Review

Jane and May Morris — A Biographical Story 1839–1938

Jan Marsh has already written informatively about Jane Morris in Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood (1985), but she has put us further in her debt with a more detailed account of Jane’s life, which she links interestingly with that of her younger daughter May. We have now been given a fuller view of both women than had hitherto been available, and very illuminating it proves to be.

Jan Marsh is an unshowy writer whose painstaking research has obviously taken her to all the relevant manuscript collections in England, as well as to the printed sources. Her work is marked by its thoroughness and fairmindedness. She remarks in the preface that she has chosen to tell the stories “in a relatively simple and straightforward way”, which precludes “the theoretical discussion of the position of women” (p.xii), but in fact the account of these lives raises many questions which might seem less urgent if presented more theoretically. In the case of Jane, we see a woman raised by marriage from a lower social class, adapting herself with skill and intelligence to life in the bohemian middle class, and capable of becoming friendly with educated women like Georgie Burne-Jones and Rosalind Howard. Jan Marsh writes clearly and sympathetically, but objectively, about the failure of the Morris’s marriage, and of Jane’s affair with Rossetti. Occasionally the lack of evidence leads to unsupported assertions, as in Chapter 4, ‘Becoming a Lady’, with its “presumption” that Jane was given “a crash course in middle-class manners, etiquette and household management during the year between her engagement and marriage” (p. 29). If Jane was then sent to “some kind of ladies’ seminary or finishing academy”, it is a great pity that no evidence survives.

Fortunately there are few similar areas of ‘presumption’ in the book, partly because Jane was a good correspondent. Her letters to Rossetti, Blunt and others are well used here to create a sense of a woman of intelligence and self-control living in a world which placed considerable burdens on her, particularly in the form of her elder daughter Jenny’s epilepsy. Jan Marsh repeats her belief, for which she presents good evidence, that “the necessity of dealing with her epilepsy may have brought Jenny’s parents closer together than they had been since the days of Red House” (p. 144). When Morris died, she suggests that Jane’s feelings for him were of some depth, despite her telling Blunt that she had never loved him: “it seems that while she never loved him romantically, her later actions and words reveal a good deal of affection and concern” (p. 233). This is surely so. It is, therefore, a little surprising a few pages later to find Jane’s remark that Mackail in the biography, not being “an artist in feeling”, failed to be ‘sympathetic’ to “such a man” as Morris, put down with the response that sympathy was “not a quality Jane herself had manifested in abundant measure to her husband” (p. 245). Perhaps there was some resentment on Jane’s part of Georgie Burne-Jones’s large role in supplying material to Mackail for the biography. That there may have been some sense of rivalry between the two women is suggested to me by Jane’s letter to Blunt in February 1896 from Folkestone, reporting that Georgie had been to visit the sick Morris for a few days, and had “proposed her having a nurse,
which gave great offence”. Jan Marsh (p. 231) interprets the offence as being to Morris, but in view of the quoted conclusion of the letter — “I shall do all that seems possible as long as I can keep well” — it may well have been to Jane, feeling that the quality of her care for her husband was being criticised.

May Morris is no doubt known to most of us as her father’s daughter and editor. This book makes a good case for seeing her as a designer and person deserving respect in her own right. The debacle of her marriage to Halliday Sparling (no surprise to her mother, who viewed the whole enterprise with no optimism at all) is in part attributed, and with justice, to the irresponsible behaviour of Bernard Shaw, who seems to have enjoyed flirting with May but had no serious intention of marrying a woman of such strong character. For May, however, the affair seems to have been very serious indeed. Jan Marsh writes very well about May’s later relationship with Mary Lobb, and reproduces a splendid photograph that suggests how the latter’s evident strength may have been a necessary source of support and vitality for May’s old age (p. 282). The story of Miss Lobb’s lecturing Basil Blackwell in 1936 to reprint all the unpublished work of Morris rather than bothering May to work on selecting from among them is splendid as retold from Blackwell’s recollections: “You’ve got to publish all that stuff. Don’t think I care a snap for the writings. I hate old William Morris — dreadful old bore — but I’ll not have May worried. You go home and write tonight telling her you will publish everything” (quoted p. 291). It has to be admitted that not much of this book has the vitality of this anecdote, but then the lives of those two women were not often attended with such drama. What can be said is that Jan Marsh has now enabled us to know much more fully than before a good deal about how they lived and felt, and has presented her findings with clarity and good sense.

I regret some of the slightly frivolous chapter-headings in this book — ‘Love and an Idyll by the Thames’ and ‘Jane’s Last Fling’ among them — and the fact that the paper is of such inferior quality and the typography undistinguished: in my copy the type is placed towards the edge of the pages, with a large central margin — I hope this is not true of all copies. The Quartet typography and paper for the earlier volume were immeasurably superior. Let us hope that the comparative cheapness of the paperback edition of this book, with its 32 well chosen illustrations, will ensure for it the wide readership that it undoubtedly deserves.

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