

THAT VENTURESOME WOMAN: THE ITALIAN TRAVELS OF JANE MORRIS

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I heartily hope that you have had satisfactory news of your mother, that venturesome woman!

– Philip Webb to Jenny & May Morris, 27 January 1881

Jane Morris, legendary for her silence and stillness,¹ is not customarily seen as “venturesome,” the word Philip Webb used to describe her in a letter to her daughters written while Jane was touring Italy in 1881. As a loyal and admiring friend, Webb may be considered as overly generous in his description of Jane, or simply adopting the light-hearted tone which often characterised his letters to the women of the Morris family. A closer examination of Jane Morris’s journeys to Italy from the late 1870s to the early 1890s, however, may shed light on Webb’s remark and provide a useful starting point for a timely reconsideration of this enigmatic woman. If we consider, for instance, a photograph of Jane Morris taken in Italy (fig. 1), we begin to see a rather different representation from that usually seen in photographs of the Pre-Raphaelite icon (such as those taken by John Robert Parsons in Dante Rossetti’s garden in 1865; see Ford). Jane is photographed before a painted backdrop of Siena, and grouped with the Cobden sisters, Jane and Annie, and Thomas Sanderson (soon to marry Annie and adopt the surname Cobden-Sanderson). Unlike Parsons’s photographs, where Jane replicates the dramatic poses and expressions of her artistic images, in this Siena photograph Jane looks like an ordinary Englishwoman traveller of the period, complete with umbrella: no flowing drapery or unorthodox accoutrements, and wearing what looks like sensible travelling dress. So who is this Siena Jane Morris? And can an examination of her travels in Italy offer a different and more complex picture of the woman who supposedly took “to the sofa in 1869, at the age of