William Morris: 
Illuminating a Life

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Abstract

Drawing on biographical, literary and other sources pertaining to the life and work of nineteenth-century English writer and artist William Morris, this thesis examines and re-evaluates the importance of Morris's love for Georgiana Burne-Jones. Arguing the significance of this relationship for Morris's personal, literary, artistic and political life, it underlines how a century of Morris biography and scholarship has misread – or failed to read – Morris’s deep romantic connection to Georgiana – the wife of his best friend – and hence the true nature of the deep personal sorrow evident in much of his life and work.

In making this case, this thesis challenges in particular the lengthy scholarship that has focused on the relationship between Morris’s wife, Jane Morris, and the artist and poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Much confusion has arisen, I argue, because so many have attributed Morris’s deep sorrow to his wife’s love for another – rather than his own, largely unreciprocated, love, for the wife of his own best friend. I propose that Morris loved Georgiana Burne-Jones before either was married, and that she remained the principal love of his life. I find evidence of this in Morris’s poetry and personal correspondence and argue that, after their marriages, when their respective partners found love elsewhere, Morris turned to Georgiana to seek a return of his love for her. Georgiana became the focus of his poetry and the recipient of many tokens of love – including handcrafted gifts that should be read as ‘labours of love’.

But this thesis extends its analysis beyond Morris’s personal writings and intimate relationships. I demonstrate that the social conditions and moral expectations that hindered free love between such people became the focus of Morris’s hatred, and awakened him to the status of women in society. Focusing in particular on the fragment of an unfinished novel never published in Morris’s lifetime, I draw connections between Morris’s personal sorrow and his attraction to social causes. Morris was drawn to socialism and alternative societies in the 1870s and 1880s, and the hope that future generations would not have their lives blighted by impersonal powers such as church and state. Thus I propose a radically different biographical interpretation of Morris’s inner life and motivation.

Further, I highlight what I believe to be a gross misconception about Morris, based on inadequate understandings that have arisen in twentieth-century biographies. These studies assert that Morris had difficulty relating to women, and that this contributed to the failure of his marriage, and his inability or unwillingness to deal with the affair between his wife and Rossetti. On this basis, some assume that the relationship between Morris and
Georgiana was close, but compensatory and chivalrous. I challenge this interpretation and demonstrate that, to the contrary, Morris was decisive in his dealings with his wife and Rossetti, and serious in his quest to win the love of Georgiana.

Thus this thesis draws out a new and challenging autobiographical narrative of Morris’s life and love. To quote Morris, ‘love is enough’ to explain many key aspects of his life’s trajectory – but we have to illuminate that love and understand it afresh.
Declaration

This thesis comprises my own work, and due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used. The thesis is fewer than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of text accompanying tables and illustrations and the bibliography.

[Signature]

Mooney
Statement of Previous Work

The material presented in this thesis comprises original writing that has not been submitted towards another degree or for publication elsewhere. Nevertheless, some research and my thinking on this topic was conducted in the course of undertaking the following earlier research and writing projects, some of which have been published:

- Mooney, Susan. “‘Her Lips were Parted Longingly’: William Morris’s Defence of the Passionate Woman’. Unpublished Honours thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the degree BA (Hons), Department of English, University of Melbourne, 2006.


- Mooney, Susan. “‘Not only a genius, he was a man’: William Morris and Manliness’, *Eras*, no. 15, March 2014; available online at http://artsonline.monash.edu.au/eras/
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I would also like to acknowledge the work of the many Morris scholars and biographers whose diligence and scholarship has provided the material that helped make this work possible.
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Stop, though! are you sure that she loves you as you love her? Nay, do not be indignant – find out without blinding yourself how the matter goes; and if you find she does not – then – why then, still strive with all your might to get her, to be with her – if not for many years, yet for a year; if not for a year, for a month; if not for a month, for a week – for a day, for an hour, a minute – do anything, stoop to any humiliation, tell any lie, commit any treachery – but do not die, as – as some people must, with your love barren and unsatisfied, when you can make it otherwise. Do not hesitate on the score of her happiness. If you feel real love, you must know that you really think the whole world exists only to minister to your passion. O, think of the happiness, if you can feel this and be satisfied. Yes! even without any return, it is happiness. It is worth passing through all the pain that clings about it – and if you do not feel this, you are not in love, and the desire you have will pass away into something else – into friendship, or into disgust, or hatred – how should I know or care which? What does it matter? All is either love or not love. There is nothing between. Everything else – friendship, kindness, goodness, is a shadow and a lie.¹

This passionate outpouring comes at the climax of a fragmentary novel begun by William Morris in 1872, a period of crisis in his own life. The story concerns the love of two teenage brothers for the same girl: John, who resembles Morris, and Arthur, who resembles his close friend Edward Burne-Jones. Both love her, but John’s love is unspoken. The passage above is from a letter written by John, which reveals to Arthur that he is in love with the girl Arthur intends to marry. In challenging Arthur to make sure his love for the girl is true love, John inadvertently shows his own acquaintance with that emotion. Penelope Fitzgerald first published the unfinished work in 1982 as *The Novel on Blue Paper*, with an introduction that attempted to align its love triangle with the famous extramarital relationship between the artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Jane Morris during the late 1860s and early 1870s. Fitzgerald argues that the novel and this ‘furious and destructive’ letter are Morris’s attempts to control his anger, lately inflamed by Rossetti and unable to be expressed openly. However, this presents problems: there is no character resembling Rossetti in the text. Instead, as I first argued in an article published in 1993,² the

characters seem to clearly represent Morris himself, Edward Burne-Jones and Georgiana Macdonald, who would eventually marry Burne-Jones.³

A persistent impression of Morris that arose in gossipy recollections after his death was that he was rather indifferent to women or else unable to relate to them. One proponent of this theory was Luke Ionedes, who wrote about Morris in Memories, published first in 1926:

[Morris] was not a bit susceptible to the charms of women; he was too full of his love for his ordinary work of decoration and design, and his literary work. He had a few men friends, who were mostly artists … but women did not seem to count with him.⁴

This opinion comes as a particular surprise, as Morris was an intimate friend and confidante of Ionedes’ sister, Aglaia Coronio, who was a recipient of some of Morris’s most personal surviving correspondence. Another diarist, Wilfred Scawen Blunt, was to remark that Morris ‘did not know, much as he had written about it, the love of woman, and that he never cared to discuss’.⁵ Not surprisingly, these reminiscences, combined with the evident problems in Morris’s marriage, have influenced biographers. Philip Henderson speculated that Morris’s preoccupation with women and love in his work represented an attempt to make up for the lack of love in his own life:

It would seem that Morris, whether because of unhappiness in marriage or because of some basic inhibition, was incapable of accepting the reality of any woman, and so was driven continually to idealistic compensations … [O]ne might infer in his own marriage the fault was not all on Janey’s side.⁶

I believe Henderson’s conjectures and Ionedes’ claims are mistaken. They are based on the knowledge that Morris’s wife Jane had engaged in a relationship with the artist Rossetti, and that Morris’s inaction was the result of an inhibition or some other inexplicable indifference. In the most recent biography Fiona MacCarthy, commenting on Morris’s assumed ‘sexual disengagement’, says that despite the evidence of his poetry,

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³ Throughout this thesis, I follow conventional usage of names in much of the literature on the Burne-Jones–Morris–Rossetti circle. This means that I have adopted the perhaps archaic or at least problematic custom of referring to most of the men in this group by their surnames, and Georgiana Burne-Jones (née Macdonald) as Georgie and Jane Morris as Jane or Janey. This is in no way intended as a mark of disregard or disrespect to these women (or to suggest that they are somehow not fully fledged adults or historical characters themselves). But the focus of this thesis is Morris (who was rarely, if ever, referred to by his given name); I follow the terms of address that he used for these two important women in his life.


Morris lacked ‘the imaginative quality in love’. One is tempted to ask how, then, he was able to write dozens of love poems, a narrative book on love and a handful of prose romances in which the quest for love is the primary motif.

I believe that only one not fully acquainted with Morris’s writings could reach such a conclusion. Morris was not disengaged as these recollections imply, and his concern with love and passion was not merely a literary device, but the record of a passionate nature and an attachment to a real woman, Georgie Burne-Jones, wife of his dearest friend. These further excerpts from John’s letter to Arthur in the novel are revealing:

[B]ut do not die, as – as some people must, with your love barren and unsatisfied, when you can make it otherwise… [E]ven without any return, it is happiness. It is worth passing through all the pain that clings about it – and if you do not feel this, you are not in love, and the desire you have will pass away into something else … [I]f you are sure, as you say you are, that Clara loves you and that you love her, heed nothing, heed nobody, but live your life through with her, crushing everything that comes in your way – everything – unless, perhaps, there was somebody who loved her better than yourself.

[God’s] blessings are showered down on the strong lucky people who come near enough to the fire to thrust in their hands and snatch the gold out of it. They cannot heed, if they would, the wailing or the silent misery of those who are … weak with the horrible fever of longing that can never be satisfied.  

Morris’s character here reveals two things about this unspoken love. First, his love is ‘barren and unsatisfied’ but would be satisfied with merely ‘a day, an hour, a minute’ of love. In other words, this love is unconsummated, and so cannot refer to Jane, Morris’s wife of a decade and the mother of his two children. Second, Morris’s privileging of passionate love, here and elsewhere, advocates the overthrowing of normal bounds and morality: ‘commit any treachery’ he says, such as the ‘strong, lucky people’ who ‘snatch the gold’.

Is intense passion and the upholding of amoral love the sort of thing the public associates with William Morris, wallpaper designer and famous cuckold? I think not. As the reminiscences above show, Morris is viewed very differently. To be crude, alongside his worthy reputation as designer and social critic, Morris is commonly viewed as a failed husband and a failure with women generally – beset with vague neuroses, a cold fish compared with his hot-blooded friend, seen as irresistible and sexually potent. In recent years an element of condescension has entered the literature, so that Morris is depicted as a rotund, incoherent and slightly ridiculous figure. As a result of Rossetti’s brooding
portraits, Jane fills the public imagination with the image of an unsatisfied wife who flung aside restraint and her boring spouse to follow her passion and become an artistic icon. The Morris marriage is usually referred to as ‘a failure’ and ‘difficult’, despite the evident care and affection the couple displayed for each other. These stereotypes, which are further discussed throughout the thesis, were perhaps most blatantly played out in the 2009 BBC television series *Desperate Romantics*, based on the book by Franny Moyle. In this series, Morris, considered ‘very handsome’ by the young women of his circle (including Georgie), was portrayed as overweight, unattractive, stuttering and subject to strange fits, while Rossetti’s character appeared far more handsome, dashing and youthful than the man himself was at this stage of his life (see Figures 1–4).

This thesis argues that, owing to the primacy of this prominent scandal of Jane and Rossetti in the public and academic mind, a century of Morris biography has misread – or failed to read – Morris’s real love and the true reason for the sorrow evident in his life and work. I propose that from the time before his marriage Morris had loved Georgiana Burne-Jones, and that she was the principal love of his life. After their marriages, when their respective partners found love elsewhere, Morris turned to Georgie to seek a return of his love for her. It was Georgie to whom the extract from the novel quoted above was sent ‘to

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*Mackail noted that in August 1855 Margaret Price recorded in her diary that her elder sister Fanny had informed her that ‘Morris is very handsome’. When Margaret Price met Morris herself, she confirmed ‘Morris is very handsome’. See Mackail, *Life of William Morris*, p. 80. Georgie confirmed the Price sisters’ estimation: ‘He was very handsome, of an unusual type – the statues of medieval kings often remind me of him – and at that time he wore no moustache, so that the drawing of his mouth, which was his most expressive feature, could be clearly seen. His eyes always seemed to me to take in rather than to give out. His hair waved and curled triumphantly.’ See Georgiana Burne-Jones, *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*, London, Macmillan & Co., 1904, vol. 1, p. 111.*
see if she could give me any hope’. Confusion arises because, while Morris’s writing displays deep sorrow, this has been attributed to his wife rather than another love. Not only does Morris’s love for Georgie impact upon understanding his work, but I will show that the social conditions and moral expectations that hindered free love between such people became the focus of Morris’s hatred, and awakened him to the status of women in society. Thus, Morris was drawn to socialism and alternative societies, and the hope that future generations would not have their lives blighted by impersonal powers such as church and state. A further aspect of Morris that has been played down in recent biographies is the extent of his rejection of Victorian morality in favour of free love. This is evident in all his writings, including the earliest. This attitude explains the behaviour that has mystified biographers – Morris’s evident cooperation in assisting his wife and Rossetti to be together. Thus I propose a radically different biographical interpretation of Morris’s inner life and motivation.

Illuminating the private life of a public figure

This is a thesis that takes seriously the private life of a public figure. From young adulthood to his last days, Morris was in the public spotlight as a man of letters and as a businessman, designer, expert on art and ancient buildings, and eventually, outspoken social critic. As noted above, his private life has been the subject of some academic conjecture, but Morris’s output has been so immense and varied that very few have given serious attention to his personal life. What, then, is the particular value in examining the private life of a public figure? The question is still often asked (often by public figures with something to hide), though it has long been recognised that identity is constituted of multiple ‘front and backstage performances’, and many have noted that the boundaries between private and public are ‘not something given in nature’ but permeable and ‘subject to change’. I argue that without knowledge of Morris’s inner life, his public life and work cannot be fully understood and appreciated. Thus this thesis argues that those details sometimes considered personal or private are worthy of serious academic pursuit.

11 Those who have paid it serious attention are discussed further below.
Historian Joan Hedrick has argued that in biographical and life writing approaches there lies

the possibility of seeing and understanding in others patterns that [are] basic to the culture … it engages the largest issues of the humanities. Indeed, I think of biography as the queen of the humanities, synthesizing politics, history, culture, and literature in one accessible form.14

Delving into the biography of Morris, and particularly his relationship with Georgiana Burne-Jones, not only fills gaps in our understanding of his work, but also reveals some patterns basic to Victorian culture: aspects of morality and gendered roles, and a synthesis of ‘politics, history, culture and literature’ that is illuminated because Morris’s life touched so many contemporary currents (as E.P. Thompson so famously argued).15 But, as a kind of biography, this thesis coheres particularly around Morris’s intimate personal interactions and revisits key misunderstandings about those relationships that are central to Morris’s life. While not psychobiography in the strict sense outlined by proponents such as William Todd Schultz, it does borrow from such approaches as I aim to ‘bring [Morris] to coherence’:

People are poems … and may be interpreted in different ways … not so much explained as understood. We make sense of them. We bring them to coherence. What is at first un-understandable becomes in a flash, clear … We ‘get’ what is being said. This meaning is often subtextual too. It must be deciphered.16

Deciphering and ‘getting’ Morris is essential because Morris has been misunderstood. I present evidence that persuades, as do other psychobiographies, because ‘conclusions rest often on a convergence of evidence’ and are cogent because they ‘make the initially incoherent cohere’, with ‘[p]uzzling details accounted for, often strikingly’.17

This point may be further clarified with the assistance of an article on psychoanalytic interpretation by Jacques Lacan.18 Lacan uses poet Charles Baudelaire’s translation of the Edgar Allan Poe story ‘The Purloined Letter’ to illustrate the problematic relationships between the symbol and how it is interpreted. In the story, a compromising letter is taken surreptitiously by a minister visiting a queen’s boudoir. Discovering the theft, the queen

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orders the police to search the minister's room, but, despite a thorough search in every possible hiding place, no letter is found. The task of discovering the letter is then passed from the police to an investigator, Dupin, who visits the minister, interviews him and, glancing around the room, at once sees the letter. It is displayed openly, crumpled and in a letter rack on a mantelpiece in full view, but because the police were looking for another object, a concealed letter, they failed to find it. Only the investigator who has analysed the thief's personality – significantly, he was a poet – can surmise where the letter might be.

In the same way, Morris's writings have been assumed to be just what they at first appear: simply works of art. When the emotional content has called for another explanation, one is at hand: sorrow due to marital discord. The truth about Morris's love for Georgie has been missed because, like Poe's purloined letter, it was in plain view, for the world to see, where no one would expect Morris to have revealed it. Arguably, Morris himself seems to have desired to bring his inner life into the public sphere, as will be shown in later chapters, where his poems speak directly to the reader, or where he writes autobiography thinly disguised as fiction.

Approaching a life: methods and evidence

How then does this thesis mount a case for a completely revised view of Morris's emotional life and even his spiritual and political life? The evidence is circumstantial but manifold, and has been brought together over many years of research. Individual pieces of evidence amass to create a formidable structure. From the enigmatic words of Morris's first biographer, able to converse with Morris's intimate friends, and privy to many letters and documents now destroyed, to the labours of love and many gifts presented to Georgie by Morris over a lifetime, to the poems of sorrow and longing Morris made, to the themes that continuously occupy his writings, to the maidens with Georgie's features who populate his stories, to the evident but inexplicable assistance he gave to his wife and Rossetti to be together, to the words written to his intimate friend Aglaia Coronio, and perhaps most persuasively, the self-revelation hidden within the fragment of hand-written manuscript that is the unfinished novel cited above – all of this evidence strengthens the case. Moreover, what is missing is as significant as what exists. Where, for instance, is any evidence of bitterness with his wife during their long, close marriage? Where is Morris's rage against Rossetti, or any attempt to stop his meetings with Janey? Where are the images

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of his wife or Rossetti in any of the heartrending autobiographical poems and tales of love and loss? Where are painstakingly wrought works of illumination made for his wife rather than the wife of his friend? Morris was apparently courting Georgie at the time he should have been rescuing his marriage. Finally, why did Georgie destroy their correspondence after his death?

Taking up the challenge of proving my case, my approach has been critical and biographical, incorporating close reading of many of Morris's texts and the correspondence between Morris and others, as well as biographical information taken from key sources. While it might be argued that a writer's work cannot be assumed to be autobiographical, I have collected evidence that shows that Morris regularly incorporated the immediate concerns of his life into his work. I identify key texts from significant periods of Morris's life, noting repeating tropes and drawing out autobiographical elements that align with real life issues. I make extensive use of primary sources, which include Morris's own works: poetry, fiction, journalism, correspondence, diaries, essays, etc., that have been edited and published in a number of multivolume collections or as individual works.20 (I have also consulted manuscripts in the William Morris Gallery collection, and the British Library, including the unfinished novel. I visited the British Museum to consult original unpublished material in 1996 and 2005. Now much of Morris's unpublished material, including his poetry, is available online, and I have also made much use of this resource.21)

Of Morris's writings, perhaps the most compelling piece of evidence is The Novel on Blue Paper, which, as noted above, was first published by Penelope Fitzgerald in 1982. Interpretation of this novel sits at the heart of this thesis. Begun by Morris in 1872, at the height of a period of unhappiness, it is a short, intense and, for many, incomprehensible work that has held little interest for biographers other than J.W. Mackail, Morris's first (and arguably still best) biographer. Although at first I found the text unfathomable, I felt this work, written at a pivotal moment in Morris's life, held the key to understanding the whole of Morris's love and unhappiness – a roman à clef. As I shall go on to demonstrate in greater detail in Chapter 6, the story concentrates on three young people who seem to represent the young Morris, Burne-Jones and Georgiana Macdonald – rather than Morris,

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21 See the online William Morris Archive: http://morrisedition.lib.uiowa.edu/.
Rossetti and Jane Morris. Several references in the manuscript refer to the years 1856–7 and the landscape seems to represent places in the vicinity of Oxford. At this time Morris, Burne-Jones and Georgie were staying in Oxford. I argue that the Novel is a key piece of evidence that illuminates Morris’s life, and throughout the thesis, I use additional evidence from Morris’s writings to further the case.

For the purposes of this thesis, primary sources also include writings and works by Morris’s contemporaries. Key among these are Georgiana Burne-Jones’s Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones (1904), which, many have noted, focus as much on Morris as on their official subject. They also include the published letters of Rossetti and of Jane Morris. Sadly, much correspondence has not survived. In her biography of Burne-Jones, for example, MacCarthy notes that Georgie discovered that a great deal of the correspondence penned by her philandering husband was not available (Burne-Jones had asked many friends to burn his letters), and also that Georgie was not ‘herself above destroying letters’. When May Morris was gathering letters for her father’s Collected Works, Georgie claimed that ‘the letters from your father I have kept only begin in 1876’. I also regard Morris’s first biographer, J.W. Mackail, as close to a primary source. The Burne-Jones’s son-in-law (he married their daughter Margaret) and a friend of Morris in his later years, Mackail hinted at aspects of ‘an autobiography so delicate and so outspoken that it must needs be left to speak for itself’, but family loyalty and professional and social mores mitigated against further revelation.

Setting Mackail aside, this thesis explicitly challenges most of the key Morris biographers, who have failed to ask deeper questions about the nature of Morris’s relationship with Georgiana Burne-Jones. Since the release in 1964 of the correspondence between Jane Morris and Rossetti, which confirmed a long-suspected relationship, a handful of major biographies of Morris have incorporated this notorious relationship into an assessment of Morris’s personal life. The first of these was Philip Henderson’s William Morris: His Life, Work and Friends, published in 1967. It was followed in 1975 by Jack Lindsay’s William Morris: His Life and Work. Lindsay focused on an early attachment to his

26 Given to the British Museum by the executor of May Morris’s estate in 1939 and placed on reserve for a period of fifty years dating from her mother’s death in 1914; see Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Jane Morris: Their Correspondence, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1976.
sister Emma who married when Morris was fifteen; Lindsay saw this unsettling event played out in some of Morris’s early writings. Henderson did consider briefly whether Georgie was Morris’s ‘love’, and Lindsay also noted that Morris ‘came to love her’ as he sought consolation for rejection by Janey, but Lindsay’s emphasis was certainly that he ‘swung between Janey and Georgie’ and expressed doubt as to how far the love between Morris and Georgie went. Similarly, the 1976 revised edition of E.P. Thompson’s 1955 political biography also argued that ‘Morris’s friendship with Georgie never replaced that feeling of loss, that sense of ‘one thing wanting’ that, Thompson surmised, arose from his ‘failed’ marriage to Janey.

To coincide with the centenary of Morris’s death in 1996, Fiona MacCarthy was commissioned by Faber & Faber to write a definitive biography. Entitled William Morris: A Life for Our Time, it noted their affectionate friendship but also ultimately gave little attention to a deeper relationship between Morris and Georgie. MacCarthy also proposed a theory that various neuroses and neurological disorders afflicted Morris. This theory, having now entered the literature, began a strange new narrative, based on no medical evidence whatsoever, of Morris as a sufferer of Tourette’s syndrome. As I have argued elsewhere, these ‘neuroses’ have fuelled further speculation that, in certain respects, Morris was ‘lacking’ and unmanly.

The year 1996 also saw the publication of the final volume of the Collected Letters of Morris. Editor Norman Kelvin, who made careful notations that highlighted many aspects of Morris’s relationships, concluded that Georgie was ‘the woman to whom he addressed himself most openly and fully on all occasions’, but did not dwell on any deeper passion between Morris and Georgie. Rather, eschewing discussion of ‘physical intimacy’ between the two, for Kelvin, Georgie was simply ‘the woman … whom he treated as a friend before all others’. Similarly, another careful article published in the same year by Isabelle Williams highlighted their ‘unique’ relationship, but focused on Morris’s ‘subtle influence’

28 Lindsay, William Morris: His Life and Work, pp. 186–8.
29 Thompson, William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary, p. 165.
30 See MacCarthy, A Life for Our Time, pp. 249–50. In 2011 MacCarthy also published a biography of Edward Burne-Jones, This work also fails to treat seriously Morris’s ‘loving tenderness’ towards Georgie; see MacCarthy, The Last Pre-Raphaelite, pp. 241–2.
upon Georgie’s political development and, ultimately, argued that ‘for Georgie, Morris was the friend of a lifetime; they shared similar hopes, similar disappointments and similar commitments’.

More promisingly, ten years later in 2006, John Le Bourgeois published a monograph entitled *Art and Forbidden Fruit: Hidden Passion in the Life of William Morris.* Le Bourgeois’ theory highlighted anomalies ignored by other biographers, but improbably – and with questionable evidence – attributed the ‘hidden passion’ he found in Morris’s writing to an incestuous impulse concerning his older sister Emma. Again, a biographer has overlooked a much more credible and likely source of Morris’s ‘passion’ – the woman on whom Morris lavished so many gifts of love.

In other works that have touched on Morris biography, including Penelope Fitzgerald’s *Edward Burne-Jones: A Biography* (1975), MacCarthy’s *The Last Pre-Raphaelite: Edward Burne-Jones and the Victorian Imagination* (2013), Jan Marsh’s *Jane and May Morris: A Biographical Story, 1838–1939* (1986), *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Painter and Poet* (1999) and her co-edited *Collected Letters of Jane Morris* (2012), as well as Wendy Parkin’s *Jane Morris: The Burden of History* (2013), Morris and Georgie’s relationship is not much dwelt upon, if at all. Studies of Morris’s literary works, including the useful and extensive study of his poetry by J.M.S. Tompkins in 1988, have also spent little time reading between the lines about the relationship between Morris and Georgie.

Thus, in all of these works, the subject of Morris’s failed marriage appears and, in some, there is brief speculation that he turned in his sorrow to Georgie Burne-Jones. This turning to Georgie is sometimes dealt with in a sentence, sometimes a paragraph, but the overarching context and theme is always the loss of marital affection and consequent unhappiness. This one fact of the Rossetti affair colours all interpretation, so that no other source for Morris’s evidently lovelorn state is sought. As a consequence, when considered at all, the relationship between Morris and Georgie is perceived as brief, compensatory and/or half-hearted – the word ‘chivalrous’ is often used, a *tendresse* not a passion. Consequently, biographies have taken the conventional line that Janey was behind all

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Morris’s heartache, and that in his sorrow and loneliness Morris may have turned to Georgie for sympathy. Not many biographers have attempted to plumb the depths of Morris’s vast literary output, but as someone who has long been acquainted with Morris’s poetry I became convinced that not just some, but almost all of Morris’s most tragic poems were directed to Georgie, not Janey, even though they were written during the time of Janey’s intimacy with Rossetti. Set alongside the many gifts Morris bestowed on Georgie – poetry, valued books and, perhaps most notably, hand-illustrated volumes such as *A Book of Verse*, completed in 1870 (see Figures 5 and 6) – the case has ultimately been easy to make across nine chapters.

**Figures 5 and 6**

*William Morris, A Book of Verse (1870).*

Frontispiece (left) and an extract (right) from this handwritten volume created by Morris for Georgiana Burne-Jones.

**Making the case: the thesis outline**

This thesis begins by establishing recurring themes in Morris’s writing on relationships, noting how they emerge from his earliest years. The opening chapter examines Morris’s early influences, especially his friendship with The Set, including Burne-Jones, at Oxford, and their plans for a celibate religious brotherhood. The thesis highlights how, despite these plans, Morris’s earliest poems identify his move away from Christianity, to instead embrace an ideal of Love of an earthly kind. Additionally, I note the influence upon Morris of the idealism in Charlotte M. Yonge’s *The Heir of Redclyffe* (1853), and how this, and strong loyalties, reinforced in Morris an ideal of self-sacrifice that was significant when he and a friend fell in love with the same woman. I argue that Morris’s work during this period
becomes highly autobiographical and his literary themes begin to centre on the love of two friends for the same woman.

In Chapter 2 this argument on hidden love is developed, noting that Morris’s literary output concentrates on the solitary hero in a way that suggests a biographical connection. I relate this identification with a solitary hero with the fact of Edward Burne-Jones’ engagement to the young Georgiana Macdonald, and note how Morris’s participation in Rossetti’s scheme to decorate the Oxford Union with Arthurian motifs can be re-read in this context. How each artist’s subject showed his identification with an aspect of womanhood exemplified in the legends, and how this betrays a broader attitude to women generally is also discussed. Particularly pertinent to these discussions is *The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems*, Morris’s first volume of poetry, published in 1858. Relevant to this chapter is the context of the social panic concerning women in the 1850s, and how the urge to define women as moral or immoral occupied the consciousness of these young men. The chapter outlines how elements of misogyny appeared in their representations of women, and how that relates to the women they were attracted to in real life.

Chapter 3 explores how Morris was attracted to his future wife, Jane Burden, ‘on the rebound’ and notes how, turning over a new leaf, he burns the unpublished poetry of the previous years. During this period, when Morris, Rossetti and Burne-Jones are all married, I compare their ideals and motivations with the reality of these marriages, and the women they married. The illness of Morris and Georgie at this time marked a change in all the relationships. Reading Morris’s poetry alongside that of Tennyson also provides evidence of Morris’s argument against the contemporary social stereotype that sexual feeling in women is unnatural. Comparing Morris’s views with those of Rossetti also demonstrates Morris’s heightened empathy for women and the strictures upon their lives. Again, this establishes an aspect of Morris’s early liberal moral position that is neglected in most of the literature. In analysing Morris’s work, thought and actions, I draw also on aspects of feminist historians, such as the work of Nead and Walkowitz, to underline that Morris, unlike his contemporaries, was particularly thoughtful, forward thinking and sympathetic to women and their place in society long before he engaged with socialism. I argue that his feelings for Georgie were in part responsible for this sensibility.

Thrown together by the absence of their spouses, both of whom were in love with other people, Morris and Georgie are shown to be particularly close in Chapter 4. I show Morris beginning to reveal, through poetry and gifts, the love for Georgie he had long kept silent. Morris’s self-revelation in these writings show clearly that, rather than experiencing
sorrow about his wife, Morris was sorrowing about Georgie’s hesitation to respond to his love. I argue that the private, unpublished poetry of this period has been routinely misinterpreted by scholars and biographers. I offer a consistent and compelling alternative reading of Morris’s work from these years, and with it a critical summary of current biographical literature assessing this situation, and my rejection of it.

In Chapter 5 I show evidence that Morris is prevented from speaking of his love to Georgie but that he continued to shower her with love tokens such as an illuminated book of poems. I note also that, as he and Rossetti secure a country house, his correspondence with his wife and Aglaia Coronio reveals that it was Morris’s intention for Rossetti and Jane to be together. Morris leaves for Iceland. On his return he writes *Love is Enough* (1872), presented as another gift to Georgie. This period in Morris’s life has been interpreted by biographers as one of domination by Rossetti, prompting speculation about Morris’s manliness. Morris’s poems, however, show evidence that Georgie is the focus of his attention, and that her reluctance to return his love was a result of conventional morality and fear of disgrace.

Concentrating on the significant fragment known as *The Novel on Blue Paper*, in Chapter 6, I argue that this work is a roman à clef revealing Morris’s love for Georgie during the time before they were married in the late 1850s. I note the similarity to Morris, Burne-Jones and Georgie of three of its characters, and the novel’s critique of Victorian morality and the double standard. I argue that this work is Morris’s attempt to demonstrate the worthlessness of the morality that influenced Georgie. A passage on the fate of a fallen woman outlined in the story again shows Morris’s concern with the woman question long before he became a socialist.

In Chapter 7 I discuss how, in studying and translating Icelandic sagas, Morris found a heroic ethos that would save him from self-pity and self-absorption. He makes a final trip to the harsh landscape of Iceland, returning with new resolve, and begins to look outside himself for ways to better society. This, I argue, marked the end of the lyric poetry of former years. He then writes what he regards as his most important epic poem *Sigurd the Volsung*, and becomes an active and passionate socialist. I underline the significance of the change in Morris. Moving outside his personal concerns, he sets aside personal love to remake himself as an advocate for others, but still championing his first ideals of love and brotherhood.

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38 Such as Henderson, Lindsay and MacCarthy.
Chapter 8 examines Morris’s socialist-inspired Utopia and traces its roots in his personal life and the hopes he once held of a fulfilling relationship with Georgie. No longer nursing personal hopes, Morris’s vision is of a society to come, in which men’s and women’s freedom to find fulfilment in love can never again be thwarted by religious or social obstacles.

Finally, in Chapter 9, I examine Morris’s last years, in which he takes up printing and publishing. It is during this time that he is afflicted by a serious illness that sharpens his awareness of the shortness of life. He decides to please himself, writing long prose romances in which young men and women, after trials and separations, finally succeed in finding and loving each other unrestrainedly. One of these, written during his last illness, seems to relate to his relationship with Georgie. As Morris became more and more ill, he wrote one final poem and sent it to her. In it, for once, Morris expresses bitterness that his love had been rejected.

* * *

Taken as a whole, these chapters mount an extremely strong challenge to accepted wisdom about Morris’s marriage and relationships. They convincingly argue that Morris secretly loved Georgie Burne-Jones even before he met Janey, and that it is she, not Janey, who inspired Morris’s most personal poetic outpourings of love and loss in the period between 1868 and 1875. I contend that, as a young man, when he first met Georgie and fell in love, quasi-religious ideals of brotherhood and self-sacrifice, such as those exemplified by Sir Guy in The Heir of Redclyffe, caused Morris to hide his love for Georgie, but that later, when their respective marriages had failed, Morris blamed his silence and self-restraint for the wrong choices they each had made. Attempting to right this wrong and win Georgie, his true love, Morris found she was hindered by social mores and fear of disgrace.

In an atmosphere highly critical of passion in women, Morris attempted to change Georgie’s mind with gifts and writings that challenged the socially constructed values that represented Christian morality in Victorian society. His concerns came together in the unfinished novel of 1872. In this he combines an autobiographical vignette of their situation in 1856 which reveals his hidden love. This is set within a sharp critique of society and how it oppressed women and the expression of true love, thus blighting the lives of men. I question current interpretations of the rift between Morris and his wife, arguing that Morris facilitated the relationship with Rossetti, also acting to protect his wife from gossip and censure. I argue that biographical readings of Morris’s life have assumed wrongly that
any relationship with Georgie was merely chivalrous, tender, rather than passionate and tragic. I show how my interpretation of Morris’s actions makes sense, while other biographical interpretations are unconvincing and inadequate.

Further, I highlight what I believe are gross misconceptions about Morris, based on those inadequate understandings, that have cropped up in twentieth-century biographies, such as those by Henderson and MacCarthy. These studies assert that Morris had difficulty relating to women, and that this contributed to the failure of his marriage, that Morris was initially unable or unwilling to deal with the affair between his wife and the artist Rossetti, that themes of love and loss in Morris’s work refer to his wife, that it was at the time of his wife’s affair that Morris and Georgie became close, and that this relationship was compensatory and chivalrous. I also challenge the notion that Morris’s liberal views on marriage and relationships were adopted as part of his socialist agenda, or were forced on him by circumstance. Morris came, I argue, to hold these views in youth, which had a bearing on his actions when his wife became involved with Rossetti. Thus this thesis draws out a new and challenging autobiographical narrative of Morris’s life and love. Indeed, illuminating the concept that ‘Love is enough’ explains many key aspects of his life’s trajectory.
Chapter 1

Sacred Brotherhood and Sacred Love: Oxford and The Set, 1855–58

In 1853, at the age of nineteen, William Morris went up to Oxford. It was here that he fell in with a group of young men who were to become friends for life. The first of these, and the one destined to be his closest companion, was the artist Edward (Ned) Jones from Birmingham. Burne-Jones, as he’d later come to be known, introduced his new friend to The Set, a group largely from Birmingham who, like Morris and Burne-Jones, intended to take holy orders. High-flown aspirations found expression in ex curricular sessions of animated discussion and debate about theology, philosophy, labour, poetry and art. The Set discussed the writings of Newman, Carlyle and Ruskin, knew the poetry of Shakespeare and Keats, Tennyson, Poe and Browning, and argued about metaphysics, philosophy, truth and beauty; the romantic, the mystical and the medieval were their lodestars. After Morris’s death one of The Set recalled that ‘[w]e all had the notion of doing great things for man: in our own way, however; according to our own will and bent’.1

Morris fully shared this youthful idealism and looked for ways in which his own ‘will and bent’ could work for, as he put it in a letter home, ‘the bettering of the World’.2 Morris was already impressing his group of friends as extraordinarily knowledgeable and well read, as well as wild, strong and intensely aspirational:

In no long time … the great characters of his nature began to impress us. His fire and impetuosity, great bodily strength, and high temper … But his mental qualities, his intellect, also began to be perceived and acknowledged. I remember Faulkner remarking to me, ‘How Morris seems to know things, doesn’t he?’, and then it struck me that it was so. I observed how decisive he was: how accurate, without any effort or formality: what an extraordinary power of observation lay at the base of many of his casual remarks, and how many things he knew that were quite out of our way.3

Fiery and impetuous, decisive and accurate, perceptive and knowledgeable: these recollections of the young Morris – and others in Mackail’s biography – are at variance

3 Mackail, Life of William Morris, vol. 1, p. 44.
with the hints of diffidence and vacillation that appear in some recent biographies.\(^4\)

Emphasising these and other qualities outlined by Morris’s contemporaries, this chapter underlines the development of characteristics and modes of behaviour and writing that would be lifelong: strongly developed notions of romance, love, friendship and honour, the rejection of conventional piety and morality, and the embrace of ‘natural’ relationships between men and women. Tracing key influences upon the young Morris, and noting autobiographical elements of his work, the chapter argues that strong loyalties formed at Oxford established also an ideal of self-sacrifice that would be significant when he and Burne-Jones fell in love with the same woman.

**Friendship, honour, love and death**

Many biographers have noted how the young Morris found personal role models in books popular with The Set at the time, including works such as Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué’s *Sintram and His Companions* (1842) and particularly Charlotte M. Yonge’s *The Heir of Redclyffe* (1853). Such works featured honourable and chivalrous young men engaged in struggle, in the case of Yonge’s hero, against his own impetuous nature and temper.\(^5\) Also, they were books that echoed, according to Mackail, the religious ideals and social enthusiasms stirring between the decline of Tractarianism and the Crimean War.\(^6\) Yonge was strongly influenced by her friendship with a leading figure in the Oxford Movement, High Churchman John Keble. Mackail identified the influence of *The Heir of Redclyffe* on Morris in particular:

> The young hero of the novel, with his overstrained conscientiousness, his chivalrous courtesy, his intense earnestness … his high-strung notions of love, friendship and honour, his premature gravity, his almost deliquescent piety, was adopted … as a pattern for actual life: and more strongly perhaps by Morris than the rest.\(^7\)

Influenced by the scientific and intellectual developments and philosophical questioning that had begun to erode literal belief in the Bible,\(^8\) Morris would soon abandon piety along with religion. The Set, including Morris and Burne-Jones, were initially destined for the

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\(^7\) Mackail, *Life of William Morris*, vol. 1, p. 41.

church. Morris in particular would later reflect on the influence of the ‘rich establishmentarian puritanism’ of his family and the High Church chivalric codes of The Set.\(^9\) Several poems show Morris’s religious earnestness at this time. ‘The Willow and the Red Cliff’, for example, was recalled by Burne-Jones as the first poem Morris ever showed The Set. Set member Dixon recalled the impression it made on him:

> As he read it I felt that it was something the like of which had never been heard before. It was a thing entirely new: founded on nothing previous: perfectly original whatever its value, and sounding truly striking and beautiful.\(^{10}\)

But as Dixon also recalled, it was not religion that was the chief ‘bond of alliance’ between The Set, but ‘poetry and indefinite artistic or literary aspiration’.\(^{11}\) They often gathered for dramatic poetry readings and Mackail notes Dixon’s recollection that at this time ‘[a]ll reading men were Tennysonians; all sets of reading men talked poetry. Poetry was the thing: and it was felt with justice that this was due to Tennyson’.\(^{12}\) It has generally been concluded that Morris ‘profited from but moved beyond the influence’ of Tennyson, preferring the elder poet’s earlier work.\(^{13}\) Dixon believed that Morris understood the early work of Tennyson ‘as if the poems represented substantial things that were to be considered out of the poems as well as in them’.\(^{14}\)

In this atmosphere of enthusiasm generated by new and wonderful friendships, sympathies and ideas, Morris began to set down more and more imaginative and romantic stories and verses of his own. His first poetic offerings to The Set were hailed by them as genius. Although nonplussed by this judgement, Morris continued to produce poetry with a facility and speed he never lost. Dixon recalled that ‘for a term or two, he came to my rooms almost every day with a new poem’,\(^{15}\) including an unnamed and unpublished offering:

> Dear friends I lay awake in the night  
> When I sung of the willow-tree  
> And I thought, as I lay awake in the light,  
> Of what you had said to me.

> For you remember how you had said,  
> That I should be a poet

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\(^{10}\) Mackail, *Life of William Morris*, vol. 1, p. 52.
\(^{11}\) Mackail, *Life of William Morris*, vol. 1, p. 43.
\(^{12}\) Mackail, *Life of William Morris*, vol. 1, p. 44.
\(^{14}\) Mackail, *Life of William Morris*, vol. 1, p. 46.
\(^{15}\) Mackail, *Life of William Morris*, vol. 1, p. 52.
Ah me: it almost made me sad,
As I lay in the light, to know it.

For I knew, as every poet does,
What a poet ought to be:
Straightway before me there uprose
My hideous sins to me.

Sweet friends, I pray you pray for me
To Him whose hands are pierced
That as, on the breast of His mother, He,
So I on His breast may be nursed.¹⁶

Morris the High Churchman is evident here and his work never again achieved such sentimental religiosity. This poem demonstrates his deference to ideals of piety and purity at this time, as well as his elevated notion of poet as moral arbiter, but it also shows Morris begin to self-identify as a poet, indicating the development of a strong autobiographical element in his writing, and also his concern that he might not live up to ‘what a poet ought to be’. In a year or two, indeed, he was exploring a different notion of sin, namely, that it was sinful not to act in accordance with nature, even if that meant giving in to illicit desire.

But for a while Morris’s early verse uncomfortably straddled the religious and secular aspects of love, as in the poem ‘Kisses’ written in April 1855. Morris begins the poem with the idea of Judas’s kiss betraying Jesus. But then the poet’s thoughts move to the lovers’ kiss between Romeo and Juliet just before death, and finally the kiss of a deacon on the brow of a dying monk, the artistFra Angelico. Morris’s desire for romantic love appears in his unlikely attribution of a love interest to the monk Fra Angelico, who mysteriously meets his love, presumably a nun, in the abbey. All the kisses are necessarily chaste, and precede death; the monk, lying at the feet of his beloved, ‘to God did pray, that his life might pass away’. Morris’s attempts to reconcile romantic love with religion and monastic life can only end in death, a symbolic culmination that avoids the need of a physical union. The resulting poetic image is unsuccessful, as he realised when he told his friend Crom that the poem was ‘exceedingly seedy’.¹⁷ Yet Morris went on to kill off lovers in the same way in several other stories and poems of this period. The problems of sex and death are neatly reconciled in the notion of spiritual union in an imagined paradise in ‘Blanche’:

Let us pray that we may die
Let us pray that we may lie
Where the softening wind doth sigh


That in heaven amid the bliss
Of the blessed where God is
Mid the angels we may kiss.

Blanche, however, seems to have some doubts about the afterlife:

Yea, she said, but kiss me now
Ere my shining spirit go
To the place no man doth know.\textsuperscript{18}

Morris was sharply aware of the inevitability of death. Mackail said this fear of death would be called morbid in a less imaginative nature.\textsuperscript{19} This awareness can also be detected in his later poems, with death always the doleful contrast to the pleasures of life and love, as if to enhance their value and urgency. Tompkins attributes the predilection for death in these early works to ‘a youthful gusto for tragedy’.\textsuperscript{20} However, despite the employment of these death unions, or (given other readings of ‘death’) because of them, it can be construed that the kind of religious purity upheld by The Set complicated Morris’s obvious interest in the erotic aspect of love. Morris also began to make a connection between eternal love and life after death: ‘Life is done/yet forever love doth run’. In the prose story ‘A Dream’, the lovers who have lost each other when the knight entered the suggestively named ‘cave in the Red Pike’, meet in several reincarnated lives as they wait for the time when they can finally embrace and vanish together.\textsuperscript{21} Ultimately, however, it seems that Morris found these resolutions unsatisfying. Depressed about his writing, he felt himself becoming ‘[m]ore imbecile as I go on’.\textsuperscript{22} The final two stanzas of the early poem ‘Kisses’ spell out Morris’s frustration:

\begin{verbatim}
I cannot say the things I would
I cannot think the things I would
How the cross at evening stood
Very blue the sky above
Very sweet the faint clouds move
Yet I cannot think of love.\textsuperscript{23}
\end{verbatim}

Mackail also noted the ‘moral tension’ evidenced in Morris’s work of this period, which could well be the conflict between Morris’s valuing of erotic love and his feeling that this put him at odds with the artistic and religious sensibilities of The Set and society generally.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Morris, \textit{Collected Works}, vol. 24, pp. 78-80. See also Mackail, \textit{Life of William Morris}, vol. 1, p. 60.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Mackail, \textit{Life of William Morris}, vol. 1, p. 215.
  \item \textsuperscript{21} Morris, ‘A Dream’, \textit{Collected Works}, vol. 1, p. 159.
  \item \textsuperscript{22} Morris, \textit{Collected Letters}, vol. 1, p. 10.
  \item \textsuperscript{23} Morris, ‘Kisses’, \textit{Collected Works}, vol. 24, pp. 76-77.
\end{itemize}
Even the title and subject of the poem – ‘Kisses’ – suggests Morris’s yearning for physical love.

Chastity was in vogue with The Set. Gothic tastes and masculine exclusivity gave birth to the idea of a monastic brotherhood that promised to extend the glorious days of undergraduate life and celibacy indefinitely. The idea was originally that of Burne-Jones. Labelled a misogynist by his comrades, Burne-Jones declared on May Day eve of 1853: ‘I have set my heart on our founding a Brotherhood. Learn “Sir Galahad” by heart; he is to be the patron saint of our Order’. A few months later he again insisted on The Set’s enlistment in a ‘Crusade and Holy Warfare against the age’, which according to Mackail, ‘definitely include[ed] celibacy and conventual life’. Even with a mythical patron, the childish idea of a Brotherhood was taken seriously by The Set, and potential members sounded out. When sublimation of excess energies in shouted debates, bear fights and singletick at the gymnasium failed, and enthusiasm for celibacy flagged, Burne-Jones had words of wisdom. He wrote a joking letter to Crom Price as ‘Edouard Cardinal de Birmingham’ in 1853. The postscript bears the real import of the letter, and shows the friends’ current thinking on the matter:

Touching the matter whereof you ask our councel [sic] and advice, hear …

You have as yet taken no vows, therefore you are as yet perfectly at liberty to decide your own fate.

If your decision involves the happiness of another you know your course, follow nature, and remember the soul is above the mind, and the heart greater than the brain; for it is the mind that makes man, but the soul that makes man angel ... if you have one who may serve for a personification of all humanity, expend your love there, and it will orb from its centre wider and wider, like circles in water when a stone is thrown therein.

But self-denial and self-disappointment, though I do not urge it, is even better discipline to the soul than that.

If we lose you from the cause of celibacy, you are no traitor; only do not be hasty.

The requirement of the poor girl in question to ‘serve for the personification of all humanity’ seems to have put an end to Crom’s would-be romance. More importantly, this passage sheds light on Burne-Jones’s complicated attitude to women and sex: fear mingled with desire. He was soon to be lost to the celibate ideal, although his engagement to Georgie, who he portrayed in a sketch at the time as the haloed virgin, lasted four years.

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27 Mackail, Life of William Morris, vol. 1, p. 86.
owing, according to Ina Taylor, to Burne-Jones’s ‘inability to visualise something so spiritual transformed by the carnality of marriage’.\textsuperscript{28}

When, towards the end of 1855, The Set finally gave up the idea of a brotherhood, it was, among other reasons, because ‘Morris [had] become questionable on doctrinal points’.\textsuperscript{29} But the self-denial and self-disappointment emphasised in Burne-Jones’s letter to Price is significant, as it was \textit{this} ideal, rather than celibacy, that Morris was to cherish, possibly as a way of curbing what he saw as his chief faults: his impulsive nature and high temper. It was this ideal of self-denial and sacrifice that Guy, the impetuous hero of \textit{The Heir of Redclyffe}, so like Morris himself, embraced to counter imagined sins of pride and willfullness.\textsuperscript{30} The ideal of self-denial was, for Morris, deeply embedded within the notions of friendship and brotherhood.

On doctrinal matters, Morris and Burne-Jones ‘diverge[d] more and more in views, though not in friendship’ during this period.\textsuperscript{31} Morris began moving towards an ideal of love as an overriding motive: ‘the love of man and woman should go before everything, before all friendship, all duty, all honour’,\textsuperscript{32} an ideal that came to take on spiritual significance in his work. Love, including physical love, in medieval settings is sanctified, and this came to be a kind of religion for Morris. Possibly he identified with the hero of one of his tales who is told: ‘Men say that you hardly believe any doctrine as other men do, and … you can see no ghosts or other wonders’. The hero replies: ‘Well friend, I scarcely call that a disadvantage’.\textsuperscript{33} For Morris, spirituality came to mean the joys of love rather than Christian restraint. Burne-Jones told a cousin in 1855 that the study of French and German philosophy had ‘shivered’ (shattered) Morris’s belief in religion and palsied his own,\textsuperscript{34} although both men continued to use medieval and Christian iconography in their work. Mackail describes Morris’s work of 1855 as showing an emergence from a time of ‘moral and imaginative tension’. He quotes a passage from one of the early prose works in support of this and identifies a ‘vague but hardly concealed second meaning’. The passage reads:

\begin{quote}
I walked down to the sea, and paced to and fro over the hard sand: and the moon showed bloody with the hot mist … though the dull east wind blew it onward
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\item 29 Burne-Jones, \textit{Memorials}, vol. 1, p. 109.
\item 31 Burne-Jones, \textit{Memorials}, vol. 1, p. 109.
\end{footnotes}
continually. I walked there pondering till a noise from over the sea made me turn
and look that way; what was that coming over the sea? Laus deo! The WEST WIND:
Hurrah! I feel the joy I felt then over again now, in all its intensity … it grew nearer
quickly, it rushed on toward me fearfully fast … then oh! Hurrah! I was wrapped in it
—the cold salt spray — drenched with it, blinded by it, and when I could see again, I
saw the great green waves rising, nodding and breaking, all coming on together; and
over them from wave to wave leapt the joyous WEST WIND.35

Mackail believes this alludes to Morris’s discovery in writing prose tales of ‘a natural outlet
in words for all his inward thoughts, loves, aspirations’, although a modern reader might
identify the ‘hardly concealed’ second meaning as sexual, and the imagery of liberation
perhaps related to the casting off of his High Church beliefs. Mackail also notes that
Morris’s discovery of Chaucer and Browning acted like ‘two great windows letting in the
air and day’ and showed him that art and literature could be the ‘means of realising life’.37
As Tompkins has noted, ‘[i]t is interesting that so little of Browning’s concern with God
and the soul … affects the poet who takes so much else from [him]’.38 Rather, Morris’s
debt to these authors was mostly a newfound freedom in writing of erotic love.

More robust and daring parts
Morris enjoyed Chaucer’s bawdier tales, but Burne-Jones said he would like to pretend
Chaucer had never written such stories; he allowed that Morris ‘ever had more robust and
daring parts than I could assume’.39 In his choices of subject matter, Morris was always to
be more uninhibited than his friends and less sanctimonious about fallen women, with
whom he generally empathised. In Morris’s first book, The Defence of Guenevere and other
Poems, published in 1858, there are several poems that deal with illicit love and which do
not chastise women for following their desires, as other artists and poets, including Rossetti
and Tennyson, were doing at the time.

Lynda Nead has written about Britain in the 1850s as a period when sexual
behaviour was deemed the cause of social decay and therefore the touchstone of social
order.40 During these years, fear of immorality focused on women in particular and, as
Nead has shown, female desire became suspect, even deviant. The subject of the immoral
woman was treated in a number of cautionary artworks and poems in which artists

39 Thomas Rooke, Thomas Burne-Jones Talking, His Conversations Preserved by his Studio Assistant Thomas Rooke,
promoted current moral and social norms.\textsuperscript{41} Morris’s poetry of the 1850s stands out among these portrayals of the ‘woman question’ as offering a radically different view to other such artists and writers at this time. Fallen women were generally consigned by artists to a fate worse than death, if not actual death,\textsuperscript{42} but Morris spares his heroines. The early poem ‘Welland River’ concerns a woman whose lover, Sir Robert, has gone to sea, and whose pregnancy is becoming obvious:

\begin{quote}
For every day that passes by  
I wax both pale and green  
From gold to gold of my girdle  
There is an inch between

I sewed it up with a scarlet silk  
As I lay upon my bed  
Sorrow! The man I’ll never see  
Who had my maidenhead?\textsuperscript{43}
\end{quote}

But Sir Robert eventually returns and in the end ‘Sir Robert’s house she did keep’ with no mention of marriage. As one anonymous reviewer of Morris’s \textit{The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems} (1858), noted, Morris’s medieval world was marked by ‘a great amount of kissing’, and that ‘kissers and kissed had but little respect for the marriage service’.\textsuperscript{44} Thus Morris’s liberal attitudes and tendency to write of free love are evident long before his socialism and even his marriage; his dedication to the ideal of true love emerged early as a major theme of his writings, especially in his poetry.

According to Mackail, it was the discovery of Chaucer that showed Morris the possibilities of poetry rather than prose as ‘a medium boundless in its range and perfect in its flexibility’.\textsuperscript{45} Chaucer, his ‘special master’, had, according to Mackail, shown him ‘the wider and sweeter view of life which was needed to correct the harsh or mystical elements of his own medievalism’,\textsuperscript{46} and, he might have added, the Christian asceticism that embraced celibacy. In this ‘secularisation of mind and outlook’ Morris was helped by his discovery of two books, Malory’s \textit{Le Morte d’Arthur} and Browning’s \textit{Men and Women}, which ‘entered Morris’s life within a few months of each other in 1855’.\textsuperscript{47} Browning’s poetic style inspired Morris; his valuing of love resonated with Morris’s own feelings, while the

\textsuperscript{41} See, for example, W. Holman Hunt’s \textit{Awakening Conscience} (1653), Rossetti’s \textit{Found} (1854–81) and F. Walker’s \textit{The Lost Path} (1863).
\textsuperscript{42} See, for example, Augustus Egg’s \textit{Past and Present} (1856), G. F. Watts’ \textit{Found Drowned} (1850).
\textsuperscript{45} Mackail, \textit{Life of William Morris}, vol. 1, p. 61.
\textsuperscript{46} Mackail, \textit{Life of William Morris}, vol. 1, p. 61.
\textsuperscript{47} Mackail, \textit{Life of William Morris}, vol. 1, p. 48.
Arthurian legends of Malory allowed his imagination to explore themes of love and passion within a framework of the medieval world he loved.

An unnamed early draft, with something of the ‘wider and sweeter view of life’ about it,\(^\text{48}\) begins: ‘A time there was in days long past away’. The work has stylistic elements that link it to the prose works of 1855–56 and is obviously influenced by *Le Morte d’Arthur*. In this poem love is threatened by the gulf in social standing between the lovers. Morris works through the stages and emotions of the romance in graphic detail. A young knight, ‘battered in the wars of many lands / and likewise in estate fallen so low / Nothing had he but what his sword and hands’, falls in love with a young woman ‘at court of noble house’ who gave him her love ‘[i]n all recklessness’. He cherished it and ‘warmed himself thereat’. With his own passion for manuscripts and illumination, Morris imagines this proffered love to be just as deliciously irresistible for his character:

Look you it was high treat for one who sat
Not so high up above the salt to find
The silkwound vellum fall before his feet

Their illicit love is made sweeter by secrecy and danger: ‘No wonder if he found it sweet /… Kissing together to sit feet to feet / And ever round him her two long arms went’.\(^\text{49}\) The knight, knowing they are in great danger, struggles between love and honour, but, like Guenevere in Morris’s ‘Defence’ poem, by no process of thought can he decide what best to do. Morris scholar Florence Boos has noted Morris’s ‘reverence’ for passion and its emergence as a stylistic element of his writing at this time:

Beyond general heterosexual yearning, he seems to feel a kinship with the couple … and reverence their physical passion … It seems clear that the young Morris felt strongly drawn to the theme of sexual love, but felt himself for the most part an outsider.\(^\text{50}\)

In this poem Morris is anything but detached, describing intimate moments in tender, realistic detail, and empathising with the woman, who has the most to lose. Despite all, his characters are united in their love:

so bold
And tender did his face seem in her sight

That all seemed won already, and such love

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\(^\text{49}\) Morris, ‘A time there was in days long past away’, untitled and unpublished poem, typescript in Fitzwilliam Museum; available online in ‘The Early Poems of William Morris’s, at the William Morris Archive: http://morrisedition.lib.uiowa.edu/earlypoemstexts31end.html.
From her compassionate eyes shone down on him,
Twixt falling of the blossoms from above,
That thought and memory both began to swim

In giddy dream, and if he could have thought
‘Better is Love than Honour’ he had said
For unto another world love had them brought,
And there they made their own laws, by my head

Upon a day there came a time at last
When both to him and her was no return
Hands off with honour, Love had got him fast
For weal and woe in this flame him doth burn

Alas she with him.51

In this Chaucerian passage, Morris uses a phrase that sums up his ‘religion of the heart’:
‘unto another world love had them brought’. This world is, for Morris, one in which the
laws of church and state have no sway, where they made their own laws, for good or ill.
Morris’s privileging of illicit love is spelled out in the formulation ‘better is love than
honour’, but, as Morris is keenly aware, such love always comes at a price. In a graphic
metaphor, the lovers’ secret is eventually revealed: ‘Swathe a snake up in wool, out comes
the head with the black forked tongue’.52

These early works of Morris’s, described by Mackail as ‘full in every vein and fibre of
the sweet juices and ferment of the spring’,53 show Morris to be a young man very
concerned with love, and subject to heightened influences upon his emotional life that are
then reworked in his writings. But this poem exemplifies a less problematic kind of love
than that which was to preoccupy Morris after 1855. From around this date on, he began
to write of love triangles in which the protagonist seems to be the outsider: the failed lover
whose loss is emphasised by the constant presence of the woman he loves. The
protagonist’s love is further complicated by loyalty to, and love for, the man who has
displaced him.

The observer: Morris as outsider to love

Perhaps the first work of this kind is ‘The Story of the Unknown Church’, the setting and
details of which were inspired by a walking tour of northern France undertaken by Morris

51 Morris, ‘A time there was in days long past away’, untitled and unpublished poem, typescript in
Fitzwilliam Museum; available online in ‘The Early Poems of William Morris’, at the William Morris
Archive: http://morrisedition.lib.uiowa.edu/earlypoemstexts31end.html.
52 Morris, ‘A time there was in days long past away’, untitled and unpublished poem, typescript in
Fitzwilliam Museum; available online in ‘The Early Poems of William Morris’, at the William Morris
Archive: http://morrisedition.lib.uiowa.edu/earlypoemstexts31end.html.
and Burne-Jones in the summer of 1855. On this tour, Morris came under the spell of medieval towns, churches and cathedrals set in a high-summer paradise of poplars and wheat fields. From France, Morris wrote to his friend Crom Price. His heightened sense of beauty is evident in his ardent description of the French landscape:

[S]o gloriously the trees are grouped, all manner of trees but more especially the graceful poplars and aspens, of all kinds; and the hedgeless fields of grain, and the beautiful herbs they grow for forage whose names I don’t know, the most beautiful fields I ever saw yet … looking as if they … were planted for their beauty only, that they might grow always only mingled with … purple thistles, and blue cornflowers and red poppies.54

Further on in the letter Morris mentions travelling through a valley of ‘grass, land and trees. O! the trees! It was all like the country in a beautiful poem, in a beautiful Romance such as might make a background to Chaucer’s Palamon and Arcite’.55 Morris was to use the elements of the French landscape in many of his Arthurian poems, and they can be recognised in the first story he published, ‘The Story of the Unknown Church’,56 which was published in January 1856. Both the landscape and architecture in this tale are drawn from Morris’s impressions of northern France, as can be seen in an article he wrote for the same volume of The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine.

This article was entitled ‘The Churches of North France: Shadows of Amiens’,57 which might have led readers to expect an architectural exposition. Instead, Morris’s article is based on his emotional response to the churches and their art. ‘Every word he writes comes straight from his heart’ wrote Mackail of this article, and this is evident in the opening phrases:

Not long ago I saw for the first time some of the churches of North France; still more recently I saw them for the second time; and remembering the love I have for them and the longing that was in me to see them … I thought I should like to tell people of some of those things I felt when I was there …

And I thought that even if I could say nothing else about these grand churches, I could at least tell men how I had loved them.

For I will say here that I think these same churches of North France the grandest, the most beautiful, the kindest and most loving of all the buildings that the earth has ever borne.58

Morris’s recollections of his journey are stirred by emotions that seem heightened and very near the surface. His response to the buildings is not merely architectural or even

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historical, but rather he sees them as outlets for the expression of love, as conduits of emotion. The whole article is imbued with love: for the earth, the buildings, the builders, his friends and his audience:

And those same builders, still surely living, still real men, and capable of receiving love no less than the great men, poets and painters and such like, who are on the earth now, no less than my breathing friends whom I can see and look on kindly now. Ah! Do I not love them with just cause who certainly loved me, thinking of me sometimes between the strokes of their chisels; and for this love of all men that they had?59

‘The Story of the Unknown Church’, written at the same time as the article in Amiens, does not at first appear to be about love, other than the brotherly kind. A narrator speaks from beyond the grave, recalling a day in his past life; his intense description echoes Morris’s letter from France:

The abbey … was girt by a circle of poplar trees, and whenever a wind passed over them, were it ever so little a breath, it set them all a-ripple; and when the wind was high, they bowed and swayed very low, and the wind, as it lifted their leaves, and showed their silvery white sides … kept on changing the trees from green to white and white to green; moreover, through the bows and trunks of the poplars, we caught glimpses of the great golden corn sea … and among the corn grew burning scarlet poppies and blue corn-flowers; and the corn-flowers were so blue that they seemed to burn with a steady light, as they grew beside the poppies among the gold of the wheat.60

The narrator, with his sister Margaret,61 is carving ornamentation on the church he is building, when he enters a dreamlike trance. He finds himself on the grassy side of a curving river. On the other side is a ‘great sea of red corn-poppies, only paths of white lilies wound among them with here and there a great golden sunflower’.62 The elements of the dream segue into a battle scene on top of a basalt cliff, which the narrator witnesses from below, lying on his back in a boat floating on a land-locked sea. From here he spies a gold and red wallflower growing in the crevice of the battlements of an old castle that towers above him, and on which two knights do battle. The battle comes to an end, at which time the banner of the castle is torn down by the victor who hurls it over the cliff. Looking up, the narrator sees the victorious knight is in fact Amyot, his dearest friend and the betrothed

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61 As noted in the Introduction, the theory has been advanced by John Le Bourgeois that Morris had a sexual love for his older and favourite sister Emma, whose marriage when he was fifteen upset Morris as it took away his favourite companion. See John Le Bourgeois, Art and Forbidden Fruit: Hidden Passion in the Life of William Morris, Cambridge, Lutterworth Press, 2006. I believe the presence of a sister in this story in no way advances Le Bourgeois’ theory of Morris’s sexual love for his sister, although the sister, who also married, has, like Burne-Jones, been separated from Morris by her sexual experience.
of his sister.\textsuperscript{61} The narrator awakes from this reverie to find Amyot is indeed beside him, just returned from the crusades.

No doubt Morris selected the elements of his dream sequence with a specific interpretation in mind. For instance, the field of flowers, red white and gold, could represent Crusade colours, or colours relating to Jesus, and symbolising heaven only reached by passage across the river of death. Amyot’s strange appearance and unnaturally bright eyes signify and predict his coming death and transformation. The battle scene re-enacts the Christian battles of the Crusades, while the narrator’s inability to act predicts his helplessness in the face of Amyot’s death and the end of the narrator’s unspecified hopes. But Morris’s dream sequence calls for further explanation. The unconscious or unintended psychological elements tell another story, which can be deciphered using a Freudian interpretation. Morris’s narrator is a master mason, which identifies him with the author who, at the close of the French tour at Le Havre, had decided to become an architect, which, because of Ruskin’s injunctions, also involved being a carver of ornament. Ruskin particularly praised Amiens Cathedral, and Morris was a devotee of Ruskin.\textsuperscript{64} For the purpose of interpretation I will call the narrator Morris.

Initially, Morris finds himself on one side of a swift river that winds and curves. It separates him from the desirable fields of flowers on the other side; a sea of scarlet poppies, with white lilies and occasional tall sunflowers. Boos remarks on Morris’s frequent habit of expressing intense emotional states through nature and flowers, noting that his ‘early work represents a romantic ‘nature’ … even flowers and leaves are active agents of a kind of pan-psychic love’.\textsuperscript{65} Looking into the blue river Morris observes how the fast flowing waters are swaying the long green weeds below the surface. In other works, as he did in ‘The Defence of Guenevere’ and later writings, Morris would use waves and water, and swaying hair or bodies as feminine, sexual imagery. I believe the river, associated with rites of passage and all the symbolism attaching to water, represents sexual experience; and the field of flowers, which is only to be reached by crossing the river, as a state of life enriched by physical and spiritual love.

Feeling someone touch his shoulder, Morris looks up to see his friend ‘who I loved better than anyone else in the world’. This friend’s name is Amyot, which brings to mind

\textsuperscript{61} Amyot’s marriage to the narrator’s sister Margaret would make a ‘brother’ of him, furthering the brotherhood metaphors.

\textsuperscript{64} On Ruskin’s view of Amiens, see works such as The Bible of Amiens; Vale Crucis; The Art of England; The Pleasures of England; The Collected Works of John Ruskin, ed. E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, London, G. Allen, 1908, vol. 33, passim.

\textsuperscript{65} Boos, Juvenilia of William Morris, p. 8.
both the French word *ami* and Amiens, the cathedral Morris and Burne-Jones visited on their tour. Given all the associations of the name, Amyot the ‘best friend’ must represent Burne-Jones. In the dream Amyot is changed and beautiful, with eyes that ‘gleamed and shone’. While not yet across the stream, Morris’s friend is about to be transformed – to literally pass over in the story.

At around this time, Burne-Jones, Morris’s dearest friend, was courting a young woman and within a few months of this story’s publication he would be engaged to her. Burne-Jones is about to ‘cross the river’, leaving Morris on the other side. Morris feels ‘sick at heart, and faint and parched’, and stoops to drink at the river, using the image of a kiss, but as soon as the water ‘touched my lips’, he is catapulted into another scene. This time he lies on his back in a boat afloat on a land-locked ‘Northern’ sea. Norse warriors were buried lying in a boat, and several myths speak of warriors whose bodies were sent out to sea in their boat. The word ‘landlocked’ reinforces the symbolic entrapment as the boat may not escape to open sea. From his position of helplessness, Morris watches a battle take place on the ramparts of a castle on the cliff directly above him. As he watches, the battle is won, and the castle’s banner of red chevrons on a white ground with several gold stars – the exact colours of his field of flowers on the far side of the river, the attainment of desire – is wrenched from the tower and cast over the cliff, falling in ‘long sweeps’ until it falls over Morris’s body, covering him, pall-like, from feet to chest, thereby doubling the corpse image. He decides to leave it there. His personal vision of love has been ‘overthrown’ and replaced with that belonging to another man. Looking up, Morris sees a man in a tilting helmet and amber surcoat, owner of the banner, look down over him, holding also in his hand a bunch of the wallflowers that Morris had seen growing in a crevice of the wall.

Significantly, a tilting helmet is not a war helmet, so Morris’s victor has been engaged in a one-on-one battle. Morris then recognises the figure as his best friend. The wallflowers in the victor’s hand are blood-red and gold, the colours of passion and kingship; the crevice where they grew is symbolic of female anatomy, making the words ‘blood’ and ‘flower’ suggestive of defloration. These images represent a sexual victory. Morris’s decision to leave the pall over his body is a decision of self-denial, a decision not to take part in the battle himself.

At this point in the narrative the narrator, Walter, wakes from his dream or reverie. In the next scene Margaret and Walter are beside Amyot’s bed on which he lies, ‘with his hands crossed downwards’, having died in the night. Apparently unable to grasp the reality

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of the death, Walter turns to the beauty of the autumn day and the vine and overblown rose that obscure the view outside:

I remembered what I had lost; and then came bitter, bitter dreams … which had once made me happy, – dreams of things I had hoped would be, of the things that would never be now; they came between the fair vine leaves and rose blossoms, and that which lay before the window; they came as before, perfect in colour and form, sweet sounds and shapes. But now in every one was something unutterably miserable … they put out the steady glow of the golden haze, the sweet light of the sun through the vine leaves, the soft leaning of the full blown roses.67

The subconscious elements of this story could well indicate that something happened to Morris that autumn that dashed his hopes, something he was powerless to change. A best friend in love with a woman he had hoped might love him would be such a scenario; to advance one’s own claim would be, in Morris’s terms, selfish, dishonourable and a breach of the bonds of friendship. Walter, like several other Morris protagonists, carries a burden of guilt for his pride, and is imbued with ideals of self-denial and self-restraint. As the dreamer watches the pulling down of ‘his’ banner, he makes a decision not to participate, but to let it cover him – ‘I let it stay there’ – accepting defeat for the sake of the friend he loves. The wallflowers he had seen first, represents the ‘dreams of things I hoped would be, things that would never be now’. In a mood of revenge, and using the motif of union in death discussed earlier, the author has the guilty party die overnight. Morris’s description of the dead Amyot, ‘with his hands crossed downwards’, and of the tomb Walter spends his life carving, again link this story to the French tour, inspired by a sculpture of the virgin’s deathbed he saw on a doorway at Amiens cathedral which he described in his article.

Georgie, Gertha and ‘April Love’

Does Morris’s blending of his actual experience with heightened emotion in these works provide an indication that Morris felt his friendship with Burne-Jones was in jeopardy over a woman they both loved? And what other evidence might be brought to bear on this moment in Morris’s life? Since abandoning the idea of a clerical life after the French trip, Burne-Jones was now determined to become an artist. Increasingly disenchanted with Oxford, he had taken to staying at an aunt’s house in London and calling on the family of Set member Harry Macdonald. Others of The Set had been occasional visitors to the Macdonalds’ before this time, but Burne-Jones now began to call regularly and alone. His delicate health, pallid and thin appearance and soulful eyes always inspired nurturing

instincts. These, together with his wit and kindness, made him a welcome guest.\textsuperscript{68} The Reverend Macdonald was a liberal cleric, his family were all lively and intelligent, and the four daughters ‘comely’.\textsuperscript{69} One of these was Georgiana, a girl of fifteen, whose tiny figure belied her firm, idealistic character (see Figure 7). She was one of eight surviving children born to the Reverend George Browne Macdonald, a Methodist minister, and his wife Hannah. Due to her father’s postings, the family moved from Birmingham to London in 1853, and it was through her brother Harry that Burne-Jones, and then Morris, became regular visitors to the household. Edward began helping Georgie with her drawing, while she had quickly and silently singled him out as her special project. There was an understanding, and by May 1856, before her sixteenth birthday, Edward and Georgie were engaged.

Morris had been introduced to Georgie the previous year in May 1855, and it is possible that he had been very attracted to her then, or in following encounters. This meeting between Morris and Georgie occurred before Burne-Jones’s regular visits had begun, although he did not get to know her until a year later. If Morris was immediately drawn to Georgie, this attraction could well relate to the symbolic image of the distant wallflower, noticed at first by Walter, but which ‘Amyot’ was then to uproot. Demure young Georgie could well be likened to a wallflower (see Figure 7) – Ruskin called her a country violet\textsuperscript{70} – but Morris, the author of stories of passion and romance is hardly to be recognised in Georgie’s account of her first meeting with him.\textsuperscript{71} She was introduced to Morris by Edward Heeley, another of the Birmingham Set, at the 1855 Royal Academy exhibition as Morris stood examining Millais’ painting \textit{The Rescue} (1855). Georgie recalled this meeting forty years later, noting that ‘[h]e looked as if he scarcely saw me’, but perhaps tellingly admitting also that ‘his eyes always seemed to me to take in rather than to give out’.\textsuperscript{72}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{69} Taylor, \textit{Victorian Sisters}.
\textsuperscript{70} Ruskin apparently described Georgie as ‘[a] little country violet with blue eyes and long eyelashes, as good and sweet as can be’ in a letter to Elliot Norton. See \textit{The Correspondence of John Ruskin and Charles Elliot Norton}, eds. John Lewis Bradby and Ian Ousby, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 64.
\textsuperscript{71} In her 1995 biography MacCarthy chose the adjectives ‘stolid’, ‘awkward’ and ‘unresponsive’ to describe Morris at this first meeting with Georgie, and yet in her own version, Georgie went on to say Morris was ‘very handsome’ and a ‘slim boy’, which, at this time, he was. Why has MacCarthy inflated the suggestion of shyness into insinuations of indifference and unattractiveness? In order to portray a personality who it is supposed was a failure with women, and with his wife in particular? I suggest that MacCarthy chooses to hint at character traits that support these assumptions, which has lasting implications for Morris’s biography.
\textsuperscript{72} Burne-Jones, \textit{Memorials}, vol. 1, p. 111.
\end{flushright}
At the beginning of 1856 Morris was still in Oxford, frantic, and struggling with architectural drawing and editorship of the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, while in London, Burne-Jones’s life blossomed. No doubt he reported the progress of his romance to his best friend and sought his advice, which was more sanguine perhaps than ‘Cardinal Edouard’ deserved. With the new literary magazine for a calling card, Burne-Jones also made the acquaintance of Pre-Raphaelite painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti and corresponded with Ruskin; he began to mix in their circles and was considered by them to be ‘one of the nicest young fellows in – Dreamland’. The Royal Academy exhibition of this year had many paintings by Pre-Raphaelite artists. Burne-Jones and Crom Price went to the exhibition and met Morris there. Consistent with his heightened identification with love at this time, Morris became enchanted by *April Love* (1855–56), a painting by Arthur Hughes (see Figure 8), which was accompanied by a quotation from Tennyson’s ‘The Miller’s Daughter’:

> Love is hurt with jar and fret,
> Love is made a sweet regret;
> Eyes with idle tears are wet,

> Idle habits link us yet.
> What is love? For we forget:
> Ah, no! no! 

In her memorials, Georgie tells the story of Morris’s acquisition of the painting:

Morris had been greatly delighted by the picture of *April Love* and … made up his mind to possess it… [A]s by that time he had gone back to his work at Oxford, he wrote up to Edward asking him to see about its purchase. His note is dated Oxford, May 17th: ‘Will you do me a great favour, vis. Go and nobble that picture called ‘April Love’ as soon as possible lest anybody else should buy it.’ This reached Edward on a Saturday evening, and by half past nine on Monday morning he was off to the academy, fortunately in time to ‘nobble’ the picture, and make Morris happy with the news.75

Although Georgie left herself out of the account, her memory of this event is vivid, for Burne-Jones proposed to her at the Academy on that day and in front of the very painting he had gone to buy for Morris. Despite poverty and no prospects, Ned had taken the plunge. Had Morris’s largess and his urgings somehow helped Ned to commit to marriage, and in front of an appropriate painting?

![Figure 8](image.png)

**Figure 8**

*Arthur Hughes, April Love (1855–56), purchased by Morris in 1856.*

As Ina Taylor has pointed out,76 Georgie’s account of this period around her engagement is somewhat misleading. Georgie suggests that after a few formal visits, Burne-Jones spoke to her parents, who then surprised her with the news of Edward’s proposal in June, the official date of their engagement. Georgie’s account of her acquaintance with

76 Taylor, *Victorian Sisters*, p. 36.
Morris is also open to question. She implies that he was more of a stranger to her at this time than was actually the case:

Morris came up from Oxford at this crisis and in his usual generous way of accepting what a friend had done, called to see me. He brought Turner’s *Rivers of France* in his hand, and I thanked him and he wrote my name in it, but we were not much the nearer for this meeting. The poet who wrote the poem of Guendolen seemed one person, the man I saw before me another – my eyes were holden that I could not yet see.77

Yet she gives something away. It is not surprising that Georgie identifies Morris as ‘the poet who wrote the poem of Guendolen’, for within two months he was working on an illumination of it as a gift for her; clearly a cherished gift, as a page of it was in the possession of Georgie’s daughter in 1945 (see Figure 9).78 Georgie’s statement is mysterious given other evidence of sympathy between them. Morris spent much time at the Macdonalds’, and came to love the family, escorting the younger girls on outings and, to their delight, immortalising their names in poems such as ‘The Blue Closet’, which is based on Rossetti’s painting of the same name (1857).79 Is Georgie being evasive, or was the thing she ‘could not yet see’ the true extent of Morris’s feelings for her at this time?

According to Georgie’s mother’s diary entry for 31 July 1856, ten days after Georgie’s sixteenth birthday and about two months after her engagement, Morris came to tea and the pair were out talking on the balcony until 11 pm – her mother had to speak to Morris about keeping her out – hardly behaviour consistent with Georgie’s remark about being ‘not much the nearer’, and more an indication that the rapport and closeness evident in later years was felt early on.80 If Morris loved Georgie, he had accepted that all he could do was look on as his best friend and his beloved made plans for a happy future. In the month that Georgie and Burne-Jones became engaged, Morris published a story about the love of two friends for the same woman in which the unsuccessful man says ‘O you all know what it is to be second in such a race, [the love of two men for the same girl] it is to be nowhere’.81

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79 This poem begins: ‘Lady Alice, Lady Louise, / Between the wash of the tumbling seas / We are ready to sing, if so ye please …’, and goes on to ask: ‘O, sisters, cross the bridge with me, / My eyes are full of sand. / What matter that I cannot see, / If ye take me by the hand …’; see Morris, ‘The Blue Closet’. Louisa Macdonald in particular (mother of Stanley Baldwin) would continue to be one of Morris’s friends and confidantes.
80 Taylor, *Victorian Sisters*, p. 41.
The story is ‘Gertha’s Lovers’. Significantly, it was published in the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* at about the same time Morris was keeping Georgie out late on the balcony. Morris prefaced his story with some lines from Coleridge’s poem ‘Love’:

> All thoughts, all passions, all delights,  
> Whatever stirs this mortal frame,  
> All are but ministers of Love,  
> And feed his sacred flame.\(^\text{82}\)

In this story, the emotional complexities of the love of two men for the same woman are explored in great detail. Gertha, like Georgie, sings ‘joyously and loud-ringing’. Her two lovers are Olaf, a tall golden-haired and serene nobleman, and his friend, a shorter dark-haired knight named Leuchnar. Leuchnar is described in detail somewhat characteristic of Morris:

> a troubled, restless look about the eyes. His thin lips were drawn in tightly, as if he were striving to keep down words which he ought not to speak, or else … the eyes would glance about no more, yet look more eager and strangely anxious than ever, and the thin lips would part somewhat, as if he were striving to say something which would not leave his heart.\(^\text{83}\).

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\(^{82}\) Morris, *Collected Letters*, vol. 1, p.176  
Gertha is smitten with the golden-haired nobleman, Olaf, and thinks about him as the day passes. The knights, also thinking of her, return at dusk to shelter at her father’s cottage. As they return ‘each of them had … visions of a dark haired maiden, sitting and singing, her eyes raised and fixed on one of them’.84 A parallel image appears in Georgie’s biography of her husband:

The house in Sloan Terrace where Edward lodged was almost exactly opposite the church of which my father was a minister, and sometimes after service, as the congregation filed out, the eyes of a girl amongst the slowly moving crowd were lifted and saw for a moment his face watching at a window.85

Olaf knows himself to be in love, but Leuchnar – who has the weight of ‘self-scorn’ upon him – ‘would not even [confess his longing] to himself, and so laughed, and his laugh sounded sad and strange’.86 In conversation, Gertha discovers the noble knight she loves is in fact the king, and although Leuchnar ‘talked much with her, and seemed to her to be very wise; yet she remembered not what he said, scarcely heard it indeed, for was not the KING by her … her king?’. Here Leuchnar is again identified with Morris who was the bard and teller of tales of his circle. This scenario of the lover who must stand by helplessly and watch his friends fall in love is repeated in Morris’s The Novel on Blue Paper, where the Morris-like character John must endure the lovemaking of his brother and Clara. In this earlier story, Gertha and Olaf fall in love; Leuchnar is the onlooker. The narrator reveals what lies beneath the surface:

Those three so seeming calm! What stormy passions, wild longings, passed through their hearts that evening! Leuchnar seeming-genial with his good friendly talk, his stories of brave deeds, told as if his heart were quite in them … yet saying to himself, ‘She must see that I love her; when since I can remember have I talked so?’ Poor fellow; how should she know that? His voice was to her as the voice of a dream, or perhaps rather like grand music when it wakes a man; for, verily the glory of his tales got quite separated from him, and in some dim way floated as a glory around Olaf, as far as Gertha was concerned…87

Written when his best friend’s engagement was uppermost in all their minds, this story’s autobiographical elements cannot be ignored. Morris explores in some depth complications that would have affected the friendship of two men in love with the same woman. Such a scenario would usually put the men in competition with each other, but in this story male friendship is paramount. Olaf believes that because of his high station, he and Gertha must always be apart in the world, but he reflects that if Leuchnar were to

marry her, he is free to do so (Burne-Jones at this time had no money to support a wife, but Morris was wealthy and able to marry). In one scene, each confesses that their love for the girl has made them selfish, and shaken the love between them, and each relinquishes their claim for love of the other. Olaf reminds Leuchnar of his oft-stated belief that ‘the love of man and woman should go before everything, before all friendship, all duty, all honour even’. Then they think to ask, ‘But which of us does Gertha love?’ Olaf asks Leuchnar to ride to Gertha and ask which, if either, she loves before they must face battle and death, noting that ‘whatever happens we must be brothers’.88 Leuchnar rides to her, but instead of telling her of his own love he advances Olaf’s offer of marriage. Gertha clearly loves Olaf and the frantic Leuchnar then cries: ‘Some token then, for Christ’s sake’. In a gesture reminiscent of the ‘The Story of the Unknown Church’, he then ‘tore down from the cottage cave a bunch of stonecrop’ for Gertha to kiss, to be taken to Olaf as a love token.89

Adopting a stance of heroic self-sacrifice, Morris might well have acted as go-between or in some other way helped nervous and shy Burne-Jones in making a commitment. In the self-denial of his actions, Leuchnar believes something unbecoming in his nature has been defeated. The theme of a failed lover is the same as that symbolically told in ‘The Story of the Unknown Church’, but this time brotherhood is not threatened, rather it is strengthened. This story may provide evidence of Morris’s involvement in Burne-Jones’s betrothal. Morris had come into a fortune when he turned twenty-one, but Burne-Jones had nothing, and little immediate prospect of financial stability as a student artist. In The Novel on Blue Paper, which also concerns the love of two brothers for the same girl, John urges Arthur to seize his chance of love and marry Clara, despite the fact that John himself has loved her in silence. The work includes this passage: ‘You shall have, at worst, two thirds of any money I can make, and if you are poor, how sweet your ambition to get on will be, when it is for her!’90 John’s urging his brother to marry in spite of his own heartache is because he wants ‘the only two people I love in the world, or ever shall love, to be quite happy’.91 This passage would exactly explain Morris’s motivation for supporting his friend’s bid for the woman he also loved.

Morris’s intense preoccupation with love and passion is evident in another prose work from this period, ‘Frank’s Sealed Letter’, written in 1856. Mackail uses a passage from

89 Morris, Collected Works, vol. 1, p. 192.
91 Morris, Novel on Blue Paper, p. 74.
this ‘letter’ as an example of Morris’s heightened emotional tenor and tendency to autobiography:

[O]f all men I ever heard of, I have the strongest will for good and evil. I could soon find out whether or not a thing was possible or not to me; then if it were not, I threw it away for ever, never thought of it again, no regret, no longing for that, it was past, and over to me; but if it were possible, and I made up my mind to do it, then and there I began it, and in due time finished it, turning neither to the right hand nor the left, till it was done. So I did with all things I set my hand to.

Love only, and the wild restless passions that went with it, were too strong for me, and they bent my strong will.92

Mackail highlights Morris’s identification of his own strength of will, and his relentless creative power, but with it he confirms love ‘and the wild restless passions that went with it’ as of great importance in Morris’s life at this time by continuing: ‘Two other great disturbing forces there were which came at long intervals into his life’ (my emphasis).93

Morris’s preoccupation with love, and his view that the attainment of love should be at any cost, is evident in his article on Browning’s *Men and Women*, which he had read in 1855. In response to poor reception of the work, Morris wrote a lengthy and defensive review, published in the March 1856 edition of the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*. It was one of only two reviews ever written by Morris,94 who was driven to write it out of his admiration for Browning. The piece reveals how he empathises with many of the concepts expressed by Browning in the poetry. Morris singles out Browning’s love poetry for special praise in earnest terms, with an impassioned statement about his own views on love as central to life and art:

This and all the other [poems] seem to me but a supplement to the love-poems, even as it is in all art, in all life; love I mean of some sort; and that life or art where this is not the case, is but a wretched mistake after all …

And in these love-poems of Robert Browning there is one thing that struck me particularly; that is their intense, unmixed love; love for the sake of love…

I cannot say it clearly, it cannot be said so but in verse; love for love’s sake, the only true love, I must say. – Pray Christ some of us attain to it before we die.95

This exclaimed prayer caused his biographer MacCarthy to describe this passage as ‘surprisingly personal, even desperate’,96 but she is unable to explain why. If my theory is correct, Morris was in a state of emotional turmoil over his friend’s engagement and his

93 Morris disliked criticism, noting ‘[t]o think of a beggar making a living by selling his opinion about other people! And fancy anyone paying him for it!’, see Mackail, *Life of William Morris*, p. 79.
own unrequited love. Expounding a philosophy that everything in art, and even in life, is secondary to love, he expressed a view that would be repeated by him in other of his writings over a lifetime.

In this review Morris qualifies the ideal of true love to include love ‘of some sort’ and ‘love for love’s sake’, elaborations that encompass unreturned and unrequited love. Tompkins mentions Morris’s debt to Browning for his ‘presentation of the inevitability and potential value of failure’, 97 with which Morris now strongly identified. This brings to mind another passage from Morris’s unfinished novel:

Even without any return [love] is happiness. It is worth passing through all the pain that clings about it – and if you do not feel this you are not in love, and the desire you have will pass away into something else into friendship, or into disgust, or hatred – how should I know or care which? What does it matter? All is either love or not love. 98

Even problematic love means everything. Writing of ‘The Statue and The Bust’ in 1856, Morris notes that the poem’s subject is:

Unlawful love that was never acted, but thought only, thought through life; yet were the lovers none the less sinners, therefore; rather the more, in that they were cowards; for in thought they indulged their love freely, and no fear of God, no hate of wrong or love of right restrained them, but only a cowardly irresolution. So Robert Browning thinks. 99

Setting love above all else, Morris now believed that lovers should ‘seize the day’, in spite of any obstacles such as accepted social mores, a view that I believe had a significant bearing on the later circumstances and events of his marriage. I will show that what has been seen as Morris’s indifference was in fact complicity and cooperation. Such writing unsettled Set member Fulford, who complained to Crom Price:

I did not like Topsy’s review at all. You men at Oxford must not let your love of Morris carry you away to admire such of his writings as don’t deserve admiration. 100

Fulford no doubt sensed the radical implications of Morris’s religion of love, for Morris agrees with Browning: lovers are not only wrong for failing to consummate their love, but they are also sinners, a view of sin he also developed in the title poem of his book of verse, The Defence of Guenevere. Browning’s subject matter and style gave him a model of poetry that brought the lived experience – particularly of love – to life, and resonated with his own

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98 Morris, The Novel on Blue Paper, p.73.
100 MacCarthy, A Life for Our Time, p. 100.
natural belief that desire was a flame that warmed and illuminated life. If he could not be a lover at least he could write poetry about love. As Tompkins has noted: ‘His excited discovery of Browning’s poetic sensibility of love called ‘strongly to what was both idealistic and amorous in [him]’.  

Despite this year of turmoil and obsession with love and its complexities, in Mackail’s biography only one fragment of a letter from Morris survives as a quotation. This is exceptional, as Morris frequently wrote to one or another of his friends. It is evident that letters with personal content were destroyed by Morris’s friends after his death, so the dearth of letters for this year suggests that most of Morris’s correspondence was too personally revealing to be kept for posterity. Even though only a few sentences remain, this letter cited by Mackail betrays something of Morris’s frantic emotional state at the time of writing, July 1856. Morris had just met Rossetti who urged him to take up painting. Burdened with work and feelings of inadequacy as an artist, Morris wrote: ‘One won’t get much enjoyment out of life at this rate, I know well, but that don’t matter: I have no right to ask for it at all events – love and work, these two things only’. Of this passage, written a year before Morris was to meet Jane Burden, biographer Jack Lindsay commented: ‘He may have felt some attraction of which we know nothing’, but why would not love also bring ‘enjoyment of life?’ Morris, like his characters Walter and Leuchnar, believes that he has ‘no right to ask for it’. About Morris’s review, MacCarthy reluctantly admits that Morris ‘does not sound dispassionate’ about love. Commenting on the above quotation she writes:

What did Morris mean by love? Love for a woman certainly, to worship, serve, be dazzled by … [H]e was steeped in the Chaucerian ideal of courtly love. But he had a broader concept of love which entailed duty towards oneself and others, to direct one’s talents usefully.

No speculation on Morris’s notion of love could more thoroughly rule out the amorous kind: Morris’s love for a woman, she suggests, was as an untouchable ideal, overshadowed by a ‘broader concept’ that is not love, but in fact love’s opposite – duty. MacCarthy seems unwilling to admit Morris’s genuine state of emotional turmoil. Undermining the evidently passionate tenor of his writing, she designates his obsession with love as merely intellectual. MacCarthy, like several of Morris’s biographers before her, has been prejudiced against

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101 Tompkins, An Approach to the Poetry, p. 58.
103 Lindsay, His Life and Work, p. 82.
104 MacCarthy, A Life for Our Time, p. 101.
105 MacCarthy, A Life for Our Time, p. 109.
thinking of Morris as a passionate man. Faced with contradictory evidence, she simply redefines passion as courtly love.

Morris expressed his love for Georgie in gifts of creative work, but this does not mean that courtly love was his ideal; quite the opposite. Morris was to uphold the right of lovers to break moral and social codes in order to fulfil their desires: the ‘strong, lucky people who come near enough to the fire to thrust in their hands and snatch the gold out of it’. Of Morris’s works written during this period, several deal with love triangles. In addition to those discussed here, there are the tales ‘The Two Partings’ (February 1856), ‘Frank’s Sealed Letter’ (April 1856) and ‘Svend and His Brethren’ (August 1856), as well as many poems in which lovers are separated by circumstance and must long for each other in vain. Unrequited love does not make for much ‘enjoyment of life’, and there is evidence that this was an unhappy time for Morris. His friends noticed a change in him so marked that they recalled it for Mackail’s biography nearly forty years later:

For the two years or so during which he worked hard at painting, he was moody and irritable; he brooded much by himself, and lost for the time a good deal of his old sweetness and affectionateness of manner.

Mackail attributed this to Morris’s frustrated efforts to paint, and his subjugation to Rossetti’s influence, but it also corresponds with the period between Burne-Jones’ engagement in 1856 and Morris’s own in 1858. This mood of withdrawal from the flow of life and love around him is echoed in several poems that appeared in _The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems_, self-published by Morris in 1858, and with a few of the unpublished poems such as ‘Palomydes Quest’. Rather than the dramatic lives and deaths of lovers, Morris begins to concentrate on a male character experiencing an absence of love that cuts him off from life. The unity of fate and purpose of previous poems makes way for this mood of isolation. Morris identifies with the knight in ‘Palomydes Quest’ who contemplates whether the honour and glory of triumphing in his quest make up for unrequited love:

But saying all this he sighed, for well he thought:  
When all this noble fame has been compassed  
Shall Iseult’s love be nearer to me brought?

And …

Therefore down he laid

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106 Morris, _The Novel on Blue Paper_, p. 73.  
107 These works from _The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine_ were published by May Morris in _Collected Works_, vol. 1.  
His bridle and he cried, How fair, how fair,
You walk within the summer gardens now
O bright Iseult! – having but little care
For Palomydes, as full well I know.109

Critics have noted the combination in works such as this of the erotic and the defeated. Ralph Berry has identified in Morris’s early works a ‘continuing and central symbol, or rather situation … defeat, coupled usually with sexual frustration though not stemming directly from it’, and argues that these poems show Morris’s creative talent ‘finding its way to compelling and personal utterances’ in which there is an alternation between triumph and defeat, ‘with the latter heavily predominating’.110 Morris’s writings evidence the theme of natural vigour obstructed, as the protagonist gives in:

In these poems it is the world … that closes in round the young human being, aborts his hopes … It is hardly too bold to take the malign bewitchments of ‘The Chapel in Lyoness’, Spell-Bound’, and ‘The Blue Closet’ as symbols of the inner obstruction, the uncomprehended psychological hindrance. It is a probable interpretation, whether Morris understood his symbol or not. Lord Arthur and the spell-bound lover, who cannot take what he has fairly won, are entranced, estranged, sequestered against their will from action and love.111

I argue that Morris very consciously explores the action of will and self-denial in love, which bring his protagonists to such states, as it was his own emotional state at this time.

One observation about these early writings is the extent to which Morris dwells on subjects that seems to preempt the events of his life. Lindsay saw in these early writings evidence of the trauma of his sister’s marriage; a problem, he argued, that Morris later ‘re-created … in terms of Janey’.112 Berry muses on how far the early works reflect ‘a mental set, an attitude to life that is destined to produce results analogous to the fates of the protagonists of the Defence poems’.113 Boos, who notes Morris’s frequent use of the romantic cliché of the distressed solitary hero,114 thinks the theme of rejected lover ‘worthy of notice given his later preoccupations and life experiences’.115 Tompkins also describes the obsession in Morris’s early work of ‘the unachieved embrace, the famished lips, or the brief delight eclipsed in death’.116

111 Tompkins, An Approach to the Poetry, p. 67.
112 Lindsay, His Life and Work, p. 101.
114 Boos, Juvenilia of William Morris, p. 56.
115 Boos, Juvenilia of William Morris, p. 18.
This insistent theme of inhibited action … was a divination of something permanent in Morris’s own nature, an intimation … of situations into which it might lead him. The link holds, however attenuated, with his passivity during the troubled years of his marriage, with acceptance of an impasse where nothing could effectively be done, and all must be suffered.117

By all biographers it has been assumed that at this time there was no present love in Morris’s life that would cause him to dwell on such tropes; some commentators have postulated that an innate psychological factor, possibly responsible for his later marital problems, is at work (discussed in more detail in later chapters). But, like the writings of his later years, these early writings on love have autobiographic elements that link Morris’s obsession with love to real people in his circle, and coincide with a mood of depression arising at the same time as his friend’s engagement.

Compelling and personal utterances

As has been argued throughout this chapter, given Morris’s practice of working his immediate emotional concerns into his writings, it seems very likely that any ‘compelling and personal utterances’ of defeat and sexual frustration evident in these poems derived from an actual situation of unrequited love. In another poem, ‘Sir Galahad, A Christmas Mystery’, most likely written in 1856,118 Morris’s meditation on loneliness, solitude and chastity includes another reference to Sir Palomydes and his unrequited love for Iseult, asking:

Is he not able still to hold his breath
With thoughts of Iseult? Doth he not grow pale
With weary striving, to seem best of all
To her, ‘as she is best’, he saith? To fail
Is nothing to him, he can never fall.

For unto such a man love-sorrow is
So dear a thing unto his constant heart,
That even if he never win one kiss,
Or touch from Iseult, it will never part.119

Morris says of this love-sorrow, even if fruitless, that by it Palomydes has ‘[e]scaped the curse’ of having none to love, no motivating force for good deeds. Palomydes’ ‘striving to seem best of all’ brings to mind Morris’s constant offerings of his finest work to Georgie, a habit he continued throughout his life.

117 Tompkins, An Approach to the Poetry, pp. 67, 68.
That the youthful Morris was ardent and passionate – a young man with heightened sensibilities, intense friendships and a consuming obsession with love that he expressed without reserve in writing – is evident on any reading of his early works. His rejection of religion and current morality, and the emergence of liberal views on love – to which he would hold consistently until the end of his life – can be traced in these early works.\footnote{120} Even in the work covered in this chapter, it should be evident that Morris does not fit the popular image of a disengaged, emasculated figure inadvertently projected by current biographies, images that in turn prejudice critical interpretations of his work. Morris would emerge from these turbulent years as a self-created, independent artist and poet, but themes of lost or impossible love were to be ever-present in his writing.

\footnote{120}{In the 1880s Morris crossed paths with fellow socialist Edward Carpenter, who lived openly with another man. On 24 December 1884, Morris wrote to Georgie with evident acceptance of the lifestyle of Carpenter and ‘his fellow’. ‘I went to Chesterfield and saw Carpenter on Monday … I listened with longing heart to his account of his patch of groud, seven acres: \textit{he says that he and his fellow can almost live on it: they grow their own wheat, and send flowers and fruit to Chesterfield and Sheffield markets: all sounds very agreeable to me” [\textit{my emphasis}]. See \textit{Collected Letters}, vol. 2, p. 353.}
Chapter 2

Gueneveres and Magdalens:
Young Artists and Young Women

A woman was present in his room … It seemed that the first thoughts he had ever known were given him as at first from her eyes, and he knew her hair to be the golden veil through which he beheld his dreams … And as he looked … his lips shook with the thrill of tears.1

Oh, you wouldn’t hang a stunner.2

In the preceding chapter I discussed a scenario whereby Morris, in love with his friend’s fiancée, remained silent because of high-flown principles of brotherhood, self-sacrifice and self-repression. Drawing on Morris’s writings, including The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems (1858), Mackail’s biography and other biographical sources, I argue in this chapter that Morris aimed for marital happiness for himself, seeking to supplant a hopeless attachment with an ideal marriage to a beautiful woman. As the epigraphs above demonstrate, women were a focus of Morris’s circle, which came increasingly under the influence of poet and painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Women represented in the works of Rossetti and Burne-Jones at this time reflected social stereotypes – either ideals of beauty and purity, or agents of sexuality and entrapment. At this time observed increases in the number of so-called disorderly prostitutes taken into custody during the years 1850 to 1860 had created a widespread anxiety in society that focused particularly on women’s morality.3 It was women’s behaviour that came to be seen as the cause, rather than an effect, of the ‘great social evil’.4 While most censure was reserved for the working classes, the middle-class woman’s behaviour was also closely scrutinised. Posing as it did a possible threat to

1 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, ‘Hand and Soul’, written in 1849 and first published in The Germ, no. 1, 1850, pp. 23-33. It was later republished by Morris at the Kelmscott Press in 1895.
2 The chorus from the young painters in 1856 when an opinion was expressed that Madeline Smith was guilty. Cited by Jan Marsh, Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Poet and Painter, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999, p. 184.
3 In 1862 social researcher and journalist Henry Mayhew published the fourth volume of his observations of life in London. The volume, which had a particular focus on prostitutes, noted increasing numbers of arrests for prostitution across the 1850s; see Henry Mayhew, London Labour and the London Poor, London, Griffin, Bohn and Company, 1862, pp. 35–269.
society and to her immediate family, female middle-class adultery was deemed a particularly heinous act. These anxieties found their way into the art and poetry of the times, where cautionary narratives about the fate of fallen women were painted and rendered in verse. In this chapter I note the double standard that put pressure on women to conform to an ideal, when no such ideal existed for men. Extreme examples of good and bad women from history interested the young men of Morris’s circle, who followed art and poetry, and engaged with current thought and debate. The passion for the Arthurian legends among the three men led to ideals of women and love that blended chivalric legends with current social theory.

However, it seems Morris managed to remain aloof from prejudices about female desire in a way that neither of his closest friends were able or willing to do. Morris’s behaviour and attitudes demonstrate his relatively liberal views and sympathy with women, which shed light on his later approach to the complexities of his marriage and those of his friends. Rossetti’s ideas about women and sexuality were tied to current social and religious attitudes. He was to influence Burne-Jones who, already labelled a misogynist, chose to paint predatory or malevolent women. This chapter demonstrates how, as each of these young men sought wives, preconceived notions of brotherhood, femininity, class and chivalry informed their choices – for better or worse. First, I look at the influence of Rossetti in inspiring Morris’s artistic talent, and how, despite a surge in creative output, Morris also experienced a period of depression at this time, reflected in his writings through his identification with the chaste solitary hero. In light of the Arthurian themes of chivalry in vogue with Morris’s set, I discuss how current thinking about women, class and sexuality influenced these young men’s depictions of women and their choice of wives and lovers. I note that Burne-Jones’s initial devotion to Georgie seems to have been based on his perception that she represented an ideal of purity and virginity, and how a fear of women and latent sexuality is very evident in his artwork. I note also Rossetti’s fascination with fallen women, as in his poem ‘Jenny’, and contrast this with Morris’s defence of feminine passion and illicit love in his poem ‘The Defence of Guenevere’, noting in particular its divergence in interpretation from Tennyson’s popular and conventional treatment of the same subject matter. Morris’s writings demonstrate unusually progressive and proto feminist views, distinguishing him from his two close associates and other artists and poets. Such enlightened views prefigure, and clarify, his eventual attitude to Jane’s relationship with Rossetti, and his own with Georgie Burne-Jones.

5 Nead, Myths of Sexuality, p. 48.
The young poet as solitary hero

As noted in the previous chapter, 1856 was a turbulent year for Morris. In November of that year that he made the momentous decision to cease his apprenticeship with the architect G.E. Street in Oxford and move to London to share rooms with Burne-Jones in Red Lion Square. Morris had decided to become a painter, in part because the influence of Rossetti now loomed large in the lives of the two younger men. Rossetti had declared that painting was the only worthwhile occupation; ‘now as he is a very great man and speaks with authority and not as the scribes I must try’, Morris wrote.7 Burne-Jones similarly recalled his unreserved admiration for Rossetti at this time, describing him as someone ‘whom I loved and would have been chopped up for’,8 an attitude adopted by The Set more widely. Set member Val Princep’s recollection is often quoted by biographers:

Rossetti was the planet around whom we revolved. We copied his very way of speaking. All beautiful women were stunners with us. Wombats were the most delightful of God’s creatures. Medievalism was our beau ideal and we sank our individuality in the strong personality of our adored Gabriel.9

Critics such as Penelope Fitzgerald have observed that Morris ‘had no more talent for humble discipleship than for painting’.10 Nevertheless Morris’s creativity flourished in Rossetti’s company, and he tempered the struggle to paint with more congenial work. Continuing to write, he also designed and executed woodcut illustration, illuminated his own work, began to embroider hangings, and designed and had made heavy medieval furniture, which the three men painted with scenes from their favourite legends.

There was also an immediate and mutually respectful rivalry between Morris and Rossetti, only occasionally noted by biographers.11 Morris’s exceptional talents as poet and medievalist quickly impressed Rossetti. Before meeting Morris, Rossetti had already read his story ‘A Dream’ and wrote that it was ‘really remarkable’.12 The first hint of jealousy from Rossetti appears from this time:

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10 Fitzgerald, Edward Burne-Jones: A Biography, p. 54.
11 Marsh has explored this dynamic in her article ‘They Never Throve Together: William Morris and Dante Gabriel Rossetti’, 2013, at www.academia.edu [accessed 2 March 2016]
Morris’s facility at poeticizing puts one in a rage. He has been writing at all for little more than a year, I believe, and already has poetry enough for a big book.\textsuperscript{13} Rossetti noted also that: ‘In all illumination and work of that kind he is quite unrivalled by anything modern that I know – Ruskin says better than anything ancient’.\textsuperscript{14} Rossetti’s friend Madox Brown wrote that:

He [Morris] has written several poems exceedingly dramatic – the Brownings, I hear, have spoken very highly of one that was read to them … Rossetti thinks one called ‘Rapunzel’ is equal to Tennyson: he [Morris] is now illuminating it for Georgie.\textsuperscript{15}

Rossetti acknowledged, with admiration tinged with resentment, the talent of his new young friend.

As noted in Chapter 1, coinciding with this period of decorative and creative output for Morris was a period of depression. Mackail’s conclusion, accepted by later biographers, such as Henderson and MacCarthy, was that attempting to paint and draw at Rossetti’s behest depressed Morris.\textsuperscript{16} Marsh has pointed out that he was still making life drawings and describing himself as ‘artist’ in the 1861 census, well beyond this time of depression,\textsuperscript{17} indicating that there was another cause. This period corresponds with the time between Burne-Jones’s engagement in 1856 and Morris’s own in 1858. It is my contention that, as in Morris’s story ‘Gertha’s Lovers’ discussed in Chapter 1, the cause was Morris’s unspoken love. The motif of unfulfilled love is evident in several of the poems that appeared in \textit{The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems}, and a few of the unpublished poems from this period, such as ‘Palomydes’ Quest’, with its emphasis on isolation from life and love.

Morris’s poems of this period can be divided into three groups according to their subject matter: fantasy, Froissartian and Arthurian. The Arthurian poems connect with the current paintings and drawings by Rossetti and his followers, linking them to this time of influence. In this group of poems Morris leaves the theme of lovers to explore the emotions of an isolated male character experiencing loneliness: a solitary hero who is often depicted in a state of physical restraint or imprisonment of some kind. The lovers in earlier poems contrast with this single lonely protagonist. As noted in Chapter 1, Morris identifies with the chaste, solitary knights Palomydes and Galahad. ‘Sir Galahad, A Christmas

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{13} Rossetti, \textit{Letters}, vol. 1, p. 312.
\bibitem{14} Rossetti, \textit{Letters}, vol. 1, p. 314.
\bibitem{15} Mackail, \textit{Life of William Morris}, vol. 1, p. 108.
\end{thebibliography}
Mystery’ well illustrates this state of isolation, with Morris’s knight, burdened by self-enforced virginity, contrasting himself with other knights:

Six hours ago I came and sat down here,  
And ponder’d sadly, wearied and forlorn.  
The winter wind that pass’d the chapel door,  
Sang out a moody tune, that went right well  
With mine own thought …

I saw the melted snow that hung in beads  
Upon my steel-shoes; less and less I saw  
Between the tiles the bunches of small weeds:  
Heartless and stupid, with no touch of awe  
Upon me …

Dismal, unfriended: what thing comes of it?

The solitary hero wrestles with doubts about both his physical and spiritual quest, which in the harsh light of the real world have come to seem pointless. ‘What thing comes of it?’ asks Morris’s knight, seeming to question the value of Morris’s own ‘quest’ of heroic self-denial for the sake of a friend.

As pointed out in Chapter 1, critics concerned with these early poems have noticed that the erotic theme is coupled with defeat and powerlessness. Morris seems to be pursuing subject matter that pre-empts an emotional state more applicable to his future married life. It is assumed that, before Morris met Jane Burden, there was no other love in his life to cause him to dwell on such tropes. But is it not likely the ‘compelling and personal utterances’ evident in these poems spring from an actual situation? In comparison with Tennyson’s Galahad, whose ‘desires are set beyond this world’19, Morris’s hero is very much focused on the physical world, ‘heartless and stupid with loneliness, cold and exhaustion’. What is the use of chastity and his quest if he should end up:

Dead in my arms in the half-melted snow,  
When all unkindly with the shifting wind  
The thaw comes on at Candlemas

He thinks of Launcelot and Guenevere and other lovers:

And what if Palomydes also ride,  
And over many a mountain and bare heath  
Follow the questing beast with none beside?  
Is he not able still to hold his breath

With thoughts of Iseult?  

Morris rationalises the value of love sorrow, but was surrounded by friends who were becoming engaged; I argue that his poetry of this period expresses the isolation and hopelessness of only having a love that could not be acknowledged or fulfilled.

Unhappiness in love would have been no small thing to Morris. A casualty of Arnold’s doleful ebbing tide of belief, his loss of faith at about this time coincided with the emotional upheaval of unspoken feelings. Morris’s fear of death is evident in the graphically imagined detail of some violent scenes in several of his Froissartian poems. Whereas his poems had once viewed death as the means of attaining union with the beloved, God and a better world to come, Morris now explored death as the end of all possibilities for pleasure and joy. Morris’s pre-occupation with grizzly deaths shows an attempt to extract value and honour from deaths that otherwise seem simply pointless. It is my surmise that, as Morris surrendered hope of winning Georgie, he began to see a value in failure if the sacrifice was in the name of a higher cause, although this was now no longer a spiritual one. Recall the phrase from Morris’s letter of 1856 written shortly after Georgie and Edward’s engagement: ‘One won’t get much enjoyment out of life at this rate, I know well, but that don’t matter: I have no right to ask for it at all events – love and work, these two things only’. Morris believed the two highest joys life had to offer were fellowship and love, and these two ideals took the place of spiritual belief and hope for him.

**Oxford, Arthurianism and the Jovial Campaign**

In July 1857 Morris was still dwelling on the theme of a love triangle when a plan to decorate the upper walls of the new Debating Hall of the Oxford Union Society, jointly conceived by Morris and Rossetti, somehow gained official approval. A group of young amateur artists was rounded up by Rossetti. They all moved into student rooms to begin a project later remembered by those who took part in it as the Jovial Campaign. The neo-gothic building had plain brick walls above panelling that were pierced by quatrefoil windows. It was this high section of painted brick that the young artists were commissioned to decorate. With no idea of fresco technique, each artist boldly took a

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21 For a discussion of the impact of the loss of faith in writers such as Arnold, Ruskin and Morris, see Edward Alexander, *Matthew Arnold, John Ruskin and the Modern Temper*, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 1973, pp. 71-3.


23 Morris, *Collected Letters*, vol. 1, p. 28.
section of wall and, with much youthful larking, began painting, each appropriating an aspect of Arthurian legend for their panel. As young men they were drawn to subjects relating to love and passion. Mackail described Morris’s choice of subject:

[It] was one for which he felt a singular and almost morbid attraction, that of the unsuccessful man and despised lover. The motive was the same which he had treated in prose a year before in the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* with many details which were directly taken from his own life. It was entitled ‘How Sir Palomydes loved La Belle Iseult with exceeding great love out of measure, and how she loved not him again but rather Sir Tristram’.

Mackail chose to link the ‘many details directly taken from [Morris’s] own life’, with the subject of unrequited love so elaborately titled. Almost a poem in itself, the title is in the form of, though not an actual one of, Malory’s chapter headings. Morris’s description goes beyond Malory’s matter-of-fact original: ‘How by the counsel of La Beale Isoud Sir Tristram rode armed, and how he met with Sir Palomides’. Morris’s identification of (and with) the subject of Palomydes dwells rather on his love – ‘exceeding great’ and ‘out of measure’ – than on the lovers he sees. Morris’s mural, now darkened and always difficult to successfully reproduce (see Figure 10 for a clearer sketch), shows Palomydes, at the extreme left, slumped on the ground eyeing the lovers on the extreme right, who are happily embracing behind a wall of sunflowers.

![Figure 10](image_url)

**Figure 10**

*William Morris, sketch for panel in the Oxford Union Debating Hall, 1857; Birmingham City Art Gallery.*

Thus yet again, Morris treated the subject of the man who stands aside, unnoticed by the woman he loves and her beau. The prose work Mackail refers to must be ‘Gertha’s

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26 This forms Chapter 53 of Book 10 of Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur*. 
Lovers’, the work linked in time and subject with Burne-Jones’s courtship and engagement, and with a figure corresponding to Morris himself; this would be the work with ‘many details directly taken from his own life’, aligning this work with the subject matter of Morris’s Oxford mural painting. If Mackail was unaware of Morris’s hopeless love, he certainly registered both the continuing ‘morbid’ theme and the elements of autobiography. A cartoon of this mural made either by Morris or one of the others present, registers Palomydes’s sullenness and the happy indifference of the lovers, no doubt accurately reflecting Morris’s experience in the presence of Burne-Jones and Georgie, who was now a frequent, if not daily, companion of Burne-Jones and therefore also of Morris. In *Le Morte d’Arthur*, Palomydes fought Tristram for Iseult in a tournament and lost, which pleased Iseult. Tristram’s terms as victor are that Palomydes must never again pursue Iseult’s love, an echo of the dream sequence of ‘The Story of the Unknown Church’, and the victorious tilting knight. Worth noting is the fact that Morris’s subject was chosen and the painting commenced months before he met Jane Burden, who would become his wife a year later, and Mackail’s biographical emphasis adds weight to my argument that Morris was obsessed with representing the emotions of one who loves an unattainable woman.

Until this time Rossetti’s art had drawn almost exclusively on Italian medieval, biblical or Shakespearean subjects. His new friends now shared with him their great passion for Malory. Some years before, Tennyson had set Morris and Burne-Jones on this Arthurian path, and in September 1855 they had acquired a copy of Southey’s 1817 edition of Malory’s *Morte d’Arthur*, relishing its ‘more archaic, tougher and less sentimental version of medieval chivalry than that presented by Tennyson’. The young men communicated their passion for Malory to Rossetti, and Morris gave Rossetti a three-volume 1858 edition of Malory’s work. Mark Girouard noted that the Victorians had taken to ‘Camelot and chivalry’. By the mid 1850s Tennyson’s rendition had made the legendary and mythical aspects famous, with the passion for the Arthurian reaching its zenith by 1857. Thus Morris and Rossetti’s project was highly fashionable. In the mid 1850s Bulwer Lytton, Tennyson and Matthew Arnold were writing Arthurian poems, the painter Watts began

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30 Mark Girouard, *The Return to Camelot, Chivalry and the English Gentleman*, Yale, Yale University Press, 1981, pp. 120–1. This contemporary enthusiasm for Arthurian legend explains in part why Ruskin was able to successfully lobby for Rossetti’s project in Oxford, arguably, an otherwise dubious scheme.
studies for *Sir Galahad* and several Pre-Raphaelite artists, including Rossetti, were approached to illustrate the lavish 1857 Moxon edition of Tennyson’s *Poems*.\(^{31}\) The myth lent itself to symbolic meanings, with specific ‘socio-cultural relevance’,\(^{32}\) and mirrored various Victorian ideals and anxieties. Knightly codes of honour and quests offered a model for masculine behaviour while upholding religious and social conventions and the class system. The popularity of the figure of Galahad showed that virginity was a subject of serious interest, and themes of romantic love in conflict with moral and social codes could be well understood by the contemporary population. The subject matter suited these ardent young men, so recently destined for the church. These tales offered a fascinating glimpse of a society with a strict moral code and Christian ideals such as their own, but with irresistible diversions into tales of illicit love and women of all moral shades.

The degree to which Morris and Burne-Jones identified with the Arthurian world was extreme. With the burial place of Fair Rosamund, murdered mistress of Henry II, at the ruins of nearby Godstow Abbey, the artists inhabited a world of heightened imagination. The legends Burne-Jones painted were almost real to him. After a pilgrimage to Godstow Abbey he wrote to his father:

> I came back in a delirium of joy, the land was so enchanted with bright colours … and in my mind pictures of the old days, the abbey, and long crosiers, gay knights and ladies by the river bank, hawking parties and all the pageantry of the golden age – it made me feel so wild and mad I had to throw stones into the water to break the dream. I never remember having such an unutterable ecstasy, it was quite painful with intensity, as if my forehead would burst.\(^{33}\)

Morris had a suit of chain mail made by a local blacksmith, and wore it to dinner.\(^{34}\) Stunners were conscripted to populate this imagined world; Morris’s intensely medieval poem, ‘The Blue Closet’, inspired by one of Rossetti’s paintings, speaks of ‘Alice the queen and Louise the queen / Two damozels wearing purple and green’; as mentioned earlier Alice and Louise were two of Georgie’s sisters.

Georgie Macdonald and her sister Alice had arrived in Oxford in July. Desperate to visit the place they had heard about from their brothers, the sisters had persuaded their mother to let them stay with friends in Oxford while the artists were in residence. Once there, the girls were invited to stay at the house of Archibald and Mrs Maclaren in

\(^{31}\) *The Moxon Tennyson* is accompanied by thirty woodcut illustrations by Pre-Raphaelite artists Rossetti, John Everett Millais and William Holman Hunt (as well as twenty-four by other artists), many of which accompanied poems with Arthurian subject matter.


\(^{34}\) Mackail, *The Life of William Morris*, vol. 1, p. 121.
Summertown, just outside Oxford. Here the sisters spent ten memorable weeks. Maclaren and his young wife were very fond of Burne-Jones and Morris. Their house had a gymnasium frequented by The Set. Ina Taylor, writing the life of the Macdonald sisters, noted that

[Invitations followed for Edward and Morris to call on the family at home... [These romantic days... seemed to belong to another world... Evenings passed listening to Edward reading from Malory or Morris from his ‘Guenevere’ poems, with general music making and merriment.]

As mentioned in Chapter 1, Georgie deliberately downplays her friendship with Morris during these years before her marriage. In the months preceding the Jovial Campaign, Morris and Burne-Jones, together and sometimes individually, had made a habit of spending several evenings a week with Georgie’s family, although, as outlined in Chapter 1, Georgie implied in her Memorials that she and Morris were almost strangers at this time. However, her recollection that she could still see in her mind’s eye Morris’s ‘long, folded white evening tie which he nailed in loops against his bedroom wall in order to hold his tools’, inadvertently reveals that she frequented the digs – even the bedroom – at Red Lion square, where Morris and Burne-Jones lived together in 1856. Georgie’s editing of the facts implies the need in retrospect to play down their early friendship in setting down their lives before marriage. Mackail records that when the autumn term began, Rossetti returned to London, while Morris remained in Oxford and seemed to regain ‘something of his old light-heartedness’. Mackail attributed this to freedom from Rossetti’s domination, but it also coincided with Georgie’s departure and return to London in September, and with her the daily reminder of Morris’s unhappiness.

**Art, beguilement, and the projection of feminine types**

As the Oxford mural project came to an end, each man was on the verge of married life. The choice of subject matter of their three individual panels would strangely prefigure their later attitudes to women and love. Morris finished his panel on unhappy love with a row of enormous sunflowers in the foreground and moved on to decorate the ceiling, Rossetti,
always tardy, drafted different versions of his own subject, Launcelot being prevented from seeing the Holy Grail (by the presence of Guenevere), and Burne-Jones chose Merlin being imprisoned under a stone by the Damsel of the Lake. Rossetti made the figure of Launcelot from a drawing of Burne-Jones, with each choosing as the subject a predatory or beguiling woman. To discuss the life of Morris in isolation from the lives of his friends and their loves at this time is impossible so I will examine the attitudes to relationships with women they expressed through their art at this pivotal time.

That these young men were obsessed with the current theories of feminine types is not surprising. As Lynda Nead and Judith Walkowitz have pointed out in detail, the late 1850s was the height of a period of moral panic and public debate about morality and differing types of women.\textsuperscript{41} It is clear that during the 1850s the Victorians were shocked that prostitution and related ills were greatly increasing\textsuperscript{42} over the next decade sexual issues dominated public debate. Contagious diseases legislation, a law against pornography, and divorce law reforms grew out of a society that believed itself to be under moral siege.\textsuperscript{43} In 1857, the \textit{Sanitary Review and Journal of Public Health} noted:

Prostitution has been so freely discussed in the periodicals of the day, that it would be mere prudery to offer an apology for drawing attention to it … It is an evil which leaves its traces discoverable by the eye of the physician among all classes of the people, and from which neither riches form a safeguard nor poverty a protection.\textsuperscript{44}

Known as the ‘great social evil’, widespread prostitution was seen as evidence of a society in decay. As most prostitutes were women, the immoral woman, seen as a threat to society, was contrasted with an ideal of womankind as wife and mother, who strengthened society with her virtues.\textsuperscript{45} As has been noted,\textsuperscript{46} it was women’s behaviour that was scrutinised and targeted for regulation, not men’s. So, the young men of Morris’s circle would have been conscious of community concern with immorality and the use of art as a vehicle for social comment and cautionary example. Arthurian legends complemented current debate by providing adulteresses and enchantresses aplenty. Around the time of the Jovial Campaign,

\textsuperscript{43} The \textit{Contagious Diseases Acts} were first passed in England in 1864, after a committee had been appointed to investigate the incidence of venereal disease in 1862; amendments were made in 1866 and 1869. See Paula Bartley, \textit{Prostitution: Prevention & Reform in England, 1860–1914}, London, Routledge, 2000. Divorce law reform occurred from 1857 under the \textit{Matrimonial Causes Acts}.
\textsuperscript{44} Nead, \textit{Myths of Sexuality}, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{45} See, for example, Coventry Patmore, \textit{The Angel in the House}, rev. edn., London, Macmillan & Co, 1864 (1854).
\textsuperscript{46} See Nead, \textit{Myths of Sexuality}; see also Walkowitz, \textit{Prostitution and Victorian Society}. 57
the Oxford group decided to adopt an artistic policy of excusing passionate but beautiful women. During the summer of 1857 twenty year old Madeline Smith was on trial for the murder of her rejected lover, who had threatened to expose her passionate letters and ruin her parentally approved engagement; he had died of arsenic poisoning. Smith was considered a beauty. It is likely that the erotically explicit letters revealed during the trial had captured the young men’s imaginations. When one of the group suggested that Smith should be hanged, there was a general outcry from the rest. It seemed it was the consensus that, as a dark-haired stunner, she should be acquitted forthwith, guilty or not.

The appeal of the subject of fallen or immoral women, especially in the case of Burne-Jones and Rossetti, is very evident in their work at this time. Fascinated by conflicting notions of womanhood – the sacred and the profane – Rossetti was experimenting with bad women as subjects for art, having recently drawn Mary Magdalene and worked on *Found* (1855, but never finished), his painting of a country lass turned tragic city prostitute. Varieties of good and bad women also fascinated Burne-Jones, many of whose paintings had sirens and femmes fatale as their subject.

Forty years later, in 1897, Burne-Jones spoke of the types of woman he liked: ‘the very good, and goldenhaired, and the exceedingly mischievous, the sirens with oat-coloured hair.’ Burne-Jones subscribed to the concept or ideal of the angel in the house, articulated in poetry by Coventry Patmore and Alfred Lord Tennyson, and in writing by Ruskin, which held that woman’s God-given duty was to be a model of restraint, achieved by strong and immovable purity, thereby offering an example that men could aspire to follow. The idea was supported by the school of thought that proposed that normal women did not experience sexual desire. No longer a practicing Christian, Burne-Jones maintained a sentimental attachment to the iconography of the church and to the ideal of purity and celibacy. As the choice of subject for his Oxford mural – Merlin imprisoned by the damsel Nimue – shows, his painting often portrayed relations between women and men as problematic: an eternal struggle against beguilement and sexual entrapment. Later in life he wrote:

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51 See, for example, Patmore’s *The Angel in the House*, 1854, and Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*, 1859.

52 See, example, John Ruskin’s lecture ‘Of Queen’s Gardens’, 1865; published in *Sesame and Lilies: Three Lectures by John Ruskin*, New York, John Wiley and Son, 1873.

A woman at her best, self-denying and devoted, is pathetic and lovely beyond words; but once she gets the upper hand and flaunts, she’s the devil – there’s no other word for it, she’s the devil … as soon as you’ve taken pity on her she’s no longer to be pitied. You’re the one to be pitied then.\(^55\)

Burne-Jones’s engagement to the petite, strong-minded Georgie can be seen as a flight from bad women, the kind he feared might fatally entrap him. While he now regarded himself as an artist living in bohemian poverty, his engagement to a middle-class minister’s daughter indicated his essential conservatism. As had religious celibacy, a long betrothal offered a compelling motive for chastity, and in his case, with Georgie only just sixteen and he with no prospect of an income fit to sustain a marriage, the betrothal might possibly have been longer than the actual four years. Long engagements were very common, causing much unhappiness but also admiration for the enforced chastity. Exploring aspects of Victorian sexuality, Fraser Harrison argued:

> The impecunious suitor with nothing but his ambition and willingness to work had to be prepared… to consign himself to the tedium of a long engagement … these couples represented the embodiment of an ideal highly prized by the Victorians – that of chaste devotion.\(^55\)

As Ina Taylor astutely observed in *Victorian Sisters* (1987), before marriage Burne-Jones idealised Georgie as a saintly figure.\(^56\) He made a sketch of her on a high dais – literally placing her on a pedestal – with himself kneeling before her like a knight before a queen. In another sketch, Georgie is haloed; she has long flowing hair and sits at a desk, (see figure 20) bringing to mind Rossetti’s *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* (1848). Burne-Jones portrays himself lying at Georgie’s feet, on propped elbows, looking up adoringly at her. At this time in his life, Rossetti had pronounced the virginal woman as ‘the symbol of female excellence, the Virgin being taken as its highest type’;\(^57\) Burne-Jones hung on Rossetti’s every word.

Georgie was justifiably discomforted by this kind of unrealistic adulation, which showed Burne-Jones’s attachment to an ideal rather than the flesh and blood woman in front of him. She wrote beneath one of these images: ‘I have an inclination to upset all the ideas suggested by the above by using language other than befitting a queen.’\(^58\) Taylor noted that a major problem for their relationship was ‘Edward’s inability to visualize

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56 Taylor, *Victorian Sisters*, p. 70.
57 Taylor, *Victorian Sisters*, p. 69.
58 Taylor, *Victorian Sisters*, p. 69.
something so spiritual transformed by the carnality of marriage'. In short, he chose a woman who he judged was not a passionate type and, as such, was scared of sexual intimacy. In an era that mistrusted female sexuality, Burne-Jones was primed to view women as either virtuous women who would curb men’s desires, or sirens who would inflame them. In either case, the male was a blameless victim.

As his marriage approached Burne-Jones wrote to a male friend: ‘I shouldn’t be surprised if I bolt off the day before and am never heard of again’. Unlike Morris, who accepted and celebrated desire in both sexes, Burne-Jones was discomforted by masculine and feminine desire. However, in deeming Georgie to be on the angelic side of womanhood he may have misjudged her nature as well as his own, for although Georgie was modest and controlled she was not without passion. She played Beethoven on the piano, and one commentator remarked on the surprisingly wild and passionate voice that issued from her small frame when singing.

Burne-Jones’ catalogue of paintings clearly shows his categorisation of women into two stereotypes: the saintly and the sexual. His paintings of Georgie are inevitably in the former category, sometimes as a virginal figure, offering a model of abstinence to the coarser nature of man, as a mother, the unavailable beggar maid in King Cophetua, or as the nun-like figure of winter – a cloaked image combining sexual unavailability with coldness, doubling the frigid metaphor. These paintings likely say more about Burne-Jones’s response to Georgie’s disapproval than her own sexual nature. As Burne-Jones’s biographers have pointed out, the death of his mother at his birth affected him greatly. He began life with a father too grief stricken to hold his son, whom he blamed for the death of his beloved wife. Burne-Jones grew up as an only child burdened with a sense of the dire consequences of reproduction, and without the presence of women or girls in his life, which is what might have caused him to view sexuality as threatening, even deadly: ‘I don’t think it is ever out of my mind what hurt I did when I was born’, he wrote later in life.

Writing of the nineteenth-century fear of women, Joseph Kestner has noted that in art and literature, women were almost exclusively portrayed as one or the other of these

59 Taylor, Victorian Sisters, p. 70.
60 Jan Marsh, Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood, London, Quartet, 1985, p. 76.
63 MacCarthy, The Last Pre-Raphaelite, p. 4.
stereotypes, and that artists in particular made use of mythology to underline archetypes. Kestner singles out Burne-Jones’ oeuvre, highlighting his misogynistic subject matter, but biographical sources indicate also that, even as a young student, Burne-Jones was deemed a misogynist by his university peers. Kestner has argued that when Georgie was compiling her husband’s memorials, she perceived ‘that the Order of Sir Galahad contained elements not of woman-worship but of woman-fear’ and noted ‘half-jesting references to celibacy and misogyny’ that Burne-Jones made in letters in 1853. That Georgie perceived these as only half jesting, indicates that she felt the sting of this attitude in their married life, where she and her baby son were excluded from the studio where Burne-Jones entertained his friends, including other women. ‘Paintings and babies are each too important to be made by one man’, he once said, after having made the babies. Always ready with a pompous phrase about women’s place, he also declared that there were ‘two kinds of women, those that take the strength out of a man and those that put it back’. It is clear that Georgie accepted such judgement and saw her role as being the kind to put strength back.

The influence of Rossetti: Sacred and profane love
In 1857, while Burne-Jones was painting the ensnaring Nimue imprisoning Merlin beneath a stone, Rossetti painted Burne-Jones as Launcelot being prevented from seeing the Holy Grail by the intervening figure of the bad queen Guenevere. He also completed another sketch for Lancelot in the Queen’s Chamber, in which he depicted the sudden disclosure of this illicit relationship and the dire consequences it implied. These two subjects fascinatingly represent a duality in Rossetti’s nature, torn between sacred and profane love, with a guilty pursuit of the earthly rather than the spiritual, and a fear of judgement. Burne-Jones’s meeting and friendship with his hero Rossetti occurred at a time when Rossetti was moving from spiritual and idealised depictions of women towards increasingly sensual and erotic subject matter. There is a stark distinction between the former and latter style that has a biographical parallel.

Rossetti had come from a highly devout background. As a young man founding the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood a decade earlier, he had put Jesus Christ atop the list of heroic role models for the brotherhood. Rossetti’s early religious subject matter appealed to

64 Kestner, Mythology and Misogyny, p. 38–9.
67 MacCarthy, The Last Pre-Raphaelite, p. 305.
68 On Rossetti’s family life and upbringing, see Marsh, Rossetti: Painter and Poet.
Burne-Jones. The transcendental jewel-like paintings, with their gaunt figures and angels, that mark Rossetti’s style up until about 1857, belong to the time when Rossetti’s main associates were the older artists Madox Brown, and the religious Holman Hunt. During these years Rossetti had been involved in a long, strange and, as Jan Marsh believes, chaste ‘engagement’ to a working-class woman, Elizabeth Siddal.69

This mysterious, blighted relationship had begun around seven years earlier when Lizzie was twenty-one and Rossetti a year older. To Rossetti her ethereal looks and mass of hair defined his ideal of beauty and inspired his paintings. He mythologised her as Beatrice to his Dante. Rossetti needed her as an image that inspired his self-obsessed identification with his namesake, and his role as Artist. After many stagnant years the relationship had soured. The new young friends coming into Rossetti’s life seemed to awaken in him a desire for change. Burne-Jones had persuaded Rossetti to enthuse over a reworking of the Order of Sir Galahad, only this time as a colony of artists. Lizzie, a milliner turned artist’s model, had been waiting for marriage for many years, latterly putting up with Rossetti’s interest in the model Annie Miller. There was an argument and separation. In spite of their living arrangements, Lizzie had represented a virginal figure in Rossetti’s art, but in his thirties his interest began to shift to alternative types, as his paintings show. Once liberated, Rossetti began to appear a man of the world, and experience other less idealistic relationships with women. He took up with Fanny Cornforth, who would become his mistress and the model for several of his most famous portraits. In the Oxford mural of 1857, Rossetti and Burne-Jones’s subjects both depicted men as victims of women’s sexual power, misdirecting them from a higher quest, and echoing some of the anxieties about women and sexuality felt in society at large. In their real lives both men sought freedom from sexual guilt through their choices of women companions; Burne-Jones sought out a virtuous woman, whereas Rossetti became drawn to the idea of fallen women.

‘Fallenness’ was a fashionable subject for artists and other social commentators during this period. The Saturday Review noted in 1860 that

\[\text{Like several fellow artists, Rossetti wished to tackle a ‘modern’ subject. In the mid 1850s he began a painting entitled Found, showing a young prostitute discovered on a London street by a drover – perhaps a former beau or relative – as he brings a calf into town. She has}\]

70 Nead, Myths of Sexuality, p. 1.
fallen to the ground against a wall and, as the man tries to pull her up, she shrinks away from him, hiding her face in a gesture of shame. The painting is Rossetti’s only treatment in oil of a contemporary subject and it remained incomplete on his death.\(^\text{71}\)

Yet Rossetti remained fascinated with the topic of prostitution. He wrote letters on the topic to other artists in the late 1840s and went on to treat the subject in other artworks.\(^\text{72}\) He also wrote a poem on the subject, ‘Jenny’, in which a narrator’s internal dialogue muses on a prostitute’s motivations and his own relationship with her. It has been suggested that Rossetti was prompted to return to the subject by his cohabitation with Fanny Cornforth and her ‘generous, undemanding sexuality, which measured affection in terms of treats’.\(^\text{73}\) As with his painting of the same subject, Rossetti reworked this poem for years, beginning in the late 1840s and considering it one of his finest poems. At the outset, the prostitute Jenny is depicted as lazy, sexual and avaricious, although the poet seems non-judgemental, perhaps sharing these qualities himself:

Lazy laughing languid Jenny
Fond of a kiss and fond of a guinea…

As she lies dozing, the narrator ponders the problem of Jenny’s motivation using words that deliberately blend notions of sentiment and desire with money and payment:

Whose person or whose purse may be
The lodestar of your reverie?\(^\text{74}\)

The narrator seems to have ‘accidentally’ found himself with Jenny – ‘Well, I suppose ’twas hard to part / And here I am’ – and the suggestion is that disorientation and the natural inclinations of men exonerate the narrator who hardly takes responsibility for his own presence in her room. Further on, he thinks sympathetically of the harshness of Jenny’s life – dealing with violence, with ‘envy’s voice at virtue’s pitch’, and with men who use, and then thrust away – but as he thinks of the abuse directed at her, he begins to argue against poverty as a cause for her situation, comparing her with other impoverished girls who have resisted her way of life:

And from the pale girl’s dumb rebuke
Whose ill-clad grace and toil-worn look
Proclaim the strength that keeps her weak

And other nights than yours bespeak.

He also imagines her inevitable descent into poverty and despair, the assumed fate for prostitutes.

The narrator imagines Jenny’s innocent youth contrasted with her seamy present life. He compares her to his cousin Nell, who, like Jenny, is also ‘fond of fun, and fond of dress, and change and praise, and love’ but has not fallen; she is ‘the girl I’m proudest of’. Using a biblical phrase, Rossetti suggests that the potter (God) has made ‘of the same lump [of clay] … For honour and dishonour, two sister vessels’. In other words, Jenny has been made for dishonour; therefore a man cannot be held responsible for despoiling her. The love of clothes, change and love, not economic hardship, has led Jenny into prostitution.

Rossetti’s narrator then muses on religious and mythical iconography of womankind, where a woman such as Jenny might be painted as a virgin, just as he painted Fanny, but the theme of monetary transactions permeates the poem, tainting Jenny’s youthful beauty with a hard materialism. The narrator ends by laying gold coins among her golden hair, and leaves satisfied with the condescending thoughts he has had of her. This brings to mind Rossetti’s relationships with models, whose hair attracted him and which he loved to paint, thus linking their beauty and his own income and status as artist.

Ruskin did not like the poem: ‘no affection for the girl shows itself – his throwing the money into her hair is disorderly … the right feeling is unnatural in him and does not therefore truly touch us’. Ruskin thought the narrator should either love the girl, which Rossetti’s narrator does not, or be sensible of his own disgrace, which he isn’t. Thus Rossetti aligns his argument with the discourse of his times to negate economic causation and promote the idea of greed, immorality and shamelessness, while simultaneously offering a kind of world-weary sympathy. As Nead observes:

Again and again, the social and economic aspects of prostitution were obscured by notions of individual sin, innate moral weakness and animal desire … Sewing girls and working-class women … are classified in terms of an innate licentious inclination.

Accepting this, Rossetti also implies that the love of finery and money suggests an ungodly materialism. Working-class prostitutes did acquire clothes they would otherwise have been unable to afford, thus blurring distinctions of class that had been clear before. The middle-
class fear of prostitution may have been as much to do with economic self-determination as innate immorality:

[The prostitute] occupies a unique place at the centre of an extraordinary and nefarious economic system … The prostitute is able to sell herself/sex again and again but she is never owned by being bought and is always available again to be re-sold … As a commodity … the prostitute encapsulates and distorts all the classic features of bourgeois economics. This is the full nature of her threat and also the key to her power.\textsuperscript{80}

Rossetti’s repeated emphasis on money and payment throughout the poem indicates that the economic aspect of Jenny’s relationship with men is what really fascinates him. The gold coins seem to relieve the man of further responsibility, or guilt, and seal any transaction, so that nothing more is required from him, as would be in a sexual relationship based on sentiment or commitment. Jenny’s silence and sleeping posture remove her from the discourse, undermining her ability to account for herself. Instead, the power to attribute motivation is annexed by the middle-class apologist with his sophisticated arguments.

Lynda Nead points out that the state of ‘fallenness’ could only apply to a woman with social position to lose, most often the adulterous married woman.\textsuperscript{81} The working classes could not fall, as Rossetti’s suggestion of the vessel made for dishonour implies. One suspects that part of Rossetti’s attraction to working-class women was this idea that they could not be ‘ruined’, lessening his own culpability, and the need for ‘commitment’ — engagement, and marriage. Thomas Hall Caine, who lived with Rossetti at the end of his life, believed that, despite his outward confidence, ‘irresolution with melancholy lay at the basis of his nature’, \textsuperscript{82} although admitting this was witnessed after a period of addiction to chloral. If so, this would certainly explain his strange reluctance to marry and the sad consequences.

A constant companion and pupil of Rossetti at this time, Burne-Jones would experience quite another aspect of him as mentor. Although the name was omitted from the account, it seems certain Rossetti was the culprit:

That wretch … once gave a woman 5 shillings to go after me – one night as I was going quietly to my bus. He told her I was very timid and shy, and wanted her to speak to me. I saw him talking to her as I looked back and then she came after me and I couldn’t get rid of her. I said no, my dear, I’m just going home – for I’m never haughty with those poor things – but it was no use. She wouldn’t go, and there we

\textsuperscript{80} Nead, \textit{Myths of Sexuality}, p. 99.
\textsuperscript{81} Nead, \textit{Myths of Sexuality}, p. 50.
marched arm in arm down Regent Street. I don’t know what any of my friends would have thought if he’d caught sight of me. He’d have thought it fine fun, as … did, of course. 83

Burne-Jones’s suave account, given in later life and in the presence of his son, doesn’t fully convey the alarm and discomfort that obviously gave Rossetti so much amusement. There is something distasteful about Rossetti’s use of the woman in question for a joke, although he probably saw through Burne-Jones’s claim to be more spiritual than physical. There is no evidence that Burne-Jones ever used prostitutes as Rossetti may have. Arguably, early and developing attitudes and relationships for Burne-Jones and Rossetti conformed with mid century stereotypes of women as angels or adulterers; female desire is figured as exotic and threatening, and inconsistent with the model of a virtuous wife and queen of the home.

Queens, wives, and Morris’s defence of female desire
Growing evidence of widespread prostitution also raised for Victorians the thorny question of the extent of women’s sexual desire. Any argument for female responsibility for prostitution hinged on this notion of unnatural desire, and therefore created the need for an alternative definition of the normal woman, which was linked with marriage and motherhood (with the definition of prostitution as deviant being because it did not produce offspring). 84 The proper place of woman in society was pronounced upon in a lecture by Ruskin entitled Of Queen’s Gardens, published in 1865, and by Coventry Patmore, among others. 85 The subject was tackled by Set member William Fulford in the Oxford and Cambridge Magazine in a long and careful article explicating Tennyson’s proposal for ideal feminine behaviour in ‘The Princess’. 86 Such writing emphasised passivity, modesty and self-abnegation as appropriate female characteristics, but the ‘weaker vessel’ was urged to be stronger than the male where sexual temptation was concerned.

Of course, a woman sat on the throne of England, and alongside the emphasis upon Victoria’s virtues as wife and mother, she was also depicted as the ruler of an empire. Several critics and commentators have discussed the potential impact of Queen Victoria on contemporary artists. In a convincing series of articles, Kestner underlined a growing tendency towards misogyny during Victoria’s reign:

83 Roose, Burne-Jones Talking, p. 166.
84 Nead, Myths of Sexuality, p. 100.
85 See, for example, Tennyson’s Idylls of the King, 1859.
The function of the flame which attracts and burns is exercised, in the first half of the century, by the fatal man (the Byronic hero), in the second by the Fatal Woman; the moth destined for sacrifice is in the first case the woman, in the second the man. According to Elliot Gilbert’s ‘The Female King: Tennyson’s Arthurian Apocalypse’, anxiety around women and power was connected with the gender of the current monarch. Gilbert’s examination of Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* focuses upon how ‘the traditionally manly King Arthur of legend and romance evolved … into the restrained, almost maidenly Victorian monarch’; Gilbert shows how Tennyson’s king becomes feminised as his treacherous wife becomes masculine, connecting the idea of risk with the notion of female rulership. Gilbert argues that Tennyson acted as a conscious moral arbiter for his times:

[He] came to feel that only some contemporary significance in the Arthurian retellings, only some ‘modern touches here and there’ … could redeem his poetry ‘from the charge of nothingness’, from Thomas Carlyle’s characterization of it as ‘a refuge from life … a medieval arras’ behind which the poet was hiding ‘from the horrors of the industrial revolution’.

Tennyson’s themes certainly touched a modern chord, and inevitably lighted on human sexuality, and in particular female passion. The four idylls published in 1859 – ‘Vivien’, ‘Guinevere’, ‘Enid’ and ‘Elaine’ – were collected under the general title *The True and the False*, and focus on ‘[t]he polar extremes of feminine purity and carnality’. Gilbert surmises that Tennyson’s emphasis is on the corrosiveness of female sexuality, and notes that Tennyson places ‘the whole blame for the decay of the Round Table and the fall of Camelot on [Queen Guinevere’s] unfaithfulness’. To further underline anxieties around the place of women in society – what Gilbert terms ‘the growing assertion of female authority’ – it might also be noted that Tennyson’s dedication of this work to the widowed queen is full of references to the passive wife whose ‘woman’s heart’ is urged to endure, be comforted, ‘encompassed and o’ershadowed by love’ until God restores her to her husband’s side. Domestic love, it seems, can place the queen in a submissive and therefore acceptably feminine role. From monarch to maidservant, women were a focus of male anxiety, evident in the works of contemporary poets and artists.

92 Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, quoted by Gilbert, The Female King, p. 863.
In 1857 Morris and Tennyson were both, unwittingly, working on poems with the same Arthurian subject matter – the adultery of Queen Guenevere. In keeping with modern thinking, Tennyson treated the adultery as a form of deviant female behaviour. Guinevere is shown as a fallen woman, one who has neglected her duty to act in an exemplary fashion, to check the nature of man and set the tone of society as a whole. Tennyson’s Arthur puts it thus:

I knew
Of no more subtle master under heaven
Than is the maiden passion for a maid,
Not only to keep down the base in man,
But teach high thought, and amiable words
And courtliness, and the desire of fame,
And love of truth, and all that makes a man.

‘Maiden passion’ even hints at the removal of sex from romantic love, and the maiden’s first duty is clearly to ‘keep down the base in man’. Any breach of duty or purity on the part of women threatened not just the home and family, but also society at large.

Such debates surrounding female adultery necessarily narrowed in on the question of the extent of female desire. In adultery, the implied sexual feelings on the part of the woman ran counter to notions of normal womanhood. In 1857 the doctor William Acton published his now oft-quoted view that ‘[w]hat men are habitually women are exceptionally’, and noted that ‘the divorce courts show … there are some few women who have sexual desires so strong that they surpass those of men’, but claiming that this ‘existence of sexual excitement’ was ‘a form of insanity’. Examining this issue, Nead underlines the tendency during this period for female adultery to be ‘represented as a consequence of abnormal and excessive sexual feeling’, whereby ‘[d]esires which are defined as commonplace in man are treated as a form of madness in woman’. In other words, transgressions of married men were regarded as ‘regrettable but unavoidable’, but a libidinous woman was considered an abnormality. Efforts to define the extent of female desire emerged, according to Nead, mainly through the medical profession and the church, ‘redefin[ing] cultural norms as facts of nature’ with the tendency to classify strong sexual

Morris spells the queen’s name Guenevere, Tennyson Guinevere.
Nead, Myths of Sexuality, p. 49.
Nead, Myths of Sexuality, p. 50.
Nead, Myths of Sexuality, p. 49.
feeling in middle-class women as particularly ‘unnatural’. Acton aired also a widely held
view that in the deviant, sexually aware woman, ‘the sin of unfaithfulness is often inherited,
as well as many other family diseases’. No longer just an aberration, female desire — a
possible source of disease — becomes, as Nead argues, a disease in itself. Contemporary
artists treating the Guenevere story, then, were already provided with a set of ideas that
related to modern society and its ills.

Thus, Tennyson’s Guenevere expresses knowledge of her guilt, shame and self-
disgust as it was hoped all immoral women would do in the process of their redemption,
although they could never reclaim their lost standing:

My own true lord! how dare I call him mine?
The shadow of another cleaves to me,
And makes me one pollution: he, the King,
Called me polluted: shall I kill myself?
What help in that? I cannot kill my sin,
If soul be soul; nor can I kill my shame;

Lest anyone be swayed by sympathy for Guinevere, Tennyson’s Arthur outlines the course
of action to deal with such contagion. The source must be driven from his home or the sin
will transfer to the husband — be will become a public foe:

I hold that man the worst of public foes
Who either for his own or children’s sake,
To save his blood from scandal, lets the wife
Whom he knows false, abide and rule the house

Tennyson’s Guinevere confesses publicly, takes all guilt upon herself and, in the face of
Arthur’s forgiveness, while still cast out, renounces her affair, vowing to love Arthur until
death. Tennyson repeatedly refers to her state as a contamination that threatens to ruin
society:

An awful dream; for then she seemed to stand
On some vast plain before a setting sun,
And from the sun there swiftly made at her
A ghastly something, and its shadow flew
Before it, till it touched her, and she turned –
When lo! her own, that broadening from her feet,
And blackening, swallowed all the land, and in it
Far cities burnt.

100 Acton, *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs*, p. 131.
102 Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, p. 539.
103 Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, p. 536.
104 Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, p. 526.
Guinevere’s shadow blights the kingdom, like the spread of an epidemic or

Like a new disease, unknown to men,
Creeps, no precaution used, among the crowd,
Makes wicked lightenings of her eyes and saps
The fealty of our friends, and stirs the pulse
With devil’s leaps, and poisons half the young

In this way Tennyson links his poem with the social evil of his own times.

By contrast, Morris’s poem, ‘The Defence of Guenevere’, offers a radically different treatment of the theme of the queen’s adultery and, I would argue, the current attitudes of society. Even Morris’s title, ‘The Defence of Guenevere’, is challenging because it can mean either her own defence or the poet’s defence of her. Defying the discourse that required fallenness to include notions of physical disease and contamination, and self-accusation and disgust, Morris makes his queen physically beautiful, proud and unrepentant. The opening stanzas show Guenevere surrounded by armed male accusers as she begins to tell her story:

But, knowing now that they would have her speak,
She threw her wet hair backward from her brow,
Her hand close to her mouth touching her cheek,
As though she had had there a shameful blow

The concept of shame and self-loathing went hand in hand with the idea of female moral disgrace, supposedly isolating the woman from family and peers. This was depicted by artists such as Holman Hunt in The Awakening Conscience and Rossetti’s treatment of prostitution in Found, where his young prostitute shrinks away from her discoverer, hiding her face from society’s judgement. Morris tackles the concept of shame with the suggestion of a ‘shameful blow’, deflecting the shame from Guenevere to the man who would strike her. He establishes early in the poem that Guenevere does not demonstrate this expected shame. In fact she thinks it is somewhat shameful that she actually feels no shame in her heart for what she has done:

And feeling it shameful to feel ought but shame
All through her heart, yet felt her cheek burned so,
She must a little touch it;

105 Tennyson, Idylls of the King, p. 537.
106 The poem as distinct from the book of poems, The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems.
She realises what she ought to say, what is expected of her, but this doesn’t come from her heart:

God wot I ought to say, I have done ill,
And pray you all forgiveness heartily!
Because you must be right such great lords\textsuperscript{108}

But, in telling of her passion she ‘spoke out at last with no more trace of shame’. Morris also addresses the question of the unnatural desire of the adulteress. Guenevere speaks of her growing desire, and Morris counters notions of unnaturalness by linking such desire with the natural rhythm of seasons:

\small
\textbf{And in Summer I grew white with flame,}
\textbf{And bowed my head down – Autumn, and the sick}
\textbf{Sure knowledge things would never be the same,}
\textbf{However often Spring might be most thick}
\textbf{Of blossoms and buds, smote on me, and I grew}
\textbf{Careless of most things, let the clock tick, tick,}
\textbf{To my unhappy pulse, that beat right through}
\textbf{My eager body};\textsuperscript{109}
\normalsize

In Morris’s poem, Guenevere experiences desire as an integral part of her – the ‘unhappy pulse that beat[s] … through [her] eager body’, whereas Tennyson demonises such sensations, describing the same pulse as ‘Devil’s leaps’ or ‘poison’, implying an unnatural or deviant origin. Morris’s Guenevere experiences sexual desire linked with seasonal change as natural, even God-given. Through Guenevere, Morris expounds the view that he developed during his years at Oxford: that love and sexual desire are above laws of church and state. This was a view of life to which Morris frequently returned in his writing and from which he never wavered.

Morris thus shows Guenevere in conflict over feelings for a man other than the unloved husband of an arranged marriage, rather like what would now be called the marriages of convenience made by many middle-class women in the nineteenth century:

\small
\textbf{Must I give up for ever then, I thought,}
\textbf{That which I deemed would ever round me move}
\textbf{Glorifying all things; for a little word,}
\textbf{Scarce ever meant at all, must I now prove}
\textbf{Stone-cold for ever}\textsuperscript{110}
\normalsize

Morris and Tennyson, both couching their social comment in an antique setting, tackled the themes of shame and desire in very different ways. Morris’s poem argues that strong

desire is as natural a part of women’s nature as it is men’s, Tennyson that such desire is unnatural. The argument that desire was natural in men was used to excuse male sexual transgressions; Morris uses it to excuse Guenevere. MacCarthy believes that in the Defence poems Morris ‘was standing aside from the social debate’ and that his poems ‘look a little lightweight in comparison with Tennyson’s In Memoriam’. I argue that Morris and Tennyson address the same social issue in their treatment of the Guenevere story, but display widely differing standpoints.

**Prostitution and hideous unhappiness**

It would seem then that Morris and Rossetti differed in their thoughts about the causal factors of the great social evil, prostitution, Rossetti arguing for moral, Morris for economic reasons. Although there is no record of Morris’s views on prostitution in the late 1850s, in 1885 he was asked to attend and speak at a conference as part of a new crusade against pornography, indecency and prostitution organised by W.T. Stead of Pall Mall Gazette. Morris did not attend, but his letter of apology, Meyers says, is distinguished from the other apologies by ‘independence of thought … and by its polite scepticism of some of the dynamics and values behind the movement being celebrated’. Morris wrote:

> I am quite sure no legislative enactment will touch prostitution as long as the present conditions of the people exist, as long as there are rich and poor classes … I especially fear the very possible danger of a puritan revival obscuring the real causes of this hideous unhappiness.

In the 1850s Morris had not yet developed such a strident – and socialistic – political standpoint on such topics. However, mistrust of puritanism and the idea that poverty, rather than immorality, was a driving force for prostitution, were long held views that predate his political pronouncements on such issues. It is clear that in this he differed from Rossetti, for while Rossetti wished to engage with the debate about female morality and had sympathy for working-class women and prostitutes, he represented himself as concurring with the current theory of the shameful woman. Similarly, Morris did not share Burne-Jones’s fear of being controlled by predatory women. Within this circle Morris alone seems to have been born with or developed a relatively uncomplicated attitude to human

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112 See discussion of Rossetti’s poem ‘Jenny,’ in Chapter 5, and Morris’s views on prostitution in Chapter 6 of this thesis.
sexuality, aware of – but uncoloured by – the moral climate of his time and class. C.S. Lewis would observe:

It is no use invoking modern psychoanalysis to reveal the concealed eroticism in [Morris’s] imagination, because the eroticism is not concealed; it is patent, ubiquitous and unabashed.115

As an unabashed proponent of Eros, and men and women’s right to take the happiness offered by love, Morris was already primed to sympathetically view the intense loves that would arise in the lives of his friends and his own wife. His belief that Georgie too should seize true love kept alive his hope that she would accept the love he offered. It was at this time that such views were crystallised in Morris’s psyche, as he contemplated these Arthurian subjects. As well as demonstrating the three friends’ attitudes to women and love, the choice of subject matter for their murals also prefigured future situations that would arise in their relationships and married lives. This will be the subject of the following chapter.

Chapter 3

Three Marriages

Her great eyes standing far apart,
Draw up some memory from her heart,
And gaze out very mournfully;
*Beata mea Domina*! –

So beautiful and kind they are,
But most times looking out afar,
Waiting for something, not for me
*Beata mea Domina!*  

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, examination of Morris’s early literary works shows him arguing against several widely-held views about female sexuality and autonomy, views that are evident in the writing and art of his close associates and wider circle. Rossetti, for example, took the contemporary line in regard to the great social evil of prostitution, arguing for immorality rather than economic necessity as the driving force, and he and Burne-Jones painted femmes fatale, entrapping men and diverting them from their spiritual quest. Morris defended women’s desire as natural, even God-given, and would later reject the immorality of prostitution, citing poverty as the causal factor of the ‘misery’. These assumptions and anxieties appear to have also played a role in the relationships of these men. At a time when they were choosing wives, notions of ideal womanhood gained from literature and current thought were projected onto ordinary women. In this chapter I shall discuss how Rossetti was drawn to working-class women, though reluctant to marry his long-time fiancée Lizzie Siddal. Eventually, the pair married, although the marriage ended tragically. Burne-Jones’s ideal of purity led him to choose the virtuous young Georgiana Macdonald for his wife, while Morris stepped outside his class to marry Jane Burden, a working-class girl of exceptional beauty. The three young women were expected to marry and to conform to a social ideal as wives and mothers.

Drawing on literature, correspondence and other biographical sources, this chapter examines the way these interrelated marriages came about and how, before long, each

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2. See discussion of Rossetti’s poem ‘Jenny’ in Chapter 5, and Morris’s views on prostitution in Chapter 6 of this thesis.
couple’s relationship came under stress. Before a decade of marriage, Burne-Jones had begun an affair with another woman, almost deserting his wife and children. Meanwhile, the widowed Rossetti began to paint Jane Morris; they developed an intimacy that became a source of gossip. This chapter highlights the fact that Morris did not oust Rossetti or in any way impede this relationship with his wife. A significant factor at work in these relationships was the double standard of morality that permitted men to stray and forced wives to endure. Social factors are pivotal to understanding the dynamics of the emerging ‘illicit’ relationships between Morris and Georgie, and Morris’s wife Jane and Rossetti. Rossetti’s relationship with Jane Morris as model and love is possibly the single most well-known aspect of his life; it also impacted upon Morris’s reputation as well.

What has not been adequately accounted for is why Morris seems to have accepted this liaison with such equanimity, even assisting the couple, and remaining on cordial terms with Rossetti, causing speculation about Morris’s manliness. Morris was not just a passive bystander but a facilitator in this relationship, and in this chapter I begin to outline the evidence and possible reasons for Morris’s cooperation, which will be developed in subsequent chapters. An unrecognised factor in Morris’s actions is the awakening of his original love for the abandoned Georgie Burne-Jones. He now turned to her with a hope that his love for her would be returned. I examine also the experience of marriage for the three women concerned, to show how Morris alone sought to navigate the changes in all their lives with deep consideration for his wife and the woman he loved.

Models, muses and marriage

Around 1857, Morris’s contemplations in poetry of real and imagined loves betray his consciousness of a noble but unenviable future as the bachelor friend of a soon-to-be happily married couple. The poem ‘Old Love’, written at this time, imagines the love of a man for the wife of his friend at the end of a long life, as Morris might have thought he would one day look back on his love for Georgie. An aged knight, Sir John, is in the presence of his dead friend, a duke, while the duchess sits by. Sir John recalls their lives together, revealing moments of intimacy with the friend’s wife:

Her eyes are shallower, as though
Some grey glass were behind; her brow
And cheeks the straining bones show through,
Are not so good for kissing now.

Her lips are drier now she is
A great duke’s wife these many years,
They will not shudder with a kiss

75
As once they did, being moist with tears

Also her hands have lost that way
Of clinging that they used to have;
They look’d quite easy, as they lay
Upon the silken cushions brave

Her present composure is contrasted with suggestions of remembered passion that reveal she and John have been lovers, perhaps adulterers. In the last stanzas Morris calls the time of love an ‘idle dream’, a ‘lost heaven’, and concludes ‘this love is not so hard to smutch’, although, given the poet’s poignant descriptions, this seems ironic. Morris’s meditation on a lifetime of love for another’s wife has an abrupt, cursory ending:

Ah! sometimes like an idle dream
That hinders true life overmuch,
Sometimes like a lost heaven, these seem.
This love is not so hard to smutch.  

The sentiment is a desire to be free of a hopeless situation: an attachment that lives in the mind of the protagonist and ‘hinders true life’. The dreaming, imaginative aspect of Morris’s personality was balanced by the active, practical side, and Morris’s life shows him ‘snapping out’ of such periods of depression with new resolve. Before the Jovial Campaign was over, a new disturbance entered Morris’s life. The cause was described in another poem entitled ‘Praise of my Lady’:

My lady seems of ivory
Forehead, straight nose and Cheeks that be
Hollowed a little mournfully
Beata mea dominol!  

On the lookout for stunners for the murals, Rossetti had discovered Jane Burden, always known as Janey to her friends, sitting with her sister in the audience at an Oxford theatre. She was tall and stately with thick dark hair, the daughter of a groom. By December Janey’s medieval beauty was causing Morris to ‘rave and sware [sic] like or more than any Oxford bargee’ 5 and of course Rossetti, her discoverer, was so taken with her that he began to change the Lizzie-like figure of Guenevere at the centre of his mural to a dark-haired Jane. Morris’s fascination also resulted in his only extant painting, known as Guenevere or La Belle Isult. After a brief courtship he proposed to her in February 1858, the

month his book of poems was published, and Janey accepted. Morris’s unmistakable portrait of Jane in words, with its hypnotic, quasi-religious refrain, appears in this work. Reverence and desire are combined with certain disquiet:

Beneath her brows the lids fall slow,
The lashes a clear shadow throw
Where I would wish my lips to be.
*Beata mea Domina!*

Her great eyes standing far apart,
Draw up some memory from her heart,
And gaze out very mournfully;
*– Beata mea Domina! –*

So beautiful and kind they are,
But most times looking out afar,
Waiting for something, not for me
*Beata mea Domina!*

Despite the perceptive hint of caution, Morris lost himself in adoration, having found a woman whose beauty obliterated the hopeless love for another. His poem is a prayer in worship, and the repeated exclamation seeks to establish a kind of ownership – *my lady* – which could be mistaken for courtly love were it not for the deeply erotic undercurrent:

Her full lips being made to kiss,
Curl’d up and pensive each one is;
This makes me faint to stand and see.
*Beata mea Domina!*

Her lips are not contented now,
Because the hours pass so slow
Towards a sweet time: (pray for me),
*– Beata mea Domina! –*

Nay, hold thy peace! For who can tell;
But this at least I know full well,
Her lips are parted longingly,
*– Beata mea Domina! –*

The tradition of courtly love is blended here with a depiction of feminine desire that meets the poet’s own, again demonstrating Morris’s atypical, unproblematic attitude to women’s sexual nature.

In view of later events, biographers have tended to see the marriage as ill-founded from the start. Henderson has speculated that Rossetti, who was still involved with Elizabeth Siddal at this time, suggested to Morris that he should marry Jane in order to

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keep her within reach. I believe Morris would not have acted on the basis of such a suggestion, and despite Rossetti’s obvious interest in Jane, he would probably not have viewed her as marriageable. As a working-class girl, daughter of a groom, and artist’s model, Jane would have been classified as pretty well available for any man of higher caste who chose to pressure, cajole or bribe her, without need of marriage. Hearing of Morris’s engagement, the young poet Algernon Swinburne wrote what others might have been thinking: ‘The idea of him marrying her is insane. To kiss her feet is all one should hope for.’ While sounding chivalrous, this dismissal of the idea hints that this marriage would be insane for one of Morris’s class. Such men made love to women like Janey, they did not marry them.

Current attitudes can be found, for example, in a letter from Morris’s exact contemporary, author George Du Maurier, who cut one of his oldest friends with seemingly genuine outrage, not for having a mistress, but for marrying her:

> You will be very much shocked to hear that he has married this woman – the same he lived with in London years ago … [he] married this woman to ‘do her proper justice before the world feeling that she owed him no less’ as if he didn’t owe 50 times as much to his father and mother. I think his conduct has been as heartless as it has been stupid, that such a nice fellow has been pumpernickeled away from us in this fashion.

So in society, to have illicit relations with a working-class woman was acceptable, but to tie oneself in marriage to her was not. Working-class women could not be ruined as they had no social standing in the first place. According to Nead, apologists for male infidelity proposed the following argument:

> In order to sustain the ideals of female chastity and domestic purity while accommodating the existence of male sexual desires, the middle-class man had to commit adultery with the available and ‘sexualised’ women of the working classes … the unspoken assumption behind this attitude was that adultery must be committed with a woman who was without family or who did not belong to the respectable classes and whose family was considered to be of no importance.

Jane’s family was of no importance, she was the kind of young working-class woman with beautiful hair who Rossetti found so irresistible and, as Lizzie had found, Rossetti was not inclined to marry.

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10 Harrison, *The Dark Angel*, p. 20.
Unless and until financial success was achieved, most young artists had little chance of marriage into their own class, as a man could not marry without an income able to support a wife and family. In the Pre-Raphaelite circle, Madox Brown had married his working-class mistress and model, but an attendant risk lay in the fact that a working-class wife was generally unacceptable in society. However, Morris had inherited wealth and could have chosen a bride from his own class. He did not need to marry Jane and in fact, should he have cared about it, was risking his own status by so doing, as the Du Maurier example shows. Rossetti, more conscious of this class divide, did not introduce Elizabeth Siddal to his sisters and mother for four years. Morris and Burne-Jones did not know of her existence until more than a year after they had become close friends with Rossetti.

For most women, marriage meant the difference between a relatively hard or easy life, irrespective of sentiment. While it was more acceptable for men than for women to marry down, it is seldom remarked just how much of a breach of propriety Morris’s marriage to Jane was at a time when such cross-class marriage and upward social mobility for women was still rare. Mackail notes that, in terms of his wealth and situation Morris was a young aristocrat. Rossetti described him exaggeratedly as a millionaire. The gap in social status between the two was, in other words, substantial. Perhaps one measure of this is the fact that none of Morris’s own large family seem to have attended their wedding in Oxford in 1858. In a monograph that considers Jane’s social position in some detail, Wendy Parkins has noted that ‘[c]lass is everywhere and nowhere in the story of Jane Morris … rarely acknowledged or addressed directly but shadow[ing] the story at every point’. Even though opportunities for working-class women were characterised during this period by ‘an intricate tapestry of change … as new employment practices and technologies became woven into the work experiences of laboring women’, Janey, if not destined for agricultural labour, would most likely have spent her life in some form of

13 Harrison, The Dark Angel, p. 12. Harrison writes: ‘When a man contemplated marriage, he was, as a matter of course, obliged to take stock of his eligibility, a quality … which resided largely in his breeding and in his bank, and preferably in both’.

14 A study of women’s mobility between 1839 and 1914 (years that precisely fit Jane’s lifespan) found that although ‘almost 50 per cent of women married a man whose class position was different to that of their father’s’, lower-middle-class women were more likely to marry down than working-class women were to marry up, and only one in ten working-class women experiences upward mobility through marriage; see Andrew Miles, Social Mobility in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century England, New York, St. Martin’s Press, 1999, pp. 153, 175.


17 Mackail, The Life of William Morris, p. 138. There is mention of Morris’s friends, but no mention of his family. Jane’s father, the ostler, gave her away.


19 Kathryn Gleadle, British Women in the Nineteenth Century, Houndmills, Palgrave, 2001, p. 3.
factory or domestic labour, even after marriage. That Janey was conscious of these matters is apparent from a letter written by Morris’s first biographer, Mackail, to Morris’s executor Sydney Cockerell in 1898. It shows that Janey was not inclined to publicise her working-class origins. When asked by her not to include a drawing of ‘old Oxford in which she lived before her marriage’ in his biography of Morris, a rather annoyed Mackail wrote to Cockerell:

What I feel is that it does fair injustice to Morris himself to gloss over the fact that he married ‘beneath him’ and did so with perfect simplicity & as a thing which he had no reason whatever to feel ashamed of in any way … As to the picture, it would hardly have relevance in the book unless it were explained what it represented. If Mrs Morris feels ashamed of having lived in a little house … such a feeling is to me unintelligible.

What these and later biographers have tended to find unintelligible or to ignore, is that there is another story to be told here that is not all about Morris as hero. If at the time of their engagement Morris ignored the tyranny of society in such matters, seventeen-year-old Jane could not have refused this offer of marriage. A typically cynical cartoon of Rossetti’s exploits this aspect of the social dynamic by showing Jane admiring with pleasure a large engagement ring, ignoring Morris’s ardent expression (see Figure 11). After Morris’s death Wilfred Scawen Blunt recorded in his diary that Janey told him: ‘I am not unhappy, though it is a terrible thing, for I have been with him since I first knew anything. I was eighteen when I married – but I never loved him’. All of which indicates the specific circumstances around Morris’s offer of marriage to Janey. It is likely that he would have come to realise that his offer may have been accepted without love, because Janey had little real choice, and thus that his offer of marriage had effectively robbed her of the chance of finding her own true love. It is also worth noting, therefore, that Morris’s own motives were also not entirely selfless. One aspect of Morris’s cooperation in helping Jane to be with Rossetti, I suspect, was a wish to make amends.

Morris seemed to have no cause for unhappiness. Financial security, recognition as a poet, a beautiful fiancée and plans for a medieval-inspired home should have produced an optimistic frame of mind. However, in the months before his marriage he became ill with a

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disorder ‘cheerfully attributed by his friends to eating and drinking too much’. Mackail discerned an emotional cause:

The instability which he found, or thought he found, in his own character became for a time acute. The overstrain of the crowded years through which he had been passing, with all their inward revolutions, all their pangs of growth and fevers of imagination, had left him, like some lover in one of his own poems, languid and subject to strange fluctuations of mood.

Mackail’s analogy of Morris as like one of the lovers in his own poems, might suggest another source for this depression – fear of the irrevocable step he was about to take. The man who had written of true love was marrying not his true love, but another. In keeping with the mood of wiping away the past, Mackail describes a ‘general massacre’, that is, Morris’s destruction at this time of all the unpublished poetry that he had written over the past few years. Only poems held by others survived the purge. While this destruction might have been owing to embarrassment at his first poetic efforts, it more likely signalled Morris’s need to disengage from his hopeless love for Georgie, expressed in the early writings, enabling him to move forward towards a new life.

![Figure 11](image)

_Dante Gabriel Rossetti, _Morris Presenting Miss Burden with a Ring_, 1857_

From mid August until early September 1858 Morris was again in France this time with his architect friend, Philip Webb. In Morris’s absence, Rossetti returned to Oxford and made contact with Jane. In December 1858 Boyce noticed among Rossetti’s new work ‘a most beautiful pen and ink study of Topsy’s “stunner” at Oxford’. What else possibly

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23 Mackail, _The Life of William Morris_, vol. 1, p. 137.
24 Mackail, _The Life of William Morris_, vol. 1, p. 137.
26 Mackail, _The Life of William Morris_, vol. 1, p. 52.
27 Salmon, _Chronology_, p. 25.
transpired apart from sketching at this time would be fascinating to discover. Rossetti had recently broken up with Lizzie Siddal, and had already proven himself treacherous where friends’ girlfriends were concerned. Whatever mutual attraction might have been registered by the pair while Morris was away, and it seems likely, given later developments, that it was, their future paths were now decided. At the end of his life, long after his marriage to Elizabeth Siddal and her subsequent suicide, Rossetti gave an account to his companion Hall Caine of what lay behind her unhappiness. He told the story of

A man who, after engaging himself to one woman in all honour and good faith, had fallen in love with another, and then gone on to marry the first out of a mistaken sense of loyalty and fear of giving pain … a man who realized that the woman he had married was reading his secret in spite of his efforts to conceal it, and thereby losing all joy and interest in life …

Rossetti married in 1860, eight years before a relationship with Jane, but Jane could well be the candidate. Rossetti would soon be summoned to the bedside of Lizzie, to whom he at last proposed. With Rossetti absent, on 26 April 1859 Morris and Jane were married.

**Rossetti and marriage**

If Morris’s motivation for marrying was in any sense a compromise, then Rossetti’s sudden engagement and marriage was even more so. Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal (Rossetti persuaded her to drop an ‘l’ as it looked more genteel) came from a family who believed they had been cheated of an aristocratic inheritance. Lizzie, or Miss Sid, was discovered in a millinery shop by a young contemporary of Rossetti. As a milliner’s assistant, Lizzie was in a poorly paid occupation seen as notoriously likely to succumb to immoral behaviour, the term ‘milliner’ being one euphemism for prostitute. Lizzie, though, was genteel, and her demeanour was perceived by Rossetti’s circle as very ladylike and proud, suggesting that she felt herself fit to be their equal. No doubt the flattering offer to model for the young men, backed up by the promise of money without sweated labour and long hours, was an incentive, but Lizzie or her family may well have also believed she could make an advantageous match through mixing with gentlemen. Her gold-red hair and ethereal

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28 In 1856 Rossetti is supposed to have seduced Annie Miller while her fiancé, his close friend Holman Hunt, was overseas. See Jan Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood*, London, Quartet, 1985, p. 102.
30 See Chapter 4 of this thesis for Rossetti’s apparent dating of his love for Jane as beginning September 1857.
32 Harrison, *The Dark Angel*, p. 34.
33 Angeli, *His Friends and Enemies*, p. 188.
features became a favourite among the Pre-Raphaelite circle. The height of her modelling career came with Millais’s painting of her as the drowning Ophelia, an icon of Pre-Raphaelite art.

The relationship between Elizabeth Siddal and Rossetti was complex and ultimately destructive. Once Lizzie had started modelling for Rossetti, around 1850, he severed her connections with other artists, making her his model exclusively, then his pupil. Given Rossetti’s series of rather chaste hand-holding sketches and paintings, the pair were perhaps innocent at first. Biographer Jan Marsh believes the absence of a pregnancy indicates that they were chaste until married.\(^{34}\) Since Lizzie had given up her milliner’s job to model and was now forbidden to model for others, she was financially dependent on Rossetti. Perhaps with a view to helping Rossetti decide on marriage, as well as offering Lizzie material assistance, Ruskin bought her artworks and offered her a stipend, which offended her. Ruskin insisted that this was not a patronising gesture but one that sprang from a genuine desire that she develop her art. While Rossetti’s friends and Ruskin were apparently uncomfortable with the arrangement and urged marriage, it seems that Rossetti spent little time considering the impact on Lizzie, possibly arguing for the notion of a spiritual union. Behind this behaviour may have been a class assumption: society accepted that middle-class men were likely to exploit such girls ‘without family or who did not belong to the respectable classes and whose family was considered to be of no importance’.\(^{35}\)

Despite her fierce independence, Rossetti called Lizzie his dove, and all his drawings show her reclining languidly or standing passively with downcast eyes, yet according to William Rossetti, she seems to have had an ironic turn of phrase and a fiery temper, hardly the attributes of passivity.\(^{36}\) To conform to Rossetti’s preference for a languid dove, Lizzie would have had to act out the ideal. There is a hint of such role play in a passage by Georgie Burne-Jones:

She did not talk happily when we were alone, but was excited and melancholy, though with much humour and tenderness as well; and Gabriel’s presence seemed needed to set her jarring nerves straight, for her whole manner changed when he came into the room. I see them now as he took his place by her on the sofa and her excitement sank back into peace.\(^{37}\)

\(^{35}\) Nead, Myths of Sexuality, p. 51.
\(^{36}\) Hawksley, Elisabeth Siddal, p. 58.
Although Georgie believes that Gabriel's presence sets Lizzie free, the opposite could also be true; he idealised a gentle creature, an inspiration for his art, encouraging her to be a dove in order to be loved and wanted, while she displayed other sides of her nature to others. Boldly independent and matching the bohemian style of Rossetti, she took rooms next to his, lived alone, and spent unchaperoned days in his studio, probably lessening the incentive to marry. For years Lizzie waited patiently – and sometimes impatiently – for the offer that never came or the mention that was soon forgotten. At other times she flew into a rage, once when Rossetti backed down after promising marriage and borrowing the money for a license, which he then spent. As years passed, Rossetti became less and less attached, and their fights more frequent. While all who knew Rossetti loved him unconditionally, a catalogue of his actions in relation to Lizzie seems simply dishonourable. The natural attraction and sympathy that drew the pair together as young people was doomed by his reluctance to 'make an honest woman' of her. The situation was evident to Rossetti's sister, the poet Christina Rossetti, who wrote of the destructive relationship and her brother's part in it in the poem 'In An Artist's Studio':

One face looks out from all his canvases,  
One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans:  
We found her hidden just behind those screens,  
That mirror gave back all her loveliness.  
A queen in opal or in ruby dress,  
A nameless girl in freshest summer-greens,  
A saint, an angel -- every canvas means  
The same one meaning, neither more nor less.  
He feeds upon her face by day and night,  
And she with true kind eyes looks back on him,  
Fair as the moon and joyful as the light:  
Not wan with waiting, not with sorrow dim;  
Not as she is, but was when hope shone bright;  
Not as she is, but as she fills his dream.

Lizzie's health deteriorated, and friends tried to have the problem diagnosed. One specialist gave the cause as 'mental power long pent up and lately overtaxed'. It was frequently the case that when Lizzie's health took a turn for the worse, Rossetti's love for her was revived, and so spells of indifference were broken by periods of intense anxiety. Despite this, Rossetti claimed that Lizzie was the one inspiration for his art, withholding from her the chance to break away. One suspects that Rossetti, always impecunious, might

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have been unwilling to go to the trouble to legalise a union which would curtail other options:

A well-born wife represented the means by which a man might add the lustre of social prestige to his recently acquired fortune, just as the daughter of a rich man afforded the gentlemanly but impecunious suitor a unique opportunity of refurbishing the dignity of the family name.41

Rossetti’s family would have hoped their talented and charming son might acquire a wife of equal station and better fortune, and Rossetti himself, in other ways highly eccentric, was as sensible as the others of his class to the nuances of social position, and Lizzie’s lack of it. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, Rossetti’s brother William, who practically supported him, did not like Lizzie. If they married, the brotherly stipend might have diminished.

At about the time of the Jovial Campaign, Rossetti’s infatuation with several models heralded a change in Lizzie, and it seems she had had enough. At 28 she was in an unenviable position, an ageing working-class woman without an income, and with a compromised past. She could hardly be called a fallen woman, having no official position from which to fall, but according to Nead, her history with Rossetti classified her as a kind of prostitute. As noted by Nead, Ralph Wardlaw’s 1842 lectures on prostitution and ‘its nature, extent, effects, guilt, causes, and remedy’ referred to prostitution as ‘illicit intercourse’ and defined a prostitute as ‘a designation of character’ formed ‘by voluntary repetition of the act’ – thereby ‘sidestep[ping] economic and social issues and represent[ing] prostitution as a moral state’.42 Lizzie attempted to sever connections with Rossetti but, when she became seriously ill, Rossetti left Oxford, Jane and his panel in the Union to be with her. Lizzie was staying with relatives in Matlock, and on Rossetti’s arrival there was a reconciliation. However not long after, Rossetti returned to Oxford, visiting Jane Burden in Morris’s absence.

In 1860 Lizzie again deteriorated and again it was thought she was dying. Rossetti rushed to her bedside, and finally made the offer he had so long withheld, writing to his mother that:

Lizzie and I are going to be married at last, in as few days as possible, Like all the important things I ever meant to do – to fulfil duty or secure happiness- this one has been deferred almost beyond possibility. I have hardly deserved that Lizzie should still

41 Harrison, The Dark Angel, p. 3.
consent to it, but she has done so, and I trust I may still have time to prove my thankfulness to her.\textsuperscript{43}

Jan Marsh points out that the final lines of this extract give away Rossetti’s expectation that her life, and therefore the marriage, would not last long.\textsuperscript{44} Lizzie was in ‘a constantly failing’ state of health, seemingly ‘ready to die daily, and more than once a day’. Rossetti’s conscience troubled him: if she died before the wedding ‘I should have so much to grieve for, and what is worse, so much to reproach myself with that I do not know how it might end for me’, he wrote prophetically.\textsuperscript{45} However, Lizzie began to recover, until she was well enough not only to marry, but also to travel to Paris for the honeymoon. Their wedding took place in May 1860, a fortnight before that of Georgie and Edward Burne-Jones. The two couples agreed to meet in Paris on their honeymoons, but the Burne-Jones honeymoon proved a disaster when Edward became ill, probably with nerves.\textsuperscript{46} As a presage of things to come, Georgie, not yet twenty, was obliged to take on the unromantic role of nurse rather than new bride.

**New life, and death in the midst of life**

Within a year of their marriage in 1859, William and Janey Morris had moved to the newly-built Red House. Morris had planned the building with architect Philip Webb while on the trip to France with him the previous year. Built in an orchard with a walled garden, it was the need to decorate this unique house appropriately that inspired the beginning of Morris’s business, The Firm, named initially ‘Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co.’ Here, Morris and Janey were extremely happy, entertaining friends who helped to decorate the walls and furniture, dining lavishly and playing games of hide and seek after dark in the many rooms. The friends utilised images and figures from the stories they loved, Rossetti teasingly – if ungenerously – inscribing the words ‘As I can’t’ in place of Morris’s motto ‘If I can’. Georgie recalled these joyful days, stating that ‘the time spent together there was one to swear by, if human happiness were doubted’.\textsuperscript{47} When she wrote these words, Georgie had had much cause to doubt human happiness.

Childbearing brought about profound changes for the friends. First the Morris’s daughter Jenny was born in January 1861. The Rossettis were also expecting when Georgie too became pregnant, but Gabriel, aware of Lizzie’s weakness and use of narcotics, was

\textsuperscript{44} Marsh, *Rossetti: Painter and Poet*, p. 215.
\textsuperscript{46} Jan Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood*, London, Quartet, 1985, p. 76.
\textsuperscript{47} Burne-Jones, *Memorials*, vol. 1, p. 208.
anxious about a successful outcome for her pregnancy, which concern proved correct when Lizzie gave birth to a stillborn daughter on 2 May.\textsuperscript{48} Georgie and Edward’s first born arrived in October. Georgie and Lizzie had planned to produce an illustrated book of fairy tales together, but the idea did not survive these births. When first married Georgie attempted to keep up her drawing practice, and even had their maid stand for her to draw rather than do the housework.\textsuperscript{49} Ina Taylor spotted the problem:

The fact that she should have to content herself with sketching a serving girl in the dining room, whilst her husband drew from a professional model in the adjoining studio, goes a long way to demonstrating the sort of encouragement Georgie received.\textsuperscript{50}

Edward’s courtship had involved art lessons for Georgie and her sisters, who had grown up with a keen desire to learn and were jealous of their brothers being educated at Oxford. Once Georgie was wed, her husband’s interest in her talent evaporated. Taylor says that Burne-Jones was content to give drawing lessons to Georgie and her sisters because it fitted his ideal of ladies passing the time in a bower ‘while awaiting the return of their champions’,\textsuperscript{51} but later his opinion of women artists was that they should never attempt to paint.\textsuperscript{52} ‘I like women when they are good and kind and agreeable objects in the landscape of existence’, he said later in life; ‘to educate them only spoils them and takes away their charms’.\textsuperscript{53} With such views in her household it is no wonder that Georgie’s summation of the situation seems to echo society’s expectations and predictions of failure and inadequacy:

\begin{quote}
It is pathetic how we women longed to keep pace with the men and how gladly they kept us by them until their pace quickened and we had to fall behind.\textsuperscript{54}
\end{quote}

Once her son was born Georgie found that she and her strident infant, the ‘small stranger’, were henceforth excluded from the artist’s studio. Excusing the real cause, she blamed the wrong person:

\begin{quote}
The difference made in our life made by the presence of a child was very great, for I had been used to be much with Edward … and I remember the feeling of exile with which I now heard through [the studio’s] closed door the well-known voices of
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{49} Burne-Jones, \textit{Memorials}, vol. 1, p. 217.
\textsuperscript{51} Taylor, \textit{Victorian Sisters}, p. 71.
\textsuperscript{53} Taylor, \textit{Victorian Sisters}, p. 71.
\textsuperscript{54} Burne-Jones, \textit{Memorials}, vol. 1, p. 218.
friends together with Edward’s familiar laugh, while I sat with my little son on my knee and dropped selfish tears upon him as the ‘separator of companions and the terminator of delights’.55

Not only could Georgie not enter the studio, but she was also discouraged in her own modest artistic aspirations. Georgie had been practising woodcutting for illustrations; after the birth of her son she returned to this craft. With typical generosity Rossetti recommended her to a friend who wanted woodcuts for a book he was writing, although qualifying his recommendation by saying that ‘Jones would be on hand’. Ruskin heard of the plan and advised her as follows:

I am delighted to hear of the woodcutting. It will not, I believe, interfere with any motherly care or duty, and is far more useful and noble work than any other of which feminine fingers are capable, without too much disturbance of feminine thought and nature. I can’t imagine anything prettier or more wifely than cutting one’s husband’s drawings on the woodblock: there is just the proper quantity of echo in it … Keep your rooms tidy and baby happy – and then after that as much woodwork as you’ve time and liking for.56

Although this is a form of encouragement, Georgie’s artistic endeavour is placed last in the context of other wifely duties, and can never compare to the work of men. Not surprisingly, Georgie let it drop altogether.

This detail is telling when considered alongside information we have about Morris and Jane’s relationship at this time. He involved Janey in his unfolding discoveries about medieval embroidery techniques. He taught her the first principles of laying in the stitches. Janey recollected their early days of marriage as a time of happy creativity:

We studied old pieces and by unpicking etc., we learned much, but it was uphill work, fascinating but only carried through by his enormous energy and perseverance … The first stuff I got to embroider on was a piece of indigo-dyed blue serge I found by chance in a London shop … I took it home and he was delighted with it and set to work at once designing flowers. Then we worked in bright colour in a simple rough way. The work went quickly and when finished we covered the walls of our bedroom at Red House to our great joy.57

The comparison is interesting – ‘he was delighted’, ‘we worked’, ‘to our great joy’. Morris and Janey are companions, partners in the discovery and creation of new projects, and despite Janey’s background, her taste and talent are recognised and encouraged. Indeed, she became an extraordinary needlewoman. Parkins rightly notes in her sympathetic biography of Jane that this is ‘not an account of a dutiful wife assisting her

husband’s hobby’ but ‘a partnership in which education intertwined with practice and where the painstaking acquisition of new skills was a joint endeavour’.\textsuperscript{58} Thus, in the same way that Morris did not make distinctions about female desire, he was inclusive and encouraging when it came to sharing his own interests in craft and design with his wife. This was presaged early in writings such as ‘The Story of the Unknown Church’ in which there is a woman sculptor carving flowers for the chapel.\textsuperscript{59}

Before long, all three women were pregnant again. In 1864 the Burne-Joneses were holidaying with the Morрисes at Littlehampton. Here toddler Philip developed scarlet fever. Probably to protect pregnant Georgie, they left the child with a nurse and went to stay with the Morрисes at Red House, but on their return home Georgie developed scarlet fever and gave birth prematurely. As she lay delirious, the child, named Christopher by his father, showed signs of the fever too and after only three weeks of life, died before Georgie was well enough to hold or care for him. Meanwhile, at Red House, Morris also became ill. He was diagnosed with rheumatic fever, a disease caused by the same bacteria as scarlet fever and sometimes a consequence of it. Rheumatic fever often affects the heart, other organs and joints, with serious consequences for health and longevity.\textsuperscript{60} Although not discussed in any biography, this episode probably shortened Morris’s life and was certainly responsible for the rheumatism and gout that were henceforward to plague him.

This time of illness marked a low point for Morris, from which he never physically recovered.\textsuperscript{61} The Burne-Jones’s infant died on 24 November, precipitating or coinciding with their decision to abort a plan that had been in Morris’s mind for some time. Morris had asked Philip Webb to design an additional wing for Red House in which the Burne-Joneses would live, and here the two men could work from home. Henderson and MacCarthy speculated on the reason Burne-Jones reneged on the plan; perhaps he could not afford his share of costs, or felt he would be financially beholden to Morris; or perhaps he preferred life in London rather than the fields of Kent. Burne-Jones wrote to Morris scotching the idea and from his sick bed Morris replied:

\begin{quote}
As to our palace of Art, I confess your letter came as a blow. In short I cried; but I have got over it now. As to our being a miserable lot, old chap, speaking for myself I don’t know, I refuse to make myself really unhappy for anything short of the loss of friends one can’t do without. Suppose in all these troubles you had given us the slip
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{58} Parkins, \textit{Jane Morris}, p. 150; see also Parkins’ discussion of Jane’s expertise as a craftswoman on pp. 162–71.
\textsuperscript{60} Mackail, \textit{Life of William Morris}, vol. 1, p. 163
\textsuperscript{61} An examination of Morris’s correspondence reveals many occasions throughout his life when he declined invitations on the basis of being laid up with ‘gouty rheumatism or rheumaticky gout’.
what the devil should I have done? … I need hardly tell you of how I have suffered for you in the worst of your troubles; on the Saturday I had begun a letter to you but it read so dismal (as indeed I felt little hope) that I burnt it.\textsuperscript{62}

Despite the attempt at a flippant tone, this brush with ‘the loss of a friend one can’t do without’ and the hoped-for joint living arrangement, might well have reminded Morris of his feelings for Georgie, whose life had been in danger, and was the one likely to have ‘given the slip’. The letter continues with a plea for the Burne-Jones family to come and stay with the Morrises for a while. The Firm moved to London, and the distance meant that in a couple of years Red House was sold. Morris never returned to the place where this dream died.

But the sorrows plaguing this circle were not at an end. Rossetti’s marriage to Lizzie had failed to bring her love and happiness, even companionship. He continued his life largely unchanged, impatient with her goading and misery. Her nervous depressed state probably increased her dependence on opiates. It is rumoured that Rossetti and Lizzie conceived another child.\textsuperscript{63} It was early in this second pregnancy that Lizzie, Swinburne and Rossetti had gone out to dine. Rossetti took Lizzie home and left for the Workingman’s College where he taught, returning late to find her in a coma after an overdose of laudanum. Doctors could not revive her, and she died the next morning, 11 February 1862. Although the coroner found it a case of accidental poisoning, according to Marsh, Madox Brown had found and destroyed a suicide note.\textsuperscript{64} Another version purporting to be an account given by Brown to his daughter Lucy, who passed it on to her daughter, the author, says it was Rossetti who found the note, and that he pocketed it and later that night, after doctors had arrived and were trying to save Lizzie, he went in his grief to show it to Brown who took and burned it.\textsuperscript{65} Thomas Hall Caine recollected:

On the night of his wife’s death, when he returned to her room, he found a letter or message to himself lying on the table by her side … he said the letter had left such a scar on his heart as would never be healed … And above all it was my impression that Rossetti had never ceased to reproach himself with his wife’s death, as an event that had been due in some degree to failure of duty on his part, or perhaps to something still graver, although in no wise criminal.\textsuperscript{66}

\textsuperscript{63} According to Helen Rossetti Angeli, the source of this rumour was Violet Hunt’s \textit{The Wife of Rossetti} (1932), apparently a notoriously unreliable source. See Helen Rossetti Angeli, \textit{Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His Friends and Enemies}, London, H. Hamilton, 1949, pp. 6n and 272.
\textsuperscript{64} Marsh, \textit{Rossetti: Painter and Poet}, p. 243.
\textsuperscript{65} Angeli, \textit{Rossetti: His Friends and Enemies}, p. 197.
\textsuperscript{66} Angeli, \textit{Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His Friends and Enemies}, p. 201.
Rossetti was devastated. In a gesture of remorse and guilt he placed the folio of poems he had been working on for years, into her coffin. Brown asked him to reconsider but Rossetti’s brother William thought it did him credit, so the folio was buried with Lizzie.\footnote{Marsh, Rossetti: Painter and Poet, p. 244.}

Once more a worldly bachelor, Rossetti now began to paint lush portraits of women. His friendship with Swinburne flourished, and along with Simeon Solomon they formed a kind of naughty boys’ circle, exchanging lewd lyrics and drawings. Into this group, Burne-Jones, but not Morris, was drawn;\footnote{MacCarthy, The Last Pre-Raphaelite, p. 194.} with Burne-Jones enjoying in particular ‘jokes’ concerning ‘victimised clerics and debauched bishops’, usually penned by Swinburne (perhaps ironic for the youth who had once aspired to become archbishop himself).\footnote{MacCarthy, The Last Pre-Raphaelite, p. 194. MacCarthy, The Last Pre-Raphaelite, p. 196.}

In a letter from Burne-Jones to Swinburne that escaped destruction, he reported how he kept one of Swinburne’s pornographic letters – over which he would ‘gloat and scream with bliss’\footnote{MacCarthy, The Last Pre-Raphaelite, p. 196.} – in his pocket constantly, for fear Georgie or someone else might find it. This secret life, so different from his public image, released the erotic tension that Burne-Jones had been repressing; deceiving his wife in this small way prepared him for the larger deceptions of adultery. Penelope Fitzgerald noted the early influence of Rossetti on Burne-Jones:

\begin{quote}
[T]here were … deeper patterns that Burne-Jones began to study from Rossetti. The first was the art of concealment. Rossetti himself carefully separated the mythical and superstitious self, darkly concerned with the coincidence of his name and life with Dante’s, from the respectable son and brother to his family, and again from the dashing cove … familiar with pawnbrokers, slop shops and music halls … Burne-Jones was to find there was a solace in manoeuvering the different aspects of his own personality.\footnote{Penelope Fitzgerald, Edward Burne-Jones: A Biography, London, Michael Joseph, 1975, p. 50.}
\end{quote}

During this period, the Morrices also experienced ill fortune. Their second daughter, May, was born fourteen months after her sister. Subsequently, Janey became noticeably ill with a mysterious disorder, which some biographers believe was psychosomatic;\footnote{Henderson, Life of William Morris, pp. 81, 104.} one speculated that a miscarriage might have caused a lingering problem.\footnote{Marsh, Jane and May Morris, p. 54.} Certain symptoms of this illness, which became worse over time, suggest it was gynaecological: back pain,
prostration and weakness, and some treatments suggest a chronic infection. This illness put an end to childbearing and possibly also to lovemaking.

Even so, Janey was not too ill to sit for Rossetti. In 1865 he commissioned a series of photographs of her, in which she looks extremely gaunt and as though she was in pain. In June 1867, the Morrises and the Burne-Joneses and their children holidayed in Oxford together, perhaps trying to recapture some of the happiness of the previous decade. But for the Burne-Joneses, there was little happiness. Edward had fallen in love with Maria Zambaco, a tragic young woman who had fled her husband in France to live in London with her mother and extended family.

‘The Greeks’, as the Ionides clan were referred to, were friends and patrons of Burne-Jones and Rossetti; Maria’s mother commissioned Burne-Jones to paint her daughter. Sessions in the studio quickly inflamed a passion between them. Maria appeared to be the kind of femme fatale Burne-Jones had been carefully avoiding in his youth, perhaps since the mysterious ‘love-troubles’ mentioned in his early Oxford days. Georgie wrote of her husband in Memorials that “[t]wo things had tremendous power over him – beauty and misfortune and far would he go to serve either”. But Georgie’s own misfortune did not inspire her husband. The affair was confirmed for Georgie when she discovered a letter in the pocket of one of Burne-Jones’s jackets, but it continued, known by a close circle of friends. Burne-Jones asked Rossetti to paint his beloved, and he had the picture framed with a door in front that he could lock. It was kept in his studio where he could dote on it in private.

In January 1869 Burne-Jones and Maria had a very public drama. She tried to bring matters to a head when Edward backed out of a planned elopement. She proposed a suicide pact, and as they walked away from Burne-Jones’s house along a lane in Kensington, he struggled to prevent her taking ‘laudanum for two at least’. Then, after a noisy scene, she tried to drown herself in the water outside Browning’s house, a known suicide locale. ‘Bobbies collar[ed] Ned who was rolling on the stones with her to prevent it, and God knows what else’, Rossetti wrote. Burne-Jones fainted on the way home, his

75 Jack Lindsay, William Morris: A Life, London, Constable, 1975, pp. 165–6. An apocryphal anecdote from 1870, in which Rossetti is supposed to have declared that Morris ‘would not dare’ to enter Jane’s sleeping area, coincides with mentions that Jane was ill most of the year.
76 MacCarthy, The Last Pre-Raphaelite, p. 38.
private life suddenly and dramatically exposed. ‘In his usual way of accepting what a friend had done’,79 Morris was pressed into service:

Poor Ned's affairs have come to a smash altogether, and he and Topsy, after the most dreadful to-do, started for Rome suddenly, leaving the Greek damsel beating up the quarters of all his friends and howling like Cassandra. Georgie stayed behind. I hear to-day however that Top and Ned got no further than Dover, Ned being now so dreadfully ill that they will probably have to return to London.80

Return they did, and once more Georgie was to nurse the husband who had almost deserted her. When the dust had settled, Georgie took her son and fled to Oxford, the place where she had once been so happy. She had now to face life with the husband who had publicly shamed her, even attending to the nervous prostrations caused by his love for another woman. The relationship with Maria continued well into the next decade, with Georgie now playing the part of steadfast wife.

**Gabriel and Mrs Top: ‘Is it not too outrageous?’**

Burne-Jones’s headlong rush into passion at this time might have stirred the desires of others in his circle. Rossetti was painting a portrait of Janey Morris, who would sometimes stay overnight at his residence in Cheyne Walk. Since November 1868 Rossetti’s mental and physical health had worsened. He now found it hard to sleep and was frequently agitated; his attentiveness towards Janey became more overt, causing comment among friends and acquaintances. William Bell Scott wrote of a dinner in November 1868:

> Gabriel sat by Jeannie [sic] and I must say acts like a perfect fool if he wants to conceal his attachment, doing nothing but attend to her, sitting side-ways towards her, that sort of thing.81

On another occasion, as the gossip shows, Janey had already been labelled a *femme fatale* and dubbed Lucretia Borgia:

> I have come to the conclusion … that the greatest disturbance to [Rossetti’s] health and temper … is caused by an uncontrollable desire for possession of the said L.B. Letitia … was the first to inform her of Gabriel’s return, he having refrained from going as he understands they are being watched. Even Mrs Street has spoken to Letitia about Gabriel being so fond of Mrs Top [Morris].82

Rossetti’s concern for being watched is a hint of the paranoia that would later develop, though it seems at parties he did not take the trouble to be careful. Burne-Jones

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81 Salmon, *Chronology*, p. 42.
parodied his attentiveness in a cartoon that dates from around this time (see Figure 12). If this attentiveness was obvious to his friends and to outsiders, it would certainly have been so to Morris. William Bell Scott also observed on the evening mentioned above:

As to Gabriel he forgets everyone else. When he went down, although it was my part to take Jeanie, G got her arm in his in a moment, then abandoned her as hurriedly for the nearest other lady, Morris looking at him all the time.83

Even the Firm’s manager, Warrington Taylor, became concerned about the potential damage to their business reputation and wrote sternly about the goings-on among the firm’s partners in 1869:

I only want … to let it be understood that we in no way sanction as a body the slightest irregularity of life … without some sort of tone is kept up the firm must sink, for no society ever lasted yet which ignored the fundamental principles of morality.84

It seems Morris became more sensible of such views at this time. When Morris left with Burne-Jones on the escape to Rome following the suicide attempt by Maria Zambaco, Rossetti wrote: ‘Janey has stopped her sittings by order during foreign service – just as I supposed.’85 In view of the climate of scandal, it seems likely that Morris, not unreasonably, wanted to keep the one emerging in relation to his wife under control until his presence would again stifle rumours.

Figure 12

Edward Burne-Jones, Dante Gabriel Rossetti bringing cushions to Jane Morris. 1869-70.

84 MacCarthy, The Last Pre-Raphaelite, p. 217.
Morris’s closest friend was now involved in an illicit relationship that was devastating his wife, while his other friend had begun to seduce Morris’s own wife. Meanwhile, social life continued as near normal as possible on the surface, with entertaining and visits. Could the ideal of brotherhood survive such underhand goings-on? Where relations between the sexes were concerned, Morris was said to be a fatalist, but with so much subterranean turmoil around him, it is no wonder his equilibrium gave way, resulting in some kind of outburst at a dinner at the Burne-Jones’s home in May. The next day Morris felt the need to apologise to his friend:

My Dearest Ned,
I am afraid I was crabby last night, but I didn’t mean to be, so pray forgive me – we seem to quarrel in speech now sometimes, and sometimes I think you find it hard to stand me, and no great wonder for I am like a hedgehog with nastiness – but again forgive me for I can’t on any terms do without you.86

To the other friend present he wrote: ‘I could explain all to you in a word or two if an explanation were necessary to you, which I doubt.’87

In the summer of 1869 Janey’s health worsened to the extent that Morris was deeply worried. This might have been owing to pressure exerted on her by Rossetti, who had been becoming increasingly agitated and irrational. As he had with Lizzie, he now insisted that Janey was the one person who could make him well, and inspire him to paint. Many letters ask about the blue dress and other props. When Janey refused to see him because she was ill and had lost weight he was appalled that she could believe her appearance alone was important to him:

Is it possible that [my letter] can have contained anything by which you could really suppose that the question as to your looks influenced the least my great desire to see you again?88

However, as their communications were based largely on what she would wear, how she would sit and what paintings he would make, it is hardly her fault if she felt that her appearance equated with her value to him. His letters unromantically centred on their joint states of health – or illness – and an interest in symptoms and remedies. She wrote that she had a presentiment that if she recovered ‘those I call my friends would be unable to stand me’.89 Perhaps she meant that it would distance her from Rossetti and his own ailments. In June the Morрисes arranged a journey to a health spa at Bad Ems in Germany for a water

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89 Jane Morris to Rossetti, cited in Lindsay, Life and Work, p. 158.
cure for Janey. Morris wanted to help his wife and perhaps also, from a safe distance, gauge the extent of her entanglement with Rossetti. Concerned for his other friend, he wrote that ‘Ned seemed more moved at my going than I would have liked to have seen him.’

In Jane’s absence, Rossetti’s letters to her became recklessly ardent. ‘I also want beyond everything to paint another portrait picture of you’. In addition he ramped up a campaign of stealthy criticism of Morris, to Janey and to others. The group teased Morris by exaggerating his tendency to put on weight and highlighting his endearing eccentricities, but always with affection. But Rossetti’s caricatures became edged with nastiness at this time. The sense is that Morris’s possession of Jane, on top of his talent and success in business and poetry, pushed Rossetti’s jealousy and envy beyond the point of restraint. The attacks seemed designed to play on any of Morris’s characteristics that might have irritated Janey, driving a wedge between husband and wife. In the abovementioned letter to Janey at the spa, for example, Rossetti included a drawing of her, sitting in a bath, dejectedly holding the second of the seven glasses of mineral water, while behind her Morris reads from the second of seven volumes of The Earthly Paradise. Morris’s eyes are on his book, not his wife in the bath (see Figure 13). Rossetti wrote: ‘The accompanying cartoon will prepare you for the worst, – whichever that may be, the seven tumblers or the 7 volumes’, but he sent ‘love to … dear Top and your dear self’. When he had received no reply a week later, Rossetti became anxious. ‘I now find Ned has heard from Top at Cologne and as I have no letter from you I fear it is possible mine may have miscarried.’

When reassured a few days later that Janey had received the letter, he wrote this extraordinary declaration:

All that concerns you is the all absorbing question with me, as dear Top will not mind my telling you at this anxious time. The more he loves you, the more he knows that you are too lovely and noble not to be loved: and, dear Janey, there are too few things that seem worth expressing as life goes on, for one friend to deny another the poor expression of what is most at his heart. But be is before me in granting this, and there is no need for me to say it. I can never tell you how much I am with you at all times. Absence from your sight is what I have long been used to; and no absence can ever make me so far from you again as your presence did for years. For this long inconceivable change, you know what my thanks must be [my emphasis].

Perhaps expecting censure for too frank a disclosure, he added: ‘Of course do not say a word of any kind in answer to this foolish part of my letter.’

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90 Salmon, Chronology, p. 44.
91 Rossetti to Jane Morris, in Their Correspondence, p. 8.
92 Rossetti to Jane Morris, in Their Correspondence, p. 8.
93 Rossetti to Jane Morris, in Their Correspondence, p. 11.
94 Rossetti to Jane Morris, in Their Correspondence, p. 11.
This outspoken declaration of love in writing would be disarming to any married woman, tucked though it is between pages of other gossipy news, and ending rather strangely with ‘All love to Topsy’, for whom it seems the letter is also intended. The ‘too few things worth expressing for one friend to deny the other the poor expression’ obviously means his love for Janey. Then the phrase, ‘He is before me in granting this’, begs the question: what has Morris granted him? It would seem to be permission to be with Janey alone, and to openly declare his feelings to her. Is this the ‘long inconceivable change’? It is evident that Top is ‘in’ on the unfolding romance, that he permits this love for his wife, confused as it is with her role as muse, model and archetypal beauty. Morris had stood by, allowing Rossetti to openly pay court to his wife, while still treating him as a friend. In one of the memorandum books Rossetti kept, there is a sketch of a bracelet of linked rosettes. Beside this is pencilled ‘Sept 57 © April 14 1868’.95 It was in September 1857 that Rossetti first met Jane; one can conjecture that 14 April 1868 was the day the ‘long inconceivable change’ occurred, and feelings were at last spoken of. Some weeks earlier, in February, Morris had written to Burne-Jones with an uncharacteristic hint of self-pity: ‘If you want my company (usually considered of no use to anybody but the owner) please say so’.96 This fragment is one of the only personal letters that remain from these years, where brusque two liners about business are all that have survived the censorship of friends and family.

Writing to Bad Ems a few letters later, Rossetti again takes the liberty of criticising Morris to his wife: ‘I suppose Topsy is roaring and screaming through the Parnassian

96 Morris, *Collected Letters*, vol. 1, p. 58.
tunnels and junctions in his usual style now, not without occasional explosion’. He included a cartoon of a naked Morris in a bath–shower arrangement, and then refers to a book on dieting, satirising the opening verses of *The Earthly Paradise* by calling it the poetry of the ‘idle singer of a too full day’, playing Morris’s weight. Janey evidently objected to the caricature on Morris’s behalf. Stung, Rossetti wrote a self-justifying paragraph invoking a swathe of biblical precedents for such satire.

It is hard to account for Rossetti’s nastiness towards Morris, especially as it would seem Morris had given him leeway to make love to his own wife. It finally upset Burne-Jones, who had it out with Rossetti: ‘With Rossetti I have had the skirmish I planned. First long letters then a face-to-face row’. MacCarthy believed this outburst was due to Burne-Jones’s disapproval of Rossetti’s relations with Janey, but it more likely sprung from his heartache about Rossetti’s nastiness to Morris. Burne-Jones wrote to Rossetti: ‘If you gird at Top [Morris] I grow impatient and feel cross – if it’s before strangers I feel explosive and miserable and so on’, and he signed it ‘your sick-at-heart Ned’. In addition to the ever-present jealousy of Morris’s success, perhaps there is also something in Rossetti’s response of the irritation of one who feels under an obligation. Jane was depressed as well as ill, and Morris’s compliance might have been given with an expectation that Rossetti’s attentions would make Janey happy. Morris initially commissioned the portraits of his wife Rossetti was painting, creating a legitimate reason for him to leave Janey in Rossetti’s company. Morris’s involvement would have irritated Rossetti, who preferred his romances to be clandestine and within his control.

This irritation, as suggested above, was no doubt exacerbated by Morris’s growing literary successes. The acclaim that greeted the publication of *The Life and Death of Jason* was really extraordinary. In 1867 Browning, Tennyson, George Eliot, Henry James and many other reviewers expressed admiration. With this new poem being released in parts, Morris was now considered one of the foremost poets of the age. Rossetti’s urge to belittle Morris privately coincided strangely with public praise. A few months previously, in February 1869, he had written to John Skelton:

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97 Rossetti to Jane Morris, in Their Correspondence, p. 21.
98 Rossetti to Jane Morris, in Their Correspondence, p. 24
You know Morris is now only 35 and has done things in decorative art which takes as high and exclusive a place in that field as his poetry does in its own. What may he not yet do?\textsuperscript{102}

Moreover, while Burne-Jones said there was nothing Rossetti liked so much as to take a friend’s mistress from him,\textsuperscript{103} Jan Marsh believes it is possible that Rossetti’s relationship with Janey, although physically intense, might have been chaste. They were both unwell, and adultery was not consistent with his values of brotherhood, Marsh argues, and could have gone against his own interests.\textsuperscript{104} Rossetti might not have wished that outcome, but he could rightly have feared it. This is further evidence that Rossetti and Morris were not enemies. Morris seems to have been a partner in the possibly ‘courtly’ role Rossetti was playing to his wife. It is no wonder that confusion has surrounded Morris’s behaviour, and that his poetry from this time, laden with love sorrow, has been attributed to this apparent breakdown in his marriage.

Thus, the three relationships that lead to marriage that have been surveyed in this chapter each began hopefully during times of youth and innocence. While Rossetti’s actual marriage to Lizzie Siddal was perhaps more compromised, each was based initially on ideals and dreams. Marriage charted a different path for men and women: Morris and Rossetti married working-class women whom they idealised as figures of beauty; Burne-Jones married a woman he idealised as a figure of purity. Each marriage would founder as these ideals came unstuck, and individuals found themselves playing new roles. The women often seem to have judged their own worth only according to the work of the men they supported. Janey Morris saw herself as an inspiration for Rossetti’s art. Georgie found her value in the socially accepted role of wronged but virtuous wife. Lizzie lost her role as a beauty, and the child who would have made her a valued mother, and finally, she lost the desire to live. As the men strove to build a reputation and career as artists, their wives found their value was solely as muse or mother figures. In the social discourse that defined women as good or bad, even these two limited options seemed mutually exclusive.

In the following chapter I examine the accounts of this period of marital upheaval as discussed in several contemporary biographies to show that Morris’s attitude to the relationship between his friend and wife has not been adequately examined or explained by commentators, including Henderson, Fitzgerald, MacCarthy, and Le Bourgeois. I offer a more consistent and compelling version of Morris’s actions in relation to his wife’s affair,

\begin{footnotes}
102 Salmon, Chronology, p. 43.
103 Rooke, Burne-Jones Talking, p. 49.
\end{footnotes}
and the import of the love poems from this period. I will demonstrate how the evidence of Morris’s own words tells a different story, one that indicates his own love, and an unusual empathy with and sympathy for the women of his circle.
Chapter 4

Go to Her Poor Rhymes and Speak the Words I Cannot Say, 1867–71

Shy and reserved in life, as to many matters that lay near his heart, he had all the instinct of the born man of letters for laying himself open in his books, and having no concealments from the widest circle of all.¹

The previous chapter examined the changes wrought upon the lives of Morris and his circle in the years between 1868 and 1875 as wayward desires arose and began to impinge upon marriages and friendships. Burne-Jones’s love affair, although considered regrettable, would be forgiven by society. There would be no lasting consequences, no social ostracism, and perhaps even a little kudos to be gained. The middle-class woman who contemplated a love affair, on the other hand, risked losing everything marriage could provide: security, status, reputation, even her home and children. Maria Zambaco had been through such a fall from grace but she had a private fortune and was supported by her family, who were wealthy members of the Greek community.² Few middle-class English women could afford to risk straying outside their marriages in this way. Although Janey was not brought up in the middle class, a widespread scandal would have been a disaster. For these and other reasons, the circle of acquaintances and later biographers of this group did what it could to prevent a scandal.

Subsequently, however, in the biographies of Henderson, Lindsay, MacCarthy and others, this period of Morris’s life has come to be referred to as the ‘stormy years’, a phrase used by Mackail in a letter to Aglaia Coronio, who had clarified details of the Zambaco affair for him.³ In this chapter I provide examples from these biographies to demonstrate that biographical interpretations of this ‘stormy’ period are inadequate or misguided. Close readings of Morris’s poetry from these years support my argument that the emotional content cannot be attributed solely to the situation with his wife, and therefore another explanation should be sought. Although Morris was at the height of his fame and success, much of his unpublished and some of his published poetry from this period is personal

and deeply unhappy. The obvious conclusion to be drawn is that the poems reflect Morris’s response to his ‘discovery’ of the relationship between Rossetti and Janey at this time. Biographers have quoted segments from the poems that seem to fit the circumstances, but are perplexed by Morris’s evident unwillingness to take a stand. It is at this point that biographers begin to puzzle over the psychological makeup of their subject. Under such circumstances, many a man might express outrage, sever the friendship with Rossetti, threaten him, even ‘punch him on the nose’, (and Morris’s ‘hot and passionate’ temper was legendary). It was within Morris’s power to forbid his wife to see Rossetti ever again. He might justifiably divorce his wife if he could prove adultery.

But biographers have had to accept that instead Morris commissioned portraits of his wife by Rossetti, and accompanied her to Rossetti’s house, or to homes close to where Rossetti was staying, and left her there for days and weeks at a time. Rather than being outraged at his friend, Morris lunched with Rossetti in London. In 1870 he began to search for a country retreat for the summer, and after a visit of inspection with his wife and Rossetti, he took a joint lease on Kelmscott Manor in a remote village in Oxfordshire. Here, on 3 June 1870 he installed his wife and children, leaving the next day for London; on 6 June he began a three-month journey to Iceland. A few days later, Rossetti moved in to Kelmscott Manor. From Iceland, Morris wrote to his wife ‘please dear Janey be happy’. These are not the actions of a deceived husband, nor are they consistent with the notion that Morris was under Rossetti’s power, or unable to take a moral stand. Morris did not stand by; he acted decisively. His actions are those of a man making way for his wife to be alone with another man. Lindsay says that Morris believed in free relations between couples, but argued ‘That the rejected one should instead proceed to provide a shield for the other two, behind which they might hide from censure, was certainly not part of his principles’. Or was it? Morris’s actions suggest otherwise. Faced with Morris’s failure to oust Rossetti, biographers struggle to reconcile this apparent passivity with the evidence of extreme heartache in his poems, and with his fiery temperament and his intolerance of other annoyances.

In response, biographers have tended to gloss over these biographical anomalies, or have proposed theories to account for them. Kelvin, for example, hints that Morris may

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7 Morris, *Collected Letters*, vol. 1, p. 142.
have suffered from some form of ‘sexual inadequacy’, Le Bourgeois that he had sexual feelings for his older sister Emma, and Fitzgerald that he was struggling with self-control in relation to the dominating Rossetti. In what follows, I examine many personal lyric poems of this time to demonstrate that these works cannot be addressed to Morris’s wife. Further, by substituting Georgie Burne-Jones for the ‘beloved’ addressed in Morris’s poetry, all the apparent incongruities fall away. Although MacCarthy has acknowledged that some of the poems must be addressed to Georgie, she and her predecessors attribute this evident love to the camaraderie of the mutually rejected, a consolation born of a greater loss – a tendresse, not a passion. I reject this view, and maintain that although the changed circumstances of his marriage caused Morris upset and readjustment, it was Georgie who had been the primary love of Morris’s life and to whom he now appealed as a freed man and potential lover. Her failure to respond, I argue, inspired the heartache in his work.

The biography of The Earthly Paradise, 1867–70

Between 1865 and 1870 Morris composed the large group of poetic tales that became The Earthly Paradise, which, after the phenomenal success of his Life and Death of Jason (1867), was eagerly awaited by the Victorian reading public. The work was issued in volumes between 1868 and 1870 as they were completed. Responding to emotional upheaval, Morris, as always, immersed himself in activity – writing poetry that apparently revealed something of his inner life. Tellingly, Morris has his poem actually address the audience in ‘L’Envoy’, when he writes: ‘Thou, keen-eyed, reading me mayst read him through’. Florence Boos places the work in the context of its time:

The Earthly Paradise is one of the great poems of an era which saw the emergence of many long poetic narratives of enduring resonance and linguistic beauty. Like Alfred Tennyson’s The Idylls of The King, Robert Browning’s The Ring and the Book, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Aurora Leigh, The Earthly Paradise expressed its author’s considered response to contemporary social issues and poetic tastes. In Morris’s case, this response carried with it a romantic and anti-puritanical view of heterosexuality, a deep attachment to ‘historicist’ evocations of past legends, and an equally deep belief in the reenactment of ‘popular’ or recurrent emotional truths which he believed were embodied in them.

9 Morris, Collected Letters, vol. 1, pp. xlii and xxxvii; see also footnote 3 on p. 173.
Morris followed *The Earthly Paradise* in 1872 with *Love is Enough*, a book-length formal masque; he continued to write many fragments and lyric poems that would remain unpublished in his lifetime.\(^{14}\) As E.P. Thompson noted, this body of work, stylistically similar and from the same years, marks a distinct change from Morris’s early work. Thompson calls it ‘the poetry of despair’, noting what he sees as the languor and luxury of the style that is nonetheless still redolent with horror.\(^{15}\) In this sense it is even markedly different in mood from its predecessor, *The Life and Death of Jason*, which is more confident and cheerful. The poetic style of *The Earthly Paradise* is dreamy and fantastical, the action narrated distantly, historically, and the feeling is quite unlike the vivacity and immediacy of Morris’s youthful poems. The oft-quoted lines from the opening apology signalling its author as the dreamer of dreams and the ‘idle singer of an empty day’ have dogged Morris’s literary reputation, tending to undercut perceptions of him as intellectually engaged with his own times:

Of Heaven or Hell I have no power to sing,
I cannot ease the burden of your fears,
Or make quick-coming death a little thing,
Or bring again the pleasure of past years,
Nor for my words shall ye forget your tears,
Or hope again for aught that I can say,
The idle singer of an empty day.

But rather, when aweary of your mirth,
From full hearts still unsatisfied ye sigh,
And, feeling kindly unto all the earth,
Grudge every minute as it passes by,
Made the more mindful that the sweet days die—
Remember me a little then I pray,
The idle singer of an empty day.

The heavy trouble, the bewildering care
That weighs us down who live and earn our bread,
These idle verses have no power to bear;
So let me sing of names remembered,
Because they, living not, can ne’er be dead,
Or long time take their memory quite away
From us poor singers of an empty day.

Dreamer of dreams, born out of my due time,
Why should I strive to set the crooked straight?
Let it suffice me that my murmuring rhyme
Beats with light wing against the ivory gate,
Telling a tale not too importunate

\(^{14}\) Many of these poems have been subsequently published in works about Morris and online, but drafts and unpublished fragments are found in the British Library manuscript collection, particularly Add. MS48298 A and B; other manuscript poems are held in the collection of the William Morris Gallery.

To those who in the sleepy region stay,
Lulled by the singer of an empty day.\textsuperscript{16}

Despite the second stanza’s suggestions of the readers’ mirth, full hearts and kindliness, the very opening lines introduce notes of fear, death, lost pleasure and tears, reiterated in the third stanza when the poet returns to the ‘heavy trouble and bewildering care’, suggesting that this entire project is an attempt to capture some kind of cumulative nobility or immortality, no matter how distant or faded, from insubstantial and sorrow-laden human existence. In this sense it provides evidence of Morris’s feeling of being lost or at sea, a motif he used more than once in published and unpublished verses around this time. With the loss of religious faith, and the personal upheavals around him, he reaches out to grasp the still attainable things – the beauty and pleasures of earthly life. Morris says plainly enough that this work is escapist:

\begin{verbatim}
So with this Earthly Paradise it is,
If ye will read aright, and pardon me,
Who strive to build a shadowy isle of bliss
Midmost the heating of the steely sea,
Where tossed about all hearts of men must be
Whose ravening monsters mighty men shall slay,
Not the poor singer of an empty day.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{verbatim}

The anomaly of this work is that while it was an enormous best seller that resonated with the Victorian middle class, it also reflected what was most personal to Morris. Thompson argues that the series of moods Morris paints in The Earthly Paradise, which he describes as oscillating between pleasure and nightmare, are evidence of Morris’s helplessness in the face of rampant industrialism, squalor and poverty.\textsuperscript{18} He convincingly argues that awareness of this misery undermined Morris’s joy in the beauty of nature and hope for the future of the things Morris loved: art, and the natural world from which it sprang. Thompson suggests that this emotional and artistic low point was passed when Morris discovered socialism, which gave him hope for the future and enabled him, through action and revolution, to cast off the oppressive languor evident in this work. Morris’s escapist dream, argues Thompson, struck a chord with contemporary Victorians, who were also suffering from the squalor and ‘feverishness’ of the age. Thompson’s harsh opinion of Morris’s style at this time is seen in his reaction to Love is Enough: ‘Morris was so possessed by the desire to escape from some important fact in his conscious thoughts [my emphasis] that he

\textsuperscript{17} Morris, Collected Works, vol. 3, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{18} Thompson, Romantic to Revolutionary, pp. 121–3.
was incapable of fashioning his experience into convincing art’.\textsuperscript{19} Thompson here begins to identify personal problems as a factor in the rather overwrought style and subject matter of the writing of this period. If there are differing views about the merit of Morris’s poetry, his biographers are unified in acknowledging the personal, self-revelatory nature of the poetry itself. In an oft-quoted phrase, Mackail wrote pointedly, if unhelpfully, that in the verses that frame \textit{The Earthly Paradise} there was an autobiography ‘so delicate and so outspoken that it must be left to speak for itself’.\textsuperscript{20} But the self-revelation is not accidental. Morris himself claims that his poem purposely reflects its author, is his messenger in fact. In ‘L’Envoy’, Morris fills six of the seven stanzas with references to his identification with the work. The poem itself speaks to us:

\begin{quote}
So near as that I lay
Unto the singer of an empty day

I have beheld him tremble oft enough
At things he could not choose but trust to me,
Although he knew the world was wise and rough;
And never did he fail to let me see
His love – his folly and faithlessness maybe.\textsuperscript{21}
\end{quote}

If this refers to love for his wife, it seems strange that Morris should call it folly, and stranger still to call it faithlessness. J.M.S. Tompkins, who made a thorough study of all Morris’s poetry, claims the autobiographical references in the work are ‘too little considered by those who dismiss Morris’s imaginative work as merely marginal to his serious interests. One does not tremble to confess what is merely marginal’.\textsuperscript{22} She also observed how, as Morris reached points in the narrative where ‘inner pressure’, or personal identification,\textsuperscript{23} distorted the version of his tale or writing style, that the work became more communicative – I would say more revealing. An example is given by another of the more astute readers of Morris’s poetry, David Latham, who notes in his article ‘Paradise Lost: Morris’s Re-writing of \textit{The Earthly Paradise}’:

In a draft for ‘The Wooing of Swanhild’, Morris writes of the reaction of the wooing Randver to the king’s warning: ‘and all the tumult of his spirit sank’ (45308.52). One might argue that Morris identifies with his character’s spirit, as Morris pauses to underline the letters of ‘spirit sank’ sixteen times.\textsuperscript{24}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{19} Thompson, \textit{Romantic to Revolutionary}, p. 153.
\textsuperscript{21} Morris, \textit{Collected Works}, vol. 6, p. 332.
\textsuperscript{23} Tompkins, \textit{An Approach to the Poetry}, p. 141.
\textsuperscript{24} David Latham, ‘Paradise Lost: Morris’s Rewriting of \textit{The Earthly Paradise}’, \textit{Journal of Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic Studies}, vol. 1, no.1, Fall 1987, p. 73.
\end{flushright}
Morris reveals his innermost life in this poetry, seemingly immersed in a mental landscape of torpid beauty and erotic desire constantly undercut by the sharp consciousness of the brevity of life. The verses for the months begin with ‘March’, which, after a brief wave at coming joy, returns to the doleful topic of death:

Ah, what begetteth all this storm of bliss
But Death himself, who crying solemnly,
E’en from the heart of sweet Forgetfulness,
Bids us ‘Rejoice, lest pleasureless ye die.
Within a little time must ye go by.
Stretch forth your open hands, and while ye live
Take all the gifts that Death and Life may give’

Again, Morris tempers any reference to happiness with a note of urgency to grasp pleasure before it is too late. Of these month poems to which Mackail referred, Thompson found ‘recurrent in several’ is ‘the theme of failure in love – the failure to establish a relationship of true confidence and intimacy, the longing of an intense love not fully reciprocated’. With the now well-known story of Janey and Rossetti ready to hand, why would biographers doubt that the misery sensed by the reader in these works is a result of anything other than the loss of marital affection? As such, Thompson finds Morris’s obsession with love misguided:

Love is not presented in the poem as a human relationship, but as a languorous yearning, a saturation of the senses, a weakening of the will, in short, as the attraction of the unconscious … The longing for death and the yearning for “love” become almost indistinguishable.

Thompson’s conclusion is that ‘[q]uite clearly, Morris felt his marriage with Jane Burden had failed: and this failure was the source of profound unhappiness’. Offering a reason for this failure, Thompson suggests Morris was beginning to emerge from a youthful world of romantic daydreams, and that:

he now was confronted in marriage … with a real person, [he] should have striven to create a new and truer relationship – one of mutual confidence, companionship and intellectual equality. And it was in this attempt, in the passing from romantic enchantment to intimacy, that he met with failure.

25 Morris, Collected Works, vol. 3, p. 82.
27 Thompson, Romantic to Revolutionary, p. 153.
28 Thompson, Romantic to Revolutionary, p. 157.
29 Thompson, Romantic to Revolutionary, p. 157.
He sees Morris as still attempting to attain an idealised experience of love, a refuge from life, and concludes that ‘[w]hichever impulse was dominant – that towards closer human intimacy, or that towards some idealised union of souls – both foundered on the rock of Janey’s passivity’. While offering Morris’s youthful idealism as one source of trouble, Thompson also has some harsh words for Janey based on her apparent indifference to the almost abject appeals evident in Morris’s poetry:

Janey, it seems, was not the kind of person to take too much blame upon herself for this failure … As she grew older, her personality seems to have grown less, rather than more, sympathetic, and her air of aloof discontent more marked.

Thompson bases this judgement, wrongly I argue, upon Morris’s personal poetry, in which his proffered love is rejected. Thompson’s conclusion is not borne out by the evidence of the affection and kindness the Morrices showed for each other throughout Morris’s life. Thompson does not believe, as some biographers have speculated, that a bond between Jane and Rossetti was forged before she married Morris and which might excuse her to some extent. He also does not take into account the fact that Jane’s social position meant she could not have refused Morris’s marriage proposal, even if she had been attracted to Rossetti, who was attached to Lizzie at the time they met.

In his 1967 biography Philip Henderson also dwelt on Morris’s failed relationship. He described Morris’s marriage at this juncture simply: ‘In the late 1860s Morris’s private life seems to have foundered in disaster’, and concluded that ‘while Morris was still passionately attached to his wife, he met with little or no response’. Looking at the published and unpublished poems of this period, he concluded that ‘there can be no doubt that Morris is writing about his own loneliness and despair’, and that this was in response to Janey’s rejection and withdrawal. The word ‘failure’ is often used in relation to Morris and this relationship – ‘[t]he failure of his marriage Morris regarded as his own personal failure’ – and I return to this notion of failure later as it is one that has had a lasting impact on modern perceptions of Morris.

In the most recent biography, Fiona MacCarthy notes that Rossetti began to be possessive about Jane as early as 1868, and that as his contact with Jane increased it became

31 Thompson, *Romantic to Revolutionary*, p. 158.
a cause for public comment. She believed that ‘Morris’s chagrin and dismay poured into his verses’. She says that these deal with love and loss and suffering, paralysis of feeling and damaged confidence, while at the same time Rossetti was penning lyrics of ‘love resurgent’, further undermining Morris’s position and self-esteem. In this context MacCarthy asks:

Why was Morris so complaisant? This is the more puzzling and more interesting question. Why did he retreat into a terrible self-pity instead of attempting to retrieve the situation with, if necessary, confrontation and threats?

MacCarthy attempts to answer this question. Morris, she argues, had been used to playing the victim for a joke; this time it was for real. He did not want a breach with Rossetti, and could ‘more easily relinquish his wife than disband a group of friends’. She notes his predilection for privacy and his shyness, implying a reluctance to broach a difficult subject. She identifies Morris’s behaviour as aligned with later liberal views on sexual relations, but asks:

Was this a view he had arrived at intellectually? Was it prompted by the stirrings of communist ideology? Or was it forced out of his own history of suffering? Would Morris have arrived at this philosophy if Janey had been other than she was?

MacCarthy also noted that, as early as June 1868, at a time when Rossetti was just beginning to openly express his attachment to Janey in letters, Morris, who was stranded in Bad Ems, fussed about a birthday present for Georgie, writing detailed instructions to his friend Webb on how it was to be packed and delivered. ‘One can tell … that he had come to care deeply about Georgie. This is the solicitude of an exceptional fondness’. Henderson also noted this closeness, saying: ‘At this time Morris and Georgie must have drawn particularly close together in understanding and sympathy’. Lindsay and MacCarthy allow that, in a few poems, Morris addresses Georgie rather than his wife, and that affection, even love, grew between them as they consoled each other in a compensatory way, but that this love was a chivalrous affection rather than a passion. Lindsay’s confusion is evident as he attempted to account for an erotically charged poem celebrating a love tryst entitled Summer Night.

This poem cannot record any experience he ever had with Janey; and when we consider that Morris was never given to writing lyrical verse of a personal kind except

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36 MacCarthy, A Life for Our Time, p. 222.
37 MacCarthy, A Life for Our Time, p. 226.
38 MacCarthy, A Life for Our Time, p. 248.
39 MacCarthy, A Life for Our Time, p. 226.
40 MacCarthy, A Life for Our Time, p. 248.
41 Henderson, His Life, Work and Friends, p. 98.
when driven to wrestle with his own problems, it seems possible that it tells of a summer night when he and Georgie embraced … there is no doubt that she and Morris must have come close together, both feeling deserted and in much need of sympathy and consolation.\textsuperscript{42}

Lindsay identifies Morris’s addresses to Georgie, but assumes this to be a secondary attraction, and takes the imputation no further. How could he, when he and others had identified Janey as the sole source of Morris’s deep unhappiness? Lindsay’s own biographical dilemma is displaced onto Morris when he states \textit{Love is Enough} was ‘his last desperate attempt to express in verse his emotional dilemma, swung between Janey and Georgie’.\textsuperscript{43}

As well as this difficult concept of being in love with two women, Morris is seen as ‘good’ and chivalrous, and Georgie as the ‘daughter of the Manse’,\textsuperscript{44} as proper and puritanical.\textsuperscript{45} They are both depicted as less sexually driven than the stereotypical Italian, Rossetti, or the mysterious gypsy-featured Jane. Their affection is deemed to have been chaste. Ignoring the passionate lyrics, MacCarthy’s conclusion is that Morris displays ‘[p]erfect self-abnegation and the clarion call to comradeship’.\textsuperscript{46} In keeping with the notion of Morris as a passive lover Penelope Fitzgerald also wrote:

\begin{quote}
It seems Morris may have made some declaration, how decent and embarrassed can be deduced by the transparent goodness of his character … Morris felt a loyalty and sympathy for her, combined with a need to give and receive affection, which trembled on the brink of love.\textsuperscript{47}
\end{quote}

Perhaps not surprisingly, Fitzgerald and Georgie’s biographer Ina Taylor picked up more clues to the relationship between Georgie and Morris than Morris’s own biographers, who were focused on Janey rather than Georgie as the source of Morris’s disturbance. Taylor noted Morris’s attachment to Georgie in the early years, and both remarked on the references to autobiography in \textit{The Earthly Paradise}, and the raft of gifts Morris bestowed on Georgie in the late 1860s. But, influenced by Henderson’s biography,\textsuperscript{48} Taylor concluded: ‘They viewed the great love and respect between them in a spiritual light, of a higher order than anything sexual’.\textsuperscript{49} Both authors noted Georgie’s destruction of all her letters to and from Morris during these years. Taylor says it is ‘a clear sign of the ambiguity of the nature

\textsuperscript{42} Lindsay, \textit{Life and Work}, p. 168.
\textsuperscript{43} Lindsay, \textit{Life and Work}, p. 188.
\textsuperscript{44} Fitzgerald, \textit{Edward Burne-Jones}, p. 123.
\textsuperscript{45} MacCarthy, \textit{The Last Pre-Raphaelite}, p. 205.
\textsuperscript{46} MacCarthy, \textit{A Life for Our Time}, p. 250.
\textsuperscript{47} Fitzgerald, \textit{Edward Burne-Jones}, p. 123.
\textsuperscript{48} Correspondence between the author and Ina Taylor, 1991.
\textsuperscript{49} Taylor, \textit{Victorian Sisters}, p. 122.
of their friendship … for Georgie … was a compulsive hoarder’. But while both acknowledge that Morris has a kind of love for Georgie during this time of trouble, neither is prepared to call it a passion, and both believe that Morris accepted that it must be chaste.

**An alternative reading: Georgie as the beloved**

To summarise, almost all of the biographical and critical literature agrees that this group of poems is primarily an indication of Morris’s feelings about his wife and his marriage, and that any feelings for Georgie were chivalrous and compensatory. But there is another way to read most of these highly personal poems, one that makes perfect sense of the beloved’s rejection and Morris’s otherwise inexplicable hopes and dreams, as well as his actions and inactions. I argue that, from about 1868, Morris had been obsessed with love for Georgie and hoped that, with each of their spouses occupied with other lovers, he could now win her heart. It is Georgie who Morris addresses in the following poem, with the burden of sorrow caused by her inability to respond to Morris’s love. The archaic, intimate ‘thou’ and ‘thy’ sound odd to the modern reader, but Morris and other poetic Victorians occasionally addressed one another this way in correspondence concerning love:

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O my love my darling, what is this men say
That I, for all my yearning have no words to deny?
Why was I made for nothing, for my life to pass away,
For thy kindness as my madness all utterly to die?

Love that cannot love me, een as I would believe
Those dreams of the sad morning, when thou callest me to come
Little touches, little kisses, all forgiveness to receive,
So I long to trust the story of that innocent sweet home.51
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The kindly ‘Love that cannot love me’, and the ‘sad morning when thou callest me to come’, identify the person being addressed as Georgie, most probably referring to the crisis in the Burne-Jones’s household that precipitated Edward’s attempted departure to Rome in January 1879. The ‘little touches, little kisses’ do not make any sense in relation to a ‘withdrawn’ wife. ‘Sad eyed and soft and grey thou art o morn!’ speaks of Morris’s growing despair for the fulfilment of their desires:

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O many-voiced strange morn, why must thou break
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With vain desire the softness of my dream
Where she and I alone on earth did seem?
How hadst thou heart from me that land to take
Wherein she wandered softly for my sake
And I and she no harm of love might deem?52

If Morris harboured a secret love for Georgie, that does not mean he did not suffer for other reasons. Friendships were fractured: his closest friends and his wife were conducting clandestine relationships that naturally involved avoiding him, as they met elsewhere, away from home, out of the public eye and in an obsessive world of their own. There was even an adulterers’ luncheon with Rossetti and Jane, and Edward and Maria.53

Also, Georgie, the focus of Morris’s hopes and dreams, was bound up in her own sorrow. One unpublished poem might shed light on Morris’s feelings of loneliness and ostracism during this time. It is an unpublished fragment with annotations, which Lindsay first suggested might have been addressed to Georgie as a fellow sufferer:

 Alone, unhappy by the fire I sat
And pondered o’er the changing of the days
And of the death of this good hope and that
That time agone our hearts to heaven would raise.
But now lie buried ’neath the stony ways
Where change and folly lead our wearied feet
Till face to face this verse and sorrow meet.

I strove to think what like the days would be
If ere we die we should grow glad again
But yet no image of felicity
From out such twice changed days my heart could gain
For still on pain I thought, and still on pain
Of shifts from grief to joy we poets sing
And of the long days make a little thing.

But grief meseems is like eternity
While our hearts ache and far-off[f] seems the rest
If we are not content that all should die
That we so fondly once unto us pressed
Unless our love for folly be confessed
And we stare back with cold and wondering eyes
On the burnt rags of our fool’s paradise.54

As the poem begins, the poet addresses another in the same situation of abandonment, disillusion and change. The second stanza ponders how happiness might come about from such ‘twice changed’ days, without success. The third stanza postulates that it must be

53 MacCarthy, A Life for Our Time, p. 254.
admitted that under the circumstances, their disappointment is owing to mistakes in loving – ‘our love for folly be confessed’. So both Morris’s and Georgie’s love for their respective spouses must be seen in retrospect as mistakes, and their belief in their marriages as a fool’s paradise. In the following stanzas, Morris is unable to imagine a happy future – ‘the happy days to come’ – because his thoughts keep returning to ‘that changed home’ and the ‘piteous tale’. That this home is Georgie’s is indicated by the next lines ‘my heart for very pain did fail / to think of thine’:

So I when of the happy days to come
I strove to think no whit would all avail
Rather my thoughts went back to that changed home
And in mine ears there rang some piteous tale
And all my heart for very pain did fail
To think of thine; I cannot bridge the space
”Twixt what may be and thy sad weary face.

Ah do you lift your eye-brow in disdain
Because I dare to pity or come nigh
To your great sorrow, helpless weak and vain
E’en as I know myself – ah rather I
On you my helper in the darkness cry
For you alone unchanged now seem to be
A real thing left of the days sweet to me65

Addressing proud Georgie, with her great sorrow, Morris recalls how she alone is unchanged from the sweeter days when they were young newlyweds and life was full of promise. Morris moves the poem onto a new level in the following stanzas. Having summarised their shared experience of rejection, praised Georgie’s stoicism, and reminded her of their happy past, he now alludes to secret feelings:

Dreamy the rest has grown now that my lips
Must leave the words unsaid my heart will say
While I grow hot, and o’er the edge there slips
A word that makes me tremble and I stay
With fluttering heart the thoughts that will away
We meet, we laugh and talk but still is set
A seal o’er things I never can forget
But must not speak of …56

Morris calls Georgie his ‘helper in the darkness’, but there is more to it – he must leave unsaid the words his heart will say – he grows hot, and must not reveal to her the thoughts setting his heart aflutter. Morris pleads his love for Georgie by reminding her of their shared past, happiness and now rejection. Returning to present loneliness, he reminds her

of what his life has become as the outsider in his own marriage, but how he strives not to be diminished by feelings of anger or hatred:

still I count the hours
That bring my friend to me with hungry eyes
I watch him as his feet the staircase mount
Then face to face we sit, a wall of lies
Made hard by fear and faint anxieties
Is drawn between us, and he goes away
And leaves me wishing it were yesterday.

Then when they both are gone, I sit alone
And turning foolish triumphs pages o’er
And think how it would be if they were gone
Not to return, or worse if the time bore
Some seed of hatred in its fiery core
And nought of praise were left to me to gain
But the poor [boon?] we talked of as so vain.57

Lindsay grasps at these verses referring to Janey and Rossetti but misses the significance of the earlier stanzas. The poet begins to speak of ‘him’ and ‘they’, Rossetti and Janey, with whom his dealings are now no longer straightforward. The ‘wall of lies’ is reminiscent of Morris’s civil yet stilted relationship with Rossetti during this time. When they are gone, the poet speaks of turning ‘foolish triumph’s pages over’. Is ‘foolish triumph’ his right to exercise authority over Jane, the ability to intervene that he now sets aside? He considers the dishonour to himself of admitting any enmity or hatred into his dealings. Morris once told a man whose wife had left him: ‘Think, old fellow, how much better it is that she should have left you, than you should have tired of her and left her’.58

And although one word is unreadable, the sense of the last two lines is that Georgie and Morris have discussed his response, which is the worthier path of tolerance. Below are the notes Morris scribbled on the manuscript alongside this poem:

was dull but alright now
Poets unrea in realities [sic]
x tears can come with verse
we two are in the same box
and need conceal nothing
don’t cast me away –
scold me but pardon me
What is all this to me (say you)
shame in confessing ones real feelings59

58 Lindsay, Life and Work, p. 171.
These unreal or real thoughts might be a direction for how the poem could proceed, but could also be notes to Georgie, to whom Morris showed all his work, and as he himself admitted, used this as a means of communicating what he was too shy to say.\textsuperscript{60} In any case it can be only Georgie who could ask: ‘What is all this to me?’ Morris reveals that expressing his real feelings might invoke shame on his part, scolding and a pardon on hers. So, while this poem speaks of Morris’s loneliness, disillusionment and need to take an honourable stand, it also indicates that Morris has an unspoken love for Georgie that is blocked by her present sorrow.

Ultimately, classifying these poems as evidence of Morris’s suffering on account of the Janey–Rossetti relationship alone simply does not hold up to scrutiny. Moreover, underlining their connection to Morris’s feelings for Georgie illuminates and makes sense of a number of elements. First, the beloved is much more like Georgie than Jane, both in appearance and demeanour. Second, given the supposed tragic triangular situation, where is Rossetti? Apart from the single previous poem’s ‘they’, he is nowhere to be found. Third, the poet’s feelings are the passion of a lover’s unfulfilled desire, not the yearnings of a rejected husband; and fourth, the enforced silence of the man, his plea for forgiveness, and the woman’s injunction at one point that the man may not address her, betokens a love that is improper, cannot be spoken of – an ‘unholy fire’ to use Morris’s un-matrimonial term.

In support of my theory I would underline also that the physical presence of the beloved is very unlike Jane, and much more like Georgie (see Figures 14 and 15). The woman described has little hands, which, according to the poet, write ‘treasured words of comfort and delight’. Would Janey, occupied with her own romance anyway, write to one with whom she shared a house? And although thin, Jane was a stately figure and pictures show her long elegant hands. Georgie was notably tiny, being less than five feet tall. Morris often refers to eyes – ‘wide grey eyes’, ‘frank and fathomless’ – in which the woman’s emotions are reflected though she does not or cannot speak of them. Georgie’s large eyes, a pale blue-grey, were her most characteristic feature; whereas according to Rossetti, Jane’s eyes were like those of a Brahmin cow. Georgie’s were described by Graham Robertson in \textit{Time Was} as unlike ‘those … I have ever seen before or since’ and noted also that their ‘direct gaze cost me little subconscious heart-searchings … lest in their grave wisdom, their crystal purity, [they] should rest upon anything unworthy’.\textsuperscript{61}

\textsuperscript{60} Morris, ‘Rhyme Slayeth Shame’, \textit{Collected Works}, vol. 24, p. 357.
During the summer of 1869, when from Germany Morris had fussed about a present for Georgie, he had also completed ‘The Lovers of Gudrun’ from the fifth book of The Earthly Paradise, a story based on an Icelandic legend about the love of two men for the same woman. This was the same motif that appeared in the story ‘Gertha’s Lovers’, written by Morris at the time of Georgie and Edward’s engagement in 1857. Again in ‘Gudrun’ two friends, united in a brotherhood although not brothers, vie for the love of a woman (whose name also begins with G). One reviewer noticed a change in the tone of this tale from those of earlier volumes of The Earthly Paradise:

The chief difference between the former and the present portion of Mr. Morris’s work lies in the increased prominence given in the present portion to passion and emotion…The versified Saga of Gudrun … is in its intention a half-tragic, half-epic study of fate and passion, and that of the most highly-strung and highly-wrought kind, and having a quite modern subtlety and involution of emotion thrown into it.

Morris’s personal state was worked into the story. Henderson remarked that in translating this saga how ‘the terrible figure of Gudrun becomes a Burne-Jones damsel’:63

Bluer than grey her eyes were; somewhat thin
Her marvellous red lips; round was her chin,
Cloven and clear-wrought; like an ivory tower
Rose up her neck from love’s white-veil’d bower64

This description is not merely a Burne-Jones damsel, it is the original: a description of Georgie’s pale grey eyes, thin lips and cleft chin. Though the theme of the love of two men

for the same woman has been seen as significant in a general way by Morris’s biographers, it has never quite fitted the Janey–Rossetti scenario, and only resonates in the attention to the inner conflict between the loyalty to a brother and love for a woman. If, however, we take Georgie as Gudrun, Burne-Jones as Kiartan whom she loves but who abandons her for other women, and Bodli for Morris, who passionately loves the rejected Gudrun, even though she does not return the love, then clear biographical parallels begin to emerge. As if to be more specific about its significance, one of the many gifts Morris presented to Georgie around 1870 was the bound manuscript of *The Lovers of Gudrun*, inscribed: ‘Georgie from W.M. 15th April 1870. This is the first copy of the poem with some alterations inserted: I wrote it in 1869 William Morris.”

Similarly, in the month poem ‘January’, we meet a woman whose eyes recall those of Georgie, and a story that fits the Morris-Georgie rather than Morris-Janey scenario. The bleak weather frames the moment when a man and woman’s eyes meet, and in this unguarded moment her true feelings are revealed. As her composure and reserve are resumed, the poet comforts himself with the belief that one day their mutual love can be expressed; in the meantime his suffering continues. The ‘eyes of heaven’ and ‘wide grey eyes, so frank and fathomless’ clearly bespeak Georgie’s eyes:

> From this dull rainy undersky and low,  
> This murky ending of a leaden day,  
> That never knew the sun, this half-thawed snow,  
> These tossing black boughs faint against the grey  
> Of gathering night, thou turnest, dear, away  
> Silent, but with thy scarce-seen kindly smile  
> Sent through the dusk my longing to beguile.

> There, the lights gleam, and all is dark without!  
> And in the sudden change our eyes meet dazed –  
> O look, love, look again! the veil of doubt  
> Just for one flash, past counting, then was raised!  
> O eyes of heaven, as clear thy sweet soul blazed  
> On mine a moment! O come back again  
> Strange rest and dear amid the long dull pain!

> Nay, nay, gone by! though there she sitteth still,  
> With wide grey eyes so frank and fathomless –  
> Be patient, heart, thy days they yet shall fill  
> With utter rest – Yea, now thy pain they bless,  
> And feed thy last hope of the world’s redress –  
> O unseen hurrying rack! O wailing wind!  
> What rest and where go ye this night to find?”

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65 Taylor, *Victorian Sisters*, p. 121.

66 Morris, *Collected Works*, vol. 6, p. 65.
If this is not a poem about Georgie, it is hard to account for the vision of unspoken love – of the sweet soul the poet believes he has seen – or the ‘scarce seen, kindly smile / sent through the dusk [his] longing to beguile’.

Henderson calls the following ‘a poem obviously addressed to Jane’, and links it to others that point quite clearly to a ‘tragic triangular situation’. Lindsay, however, identifies this work as addressed to Georgie and as evidence that Morris and Georgie ‘consoled one another for the griefs through which they were passing’. But the attainment of consolation is one thing; being drawn into Paradise quite another. It is consoling, brotherly love that throws the poet into despair:

She wavered, stopped, and turned; methought her eyes,
The deep grey windows of her heart were wet,
Methought they softened with a new regret
To note in mine unspoken miseries.
And as a prayer from out my heart did rise
And struggled on my lips in shame’s strong net,
She stayed me and cried Brother! Our lips met
Her dear hands drew me into Paradise –

Sweet seemed that kiss till thence her feet were gone
Sweet seemed the word she spake, while it might be
As wordless music – But truth fell on me
And kiss and word I knew, and left alone
Face to face seemed I to a wall of stone
While at my back there beat a boundless sea.

Lindsay says that in naming Morris ‘Brother’, ‘Georgie revives the taboo over which there can be no appeal’, but her use of the word ‘brother’ could also legitimise the intimacy of a kiss and embrace that would otherwise clearly be immoral. Perhaps in using this word, Georgie is convincing herself that these encounters are innocent. No wonder Morris was confused – her eyes and gestures say one thing, her words another. MacCarthy says of the following unpublished poem that Morris’s ‘personal history is made still more explicit’ without further comment. Alongside the draft of this poem, Morris has written the words ‘ask to be together’. Lindsay says that after line six Morris is making an effort to get inside

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69 Lindsay, *Life and Work*, p. 186.
71 Lindsay, *Life and Work*, p. 188.
Janey’s mind and understand her rejection, but by the fourth stanza things are becoming unclear:

Why dost thou struggle strive for victory
Over my heart that loveth thine so well?
When Death shall one day have its will of thee
And to deaf ears thy triumph thou must tell

Unto deaf ears or unto such as know
The hearts of dead and living wilt thou say
A childish heart there loved me once, and lo
I took his love and cast his love away

A childish greedy heart! yet still he clung
So close to me that much he pleased my pride
And soothed a sorrow that about me hung
With glimpses of his love unsatisfied

The woman has a sorrow, the man has ‘love unsatisfied’:

And soothed my sorrow--but time soothed it too
Though ever did its aching fill my heart
To which the foolish child still closer drew
Thinking in all I was to have a part.

But now my heart grown silent of its grief
Saw more than kindness in his hungry eyes
But I must wear a mask of false belief
And feign that nought I knew his miseries

The woman must wear a mask, and pretend that she does not see the misery she is causing the man. Why would Janey be alarmed to see desire in her husband’s eyes? Why would she have to feign ignorance? After all, the couple had come to an arrangement in which, as Norman Kelvin puts it, ‘Jane could do as she pleased’, so why the need for a mask?

I wore a mask, because though certainly
I loved him not, yet was there something soft
And sweet to have him ever loving me:
Belike it is I well nigh loved him oft.

Nigh loved him oft, and needs must grant to him
Some kindness out of all he asked of me
And hoped his love would still hang vague and dim
About my life like half heard melody.

He knew my heart and over well knew this
And strove poor soul to pleasure me herein;

74 Lindsay, *Life and Work*, p. 181.
But yet what might he do some doubtful kiss
Some word some look might give him hope to win

Poor hope poor soul, for he again would come
Thinking to gain yet one more golden step
Toward Loves shrine and lo the kind speech dumb
The kind look gone no love upon my lip – 77

The sense of this phrase – ‘one more golden step towards love’s shrine’ – is that this love is unconsummated, and hardly likely to represent the relationship of a man with his wife of ten years. The kindness that then turns to blankness has been seen as some kind of cruel torture enacted by Jane, but if this behaviour was that of a confused married woman, unsure of how to express her own feelings or react, it seems quite plausible:

Yea gone yet not my fault I knew of love
But my love and not his; how could I tell
That such blind passion in him I should move
Behold I have loved faithfully and well
Love of my love so deep and measureless.
O lords of the new world this too ye know78

The final stanzas clearly do not fit the Morris–Janey pattern. Why would a wife excuse herself with the line: ‘How could I tell that such blind passion in him I should move?’ The eulogising of the woman’s love for another with the description ‘faithfully and well’ could not apply to Jane’s love for either Morris or Rossetti, but is an apt description of Georgie’s admirable but possibly misplaced devotion to her husband and marriage. Urged by Rosalind Howard to stand up for herself, Georgie replied that there was enough love between her and Edward to last a long life.79 Having begun to dwell on the theme of the woman’s faithful love for another in the unfinished last stanza, Morris loses heart and cannot continue. Of this poem Henderson said that ‘there could be no doubt of his bitterness at this time’,80 but the biographer does not address any of these anomalies. Here is another fragment in which Morris makes clear the passionate nature of his feelings:

Hearken; nigher still and nigher
Had we grown, methought my fire
Woke in her some hidden flame
And the rags of pride and shame
She seemed casting from her heart,
And the dull days seemed to part;
Then I cried out, ‘Ah I move thee

79 Taylor, Victorian Sisters, p. 83.
80 Henderson, Life, Work and Friends, p. 95.
And thou knowest that I love thee –
– Half-forgotten unforgiven and alone!

Yea, it pleased her to behold me
Mocked by tales that love had told me,
Mocked by tales and mocked by eyes
Wells of loving mysteries;
Mocked by eyes and mocked by speech
Till I deemed I might beseech
For one word, that scarcely speaking
She would snatch me from that waking
Half forgotten unforgiven and alone.

All is done – no other greeting,
No more sweet tormenting meeting
No more sight of smile or tear,
No more bliss shall draw anear
Hand in hand with sister pain –
Scarce a longing vague and vain –
No more speech till all is over,
Twixt the well-beloved and lover
Half-forgotten unforgiven and alone81

Again, the beloved’s eyes are highlighted as wells of loving mysteries, and the celibate image of the brother–sister relationship is evoked. Morris’s self-pity reaches a crescendo here. Again, the speaker feels he has been led on by the woman’s eyes and the ‘sweet tormenting meetings’ to believe there was an understanding. Significantly, Morris blames ‘the rags of pride and shame’ for the woman’s withholding of love – shame in the sense of modesty or morality. Morris also posits himself as a sinner in relation to the woman, and in need of forgiveness, which has prompted Henderson to say: ‘One can only wonder what Jane was being asked to pardon him for’,82 thus encouraging future speculation around Morris’s failure, his manliness, and possibly his virility.

**The rags of pride and shame: modesty and morality**

Significantly, one of Morris’s preoccupations in these poems of unfulfilled love is the dominance of the wise and rough world: that is, Morris’s sense that the disapproval of society threatens the expression of the love he has for Georgie. Because the world would categorise this love for another’s wife as sinful, Morris feels the need to apologise. His gratitude to Georgie, who unlike Morris still believes in God, is that despite her values she does not call his love a sin. There is still the suggestion that the woman reveals her own love, by means of a longing look, word or kiss:

81 Morris, ‘Twas One Little Word that Wrought It’, *Collected Works*, vol. 24, pp. 360-61.
Dear if God praise thee much for many a thing
And somewhere builds for thee a house of bliss
I poor and weak must praise thee most for this,
That thou beholding how my heart doth cling
To thy dear heart makest no questioning
That nor in longing look nor word nor kiss
There hideth aught where aught of guile there is
For thee nor me thou fearest no treacherous sting

Yet do I wonder praise thee as I may
Or fear to trust thee utterly herein
Or deem that thou wouldst call my service sin –
Thou who with love for all thy staff and stay
Goest great hearted down the weary way
Still looking for the new dawn to begin – 83

Note that the poet’s service could be called ‘sin’, and the description of the one who goes
great-hearted down the weary way sounds much more like praise of Georgie’s stoicism
than for an adulterous wife at home. Another fragment with several versions concerns the
gift of a gold chain, with the distinct sense that it was a gift to Georgie, and that she has
softened and will accept a love-token:

Dear yesterday I heard thy kind lips say
That thou some little gift from me wouldst wear …

As on thy neck lies this thin golden thread
So on thy heart dear let my poor love lie
Nor note it much nor cast it wholly by
Because though little worth its links do hold
Yet comes it of a stock in story told
A trusty thing that time and mockery
And shame earth’s tyrants still in vain shall try
A charm to make the cowards heart wax bold84

In a further verse, Morris outlines his sense that Georgie’s failure to respond to his entreaties
imprisons him:

Then wearest it dear who forges day by day
Armour of proof for me I needs must wear
Although at whiles it seemest hard to bear
If thou no hand to thine own work will lay
Since that I took I may not cast away
Guard that I give till death our eyes shall clear85

83 Morris, ‘Dear God if praise thee much for many a thing’, untitled and unpublished poem, British Library
Add. MS. 45298A, ff. 86-87; available online in ‘List of Morris’s Poems in the Earthly Paradise Period’,
23/4/16].
84 Morris, ‘As This Thin Thread’, Collected Works, vol. 24, p. 259 and version B L Add. MS. 45298A, ff. 87-
88.
The references to time and mockery and shame – earth’s tyrants – which Morris blames for Georgie’s inability to respond to him bring to mind the great weight of social and moral opinion against adultery. Morris cannot cast away his love, but is condemned to silence.

Another draft fragment has the same theme:

The world perchance to mock & jest would turn
My love, for thee and ask what I desire
Or with the name of some unholy fire
Would name the thing wherewith my heart doth yearn.
[stain the light wherewith my heart doth burn.]

For they love[']s (essence scarcely) (proper self) may (scarce) discern
(But where love unto love is nigh turned liar)
Nor to his golden house have they drawn nigher
Than where his flowers of joy with poison strewn

But I now clinging to thy skirt pass through
The dangerous pleasant place with half-shut eyes
And with new names I name old miseries
And turned to hopes are many fears I knew
And things I spoke as lies seem coming true
Since thou hast shown me where the high heaven lies86

Jane could hardly be the one who ‘bear’st the burden of [her] grief and wrong’, while it was widely known that Georgie’s husband had a mistress. And why ever would the world mock and jest at a Morris’s love for his wife? How could such desire ever be called ‘unholy’?

The heavily edited second stanza is most interesting, as Morris here addresses ‘the world’s’ view of his love for Georgie, ‘the unholy fire’: that is, adulterous love. Morris argues that the world cannot discern love’s essence, except as lies or false love, because these people don’t know real love: have not drawn near ‘Love’s house’ except to strew poison upon the flowers around it. The third stanza suggests that Morris did elicit a response from Georgie at some stage. Around the 1870s Georgie sewed Morris an embroidered linen blouse. A dark brown lock of his hair was in Georgie’s family’s possession in the mid twentieth century. There are also a few poems that indicate the relationship may have been briefly consummated,87 but given the social consequences,

Morris’s love necessarily remained unspoken, unacknowledged and private. And yet, these many tantalising hints remained for biographers to puzzle over.

**No concealments from the widest circle of all**

Nevertheless, there are strong indications that one who first studied Morris's life from close at hand was aware of Morris's love. Mackail was a fine scholar with a great respect and love for his subject, who had correspondence with those closest to Morris about these years of turmoil. Many followers have quoted the opening lines of the following passage, but few if any have given the quotation in full. Unwilling to obscure what was so important to Morris himself, Mackail drew attention to what he saw as the self-revelation in *The Earthly Paradise* for those with the sensitivity or curiosity to read it. While lengthy, the passage is worth quoting in full:

Shy and reserved in life, as to many matters that lay near his heart, he had all the instinct of the born man of letters for laying himself open in his books, and having no concealments from the widest circle of all. In the verses that frame the stories of “The Earthly Paradise” there is an autobiography so delicate and so outspoken that it must needs be left to speak for itself: and the final words which he puts in the mouth of his book, when he sends it forth to seek a place with Chaucer, are the plain truth about his own life so far as he understood it, as well as his deepest thought on the mystery of things.

> ‘For this he ever said, who sent me forth  
> To seek a place amid thy company;  
> That howsoever little was my worth,

> Yet was he worth e’en just so much as I;  
> He said that rhyme hath little skill to lie;

> Nor feigned to cast his worser part away  
> In idle singing for an empty day.  
> ‘I have beheld him tremble oft enough  
> At things he could not choose but trust to me,  
> Although he knew the world was wise and rough:  
> And never did he fail to let me see  
> His love, his folly and faithlessness, maybe;  
> And still in turn I gave him voice to pray  
> Such prayers as cling about an empty day.

> ‘Thou, keen-eyed, reading me, mayst read him through,  
> For surely little is there left behind;  
> No power great deeds unnameable to do;  
> No knowledge for which words he may not find,  
> No love of things as vague as autumn wind  
> Earth of the earth lies hidden by my clay,  
> The idle singer of an empty day!

http://morrisedition.lib.uiowa.edu/listpoemsepperiodcontents.html#C-61 [accessed 2/1/16].
Children we twain are, saith he, late made wise
In love, but in all else most childish still,
And seeking still the pleasure of our eyes,
And what our ears with sweetest sounds may fill;
Not fearing Love, lest these things he should kill;
Howe’er his pain by pleasure doth he lay,
Making a strange tale of an empty day.

‘Death have we hated, knowing not what it meant;
Life have we loved, through green leaf and through sere,
Though still the less we knew of its intent:
The Earth and Heaven through countless year on year,
Slow changing, were to us but curtains fair,
Hung round about a little room, where play
Weeping and laughter of man’s empty day.’

People who have not this imaginative instinct often wonder how a poet can bear to lay open his inmost feelings, and uncover the weaknesses of which man is made: still oftener the self-revelation passes clean over the heads of his audience, and so far are they from wondering that they do not even notice. It is the knowledge, no doubt, that all of his innermost heart, his love and hope and sorrow, which he pours into his verses is to the unsympathetic reader simply meaningless, which allows a poet to write fearlessly what, being a poet, he must write in any case. Sorge nie dass ich verrathe ! so true still are Heine’s bitter words : sorge nie ! diese Welt glaubt nicht an Flammen, und sin nimmt’s fur Poesie. 88

Among the other profundities here, Mackail discerned the importance to Morris of love. His choice of an exemplar for Morris’s poetic autobiography and the public’s inability to see it is in itself revealing. The bitter words he chose are from Heinrich Heine’s poem ‘New Spring’, also an autobiographical work about a forbidden love, which Morris seems to echo when he speaks about the failure to discern love’s essence. The full translation is:

Fear not that I reveal
My love before the world
When my lips overflows
With metaphors of your beauty.

Under a forest of flowers
Lies, in quiet, carefully concealed,
Every ardent secret,
Every deep ardour.

If some forbidden gleam
Flashed from the roses – fear not!
This world does not believe in fire,
And takes that for poetry. 89

89 Heinrich Heine, ‘New Spring’, unpublished translation by Tina Kane.
Mackail read Morris’s poetry closely and corresponded with Aglaia Coronio, who was Morris’s confidante during these turbulent years. I believe Mackail had full knowledge of Morris’s ‘love and hope and sorrow’ for Georgie, and that his use of Heine’s poem with its motif of a secret passion was not accidental but a deliberate clue, respecting Morris’s own desire to have no secrets, and tell his love to ‘the widest circle of all’. As with the ‘labours of love’ – Morris’s illuminated and literary works made for Georgie, which I will discuss in the next chapter – not only have Morris’s subsequent biographers failed to heed these clues, but they have also failed to adequately interpret the poetry of this period as it relates to Morris’s love for Georgiana Burne-Jones.

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90 See Chapter 9 for the circumstances of the writing of Morris’s biography.
**Chapter 5**

**Love is Enough:**
**The Illuminated Heart, 1869–71**

Even without any return [love] is happiness. It is worth passing through all the pain that clings about it — and if you do not feel this, you are not in love.¹

In the previous chapter I argued that the obsession with love and love—sorrow evident in Morris’s writing during *The Earthly Paradise* years was due to his unrequited love for Georgie Burne-Jones. This is a distinct alternative reading to that of twentieth-century biographers, who posit that while Morris grew close to Georgie in order to share mutual troubles, the chief cause of his unhappiness was due to marital problems. In this chapter I continue to offer evidence to support my thesis that Georgie was the source of Morris’s obsession with love, and that this was the sorrow evident in his writings. Between 1869 and 1871 Morris continued to be deeply engaged with love for Georgie, whose immovability drove him to produce gifts and offerings of exquisite beauty. The key sources of the evidence are biographical and literary. Between 1869 and 1870 Morris finished writing *The Earthly Paradise*. He had been learning Icelandic, and began translating the sagas he could now read in their original language. He also took up calligraphy and began to make decorated texts based on the sagas, and the fairy and folk tales he loved, as well as his own poetry. All these endeavours resulted in gifts of love for Georgie, but none seems to have moved her to return Morris’s passion. Still looking for a longer project, in 1871 Morris began a contemporary novel, but it seems he was dissuaded from continuing by Georgie, to whom a section was sent. Although Morris’s biographers have identified this work as autobiographical, none have viewed it as significant (this is the focus of Chapter 6). This was a time of crisis for Morris. Unable to bear the stifling impasse in which he found himself, he now looked to the sagas and Iceland itself for an ethos that allowed for heroic failure, in which simply to love, even without return, was enough. By 1872 he had made two voyages to Iceland. The following years of activity and adventure show Morris emerging from a period of languor and self-pity, and reaching out for a broader view of life and fate.

In studying the self-revelation in Morris’s writings during this period, I highlight also the ways Morris’s behaviour did not conform to that expected of a cuckolded husband, and explore the cooperative dealings with his wife and Rossetti that have perplexed his biographers. Morris presented many hand-written and illuminated manuscripts he made during these years to Georgie, not to his wife; curiously, this has elicited little comment from biographers (although was noted by some, as discussed below). As well as the best known gifts, such as The Book of Verse, the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam and his Icelandic journals, there are several other manuscripts held in various collections that can be shown to have been in Georgie’s possession, and again demonstrate Morris’s desire to shower Georgie with tokens of his affection. And, while Georgie destroyed most of the correspondence she shared with him,2 Morris confided in a close woman friend and examining his surviving letters to Aglaia Coronio sheds further light on his part in the arrangement with Jane and Rossetti at this time. This evidence demonstrates that, far from being the victim, Morris was a key player in arranging for his wife to spend time with Rossetti at Kelmscott while he was on a three-month trip to Iceland. This was, I argue, in keeping with his deeply held belief that lovers should be together, no matter what.

**Labours of love**

In 1872 Morris gave Georgie an exquisite hand-illuminated copy of the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam (pictured below). Khayyam’s verses echo Morris’s own desire:

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Ah Love! could thou and I with Fate conspire
To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire,
Would not we shatter it to bits—and then
Re-mould it nearer to the Heart’s Desire!
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This was just one offering made during the late 1860s and early 1870s, when Morris presented Georgie with many labours of love – gifts, I argue, that represent the intensity of Morris’s ardour. There is a series of five manuscript poems from around 1870 that remained unpublished until relatively recently.4 While some have used these as evidence of Jane’s withdrawal from Morris, numbered fair copies were apparently in Georgie’s possession all her life, and I believe this is significant. One of these is the revealing work

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‘Silence and Pity’, a fair copy of which is part of a set presented to the William Morris Gallery almost seventy years later by Georgie’s daughter:5

Thy lips my lips have touched no more may speak
The words that through my sorrow used to break;
Yet may they tremble sometimes for my sake
Because pure love thou art, and very ruth.

The eyes that I have kissed, no more may gaze
Into wild dreamland meads my heart to raise,
Yet may they change at thought of my changed days,
Gazing with pure love from the heart of truth.

Thine oft-kissed little hands no more may write
The treasured words of comfort and delight
Yet may they yearn for what thou dost endite,
O heart of very love, O life of ruth!

Hands, eyes, and lips, dear ministers of love,
How can I pray thy pity not to move
Your calm to pain, my folly to reprove,
Since of my heart thou knowest, O Lady Truth!

Ah midst it all, think not of me as one
To curse the sun that yestereve it shone
To wish the life of all my life undone!
And yet – thy pity, O sweet Love and Ruth!6

Elements of this poem were cited in the previous chapter as evidence that the beloved cannot be Janey, (why would she write to her husband, for instance) but the work is also revealing in other ways. One of Morris’s biographers, Jack Lindsay, noted this poem and concluded that ‘[w]e cannot think of him saying to Janey “Thine oft-kissed little hands no more may write”’.7 But in the end Lindsay was equivocal about any relationship with Georgie, believing that while Morris ‘came to love her’, he was in an ‘emotional dilemma, swung between Janey and Georgie, neither of whom … would have him’.8 Yet the references to kissed lips, eyes and hands would indicate a period of physical intimacy, which would explain Morris’s hopes – it was understood the love was mutual. It is implied, however, that this intimacy has now been curtailed, either by the woman herself or possibly her husband. The latter is suggested – the woman ‘no more may speak, write or gaze’ – but

5 Email correspondence between the author and Inez Pina, William Morris Gallery, 18 October 2013. Ms Pina confirmed that the Gallery had received the three poems in this series from Mrs Margaret Mackail in 1946.
8 Lindsay, Life and Work, pp. 186, 188.
though she may not now openly respond to the poet, his hope is that she will still love him, as this love is ‘the light of all [his] life’. In another intensely heartbroken poem of farewell, entitled ‘Pain and Time Strive Not’, the beloved has a ‘delicate face’, which seems an appropriate description of Georgie’s appearance, rather than Jane’s strong features. Building up this picture further, another fragment of a poem from the same period recalls intimacy that seems far from matrimonial:

Our hands have met our lips have met,  
Our souls who knows when the wind blows,  
How light souls drift mid longing set  
If thou forgetst can I forget.  
O love was all done long ago.

Thou wert not silent then, but told  
Sweet secrets dear – I drew so near  
Thy shamefaced cheeks grown overbold  
That scarce thine eyes might I behold!  
Ah was it then so long ago.

Trembled my lips and thou wouldst turn  
But hadst no heart to draw apart  
Beneath my lips thy cheek did burn –  
Yet no rebuke that I might learn;  
Yea kind looks still, not long ago.⁹

The speaker may not now openly speak of his feelings to the beloved, or to share kisses and embraces – brotherly or not. This apparent injunction of silence marks the time Morris began to send exquisite gifts to Georgie, some his own handiwork, others precious books and objects. In this way he was able to continue to demonstrate his love.

As well as the bound manuscript of ‘The Lovers of Gudrun’ mentioned in the previous chapter, among the gifts from Morris to Georgie in the years 1869 to 1870 are the decorated calligraphic manuscripts *The Story of Hen Thorir* and *The Saga of Gunalung the Wormtongue*, both on paper watermarked 1869, and Morris’s translation of *The Story of the Volsungs and Niebungs*, one of twelve printed for private circulation. The manuscripts are beautifully worked and decorated. A few of them are Icelandic tales Morris translated. The works representing the pinnacle of these labours, however, are the magnificent and famous illuminated *A Book of Verse* (see Figure 17) and *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* (see Figure 16), which show Morris presenting his poems and those of Khayyam in the most gorgeous and elaborate format possible. Georgie’s initials are set atop each page, or at the end. But for this clear attribution to Georgie, it might be argued that these works are merely Morris

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enjoying an outlet for his boundless creativity and imagination, and that he gave them to Georgie rather than to his wife who had rejected him. Also purchased for Georgie was a book of Shakespeare’s poems presented to her on 29 December 1869, a four-volume first edition of Browning’s *The Ring and The Book* (1870) and a sixteenth-century edition of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. These gifts each exemplify Morris’s concern with love and passion, and are clearly significant gifts. As Amy Bingaman and Rosie Miles have noted, these were gifts of a ‘highly charged’ nature, and the *Book of Verse* in particular was ‘a powerful effort to express Morris’s unsatisfied longing’.¹⁰ Unlike others, both of these authors are attentive to the significance that the book was a gift to Georgie, and Miles in particular asks how ‘is it possible not to be in debt to the receiving of such a gift as *A Book of Verse*?’¹¹

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**Figure 16**

*Morris’s hand-illustrated Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, begun 1871; presented to Georgiana Burn-Jones in 1872.*

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In February 1870 Morris began creating *A Book of Verse*, intended for Georgie’s birthday in July. He wrote all the poems but two, which he translated from the Icelandic originals. Many had been included in *The Earthly Paradise* cycle of poems. Burne-Jones made one illustration, Fairfax Murray painted some small figures based on Morris’s drawings and George Wardle decorated the first ten pages with neat small flowers, unlike Morris’s own more exuberant decorations on the rest of the pages. The title is derived from *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*:

Here with a little Bread beneath the Bough,  
A Flask of Wine, *a Book of Verse*—and Thou  
Beside me singing in the Wilderness—  
Oh, Wilderness were Paradise enow!¹²

This is a very Morrisian scene and sentiment, and addresses the beloved, as the gift itself would: the Burne-Joneses had discovered FitzGerald’s translation, which became a favourite, so the reference would have been apparent. Morris’s *Book of Verse* contains fifty-one pages of hand-lettered poems set in foliate ornament with miniature scenes. The poems Morris assembles here are saturated with love – either the sorrow of unrequited love, or urgings to seize the day and the bliss of love. They have titles such as ‘Lonely love and loveless death’ and ‘Hope dieth, love liveth’, and the following lines are representative:

And thou, that men called by my name  
O helpless one, hast thou no shame

That thou must even now seem the same
As while agone, as while agone
When thou and She stood close alone
And hands and lips and tears did meet

Grow weak and pine lie down to die,
O body in thy misery
Because short time and sweet goes by
O foolish heart, How weak thou art!
Break, break, because thou needs must part
From thine own Love, from thine own Sweet.\textsuperscript{13}

In these poems, as plaintive in tone as \textit{The Earthly Paradise} (from which some are drawn) the lover and beloved are united in feeling, but separated by fate and the forces of the world. Morris begins to depict a love that is able to transcend time and distance. There is hope that at some future time, such lovers may finally be united, as in ‘Two Sides of the River’, where maidens and youths, torturously separated by the seasonal variations of weather, water, work and war, finally come together for a night of love. The final poem, which praises Venus, emphasises the ending of love’s obstacles, pride and shame: ‘Thou cams’t to take our shame away’.

Morris made a second less ornate copy of his \textit{Rubaiyat} on paper, with and for Burne-Jones, who gave it to Miss Frances Graham.\textsuperscript{14} This gesture, and Burne-Jones’s contribution to the works dedicated to his own wife, begs the question how much he knew of Morris’s feelings for her. It would be surprising if he knew nothing: Morris hated a lack of plain speaking. It was only later in life, when Morris was involved with socialists, whom Ned disliked, that their friendship lapsed.\textsuperscript{15} My feeling is that Burne-Jones knew of Morris’s feelings for his wife and either tacitly approved, rather hoping Morris would keep Georgie occupied while he conducted his own liaisons, or felt so sure of Georgie’s steadfastness that he did not feel threatened. From early in the marriage he was unkind to and rather dismissive of Georgie, as his conversation with his studio assistant shows.\textsuperscript{16} In the most recent biography of Morris by MacCarthy, Georgie is depicted as somewhat puritanical.\textsuperscript{17} In later life, when Morris would visit every Sunday morning, Burne-Jones’s comments to

\textsuperscript{13} Morris, \textit{Collected Works}, vol. 5, p. 126.
\textsuperscript{14} Mackail, \textit{The Life of William Morris}, vol.1, pp. 279-280.
\textsuperscript{15} In 1883 Burne-Jones wrote to Charles Eliot Norton: ‘We are silent about many things and we used to be silent about nothing’. See Penelope Fitzgerald, \textit{Edward Burne-Jones A Biography}, London, Michael Joseph, 1975 p. 19.
\textsuperscript{17} Fiona MacCarthy, \textit{The Last Pre-Raphaelite: Edward Burne-Jones and the Victorian Imagination}, London, Faber & Faber, 2011, p. 205.
his studio assistant suggest he confidently assumed that it was *he* who Morris came to visit, when Georgie may well have been the primary cause.\(^{18}\)

The quality and quantity of the gifts to Georgie surely raises the issue of who Morris cares more about – his wife or the person receiving these touchingly beautiful objects, created with much more than mere comradely feelings? Henderson calls it a ‘token of love’,\(^ {19}\) Lindsay says these works show ‘to whom his thoughts were now turning’,\(^ {20}\) but neither biographer takes this question any further. MacCarthy mentions merely that Morris was busy with illumination and, in passing, that the *Book of Verse* was for Georgie, but does not mention the *Rubaiyyat* or the many other works made for her.\(^ {21}\) With all eyes turned on Morris’s supposed sorrow over his wife, who would look further?

**Rossetti and the Fleshly school of poetry**

During this period Jane and Rossetti were spending much time in each other’s company, Rossetti painting and drawing her obsessively. In March of this year, 1871, Morris took Janey to Scalands, a house in Sussex owned by Rossetti’s mentor, Barbara Leigh Smith. The Morrices visited together, and then Morris left Jane with Rossetti, who reported her improved health to his mother weeks later. Morris wrote to her there; in April he and Rossetti met for a lunch of oysters, no doubt collaborating on Morris’s forthcoming review of Rossetti’s book of poems, which was released the following day. It was not until many weeks later, in May, that Morris retrieved his wife, Rossetti writing that ‘Dear old Top is here – not very well’.\(^ {22}\) Old Top was just thirty-seven; Rossetti was forty-four.

The book of Rossetti’s poems Morris was to review had been a project long in the planning; Rossetti hoped it would bring him acclaim. He had first thought of publishing a book of poems in response to Morris’s *Defence of Guenevere*, and so had begun to assemble a folio and tinker with the poems before and during his marriage to Lizzie Siddal. Her death caused him much guilt and he attributed his inattentiveness towards her on time spent over the projected volume. In mid August 1869 he conceived the idea of recovering the folio he had buried with his wife, and instructed his friend Charles Augustus Howell to proceed to recover them. Attempting to emulate Morris’s success, Rossetti confided to his brother William that his ambition now was poetry, for in painting he felt outclassed by Millais and

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\(^ {18}\) See, for example, Rooke, ‘Enter Morris and Mistress’, *Burne-Jones Talking*, p. 38.


\(^ {20}\) Lindsay, *Life and Work*, p. 162.


Rossetti had always been slow to finish paintings and, fearful of criticism, was reluctant to show his works publicly. As well as reworking his old poems he added new ones. After the ghastly and somewhat illegal plan to retrieve the volume was effected with the aid of some string pulling, Rossetti’s poems were returned to him, but the long poem ‘Jenny’, the one he had most wanted to recover, had a ‘great hole’ through it. One can’t help thinking that this episode played on Rossetti’s conscience, perhaps causing the insomnia that led to addiction and decline.

Possibly encouraged by the favourable reception of Morris’s amorous themes in The Earthly Paradise, and his association with Swinburne, Rossetti included some erotic poems in the collection he was preparing. His work would later be dubbed ‘fleshly’ by the poet Robert Buchanan in a long, vitriolic, unsigned review that appeared the following year. Buchanan seemed to think that Rossetti had filched the idea of a poem about a prostitute from him, but he was wrong; Rossetti had been working on the poem since the mid 1850s. Particularly galling for Rossetti would have been the damning comparison with Morris, as Buchanan accused Rossetti of imitation, only of an inferior kind:

Mr Morris is often pure, fresh, and wholesome as his own great model; Mr Swinburne startles us more than once by some fine flash of insight; but the mind of Mr Rossetti is like a glassy mere, broken only by the dive of some water-bird or the hum of winged insects, and brooded over by an atmosphere of insufferable closeness.

While Morris and Swinburne, as other ‘aesthetes’, also came in for a drubbing, Buchanan most devastatingly attacked Rossetti’s work, which he characterised as displaying a self-absorbed sensuality – the word used by the Victorians for this concept was ‘morbidity’. Buchanan was not prudish, but rejected the physicality without emotion:

Whether he is writing of the holy Damozel, or of the Virgin herself, or of Lilith, or Helen, or of Dante, or of Jenny the street-walker, he is fleshly all over, from the roots of his hair to the tip of his toes; never a true lover merging his identity into that of the beloved one; never spiritual, never tender; always self-conscious and Esthetic. ‘Nothing,’ says a modern writer, ‘in human life is so utterly remorseless – not love, not hate, not ambition, not vanity – as the artistic or æsthetic instinct morbidly developed to the suppression of conscience and feeling;’

There is the grain of truth at the heart of this criticism.

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25 Salmon, Chronology, p. 47.
27 Buchanan, ‘The Fleshly School of Poetry’. 
While the Morrices were in Germany in 1869, Rossetti had composed ‘The Stream’s Secret’, which seems to refer to his love for Janey. The speaker is parted from his beloved. The poem describes a situation in which, after a long period of yearning, the poet has been granted permission to speak to her and share their love, but as yet it has not been consummated:

For then at last we spoke
What eyes so oft had told to eyes
Through that long-lingering silence whose half-sighs
Alone the buried secret broke,
Which with snatched hands and lips’ reverberate stroke
Then from the heart did rise.

But she is far away
Now; nor the hours of night grown hoar
Bring yet to me, long gazing from the door,

In the last chapter I discussed Rossetti’s letter to Jane while she was at Bad Ems, in which he referred to ‘the long inconceivable change’, which I speculated meant that Morris now permitted Rossetti to speak of his love to Jane. This letter would link the above poem to this time. In another letter to Jane at this time, Rossetti again betrays his constant awareness and jealousy of Morris’s prolific success as a poet: “Topsy’s mountain must indeed view my mouse [his book of poems] with scorn.” Even before Buchanan’s attack, Rossetti was showing signs of mental instability. In writing and revising his poems, his judgement seems to have been affected in that he ignored hints from those in his circle that his work was too openly erotic, so much so that his maiden sisters were forced to leave the room during one of Rossetti’s readings. Rossetti’s developing mental problems have been blamed on his growing dependence on the sedative, hypnotic and addictive chloral, to which he was supposedly introduced for his insomnia by the American journalist W.J. Stillman when both men shared Barbara Leigh Smith’s cottage, Scalands, in 1870. If this is so, the beginning of his decline could be traced to this period. Chloral did not help Rossetti. Rather, taken with alcohol, it hastened the onset of a physical and mental breakdown.

After publication of Rossetti’s book of poems, Morris wrote to Janey: ‘then I shall set to work about Gabriel’s review, wh: I must say rather terrifies me’. The review appeared on 14 May in The Academy. Mackail says that

Morris, with other friends, had been dragged into the business; [of providing favourable reviews] and his article bears all the traces of a task, for once, executed against his will. It is stiff and laboured, and as nearly colourless as anything of his writing could well be.

Rossetti, however, was pleased: ‘direct and complete – an honour and a profit to the book’, revealing again his admiration for Morris’s stature. I see Morris’s review to be as much a gesture of friendship as of self-interest, but either for artistic or personal reasons, or both, he found the task unpleasant in the extreme: ‘I have done my review, just this moment – Ugh!’ he confided to Aglaia Coronio.

Morris, Kelmscott Manor and Iceland

In August 1870 Morris was settling arrangements with Rossetti about sittings and payments for Jane’s portraits, and the illuminated floriated Book of Verse was completed, a little late for Georgie’s birthday in late July. At the same time he continued to work on the final volume of The Earthly Paradise, which he completed in November. He wrote in a lonely tone to Jane who was staying with his mother and sister:

I confess I am dull now my book is done; one doesn’t know sometimes how much service a thing has done us till it is gone: however one has time yet; and perhaps something else of importance will turn up soon – …
Tell me the day you are coming back on: I shall be so very glad to see you dear.

In January 1871 Morris dined with Rossetti, his brother William and others. William recorded in his diary that Morris was thinking of writing a drama or prose romance, both of which he would soon commence, but in the meantime he busied himself preparing for a trip to Iceland, at the same time searching for a country house that would be shared with Rossetti. For public consumption the story was that

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35 Morris, Collected Letters, vol. 1, p. 127. Kelvin believes Morris did not know of the relationship between Rossetti and Jane at this time, believing that, if he had, he would have refused an invitation to dinner. See notes, p. 124.
Morris [would acquire] a summer residence for his family which he would visit at weekends, and where he could indulge his boyish delight in coarse fishing. For Rossetti it was to be ‘country quarters’, where he could work in the summer leaving his traps over the winter.\(^{37}\)

Jane’s health would have been one factor but, as Jan Marsh has argued, the true aim was to enable Janey and Rossetti to be together over the summer, away from city gossips. Marsh noted the ‘air of studied casualness’ in contemporary references to the arrangement, as if this were nothing out of the ordinary. Morris would have been sharply aware of the collateral damage – to Janey and his children – of gossip in the middle-class London circles in which they mixed. While it was scandalous for Burne-Jones to be having a love affair, it was accepted as something men do – regrettable but pardonable. Female adultery was considered outrageous, and the female children of an adulteress were suspected of harbouring the same dangerous proclivities, making them unsuitable for marriage, a social theory echoed by Tennyson in *Idylls of the King*.

Is this the only explanation for Morris’s cooperation? If this was his concern, could he not have stopped the whole thing by order, as he had during the planned trip to Rome? Some, such as Fitzgerald, have assumed Morris was cowed by Rossetti’s overbearing personality but this is not so. Morris was a major player in the plan, which was twofold – the house outside London, of which the Scalands episode had been a rehearsal – and the trip to Iceland, which would remove Morris from the scene of his own troubles over Georgie as well as from his wife’s tryst with Rossetti. His kindness towards and care for his wife at this time are very evident in their correspondence, which undermines the commonly held theory of her withdrawal and his passivity.

‘I have been looking for a house for the wife and kids’, Morris wrote to Charlie Faulkner.\(^{38}\) He had found Kelmscott Manor, an Elizabethan house and garden on the Thames, a ‘heaven on earth’ as he called it. On 20 May 1871, Janey, Rossetti and Morris visited it together. A joint tenancy with Rossetti was quickly arranged while Morris hurriedly prepared for Iceland. Together with Charlie Faulkner and a handful of others, he had planned the trip that summer to visit the scene of the sagas that so touched him with their tales of endurance and forbearance. As Morris’s correspondence shows, beneath a rather bluff surface his emotions were turbulent as he prepared for the risky sea journey. In a letter dated 1 June 1871 to Georgie’s sister Louisa, the friend from the days before his marriage, it seems Morris was making her a parting gift of a much-loved old book from

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\(^{38}\) Morris, *Collected Letters*, vol. 1, p. 133.
those days – perhaps *Yule-tide Stories of the North*, by Benjamin Thorpe, which was one of his favourites:

Will you kindly accept this book of me; it is heavy to carry west-a-way but will be very good reading when you get it there: it was one of my treasures in those times your memory serves you so well in; and I think I know it pretty well by heart for these many days. I like to think that I remember past times well: I would not willingly forget anything that has happened to me in my life either good or bad … goodbye till I see you again.39

This gesture of farewell, and the nostalgic mood, dwelling on the days before his marriage, link the trip to Iceland with the biographical tone of the novel he was about to undertake. Morris’s unwillingness to forget anything that has happened – good or bad – is also echoed in the words of Philome in the tale ‘Bellerophon in Lycia’ from *The Earthly Paradise*, and it could be Morris speaking:

> Sweet pain! be kind to me and leave me not!
> Leave me not cold, with all my grief forgot,
> And all the joy consumed I thought should fill
> My changing troubled days of life, until
> Death turned all measuring of the days to nought.40

The journey was not simply an adventure: Morris’s letters to Agaila say that the trip was about physical and spiritual healing – away from the source and reminders of his pain and loneliness.

Later, in one of his last prose romances written in the 1890s, *Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair*, Morris writes of two close friends talking about the love of one for the other’s wife. The friend, David, reveals all and tells of his plans to leave, and it is tempting to see Morris reflecting on his reasons for his earlier visit to Iceland:

> Friend and fellow, I must now tell thee the very sooth, and then shalt thou suffer me to depart, though the sundering be but sorrow to me. For this it is, that I love thy lady and wife more than meet is, and here I find it hard to thole my desire and my grief; but down in the thicket yonder… I shall become a man again, and be no more a peevish and grudging fool.41

Significantly, Morris does not say, ‘My friend loves my lady and wife more than meet is’. David tells his friend he is ‘bound for over-sea to seek adventure’. Morris’s voyages to Iceland follow the pattern established in ‘Gertha’s Lovers’, and then *The Novel on Blue Paper*, where in each case the rejected lover takes himself away overseas.

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40 Morris, *Collected Works*, vol. 6, p. 264.
Within weeks of leasing Kelmscott on 3 July 1871, Morris took his wife and children to Kelmscott Manor, leaving them there and travelling back to London the next day to stay with Georgie and Edward Burne-Jones. On the day – perhaps the moment – of departure, Morris presented Georgie with the gift of a rare book, *The Fifteene Bookes Of P. Ovidius Naso*, published by Thomas Purfoot in 1612, the first English translation of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. The inscription above the title page reads ‘To Georgie from W.M. July 6th 1871’. Was it at this parting that a lock of Morris’s dark brown hair came into Georgie’s possession, or did Morris send it to her from Edinburgh the next day where he reported having his hair cut? Such locks were exchanged as love tokens, particularly before a separation. The lock of hair in question was presented to the William Morris Gallery by Georgie’s daughter in 1945. It is enclosed in tissue paper with the date 1880 inscribed in pencil, but Morris mentioned that his hair was greying around the time of his thirty-ninth birthday in March 1873, grey temples being evident in Richardson’s portrait of him painted that year. His hair is already ‘pepper and salt’ in the Fry portrait photograph of 1877, so an earlier, more significant date is probable, and an emotional parting a likely time for such an exchange. The later date was perhaps added to allay any questions about Georgie’s possession of such an object at that ‘stormy’ time. To Janey he wrote lovingly: ‘I have so often thought of the sweet fresh garden at Kelmscott and you and the little ones in it, and wished you happy’.

In his obituary of Morris written in 1896, Eirikr Magnusson described Morris as a tender, devoted husband and father, and he recalled that while in Iceland:

> we were engaged in preparing dinner in the kitchen of a farmhouse, [and] I observed my robust-minded friend so entranced in thought as not to heed what he was doing: on my asking what was the matter, he answered with that inexpressibly sweet smile that transfigured his face when he was intensely delighted, ‘I was thinking of my love-nest at home’.

‘Intensely delighted’! Magnusson could not have known that Morris’s love-nest included Rossetti, but it seems Morris himself was able to feel joy for the happiness of his own wife, perhaps also imagining his own turn at happiness in the beautiful old house one day. No

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42 Inscription included for item in Sotheby catalogue for sale of Mackail’s library, 22 December 1952.
43 Salmon, *Chronology*, p. 54. Salmon notes: ‘Morris, Magnússon, Faulkner and Evans arrived at the Granton Hotel, near Edinburgh, in preparation for their departure for Iceland. They later returned to Edinburgh where Morris had his hair cut, Faulkner all the while egging on the hairdresser to cut it shorter’.
44 Lock of Morris’s hair donated by Georgie’s daughter Margaret Mackail to the William Morris Gallery in 1945. It is enclosed in the original paper marked ‘Mr Morris’s hair/1880’.
45 Salmon, *Chronology*, p. 64.
46 Morris, *Collected Letters*, vol. 1, p. 147.
wonder this recollection has not found its way into any biography as it so clearly undercuts the idea of Morris as victim and cuckold. Can there be any question that Morris supported the plan? From Reykjavik he finished his letter with ‘Be happy, I am with all love, your most affectionate William Morris’.

The rags of pride and shame

[C]ast shame and pride away,
Let honour gild the world’s eventless day,
Shrink not from change, and shudder not at crime,
Leave lies to rattle in the sieve of Time!

Morris’s idea of heaven was to be with your love in a beautiful old house, but as he cooked a dinner of plover and bacon over a campfire in Iceland, Rossetti, for whom he had relinquished that house, was enjoying the summer air, the beauties of nature and the company, making many drawings and a few paintings, and writing sheafs of poems. At the end of August, Rossetti wrote to Madox Brown that he intended to stay another month as ‘I don’t want … to be returning just as Top comes here’ – that might look suspicious to the locals.

One of Morris’s poems from around this time is a ballad entitled ‘Thunder in the Garden’:

When the boughs of the garden hang heavy with rain
And the blackbird reneweth his song,
And the thunder departing yet rolleth again,
I remember the ending of wrong.

When the day that was dusk while his death was aloof
Is ending wide-gleaming and strange
For the clearness of all things beneath the world’s roof,
I call back the wild chance and the change.

For once we twain sat through the hot afternoon
While the rain held aloof for a while,
Till she, the soft-clad, for the glory of June
Changed all with the change of her smile.

For her smile was of longing, no longer of glee,
And her fingers, entwined with mine own,
With caresses unquiet sought kindness of me
For the gift that I never had known.

Then down rushed the rain, and the voice of the thunder
Smote dumb all the sound of the street,
And I to myself was grown nought but a wonder,

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49 Morris, ‘Love is Enough’, *Collected Works*, vol. 9, p. 78.
As she leaned down my kisses to meet.

That she craved for my lips that had craved her so often,
And the hand that had trembled to touch,
That the tears filled her eyes I had hoped not to soften
In this world was a marvel too much.

It was dusk 'mid the thunder, dusk e’en as the night,
When first brake out our love like the storm,
But no night-hour was it, and back came the light
While our hands with each other were warm.

And her smile killed with kisses, came back as at first
As she rose up and led me along,
And out to the garden, where nought was athirst,
And the blackbird renewing his song.

Earth’s fragrance went with her, as in the wet grass,
Her feet little hidden were set;
She bent down her head, 'neath the roses to pass,
And her arm with the lily was wet.

In the garden we wandered while day waned apace
And the thunder was dying aloof;
Till the moon o’er the minster-wall lifted his face,
And grey gleamed out the lead of the roof.

Then we turned from the blossoms, and cold were they grown:
In the trees the wind westering moved;
Till over the threshold back fluttered her gown,
And in the dark house was I loved.\(^{51}\)

While it is tempting to believe that this ballad refers to a day when Morris and Georgie made love at last – Morris’s ‘ending of wrong’ – I believe that this rare poem of happy union more likely represents his imaginings inspired by the walled garden at Kelmscott rather than any actual event. Like an incantation, it is sung, perhaps to charm his hopes into reality.

It is interesting to note that the imaginary lover boldly takes the initiative with ‘caresses unquiet’. When Morris wrote about a gold chain, which I suggest above was given to Georgie, that it was ‘a charm to make the coward’s heart wax bold’, he meant this literally. Georgie was a woman very much formed in the pattern established in her lifetime as the ideal for Victorian wives, which suited well her ardent, idealistic nature. She continued to be devoted to her nervous, sickly husband, despite his love affairs. She saw it as her duty to stand by Edward, and she firmly strove to protect his reputation and foster his career in the world.\(^{52}\) While this sort of one-sided self-sacrifice would be viewed today

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\(^{51}\) Morris, *Collected Works*, vol. 9, p. 155.

as excessive, Georgie was conforming perfectly to the ideal of middle-class Victorian womanhood prevalent at the time, which offered women possession of the moral high ground in exchange for forbearance.\(^{53}\) Yet in this period during which Morris assailed Georgie with so many gifts and poems, it seems from the subject matter he chose that he hoped to encourage her to shed the ‘rags of pride and shame’:\(^{54}\) that is to say, to reject accepted moral conventions. It seems, however, that Georgie could or would not adopt Morris’s liberal views and throw reputation to the wind. As noted previously, although women of the upper classes were somewhat protected when it came to extramarital relations, and their working-class sisters also had less to lose, middle-class women were at risk of a great fall in reputation and status, potentially losing friends, family and security.\(^{55}\) Another factor was Georgie’s firm, idealistic, self-denying nature. As the daughter of a Methodist minister, she was part of a strong-minded family proud of their intellectual and moral standing. But not giving in to Morris did not mean that Georgie did not have a passionate nature – as would be apparent in later years when she would campaign ardently for a number of causes (see Chapter 9).

Morris understood this. In his writings, as in ‘Thunder in the Garden’ above, Morris had never subscribed to the idea that women had a different or lesser amount of amorous feeling. In his prose romances, as well as in his earlier work, his heroines’ desires equal that of their men. In this he stood apart from religious and medical notions of this period, which linked strong desire in women with deviance and depravity.\(^{56}\) Morris seems to have held the same view as Dr George Drysdale, who dissented from the accepted wisdom. A vehement supporter of the women’s movement, in 1855 he anonymously published a work defending contraception entitled The Elements of Social Science; or Physical, Sexual and Natural Religion in which he argued:

To have strong sexual passions is held to be rather a disgrace for a woman … this is a great error … In woman exactly as in man, strong sexual appetites are a very great

\(^{53}\) Taylor, *Victorian Sisters*, p. 83.

\(^{54}\) Tompkins, *An Approach to the Poetry*, p. 229. On the issue of ‘shame’, Tompkins writes: ‘Morris’s attitude to love has been somewhat confused for readers, who have not mastered his vocabulary, by his use of the word “shame”. He uses it to mean modesty, as in the medieval “shame-fast”, and extends it through shyness, consciousness and the timorous delicacy of young passion to the familiar sense of disgrace… “Sin” has a similar range … and covers mistake and miscalculation as well as moral error…[His medieval usage] is very apt to mislead’; p. 299.


\(^{56}\) Dr William Acton’s views, already noted in Chapter 2 – and particularly his view that ‘the majority of women (happily for society) are not much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind’ – stands in stark contrast to Morris’s heroines, such as Guenevere, whose ‘unhappy pulse … beat right through [her] eager body’ (only unhappy because she is condemned by society for it). See William Acton, *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs in Childhood, Youth, Adult Age, and Advanced Life*, fourth edition, Philadelphia, Lindsay and Blakiston, 1875 (1857), p. 162.
virtue … If chastity must continue to be regarded as the highest female virtue; it is impossible to give any woman real liberty.57

It is tempting to speculate whether Morris had seen Drysdale’s work, published just at the time Morris was writing his Guenevere poems, for he has Guenevere argue against prevailing notions of purity and chastity:

Must I give up forever then, I thought
That which I deemed would ever round me move
Glorifying all things; …
must I prove
Stone cold forever?58

The title of Drysdale’s work refers to natural religion, which brings to mind Morris’s phrase ‘glorifying all things’, again indicating what Morris refers to again and again in various writings, that erotic love is spiritual. At this time the church, as well as the medical profession, militated against female sexuality, linking purity with all feminine virtues and duties,59 but Morris’s early poems as well as his later writings, suggest he believed there is an internal, personal morality that supersedes that of church and state. By September 1871 Morris had begun the masque, or drama in verse, he had planned to write earlier in the year. Not surprisingly, the subject was love and its title was ‘Love is Enough’.

**Love is Enough**

During this intense year filled with work around and about love, Morris produced *Love is Enough*, a book-length masque, in which love is personified and speaks to the audience:

Now must he tear the armour from his breast
And cast aside all things that men deem best
And single-hearted for his longing strive
That he at last may save his soul alive60

The masque, a play about King Pharamond, who gave up his kingdom to find and win Love, is acted by two players who are also lovers, just like the characters they represent. The play is watched by a newly-married couple, making three sets of lovers in all. Pharamond, in his lonely quest, is like Morris, giving up all for love, while Love stands by to narrate the trials of his servant. With what seems a strange indifference to the actual plot, or perhaps wishful thinking, Burne-Jones summarised the story in a letter to a friend:

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He makes a poem these days-in dismal Queen Square in black old filthy London in dull end of October he makes a pretty poem that is to be wondrously happy; and it has four sets of lovers in it and THEY ARE ALL HAPPY and it ends well … such is Top in these days … It’s splendid when the King gives up his kingdom for Love’s sake, but when at the end it comes to nothing more than a mere matrimonial existence, that’s poor. I wanted him to stop it before it came to that, when the kingdom was given up, but he wouldn’t.\footnote{Georgiana Burne-Jones, \textit{Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones}, 1904, London, Lund Humphries, 1993, vol. 2, p. 23.}

The happy ending may apply to the watchers, but Pharamond, after a single night of love, is separated from his beloved Azalais, with nothing even as satisfactory as mere matrimony to show for it. Brought to a state of deep despair by his inability to win Georgie, Morris here wrestled with the meaning of a life if love – to Morris the pinnacle of human existence – is not able to be fulfilled. Already obsessed with love and death as two opposing forces, and seeing the possibility of spiritual transformation through love alone, Morris reaches the conclusion that to love \textit{is} the meaning, even without pleasure and fulfilment. These words quoted elsewhere are put in the mouth of the character that resembles Morris in his unfinished novel, written in the same year:

\begin{quote}
\textit{even without any return [love] is happiness. It is worth passing through all the pain that clings about it – and if you do not feel this, you are not in love …} \footnote{Morris, \textit{The Novel on Blue Paper}, p. 73.}
\end{quote}

Morris believed that individual suffering for love becomes part of the eternal cosmic sum of love, and from this a kind of immortality is born, which exists through the ever-repeated stories of human love and great deeds, some such as Morris writes now from the depths of his heartache: ‘And my tears be a treasure to add to the hoard / Of pleasure laid up for [Love’s] people’s reward’.\footnote{Morris, ‘Love is Enough’, \textit{Collected Works}, vol. 9, p. 47.} Of this work Morris’s daughter May would later write that:

\begin{quote}
No glimpse of the inner life of Morris was ever vouchsafed even to his closest friends – \textit{secretum meum mihi} [my secret to myself]. It was a subject on which he never spoke except in \textit{Love is Enough}. But here he certainly does reveal much of himself, as a poet must in developing a story which expresses the passionate desire of the soul to come into contact with something beyond worldly experience … If love is enough, it is not the world’s love and contentment, but that final absorption in eternal good, that something-beyond-all for which the speech of man can find no defining words and towards which the thoughts of man travel down every path of belief.\footnote{May Morris, \textit{William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist}, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1910-1915, vol.1, pp. 441-42} \end{quote}
Picking up May’s suggestion of spiritual quest, Morris scholar Florence Boos has written a convincing and perceptive article, ‘Love is Enough as Secular Theodicy’, in which she examines Morris’s use of biblical phraseology and imagery. Boos argues that Morris also embraces forms of love other than Eros, such as companionship, affection and Agape, and here I think she is mistaken. She sees the generally bleak work as upholding a higher aim: ‘Life may give lovers courage, but not each other’, and ‘conscious happiness may be greater in retrospection and hope’. Morris rejects the world, but I would argue that he does so because, as mentioned earlier, he perceives that the world opposes his love. I take the following to be the god Love’s attack on the moralists who would condemn love categorised as illicit:

Beware, Beloved! For they sow the weed
Where I the wheat: they meddle where I leave
Take what I score, cast by what I receive,
Sunder my yoke that I would dissever,
Pull down the house my hands would build for ever.

And in another passage, with love ‘filched away’ by the world, thwarted sexual desire becomes a poisoned fire, a force for destruction and trouble. Still a God, but of wrong and shame:

Behold again; this life great stories made;
All cast aside for love, and then and then
Love filched away; the world an adder-den,
And all folk foes: and one, the one desire –
– How shall we name it? – grown a poisoned fire,
God once, God still, but God of wrong and shame
A lying God, a curse without a name.
So turneth love to hate, the wise world saith.
– Folly – I say 'twixt love and hate lies death,
They shall not mingle: neither died this love,
But through a dreadful world all changed must move
With earthly death and wrong, and earthly woe
The only deeds its hand might find to do.

Boos takes the work to be a theoretical struggle with Love as religion, based on the problem of Morris’s unhappy marriage, so she therefore misses an alternate biographical application:

65 J.M.S. Tompkins, William Morris: An approach to the poetry, London, Cecil Woolf, 1988, p.224. Tompkins also agrees the work is religious, but without faith in the supernatural.
67 Boos, ‘Love is Enough as Secular Theodicy’.
Unaccountably, Love now insists at the day’s end that Pharamond leave Azalais and return to his kingdom. He offers various rationales for this injunction, but they are clearly the weakest aspect of the poem’s conceptual and narrative structure. For one thing, they never answer the obvious question: why shouldn’t Azalais accompany him?70

The obvious question has an obvious answer – Morris’s love transgresses social bounds so his beloved cannot be with him – she is married to another. His love is wrong and shameful in the eyes of the world. For her sake it must be enough just to love her. Morris battles to bring some meaning from his situation. In these following verses Morris seems to speak of his love for Georgie, which grew unnoticed over time, until, awoken by the events precipitated by their spouses – the ‘pain of its blossoming’ – the love revealed itself. Despite the ‘despair in its seeding’, and the physical separation, he believes it has value and remains as a treasure in his heart:

Love is enough: it grew up without heeding
In the days when ye knew not its name nor its measure,
And its leaflets untrod by the light feet of pleasure
Had no boast of the blossom, no sign of the seeding,
As the morning and evening passed over its treasure …

It sprang without sowing, it grew without heeding,
Ye knew not its name and ye knew not its measure,
Ye noted it not mid your hope and your pleasure;
There was pain in its blossom, despair in its seeding,
But daylong your bosom now nurseth its treasure71

Tompkins believes Morris valued the pain of unrewarded love because pain, like pleasure, betokens aliveness and Morris, she says, feared age and the death of desire as the prelude to death itself. One possible outcome of this extended suffering was that love would turn to hatred, but Morris would give up the quest rather than his love:

"Till in his path the shade of hate arose
Twixt him and his desire: with heart that burned
For very love back through the thorns he turned …
Because for love’s sake love he cast aside72

This work is the apogee of Morris’s passionate commitment to Love expressed poetically.

70 Boos, ‘Love is Enough’, p. 66.
72 Morris, ‘Love is Enough’, *Collected Works*, vol. 9, p. 79.
Rossetti and unromantic discontent

In November 1872 Morris, who was planning a second trip to Iceland, wrote to Aglaia about how he was being kept away from his beloved Kelmscott Manor by Rossetti’s constant presence. Rossetti now complained of cold and draughts, and, seedy from alcohol and chloral would stay in bed until noon or later, staying as if he ‘never meant to go away’.73 Morris’s letter makes it clear why he is so irritated:

[Rossetti] has all sorts of ways so unsympathetic with the sweet simple old place, that I feel his presence there as a kind of slur on it: this is very unreasonable though when one thinks why one took the place, and how it has really answered that purpose [my emphasis].

Morris continues, complaining not that Jane and Rossetti are together, but that Rossetti isn’t enjoying himself enough:

nor do I think I should feel this about it if he had not been so unromantically discontented with it and the whole thing which made me very angry and disappointed [my emphasis].74

Morris spells out the deliberate nature of Rossetti’s partnership with him in leasing Kelmscott. Morris’s only disappointment is Rossetti’s failure to be ‘romantically contented’, as Morris’s mention of his ‘love nest’ to Magnusson indicates. Instead of anger over Rossetti’s romance with his wife, Morris is angry there isn’t enough romance. There can be only one interpretation of this: that Morris was a key player. Viewed in this light, Morris appears not as an innocent cuckold, but almost as the creator of the relationship, and to be acting with kindness and consideration, for his wife in particular. This seems such an unlikely scenario that it puzzled even those close to the family. Sydney Cockerell, who knew Morris only in the last years of his life, but was an executor of Morris’s estate, wrote to G.B. Shaw eighty years after the event: ‘It may be that high principles not dishonourable ones compelle M to accept the situation’75.

Accept or facilitate? In such strange circumstances, with Morris so much involved, little wonder that Rossetti felt ‘unromantically discontented with … the whole thing’, and no wonder he combined admiration for Morris with a peculiarly bitter sarcasm during these years. Morris, who has been seen as a hapless victim, may actually have been more in control of the situation than Rossetti. A reality so far from public perceptions and biographical interpretations of this celebrated ménage à trois can

hardly be imagined. In the same letter to Aglais as quoted above, Morris confided the reasons for his current discontent in a way that shows she was in on the whole story:

When I said there was no cause for my feeling low, I meant that my friends had not changed at all towards me in any way and there has been no quarrelling: and indeed I am afraid it [low spirits] comes from some cowardice or unmanliness in me. One thing wanting ought not to go for so much: nor indeed does it spoil my enjoyment of life always, as I have often told you … Furthermore, my intercourse with G has been a good deal interrupted not from any coldness of hers or violence of mine; but from so many untoward nothings.

The ‘one thing wanting’ is physical intimacy, yes, but not with Janey as has been thought, but with the mysterious G – the one identified only by her initial. Their contact has been interrupted, but ‘not because of any coldness of hers’, so the two were again close. And the cowardice and unmanliness he fears in himself is not his failure to oust Rossetti, or some kind of impotence, as has been suggested by others, but the fact that with everything intellectually agreeable between the various parties concerned, he is unable to overcome feeling depressed by being an outsider to the lovemaking occupying his friends. Left alone to brood, Morris detested the impasse he found himself in, which explains his need to get away to the bracing gales of the north. His later socialism was based on the conviction that everyone had the right to a fair share of life’s happiness, hence Morris’s constant wish for Jane to be happy, and his belief that if his wife and friend passionately loved one another, they should be together. If Morris’s poetry tells us nothing else, it is that he was sharply aware of death and believed in seizing the day. If the lovers happened to be his beautiful wife and his friend, then so be it. Once again, Morris had, as he had at the time of Burne-Jones engagement, set his own claims to happiness aside for others he loved.

Later in life Morris would publicly espouse his radical views on freedom within love and marriage in News from Nowhere and privately in a letter to his friend Charles Faulkner in 1886; it has been assumed – specifically by Marsh and MacCarthy, but also generally – that he adopted this position along with his adoption of other socialist principles. This is evidently not the case. Marsh, in her article ‘Concerning Love: News from Nowhere as erotic dream’, notes Morris’s liberal views on love and assumes that Morris was ‘unavoidably drawn into the debate’ of the 1880s. However, it is evident that Morris, because of the circumstances of his own life, was already preoccupied with the woman question long

77 See, for example, Collected Letters, vol. 1, p. 172.
before he took up socialism. He may even have been attracted to socialism because it attempted to address issues dealt with by him personally many years before, along with other effects of commerce on society. As one socialist observed in later years:

If I thought [Morris’s] opinions on the relations of the sexes in old days were the same as he professes to hold now – why then, you might believe anything. 80

In the following chapter, I discuss Morris’s unfinished novel, written at this time of greatest anguish. Couched in a critique of current moral values and arguing for free love, I propose that this work is Morris playing his final card. With echoes of ‘Gertha’s Lovers’, written sixteen years earlier, the work is in fact Morris’s revelation of the long history of his love for Georgie, and therefore the validity of his present claim on her love.

80 Lindsay, Life and Work, p. 322.
Chapter 6

From Knowledge and Vivid Recollection:
*The Novel on Blue Paper, 1856 and 1871*

I suppose if he ever painted he would never have hidden things with darkness.
That was Top, so clear. That was Top, so out in the sunlight.¹

At a pivotal time in his life and at the height of his courtship of Georgie in 1871, Morris began to write a contemporary novel, of which only a portion exists, now published as *The Novel on Blue Paper*. As a mere unedited fragment, it has been largely bypassed by scholars and researchers. I believe, however, this manuscript to be a key that unlocks the mystery of Morris’s feelings for Georgie, assumed by biographers to have begun only when his marriage was under strain. This intense roman à clef, if read as autobiography, reveals that Morris’s feelings for Georgie began before either was married and was not merely an attachment that developed between two abandoned friends, as biographers have supposed. It tells how one man, driven by the ideal of brotherhood, kept his love silent, surrendering his chance of love for his brother’s sake. Although this interpretation is pivotal to deciphering the mystery of Morris’s attachment to Georgie, it has lain concealed in the text, its import hidden.

The novel has two separate but related themes – first, the love of two brothers for the same woman, and second, the dire consequences of society’s restrictions on illicit love. The story does not go far, but in this short work Morris deliberately referenced his own life and the period of the 1850s when he, Burne-Jones and Georgie were young people staying in Oxfordshire. A reasonable interpretation of Morris’s motive in using a narrative of their shared youth is that it would reveal to Georgie how, while she and Edward were courting, he kept his own love for her a secret, for ideals of fellowship, brotherhood and self-sacrifice, ideals that now, when life had let them all down, seemed outworn and misguided. The work contains several pointed references to the year 1856, the year of Georgie’s engagement to Edward, and also the year that Georgie’s mother had to speak to Morris when he and Georgie were found talking on the balcony at 11 o’clock at night.² The background of the novel, with its history of a fallen woman and the harsh judgement made

by society on women who follow love and freedom, seems relevant to the lives of the three protagonists. Morris suggests that controlling women’s freedom in love distorts the life of men also, an idea expressed later in News from Nowhere:

[Many violent acts came from the artificial perversion of the sexual passions …]  
[What lay at the bottom of [the miseries] was mostly the idea (a law-made idea) of the woman being the property of the man, whether he were husband, father, brother …]  
That idea has of course vanished with private property, as well as certain follies about the ‘ruin’ of women for following their natural desire in an illegal way, which was of course a convention caused by the laws of private property.  

This argument for free love has been overlooked by researchers and scholars who have taken Morris at his word when he referred to the work as ‘nothing but landscape and sentiment’. If we recall that the word ‘sentiment’ in Victorian usage did not have the pejorative associations of today, but meant feelings and emotions as a guide to truth, Morris’s import becomes clearer. It is also interesting that this critique of conventional morality in relation to women takes place decades before Morris identified with socialism.

The book is an intense, puzzling piece, which is unrevised, and went unpublished and almost totally unremarked until 1986 when Penelope Fitzgerald published it with an introduction speculating on its meaning and significance.  

Apart from this introduction, an article by Jessie Kocmanova in 1975 that linked it stylistically with Morris’s later works, and another by Margaret Flemming identifying the landscape of the novel as places near Oxford that Morris would have known in the 1850s, there has been little scholarly writing on it except for my article ‘Self-revelation in Morris’s Unfinished Novel’. This article, which proposes the theory I put forward here, was noted in passing by MacCarthy in her 1996 biography of Morris in which she says, somewhat mysteriously, that the novel has ‘much exercised late twentieth-century biographers and critics’, and is ‘the work in which the emotional triangle, the love of two men for the same women, seems to come most deliberately close to home’ (by which one assumes she means the Rossetti–Janey scenario). While the work is mentioned perfunctorily in most biographies, which usually quote Morris’s deprecating remark that it was ‘nothing but landscape and sentiment’ and ‘just a

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specimen of how not to do it,' I argue in this chapter that Morris’s plot is far more significant and that it had nothing to do with Rossetti and Jane. The work seems to have been set down with a clearly formed meaning already in Morris’s mind: that the thwarting of passionate love – and women’s love in particular – by social and religious strictures is destructive to individuals and to society as a whole. This radical, broader message, intended for society in general, sits within an autobiography that tells the beginnings of a more personal love story. Having tried to win her through poetry, and then a series of beautiful works of art, Morris no doubt hoped that this story, with its twin purports, might touch Georgie and inspire her to throw off convention and accept his long-held love, perhaps following her own suppressed inclinations.

This chapter examines the plot, Morris’s focus on a moral scenario as a background to his story and the strongly autobiographical elements of the work. The latter include the presence of Georgie, the relationship of the two brothers who represent Morris and Burne-Jones, and Morris’s personal philosophy of love and spirituality. Challenging previous commentators, including Fitzgerald’s key introduction to the published version, which theorises that the story centres on Morris, Rossetti and Janey, I demonstrate how my alternative reading fits effortlessly with key facts, while Fitzgerald’s is laboured and unconvincing.

Landscape and sentiment

[B]eautifully clear of skin but without much red in her cheeks, dark brown, abundant, silky hair; and a firm, clear-cut, somewhat square jaw, and round, well-developed chin; lips a little over-thin, a little too firmly closed together for her youth and happiness; a straight nose with wide nostrils, perfectly made, but somewhat short; rather high cheekbones that gave again too much of a plaintive look to the cheeks, a wide forehead, and a beautifully-shaped head above it; and, to light all this up, large grey eyes set wide apart, fringed with dark lashes.\(^9\)

Thus Morris describes in rather too much detail the fifteen-year-old heroine of his unfinished novel of which there are fewer than eighty pages extant. Although Morris tells us that his young hero will not again see ‘so goodly a sight’, Clara is less than a classic beauty; her jaw is square, her nose short and her lips over-thin and firm. Surely imagination could produce more ideal features in a heroine – soft, full lips, a nose that did not lack length, a heart-shaped face perhaps? But Morris is here describing the facial features of a real woman, Georgie Burne-Jones, who Morris first met when she too was fifteen (see

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\(^9\) Morris, *Collected Letters*, vol. 1, p. 162.

Figures 18 and also Figure 7 above). It is an indication that throughout this work Morris borrowed from his past to form this story.

![Image](image_url)

Figures 18

Dante Gabriel Rossetti, ‘Mrs Burne-Jones’, a drawing of Georgie in 1860

The above-cited description is characteristic of much of the novel, featuring as it does an abundance of minute descriptive detail. Throughout, this has a disorienting effect, as if our attention is sharply focused on something important but we do not have the key to its significance. The story also jumps abruptly from one period to another, and the prose, as a first draft, is slightly repetitive, although in places Morris’s heightened perception makes it flash. The work appears to have been written in a flowing hand, hastily and almost without correction, perhaps at one or two sittings. The opening chapters outline the background of the two brothers at the centre of the tale and frame their story, which begins when their mother, who is expecting a third child, finds and reads three letters her husband has hidden in an old pocketbook within his clothes. This is a motif that echoes Georgie’s own discovery that confirmed Burne-Jones’s infidelity.\(^\text{11}\) The first of the letters their mother reads was written by her parson husband before their marriage, and details the abandonment of his lover:

My love, my darling—
I could not do it yesterday, though I came up to London for nothing but to tell you. And yet I was going to do it., the last half-hour we were together, though you were so happy and bright. Didn’t you notice how confused and stupid I was? But then, when you took me upstairs to see your newly furnished bedroom … and showed me your dear clothes in the drawers, and I saw your little slippers lying about, and all the dear things that touch your body that I love so, then my heart failed me, as I thought that I

\(^{11}\) In 1867 Georgie discovered proof of Edward’s relationship with Maria Zambaco when she found a letter in his clothes (discussed above in Chapter 3).
should never lie with you in the new pretty bed, and I came away with the kisses I feel now, and leaving that lie behind me – for you know the kind of thing I have to say.\textsuperscript{12}

Mackail called this work ‘the most singular of writings’ and this extract shows what he means.\textsuperscript{13} The openly sexual relationship between unmarried people, which comes at the start of the book, would be radical in a mid nineteenth-century novel, and serves immediately to signal this relationship as both passionate and immoral, revealing the novel’s burden as love and the associated question of morality.

Of greater import to my argument in this chapter, however, is the story of Parson Risley’s two young sons, John and Arthur. After their mother’s death in childbirth, they are brought up by the housekeeper and kindly neighbours, the Godby’s, and are helped in their development by the frequent absence of their hated and feared father, now prone to angry outbursts and violence. He busies himself with commerce, hardly seeing his children, who he ‘thinks next to nothing of’. Their story begins when John is seventeen and his brother Arthur sixteen. It is not only the young Georgie who Morris portrays so accurately; Mackail was first to label the work autobiographical and identify John with the young Morris:

In an unpublished story … the description of his hero’s boyhood has passages in it which are unmistakeably drawn from his own experience. The dreams which mingle with the healthy life of a boy, the first beginnings of thought, of sentiment, of romance, are touched in these passages from knowledge and vivid recollection…

The boy who cannot help thinking of tales going on [in the world] is undoubtedly Morris himself, and Morris as he remained all through his life. Even more strikingly autobiographic perhaps is another touch a little later in the same story.\textsuperscript{14}

Mackail refers to Morris’s / John’s dreamy nature, and his habit of mentally changing whatever he saw into some tale, this being both a ‘strength and weakness’. Morris has the brothers each exhibit some of their father’s physical features, but there are real life similarities. Like Burne-Jones, Arthur is delicate and has a ‘faraway dreamy’ look in his eyes, while John, like Morris, an eager fisherman, is sturdy, with a ‘fierce and restless’ look in his. Like the young Morris of the 1850s, John tells himself long tales, and is earnest and intense, with, as Mackail points out, a similarity to Guy, hero of The Heir of Redclyffe, a book read and admired by Morris and his friends in the 1850s (and whose protagonist is, in turn, very like Morris himself, with a self-destructive ideal of renunciation; the book even has a narrative tone strikingly similar to this work). Mackail emphasises Morris’s devotion to the notion of self-sacrifice and brotherhood, which, in The Novel on Blue Paper, will be John’s undoing:

\textsuperscript{12} Morris, \textit{The Novel on Blue Paper}, p. 8.
\textsuperscript{13} Mackail, \textit{Life of William Morris}, vol. 1, p. 287.
\textsuperscript{14} Mackail, \textit{Life of William Morris}, vol. 1, pp. 20–1.
The young hero of the novel, with his overstrained conscientiousness, his chivalrous courtesy, his intense earnestness... his high-strung notions of love, friendship and honour, his premature gravity, his almost deliquescant piety, was adopted by them as a pattern for actual life: and more strongly perhaps by Morris than by the rest.15

Perhaps, as did John, Morris imagined himself being generous, forgiving and 'greathearted'.16 As if to confirm that Morris now questioned the ardour of such youthful idealism, he has Mrs Mason advise John: ‘Sometimes I think the kindness of people ... may bring on dreadful things; I mean to say when one’s kind because one wants other people to be kind to one’.17 The brothers self-consciously exhibit the same qualities and relationship to one another as Morris and Ned did in their brotherhood of the Oxford days; we meet John fishing, and rejoicing in the beauty of nature, collecting armfuls of marsh marigolds (one of the flowers Morris admired),18 and experiencing the vivid sensibility to nature so evident in Morris’s early writings. Like Morris, John reads aloud to Arthur, a characteristic and lifelong habit of Morris and Burne-Jones (see Figure 19). The brothers share romantic dreams and antiquarian sympathies, but other traits of Arthur’s are those of Burne-Jones alone: an extreme imaginative sensitivity that expressed itself in ecstasies and daydreams, or bogeys and nightmares, as well as a predisposition to illness, especially of a nervous origin, and a charming manner that endeared him to women of all ages. Burne-Jones’s biographer wrote that ‘nearly every women he met wanted to look after him’,19 and in the novel Clara and her mother react this way to Arthur.

Figure 19
Edward Burne-Jones, William Morris reading poetry to Edward Burne-Jones.

A further connection with the past is that Burne-Jones was drawn and painted as the young King Arthur by Rosetti for his Oxford Union panel. Although John is physically strong, like the youthful Morris he suffers from shyness, blushing at even at the mention of a woman. Morris’s narrative follows John’s activity, his youthful pleasure in the natural world, as if ‘through knowledge and vivid recollection’. To anyone who knew Morris, Burne-Jones and Georgie personally, the identity these three characters represent would be self-evident, but not to others. Memories play a great part in the dialogue, as if Morris is recalling real events to remind those who shared them with him. In one scene John says to Clara of a Christmas past:

He and I read our books wallowing about on the floor, while you read solemnly in the inlaid chair at the table … but I got tired first, and then you, and then we both bullied Arthur for reading in the twilight … – Don’t you remember?

Clara replies:

It’s strange we should both have remembered that time so distinctly, isn’t it? And be talking about it like old people. I wonder if perhaps in years to come we shall remember this afternoon.

Figure 20 is a drawing taken from a joint letter from Georgie and Burne-Jones to Georgie’s brother written in 1856. It shows Burne-Jones on the floor, adoring Georgie sitting in her (inlaid?) chair. It also provides some indication of his and Arthur’s capacity for non-embarrassed attentiveness to women, quite unlike the young Morris or John.

After announcing his father’s intention that he leave the area to work in London to Clara and her mother, John becomes increasingly silent and tongue-tied; Clara appears confused and disconcerted by the news. While no reason is given for this, it could be that

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she feels John does not care about her if he could up and leave that way. John notes but doesn’t interpret the signs of her distress, being himself in a turmoil of emotion:

He stopped himself and reddened, as his custom was when he got talking or indeed thinking much about his feelings.

‘What, John?’ said she.

‘O, nothing,’ he said. ‘I can’t express myself properly.’

And that was true; yet there was something more than a vague thought in his head; a feeling that he was half ashamed, half afraid of had fallen on him at whiles lately, of discontent and hopelessness – of emptiness in the summer country about him.\textsuperscript{22}

Clara gives John a letter to deliver to the invalid Arthur, who reads it greedily without sharing the contents with John. Clara writes presciently:

I was thinking about you and your brother, and wishing that I could see you, and hoping so much that you were better: then I began to wonder how our three lives would run on together, and then, all of a sudden, I felt so strange! As if I understood all about it – and why we were alive and liked each other so, and it felt so sweet and delightful … and yet I was longing for something.\textsuperscript{23}

Although the letter concerns both youths, Arthur believes it is a sign of Clara’s love for him alone. Had John been less self-effacing and tongue-tied he could have shared his own similar experiences with Clara, but they are kept from knowing how alike their inner lives are.

There is a boating journey up river with Clara and her attractive mother to an Elizabethan hall, again described in excessive detail. While John talks to the burly housekeeper, Clara keeps close to the invalid, who reads much into her attentions:

all the morning as he talked he imagined her thoughts about him, and had changed her clinging kindness into heaven knows what dream of singlehearted passion;\textsuperscript{24}

Clara cares for both brothers but her demonstrated affection for Arthur, who is recovering from his illness, seems to stem more from sympathy and affection than from actual love. Arthur, with his charm and grace, woos her without noticing the ‘strange, faraway look in her lowlying eyes, as though she did not see him. But [this]melted away in a while to mere tender kindness’ [my emphasis].\textsuperscript{25} The river, bridge and inn of the return journey are again sharply detailed. When John finds Clara looking pensive, she tells him, ‘I was thinking that

\textsuperscript{22} Morris, \textit{The Novel on Blue Paper}, p. 43.  
\textsuperscript{23} Morris, \textit{The Novel on Blue Paper}, p. 53.  
\textsuperscript{24} Morris, \textit{The Novel on Blue Paper}, p. 60.  
\textsuperscript{25} Morris, \textit{The Novel on Blue Paper}, p. 58.
it would be very dreadful to live here if one got to be unhappy – which is probably the way Morris intended the story to develop after her marriage. At this point the narrative is poised for a choice – for good or for ill. At one pivotal moment Clara is literally suspended between John and Arthur, her hand resting on John’s shoulder as she steps past him in the boat, looking towards the glories of the setting sun. The moment is of almost spiritual significance. Her movement breaks the stillness, and then, she chooses to sit next to Arthur. As members of the party take leave of each other in the evening dusk, Arthur boldly steals a kiss, ‘pass[ing] his lips from the cheek that was offered him to her averted lips’, while John ‘whistl[es] in sturdy resolution to keep his heart up’ and also berates himself ‘for a feeling of discomfort and wrong’. The choice appears to have been made, and is sealed with a stolen kiss. John appears unable or unwilling to interfere, in spite of his feelings.

The last chapter ends abruptly and incompletely: A further single separate page of the manuscript has turned up among Sydney Cockerell’s papers, indicating that, fascinatingly, there may once have been more of the novel that is now lost or destroyed. The remainder of the manuscript, which is contained in an envelope, picks up the story at a later date. These pages consist of a frantic letter from John, written perhaps a year later from overseas, and sent to Arthur on learning that he plans to marry Clara. In an outpouring of emotion John urges the couple to marry in desperate terms that betray his own unspoken feelings. Suddenly, all John’s past sturdy silences, embarrassment and blushes are unwittingly revealed as evidence of his passionate but unspoken love. He urges Arthur to be sure that what they have is true love, rather than mere affection, revealing John’s familiarity with that emotion all too plainly. In a key passage, quoted already, the Morris/John character urges Arthur/Burne-Jones to understand that ‘[i]t is worth passing through all the pain that clings about [love] – and if you do not feel this, you are not in love’. He emphasises: ‘There is nothing in between. Everything else – friendship, kindness, goodness, is a shadow and a lie’. John begs Arthur to be like ‘the strong lucky people who come near enough to the fire to thrust in their hands and snatch the gold out of it’ and who ‘cannot heed those who are … weak with the horrible fever of longing that can never be satisfied’. He explains:

27 Morris, The Novel on Blue Paper, p. 70.
28 See Journal of the William Morris Society (now Journal of William Morris Studies), vol. 9, no. 3 Autumn 1991, p. xix. Richard Pearson says the page (Mss. HM 369717) was found in the Huntington Library, California. It had been part of Sydney Cockerell’s collection sold by him in 1956. Pearson speculates in the note why Cockerell chose not to unite it with the portion at the BL.
29 Morris, The Novel on Blue Paper, p. 73.
You see the only thing I care about is that the two people I love most in all the world should be quite happy, quite without a cloud on their love.\textsuperscript{30}

Shocked and with a twinge of guilt, Arthur keeps the letter from Clara, and in so doing, also keeps the knowledge of John’s true feelings from her, ensuring that John’s warning to make sure their love is true, not merely friendship, kindness, goodness doesn’t reach her.

If there is a suspicion that such a narrative has occurred earlier in this thesis, that is because it is the same trope as Morris’s 1856 story ‘Gertha’s Lovers’, written at the very time of the Burne-Jones’s engagement, and telling of the self-effacing Leuchnar’s heroic assistance to his friend Olaf in winning Gertha, renouncing his own great love for her. In creating this piece of fiction Morris drew on his memory of actual events and conversations that occurred around the time of Georgie’s engagement to Ned. The three spent the time of the Oxford Union murals in country very like that described in the novel,\textsuperscript{31} probably making the journey by boat to a similar historic house. Morris’s sharply focused recreation of this time in their lives would have been readily identifiable to Georgie, along with his judgement that the feelings between Ned and the teenaged Georgie were not true love, but kindness and goodness. Not only does his minute description of Clara’s facial features fit Georgie exactly, but there are also pointed references in the text that only Georgie and a few others would have recognised. For instance, in the background to the story, the Olympic Theatre is mentioned as the rejected lover Eleanor, a fallen woman, wanders London at night: ‘I went and sat in one of the stalls close by the door, just where we sat last week, my Darling – and Robson was acting in Medea still’\textsuperscript{32}. Medea was playing at the Olympic with Robson in July 1856.\textsuperscript{33} A passage about the year 1856 in Georgie’s \textit{Memorials} says:

\begin{quote}
Morris began a pleasant custom of running up from Oxford on Saturdays … Often on these Saturday evenings both friends would go to some play or other with Rossetti.\textsuperscript{34}
\end{quote}

Elsewhere, Morris describes the boys’ bedroom, the walls of which are decorated with, among other things, ‘an old sampler, and a picture, worked in brown worsted, of Abraham and Isaac’.\textsuperscript{35} While we don’t know if these were real items, as examples of

\textsuperscript{30} Morris, \textit{The Novel on Blue Paper}, p. 73.
\textsuperscript{31} Flemming, ‘Nothing but Landscape and Sentiment’, pp. 4–9.
\textsuperscript{32} Morris, \textit{The Novel on Blue Paper}, p. 10.
\textsuperscript{33} See Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama; available online at: www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk/productions/production/1135 [accessed 13 July 2014].
\textsuperscript{35} Morris, \textit{The Novel on Blue Paper}, p. 18.
Morris’s over-precise detail it would seem that they were, otherwise why are they there at all? Arthur is recovering from a fever, and is confined to bed, mirroring Burne-Jones’ frequent illnesses,36 while John reads to him from ‘a new green-coated book – (Lane’s Arabian Nights, to wit)’.37 We are even given the detail that John is reading the ‘tale of Maroon’. John’s offer to give Clara a copy of this book would have reminded Georgie that in 1856 Morris made a gift of that very edition to her family.38 Clara sings ‘a sweet old tune – a Christmas carol’.39 Georgie was the singer of the group, and recalled how on an evening in 1858 the friends hired a piano to sing and play from the book of old music, *Echoes du Temps Passe*.*40* Volume 1 of this series was a selection of French carols. Two years later Morris would write a carol – ‘Masters in this Hall’ – to an old tune by Marais.41 Many other objects, such as the green dragon bowl, in which syllabub is made, and the details of Clara’s jewellery, including a brooch with a miniature of ‘a long dead ancestor of her father’s (a red-coated, crested-helmed militia man) may well have had significance for Georgie. It is clear that this work is a book with a hidden message.

Morris’s intrusions of reality into a work of fiction are sometimes problematic for his narrative. We are told, for instance, that Clara Mason comes from a liberal household where her mother dresses ‘showily’ and lets Clara do as she pleases,42 yet in his portrait of Clara herself, Morris changes her upbringing from liberal to something more like Georgie’s own:

On the second finger of her dear right hand she had a flimsy, old fashioned ring of two or three coloured golds and turquoises, and a little brooch at her throat of the same manufacture. These were all her ornaments, and even these, perhaps, would have seemed excessive for a workaday to the canons of taste which ruled the system she had been brought up in, which at all events implied (if they did not declare) that all ornament was display.43

‘The system she had been brought up in!’ It was Georgie not Clara who had a Wesleyan-Methodist upbringing. Further on, Clara’s eyes are extensively described:

So capable were her eyes of all shades of expression that they were liable from their expressiveness to be misread, so sympathetic to the soul that showed through them, that in times of strong emotion, before the lips had begun to tremble, the whole

change would have come over the eyes. Amidst apparent coldness they would be tender — o, how tender! — with love; amid apparent patience they would burn with passion; amid apparent cheerfulness they would be dull and glassy with anguish. No lie or pretence could ever come near them. They were the index of the love and greatness of heart that wielded the strong will in her, which in its turn, wrought on those firm lips of hers that serious brow which gave her the air of one who never made a mistake, a look which, without the sanctification of the eyes, might perhaps have given an expression of sourness and narrowness to her face.  

These are the eyes of passion and anguish that told Morris of love in the month poem ‘October’. Realising that his heroine is supposedly fifteen and actually without any troubles in her life, Morris awkwardly adds ‘it is true that even at this time all this was in her face, yet certainly undeveloped’.

This autobiographical novel, then, has characters that relate to real people, and an engagement between the Georgie and Burne-Jones-like characters and references to the year 1856, the actual year of Georgie Macdonald and Edward Burne-Jones’s engagement. So what have biographers had to say about this extraordinary work? Philip Henderson mentions the novel and its theme of the love of two brothers for the same woman and quoted Morris’s note to Louisa Baldwin, saying he was abandoning the work, without further comment or analysis. Jack Lindsay, influenced by John Le Bourgeois’ theory, outlined the plot, noted the autobiography and the parallels with his later work, News from Nowhere, and observed that Clara, a Georgie type, indicated Morris’s recent rejection of the Pre-Raphaelite ideal – Janey. He identified the triangular love theme as representing Morris’s inner conflict, dating from his early attachment to his older sister Emma, and then his traumatic sense of loss when she married. Tying the work to Morris’s life, Lindsay says this loss emerged in Morris’s writing ‘when the Emma-complex was actualised in his relations with Janey and Rossetti’. Lindsay planned to write a monograph exploring this theme but it was abandoned and never published, possibly because the pattern could not be proven.

As noted above, in 1988 Fitzgerald, Burne-Jones’s biographer, published the fragmentary novel, giving it the title The Novel on Blue Paper and including a lengthy introduction that speculates on the work’s meaning and significance. She noted the presence of Georgie, with whom she says Morris ‘with his own loneliness and bewilderment’ was at this time in love, but she failed to recognise Ned in the figure of

45 Lindsay, Life and work, p. 211.
46 Lindsay, Life and Work, p. 64.
47 The title was registered with an ISBN — as Clara’s Lovers or a Novel on Blue Paper — but Gabriel Beaumont tells me the book was announced for sale but never published.
Arthur, with his delicate health, ‘dreamy look’, and ecstatic imagination. Fitzgerald assumed that the Rossetti–Janey relationship was behind Morris’s novel writing, and she believed that the question of why Morris did not ‘strike’ Rossetti is at the heart of the story. In her scheme, John and Arthur somewhat confusingly represent two sides of Morris’s nature, recently inflamed by anger with and resentment of Rossetti. Volatile John is unsuccessful, but Arthur is a self-controlled, successful individual who wins Clara. Fitzgerald spotted the references to 1856:

By the time we reach John’s letter to his brother, Morris is in trouble with his time scheme. The Medea, which Parson Risely and Eleanor see at the Olympic, gives us the date 1856, and he marries shortly afterwards. John is born, presumably in 1857 … bringing us to 1872, the actual year when it was written. He later makes John tell his father he was ‘seventeen last February’; we are now in 1874. 48

But she fails to see anything significant in this non-helpful intrusion of an actual date in the past and its relationship with the present, probably because she assumed Morris was referencing the Jane–Rossetti intrigue, which did not play out until the late 1860s. Ina Taylor comes closest to Morris’s motivation, though without clarification, when she writes:

His single attempt at novel writing concerned the love of two brothers for the same woman, and when partly written, Morris gave it to Georgie ‘to see if she could give me any hope, she gave me none and I have never looked at it since’ he told Louisa Baldwin. Evidently, autobiography in the guise of fiction frightened Georgie. 49

Gender, morality and society

The autobiographical elements described thus far are all set within another story, that of the embittered Parson Risley and his history. To explain the relevance of this, it is necessary to return to the opening chapter of the book that deals with the subject of morality, double standards and the question of the fallen woman. In the letter of abandonment to his lover written decades earlier (cited above), Risley betrays a passionate love for Eleanor, 50 whom he addresses as ‘My love, my darling’, and refers to ‘kisses I feel now’. He calls her the ‘cleverest and most beautiful woman in the world’ and concludes with ‘I shall always love you my precious, my darling, my own’. 51 But despite this, he has succumbed to pressures to cover his debts, marry well and continue in the family tradition of parson. His weakness is his desire to live richly, which has no doubt caused his

49 Taylor, *Victorian Sisters*, p. 121.
50 Eleanor was Elizabeth Siddal’s middle name, also a woman with a compromised past.
impecunity: ‘Why was I born among rich people, loving all sorts of comfort?’ he writes. Risley’s actions in abandoning the woman he loved inadvertently destroy another woman: in finding the letters decades later, his wife reads how he must ‘pretend to love this ugly, stupid woman’. Her shock and despair seem to have contributed to her death in bearing her third child, who dies with her.

The second letter in Risley’s pocketbook is a reply from Eleanor, returning his letter and proudly rejecting his offer to send her money from his wages and new wife’s fortune: ‘curse you and your money – the money for which you have sold me and yourself’. Her curse accurately predicts Risley’s future:

may you have no escape in the whole world from dullness. May all your grossness and falseness increase on you till everything hates you, till your face … changes as your base soul works on it.

In a third letter, Eleanor recants, saying that her heart is full of love, and that she will wait in case they can ever be together again, but she also outlines her now precarious position, rejected by her family and society, and unprotected. We note the disparity in the consequences of illicit love for the man and the woman. While Risley finds it impossible to resist the social pressures that have led to this situation, he downplays the consequences for Eleanor. As a fallen woman she is now in serious trouble. No longer under the protection of a man, she will become an outcast with no means of support, and little chance of marriage in her own class. With limited employment opportunities, such women had a struggle to earn enough for food and shelter. By openly living with a man, Eleanor would already be regarded as equivalent to a prostitute in the eyes of society, which viewed prostitution as a moral, not an economic, condition. One voice in the prostitution debate questioned whether active sexual desire, such as Eleanor has shown, was ‘a result or cause of prostitution’, inextricably linking desire with immorality and ignoring evidence that showed that ‘poverty and unemployment were the two primary factors’. Yet in spite of her desperate circumstances, Eleanor’s greatest blow is discovering that the man she has loved is capable of such action.

Significantly, Morris reverses the usual moral view of this scenario, equating Risley’s actions with prostitution – selling himself for the material assets his marriage will bring,

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57 Nead, Myths of Sexuality, p. 102.
while Eleanor initially rejects Risley’s offer of money, and the common arrangement of a kept woman. She describes her first night of despair, in which she comes close to acting out some of the clichés of the moral panic scenario depicted in such paintings as Augustus Egg’s *Past and Present* (see Figure 21), in which outcast women inevitably fall into a life of prostitution and eventual suicide. She wanders through music hall crowds, but finding this to be like hell, she contemplates suicide at Waterloo Bridge, the traditional place for fallen women to ‘fetch up’. She is mistaken for a prostitute and accosted. She finds her way home, and then, after a kind of nervous breakdown, she recovers. Having described a scenario that would normally be considered an inevitable path to prostitution, Morris has her tell Risley that she *will never become a prostitute* [my emphasis].

![Figure 21](augustus-egg-past-and-present.jpg)

**Figure 21**

*Augustus Egg, Past and Present 3 (1858)*

This avowal shows Morris contradicting society’s assumptions that made no distinction between illicit love and prostitution. Definitions of what constituted a prostitute between 1840 and 1870 were, according to Nead, ‘fragmented and vague’ and ‘best understood as a diverse range of beliefs which work[ed] to evade questions of economic causation’, but they tended to include illicit love:

> In his 1842 *Lectures*, Wardlaw referred to prostitution as ‘illicit intercourse’ and specified: ‘a prostitute is a designation of character … to form the character and justify the designation there must be voluntary repetition of the act … the giving up of the person to criminal indulgence’ … Wardlaw entirely sidesteps economic and social issues and represents prostitution as a moral state [author’s emphasis].

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William Acton used this argument in his second edition of *Prostitution* of 1870 to support the contagious diseases legislation. As historian Judith Walkowitz has noted, ‘[u]nder the acts, extramarital sex became a question of state policy, a matter of vital national importance’.61 The moral panic model equated illicit sex with prostitution, a connection that emphasises the commodification of women, for, by allowing a man outside the family to own her body, a woman displaced responsibility for herself from the men in her family to other men prepared to purchase it. In saying that she will never be a prostitute, Eleanor is challenging the discourse that equated extramarital sexual relationships based on love with commercial sexual transactions.

*The Novel on Blue Paper* thus prefigures aspects of Morris’s thinking on double standards and social morality in Victorian society that would emerge more explicitly in later years. In 1885 Morris was asked to attend and speak at a conference, organised by W.T. Stead of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, as part of a new crusade against pornography, indecency and prostitution. The publisher of Morris’s letter of apology says it is distinguished from the other apologies by ‘independence of thought … and by its polite scepticism of some of the dynamics and values behind the movement being celebrated’.62 Morris wrote:

I am quite sure no legislative enactment will touch prostitution as long as … there are rich and poor classes … I especially fear the very possible danger of a puritan revival obscuring the real causes of this hideous unhappiness.63

Morris’s claim for economic hardship rather than seduction as a cause of prostitution was born out in a late nineteenth-century survey that found that less than eighteen per cent of prostitutes interviewed gave seduction as ‘the immediate cause of their going on the streets’.64 As Walkowitz notes, ‘[d]ifficult circumstances precipitated the move into prostitution, but for many, that choice still constituted a choice among a series of unpleasant alternatives’.65 In Morris’s novel, Eleanor is not made a potential prostitute by her sexual history, but by her economic dependence on men – the force at work in society controlling the lives of women. In living honestly with Risley in a relationship of true love, the sort Morris upholds, Eleanor has left herself open to social ruin, even possible death, while Risley is made to live a lie with a woman he doesn’t love.

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Luckily – and unusually – Eleanor has someone else to support her (the idea of moral contamination, pedalled by religious and secular discussion about sexual conduct suggested and required sexually deviant women to be outcast from respectable homes or risk labelling those homes and families as being outside respectability). We are told that Eleanor is able to find a home with her godfather, Dixon, who ‘in spite of all’ has asked her to live with him, only because ‘[he] knows and cares so little for the ways of society that I think he looks upon marriage as quite as shocking as anything else’.\textsuperscript{66} Morris here suggests that marriages can be as immoral as prostitution, an idea he was to take further in later years, and which is discussed in the next chapter. One definition of a prostitute was a woman ‘who gives for money that which she ought to give only for love’,\textsuperscript{67} so if some women married for money, Eleanor’s godfather was right – it is quite as shocking. He later called marriage a ‘system of venal prostitution’,\textsuperscript{68} because women were obliged to marry for economic reasons.

It is clear in this opening chapter that Morris is broaching the subject of the effect of social and commercial strictures on the lives of those who should by ‘nature’ be together. It is also clear that he has thought through this subject long before he had read any socialist literature or identified himself with that movement. This is an extension of the theme in the poem ‘The Defence of Guenevere’, but in \textit{The Novel on Blue Paper} Morris has made the story a contemporary one, with everyday consequences. This time, it is not forces such as the law or church that come between the lovers, but personal and socially based middle-class concerns, such as debt, familial expectations, the need to carve out a comfortable place in society and a good reputation. Morris underlines how these values have an impact upon women, perhaps Georgie herself. As he did in ‘The Defence of Guenevere’, Morris undermines the notions of sin and shame universally applied to the fallen woman in Victorian society. Eleanor and Guenevere have risked all for love. Like Guenevere, Eleanor has self-respect and inner strength, and like Guenevere, Eleanor is associated with God through the first words she writes to Risley: ‘I don’t curse God – I bless him rather’.\textsuperscript{69} Morris links passionate love with an implied spirituality here as he did in \textit{The Defence}. As a contrast to this, Risley is to be a parson, preaching empty religion and morality to his flock. Morris makes a distinction between this kind of religion and that of the godfather Dixon,\textsuperscript{70} with his tolerance for passion and distrust of legal marriage, of which Morris later wrote

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[66]{Morris, \textit{The Novel on Blue Paper}, p. 11.}
\footnotetext[67]{Nead, \textit{Myths of Sexuality}, p. 101.}
\footnotetext[68]{Morris, \textit{Collected Letters}, vol. 2, p. 584.}
\footnotetext[69]{Morris, \textit{The Novel on Blue Paper}, p. 9.}
\footnotetext[70]{One of Morris’s oldest and dearest friends was the religious poet Canon Richard Watson Dixon.}
\end{footnotes}
that the system ‘could only be kept up by the same means as the wages system is, ‘ie [sic] the police & the army’.\textsuperscript{71}

But it is not just women who suffer, and in \textit{The Novel on Blue Paper}, Morris begins to outline the way in which the double standard could have a destructive effect on individuals of both sexes, and society as a whole. As the story unfolds we see that Morris shows the failure to act out passionate natures, particularly in men, to be a kind of moral cowardice worse than any breach of social or religious mores. As discussed in Chapter 1, it would appear that he adopted this view in youth, as his review of Browning’s \textit{Men and Women} of 1856 showed:

Yet were the lovers none the less sinners … in that they were cowards; for in thought they indulged their love freely, and no fear of God, no hate of wrong or love of right restrained them, but only a certain cowardly irresolution.\textsuperscript{72}

Here, Morris displaces the notion of sin from the act the lovers might have committed to their inaction, a result of cowardly irresolution, not of any innate moral purity. In relating what happens to Risley later in life, Morris has him suffer the consequences of his sin of cowardice. Risley is altered over a period of years to become bitter and lonely: as a man of forty, he exhibits ‘reckless cruelty’, and his once handsome features are now spoilt by a scowl and an expression of ‘suppressed rage’, making him hated and feared by all.\textsuperscript{73} His malaise has spread from the rectory to the village of which he is supposedly the spiritual father. The countryside where Risley is squire as well as parson, while old and historically interesting, is oppressive, boxed in – a place to ‘crush passion, or to soothe it, or rather to nurse and foster it with brooding, with a sense of isolation and imprisonment’.\textsuperscript{74} The old church is unkempt, the local men ‘heavy-walking’ and the women ‘anxious’. The rectory, though threadbare and drab, is decorated with hunting trophies, in particular a stuffed tiger, of Risley’s adventurous forbears.\textsuperscript{75} Risley’s hypocrisy extends to his religion, ‘the disbeliefed or disregarded creed of which he was priest’.\textsuperscript{76} Even the countryside is described as a ‘dull, enchanted valley to be escaped from’. Risley and his rectory and neglected, ruined church are described as ‘the scene and actor of a tragedy without meaning and without ending, a curse without a name’.\textsuperscript{77} This phrase links Risley’s story with the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{71} Morris, \textit{Collected Letters}, vol. 2, p. 584
\item \textsuperscript{72} William Morris, ‘Review of Browning’s \textit{Men and Woman}, \textit{The Bibliot}, March 1898, p. 114.
\item \textsuperscript{73} Morris, \textit{The Novel on Blue Paper}, pp. 6, 7.
\item \textsuperscript{74} Morris, \textit{The Novel on Blue Paper}, p. 4.
\item \textsuperscript{75} Morris, \textit{The Novel on Blue Paper}, p. 7.
\item \textsuperscript{76} Morris, \textit{The Novel on Blue Paper}, p. 13.
\item \textsuperscript{77} Morris, \textit{The Novel on Blue Paper}, p. ?.
\end{itemize}
philosophy of love expressed in *Love is Enough*, that if passionate love is thwarted or repressed, it will turn inward to hatred and violence:

\[
\text{the one desire –}
\]
\[
- \text{How shall we name it? – grown a poisoned fire,}
\]
\[
\text{God once, God still, but God of wrong and shame}
\]
\[
\text{A lying God, a curse without a name.}^{78}
\]

Here Morris has turned around the Victorian idea of the woman as moral polluter, like Tennyson’s *Guinevere*, and instead made this man, with his cowardice and suppression of his sexual nature – his ‘dis-integration’ – the bringer of a spiritual disease to the community. In anticipation of Freud, Morris bedecks the rectory with death in life images of repressed animal nature – stuffed and mounted animals of prey – and pictures of hunting. In fact, all the masculine symbols of action and passion are portrayed as thwarted and skewed. In later years such thought would find expression in Morris’s socialist message: if we feel the least degradation in being amorous, or merry, or hungry, or sleepy, we are so far bad animals, and therefore miserable men.\(^{79}\)

Risley was given a chance to redeem himself. The narrative moves forward three years, to a time six weeks after the death of his wife and baby, when Risley is visited by Eleanor with a hope that they can now be together, but he is now a man of substance with a reputation to protect:

\[
\text{I did what lots of young men do. I never said I would marry you then, even, did I? – and how can I marry you now? … I wish you had written and asked to meet me somewhere, instead of coming here.}^{80}
\]

Risley curses Eleanor for her impulsive, passionate nature. Her parting words bespeak her despair:

\[
\text{I don’t curse you now. I don’t say farewell to you. I have nothing to wish for, to hope for, to think of. I am glad I can’t see your face.}^{81}
\]

Risley then flees overseas, taking care not to read any English newspapers, and returns to his parish months later, a ‘moody, irritable, overbearing man’\(^{82}\).

In her introduction to the published version of the novel, Fitzgerald wrote that Morris was trying to deal with his anger at Rossetti. Confronting the issue of his temper,
she argues, Morris is exploring self-control, which ultimately fails him in John’s final letter. The real victory, Fitzgerald argues, would be for self-restraint and renunciation. I would argue that self-restraint and renunciation are the very opposite of what Morris intended this story to uphold. It is John’s self-restraint that prevents him from speaking to Clara of his love, thus saving her from a disappointing marriage, hinted at by her remark to John on the river. Clara and John are passionate, Arthur is not. John has inherited passion from his embittered father, and with it the self-restraint that, Morris argues, stifles lives and has made Risley bitter and lonely. Arthur inherited Risley’s moral cowardice, and hides the truth of John’s love from Clara. If the passionate Risley had been more courageous, he would have stayed with Eleanor, his love, and avoided the curse his rejection inspired, and which has poisoned his own life as well as that of his sons and the village. As a background to the story of John, Clara and Arthur, I see this episode as intended to lend strength and justice to Morris’s planned outcome, that is, Clara’s eventual recognition of John’s love for her, and in spite of society’s scorn, her abandonment of her marriage for a union of true love with John. Morris would no doubt hope such a narrative would speak directly to Georgie.

**Liberality versus restraint: a further autobiographical allusion**

There is a further significant autobiographical detail that has been overlooked by other commentators on the novel. While John and Arthur live in the rectory, Clara comes from a neighbouring farm where she lives with her widowed mother, Mrs Mason, who is young and attractive and says she feels more like Clara’s sister than her mother. Among scenes of pastoral and domestic delight, this liberal-minded mother offers a starkly contrasting parental alternative to the repressive parson Risley. John learns from a farmhand that her husband the late Mr Mason had fathered a child outside his marriage, and his wife responded to Risley’s censure:

> ‘Mr Risley, if my husband likes to make love to every girl in the village, he has a full right to it, if I let him. And let me tell you … that if he was to do what he would be hanged for, he would be a better man that you, who haven’t the spirit to do either right or wrong.’

Here Morris again echoes his defence of Browning’s ‘Statue and the Bust’, that the sin is in the cowardice of inaction. Perhaps most significantly, Mrs Mason’s message of liberality is the more interesting, given that she strongly resembles Jane Morris in appearance and

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demeanour: she was ‘much taller than her daughter ... and most certainly beautiful ... Her hair was abundant, dark and crisped; she had great soft brown eyes, and a large mouth with full lips’.\textsuperscript{85} If Morris’s novel was directed to Georgie as an argument for free love, then the words Morris has Mrs Mason / Jane say – that her husband has a full right to make love to other women, ‘if I let him’ – might also be directed to Georgie as if from Janey herself. Why else is the Janey figure in the story? As if to confirm the real relation between them, she describes herself as more like Clara’s sister than her mother, making their ages comparable, as Janey’s and Georgie’s were.

With her affectionate but exacting nature, and her liberal attitude to her husband’s affair, Mrs Mason presides over Leaser Farm, a place of happy nurturing life populated by women, where even catching fish is regarded as cruelty. The parlour is charming and full of the evidence of creative female pursuits, such as dressmaking. By contrast, Parson Risley’s\textsuperscript{86} all-male domicile is a bare, gloomy household. As noted above, hunted animals have been stuffed and mounted in frozen attitudes of aggression that mirror the thwarted animal passions of the parson. The names Morris assigns the two establishments, along with their attributes and atmosphere, signify the groups of associations Morris is seeking to represent. Interestingly, these attributes are divided along gender lines. Morris has made a stark distinction between the world of women and that of men. The rectory’s name suggests the words ‘erect’, ‘correct’, ‘rectify’, potent but controlling; by contrast Leaser Farm suggests ‘lease’, ‘let’, ‘release’ and a place of liberty, with all that word implies. It is no accident that the rectory is an all male household, empty of emotion and love, and the absent father’s only gift to his sons is a handful of money, while Leaser Farm is an all female household where John receives feminine gifts of affection, food and syllabub made from the creamy milk of the brown cow Clara has crowned with clematis. Morris clearly aligns the empty or repressive social and religious imperatives with the world of men, the nurturing sensual natural world with that of women. An interesting dichotomy emerges: woman as symbol of sexuality, freedom, love, self-worth, happiness and true spirituality; and men as symbol of fear, law, duty, reputation, formal religion and material wealth. Women are signified as creative, men as destructive.

The fact that a previously unknown, additional page was found among Sydney Cockerell’s papers hints that perhaps, if more had been written, then those close to Morris might have thought it best if this was ‘misplaced’. Nevertheless, enough has survived to prove that Morris’s concern with the morality-based oppression of women, and by extension men

\textsuperscript{85} Morris, The Novel on Blue Paper, p. 39.
\textsuperscript{86} The surname itself including the word ‘Rise’ suggests action or anger.
also, grew from his love for Georgie and the circumstances of his own life and marriage. This unfinished novel was Morris’s last written attempt to win Georgie; it held the story of his love for her, and its validity, predating both their marriages. He also couched the story in a history that questioned the morality of the times that might have restrained Georgie from responding to his love. While it failed in its purpose, Morris had begun to see personal disappointment in a wider context – that of society as a whole. These tropes would appear again in \textit{News from Nowhere}, but this time they were to be fully enlarged into the explication of his generous hopes for a future society freed from the economic and social restraints at work in this fragmentary love token of 1872. Just as Clara was poised between her two lovers, Morris’s novel represents a point in his life and thought, poised between two paths: Georgie’s acceptance or rejection and, as the novel’s theme of blighted lives suggests, contraction into the personal or expansion into the social world. Morris described John’s final letter as ‘a dash at the end to try to give [the novel] life when I felt it beginning to fail’. It was found in the envelope in which he had sent it to Georgie ‘to see if she could give me any hope. She gave me none, and I’ve never looked at it since’.\footnote{Morris, \textit{Collected Letters}, vol. 1, p. 162.} Morris’s tone of hopelessness, combined with Georgie’s evident imperviousness, suggests that this work was all too clearly deciphered and rejected by her. In the next chapter I show how Morris’s abandonment of this personal quest for love caused him to look outside himself, and move into social action.
Chapter 7

‘All is gained when all is lost’:
The Great Story of the North

Ah, shall winter mend your case?
Set your teeth the wind to face
Beat the snow down, tread the frost,
All is gained when all is lost.¹

This chapter illustrates how, from about 1873 onwards, Morris began to focus on the social and cultural problems of the world around him and a sense of new purpose infused his actions and directed his energies outward. That this change began after his second voyage to Iceland in July that year has been noted by his biographers as a significant moment in which Morris drew out of himself a new ethos based on acceptance, while maintaining heroic ideals of courage and action. This change involved the wrench of finally giving up all hopes of winning Georgie, and thoughts and dreams of love, which freed Morris for other challenges. As evidence of this new outlook, after his second voyage and apart from his ‘socialist chants’,² Morris ceased writing poetry; with one or two exceptions, there are no more poems of personal love and loss from him for the next twenty years.³ His final poem, ‘He and She’, was written and sent to Georgie in the year of his death, 1896.

Morris’s first trip to Iceland in 1871 had been a long journey away from heartache to a place where the landscape and climate would harden him, but in a sense it failed. On returning he had not yet relinquished hope that his love would finally win Georgie. A poem called ‘Of the Three Seekers’ was written between the two sea voyages, but not published until 1884. The opening stanzas reveal the burden of love, and the wending verse ends with Morris’s characteristic long-deferred union:

There met three knights on the woodland way,
And the first was clad in silk array:

³ The volume published as Poems by the Way (1890) is, apart from ‘Goldilocks and Goldilocks’, a compilation of earlier work, forming a kind of reflection on the decades of changing life.
The second was dight in iron & steel,
But the third was rags from head to heel.
‘Lo, now is the year and the day come round
When we must tell what we have found.’
The first said: ‘I have found a King
Who grudgeth no gift of anything.’
The second said: ‘I have found a knight
Who hath never turned his back in fight,’
But the third said: ‘I have found a love
That Time and the World shall never move.’

However, the final resolution is in love’s favour:

‘Come, tell my flowery fields,’ she said,
‘How I have drawn thee from the dead.’
Whither away to win good cheer?
‘With me,’ he said, ‘for my love is here.’
The wealth of my house it waneth not;
No gift it giveth is forgot.
‘No fear my house may enter in[,]’
For nought is there that death may win.
‘Now life is little, and death is nought,
Since all is found that erst I sought.’

After the revelations in his unfinished novel failed to move Georgie, it would seem that Morris was left with nowhere to turn. The journal he had written in Iceland, and which represented his efforts to cast off old fears and hopes, he now viewed with a somewhat jaundiced eye:

it is true that the journey was altogether successful, and that I think I have gained in many ways by it: but it seems such a long way off now, and there is a bit of one’s life gone … and when I look over it I am afraid of having to grin sourly at this bit of enthusiasm, and be puzzled by that bit of high spirits; and now here how I refused to acknowledge a disappointment, and there how I pretended not to be weary – and in short- all the rest of it

He copied the journal and presented it to Georgie.

It was the second voyage to Iceland, a journey made at his lowest emotional ebb, and one that he took with fear and reluctance, which finally produced in Morris the spirit of courage he needed. This chapter notes Morris's preparation for this voyage and the final poems written at this time that articulate unrequited love, followed by the journey that changed his outlook on life. On returning home he began to take affirmative steps. He

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5 Morris, *Collected Works*, vol. 9, p. 120.
6 Morris’s *Journals of Travel in Iceland: 1871-1873* were published by May Morris and appear as volume 8 in the *Collected Works*.
again took up drawing from the figure, rearranged his firm to better reflect his enormous input; he resigned from the directorship of his father’s copper mine - he is said to have come home and sat on his hated top hat – and he put an end to the joint tenancy of Kelmscott by offering to give up his share to Rossetti. As Morris moved his attention and actions outward, he would also begin to wage war on the social and religious pressures that he blamed for thwarting his personal happiness. Morris and Georgie remained close friends, probably Morris’s closest relationship; however, in later writing one senses a lingering bitterness that the great love he had offered to Georgie had been rejected.

Iceland: the last journey

I am going to try to get to Iceland next year, hard as it will be to drag myself away from two or three people in England.\(^8\)

As noted above, the rigors of his first trip to Iceland had helped Morris to escape both physically and emotionally, but he returned with hopes still intact. Writing to his close friend Aglaia Coronio in January 1873, Morris mentions his ‘dullness’ at this time, which, he says, comes out of his own heart, and of which he is ashamed:

I fancy the Iceland voyage will be necessary to me this year: sometimes I like the idea of it, and sometimes it fills me with dismay; but I think ‘tis pretty certain to do me good if I come back safe from it … if I can only get away in some sort of hope and heart I know it will be the making of me.\(^9\)

While he still held out hope regarding his love for Georgie, the firm resolve, evident in her response to the unpublished novel, clearly led to a downcast frame of mind. At this time he depended on Aglaia for comfort and sympathy, writing: ‘I think of you a great deal, my dear friend’.\(^10\) At this juncture Morris was also between abodes: the family moved out of Queen Square where they had been living above the shop and into a ‘new house on the Turnham Green road’. He mentions that the new house:

is a very little house with a pretty garden: and I think will suit Janey and the children: it is some ½ hours walk from the Grange which makes it quite a little way for me; on the other hand I can always see anyone I want at Queen Sq: quite safe from interruption: so all ways it seems an advantage – does it not? \(^{11}\)

The Grange was the Burne-Jones’ house, and the remark that follows, which seems to flow from the first about Queen Square offering a venue for seeing anyone quite safe from

\(^{8}\) Morris, *Collected Letters*, vol. 1, p. 173.

\(^{9}\) Morris, *Collected Letters*, vol. 1, p. 178.

\(^{10}\) Morris, *Collected Letters*, vol. 1, p. 178.

\(^{11}\) Morris, *Collected Letters*, vol. 1, p. 176.
interruption, hints at meetings with Georgie there, where Morris still had a study and bedroom. At this time Georgie was still enduring the affair between Burne-Jones and Maria. This letter indicates a continuing but perhaps incomplete intimacy with Georgie, which would in no way help the healing process for Morris.

At about this time Morris wrote to a member of the Icelandic Society, mentioning the forthcoming publication *Saga of Tristram ok Isodd*, an Icelandic retelling of the Arthurian *Tristram and Isolde*. Morris wrote:

> [A]ll my literary life I have been deeply moved by that Cycle of Romance, as indeed I ought to be, being myself Welsh of kin ... and I am very anxious to see the earlier version great story written in the noble language of the classical Icelandic time.\(^{12}\)

This references indicates that Morris’s identification with the Tristram legend is still part of his psyche, and the blending of this much earlier love with his burgeoning interest in all things Icelandic would have delighted him – although it would be another five years before the edition was published. At the time of this letter, in March 1873, a hopeful little poem, ‘Spring’s Bedfellow’, was composed:

Spring went about the woods to-day,  
The soft-foot winter-thief,  
And found where idle sorrow lay  
‘Twixt flower and faded leaf.

She looked on him, and found him fair  
For all she had been told;  
She knelt adown beside him there,  
And sang of days of old.

His open eyes beheld her nought,  
Yet ’gan his lips to move;  
But life and deeds were in her thought,  
And he would sing of love.

So sang they till their eyes did meet,  
And faded fear and shame;  
More bold he grew, and she more sweet,  
Until they sang the same.

Until, say they who know the thing,  
Their very lips did kiss,  
And Sorrow laid abed with Spring  
Begat an earthly bliss.

Here, ‘Sorrow’ is unable to do anything until ‘Spring’ sings to him of ‘days of old’, of ‘life and deeds’ and helps him to overcome ‘fear and shame’, which brings about a blissful

union, but only with a spirit rather than a real woman. Morris now imagines a union that might bring about earthly bliss, the sort of utopian hope of salvation from idleness and sorrow through his coming journey to Iceland, the place of the valorous deeds of old.

In April 1873, Morris again began to prepare for the second summer voyage to Iceland. He put off a visit to Kelmscott, where Rossetti wrote to Ford Madox Brown in June: ‘it’s a bore showing him one’s work, and not to do so is awkward’.13 After years of the shared Kelmscott arrangement Morris himself confided to Aglia, ‘it is really a farce our meeting when we can help it’.14 Rossetti again displays a sense of inferiority where Morris is concerned, and whatever the work was – presumably more portraits of Jane – Rossetti produced very little art this year. His letters to friends recommending wax seals and thick opaque envelopes for correspondence betray his ill health, a growing paranoia. A poem entitled ‘Fair Weather and Foul’, gives a glimpse of Morris’s need to get away from England, due to sorrow over Georgie:

Hill-side and vineyard hidden, and the river running rough,
Toward the flood that meets the northlands, shall be rest for thee enough
For thy tears to fall unbidden, for thy memory to go free.

Rest then, when all moans round thee, and no fair sunlitten lie
Maketh light of sorrow underneath a brazen sky,
And the tuneful woe hath found thee, over land and over sea.15

As the mooted journey drew closer, Morris became more edgy. His goodbyes seemed fatalistic. On 5 July he presented Georgie with the fair copy of his Icelandic journal of 1871.16 He called on Aglaia the day before leaving to farewell her.17 At about this time, Morris wrote a poem. It addresses a woman, the ‘fair gold goddess’, and tells of the poet’s forthcoming journey to Iceland.18 For some reason, May Morris omitted the poem from the Collected Works. The mood is hopeless and regretful: in face of the woman’s indifference, the poet will be with the souls of the men and gods who once strove and died there, who have lost the battle but fought valiantly:

O fair gold goddess [woman]
As fain thou mayst be
That gone I were

16 It is inscribed ‘5th July 1873 To George from WM’.
To the white sea’s-roof land [this means Iceland]
Yet fainer were I
To leap on the wave-swine,
If God for me
The ghosts would quicken
Of Odin’s fellows,
The old abiders
In the land of Naddod [Iceland]19

The poem remained unpublished until 1964 when R.C. Ellison wrote an article about it, noting that while May amassed almost every fragment of her father’s literary output for publication, this poem survived in two manuscript drafts, one of which was in May’s possession after Morris’s death. Ellison describes the poem as ‘an outspoken and poignant expression of regret’ as the following verses demonstrate:

Might the world go backwards
Then, Roses’ Freyia,
Soon were I faring
Along the way
That leads to Vallhall,
Long rest before me,
And my right hand holding
A story maybe?
To give to Odin

For foul is waxen
That world the gods made,
And I – I help nought
Nor holpen am I…

Ellison notes of the poem:

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Morris maintained a veil of pretence of being only the translator of the poem, by signing the fair copy ‘Vilhjalmar Vandreaoskald’, a wry joke and no great disguise, for ‘Vilhjalmar’ is ‘William’ and ‘Vandreaoskald’ is the nickname of a famous poet of saga times, rendered by Morris in the Heimskringla as ‘Troublous Skald’.

Ellison believes that the poem refers to Jane and Rossetti, who were at Kelmscott together during Morris’s second voyage; she also believes that May decided against publishing the poem to avoid raising questions, as the poem might be identified as autobiographical. May held a draft copy, which is now with papers willed by her to the British Museum; but the fair copy, signed William Troublous-Skald, is in the William Morris Gallery and was presented to the Gallery in 1946 by Georgie’s daughter, Margaret Mackail. Morris therefore had given it to Georgie, for whom, no doubt, it was written. The poets ‘praying for pardon’ would make no sense if addressed to his wife. It is Georgie who is the ‘fair gold goddess’ and seems to wish him gone.

Ellison calculates that the poem dates from just before Morris’s second trip to Iceland. The poet’s reference to himself as Scald (a bard) supports this, as during the first visit Morris was given this name by the Icelanders. This poem is without any hope, distinguishing it from most of the poems of The Earthly Paradise period, which link love and present sorrow with hope, however distant and deferred. But in this poem Morris is so stricken that he is in need of help and at the same time unable to help others. Still praying for pardon, Morris seems to have finally accepted that he cannot win Georgie, but she is still the one to whom his work is offered, although he grimly and somewhat melodramatically hints that this poem may be his last. In fact, he did stop writing poetry for many years after this point. A letter written from Iceland to his friend Webb also reveals a state of mind analogous with the poem’s author: ‘I feel grave enough, & not much as if this were a pleasant trip, but hope to get something out of it all … I am so distracted that I really can’t find anything rational to say’. And on the same day he wrote to Janey:

My dear how I wish I was back, & how wild and strange everything here is. I am so anxious for you too it was a grievous parting for us the other day. And this shabby letter! but how can I help it, not knowing whether I am on my head or my heels.

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23 Email to the author from Carien Kremer, William Morris Gallery, 16 July 2009.
Clearly, Morris was in a wretched state at the outset of the voyage: afraid of the potentially dangerous journey; sick at heart over his love for Georgie, and also anxious for his wife, who had been ill,\textsuperscript{26} and now left with Rossetti who was becoming unstable.

But Morris must have discovered new strength within himself in the barren wasteland. On his return months later he again wrote to Aglaia saying he was now ‘very well and happy’. He tells her that the day after his return he had visited The Grange, the Burne-Jones’ home, and ‘had as joyous a meeting as you may imagine’.\textsuperscript{27} Referring to the confusion and fear he had felt at departing, he makes a clear admission to his trusted confidant. If there was any doubt that Morris’s sorrow was over Georgie and not his wife, then he spells it out in these words:

Nevertheless I was very full of longing to be back, and to say the truth was more unhappy on the voyage out and before I got into the saddle than I like to confess … but the glorious simplicity of the terrible & tragic, but beautiful land with its well remembered stories of brave men, killed all querulous feeling in me, and have made all the dear faces of wife and children, and love, & friends dearer than ever to me.\textsuperscript{28}

‘[O]f wife and children, and love …?’\textsuperscript{29} How else can this phrase be interpreted other than that his wife is \textit{not} his ‘love’? Here perhaps is one of the clearest pieces of evidence that Morris had a ‘love’ other than Janey and that the face he referred to as ‘love’ was Georgie.

\textbf{The end of poetry, the beginning of action}

As many biographers have noted, Morris returned from the second journey to Iceland a changed man. E.P. Thompson, for example, wrote of what he believed Morris found in Iceland:

Courage, not in the presence of hope and success, but in the face of failure and defeat and hostile fate – this quality so opposed to the self-indulgent melancholy of romanticism in its decline, was surely one of which he felt the need, not only to face the world, but in his personal life as well?\textsuperscript{30}

This turning away from introspection towards action, noted particularly by Thompson, marked the beginning of a sea change in Morris’s life. If it did not mark the end of his love for Georgie, it did mark an adjustment in Morris’s expectations and, apart from one small

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\textsuperscript{26} Morris, \textit{Collected Letters}, vol. 1, p. 192.
\textsuperscript{27} Morris, \textit{Collected Letters}, vol. 1, p. 198.
\textsuperscript{28} Morris, \textit{Collected Letters}, vol. 1, p. 198.
\textsuperscript{29} Of this letter, Henderson wrote: ‘One would very much like to know who Morris had in mind when he wrote [this] … Was this Georgie Burne-Jones, after all?’ See Philip Henderson, \textit{William Morris: His Life, Work and Friends}, London, Thames & Hudson, 1967, p. 142.
example, an end to the introspective poetry of love and loss. From now his approach to life changed from passive to active:

Do you know I feel as if a definite space of my life had passed away now I have seen Iceland for the last time: as I looked up at Charles’ Wain tonight all my travel there seemed to come back to me, made solemn and elevated, in one moment, till my heart swelled with the wonder of it: surely I have gained a great deal and it was no idle whim that drew me there, but a true instinct for what I needed.\(^\text{31}\)

Writing to Georgie’s sister Louisa following his forty-first birthday, Morris told her: ‘I am in the second half of my life now, which is like to be a busy time with me, I hope till the very end: a time not lacking in content too I fancy: I must needs call myself a happy man on the whole.’\(^\text{32}\) Launching into new creative projects that would stretch his abilities, Morris wrote:

I am wanting to settle down now into a really industrious man: for I do not mean to go back to Iceland again if I can help it, and it is strange what a hole in my life that determination has made. I have had a good deal to do of a trivial kind…but it seems I must needs try to make myself unhappy by doing what I find difficult – or impossible-so I am going to take to drawing from models again, for my soul’s health chiefly.\(^\text{33}\)

He began Italianate illumination,\(^\text{34}\) and planned *Three Northern Love Stories*, that were eventually published in 1875.\(^\text{35}\) The gifts to Georgie continued – in February 1874 Morris’s translations of *The Henthorir Saga*, *The Banded Men* and *Howard the Halt* were written out calligraphically and illustrated with the illuminated letters ‘GBJ’ and given to Georgie as a gift.\(^\text{36}\) At this time Morris also ordered vellum for the next illumination project, the *Odes of Horace*, however this project was never completed.

Once again in March 1874, however, Morris confessed his dullness, by which I suggest he meant ‘depression’, to Aglaia:

I am ashamed of myself for these strange waves of unreasonable passion: it seems so unmanly: yet indeed I have a good deal to bear considering how hopeful my earlier youth was, & what overweening ideas I had of the joys of life.\(^\text{37}\)

Morris’s early ideas of ‘the joys of life’, as pointed out in the earlier chapters of this work, consisted largely of dreaming of the joys of lovemaking. It is ironic and cruel that of all his


\(^{33}\) Morris, *Collected Letters*, vol. 1, p. 203.


\(^{36}\) Salmon, *Chronology*, p. 70.

\(^{37}\) Morris, *Collected Letters*, vol. 1, p. 216. It is this mention of ‘unmanliness’ which has caused biographers to speculate about a physical or psychological problem in Morris’s marriage. See Kelvin’s comments *Collected Letters*, vol. 1, p. 173.
immediate circle Morris was most hindered in the physical expression of his love. In spite of these ‘strange waves of passion’, however, Morris had begun to think of society and the possibility of other ways of living than the one he found about him. In March 1874 he wrote: ‘Surely if people lived 500 years instead of three score & ten they would find some better way of living than in such a loathsome place’.

As evidence of a new kind of ‘manly’ resolve, he also began to restructure his business to better reflect the input of its members. This involved paying out Rossetti, Madox Brown and Marshall, who barely contributed but continued to draw a return. Bad feeling was generated among the former partners, but the move might also have been prompted by a period of financial scarcity, as Morris’s letters from the first half of the year 1874 mention a shortage of money several times. He also wrote to Rossetti saying he wanted to pull out of his share of the co-tenancy of Kelmscott Manor, a move that would compromise Jane’s presence there. Although Rossetti took steps to take over the lease, this never eventuated, freeing Morris to enjoy the place unhindered. Janey herself would by now have been well aware of Rossetti’s mental instability and the extent of his dependence on chloral hydrate. His ill health increased and he henceforward lived as a kind of recluse, dying in 1882. In March 1876 Rossetti was painting Jane at Aldwick Lodge, not Kelmscott Manor, so he had by then removed his artist’s plant. Despite Morris’s threat to give up the lease of Kelmscott, he kept it until his death.

Meanwhile, Georgie had made friendships with a couple of strong and extraordinary women. One was Rosalind Howard, Countess of Carlisle, who, with her husband, was also to become close to Morris. The other was George Eliot, with whom Georgie developed an intimate friendship, only severed by Eliot’s unheralded marriage to John Cross and her untimely death at the age of 61. Eliot had rejected conventional marriage arrangements, and was living unmarried with George Lewes, calling herself Mrs Lewes. These strong women valued Georgie’s company, and biographer Ina Taylor noted that, in relation to her
affection for George Eliot, ‘for all her affirmation of the sanctity of marriage, Georgie Burne-Jones was extraordinarily tolerant of those whose behaviour was at variance with her own’⁴⁷ – perhaps from a familiarity with such behaviour in those closest to her. In the early days of their acquaintance, when the Burne-Jones–Zambaco affair was in full swing, Georgie found herself pouring out her troubles to both Eliot and Rosalind Howard, and it is clear from the correspondence that both knew the secrets of the Burne-Jones marriage. Georgie thanked Eliot for listening to her woes and resolved that ‘what you have said to me in advice and warning shall not be lost’.⁴⁸ In response to some reference to her troubles, Georgie wrote to Rosalind Howard: ‘One thing I know, that there is enough love between Edward and I to last a long life if it is given us’.⁴⁹ Mrs Lewes might have disagreed, and seems to echo Morris’s sentiments when she wrote to Georgie thanking her for an affectionate note:

I like not only to be loved, but to be told I am loved. I am not sure you are of the same mind. But the realm of silence is large enough beyond the grave. This is the world of light and speech.⁵⁰

While Georgie’s experience of these worldly friendships must have opened her eyes to relationships between couples that varied from the norm, their example and possibly advice did not inspire her to follow suit. Indeed, if anything this period seems to have consolidated Georgie’s long-suffering acceptance of her situation.

**Sigurd the Volsung: signs of change**

Morris, however, was moving forward, challenging himself in small ways and larger ones. In 1876 he began another epic poem *Sigurd the Volsung*, drawn from the Volsunga Saga first recorded in medieval Iceland and later expanded with Scandinavian folklore. Morris had previously published the first English translation of the saga with his friend the Icelandic expert, Eirikr Magnusson, in 1870.⁵¹ Believing the Volsunga Saga ‘the grandest tale that was ever told’ and a tale of tragic love,⁵² Morris commenced writing his own version in the spring or summer of 1876. But it was in 1869, during a time of great inner torment, that he

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⁴⁸ Taylor, *Victorian Sisters*, p. 128.


⁵⁰ Taylor, *Victorian Sisters*, p. 128.


had first discovered the story of Sigurd, and he wrote to Charles Eliot Norton, revealing how deeply the story touched him:

It seems as though the author–collector felt the subject too much to trouble himself about the niceties of art, and the result is something that is above all art; the scene of the last interview between Sigurd and the despairing and terrible Brynhild touches me more than anything I have met with in literature there is nothing wanting in it, nothing forgotten, nothing repeated, nothing overstrained; all tenderness is shown without the use of a tender word, all misery and despair without a word of raving, complete beauty without an ornament … for my part I would be sorry to attempt reading aloud the scene I have told you of before strangers.53

As Morris retold the story, he believed it contained ‘the embodiment of the Hope of Men, the herald of a better world on earth’, but not the resolution of love. As Jane Ennis points out in her introduction to the Thoemmes Press edition:

Images of harvest and fruitfulness are used on occasion with reference to Sigurd and Brynhild; the reader is aware of an ironic sub-text, since their happiness is not destined to last, and there will be no fruit or harvest, in other words, no fulfilment.54

Morris’s text asks: ‘[W]hat fruit of our life-days, what fruit of our death shall be? / What fruit, save men’s remembrance of the grief of thee and me?’55 Tompkins argues that in Sigurd, Morris’s new concentration on the impersonal ‘does not weaken or obliterate the love tale’. In comparison with ‘The Lovers of Gudrun’, Morris’s Sigurd poem has a ‘high note of courage, stoicism and acceptance of fate, and to these is added a continual remembrance of larger issues, transcending personal happiness’.56 After Morris’s death, Burne-Jones was recorded explaining Morris’s love of Sigurd to Mackail, who was working on his biography of Morris:

I don’t suppose he was ever so excited as with Love is Enough, except with Sigurd. He was pleased with the name, he was pleased with the – [illegible] –, he was pleased with all those things. Not that he was so very much disappointed with its unpopularity, or ever talked about the public himself. But he was hurt with them for not liking Sigurd. He loved it – thought it was a shame they should neglect the absolutely best thing he had made.57

In this long poem Morris reveals the distance travelled from the torpor of Love is Enough and his recently hard-won surrendering of personal love for the greater challenge and

55 Morris, Collected Works, vol. 12, p. 147.
56 Tompkins, An Approach to the Poetry, p. 244.
honour to be gained from relinquishing personal concerns and taking his fight for right out into the world. Morris’s reading of the sagas gave him a perspective on the social life of the old Icelanders and the place of women in society, which contrasted with their status in his own:

[T]he greatest men lent a hand in ordinary field- and house-work … The position of women was good in this society, the married couple being pretty much on an equality: there are many stories told of women divorcing themselves for some insult or offence, a blow being considered enough excuse.58

These social attributes would later make an appearance in Morris’s imagined socialist utopia, News from Nowhere.

Morris’s translations and reinterpretations of the sagas, however, have been criticised for the romantic treatment and deliberate archaisms that obscure the simplicity of the original narrative. But I agree with E.P. Thompson, who argued:

Morris … consciously used the old story as a vehicle for contemporary themes. It is possible to feel the pressure of Morris’s feelings about his own society, the immanence of his own participation in political life, straining the fabric of the epic.59

That Morris’s personal life, his relationship with Georgie, impacted upon this piece of writing is shown by the fact that the last meeting between Sigurd and Brynhilde, the section of the original tale Morris mentioned as bringing him close to tears, exists in seven versions, four of these being important variants. Tompkins noted that ‘[t]he rejected versions contain notes of lonely and vehement anguish which are not found in the final one’.60 So it seems Morris worked through these shades of feelings until the heroic ethic dominated the personal one. As Morris rewrote his versions, he aligned his unresolved feelings with the simple stoicism of the original, but always as if through the inner truth of his own eyes and heart. These workings too were given to Georgie to read and understand.61 Thus through Sigurd Morris aimed to convey

less the spirit of the original, than the feelings aroused in him by the old legends. In the significance given to action rather than to mood, in the suggestion of heroic values, the poem marks a complete break with The Earthly Paradise.62

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59 Thompson, Romantic to Revolutionary, p. 189.
60 Tompkins, An Approach to the Poetry, p. 245.
61 A series of notebooks and drafts of Sigurd, and of Morris’s translations of the Aenid, [1874-5] were in Georgie’s possession until 1911, and are now part of the May Morris bequest to the British Library (William Morris Literary Manuscripts, vols. 14-20, 45310-45316).
62 Thompson, Romantic to Revolutionary, p. 190.
Aspiring to throw off the oppression of personal disappointment and strive instead for the heroism he found in the legends of Iceland, Morris discovered a new battle through the story of Sigurd. Thompson saw in the work ‘[t]hat myth of the destruction of the Northern gods [that] prepared his mind … for the idea of a revolution in his own society.’

At the same time, however, Tompkins notes of Sigurd:

> It does not seem possible to dispose wholly of the love-theme with its personal vibrations before turning to the public theme of the Hope of Men, as one would wish to do; they are intertwined throughout.

To solve the problem at the heart of his life, Morris used the story of Sigurd, gradually replacing Eros with Agape. The figure of Sigurd came to be, for Morris:

> a light-bringer in the long and costly process of human history, whose task … was to cherish and quicken the world, and waken and make the Day – a far-off, coming Day of justice and brotherhood.

Thus the longed-for day, which had once been the hope of a love union, became for Morris the long awaited transformation of society. Since youth, Morris had thought that the only way to defeat the evils of society was to retreat from the world in a self-made fortress of art and beauty. He had hoped to fulfil and complete his own life in a spiritual sense through love, and to achieve that, I argue, it had been necessary to win Georgie by an effort of will. But Iceland had given him the example of the Heroes, and having given up the hope of personal fulfilment, Morris turned his attention to attacking the forces that restricted the lives of his contemporaries so that future generations might realise the hopes he had been forced to relinquish. By 1876 Morris had begun to enter public debate, as is shown by a letter to the Daily News from this year, quoted as a significant example of Morris’s new attention to public and political affairs by Thompson:

> I cannot help noting that a rumour is about in the air that England is going to war: and from the depths of my astonishment I ask, On behalf of whom? Against whom? And for what end?

Thompson cites this and other examples of Morris’s resolve to take a more active part in public affairs, beginning with agitation and the formation of the Eastern Question Association, which he took to working men and liberals, lecturing at various working men’s

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63 Thompson, *Romantic to Revolutionary*, p. 186.
venues.\textsuperscript{68} The following years show Morris beginning to be active in all the areas that he felt needed his support, and he began to use his considerable reputation to promote causes in which he believed. Morris’s voice began to be publicly heard on all causes to do with ancient buildings, such as the restoration of Canterbury Cathedral, and St Mark’s Basilica in Venice. He lectured regularly on the Decorative Arts. His stature at the time is evident from the fact that he was invited to be professor of poetry at Oxford in 1877, an honour that he declined.

Morris’s growing interest and involvement in the social and political sphere would lead to a tempering of relations with his old friend Burne-Jones. Georgie, however, discovered a zeal for such ideas. She attended antiwar meetings and maintained an ongoing interest that she shared with Morris until his death, and then through the rest of her life. Her biographer Taylor noted that

\begin{quote}
[I]t fell to Georgie to be the natural critic of his speeches, listening and commenting in much the same way as she used to do with his poetry. On one occasion Edward, who preferred to remain sketching in another room during such orations, heard raised voices, and asked Morris: ‘Well, were you quarrelling with Georgie?’ ‘No!’ came the reply. ‘Georgie argued very well, but I put her down.’\textsuperscript{69}
\end{quote}

So, although Morris and Georgie would not be united as lovers, he was able to share his hopes for humanity with her. The decade between 1874 and 1884 would be marked by positive action in many areas. After \textit{Sigurd}, Morris rallied to save ancient buildings, rejoiced in dyeing experiments and fabric designs, began weaving and continued the work of translation and illumination. In 1877 he formed the Society for Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB).\textsuperscript{70} He taught himself hand-knotting of carpets in 1878,\textsuperscript{71} but it was his political beliefs that occupied his mind and heart during this decade and beyond, becoming something of an obsession, and isolating him from his old friend and companion Edward

\textsuperscript{68} In 1876 the Turkish government retaliated against an uprising of Christians in their Bulgarian province by massacring thousands. Morris was angered when Disraeli’s Conservative Government proposed that Britain should intervene on behalf of Turkey against the threat of a Russian invasion. Morris vigorously opposed any British involvement in what he felt would be an ‘unjust war against a people who are not our enemies’, and served as Treasurer of the Eastern Question Association, and spoke at a number of meetings. See Morris’s pamphlet ‘To the Working-men of England’ and his letters throughout 1876–78, particularly his first on this topic to the \textit{Daily News}, 24 October 1876, in \textit{Collected Letters}, vol. 1, pp. 323–6.

\textsuperscript{69} Taylor, \textit{Victorian Sisters}, p. 130. In 1895 Georgie would win a seat on the local council in Rottingdean, focusing largely on issues of community well being but would also go on to become the supporter of some more radical causes, including opposition to the Boer War. See Taylor, \textit{Victorian Sisters}, pp. 158–9, 264. See also Flanders, \textit{A Circle of Sisters}, p. 300.


\textsuperscript{71} Salmon, \textit{Chronology}, p. 89.
Burne-Jones. ‘What wouldn’t I give that he should never have been in with it all’, Burne-Jones said.\textsuperscript{72}

Morris’s political rise and culmination has been well covered by other scholars, E.P. Thompson and Nicholas Salmon among others, and this work is primarily concerned with the impact of Morris’s personal relationship with Georgie. In what remains of this chapter, therefore, I intend to focus on how Morris's socialism was fuelled by his sense of the broad injustices within his society, but also perhaps personal injustices he felt he had faced himself. By 1886, in an essay later collected under the heading ‘Signs of Change’, he was writing:

I ask you to think with me that the worst which can happen to us is to endure tamely the evils that we see; that no trouble or turmoil is so bad as that; that the necessary destruction which reconstruction bears with it must be taken calmly; that everywhere – in State, in Church, in the household [my emphasis] – we must be resolute to endure no tyranny, accept no lie, quail before no fear, although they may come before us disguised as piety, duty, or affection, as useful opportunity and good nature, as prudence or kindness.\textsuperscript{73}

Social action into socialism: pilgrims of love
Between 1877 and 1882 Morris wrote no poetry, but instead busied himself with designing, dyeing, running his business and his current battle to save ancient buildings from restoration. While busy, he began 1881 in a doleful mood, evident in a letter to Georgie on New Year’s Day:

I have of late been somewhat melancholy … not so much so as not to enjoy life in a way, but just so much as a man of middle age who has met with rubs (though less than his share of them) may sometimes be allowed to be. When one is just so much subdued one is apt to turn more specially from thinking of one’s own affairs to more worthy matters; and my mind is very full of the great change which I hope is slowly coming over the world and of which, surely, this new year will be one of the landmarks … nor perhaps will you think it ceremonious or superstitious if I try to join thoughts with you to-day in writing a word of hope for the new year, that it may do a good turn of work towards the abasement of the rich and the raising up of the poor, which is of all things most to be longed for, till people can at last rub out from their dictionaries altogether these dreadful words rich and poor.\textsuperscript{74}

Yet, while ‘melancholy’, this letter shows resolve, and in his personal writing throughout this period there is evidence of such thinking. In August that year there was a boating trip to Oxford. Morris’s account to Georgie includes a reference to the past that might have caused her a twinge of guilt, as their time in Oxford was a shared one:

\textsuperscript{72} Rooke, \textit{Burne-Jones Talking}, p. 93.
\textsuperscript{73} Morris, \textit{Collected Works}, vol. 23, p. 96.
\textsuperscript{74} Morris, \textit{Collected Letters}, vol. 2, p. 3.
A kind of terror always falls upon me as I near [Oxford]. Indignation at wanton or rash changes mingles curiously in me with all that I remember I have lost since I was a lad and dwelling there... At any rate, the younger part of us have enjoyed themselves thoroughly; and indeed so have I. You know my faith, and how I feel I have no sort of right to revenge myself for any of my private troubles on the kind earth: and here I feel her kindness very specially and am bound not to meet it with a long face.\textsuperscript{75}

Morris’s private troubles included the devastating illness of his oldest child, Jenny. Her epilepsy had become severe and frequent at this time, saddening and traumatising her parents, and causing Jane, who was with her constantly, to suffer from ongoing nervous exhaustion. And yet Morris is determined ‘not to meet [his troubles] with a long face’.

By 1883 Morris was including socialist themes in lectures such as ‘Art, Wealth and Riches’ and ‘Art under Plutocracy’, and his complete abandonment of poetry of the kind he had written until 1873 caused Georgie to mention her concern for his former art. In response he wrote:

I am touched by your kind anxiety about my poetry; but you see, my dear, there is first of all my anxiety, which I am bound to confess has made a sad coward of me; and then, though I admit that I am a conceited man, yet I really don’t think anything I have done (when I consider it as I should another man’s work) of any value except to myself: except in showing my sympathy with history and the like... Meantime the propaganda gives me work to do, which, unimportant as it seems, is part of a great whole which cannot be lost, and that ought to be enough for me.\textsuperscript{76}

The ‘strong grief and disquiet’ of Jenny’s illness may not have been the sole reason: Morris’s personal poetry was inspired by hope of love, and Morris had lost that hope, supplanting it with his hope for a great social change for which he now directed his energy and creativity. His answer to Georgie shows how little he now cared for the introspection which generated much of his earlier lyric poetry. During the 1880s Morris did write poetry in the form of ballads and chants, but with few if any exceptions it was solely concerned with the socialist cause, with titles such as ‘The Message of the March Wind’, ‘The Voice of Toil’ and ‘All for the Cause’. In 1884, however, a poem entitled ‘Meeting in Winter’, was published in the March edition of the \textit{English Illustrated Magazine}. Originally published in \textit{The Earthly Paradise}, it was also beautifully illustrated in the \textit{Book of Verse} presented to Georgie, perhaps allowing Morris to again recall the longed-for return of his love:

\textsuperscript{75} Morris, \textit{Collected Letters}, vol. 2, p. 60.
Winter in the world it is,
Round about the unhoped kiss
Whose dream I long have sorrowed o’er…

By 1884 Morris had publicly established his socialist credentials in writing and lectures. This coming out drew many brickbats, as he described it, but he was energised for the battle and we find him writing *A Summary of the Principles of Socialism* with H.M. Hyndman, lecturing on ‘Art and Socialism’, ‘Art and Labour’, ‘Useful Work versus Useless Toil’ and ‘How We Live and How We Might Live’, some of his most famous statements.

In the years before 1885 the topics of Morris’s literary output had been a mixture of socialism, architecture and art, but by that year his socialist writings outnumbered other topics three to one. He was writing the manifesto of the Socialist League, articles for *Commonweal*, *Chants for Socialists* and the moving narrative poem *The Pilgrims of Hope* (serialised March 1885–July 1886), which discerning readers Tompkins and G.D.H. Cole have seen as the Sigurd hero in a modern setting. May Morris said the work was written ‘in sorrow and anger’ after her father’s return from ‘poor quarters full of sights and stories which wrung his heart’. The opening poem, ‘Message of the March Wind’, seems to sum up Morris’s life, and significantly, through the eyes of a lover redirecting the struggle outward to help others:

Time was we have grieved, we have feared, we have faltered,
For ourselves, for each other, while yet we were twain;
And no whit of the world by our sorrow was altered,
Our faintness grieved nothing, our fear was in vain.

Now our fear and our faintness, our sorrow, our passion,
We shall feel all henceforth as we felt it erewhile;
But now from all this the due deeds we shall fashion
Of the eyes without blindness, the heart without guile.

Let us grieve then – and help every soul in our sorrow;
Let us fear – and press forward where few dare to go;
Let us falter in hope--and plan deeds for the morrow,
The world crowned with freedom, the fall of the foe.

In the next poem in the sequence, ‘Mother and Son’, which tells of the birth of his protagonist, Morris mentions one of his social themes, loveless matches that are the result of commercial necessity:

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Many a child of woman to-night is born in the town,
The desert of folly and wrong; and of what and whence are they grown?
Many and many an one of wont and use is born;
For a husband is taken to bed as a hat or a ribbon is worn.
Prudence begets her thousands: ‘Good is a housekeeper’s life,
So shall I sell my body that I may be matron and wife.’
‘And I shall endure foul wedlock and bear the children of need.’
Some are there born of hate—many the children of greed.
‘I, I too can be wedded, though thou my love hast got.’
‘I am fair and hard of heart, and riches shall be my lot.’
And all these are the good and the happy, on whom the world dawns fair.81

Richard’s birth out of wedlock echoes the shame of the unmarried woman faced by
Eleanor in Morris’s unfinished novel:

A rich man was my father, but he skulked ere I was born,
And gave my mother money, but left her life to scorn;
And we dwelt alone in our village: I knew not my mother’s ‘shame’,
But her love and her wisdom I knew till death and the parting came.
Then a lawyer paid me money, and I lived awhile at a school,
And learned the lore of the ancients, and how the knave and the fool
Have been mostly the masters of earth: yet the earth seemed fair and good
With the wealth of field and homestead, and garden and river and wood;
And I was glad amidst it, and little of evil I knew
As I did in sport and pastime such deeds as a youth might do
Who deems he shall live for ever.82

At the barricades the story progresses; the protagonist faces the fact that his wife and best
friend are lovers. No need to flag the biographical references, as husband and wife deal
with this:

Yet a while, and we spoke together, and I scarce knew what I said,
But it was not wrath or reproaching, or the chill of love-born hate;
For belike around and about us, we felt the brooding fate.
We were gentle and kind together, and if any had seen us so,
They had said, ‘These two are one in the face of all trouble and woe.’
But indeed as a wedded couple we shrank from the eyes of men,
As we dwelt together and pondered on the days that come not again.83

These verses would seem to be based on Morris’s personal experiences and his belief that
there would always be difficulties where love was concerned. Richard’s wife and friend are
killed, the lovers die on the barricades in the final hours of the revolution, the
‘foresdoomed, fruitful’ ending of dedicated lives, as was Sigurd’s, fated for the task and their
end. That Morris believed that, like Sigurd, he was fated to the cause of socialism is evident
in a letter to Georgie:

82 Morris, Collected Works, vol. 24, p. 381.
If these were ordinary times of peace I might be contented amidst my discontent to settle down to [be an] ascetic hermit … but I don’t see the peace or feel it; on the contrary fate or what not has forced me to feel war, and lays hands on me as a recruit.

For Morris, the hope of a future society is inextricably joined with a revision of social attitudes to women and love. As mentioned earlier, in 1885 W.T. Stead launched a moral campaign against prostitution. In a speech made on 5 April that year, Morris made it clear that from a socialist perspective the cause of the problem was not morality:

There is much talk of immorality. Whatever is unhappy is immoral. It is unhappiness that must be got rid of. We have nothing to do with the mere immorality. We have to do with the causes that have compelled this unhappy way of living … Women’s wages are not even subsistence wages. They are intended to cheapen labour for the manufacturers. The first thing that is necessary is that all women should be freed from the compulsion of living in this degraded way. We aim at the real liberty of every human creature, not the liberty to starve or to sell oneself or one’s child … We desire that all should be free to earn their livelihood – with that freedom will come an end of these monstrosities, and true love between man and woman throughout society [my emphasis].

‘Whatever is unhappy is immoral’ and ‘true love between men and women’: these beliefs were Morris’s faith from youth, and here we see them as planks in his socialist platform, linking his poetic obsessions with the social striving of his middle age.

And, unlike her husband, Georgie took the trouble to listen to Morris on these issues, and to debate with him. Her admiration, even love for him, is often evident, as in this letter to Rosalind Howard in 1878:

It is such a blessing to hear him put truth into straightforward words as no one else does at present – for he is free from all the usual forms of public speaking and in fear of no man.

Morris wrote Georgie long letters explaining his position on various matters, and to some extent she followed him into socialism, albeit often advising him or playing devil’s advocate. Georgie and Morris now spent much time discussing theory, his lectures and reading from Sigurd. Several of Morris’s letters to Georgie from this post-romantic time have been spared her censorship. In one letter of 1884 he writes: ‘to think me quarrelsome is a misjudgement, for I commonly hold my tongue when my conscience … bids speak: so when at last I do speak it sounds quarrelsome you know’. Perhaps most touchingly,

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85 Thompson, *Romantic to Revolutionary*, p. 705.
86 Taylor, *Victorian Sisters*, p. 130.
although deeply involved with ‘the cause’ at this time, Morris’s doodles at a socialist meeting of 1886 betray to whom his thoughts often turned, as he created a page of letter Gs among floral decorations (see Figure 22 below).

Finally, it is also worth noting that Morris was now part of a wider movement in which art and socialism joined hands, with the result that Morris was exposed to many other strands of thinking on human relationships. Hobsbawm argues that Morris and the group he became associated with in the last decade of the century were ‘drawn into’ socialism as part of the avant-garde movement that questioned current social mores:

Eleanor Marx was not only a Marxian militant but a free professional woman who rejected official marriage, a translator of Ibsen and an amateur actress. Bernard Shaw was a Marxist-influenced socialist activist, a self-made literary man, a hammer of conventional orthodoxy as a critic of music and drama, and a champion of the avant-garde in arts and thought (Wagner, Ibsen). The avant-garde arts-and-crafts movement (William Morris, Walter Crane) was drawn into (Marxian) socialism, while the avant-garde of sexual liberation – the homosexual Edward Carpenter and the champion of general sexual liberation, Havelock Ellis, operated in the same milieu. Oscar Wilde, though political action was hardly his field, was much attracted to socialism and wrote a book on the subject.88

Thus, with Marsh, MacCarthy and others, Hobsbawm believes Morris was drawn into a multifaceted Marxian socialism along with other artists and intellectuals, and it is certainly the case that Morris was encouraged by the growing sexual radicalism of some during this decade to air his personal beliefs. As Stephen Brookes has argued, ‘the relationship between socialism and sexual reform was mapped in important ways from the 1880s’, including the ‘sexual emancipation of women … a commitment to the amelioration of working-class women and the working-class family, and the belief that the reform of sexuality was firmly linked to the reform of politics’.89

However, I have argued that Morris’s original rejection of conventional morality can be traced back to 1871 or earlier. In this chapter I have demonstrated how Morris found his way out of the impasse created when he finally accepted that a union with Georgie was impossible and looked around for a meaning for existence other than love. From the Icelandic tales that inspired him he extracted a heroic ethic that reverberated with the elements of the literature he had loved since youth, and he remade himself as a warrior for the world. In the next chapter I examine Morris’s work, News from Nowhere, Morris’s

vision for a socialist society, and show how it harked back to his earlier writings, and the events of his life that precipitated them.

Figure 22
Page of doodles by Morris following a lecture by him at Kelmscott House, Hammersmith, 1886.
Chapter 8

Looking Forward: News from Nowhere

Again, many violent acts came from the artificial perversion of the sexual passions, which caused overweening jealousy and the like miseries. Now ... you will find that what lay at the bottom of them was mostly the idea ... of the woman being the property of the man... That idea has of course vanished ... as well as certain ideas about the 'ruin' of women for following their natural desires...

In this chapter I demonstrate that Morris’s best known and most widely read socialist statement, which contained his vision of the future, is singularly connected to his personal life and unhappiness in love. Rather than being simply an ideological statement, the work is imbued with echoes of The Novel on Blue Paper begun twenty years earlier during a time of great unhappiness: the roman à clef that revealed his love and sense that Victorian morals and economic imperatives cruelly circumscribed the lives of lovers such as himself. But whereas The Novel on Blue Paper has received very little attention from scholars, News from Nowhere, has received a great deal: it is his best known and most studied work, perhaps also the most accessible. Written after a decade of commitment to socialism, it was published in instalments through the paper of the Socialist League, Commonweal, in 1891, five years before Morris’s death. Most pertinent to this thesis is the work’s promotion of a new morality that, I argue, not only presented a general vision of improved relations between men and women, but one that spoke to Morris’s personal history.

I am by no means the first to draw attention to such new relationships in Nowhere. In her article ‘Concerning Love: News from Nowhere as Erotic Dream’, Jan Marsh remarked that many ideas about the woman question were circulating privately among socialists at this time, but they were reluctant to proclaim these views publicly. Marsh argues that the opponents of socialism ‘were even more agitated by “free love” and sexual autonomy than they were by the prospect of dispossessed factory-owners and landlords’, and assumes that Morris was ‘unavoidably drawn into the debate’ of the 1880s. However, as I have demonstrated, Morris was already preoccupied with the woman question through his

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personal experience. He may even have been attracted to socialism because it attempted to address these issues along with other effects of commerce on society. Thus, charting first the emergence of Morris’s utopian vision, this chapter then focuses specifically on the relationship between *News from Nowhere* and *The Novel on Blue Paper*, examining in particular the place of women in Morris’s society of the future, and noting how a concern for women’s liberation emerges from his own personal hopes and desires as well as broader social concerns.

**Utopian visions and ‘the business of life’**

It is known that Morris, who had been involved with socialist organisations since 1880, wrote *News from Nowhere* in reaction to Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*, and in a mood of dissatisfaction with the Socialist League, from which he broke after the last instalment of the novel. Bellamy’s work described a socialist utopia set in the year 2000. Morris was disturbed by several aspects of the work, as can be seen in his review of it, which appeared in *Commonweal* on 21 June 1889. Morris feared Bellamy’s book would be eagerly read by those who were curious about socialism, and taken for ‘gospel’, arguing ‘[i]f they are but enquirers or very young Socialists …[they] will be inclined to say, “If that is Socialism, we won’t help its advent, as it holds out no hope to us”’. Bellamy’s book proposed the amalgamation of corporations into one giant commercial monopoly, making all citizens employees. His female citizens would be freed from housework but segregated into a workforce of women’s industrial armies with women generals. Morris felt that the best Bellamy had to offer mankind was the life of ‘a professional middle-class man of to-day’. Morris was disappointed by the author’s ‘satisfaction with the best part of modern life’, and his use of the monopoly model for society:

> by this use of the word monopoly he shows unconsciously that he has his mind fixed firmly on the mere machinery of life … Individual men cannot shuffle off the business of life on to the shoulders of an abstraction called the State, but must deal with it in conscious association with each other … Mr. Bellamy does not see any other sides to the problem, such, e.g., as the future of the family.

The business of life, the conscious association with each other and the future of the family (sexual relations) were at the very heart of Morris’s concerns and hopes for a socialist society; Bellamy’s work seemed to offer a vision of socialism devoid of these

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aspects so important to Morris. In 1886 Morris wrote to his old friend Charles Faulkner on the subject of the family, citing his strongly held opinions. Here he indicates clearly, in a manner that seems to challenge Marsh’s interpretation, that his view ‘is only my opinion and not “doctrine”’:

Copulation is worse than beastly unless it takes place as the outcome of natural desires and kindliness on both sides: so taking place there is even something sacred about it … as was well felt by the early peoples in their phallic worship. But further man has not been content to leave the matter there, mere animal on the one side, inexplicably mysterious on the other, but has adorned the act variously … and in my opinion he will always do so. Still if he were to leave off doing so I don’t think we ought to be shocked, there would still remain the decent animalism and the human kindliness: that would be infinitely better than the present state of venal prostitution which is the meaning of our present marriage system on its legal side, though as in other matters … real society asserts itself in the teeth of authority by forming genuine unions of passion and affection.⁶

This is not the acolyte spouting doctrine. Morris had long meditated on marriage and the social constraints that governed it, as shown in his unfinished novel written twenty years earlier. In that work the passionate Eleanor is betrayed by her equally passionate lover when he bows to the constraints of his social position and abandons her. The strength of Morris’s language in the letter cited above – calling marriage ‘venal prostitution’ – echoes the words of Eleanor’s uncle who ‘knows and cares so little for the ways of society that I think he looks upon marriage as quite as shocking as anything else’.⁷ Morris had held this view about ‘real society’ since his youth, and this I argue played a significant part in his approach to the relations between his wife and close friends. It is evident in his poetry that he had once hoped Georgie might also see past and reject the tyranny of society to be with him.

Shortly after a riot on February 8 this year, Burne-Jones wrote to Morris asking him not to do anything rash. Mackail quotes from Morris’s letter of reply, not included in the Collected Letters: he answered:

“I will talk of this matter when we meet: meantime, old chap, I send my best love to you for troubling about me.
“I wish I were not so damned old. If I were but twenty years younger! But then you know there would be the Female complication somewhere. Best as it is after all.”

It is hard not to take this as evidence that Morris and Ned confided about their feelings for the women they loved, even if in Morris’s case it was his friend’s wife.

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In writing *News from Nowhere*, Morris used *Looking Backward* as a model and an opportunity to expound the ideas expressed in his letter to Faulkner. He noted that Bellamy’s story was ‘cast into the form of a romance … [with] the device of making a man wake up in a new world’, and, despite criticising this genre as overused, Morris used the model himself. He too presents English society some time during the twenty-first century, one hundred and fifty years after a socialist revolution, visited by ‘William Guest’. By adopting the same form, Morris no doubt hoped to sharpen the distinction between Bellamy’s vision and his own, so different in every other way.

**The grey-eyed woman of the future and the past**

My key argument in this chapter is that *News from Nowhere* has many narrative elements and concerns in common with *The Novel on Blue Paper*, hence demonstrating that these ideas were originally generated in the pre-socialist years of the 1870s and Morris’s personal trials of that period. In both works there is a boating journey up the Thames to an old stone house in the country, a visit to an Elizabethan court, and perhaps most significantly, a loving, suntanned and grey-eyed maiden. In *The Novel on Blue Paper*, although tall, the woman is given the facial features of Georgie Burne-Jones:

> a firm clear-cut, somewhat square jaw and round, well-developed chin; lips a little over-thin, a little too firmly closed together for her youth and happiness; a straight nose with wide nostrils, and perfectly made, but somewhat short; rather high cheekbones … a wide forehead … and to light all this up, large grey eyes set wide apart fringed with dark lashes.⁹

She is ‘somewhat burnt by the sun’, and her hands are described as ‘browned with the sun too’.¹⁰ Likewise, in *News from Nowhere* there are frequent and similar references to Ellen’s ‘delicate sunburnt cheeks’ and ‘grey eyes light against the tan of her face’.¹¹ Here we see the ‘clear grey eyes’ of Georgie, but without a hint of the shadow of anxiety that clouded Clara’s features. Ellen is an empowered women from a future in which such anxieties are non-existent.

The *Novel* spoke of the recent past to try to influence the present, but *News from Nowhere* looks forward. No longer believing personal happiness possible, Morris enters his new world as a witness of future happiness, when the forces that thwarted his own life have been done away with: these are some of the closing passages of the book:

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All along … I had been feeling as if I had no place among them: as though the time would come when they would reject me, and say, as Ellen’s last mournful look seemed to say, ‘No, it will not do; you cannot be of us; you belong so entirely to the unhappiness of the past that our happiness even would weary you. Go back again, now you have seen us, and your outward eyes have learned … that there is yet a time of rest in store for the world.\textsuperscript{12}

Throughout \textit{News from Nowhere}, we are invited to see with ‘outward eyes’ a society that has not only swept away capitalism, and with it the economic dependence of women and children, but almost everything else on which modern society rests – the cash economy and money itself, government, the prison system and the education system. But it is significant that Morris devotes a chapter to issues concerning love. In this Morris highlights Victorian gender relations by contrasting them with relationships in Nowhere, where economic imperatives are non-existent. It is also significant that, while other socialists theorised about the abolition of monogamy, Morris was prepared to incorporate the details of such a theory in a widely circulated public statement. It is interesting that in the unfinished novel also, he makes the connection between commercial interests and the morality used to control women’s lives and argues that economics lies behind such morality. Nevertheless, while Morris had the courage to air his views on relations between the sexes publicly, he did not identify himself with the various schools of thought of his socialist colleagues, sidestepping both the misogynists and the anarchist free love school.\textsuperscript{13}

After half a life thwarted by unrequited love and desire, Morris’s views are plainly set out. He proposes doing away altogether with the restrictive forces governing public and private morality. There is marriage, but it has no legal or personal obligation. Couples are together so long as they wish to be. The term ‘marriage’ simply describes the current relationship between two people with no other connotations. While Morris believed that people would somehow ‘adorn the act’ with some celebration or formal recognition, in Nowhere there is no church-sanctioned or legal interference in relationships, no private property, and consequently no divorce. In learning of the relationship between two residents of Nowhere, Clara and Richard, Guest learns how after two years of marriage, Clara took it into her head that she was in love with someone else, but now out of love, she had recently returned for news of Richard. ‘No doubt you want to keep them out of the divorce court,’ says Guest. His host Hammond replies:

\begin{quote}
I know there used to be such lunatic affairs as divorce courts. But just consider; all the cases that came into them were matters of property quarrels … quarrels about private
\end{quote}


property do not go on amongst us … fancy a court for enforcing a contract of passion or sentiment! If anything were needed for a reductio ad absurdum for the enforcement of contract, such a folly would do for that.\textsuperscript{14}

Thus Morris rails against the system that treated women as a kind of property that belonged to men, and that saw their independent actions controlled not only by legal and economic means but also by public opinion. Would-be illicit lovers of the Victorian middle class faced the threat of scandal and loss of reputation, which pressured individuals to internalise social control. I have proposed that such pressures impacted negatively upon Morris’s own life through their restrictive effect on Georgie Burne-Jones’ ability or will to respond to Morris’s love. Morris heatedly denounces this aspect of Victorian society in Nowhere, where:

there is no code of public opinion which takes the place of such courts and which might be as tyrannical and unreasonable as they were … There is no unvarying conventional set of rules by which people are judged; no bed of Procrustes to stretch or cramp their minds and lives, no hypocritical excommunication which people are forced to pronounce.\textsuperscript{15}

Morris’s narrative becomes meditative and somewhat autobiographical when he then has Hammond explain:

We do not … believe we can get rid of all the trouble that besets the dealings between the sexes … but we are not so mad as to pile up degradation on that unhappiness by engaging in sordid squabbles about livelihood and position, and the power of tyrannizing over the children who have been the result of love or lust – and – If there must be sundering betwixt those who never meant to sunder so must it be: but there need be no pretext of it when the reality is gone.\textsuperscript{16}

The autobiographical note here, the ‘trouble that besets the dealings between the sexes’ such as was happening between the members of Morris’s circle in the 1870s, underlies the sense that Morris’s preoccupation with the subject of love has personal associations. Morris’s thoughtful tolerance of Jane and Rossetti’s love, Mrs Mason’s defence of her husband’s affair in \textit{The Novel on Blue Paper}: these are precursors to the attitudes outlined in \textit{News from Nowhere} regarding such relationships. In a much-quoted paragraph believed to refer to Morris’s own marriage, Guest is invited to draw a distinction between ‘[e]alf love, mistaken for a heroism that shall be lifelong, yet early waning into disappointment’, and:

\textsuperscript{14} Morris, \textit{Collected Works}, vol. 16, p. 57.
\textsuperscript{16} Morris, \textit{Collected Works}, vol. 16, p. 58.
the inexplicable desire that comes on a man of riper years to be the all-in-all to some one woman, whose ordinary human kindness and human beauty he has idealised into superhuman perfection, and made the one object of his desire.17

If the first passage relates to the Morris’s marriage (or, indeed, the Burne-Jones’s), then the self-awareness and autobiography in these following passages cannot be dismissed:

or lastly the reasonable longing of a strong and thoughtful man to become the most intimate friend of some beautiful and wise woman, the very type of the beauty and glory of the world which we love so well, – as we exult in all the pleasure and exaltation of spirit which goes with these things, so we set ourselves to bear the sorrow which not unseldom goes with them also; remembering those lines of the ancient poet (I quote roughly from memory one of the many translations of the nineteenth century):

‘For this the Gods have fashioned man’s grief and evil day
That still for man hereafter might be the tale and the lay.’18

To enhance the biographical relevance of this passage Morris finishes with a piece of poetry outlining his own belief about sorrow in the world. Just as he hoped for all mankind to have their fair share in the beauty of life, so too he wished for all men and women their chance of happiness in love, achievable only, he argues, when women become equal members of society. This is clearly the message of both the unfinished novel and of News from Nowhere.

The ‘new’ woman and her enemies

Both works also acknowledge that equality cannot exist where economic power is one-sided. In the unfinished novel Morris links the subjugation of nineteenth-century women with economic dependence, which in Nowhere has disappeared along with the economy that supported it. Guest’s host Hammond calls the emancipation movement a ‘dead controversy’, explaining that ‘[t]he men have no longer any opportunity of tyrannising over the women, nor the women over the men’.19 Meanwhile, the New Woman of Nowhere – ‘desired as a woman, loved as a companion, unanxious for the future of her children’ – is contrasted with the working-class ‘poor drudge and mother of drudges’, or her ‘sister of the upper classes, brought up in affected ignorance of natural facts, and reared in an atmosphere of mingled prudery and prurience’.20 The men and women are openly affectionate and demonstrative, and this sense of equality between the sexes in News from Nowhere salvages its liberationist morality from any taint of a masculine sexual free for all. It

is necessary to remind oneself of the entrenched norms of acceptable nineteenth-century middle-class female behaviour – passivity, modesty, assumed helplessness and ignorance of anything physical – to appreciate the contrast with the women of Nowhere’s healthy attitudes towards men, physical work, sex and childbearing, and their general free and open demeanour.

Another sign of the freedom of women in Nowhere is that they work in any way they want; and one, Philippa, is an architect and stonemason. This recalls Morris’s ‘Story of an Unknown Church’, set in the fifteenth century, in which Margaret works with her brother as a stonemason. Morris’s past and the actual past meet his imagined future. While the need to work to live no longer exists, the choice of work is given to women, providing a stark contrast to Victorian society, which as Gillian Sullivan and others have noted, offered few respectable livelihoods for middle-class women. No longer are expectant or single working mothers without family support forced to pay dubious profiteers to look after or adopt their children (here Morris refers to the baby farms that boomed during the second half of the nineteenth century, with much corruption and high death rates among infants through illness, neglect or murder). Morris’s vision for Nowhere has eliminated this source of heartbreak for women. Thus, Morris says, ‘all the artificial burdens and anxieties of motherhood will be done away with’, and mothers can be assured that their children ‘will live and act according to the measure of their own faculties’. Maternal anxiety for the welfare of children was a significant factor in women’s economic dependence on men, as noted in the unfinished novel.

How, then, was Morris’s vision of the ‘new woman’ of Nowhere greeted by his contemporaries? We have no direct evidence of how Georgie may have reacted to such characters, but it is tempting to gage her thoughts in relation to other ‘standard bearers’ of the times. Reviewers at the time were, as always with Morris’s work, divided. In a generous review in the Academy of May 1891, poet Lionel Johnson defended the book’s down-to-earth philosophy for ‘rightness of mind … healthy delight in physical existence, because the world is so … lovely’. Three months later, however, Maurice Hewlett produced a

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21 Here, Morris honours Philippa, as he regarded architecture as the highest form of applied art.
lengthy discussion for the *National Review*, reminiscent in tone of the attacks on the *Defence of Guenevere*. Entitled ‘A Materialist’s Paradise’, Hewlett made objections first to Morris’s historicisms, describing *Nowhere* as spiritually bereft, but then turned to Morris’s depiction of women, treating this topic in immoderate and exaggerated terms that betray more about Hewlett than Morris:

This body, glowing with the flush of health or the sun-given graduations of rose-pink, carnation and red-brown, – this body of ample bosom, curving and heaving like the waves of a morning sea, supple throat, well-set head, glossy hair inviting homage and caress.\(^{26}\)

Hewlett no doubt intended to satirise the gentle eroticism of some of Morris’s descriptive passages, and thereby discredit him, but instead he drew attention to an overheated imagination all his own, without clear parallel in the story. Hewlett called *Nowhere* an ‘earthy’ rather than an ‘earthly’ paradise, and warned:

Animal love and animal beauty, ‘the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life,’ are very volcanoes, breeding eruption and riot; burning fiercely, they scorch, and may not always be quenched by being let loose.  
And this is the kind of slavery which to escape is life indeed.\(^{27}\)

One wonders what Georgie may have thought reading these lines. Certainly, Hewlett, writing from a Christian perspective, exhibits great discomfort with Morris’s treatment of ‘the woman question’. Trying to make light of his subject by mockery, Hewlett betrays a deep-seated fear and he seems unable to regard women as fellow citizens, but merely as sexual objects – ‘units of the world kiss[ing] freely’.\(^{28}\) This review shows that Morris’s ideas on love must have fallen on many such unsympathetic ears, accustomed to associating women in flowery gardens with sin, temptation, corruption and the fall.\(^{29}\)

**The pleasure principle and the liberation of desire**

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\(^{27}\) Faulkner, *Critical Heritage*, p. 351.  
\(^{28}\) Faulkner, *Critical Heritage*, p. 349.  
\(^{29}\) In the twentieth century, Marsh and others have criticised Morris’s views on women as expressed in *Nowhere*. On the chapter ‘Concerning Love’, Marsh outlines that while Morris has done away with the gendered value system that informs judgements about high and low status work, women still exhibit a preference for housework and maternity, although all people are expected to take part in ‘cleaning, cooking, baking and so on’. Morris’s elimination of high status jobs, she argues, is an active limitation on women’s choices: ‘It is all very well for there to be no jobs in Nowhere for lawyers or army commanders for example … when women have never had the opportunity to select or reject such work’. But to value jobs considered high status according to masculine values is to miss Morris’s rejection of the masculine system of values altogether. See Marsh, ‘Concerning Love’, pp. 121, 113.
Of course, like all Morris’s writing, there is a distinct erotic element in *News from Nowhere*. Marsh noted that middle-aged Guest looks admiringly upon the women with ‘quite unreformed masculine desire’. However, she also points out that in Nowhere there is no one-sided system of sexual attraction as sanctioned by the Victorian double standard; rather, there is equality of desire. Feminist scholar Ady Mineo delved deeper showing that *Nowhere* society operates on a pleasure principle that permeates all aspects of life: ‘pleasure begets pleasure’, as Morris says. Here again, a parallel can be drawn with Morris’s unfinished novel, with Leaser Farm providing a prototype for life in *News from Nowhere*. Leaser Farm, occupied by women, provides a stark contrast to Risley’s cold, economically driven all male household, and it also provides a model for the ‘natural’ life of the people Guest encounters in Nowhere. In the earlier work, the ‘liberated’ Mrs Mason is the representative of active, creative work and enjoyment of life, as distinct from her repressed neighbour, Risley. Morris draws on and enlarges this trope in his utopian novel, where now no legal, religious or social obstructions hinder women from engaging with the pleasures of life.

Such pleasures are simply wrought and obtained in *News from Nowhere*. It is the activities and objects of daily life that provide pleasure: work, nature and buildings, with their decorations, all are works of art. Art is the visible manifestation of pleasure in creative work, and in *News from Nowhere* beauty and creativity are qualities that Morris strongly identifies with women. This association had begun in *The Novel on Blue Paper*, as demonstrated in Chapter 6. Morris also makes it plain that in the new society, creative work of any kind – the making of beautiful objects or buildings, a pleasant environment or a meal – is regarded as a pleasure in itself. In this new world, work most often undertaken by women, such as childrearing – the ultimate creative act – and housework rate high on the Nowhere scale of priorities. Looking back on the ‘emancipation question’ and maternity issues of the 1890s, Hammond asks: ‘How could it possibly be but that maternity is highly honoured amongst us?’ Maternity, then, is not regarded as a woman’s duty to society, or the perpetuation of a family name, but as an honoured manifestation of creativity. Indeed, all work is likened to lovemaking. When Guest asks how people are made to work ‘when there is no reward of labour’, Hammond answers that there is:

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31 Marsh mentions this equality in a discussion that centres on the erotic elements of the work in ‘News from Nowhere as Erotic Dream’, *Journal of the William Morris Society*, vol. 8, no. 4, Spring 1990, p. 22.
[p]lenty of reward … the reward of creation. The wages which God gets, as people might have said time agoone. If you are going to ask to be paid for the pleasure of creation … the next thing we shall hear of will be a bill sent in for the begetting of children.34

Little wonder Marsh found *News from Nowhere* deeply imbued with desire. The desire principle is the driving force in Nowhere. But the key element is that rather than restraining or regulating female desire, as Victorian society attempted, Morris liberates it. Nowhere’s residents seek out ‘domestic’ physical labour, as well as craft and intellectual work. The idea of the nobility of manual work initially came to Morris through Carlyle and Ruskin, but Morris’s identification of domestic work – traditionally women’s sphere – as valuable in itself is, I believe, unique and remarkable. Morris elevates the status of women, who in his day were universally associated with domesticity, while at the same time undermining the prestige attached to lives of idle wealth or sedentary profit mongering. It is likely that Georgie at least approved of this emphasis: a woman who had steadfastly maintained hearth and home while her husband ‘wandered’.

In line with the principle of female energy as a creative force, Morris expands the idea of repressed male energy as a source of social disruption, linked to sexual repression. This is also broached in *The Novel on Blue Paper* through the character of Risley, and again counters Victorian notions that linked social pollution with women and immorality. When Guest questions the lack of violent crime in the new society, Hammond says:

we have got rid of the scowling envy, coupled by the poets with hatred, and surely with good reason; heaps of unhappiness and ill-blood were caused by it, with which irritable and passionate men – i.e. energetic and active men- often led to violence.35

Parson Risley in *The Novel* exemplifies such a man. Morris describes him as

this handsome house and this handsome man, its owner, [were] the scene and actor of a tragedy without meaning, and without ending, a curse without a name, a lurking misery that could not be met and grappled with, because its very existence had slain sight, and memory, and hope – that of pain itself, that quickens those whom God will not have die while they seem to live.36

As he began to do in his *Novel*, Morris equates the repression of sexual passion with a violent society, and links such repression with the attitude to women:

many violent acts came from the artificial perversion of the sexual passions…what lay at the bottom … was mostly the idea (a law-made idea) of the woman being the

35 Morris, *Collected Works*, vol. 16, p. 82.
property of the man, whether he were husband, father, brother. That idea has vanished with private property, as well as certain follies about the ‘ruin’ of women for following their natural desire in an illegal way, which was of course a convention caused by the laws of private property.\footnote{Morris, \textit{Collected Works}, vol. 16, p. 81.}

In \textit{The Novel on Blue Paper}, the artificial perversion of sexual passion is just what lies at the heart of Risley’s anger and bitterness – and potentially, in a personality less able to integrate, Morris’s own thwarted passion for Georgie and possibly hers for him. This was at the heart of Morris’s argument against such repression in both these works. As shown in previous chapters, Morris identifies sexual repression with men and the potential for social and sexual liberation with women. Hence the need to free women for men also to become free.

Thus in \textit{The Novel} Morris shows the link he believed existed between the vast, artificial forces of the law, private property and cash nexus that propped up patriarchal dominance and the code of morality that oppressed women, particularly for following their natural desire. In \textit{Nowhere}, Ellen, Morris’s exemplar for the new society, speaks about what her life would have been like in the past with which Guest is so familiar:

\begin{quote}
Well, I think I have studied the history of [those past days] to know pretty well. I should have been one of the poor, for my father when he was working was a mere tiller of the soil. Well, I could not have borne that; therefore my beauty and cleverness and brightness (she spoke with no blush or simper of false shame) would have been sold to rich men, and my life would have been wasted indeed; for I know enough of that to know I should have had no choice, no power of will over my life … I should have been wrecked and wasted in one way or another … Is it not so?\footnote{Morris, \textit{Collected Works}, vol. 16, p. 81.}
\end{quote}

It can be seen in this work that Morris’s concern for the lives of women is central to his concern for society and hope for the future. It is clear that he wanted to address not only poverty and inequality, but the waste of women’s lives and potential.

It is therefore disappointing to read in the closing chapters of the most recent major biography of Morris that:

\begin{quote}
Morris was too hemmed in by his age and class and by his peculiar mix of inhibitions to sustain a feminist critique. His views on the woman question are less radical than his opinions on factory environment or education or old age. Like Walter in his novel, and indeed so many of his male contemporaries, he is forever poised between the lascivious Lady and the steadfast Maid. Even in these novels they remove their shining armour to wait on the menfolk at the celebration feast.\footnote{Fiona MacCarthy, \textit{William Morris: A Life for Our Time}, London, Faber & Faber, 1995, p. 638. As for the ‘lascivious Lady’, Morris used this figure in his fairy tales as representing the false use of sexuality, wealth and power.}
\end{quote}
Morris is here misrepresented. Of all his associates, Morris was demonstrably the least hemmed in by his age and class, and his views on the woman question were among the most radical, particularly when compared to his close associates Rossetti and Burne-Jones. One can only assume that MacCarthy has been influenced by Henderson’s phrase about Morris’s ‘basic inhibition’ when he states:

> It would seem that Morris, whether because of unhappiness in marriage or because of *some basic inhibition*, was incapable of accepting the reality of any woman, and so was driven continually to idealistic compensations [my emphasis].

I have discussed elsewhere the origins and growth of this emerging trope of Morris as neurotic, noting the gossip and speculation surrounding the affair between Morris’s wife and Rossetti, which over time created a biographical narrative questioning Morris’s manliness and mental health. As I have argued throughout, this is fundamentally mistaken and when we put Georgie at the centre of Morris’s life, another picture emerges.

Seen as the creation of a world in which female and male desire are liberated, and relationships are freed from the tyranny of property and marriage, *News from Nowhere* is a generous, hopeful and surprisingly complete vision of a utopian society in which women’s status as equal citizens is central to the physical and emotional wellbeing of all. Morris’s utopia uniquely includes new economies of beauty and joy, which are now counted among the necessities of life. To achieve such a reordering of values, he believed, would require a complete structural change to society. Only such radical change to the *status quo* could overcome the entrenched forces that perverted or ruined the individual lives of women and, therefore – said Morris – of men also. So, while *News from Nowhere* is a socialist statement, it is also an evolved version of his unfinished novel written a generation previously, the autobiographical work based on his own life and his love for Georgie Burne-Jones. Morris has transformed the unhappiness he suffered into a program for future lives, so that others might achieve the happiness he could not.

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Chapter 9

Deliberate Happiness: 
Prose Romances and The Sundering Flood

Most lovely is thy lay, and there is this in it, that I see thou hast made it while thou wert sitting there, for it is all about thee and me, and how thou lovest me and I thee . . . And look, heed it, what sunders us, this mighty Flood, which hath been from the beginning and shall be to the end.1

The last years of Morris’s life were filled with activity and achievement, although also with an undercurrent of increasing ill health that lent urgency to his work and writing. Some lengthy correspondence with Georgie from this period has survived, giving an insight into their shared discussion and debate, and the continuing strength of their relationship. As he had during the 1880s, Morris continued in the 1890s to be in regular contact with Georgie, and now too with her husband, his old friend. Impatience with the socialist movement coincided with a commitment to other projects: to the Kelmscott Press in partnership with Burne-Jones, and to self-expression through the medium of prose fantasy. In the latter, Morris did not abandon the long-established pattern of including references to Georgie in his writings. In the quotation from The Sundering Flood above, the young man makes a lay, or poem, for his beloved in which he tells the story of their love, being so close that he can speak and throw gifts to her although they can never touch each other. This is because of the mighty flood that separates them. What a fitting representation of the Morris–Georgie relationship – so close and loving, yet barred from physical intimacy by the torrent of social and religious prohibition. It is significant that this work was Morris’s last, the final chapter dictated shortly before his death. This is one of a group of prose romances written in the 1890s, and these works, along with the productions of the Kelmscott Press, were Morris’s two great and final achievements.

This chapter focuses particularly on the sequence of prose romances Morris wrote during what would be the final years of his life. Specifically, I argue that these are works in

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which Morris seems to be constructing for himself ‘deliberate happiness’. Like his early prose and the poetry of middle years, there is a distinct erotic thread running through the tales. After a health crisis in 1890 that coincided with the beginnings of the Kelmscott Press, Morris’s letters increasingly refer to ill health and doctors. This taste of mortality seems to have produced a subtle emphasis in Morris’s work, to henceforth strive to please himself. This he did by purchasing the rare and beautiful books he loved, and in doing what he termed ‘work[ing] hard at my easy work’: that is, making the stories that gladdened his heart. This new emphasis was expressed in a letter to Georgie in July 1890, in which he admitted that although he had ‘been somewhat worrited by matters connected with the league, and am like to be more worrited [a term borrowed from Dickens] … somehow or other I don’t seem to care much’. We now see Morris begin to consider his own interest above others – and even, finally, to express some bitterness towards Georgie. Morris’s increasing episodes of ill health, I argue, led to the expression of what lay closest to Morris’s heart – the stories that delighted him, but also a reference to a love that had been thwarted, and the flood that had sundered him from Georgie.

A health crisis

In 1889, after a long period of frustration with socialists and a heavy schedule of lectures, meetings and outdoor speech making in all weathers, Morris had begun writing the prose romances that soothed his heart and mind, and in which he could enact battles and satisfyingly slay enemies by proxy. The Tale of the House of the Wolfings (1889) and The Roots of the Mountains (1890), two works informed by Morris’s knowledge of early societies, contain many violent battles through which Morris may have sublimated his ire with fellow socialists as well as with the enemies of socialism generally. In 1889 he wrote to Georgie of his latest publication, The Roots of The Mountains:

I am so pleased with my book … – typography, binding, and must I say it, literary matter – that I am any day to be seen hugging it up, and am a spectacle to Gods and men because of it.

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4 Morris, Collected Letters vol. 3, p. 175.


Perhaps with a premonition of the shortness of the time left to him, but not without some guilt, Morris increasingly began to purchase rare and beautiful old books, spending comparatively huge amounts. May Morris writes:

In the summer of 1890 my father bought a copy of *The Golden Legend* printed by Wynken de Worde in 1527 and he soon after determined to print it himself. Thus in starting the Kelmscott Press he started buying early printed books ‘to serve as models’ for his own productions … and so it grew, till it came to pass that before the end, when a splendid manuscript was in the market and exactly after his own heart he could not rest until he had made it his own indeed at almost any price.\(^7\)

She continued with the following touching passage, saying that Morris was no mere collector:

As I sit here in the old house by the river, turning over many matters and listening to the distant rumours of War, I can scarcely think without emotion of the exquisite pleasure my father got from his manuscripts in those last years of declining strength, and how wisely and nobly he spent the proceeds of his toil…he loved his books as a craftsman, as a poet, as a romancist: with a threefold affection and a threefold pleasure.\(^8\)

As a craftsman and lover of history and story, Morris’s passion for these old and rare books awakened a new vitality and vision. In January 1889 he wrote to his friend Ellis:

I am beginning to learn something about the art of Type-setting; and I now see what a difference there is between the work of the conceited numbskulls of to-day and that of the 15\(^{th}\) and 16\(^{th}\) century printers.\(^9\)

Morris’s delight in the beauty of these works fuelled a desire to create similar works of art himself, works that could be shared with others and become a lasting legacy. He had gathered together others interested in such a project, including his dearest friend Edward Burne-Jones. A series of publications was planned, including an edition of *The Earthly Paradise*. Writing to Georgie in June 1890, Morris mentioned rereading this work so imbued with his love-sorrow of the 1870s, and he made the wry comment that ‘[s]ome people would say the work was hard’.\(^10\)

To produce the books a press was set up in the basement of a house in Upper Mall, Hammersmith, near Morris’s own. But just as this project was beginning, Morris suffered a terrible setback to his health from which he never fully recovered. It was in February 1891 that he was taken ill. The previous month, Morris’s adult daughter Jenny had fallen ill with

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\(^{10}\) Morris, *Collected Letters*, vol. 3, p. 170
meningitis, which sent Morris into a state of anxious dread. As Jenny recovered, Morris came down with what was diagnosed as gout, becoming so severely ill that he was bedridden for five weeks and enfeebled for months. The episode put a stop to Morris's lecturing. Recounting this episode, his biographer Mackail wrote:

Towards the end of February, Morris was laid up with a severe attack of gout, attended by other symptoms of an alarming kind. On consultation the kidneys were found to be gravely affected; and he was told that henceforth he must consider himself an invalid to the extent of husbanding his strength and living under a careful regimen.11

Poet and writer Wilfred Scawen. Blunt recorded in his diary in May that year that Morris 'had been at Death's door' from gout.12

We do not now think of people dying of gout, but in past times Saturnine gout, or lead poisoning, was known as a deadly complication of work or wine consumption. Morris was seriously ill and his kidneys affected. This breakdown was attributed by Jane to anxiety over Jenny's illness, but could there have been another factor at work? Just before he fell ill Morris had been keenly engaged in setting up the Kelmscott Press. He had the first typefaces ordered, and continued to orchestrate the business of the press from home, where he was attending Jenny. On 20 January Morris writes that he is eagerly anticipating the arrival of cases of his Golden type, which were delivered on 18 February.13 A worker at the press later recalled that:

When the type came in from the founders, he was very anxious to help lay it in the cases, but … more often than not put the type in the wrong box. It was very amusing to hear him saying to himself: ‘There, bother it; in the wrong box again!’14

Type is an alloy of 63 per cent lead and 27 per cent other metals. The previous week Morris wrote to a colleague: ‘If you could call here about 11 AM on Saturday we could arrange what is to be done about the type gas fittings &c’15. According to William Peterson, gas firing was used to melt the lead type to be recast in moulds.16 Just ten days after the type arrived, on 28 February, the first symptoms of that fateful attack of ‘gout’ are recorded and Morris was bed-bound with illness. It is not unreasonable to suppose that Morris, excited with a new project, and in his usual hands on spirit, tried out the fitting and melted

lead alloy in the confined space of the Hammersmith cottage, closed up against the winter weather. Under these circumstances he probably exposed himself to lead fumes. Before the twentieth century the symptoms of lead poisoning were confused with gout, and Morris’s history of ‘gouty rheumatism or rheumaticky gout’, as he called it, a legacy of his episode of rheumatic fever, might have masked a more sinister cause for this health crisis.\textsuperscript{17}

Four days after Morris’s initial attack he wrote: ‘My hand seems like lead and my wrist string’.\textsuperscript{18} Later Morris reported that he could not pick up his keys. Wrist drop, or weakness of the wrists and hands, is a distinctive characteristic of lead poisoning. Lead is a cumulative toxin, and most Victorians were constantly exposed to lead and would have had high though subclinical levels in their bodies.\textsuperscript{19} Wine in particular was preserved with ‘sugar of lead’. This lead accumulated in bones and could be released during periods of stress or illness, and Morris had been distressed over Jenny’s illness. Furthermore Morris would also have been exposed to lead through his work with dyes, paints and stains, glazes and leadlight. In \textit{News from Nowhere}, Guest attends a dinner at the Bloomsbury Market:

> The glass, crockery and plate were very beautiful to my eyes, used to the study of medieval art … the crockery being lead-glazed pot-ware, though beautifully ornamented.\textsuperscript{20}

Morris’s own crockery may well have been lead glazed ware, and it is at least possible that Morris’s serious attack of what was diagnosed as gout, and his kidney damage, were a consequence of subclinical accumulation of lead that tipped over into acute poisoning. If so, contact with lead vapour during experiments with lead type could have been the catalyst.

Whatever the cause, the illness and lengthy recovery – his appearance became very aged – shook Morris, causing him to face his own mortality. Perhaps it spurred him on in the work of the following period even more impatiently than usual. A year after this crisis Morris mentioned in a letter to Georgie that he was ‘not as well as I should like, and am even such a fool as to be anxious – about myself this time’.\textsuperscript{21} At the same time, the falling away of Morris’s active engagement with socialism meant he grew closer again to Burne-Jones, and the two collaborated closely in their final years on the productions of the press. Meanwhile, Morris pleased himself by writing the unique fantasy quest romances that, in

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\begin{itemize}
  \item\textsuperscript{17} On the relationship of lead to gout, see for example: George A. Porter, \textit{Nephrotoxic Mechanisms of Drugs and Environmental Toxins}, Portland, Springer Science, 1982, p. 22.
  \item\textsuperscript{20} Morris, \textit{Collected Works}, vol. 16, p. 101.
  \item\textsuperscript{21} Morris, \textit{Collected Letters}, vol. 3, p. 327.
\end{itemize}
\end{flushright}
another century, would directly inspire the work of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien and their followers – and provide him with one final means of imagining happiness in love.

**Deliberate happiness: an imagination fully liberated**

Just as during the 1880s Morris’s lectures and writings had increasingly become more concerned with socialism and less with buildings and decoration, so as the 1890s got underway his work began to return to medievalism, books, buildings, and also to the fantasy worlds he was inventing. Writing to Jane for her birthday in October 1889, Morris told her of his pleasure at seeing his book *The Roots of the Mountains* newly published and bound in one of his chintzes. ‘I have begun another story, but do not intend to hurry it’, he wrote. ‘I must have a story to write now as long as I live.’

The romances are couched in an archaic and what has been styled ‘anti-bourgeois’ diction, initially off-putting to the modern reader, and with some resulting criticism and dismissal of these works. Literary scholar Norman Talbot took particular offence at the offhand treatment of these stories by biographer Henderson, noting the psychological sophistication, exceptional proto feminism and eroticism in the tales. Similarly Frederick Kirchoff complained that these works constitute the least understood body of major Victorian fiction and, summarising the critical response at that time, wrote:

Shaw dismissed them as ‘a startling relapse into literary Pre-Raphaelitism’, symptomatic of Morris’s need for ‘a refuge from reality’. E. P. Thompson, who rejects the ‘startling relapse’ theory, treats them as mere ‘fairy stories, legends, for which the belief of the active mind is not invited’. Philip Henderson, in a life-and-works biography his publisher had the temerity to call ‘definitive’, does not even seem to have read the romances with sufficient attention to get their plots straight.

Kirchoff himself argues against the notion of the works as escapist, citing ‘the revolutionary nature of the romance’ and ‘their relevance to the social and political concerns of Morris’s last years’. He goes further, stating that

Far from being a ‘refuge from reality,’ Morris refines the genre into a uniquely syncretic model of human experience – a model which, among its other functions, at once confirms and re-examines his commitment to Marxism … Morris establishes a set of psychological archetypes by means of which he can explore the processes of individuation, sexual relationship, and social interaction … Moreover, this fascination

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with form in itself leads Morris to an imaginative and intellectual freedom … Here, as nowhere else, Morris’s imagination is fully liberated.\textsuperscript{27}

Morris himself debunked the idea of socialism by stealth in these works,\textsuperscript{28} although his own liberal attitude to love is evident. But other themes in these romances – those of parted lovers, the need to live a lie and the overcoming of great trials to achieve the fulfilling union – align with this study’s interpretation of Morris’s writings generally as reflecting the concerns of his life. In a letter to Georgie, Morris referred to a narrative poem he had written to fill a gap at the end of Poems by the Way: ‘My wig! But it is garrulous: I can’t help it, the short lines and my old recollections lead me on’.\textsuperscript{29} Revealing how much he drew on old recollections when writing, Morris’s autobiography is even more explicit in passages describing his prose romance heroines. As Georgie’s facial features were given to the heroines of his unfinished novel and News from Nowhere, so they appear again in The Well at the World’s End (1896):

[H]e deemed he had never seen a woman so fair. Her hair was dark red, but her eyes grey, and light at whiles and yet at whiles deep; her lips betwixt thin and full, but yet when she spoke or smiled clad with all enticements; her chin round and so wrought as none was ever better wrought.\textsuperscript{30}

In The Water of the Wondrous Isles (published posthumously in 1897), Birdalone too shares Georgie’s features:

The hair of thee is simple brown, yet somewhat more golden than dark … Now as to thy face: under that smooth forehead is thy nose, which is of measure, neither small nor great, straight, and lovely carven at the nostrils: thine eyen are as grey as a hawk’s, but kind and serious … with their long full lashes. But well are thine eyen set in thine head, wide apart … Thy cheeks … are they not fully rounded, as some would have them; but not I … Delicate and clear-made is the little trench that goeth from thy nose to thy lips, and sweet it is … Thy lips, they are of the finest fashion, yet rather thin than full; and some would not have it so; but I would … Surely he who did thy carven chin had a mind to a master-work and did no less.\textsuperscript{31}

These tender and extensive references to Georgie’s appearance flourish unbounded here. Morris indulgently dwells in his love and his memory of close observation of Georgie’s face. The romances in this respect are tributes of his enduring love, marking his devotion even in the last decade of his life. As noted below, Georgie’s presence may be detected

\textsuperscript{27} Kirchoff, \textit{Studies in the Late Romances}, p. 13.
\textsuperscript{28} Lindsay, \textit{Life and Work}, p. 366.
\textsuperscript{30} Morris, \textit{Collected Works}, vol. 18, p. 51.
\textsuperscript{31} Morris, \textit{Collected Works}, vol. 20, p. 17.
even in his final work, *The Sundering Flood*, indicating that for decades Morris had kept her as a vision of his beloved.

**Loss and wrong: a final poem**

And yet there were also signs in these last years that Morris allowed himself to feel and express a sense of loss and wrong. In August 1895 Morris wrote to Georgie expressing ‘hurt’ and articulating a sense of regret that he had repressed his feelings:

> I was thinking just now, how I have wasted the many times when I have been ‘hurt’ and (especially of late years) have made no sign, but swallowed down my sorrow and anger, and nothing done! Whereas if I had but gone to bed and stayed there for a month or two and declined taking part in life, as indeed on such occasions I have felt very much inclined to do, I can’t help thinking that it might have been very effective. Perhaps you remember that this game was tried by some of my Icelandic heroes, and seemingly with great success.32

While no doubt applicable to a number of scenarios, it is entirely possible that this feeling also applied to Morris’s dealings with Georgie herself. Half a year later his health and energy had become much more depleted, and his clothes hung loosely on his once sturdy frame. His many small excuses and non-attendance to duties on the grounds of ill health, which had begun in 1889, developed into full-blown illness; now, both Morris and his friends were becoming alarmed at his state of health. In the last year of his life Morris wrote a final poem, ‘She and He’, one of the very few since the Iceland days. Written on 7 January 1896 in the presence of his assistant, Cockerell, Morris had him post it to Georgie corrections and all. Before doing so, Cockerell made a fair copy. Morris added a note in pencil to the version sent to Georgie, explaining: ‘this may be called a “poem by the way” a stanza or two got into my head on Friday last, and so I thought I would go on with it. I send it on so that it may not interrupt tomorrow’, he wrote (referring to ‘Wednesday’s reading’), ‘as that is business and is like to take time’.33

The poem begins with a woman (‘She’) addressing a man, inviting him to go with her, for the sake of past times, and a former intimacy casually referred to, to attend the celebration of her birthday:

> And I am lady of the land  
> My hall is wide and side

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And therein would I have thee stand
To see my blossomed pride

Since oft a-days forth wandered we
Oer mead and dale and down
Till on the edges of the sea
Aloof we saw the town …

Wherefore while yet the day is young
And the feast's awoke with morn
Come oer and hear the praises sung
Of the day when I was born.

Although married to another, she recalls their love:

Twas oft from glooming of the lea
Into the house we turned
And I by thee and thou by me
For ne'er another yearned

The man (‘He’) bitterly rejects this offer:

This morn I will not cross the ford
And take thee by the hand
And see the feast upon thy board
And midst the prideful stand …

And through thy halls be wide and side
No room is there for me
For there be men of mickle pride
Between thy face and me

An earl upon thy right hand is
A baron takes thy sleeve
A belted knight thine hand doth kiss
And craveth little leave.34

The poem contains giveaway elements of autobiography. The wandering to the sea brings to mind Morris’s visits to the seaside village of Rottingdean, where he recalled walking with Georgie in September 1894 or 1895.35 The reference to a baron is interesting. In 1894 Burne-Jones’ career reached a pinnacle. Previously appointed president of the Society of Artists, he was now offered and accepted a baronetcy. Since his association with the Grosvenor Gallery, Burne-Jones, with Georgie, had been increasingly feted by society, despite his frequent assertions that he detested such accolades.36 The baronetcy involved

34 Morris, Collected Works, vol. 21, pp. 645-46. See also B L. Ms. 45,298a, ff. 128-29.
36 Burne-Jones was reported as saying to a friend: ‘I would live a very different life if it were to be had over again, wouldn't it? I've go into society or know anybody, but live for nothing but work. But then reflecting: ‘You think perhaps that I wouldn't do anything different from what I have done – well, perhaps I shouldn't!’’. See Georgiana Burne-Jones, Memoirs of Edward Burne-Jones, London, Macmillan & Co, 1906, vol. 2, p. 287.
‘the necessary heraldic arrangements’ – the question of arms and a motto – and Morris’s scorn was palpable. He began to refer to his friend as ‘the Bart’ and, in reference to the fact that Burne-Jones accepted the baronetcy because of his son who would inherit the title, was heard to say: ‘Well, a man can be an ass for the sake of his children’.37

More telling stanzas of ‘She and He’ occur toward the end of the poem. Here ‘He’ will not be lured by the woman’s appeal to their past, and rejects her calm unresponsive selfishness, familiarly invoking a sea voyage, a symbol for separation, even death:

Then will I get me to the town  
And ship me o’er the main  
And clean forget both dale and down  
And the ways we went we twain

The while thy maidens round thee throng  
To lay thee soft abed  
And thou lay’st down my loss and wrong  
On the pillows of thine head.

One foot upon the deck shall be  
One hand upon the rope,  
And the Hale and the How on the weltering sea  
And one farewell to hope.

For the first time, in his poem, Morris expresses bitterness, allowing himself to feel aggrieved. His years of devotion are seen as a mere plaything to the woman, an adornment for her amusement. How Georgie, by now mingling in the circles of high society, received this poem would be fascinating to know. Morris had stated that ‘friendship, kindness and goodness’ were no answer to passionate love; now a dying man, he felt it was past the time for mincing words.

Cockerell’s fair copy of the poem had one significant alteration from Morris’s original. In Morris’s copy sent to Georgie is the intimate couplet:

And I by thee and thou by me  
For neer another yearned

While Cockerell’s neatly penned version has:

And I by thee, and thou by me  
Watched how the oak log burned38

38 Morris, ‘She and He’, B.L. MS 45,298A, ff. 128-29.
… a distinct alteration of the relationship from lovers to companions. When in the early twentieth century May Morris began compiling her father’s work she spotted the alteration and must have written to Cockerell for an explanation. His reply is somewhat defensive:

I have no very clear recollection of my copying that poem, but there can be no question that the revision was made at the time by your father. I see that my copy is dated Jan 7 1896 11:30 A.M. so I evidently made the copy soon after I arrived in the morning and the original manuscript was then posted to Lady B.J.  

If this was true, why was Georgie’s version different from Cockerell’s? Where is Morris’s revision? And, more to the point, why are there two versions? May knew her father’s work intimately, and the tone of Cockerell’s letter of reply indicates that May suggested he had made the change. Did Cockerell interfere with the line? It is impossible to know for certain, but with Morris clearly very ill, Cockerell’s mind might have been dwelling on biographers getting hold of suggestive material that would prompt further investigation.  

As I have noted elsewhere, in an interview he gave to Henderson in the 1950s, Cockerell denounced the practice of ‘prying into what does not concern them’ by biographers investigating the private affairs of his circle. When Henderson mentioned Rossetti and Mrs Morris, Cockerell rejoined ‘Morris was not a ladies’ man’, a remark that might have led Henderson to suppose some form of sexual inadequacy, but instead could well have sprung from Cockerell’s fear that Morris’s secrets, which also concerned Lady Burne-Jones, might come to the surface.

The Sundering Flood: the last romance

In June 1896, just four months before his death, bedridden and already gravely ill with consumption and diabetes, Morris dictated the closing chapters of The Sundering Flood to his secretary Cockerell. He had lived to see and handle the great, beautiful folio edition of the Kelmscott Chaucer, the edition of the Canterbury Tales planned in 1890 and now complete in all its splendour, the joint project of two lifelong friends and a testament to their devotion to that poet. The Kelmscott Press had also published much of Morris’s earlier work: The Earthly Paradise, Love is Enough, Poems by the Way, News from Nowhere and so on. A further handful of prose romances, including The Sundering Flood, written in the

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40 Four pages were excised from a notebook of Morris’s private, unpublished poetry, and Cockerell was one of only four people to handle that notebook. (see Boos, ‘Unprintable Lyrics: The Unpublished Poems of William Morris’, Victorian Poetry, vol. 53, no.2, 2015, pp. 193-227.) Also, a single unpublished page of The Novel on Blue Paper was found among Cockerell’s papers, separated from the rest.
preceding years, would emerge from the Kelmscott Press following Morris’s death as an echo of this great achievement. Searches of rare book auctions and library catalogues frequently turn up the dedication ‘to Georgie from W M’, under Kelmscott Press titles – random evidence of Morris’s continued gift giving to Georgie from each new edition.43

Apart from the descriptive passages cited earlier, there is little obvious or overt autobiography in the mythic quests that structure the tales. Yet the poignant central motif of *The Sundering Flood* perhaps testifies most clearly to Morris’s continuing attachment to Georgie. The flood – the great river separating the lovers while enabling them the proximity to speak and desire each other – seems to stand for the immense and immoveable forces that Morris felt had thwarted his love for Georgie, as well as the coming separation of impending death. Moreover, there are other elements that illuminate subtle allusions in this work. Noting the way Morris occasionally selected domestic fragments from his own life to add into the imaginative pleasure of creating his romances, for example, Tompkins points to the fact that ‘the childish figure of Elfhild has reminded more than one reader of Georgie Burne-Jones’.44 The likeness with the young Georgie is evident:

[H]er hair was knit up as a crown about her beauteous head, which sat upon her shoulders as the swan upon the billow: her hair … was now brown mingled with gold, as though the sun were within it … her eyes were blue-grey and lustrous, her cheeks a little hollow, but the jaw was truly wrought, and fine and clear, and her chin firm and lovely carven: her lips not very full, but red and lovely, her nose straight and fine.45

Osberne’s innocent gift to Elfhild of a love poem, sent to her across the narrow chasm that separated them, also aligns with Morris’s many poetic gifts to Georgie, an unattainable, married woman. But this biographical parallel, which in other circumstances might awaken interest from scholars, is obscured by the ever-present narrative of Morris’s failed marriage. Thus Tompkins argues that the likeness to Georgie means little as the tales morph into greater quests and battles:

The narrative movement obscures the likeness. Nevertheless, the likeness is there. She continues: ‘We are told that ‘at times, there was something like sternness in Elfhild’s eyes’, and Georgie’s friends record this latent austerity in hers.46

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43 At the time of finalising this thesis, for example, auction catalogues listed a Kelmscott Press edition of *The Life and Death of Jason*, indicating that it was a presentation copy to Georgiana Burne-Jones, and a copy of *The Story of the Glittering Plain* with the dedication ‘Georgie from W.M., May 8th 1891’. See the site ‘Invaluable’, at www.invaluable.com/catalog/searchLots.cfm?scp=c&catalogRef=xte3kk7b93 [accessed 21 May 2015].
45 Morris, *Collected Works*, vol. 21, p. 112.
Landscape also provides biographical parallels in this tale. As noted by more than one scholar, the topography of this novel is the harsh, barren landscape of Iceland.\textsuperscript{47} To read Morris’s journals is to understand how the landscape affected him, being both wonderful and awful, linked with the fate of heroes of legend. Morris, who had gone to find the courage to face his own fate, dwelt more than once in his journal on facing death there. Phillippa Bennett highlights the way Morris’s impressions of Iceland, as recounted in his letters and diaries, are echoed in \textit{The Sundering Flood}:

Morris’s last romances are structured through such contemplation and interrogation, processes frequently enacted through the interaction between protagonist and topography. This is perhaps articulated most explicitly in Osberne’s question to Elfhild across the torrents of the eponymous river that divides them in Morris’s very last narrative, \textit{The Sundering Flood} – a river which falls in ‘swirling and gurgling eddies’ of ‘black water’ through ‘a wall of sheer rock’ flanked by ‘rent and tumbled crags’ …\textit{The Sundering Flood} thus asserts itself from the very beginning of the romance as a topographical wonder, not only because of its compelling Icelandic details and its suggestions of non-traversable space, but also because through its autonomy and vitality it gives physical expression to the dynamics of wonder, hope and desire that inspire Osberne and Elfhild’s quest to be united.\textsuperscript{48}

As I have argued, Iceland was the place where Morris sought solace from the misery surrounding his love for Georgie twenty years earlier. The Icelandic landscape for Morris embodied Fate and the finding of courage to accept it, so the setting of \textit{The Sundering Flood}, ‘which hath been from the beginning and shall be to the end’, links this final tale with the years of the early 1870s, troubled not by his wife’s infidelity, but by his enforced separation from his true love, Georgie. Morris had been kept from a union with Georgie by forces of destiny as impossible as the great flood, and he was now aware of coming death, a final separation that meant any hope was now past.

By February 1896 chill fear for Morris lodged in the hearts of his close friends and family. Burne-Jones, unable to stand the strain, took Morris to the best specialist of the day to try to find the cause; no cancer was found, just slight diabetes. Yet in spite of corrective diets, Morris’s weight loss continued, marked by a grim daily vigil of measurement that only confirmed the decline.\textsuperscript{49} The publication of the Kelmscott \textit{Chaucer} in June, as well as visits to see manuscripts, lifted Morris’s spirits somewhat. More doctors were consulted,
including one named Pavey, who unhelpfully – and incorrectly – opined that the disease was ‘being William Morris, and working 18 hours a day’.\(^{50}\)

Morris seemed to have little faith but some hope in the dietary regimens and potions prescribed. According to the treatments of the day, Morris was first sent to Folkstone for sea air, and at the end of July, he was sent on a sea voyage to Norway. He bore the journey well enough, but arrived home in a much worse state than when he had left. It was all he could do to reach home and his own bed. It was now that his cough was identified as consumption.\(^{51}\) On 8 September he dictated the last lines of *The Sundering Flood* to Cockerell. He was now waiting for the end, nursed devotedly by Jane and a few friends. Adding to the pall of gloom, in 1896 first the artist Lord Leighton, and then Millais died; each had depressingly large and showy funerals. On 1 September Morris wrote the last letter in his own hand to Georgie: ‘Come soon’, and he ended, ‘I want a sight of your dear face’.\(^{52}\) Morris died on 3 October. Georgie was present, and wrote that ‘He died as gently, as quietly as a babe who is satisfied drops from its mother’s breast’.\(^{53}\)

Just few weeks later, Burne-Jones mysteriously mentioned in a letter to one of his young woman friends, Frances Horner, that Morris had left him:

> in low spirits, for he tells me long histories of how much he has been loved of women and what deeds they have done for his sake in Pontus, and the furthermost parts of Cyrene, and no man ever likes to hear that; and I believe it all, for why should he tell untruths?\(^{54}\)

Perhaps the unearthing of the evidence of a lifetime’s correspondence with his wife awakened Burne-Jones to the extent of the bond between her and Morris, for otherwise why should he not like to hear that Morris had been loved of women? Burne-Jones wrote this passage just as Georgie had begun to gather letters and documents for Morris’s biography, hastily commissioned to be written by their son-in-law, Jack Mackail, just weeks after Morris’s death. Significantly, Georgie not Jane, had undertaken to manage this task before anyone else had the chance, possibly to prevent an outsider from investigating Morris’s personal life and seeking out letters and other documents such as unpublished poems.\(^{55}\) While writing the biography, Mackail sought information from Aglaia Coronio. Her letter to him is not available, but Mackail’s reply is revealing: ‘How extraordinarily

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\(^{50}\) Salmon, *Chronology*, p. 281.


interesting one could make the story, if one were going to die the day before it was published.’

He called his task ‘unpleasantly near untruthfulness of

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The following year, after some troubling symptoms kept secret from his family, Burne-Jones himself died of a heart attack. At his funeral Georgie was philosophical:

She had that air of determined resignation that she wore after W.M.’s death. She was very well, she said, and very thankful to have known those two men as she had known them – and ‘we must pay for the wine we have drunk’.

She spoke of Morris in the same breath and with the same emphasis as her husband, as if he were as important and close to her as that relationship implied. It would be more than twenty years before Georgie would die at the age of 80, two years after the Great War ended. Mackail’s obituary of his mother-in-law in The Times was extraordinarily heartfelt, marking the end of an era with her death. Of the inner circle whose lives had been so inextricably tied, he said: ‘Among no group of people at any time has life been lived more vividly or at higher tension.’ He called her a personality of ‘singular strength and sweetness’, highlighting the achievement of her account of her life with Burne-Jones, told with ‘incomparable truth, delicacy, and skill’. In this work, he says, her character was displayed: ‘Love was the guiding force of her life, but it was a power, not a weakness.’

Mackail highlights her ‘nobility of character’. He says the ‘commerce between all great of mind with all great social and religious thinkers came naturally to her’, which leads to the paragraph: ‘Between her and William Morris in particular, sympathy was as deep and as affectionate, though different in kind, as between Morris and Burne-Jones himself.’

Mackail’s own sympathy, with Morris and Georgiana, must have been sustained by a profound understanding gained through close rereading of Morris’s writing and the handful of letters he alone was uniquely privileged to see while writing his life of Morris.

If love was the guiding force of Georgie’s life, this study shows that it was also Morris’s lodestar. Since his death nearly 120 years ago, any conclusive evidence of this love of or between Morris and Georgiana Burne-Jones has probably been obliterated – apart, that is, from Morris’s own writings upon which this work primarily depends. Hidden in plain sight, three aspects of Morris emerge as lifelong themes of significance: first, Morris’s identification with the ideal of love; second, his sympathy for women and the feminine as

58 Rooke, Burne-Jones Talking, p. 190.
60 Mackail, ‘Death of Lady Burne-Jones’.
61 Mackail, ‘Death of Lady Burne-Jones’.
redemptive; and third, through these first two, his opposition to the conventions of behaviour and control governing both love and women. These and a final review of the journey undertaken in this thesis inform my conclusion.
**Conclusion**

**Hidden in Plain Sight**

John Tosh has defended biography as ‘indispensable to the understanding of motive and intention’ and says that biographers have ‘increasingly stressed the private or inner lives of their subjects as well as their public careers’.¹ A number of biographies of William Morris have examined his private as well as his public life, both being of considerable interest. But this has arguably raised more questions than it has answered. Since the 1960s, the story of his wife Jane and her very ‘un-Victorian’ liaison with artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti has captured much attention, but Morris’s consequent actions and inactions have remained mysterious and tended to produce speculation about his courage and manhood. To the public, Morris’s association with floral wallpapers rather than radical politics – or indeed, passionate poetry – means that he is remembered more as an aesthete than a man of action as he was once characterised. (I am regularly asked how my thesis on wallpaper is going). Take for example this quotation from Bill Bryson’s *At Home: A History of Private Life* published in 2010, which refers to Morris’s attendance at the Great Exhibition of 1851:

William Morris, the future designer and aesthete, then aged seventeen was so appalled by what he saw as the exhibition’s lack of taste and veneration of excess that he staggered from the building and was sick in the bushes.²

Morris shunned the exhibition because he thought it crass, but this account is an invention, and the word aesthete has associations that Morris could never be accused of.³ Nevertheless, such popular representations have not only influenced broader perceptions but emerged in part from scholarly literature.

Reading Morris’s works over many years, I found that what I read did not ‘fit’ this picture and more specifically the theories about Morris’s marriage and relationships put forward in most biographies. In 1995 when a new biography by Fiona MacCarthy was published, I hoped my concerns would be addressed, but I was disappointed. Instead I felt that perceptions of Morris as an anomalous personality, in some ways active and fiery, but

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also querulous or inept when it came to women and love (and with a mindset that predisposed him to problems in marriage), were becoming more entrenched. The concept 'cuckold', while never actually used by those writing of Morris, has seemed to drift about him, inspiring a kind of apologetic pity from his champions. Small amusing drawings of Morris made by his dearest friend and meant only for the eyes of a few others have lately been widely publicised, along with an emerging and unsupported theory of Morris as a sufferer of neurological conditions, with his 'high temper' now redefined as a pathological illness.4

These subtle but emerging perceptions ran counter to my view of Morris as a man of decidedly active and passionate temperament, and with a practical yet heroic personal ethic that developed into radical political and social views. I saw in his writings evidence of an unusual empathy for women and a thoughtful critique of their treatment in Victorian society, and yet this hardly rates a mention in the handful of twentieth-century biographies. Nor is Morris’s unusual ‘pagan’ attitude to love and sex much acknowledged, or considered in relation to his actions especially in relation to his wife. And Jane has herself been the focus of harsh criticism, and called everything from indifferent to ‘a wife of such matchless stupidity, as well as such matchless beauty’,5 and yet the couple were close and affectionate companions until Morris’s death.

However, I was singularly struck by the presence in Morris’s writings of the deep longing for one mysterious, beloved figure. It is a woman who withholds her love, and from whom the writer begs forgiveness while longing for union one day. The material assembled in this thesis, I argue, demonstrates that Georgie is this beloved woman, and a relationship of the utmost importance in understanding Morris’s life. It is Georgie, I believe, who sits at the centre of the ‘autobiography so delicate and so outspoken that it must be left to speak for itself’.6

Thus this thesis emerged in response to both my own reading of Morris’s work over many years and to readings of his biographers who examined a grey area in Morris’s private life that had allowed the notion of Morris as somewhat less than manly, or as a failed lover, to emerge. While I have no particular desire to prove Morris’s ‘manliness’ here, I have wanted to examine Morris’s relationship with Georgiana, the wife of his close friend

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Edward Burne-Jones, to draw out a new narrative and make sense of Morris’s private affairs and more. Biographers have touched on this relationship with Georgie, but the prevailing view is that if a relationship existed, it simply compensated the two for the sorrow of their ‘failed’ marriages. What surprised me in deploying my theory to the analysis of existing biographical material, and Morris’s own words, was the way it simply and clearly illuminated meaning and significance, to reveal in fact what was already there to be seen.

In Chapter 1, I outlined the pivotal influences that formed Morris’s ideal of life and love as a young man: his initial piety, the intellectual stimulation of a group of serious minded young men, his discovery of poetry and self-expression, his sense that he was unworthy and his tendency to self-repression and self-abnegation; and his commitment to sacred ideals of friendship and Brotherhood based on quasi-religious response to the Arthurian legends. I examined Morris’s loss of faith and his adoption instead of extreme ideals of heroism and Love. I noted the liberalising influence of Chaucer and of Browning’s *Men and Women*, which also idealize love and passion. I examined the biographical significance of the appearance in his life of the girl who would marry his best friend, evident in the theme of early writings about love, in which triangular relationships echo the real-life situation between Burne-Jones, Georgie and Morris. I suggest that Morris may have encouraged or assisted Burne-Jones to become engaged to Georgie, and I point to the fact that Morris’s unfinished novel of the 1870s (analysed in Chapter 6) reinforces my argument about the biography of this period; that is, that Morris was in love with Georgie himself, but kept silent as a self-denying act of ‘brotherly’ love.

In Chapter 2, I showed how the entrance of Rossetti into Morris’s life was the catalyst for a period of intense artistic activity. I argued that Morris’s sublimation of his emotional situation into that of the Arthurian legends saw him identify in his writings and painting with the unsuccessful lover and knight Palomedes, and the chaste Galahad. His painting for the Oxford Union mural scheme undelineed a theme first examined in earlier stories – the lover as heroic outsider. I noted Rossetti’s influence on Burne-Jones as he began to dabble with ideas of sacred and profane love, and I argued that for Morris, the appearance of Jane Burden, with her ‘medieval’ beauty, enabled him to put love for Georgie aside, and claim a love of his own. I recognised however that, for Jane, turning down this offer of marriage would have been unthinkable, whatever her feelings for Morris may have been.

In Chapter 3, I discussed and compared the three marriages of Rossetti Burne-Jones and Morris, and I noted how the women fared as wives. I demonstrated that Morris’s
The poem ‘The Defence of Guenevere’ was a response to current social trends, and that it challenged socially accepted ideas during a time of moral panic, when women became the object of social control. Morris and Janey were very happy for a time before changes and new realities began to affect their lives. The impact of child-bearing and infant mortality on all three women was significant. I noted also that Burne-Jones began an affair, devastating his wife, and that Rossetti began to paint Jane Morris obsessively, and I recorded Morris’s response to these developments that would draw him closer to Georgie.

Chapter 4 dealt with Morris’s response to the relationship emerging between his wife and Rossetti, examining in particular his long narrative poem *The Earthly Paradise*, which seems to coincide with a period of great unhappiness usually attributed to Rossetti and Jane’s liaison. With a sense that both his and Georgie’s marriages had been a mistake, Morris’s love for Georgie was reawakened. I examined the biographical interpretations of the work of this time, and I offered an alternative reading of the poems as addressed to Georgie, not Janey, and demonstrate how only this reading makes sense.

In Chapter 5, I discussed how, in an effort to display his love for Georgie, Morris produced two written works and a raft of illuminated love-tokens, the finest work he could make. I noted Morris’s active role in leasing Kelmscott Manor as a retreat where Jane and Rossetti could be together. I showed how this active role puts Morris in the position of being a key player in this drama – almost arranging the adultery – rather than being a passive onlooker, unable to take a stand. I outlined how Morris’s writings reveal his belief that society and the importance of reputation for married women held Georgie back from becoming his lover, while other women of their circle disregarded social mores.

Chapter 6 focused specifically upon the fragment of a contemporary novel written at the heart of the time Morris was obsessed with love for Georgie. I argued that this ‘novel on blue paper’ is a roman à clef, referring to the years before Morris had met Jane, and the circumstances of the relationships between Morris, Burne-Jones and Georgie. In this work, Morris drew out a narrative that critiqued the moral code of his time, and I demonstrated that this work was particularly directed to Georgie, with Morris ultimately blaming contemporary social mores and attitudes to adultery for hindering Georgie’s response and enforcing their separation.

Chapter 7 outlined how Morris looked to the North for an answer to the dilemma of his life, to find a way to live without the sanctification of love. Only during his second trip to Iceland, I argued, did he find peace, returning with a new resolve but finally surrendering hope of becoming Georgie’s lover. I outlined how the end of hope also
meant the end of poetry of the personal kind. Instead Morris looked for other commitments, and took up social and artistic causes. He looked to politics as a way to end the moral, economic and social oppression that separated lovers such as himself and Georgie.

In many respects an extension of this argument, Chapter 8 highlighted how Morris’s utopian romance *News from Nowhere* reflected Morris’s hopes for a future where relationships would be unfettered by social strictures. Specifically, I highlighted the debt owed by *News from Nowhere* to *The Novel on Blue Paper*, demonstrating how Morris’s vision for the future developed out of the unfinished novel, and reiterated Morris’s sympathy for women and their need for liberated and fulfilling lives.

Chapter 9 surveyed the final years of Morris’s life, and how, as Morris grew impatient with aspects of the socialist movement, and rekindled his friendship with Burne-Jones, he became determined to ‘please himself’. He found joy in his Kelmscott Press, and in writing the prose romances whose heroines bear a resemblance to the still-loved Georgie. *The Sundering Flood* in particular seems to speak to his history with Georgie. I provided evidence that in the final year of his life, Morris expressed bitterness at Georgie’s failure to respond to his love. This is most evident in his last poem, ‘He and She’, which has a mysteriously altered couplet that provides evidence of a possible ‘cover-up’ by those in Morris’s circle.

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As is apparent from this outline, I have no conclusive piece of evidence to seal once and for all the question of Morris and Georgie’s relationship. This may still exist in an as yet unexamined or private collection of papers or letters, and future students of Morris’s life and work may have the time and resources to examine this and other material in greater detail. Nevertheless, we know that Georgie and others in her circle were assiduous in destroying ‘evidence’, and I think such a discovery is now unlikely. The focus of my thesis and research has been on Morris, and not on Georgie; possibly those researching Georgie’s life or circle in greater depth may unearth new material. While much is available online and archival work was undertaken in the United Kingdom during the course of research on this topic, scholars of Morris in Australia are somewhat limited by the ‘tyranny of distance’. Thus I encourage future researchers to be attentive to the evidence presented in this thesis, to be alert to new evidence, and to seek alternative readings that could be applied to any new fragments of poetry or letters discovered, and not to let the Janey-Rossetti scenario dominate interpretation.
For, despite the lack of conclusive or categorical evidence, I believe the circumstantial evidence presented in this thesis mounts an almost definitive case for accepting that Georgie is at the centre of much of Morris’s writing and work. As I have argued, it is the only account that makes sense of most if not all of the facts. Thus I believe that this thesis contributes to scholarship first by alerting current and future scholars to a key misreading of Morris’s life – that the love triangle between Morris, Jane and Rossetti explains all. There was no such triangle, and the sooner Morris scholars look with fresh eyes upon the evidence, the sooner we shall have fresh insight into the remarkable progressive elements of Morris’s life, thought and relationships with women. Secondly, and consequently, I believe this thesis illuminates Morris’s great-heartedness in relation to his friends, family and ‘love’, and by producing an ‘illuminating’ biographical treatment, reveals a man who presents a much more dynamic and interesting figure to a twenty-first century audience.

Positing that Morris’s love for Georgie was passionate, long-lasting and significant, I ultimately offer the following final conclusions: firstly, that Morris identified love and sexual feeling between individuals as sacred, a ‘law’ above that of church and state, and that he supported illicit love long before he engaged with socialism. Secondly, I suggest that this principle influenced his actions in relation to his wife, actions that have long been a source of confusion. Thirdly, I argue that Georgie’s unwillingness to accept his love caused Morris to ponder on the strictures on women’s lives, and their place in society, and this played a part in his journey to imagining a different kind of society. Fourthly, and perhaps obviously, I emphasise that Morris’s love for Georgie had a significant influence upon his creative output. Thus this work challenges fundamental biographical (mis)interpretations of Morris’s life, and mis-attribution of the sorrow at the heart of his literary work. I highlight that Morris’s love was expressed for all to see – ‘hidden’ in plain sight.
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