

William Morris, Biotech Genius: Reasons for Misprison

Norman Talbot

In 1990 Brian Stableford, a well-known British author and critic of science fiction, published a near-future short story called 'The Furniture of Life's Ambition' in a collection, Zenith 2, edited by David S. Garnett. It was reprinted in his collection, SEXUAL CHEMISTRY: Sardonic Tales of the Sexual Revolution, (Pocket Books 1993, pp. 179–209). This essay uses the latter text.

The protagonist of this story is a passionate revolutionary called William Morris. However, the narrative is at first glance an extraordinary travesty of all the values most enthusiasts identify with that name. Stableford's 'William Morris' (henceforth **Morris***) is a research scientist, and the revolution of which he is at the forefront is biotechnological. Worse, the applications of his research are wholly controlled by big-business interests.

Morris* begins his story as a genius whose achievements are already momentous. His work is impressive in the deftness and precision of his innovations and in the world-shaking consequences of the resultant inventions; however, they would have been found revolting by the environmentally and socially conservationist radical from whom he is named.

In this near future, the 'geneswitchers' have developed bio-engineering so that the tissue-culture of a cow's ovum can be developed into either a single huge, edible muscle or a single vast milk-manufacturing udder. **Morris*** becomes a leader in this field, finding a way to delay the development of this quasi-embryo at the unspecialised blastula stage until it has grown (but not developed) into a monstrous spherical single cell before the first stage of the gene-switching that conditions specialisation. Of course, in this period of intense and uncensored greed in the 'first world' and endemic famine in the 'third world', having a steak the size of a factory or an udder the size of a dairy to exploit was very welcome (after all, only a few operatives had to actually look at and work with the things). **Morris***'s second innovation was to fit simple maintenance-brains (silicon chips and metallo synapses) as controls to a hen-derived egg-producer. The production was colossal, however unlovely.

But as the story starts, he is deeply depressed about being trapped in this straitjacket of success. As he and his wife Judy (not Janey, thank heavens) cuddle in bed, he laments not only that his employers, Plasmotech, get all the profits but more particularly that he has solved all the real problems in this food-augmentation field. As she skilfully strokes him to erotic complaisance, **Morris*** is described:

William, as his finely-chiselled, delicately Pre-Raphaelite features implied, was rather over-sensitive, and was prone to overreact [*sic*: for over-react] to any slight, real or imagined. As a child he had been spoiled dreadfully because of his marvellous intelligence and stunning good looks, and in adult life he remained petulant, horribly jealous and prone to outrageous tantrums. Those who loved him had to learn to handle him very delicately. (p. 179)

There are components here that seem like a systematic misinterpretation of Morris signalled by the term 'Pre-Raphaelite', as commonly misapplied to Morris, but why? The seeds have been sown for a savage collision between text and intertextual biography... Many Morris scholars might feel most unwilling to read on!

The second of the story's four conversations is with a financial entrepreneur called P. P. Marshall, head of an investment company called Marshall & Faulkner (because his hair is red and his shrewdness proverbial, City gossip nicknames him the 'copper-crowned certainty'). Admittedly, P. P. is Peter Peregrine rather than Peter Paul, and no one ever accused Peter Paul Marshall of financial wizardry, but the raiding of Morris's biography is now overt. **Marshall*** is almost as beautiful as **Morris***, and they become instant rival allies, inventive genius against financial parasite (or day-dreaming loner against worldly-wise analyst). The genius needs the financier, and proposes a firm to make and purvey organic furniture, in the most literal sense. A single 'superblastula', controlled by an elementary silicon chip and connected to a simple circulatory and nervous system, can mature into a perfectly-formed and perfectly-adaptable living chair (given a small monthly injection).

Of course Marshall cannot resist the prospect. And of course they call the thing 'the Morris Chair', and set up a firm called 'Morris, Marshall & Faulkner (Furniture Manufacturers)' which is electrifyingly successful. But at this point Stableford cannot resist intruding a comparison of his obviously useful genius with 'that earlier William Morris who also lent his name to an adaptable chair' and who 'had brought News from Nowhere of a finer and happier world to come' (p. 193). This seems to me a mistake, the gain a trivial juxtaposition and the loss a world of questions and implications. In just the same way the City joke about **Morris***'s antagonist **Marshall*** being 'copper-crowned' is explained earnestly as an inversion of the financial laudation 'copper-bottomed' on p. 191.

But with the comparison between Morris and **Morris*** now spelled out, we are ready to ask what this apparent historical misprision is going to achieve. As **Morris*** becomes a hero of humanity's technological triumph over what he describes as 'the poverty and narrowness of ... Creation', and allows people to infer that 'DNA has no other master as virtuous, as adept or as ingenious as himself' (pp. 195-6), his success imprisons him. Red tape and fame begin to stifle him; he breaks paparazzi cameras, and begins to frighten the workers in his company. As Judy says in the second pillow-talk scene, 'you can't blame them for wanting to consult you when you get so angry if they do anything wrong, or anything you don't like' (p. 197). Ah, but though Judy still caresses him dutifully, she has some years ago turned for sexual excitement to **Marshall***.

The improbable – and very un-Morrisian – earlier equation of **Morris***'s high-achievement solitary genius with a 'horribly jealous' temperament is depended on for the story's denouement. How can such a passionate man endure his awareness that his wife has a lover? Those with a clear picture of Morris's life will find the association of his name with this version of marital tension especially surprising. Does Stableford wish us to forget that Morris deliberately went to Iceland to enable Janey to 'make her break', either with or from Rossetti, on her own terms, and refused to succumb to the violent rage of which he was capable? Or does he wish us to seize upon this contrast between Morris and **Morris*** with special keenness?

The second conversation with **Marshall*** takes place in **Morris***'s 'inner sanctum',

and focuses upon a horrific revenge-motif much closer to Poe than to Morris. As soon as the adulterer is seated in the new superblastula Morris chair, its arms imprison him. The chair is made of Judy, reduced and reprogrammed...

The story's climax is a melange of erotic horror with comedy, and its closure focuses upon a last emblem, the double S-shaped chair called a 'LOVE SEAT', for two people facing in opposite directions, the halves differentiated by upholstery in Judy's silken blond and **Marshall***'s copper red. They are, of course, make of the two adulterers. This kind of precious, aristocratic furniture is shrewdly chosen: it would infuriate Morris, and evokes a despised Renaissance and Augustan convention of noli-metangere flirtation and arranged marriages.

Stableford's sardonic misapplication of various names and emblems from Morris's life is a way of illuminating the desperate neurosis that is, the story implies, inseparable from high-technology perspectives on the supposedly sentimental ideas of nature, love and integrity. The choice of Morris as the spiritual opposite of the near-future genius **Morris*** is a discerning one, since no one of his period showed more clearly the problems of trying to make beautiful things worth living with, while ruled by stock-exchange criteria that demand ever more elaborate techniques for the exploitation of nature.

Geniuses like **Morris*** may compare their skills favourably (or allow journalists to do so) with 'the power of the hypothetical being', the God who created 'the wonders of nature' (p, 195), but they are still intimately, if self-deceivingly, human. His hubris begins the story, when his wife has to avoid any hint of 'jokes about loaves and fishes' (p, 179), and maintains its tension when, in the second pillow-talk, she eschews similar jokes about disciples, being worshipped, and crucifixion. At the end, instead of driving the money-changers from his temple, he welcomes **Marshall*** into his 'inner sanctum' (repeatedly so called on pages 201-2). There, before reducing him to protoplasm and converting him into furniture, he humiliates him sexually in the arms of his mistress the chair. Vengeance is mine, saith the spiteful biotech.

Morris's response to the financiers and technologists of his day varied from roaring wrath to searing contempt, but he never wrote a sardonic dystopia, or awful warning, laced with the black humour that rules Stableford's story. However, since 'The Furniture of Life's Ambition' evokes him explicitly as the author of *News from Nowhere*, it seems fitting to give the last word to a woman from *Nowhere* whose love-life has become a denial of all jealousy. Henry Morson asserts that 'only slaves and slave-holders could live solely by setting machines going' (*Collected Works*, XVII, p. 179), and Clara goes more deeply:

'Was not their mistake once more bred of the life of slavery that they had been living? – a life which was always looking upon everything, except mankind, animate and inanimate – "nature" as people used to call it – as one thing, and mankind as another. It was natural for people thinking in this way, that they should try to make "nature" their slave, since they thought that "nature" was something outside them.'

Precisely this irony reveals that Judy, **Marshall*** – and their supposedly godlike transformer -are merely potential animated armchairs, if that is the way the analytical mind chooses, for its own childish and self-pitying reasons, to regard them. We can make ourselves and each other both animal and object, protoplasm and furniture, but 'nature' nowhere says we have to!