

# ‘Silence and Pity’; an Unpublished Fair Copy.

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## Silence and Pity

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

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

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

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

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

In 1975, K. L. Goodwin published in *The Yearbook of English Studies* a series of previously unavailable Morris poems which he gathered from manuscripts in the British Library collections. One of these, ‘Thy lips that I have touched no more may speak’, was collated from Morris’s early draft of the poem (Add. MS 45298A, f. 8.) and a transcript of the same by Jane Morris (Add. MS 45298B, f. 95). This poem was significantly altered when Morris came to revise a fair copy, and given the title ‘Silence and Pity’.

'Silence and Pity' was written about 1869, a time of great emotional stress for Morris. The relationship between Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Jane Morris had continued to grow through what J. W. Mackail described in a letter to Mrs Coronio, 12 May 1899, as 'those stormy years of *The Earthly Paradise* time and the time following it', and Morris stayed less and less at home and turned more and more to other friends for sympathy. That he became emotionally close to Georgiana Burne-Jones is well recognized from their correspondence and the devotional labour Morris put into the four calligraphic manuscripts designed as birthday presents for Georgie. Many of the poems in the first of these, 'A Book of Verse', completed on 26 August 1870, were written during the preceding two or three years, and remained unpublished in Morris's lifetime. Much as Rossetti buried his volume of poems dedicated to Elizabeth Siddal in 1862 and resurrected it in October 1869, Morris 'buried' his poems from the public's gaze in the special volume for Georgie. Morris did eventually revise some of this early work for *Poems by the Way* (1891).

'Silence and Pity' was written against this background and, like several other poems (including the entire calligraphic manuscript of 'Kormak's Saga'), was left unpublished by Morris probably as much because of the upsetting subject matter as the unsatisfactory poetry. 'Silence and Pity' is a recognition of the breakdown of a once-secure relationship. It is an expression of the confused state of the spurned lover who is trying to see the conflict from a distance but cannot avoid feeling the emotions of sorrow and longing. The poem reveals the tension in the life of the poet between the need to have love returned, in however small or simple a gesture or glance, and the recognition that love has ended. In actuality, Morris felt that he must not interfere in the happiness of his wife, and painfully resolved to accept the situation.

Morris chose not to include 'Silence and Pity' in his 'Book of Verse' for Georgiana Burne-Jones, and one possible reason for this is that he considered the poem a part of his relationship with Janey and expressive of the sadness he felt at the disappearance of the earlier passion between husband and wife. There is evidence to suggest that Morris was considering a series of poems based directly on the division between himself and Janey and he may have withheld the poem for that purpose. But ultimately the poem was buried even deeper than the calligraphic 'Book of Verse'.

The manuscript of 'Silence and Pity' reveals a great deal about the poem and also about Morris's sentiments in 1869. The fair copy of 'Silence and Pity', from which the above poem is published, is written on one side of a single sheet of blue paper, the type of paper common to the *Earthly Paradise* period. It is numbered '3' in the top right-hand corner. On the reverse of the sheet is an example of Morris's impetuous copying. The poet has written the title and then commenced copying the poem, beginning 'Thine'. This was an error. The title has then been smudged, probably by the poet resting on the bottom edge of the paper after having turned it over and reversed the sheet ready to begin again.

'Silence and Pity' was the third in a sequence of poems, and I have succeeded in identifying four more which together probably formed a small set, all fair copied by Morris at around the same time. These five poems are in Morris's fair handwriting from the period immediately prior to his study of calligraphic scripts, which began around 1870 and which changed his copying hand substantially. The others in the sequence are 'Pain and Time strive not' (in the Huntington manuscript of *Poems by the Way*), numbered 1, 'Three chances and one answer', numbered 2, 'Everlasting

Spring', numbered 4, and 'Fair Weather and Foul', unnumbered (the last three in the British Library). 'Fair Weather and Foul' is unnumbered, but may well have formed a fifth page to the series, as Morris frequently forgot to number pages or numbered them incorrectly. The blue folio of 'Silence and Pity' is watermarked 1869, as are those of 'Pain and Time strive not' and 'Fair Weather and Foul', whilst the other two leaves have the watermark crest of the paper manufacturer, thus the five pages show the usual quire pattern of alternate date and crest. Morris may have intended to build a series of poems out of his experiences of the late eighteen-sixties, but in the end, he abandoned the plan. It is interesting that, out of the five poems, only one, 'Pain and Time strive not', was published during Morris's lifetime. Even then almost twenty two years elapsed before Morris finally printed the poem in *Poems by the Way* in 1891. Nor did Morris copy any of the five into his calligraphic 'A Book of Verse'. However, the four unpublished poems were among those which Jane Morris transcribed into an undated notebook, now in the British Library.

Morris's revisions to the poem, from draft to fair copy, occur on nearly every line. They show the poet smoothing out the slight awkwardnesses of the draft. The original first line was altered to rid the rhythm of the clumsy "Thy lips that I have touched" and produce the more visually expressive and balanced "Thy lips my lips have touched".

The most complex revision occurs in line 6. Morris first of all cancelled a reference to the early days of his marriage: the beloved's eyes gaze "Upon me as in those lost festal days". He then inserted above this a phrase of commonplace poetic sentiment, "As they were wont my heart to heaven raise". This was changed in the fair copy to a line better suiting the author of *The Earthly Paradise*, "Into wild dreamland meads my heart to raise". The line thus becomes less trite than the first two versions, and somewhat more vague and mysterious.

'Everlasting Spring' also contains the same archaism in the line "Those fair meads of the old painter with their blossoms red and white" (line 9), a description which represents an idyllic state in the past history of a lover's relationship. It is a curious, but significant, parallel which, in the course of his re-writing 'Silence and Pity', Morris inadvertently drew between "the past", "heaven" and "wild dreamland meads". Another archaism was introduced into line 18, where he altered "yesterday" to the virtually obsolete "yestereve".

Morris's other revisions sharpen the diction of the poem, such as the change from the bland "your loveliness" to the moving "your calm to pain" (line 15), and add emphasis with a few judiciously placed exclamatory 'O's'. Morris also wished to widen the significance of the poem, and this process can be seen in his expansion of "But midst thy ruth" into "Ah midst it all" (line 17).

The overall effect of these revisions is to create a clearer and more polished poem, but Morris evidently still felt it fell short of his own exacting standards. 'Silence and Pity' was suppressed shortly after it was written, and was overlooked by May Morris when she came to edit the surviving manuscripts for the *Collected Works* (1910-15) and for *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist* (1936). Yet it is a lyric which expresses Morris's mood at a time of intense emotional turmoil, and which frankly conveys the "silence" to which he commanded himself and the honest self-pity from which he could not wholly free himself. Perhaps the weaknesses which Morris could not hide here were finally conquered whilst experiencing the harsh environment of Iceland in

1871, and a new inner strength condemned 'Silence and Pity' to the obscurity of a relic from the poet's formative years. Certainly, 'Fair Weather and Foul', the last poem in the series of which 'Silence and Pity' was the third, seems to suggest that Morris believed Iceland would provide the therapy he required to find "rest". Addressing himself, he looked forward to the place where:

Hill-side and vineyard hidden, and the river running rough,  
Toward the flood that meets the northlands, shall be rest for these enough  
For thy tears to fall unbidden, for thy memory to go free.