stimulating encounter with the fourteenth century rebels. The narrator’s words, in turn, are received by John Ball as a prophetic dream, the knowledge of which reinforces the heroic aspect of the rebels’ struggle. Both the narrator-dreamer and John Ball are shown, in fact, as sharing a dream of freedom for all people.

Much as this dream vision might be inspiring, it does not exert, however, contrary to medieval conventions, any healing or transformative influence on the dreamer-narrator. Quite in contrast, it leaves him discontented as he opens his eyes to become again painfully aware of the unsightly view outside his window, which reminds him of the degradation of the industrialized world brought about by ruthless economic practices. “The frightful noise of the “hooters” [...] call[ing] the workmen to the factories (*Dream*, 113)” wakes him from his dream. “Shivering and downhearted (*Dream*, 113)” he confronts the real world outside his window:

...the river was before me broad between outer bank and bank, but it was nearly dead ebb, and there was a wide space of mud ... On the other side of the water the few willow trees left us by the Thames Conservancy looked doubtfully alive against the bleak sky and the row of wretched-looking blue-slatted houses, although, by the way, the latter were the backs of a sort of street of "villas" and not a slum; the road in front of the house was sooty and muddy at once, and in the air was that sense of dirty discomfort which one is never quit of in London... (*Dream*, 113)

The representation of the Middle Ages created by Morris in *The Dream of John Ball* both strikes a familiar chord and at the same time is entirely distinctive. Like many of earlier and contemporary writers who struggled against social injustice, he expresses his admiration for the medieval world and sets it in contrast to the depressing image of Victorian England. His idealization of the medieval culture has, however, an alternative focus. His worship of medieval art is in tune with the spirit of Gothic revival, yet his principal focus on the superiority of medieval craftwork read alongside his theory of art reveals the social implications of this attitude. Emphasizing the burdens that the poor had to shoulder in the feudal system, Morris portrays them as still enjoying greater freedom than the nineteenth century working classes. His idealization of the Middle Ages is, thus, very selective. His visionary account of the major uprising of the medieval third estate is a call for changes in Victorian England and Morris asserts his difference from other social radicals of his day by calling for revolution rather than reform. He learnt a lesson from history, since it was the trust that the participants of the Peasant Revolt gave to Richard II that determined their ultimate demise. Instead of rewriting a story of the fourteenth century Peasant Revolt into a story of success, Morris idealises the very effort which the medieval non-ruling community exhibited in standing up against the powerful establishment. By holding up a medieval mirror to his Victorian reality he not only brings the issue of oppression into focus but also exposes all the aspects of class struggle which he considers desirable. He depicts the medieval rebels as heroically determined and consolidated by unified purpose and the idea of fellowship. Morris's engagement with the Middle Ages might be called dialectic. He places the medieval rebellion in a larger perspective of mankind's struggle for freedom which is yet to be achieved. The medieval events are, therefore, reevaluated in the light of the plight of Victorian laborers. The reconsideration of the Peasant revolt seems to provide both inspiration and an expansion in the awareness of Morris's contemporaries. He uses the Middle Ages, therefore, as a lens through which he perceives the present, and the Victorian perspective as a lens through which he sifts his representation of the past.

Bibliography

- Barczewski S.L., *Myth and National Identity in Nineteenth-century Britain: The Legends of King Arthur and Robin Hood*, New York 2000.
- Boos F., *An Aesthetic Ecocomunist. Morris the Red and Morris the Green* [in:] *William Morris: Centenary Essays*, eds. P. Faulkner, P. Preston, Exeter 1999.

- Breton R., *WorkPerfect: William Morris and the Gospel of Work*, "Utopian Studies", 2002, no 13(1).
- Chapman R., *Last Enchantments: Medievalism and the Early Anglo-Catholic Movement*, "Studies in Medievalism" 1992, no 4.
- Du Boulay F.R.H., *The England of Piers Plowman: William Langland and His Vision of the Fourteenth Century*, Cambridge 1991.
- Gellrich J.M., *Discourse and Dominion in the Fourteenth Century: Oral Contexts of Writing in Philosophy, Politics, and Poetry*, Princeton, NJ. 1995.
- Gaunt W., *The Pre-Raphaelite Dream*, New York 1966.
- Harrison A.H., *Medievalism and the Ideologies of Victorian Poetry*, "Studies in Medievalism" 1992, no 4.
- Haydock J., *On a Darkling Plain: Victorian Poetry and Thought*, Bloomington 2008.
- Hill Ch., *Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution – Revisited*, New York 1997 [1965].
- Hilton R., *Bond Men Made Free: Medieval Peasant Movements and the English Rising of 1381*. New York 2003.
- Lambdin L.C., Lambdin R.T., *Camelot in the Nineteenth Century: Arthurian Characters in the Poems of Tennyson, Arnold, Morris, and Swinburne*, Westport, CT, 2000.
- Medievalism in England*, eds. L.J. Workman, Cambridge 1992.
- Moran M., *Victorian Literature and Culture*, London 2006.
- Morris W., *On Art and Socialism. Essays and Lectures Selected with and Introduction by Holbrook Jackson*, London 1947.
- Morris W., *Three Works by William Morris*, London 1986.
- Robertson D.B., *The Religious Foundations of Leveller's Democracy*, New York 1951.
- Simpson R., "Revisiting Cramalot": *An Arthurian Theme in the Correspondence of William Taylor and Robert Southey*", "Medievalism in England" 1992.
- Smith R.J., *Cobbett, Catholic History, and the Middle Ages* [in:] *Medievalism in England*, eds. L.J. Workman, Cambridge 1992.
- Stange G.R., 'Refractions of Past and Present'. *Carlyle's Past and Present: A Collection of New Essays*, eds. K.J. Fielding, R.L. Tarr, New York 1976 [in:] *The Critical Response to Thomas Carlyle's Major Works*, eds. J. Trela, R.L. Tarr, Westport 1997.
- Strohm P., *Hochon's Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth Century Texts*, Princeton, NJ 1992.
- The Critical Response to Thomas Carlyle's Major Works*. eds. D.J. Trela, R.L. Tarr, Westport 1997.
- Williams S.T., *Carlyle's Past and Present: A Prophecy*, "South Atlantic Quarterly" 1922, no 21 [in:] *The Critical Response to Thomas Carlyle's Major Works*, eds. D.J. Trela, R.L. Tarr, Westport 1997.