

“ ... not only a genius, he was a man”: William Morris and Manliness

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Abstract: *William Morris valued the idea of Manliness and strove to emulate a Victorian “manly” ideal. His friends saw him as exhibiting “manly” qualities during his lifetime. However, in the intervening years, succeeding biographers have moved away from the notion of Morris’s “manliness”, instead discovering psychological and neurological problems in him. As a result of modern biographies, Morris has latterly been caricatured as a comic, ridiculous figure in contrast to the Pre-Raphaelite artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti who is portrayed as romantic and virile – the modern version of “manliness”. I argue this revision has come about from preconceptions about Morris’s relationship with his wife and his friend Rossetti. Further, I argue that Morris believed in “free love”, and was himself in love with another woman, and that this has not been adequately investigated by biographers. The overriding idea that Morris was a “cuckolded” husband has caused him to be portrayed recently as weak and effeminate, skewing public perceptions erroneously.*

Manly: 1. having the qualities generally regarded as those that a man should have; virile; strong, brave, resolute, honourable, etc.¹

In his own lifetime William Morris was widely known as a poet and designer but also a fiery social critic and political radical. However, his name is now almost always associated with floral wallpaper, and the Pre-Raphaelite artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who famously painted and loved Morris’s wife. Both of these associations might tend to emasculate Morris in the public mind. The recent BBC television dramatisation of the exploits of the young artists of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, entitled *Desperate Romantics*, presented a wildly exaggerated picture of Rossetti

¹ New World Dictionary, www.memidex.com/manly (accessed 6 Feb 2014).

and his circle.² In this series Rossetti was cast as a handsome, dashing character, able to seduce any woman; while Morris, who was twenty-two, eight years younger than Rossetti, was played by an overweight actor in his late 30s, preposterously outfitted in a purple frock coat and top hat, and with a debilitating stutter. In one scene he is seized by a fit, during which he stabs his own hand with a fork. His abject marriage proposal to Jane Burden, incorrectly cast as a serving wench, was accepted by her on the basis that he must sleep in another room.³ In caricaturing these two men, the casting gave Rossetti athletic good looks and sexual prowess, while Morris appears as an unattractive, comical figure, as if the two must be defined in relationship to one another as a pair of opposites.

Until the twentieth century Morris was never seen as a failure in any context. During his lifetime he was a highly respected man of letters and a social critic. He spent the last decades of his life, among other pursuits, as a public speaker advocating radical social change. At the time of his death in 1896 the socialist paper *The Clarion* printed a heartfelt eulogy:

Great as was his work, he himself was greater ... he was better than the best. Though his words fell like sword strokes, one always felt that the warrior was stronger than the sword. For Morris was not only a genius, he was a man. Strike at him where you would, he rang true... he was our best man.... In all England there lives no braver, kinder, honest, cleverer, heartier man than William Morris.⁴

² Peter Bowker, Franny Moyle, *Desperate Romantics*, BBC Television, (2009).

³ Jane was just seventeen and although working class was not known to be working.

⁴ Jack Lindsay, *William Morris: a Biography* (London: Constable, 1975), 376.

Although the *Clarion*'s writer knew Morris only as a member of a socialist group, the statement is broad – Morris was a "man's man" to those who actually knew him.⁵ The descriptive words pile up "masculine" attributes: brave, hearty, clever, strong - a warrior. In another account Morris was addressed by a working man: "They tell me you are a poet, Mr Morris? Well, I know nothing about poets or poetry, but I'm blooming well sure I know a *man*, and *you're* one, by God!"⁶

In the Victorian period "manliness" was a much bandied-about term with distinct attributes, both innate and acquired, which men strove to exemplify. In her article, "William Morris and Victorian Manliness", Jan Marsh enumerates these qualities, and shows the ways Morris adopted the manly ideal, sometimes naturally through his strength and courage, or sometimes with a struggle, such as developing stoicism when he was by nature highly impatient.⁷ As Marsh points out, it is true that his sympathy and talent for the "feminine" in design and nature run alongside his "solidly masculine persona".⁸ Similarly, Scott Brennan-Smith concludes that "Morris affected a dynamic balance of masculine and feminine elements in his personal psychology" – an ideal achievement.⁹ How then has such a change in perceptions of Morris come about?

⁵ Morris's socialism is explored in Ruth Livesey's article "William Morris and the Aesthetics of Manly Labour" in *Socialism, Sex and the Culture of Aestheticism in Britain, 1880-1914* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 18-43.

⁶ E.P. Thompson, *William Morris Romantic to Revolutionary* (London: Merlin Press, 1996), 673.

⁷ Jan Marsh, "William Morris and Victorian Manliness", in Peter Faulkner and Peter Preston (eds), *William Morris Centenary Essays: Papers from the Morris Centenary Conference organized by the William Morris Society at Exeter College Oxford, 30 June - 3 July 1996*, (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999).

⁸ Ibid., Scott Brennan-Smith, "Knight and Lady as One: The Reclamation of the 'Feminine' in William Morris's Decorative Art Designs," in *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* 5, no.1 2009, <http://www.ncgsjournal.com/issue51/brennan.htm> (accessed 19 Feb 2014).

⁹ Brennan-Smith, "Knight and Lady as One", para. 2. This has also been explored by Frederick Kirchoff in his analysis of Morris's psychological self-development as a man in the world. He draws similar conclusions. See Frederick Kirchoff, *William Morris the Construction of a Male Self 1856-1872*, (Athens, Ohio University Press: 1990). Manliness as an aspect of Morris's socialism is discussed in Ruth Livesey, *Socialism, Sex and the Culture*, 18-43.

In the period between the *Clarion's* eulogy and the portrayal of Morris in *Desperate Romantics*, a handful of biographies have told Morris's life story. A look at several of these discloses a subtle redirection of emphasis away from the idea of "manliness". It is an interesting study to note how the later works have diverged from the assessments of Morris as "not only a genius but a man". The first biography of William Morris was undertaken almost immediately after his death by Jack Mackail, scholar son-in-law of the artist Edward Burne-Jones who had known Morris personally for a decade. Mackail presented Morris as an exceptional personality, ardent and talented in youth, later an idealist and a practical activist. Mackail quotes one of Morris's associates a year or two before his meeting with Rossetti:

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...¹⁰

This stark contrast to the parody of Morris in *Desperate Romantics* is backed up by Georgiana Burne-Jones describing her first sight of him in 1855: "He was very handsome, of an unusual type – the statues of medieval kings often remind me of

¹⁰ J.W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris*, vol. 1 (London: Longmans Green and Co., 1899), 44.

him.... His hair waved and curled triumphantly."¹¹

Rossetti had been impressed by Morris's writings even before meeting him. Later he described Morris as "a real man", despite being "a touch incoherent" as a result of his intellectual exuberance.¹² Morris was also exceptionally strong, and in his undergraduate years used to attend a gymnasium where he and friends fenced, boxed and played singlestick, Morris's playing being particularly forceful and relentless. According to Jan Marsh "martial and physical courage are core ingredients of Victorian masculinity".¹³ The owner of the gymnasium, who became a firm friend of Morris, reported that his bills for broken sticks equalled that of all other pupils combined.¹⁴

Mackail's biography emphasises Morris's manly characteristics. Despite his fear that his biography of Morris would have to be "excessively flat owing to the amount of tact that had to be exercised right and left" the work is never stuffy, or aggrandizing, and is frequently lightened by accounts of Morris's eccentric and endearing qualities.¹⁵ These are placed in perspective by an overarching respect, even love for his subject. Mackail was a poet, and he drew on a close and intelligent study of all Morris's writings, as well as first-hand accounts and primary sources. It is evident that he knew of the complexities of the Morris marriage and those of his circle in the 1870s but of course could not refer to them in the work. Mackail wrote, "how

¹¹ Georgiana Burne-Jones, *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1904), 111.

¹² Jan Marsh, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Painter and Poet*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1988), 164.

¹³ Marsh, "William Morris and Victorian Manliness," 186.

¹⁴ Mackail, *The Life of William Morris*, 65.

¹⁵ Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* (London: Faber & Faber 1995), 249.

extraordinarily interesting one could make it if one was going to die the day before it was published".¹⁶

It was the dramatic changes in sensibilities wrought by the First World War, well after Morris's death in 1896, that perceptions of Morris began to alter somewhat. Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (1918) punctured the aura of moral superiority surrounding the previous generations' major figures, and this, together with a rejection of pre-war values, contributed to a virulent period of anti-Victorianism.¹⁷ Morris was himself a critic of Victorian humbugger, and was excused by Strachey from being considered one of the eminent, but the mood for debunking the "late and great", such as seen more affectionately in the caricatures of Max Beerbohm, no doubt contributed to some jocular speculation around Morris's wife's relationship with Rossetti and therefore possibly also Morris's "manliness". A persistent rumour that arose in gossipy recollections from the first half of the twentieth century was that he was rather indifferent to women or unable to relate to them. One proponent of this theory was Luke Ionedes, who claimed a close association with Morris. In *Memories*, published first in 1925, Ionedes stated that Morris was not susceptible to the charms of women, and that women did not count with him.¹⁸ The reference implies sexual indifference, as Morris was an intimate friend and confidante of Ionedes's sister, Aglaia Coronio. Another diarist and associate of Ionedes, Wilfred Scawen Blunt, believed that Morris "did not know, much as he had written about it, the love of

¹⁶ Lindsay, *William Morris: a Biography*, 153.

¹⁷ Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians* (Garden City, NY: Garden City Publishing Co., 1918). See for example Richard D Altick, "Eminent Victorianism: What Lytton Strachey Hath Wrought" *The American Scholar* 64, no.1 (Winter 1995): 81-89.

¹⁸ Luke Ionedes, "Memories", *The Journal of the William Morris Society* VII, no.4 (1988): 28.

woman, and *that* he never cared to discuss."¹⁹ Despite his genuine affection for Morris, Blunt made love to Janey Morris while a guest in Morris's house, possibly for the unwholesome reason that she had been a former lover of his hero Rossetti.²⁰ Blunt assumed, perhaps incorrectly, that Morris was unaware of this. His attempt to tease from Morris any of his own improprieties failed, but it is unlikely that Morris, who detested gossip, would disclose any private information to a womaniser such as Blunt.

At the turn of the century there arose another possible influence on public opinions of Morris's manliness. This was a controversy surrounding the life of Thomas Carlyle, man of letters and proponent of a Great Man theory.²¹ During the 1880s Carlyle's reputation was blighted by a series of revelations about his private life. His wife, Jane Welsh Carlyle, had documented her suffering at the hands of her violent-tempered and self-centred husband in her diaries. Reading these after her death, Carlyle was filled with remorse and belated admiration, and placed these and other papers in the hands of their friend, James Anthony Froude. During the 1880s Froude published edited *Letters and memorials of Jane Welsh Carlyle* and a "warts and all" biography of Carlyle himself, believing that Carlyle wished the truth to be told, but instead, a controversy around the 'private' subject matter and the role of the biographer began

¹⁹ Wilfred Scawen-Blunt, "1889, Political Disappointments 25," in *My Diaries: Being a Personal Narrative of Events 1888-1914* (New York: Knopf, 1921) section 1899 http://www.archive.org/stream/mydiariesbeingpe01inblun/mydiariesbeingpe01inblun_djvu.txt (accessed 19 Feb 2014). My emphasis.

²⁰ Longford Elizabeth, *A Pilgrimage of Passion: The life of Wilfrid Scawen Blunt* (New York, Knopf, 1980), 279.

²¹ The Great Man theory was a Nineteenth-Century hypothesis that history can be explained as the impact of great men of genius on the world. Thomas Carlyle's *On Heroes, Hero-worship and the Heroic in History* (1841) included a chapter on "The Hero as Man of Letters", which was a testimony to the personal qualities of Johnson, Rousseau and Burns. See Thomas Carlyle, *The Works of Thomas Carlyle in Thirty Volumes*, vol V, (London: Chapman and Hall Limited, 1897).

and continued for a decade.²² The scandal was re-ignited in 1903, with the posthumous publication of Froude's *My Relations with Carlyle*, in which more private information was disclosed in a way that touched upon Carlyle's marriage and his manhood :

Various hints were dropped in the circle which gathered at the house in Cheyne Row, about the nature of the relations between them, that their marriage was not a real marriage, and was only companionship, &c.²³

To back up the inference of impotence, Froude mentioned that "one had heard that she had often thought of leaving Carlyle, and as if she had a right to leave him if she pleased."²⁴ This suggests the marriage was not legally binding on her, such as an unconsummated one. That there was a debate about the marriage and private life of a prominent figure in the years following Morris's death is interesting. In a review of a book discussing the Carlyle story, Stefan Collini neatly summed up the controversy among the literary world, and its relevance to Morris's reputation:

The history of the Carlyles' marriage raised in acute form the question of whether a writer was an inherently unsuitable marriage partner, at once too demanding, too self-absorbed and too much at home. Froude certainly revealed Carlyle to have been "ill to live wi' But he did more: he alluded to, but ostentatiously refused to confirm or deny,

²² See Trev Lynn Broughton. *Men of Letters: Writing Lives, Masculinity and Literary Auto/Biography in the Late Victorian Period* (London: Routledge, 1999).

²³ James Anthony Froude. *My Relations with Carlyle* (London, 1903), 1-41
http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/biography/my_relations_with_carlyle.htm

²⁴ *Ibid.*

rumours that the Carlyles' was "not a real marriage, and was only companionship etc", an innuendo which careered off into a full-scale controversy on that most delicate of subjects, whether Carlyle had compounded his unsatisfactoriness as a husband by also being impotent.... In the course of the 1880s and 90s, the name of "Carlyle" had become emblematic of "the Man of Letters as bad Husband" ...²⁵

This discussion introduced a taste for "domestic voyeurism" and a sympathy for badly-treated wives.²⁶ That the Carlyle controversy influenced speculation about Morris's marriage seems likely, as Ionedes couched his opinion of Morris in terms of his preoccupation with work, with an implied criticism of him as a husband, stating that "he was not a bit susceptible to the charm of women; he was too full of his love for his ordinary work of decoration and design, and his literary work."²⁷

However, a few weeks after Morris's death in 1896, Edward Burne-Jones mysteriously mentioned in a letter to a woman friend, 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 furthestmost parts of Cyrene, and no man ever likes to hear that;

²⁵ Stefan Collini, "Having Emotions the Manly Way," *The Times Literary Supplement; Literature & Poetry*, (June 4, 1999), 6. The book being reviewed was Trev Lynn Broughton, *Men of Letters: Writing Lives*.

²⁶ Broughton, *Men of Letters: Writing Lives*, 115.

²⁷ Ionedes, "Memories", 28.

and I believe it all, for why should he tell untruths?²⁸

Burne-Jones wrote this passage just as his wife Georgiana had begun to gather letters and documents for Morris's biography, which was to be written by their son-in-law, Jack Mackail. She had undertaken to manage this task almost immediately after Morris's death, before anyone else had the chance.²⁹ It can be deduced from the fragments of letters which are recorded that Morris and Georgiana kept up a close correspondence, now largely lost.³⁰ Perhaps, with the documents of a lifetime gathered together, Burne-Jones was forced to re-evaluate Morris's relationship with his own wife, and other women friends.

Not surprisingly, the reminiscences of Blunt and Ionesco, combined with the perception of problems in Morris's marriage, have influenced more recent biographers in their view of Morris. During a resurgence of interest in the Pre-Raphaelites and Art Nouveau in the 1960s, Philip Henderson's 1967 biography *William Morris: His Life, Work and Friends* brought Morris's achievements in art and design and his larger-than-life personality to a new audience.³¹ In 1964 an embargo on the correspondence between Janey Morris and Rossetti had been lifted and rumours of an illicit relationship seemed to be confirmed. Henderson incorporated this material into his biography. The book was filled with humorous anecdotes and speculation on the relationship between Rossetti and Janey Morris in a time when

²⁸ MacCarthy, *William Morris*, 273.

²⁹ Mary Lago (ed.), *Burne-Jones talking: His Conversations 1895-1898 Preserved by his Studio Assistant Thomas Rooke*, (London: John Murray, 1982), 118.

³⁰ When May Morris asked Georgiana for her father's letters, she replied "I turn to my archives and find that the letters from your father that I have kept only begin in 1876". On Morris's death Georgiana requested the return of her own letters and a box was burned. See Ina Taylor, *Victorian Sisters* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1987) 122.

³¹ Philip Henderson, *William Morris: His Life, Work and Friends* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1967).

Freud's theories had reached the public domain and frank discussion of sexual matters was new and exciting. Henderson described Morris's marriage as a failure, a term that has endured despite a lifetime of affectionate cooperation between the pair, culminating in Janey's dedicated care of Morris during his final illness.³²

In researching his book, *The Letters of William Morris to his Family and Friends* (1950), Henderson had visited Morris's secretary, the long-lived Victorian Sir Sydney Cockerell, who warned him against the practice of those who were "pry[ing] into matters that [did] not concern them".³³ Hoping for some gossip about Janey and Rossetti, Henderson reported that he was disappointed when Cockerell cut him short: "That will not concern you of course" he said, adding somewhat unnecessarily "Morris was not a ladies' man ..."³⁴ Cockerell was evidently keen to quash any hint of scandal that might taint his beloved Morris, and although Morris was indeed not a ladies man, perhaps in pointedly downplaying his interest in "ladies" in connection with the Janey-Rossetti intrigue, Cockerell might have added weight to the view that Morris was uninterested in "that sort of thing".

In the biography *William Morris: His Life, Work and Friends*, Henderson quoted lengthy passages from some of Morris's most ardent and personal love poems – works in which hopelessness and sorrow are very evident – and he interpreted these as words directed to an unfeeling, withdrawn wife. Trying to reconcile these outpourings with the curiously calm way Morris apparently accepted his wife's relationship with his friend, Henderson, perhaps inadvertently, put a question mark

³² Ibid.

³³ Philip Henderson, "Visiting Sir Sydney," *The Journal of the William Morris Society* I no.2 (1962): 12.

³⁴ Ibid., 12-13.

over Morris's "manhood", or his courage, or both. He was obliged to posit Morris as a cuckolded husband, and account in some way for his evident failure to act appropriately, that is, to deal with Rossetti and regain control of his errant wife. While Morris valued stoicism highly, his evident misery, combined with his failure to act, seemed to undercut the historic image of him as a man of action and decisiveness. Morris's tolerance of the situation appears cowardly, and places Rossetti in a dominant and sexually potent position in relation to his friend, the very dynamic depicted in *Desperate Romantics*. Henderson tries to navigate this obstacle by making Morris an enigmatic figure, in some ways active, decisive and passionate, but also where women were concerned, querulous, and insecure. Nevertheless, Henderson knew that in Morris's writings, he dwelt on the love of women, especially women who were free of sexual inhibition. In a few passages Henderson gently speculates that Morris's continuous preoccupation with women and love in his work represents an attempt to make up for the lack of love in his life; a lack that Henderson suggested might be self-imposed.

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.³⁵

With two words, "basic inhibition", the notion of a psychosexual problem is created, and a reader might conclude that Jane Morris was driven to have affairs by an

³⁵ Philip Henderson, *William Morris: His Life, Work and Friends* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1967), 328.

indifferent husband. The difference between speculation and fact is frequently missed as stories are retold, and the idea of a hidden flaw can be an attractive biographical motif in the life of a great man.

However, one possibility did not occur to Henderson. Blinded by the assumption that Morris's love poems were addressed to his wife, he did not allow for the possibility that Morris knew of and even facilitated the relationship between his wife and his friend. Long before he became a socialist, Morris's writings showed he was an advocate of free love, in the sense that if two people were in love, then no legal or social restraint should hinder the expression of it.³⁶ Furthermore, by the late 1860s he was himself in love with another woman, the woman to whom his ardent poems were addressed. His love was for Georgiana Burne-Jones.³⁷ It was to her that his ardent poems were addressed. This aspect of Morris's life has received little attention in biographies as it does not sit well with the legend of his heartache over Janey's "rejection". The evidence of his love for Georgie has been incorporated into the idea that the two consoled each other for the sorrows caused by their respective spouses, and became close and almost loving. Occluded by the belief that Morris's unhappiness was due to his wife's infidelity, the accepted wisdom is that his love for Georgie was a compensation, merely a *tendress*, not a passion. Confusingly, Morris and Rossetti together sought out and jointly leased Kelmscott Manor as a place where Rossetti and Janey could be alone together. Not only have biographers struggled with his response, even Morris's contemporaries were nonplussed.

³⁶ William Morris, "Browning's Men and Women: a Review by William Morris" *The Bibliot* IV, no.3, March MDCCCXCVIII.

³⁷ See Susan Mooney, "William Morris: Biographical Gleanings 1865-1875" *The Journal of the William Morris Society*, Vol. VIII, No.3 (1989) 2-12 and "Self-Revelation in Morris's Unpublished Novel", *The Journal of the William Morris Society*, Vol. X No.2 (1993), 2-9.

Towards the end of his life when he publicly advocated free love, one of the younger generation of socialists who had heard the rumours about Jane and Rossetti, wrote to a mutual friend that "if I thought his 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."³⁸

However, Henderson's evaluation of Morris as a man weakened by an inability to face his tormentors has had a lasting influence. The most recent biography by Fiona MacCarthy was commissioned in 1996 by publishers Faber and Faber to coincide with the centenary of Morris's death. The biography is an exhaustive study and a great achievement, but occasionally MacCarthy's attempts to reconcile conflicting theories about Morris's manliness are somewhat confusing. She counters Lonedes's claim, saying that women "counted a great deal with Morris" and that he could be intimate with them.³⁹ But elsewhere she echoes Henderson's implication of a psychological flaw, saying Morris was hampered by a "fatal emotional ambivalence" where women and love were concerned.⁴⁰ Her unique contribution to the biographical heritage is the suggestion that Morris suffered from a form of epilepsy and possibly also Tourette's syndrome.⁴¹

The idea of Morris's epilepsy came from George Bernard Shaw in 1949.⁴² Morris's older daughter Jenny developed epilepsy as a teenager. According to Shaw, Morris

³⁸ Lindsay, *William Morris: a Biography*, 322.

³⁹ MacCarthy, *William Morris*, 273

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 49-50.

⁴² Brian Tyson (ed.), *Bernard Shaw's Book Reviews 1884-1950*, (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University, 1996), 533.

believed she had inherited it through him.⁴³ Jenny's seizures began after she fell into water from a boat, so it is possible that her epilepsy was caused by an episode of hypoxia or brain injury rather than heredity.⁴⁴ Shaw's recollections are frequently self-dramatising, and his "clinical observations" of Morris's temper are possibly unreliable.⁴⁵ His fascination with the new idea of heredity and dysgenic inheritance, which he linked with genius (his own) might have led to his interest in Morris's family having a hereditary disease.⁴⁶ He also developed several deluded and extreme medical theories.⁴⁷

Morris's passionate temper was legendary among his friends, but considered harmless, even entertaining, to the point where in youth they would sometimes deliberately provoke an outburst. These episodes have been recorded as having been sparked off by some frustration, or by an opinion that required dispute, but he was more or less always vociferous. His "tempestuous" company was said to have "something of the quality of an overwhelming natural force; like the north wind, it braced and buffeted in equal measure".⁴⁸

MacCarthy took up Shaw's suggestion that Morris's temper outbursts were related to his daughter's epilepsy. She quotes Richard Watson Dixon, one of Morris's earliest friends, who described Morris as "translated" when he discovered they had missed

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ For a brief summary of the causes of epilepsy, see "Epilepsy", University of San Francisco Medical Health Centre, <http://www.ucsfhealth.org/conditions/epilepsy/> (accessed 4 March 2014)

⁴⁵ Tyson, *Bernard Shaw's Book Reviews 1884-1950*, 533.

⁴⁶ Sally Peters, *Bernard Shaw: The Ascent of the Superman*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 188-96.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 68-9. A hypochondriac, Shaw nevertheless refused to accept the germ theory of disease, arguing that germs were the vehicle of disease but not the cause. He abhorred antiseptics, and he believed vaccination was a worthless stunt that merely killed babies.

⁴⁸ Lindsay, *William Morris: a Biography*, 169.

the last train one night. Lighting on the term "translated", MacCarthy suggests that Morris was in a trance or "semi-unconscious" state which, she argues, was epileptic in origin.⁴⁹ While these tantrums might well have had a pathological cause, it is hard to reconcile the idea of a trance-like or semi-conscious state with accounts of Morris's volubility on these occasions, and his bellowing and swearing.

The roar of anger is potentially quite a masculine image, but MacCarthy portrays it as evidence of debility:

It does seem certain that Morris's famous rages at their worst could develop into something more alarming: a kind of seizure in which he partially lost consciousness. The most graphic description comes, again, from Dixon in notes supplied for but played down in Mackail's biography.... There has been such a conspiracy of silence over Morris's true medical condition that it is difficult to piece the evidence together.⁵⁰

But is there evidence? The account by Dixon includes the sentence that Morris's state "vanished in a moment: he was calm as if it had never been".⁵¹ As he became calm afterwards, then this suggests the condition was not a semi-conscious, trancelike state. There are other graphic descriptions of such episodes that fail to indicate any form of trance – quite the opposite. A young socialist recounts an episode in which Morris was translated, but into something more resembling an angry deity:

⁴⁹ MacCarthy, *William Morris*, 78

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

His eyes flamed as with actual fire, his shaggy mane rose like a burning crest, his whiskers and moustache bristled out like pine-needles. "Art forsooth!", he cried, "where the hell is it? Where the hell are the people who know or care a damn about it..." In this vein he continued for I don't know how long, flashing his wrath in my face and moving around the room like a caged lion. Eventually there was a tap at the bedroom door...and a voice expostulated: "Really, the whole house is awakened..."⁵²

The storm over, Morris apologised:

"I *have* been going at it a bit loudly don't you think? I hope I have not upset you – I didn't mean to do that".⁵³

These outbursts did not inspire alarm in Morris's contemporaries. This is evident from a comment Georgiana Burne-Jones made later in life: "I really thank Morris for the rages and tearings of the hair by which he expressed himself in early days, for though I can't imitate him I can say 'that's how I FEEL'".⁵⁴

MacCarthy also compared Morris's energetic restlessness to the manifestations of Tourette's syndrome. There is nothing in the literature to suggest Morris had tics or jerks, yet in this discussion MacCarthy links the English writer, Samuel Johnson's

⁵² Henderson, *William Morris*, 322-3.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Lago, *Burne-Jones Talking*, 33.

tics with Morris's over-exuberance:

Morris's jerks and antics were certainly peculiar. His physical oddities bear some resemblance to those of Samuel Johnson whose tics, gesticulations, ejaculations, mimicries were so compulsive. Oliver Sacks, in discussing Tourette's syndrome, has claimed that Dr Johnson's creative spontaneity and lightening-quick wit had an "organic connection with his accelerated motor impulsive state". Could the same be true of Morris? Certainly Morris's bouts of playfulness, extravagance, the speed of his inventiveness, the rush of visual images, have many of the elements found in Tourette's syndrome in its innovatory and phantasmagoric form. Morris, like Johnson, could behave well and write soberly; but he too had the compulsion to break out, cavort, career like an out-of-control child and spew forth his inner fantasies. In his old age more than ever: in his last years Morris embarked on writing a new version of the long, meandering surreal stories that, ever since his schooldays, had been crowding through his mind.⁵⁵

MacCarthy aligns Morris's restlessness with *involuntary* movement, and his imaginative writing with uncontrolled visions. This paragraph is speculative, and yet it has influenced other Morris biography, suggesting a neurological illness that, by robbing Morris of agency, further erodes the idea of manliness.

MacCarthy's quest to resolve the complexities created by various commentaries

⁵⁵ MacCarthy, *William Morris*, 49-50.

seems to have resulted in the frequent use of adjectives that downplay Morris's masculine attractiveness. She chose the adjectives "stolid" and "awkward" to describe Morris at the first meeting with Georgiana Burne-Jones.⁵⁶ MacCarthy creates an impression hardly suggested by Georgiana herself, who merely reported that the handsome man before her "scarcely seemed to see me".⁵⁷ Ideas around masculinity are complicated today, and more than ever have been reduced to the concept of virility. No doubt reason dictates that if Morris's virility was questionable, then how could he be manly?

The most recent account of Morris's life appears as an episode in Franny Moyle's book *Desperate Romantics* (2009), the source of the material for the television dramatisation of the same name. Moyle used MacCarthy's biography among other sources as a reference for her material on Morris, who makes a cameo appearance in a work more concerned with Rossetti.⁵⁸ Here, any demeaning notions gleaned from her sources have been singled out and crammed into an introductory paragraph, and carelessly Moyle now attributes Samuel Johnson's tics to Morris:

He cut an intriguing and rather comical figure: short, a little dumpy and called "Topsy" in reference to a mound of unkempt curls that bobbed on his head, he marched around with a peculiar drunken gait. Already a defined eccentric, with little tics and twitches, sudden outbursts of rage and little care for hygiene or manners, he was a man who could not be

⁵⁶ MacCarthy, *William Morris*, 80-1.

⁵⁷ Georgiana Burne-Jones, *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*, 111.

⁵⁸ Moyle, Franny, *Desperate Romantics: The Private Lives of the Pre-Raphaelites* (London: John Murray, 2009), xiii.

ignored.⁵⁹

The frequent use of the word "little" in this paragraph describing Morris's presence literally diminishes him. The imagery brings to mind a Disney cartoon dwarf rather than the first impression of young Morris quoted earlier. Moyle is not concerned with the subtleties of biography. Later, she writes:

Rossetti's departure from Oxford would have left Jane Burden high and dry, were it not for another member of the group who was more than happy to adopt her as his model. This was William Morris. Morris was not apparently successful with women.⁶⁰

Even before marrying, Morris's "failure" has already been flagged. Where now is the brave, kind, honest, clever and hearty warrior of *The Clarion's* eulogy above?

Generations of writers, influenced by the myth-like aura surrounding Rossetti and Morris, have subtly altered the historic figure Mackail wrote about. If Morris was viewed by his contemporaries as an heroic, larger-than-life figure, the modern public will now have an idea of him as a "comical" figure who was indisputably unsuccessful with women. A telling example of this "Chinese whispers" effect is the subtle variation in the accounts of the youthful Morris's aversion to the Great Exhibition of 1851. In a lecture delivered after Morris's death, F. S. Ellis recounted Morris's own recollections:

⁵⁹ Moyle, Franny, *Desperate Romantics*. 211.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 224.

As a youth of 17, he declined to see anything more wonderful in [the Great Exhibition] than that it was "wonderfully ugly" and, sitting himself down on a seat, steadily refused to go over the building with the rest of his family.⁶¹

Taken from the same source, Henderson's account of the episode in 1967 is simply that Morris "sat down and refused to go inside".⁶² This is not exactly the same. In Ellis's version Morris could already have been inside, and made his judgement looking around him before taking a seat – there would be many inside – and "refusing to go over the building". In 1995 MacCarthy progresses Henderson's interpretation, colouring the incident with an addition of her own, stating that "even as a boy of seventeen he had refused to enter the Crystal Palace to see the Great Exhibition with his family, remaining sulking outside on a seat."⁶³ In 2010, Bill Bryson, draws on MacCarthy's biography in *At Home: A History of Private Life*, declared confidently that:

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.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Nicholas Salmon with Derek Baker (eds.), *The William Morris Chronology* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1996), 6.

⁶² Henderson, *William Morris*, 9.

⁶³ MacCarthy, *William Morris*, 121.

⁶⁴ Bill Bryson, *At Home, A Short History of Private Life* (London, Doubleday, 2010), 28.

Steady refusal has become sulking and finally actual illness; the direction is from strength to weakness, from "masculine" steadfastness to "effeminate" sulking. To counter Bryson's allegation of aestheticism, we have the evidence of Morris's own words, highlighted in Peter Faulkner's article, *The Odd Man Out: Morris amongst the Aesthetes*:

Morris remained consistent in his critique of aestheticism. Thus in 1888, in "The Revival of Handicraft", he wrote: "It is to my mind that very consciousness of the production of beauty for beauty's sake which we want to avoid: it is just what is apt to produce affectation and effeminacy amongst the artists and their following."⁶⁵

Bryson is a popular author with a wide readership, and thanks to him the public perception of Morris has no doubt moved even further towards that of a wilting aesthete.

Manliness, incorporating notions of courage, chivalry and honour, was a characteristic valued in Morris's day and by him personally.⁶⁶ In our time, if the concept exists at all, it is associated primarily with virility, and fraught with negative associations. In little over a century Morris's "manly" persona seems to have been affected by relatively small speculations about his mental courage and physical health, charged with undue significance by the idea of a "sex scandal". In the wake of these speculations, a new, diminished image of Morris is emerging. It is to be

⁶⁵ Peter Faulkner, "The Odd Man Out: Morris Amongst the Aesthetes," *Journal of Decorative Arts* 34, The Aesthetic Movement (2010), 85.

⁶⁶ See Marsh, "William Morris and Victorian Manliness," 185-99.

hoped that future biographical representations of Morris can restore him to the full-blooded vigour his life and work bespeak.

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