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MORRIS, GENDER, AND THE WOMAN QUESTION

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From his first volumes of poetry through his final prose romances, Morris's writings often featured portrayals of complex and striking women. An understanding of the possible influences on these representations is thus central to a full interpretation of his work. In addition, recent biographers and other critics have devoted much attention to the women in Morris's life. As background for this chapter, I will review what is known about his relations with female family members and friends and consider how these may have shaped his later views on sexuality and marriage. In the chapter's next section, I will compare Morris's stated views on female equality with the goals of late Victorian feminists in general, as well as with emerging nineteenth-century socialist feminist thought. Finally, I will identify underlying patterns in several of his more dramatic literary representations of women and consider the extent to which these shifted as Morris began to formulate explicitly egalitarian socialist views.

I will argue that although from the first Morris showed recognition of the ways in which women were forced into confined and unequal social positions, under the influence of life experiences and contemporary socialist debates on marriage, his later writings manifest an increased appreciation of women as autonomous sexual beings and political agents. Nonetheless, Morris retained an imaginative preference for conventional gender divisions: within his literary works; men are more often warriors and travelers, and his women, with some exceptions, are aligned with forces of nature and love. It has often been noted that bipolarities are central to his thought—struggle and achievement, energetic action and rest, oppression and utopia—and his men and women are similarly dichotomized, with males assigned roles of aggression and females the arts of peace. As he moved toward the more socialist-influenced imaginations of his later work, however, these dualities, though not erased, are softened to endow his female characters with greater inventiveness, active force, and prophetic wisdom. Although Morris cannot be claimed as a modern feminist, I suggest that he was instead a proto-feminist whose attitudes closely ally with the tenets of nineteenth-century socialist feminism.

The Women in Morris's Life

Morris's relationships with female family members and friends were generally affectionate, though on occasion these required negotiation and adaptation. Though it would be overly literal to seek direct correlations, arguably he learned from these experiences, and his writings

portray female characters who exhibit an array of alternately benign and destructive qualities. Whatever their actions, however, these women are often represented as limited in their choices and threatened by potential sexual victimization in a violent and male-directed world.

Morris's Mother and Sisters

Morris's father died when he was thirteen, and as a result his mother may have assumed a more significant role in his life during his adolescence and early manhood than might otherwise have been the case. Physically vigorous, Emma Morris (1805–1894) was to maintain cordial relationships with her family of nine surviving children (out of ten) and their descendants throughout her long life. Fiona MacCarthy maintains that “William Morris’s relations with his mother were peculiarly tortuous,” (MacCarthy, 10), but evidence for this is uneven. During Morris’s childhood she would have been busy with the care of his younger siblings (he was the third child and eldest of five living sons). Nonetheless she provided for him in important ways: she paid for William to attend a day boarding school beginning at age 11 (*Ibid.*, 20), contributed the annual stipend for his education at Marlborough College, and, when the latter proved unsatisfactory, arranged for him to board privately with a tutor to enable him to pass his Oxford entrance exams. She underwrote his three years of university instruction—the only Morris son to be so prestigiously educated—and insisted that he complete his final year of university and take his degree. Despite what were likely some misgivings, she also invested 200 pounds¹ in the initial business enterprise of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co.

In a short biographical sketch addressed to fellow socialist Andreas Scheu in 1883, Morris later wrote that he had strongly disliked the “rich establishment Puritanism” of his childhood



Figure 3.1 Emma Morris, Morris's mother. Courtesy of the William Morris Gallery.

(Kelvin 2:227), as enforced by his devout mother. Still, one might argue that the moralistic tone of his mother's religion influenced her son at some level, acting to moderate what might otherwise have been the more self-indulgent lifestyle of a son of the wealthy upper-middle classes. She had wished him to become a clergyman, and when he resisted, had clearly expressed her distress, as shown in an 11 November 1855 letter to her in which he announces his intention to become an architect. His letter is a model of tact, and its language of appeal ("sin," "God being my helper") is not one he was to use later or in other contexts:

You said then, you remember, that it was an evil thing to be an idle, objectless man; I am fully determined not to incur this reproach. ... [B]esides your money has by no means been thrown away, [since he has met loving friends at Oxford]; if moreover by living here and seeing evil and sin in its foulest and coarsest forms, as one does day by day, I have learned to hate any form of sin, and to wish to fight against it, is not this well too? ... it will be rather grievous to my love of idleness and leisure to have to go through all the drudgery of learning a new trade ... I in my turn will try to shame [those who criticize me], God being my helper, by steadiness and hard work.

(*Ibid.*, 24–25)

These claims seem more than special pleading, for it is hard to imagine a less "idle, objectless man" than Morris was to become; and notably two of Mrs. Morris's other children, Emma Morris Oldham and Isabella Morris Gilmore, were also distinguished by active social or philanthropic endeavors.

Observers noted that Mrs. Morris was attached to her eldest son; Georgiana Burne-Jones recorded that when Edward first visited the family home, his mother "would willingly have told many stories of his childhood," (*Memorials* 2:87). May Morris remembered her grandmother's "fond pride in the son who had once disappointed her by giving up the church as a career ... 'why, my dear, he might have been a Bishop now!' she exclaimed to me once with plaintive affection" (*CW* 4:xvii). Less complicated were May's memories of visits to Mrs. Morris's house in then-rural Leyton "with the grandmother who spoilt us so outrageously and adorably" (*Ibid.*).

Morris's mother distributed a large portion of her wealth to each of her children equally on their maturity, a bequest which allowed her son financial and thus artistic and professional independence. Among other freedoms, it enabled him politely and firmly to ignore her advice, as well as to subsidize *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* in which he published his first poems and romances, and to obtain some training as a painter and architect before settling into his life's work as a designer and entrepreneur. On the other hand, Mrs. Morris's views on finance aligned with those of her class; it may be on her account that Morris served briefly as a director of the Devonshire Great Consols mine, the source of his family's sudden accession of wealth. He reportedly said in later life that his relatives had thought he was "both wicked and mad" to sell the shares he had inherited (the value of which soon plummeted), and his mother would likely have been foremost among these critics (MacCarthy, 171).

Emma Morris senior was thus clearly more conventional than her son; her absence at his wedding to a woman of lower social station seems marked, although she socialized pleasantly with Jane and his family in after years. His many preserved letters to her are cordially affectionate, but also relatively brief and devoid of controversial subjects. Nonetheless Frank Sharp has observed that in 1888, he sent her two copies of his volume of socialist essays, *Signs of Change*, something he presumably would not have done had he believed its contents would distress her.² Jane Morris described her mother-in-law five years before her death: "she walks and takes drives in an open carriage ... and reads and talks incessantly; she is quite happy and I really think

she expects to live another twenty years at least” (13 February 1889, Salmon and Baker, 213). Somewhat cryptic are Morris’s remarks at her death in December 1894:

Tuesday I went to bury my mother, a pleasant winter day with gleams of sun. She was laid in earth in the churchyard close by the house, a very pretty place among the great wych-elms, which, if it were of no use to her, was softening to us. Altogether my old and callous heart was touched by the absence of what had been so kind to me and fond of me. (Kelvin 4: 290–91)

Why his heart was “callous” cannot be known, but despite their differences in outlook, descriptions of the elder Mrs. Morris suggest that at least some of Morris’s traits—energy, intelligence, firm-mindedness, and ambition—were those he had shared with his mother.

In boyhood, Morris was closest to his eldest sister Emma (1830–1915), described by May Morris as “a gentle nature and specially fond of him” (*AMS* 2, 613). Two of his earliest poems, “Fame” and “The Three Flowers,” may describe his sadness when her marriage to the Rev. Joseph Oldham removed her from the vicinity. Emma preserved copies of Morris’s earliest verses, transcribing several in her own hand;³ in later life, when on a socialist speaking tour, he visited Emma and her husband in Clay Cross, Derbyshire, and in his will he left her an annuity of 100 pounds (Lawrence, 55).

Morris’s elder sister Henrietta, described by May as “more given to ruling” (*AMS* 2, 613), reportedly objected to William’s refusal to attend the Duke of Wellington’s funeral in 1852 and expressed unhappiness when he decided not to enter the clergy; in mid-life, Henrietta converted to Roman Catholicism (Lawrence, 55). She had accompanied him on his first trip



Figure 3.2 Emma Morris Oldham. Courtesy of the William Morris Gallery.

to France in 1854, and their later relations seem to have been cordial; in 1893, he thanked her by letter for a “nice neckerchief,” and on their mother’s death, he helped her locate a suitable home. She must have felt him to be a source of support, for on his death she wrote Sydney Cockerell, “[T]he world is different to me now in every way and I feel utterly lost and alone” (*Ibid.*, 56). Deprived of the opportunity for further education, Henrietta spent her life as her mother’s companion, perhaps serving for Morris as an example of a strong-minded woman sadly confined to her home by Victorian conventions for unpartnered women.

And finally, Morris’s younger sister Isabella Gilmore (1842–1923) helped raise their brother Thomas’s eight children after his death and that of her husband. In 1887 she was ordained as an Anglican deaconess, founding an order of women dedicated to helping the poor of Battersea; Morris contributed designs for two rooms of the order’s home and chapel (*Ibid.*, 67, 69). Unlike Morris in his adulthood, Emma senior, Emma, Henrietta, and Isabella were all devout, but as mentioned, it seems noticeable that both his sisters Emma and Isabella similarly devoted much of their lives to efforts to aiding the less fortunate.

Jane, May, and Jenny Morris

Beginning with Jan Marsh’s pioneering *Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood* (1985), much has been written on the character of Morris’s wife Jane Burden Morris (1839–1914) and Morris’s relationship with her. Her *Collected Letters*, meticulously gathered and annotated by Marsh and Frank Sharp (2012), reveal a serious, intelligent, and friendly woman, though in later life somewhat confined by her role as partial caretaker to her epileptic daughter. Jane was the daughter of



Figure 3.3 Jane Morris, 1879. Courtesy of the William Morris Gallery.

Robert Burden, an Oxford stableman, and Ann Maizy, whom Marsh and Sharp surmise was a former domestic servant, and they note the skill with which she adapted to her new marital circumstances:

Far more remarkable than any iconic image or romantic legend ... is her rise from poverty in the slums of Oxford to life in both Bohemian artistic circles and in respectable, even aristocratic, Victorian society. This transformation was made possible by Jane's keen intelligence, warm human sympathy and common sense as she adapted to her changing fortunes. (*LJM*, 1)

Jane was courted by the young William while he was living in Oxford in 1857–58. He admired her appearance and may also have been attracted by her mixture of sweetness and reserve; an early *Defence* poem, "In Praise of My Lady," describes the speaker's beloved thus:

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. (ll. 25–31)

The heroes of Morris's early poems and romances exhibit a protective and unselfish love for their intended partners and often hope to rescue them from some form of confinement or poverty; for example, "Gertha's Lovers," one of Morris's tales in the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, portrays a peasant maid Gertha who is courted by the noble King Olaf, and who after Olaf's death in battle becomes the champion and spiritual leader of her people.

Marsh and Sharp suggest that Jane was likely privately educated for her new role before the Morrises' April 1859 wedding. The marriage began well, with the couple enjoying life among friends at Red House; Georgiana Burne-Jones recalled Jane's playfulness and her happy companionship with Lizzie Siddal and Georgiana. Jane soon learned to manage competently the Morris household, which eventually employed as many as five servants, as well to execute embroideries for Morris and Co. and oversee the Firm's embroidery section. Two children were born to the couple, Jane Alice (Jenny) in 1861 and Mary (May) in 1862. Unfortunately, for the next several years, perhaps as a result of childbirth, Jane suffered from a spinal or back condition, and in later life was subject to bronchitis and rheumatism; attempts to improve her health brought the Morrises to Bad Ems, Germany in 1869, and in later years Jane made four visits to Italy in the company of her aristocratic reformist friend, Rosalind Howard.

As is widely known, Jane was the object of the attentions of the painter and poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–82), who had been a mentor to the younger Pre-Raphaelites and contributing member of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co. She served as the model for several of Rossetti's paintings, and the two conducted an affair from sometime in 1868–69 through 1873–74. Since both partners apparently had serious health problems, it is unclear how physically intimate the relationship may have been, but it certainly excluded Morris, who expressed his sadness and grief in a series of poems written between 1869 and 1873 (Boos 2015). An unpublished poem of 1869, "Alone, Unhappy By the Fire I Sat," describes the speaker's anxieties after the undesired visit of a "friend":

Then when they both are gone I sit alone
And turning foolish triumphs pages oer
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 ... (ll. 50–54)⁴

Notably, the poet fears less the loss of love (now an accomplished fact) than permanent isolation and bitterness; instead, he struggles to expel the “seed of hatred” within himself, as he later wrote Aglaia Coronio on 25 November 1872, after his wife’s return from a visit to Italy with the Howards:

I am so glad to have Janey back again: her company is always pleasant and she is very kind & good to me ... another quite selfish business is that Rossetti has set himself down at Kelmscott as if he never meant to go away. ... There, dear Aglaia see how I am showing you my pettinesses! Please don’t encourage me in them. ... O how I long to keep the world from narrowing on me, and to look at things bigly and kindly. (Kelvin 1:172–73)

In coded language, these ungathered poems also convey his determination to remain with his wife; in “Hapless Love,” for example, when a deserted lover is chided by his male friend for foolishness in not seeking another partner, he responds sharply: “Art thou a God? Nay, if thou were, / Wouldst thou belike know of my hurt, / And what might sting and what might heal? / ... To my heart / My love and sorrow must I press” (ll. 136–38, 141–42).

Morris and Rossetti became co-tenants of Kelmscott Manor in 1871; biographers have speculated that this permitted Jane and Rossetti freedom to cohabit away from the prying eyes of London society, though in this volume, Julia Griffin argues that the tenancy may instead have preceded and fostered the affair. Rossetti experienced a breakdown in 1872, and apparently Jane broke off the relationship, perhaps motivated both by his erratic behavior and concern for the effect her actions might have on her growing daughters. Nothing in Jane’s letters or the recollections of others suggests that she felt ambivalence about her relationship with Rossetti on Morris’s behalf; even so, one cannot but wonder if the increasingly troubled and inwardly divided women of Morris’s literary works from the period may reflect recognition that she too suffered the tensions of competing claims.

Friends and later visitors to Kelmscott Manor remembered Jane as a kindly and good-humored hostess (rather like Annie in the Guest House in *News from Nowhere*), and several noted William and Jane’s mutual affection and respect (*LJM*, 12). Jane also maintained a wide variety of interests in addition to her work for Morris and Co.: she supervised her daughters’ early education; organized collections for progressive causes; read literary works in English, French, and Italian; and enjoyed gardening, occasional sketching, and playing the piano and mandolin. In later life, Jane was to spend much of her time at Kelmscott Manor with Jenny, whose epileptic or epileptic-like symptoms had begun as early as 1876. These caused her mother great pain, as Jane wrote in 1888:

It has been a dreadful grief for us all, worse for me than for anyone, as I have been so constantly with her, I never get used to it. I mean in the sense of not minding, every time the thing [epileptic fit] occurs, it is as if a dagger were thrust into me.

(*LJM*, 169)

From at least 1887 until 1892 (MacCarthy, 651) Jane apparently conducted a second affair with Wilfred Scawen Blunt (1840–1922), and her letters to him are preserved in Peter Faulkner’s

1981 *Wilfred Scawen Blunt and the Morrises* and Marsh/Sharp. As a Tory anti-imperialist, unsuccessful parliamentary candidate, and supporter of Irish independence, Blunt would have seemed a romantic figure; he was also a womanizer, and in later years an alcoholic who spent his final years in lawsuits against his wife, daughter, and granddaughters, and whose condescending remarks on Jane in his *Diaries* (Blunt 1919) make unpleasant reading.

Though Jane's politics were progressive, they were not socialist, and she was apparently lukewarm to some of Morris's working-class socialist friends; after his death, she became a Fabian. Her views on the "woman question" were also slightly more conservative than her husband's; although several of her friends were suffragists, in 1907 she wrote Cornell Price:

I can't make up my mind about our vote ... I object to these noisy women having an increased power because they only want to reverse things and spitefully trample on the men. I want both sexes to have equal rights when the women are better educated companions and housekeepers.

(LJM, 401)

When Morris died Jane Morris was only 57, and she lived for 20 more years at Kelmscott Manor, apparently remembering her husband fondly, preserving his manuscripts and artworks, arranging for various charities, and purchasing the lease of Kelmscott Manor. It is unclear how close she and May were in earlier life; she disapproved of May's marriage, and her letters at times criticize her daughter. In later years they were clearly at peace, however, and after 1909, May relied on her mother's help in contributing recollections for her edition of Morris's *Collected Works*. In fact, Jane's sole recorded expression of irritation to Blunt appears in a 13 January 1913 letter in which she chides him for providing his recollections of Morris to another writer: "When May is writing an important book on her Father, and is glad of all fresh matter—it vexes me to find that old friends have contributed anything to an unknown author" (*Ibid.*, 459).

In all, the complexities of the Morrises' ultimately stable and affectionate marriage recall Morris's praise for the inhabitants of Nowhere, who have overcome "the unhappiness that comes of men and women confusing the relations between natural passion, and sentiment, and the friendship which, when things go well, softens the awakening of passing allusions" (chapter 9).

May Morris

May Morris (1862–1938), William and Jane Morris's younger daughter and a professional art embroiderer, has been the subject of several recent edited collections and exhibitions of her artwork. First educated by her mother and governesses, then for a time at Notting Hill High School, May also learned art embroidery from her mother and from her aunt Bessie Burden. She studied embroidery at the National Art Training School, precursor of the Royal College of Art, and in 1885 at the age of 23 she assumed direction of the embroidery section of Morris and Co.

May was also an active member of the Socialist League and, later, the Hammersmith Socialist Society, and in 1894 she ran unsuccessfully as a candidate for the Hammersmith Vestry under the joint sponsorship of the Independent Labour Party and the Hammersmith Socialist Society.⁵ In 1890 she married a fellow socialist, Henry Halliday Sparling; Morris had not been enthusiastic about the engagement since Sparling had no steady employment, but after his daughter's marriage, he employed his son-in-law at the Kelmscott Press. In a letter recommending Sparling for a post as librarian, Morris described him as "a man of high principle and very industrious and painstaking, and ... remarkably good-tempered" (Kelvin 2: 666).⁶ Although her letters to Andreas Scheu from this period reveal May's excitement and pride in the engagement, the marriage itself was brief.



Figure 3.4 May Morris, 1886. Courtesy of the William Morris Gallery.

May left her husband in late 1894 after a period in which they had shared a house with George Bernard Shaw, although the formal divorce did not occur until 1898.

May Morris continued her embroidery career, teaching at the London Central School of Art from 1897 to 1905 and briefly at other locations; in 1893 she published a handbook, *Decorative Needlework*; between 1888 and 1905 she contributed a series of articles on embroidery to English periodicals; and in 1907 she was a co-founder of the Women's Guild of Arts. In addition to executing embroideries and designing jewelry, May completed a body of watercolors, and in 1903 she wrote and acted in a one-act melodrama, *White Lies*. In 1909 May toured the United States, attending suffrage rallies, living briefly at Hull House, and lecturing in favor of trade unionism and equal remuneration for women artists. During World War I she helped organize activities in support of England's war effort, and after her retirement, she lived at Kelmscott Manor, engaging in activities for the benefit of her community and enjoying visits to Iceland with her companion Mary Lobb.

Her sister's collapse in health left May Morris as the custodian of her father's legacy, and with only limited help from Sydney Cockerell and her mother, she completed the massive task of editing the 24-volume *Collected Works of William Morris*, issued 1910–15. For the introductions to these volumes, May organized a wealth of material invaluable to later biographers, editors, and critics, including letters, anecdotes of Morris's family life, and information about his writing practices. Nonetheless, under pressure from her publishers, who believed that additional volumes would make the *Collected Works* difficult to sell during wartime, May had been forced to omit many of Morris's ungathered writings. She preserved this material, however, and in 1936 at the age of 74 brought out her masterwork, *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*, a two-volume,

1328-page compendium of Morris's unpublished writings on art and politics with extensive prefaces and commentaries. May's reflections offer full and insightful glosses on details of Morris's life, literary development, and political activities, many of which remain the most accurate accounts of their topics. Indeed it is doubtful whether Morris's reputation would stand as high as it now does were it not for his daughter's editorial labors and perceptive commentaries.

Nonetheless, a few of her editorial decisions may be regretted. She was not a trained editor, and she had been left with a massive number of manuscripts, books, and artifacts to sort out and distribute. The discussions in her introductions and in *Artist Writer Socialist* are on occasion factually inconsistent, although the awkwardness of returning to the same topics in different volumes has been partly overcome by Joseph Dunlap's index to her introductions (Dunlap, ed., 1973). May's memories of her childhood and father largely exclude her mother, thus contributing to Jane Morris's near-erasure from the biographical record. In addition, May also gave away and sold many of Morris's literary and calligraphic manuscripts. These were eventually dispersed to repositories in the Netherlands and several parts of England and the United States, and the relative inaccessibility of these materials has hindered full appreciation of the coherence and scope of Morris's creative processes.

As she edited his works, May discovered Morris's many ungathered personal poems from the period 1869–73, which, as mentioned, express dismay at his wife's preference for another and his protracted efforts to find solace in a more enduring and universal form of love. She published only a few of these poems, obscuring their number and chronological order, thus suppressing a major part of her father's emotional history and some of his more interesting works. Her introductions and biographical anecdotes also ignore her family's chief affliction, Jenny Morris's mental degeneration. Understandably, May Morris might have wished to shield her family from potential embarrassment on both counts—from revelations of her mother's affair with Rossetti and her sister's epilepsy—but these choices also prevented recognition of aspects of Morris's life which reflect favorably on his character: his willingness to grant his wife sexual and emotional autonomy without withholding his own affection, and his steadfast concern and love for his increasingly isolated and dependent daughter. Moreover, failure to acknowledge the importance of William and Jane's shared love for and protectiveness toward their disabled daughter has deflected attention from one of the more creditable and enduring aspects of their relationship in favor of a preoccupation with its sexual strains.

Despite these lapses, Morris was very fortunate in his younger daughter, who through her artistry, political activism, preservation of Kelmescott Manor, and loyalty to his socialist as well as literary writings helped extend his memory and legacy, as well as her own, into another century.

Jenny Morris

Jane Alice ("Jenny") Morris (1861–1935), William and Jane Morris's elder daughter, was a bright, serious child, considered more intellectual than May, and keenly interested in her father's political and artistic activities. Her parents had hoped to send her to Girton College, Cambridge, which their friend Barbara Bodichon had helped to found. Unfortunately, in 1878 Jenny began to suffer from a mysterious syndrome which resulted in violent seizures, and eventually—perhaps also as a result of heavy medication—in progressive physical and mental deterioration. Morris believed her condition had been inherited from his family and blamed himself. Although her illness is sometimes diagnosed as epilepsy, surviving documents are reticent about the details of her condition, and so it is difficult to be certain of its nature.

Amidst Morris's many activities and travels of the 1880s and 1890s, he faithfully wrote long, affectionate, and politically detailed letters to Jenny; these missives to "Dearest own child" were among the fullest and most uninhibited he ever wrote. During the 1890s and after Morris's death,

Jenny increasingly lived at Kelmscott Manor under the care of Jane Morris and a nurse, and eventually she was placed in private care. As his health failed, Morris was concerned to leave enough money to support his family after his death, and he gathered a collection of incunabula and rare manuscripts which, when sold, provided among other things for Jenny's lifelong care. A few of Jenny's letters, preserved in the British Library and Victoria and Albert Museum, reveal her efforts to continue serious reading in literary and historical topics for as long as her faculties permitted.

Friends and Associates

Georgiana Burne-Jones

Georgiana Macdonald Burne-Jones (1840–1920) played a significant role in Morris's life as his closest female friend and kindred spirit. The daughter of a Methodist minister and his wife, Georgiana lived with her family first in Birmingham and later in London, where she studied art at the Government School of Design; her surviving work includes woodcuts and drawings. She became engaged to Edward in 1856 at the age of 15, and after their marriage in 1860, she joined in the early artwork of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co., and the couple's two surviving children, Philip and Margaret, were born in 1861 and 1866. Edward was Morris's closest friend, and they collaborated on artistic projects, often working out details at the Burne-Joneses' Fulham home, The Grange. The Morrises and Burne-Joneses socialized frequently during the 1860s, and Morris continued to visit the Burne-Jones home weekly throughout his life.

During the late 1860s, however, these relationships became fraught as Edward pursued an affair with Marie Zambaco, a sculptor and relative of the Greek Ionides family, while as mentioned, Jane Morris became attached to Rossetti. This left Georgiana and William, who drew close as they confronted similar problems. Morris gave her his calligraphic manuscripts and copies of his poems from this period, and in 1870 he presented her with the birthday gift of a hand-decorated illuminated volume of a selection of his recent poems, "A Book of Verse." The unpublished poems of the period, which, as mentioned, allude to Morris's unhappiness at his wife's desertion, apparently also convey his gratitude for Georgiana's steadiness—"For you alone unchanged now seem to be / A real thing left of the days sweet to me."⁷⁷ Similarly the poem "Hope is Dead, Love Liveth" praises a loved one who, though "wed to grief and wrong," continues on as a "silent wayfarer," retaining love despite the death of hope."⁷⁸

Georgiana claimed not to have retained Morris's letters from this period (MacCarthy, 249), but his candid and introspective letters to her from 1876 onward include many details on his artistic work for Morris and Co. and socialist activism. From the years 1881 to 1888 alone, for example, 43 letters have been preserved, many quite lengthy. Often he appears to be thinking out loud, and at times fending off suggestions that he should moderate his views; for example, on 9 August 1882, he explains why, in a period when the "surroundings of life are so stern and unplayful," the only valuable art is that "rooted deepest in reality" (Kelvin 2, 119); on 30 August 1882, he declares that he seeks a life of "simplicity, and free from blinding entanglements" (*Ibid.*, 122); and on 31 October 1885, he explains why he "can't help" his commitment to a new birth of society (*Ibid.*, 480). He also conveys his moods: when in Italy to join his wife and children, he writes Georgiana on 15 May 1878 that "I am more alive again, and really much exited at all I have seen and am seeing, though sometimes it all tumbles into a dream" (Kelvin 1, 486). Although Edward strongly disapproved of his friend's political interests and associates, Georgiana was more supportive; when Edward refused any association with Morris's socialist endeavors, she ordered a *Commonweal* subscription addressed solely to her. On his deathbed one of Morris's last requests was that Georgiana visit him again: "Come soon, for I want a sight of your dear face" (MacCarthy, 670).



Figure 3.5 Georgiana Burne-Jones, Photograph: Frederick Hollyer, 1882. Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery.

In her own way, Georgiana followed Morris into political activism; a staunch anti-imperialist, she opposed the Boer War, and after the Burne-Joneses purchased a home in Rottingdean on the southern coast of England, she became a parish councilor who campaigned for better housing, sanitation, and health care for the town's inhabitants (Williams, 2013, 2014).

After her husband's death, Georgiana devoted herself to memorializing the ideals of her husband and his associates, especially Morris. Her beautifully written two-volume *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones* (1904) pays tribute to William's memory as Edward's closest comrade from their initial meeting at Oxford onwards: "seeking his way in unlooked for loneliness of spirit, ... there, shoulder to shoulder, stood [Edward's] life's companion" (*Memorials*, 1: 72). Although on occasion Georgiana conflates Morris's responses with those of Edward, the *Memorials* convey the originality and idealism of the Oxford Brotherhood, the intensity of the two men's shared enthusiasms, the initial camaraderie of the Red House circle, and the collaborative excitement of the Firm's early days. Georgiana was also a primary source of materials and perspectives for the official biography of Morris, J. W. Mackail's *The Life of William Morris*, published three years after Morris's death.

Aglaia Coronio

Aglaia Coronio (1834–1906) was a member of the Holland Park Ionides circle, bookbinder, embroideress, and patron of the arts. Married to Theodore Coronio and the mother of a daughter, Calliope, and a son, John, she served as official hostess to her father Alexander Ionides, the



Figure 3.6 Aglaia Coronio, carte de visite. Courtesy of the Hastings Museum and Art Gallery.

Greek consul-general in London until 1866, and as of 1869 lived next to her parents at 1A Holland Park. According to Linda Parry (*ODNB*, Coronio), Morris supplied her with embroidery threads, and she secured for him samples of the rare red dye kermes and packets of unspun Levantine wool. The only known sample of her work which has been preserved is a pair of embroidered curtains designed by William Morris in the 1870s.

As Aglaia and William became friends, he read Chaucer to her (*Kelvin* 1:116), on occasion dined at One Holland Park (*Ibid.*, 120), and confided in her during Jane Morris's absences in Italy. Twenty-five letters to her from the 1870s are preserved; these record his family life and moods, including the previously quoted letter in which he expresses his desire, despite frustrations, to "keep the world from narrowing on me, and to look at things bigly and kindly!" (25 November 1872, *Ibid.*, 173) Morris describes to Aglaia his family's move from Queen Square to Horrington House in detail, noting that "as I looked out of my window on Sunday, I pictured you coming into the little garden till I could almost see you standing there" (*Ibid.*, 178). He also expresses concern for her various troubles; in February 1878, for example, on hearing that her family's business might have suffered reverses, he writes that "I am really very much grieved that you should be in trouble, though my ignorance of City business keeps me from knowing how serious the matter may be" (*Ibid.*, 445). Although biographers have speculated that theirs was a romantic attachment, the fact that Morris's letters dwell frequently on his wife and family suggest a desire to remind Aglaia of his primary attachments. Later letters also apologize for his failure to write, pleading a lack of subject matter, a concern absent from his letters to Jenny, Georgiana, or his wife.

In later life Aglaia was given to depression; her husband died in 1903, and after the death of her daughter in 1906, she committed suicide at the age of 72.

Women Socialists and Anarchists

During his period of socialist activism, Morris met and shared speaking platforms with a variety of women reformers, including socialists Annie Besant and Eleanor Marx and anarchists Lucy Parsons, Louise Michel, and Charlotte Wilson. He would also have met former women Communards and other female émigrés, such as Socialist League member Jeanne Derain, a veteran of the French June Revolution of 1848, and as mentioned, May Morris was an active member of the Socialist League who later ran for a position on the Hammersmith Vestry in 1894. Despite his occasional private reservations about their differing views—for example, in February 1887, he noted of a speech by Annie Besant, “she was fairly good, though too Bradlaughian in manner; she has advanced somewhat in her socialism”⁹—it seems likely that these experiences influenced his later literary portrayals of women, such as the female Communard in *The Pilgrims of Hope*, the prophetess Hall-Sun in *The House of the Wolfings*, and the adventuress Birdalone in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*.

As we have seen, Morris’s relationships with family members, friends, and political associates provided him with examples of strong-minded, talented, and at times rebellious women. Of those closest to him, Georgiana Burne-Jones, May Morris, and his wife had experienced varying degrees of marital unhappiness; Aglaia Coronio reportedly suffered from depression; at least two of his sisters had been constrained by or rebelled against Victorian codes for upper middle-class women (Henrietta, Isabella); and the Morris’s wider social circle included energetic women philanthropists and political activists such as Rosalind Howard, Jane Cobden, and Barbara Bodichon, as well as women anarchists and socialists. Morris’s literary representations of women often intensify these qualities of restlessness or discontent, as his generally sympathetic portrayals of female characters dramatize forms of passionate intensity and determined resistance that arguably also express aspects of his own sensibility.

Morris and Socialist Feminism

As mentioned, Morris’s views on women’s roles should be placed within several contexts: present-day definitions of feminism, nineteenth-century socialist feminist thought, and Morris’s empathetic, if sometimes male-centric, literary portrayals of female characters. To the question of whether Morris was a feminist in the modern sense, the answer must be, only partially, since he was admittedly unconcerned with some of the topics of interest to twenty-first century feminists, including notions of gender and sexual fluidity and the limitations of binary sexual divisions.¹⁰ On a pragmatic level, as a member, first, of the radical wing of the Liberal Party and later as a socialist, Morris supported many of the reform efforts of his day on behalf of women, including the campaigns for women’s higher education, unionization, and rational dress. An 1881 speech in support of an early women’s trade union, the Women’s Protective and Provident League, for example, expresses firm support of equal remuneration: “Now until the market value of the wages of women is advanced to the same rate as that of the wages of men, for the same work, they have a wrong to be righted,”¹¹ and a female worker at the Kelmscott Press reported in the 8 October 1892 *The Queen* that Morris and Co. paid men and women compositors at the same rate.¹² In 1882, Morris lectured at the Kensington Vestry Hall in support of women’s freedom to choose simple, natural, and comfortable clothing according to their own tastes.¹³ Nonetheless his 1886 statement to Scottish socialist Bruce Glasier that under present economic conditions women would need special protection during childbearing years—a paternalism based doubtless in part on his own experiences—could under some circumstances have justified an unequal economic order.¹⁴

Over the years, Morris’s literary portrayals and hopes for women shifted somewhat, as late-Victorian attitudes towards gender roles broadened and, as mentioned, he encountered many

independent women active in the public sphere. Accordingly, in his later writings, he turned increasingly to projecting peaceful, overlapping roles for members of both sexes within imagined communal societies. Moreover, in a period in which women had limited legal rights to leave abusive husbands and even to guardianship of their own children, Morris's firm belief in women's right to complete freedom of choice in sexual matters was distinctive even within the progressive circles in which he moved.

In general, nineteenth-century socialists and anarcho-socialists shared the view that contemporary marriage laws were oppressive, though they often differed over *whom* and *how* these oppressed. As an extreme case, Marxist theorist Ernest Belfort Bax, Morris's Socialist League colleague and author of *The Fraud of Feminism* (1913), maintained that Victorian laws were weighted entirely in favor of women,¹⁵ and even George Bernard Shaw, a champion of women's right to economic equality, exclaimed with irritation in a letter to Ellen Terry that "Marriage is not the man's hold on the woman, but the woman's on the man" (*CLGBS*, 777). By contrast, two works published in 1879 and 1884 by German authors, August Bebel and Friedrich Engels, more accurately represented advanced socialist views of the time, and both provided insights which may have influenced Morris's writings on the topic. Bebel and Engels advocated women's political equality and freedom of choice, posing female emancipation as necessary for a fully socialist society, yet both often seemed oblivious to the immediate problems of their women contemporaries such as wage discrimination or domestic violence.

Perhaps the more influential and broadminded of the two treatises was August Bebel's 1879 *Die Frau und der Socialismus*, translated in 1885 as *Women and Socialism*, which predicted that in a socialist future women would assume a wider variety of active and creative roles:

The woman of future society is socially and economically independent; she is no longer subject to even a vestige of dominion and exploitation ... Her education is the same as that of man ... Living under natural conditions, she is able to unfold and exercise her mental powers and faculties. She chooses her occupation [in accord] ... with her wishes, inclination and natural abilities, and she works under conditions identical with man's. (344)

Bebel envisioned a society that would make childbirth and maternity desirable to women; like his fellow socialists of the period, he saw no reason to limit population artificially, but nonetheless he was farsighted in predicting that "intelligent and energetic" women might decide to limit childbearing (Bebel, 370). He was myopic, however, in proclaiming that women's entrance into the industrial labor force had already granted them full equality—ignoring the vast disparities in female wages and working conditions. And although like other socialists of the period, he identified both prostitution and marriage as economically driven sexual slavery, he asserted that sexual frustration remained the chief form of female oppression—not poverty, domestic violence, sexual assault, grueling workdays, the physical toll of multiple pregnancies, or the threat of death in childbirth. Bebel was progressive, however, in specifying that maternity should not limit women's occupational choices, though like other nineteenth-century socialist feminists, he imagined that women "[n]urses, teachers, female friends, the rising female generations" (347) would combine to raise children, but specified no co-participation by fathers or men in general. Morris purchased a copy of Bebel's book in July 1885 (Richardson, 293), and would also have learned of its contents through Eleanor Marx's enthusiastic April 1885 review in *Commonweal*.

The second major socialist feminist treatise of the period was Friedrich Engels's *Der Ursprung der Familie, des Privateigentums und des Staats* (*The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*), which appeared in 1884. Although it was not translated into English until 1902, Engels's

views would have been well known to his fellow London socialists. At once bolder and somewhat more eccentric than Bebel's treatise in its claims, the *Origin* argues (following Lewis Morgan's depictions of Iroquois tribal structure) that an original form of permissive "group marriage" practiced in primitive societies had been overturned by the present capitalist economic order, which now assigned women to individual owners in order to ensure the transmission of property in the male line; in Engels's words: "the first class oppression coincides with that of the female sex by the male" (*Origin*, 58). Enforced monogamy, described by Engels as an institution entirely devoid of love or sentiment, existed solely to perpetuate property, as did its concealed double—widespread prostitution.

As an advocate of sexual choice for both men and women, Engels usefully points out both the double standard employed to judge sexual conduct and the unrelieved nature of domestic labor, and he asserts that for women to be emancipated, society must accept responsibility for the rearing of children. On the other hand, he blames domestic violence largely on monogamy, and ignores evidence that women had been oppressed even before the advent of capitalism. He expresses romantic nostalgia for the satisfactions of a primitive sexual freedom, according to which all men and women of a given tribe had equal sexual access to one another (free love or gang rape?), and his view that present-day lower-class women have attained equality since "no basis for any kind of male supremacy is left in the proletarian household" (*Ibid.*, 64) ignores such factors as unequal pay, heavy domestic duties, or the effects of multiple pregnancies.

Like Bebel, Engels sees no reason to limit childbearing, since under socialism, economic factors will no longer "prevent a girl from giving herself to the man she loves" (*Ibid.*, 67). And finally, like Bebel, Engels does not consider how women as active agents might help enable their own liberation; this must presumably wait for a change in the social order. Linda Richardson, Anna Vaninskaya, and others have noted that aspects of Morris's historical Germanic romances, *The House of the Wolfings* and *The Roots of the Mountains*, both published in 1889, may have been influenced by Engels's account of the relative respect accorded to women by primitive tribes. Morris's idealized tales of primitive Germanic communities do include women warriors, farmworkers, shepherds, and sages, though Morris's tribal peoples notably refrain from the happy promiscuity that Engels celebrates as a feature of pre-capitalist societies.

The final socialist-feminist treatise of the 1880s was composed by Eleanor Marx, who in 1887 published an expanded version of her *Commonweal* review of Bebel's *Woman and Socialism* as *The Woman Question*, co-authored at least nominally with her partner Edward Aveling. Some of the claims of *The Woman Question* seem to echo Bebel's ideas; like him, Marx/Aveling find sexual frustration and celibacy a major source of female suffering, even insanity, and like Engels they note the harm wrought by a double standard in judging women's sexual behavior. Also like its predecessors, *The Woman Question* assumes that other women and young girls, but not men and young boys, will assist mothers in childcare, and predictably they dismiss reformist efforts to grant women access to all occupations, higher education, and political participation as of minimal value, since even if such reforms were enacted, "the actual position of women in respect to men would not be very vitally touched" (14).

Still, Marx/Aveling's treatise differs from its predecessors in its references to women authors, in its awareness of and interest in the initiatives of the women's movement of its day, and in its sincere and pained appeal for honest sexual education for children: "With the false shame and false secrecy, against which we protest, goes the unhealthy separation of the sexes that begins as children quit the nursery, and only ends when the dead men and women are laid in the common earth" (22). Its final idealistic tribute to monogamous relationships of intellectual equals, offering "the love and respect that are ... lost today, ... the product of the commercial system of society" (28), seems sadly

wistful in view of Eleanor Marx's later fate at the hands of her allegedly socialist partner.¹⁶ It is also notable that the sole partly or entirely female-authored socialist treatise of the period idealizes mental companionship rather than children as the goal of marriage.

A less admirable feature of the treatises of Bebel, Engels, and Marx/Aveling is that all stigmatize any form of "effeminacy" or homosexuality; to Marx/Aveling, for example, "The effeminate man and masculine woman ... are two types from which even the average person recoils with a perfectly natural horror of the unnatural" (23). Although Morris's imaginative works contain no transgender characters or same-sex couples, it is commendable that in this, as in other matters, after carefully considering the ideas and writings of others, he avoided repetition of their less substantiated or more prejudiced claims.

As we have seen, Morris was thus surrounded by Socialist League members—Bax, Engels, Eleanor Marx—who held strong views on the status of future women, and his imaginative writings from the late 1880s onward reflect an interest in imagining such socialist "new women." The most overt presentation of his views occurs in his 1890 pastoral utopian romance, *News from Nowhere*, and two scenes from *News* have been often cited by critics as representing the polarities of Morris's thought regarding women's future roles.

In the first of these (chapter 4), after awakening in the new society, the protagonist William Guest meets his guide, Dick, and the men enter the Hammersmith Guest House on the Thames River. There three friendly women greet him and serve breakfast to them and other visitors. Since Morris is, after all, fictionalizing his own Hammersmith home where his family consisted of three women, and since the handsome woman serving breakfast may be based on his wife (he kisses her), matters might have stopped there. However, in chapter 9, after Guest is taken to meet Dick's grandfather, Old Hammond, he observes that "I saw at the Guest House that the women were waiting on the men; that seems a little like reaction, doesn't it?" but Old Hammond brushes off his concerns, "don't you know that it is a great pleasure to a clever woman to manage a house skillfully, and to do it so that all the house-mates look pleased, and are grateful to her?" (*CW* 16:60) Since this interchange precedes a passage on the importance of maternity, Morris may intend to pay tribute to the importance of the roles usually assigned to women, including his own wife, but he also evades the issue of why both servers and guests could not have been comprised of both sexes.

Hammond's views on childbearing, however, deserve quotation as Morris's own:

How could it possibly be but that maternity should be highly honoured amongst us? Surely it is a matter of course that the natural and necessary pains which the mother must go through form a bond of union between man and woman, an extra stimulus to love and affection between them, and that this is universally recognised. ... So that, you see, the ordinarily healthy woman (and almost all our women are both healthy and at least comely), respected as a child-bearer and rearer of children, desired as a woman, loved as a companion, unanxious for the future of her children, has far more instinct for maternity than the poor drudge and mother of drudges of past days could ever have had; or than her sister of the upper classes, brought up in affected ignorance of natural facts, reared in an atmosphere of mingled prudery and prurience. (61–62)

In addition, Morris does not entirely neglect the independent "new woman," for the second scene most often cited in this context occurs in chapter 26, "The Obstinate Refusers." During the travelers' visit to a building site, they meet the region's head stone carver, Philippa, who refuses to join the communal hay festival so that she may continue her carving:

“I am sure that you won’t think me unkind if I go on with my work, ... and this open-air and the sun and the work together ... make a delight of every hour to me; and excuse me, I must go on”

(174).

In the society of *News*, the ornamental carving of an important building would have been among the most highly regarded occupations; Philippa’s name also pays tribute to Philippa Fawcett, daughter of the reformers Henry and Millicent Fawcett, who in 1890 had earned the highest scores in the Cambridge mathematical tripos. Philippa herself is attended by a young woman who models for her when needed; by her 16-year-old daughter, also a carver; and by a foreman, who explains that since Philippa is the group’s finest artist, they have waited for her recovery from an illness in order to execute their best work. No unfavorable notice is taken of the fact that Philippa may be a single mother, and as John Bellamy Foster has recently observed, this group is served refreshments by a small boy rather than a female attendant (Foster, 30). “The Obstinate Refusers” was the sole chapter Morris added in revising his 1890 *Commonweal* text for publication in 1891, and arguably may have been intended to balance *News*’s earlier portrayal of women in more traditional roles.

The clearest statement of Morris’s views on the issues of marriage and sexual freedom, however, is provided in Old Hammond’s further remarks in chapter 9. Hammond tells Guest that Dick’s former wife Clara had deserted him for another man, but now wishes for a reconciliation; during the interim, their two children have been living with Hammond’s daughter, and Clara has joined them for most of the time. When Guest inquires whether Clara’s actions will lead to divorce, Hammond demurs at length:

You must understand once for all that we have changed these matters; or rather, that our way of looking at them has changed, as we have changed within the last two hundred years. We do not deceive ourselves, indeed, or believe that 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 tyrannising over the children who have been the results of love or lust. ...

[I]t is a point of honour with us not to be self-centered; not to suppose that the world must cease because one man is sorry; therefore we should think it foolish, or if you will, criminal, to exaggerate these matters of sentiment and sensibility: we are no more inclined to eke out our sentimental sorrows than to cherish our bodily pains; and we recognise that there are other pleasures besides love-making. ... As on the other hand, therefore, we have ceased to be commercial in our love-matters, so also we have ceased to be ARTIFICIALLY foolish

But I do say that 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, either by unconsidered habit, or by the unexpressed threat of the lesser interdict if they are lax in their hypocrisy. Are you shocked now? (56–59)

Through the voice of Hammond, Morris here addresses many topics at once: women’s right to select new partners, social sanctions that enforce a double sexual standard, divorce and marriage, parental responsibilities, and—what none of his predecessors had admitted—the inability of any form of social organization, however ideal, to resolve all conflicts. Morris shared the limitations

of his predecessors in failing to imagine how a truly egalitarian society would deal with issues of joint housekeeping and parenting, or to envision the need for restraints on conception and population growth. Still, his opinions are remarkable for their rejection of conventional views on fidelity, their recognition of the degree to which economic factors constrain women's choices, and their realism in acknowledging that greater independence for women will require a corresponding acceptance and adaptation on the part of men.

And finally, as Guest's journey nears its end, Ellen, the young woman who embodies the ideals of the new society, explains to the visitor how her present life contrasts with that of nineteenth-century women:

My friend, you were saying that you wondered what I should have been if I had lived in those past days of turmoil and oppression. Well, I think I have studied the history of them 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; ... I should have had no choice, no power of will over my life ... I should never have bought pleasure from the rich men, and even opportunity of action, whereby I might have won some true excitement. I should have been wrecked and wasted in one way or another, either by penury or by luxury (Chapter 31, 204)

Ellen is the socialist woman envisioned by Bebel, Engels, Marx, and Morris himself—intelligent, self-directed, devoid of prudery, freed from economic pressure in choosing a mate, and eager for “opportunity of action” and “true excitement.”

Thus, despite his frequent representations of women in relatively conventional gender roles, Morris's stated views on marriage and women's future contributed to an emerging body of socialist feminist thought. Moreover, as he argued that an egalitarian, socialist society should provide for women the same liberty of action assured to its men, his later writings increasingly model the qualities appropriate for the liberated women of a new, socialist society.

Patterns in Morris's Literary Portrayals of Women

Since women, and male responses to women, are central to Morris's imaginative writings, any discussion of this topic must be selective. As the author of hundreds of poems, shorter tales, and romances, Morris created characters of all levels of virtue and vice, simplicity and intelligence, loyalty and treachery, timidity and ambition. Several patterns do emerge, however: he often seeks to understand, rather than judge, the crimes of his most enraged and murderous women characters, such as Medea in *The Life and Death of Jason*, and from his early *Defence* poems onward, he foregrounds the threats posed to women by their sexual vulnerability and socially dependent status. And finally, his projected models for a future alternative society feature women of intelligence, independence, and communitarian ideals who are effective in achieving their goals.

Early Poems

Of the *Defence of Guenevere's* thirty poems, at least nine represent female characters who experience some form of forced marriage, imprisonment, situation-induced suicide, prospective rape, and threatened or actual murder. Most famously, the heroine of “The Defence of Guenevere” is trapped within a loveless marriage and faces potential death by burning; the female protagonist

of “King Arthur’s Tomb” is ensconced within a convent until death; that of “Rapunzel” is imprisoned in a tower; the heroines of “The Blue Closet” are entombed within an underground sea cave, then escorted to their deaths; Margaret of “The Wind” has been murdered by her remorseless supposed lover; the speaker of “Concerning Geffray Teste Noire” encounters the corpse of a woman who has been killed along with her male partner; Jehane of “Golden Wings” commits suicide; and Alice of “Sir Peter Harpdon’s End” helplessly awaits the fate of her lover, knowing that it will determine her own. One can argue that these medievalized scenes allegorize psychological states of entrapment or longing, but for several, the social context for these oppressions is also made explicit. Although male characters also face imprisonment (“In Prison,” “Riding Together,” “A Good Knight in Prison,” “Spell-Bound,” “The Tune of Seven Towers”) or are killed in battles (“Near Avalon,” “Golden Wings,” “The Eve of Crecy,” “The Haystack in the Floods,” “The Judgment of God”), it is notable that several of Morris’s heroines openly resent their dependent status as women, actively resist their oppressors, and make calculated choices even within their limited circumstances.

An instance of such resistance occurs in “The Haystack in the Floods,” set during the waning years of the Hundred Year’s War. Jehane and her lover Robert have been captured by a particularly cruel French commander Godmar as they flee from their home in French territory toward the English border. Both immediately perceive the hopelessness of their situation, and although Robert bravely attempts resistance he is beheaded and eviscerated in the poem’s final section. Morris’s portrayal of Jehane is more complicated, as unlike Robert, she is offered a seeming choice: she can witness Robert’s immediate death, or agree to become Godmar’s paramour on the promise that Robert will be spared. When she refuses Godmar’s advances, however, he taunts her with the fact that even this proffered “choice” has been deceptive:

red

Grew Godmar’s face from chin to head:
“Jehane, on yonder hill there stands
My castle, guarding well my lands:
What hinders me from taking you,
And doing that I list to do
To your fair wilful body, while
Your knight lies dead?” (ll. 81–88a)

Under such circumstances, Jehane’s response is remarkably courageous. She threatens to murder him, and if that fails, to commit suicide:

A wicked smile

Wrinkled her face, her lips grew thin,
A long way out she thrust her chin:
“You know that I should strangle you
While you were sleeping; or bite through
Your throat, by God’s help—ah!” she said,
“Lord Jesus, pity your poor maid!
For in such wise they hem me in,
I cannot choose but sin and sin,
Whatever happens: yet I think
They could not make me eat or drink,
And so should I just reach my rest.” (ll. 88b–99)

Godmar then threatens to turn her over to a Paris mob: “You know, Jehane, they cry for you, / ‘Jehane the brown! Jehane the brown! / Give us Jehane to burn or drown!’ (ll. 106–108)—at which point Robert rushes at him and is beheaded, and his body is then trampled into pieces.

For Jehane, the results of this traumatic event are imprisonment, near madness, and likely death:

Then Godmar turn’d again and said:
“So, Jehane, the first fitte is read!
Take note, my lady, that your way
Lies backward to the Chatelet!”
She shook her head and gazed awhile
At her cold hands with a rueful smile,
As though this thing had made her mad. (ll. 152–58)

Morris’s Jehane is coolheaded, resolute, and capable of aggressive self-defense, qualities which, while they fail to preserve her freedom or her lover’s life, do protect her from rape. Notably Robert does not expect her to choose to delay his death, and nothing in the narrative suggests that Jehane should have succumbed in the hope of softening her or Robert’s fates. Jehane’s firm resistance, swift protection of her sexual integrity, and plausible counterthreat of murder render her an active agent rather than a passive victim.

Poetry of Morris’s Middle Period

As we have seen, Morris was unusual in having accepted his wife’s infidelity (sexual or emotional) during the years 1869–73 without apparent complaint, although his personal and unpublished writings indicate that this response resulted from choice rather than weakness or lack of concern. In addition to inspiring introspection, this experience apparently prompted him to brood on the nature of female sexual desires and the potential frustrations women experienced as a result of limited choices. If the women of Morris’s early poetry are often victimized by male violence, sexual and otherwise, the poetry of Morris’s middle period presents several women who are impervious to male desires, or alternately, driven by vengeful and jealous passions.

On the one hand, in the *Earthly Paradise*, he imagines several seductive Venus-like figures who prove alluring to men but are ultimately unresponsive and heedless of their happiness (“The Watching of the Falcon,” “The Man Who Never Laughed Again,” “The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon,” “The Ring Given to Venus,” and “The Hill of Venus”). More dramatically, between 1867 and 1876, he also created a series of intense and passionate women characters who are propelled by lust, rage, and jealousy to destroy the objects of their former attachments and/or themselves, a pattern represented by Medea in *The Life and Death of Jason*, Stenoboea in “Bellerophon at Argos,” Gudrun in “The Lovers of Gudrun,” and Brynhild and Gudrun in *The Story of Sigurd the Völsung*. To a surprising extent, these representations of violent and passionate women are characterized by empathy, or at least suspension of judgment, toward those who actively harm others and themselves. Whether Morris *identified* with the turbulent emotions of these women, or embodied them in literary form as a means to *understanding* them, cannot be known, but his efforts during this period produced some of his most fully realized women characters.

An example of this pattern is found in the portrayals of Brynhild and Gudrun in Morris’s 1876 poem *The Story of Sigurd the Völsung*, a four-part epic he considered his finest literary work. *Sigurd* is based on the *Völsunga saga*, a late-thirteenth-century Icelandic epic which in 1870

Morris had co-translated with Eiríkr Magnússon as *The Story of the Volsungs and Niblungs*. In a 21 December 1869 letter to Charles Eliot Norton, he poured out how deeply he had been moved by “the depth and intensity of the complete work”:

[T]he scene of the last interview between Sigurd and the despairing and terrible Brynhild touches me more than anything I have ever 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. (*AWS*, 1:472)

In the introduction to the translation, he describes the tale as

the Great Story of the North, which should be to all our race what the Tale of Troy was to the Greeks . . . and afterwards, when the change of the world has made our race nothing more than a story too, then should it be to those that come after us no less than the Tale of Troy has been to us,

and his prefatory poem enjoins his audience to hearken sympathetically “Unto the best tale pity ever wrought”:

Of how from dark to dark bright Sigurd broke,
Of Brynhild’s glorious soul with love distraught,
Of Gudrun’s weary wandering unto naught,
Of utter love defeated utterly,
Of grief too strong to give Love time to die!¹⁷

Sigurd’s women characters assume more active roles than in Morris’s sources, and they determine much of the epic’s action. This tale of “utter love” resists brief summary, but a uniting motif of the plot is that all three of its passionate royal heroines have been forced, pressured, or deceived into a hated marriage for dynastic reasons. All react violently to their emotional pain, plot to cause the death of others, and are eventually driven to suicide, immolating the objects of their hatred and/or being immolated by fire. The first, Signy, the Volsung princess of book one, is forced by her empire-seeking father to marry the hated Siggeir, King of the Goths, and later incestuously conceives a son with her brother Sigmund, who is then groomed for the later murder of her husband and his family. In book two, Sigmund’s son, the Volsung hero Sigurd, enters the fiery ring which protects Brynhild, Odin’s earthly daughter, and the two pledge undying love. In book three, the Niblung queen Grimhild, eager to unite the Volsung and Niblung tribes, plies Sigurd with a drug that erases all memory of his prior troth to Brynhild. His subsequent marriage to her daughter Gudrun precipitates the grief, remorse, and jealousy of all three major characters.

In an attempt to cement this misconceived tribal alliance, Sigurd himself becomes a betrayer. Disguised as his brother-in-law Gunnar, he treacherously re-enters the fiery ring in order to induce Brynhild to marry the latter. When after her reluctant marriage she discovers his deception, the enraged Brynhild goads Gunnar and his brothers Hogni and Guttorm to murder her former lover, an act which renders Gudrun a grieving widow, precipitates Brynhild’s own suicide, and ultimately destroys the fortunes of both kingdoms. In book four, finally, the widowed Gudrun is pressured against her will to marry the outland King Atli in order to further extend the Niblung line. She takes revenge both for Sigurd’s death and her

own unhappiness by inducing her husband to kill her brothers during a state visit to their kingdom. She next murders Atli, sets fire to the royal compound, and plunges to an ocean death, thus obliterating both the Volsung and Niblung royal lines. All of these vengeful acts flow at least in part from the repressed energies of women exploited as sexual pawns in the competition for gold and empire.

Although she has been wronged, one might also condemn Brynhild, who has not only precipitated the murder of Sigurd, but by so doing has also doomed the Volsungs to ultimate destruction. Morris nonetheless presents “the despairing and terrible Brynhild” in an essentially sympathetic light. As Sigurd’s complement, she serves as a vatic figure, able to intuit and communicate profound truths that he can only embody:

But thy heart to my heart hath been speaking, though my tongue hath set it forth:
For I am she that loveth, and I know what thou wouldst teach
From the heart of thine unlearned wisdom, and I needs must speak thy speech.

(*Bk. 2, canto 10, “How Sigurd awoke Brynhild upon Hindfell,” CW 12: 128*)

Moreover, she has learned these inner secrets from “Wisdom,” a supernatural figure who conveys to her truths beyond language:

I saw the body of Wisdom and of shifting guise was she wrought,
And I stretched out my hands to hold her, and a mote of the dust they caught;
And I prayed her to come for my teaching, and she came in the midnight dream—
And I woke and might not remember, nor betwixt her tangle deem:
She spake, and how might I hearken; I heard, and how might I know;
I knew, and how might I fashion, or her hidden glory show? (*Ibid.*)

On viewing Sigurd’s dead body, Brynhild first stabs herself with Sigurd’s sword, then uses her last breaths to demand that her aghast and grieving husband bury her on the same pyre as Sigurd. The narrator closes with a forgiving and cathartic tribute to the lovers’ best qualities as “the hope of the ancient Earth”:

They are gone—the lovely, the mighty, the hope of the ancient Earth:
It shall labour and bear the burden as before that day of their birth:
It shall groan in its blind abiding for the day that Sigurd hath sped,
And the hour that Brynhild hath hastened, and the dawn that waketh the dead.

(*Book 3, canto 15, CW 12: 244*)

Although Brynhild’s actions have hastened Sigurd’s death, they have also served the more benign purpose of moving the world closer to its appointed end. For *Sigurd’s* narrator, human actions are ultimately inscrutable, driven by passions beyond human control, and inextricably woven by fate into the web of life.

Another heroine driven by twisted passion but viewed by the narrator with considerable empathy is Sigurd’s tortured wife Gudrun. It is she who had jealously informed Brynhild of Sigurd’s trickery, thus indirectly provoking violence. Yet she is also capable of genuine love; it is she, not Brynhild, who delivers the most eloquent tribute to the character of her murdered husband, and after his death she flees the corrupt court environment into a forest until forced once again to serve her family’s exploitive ambitions. Isolated, unyielding, and fearlessly committed

to the revenge codes of her line, Gudrun is portrayed with pity as well as horror as she arranges for the violent destruction of her brothers, husband, home, and self. As she leaps into the sea, she cries out her husband's name, loyal to her own vision of justice:

She hath spread out her arms as she spake it, and away from the earth she leapt
And cut off her tide of returning; for the sea-waves over her swept,
And their will is her will henceforward; and who knoweth the deeps of the sea,
And the wealth of the bed of Gudrun, and the days that shall yet be?

(Book IV, canto 7, *CW* 12: 306)

Gudrun too belongs to the future, her passions and crimes now rendered harmless as the cycles of love and wrong begin anew.

Later Writings:

As we have seen, Morris had always identified to some degree with the constricting life circumstances of women, and the poetry of his middle period further dramatizes the degree to which sexual emotions could prove destructive to women, men, and society itself. As he aged in the company of socialist women and reflected on their place in an egalitarian society, however, Morris's later prose romances fashioned energetic, forthright, and wise female characters who model many of the qualities ascribed to Ellen in *News from Nowhere*. His last fully completed romance, *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, finished directly before his death in 1896, is also his only long prose tale with a female protagonist. In creating Birdalone, Morris strives to imagine the psychological traits as well as the special difficulties faced by a mostly "new" woman as she undertakes a search for adult identity and maturation that parallels the explorations of his male heroes.

In particular, Birdalone faces threats of servitude, physical confinement, potential sexual exploitation, unwanted male attention, harassment, and possible rape. Moreover, she must learn the arts of peace and fellowship as she acquires skills of survival and artistry, forms a community of supportive women friends, runs a successful craft business with her fellow women, forges a loving tie with the mother from whom she had been separated as a child, and experiences the guidance of a female wisdom-figure, Habundia, who helps forge Birdalone's spiritual bond with nature and aids her successful courtship and reintegration into her community.

Birdalone is the first Morrisian heroine who presumably continues her active employment after marriage, as Bebel and Marx/Aveling had predicted would be the case for the socialist women of the future. She is also his first heroine whose loving companionship with other women is central to her happiness and to the tale. And though at times she requires the aid of armed men to rescue her, Birdalone is physically vigorous, decisive, and quick-witted in self-defense. Remarkably, too, the tale ends not with childbearing, rulership, or references to the future family life of Birdalone and her partner, but with the friends' joint efforts to clear the dark wood Evilshaw, and the continued harmony by which "their [shared] love never sundered, and ... they lived without shame and died without fear" (*CW* 20:387).

The tale begins in Birdalone's girlhood as she is stolen from her mother by the Witch-wife of Evilshaw, who forces the child to perform heavy labor. In contrast to the Victorian ideal of idle femininity, Birdalone "was not slack nor a sluggard, and hated not the toil" (*Ibid.*, 9). Bright and eager to acquire skills, she becomes adept at tilling, harvesting, cooking, fishing, shooting deer, and tending to animals; her ability to fend for herself off the land later stands her in good stead

throughout her adventures, and enables her to convey these skills to the more helpless women she encounters on the Isle of Increase Unsought. Not work but the threat of prostitution goads her to flee from the Witch-wife's home, as she realizes that the Witch "not only used her as a thrall in the passing day, but had it in her mind . . . to bait the trap with her for the taking of the sons of Adam" (*Ibid.*, 10).

After escaping the Witch's home and landing on the Isle of Increase Unsought, Birdalone becomes deeply attached to its three female inhabitants, Aurea, Atra, and Viridi, who, before helping her escape their malign mistress, recount stories of their absent lovers—the first of many interchanged tales which bind the romance's characters to one another. Birdalone's onward journey now becomes a quest to locate her friends' lovers—a rare Morrisian subplot representing a female journey in the service of friendship rather than love. As she enters new territory, Birdalone seeks shelter at the Castle of the Quest; here she is kept a virtual prisoner by its castellan, who fears that if she leaves she will be captured or harmed. Nonetheless she escapes to the nearby Valley of the Greywethers in search of solitude and communion with nature, and there encounters the knightly lovers of her three women friends. On learning their betrothed's whereabouts, the knights depart in order to rejoin and rescue them, thus leaving the Castle undefended.

When Birdalone next ventures forth, the castellan's fears prove prescient as she is captured in succession by the Black and Red Knights. The first of these threatens her sexually, and although she seizes his armor during the night and prepares her bow and knife for use in self-defense, "she, for her part, was silent, partly for fear of the strange man, or, it might be, even for hatred of him, who had thus brought her into such sore trouble" (*Ibid.*, 170). When the even more malicious Red Knight surprises them both and attacks the Black Knight, Birdalone shoots an arrow at the attacker and stabs him in the shoulder with her knife. He thrusts her off, however, murders the Black Knight, and, after many salacious jibes, threatens her with further cruelty: "[I]t is not my pleasure to slay thee, rather I will bring thee to the Red Hold, and there see what we may make of thee" (*Ibid.*, 210). Matters are righted only when the three knights return with Birdalone's women friends and are able to rescue her from the Red Knight, but not without loss, for Aurea's betrothed Baudoin dies in the attempt.

Birdalone has thus needed male intervention to deliver her from imprisonment and humiliation, her desire for independence has led to a friend's death, and she is further troubled by the growing reciprocal attachment between herself and Atra's former lover Arthur. In striking contrast to the rivalries which drive both Brynhild and Gudrun to destructive acts, Birdalone flees the Castle in distress to prevent further emotional harm to her companions, and five years of separation and healing ensue before the friends are again united.

These years bring several intervening changes necessary for Birdalone's maturation and the rekindling of the fellowship. After departing from her companions, Birdalone earns her living for five years in the City of the Five Crafts as the manager of a weaving establishment, receiving honor for her creative nature-based designs (in this way resembling Morris's daughter). The master of the embroidery guild notes that Birdalone's designs resemble those of an older woman, Audrey, and when Audrey later visits, she recognizes Birdalone as her long-lost daughter. The bond between the two women is instantaneous and deep; when Audrey asks her daughter not to desert her, Birdalone responds with fervor, "I love thee dearly, and never, never shall I leave thee" (271), and she refrains from seeking her former friends and lover until her mother dies five years later. Several other nineteenth-century narratives with a woman protagonist also represent a reunion with a lost mother-figure as central to female identity-completion, as in Tennyson's "Lady Clare" and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley*. In this case, after Birdalone recovers

her proletarian history as the daughter of a peasant farmer and needlewoman, she is emotionally freed to seek other relationships.

The first of these is with a supernatural, more elevated mother-figure, Habundia, who since Birdalone's adolescence has appeared to help her in times of greatest need, and who serves as wisdom-figure, tutor, protectress, and source of love. Her interventions are more concrete than those of Brynhild's tutelary "Wisdom," for when Birdalone expresses her fear of permanent separation from both her friends and Arthur, and further, that any relationship with Arthur would further alienate her from her other friends, Habundia offers guidance and help in accomplishing both reconciliations. Meanwhile, after Birdalone's flight Arthur had undergone a period of despair and madness, but Habundia has nursed him to health and now guides him to where Birdalone resides. After the lovers unite, she leads them to where Aurea, Viridis, Atra, Hugh, and Aurea's new partner, the Green Knight, presently reside. After some initial awkwardness in Atra's re-encounter with Arthur, the fellowship is reestablished, with Atra assuming a special relationship with the spiritual feminine spirit of Habundia. As mentioned, the friends live together until death, maintaining themselves peacefully as they slowly overcome the menacing forces of the nearby forest.

Unlike the many plots which achieve closure by representing the deaths or unions of a single pair of lovers, *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* seems a truly egalitarian tale in representing a community's shared achievement of cohesion and a sense of purpose, as the many individual stories which the characters have told to one another throughout are folded into a single narrative. It also embodies the ideals of socialist feminism in that a woman's pursuit of vocation, identity, and love is subsumed into a wider tale of harmony with her fellow women and with nature, Arthur's adventures are made subordinate to those of his future partner rather than the reverse, and the stain of violence, which in previous narratives had often tragically severed men and women, has been overcome by the softer virtues of mutual attachment and loyalty. *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* is thus the story of the formation of a proto-socialist community and of the egalitarian gender relations which sustain it.

Conclusion

Morris's early writings manifest a temperamental identification with many forms of entrapment, expressed in representations of the violence and confinement inflicted on both sexes by the problematic nature of gender polarities as well as an unforgiving external world. Tempered by his personal experiences, Morris's writings of the late 1860s and 1870s exhibit a similar empathy with the pain caused by the social and sexual oppression of women. Set within tragic and mythic plots which intensify the contradictions of character and fate, the enraged women of the poetic epics of his middle period—Medea and Gudrun, Stenoboea and Brynhild—also reflect their creator's ambivalence about the erotic passions as necessary but destructive forces inhibiting happiness and survival.

Thus when, in the late 1880s, Morris came to the debates surrounding marriage and feminist socialism, he had already thought deeply about how class hierarchies and other forms of social constraint distort sexual relationships and familial ties. As he envisioned a new "epoch of rest," he formulated guidelines for how freedom of attachment might be furthered without imposing unrealistic expectations of complete accord. Through the voice of the elderly sage figure Old Hammond, *News from Nowhere* addresses issues of central concern to socialists of the period, especially the need for human relationships to be freed from restraints of property, class inequities, and social conventions. In their exploration of the psychological and practical adaptations

required for “freedom,” these commentaries remain among the more nuanced and powerful socialist feminist statements of their time.

In his writings of the 1890s, Morris strove to envision the application of such principles in a yet-unrealized world—although with uneven results, as many of the active and beneficent women of his later romances still function largely as helpmates. In his last fully completed work, *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*, however, Morris creates a tale of female maturation which is arguably his most feminist literary work. The choice of a female protagonist prompts him to recast the achievement-through-combat plot common to many adventure tales, and instead to place emphasis on the heroine’s inventiveness, active artistry, and search for sustaining human ties. The result may be Morris’s most fully socialist feminist plot, in which both women and men achieve fulfillment through the integration of egalitarian personal relationships and a shared commitment to the common good.

Notes

- 1 Charles Harvey and Jon Press, *William Morris: Design and Enterprise in Victorian Britain*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991, 47.
- 2 Letter to author, 3 August 2019.
- 3 “The Early Poems of William Morris,” William Morris Archive, [http://morrisarchive.lib.uiowa.edu/Poetry/Early Poems/earlypoems.html](http://morrisarchive.lib.uiowa.edu/Poetry/Early%20Poems/earlypoems.html). All or part of seven poems are copied in Emma’s hand, the sole copies to survive.
- 4 William Morris Archive, <http://morrisarchive.lib.uiowa.edu/listpoemsepperiodcontents.html#A-25>.
- 5 *West London Observer*, 22 December 1894, 6. She ran in Ward 3, polling 414 votes, 215 less than needed. Stephen Williams, letter 12 August 2019.
- 6 See also Peter Faulkner, “In Defense of Halliday Sparling,” *JWMS* 23.1 (2018), 39–68.
- 7 “Alone, Unhappy by the Fire I Sat,” ll. 33–34, William Morris Archive, <http://morrisarchive.lib.uiowa.edu/listpoemsepperiodcontents.html#A-25>.
- 8 The poem continues, “Behold with lack of happiness / the Master, Love our hearts did bless / Lest we should think of him the less — / Love dieth not, though hope is dead!” (ll. 45–48). William Morris Archive, <http://morrisarchive.lib.uiowa.edu/listpoemsepperiodcontents.html#A-10>.
- 9 William Morris, *Socialist Diary*, ed. Florence Boos, 2nd ed. (Nottingham: Five Leaves Press, 2019), 65–66.
- 10 See, for example, Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York: Routledge, 1990, and Eve Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.
- 11 “A Morris Speech on Women’s Trade Unions,” ed. Florence Boos, *William Morris Society U.S. Newsletter*, July 2008, 21–23.
- 12 Frank C. Sharp, letter to author, 17 August 2019.
- 13 “A Morris Speech on Women’s Trade Unions”. He praises the Union for addressing the root causes of inequality: “Any association which seeks to penetrate to the root of a mischief, and to help people till they themselves can put themselves into a position in which they no longer need help, is worthy of consideration very different from what should be given to most so-called charities.” (22) He further criticizes male unionists who would narrowly exclude women, and concludes that “in all classes every woman should be brought up as if she might not marry and keep house; as if she might have to earn her own living. I know that in the middle classes this would often save much wretchedness and degrading dependence; and ... in the working classes it would create a body of independent, helpful, well-organized workers, who would raise the character of the life of the whole nation.” (23)
 “The Author of ‘The Earthly Paradise’ on Ladies Dress,” *Glasgow Herald*, 3 April, 1882, 3.
- 14 During the period in which as editor of *Commonweal* he sought to keep the peace between warring factions, Morris declined to print a rebuttal by Bruce Glasier to an article by Ernest Belfort Bax, writing perhaps his most unfortunate statement on the topic to Glasier on 24 April 1886: “you must not forget that child-bearing makes women [economically] inferior to men, since a certain time of their lives they must be dependent on them. Of course we must claim absolute equality of condition between women and men, as between other groups, but it would be poor economy setting women to

- do men's work (as unluckily they often do now) or vice versa" (Kelvin, 2: 545). In 1888, Bax left the Socialist League, and Morris's 1890 *News from Nowhere* presents children (though not infants) benefiting from the instruction and companionship of adults of both sexes.
- 15 Especially disturbing was his objection to laws punishing domestic violence. In 1877, Bax had married Emma Wright, who died at the age of 36 after bearing seven children, whom their father then sent to live with others. Four years later in 1897, he married a German woman, Maria Henneberg, and later died within hours of her death in 1926.
- 16 After learning that her long-term partner, Edward Aveling, had secretly married another woman, Marx committed suicide under suspicious circumstances in 1898 at the age of 43. Aveling himself died four months later. For a fuller exploration of the events leading up to her death, see Stephen Williams and Tony Chandler, "'Tussy's great delusion': Eleanor Marx's Death Revisited," *Socialist History*, forthcoming.
- 17 *Völsunga Saga: The Story of the Volsungs and Niblungs, with Certain Songs from the Elder Edda*. Translated by Eiríkr Magnússon and William Morris. London: Ellis, 1870.

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