

“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: