‘She and He’: Morris or Cockerell?

Susan Mooney

The last poem William Morris wrote was called ‘She and He’. In it a woman invites a man – with recollections of their shared past – to come with her to her house and participate in a social occasion in her honour. In reply the man rejects the invitation with sorrow. The poem was the subject of an article by R. C. H. Briggs in the Sydney Carlyle Cockerell memorial edition of the Journal (Winter 1962). The article begins with Morris’s note to Georgie Burne-Jones to whom the poem was sent shortly after it was written: ‘This may be called “a poem by the way”. A stanza got into my head on Friday last, and so I thought I would go on with it. I send it on so that it may not interrupt tomorrow (Wednesday’s reading) as that is business and like to take time. W.M.’ Briggs goes on to say: ‘This pencilled note of explanation was written on the original draft of the poem Morris sent to Lady Burne-Jones on Tuesday, 7 January 1896. Before it was posted, Cockerell made a fair copy.’

The article included a reproduction of the first page of Morris’s draft and the same section of Cockerell’s fair copy, showing the latter’s minute and tidy penmanship. Morris’s draft in his flowing hand shows many corrections, but one line without any corrections by Morris is altered entirely in Cockerell’s copy – and in the fair copy later made by Morris himself. Stanza 6 in Morris’s draft reads:

Twas oft from glooming of the lea
Into the house we turned
And I by thee and thou by me
For neer another yearned

While in Cockerell’s copy the last two lines read:

And I by thee, and thou by me
Watched how the oak-log burned.

The first version is easily recognisable as Morris’s style, but the second, and perhaps weaker, version lacks the distinctly erotic tone of the original; the change from an active, intimate image to a passive, domestic one in a poem recounting an enduring emotional entanglement is at least a little odd and could as well fit the notion of mere companionship. The alteration was not overlooked by May Morris; when compiling her father’s work she must have written to Cockerell about it. His reply, dated 6 October 1914, is as follows:

Dear May,

I have no very clear recollection of my copying that poem, but there can be
no question that the revision was made at the time by your father. I see that my
 copy is dated Jan 7 1896 11:30 A.M. so I evidently made the copy soon after
 I arrived in the morning & the original manuscript was then posted to Lady
 B.J. I can’t be sure whether awake or awoke is the correct reading but, on the
 whole I must vote for awake.

Yrs affectionately

SCC²

Cockerell’s insistence that ‘there can be no question’ of his having altered the poem
 hints that May – an expert on her father’s poetry – might well have made such a
 suggestion on the basis of the inconsistency mentioned above: the interesting
 implication is that she at least considered the possibility of this type of intervention
 on Cockerell’s part.³ But Cockerell’s reply raises more questions than it answers.
 If Morris authorised the alteration why did he not change the draft that was sent
to Georgie? It was already covered with corrections. Morris’s fair copy – made
 after the draft had been sent – follows Cockerell’s precisely, suggesting that Morris
 copied it later from that source, perhaps not exactly recalling his original words.
 If Cockerell did make an unauthorised change, what motivated him to do so? If
 Morris made the change why did he produce two versions? Perhaps these questions
 can begin to ‘take shape’ if one version is seen as a direct personal communication
to Georgie Burne-Jones, and the other as intended for the public at large.

Whether Morris intended ‘She and He’ to be autobiographical is, of course,
open to question; but as it explores a complex, lifelong relationship and was sent
immediately to Georgie – she might well have read it in that light. My research
into Morris’s relationship with Georgiana Burne-Jones suggests that he was
preoccupied with her even before his meeting Janey, and that he may (perhaps
belatedly) have identified his feelings for her as love as early as 1867.⁴ I have no
 doubt that many of Morris’s most direct and anguished love poems are for and
about Georgie, not Janey, and that he used his poems as vehicles for the expression
of his love:

Go to her poor rhymes who know my heart indeed
And sing to her the words I cannot say . . .⁵

In his *Life of William Morris*, even the careful and scholarly Mackail specifically
directs us to look for further biography in Morris’s own work:

Shy and reserved in life, as to many matters that lay near his heart, he had all
the instinct of a born man of letters for laying himself open in his books, and
having no concealments from the widest circle of all . . . People who have not
this imaginative instinct often wonder how a poet can bear to lay open his
innermost feelings, and uncover the weaknesses of which man is made, still
oftener the self-revelation passes clean over the heads of his audience, and so
far are they from wondering that they do not even notice. It is the knowledge,
no doubt, that his innermost heart, his love and hope and sorrow, which he
pours into his verses is to the unsympathetic reader simply meaningless, which
allows a poet to write fearlessly what, being a poet, he must write in any case.
Sorge nie dass ich verrathe! so true still are Heine's bitter words: sorge nie! Diese Welt glaubt nicht an Flammen, und sie nimmt's fur Poesie.6 [Fear not that I'll reveal! Fear not! This world doesn't believe in flames, and takes it for poetry.]

When his earlier efforts to persuade Georgie to become his lover seemed hopeless Morris eventually came to believe in an ideal embodied in the expression 'Love is enough' – the idea that simply to love ennobled, and was worthwhile without return or fulfilment: any personal sorrow or joy the lovers passed through would be added to the sum of human experience, the 'memory' of which is stored in the Earth herself in some mystical way.7 Yet always there remained hope for the eventual 'righting of wrongs'. But in contrast to almost all his other poems, 'She and He', written in the year of his death, is distinctly bitter, even condemnatory in tone – perhaps further evidence for a biographical interpretation. Morris was ill, alarming friends with unusual signs of tiredness and talk of finishing up work left undone,8 continuing to decline until he died in October 1896. Foreseeing the approach of death, it would seem that Morris was evaluating his years of devotion and viewing them now in a harsher light. The last three stanzas offer a glimpse of coming separation or death, and the end of hope:

Then will I get me to the town
And ship me o'er the main
And clean forget both dale and down
And the ways we went we twain

The while thy maidens round thee throng
To lay thee soft abed
And thou lay'st down my loss and wrong
On the pillows of thine head.

One foot upon the deck shall be
One hand upon the rope,
And the Hale and the How on the weltering sea
And one farewell to hope.

I would like to move from the poem and Morris's intentions, and look again at Cockerell's role. Cockerell was Morris's devoted assistant for four years, and closely acquainted with the Burne-Joneses. While Morris's personal feelings for Georgie may not have been openly discussed, it would hardly be possible for Cockerell not to be aware of the attachment, although he might not have known of its depth and duration. Is it possible that when copying this poem before its despatch, Cockerell became concerned about the suggestion of an intimate relationship with a woman whom other readers might identify as Georgie – Lady Burne-Jones, wife of a baronet and hostess to the rich and famous?

And though thy halls be wide and side
No room is there for me

66
For there be men of mickle pride
Between thy face and me

An earl upon thy right hand is
A baron takes thy sleeve
A belted knight thine hand doth kiss
And asketh little leave

Might Cockerell, with regard to the ‘impropriety’ of such a relationship, and solicitous of his master’s reputation, have suggested an alteration for ‘artistic’ reasons? Whatever the case, Morris sent his original version; it is marked ‘received Jan 7 1896 by GBJ’. The fair copy was presumably for publication and posterity.

Apart from this instance, after Morris’s death, Cockerell would have seen his role in a broader sense as guardian of Morris’s reputation, prepared, if necessary, to ‘gild the lily’. The nineteenth century tradition of biography required two volumes tending to glorify the subject while glossing over any perceived weaknesses or shortcomings – ‘unpleasantly near untruthfulness often!’ Mackail confessed privately. Cockerell lived on until 1962 and was the obvious person to turn to for those seeking first-hand information about Morris and his circle – but how reliable was he as a witness? In the same issue of the Journal (Winter 1962), there is an article entitled ‘Visiting Sir Sydney’ by Philip Henderson. He describes ‘fishing’ for information about Janey and Rossetti. Cockerell praises Mackail’s biography and continues:

‘Unfortunately other people are now taking upon themselves to pry into matters that do not concern them.’

I guessed what was in his mind. ‘You refer, perhaps, to Mrs Morris’ relationship with Rossetti?’

His spectacles flashed. ‘That will not concern you, of course.’

My afternoon promised to be as wintry as the weather.

‘Unlike Rossetti, Morris was not a ladies’ man’, he added, after a short pause, in which I had had time to reflect upon the implications of his last remark.

Cockerell’s reaction, even in a man of his years, is surprisingly censorial. Rossetti’s relationship with Janey, if not confirmed, was widely accepted – and had occurred nearly a hundred years before. When asked about the affair all Cockerell had to say was that Morris was not a ladies’ man. Had anyone suggested he was? In what I take to be Cockerell’s efforts to distance Morris from any hint of adultery, Henderson is led, not surprisingly, to doubt Morris’s ‘manhood’ – some people go in for that sort of thing, but not Mr Morris. Morris’s failure to respond to his wife’s affair with customary outrage puzzled observers at the time. The fact that he was himself in love with another woman, considered Janey’s life her own, and wanted her to be happy, readily explains his behaviour: however, the superficial conclusion to be drawn from Morris’s ‘inaction’ was that he was ‘unmanly’, cowardly, or simply not interested in women except as an ideal. Those who did not know Morris intimately would have been satisfied with this
explanation, and the notion that Morris was ‘independent of sex considerations’ is mentioned several times in reminiscences. 10 Cockerell, I surmise, knew better, and by linking Janey’s affair with the notion that Morris was not a ‘ladies’ man’ he was promoting a misconception which Henderson duly passed on to a wider public. The same notion has permeated Morris biography and has found its way into the literature as recently as the 1990s. Motivated no doubt by love for Morris and respect for Georgie and her family, Cockerell has played a part in concealing an aspect of Morris’s life which he would gladly have shared with the whole world.

NOTES

2 British Library, Add MSS 45347.
3 The poem was not included in The Collected Works of William Morris by May, perhaps because of this anomaly.
5 William Morris, ‘Rhyme Slayeth Shame’.
6 J. W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris*, (London: Longmans & Co. 1899), I, pp. 210–212. Jane was reserved about the biography. She wrote: ‘You see Mackail is not an artist in feeling and therefore cannot be sympathetic while writing the life of such a man’. It is hard to understand in what sense Mackail is ‘unsympathetic’, unless in his implication here that Morris’s poems are not ‘art’ – as Jane may have preferred them to be regarded – but instead reveal ‘love and hope and sorrow’ in the poet’s own life.
7 See, for example, Morris’s poems ‘Earth the Healer, Earth the Keeper’ and ‘Love’s Gleaning-tide’.