The Defence Of Janey

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Extracts from a lecture given at the William Morris Gallery in November 1986.

Janey Morris had a great capacity for loyal friendship — maybe a good deal more than her husband. Evidence of her close enduring friendships is contained in letters to Philip Webb and Crom Price, for example, who are the only two people — as far as I’ve been able to discover — to whom Janey ever mentioned incidents from her childhood. She told Webb that her family had not been happy, and recalled for Crom how she had enviously watched the boats on the river at Oxford, never dreaming she would enjoy a pleasure trip herself. And it is significant that she retained the friendship of these two staunch friends of Morris’s throughout the ‘stormy years’ of her relationship with Gabriel: they at least seem never to have cast any blame at her.

Incidentally, Janey also had several very good, longterm friendships with women — with Marie Stillman, for example, with Janey Cobden, and with Rosalind Howard.

Jane’s Oxfordshire origins were recalled too, with the choice of Kelmscott Manor as a summer residence — which has come to be so closely identified with Morris’s idealism. It was, of course, Morris himself who in 1871 found the house in an estate agent’s catalogue, who went to inspect it and who negotiated the lease, and it was, from the beginning, his ideal of a traditional house.

But, also in the beginning, its purpose was to provide a country retreat where Jane and Gabriel could be together, without constant gossip. In town, there was gossip — that’s clear from other people’s letters and from Burne-Jones’s teasing caricature of Gabriel tiptoeing after Janey with her cushions. At Kelmscott, they were protected from gossip, partly by the isolation and also by the fact that the tenancy was jointly held by her husband and his friend, colleague and business partner.

But it seems so far to have escaped notice that Kelmscott lay, so to speak, in Janey’s native land. Both her parents were born within a few miles of the Manor — her mother Ann Maizey (who we may note died earlier in the year) was from Alvescot and her father Robert Burden from Stanton Harcourt.

And Jane herself, during her first weeks at the Manor in 1871, described the countryside as ‘all delightful and home-like to me’. Others thought the landscape flat and the walks dull, but Jane’s affection for the place never wavered.

The summer of 1871 at Kelmscott, with Morris away in Iceland, was perhaps the happiest time of her life. But the idyll didn’t last. The next year, as Janey again prepared to spend the summer with Gabriel at Kelmscott, he suddenly collapsed with raving paranoid insanity.

Some friends explicitly blamed Janey, and regarded Morris with amazement as he accompanied his wife to see the invalid. Gabriel was extremely deranged — he heard
voices coming from the walls and bushes and believed himself the victim of a hostile conspiracy. He spent the summer in enforced seclusion until his hallucinations subsided a little, and in September he re-joined Janey at the Manor. And she cared for him — a rather thankless task: 'That Gabriel was mad was but too true', Janey remarked later. 'No-one knows it better than myself.'

It was however hopeless: Gabriel never recovered despite her efforts and in 1876 when, as she described, she realised she could do nothing to help him, she stopped seeing him. All in all, it was a sad conclusion to a great romance.

The other reason Janey gave for not seeing Gabriel was on account of her children, who were now in their teens. And this brings us to another of the accusations against her, which is that she was lacking in maternal feeling towards her daughters, Jenny and May.

This, like the accusation of infidelity, is a serious charge, but unlike that accusation, it is not true. As with the inference — seemingly derived from visual images — that her personality was cold, aloof, withdrawn, the evidence from her actions simply doesn't support the view that she lacked motherly affection.

This calumny in fact derives partly from Bernard Shaw — whom Jane had other reasons to dislike — and from her own report that at one period her doctor said she should no longer live with Jenny while she remained epileptic, as, in Jane's words, 'my brain was suffering from it'.

This outside medical opinion has carelessly been transferred to Jane, who never in fact abandoned her care of Jenny, and who wrote, in the very next letter, the following account of her feelings about the epileptic seizures: 'It has been a dreadful grief for us all, worse for me than anyone, as I have been so constantly with her,' she wrote, 'I never get used to it — I mean in the sense of not minding — every time the thing occurs it is as if a dagger were thrust into me'.

This was written in 1888: Jenny's epilepsy had been a fact of family life for 12 years, and it was of course a life sentence. In my view, insufficient attention has been given to this tragic development and its effect on Jane. She was 35 years old when Jenny's fits first began, and she was never free from the responsibility for the remaining 38 years of her life. Those caring for invalid or handicapped dependants know what that means in terms of anguish, despair and exhaustion. Those who accuse Janey of being discontented, self-pitying and moody may consider what she was enduring.

She did from time to time succumb to depression and desperation. Because she has been blamed and her husband credited with more affection towards Jenny, it's only fair to point out that Morris's frantic political activity, through from the Eastern Question and Anti-Scrape to the SDF and the Socialist League, coincided with the years of Jenny's illness, and that in these years he was seldom at home, spending many of his evenings and weekends in political meetings and travels. True, when at home he showed great tenderness towards Jenny, but it was Jane and May who carried the main burden; the hired nurse was only part of the solution.

Jane is also charged with lack of affection towards May, partly at least because of her negative responses towards May's marriage: 'I suppose the dreadful ceremony will
have to take place before very long’ she wrote in 1889. ‘Alas! alas!’ was her comment when the date was fixed. ‘I have done all I can to dissuade her, but she is a fool’, she wrote — unkindly — to Rosalind Howard.

In her defence it must be said that Jane knew that May did not love her prospective husband Harry Sparling, whom she seems to have picked up on the rebound from Bernard Shaw. In many ways Jane remained a romantic believer in true love. If she warned her daughter against a loveless marriage, her advice was vindicated within a couple of years, when Shaw re-appeared on the scene, re-awakened all May’s feeling, drove Sparling off and then vanished again himself. To some extent, Jane’s morose response towards May’s emotional affairs would seem to have been justified.

However despite the loss of her lover to insanity, one daughter to epilepsy and the second to unhappiness, Janey did not allow sorrows to overwhelm her entirely. Helena Sickert, visiting the Morris house, recalled Jane’s ‘delicious chuckling laugh with which she would greet our youthful extravagances’, the marvellous skill of Jane’s embroidery and ‘the exciting moments when she would rise and fling the great portiere down and spread it out, so as to judge whether the general effect was what was intended’.

There was also the simple comfort of the household and housekeeping — the plain trestle table, the dresser with blue and white crockery, the honey, the home-made bread and ‘the exquisite cleanliness of the whole house — for Mrs Morris was a notable housekeeper’.

Janey’s sense of fun, on which several friends remarked, can be found in her cheerful account of family visits to Crom Price’s Tower and Broadway, and from the travel diary of the Voyage of the Ark, that ramshackle houseboat, with Crom and William de Morgan making excruciating puns. Janey, the supposed invalid, took her needlework, supervised the supply of provisions, slept in sometimes uncomfortable riverside inns, and went on ahead of the rest at Oxford to prepare the Manor for their arrival.

In these years, she also took up new pursuits. The tiny illuminated keepsake presented to Rosalind Howard in Italy demonstrates a high standard of decorative illumination. Jane also tried her hand at bookbinding — three tiny handmade booklets survive. And she designed a book cover for the prison poems of Wilfrid Scawen Blunt — decorated with shamrocks in honour of his support for Irish Home Rule.

She was of course in love with Wilfrid Blunt. This second adulterous affair is less excusable than her love for Rossetti. But, however hard I try, as Jane’s biographer, to sympathise with her feelings and her friendships, I can’t regard this as a great romance, nor entirely understand what she saw in Blunt; surely she realised what a shallow philanderer and vain, self-important figure he was. I can only conclude that, with the loss of Gabriel and concern for Jenny, she was emotionally vulnerable to Blunt’s flattering flirtations.

It does however provide us with some clues as to Jane’s political views, which is the last calumny with which I wish to deal. ‘Spoiled and indifferent’ is how one commentator has described her, and wholly antipathetic to her husband’s political activities. But even a cursory reading of his letters with their long accounts of political
‘Tears, idle tears’ from Tennyson’s The Princess; a page from an illuminated keepsake designed and executed by Jane Morris at Oneglia for Christmas 1878, and presented to Rosalind Howard. Now in the archives of Castle Howard, York.

matters will show this can hardly have been the case: Morris was not one to bore his correspondents with subjects in which they took no interest. And Jane’s letters to other people, notably Blunt, confirm that she did indeed follow day-to-day political events with interest.

It is true that she did not follow Morris into the heat of the Socialist sects, but perhaps this was because she had more independence of judgement?

It was — again — Bernard Shaw who spread the notion of Jane’s hostility to socialism and socialists as ‘tiresome people who orated on economics and infant mortality’ and invaded her beautiful house. This is quite unjust. She did not dislike socialists — except perhaps the one named Bernard Shaw — nor was she indifferent to child mortality.

She does not seem to have liked street corner agitation or large scale public confrontations. She was however a lifelong atheist and republican, and, no doubt under Blunt’s influence, she was a strong supporter of Irish independence. Morris of course actively opposed national struggles. And, such was her admiration for Blunt that she offered to canvass for him when he stood as a parliamentary candidate — even though he was a Tory and she a Liberal!

She did not support free school meals, on the grounds that this would give the parents more money to spend on drink. Was this perhaps prompted by personal memories? In other ways she was very concerned with poor living conditions.

She supported the village school in Kelmscott and other endeavours to raise the quality of life for farm labourers’ families. It was her idea to build a village hall for
community use, and her memorial to her husband was the pair of handsome cottages designed by Philip Webb, to provide accommodation for those, like the schoolteacher, who made a positive contribution to village life. If not socialism, this was very practical politics.

Contrary to many accounts, Jane was also interested in ideal communities — such as the real life utopian experiment at Topolobampo founded in New Mexico, 'several hundred miles from most other places', as she said. 'Do you think it sounds inviting?' She also followed the progress of Morris's own account of utopia when it first appeared as a serial, as her letters to Blunt indicate.

'Would Jane have found a place in News from Nowhere?' asks a recent writer on Morris, who repeats the tales of her political indifference and implies that she would not have been at home in such a paradise. I believe she is there — not indeed as the young woman who represents the future, but as the older woman who greets the travellers when they arrive at the head of the river for haymaking:

A tall handsome woman, with black wavy hair and deep set grey eyes, came forward on the bank and waved her hand gracefully to us and said: 'Dick my friend we have almost had to wait for you! Why didn’t you take us by surprise and come yesterday?'

This stately lady — 'for stately is the word that must be used for her' says the narrator — reminds me much of Jane, and it is surely her house and lifestyle which inspires the simplicity and contentment of Nowhere — the house being of course Kelmscott Manor which as Ellen says 'held the gathered crumbs of happiness from the confused and turbulent past' - the house with 'its superabundance of well-tended gardens' and its simple, peaceful, uncluttered interior.

The utopian view of the good life under communism in News From Nowhere may owe more than we suspect to Janey's real life example.