William Morris’s Childhood and Schooling

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Linda Anne Richardson, an American-born Morris scholar and member of the Society, was awarded the D.Phil degree from the University of Oxford in January 1990, a few months before her untimely death in May. In her wide-ranging and comprehensive dissertation William Morris and Women: Experience and Representation, Linda discussed Morris relationships with women in childhood, adulthood and in the Socialist movement, as well as his portrayal of women in prose, poetry and political writings. Here we reproduce an extract from Chapter One. The dissertation is available for consultation in the Society’s library at Kelmscott House.

When Victoria ascended the throne in 1837, William was three years old. Emma, the eldest of the Morris siblings, was seven and Henrietta was five. The family lived near London, and Mr. Morris commuted daily to work in the City. He must have seen something of the coronation festivities, and probably entertained his children with stories about them. The children would also have seen images of the event in the newspapers their father brought home or in the magazines to which he and their mother subscribed. However they learned of it, the three oldest Morris children certainly made a favourite game of the crowning of a Queen. Emma or Henrietta, because they were older and because they were female, like the new Queen herself, would have played the leading part in the games. William, the toddler, “played at swearing fealty/To a Queen of beauty bright.”\(^1\) The subtle distinction between sitting on the throne and actual puissance would have been lost on the children: for them the Queen’s rule was absolute. And thus William first learned to associate political power with women.

Practical, quotidian power would also have been associated in the small boy’s mind with women. His father, the business commuter, was away from home most of the time, leaving his mother to deal with the management of the household. The Morris home was a large establishment, with numerous servants, so little William saw his mother doing no work herself but directing the work of others, including men. That he believed she did this well is perhaps reflected in his praise of housekeepers in News From Nowhere: “don’t you know that it is a great pleasure to a clever woman to manage a house skilfully, and to do it so that all the house-mates about her look pleased, and are grateful to her?”\(^2\) And the Morris home, as biographers from Mackail onward have been careful to stress, incorporated many of the elements of the medieval household that William loved as an adult. What these biographers have not so carefully noted is that, in the tradition of the medieval lady of the manor, it was William’s mother who arranged for the production of their homemade goods, such as beer, butter and bread, that it was she who arranged for the observation of the old festivals in which the family and servants delighted, and that it was she who oversaw
the dispensation of justice and bounty within the walls of the household. It is not true, as Mackail says, that the “love of the Middle Ages was born in him,”3 but it was inculcated at a very early age by the circumstances of the home his mother created and controlled.

Mackail also asks us to believe that the “knowledge of books came to him almost by instinct. ‘We never remember his learning regularly to read’, his sisters say, ‘though he may have had a few lessons from our governess;’ and he himself could not remember a time when he was unable to read.”4 It seems obvious that he was taught, perhaps even his basic ABCs, chiefly by his older sisters. “Children bring each other up,” he often said to his own daughter, May, who added, “and as one of a large family he knew it by experience.”5 As they grew, the play of the three children, William, Emma and Henrietta, revolved around stories they read, and their play was eventually replaced entirely by their shared experience of reading. This is evident in one of his early stories, ‘Frank’s Sealed Letter’, where Morris describes a scene based on a memory from his own childhood: “I see a little girl sitting on the grass beneath the limes in the hot summer tide, with eyes fixed on the far-away blue hills, and seeing who knows what shapes there; for the boy by her side is reading to her wondrous stories of knight and lady and fairy thing that lived in the ancient days”. The children in the story find a picture of a knight being crowned by a fair lady at a tournament, and the girl immediately suggests they act out the scene.6 Significantly, in the story it is the little girl who controls events, just as in William’s early childhood it was Emma and Henrietta who controlled play and reading. William, as this passage also suggests, cultivated his oral reading skills to please his sisters, with evident success. Decades later, Emma told Mackail how she and William used to read Clara Reeve’s 1778 Gothic novel The Old English Baron together, “poring over the enthralling pages till both were wrought up to a state of mind that made them afraid to cross the park to reach home”.7 His ability to control words, and to use them to bring pleasure to his sisters, seems to have made him eager to monopolize the shared readings: by the time he was an adolescent “he could not bear to be read aloud to himself,”8 but loved to read to others.

As he grew older, and engaged in independent reading, he brought his favourite books to his sisters. But William, who had been accustomed to allowing his sisters to choose the texts they shared, felt some trepidation on bringing books to Emma and Henrietta. This can be seen in memories associated with tales from the Arabian Nights. According to Mackail, “as he grew bigger, he found and revelled in Lane’s ‘Arabian Nights’”,9 and this was a book he no doubt brought home to share with his sisters. Decades later, in Morris’s unfinished work, The Novel on Blue Paper, the brothers Arthur and John, who may easily be read as a composite personality based on the author, read from this book for Clara:

they fell to the book, Arthur reading at first, to whom Clara drew near, and sat watching his eager face, with a little frown on it, with kind and serious eyes; but turned, in the pauses of the tale, to talk about it to John, who spoke well .... Then John took the book and read, not so well as Arthur, because he couldn’t help thinking of what was coming further on in the tale ...10

This is clearly a passage which calls on Morris’s memories of reading the Arabian Nights to Emma and Henrietta. In Blue Paper, Clara is protective, nearly maternal, toward Arthur, but she expects John to be strong and capable. It was apparently
Morris’s intention to have Clara increasingly dependent on John, who becomes her brother-in-law. Although a multiplicity of interpretations can be drawn from this densely autobiographical novel, I wish here only to point out how Morris uses these characters to reflect on his boyhood relationship with Emma and Henrietta. By splitting one brother, himself, into two brothers, Arthur and John, he expresses the ambivalence he felt as a child who was first allowed to be utterly dependent upon his sisters and then, increasingly, expected to take the lead over them.

At the age of fourteen William was sent to Marlborough College, from which he returned home only for vacations. The loss of daily contact with his sisters was not compensated for by new intellectual pleasures. “I learned next to nothing there, for indeed next to nothing was taught”, he later wrote. The College was isolated, and, of course, restricted to males. And Marlborough, although recently established, seems to have sprung to life with public school traditions of sadistic violence full-blown. The boys learned to value, and abuse, their privileged position in society: they could tease and torment their less privileged neighbours with impunity. In the 1880s Morris told a friend how in his schooldays a local farmer was pelted from Marlborough’s windows as he passed by, evidently suffering some injury, for he “lodged a complaint with the Headmaster”. The school was assembled, ostensibly to hear the farmer “state his grievance”, but the raucous laughter with which the boys greeted him “was so great that the grave inquiry had to be abandoned”. There was to be no justice for the farmer. Between the boys, as well, there was an atmosphere of violence. William, “fond of mooning and talking to himself, and considered a little mad by the other boys”, must have come in for his share of victimization, although, in the best public school manner, he only admitted to having “had a hard time of it, as chaps who have brains and feelings generally do at school”.

Nothing in his boyhood, although he had played and hunted and fished with his brothers, prepared him for the brutalizing society of the boyish hierarchy at Marlborough. He learned quickly to protect himself with his fists, and, with a skill he had cultivated for the entertainment of Emma and Henrietta, he “invented and poured forth endless stories, vaguely described as ‘about knights and fairies’, in which one adventure rose out of another, and the tale flowed on from day to day over a whole term”. Consigned to quarters dominated by older boys, he found a protector in the “captain of his dormitory, who had a fancy for listening to stories”. It may easily be imagined that he also privately cultivated story-telling as a means of consolation and self-amusement, and learned quickly to differentiate between the elements of his stories he could safely share with the other boys and those he should keep to himself. Surrounded by the boys, he would hardly have been likely to spin the sentimental tales of ladies and their suitors which pleased his sisters, and which, as a consequence, he himself had come to love. In the darkened dormitory at Marlborough, often, no doubt, to the less than musical accompaniment of a small boy being tormented in a distant corner, William spun lurid tales of knights in shining armour hacking and carving at one another.

His chief enjoyments at Marlborough were solitary ones: reading in the College library and exploring the neighbouring countryside. He used these opportunities to deepen his knowledge of the past, for the College had a good collection of books on the Middle Ages, and the area was rich with buildings and sites from the neolithic period onward. But, much as he enjoyed his readings and ramblings, William missed
his home and the company of his sisters, although, taking on the expected masculine role, he accepted that he should not. “I am sure you must think me a great fool to be always thinking about home always, but I really can’t help it,” he wrote to Emma. He was no doubt glad to be released from the College and brought home to study privately for his University matriculation examinations in 1851, although only Henrietta waited there for him – Emma married a clergyman and moved away to Derbyshire in 1850. Now too grown-up to play in the gardens together, William and Henrietta could at least share books, stories and conversation for the year which elapsed before he went into residence at Exeter College, Oxford. Given his experience of public school, it is unlikely that William looked forward to entering the all-male preserve of the University.

William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones began their studies at Exeter College in the same year, and quickly became friends. Through Edward, William met several other young men, mostly at Pembroke College, and formed with them a network of friendships which Edward named the “Brotherhood”. With these friends, William could replicate to a degree the intellectual closeness he had previously known only with his sisters: he “early started the habit of reading aloud to Burne-Jones”, and, first protecting himself with an air of nonchalant self-deprecation, began to share his own poems with Edward, and then the others. R.W. Dixon, one of the Brotherhood, described the sensation Morris’s first revealed poem caused within the group:

I felt that it was something the like of which had never been heard before. It was a thing entirely new: founded on nothing previous: perfectly original, whatever its value, and sounding truly striking and beautiful, extremely decisive and powerful in execution. It must be remembered particularly that it was the first piece of verse that he had ever written.

William told them it was his first attempt at poetry, and that “if this is poetry, it is very easy to write”. But, as is now well-known, William had been writing verses for several years. A cache of his poetry, sent to his sister Emma, was discovered shortly after her death in 1921. The reason for William’s prevarication as he brought the poem before his new friends at Oxford is easily determined: ‘The Willow and the Red Cliff’, in which a woman grieves for her lover, who we learn has been lost at sea, before flinging herself from the Red Cliff to join him in death, is a poem of the sort he had previously shared only with his sisters. The lessons of Marlborough present in his mind, he wanted to be able to distance himself easily from the work if it met with derision. The Brotherhood were careful to adopt acceptable masculine tastes, in literature and recreation. Burne-Jones once said lady novelists “never give us any fighting – they only give us magnificent sentiments …. I can’t fight myself; I suppose that’s why I like to read about it”, but then hastened to add, worried perhaps about his manliness, that “at Oxford” he fenced, used the broadsword and single-stick. William had chosen his new friends wisely, however: Edward also remembered how, in their second year at Exeter, “one morning, just after breakfast”, and, probably, just after a long night of vacillation, William “brought me in the first poem he ever made”; Edward accepted the poetry in the same way William’s sisters did, admiring the effort and the sentiment, and thereby earned the kind of trust and affection William had formerly only given to Emma and Henrietta. For William, who was once again
free to express the softness of his nature, the Brotherhood became akin to a sisterhood.

NOTES

2 *Collected Works*, XVI, 60.
4 ibid. I, 5.
5 *Collected Works*, VI, xiv.
6 ibid. I, 320-1.
8 ibid. I, 37.
9 ibid. I.8.
   To Andreus Scheu, 15 Sept. 1884.
18 ibid. I, 52.
19 *Collected Works* XII, xxx-xxxv.