

Reply to Peter Faulkner's Review of Art and Forbidden Fruit

John Le Bourgeois

I was surprised to see the *Journal* devote such extensive space to Peter Faulkner's review of my biography of William Morris.¹ In the Preface (p. 5), I stated that the book 'explains how Morris's love for his sister evolved, how it destroyed his marriage and how it produced the great achievements of his life'. The subject is difficult and poignant, so I appreciate Faulkner's saying that the work was not written in a 'derogatory spirit'.

In his biography of Morris, J. W. Mackail reported that Charlotte Yonge's novel *The Heir of Redclyffe* provided Morris with a 'pattern for actual life'. In my book I tried to show how Morris incorporated his sister into that pattern as a guiding light and how she appeared in a number of his poems and stories. I identified, for example, the characters Hugh and Mabel in the story 'Frank's Sealed Letter' as Morris and his sister. Faulkner makes an excellent observation when he points out that Hugh is deformed. I wish I had thought to use the fact in my analysis of the story, because it is an apt metaphor. Morris saw his sister not only as a strength and a guide, but as a debility as well. He presented the contradiction brilliantly when Hugh opens the sealed letter to read Frank's advice to distinguish between the noble Mabel and the real one, and to remember and honour the first and to forget the second. Hugh's anguish at the story's end reveals how difficult it was for Morris to achieve that separation.

I am also pleased that Faulkner thinks that on the whole I have presented my argument with skill. But, naturally I am disappointed that, despite the skill, he finds the argument lacking. In particular, he disagrees with my reading of Morris's sonnet 'Near but Far Away', which we both agree is important to understanding Morris's private life. He observes that in chapter seven I make a good point were it only true. He writes:

The chapter ends with what would be a very telling piece of evidence for Le Bourgeois' case if we were to accept his interpretation of it ... In Le Bourgeois's account of the poem, 'the sister turns to look at her brother ... He starts to speak, fighting to overcome restraints of shame, but she stops

him. Instead, they kiss as she pulls him into paradise. She then withdraws, leaving him with unwelcome truth, pinned down between a threatening sea and a blank wall' (p. 61).

The poem is dramatic and effective, but certainly problematic if we seek to explain it biographically – as in this case the personal urgency of the mode encourages us to do. Its crux is the moment of the kiss:

She stayed me, and cried 'Brother!' our lips met
Her dear hands drew me into Paradise.
Sweet seemed that kiss till thence her feet were gone ...

The woman withdraws, leaving the man in isolation. The crucial question is whether we should interpret the word 'Brother' literally, or whether it marks the moment when a beloved woman terminates the scene by using the term to tell the man that the relationship can go no further. The latter has been the view of most critics, in particular that of Lindsay, as we have seen. MacCarthy quotes the whole poem and also relates it to Morris's feeling for Georgie Burne-Jones at this difficult time...²

I agree that a crucial question is whether we should see the woman in this poem as Morris's sister Emma or his friend Georgie Burne-Jones, but Faulkner has framed the question badly. The alternative that he proposes to a literal reading could apply to Emma as well as Georgie, or even to Janey as Philip Henderson has argued. But, more to the point, it is simply incorrect to contend that the word 'Brother' 'marks the moment when a beloved woman terminates the scene by using the term to tell the man that the relationship can go no further'. 'Brother' actually marks the moment when she kisses him and pulls him into Paradise. There is nothing in the poem on which to base the notion that the term 'Brother' is code for telling the man that their relationship is over and can go no further. Rather, it is the unwelcome 'truth' at the end of the poem that tells us that the relationship is forbidden and should not continue.

Even so, Faulkner makes it clear that he supports Jack Lindsay's view, and Fiona MacCarthy's, that the poem refers to Georgie Burne-Jones and not to Morris's sister (or to Janey). He apparently feels the matter was firmly settled when Lindsay published his biography in 1975 and brushed off Philip Henderson's view that the woman in the poem was Janey and dismissed my view that she is Emma. Faulkner writes:

Lindsay points out that, at the climactic moment of the sonnet, the woman addresses the man she has kissed as 'Brother'. He then comments,

'It has been argued that here Morris is revealing his unassuaged passion for Emma; but that is untenable. We might say however that his feeling of hopelessness at the moment of closest union (with Georgie?) awakens some sort of recollection of primal patterns of loss and denial. In saying "Brother" instead of "Husband" or "Beloved", Georgie revives the taboo against which there is no appeal, making his exclusion final'. (p. 188) We find in a footnote that the rejected claim for Emma had been made in an unpublished lecture to the William Morris Society by John Le Bourgeois in 1972.³

Yet, when we turn to Lindsay to see what else he wrote about this poem, we find nothing solid. 'It seems' he wrote, 'that Georgie hesitated on the brink of giving herself to Morris. This reading of the situation is supported by the poem which May [Morris] printed as "Near but Far Away", inscribed "May 11th" and which cannot be addressed to Janey (as it has been taken)'.⁴ When we read on, we still find that he made no effort to link anything in the poem to his assertion that the woman is Georgie or to his contention that she is neither Janey nor Emma. Lindsay swept all objections aside and pronounced a new dogma.

It is difficult for me to understand why Faulkner prefers Lindsay's reading of the poem (or Henderson's) to mine. It may be, as Faulkner says, that Lindsay's is the view accepted by most critics. But, it is my experience that most people, including critics, give their first priority to a literal reading when they encounter a text, whether it's the poetry of William Morris or any other document, and only resort to an alternative explanation if there is some compelling reason to do so. If nothing else, consistency calls for a literal reading of the poem. Lindsay was quite willing to link the young woman in the poem 'The Three Flowers' – who asks 'Do you keep your child-love, brother?' – to Emma. If a straight reading of the word 'brother' is acceptable in the early poem, consistency requires a more robust argument than has been presented for disqualifying the word 'Brother' from meaning 'Brother' in the later poem.

When I spoke to the William Morris Society at Kelmscott House thirty-five years ago, R. C. H. Briggs, the Society's Hon. Secretary, offered to print my talk in the *Journal* and asked if Lindsay could be sent my paper as he was unable to attend. I agreed to both proposals. By the time Lindsay's biography came out, my lecture had not been published in the *Journal* so I offered it to *The South Carolina Review* where it appeared in 1977.⁵ Anyone interested may read the piece on-line at the *Review's* website.⁶

In the final chapter of my book, I argued that Lindsay and MacCarthy also misinterpreted another poem, one that begins with the line 'Why Dost Thou Struggle'. Both authors identified the woman as Janey Morris, while I contend she is Emma Morris. The woman of the poem expresses surprise that her love

would arouse passion in the man, a fact which precludes Janey and is consistent with a sister's love. The woman also refers to the childish nature of the man's love, which suggests a love that developed in childhood and resonates with the reference to 'child-love' in 'The Three Flowers' mentioned above. Faulkner writes that he is not persuaded by what I say, but neither does he come to a vigorous defense of Lindsay and MacCarthy, preferring to say that the poem's 'biographical significance cannot easily be answered'. I take heart in his conceding that the poem 'certainly deserves careful consideration'.⁷

Like most people who have been drawn to him through his poems or socialist lectures or his designs, I admire William Morris for his accomplishments and his integrity. He was an amazing man, and I am convinced that knowing his attachment to his sister in no way diminishes his stature. In fact, to understand the way in which he struggled to re-channel a set of feelings over which he had little control can only enhance our appreciation of his strength of character. For me, he becomes humanised through a tragic flaw.

NOTES

1. Peter Faulkner, 'John Y. Le Bourgeois, *Art and Forbidden Fruit: Hidden Passion in the Life of William Morris*.' *JWMS*, volume XVII, number 2, Summer 2007, pp. 115–138.
2. *ibid*, p. 125.
3. *ibid*, p. 117.
4. Jack Lindsay, *William Morris: His Life and Work*. London: Constable, 1975, p. 186.
5. John Le Bourgeois, 'The Love and Marriage of William Morris: A New Interpretation.' *South Carolina Review*, vol. 9, number 2, April 1977, pp. 43–55.
6. http://www.clemson.edu/caah/cedp/SCR_Archives_Facsimiles.htm [last accessed 28 March 2008].
7. *JWMS*, *op. cit.*, p. 137.