

ABSTRACT

The Kelmscott *Chaucer*: William Morris's Quest for the Medieval Reader

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William Morris's Kelmscott *Chaucer* was the culminating masterpiece of his "typological adventure," as he called his press. In preparing for his work at the press, he collected numerous medieval manuscripts as well as early printed books. Morris used his medieval scholarship as a vehicle for societal reform throughout his career; this continued with his Kelmscott editions whose medieval-inspired graphic design presented a different set of values for the reader. That is, dense frames, elaborate ornamentation, and decorated letters ensure the domination of the visual text; the density of the visual and verbal cues requires a different pace from the reader. The medieval hermeneutic of *lectio divina* best describes the experience of the reader. However, Burne-Jones's illustrations of the text problematize Morris's historically-influenced designs by introducing aspects of *l'art por l'art*. By incorporating medieval graphic design in new ways Morris shapes this encounter between text and reader, the culmination of which was to encourage a counter-cultural response. Morris's work anticipates the detachment of the work of art, and the viewer, from its authentic presence, or "aura," best described by Walter Benjamin in his seminal work "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

The Kelmscott *Chaucer*: William Morris's Quest for the Medieval Reader

by

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DEDICATION

To Cy and Brody in hopes that you will read this someday
and know what I did in the time I spent away from you.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The History of the Kelmscott Chaucer

In an 1893 interview published in the *Daily Chronicle*, Morris explains his motivation for starting Kelmscott Press: “I wanted to print some nice books. Also, I wanted to amuse myself. I think I may say I have done both” (Morris, “Master” 95). Morris’s casual response to the interviewer highlights two conditions in the Victorian workplace he hoped to improve. With the Kelmscott Press Morris showed that books could still be an art form and that making well-crafted products was worth the time, effort and forethought involved. Additionally, Morris believed that self-amusement was no light matter; in fact, he believed that until self-amusement or enjoyment was the goal of work, art would eventually die out. He writes later in his life, “Both my historical studies and my practical conflict with the philistinism of modern society have *forced* on me the conviction that art cannot have a real life and growth under the present system of commercialism and profit-mongering” (Morris, May, *WM* 2:12). Morris’s aims with his press had everything to do with his ideas of social reform and education, and the *Chaucer* represents a physical argument of these ideas, teaching its readers not only how to read but also how to live.

In a later interview that year published in “Bookselling,” Morris discusses his intentions for safeguarding tradition. The interviewer asks, “ ‘And now, Mr. Morris, will you kindly tell us why you started the Kelmscott Press?’ ” Morris replies,

Oh! simply because I felt that for the books one loved and cared for there might be attempted a presentation, both as to print and paper, which should be worthy of one's feelings. That is all. The ideas we cherish are worth preserving, and I fail to see why a beautiful form should not be given to them, as well as an ugly one. (Morris, "Kelmscott" 107)

As a book printer Morris is also in many ways a bookmaker exactly because his own values and feelings were very closely linked not only with the texts he chose but also with the forms in which he chose to present them. Morris helps to make a text by shaping its physical manifestation. This project grows out of the story present in Morris's ideas of "beautiful forms" and "preservation." On multiple levels, the work Morris did in his edition of *Chaucer's* works offers the best example of these concepts.

I began this project with two underlying assumptions. First I argue that the book's graphic design can be every bit as revelatory as the text that it encases. This issue has been a topic of recent literary discussions and conferences concerning the iconic or graphic status of the material aspects of a text. Some of the most influential contemporary writers on this theme include Marta Werner (*Emily Dickinson's Open Folios*), George Bornstein and Theresa Tinkle (*The Iconic Page in Manuscript, Print, and Digital Culture*), Michael Camille (*The Gothic Ideal and Image on the Edge*), David Latham (*Writing on the Image*) and Jerome McGann (*Black Riders and Radiant Textuality*). But Morris himself calls attention to the physical nature of a book when he writes: "in fact a book, printed or written, has a tendency to be a beautiful object, and that we of this age should generally produce ugly books, shows, I fear, something like *malice prepense*—a *determination* to put our eyes in our pockets wherever we can" (*Ideal* 67). Morris insists that delivery must be important, that the superficial nature of a thing can be ignored, but not escaped. I agree with Morris's argument for the importance of the visual because it

operates as a readable sign. My second assumption is that images can tell their own story and, thus, that Morris's Kelmscott *Chaucer* edition contains multiple voices, multiple narratives. Writers, ancient and modern, address the ability of an image to communicate, and fully addressing the history of this discussion is beyond the scope of this inquiry. However, the following contemporary writers set up a framework for a discussion on the nature of visual art, especially its ability to "speak" to the viewer: Foucault ("*Les Mots et les choses*"), Meyer Schapiro's (*Words and Pictures*), E. H. Gombrich (*Art and Illusion*) and Derrida ("Truth and Painting"). These texts set up a preliminary space for a discussion of the visual text of Morris's work and the stories they tell.

William Morris's 1896 edition of *Chaucer* may have been the publication for which he created the Press. As early as June of 1891, the same year he founded his press, Morris mentioned working on a copy of Chaucer's works to his secretary, Sydney Cockerell. Since Morris considered Chaucer to be one of his greatest discoveries at Oxford, it is not surprising that the design of this last major Kelmscott publication is one of his most ambitious (Peterson 229). It was the most illustrated and richly ornamented of all the Kelmscott Press productions, taking two years to print and as many years to conceive and design. Certainly this book has a "definite claim to beauty," a goal for all works of the press he describes in his *Note by William Morris on His Aims in Founding the Kelmscott Press* (1896). But with Morris, aims are never as simple as aesthetic pleasure. His driving force was social reform. As William Peterson writes in his *Kelmscott Press*, "When he [Morris] appears to be speaking about typographical matters, he is in reality examining how we ought to live" (4). Because he faced problems with his health and disappointments in his marriage and his beloved Socialist league, some

critics argue that Morris's "typological adventure," as he call his press, represented a retreat from his more youthful passion for change. However, I argue that the Kelmscott *Chaucer* continues Morris's re-visionary aims and does visually and physically what his lectures on art and society do verbally. Design, ornamentation, page-layout, and production contend for a more deliberate, contemplative, and "medieval" experience of text. Functioning like a medieval psalter, the *Chaucer* makes room for a different way of reading and, ultimately, of "seeing."

In Morris's estimation, the best art was organic, harmonious, and inventive. These qualities grew out of the craftsman's connection to his purpose and his worldview. Morris saw the medieval period as the one that produced the best and most prolific examples of organic art. First, medieval art's vibrancy grew from the freedom and confidence of its creator. Second, because the craftsman expressed the harmony that existed in his worldview through design, the visual effect was stunning interconnectivity. In an essay entitled "Some Thoughts on the Ornamented Manuscripts of the Middle Ages," published privately and posthumously in 1934, Morris discusses the importance of medieval art. Unlike modern publishers who give the public such "revoltingly ugly and vulgar" examples of books, the medieval period, Morris writes, gives some of the most beautiful. The rest of the essay supports this thesis by establishing the primary differences between the makers of medieval and Victorian books and, by extension, the differences in their contexts. He notes, "the craftsman, scribe, limner, printer, who had produced it had worked on it directly as an artist, not turned it out as the machine of a tradesman; and moreover amidst the traditions that swayed him he could no more help doing so than the present book-maker can help working as a machine" (*Ideal 2*).

Additionally, the medieval craftsman approached his work with freedom, imagination, and harmony in outlook that cannot be recaptured. His relationship to the work was “personal and not mechanical” and he was “free to develop his love for ornament and his love for story to the full” (2). The effect of being allowed this love of ornament was a product of great skill and “invention.” His love of story reflected “a nature unspoiled by the sordidness of commercialism” as well as one “deeply imbued by a sense of the epic of the World” (4). In other words, the craftsman’s product reflected the universe he understood, and the continuity of his “sense of the Epic of the World” gave him greater freedom, sincerity of expression, and ability to communicate his experience. Commercialism and industrialism, Morris maintains, inhibits individual creativity and interferes with one’s personal connection to art and to “the World.”

In approaching bookmaking as a handicraft undertaken jointly by a variety of craftsmen, Morris attempted, at times unsuccessfully, to live out an alternative to the problems he saw with Victorian industrialism. Moreover, his use of medieval designs in the production of Kelmscott books, many of which were medieval texts, called for a change in perspective and pace of life from his readers. He believed, as Ruskin did, in art’s power to reform culture, a belief that Linda Dowling in *The Vulgarization of Art* notes “linger[ed] even into the disenchantment of his later years”; the Kelmscott *Chaucer* offered a visual testimony of his convictions (x). With medieval manuscripts at his constant disposal and fifteenth-century wood-cut illustrated books and early printed books from multiple European countries as his inspiration, Morris uses medieval design to change the graphic layout of the page and, ultimately, the experience of the reader. He decries the state of book art by insisting that the printing of “makeshifts” which invite

carelessness and familiarity by the reader cannot inspire and instruct as one that is craftsman-produced and well-designed in every possible facet, from its paper and ink to its ornamentation (*Ideal* 1).

Morris's medieval remedies in his *Chaucer* are literally laced with complications. The Pre-Raphaelite-inspired depictions of its illustrator do little to support his overall medieval designs. As Fiona McCarthy, Morris's most recent biographer, points out, "these books are Victorian and yet anti-Victorian" (619). The ornamentation and design in the *Chaucer* project may be medieval and "anti-Victorian," but the illustrations produced by Morris's long-time friend Edward Burne-Jones certainly are not. Peterson summarizes the crux of their disagreement by pointing out the different sources of their inspiration: Morris from the "Gothic North" and Burne-Jones from the "Mediterranean" South. In a letter to J. Comyns Carr, Burne-Jones writes "I quarrel now with Morris about Art. He journeys to Iceland, and I to Italy, which is a symbol" (qtd. in Peterson 161). The differences in their inspirations find reflection in their work on the *Chaucer* project. It was the project on which they worked the most closely. Burne-Jones does help support Morris's efforts to integrate text and illustration, but his subject matter, mainly romance scenes with beautiful Pre-Raphaelite "stunners" scattered throughout, corresponds more closely with his own interests. Moreover, these differences in inspiration indicate a divergence in politics (161). While Morris was bent on social change, Burne-Jones felt little desire to engage in solving the corruption of the capitalist system. However, his illustrations do speak of these problems even if it is by avoidance of them.

These conflicts in the text, the one effort to recover something of the lost art and way of life of the medieval period and the other to retreat into romance scenes, often inspire equally conflicting reviews by its readers. But most readers acknowledge that Morris does something very different with his *Chaucer*. My conclusions about his material innovation lead me to a dialogue with Walter Benjamin's foundational 1936 essay about the technical reproduction of art in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In Benjamin's essay, he describes the gap between the work of art and its original use as part of a ritual effectuated by the inauguration of the mechanical age. (2). Industrialism and reproducibility brought with it a loss of authenticity, or "aura." I argue that Morris's choices in everything from layout of the page to font creates in the text a sense of ritual not unlike the one evoked by a medieval psalter in an attempt to solve the problems of mechanical reproduction. Thus, the "physical performance," as Jerome McGann calls it in his *Black Riders*, of the Kelmscott *Chaucer* provides another type of narrative that philosophically supports the text, although the illustrations may not always correspond with the narrative or the page design they accompany.

The primary aim of this inquiry is to see the Kelmscott *Chaucer* as a cultural artifact, a reflection of its context. I implement Margaret A. Syverson's approach from her 1999 work *The Wealth of Reality* in which she studies composition as an ecological system. This complex system includes the processes of distribution, emergence, embodiment and enaction. Although she emphasizes written composition her ideas easily transfer to other complex systems of creation such as those involved in designing and printing a text. Distribution and emergence deal with the compositional context and the

organizing influences of the culture on the work, while embodiment and enaction refer to the way the work creates its own world. Philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer's ideas on art speak to this "world" of the text. In "Image and Gesture" he writes, "In fact, all artistic creation challenges each of us to listen to the language in which the work of art speaks and to make it our own" (39). Enaction explains the way the art creates its own form of communication in which the viewer learns and participates.

But studying a work of art in relationship to its context is certainly not a "new" idea. Writing in the late nineteenth century, about the same time as Morris was working on his *Chaucer*, sociologist Georg Simmel discusses art in relationship to the life of the artist. Although ecological criticism expands its range to include the milieu of the text, both types begin with the life circumstances and influences on the artist. Although it is a contemporary methodology, ecological criticism is suited to historical research. Simmel outlines potential perspectives on art that can be compared to ecological phases:

One may look at a work of art only in regard to its artistic significance; one may place it, as if it had fallen from the sky, within a series of artistic products. Yet one may also understand it in terms of the artist's personality and development, his experiences and tendencies. One may interpret it as a pulsation or immediate experience of individual life. (17)

Since Morris's *Chaucer* does anything but float, examining it as a product of a particular environment (distribution) and the artist's experiences and tendencies (emergence) offers a far more accurate and interesting picture. Certainly, the details of the Kelmscott *Chaucer* provide a more complicated and interesting visual history than many textual critics have acknowledged.

This project includes six chapters. The first four chapters describe the creation and production of the text while the last two will deal with reception of it. The first

chapter includes a brief history of the press, the importance of Chaucer as the text of his endeavor, the process of choosing a Chaucer text, and the practical aspects of printing it. Most of this information I take from William Peterson's work on Kelmscott because of his consultation of primary materials, although I also refer to the account by Sydney Cockerell, Morris's secretary. To explore the visual effects these books produced, I investigate Morris's ideas about books and book production, which I do in the second chapter. Additionally, I spend some time reviewing the visual culture of the period, specifically the guiding principles of visual interpretation, which were changing with urbanization and industrialization. In chapters three and four I discuss the "Victorian" and "anti-Victorian" aspects of the *Chaucer* project. In these chapters I describe the compositional process, especially those elements that directly influenced the *Chaucer*. For the medievalist inspirations, Morris's research on the period, including his own library and those he frequented, occupy the bulk of the discussion. The fourth chapter explores the characteristically Victorian elements of the *Chaucer*. In chapter five I examine the influence of medieval hermeneutics upon the design of the Kelmscott *Chaucer*. This chapter also includes a discussion of the medieval visual culture. I use Michael Camille's 1992 work, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* and his 1997 *Mirror in Parchment: The Luttrell Psalter and the Making of a Medieval England*, to help explain the visual environment of the medieval period. Additionally I track the reception of the work in order to gauge reactions to Morris's argument. The final chapter explores the importance of Morris's work in light of Walter Benjamin's seminal essay on art and mechanical culture.

Although much has been written about the Kelmscott *Chaucer*, no critic has taken up this text and engaged its materiality fully. Partial analyses have been completed by Jerome McGann in *Black Riders*, by William Peterson, and, more recently, in several essays in *The Victorian Illustrated Book*; however, the “the performance of the text,” or its physical presentation, and its visual argument need to be addressed more fully. Other critics, such as Nicholas Frankel in *Oscar Wilde’s Decorated Books*, have begun to explore what he calls “the text’s iconic or graphic status” (7); however, such an analysis has not been initiated for Morris’s *Chaucer*. This project adds to the wealth of material already written about Morris’s final achievement, the Kelmscott *Chaucer*, bringing to the conversation a much-needed analysis of the relationship between his aestheticism and his commitment to social change reflected in his graphic design.

Most writers categorize Morris’s founding of his press as either a retreat from his work in the Socialist League, as E. P. Thompson argues, or a continuation of it, as William Peterson suggests. Breaking from his interpretation of Morris’s work elsewhere, seminal socialist biographer, E.P. Thompson, in his 1955 work *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, sees the founding of the press as a response to the vacuum left after his break from the Socialist League. Morris left the League after being expelled from editorship of *The Commonweal* and after being alienated by the new anarchist direction the League took. Morris established his own socialist league at Hammersmith, but the bulk of his time he poured into beginning a press. Thompson writes of this time, “Now, as before, his reflex when faced with disappointments was to plunge himself into other work” (581). Unlike the brotherhoods of which he was a part in his youth, Thompson argues, the Kelmscott Press was simply a “source of delight and relaxation, in

which his craft as designer and his craft as a writer both found expression” (583).

Thompson substantiates his claims by pointing out the way Morris refers to his press as an amusement in two of his letters and by highlighting the fact that Morris did not print books for profit or for wide distribution. Thompson later calls the Press “creative relaxation for him in his last years” (584).

William Peterson in his meticulously researched *The Kelmscott Press* argues persuasively that the Press was much more than that. He suggests that “the Kelmscott Press, which began as a lark, turned into a large and complex business operation as the months went by” (165). Both Peterson and Thompson discuss Morris’s letter to Philip Webb in which Morris says he “do[es] the books mainly for you and one or two others; the public does not really care about them a damn” (qtd, in Peterson 193). Thompson highlights this letter in order to show Morris really never intended his Press to be either profitable or influential; however, Peterson states, “the size of the address list and the actual sales of the books belie this claim [by Morris in his letter to Webb that only a handful of people had an interest in his books]” (193). Morris took over the actual sales of his books when other publishers did not meet with his expectations, and the address list was his method of book sales. He sent out announcements to more than 800 names, mostly book sellers, when he was going to print a new book (Peterson 191). Actual sales of the books were far from a smattering of a few friends. These books were so popular that some booksellers would wait until after the value of the book rose before selling their copies (Peterson 194).

What neither Thompson nor Peterson address in talking about Morris’s 1894 letter is Webb’s own recognition of the Kelmscott Press books’ popularity and high price

tags. Webb objects to receiving free copies of what he knows to be extremely valuable books. In August of 1894, he writes, “ ‘Your loving gifts of them have been more than a mere boon to me; but I must not lose this opportunity of saying that such a book as the Chaucer is beyond the swallow of my conscience” (*Letters* 4:199). So Morris’s light-hearted reply attempts to assuage his friend’s objections. He calls his Kelmscott Press a “larx (sic)” and “hash.” He also makes wry comments about the way the public does not care about his efforts; he admits this situation “is stale,” but does not keep him from doing the work. So by devaluing his efforts and downplaying the *Chaucer*’s importance to him personally, Morris makes his gift a less weighty one and, thus, easier for the recipient to keep.

As Peterson points out, just because Morris enjoyed his work did not make it any less important to him; rather enjoyment turns out to be one of the central issues of Morris’s reforming work. Though he calls it a “larx,” Morris’s Kelmscott Press combines his deep love of books, design, and all things medieval with his belief that art could affect change in society. And in Morris’s opinion, many aspects needed changing. One of the most pressing concerns to Morris was the way in which work was done. As H. Halliday Sparling, son-in-law of Morris, explains in his book *The Kelmscott Press and William Morris Master-Craftsman*, Morris was deeply concerned by the changes effectuated by industrialism:

But, as Morris so often pointed out on other connexions (sic), trying for the utmost attainable perfection in handiwork results in something very different indeed from attaining mathematical precision by means of a machine; in the one, there is human effort, *life*; in the other, there is long-distance calculation and the interposition of a feelingless metallic efficiency between the hand and its work, which in matters of art means *death*. (70)

Morris's concern for making quality books started with the deplorable state of book production, and he blamed this state on the replacement of the craftsman by the machine.

Industrialism afforded new ways of printing books (Figure 1) that encouraged wider distribution, but the use of new technologies also encouraged publishers to turn a profit by using cheaper quality paper and ink and changing the size of the types to require less of both. The fine types and poor quality combined with the use of space between lines for easy reading made these books look “greyish” (Peterson 20).

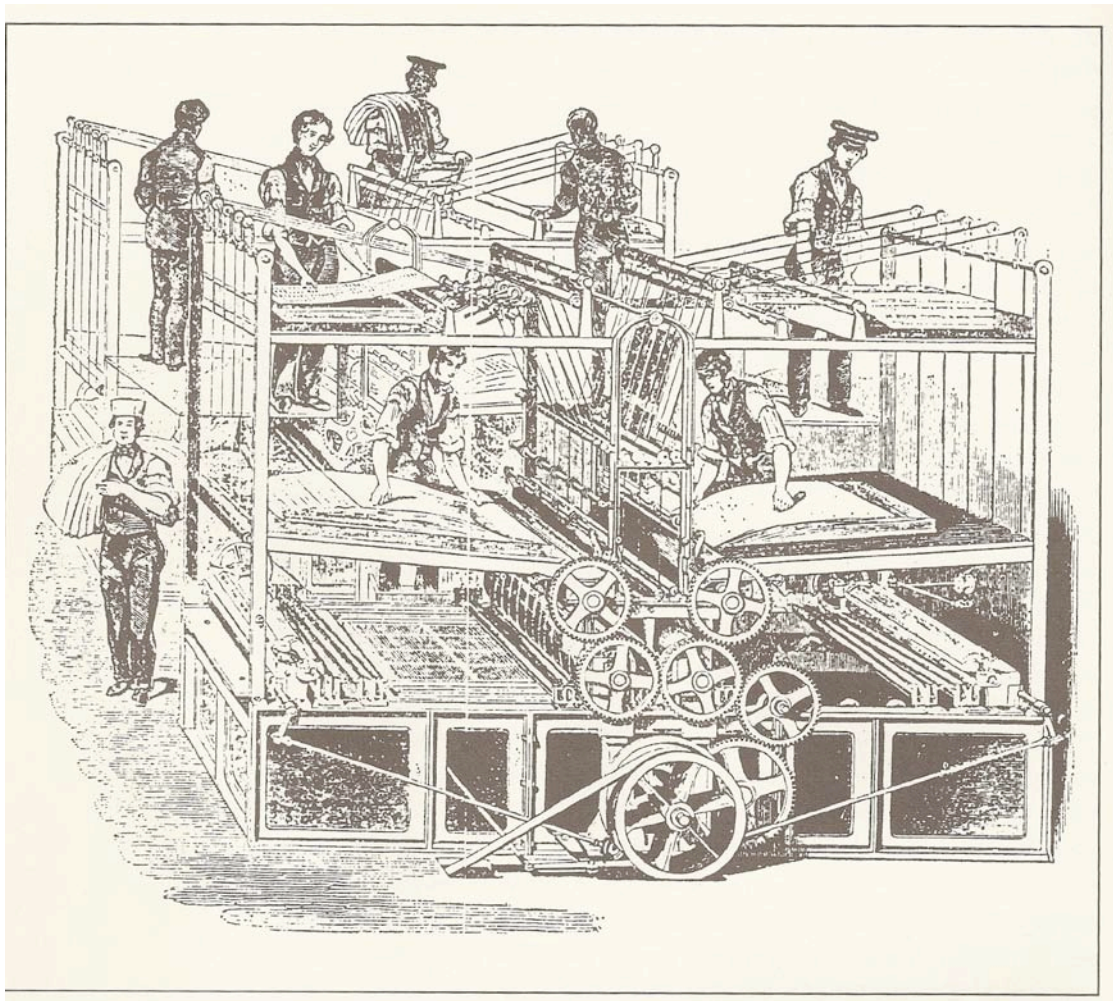


Figure 1. Early Steam Press, rpt. in Peterson, William, *The Kelmscott Press* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991).

The use of steam-driven cylinder presses opened up the possibility of wider distribution; the ease of production and a wider audience encouraged printers to cut corners for a bigger profit margin. In fact, probably due to the use of below-standard rags and the introduction of bleaching into the papermaking process, books began to disintegrate.

Poor design often accompanied poor quality. Illustrations and the text were printed in separate processes and joined only after they were complete, causing the page and picture to seem disjointed. Additionally, the Victorian printers participated in the ornamentation called “elegence” (Figure 2) which “prettied up” their outsides with “filigree, scrollwork, curlicues, scrimshaw, doodads; they were drowned in gilt, or attired, like Joseph, in coats of many colors” (Winterich ix).

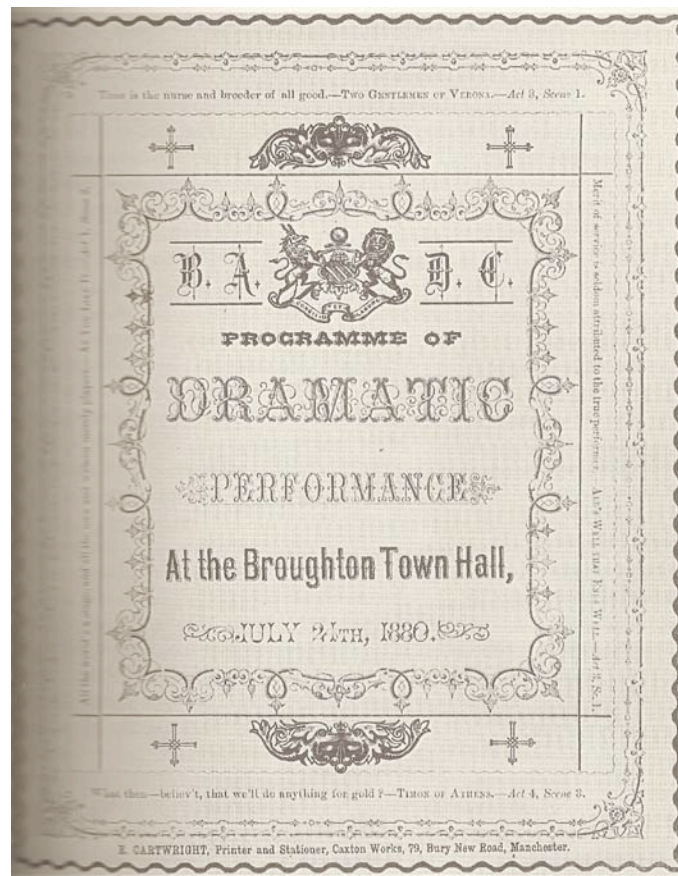


Figure 2. *Printers' International Speciman Exchange* (1880); rpt. in Peterson, William, *The Kelmscott Press* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991).

Morris assesses the situation in his 1893 lecture quoted at the beginning of this chapter; he accuses the age of “malice prepense—a *determination* to put our eyes in our pockets wherever we can.” The *OED* defines “malice prepense” as “malice aforethought; wrong or injury purposefully done.” Morris saw the deterioration in printing as a reflection of deterioration in society itself. He believed medieval craftsmen produced quality books because their worldview and their morals were properly aligned.

In *A Note By William Morris on His Aims in Founding the Press* published in 1896, Morris outlines his preferences for medieval printing while disparaging Victorian practices. The most pressing questions in printing a book with a “definite claim to beauty” were “the paper, the form of the type, the relative spacing of the letters, the words, and the lines; and lastly the position of the printed matter on the page” (75). About paper, he argues it should be “hand-made, both for the sake of durability and the appearance” (*Ideal* 75). The very next sentence reveals an underlying morality guiding his preferences: “It would be a very false economy to stint in the quality of paper as to price . . .” (75). Since most printers did “stint in the quality of paper as to price” Morris had to look elsewhere for a model of quality. He concludes that paper must be made “wholly of linen,” it must be “hard” and well-sized, and it must be laid and not woven but the lines caused by the moulding must not be too strong (75). He “found himself at one” with the papermakers of the fifteenth century, and fortunately, he found someone in his circle of acquaintances who could fill his order for paper which was styled after “a Bolognese paper of about 1473” (75).

Throughout the rest of this essay, Morris evidences his careful scholarship; he was a student of the beautiful book, and he argued the best examples were of the

medieval period when perfection not profit was the aim. In the next section, he discusses the merits of early type while suggesting the need to reform modern practices. He expostulates, “And here what I wanted was letter pure in form; severe, without needless excrescences; solid, without the thickening and thinning of the line, which is the essential fault of the ordinary modern type, and which makes it difficult to read; and not compressed laterally, as all later type has grown to be owing to commercial exigencies” (76). The evils of commercialism and the excesses of modern times he sees reflected in the needless alterations to letter shape. In comparison, he finds the “great Venetian printers of the fifteenth century” give him a model for the “pure form” he seeks (76). Naturally, though, as a designer Morris could not help tweaking, or perhaps even improving, the shape of the type: “I did not copy it servilely; in fact, my Roman type, especially in the lower-case, tends rather more to the Gothic . . .” (76). When he developed his next type—which he calls Gothic—Morris describes himself as more than a student of medieval fonts, but also a defender: “. . . and herein the task I set myself was to redeem the Gothic character from the charge of unreadableness which is commonly brought against it” (76). While Victorian printers had no excuse for their illegible quality, Morris finds one for the medieval printers who merely were modeling their practice after those of the scribes who used contractions and “tied letters.”

Further into his discussion, Morris uses terms such as “transgress” and “spoil” to make clear that his criticism of Victorian printing involves much more than simply correcting the technical issues of the process. Modern printers were guilty of disregarding the impact of careless designs. Modern printers who neglected such issues produced “licentious spacing, thereby producing, *inter alia*, those ugly rivers of lines

running about the page which are such a blemish to decent printing” (78). Morris insisted that when positioning the printed matter on a page, the overall design should be carefully considered. He thought spacing should reflect continuity between pages, a practice he saw rarely with modern printing. The rule he explains thus: “Third, the whites between the lines should not be excessive; the modern practice of “leading” should be used as little as possible, and never without some definite reason, such as marking some special piece of printing” (78). Embedded in this rule is Morris’s insistence to have nothing in one’s house which one does not consider beautiful or know to be useful; this idea became the motto of the Arts and Crafts movement. He calls the two-page design “the unit of a book” and asserts that the medieval rule of spacing should be followed. This includes “the inner margin the narrowest, the top ‘somewhat wider’, the outside edge wider still and the bottom widest of all” (78). When modern printers “transgress” against this rule, they reveal they are “apparently contradicting the fact that the unit of a book is not one page, but a pair of pages.” Morris considered these issues of primary importance because when done well even the most humble book is beautiful and when disregarded even the best type is ruined.

So far in this essay, Morris accuses Victorian printers of unreasonable, licentious, excessive and careless practices. This deplorable state necessitated action on his part: “It was only natural that I, a decorator, should attempt to ornament my books suitably” (78). In comparison to its “transgressive” offspring, medieval books offered a realm of imaginative playfulness along with a careful sense of order. In his new efforts at the Press, Morris imitated the early printers by “keep[ing] in mind the necessity for making my decoration a part of the page of type” and by including only decoration that could be

considered “harmonious” with the text itself. His publications came only after extensive study and experiment.

Morris spent extensive time studying medieval book art before he started the press, but he did even more as he worked on his new venture. In his *A Short History and Description of the Kelmscott Press* Sydney C. Cockerell, secretary of the Press and later, after Morris’s death, its administrator, explains that book design, especially medieval book design, had been of interest to Morris since the 1860s. In the 1870s, Cockerell notes, Morris became “absorbed in the study of ancient manuscripts and in writing out and illuminating various books” (*Ideal* 80). About the time he started the Press, Morris began adding to his library with the specific intention of using these new manuscripts and books as resources for his own work. By the end of his life, his library contained approximately 117 illuminated manuscripts, 21 fifteenth-century illustrated books from Holland and the Low Countries, 136 from Germany and Switzerland, 20 from Italy, close to 100 from France, and several hundred early printed books both with and without woodcuts from all over Europe. This list displays Morris’s specialized tastes and the extent that he went to research his interests. Cockerell explains how Morris used these books:

Among the first books so acquired was a copy of Leonard of Arezzo’s *History of Florence*, printed at Venice by Jacobus Rubeus in 1476, in a Roman type very similar to that of Nicholas Jenson. Parts of this book and of Jenson’s *Pliny* of 1476 were enlarged by photography in order to bring out more clearly the characteristics of the various letters; and having mastered both their virtues and defects, William Morris proceeded to design the fount of type which, in the list of December 1892, he named the Golden type, from *Golden Legend*, which was to have been the first book printed with it. (*Ideal* 83)

Morris drew much of his design for books from medieval sources, but the practical aspects of printing he primarily gleaned through conversations with his comrade Emery Walker and C. T. Jacobi, head of the Chiswick Press (McCarthy 610).

Cockerell credits the talk Morris heard by Walker in November of 1888 at the first Arts and Crafts Exhibition for his shift from a casual bibliographic interest to a serious one (Peterson 74). H. Halliday Sparling goes further and argues that the November 15th lecture marked the beginning of Morris's fount (8). Walker's lecture included a series of lantern-slides which juxtaposed the poorest examples of Victorian printing with the best of previous ages' (Peterson 78). Though there is no extant copy of the lecture, Oscar Wilde attended the lecture and made notes on its content, much of which Morris's beliefs support. Some of the similarities between the lecture and Morris's own views include use of lead, which "left the page in stripes," and harmony between text and decoration (330). Wilde reports Walker as being "opposed to the silly habit of putting pictures where they are not wanted" and as insisting that "mechanical harmony and artistic harmony went hand in hand." Even before the lecture, Walker and Morris had spent much time conversing. Walker, a commercial printer, had given Morris some helpful suggestions for the physical layout of a book Morris had in production at Chiswick Press called *The House of the Wolfings* (Winterich ix). Additionally, the two were closely connected through socialist activity (Emery Walker was actually the secretary of the Hammersmith League) and through their proximity as neighbors. On the way home from the lecture Morris mentioned to Walker, "Let's make a new fount of type." After that night, Morris began researching typography and printing. Walker was a foundational figure of the press because of the time he spent talking with Morris about

the technical aspects of printing; his hands-on knowledge proved invaluable (Peterson 76). As Cockerell maintains, Morris invited Walker to be his partner in the Kelmscott Press venture, but Cockerell declined; however, “he was virtually a partner in the Kelmscott Press from its first beginnings to its end, and no important step was taken without his advice and approval” (82-83).

By the time Morris started the Chaucer project, the Press had grown from one small cottage to three and from one press to three, the third being purchased for work on *Chaucer* (Cockerell 85-89). Morris had designed three new types—the Golden, the Troy, and the Chaucer; additionally, he had hired several compositors, found suppliers for paper and vellum, and created nearly six hundred engravings for ornament (Cockerell 87). All of this work took several years. Equally as important was the fact that the Kelmscott Press had become a community effort between editor, engraver, compositor, and binder. Morris was involved with every aspect of the press. McCarthy even claims that, “[t]he Press had its own life, with internal celebrations and the outings known as Waygooses” (622). “Waygooses” included breakfast at Kelmscott Manor followed by boat races. McCarthy notes that Morris’s relationship with the workers was more like that of a master with servants, but he did see to it that they had good pay and all the time they needed to do quality work. With many of the questions worked out about how to operate a Press, the printing enclave was ready for a project like the *Chaucer*.

The public anticipated Morris’s Kelmscott edition of *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* with great excitement. Before it was published it was hailed as “the grandest book of the century” and as holding “the place of honour among the other productions of this press” (Peterson 228). It is difficult to determine what exactly caused all the

excitement, but there were significant differences between the *Chaucer* project and other Kelmscott productions. It was the most elaborately decorated and illustrated. It was one of the most physically impressive (Peterson 50). Moreover, it was a project that reunited Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris as collaborators and friends (McCarthy 648). Additionally the text itself was one of Morris's favorites; he considered Chaucer to be one of his most important discoveries at Oxford (Peterson 229). Peterson sums up the importance of the Chaucer project to the Press:

We have seen that the *Chaucer* is far from being a typical Kelmscott volume, but it is certainly the most celebrated and frequently photographed, and it represents, in a sense, Morris's tendencies in book-design and ornamentations carried to their logical conclusion; thus, rightly or wrongly, the *Chaucer* has become a litmus test which measures one's response to Morris's work as a printer. (229)

The size of the book and the amount of text, ornamentation, and illustrations it contains make it an ambitious book to hold and view much less to produce.

The first question Morris had to address was that of a text. Fortunately a renewed interest in early English texts meant Morris and his editor Ellis did not have to work out a text themselves. The copy of Chaucer they used was the six-volume edition of Chaucer published by Clarendon Press. Its editor, Walter William Skeat, was a philologist and an authority on fourteenth-century English literature (Winterich x). However, his single-text edition was pulled directly from the six-text version of Morris's friend F. J. Furnivall, founder of the Chaucer society. But the Delegates of the Press hesitated to let Morris reprint Skeat's copy, even though Skeat supported the project. The third time he submitted his request, he laid out his intentions more fully:

I am publishing a Chaucer which is being printed at the Kelmscott Press, & will be ornamented with picture[s] designed by Sire Edward Burne-Jones and borders &c by myself. This book I hope to make a specially

beautiful one as to typography & decoration, and I naturally wish to make the text as good as possible. I ask therefore to be allowed to avail myself of the corrections of errors which Professor Skeat's learning & acumen are making public. . . I should add that it is impossible that this book could come into competition with the text now being published at the University Press, as only 325 copies will be issued, at a high price (20 pounds), & without notes or commentary. It is intended to be a work of art. (qtd in Peterson 238)

The committee did eventually approve of Morris's request. However, as Peterson notes, this letter is not quite accurate. Morris's copy of Skeat's edition actually shows very few emendations. Ellis and Morris did pull their copy of *The Canterbury Tales* from the Ellesmere manuscript, but the rest of it was simply Skeat's copied. As Burne-Jones notes, the Kelmscott version without introduction, preface, notes, or glossary offers an experience "unvexed by the impertinence of the intruder" which in this case was Professor Skeat (Peterson 239).

Morris did not wait for the committee to approve his request. He had already started printing by the time they agreed to let him use Skeat's *Chaucer*. And the amount of work he did before hand proves how specialized the *Chaucer* really was. Morris had to order special paper for the Chaucer project. This all-linen paper was a larger size than his usual orders and had the watermark of a perch. He employed his newest type (a smaller version of Troy which he entitled, fittingly, Chaucer) and began work on the design. The title page itself took him two weeks. The finished work includes eighty-seven woodcuts by Burne Jones which were engraved by W. H. Hooper. Each of these woodcuts took the engraver a week to finish. In addition to supervising the project, Morris worked out all the borders, decorations, initials and frames around each illustration (Winterich x).

The project did encounter a few challenges, many of which pertained to printing. There were problems with ink once printing started. Yellow stains began to appear on the pages, so Morris had to quickly replace the type of ink he used. Hooper, an engraver, caused a delay when he engraved the title too small, requiring Morris, who was very ill, to extend the design by about a fifth of an inch (Peterson 242). Additionally, Morris anticipated the book taking too long to print so he rented another small cottage and bought another Albion press expressly for speeding up the process of printing 325 copies. Because of the delays and the huge investment in the book (a total of over 7,000 pounds), Morris announced he would print a total of 425 (Peterson 253). Thirteen additional copies were produced on specially-ordered vellum (Titlebaum 473). Today, 438 copies of the book exist, although a facsimile edition was published in 1958 with the addition of a glossary and introduction.

In his essay “The Creation of the Kelmscott Chaucer,” Richard Titlebaum points out that “the *Chaucer* is a monument not only to the ideals of the Kelmscott Press and the Gothic Revival, but to Morris’s life-long love of Chaucer, whom he had first read as an undergraduate with Burne-Jones at Oxford in 1855” (475). Morris later addresses Chaucer as his “master” in both *The Earthly Paradise* and *The Life and Death of Jason*. Morris writes, “O Master, pardon me, if yet in vain / Thou art my Master, and I fail to bring / Before men’s eyes the image of the thing / My heart is filled with” (*Works* II: 259). If Morris himself admits that his work at the press was to publish books in a manner “worthy of one’s feelings,” then we can see the depth of his devotion to this writer through the amount of effort and life itself that he poured into the undertaking. Morris leaves readers a vignette into not merely his admiration for the medieval book, but

his sense that for the works of Chaucer a particular and different style was necessary. By considering its material presentation, we can flesh out Morris's own interpretation of Chaucer as worthy of significant time and respect.

As Thompson points out in his 1976 postscript, "We have to make up our minds about William Morris" (801). And this comment definitely applies to his work in the press. Either we can see it as an integral part of the work that Morris did throughout his life, or we see it as the frivolous pursuit of an aging man too tired to deal with the disappointments of his life. Morris's own writings on the topic of printing, which I will discuss more thoroughly in the following chapter, make it clear that his work at Kelmscott was rooted in the same general dissatisfaction with the state of things in his society; the same problems which affected his politics also influenced its book production. By addressing the quality in one, he was speaking about the other as well.

Despite my disagreement with Thompson's account of Kelmscott Press as simply a pastime, I do agree with his assessment of the man himself. Thompson discusses the way Morris eludes neat packaging because he was both a Marxist and a romantic, or as Engel calls him, "a sentimental Socialist" (803). For the Marxist part, Morris understood the primary job of the Socialist, himself included, "to help people to find out their wants, to encourage them to want more, to challenge them to want differently, and to envisage a society of the future in which people, freed at last of necessity, might choose between different wants" (806). Morris writes, "It is to stir you up not to be contented with a little that I am here tonight." The romantic sentiment that Morris felt, Thompson describes as a "devotion to pre-capitalist achievements in the visual and architectural arts" and this feeling was re-inforced by "Keatsian and Pre-Raphaelite notions of 'Beauty'" (808).

Morris's "romantic" impulses led him to draw his inspirations from the past in an attempt to make them a part of his present. Thompson interprets his tendency toward archaism as a type of disengagement from the sensibility of his time, an expression of the alienation he felt. He writes:

But, as I've argued sufficiently, his premises were wrong, and to attempt to 'make a new tongue' in that way was to disengage from, rather than to challenge the sensibility of his time. The attempt succeeded only when it was matched by the form of dream, when disengagement was itself a means by which criticism of the age's common-sense could be brought to bear. (808)

By starting a Press which drew from medieval masterpieces, Morris evidences both a drive to educate people to "want more" and to "want differently" and the disengagement such a moral readjustment might require in the form of a different space—a book.

Morris's new project with the press allowed for new forms of expression, and it is doubtful that he stopped believing in the ability of art to reform society. By focusing his energies on reforming printing, especially because he called upon the medieval period for inspiration, Morris could gloss the social ills he had been talking about all these years in a new way. His lectures on the topic of printing reveal he is thinking about the issues of modern society with his new undertaking, especially because many of the problems with Victorian printing grew out of new technologies used for mass production and distribution.

CHAPTER TWO

Morris's Ideas on Art

On the Nature of Morris's Gothic

If to know William Morris is to know his favorite era, as his close friend Edward Burne-Jones suggested, sorting through Morris's medievalism is key to understanding his work. In the months after Morris's death, Burne-Jones explains the importance of the Middle Ages to Morris:

Remembering those early years and comparing them with the last in which I knew him, the life is one continuous course. His earliest enthusiasms were his latest. The thirteenth century was his ideal period then, and it was still the same in our last talks together; nor would he ever wander from his allegiance. The changes that have come over later impressions about art passed beside him or under him with scarcely any notice.
(Mackail 2.336)

Morris's passion for the period is apparent in all he did from his tapestries to his stained glass, his furniture to his Kelmscott books. Establishing Morris as a medievalist is not difficult, but knowing how this penchant fits with his socialist interests is. Although many critics have struggled with how to understand Morris's medievalism, none have spent significant time studying what exactly "Gothic" meant to Morris. In this chapter I address this question as a starting point for reconciling Morris's love for the past with his socialist vision for the future. As Ruskin notes in his seminal chapter "The Nature of Gothic," "We all have some notion, most of us a very determined one, of the meaning of the term Gothic [...]" (153). Morris formulated his own concept of Gothic from many different sources, the most important of which was Ruskin's influential chapter. After discussing the impact of Ruskin's ideas on Morris's own concept of the period, I analyze

Morris's extant lectures and essays on printing in order to clarify his idea of "Gothic," especially as it relates to his final venture in the Kelmscott Press. When read separately, these pieces reflect the interests of a collector, much like a tour through Morris's library; but taken together, they sketch out the essential elements of Morris's "Gothic," the most prominent of which are organicism, harmony, and inventiveness.

When critics interpret Morris's medievalism, they raise the same issues that Frances Power Cobbe, journalist and prose writer, did in her 1869 *Echo* article entitled "Conversions to Romanism." In this article she uses physiognomy in describing what she calls "the Batminded Man." These are characters "to whom daylight is an extremely unpleasant fact, who seek and find all their mental food in dark places." She goes on to say that this "batminded" type has always been around. An introvert, the "batminded man" shows his particular brand of cowardice by hiding in the pages of history. She observes:

To these men it is a penance to have been born in the age of steam and telegraphy. They are Mediaevalists by nature; nay it is probable that had they lived in the Dark Ages they would have looked back with sighs to yet earlier and obscurer "Ages of Faith"—Iron, Bronze or Stone. In our time all they can do is to become archaeologists, bibliophiles, Ritualists; and well it is when they stop there. But even as their prototypes the Bats, when they perceive a yet darker inner chamber than the one they occupy, are sure sooner or later to flit into it. (*Echo*, 1:9)

In this article, Cobbe reproaches those who do not face the changes of the age. She decries those who grow nostalgic over the "medieval period," what she calls the "dark," rather than face the difficulties of her day, although she does acknowledge the trials of her own age are not little ones, presenting themselves "with terrible force." Ultimately she discusses the Anglo-Catholic revival of the nineteenth century, saying that no one can "get faith" while in the grip of these difficulties by "running away" and "hiding" one's

face in the “lap of Authority.” She views the medieval revival as just that—an appeal to the past as a source of instruction that does not necessarily help solve anything. Instead, medievalism serves to soothe the onslaught of doubt that accompanies the challenges presented by change.

Writing about Morris necessarily involves confronting Cobbe’s challenge to the medievalist. Did Morris recoil from the issues of his own age when he broke from the Socialist League by “haunting” the medieval world of books? Was the Kelmscott Press a way to hide from the disappointments of the “day”? One could easily construe his trips to Iceland and his sudden interest in expanding his collection of medieval incunabula as a desire to withdraw from the chaos of contemporary society. Affirming Cobbe’s perspective, Linda Dowling in her book *The Vulgarization of Art*, sees Morris’s medieval interests as escapism. She attributes Morris’s Kelmscott Press venture to a retreat into the “Palace of Art,” one reminiscent of his childhood love of Scott’s Gothic novels (51-74). Jessica DeSpain in her 2002 article “A book Arts Pilgrimage: Arts and Crafts Socialism and the Kelmscott Chaucer” defends Morris as a reformer who forwarded his socialist idea of brotherhood through his medieval-inspired book production of the Kelmscott *Chaucer*. However, she acknowledges this reading of his venture is not without complications. She writes, “The most pressing criticism for a scholar to overcome when examining a work for the Kelmscott Press as a particularly socialist statement is the lavishness and scarcity of the editions” (84). Additionally, she ends her article with questions that indicate her conclusions are not entirely satisfying: “Why would Morris create such an elaborate edition? Why would he look back to these antiquarian models for a nineteenth-century edition created in a pool of progress?” (87).

These questions cannot be explained solely by looking at Morris's Kelmscott productions. His writing on the topic of printing reveals both impulses—on one hand, he idealized the medieval period, modeling the community at the Upper Mall after a medieval guild and emulating the medieval book arts in his own; yet Morris also believed in taking the traditions of the past and innovating upon them. His hopes for art in his time indicated also his hopes for social change which would never have been possible in the medieval period.

When discussing his ideas on Gothic, Morris acknowledges his reliance on Ruskin's ideas and says as much in his socialist essay, "The Lesser Arts." He calls Ruskin's chapter, "On the Nature of Gothic," "the truest and the most eloquent words that can possibly be said on the subject" (5). He admits his ideas merely echo Ruskin's. In fact, Ruskin's chapter was so important to him that it was among the first books printed by Kelmscott Press. Mackail writes of this chapter, "It was the first thing that, when Morris met with it long ago at Oxford, had set fire to his enthusiasm, and kindled the beliefs of his whole life" (2.275). In his preface to the Kelmscott edition of the chapter, Morris calls it one of the most influential chapters of the century, crediting it with the discovery of "a new road on which the world should travel" (2.275). Morris sums up the chapter's content by highlighting its most prominent point: "The lesson which Ruskin here teaches us is that art is the expression of man's pleasure in labour (sic); that it is possible for man to rejoice in his work, for strange as it may seem to us to-day, there have been times when he did rejoice in it" (2.275). In this section from his larger work, *The Stones of Venice*, Ruskin spends most of his time describing what he calls the "mental power or expression" of the builder. He explains: "what characters, we have to discover,

did the Gothic builders love, or instinctively express in their work as distinguished from all other builders?” (2.154). Ruskin describes six characteristics of the mental or moral elements expressed in Gothic, but he spends by far the most time discussing the first one—savageness. Ruskin talks about the workman’s “pleasure in labour”—to which Morris refers—in this section.

Rudeness or wildness, Ruskin writes, is a recognizable attribute of “Gothic” that deserves more attention. He explains, “I believe it is in this very character that it deserves our profoundest reverence” (2.156). Savageness possesses moral nobility in that it testifies to the strength of the “Northern nations,” but its most valuable aspect comes through its display of “religious principle” (2.159). The medieval system (which Ruskin notes is synonymous with Christian) of ornament supports and encourages the value of an individual soul. Secondly, it embraces “lost power and fallen nature.” These tendencies give the workman freedom. Ruskin impugns his England of making “tools” or “slaves” out of men who are capable of much more. A workman becomes a slave when he is asked only to replicate and not to imagine; Ruskin starts by criticizing the Greek use of this practice, which he calls “servile ornament.” Ruskin notes that the “modern English mind has much in common with that of the Greek” (258). However, “[t]his is a noble character in the abstract, but becomes ignoble when it causes us to forget the relative dignities of that nature itself, and to prefer the perfectness of the lower nature itself to the imperfection of the higher . . .” (*Lamp* 258). Ruskin explains that it is the possibility of imperfection that allows the craftsman to achieve greatness:

Let him but begin to imagine, to think to try to do anything worth doing; and the engine-turned precision is lost at once. Out come all his roughness, all his dullness, all his incapability; shame upon shame, failure upon failure, pause after pause: but out comes the whole majesty of him

also; and we know the height of it only, when we see the clouds settling upon him. (160-161)

The other aspects of Gothic, which Ruskin discusses, grow out of this “majesty” that gives voice to the medieval craftsman’s inner life. “Love of change,” “Love of Nature,” “Disturbed Imagination,” “Obstinacy,” and “Generosity” are the other mental characteristics that Ruskin describes. All of these qualities are the products of a freely developed imagination, one that accepts and allows mistakes. Ruskin praises the quality of imperfection as one that proves the free expression of the workman; perfection and the desire for it leads to men working as “animated tools.” This form of servility did not happen in the medieval period when the fantastic creatures on the old cathedrals testify to the “... signs of the life and liberty of every workman who struck the stone; a freedom of thought, and rank in scale of being, such as no laws, no charters, no charities can secure [...]” (*Lamp* 261).

Ruskin’s explanation of Gothic appealed to Morris because it instructs the reader on the best working conditions for the production of art. Morris, like Ruskin, saw a free imagination as the source of all good work, especially good art; but Morris focused on what he saw as the most important condition for the imagination’s fullest development: enjoyment. Morris’s foundation for Gothic does echo Ruskin’s; in fact, both could be described as participants in the cult of enthusiasm that Houghton talks about in his foundational work, the *Victorian Frame of Mind*. Houghton describes “the ethic of enthusiasm” as one that sees human nature as good and “the organ of virtue is the sensibility rather than the conscience; and that the moral life depends, not on the arduous struggle to master the passions and compel the will to a life of duty, but on the vitality of the noble emotions, inspiring the delighted service of a high ideal”(264). Both Morris

and Ruskin adhere to these principles. However, with the introduction of the term “pleasure,” he indicates a different motivation than Ruskin’s “noble emotions.” When Ruskin talks about changing the Victorian working conditions, he emphasizes gaining understanding of the kinds of labor that “are good for men, raising them, and making them happy” (2.166). He encourages the pursuit of an “ennobling labor” which is free from any kind degradation or dehumanization. Ruskin’s vision for change involves the idea of emancipation, or a revelation of a higher and better existence. Morris’s translation of this goal, though, suggests the starting point is not an outward and upward vision but an inward one. He insists one can delight in laboring, in collecting, in reading, and he uses the term pleasure with all three activities. In the above passage, he talks about man’s “pleasure in labor”; in *The Ideal Book*, reading a well-printed picture book gives “endless pleasure”; and in his essay “Some Thoughts on Ornamented Manuscripts of the Middle Ages” he describes a good book and a good house as “the pleasurable end towards which all societies of human beings ought now to struggle” (1). For Morris, pleasure feeds the soul. People should have the space to find work as delightful as play and play that allows better and more fulfilling work.

While Ruskin focuses on breaking down the enslavement of division of labor by advising his readers what kinds of products they should buy, Morris talks about the necessity of enjoyment in order for a reader to even want such change to happen. In his 1879 essay, “Making the best of it,” Morris explains the connection between pleasure and change:

So I say again, my hope is that those who begin to consider carefully how to make the best of the chambers in which they eat and sleep and study, and hold converse with their friends, will breed in their minds a wholesome and fruitful discontent with the sordidness that even when they

have done their best will surround their island of comfort, and that as they try to appease this discontent they will find that there is no way out of it but by insisting that all men's work shall be fit for free men and not for machines: my extravagant hope is that people will learn something of art, and so long for something more, and will find, as I have, there is no getting it save by the general acknowledgement of the right of every man to have fit work to do in a beautiful home. (*Works* 22.86)

Here Morris outlines his ideas about why art and the pleasure that art brings are so important; only by experiencing such pleasure can a person believe that every human has the right to the same. Such a belief necessitates social change. Morris saw the medieval period as a time when the pleasure of labor and the pleasure of enjoyment were equally felt. The elements of organicism, harmony, and inventiveness he saw as proof of this pleasure.

As Ruskin notes in his chapter on Gothic, defining the "nature" of this period is much like sketching out "[a] grey, shadowy, many-pinnacled image" than conducting a scientific inquiry (254). As such, several consistent themes compose the structure of Morris's Gothic spires, although they are not always easily distinguished. What is clear, however, is that Morris had a specific idea of good art. Good art, fine art, he argues, must be "organic." This, like Ruskin's "savageness," is the foundation of Morris's idea of Gothic. Like "savageness," Morris's "organicism" focuses on the conditions of the workmen, on the quality of freedom. However, Morris's emphasis of tradition and the epical and ornamental qualities of organic art take him in a different direction. Morris first mentions the term in his 1895 lecture "The Early Illustration of Printed Books," although he references the idea before. In this essay Morris establishes the three principle parts of organic art. First, it must be traditional. "Organic art," he clarifies, has "the principle of growth in it being not merely accidental or individual, but connected by

a long line of tradition, of practice and craftsmanship” (*Ideal* 15). In his unpublished essay, “Ornamented Manuscripts of the Middle Ages,” Morris discusses the life of the craftsman more thoroughly, clarifying his idea of “traditional.” He suggests, “Working as a free-workman, or artist, amidst just the amount of traditional skill and mechanical appliances best fitted for making an ordinarily intelligent man an artist; organized (as far as he was organized) not by a portion of a vast commercial system, but by his craft and guild and politically and socially rather than commercially, his relation to art was personal and not mechanical” (2). The life of the craftsman affected the quality of his craft. Morris sees the personal relationship as a product of the artist’s circumstances, his connection to guilds and their traditions as important as the tools he used.

The craftsman’s personal connection to his art and to his craft caused it to be full of vitality, the second quality of organic art. Morris explains in both “Ornamented Manuscripts” and “Illuminated Books” that vitality or growth has a basis in belief. In “Ornamented Manuscripts,” Morris discusses the mystery plays of the fifteenth century in order to defend them—and by extension, medieval ornamentation—from the accusation of being “coarse” or “rude.” He admits that although these plays would “make the average religious person of today shudder at their plainness of speech,” they are not profane because they are sincere (4). He notes, “[...] every personage represented up to God himself is thoroughly believed in, and is made to speak and act as the playwright knew he would act under the given conditions. They are in a word full of *life* [sic]” (4). When Morris discusses art having vitality or life, he means it is direct and sincere, even if it appears coarse and rude to Victorian eyes. The craftsman “was first of all a man, and thought it no impiety to draw a jest, his quaint and simple expression of how he

personally felt the strangeness of life, even on the page of a service book” (5). As a picture-illustration of this aspect Morris gives the second page from the Queen Mary’s Psalter (Figure 3) “in which the ‘coarseness’ of the artist (*i.e.* his appreciation of the facts of ordinary life) is set forth in some of the most delicately beautiful drawings ever given to the world” (5).

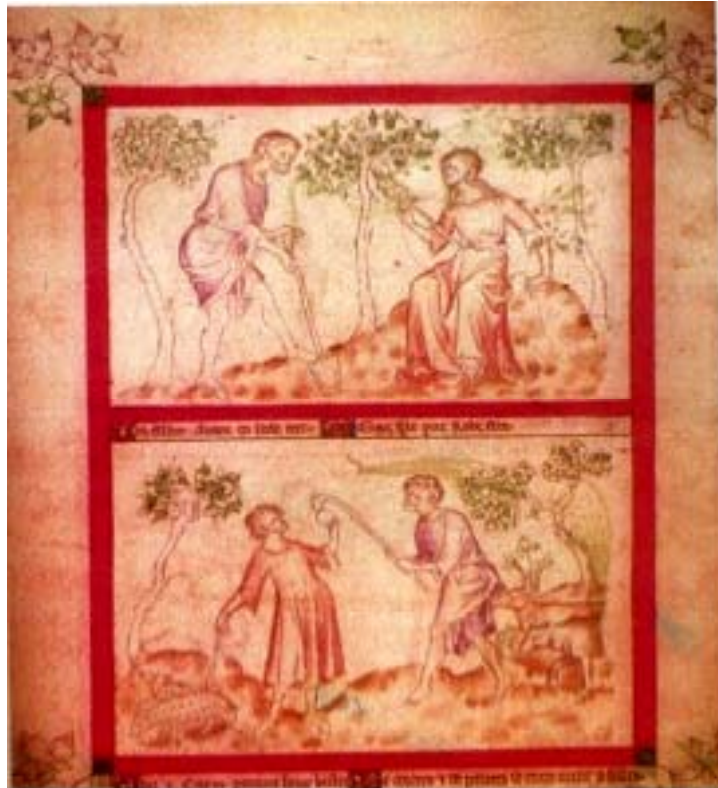


Figure 3. *Queen Mary Psalter*, folio 4v: Toil of Adam and Eve; Game of Cain and Abel; rpt. in Anne Rudloff Stanton, *The Queen Mary Psalter: A Study of Affect and Audience* (Independence Square: American Philosophical Society, 2001) xxiii.

Although this page of the psalter is not the one described by Morris, it is from the same section—the preface. Anne Rudloff Stanton describes this section as the preface, which can be easily distinguished from the psalter proper by the materials used, the colors, and the layout. This section uses gold leaf for letters and a red vermilion border; however the pictures themselves are of a more delicate wash than the rest of the book, requiring a

more intimate viewing in order to be seen. For Morris, the illustrations by the artist in this section are signs of the artist's understanding of biblical stories through his own life. They are ordinary scenes whose simple and pastoral qualities reveal the artist's belief in them.

His lecture "Woodcuts of Gothic Books" further clarifies the idea of vitality when he juxtaposes "organic art" with art that is "rhetorical, retrospective, or academical art, art which has no real growth in it" (26). Rhetorical art has no growth because it is both abstract and contrived. The most vital period, according to Morris, was between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries when a sudden surge of organic art occurred. He attributes this surge to an excitement that could be called "spiritual" and that was "in everybody's heart" (18). The craftsman unconsciously reacted to this revival by producing masterpieces. Morris explains that the medieval craftsman was "deeply imbued with a sense of the epic of the World, as it was understood in his day" (4). The expression of vitality communicated his complete assurance in his beliefs.

Finally, all organic art was both epic and ornamental. These characteristics Morris mentions in almost every lecture and essay on printing. In his 1892 lecture, "Woodcuts of Gothic Books," Morris praises the aspects of Gothic that he so admires: their organic quality, their harmonious use of pictures and ornament, their clarity of design. He says of the Gothic book, "As things to be looked at they are beautiful taken as a whole; they are alive all over and not merely in a corner here and there" (36). The "epical" and the "ornamental" are the two qualities which produce this vibrancy. The epical side he explains as "the telling of a story with the interest of incident," and the ornamental part as "the sense of expression of the beautiful and fitness from the

beautiful—a proportional point of view of the picture and the work in which it is set” (20). He claims that medieval art exemplifies these two aspects more than art from any other period. Before his general discussion of these early printed books, Morris describes the effectiveness of medieval design: “Medieval art, the result of a long unbroken series of tradition, is preeminent for its grasp of those two functions, which indeed, interpenetrate then more than in any other period” (26). Morris suggests that medieval books excel in both storytelling and ornament to the point that “the sensuous pleasure of the eye [n]ever lack[s]” (26). Further into the essay, Morris explains more thoroughly what brings him “pleasure.”

In those [books] that are ornamented without pictures illustrative of the text, the eye is so pleased, and the fancy so tickled by the beauty and exhaustless cheerful invention of the illuminator, that one scarcely ventures to ask that the tale embodied in the written characters should be further illustrated. But when this is done, and the book is full of pictures, which tell the written tale again with the most conscientious directness of design, and as to execution with great purity of outline and extreme delicacy of colour, we can say little more than that the only work of art which surpasses a complete medieval book is a complete medieval building. (27)

Some of the key words in this passage are “invention,” “directness,” “purity” and “delicacy.” These adjectives pull together all of the qualities which Morris most admired about the art of the medieval period. The epical and ornamental elements of organic art are most stunning when they showcase both the craftsmen’s ingenuity (inventiveness) and his ability to accomplish an overall design (harmony).

Although only two of his lectures mention “organic art” directly, its principle qualities appear in many of his other writing on printing. Primarily, Morris sees organic art as being produced by artists who utilize past traditions while shaping a new art. Additionally, this organic art is a product of a certain social condition and is an indication

of societal health. The measurement of its health is in its ability to tell a story and to design a book architecturally; in other words, the artists give thought to its overall structure and purpose. He explains the appearance of this quality in talking about the force of tradition in “Woodcuts of Gothic Books”:

No doubt the force of tradition, which culminated in the Middle Ages, had much to do with this unity of epical design and ornament. It supplied deficiencies of individual by collective imagination (compare the constantly recurring phrases and lines in genuine epical or ballad poetry); it ensured the inheritance of deft craftsmanship and instinct for beauty in the succession of the generations of workmen; and it cultivated the appreciation of good work by the general public. (26)

Being a traditional society meant that the past successes instructed the efforts of the next generation of craftsmen and their audiences. The collective history and taste made everyone “a potential artist” (27). In talking about living conditions and audiences Morris is also talking about his own period. He accuses his fellow Victorians of a lack of education and he criticizes the Victorian artist of “looking at the ignorant laymen with contempt” (26). Morris’s lectures and essays are an attempt to solve the ignorance and close the gap of tradition.

In “Woodcuts of Books of Ulm and Augsburg,” Morris points to a tangible example of these epical and ornamental qualities when he mentions the most important early printed German book as Günther Zainer’s *Speculum humanae salvationis* (Figure 4).



Fig. 4. *Speculum humanae salvationis*, printed by Gunther Zainer (Augsberg, 1473); rpt. in Iain Sharp, *Real Gold: Treasures of Auckland City Libraries* (Auckland, 2007).

The above pages show a balance between words and images. Both the colors of the woodcut and the font are clear and bright. These early books gave Morris “clear insight into the essential qualities of the medieval design of the period” (52). The design Morris so admired involved “straightforward” cuts which evidence individuality in spite of rudeness. Additionally, he notes that “the composition is good everywhere, the drapery well deisgned, the lines rich, which shows of course that the cutting is good.”

The art of the medieval period excelled in “good composition.” At the heart of Morris’s conception of good design was the presence of harmony. Throughout his writing on printing, Morris discusses harmony first and foremost in connection to the design of the page; but more importantly, the harmony Morris most admired pertained to relationships—between pages, between illustration and text, between materials, between craftsmen, between the purpose and the product. In “Woodcuts of Gothic Books,” Morris focuses on the *mise en page*, or the unit of the page including the relationship between the verbal and visual texts. With lantern slides, he stresses to his audience the qualities of even the earliest printing efforts which far exceed those of the modern. He argues, “... I

want once more to impress upon you the fact that these designs, one and all, while they perform their especial function—the office of telling a tale—never forget their other function of decorating the book of which they form a part” (36). Morris persuades his audience that illustrations and decorations are not to be looked as separate from the text, but all elements—“type, paper, woodcuts, and the due arrangement”—should function as a harmonious whole. Of the medieval book, however, he says “they are alive all over, and not merely in a corner here or there” (36). Morris condemns the Victorian consumer who merely wants to read a text. He claims that book art should be restored to its proper place in society. To his critics he writes:

You may say that you don’t care for this result, that you wish to read literature and to look at pictures; and that so long as the modern book gives you these pleasures you ask no more of it, well, I can understand that, but you must pardon me if I say that your interest in books in that case is literary only and not artistic, and that implies, I think, a partial crippling of the faculties; a misfortune which no one should be proud of.
(37)

As this passage indicates, Morris had a specific idea about the state of book art and its remedy. He insists that all parts of the book, how it is made and put together, should be considered. He sees in these early books a consideration of overall design. The illustrator especially must be aware of this aspect: “The artist, to produce these satisfactorily, must exercise severe self-restraint, and must never lose sight of the page of the book he is ornamenting. . . I do not think any artist will ever make a good book illustrator, unless he is keenly alive to the value of a well-drawn line, crisp and clean, suggesting a simple and beautiful *silhouette*” (38). Another essential element of the well-designed book is the execution of the wood-cutting by the engraver. Harmonious relationship between illustration and text reflects a clear understanding of the purpose and

a corresponding harmony between the artists who produce the book. The relationship between the craftsman must be ongoing with the ultimate goal in mind because, as Morris puts it, “lack of precision is fatal” (38).

Morris partially credits the medieval craftsman’s ability to produce a harmonious text to his understanding of the world and his place in it. For the medieval craftsman, the unity in his “epic of the world” allows him both a sense of freedom and clarity. These aspects of the medieval artist’s mind find expression in his work through its simplicity and purity. Proportion and balance exist both in the layout of the pages and in the integration of its ornament. The craftsman’s clarity of purpose and his clarity of execution speaks to the absence of doubt or confusion and his faith in both his life on earth and the continuity of life in the hereafter. Morris found himself deeply attracted to the peace he found in the pages of the illuminated manuscript and medieval book because these values were reflected there.

In addition to organicism and harmony, Morris praises the individuality of each of these books. This quality, what he also called invention, attests to the craftsman’s freedom of expression and his personal connection with the work. Nothing mechanical or “rote” detracts from the experience of the text as both a written and a verbal masterpiece. Like Ruskin’s quality of “changefulness,” invention or individuality engages the reader on a different level than something that is predictable. Morris’s idea of “pleasure” seems to be crucially linked to the balance between a perfect design and an unpredictable content. In these medieval books and manuscripts Morris finds individual expressions of the craftsman—something that has not been done and will never be done again in the same way. It is their uniqueness that he loves. And it is the expression of

individuality that he does not see in modern books with their sterile and scientific precision. Ruskin wrote much the same thing in his discussion of savageness, especially in his discussion of “servile ornament” which elevates “perfection” rather than invention. Ruskin blames this desire for machine-like perfection for the enslavement of art and the mechanization of production. Morris echoes these sentiments in several of his Socialist lectures.

An example of the balance between harmony and inventiveness can be found in looking at a thirteenth-century Latin psalter from North France, in the vicinity of Beauvais, which Morris purchased from Charles Butler in 1888 (Figure 5). One can see in this picture both regularity in the font and the organization of the page and variability in its decoration. The unpredictability holds the attention while moving the eye around the page. For instance, the bird at the bottom right of the page acts as a focalizer whose body position and gaze focus the attention to the top of the page again. Yet amidst the inventiveness of the page are aspects of regularity and balance. The font is even throughout. The pattern of the ornamentation on the right and the left are perfectly regular, although they are different on each side. Pictures are for the most part evenly spaced, balancing the page.

Morris assesses the features of the book in a note made on the manuscript:

This book has a complete and satisfactory scheme of ornament which is nowhere departed from, and the colour of which is thoroughly harmonious. Many of the dragon-scrolls end in daintily painted little heads, drawn with much expression & sense of fun; and the hair of them is beautifully designed, and drawn very firmly. The figure-work in the eight historiated letters is everywhere quite up to the average of its date; but on the first page, in the Beatus and the symbols of the Evangelists, goes a

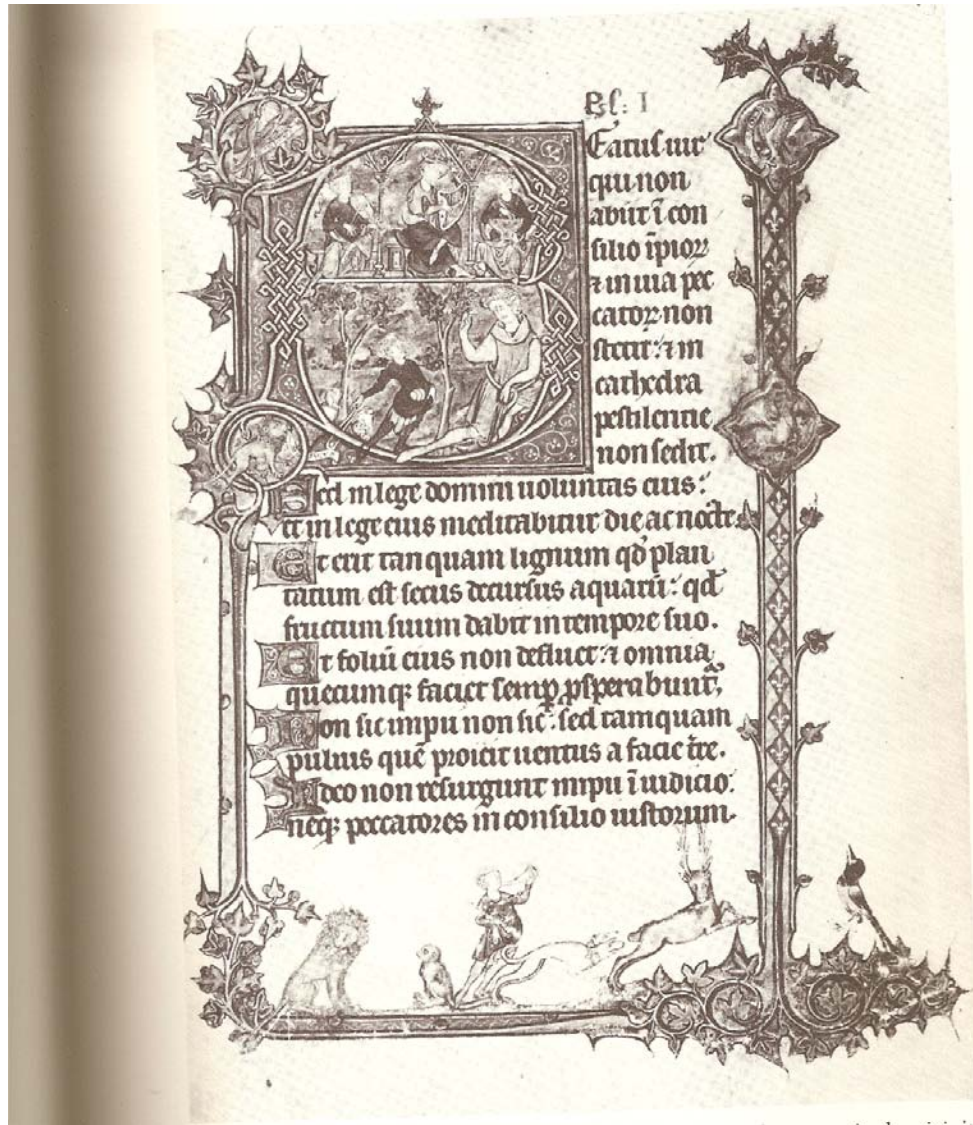


Figure 5. Morgan Library M. 98, folio I I. A Latin Psalter from the North of France (Beauvais, 13th century); rpt. in William S. Peterson, *The Ideal Book* (Los Angeles, 1982).

good deal beyond that. Altogether an admirable specimen of the work of the later 13th century. (3)

Morris admires the book's overall design and the artist's ability to sustain it throughout the book. This quality he admits is "satisfactory" because it is consistent and maintained throughout. But he also calls attention to its detail and individuality with his admiration for the "expression" and "sense of fun" in the ornamentation.

In his 1893 lecture, “The Ideal Book,” Morris works through many of these issues—beginning with the proper elements of design and concluding with an apologetic for why beautiful books should be made. But distinctive to this essay is a description of reading by Morris. He maintains that small books are not the best size for reading because “you have either to cramp your hand by holding it, or else to put in on the table with a paraphernalia of matters to keep it down, a table-spoon on one side, a knife on another, and so on, which things always tumble off at a critical moment” (72). The benefit of the folio, Morris says, is that it “lies quiet and majestic on the table, waiting kindly till you please to come to it with its leaves flat and peaceful, giving you no trouble of body, so that your mind is free to enjoy the literature which its beauty enshrines” (72). Surely this sense of freedom to experience the performance of the text is the “endless pleasure” which Morris sees in the well-wrought picture book (73). He goes on in the essay to describe how the beauty is achieved. The ideal book ultimately must be “*architectural*.” A beautiful book, like a beautiful building or a beautiful piece of literature, is more than the sum of its parts separately. The pieces work like an equation that balances every aspect of its production and invites more than information gathering, but inspiration.

The art of the medieval period is beautiful because it is a living art which grows from the traditions of the craftsman and yet offers something individual and inventive all its own. Morris sees the medieval period as a hopeful one because of this organicism, and he calls for a rebirth of organicism in his own time. His own work models what such a rebirth might look like. He insisted on mastering every aspect of the process of printing, on using a community of artists in producing illustrated books, on collecting the

very best materials, and on printing pieces he felt were works of art. Art, Morris argues, should not be institutionalized or purely academical because it needs to be cultivated by spirit. Without a personal connection to what is being made, the worker cannot produce art. Spirit produces art. Ruskin definitely discusses this need for connection, but Morris's idea of organicism represents a break from Ruskin's focus and terminology. This characteristic is unique to Morris's Gothic.

In his essay, "Early Illustrations of Printed Books," Morris makes it clear that he is concerned about the state of art. And because the aspects of Gothic that Morris so admires stem from the life of the medieval craftsman, it does appear that Morris is nostalgic for that time. However, in his socialist lecture "Feudal England" published in *Signs of Change*, Morris highlights the difference between that period and his own. He says that despite all their struggles, serfs did not achieve an "equality of condition" (xxiii.26). Morris saw a better life as possible in his own time with "the inevitable social revolution, which will bring about the end of mastery and the triumph of fellowship" (xxiii.57-58). The challenges of his own time, he notes, are the "profit-grinding master" and the industrialism that instituted division of labor. In his 1885 lecture, "The Hopes of Civilization," Morris reiterates Ruskin's feelings on the subject of division of labor:

The individual workman in this system is kept life-long at the performance of some task quite petty in itself, and which he soon masters, and having mastered it has nothing more to do but to go on increasing his speed of hand under the spur of competition with his fellows, until he has become the perfect machine which it is his ultimate duty to become since without attaining to that end he must die or become a pauper. (xxiii.67-68)

Morris envisions something better for all people, with pleasure in labor, in fellowship, and in art. He saw the main source of that change, which he explains in "How we live

and how we might live,” as “educating people to a sense of their real capacities as men [...]” (26).

The real question, then, is what exactly Morris teaches through his writing and his work. The qualities of organicism, harmony and invention reflect Morris’s belief in the abundance of life, in the possibility of finding and doing something which one loves and in sharing that delight with others. Yeats calls him “the happiest of poets.” Then Yeats describes what he means by happy: “... for to be happy one must delight, like nature, in mere profusion, in mere abundance, in making and doing things, and if one sets an image of the perfect before one, it must be the image that draws her perpetually, the image of a perfect fullness of natural life, of an Earthly Paradise” (535). Morris’s use of organic abundance echoes the romantic’s vision of the natural world as its own heaven.

Houghton notes that “when an other-worldly orientation declines, the natural life of man reasserts its ancient-pagan importance, and ascetic discipline is discarded for the free development of all the faculties” (288). Though he did encourage a type of escapism through a sumptuous reading experience, Morris also calls attention to the fact that real “escape” is not possible. Books and their readers are part of the physical world. What Morris’s writing and his work does is offer his own take on what he thought should be natural in hopes that what was natural for him—the haste and waste of industrialism—would change in the future.

CHAPTER THREE

The Making of the Kelmscott *Chaucer*, Part I

Morris's Medieval Inspirations

Critics are quick to agree on Morris's medieval sources for his writing and handicraft. Paul Needham, William Peterson, E.P. Thompson and Fiona McCarthy discuss Morris's use of medieval manuscripts and early printed books for instruction on his press, but their commentaries leave room for a first-hand examination of the sources Morris collected and after which he modeled his work. As Michael Alexander points out in a book devoted to the term, *Medievalism: The Middle Ages in Modern England*, “‘Medievalism is a word which gestures towards an unwieldy province of cultural history which comprises both the Middle Ages and what has been made of them’” (xiv). Alexander divides Victorian medievalism into two different periods: the early period was one of “imaginative medievalism” while the later period was one of “antiquarian recovery.” Morris's medievalism falls into the later category. His medieval values—organicism, harmony, and inventiveness—were based on his collection and study of primary materials. These values took on physical shape with the Kelmscott *Chaucer*. In this chapter I break down the general, undeveloped assumption of Morris's medievalism by comparing the physical layout of the *Chaucer* with the primary sources he researched for his press.

Morris was a revivalist, and as Alexander argues, “All revivalists hold up for admiration a selective version of the past, whether their chosen ideal is medieval or classical, secular or Christian, Tory or republican” (96). Morris's version of Gothic is

selective and sometimes conflicted, especially in relationship to the illustrations by Burne-Jones who adopted a more idealized and less historical version of medievalism. Morris gathered from medieval cathedrals, medieval prayer books, and the early printed book the artistic attributes of framing, symmetry, symbolism and inventiveness. These visual features connote for the reader an elevation of images and a sanctification of textual space—both qualities of the cathedral and the Book of Hours. Identifying these qualities and their possible sources aids in explaining the visual reverberations experienced by the reader.

Margaret A. Syverson's work *The Wealth of Reality: An Ecology of Composition* provides an organizing structure for this discussion. Syverson argues that composition is a complex adaptive system that involves the processes of distribution, emergence, embodiment, and enaction. These steps allow a broader perspective of the *Chaucer* as a collection of visual features from medieval (and Victorian) sources; additionally, her work emphasizes the importance of the physical environment in both the act of creation and the act of reading it.

Although Syverson directs her attention to the act of writing, her description of composition is useful for any creative or interpretive act. A complex activity such as composing (whether written or visual art) “defies any attempt at strictly mechanistic explanation” (4). Syverson's argument opens the door for consideration of the physical, social, and environmental elements of the creative work, aspects often disregarded because they are not easily explained or are “discontinuous.” She outlines the process of composition as one that cannot be separated from “the agents and structures in the environment” (7). Creative products bear a mark of these agents and structures, and

graphic composition, like written, is distributed among them. Secondly, a text undergoes the process of emergence. With this second step Syverson discusses the classification systems (or the social, historical, cultural contexts) that interact with and shape the text (verbal or visual). The fourth step, embodiment, suggests that texts cannot be separated from their physical qualities, just as human experience cannot be separated from the physical body. All of these activities (distribution, emergence, and embodiment) are enacted through “activities and practices in composing situations” (13). Enaction involves all of the previous processes, but it also compares composition to the act of giving birth: “In text composing we do not report on a pregiven world ‘out there’ or ‘inside ourselves’; rather we *bring forth* a textual world as we are writing it. And we dwell in that world and are defined by its creation as certainly as we dwell in the ‘real’ world” (16). By analyzing these aspects of the ecology of composition in the design of the *Chaucer* we can see more clearly the “textual” or “artistic” world that it creates. In the following chapter I focus on the distribution and emergence of the text in order to analyze the organizing structures of its composition.

Distribution

Morris, in his introduction to the press, calls attention to his medieval sources in constructing his own “pocket cathedral.” He looked to early printed books to inform his use of materials and his production and to medieval manuscripts for instruction on page layout, ornamentation, and font. His design choices reflect Syverson’s description of the process of distribution because the *Chaucer* carries visually identifiable features of the works he collected in researching the press and those he encountered through travel. His composition is “divided and shared among agents and structures in the environment”

(Syverson 7). The influence of these materials started with production when he broke with the “limitation” of the machine on the ordinary printer and used a hand-press instead so as to avoid diluting his ink, softening his paper, and thinning his letter as recounted by H. Halliday Sparling. In this sense, the *Chaucer* was not printed; it was built. Morris started with the foundation of the best materials, designed the textual “rooms” of the building, and orchestrated its construction from overseeing the hand press to solving problems that arose.

Burne-Jones emphasizes the scope of the project when he calls Morris the architect of their “pocket cathedral” in a letter to Charles Eliot Norton on December 8, 1894. He writes, “When the book is done, if we live to finish it, it will be a little like a pocket cathedral. My share in it is that of the carver of images at Amiens and Morris’s that of the Architect and Magister Lapidida.” Burne-Jones’s title for Morris, “Magister Lapidida,” was the title given to the architect of Cologne Cathedral and appears in Ruskin’s *Seven Lamps of Architecture* (xvii). This comparison of Morris as the architect, or “carver of stone,” and the *Chaucer* as a Gothic cathedral highlights the complexity of the project. But the image holds more potency than that. As a cathedral, the book is a sacred space, as well as a political and social one. The idea of “book as cathedral” is not a new one, as Anne R. Meyer’s dissertation *Pearl in its Architectural Setting* shows. Medieval artisans, of books and cathedrals, shared artistic programs, namely to instruct and inspire the faithful. And with the Franciscan-inspired spiritual revival in the thirteenth century, visual elements were of primary importance whether in stone or on paper. Morris’s own work encases a collection of symbols and structures that can be traced much like a genealogy to these medieval ancestors; their physical presence in

Morris's work introduce a more meditative, contemplative reading pace and invite comparisons with cathedrals and psalters.

At the point that he started working on the Kelmscott Press, Morris had a wide exposure to medieval art. On excursions with his father, Morris first encountered medieval illuminations and architecture; his trip to Canterbury Cathedral with his father "was among the indelible experiences of his first decade" (Cary 6). As an Oxford student he took trips to France with Edward Burne-Jones to see the great medieval cathedrals, and he also was known among his peers for the long hours he spent studying at the Bodleian library sketching illuminations and calligraphy. Finally, as an adult bibliophile he filled his library with rare manuscripts and *incunabula* which one interviewer described as "arranged not as if they were part and parcel of a 'show-library,' but as if they were in daily, hourly use" (*Ideal* 89). Morris's attraction to medieval art has much to do with its design, which is both precise and surprising. By traveling and collecting, Morris immersed himself in vestiges of the medieval period. As Fiona McCarthy explains, his *modus operandi* was "first to know and then to look, and looking transform knowledge" (42). Morris's intimate knowledge of the medieval period grew from his pursuit of not just casual acquaintance but hands-on experience of medieval art. His library demonstrates those tools he found most useful for studying this period.

Morris's collecting tastes were formed early on, but the medieval portion of his library really took shape with his interest in starting a press. Morris makes it clear that his collection served as a model for his work; he states, "I want these books close at hand, and frequently, and therefore I must buy them" (92). Peterson explains how Morris used his library: "Aside from approximately one hundred medieval manuscripts, the library's

great strength lay in its fifteenth-century German and French illustrated books, which Morris drew upon repeatedly for examples of that unity of text and illustration which was central to his definition of the ideal book” (Peterson xxiv). His relationship with collector’s pieces started early. During the 1860s he began purchasing early printed books a few at a time, but very few manuscripts (Needham 25). The first incunabulum he acquired (1864) was an Ulm edition of Boccaccio’s *De claris mulieribus*, 1473 (24-25).

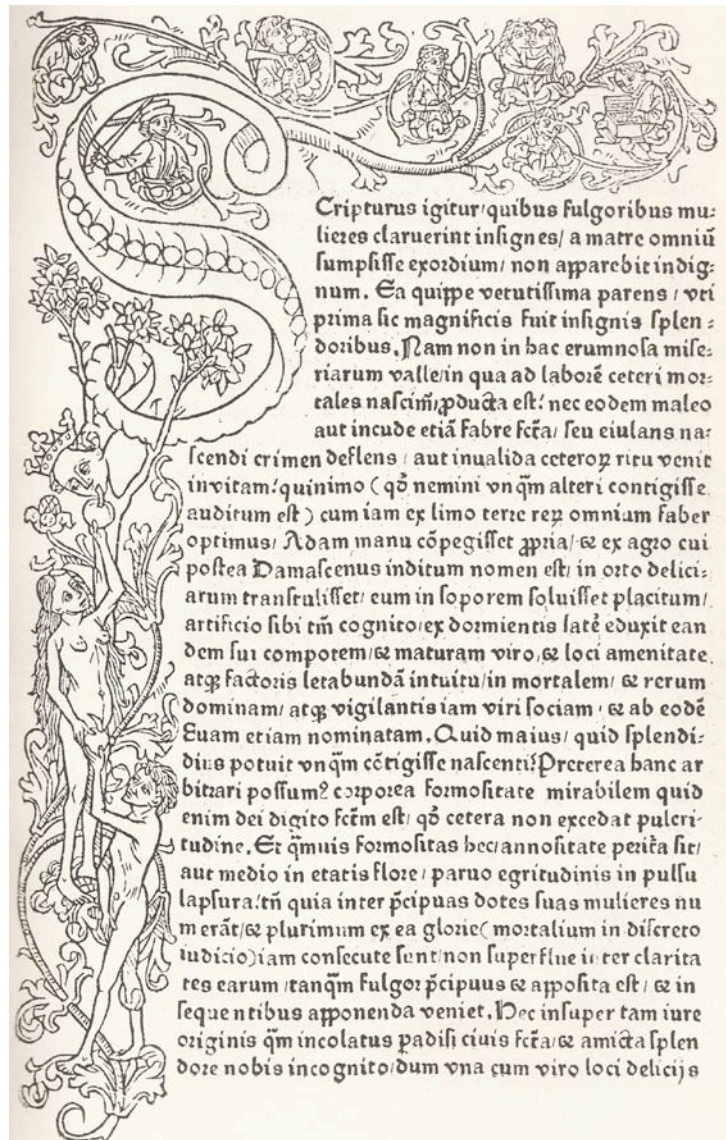


Figure 6. [ULM] Boccaccio, *De Claris Mulieribus*, rpt. in Paul Needham, *William Morris and the Art of the Book* (New York, 1976) XXIV.

This Boccaccio was the first illustrated book printed in Ulm, and Johann Zainer, the first printer in Ulm. Zainer uses a layout strongly reminiscent of a medieval manuscript, which Morris notes in writing about the woodcut tradition that came out of Germany. He recognizes the book for its beautiful ornamentation and clear, skillful woodcuts, “The great initial S I claim to be one of the very best printers’ ornaments ever made, one which would not disgrace a thirteenth century manuscript” (*Ideal*). Zainer’s designs are elaborate, yet clear. The lines are rich because he cut the woodcuts carefully and with precision.

Morris’s own Kelmscott work shows the influence of Zainer’s work, especially in his elaborate initial letter decorations, his serpentine curling-vine ornamentation, and his font design.

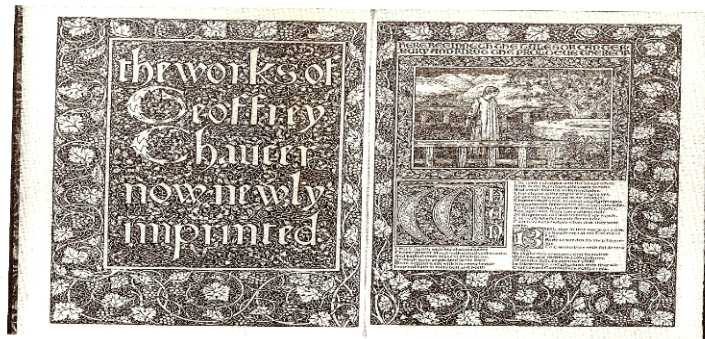


Figure 7. Kelmscott *Chaucer*, title page.

His title-page letters coil like the vines behind them. However, the font of the text itself on the recto is clear and bright. Unlike Zainer’s work, though, the layering of rectangular

frames around the central text and the borders look more like a medieval psalter, which Morris began collecting especially for his press.

Morris made other purchases of early printed books through the 1860s and 70s, but he collected few books between 1876 and 1890; J. W. Mackail, argues that this lessening in activity was due to his focus on building up the socialist party (Needham 26). However, when he grew frustrated with the socialism in England and distanced himself from it, (at which time he also started thinking about a press) he also began collecting again, focusing this time on medieval manuscripts in addition to incunabula. By the early 1890s he had acquired around 82 manuscripts. As Needham notes, “[...] Morris’s distinctive taste in book design was to a great extent engendered and confirmed by his own adventures in collecting” (21). Morris’s collection sketches out his preferences visually, but a closer look at the collection also situates an understanding of the Kelmscott *Chaucer* composition. Syverson notes, “To overlook this situated-distributed nature of knowledge and knowing is to lose sight not only of the cultural nature of knowledge but of the correspondingly cultural nature of knowledge acquisition” (36). Morris’s collection explains more fully the visual culture in which he created the Kelmscott *Chaucer*.

The textual schematic below (Figure 8) gives a graphic depiction of the process of distribution for the Kelmscott Press. Morris’s typographical adventure began long before he started on the *Chaucer* project. His early collection ventures and printing experiments were markedly different from his later ones with his Kelmscott Press. Moreover, the *Chaucer* is Morris’s most recognizably “medieval” Kelmscott Press book. Its distinctive

features reflect years of collection and development in his design choices through encounters with primary materials.

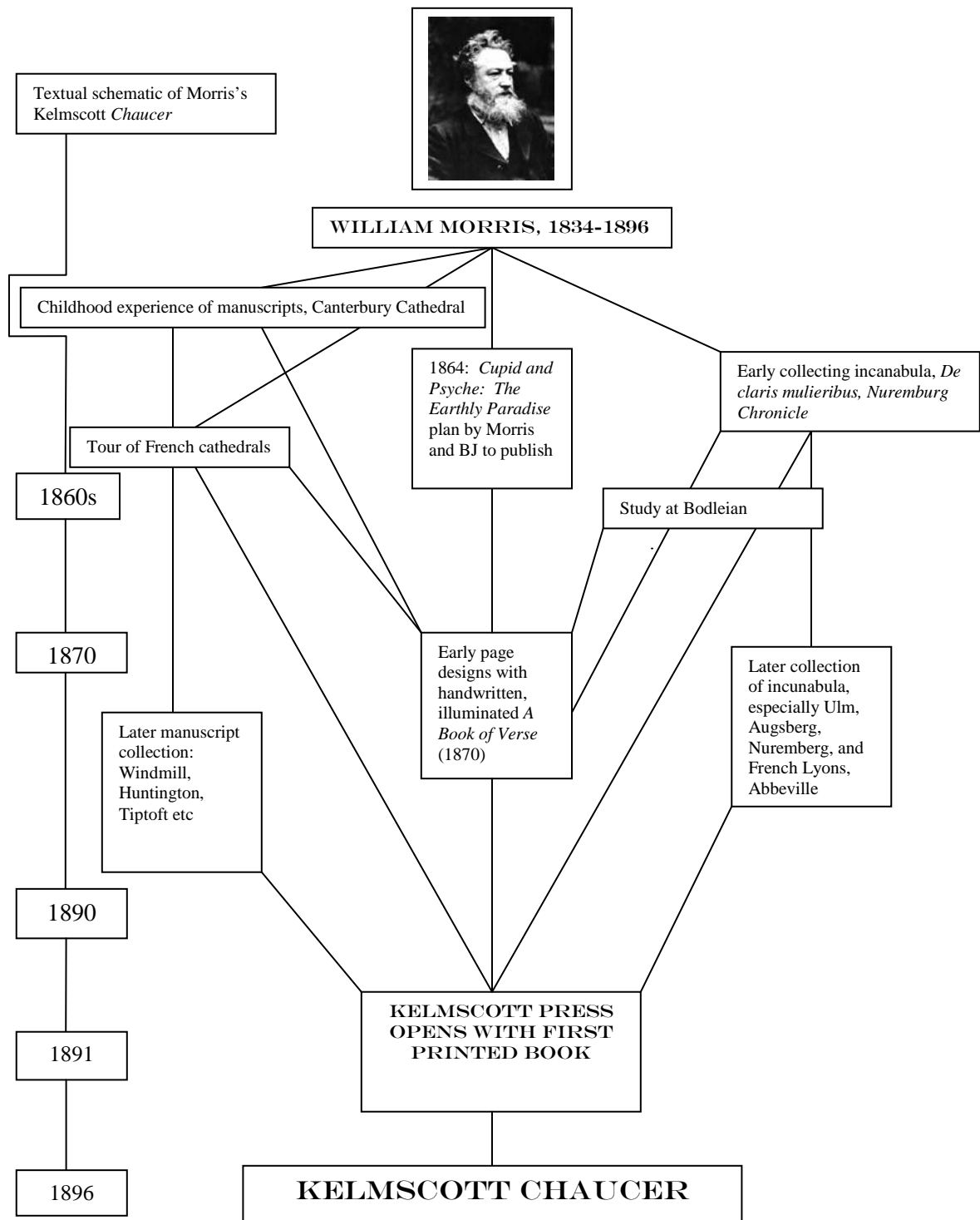


Figure 8. Kelmscott Chaucer Schematic.

Morris's first experiments with book design differ dramatically in scope and style from his *Chaucer* project. His first work with book production (Figure 9) started as a collaboration with Burne-Jones when he decided to publish his long poem *The Earthly Paradise* in a lavishly illustrated edition. Burne-Jones's illustrations would be woodcut and the format would resemble an early printed book.

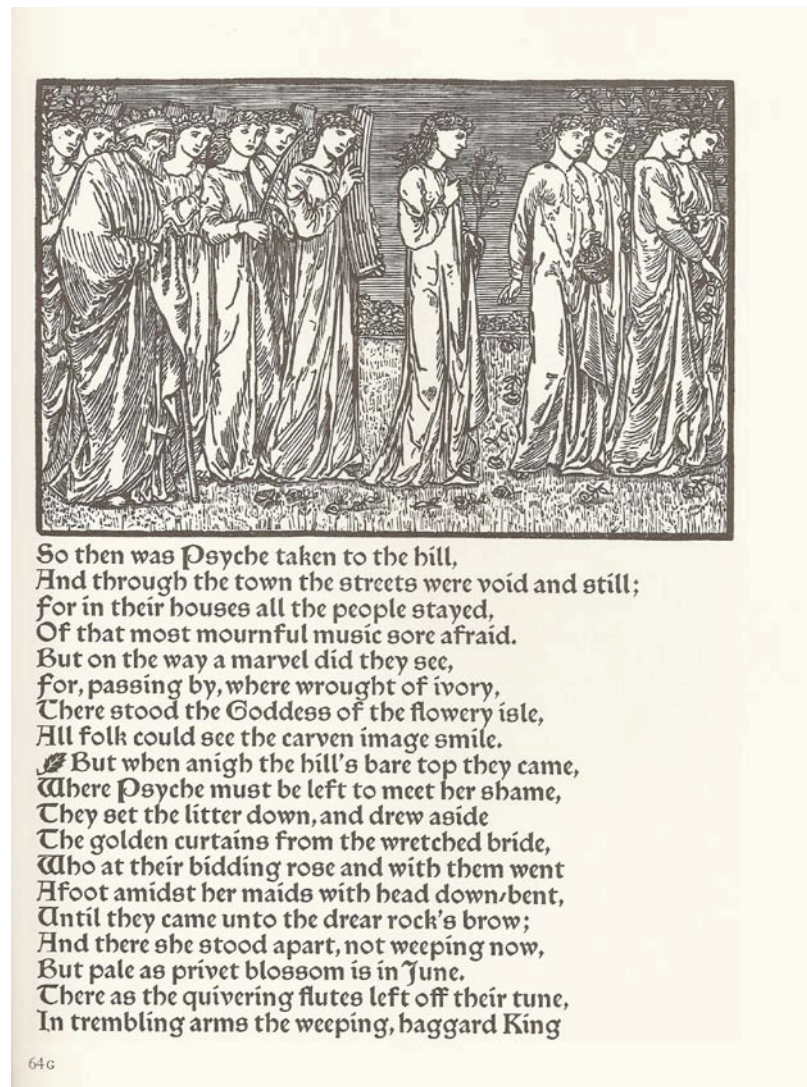


Figure 9. *Cupid and Psyche: The Earthly Paradise*, rpt. in Paul Needham, *William Morris and the Art of the Book* (New York, 1976) LVI.

Morris abandoned his plans for production because of “the impossibility of integrating the woodcuts appropriately with contemporary typography” (116). Visually, the work does resemble an early printed book, although the left alignment of the text does make the illustration look precarious. His second project (Figure 10) he started and stopped in much the same way. The page layout was slightly different, still resembling the early printed book.

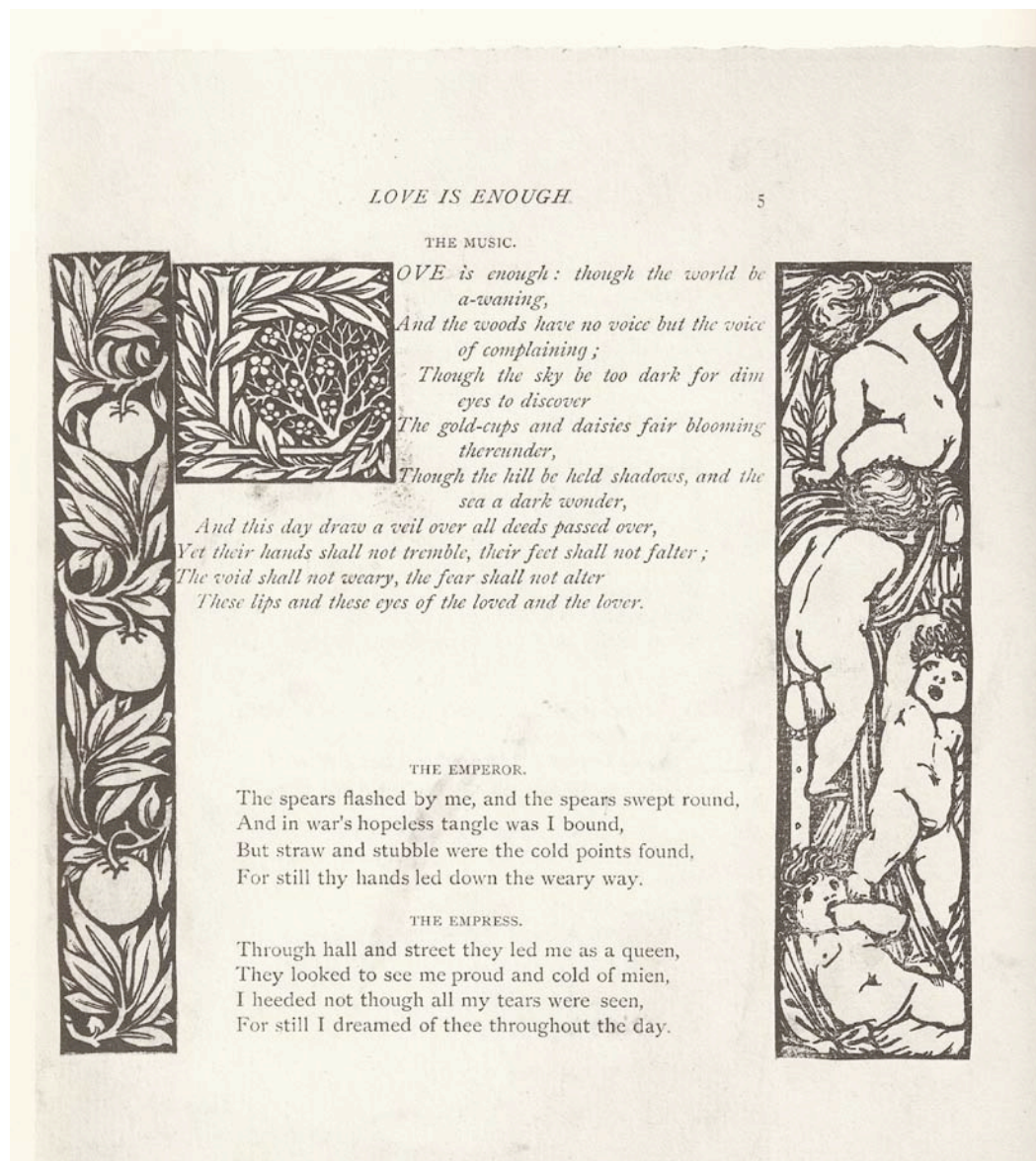


Figure 10. *Love is Enough*, rpt. in Paul Needham, *William Morris and the Art of the Book* (New York, 1976) LXIV.

Like Zainer's work, the illustrations and font have no overlap and the page includes plenty of leading (white). This project does have a graphic design that integrates the text and its decoration more thoroughly, but neither of these early printing designs incorporated the extensive framing and lavish ornamentation that the *Chaucer* did. Morris's later works show his conversion to the layout of early medieval manuscripts, many of which he purchased for his library.

The valuation of Morris's library done soon after his death by friend and former publisher Frederick Startridge Ellis elucidates more fully this need to collect what Needham calls a library of "higher quality than any other major English literary figure" (21). With 117 illuminated manuscripts, 21 fifteenth-century illustrated books from Holland and the Low Countries, 136 from Germany and Switzerland, 20 from Italy, close to 100 from France, several hundred early printed books with and without woodcuts from all over Europe, Morris's tastes could certainly be described as specialized and his resources quite extensive. What his library provided for him was "a sense of the continuity between the earliest printing in both letter and in decoration" (Needham 34). From medieval manuscripts he studied illumination and the balance between text and decoration, and from early Ulm and Augsburg imprints he found his favorite examples of woodcut ornaments.

The photograph below (Figure 11) was taken in the second half of 1896. The manuscript on the reading stand in the foreground is the Windmill Psalter; to the left, closed on the table is Günther Zainer's edition of the *Spiegel des menschlichen Lebens*.

The upper shelves of one case are mostly filled with vellum-bound Kelmscott Press volumes.



Figure 11. The Library at Kelmscott; rpt. in Paul Needham, *William Morris and the Art of the Book* (New York, 1976) IV.

On the bottom shelf of that case, partly obscured by the table, the tallest volume is part of a large folio French Bible, newly bound with white pigskin spine by Douglas Cockerell; its two companion volumes, in older plain vellum are next to it.

Morris planned on publishing a printed catalogue of his library in 1894; his descriptions point out the features he found most appealing—unusual images and consistent overall design. When he describes the psalter made for Baron de Vescy he highlights the “extraordinary beauty and invention of the ornament” but he also admires the bold use of black boundaries which produce an unusual effect on the color” (Needham 100). Morris recognizes these same features, unusual ornamentation and harmonious design in a thirteenth-century psalter from Northern France. He calls the scheme of ornament “complete and satisfactory” and its use of color, “harmonious.” However, he notes that this psalter’s distinguishing feature is its first page in the Beatus and the symbols of the Evangelist “which goes a good deal beyond that [average]” (101).

These comments are those of a student. Morris summarily points out the key features of a medieval manuscript; additionally, his knowledge allows him to spot a book that exceeds the mark. In the case of this psalter, the illuminator's depictions of the Evangelists are the expression of an individual artist, not solely a copy. These books, the ones that stand apart, he collected. Most of the best pieces, he argues in "Woodcuts of Gothic Books," appear between 1160-1300. After 1300 Morris argues, the medieval book loses some of its purity and simplicity in design and individuality in ornamentation (27). Design, he notes, is best when it is direct while ornamentation is best when it is innovative.

Morris spent extensive time and resources finding medieval psalters and missals with unusual visual features. His focus on the visual effect of a page shapes his collecting tastes and his design choices. One psalter, the "crown jewel" of Morris's library (Figure 12), offers an example of book as art. Morris's last and most expensive acquisition he renamed the "Windmill Psalter" for its rare representation of a windmill at the beginning of the second folio (Needham, "Catalogue" 103). Decoration, symbols and decorated letters interrupt the text of the first Psalm on the page. The large initial E, a possible allusion to Edward I of England, contains references to the story of Solomon's judgment. Four types of vines decorate the background while the text itself includes more decorative inserts including a hybrid man with a dragon body and tale. These figures offer another layer of symbolic text to be read by the patron; the luxury of the pages and its symbolic references royal patronage.

A king reading the words of the first psalm, “Blessed is the Man,” also may consider the wisest of kings, Solomon, or consider the symbolic meaning of the pheasant, a medieval symbol for vanity.



Figure 12. Psalter, London, end of the thirteenth century. Rpt. in *William Morris and the Art of the Book*, the Pierpont Morgan Library, Oxford UP, 1976.

Pheasants and peacocks were commonly kept on royal grounds for a show of opulence. On the one hand, the pheasant may encourage the reader to look beyond superficial values, the true treasure being not in the flash of beautiful colors, but in the meaning they contain. On the other hand, the pheasant may be a self-reflective symbol by the artisan on his work for his very wealthy patron, warning against the temptation of displaying the work without heading its contents. While contemporary readers such as McGann see the

effect of Morris's highly decorated pages as objectifying the words on the page so that the reader is "borne down" by the text, a medieval reader would know that every aspect of the physical world contains potential for symbolic and therefore transcendental experience. The visual components of this psalter orient and instruct the reader, holding potential for interpretation and revelation equal if not greater than that of the verbal text. Especially with Books of Hours and psalters that contain text memorized by the faithful, images offered different entry points for prayer or instruction.

Morris's Kelmscott *Chaucer* page structure and ornamentation support this idea that images, like text, can engage the reader, especially as they venerate through their beauty the words that they house. All of the illustrations in Morris's *Chaucer* dominate the text in size and status. They have more decorative frames than text and occupy the central space. The implication of Morris's page structure is to argue along with the medieval book of prayer, that the visual features, not solely the written words, offer instruction for the reader. The prominence of the images and ornamentation make their presence impossible to ignore. Moreover, Morris's use of frames around the illustrations draw the eye toward the illustration, and away from the written text. The decorative borders and letters also draw the eye. The text itself is not displaced but reorganized—occupying a supportive and secondary role. However, these page-design choices are also representative of Morris and Burne-Jones reading of the text itself; like the medieval scribe, they are the interpreters of the text. So even though the text plays a secondary role to the text visually, it is key to unlocking the meaning of the images.

At the same time, though, Morris employs alternatively sacred and secular symbols and images. Although he occasionally utilizes traditional decorative strategies

(the grapevine such as the one on the title page was a common medieval ornamentation), Morris also innovates upon these features. First, his page design is more regularized than that of a medieval psalter. The illustrations are consistently nine and a half centimeters, the letters a little over six or two centimeters depending on their purpose. Larger letters appear immediately below illustrations, and the borders around them are exactly the same size and layout. Secondly he creates his own unique ornamental borders and decorative letters that are neither wholly medieval nor Victorian. Morris based his letter shapes on early Gothic letters; he also uses decorative letters, producing the effect of a psalter. But the patterns he uses within and behind them are much more detailed and natural than those of a psalter's. Finally he uses Burne-Jones's illustrations, which, like Morris's decorative designs and page lay-out, are partially medieval. Burne-Jones followed a more romantic strain of medievalism and drew from his Pre-Raphaelite past in creating these illustrations. The overall affect of these decorative and illustrative choices is complex and unusual with the pull between historical and imaginative, earthly and other-worldly, sacred and secular visual cues. But since Morris collected curious and unusual books, making one with the same effect could have easily been a goal.

The "Windmill Psalter" embodies Morris's quest for one-of-a-kind images. His collection testifies to his attraction to the vital, original expression of the medieval artisan such as those found in this distinctive illustration. This aspect of individuality and authenticity which Morris found attractive was a personal goal in his art as well. He believed organic art moved beyond imitation to innovation, like the lavish cycle of illustration that attracted him to the "Windmill Psalter." Its illustrations finally persuaded him to buy it after passing it by on three separate occasions (Needham, "Catalogue" 101).

Historians identify two artists' work in this book; the first they recognize as the better. His work is recognizable because of the way he breaks up the background with panels, his use of architectural forms, and his figures' lively expressions. The illustration below depicts Adam and Eve in the garden and their removal from it. Its use of imagery is both traditional and unique.

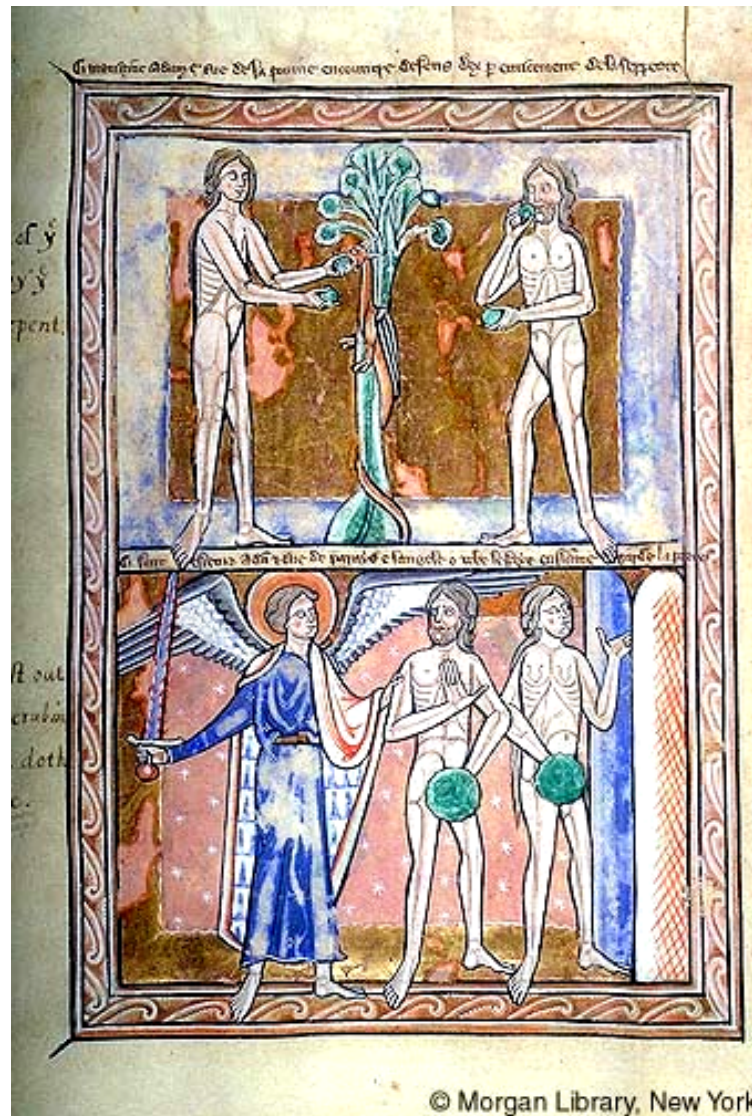


Figure 13. Psalter, possibly made at Lesnes Abbey, Kent, first quarter of the thirteenth century, Rpt. in *William Morris and the Art of the Book*, the Pierpont Morgan Library, Oxford UP, 1976.

Adam and Eve are easily recognizable, but not overly simplistic. The first twenty pages of this manuscript are illustrated in a similar way, the most dramatic aspect of these pages being the beautiful use of color and pattern, and overall page design. The artists used gold leaf and silver to add to the lavishness of the 92 scenes on these pages. The page design includes an exterior rectangular frame that encases both of these depictions and unites them on the page.

Though Morris did not use gold or color other than the occasional red-colored font, his *Chaucer* imparts the same sense of extravagance. Morris's decorative patterns effectuate a bountiful, luxurious, even excessive quality with the layering of texture and pattern. Frames serve the purpose of unifying the illustration to the text and the verso to the recto and of simultaneously emphasizing the illustration. Like the psalter above, this introduction page from *Troilus and Cryside* (Figure 14) alternates ornamental border with white and black frames. The patterns resemble those of the Huntingfield's illustrations or even the Windmill psalter's initial letter design, and they operate in a similar way by denoting different realms and engaging the eye with symmetry and balance. Herbert F. Tucker in his essay "Literal Illustration in Victorian Print" describes the effect of Morris's framing. He notes that when one measures the rectangles in Morris's *Chaucer* illustrations, their length to width ratios are "roughly alike," and "their common ratio approximates that of both the page itself and the "opening" (the two-page spread that actually meets the eye and that Morris insisted was 'really the unit of the book')" (198-9). Tucker's point is well taken when he insists, "the numbers work out as they do, not because Morris was a closet Pythagorean but because the logic of internal inscription is fundamental to the book" (200).

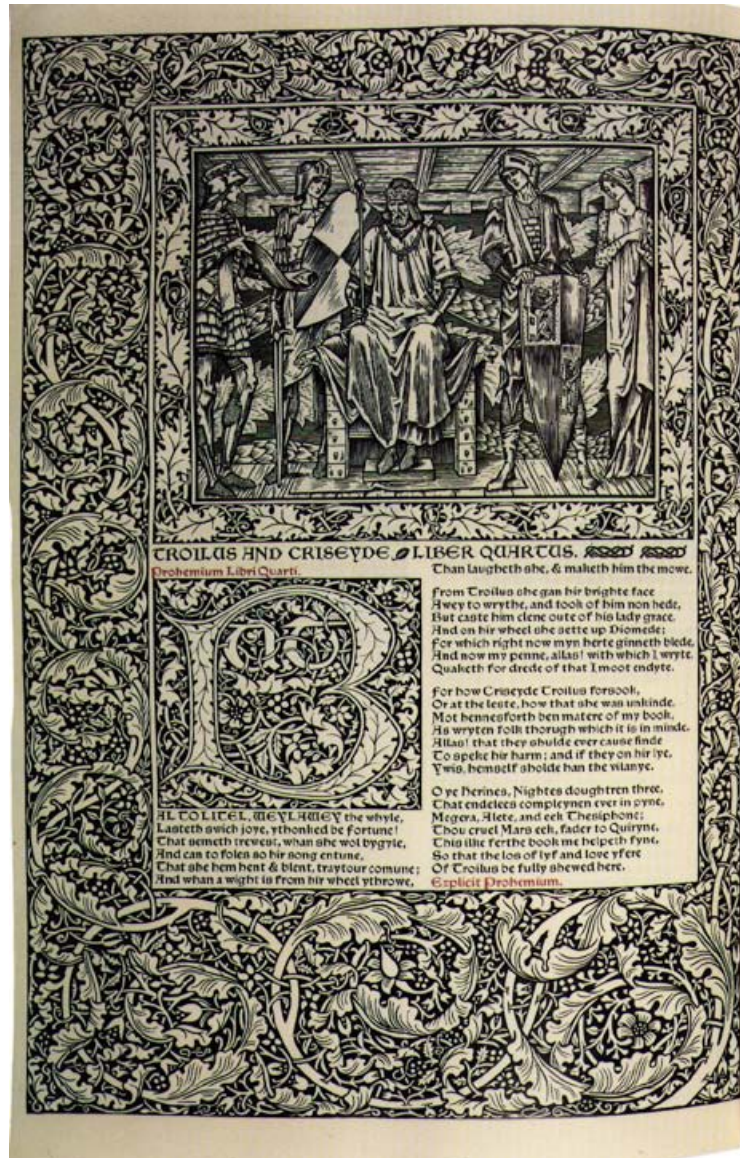


Figure 14. *Kelmscott Chaucer. Troilus and Chriseyde.*

Morris's consistent design plan does not detract from the originality of its ornamentation; rather, it ensures that these unusual features stand out amidst the regularity of a pattern.

Morris's emphasis on innovative and symbolic features extends to decorative letters as well. He found examples of beautiful writing and decorative letters in both manuscripts and incunabula. The Vescy Psalter (Figure 15), for example, he finds

interesting for its “figure-work of extraordinary beauty and invention of the ornament”
(Needham, “Catalogue” 100).



Figure 15. Psalter, England, perhaps East Anglia, late thirteenth century. Rpt. in *William Morris and the Art of the Book*, the Pierpont Morgan Library, Oxford UP, 1976.

The foldover leaf he points out as distinctively English, and he also calls attention to its use of color. The curling serpentine vines suggest Celtic influence. However, what is also noticeable, aside from the fact that Morris's ornamentation of the Kelmscott *Chaucer* employs curling vines of different types exclusively, is the layering of ornament. The curling vine contrasts against the pattern of the B; the letter appears on a patterned background and is surrounded by layers of frames. Morris practiced a similar use of ornamentation and decoration. He looked to these manuscripts for page layout and design ideas while he drew his printing techniques and font from early printed books.

Morris's interest in the early printed book was in part to look at the development of a new craft in which the scribe was "shov[ed] out [...] by the punch-cutter, the typesetter, and the printer" and in part to understand the relationship between the hand-made and the hand-printed book ("Woodcuts," 27). Morris's lecture "Early Illustration of Printed Books" discusses the two qualities that the best examples have: the epical, which is illustration, and the ornamental, which is "the sense of expression of the beautiful and fitness from the beautiful" (20). Early printed books present the pure lines, direct design, and interesting illustration that attracted Morris to the medieval manuscript. For Morris, these features expressed "that passionate pietism of the Middle Ages which has been somewhat veiled from us by the strangeness, and even grotesqueness, which has mingled with it, but the reality of which is not doubtful to those who have studied the period without prejudice" (*Ideal* 28). Although he did not outwardly embrace the pietism of the middle ages, Morris does adopt its forms in his own work. He delighted in the combination of the sacred and the strange in straightforward presentation.

This example of an Ulm woodcut book (Figure 16) displays clear cuts, deep contrast between font and background, and simply designed illustrations.



Figure 16. Giovanni Boccaccio, *De claris mulieribus* (Ulm: Johan Zainer 1473), folios xxiiiiv and lxxiir. Morris's copy is in the Morgan Library.

However, note that there is not an exterior frame or ornamental border. Although some early printed books did use such borders, they are more frequent in the psalter. But the structure of the page is similar in that the words are not the focus. The text is still dominated by the illustration. The illustrations themselves are both simple and yet distinctive. Morris's Kelmscott books represent a combination of the qualities of both manuscript and early printed books (but only those that retain the best features of the manuscripts before the Renaissance took hold).

In spite of their simple, straightforward designs, not all of these early books were so minimalist. Some of these Gothic books are more elaborate, even excessive such as the Günther Zainer's copy of *Spiegel des menschlichen Lebens* (Figure 17). Morris notes that this genealogy of the House of Hapsburg "is an unsurpassable ornamental work of its kind, both as to figures and scroll work, and is very well cut, as indeed are the pictures to the book generally" (*Ideal* 33). Two aspects of this book are worth pointing out: first, this work took great skill to complete and secondly, although it is not in color, its appearance is as lavish as some of the psalters discussed previously. Neither scroll nor image is repeated in the design although the overall pattern gives a sense of unity. This early Gothic book exemplifies the fact that the "organicism" Morris praises in medieval psalters does in fact continue with the initial phase of printing. Morris admired this skill and even urges listeners in his lecture "Early Illustration of Printed Books" not to try and attempt such work because of the "gulf between that period and the present" (*Ideal* 22). Morris did try to bridge the gap, though, in that he imitated the scrollwork in his border designs for Kelmscott Press books, especially the massive ones for the *Chaucer*.



Fig 17. Rodericus Zamorensis, *Spiegel des menschlichen Lebens* (Augsburg: Günther Zainer, 1475-78), fol. 8v. Size of original 62 x 40mm. Morris's copy is in the Morgan Library.

In his essay “William Morris: Book Collector,” Paul Needham tracks Morris’s development as a collector and offers an insightful summation of Morris’s book-collecting tastes. He looks at a group of six auction catalogues from the 1890s in which Morris makes comments about the manuscripts for sale. Needham argues,

The general character of these notes accurately reflects Morris’s taste in that he was not strictly or entirely a connoisseur of miniatures, but looked rather for a more subjective overall fitness of script, decoration, and illumination. His taste was formed not from scholarship, his own or others’, but from decades of designing, often in a medieval idiom, in a wide variety of media. (35)

Needham may be correct that Morris’s designing experience helped to shape his tastes, but it is doubtful that his scholarship did not help form his preferences. Morris’s tastes were a culmination of a life spent in scholarship. Designing afforded him the opportunity to imitate the best he had encountered in his studies and to infuse it with his own ideas. Morris had a specific conception of the “ideal book” which was drawn from medieval examples. Each book he encountered could be measured by the ideal, so clear was his vision of it. So when he makes swift assessments of manuscripts for sale such as “swell looking book very bright & clean,” or “lack calendar, a very fine book, writing good,” he voices his clear preference for a not so “subjective overall fitness.” Morris’s Gothic book includes specific qualities: those we have already discussed include a sustained design, clear font, and interesting and skillful ornamentation and illustration. Additionally, Morris preferred those books that favored visual text over verbal. Book art, according to his collecting and designing tastes, should perform as other art; shape, design, symbolism, creativity should stand out, not solely the written text. Morris’s selective definition of Gothic guided those books he sought to acquire, and it shaped the way he designed his Kelmscott Press books. Morris’s medieval-influenced idea of beauty he

hoped would find similar tastes in his audience. He explains his desire for a ready market to the Technical Instruction Commission, “On the whole, one must suppose that beauty is a marketable quality, and that the better the work is all round both as a work of art and in its technique, the more likely it is to find favour [sic] with the public”(Mackail 2.59). “Excellence,” Morris argued, was visually instantly recognizable. Overwhelmingly, audiences did admire Morris’s design and technical skill in his production of the *Chaucer*, proving he was right: “beauty”—albeit antiquated—is marketable.

Emergence

The Kelmscott *Chaucer* carries traces of medieval sacred texts, an important point in fully assessing the visual effects of his work. Morris critics credit him with a material response to capitalism, which Skoblow labels “aesthetics of immersion” in his work *Paradise Dislocated*. Skoblow explains, “The aesthetics of immersion is a function of Morris’s profoundly materialist conception of Art; it is part of his effort to transform the Transcendental Imagination of Romanticism into an imagination of habitation, a nontranscendental, sensuous mode of praxis, a collective enterprise” (5). Although Skoblow’s argument is essential to understanding the way Morris grapples with his context and the way his work prefigures modern and postmodern issues with capitalism, he assumes, as many others do, that Morris’s work is not transcendental because it focuses on the “earthly” paradise. Morris’s emulation of medieval art contradicts this assertion because of the essentially spiritual quality of most medieval art. In spite of the fact that Morris adopted only the “husk” of medieval art and lost his taste for the “kernel” as Eugene Mason points out in his 1925 article “The medievalism of William Morris,”

his use of this outward form carried with it the vestiges of a sacred text for the reader and reveals his attraction to medieval piety—a quality of which Morris was well aware (118).

The textual emergence of Morris's work involves both the medieval and the Victorian context. Syverson explains that "*emergence* refers to the self-organization arising globally in networks of simple components connected to each other and operating locally" (11). Self-organization occurs through interaction with the environment. For Morris, the Victorian crisis of faith and the threat of industrialism necessitated a return to earlier organizing structures. His medievalism did have to do with reorganizing the cultural problems he saw, but without the force of the Catholic faith. However, his focus on medieval art and life reflects an attraction to the products of faith—especially the simplicity and security of the medieval outlook. Morris's work with medieval design and his attraction to medieval values emphasizes his desire to recreate something like the traditional spiritual life—and its resulting social life—he saw there.

Morris's *Chaucer* imagines the sacred possibilities for "habitation." Books, like buildings, offer a space in which humans live and work and speak, and such habitation for Morris was a holy thing. His revision of all art had this reverence in mind. As E. L. Cary an early biographer of Morris, writes, "No one tried with more persistent effort first to create and then to satisfy a taste for the possible best in the lives and homes of people" (1). His work insists that material existence is not casual, disposable, or isolated. Medieval works claim these same qualities in that they communicate the possibility that all things, and especially human creations, reverberate with the spirit of God. Morris hoped to restore the medieval reverence for books as art. By actively practicing craftsmanship and by attending so carefully to the design of his Kelmscott books, Morris

elevated both his creative process and his product. His goal was, in his words, to “get a market for excellence,” but it might also be rephrased as “getting a market for treating our lives [bodies] and work [things] as sacred.”

Morris’s Kelmscott editions shared the physical features of framing, mathematical spatial organization, and symbolism so prevalent in medieval architecture and book art. In the medieval period, these physical features were not solely aesthetically pleasing; they had the common goal of spiritual edification. In his 1879 lecture “The History of Patter Design,” Morris displays his awareness of the innerworkings of medieval art, and his statements reveal that he was well aware of the implications attendant to using medieval-inspired design. He offers, “In more modern and less forbearing art the pictured wall is apt to become a window [...] in older and more suggestive art the great subjects symbolized rather than represented by pictures, only reached the mind through the eye when the mind was awake and ready to receive them” (Morris, “History” 135-6). Barbara Nolan in *The Gothic Visionary Perspective* details what such awareness entailed. She points out that both Gothic architecture and literature (including the creation of Gothic books) shared a context in which art served a purpose. She writes, “Artists who entered into the newly formulated discussions of vision, anagogy and *aevum* with the materials of their art undertook to create symbolic forms capable of pointing souls toward the full ecstatic experience of God” (40). Anagogy is traditionally defined as the fourth sense of scriptural exegesis when the reader actually experienced an ecstatic moment. Gothic art participated in the goal of anagogy: the elevation of the mind for supernatural contemplation (Nolan 37). The possibility of anagogy rests upon the ability of the reader to understand and absorb a symbol.

Medieval readers understood the potency of an image and read the visual text in a similar manner to a verbal one. Primarily, medieval audiences had exposure to interpretive strategies such as those by Richard of St. Victor, Scottish theologian and exegete from the twelfth century. In his commentary on the Book of Revelation, Richard of St. Victor outlines four distinct modes of vision that serve as a guideline for visual decoding. First he distinguishes between “spiritual” from “corporeal” levels. Corporeal he divides into two levels. The first involves opening one’s eyes to “the figures and colors of visible things in the simple perception of matter” while the second level added the “mystical significance” of the outward appearance (seeing one image in terms of another). The third level, spiritual, involves “the truth of hidden things [...] by figures and similitude of things.” This level corresponds to the revelation experienced by St. John in the Apocalypse. The final level is the mystical mode, which entailed the “pure and naked seeing of divine reality,” echoing the last portion of 1 Corinthians 13:12 “but then face to face (Camille 16-17).” To the medieval mind, the world functioned like a book, with everything pointing toward a higher order. Being able to see this connection was dependent upon a person’s ability to participate in different modes of vision. Artistic creations reflected the idea of the world as a book by employing multiple layers of symbolism, from the structure of the cathedral to the images carved upon it.

The medieval visual culture worked very differently from the Victorian one. While medieval readers were able interpret the underlying meaning of a pheasant, Victorian ones had lost most of that verbal fluency although traces of it remained, especially those connected directly to the church. Colors and flowers could be directly linked to their biblical and spiritual meanings; additionally, herbals were very popular

books. Mackail identifies Gerard's *Herbal* (1597) as one of Morris's favorite from early childhood; he in turn shared it with his girls (Baker 80). Herbals like Gerard's gave the shape, medicinal purposes, and moral values of plants so Victorian audiences could easily access information about the moral and instructive meaning of various vines and flowers. But they could not reconstitute that state described by Otto von Simson in his book *The Gothic Cathedral*. He explains: "For us the symbol is an image that invests physical reality with poetical meaning. For medieval man, the physical world as we understand it has no reality except as a symbol" (xvi). Everything held the potential for symbolism and similitude—from nature to architecture, music and art. Additionally, the medieval understood vision as a supremely active rather than passive or reflective. Art critic Michael Camille explains, "In a world thick with presences, unseen as well as seen, images of things were far more powerful than they are today" (19). Books and buildings were the primary places for using symbolism and for displaying the systematic classification of it. Not only were the images vehicles of meaning, but the forms and structure of them also. I describe more fully below the medieval comprehension of visuality because even though the Victorian culture was hundreds of years removed from this world "thick with presences," the physical existence of medieval cathedrals and manuscripts in the Victorian context brought with it marks of this age. Moreover, the Anglo-Catholic and Gothic revivals inspired new interest in all things medieval. Ritual and symbol inhabited a special place to a culture on the verge of losing them.

Medieval cathedrals embody the architectural possibilities of symbolic. Otto Simson elaborates, "Designed in an attempt to reproduce the structure of the universe [...] the cathedral is perhaps best understood as a 'model' of the medieval universe. That

may give us a better idea of the speculative significance of these great edifices, a significance that transcends their beauty and practical purpose as a place of public worship” (35). As a model, the Gothic cathedral attested to the mystical correspondence between the physical universe and the divine order of the cosmos. Many critics of Gothic architecture agree that one of its main sources of inspiration was St John’s description of the New Jerusalem and its splendor of “pure gold, like to clear glass.” Christopher Wilson makes note of this in his analysis of the Gothic cathedral: “Every medieval church was an evocation of the heavenly Jerusalem, the abode of the saved to be established after the completion of the Last Judgment (Revelation 3 and 4). That this was the primary meaning of the church buildings is clear from the service for their consecration where frequent allusions are made to St. John’s vision (8).

Ann Meyer’s dissertation analyzes the dedication ceremony for Abbot Surger’s renovation of St. Denis in 1140 in order to understand more fully the symbolic meaning of the medieval cathedral. Dedications for churches emphasize aspects of the Apocalyptic vision of the New Jerusalem (with the church as its earthly representation) and the meaning of the word “temple” according to Jewish and Christian tradition. The opening sets the tone of the worship: “The Lord has sanctified His tabernacle; for this is the house of God, in which His name will be invoked, as it is written: and my name will be there, says the Lord.” Next came the reading from the Apocalypse 21:2: “I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down from heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband” (59-62). What followed was a nuanced description of the house of God from the Psalms (especially the *Songs of Zion*, Psalm 23), from Genesis (story of Jacob), Mathew 21:13 in which Jesus is described driving out the money

changers, other passages from the Apocalypse and finally a reading from 2 Corinthians 5. Most of these passages consider the physical realm being infused with the possibility of the presence of God. Bernard of Clairvoux, in a sermon he wrote for the dedication of churches, makes this same connection: “In what respect, however were the stones able to have sanctity so that we celebrate their solemnity? They certainly have sanctity, but on account of our bodies. In truth, who doubts that your bodies are holy, which are the temple of the Holy Spirit, so that each individual understands to possess his own vessel in holiness?” (qtd. in Meyer 75). The stones merely provide a place for revelation and transformation to happen; they are not the source of holiness. Those who enter there sanctify it.

Morris’s ideas about social space confirm the relevance of these biblical allusions to his work on the *Chaucer*. He may have rejected the ritual of the church, but he embraced the sacred nature of the body and the book as an extension of the body. His writing clarifies this idea. He talks about “the scholar of the early Renaissance when he sold his best coat to buy the beworshipped classic new-printed by Vindelin or Jenson, each of these was dealing with a palpable work of art, a comely body fit for the habitation of the dead man who was speaking to them [. . .]” (2). With the words “palpable” and “comely body” Morris emphasizes the importance of a personal and physical encounter with a book. Moreover, his description of a book as a sepulcher, a receptacle of not only the words but also the body of the author, clarifies the idea of the book as a “cathedral” or a sacred space. When the book is a space, not solely an object, it provides for a range of possible events. It is a social space that hosts the acts of meeting, feasting, birthing,

dying, celebrating, mourning, and learning. It is a refuge or simply another dimension in which one can enter and talk to dead men.

Even Morris's fiction describes the importance of social spaces. His most well-known novel, the socialist distopia *News from Nowhere*, culminates in a trip home, literally. The last three chapters take place in Kelmscott Manor and Kelmscott Church. In Chapter 31, the medieval number for signifying the New Jerusalem, aptly entitled "An old house amongst new folk," Morris describes the house as a carrier of memories and emotions, a stable force among the generations. Ellen, the guide on his dream-vision, explains,

Once again Ellen echoed my thoughts as she said: "Yes, friend, this is what I came out for to see; this many-gabled old house built by the simple country-folk of the long-past times, regardless of all the turmoil that was going on in cities and courts, is lovely still amidst all the beauty which these latter days have created: and I do not wonder at our friends tending it carefully and making much of it. It seems to me as if it had waited for these happy days, and held in it the gathered crumbs of happiness of the confused and turbulent past. (211)

For Morris, the house does more than provide shelter. Because it is a dwelling place, its space is valuable. The habitation is made valuable through its inhabitance. In fact, the house holds the best of the past, sifting through the confusing and turbulent for the happiest moments. For this reason, a beautiful house is worth preserving for the instruction on how to live and live well it provides to the future. A house, or any kind of social space, tells us how people once lived, how they spent their time, and what was important to them. Morris affirms the value of the house in his essay "Ornamented Manuscripts of the Middle Ages" when he says "if I were asked to say what is at once the most important production of Art and the thing most to be longed for, I should answer, A beautiful House [...]" (1). A beautiful house is made so. It is created by those that live

there. Its art is the record of their lives, and it carries their life forward in the form of hopes and dreams and memories. The final chapter of Morris's *News from Nowhere* ends in a communal house: a church.

Morris's *News from Nowhere* culminates in a very specific social space. The protagonist is invited to attend a feast in a small chapel (Kelmscott Chapel), and thinks to himself, "This was something new to me, this dinner in a church and I thought of the church-ales of the Middle Ages [...]" (217). The speaker describes the church as a small one, "for a small church makes a biggish house" (218). As the speaker describes the space, he is careful to note that it was preserved "with no modern architecture in it." Its decorations were simple—garlands and two cross scythes. But the best ornament, he notes, are the glad people in it. Although many have argued he was not a religious man, Morris employs religious symbols and religious spaces to emphasize the importance of the event. Feasting in a church invokes such spiritual associations as the Eucharist even as it brings to mind the marriage feast of the lamb from Revelation. His attraction to space had everything to do with the two aspects: one, possible experiences, and two, past experiences. Morris weds these ideas in *News from Nowhere* by reinstituting the church-ales of the Middle Ages in the form of a futuristic feasting in a better age. Just like a house or a church, the book is not a single-dimensional object. Because it holds the voice of its author, it functions like his body. So in making or printing a book, the designer should be attendant to the fact that his space is not empty, but lived-in, like a house or a church. Words are not merely graphic symbols; they are carriers of a voice, record-keepers of a person. Additionally, a book, like a church or a house, is a potential place for change and growth. Morris chooses the works he prints in his press carefully, and in

choosing Chaucer, whom he calls his “master,” he acknowledges the importance of this man’s writing to the change and growth of his nation’s past and to its future as well.

Churches like books are social spaces, places of instruction and inspiration. A medieval cathedral contained many layers of possible text for the devout to read (Figure 18). Medieval churches display the heaviest iconography on its doors, emphasizing the importance of the act of entering.

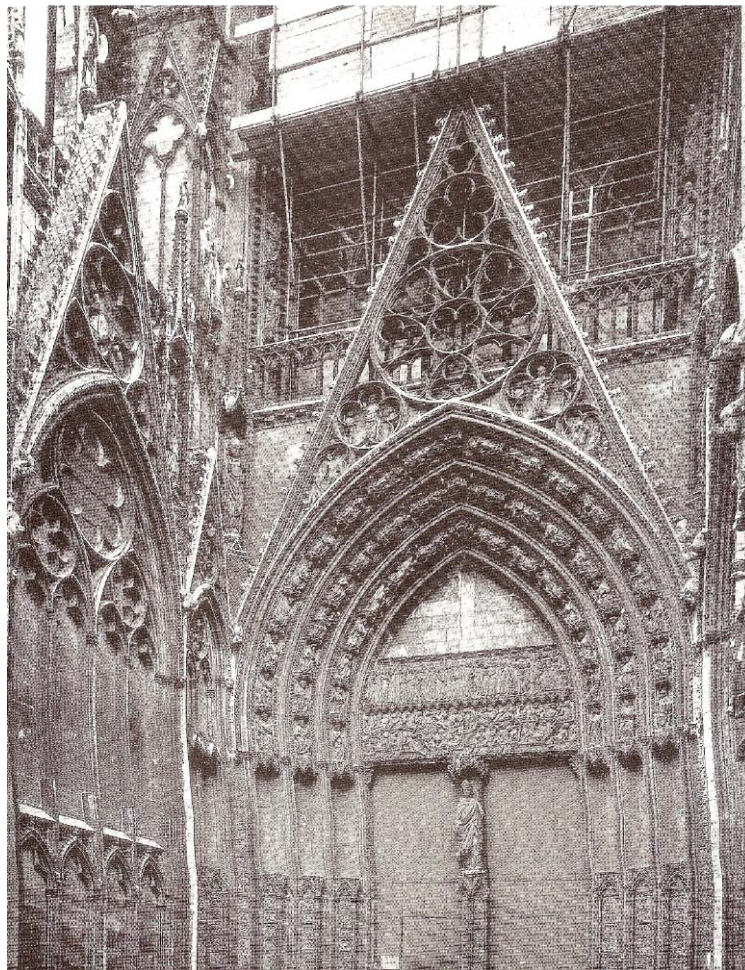


Figure 18. Portail des Librairies, Rouen Cathedral: rpt. in Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992) 86.

The elaborate and yet symmetrical design of the door and the layers of frames studded with medieval iconography give voice to the idea of perfect order, to the connection between realities. The door encourages the observer to engage by preparing for moving through these frames. This design is connected to the spiritual universe through its participation in divine order, as seen in the perfect symmetry of the designs and the elevation of those designs through the sheer height of the frames. At eye level is an image of Christ, which immediately connects the laity to the eschatological passage which states “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock” (Rev. 3:20).

This example of a cathedral door taken from Michael Camille’s *Image on the Edge* exemplifies the variety of symbolic material available to an entering layperson. The portal, begun by Archbishop de Flavocourt in 1278, exemplifies “the geometrical exactitude of Gothic architectural framing”; however, “what is framed by all this elegant ecclesiastical order at the Portail des Libraires, is chaos” (85). One quatrefoil contains jongleur and monkey, two monsters, and a scene of charity, while another contains a creation scene and a parody of the Virgin birth with a woman holding a half-human, half-dog baby (89). These images embody the medieval understanding of imagination as a “force that could actually create forms.” Camille argues that these horrific creatures that parody aspects of Biblical stories call attention to the “worldliness of the medieval cathedral” while warning against acts that profane the space.

A medieval book, like a medieval cathedral, develops meaning in layers by employing the same characteristics of symbolism, framing and form (Figure 19). Like the cathedral door, an illustration and border offer an entry to a transforming experience, requiring the same type of devotion and astute observation. For example, this Book of

Hours, although not mentioned by Morris directly, could easily have been one he studied at the Bodleian during his years as an Oxford student.



Figure 19. *The Oxford Book of Hours*. Flemish, 15th century. Actual size. Illuminated by the Master of Mary of Burgandy. Bodleian Library, Douce 219; rpt in David Bland, *A History of Book Illustration* (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1958) 66.

A background of peacock feathers, also called a “scatter border” produces the effect of a fabric upon which the vignettes contrast. David Bland explains, “This [scatter-border] is an adaptation of the naturalistic still life border which had already been used in the *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, and it consists of flowers, butterflies, jewels and so on, surrounding the miniature which it frames, and, by means of shadows, giving its own feeling of depth quite independently of the miniature which it frames” (65). Bland talks about these naturalistic borders replacing the purely decorative ones of the early fourteenth century, and he projects they were simply smaller versions of the panel paintings that these same artists were producing. The effect of this border is to make the reader feel it is closer to him/her than the text and that the miniature is farther away. The peacock feather border emphasizes the symbolic nature of the pictures, reminding the

reader of the vanity of all beauty. Another border surrounds each of the miniatures like a frame. When the text finally does begin, two initial letter decorations add yet another layer of opulence to the already richly decorated text. Morris used framing and page layout in a mathematically precise way—worthy of the architect at Cologne or the illustrator of *Très Riches Heures*. Tucker’s essay emphasizes Morris had mathematical perfection in mind when he designed the layout of the page, not dissimilar to a medieval craftsman of books or buildings.

Eamon Duffy explains in his book *Marking the Hours* that these elaborate designs and ornamentation held a spiritual purpose. Primarily the Book of Hours became known as “an instantly recognizable symbol of recollectedness, interiority and prayer” (3). He discusses the growing need in lay people for a greater intimacy in devotional life as well as a need for an “instrumental approach to prayer” (64). Images and decoration were intended to guide readers to a more mystical experience of prayers and psalms while at the same time they played a part in the “religion of the image” in which the image acted like a legend or an indulgence, protecting “against life’s troubles and terrors of death” (63-64). In the Kelmscott *Chaucer*, Morris used a disproportionately large number of borders, illustrations, and decorative initials in comparison to other Kelmscott Press publications. *Chaucer’s Works* is anything but merely a book. Its physical presentation insists it is something more; it is constructed like a cathedral, painted like a book of hours, and doted upon as an object of devotion.

Embodiment/Enaction

Ultimately, Morris confronts the physical nature of the book by insisting that its materials and designs were of primary importance. He was prophetic in that he foresaw

the “massive suppression of awareness” of “the inherently physical interaction between writers, readers, and texts,” to which postmodern literary critics have sought to call attention (Skoblow 12). He built the meaning of his own cathedral in layers, beginning with the materials and moving to layout and illustrations. His focus on the physical opened up the possibilities of a book’s function as more than an information delivery system, but a space in which meditation and enlightenment may occur. Like a medieval portal, the design of the page is the exterior shape that moves the viewer progressively inward to the heart of the page—the entrance to a meditative experience of the text. The ornamentation operates symbolically, framing and supporting the experience of the words and the images equally.

Morris’s title page sets the tone of the work and acts as an entrance, carefully framed and balanced (Figure 7). The exterior border emphasizes the relationship between recto and verso. As guides, the frames elevate what they contain. The eye is drawn naturally to the illustration (verso) because it is literally embedded in borders. The overall effect, however, is one of proportion and symmetry. Much like the cathedral door, the chaos of the curling vines is counteracted by the structure that houses it. The layers of framing and ornamentation keep the eye moving around the page before beginning the text, which itself is decorative. In his efforts at the Press, Morris imitated the early printers by “keep[ing] in mind the necessity for making my decoration a part of the page of type” and by including only decoration that could be considered “harmonious” with the text itself. The verso of the Kelmscott Chaucer title page illustrates his opinions because the font is so carefully worked into the decoration that it seems to spring out of the foliage itself. It suggests that text—the words themselves—

have a physical presence that can also be decorative and beautiful. The facing page begins the actual text of the book. The text itself also contains ornamentation in the form of initial letter designs that tantalize the eye with yet another layer of decoration. If anything, the text appears embedded in decoration. The words are not the primary text, and it is nearly impossible simply to read the verbal text itself without noticing the other decorative features. In other words, this book is not created for a quick read. Jerome McGann describes the impact of this feature: “In a [Victorian] culture that largely imagines print as a vehicle for linguistic meaning, the effect is to foreground textuality as such, turning words from means to ends-in-themselves”(74). So, the decorative features of the page include the words themselves. McGann argues that Morris’s work at Kelmscott turns the hierarchy of words over images on its head. The equalization is disruptive as is the possibility that words can be ornamentation. In McGann’s estimation, Morris is confronting the problem of the separation between the poet and his performance. He calls it the “the problem of poetry’s relation to its material encoding” which arose after poetry was no longer delivered orally. For Morris, the medieval period dealt with this problem sufficiently “so long as printing and bookmaking were skilled crafts carried out in a culture of artisanal practices” (45). One way Morris emphasizes the environment of the text is by introducing symbolic images that offer a secondary text to be read, one that inevitably competes with the verbal one for attention.

The title page’s grapevine border illustrates his efforts to emulate the medieval preference for the symbolic. The curling grapevine operates spatially and symbolically to prepare the reader for this text which is both a tribute and treasure. Hilmo, in discussing the Ellesmere manuscript, talks about its borders as establishing an aristocratic preserve,

an English pleasure garden. But Morris does not choose any of the traditional garden flowers or vines for his opening page; rather, with wide curling coils of leaves and vine and fruit, he introduces the image of a vineyard with all its iconographic potential. As a collector of psalters and books of hours, Morris had access to a wide range of medieval visual tropes and the fruitful vine is one with many layers of potential meaning starting with biblical ones. What one must recognize is that a simple curling vine with grape clusters ready for harvest carries a wide range of possible readings and that Morris was not unaware of those meanings. Michael Camille in “Sensations of the Page” talks about the common use of fruit in illuminated manuscripts for signifying the act of reading itself. He points out the vineyard metaphor as a conventional one for describing texts, one that “parallels the world of knowledge with the world of sensorial delight” (40). Readers step through this frame of abundant fruit to taste their fill in the richness of the reading experience.

With its immediate connection to the senses, the grape vine also suggests the idea of organicism, a critical aspect of good art to Morris. In “Woodcuts of Gothic Books” Morris defines “organic art” as art that is “genuinely growing, opposed to rhetorical, retrospective, or academical art, art which has no real growth in it” (26). The vineyard border embodies the aspects of organic art which Morris praised: it is traditional, vital, and inventive. First, the border’s design is traditional; Morris’s use of the vine places him within the medieval tradition of designing. Secondly, the border is vital, not only in that it has produced grapes, but in that he pushes the design forward and presents his own take on the matured vine. Finally, it is inventive because the facing pages of coiling

vines are both perfectly proportioned and individual. Both pages have slightly different patterns of leaves and grapes and coils, although the overall effect is unifying.

All of these features one can identify in Morris's title page, and throughout his *Chaucer*, particularly on pages with a focal point such as an illustration or title. The page below (Figure 20), the prologue to Man of Law's Tale, uses the layers of patterns to highlight the illustration and the title. The initial letter O does the same. Like the B from the psalter it uses contrasting ornamentation. The layers of patterns emphasize the richness of the text and the costliness of its making—true for both the medieval B and the Victorian O. Morris's decorative and design choices end up elevating the illustration.

Morris collaborated with Burne-Jones when Morris commissioned the renowned artist to do illustrations for the project. However, Burne-Jones's medievalism, more romantic and ideal than historic, introduces another layer of complexity to the work. The illustrations themselves are far more Victorian than medieval, and by using Victorian symbols with a medieval framework, Morris and Burne-Jones present an entirely new product to the reader—one that hangs between styles and challenges readers in the act of reading. The first challenge occurs on a visual level when the decorated page insists on the dominant place of the visual content. The second challenge is in decoding these visual cues, which participate in different genres—both sacred and secular. The final challenge to the reader is to relate the text of the page to its context; sometimes the connection is clear, but other times, the reader must search through the text for an explanation of the source of the picture. Additionally, the picture may either compliment or contradict the reader's own interpretation of the text.



Figure 20. Kelmscott Chaucer. *Canterbury Tales*.

Jessica Despain describes Burne-Jones's title page illustration of Chaucer as "both a literal and figurative journey for him and the reader—one that exceeds the confines of the Book" (79). In fact, it is a journey that not only exceeds the confines of the Book, it exceeds within the confines of the Book as well. It indicates travel in many books, many

of which we literally can visualize. But its overall effects, especially because of its combination of medieval and Victorian sources, are not always easily read. Michael Alexander assesses Morris's masterpiece in his chapter on "The Working Men and the Common Good" (179). "The Kelmscott Chaucer [sic]," he writes, is an original which looks like a facsimile: a fascinating object and work of art, but not a book to read" (179). Morris insists through these objects that we attend to the act of reading and all it entails. He claims that books can also be art, and as such they are social spaces with the possibility for epiphany. What Morris reintroduces is the possibility that the book can be a sacred space and he does so by elaborating on the medieval psalter and cathedral. But for Morris, sacred had less to do with the leaving the world behind in the pursuit of heaven than with the sanctity of life and work on earth. He explains it best himself in *News from Nowhere*: " 'The spirit of the new days, of our days,' says the old man, 'was to be delight in the life of the world, intense and almost overweening love of the very skin and surface of the earth on which man dwells'" (20). And "man dwells" often in books, says the architect of the Kelmscott *Chaucer*.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Making of the Kelmscott *Chaucer* Part II

“The Happiest of Poets,” the Saddest of Illustrators: Burne-Jones and the Composition of the Kelmscott Chaucer Illustrations

“I was half mad with beauty on that day,
And went without my ladies all alone,
In a quiet garden walled round every way;

I was right joyful of that wall stone,
That shut the flowers and trees up with the sky,
And trebled all the beauty: to the bone,”

--William Morris, “The Defense of
Guenevere”

When William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones became friends at Oxford they shared many common interests: a love for Tennyson, Ruskin, and Mallory, a hunger for a calling, and a desire for a creed. Through their years of early friendship, much of their art developed in the same vein; the two friends, influenced by Rossetti and the ideas of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, explored what it meant to be an artist. Morris’s early poem “The Defense of Guenevere” could easily narrate many of Burne-Jones’s early works. But by the end of their lives, Morris and Burne-Jones had established different styles and specialties, although they retained many of their earlier values. The last project they worked on together, the Kelmscott *Chaucer*, illuminates both their similarities and differences. Both shared a revivalist vision influenced and inspired by medievalism, but in the Kelmscott *Chaucer* Burne-Jones’s illustrations often do not fit with Morris’s page design. These differences emphasize the fact that the Victorian

medieval revival had two different strains. Although critics assess the Kelmscott *Chaucer* as a seamless unit, its composition and its execution were complicated processes, and the tone of the work done by its two creators, Burne-Jones and Morris, does not mesh at every point. Duncan Robinson in his book *William Morris, Edward Burne-Jones, and the Kelmscott Chaucer* describes their project thus:

That ‘little typographical adventure’ into which he [Morris] had launched, as always with the help of his friends, resulted in what many would claim to be the finest publication of the nineteenth century. It undoubtedly produced, in a single work, an epitome of the convictions and the aims upon which both Morris and Burne-Jones based a shared lifetime of prodigious activity. (35)

This description, although accurately reflecting the reception of the Kelmscott *Chaucer*, overstates the cohesion between Morris and Burne-Jones and their work. The project was conceived of and designed by Morris, so Robinson’s argument about ideals and convictions is justified for him. However, Burne-Jones, who answered to Morris for the design of his illustrations, even redrafting several of them at Morris’s behest, may not have agreed with all of the design decisions, and ascribing to Burne-Jones the same ideals and convictions as Morris limits our understanding of his work as an individual artist and oversimplifies our grasp of the relationship between the artists.

The friendship between Burne-Jones and Morris, although very close, was not without its difficulties. Edward Burne-Jones’s wife Georgiana presents a more discerning view of the interaction. She notes that although the relationship remained constant, their beliefs and expression did not always correspond. She writes, “‘Divergence in views but not in friendship’ exactly expresses what happened and was bound to happen from time to time between such men as Morris and Edward; but divergence of aim, never” (109). Morris and Burne-Jones shared enough of the same

values to pursue similar goals and to collaborate on a beautiful text; however the text itself reflects the differing views of its creators. The process of composition highlights and explains many of the differences between Morris and Burne-Jones.

In the previous chapter I establish the sources of Morris's inspirations and discuss their overall effect. In this chapter I discuss the way that Burne-Jones's illustrations interact with Morris's page design by first analyzing Syverson's "ecology of composition." By following Syverson's description of composition, one can discuss the layers of meaning that Burne-Jones's images conjure. In this chapter I focus on the act of composition and the relationship of the images to their context both in the life of Burne-Jones and in the broader Victorian milieu.

Distribution

In talking about the act of composing the illustrations of the *Chaucer*, one must address the dynamic interrelationship between the artist and the social and environmental structures influencing composition. Burne-Jones did not conceive of or draw the designs for the Kelmscott copy of *Chaucer's Works* in a vacuum. The social and physical context constrained their creation. Syverson explains,

By privileging the individual writer [or artist] composing in isolation, we have slighted or ignored compelling evidence that writing, like other cognitive processes, occurs in ecological systems involving not only social but also environmental structures that both powerfully constrain and also enable what writers are able to think, feel, and write. (9)

Syverson's point emphasizes the fact that composition is complicated; it is multi-dimensional and multi-textual, helped and hindered by circumstantial influences. Burne-Jones's illustrations contain imprints of the social and natural structures surrounding him as he worked. Some influences were stronger than others. By far the most influential

structure was his relationship with Morris as both old friend and master designer, although other social influences, such as his relationship with the women in his life, made an impact also. Finally, the physical environment (studio), the medium of his composition (pencil), and the final translation by other craftsman to wood block molded the outcome of Burne-Jones's work.

The most compelling influencing agent on Burne-Jones's illustrations of the *Chaucer* was William Morris. Morris was physically present during the composition of these illustrations, and he held the final say over whether or not the design would work. These two facts are the most measurable ways that Morris influenced the illustrations of the text. However, Burne-Jones's illustrations reflect abiding differences between the two artists, and the story of their composition is as much about these dissonances as it is about the way Morris and Burne-Jones collaborated on them. In fact, the disparities between the two artists is rarely accounted for and often assumed, understandably so. But familiarity does not necessarily breed similarity. Though the two friends worked together closely, their relationship was not a simple one; in a similar vein, their life's work, though begun with similar aspirations, takes on more complexity as it reflects different styles and preferences. The history of their relationship and their differences as artists play a part in the final production of the *Chaucer* illustrations.

The two artists started on the Chaucer project as they had many others, thinking and talking together. Burne-Jones began sketching illustrations with Morris in 1892 or early 1893 and worked strictly on the weekends when Morris would come to his studio to talk and read aloud (Burne-Jones, G 2:259). Although he only composed his pieces on Sunday and describes the process as "refreshing," he and Morris had a long history

behind them and a dramatically different interpretation of Chaucer. Probably, projects Peterson in his work *The Kelmscott Press*, these conflicts produced some very lively discussions, and most likely Burne-Jones was composing his pieces as they talked (252). Lady Burne-Jones notes the two sat down at the beginning of the project to reread Chaucer, whose work they both had encountered and enjoyed at Oxford. However much the two agreed on Chaucer's mastery of poetry, they focused on different aspects of his work.

From their first encounter with Chaucer, the two friends disagreed on which parts were the best. Morris loved the *Canterbury Tales*, enjoying especially the frolicking and fun-filled side of Chaucer, while Burne-Jones became a "discriminating reader" of *Legend of Good Women*, the *Parlement of Fowls*, the *House of Fame* and the *Romaunt of the Rose*, interpreting Chaucer as "sophisticated, courtly, and sad" (Fitzgerald 23). Penelope Fitzgerald in her biography *Edward Burne-Jones* explains, "He [Burne-Jones] understood perfectly Criseyde's remark that we are wretched if we despair of happiness, but fools if we expect it" (23). While Morris delighted in collecting medieval displays of "bawdy" images and enjoyed Chaucer's fabliaux tales, Burne-Jones wanted to gloss over them. Fitzgerald sums up the differences in their readings succinctly when she explains how their readings of Chaucer influenced their Kelmscott edition designs: "Morris wanted illustrations of the 'Miller's Tale,' while Burne-Jones was lost, once again, in the magic rose-garden" (251). Fitzgerald humorously contrasts the two artists tendencies-- Morris's joy in Chaucer's wit, and Burne-Jones's in his romance and myth. On being congratulated for not illustrating the "base stories" of *The Canterbury Tales*, Burne-Jones replied: "I'd like to pretend Chaucer didn't do them. Besides, pictures to them would

have spoiled the book. You don't want funny pictures either. Pictures are too good to be funny. Literature's good enough for that" (Peterson 247). Though Burne-Jones did have a taste for a more rude humor in private, especially cartoons of "Topsy" as they fondly called wild-haired Morris, in public he preferred "high seriousness," sticking with his melancholy and mysterious figures, "willowy and graceful, intense but expressionless" (Peterson 247). Robinson in his work *William Morris, Edward Burne-Jones and the Kelmscott Chaucer* points out that Morris, too, stuck to "Victorian standards of expression" in other publications; though he may have expressed a desire, according to Burne-Jones, to have the "Miller's Tale" illustrated, he too found medieval romance appealing. In general, though, Morris liked bold design and unusual images, both of which he found plentiful in medieval book arts.

Though both artists found the medieval period attractive, they were drawn to it by different elements. Morris, more of an antiquarian, did enjoy medieval elements of romance, but he also admired what he called the "vital" part of medieval art—which included surprising (or "rude") depictions in psalters and books of hours. Burne-Jones took on the chivalric themes, embodying in his art the formality of the Arthurian court. However, both agreed on the reforming agent of medievalism communicated by Ruskin and both appreciated the romantic medieval lore proliferated by Scott novels. Their differences in taste, however, were enough to produce a conflict within the text itself when "the delicate pencil drawings were, more than ever before, quite out of key with the great wondrously bordered folio for which Morris, at the same time, was drawing the ornaments" (251). Their differences of expression existed long before the *Chaucer* project, though.

The wide gap between their childhoods explains in part the disparity in their outlooks. Morris, born of a wealthy family, saw and explored the world from an early age. Understandably, then, he believed in a bounteous earth. As Penelope Fitzgerald articulates it, he trusted “in this earth, ‘the nesting and grazing of it,’ the men and women that inhabit it, and what they could make with their hands” (20). Burne-Jones, deeply affected by the early death of his mother and his very restrictive and humble Evangelical childhood, focused on more tragic and melancholy themes. Also unlike Morris, Fitzgerald notes, Burne-Jones held on to parts of the Christian faith, “He continued to believe in the Gospels, but transferred the meaning of the events, in particular the Annunciation, Mary’s loss of her Son and the Passion, to the everyday life of humanity” (20). Burne-Jones’s work communicates that loss, real or projected, is a central part of the human story. Most of his figures emanate a sense of sadness that picks up on this theme.

Though the environment had shifted over the years, these two had a long history of talking and working together. The habits that began in Oxford for “Topsy and Ned” continued in this last project. They lived and worked together first in Oxford, then at Red Lion Square, and finally they adopted a title for their group with Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co. in 1861. This group became reorganized under Morris’s sole leadership when he bought out most of its members and changed the name to Morris & Company (Robinson 14-15). The Kelmscott Press was not the first time the men had collaborated on creating a book, either. Burne-Jones designed 44 illustrations for Morris’s Chiswick Press edition of *The Earthly Paradise* in 1866. These collaborations together established habits that would continue during the rest of their working

relationship. For example, during their production of a decorated, hand-written copy of the *Aenied*, Morris would read and Burne-Jones would draw (Figure 21).



Figure 21. Burne-Jones, *Mr. Morris reading poems to Mr. Burne Jones*, British Museum, London; rpt. in Duncan Robinson, *William Morris, Edward Burne-Jones and the Kelmscott Chaucer* (London: Fraser, 1982), 16.

The Burne-Jones cartoon emphasizes their habitual practices. Morris typically read (directed) while Burne-Jones listened (followed). Their ritual continued with the composition of the Chaucer. Georgiana Burne-Jones in her *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones* describes the setting at their house, the Grange (Figure 22), thus:

Though we never had any special time for being at home, Sunday always brought someone to the Grange. The day began with Morris' strenuous company at breakfast and a morning of work with him; friends generally dropped in or had been invited to lunch; others, together with a fringe of acquaintances, filled the afternoon, and almost always some remained for the evening. It was, therefore, no time of rest for Edward, who was often more tired on Monday morning than on Saturday night. (2:90)



Figure 22. Photograph of the Grange; rpt. in Georgiana Burne-Jones, *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*, volume (London: Macmillian, 1904) 4.

The Grange was a continuation of the kind of close interaction that Morris and Burne-Jones began in Oxford when the two shared a kind of spiritual awakening to their desire to be artists and afterward shared work in various “companies” and brotherhoods.

From their earliest conversations together, Morris held a special kind of power over Burne-Jones. In a letter written in 1853 to his friend Cornell (Crom) Price, he explains, “For myself, he has tinged my whole inner being with the beauty of his own, and I know not a single gift for which I owe such gratitude to Heaven as his friendship. If it were not for his boisterous mad outbursts and freaks, which break the romance he sheds around him—at least to me—he would be a perfect hero” (Burne-Jones 1:96).

Although Burne-Jones’s style developed through the influence of Rossetti and the early

Italian masters, much of his energy and inspiration he drew from Morris. He recognized Morris as a genius and his vision of the *Chaucer* as one that would continue to make an impact. Georgiana Burne-Jones describes his sentiments and her own in her *Memorials*. She writes, “Whenever I speak of the Kelmscott Press I think of its crowning glory, the Chaucer, and of the strength which carried the whole thing through—Morris’s strength” (2:216). She writes further, “ ‘Listen to Edward about this: ‘Morris will be here tomorrow, strong, self-contained, master of himself and therefore of the world. Solitude cannot hurt him nor dismay him. Such strength as his I see nowhere’ ” (2:216). In his mention of the Chaucer designs in letters during that time he reveals that through the process Morris had final say over whether or not the Burne-Jones’s pencil designs would pass or not. He would have to revisit these designs more than once sometimes. In a remark to Mr. Catterson-Smith, who translated the drawings into ink for the engraver, Burne-Jones calls Morris the genius and himself a “plodding cove” and a “hard-working chap” like the draftsman (260).

Burne-Jones calls himself “plodding” and “hardworking” because he did redraft illustrations based on Morris’s suggestions. Below (Figure 23) is a rejected design for illustration of “The Knyghtes Tale.” Burne-Jones chose first to illustrate the dramatic climax of the story when Venus appears to Emily. The revised illustration (Figure 24) Robinson describes as “dramatically less important but pictorially richer description of the shrine given about three hundred lines earlier in the poem [...]” (27). As Robinson points out, Burne-Jones retains the principle features of the first design but the subtle alterations have significant impact on its effect.

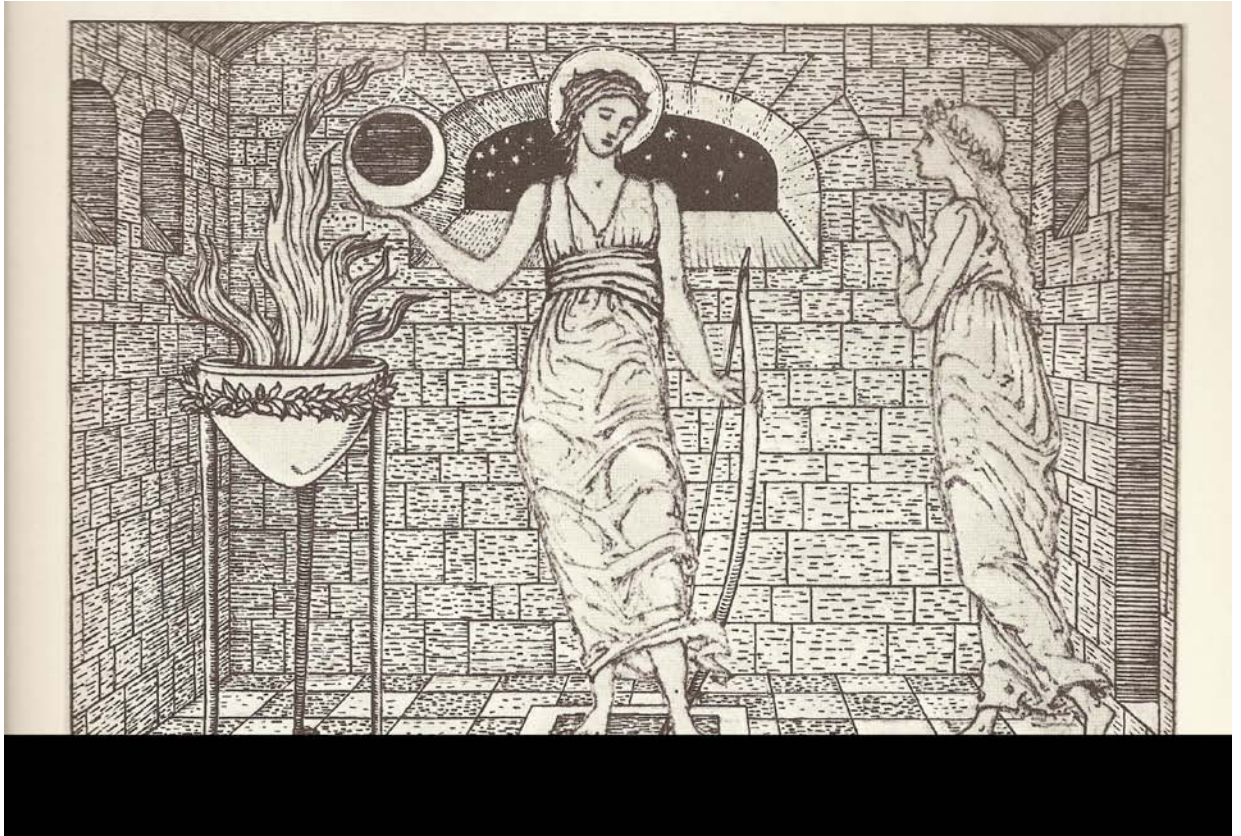


Figure 23. Burne-Jones, *The Knyghtes Tale*, rejected design for p. 23, pen and ink and Chinese white over a photographic reproduction of the pencil drawing, 165 x 227 mm, Fitzwillian Museum, Cambridge; rpt. in Robinson, *William Morris, Edward Burne-Jones, and the Kelmscott Chaucer*, plate 46.

If Morris did indeed redirect the topic of the illustration, then we can credit to him the emphasis on the elaborate pictorial descriptions of the temple in the “Knight’s Tale,” and to Burne-Jones the emphasis on the dramatic high-point in the tale when Diana appears to Emelye after the kindling of the sacrificial flames.

The visual impact of the two reflects a difference in taste. The one of Diana’s appearance is more restrained, even solemn, while the revision is far bolder. In the first picture Emelye’s arms barely reach past her face. Diana inhabits the greatest portion of the illustration, but her presence is not overpowering. Overall, the picture is symmetrical and balanced.



Figure 24. Burne-Jones, *The Knyghtes Tale*, p. 23 wood engraving; rpt. in Robinson, William Morris, Edward Burne-Jones, and the Kelmscott Chaucer, plate 48.

The second picture is not so contained. Diana dominates, her head far above Emelye's, her presence extending beyond the frame of the picture. The picture implies more drama: Emelye's hands almost touch Dianna, and her face communicates more emotion.

Dianna, too, conveys a greater sense of power and visual impact. She is seated now on a hinde, holding an sharp arrow rather than an empty bow, and baring her breasts. The changes in the composition emphasize different features of the text and stir the audience with more potent symbols and images.

Burne-Jones trusted Morris's sense for the actualization of a project, so his suggestions, Burne-Jones generally followed. In letters, Burne-Jones indicates his respect for Morris hinged on his belief that Morris was a visionary. He writes to Mrs. Horner in the early stages of work on the *Chaucer* that he doubted there would be a wide audience for the finished printed project, "But" he writes, "I think about the year two

thousand one hundred and thirty-three, there will be a passing craze for it, and it will be the fashion in London to talk of it during the Easter recess of that year” (259). In many ways Burne-Jones was right about posterity’s interest in Morris’s work, but his admiration for Morris may also have been a result of the breadth of their differences. Morris, confident and decisive, challenged, encouraged, and probably bothered the self-conscious and self-doubting Burne-Jones.

Two of the most telling signs of a complicated relationship are the astounding lack of written communication by Morris to Burne-Jones and the “Topsy” cartoons done by Burne Jones of Morris. In the four volumes of Morris’s collected letters only six are addressed to Edward Burne-Jones. Norman Kelvin in the introduction to the first volume explains, “Burne-Jones is usually designated as Morris’s closest friend. [...] Yet the scarcity of surviving letters stands in some contrapuntal relationship to the fact of lifelong friendship” (xxxv). Although Morris wrote a large quantity of very expressive letters to Ned’s wife, Georgiana Burne-Jones, he wrote only two letters that are more than a paragraph in length to her husband, his supposed best friend; no satisfactory explanation exists for the absence of written letters. One possibility is that their regular companionship voided the need for written communication, another, Kelvin suggests, may have been the destruction of Morris’s letters to Burne-Jones by either Georgiana or Mackail, but there is no record of this nor any explanation for why anyone would have done so.

The letters that do survive offer a very limited but revealing glimpse into the relationship. Morris is most expressive when he is communicating about the work done by the two together. Loss of the relationship, especially in his 1864 letter to Ned at the

death of his three-week-old son Christopher Alvin, he measures in terms of a loss of a collaborator:

Suppose in all these troubles you had given us the slip what the devil should I have done? I am not sure I couldn't have had the heart to have gone on with the firm: all our jolly subjects would have gone to pot—it frightens me to think of, Ned. But now I am 30 years old, I shan't always have the rheumatism, and we shall have a lot of jolly years of invention and luster plates together I hope. (1:39)

Morris's hopes revolve around the projects they will do together and the fun they have in the process. Burne-Jones's value to Morris is strongly connected to his value of work, which was of no small value to him. The second longer letter indicates a broader connection to Burne-Jones, though. Written in 1864, this letter proffers an apology for his night of bad behavior: "I am afraid I was crabby last night, but I didn't mean to be, so pray forgive me—we seem to quarrel in speech now sometimes, and sometimes I think you find it hard to stand me, and no great wonder for I am like a hedgehog with nastiness—but again forgive me for I can't on any terms do without you" (1:76). The letter's tone indicates intimacy—familiarity to the point of annoyance, humor in the form of private cues ("hedgehog with nastiness"), and anxiety for the offended party. Morris soothes Burne-Jones's offense by reassuring Burne-Jones of his importance: "I can't go on without you." But intimacy does not exclude the possibility of deep disagreement between the two, and Morris, of course, did "do without" Burne-Jones in his years as a socialist although he spent a good deal of time explaining his philosophical and political perspectives during this period of his life to Georgiana. Some argue the quantity of his letters and vulnerability of his discourse to her indicates more than a friendship, but at the very least, Morris felt more comfortable with expressing his thoughts to her than to any other female, including his wife (Kelvin xxxv). These six extant letters offer several

labels for his relationship with Burne-Jones. First, Burne-Jones was friend. His deep commitment to Burne-Jones comes through several of the letters, especially his letter of apology. Secondly, the two are business associates, or collaborators. Given Morris's view of the importance of work, this is no small or secondary relationship. It is a vital one. Finally, Burne-Jones was an employee. Though Morris explains extensively to Georgiana that he will not be the typical capitalist employer, he did not invite Burne-Jones to be a partner, nor is there any record of Burne-Jones sharing in the profits of the Press.

Burne-Jones indicates a certain level of struggle with Morris, perhaps due to the tensions between these relationships, in his Topsy cartoon series. These caricatures were part of the "fun" that Morris, Burne-Jones and their mentor Rossetti had at the George Street house early on in their careers as artists. In writing to Lady Burne-Jones's sister Agnes, Burne-Jones explains that "The Topsy Cartoons" have "created the greatest sensation in our limited circle" (1:165). Lady Burne-Jones describes Morris as joining in the fun by laughing along with these depictions, but their existence opens the door for some questions. First, Morris, not Rossetti, is the brunt of these jokes. Typically, the schoolboy humor would be focused on the master as a way of dealing with his position of power. Instead, Burne-Jones focuses his attention on his friend, which seems to be a way for Burne-Jones to deal with his frustrations with Morris by making his larger-than-life and often insensitive nature more humane and more understandable. Secondly, these cartoons dissociate Burne-Jones from his subject. Gay Daly's premise in her book *The Pre-Raphaelites in Love* is that Pre-Raphaelite artists could not be in a successful relationship with their "stunner" subjects, namely due to the distance created by the work

between artist and object. Morris was a different kind of “stunner”; Burne Jones describes his manner as “forcible and energetic” and his physical presence as “unnaturally and unnecessarily curly” (1:165). His cartoons indicate the power of his influence over Burne-Jones even as their topics display Burne-Jones’s difficulty with this power. One particularly revealing cartoon, done in 1881 (Figure 25), is entitled “Triumphing over Morris.” Burne-Jones stands in the bowels of a dead Morris, whose blood runs down the page. The cartoon is humorous because of the size of Morris in comparison to Burne-Jones, a Victorian version of David and Goliath. However, the depiction couches the relationship in terms of contest and conquest, expressing Burne-Jones’s desire to be free of Morris and a dependence upon him at the same time.

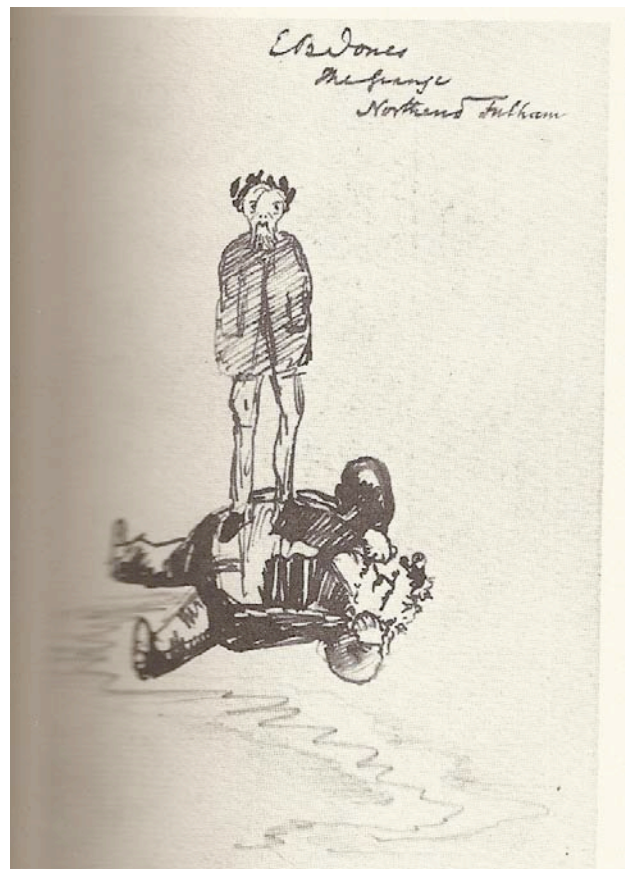


Figure 25. Burne-Jones’s caricatures of himself triumphing over Morris, c. 1881; rpt. in *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, 2:233.

Still, Burne-Jones draws himself in grays and Morris in black and white. Even dead, Morris looks more alive than the gloomy conqueror, which is typical of the Topsy series (cf. Figure 21 when a straight-backed Morris reads to the hunched over listener, Burne-Jones).

Vigor or energy is the feature most indicative of Morris's influence on Burne-Jones's work in the *Chaucer*. At the time that he began working on the *Chaucer*, Burne-Jones had become known for his stylized and dreamlike backgrounds. *Laus Veneris* (Figure 26) exemplifies the enclosures and flat perspective which made Burne-Jones's work so recognizable, distinctive from other Pre-Raphaelites. Tim Barringer in *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites* sums up this feature: "The sheer refinement of Burn-Jones's rarefied world is achieved at the loss of that radical energy and vitality which characterized Pre-Raphaelitism at its finest" (163-4).



Figure 26. Edward Burne-Jones, *Laus Veneris*, 1873-8, Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne; rpt. in Tim Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1998) 160.

In the above painting, Burne-Jones takes up the German legend of Tannhauser, the knight who gives himself over to a life of sensuous delight with the pagan Love goddess (160). Mythic themes, especially those involving goddesses, painted with subdued colors with flat perspectives typify many of Burne-Jones's works. The female form, draping and being draped upon, is the subject of *Laus Veneris*. Burne-Jones also takes up the issue of the gaze, but contrary to other voyeuristic perspectives, it is the female gaze that dominates the male voyeur. The enclosure forces the viewer to think about the act of gazing while the dreamlike quality of the picture creates a surreal, imaginative experience, far from the "truth to nature" motto of earlier Pre-Raphaelites.

Burne-Jones works out many of these same issues in *Chaucer* illustrations. His use of enclosures is so common that Robinson identifies them as a formula. He describes the formula, "consciously or unconsciously developed" as one that includes a shallow perspective, a contained room or garden, and a window or vista of some kind. But some of his illustrations reach beyond this formulaic approach. The backgrounds of Burne-Jones's illustrations are not all solemn and contained; often they are as wild and "wondrous" as Morris's curling borders. If Burne-Jones preferred solemn romantic interiors, Morris preferred profuse exterior ones. He describes this view in his early poem "The Defense of Guenevere" with the "quiet garden all around," the wall of stone "that shut the flowers and trees up with the sky" (Lang 164). Morris's influence makes its appearance in many of the most important illustrations in the text. The title page illustration (Figure 27) combines both an enclosure and an uninhabited and mountainous background. Others, such as the one of Chaucer's "Franklyn's Tale" limit the nature of the enclosure to a boat, an island or the ramparts of a castle. Importantly, Burne-Jones

moves beyond his typical interior space or dreamscape to include in his illustrations the wildness of the natural world.



Figure 27. Edward Burne-Jones, Kelmscott *Chaucer* title page.

In the above illustration Chaucer is in an enclosure, however, he is not cut off from the natural world. The garden is bounteous to the point of unruly. The mountains in the background are reminiscent of a Scandinavian vista, a Morris-inspired detail. The low fence constructs a boundary but it more decorative than substantial.

In the picture below (Figure 28) from *The Tale of the Clerk of Oxenford*, the enclosures still exist, but they are part of the landscape and easily navigated. The space between the rocks allows the eye to escape to the wider world beyond. Both of the above illustrations represent a break from Burne-Jones's typical use of enclosures.



Figure 28. Burne-Jones, *The Tale of the Clerk of Oxenford*, p. 136, wood engraving; rpt. in Duncan Robinson, *William Morris, Edward Burne-Jones, and the Kelmscott Chaucer*, plate 60.

Morris's roses, grape vines, trumpet vine borders suited more a mountain vista or a rocky path than a castle interior. His influence, whether direct or indirect, may have been the impetus for Burne-Jones's change in background from artificial enclosure to natural landscape.

If Morris's presence can be felt in the Chaucer illustrations, so can Burne-Jones's obsession with women in general and with one woman in particular, Helen Mary Gaskell (Figure 29). Burne-Jones met and fell in love with "May" as he called her in 1892, and

her face, Daly in *Pre-Raphaelites in Love* notes, is everywhere in the *Kelmscott Chaucer* (319).



Figure 29. Portrait of Helen Mary Gaskell, Edward Burne-Jones, 1893, oil on canvas, from Victorian Web, 20 December 2008, <<http://www.victorianweb.org/painting/bj/paintings/2.html>>.

His relationship with May started in 1892 and lasted for several years. Between 1892 and 1895 he wrote her every day, sometimes twice a day (318). They spent most of their time together in social settings, but found time alone in his studio where he would sketch her face for the Kelmscott *Chaucer*. She is especially recognizable as “May” from the Knight’s Tale below (Figure 30).

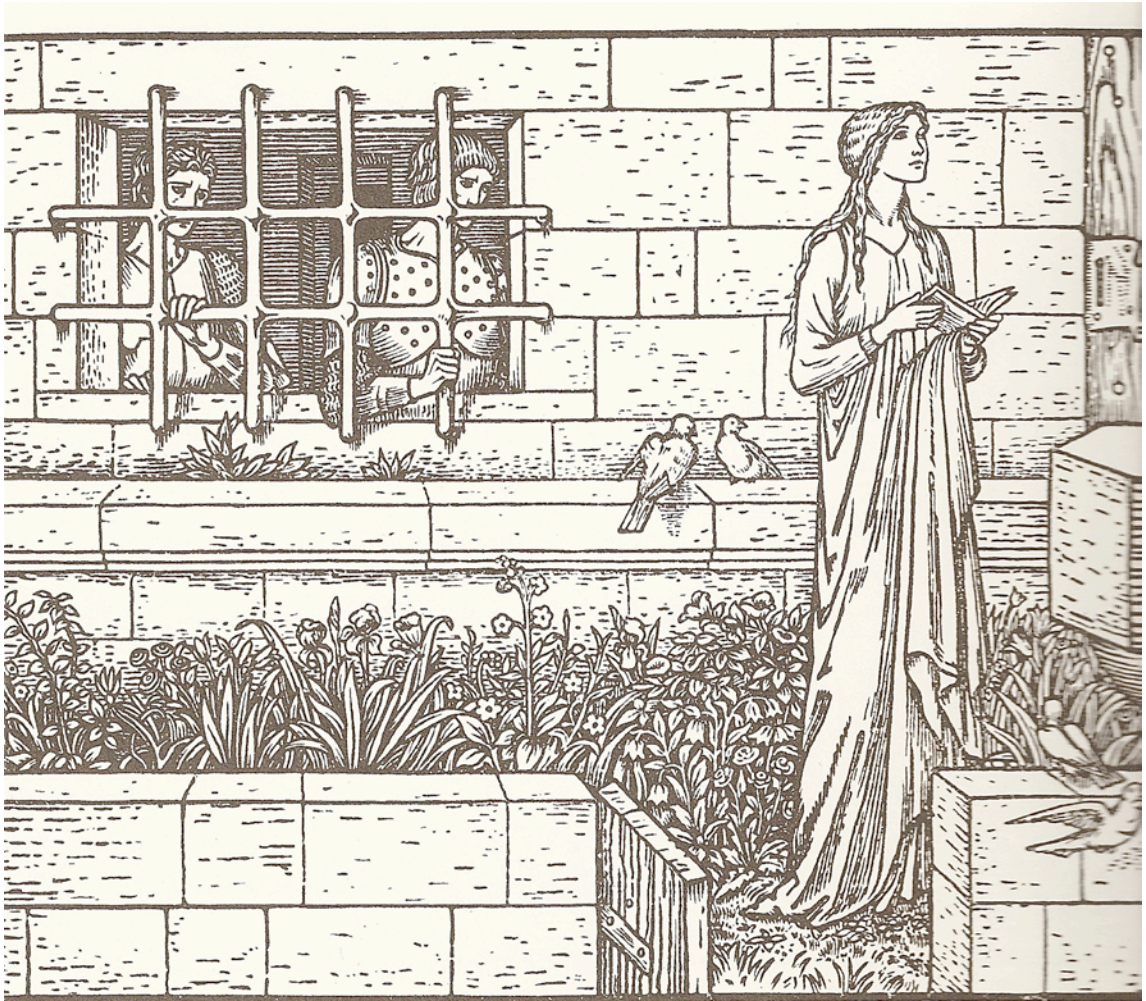


Figure 30. Edward Burne-Jones, “*The Knyghtes Tale*,” p. 10 wood engraving; rpt. in Robinson, *William Morris, Edward Burne-Jones, and the Kelmscott Chaucer*, plate 72.

After much emotional upheaval, Ned decided to stay with Georgie and continue his relationship with May, but in a different vein (320). Georgie did know about May and

permitted the relationship, just as she had permitted other of her husband's liaisons. Ned's need for female company and approval other than Georgie's was not uncharacteristic; in fact, these relationships punctuated his married life. These extramarital friendships/liaisons seemed almost compulsory, beyond his control, and Georgie understood and tolerated them.

His first and most dramatic extramarital relationship ended in humiliation and depression. Burne-Jones met Mary Cassavetti Zambaco in 1866 when her mother commissioned a painting of her beautiful daughter. Mary became the object of Ned's passion (Daly 283). The relationship came to an end when Mary threatened suicide and the two attempted to flee England together. Their plan failed, however, and Burne-Jones ultimately decided he could not abandon his wife and two small children. However, his need for Mary and the transformation of his work through this period he expresses as equally powerful (Morris and Georgiana Burne-Jones became close friends during Ned's long absences with Mary and Jane's with her lover). Burne-Jones neither left his wife nor gave up Mary. The complexity of his relationship with women became a central inspiration in his work. Burne-Jones's later paintings ascribe to the female sex the power, danger, and inapproachability. The six-feet high *Beguiling of Merlin* (Figure 31) sums up these characteristic features. In letters, Burne-Jones openly identifies himself as Merlin and Mary as Nimue (Daly 301). Merlin is powerless to resist, frozen, emasculated. The female form appears just as powerful in the *Chaucer* illustrations, where male figures are difficult even to identify because the female form and the female gaze so controls his work.



Figure 31. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Beguiling of Merlin*, 1874, oil on canvas, Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight Merseyside; rpt. in Tim Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1998) 162.

Venus in this illustration from *The House of Fame* (Figure 32) calls to mind Burne-Jones's Nimue from *The Beguiling*. Though her posture is more open, the female figure of Venus dominates the male.



Figure 32. Burne-Jones, *The House of Fame*, p. 448, wood engraving; rpt. in Robinson, William Morris, Edward Burne-Jones, and the Kelmscott Chaucer, plate 37.

She gazes on him, while he is blind-folded. Moreover, his figure is smaller, more androgynous, and delicate. Although Chaucer's works direct his choice of topics, Burne-Jones's inclinations toward figures of female power guide his choice of topic while his personal relationships with women influenced the details of their appearance.

Aside from the social and psychological features of distribution, natural limitations also manipulated Burne-Jones's designs. The natural structures involved in Burne-Jones's composition include the limitation of his use of pencil for the project,

which was different from his usual medium of design, and the involvement of a number of skilled craftsmen in the production of the wood blocks. Robert Catterson-Smith and Charles Fairfax Murray translated the final drawing into pen and ink, Emery Walker photographed it, and Hooper cut the wood. Each of these steps represents another layer of distributed composition. Catterson-Smith describes the process of translation in detail in a manuscript dated 1 June 1917 (from the collection of Sidney Cockerel now housed in the Morgan Library). He writes:

Emery Walker made a very pale print of a photograph (a platino) from Sir E. B-J's pencil drawing—the exact size of the drawing—then I stuck the print down on stout cardboard, and, in order to avoid the expansion of the paper I put the paste on the cardboard first and then applied the paper print very, quickly, so quickly that it had not time to absorb moisture and so expand, then I immediately ran a hot smoothing iron over it which at once dried the paste. Next I gave the print a thin even wash of Chinese white with a little size in it. The result was to get rid of everything but the essential lines. Next I went over the pale lines with a very sharp pencil, copying and translating from the B.-J. drawing which was in front of me. The lines of the shading were put in pencil. These shadow lines were very difficult as they had to be translations of very grey pencil tones, and they often took a long time to fit into their spaces. When the pencil drawing was finished all trace of the photograph had disappeared. Next came the inking over, which was done with a fine round sable brush and a very black Chinese ink which I bought in bottles. By putting a little size in the Chinese white, as above mentioned, the ink was not absorbed by the white and so remained jet black—otherwise it would have become grey. . . . When difficulties arose in the treatment of passage I consulted B.-J.—sometimes work by Albert Dürer was consulted to see how he had dealt with passages. Some of the drawings were done over several times. . . . Finally E. Walker made a photograph on the wood block and Hooper cut it. (Robinson 34)

Catterson-Smith, not Burne-Jones, decided which lines were essential. His editorial choices decided the final draft of the woodcut. So Burne-Jones depended upon the skill of these artisans whose work physically changed the appearance of his original work.

The social and natural structures of Burne-Jones's environment played a part in how he composed the illustrations of the Kelmscott *Chaucer*. The process of composition, in which Morris played a dominant role, highlights the differences between the two artists and the difficulties in their relationship. Other social influences included his relationship with women, May Gaskell in particular, and his relationship with artisans whose hands-on involvement in the process determined the appearance of the final product.

Emergence

The above section outlines the structures that directly affect composition. Syverson's second step, emergence, emphasizes the broader milieu in which the work materializes. Morris and Burne-Jones were both affected by the Pre-Raphaelite art they encountered, but their differences can also be explained by this same art. Morris took on historical aspects of Gothic while Burne-Jones followed in the footsteps of his mentor, Rossetti, in adopting the romantic. Both preferred medieval topics and themes, but expressed them differently. Syverson explains of emergence that composition is "situated activity." In this section, I look more closely at the context of the Burne-Jones's work, especially his relationship with Rossetti's work, with Botticelli, and with medievalism. Each of these contexts--Rossetti, fifteenth century Italian masters, and medievalism--touched Morris, too, but he concentrated on different features.

William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones were second generation Pre-Raphaelites. Coming at the end of the movement, they spent the most time with only one of the original Pre-Raphaelites, Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Michael Alexander points out that by this later date (1860s) when Morris and Burne-Jones met Rossetti, the historical

phase of medieval revival had ended and the romantic narrative and mythic phase had begun (159). So when Rossetti introduced the two Oxford students to his circle of friends, his lifestyle, his idea of medieval and his favorite models, “stunners” he called them, he did not offer a full picture of the movement. In spite of this, Morris seems to have taken on more elements of the earlier medieval revival, particularly with the Kelmscott Press undertaking when he collected primary materials for researching his press. Initially, though, he fully participated in Rossetti’s “cult of women.” Georgiana Burne Jones describes this attraction for the group: “Human beauty especially was in a way sacred to them [...]” (1:169). Rossetti’s later paintings “are icons who are well on their way to becoming idols” (Alexander 143).

Astarte Syriaca (Figure 33) is a depiction of a Syrian Venus with ministering spirits and represents the erotic “culmination of his sequence of images of women [...]” (Barringer 155). Rossetti’s ideas influenced Morris deeply; after all, he did marry one of these “stunners.” Some of Morris’s poetic works, especially his poem “The Defense of Guenevere,” pick up on the irrepressible power of female beauty. However, Rossetti’s “cult of women” did not become a central theme for Morris as it did for Burne-Jones (cf. above paintings *The Beguiling of Merlin* and *Laus Veneris*). Rossetti’s presence in Burne-Jones’s work can be seen in his topic (females and myth) and his confidence in his own artistic ability. David Cecil in *Visionary and Dreamer* appraises this development: “Rossetti inspired him to have full confidence in his own talent and, more important, encouraged him to paint without hesitation the kind of pictures he liked best; drawn not from nature, but from fancy” (118).



Figure 33. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Astarte Syriaca*, 1875-7, oil on canvas, Manchester City Art Galleries; rpt. in Tim Barringer *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites*.

Burne-Jones's project *The Flower Book* (1882) sums up his attraction to the imaginative, not natural, world. With this project he took the traditional name of a flower and sought to reinvent it. He wanted to break from the concrete image, the natural association, and call up the symbolic power of the name. Each name had a circular illustration filled with mythic, biblical, and fanciful images. Rossetti's influence can be traced throughout the course of Burne-Jones's work, but he did move beyond simple

imitation of him. By 1862-3, Burne-Jones broke from his apprenticeship to Rossetti and began to establish his own recognizable style.

One of the most important incidences for Burne-Jones's artistic development was his tour of Italy. Timothy Hilton in his work *The Pre-Raphaelites* summarizes the recognizable features of Boticelli's work which Burne-Jones adopted afterward this trip: "Sandro [Boticelli] was, among other things, the painter of grace, and a particularly lovely thing he could do is a kind of movement, half-gliding, half-trotting, that is the lightest and most delightful delineation of serene female movement in Western art [...]" (133). Like Boticelli, Burne-Jones focuses on female movement in his work. In addition to adopting a similar style, he reintroduces the female nude to Victorian art; Boticelli's *Venus* appears over and over again in his work. Georgiana describes the impact of both Rossetti and his first trip to Italy: "Rossetti had taught him 'not to be afraid of himself,' that is to say, of the imagination that was in him, and now he had seen the way in which the great painters of a great time had painted what was in them, and had come away knowing that he was their own son" (1:200). Robinson notes that Boticelli and Magenta's influence can be seen in the *Chaucer* illustrations. Boticelli's *Venus* (Figure 34) makes several appearances in the nudes of the illustrations.

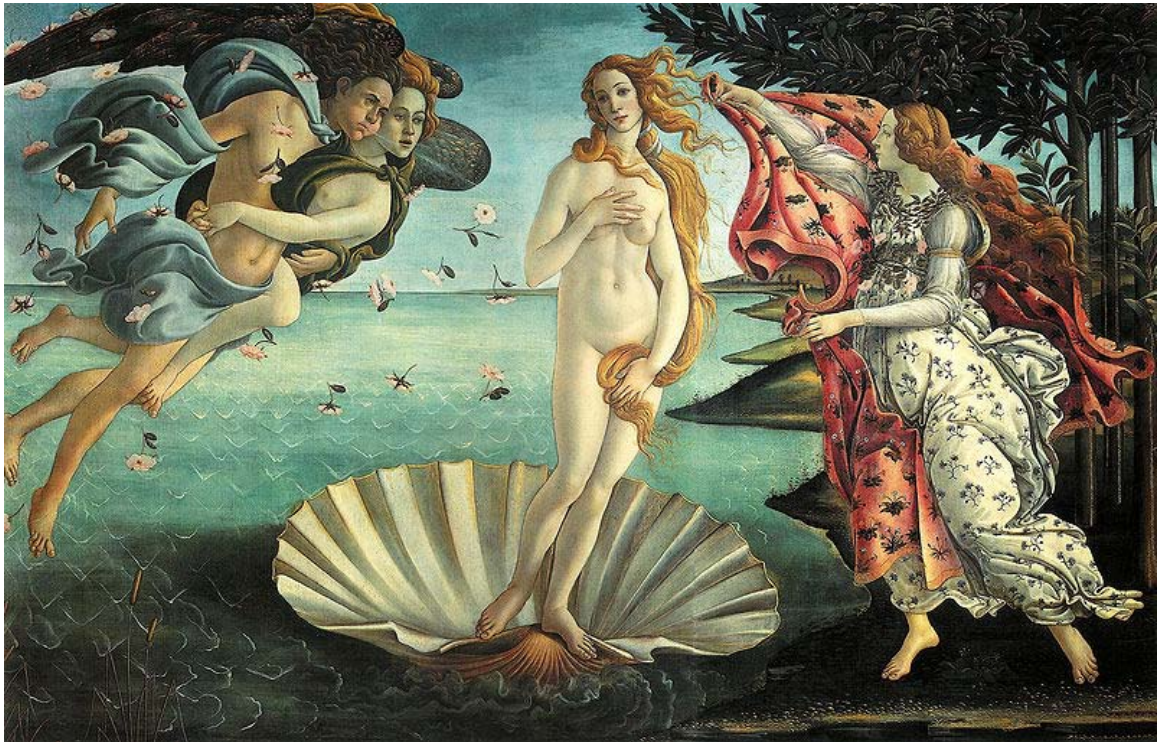


Figure 34. Sandro Botticelli, *Birth of Venus*, c. 1482-1486, tempera on canvas, Uffizi, Florence.

Burne-Jones's nude in *The House of Fame* illustration stands with the same right leg propped, head tilted in the same direction. Though Burne-Jones's Venus's hands and hair expose more of her body, their general appearance is almost identical.

Botticelli's *Primavera* (Figure 35), especially the dancing women appears, in Kelmscott Chaucer's *The Romaunt of the Rose* (Figure 36). Botticelli's female dancers intertwine their hair and limbs like the vines that surround them. Their robes indicate gentle, graceful movement. Burne-Jones's dancing girls exhibit flowing robes, hair and limbs. Their arms, legs, hands, and hair suggest the same organic movement as the vines and plants behind them.



Figure 35. Sandro Boticelli, *Primavera*, 1482, tempera on panel, Uffizi Florence.



Figure 36. Burne-Jones, *The Romaunt of the Rose*, finished drawing for p. 257, from Robinson, William Morris, *Edward Burne-Jones, and the Kelmscott Chaucer*, plate 3

Burne Jones's final pencil drawing indicates his homage to Botticelli's work; their positions and their garb strongly resemble the configuration of female forms in *Primavera*.

Embodiment

The differences between Burne-Jones's final pencil drawings and the woodcut illustrations in the printed book highlights the final aspect of composition—embodiment. The fine pencil sketches done in shades of gray appear very different from the illustration embedded in Morris's lavish borders and situated above text. Syverson reviews the many critics, feminists and linguists, who emphasize the relevance of physical situation on comprehension. She notes that “embodiment grounds our conceptual structures, our interactions with each other and with the environment, our perceptions, and our actions” (13). Importantly, the creation and interpretation of texts—whether textual or visual—depends on their physical presentation, “Writers, readers, and texts have physical bodies and consequently not only the content but the process of their interaction is dependent on, and reflective of, physical experience” (12). Embodiment for Burne-Jones's illustrations involves this literal mantling of his illustrations in borders and text. The Chaucer text itself physically and topically constrains and guides his illustrations while Morris's overall design of the *Chaucer* determines the size of the picture and the work it illustrates. On another level, embodiment involves the story of the text as it was printed (Chapter 1) and the story of the reader encountering it (Chapter 5).

Enaction

Composition, as Syverson describes it, has a story, enacted through the steps of distribution, emergence and embodiment. “*Enaction*,” Syverson writes, “is the principle that knowledge is the result of an ongoing interpretation that emerges through *activities* and *experiences* situated in specific environments” (13). The message of the Chaucer illustration’s enaction includes the physical and social contexts in which they were composed, but also the broader cultural issues from which they offer a respite. Morris and Burne-Jones did, as Robinson suggests, have a common aim which was to make art relevant and important (Corbett 5). However, Morris’s answer to this problem was enacted differently than Burne-Jones’s. Corbett explains of Burne-Jones, “[...] Burne-Jones’s devotion to the unreality of his fictional worlds allows him a vantage point from which the realities of contemporary experience can be rescued from their normal obscurity and rendered visible. The escapism of art is a tool through which the natural reaction from an ‘age of rationalism and materialism’ can offer consolation as well as diagnosis and critique” (29). Burne-Jones’s fictional worlds are the centerpieces of Morris’s Kelmscott *Chaucer*. These illustrations, refined, formal and sensuous, showcase the complexity of the process of composition. The difference between the illustrations and their surroundings helps to explain the wide range of responses to Morris and Burne-Jones’s final, masterful collaboration together.

CHAPTER FIVE

Designing the Reader: Morris and Medieval Hermeneutics

The printing of Morris's copy of *Chaucer* was a highly anticipated event, described by many as "the most splendid book production since printing began," notes Colin Franklin in his book *Private Presses* (14). Many book lovers still agree with this statement. The *Chaucer* literally sits apart, a "fetish object" as Jeffrey Skoblow in "Beyond Reading" calls it, in the libraries and private collections of the most fortunate. Many of the questions addressed by this project begin with a simple one: what makes this book different? At the top of the list is the *Chaucer*'s resemblance to the medieval psalter, and in this chapter I analyze the way the physical appearance of the text teaches its readers how to read. This research would not be possible without McGann's seminal discussion the "material encoding" of a page and Michael Camille's with medieval manuscripts as works of art and culture. Their work clarifies that the reception of a text cannot be separated from its physical medium. The question of how to read the Kelmscott *Chaucer* arises with every fresh assessment of it. Most recently Jeffrey Skoblow summarizes: "When I speak of reading the Kelmscott Press as a problem, then, I mean 'problem' not in terms of legibility, but in the sense that, to take these volumes in hand, one must reexamine the nature of the act of reading" (257). He suggests that the Kelmscott Press is a modernist venture in that it "imagines reading as a sensuous act" (256). But given that Morris's models were medieval psalters, a closer look reveals that its reading complexities, including its sensorial elements, originate with its medieval

predecessors. Skoblow rightly assesses Kelmscott works as “unalienated things” reclaimed from “the dilutions, adulterations, and abstractions of commodification” (241-2), but the medieval element brings with it more than a reconnection to the sensorial experience of books. The senses are merely gateways to the possibilities of meditation and transformation, and with his page design and Burne-Jones’s illustrations, Morris argues that Chaucer’s text provides the proper food for such an experience.

Mary C. Olson’s discussion in *Fair and Varied Forms: Visual Textuality in Medieval Illuminated Manuscripts* aids in sorting through the issues raised by Morris’s *Chaucer*, clarifying that the questions his work raises center around the issue of genre.

One of the determining characteristics of a genre is the way in which the text relates to its audience. It is this relationship which the scribe and the illustrator enhance or resist, or in some cases create, with the design of the page, the style and size of the script, and the characteristics of the illustrations. (xxv)

Although Morris’s *Chaucer* departs in places from his medieval models, his graphic choices cross over into the genre of the sacred text. The illustration, the ornamentation, the embedding of text and illustration within a series of frames, the double columns of print punctuated by belles lettres resemble much more immediately a medieval penitential psalm from a psalter than anything else. A medieval sacred text reflected a different reading practice by its original audience, one that was more meditative, reflective, and multivalent. I argue here that the presentation of the page (embodiement) requires a different response from Victorian (and contemporary) audiences (enaction), and the medieval hermeneutic of *lectio divina* explains the antique and, thus, unusual experience for the reader. As this chapter will show, some readers enjoy the encounter while others do not. I utilize Mariano Magrassi’s work *Praying the Bible: An*

Introduction to Lectio Divina (1990) to describe this way of interpreting texts. Reading the Kelmscott *Chaucer* begins with the way it calls one into a physical encounter of the text and the way it insists upon a ritualized, specialized experience.

Morris rebelled against mechanized and disconnected printing practices by calling attention through his own printed texts to the act of reading itself, an act understood in the medieval period to be both individual and collective, physical and spiritual. Michael Camille in “Sensations of the Page” describes this experience:

The book today has lost much of these corporeal, communicative, and erotic associations. The medieval book was activated constantly, however, by the speaking, sucking mouth, the gesturing, probing hand, and the opening, closing body. Reading a text was a charged somatic experience in which every turn of the page was sensations, from the feel of the flesh and hair side of the parchment on one’s fingertips to the lubricious labial mouthing of the written words with one’s tongue. (38)

As anyone who has looked at an original copy of the Kelmscott *Chaucer* can attest, it has the same feel of a medieval book; “clunky and physically intimidating” like a medieval bible, the *Chaucer* copies were made to call attention to the sensorial experience of them. Their size necessitates sitting while reading, their hand-cut pages rustle while turning, and their woodcut print presents texture for the brush of a fingertip (or glove).

Sensual pleasure is one of the primary goals of art, according to Morris. The qualities of inventiveness, harmony, and organicism—the principal values of medieval art for Morris—all pertained to the enjoyment felt by the craftsman in creating it and the audience in viewing it. In his lecture “Aims of Art” from *Signs of Change* he writes, “Perhaps it is difficult to explain to the non-artistic capacity that this definite sensuous pleasure is always present in the handiwork of the deft workman when he is working successfully, and that it increases in proportion to the freedom and individuality of the

work” (*Signs*, 121). Morris believed creating art should be enjoyable, as should viewing it. He writes, “[...] the end proposed by a work of art is always to please the person whose senses are to be made conscious of it” (*Signs* 122). Summarized, the aims of art are to “make work happy and rest fruitful” (*Signs* 122). Morris had in mind what he called “fruitful rest” and with this “sensual consciousness.” Art provides a source of rejuvenation, which he explains as the ability to renew oneself through “pleased contemplation or dreaming.” This ability to meditate or contemplate starts with the enjoyment of the body, the “consciousness” of the senses (122). Morris’s work on the *Chaucer* tells the story of his own sensual journey in making the book as it insists on the sensual satisfaction of it. But as the above passage by Camille reveals, these possibilities existed first in the medieval book, and like the medieval book, the senses opened for the reader the possibility of a spiritual encounter.

The relationship between the physical and spiritual experiences of the text becomes clear when considering the medieval manuscript’s shorthand for its oral performance. The “material performance” of a *Chaucer* does more than invite a pleasurable reading of it, it also imitates the social experience imbedded in a medieval manuscript whose “rich marginal art [...] support[s] this notion of choric audience response” (Camille 39). The spiritual component of medieval reading grew out of the sensual experience of it—in private and public. In private devotional reading, the viewer began with the physical act of slowing and quieting the body and mind. But as Magrassi points out, church fathers recount revelatory experiences from the communal experience of the text, which begins with the physical act of opening the mouth. As Mariono Magrassi writes, “The Word is living when the speaker is present and it is actually

coming from his mouth” (3). Medieval texts often contained references to the oral experience of a text in the form of “visual noise.” These images included open mouths or even, as Chaucer describes, “eyr broken” such as “wind-breaking images” (Camille, “Sensations 39). The role of the physical body was primary in a community experience of a text.

Camille explains that the development of the illuminated prayer book held visual cues of the collective and oral experience of a text even as they encouraged a new level of individual spirituality. Medieval prayer books indicate how they were to be read through their layout—slowly, deeply, reflectively. But as their title reveals, the prayers and psalms included in these books were part of a communal experience of liturgy. Magrassi offers reflection from Gregory the Great in which he discusses the need for the combination of silent reflection, *lectio divina*, as well as the collective experience of sacred text in the liturgy:

For I know that in the presence of my brothers and sisters I have very often understood many things in the sacred text that I could not understand alone. . . . Thus it happens, by the grace of God, that as perception grows pride diminishes, since on your behalf I learn what I am teaching in your midst, for—I must confess—I often hear with you what I am saying. (qtd in Magrassi 10)

Magrassi explains, “the community assumes the role of making the Word come alive” (10). Books designed for oral reading often have a more interactive layout, one that invites meditation—the spiritual act vitally connected to physically focusing and breathing. Such a break occurs with ornamentation as it invites the same rest and reflection experienced by a cleric as he listens to the response of the faithful.

Like a medieval prayer book, Morris’s own books insist upon a physical adjustment by the reader and invite a ceremonial experience. Skoblow rightly assesses

this phenomenon, “If this is reading, then reading is not what we learn in school: we are called, at Kelmscott, to a different order of activity” (249). Its size, material and design invite an attendance to the sensuality and immediacy in the act of reading. Additionally, its physical presence, argues Elizabeth K. Helsinger in “William Morris before Kelmscott,” is suggestive of a social experience of the text. She writes about his copy of *The Earthly Paradise*, “This was not a book intended for hand or lap or bed: it would appropriately rest open on a bookstand or table. The *Earthly Paradise* demanded a certain ceremonial—and probably social—ritual of reading. It was a book for reading aloud” (219). Morris’s *Chaucer* is a similar type of book, one that cannot be casually handled and is meant to occupy a central place in a room. The importance of fellowship to Morris makes it likely he did have in mind an oral reading of the text. Though oral readings are uncommon these days, it is notable that most current readings of a Kelmscott *Chaucer* start with social interactions in the form of formalities, clearances and careful handling, not to mention required observation of the reading experience for the most rare copies of his *Works*. A reading room experience is ritualized, ceremonial, and social.

In private or public, reading the Kelmscott *Chaucer* requires adjustments on the part of the reader whether Victorian or cotemporary. The four acts of *lectio divina* described by Magrassi help to explain the process of reading a sacred text, and because Morris’s book participates in this genre, these acts clarify the reading of it also. The four acts include reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation.

The first act—attentive and committed reading—requires an attitude of dedication and “contemplative calm” (105). Magrassi explains,

We moderns, when we read, are usually in a hurry. Our haste stems from curiosity and a thirst for novelty. We can see this in the avalanche of

written words in which we are drowned, thanks to modern publishing. But this is deadly when dealing with a Word that holds the mystery of God. It prevents us from understanding, and above all, from assimilating. (105)

When Magrassi describes the act of reading he differentiates between what he considers “good” and “bad” reading: the quality of reading and knowing finds reflection in the pace with which the reader works through the text. Pace also correlates with the value the reader gives to the words. Interestingly, Magrassi describes a difference in attitude about books between the medieval scribe and the modern with which Morris would have agreed. Magrassi argues that the accessibility of books has caused a devaluation of reading while the medieval reader cherished books because of their scarcity. Not only did medieval readers saturate themselves in text, they treated them differently. “Who has not heard of magnificent illuminated codices that resulted from this spirit?” he writes, “It not only testifies to an infinite reverence for the sacred text; it is also the sign of attentive and careful reading” (106). To read as a medieval, one’s pace must be patience and one’s attitude reverence. Moreover he explains the motivation behind book decoration: it communicates the importance of these texts and, literally, the time spent with them. Morris in numerous essays decries the state of printing, arguing that inattentive printing encourages carelessness and casualness on the part of the reader who “bends its boards,” “thumps its familiar pages with his fist,” “dog-ears the leaves, turn it face downwards on a dirty table, blot it with ink and smear the blot off with his thumb; in short so maul it that he deserved to have his books read aloud to him henceforthward instead of being allowed to read them himself” (*Ideal* 1). With his press Morris attempted to modify these values by reintroducing more medieval ones, and a simple

measure of his venture's success is to look at readers' reactions to the experience of these texts.

When readers express frustration (or praise for that matter) of the Chaucer, they often relate it to the pace of the reading. "The eye is led here," offers Skoblow, "not so much from left to right and top to bottom as in every direction at once, and not so much led as slowly pulled: the effect is rather like reading taffy—no reader is likely to proceed for long before being compelled into reverie (and beyond reading), absorbed in the more immediate and sensuous considerations of Morris's book art" ("Beyond" 254). Skoblow elucidates that Morris successfully communicates through his page design the need for "fruitful rest." Morris argues graphically that reading can be productive on different levels; it can be physically compelling even as it invites contemplation—"beyond reading." Other readers do not have such a positive reaction to the restructuring of the reading experience.

Morris's contemporaries generally praised his copy of Chaucer as his *magnum opus*. Two unpublished pieces housed with Burne-Jones's copy of *Chaucer* at Southern Methodist University's Bridwell Library indicate how Morris's close circle felt about his work. The letter below from Swinburne to "Ned" (Morris's nickname for Burne-Jones) describes the kind of "fruitful rest" Morris was hopeful his audience would experience. The July 14, 1896, note reads:

My dear Ned

A thousand thanks for
your share in the magnificent
gift I have just received. It is not,
my very dear sir, for me to praise—
it suffices me to admire, to appreciate,
& to enjoy. When the meridional glow

of genius is tempered by the cordial
urbanity—if I may be allowed that
endearing phrase—of friendship,
the emotions cooked are such as now
animate the (shall I say?) laboring
bosom of yours ever devotedly

Al Swinburne

Swinburne's response to the gift corresponds closely with Morris's explanation of the "mood of idleness" he describes in "Aims of Art." He specifically mentions enjoyment as vitally important to a more restorative and inspirational time of rest from work, the result of which is "that energy hope of producing something worth its exercise" (*Signs* 133). In other words, the experience of great art encourages the production of it by those who enjoy it. And Morris and Burne-Jones did produce a "great work," one for which Chaucer himself waited, according to contemporary Sebastian Evans. Written in 1896, the year of the *Chaucer's* publication, the poem emphasizes the unity in the work between the "three poets" and extols the work as a musical production—written upon golden scales and heard as singing. He writes,

In librum aureum/ trium poetarum opus.

Geoffrey/ half a thousand years
Have you waited for your peers—
Greet them now/ your fellow seers!

Look how Edward here doth limn
All you have revealed to him—
Worlds and gods and seraphim.

Hand in hand comes William/ who
Sheweth all that print can do
Worthy of his brethren two.

Chaucer—Burne-Jones—Morris! We
Turn your leaves and hear you three
Singing Benedicite.

S. E.

July/ mdcccxcvi

These two contemporary responses confirm the general attitude of this production as a triumph, its product highly sought after. Other contemporaries, however, also express reservations about the reception and understanding of the work.

Crane does applaud Morris's work in his *Of Decorative Illustration Old and New*, but he also notes that this book is not for the "general reader—unless that ubiquitous person is more erudite and omnivorous than is commonly credited" (193). He does not explain his comment about the "ubiquitous" general reader, but his emphasis on the historical aspects of Morris's work indicates one should have a wide range of exposure to earlier book art in order to fully appreciate it. Crane explains that many of the best parts of the *Chaucer* are recognizably influenced by medieval manuscripts and by the early printed book; but he also explains that Morris thought through the practical aspects and innovated where he saw a need. He calls attention especially to the consideration of the relationship between *verso* and *recto* as well as the functionality of leading, otherwise known as the "handling," which allows one to hold the book without covering any of the page (194). However, what Crane praises as "richness and distinctive character, other peers criticize as "superabundance."

Some peers had problems with what they called the "excess" of the page. Lewis F. Day in the 1903 *Contemporary Review* explains that Morris's work turns away the average reader through his elaborate decorations.

Altogether the luxury of ornament with which he crowded his page (he was at his most restrained an exuberant decorator) is in excess of what we

want; but the ornament itself is full of vigour, fancy and ingenuity, admirably characteristic of the man, and proof sufficient that he died in the fullness of his power. In his printing, more than in his more purely decorative work, he lies under the pronounced disadvantage of not being in touch with his practical and utilitarian generation. His books attract the artist but do not invite the reader. Nevertheless, when all is said, he produced some splendid volumes, and gave a strong impulse to the awakened interest in modern type in the printed page, and in the decoration of the book. (795)

This commentary gives a mixed review of Morris's work. Lewis argues that as a designer Morris was brilliant and undeniably influential, but that as a printer, although equally influential and important, he did not follow his own advice. In his *A Note by William Morris on His Aims in Founding the Kelmscott Press* Morris famously writes that the books he hoped to produce should be beautiful and "at the same time they should be easy to read and should not dazzle the eye, or trouble the intellect of the reader by eccentricity of form in the letters" (*Ideal*). What may have troubled Morris was different from other readers. He had fewer problems with densely decorated text than with poorly executed Spartan ones. Day's criticism pertains to the visual slowing of a verbal textual reading by "excessive" ornamentation and "artistry."

The attitude expressed by contemporary Alan Bartram indicates that Morris's methods did work; however, he, too, indicates that these pages are for "artists" and not for "readers. He writes,

In his last works, Morris used his sophisticated craftsmanship to further his medieval dream. These are not books for the working man (though no-one worked harder than Morris). Now the type reflects his attempts to make the gothic character readable—in which it sort-of succeeds. But these are daunting pages, and the modern designer must remain silent, baseball cap in hand, before them. (113)

As Lewis writes before him, Bartram suggests these books limit the scope of their reception by their physical presentation. While a designer understands enough to stand

“silent” before them, a “working man” may not appreciate them. Again, too, arises the issue of legibility. Bartram notes that the Gothic type is as readable as Gothic will get, but it is not as readable as other fonts. In other analyses of font, Bartram suggests the layout, not just the shape of the letters is the problem. The double column of dense black letters is not as easy on the eyes as other books. In fact, these books are not “easy” on the eyes at all. The activity on the page makes the pages, at least the illustrated ones, complicated to take in at the very least.

Morris insisted through his designs that readers slow down and open up. When Magrassi talks about the dangers of reading too quickly, he is suggesting that one cannot absorb a text without investing time and energy in it. Giugo II who first outlined the four acts of divine reading, *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *contemplatio*, explains that time spent in meditation is the act that digests the material: “Reading, as it were, puts food whole into the mouth, meditation chews it and breaks it up, prayer extracts its flavor, contemplation is the sweetness itself which gladdens and refreshes” (“Ladder”). Meditation, he explains, “digs and delves deeply to find that treasure” (“Ladder”). Skoblow depicts the encounter with a Kelmscott Press production as one that moves “beyond reading.” His use of the words “reverie” and “absorb” underscore the medieval activity of *meditatio* insisted upon by these works.

The demands of the text separate readers between those who are willing to do a different kind of reading and those who are not. Colin Franklin in *The Private Presses* talks about the differences between readers and categorizes these differences in reader’s terms: “paperbackers” and “hardbackers” (15). The “clever dons” prefer the “avalanche” of words. The “paperback mind” suggests “strong powers of concentration

and blindness to conditions which exist outside the reading brain” (15). So when Michael Alexander in *Medievalism* assessed the *Chaucer* as “an original which looks like a facsimile: a fascinating object and work of art, but not a book to read” (179), he acknowledges his adoption of the “paperback mind.” However, argues Franklin “physical conditions do come to bear on the reading experience, even for the paperbacker.” Physical experience does amend one’s ability to read and absorb, and he argues that beauty on the printed page supports a broader experience of the text. His conclusion that “the mind likes to wander and absorb, even beyond the author’s meaning” gives credence to the possibility of meditation, the second act in *lectio divina*.

Meditation only occurs in a specific environment and requires flexibility or “resonance” in the heart. Magrassi further describes this attitude:

This demands the kind of recollection we feel the need for when something great and beautiful appears in our life. A poem demands that we pause at the end for silence. A musical theme that has moved us continues to echo sweetly and insistently, within our soul. We feel the need to keep listening to this inner echo until it has permeated every fiber of our heart. The Word of God is much more demanding than a musical theme and much more profound. (109)

Magrassi’s point here is that beauty can open the heart. Morris firmly believed that art could change the course of history, starting with the life of an individual, and he understood beauty as a way to create self-awareness and the possibility of meditation. St. Augustine, writes Magrassi, described the space as “ ‘mouth of the heart’ ” and compares meditation to the assimilation of food: “The heart is the mouth in which the text is chewed—or as they prefer to say, ruminated” (19). This connection calls to mind the relationship between the inner and outer act of digestion. Morris called attention constantly in his production to the text itself and the physical surroundings as an

actualization of those words. McGann in *Black Riders* spends a chapter describing this phenomenon in Morris's early printing plans (*A Book of Verse* and *The Earthly Paradise*) as well as his early Kelmscott editions. He writes:

Equally important for creating the extraordinary (even excessive) richness of these pages is the choice of typeface and line layout. The decision to print everything in capitals recalls the manner of certain medieval manuscripts. [...] The text here is hard to read, is too thick with its own materialities. It resists any processing that would simply treat it as a set of referential signs pointing beyond themselves to semantic content. This text declares its radical self-identity. (76)

Morris slows down the act of reading by calling attention to the environment of the words. The beauty of its binding and form makes room in the heart while the words themselves call attention to the physical act of processing words and images. The work constrains the reading experience: rumination or rejection.

Some readers find the demands of the text to be wholly satisfying. William Butler Yeats in a 1905 letter to Sydney Cockerell identifies himself as a "ruminator":

I do not know how to thank you for the trouble you have been put to about the Chaucer. It is a book I have longed for some years, indeed ever since it was made. To me it is the most beautiful of all printed books. It is especially valuable to me just now, for I am to start reading Chaucer right through. I have never read him since I was a boy, and then not thoroughly. Just as one gets at certain times a desire for a certain kind of food and drink which the body needs, one desires things that the mind needs. (*Friends*, 269)

Yeats expresses a desire for assimilation related to St. Augustine's description of the "mouth of the heart." The "wise and sane" Chaucer provides for his mind sustenance as food does for his body. Moreover, the Morris edition of the text offers an elevated experience, one he compares to a physical need.

Meditation starts with an opening of the text through the concurrent opening of the heart. This step leads to a response, which The Kelmscott *Chaucer* certainly invites.

Prayer is the third act of *lectio divina*. Magrassi relates that prayer is the natural product of meditation: “Meditative reading as we have described it leads spontaneously to prayer” (112). Essentially, describes Magrassi, prayer is a giving back of the words to their originator, an echo. The medieval book was most often a sacred text, including prayers of the church and psalms. Chaucer’s text is no exception. Though a common introduction to Chaucer is a selection from his *Tales*, and though these tales are more often than not taught with an emphasis on their humorous and bawdy moments, a more complete picture would emphasize the spirituality and devotion also present in the tales, exemplified by the “Parson’s Tale” and Chaucer’s “Retraction.” Chaucer also wrote numerous devout shorter poems and translated Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, an important text for the medieval church, described by D. W. Roertson, Jr. as “the most popular philosophical elaboration of Augustinian doctrine” and a “preface to the medieval world” (“Historical” 7-8). Chaucer’s work should not be characterized, though it often is, as solely secular, so prayer would be a possible response, especially for a Victorian audience.

Burne-Jones created several sacred images for a select number of these texts, including the *verso* and *recto* images above Chaucer’s “Retraction” and “An A. B. C. of Geoffrey Chaucer” (Figure 37 and 39). These illustrations stand out as the most overtly religious in the entirety of the work because they include direct references to Christian iconography. Although Charles LaPorte in his essay “On Victorian Editorial Theory and Kelmscott *Chaucer*” makes the case that these two images downplay the disappointing effect of the “Retraction” on the reader by affirming Chaucer’s secular poetry, his reading hinges on the identity of the woman on the *verso*. LaPorte asserts this woman

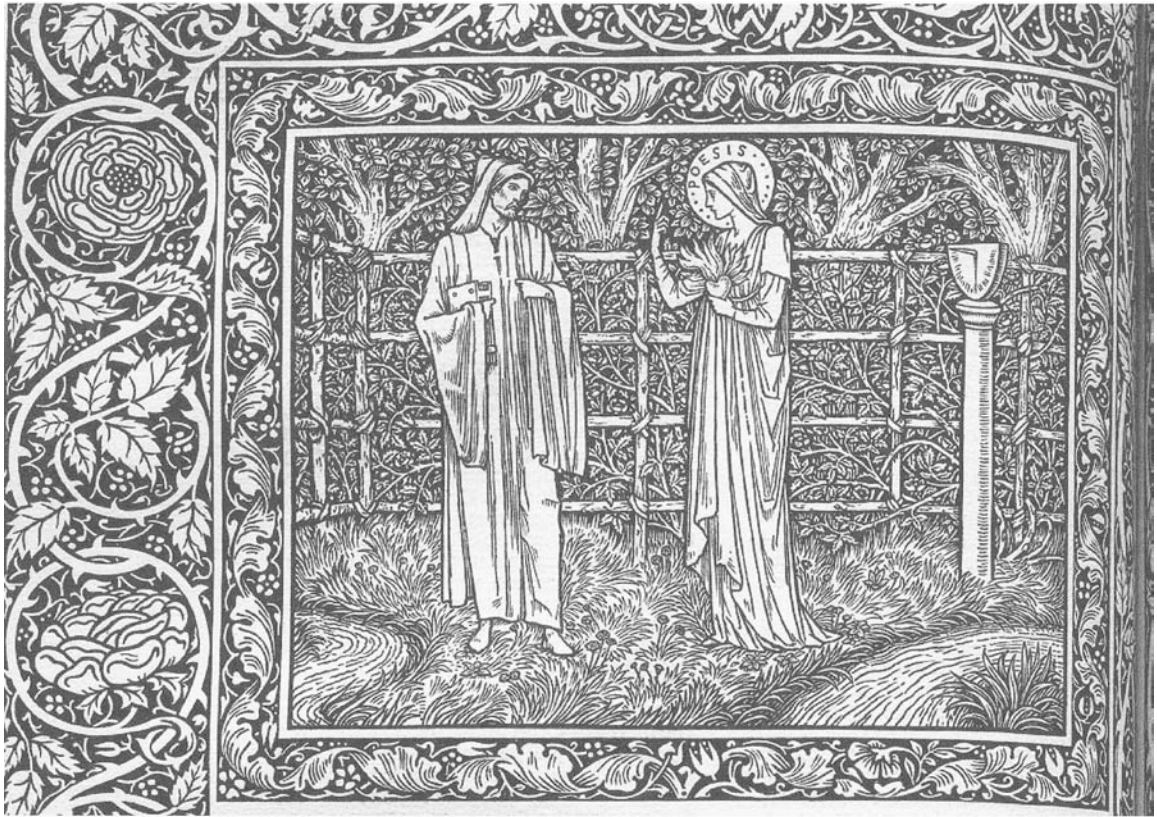


Figure 37. Kelmscott *Chaucer Retraction*.

is a “stock Virgin” who gestures above and carries a flaming heart. He writes, “Yet Burne-Jones inscribes ‘POESIS’ in her halo, as though to conflate this Virgin with Calliope, to suggest that the mother of God appreciates a good secular lyric as much as anyone, and to imply that Chaucer’s repudiation of the ‘enditynges of worldly vanities’ is not necessarily sanctioned by the divine powers for whom he repudiates them” (212). LaPorte’s reading of this image is out of character for Burne-Jones, who often uses halos with names in order to label the individual. For example, in a letter to his daughter Burne-Jones includes a cartoon of himself, Morris and Chaucer. Chaucer is clearly identified by the halo inscribed with his name. The caption reads “Bless Ye My Children. May. 1896.” The cartoon emphasizes Chaucer’s status

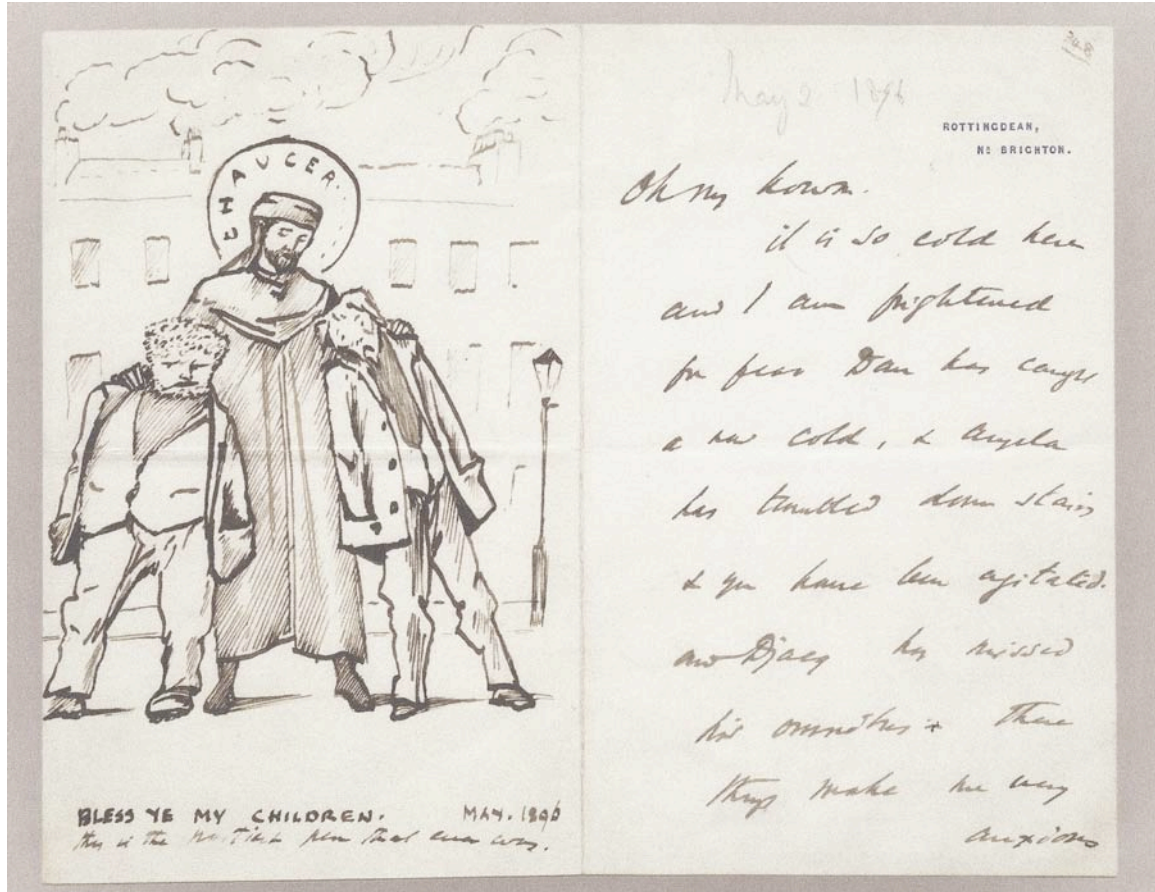


Figure 38. Burne-Jones, Edward, Topsy cartoon series, Chaucer.

to his printers, and it also hints at the emotional costliness of the *Chaucer* venture and Burne-Jones and Morris's hope to portray him accurately. If anything, Burne-Jones's quick sketch affirms the view of Chaucer as clerical and traditional through his dress and his comment. By implication, this cartoon confirms that Burne-Jones does identify the woman in the illustration of the *verso*. Though the woman appearing to Chaucer above the retraction does have the traditional draped robes of the Madonna, her resemblance to the Virgin stops there. No other symbol indicates she is the Virgin. Moreover, her name

is not mentioned in the retraction, whereas on the two pages where she is undeniably present in the illustrations (61 and 223) her name also appears in the text of the page.

A reading more in keeping with Burne-Jones's style would be that this is Calliope, or the muse "poetry." The symbolic references to religious life, flaming heart and gesturing finger, seem more likely to refer to the presence of sacred truths in all poetry. Such an allusion to poetry as a source of religious instruction would be in keeping with medieval understanding of the arts as possible sources of eternal truth outlined so clearly in Bonaventure's *On Retracing the Arts to Theology*. Moreover, LaPorte completely ignores the symbolic character of the incomplete timepiece. This symbol especially emphasizes the medieval understanding of time as either Kairos (eternal and complete) or Kronos (chronological and incomplete). Poetry tells the story of the meeting point between the two, foreshadowing a time when we will "see face to face," not merely in a mirror. Chaucer himself calls attention to this commonly held belief when he writes: "And if ther be anything that displese hem, I preye hem also that they arrette it to the defaute of myn unkonnyng, and nat to my wyl, that wolde ful fayn have seyde better if I hadde had konnyng. For oure boke seith: Al that is writen is writen for our doctrine, and that is myn entente" (222). Chaucer's loaded word here, "entente," reverberates with readers who have traced the misguided ones of many of the tellers, and his reference to partial "konnyng" as well as the doctrine of Romans 15:4 places him strongly within fourteenth-century penitential conventions. LaPorte's assertion that "the medieval religiosity of this renouncement was as distressing to the Victorian reader as it is to the modern, and it was surely bothersome for Morris" assumes a great deal about all these readers, namely that all of them took the retraction at face

value as a literal denunciation of the works rather than an affirmation of medieval values, especially the allegorical potential of a pilgrim journeying to the true city.



Figure 39. Burne-Jones, Edward, Kelmscott *Chaucer*, “ABC.”

Unlike the *verso*, the *recto* illustration is unmistakably of Mary. Carrying Jesus and surrounded by lilies, she appears to a kneeling, worshipping Chaucer. The difference in the demeanor and physical position of the two Chaucer figures corroborates one as a muse and the other as divine. The topic of the poem is more clearly a prayer as well directed to “Almighty and Al Merciable Quene” from whom Chaucer asks for “Bountee” and “Comfort.” But both of these images reflect the prayer-filled topic of the text and invite a similar response from its readers. The symbolic food on the pages—even the rose border—participates in traditional early Christian iconography. Morris and Burne-

Jones are the initial readers of the text and cue their audience to the spiritual possibilities of the page. Burne-Jones's depictions of Chaucer track possible responses to the texts.

The depictions of Chaucer in prayer or in visitation with a spirit indicate the potentialities of reading a text—books accompany him in many pictures, whether on a stand or in his hand. Prayer as words echoed back to their originator begins with the words themselves, specifically with the book and the open mouth. For example the first illustration in the text is of Chaucer reading a smaller book, very like a book of hours or penitential psalms. But other depictions, especially the one above “An ABC of Geoffrey Chaucer,” frame Chaucer in prayer. In this picture he is kneeling, hands clasped in a signal of entreaty, before the Madonna and Child. The room itself with its ascetic feel, scroll and books on stand and rug just the size for kneeling, indicate monastic as well as scholastic interests.

But most often Burne-Jones depicts Chaucer as either observing or entering a different dimension, one in which he meets with angels and spirits. These figures relate to the next step in *lectio divina*—*contemplatio*—a visionary mode of reading. The illustrated Chaucer experiences supra-visionary moments in the text. Two important ones depict him as a prophet, listening and transcribing a message, or as visionary. The image above the short poem “Womanly Noblesse” is of a female winged being and of Chaucer who writes her words in his book. The facing page shows Chaucer as a visionary whose spirit leaves his body and travels to a different world. The room includes books, emphasizing the role they play in this kind of experience. Both of these pictures leave one with a feeling that Chaucer is more than a writer, more than a reader. His work

reveals his spiritual experiences and presents the possibility that reading is an entry point to another realm.

Although Burne-Jones depicts scenes of cupidity also, his illustrations that include the Chaucer figure emphasize the possible spiritual experiences contained in a book. The final rung in divine reading involves the idea that words do contain spiritual possibilities and even spiritual presence. Magrassi writes that the Bible is a living book: “This is not simply an encounter with a piece of writing, even though divine. It is an encounter with the living God” (31). Contemplation is the culmination of the reading experience as the reader draws closer to the divine book—Christ himself. Contemplation is the encounter between the soul and the object of its devotion. John of Fecamp describes his experience of contemplation as a moment when “all becomes quiet and calm. The heart burns with love. . . . The soul overflows with joy, the memory with strength, the intellect with light. And the whole mind, ardently longing to see your beauty, is caught up in the love of invisible things” (Magrassi 118). The ability to contemplate a text relates to the ability to respond to it, to move beyond the words, “beyond reading” to the object behind it. Magrassi relates this directly to the ability to “see” clearly. He writes that the face of Christ “is revealed to us on every page of the Bible. All we need to do is *look*: open ourselves to the light and desire that it shine in us. Look *with admiration*: ecstasy in the presence of the good and beautiful. *With a child’s eyes*, that is, with a clear gaze that open on reality as after a dream, delights in it, is amazed, and sees its perennial newness” (116). Morris’s collection of Chaucer’s *Works* ends with the courtly romance *Troilus and Criseyde*. Chaucer’s own words at the conclusion of the text emphasize the importance of contemplation: “O yonge fresshe

folks, he or she, / In which that love up groweth with your age, / Repeyreth hoom from worldly vanitee, / and of your herte upcasteth the visage / To thilke God that after his image / You made, and thinketh nis but a faire / This world, that passeth sone as floures fayre” (552). Chaucer reminds readers that in opening the heart to God, one remembers he is a maker. The human image holds the symbolic potency of the first act of creation. Morris creates an environment in which even if readers do not in fact “your herte upcasteth the visage / To thilke God” they can observe another person (Chaucer illustrated by Burne-Jones) doing just that. Contemplation is the final door through which one may seek out revelation.

Interestingly, in William Dana Orcutt’s *In Quest of the Perfect Book* (1926) he describes just this effect of the Kelmscott *Chaucer*, “After all, a book is made to be read, and the *Kelmscott Chaucer* is made to be looked at” (263). This comment emphasizes the artistic quality of the text, highlights its density, and supports the idea that in “looking” not all readers will actually “see.” For some the climbing vines and elaborate format is inhibitive, standing in the way of understanding; for others, the beauty of the book not only restores the senses, it restores the soul.

Part 2: Encountering the Text

In his work *Paradise Dislocated: Morris, Politics, and Art*, Skoblow assesses Morris’s crowning achievement as a writer—the creation of a revolutionary literature. He quotes Goode’s definition of this type of literature:

For Goode, creating a revolutionary literature ‘means creating forms which neither accept as eternal man’s alienation, nor retreat into worlds in which it has no relevance, but which provide for both its recognition and its assessment by realizing it as a subjective response to an objective condition which is not only valid as subjectivity in recoiling from the

objective world, but which is also capable of returning to that world as a subversive force. It means the recognition of the estranged mind of man not merely as an escape but also as a revolutionary agent. The dreamer of dreams has to recognize that he is born in his due time.’ (186)

By utilizing a layout that encourages a deeper level of reading, Morris calls attention to the physical estrangement of the “normal” reading experience and at the same time provides for the type of “dreaming” that allows revolutionary reassessment of the status quo. His work is a confrontation of the environment and a challenge to the reader to both escape and to change it.

A firsthand experience of a Kelmscott *Chaucer* helps to explain the responses of the readers and clarifies the revolutionary messages of the text. These days the Kelmscott *Chaucer* is readily available in the form of facsimile and CD. Both copies do little justice to the sensual presence of the text. But the existence of these forms does reveal the popularity of the text and the desire to “look” at it. My own reading room experience confirmed the way this book is treated as a sacred object. I entered the DeGoyer Library at Southern Methodist University anticipating the routine reading room procedures; however, as time passed I quickly realized my expectations were going to be exceeded. First the reading room attendant realized he had to call the director of the library to even locate the text; then the head librarian had to come down and retrieve it and sit with me while I looked at it. Although this minutia pertains very little to the text itself, the circumstances influenced my experience of it by heightening my expectation and my awareness of it as an extremely “rare” and even “devotional” text, one that requires attendance on multiple levels. I consulted this full-vellum bound Doves Bindery copy as well as with three other copies at SMU’s Bridwell Library. Each copy had a slightly different presence due to material differences. The modifications in binding and

in texture influenced my experience of these books, the most impressive by far being the full-vellum copy given to Burne-Jones by Morris. The fact that numerous researchers have worked on a census of these books underscores the way these books are revered individually.

The first copy I consulted was to Margaret Mackail from her father, Edward Burne-Jones (Figure 40). The vellum-bound copy is elaborately engraved. The upper cover includes patterns reminiscent of the interior title page: “Geoffrey Chaucer” sits above the series of frames with elaborate patterns. The most exterior pattern is a lily of the valley design; the largest and most stylized design is the grapevine, with squarish fruit and leaves. The most interior frame has a series of diamond patterns with small fleur de lys and flowers. “Kelmscott” is at the bottom. The exterior binding itself and its copper hinges are remarkably preserved. The color is clear and bright, the hinges without rust. The lower cover’s oak leaf pattern was based on a binding that Morris had in his collection, made in 1478 by Ulrich Schreier, “one of the outstanding artisans of fifteenth-century Austria” (*Six* 29). The spine includes an organic pattern with fleur de lys growing from vines. Margaret Mackail’s copy can only be described as amazingly pristine. The pages have little discoloration, and the binding has very little wear, proving that Margaret considered its preservation from the time of her father’s gifting of it. The pigskin binding not only holds up better than the blue boards, it inspires awe in the craftsmanship and suites the elaborate ornamentation on the interior pages.



Figure 40. *Kelmscott Chaucer* binding.

I also looked at a copy bound in the traditional blue board binding. The linen spine holds up to opening the book, but the paper covering the spine shows some damage. The spine's title is torn most of the way with the remnant of "CH" still attached to the linen. However, the paper is not as clean as Margaret's copy. The library's copy of another of the Kelmscott Press productions, *Psalmis Penitenciales*, has the same blue board binding with light tan linen spines. The boards of this book are in better condition than the *Chaucer*'s, but they are not as well preserved as the vellum.

For example, the original blue-board bound, full vellum copy that Morris gave Burne-Jones required rebinding in 1974 by Decherd Turner. The blue board bindings, especially the spine, disintegrated over the years, though the vellum pages did not. Sydney C. Cockerell in a letter to the book's second owner, John Gribbel, tells the

background of the noticeable name change at the beginning of the book. He writes that he had to help Morris open the book to write the inscription; it was one of only two vellum copies that Morris gave away. Morris was so ill at the time that he mistakenly wrote “Sir Edward” rather than simply “Ed” or “Ned,” and Burne-Jones himself ended up erasing “Sir Edward” and rewriting over the spot “Ned.” The difference between the full vellum copy and the paper explains why Morris would want to choose the vellum for a gift to his closest collaborator. The pages gleam, as do the printed letters and illustrations upon them. The print engraving is more raised than on the paper, and the borders can actually be felt, even seen through to the opposite page. The pages of the vellum are far more regularized and finished than a medieval manuscript, showing the use of mechanized processing. However, these vellum pages show more cockling than paper copies; they feel and sound different, too. The color is a warm cream, and the print is not as stark because of the texture. Scraping is also apparent on some of the pages.

Overall, reading an original *Chaucer* involves seeing, hearing, and feeling in a way that sets it apart from other texts. The mere fact that they generally weigh roughly forty pounds and are so large that curators need to roll them from place to place ensures they are treated with special attention. The quality of the composition from materials to page layout only affirms the message of the remarkable exterior. As far as the reading experience, it is nearly impossible to just sit and “read” as one thinks of reading. In fact, only with multiple viewings can one begin to take in one of these books because of their literal and figurative density. And the message this presence sends begins with a calling into the body and culminates in a calling out of it. The process of *lectio divina* describes this type of reading, one that suits a revolutionary message. Morris’s *Chaucer* may be a

conflicted one. It mixes medieval page design with modernized ornamentation and Pre-Raphaelite-inspired illustrations, however, his work calls attention to the need for a social healing in the form of sensorial and spiritual experiences made difficult in a world of physical and spiritual alienation. As Skoblow in *Paradise Dislocated* summarizes, “Art, the embodiment of joy to the maker and pleasure to the user, is the site for Morris not of our transcendence of the world but of our habitation of it” (187). “Making the best of it,” according to Morris, did have everything to do with living in the world, but as his book design reveals, habitation as a physical experience includes, not replaces, the need for a transcendental one.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion

On Becoming “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”: Morris and Benjamin on the Qualitative Nature of Art

In explaining the final aspect of the ecology of composition, Margaret Syverson describes texts as “‘paths laid down in walking’ that are always about or directed toward something that is missing” (16). Morris’s graphic philosophies, design, and printing practices underscore the threatened and missing aspects of his own compositional circumstances. Walter Benjamin’s most celebrated essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936), elucidates Morris’s enaction of the text by explaining those qualities that Morris experienced as either lost or absent. Benjamin not only describes the change in sense perception brought on by mechanical reproduction, which Morris so feared and fought, he also explains the loss of connection to tradition and purpose which Morris’s work attempts to reclaim with his use of medieval forms. Moreover, Benjamin’s assessment of the dangers of *l’art pour l’art* helps to identify the strongly contradictory element of the *Chaucer* which on some pages elevates religion and on others the cult of beauty.

Walter Benjamin’s work, as Jeffrey Grossman in “The Reception of Walter Benjamin in the Anglo American Literary Tradition” points out, cannot be categorized simply. Grossman maps out the way Benjamin has been interpreted by the critics. Like Morris, his Marxism is an issue because he was not a strict Marxist; his ideas at times fall into other categories. Grossman indicates the different emphasis with which scholars

treat his oeuvre. Hannah Arendt characterizes him as a passive figure, not actually engaged in Marxist politics and more in line with her teacher Heidegger in spite of their differences in political and institutional affiliations. Rene Wellek presents him as a disinterested scholar and only passing Marxist, and Terry Eagleton labels him as a Marxist aesthete that occasionally lapses into “Messianism” (421). Eagleton’s assessment of Benjamin’s work remains the most open to the complexities of Benjamin’s writing; Benjamin, like Morris, had more than Marxism in mind. Benjamin and Morris shared similarly conflicting applications of Marxism, and although their circumstances were very different, it seems possible that Benjamin was aware of and influenced by Morris. This connection is not the purpose of this essay, though. Specifically, Benjamin’s cultural history serves as a horizon against which Morris’s own cultural work appears more clearly.

Benjamin’s work looks at the way reproducing art detaches it from its traditional mores and reorganizes it in a way that supports the violent demands of Fascism, namely war. He begins the essay with a history of the effects of industrialism outlined in terms of loss. First, technical reproduction removes art from its original context: “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be” (220). A loss in “unique existence” entails a loss also of the history of that piece: “This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence” (220). Without a connection to time and place the work then has no authenticity. Benjamin emphasizes the exclusive material nature of a work of art, an aspect which reproduction diminishes with its inundation of copies.

However, manual reproduction does not do the same thing as mechanical because the original is still that. Replicas made by pupils or profiteers do not diminish the “authority” possessed by the original work (220). But mechanical reproduction is “more independent of the original than manual reproduction.” The reasons for this distinction are they way that “process reproduction can bring out those aspects of the original that are unattainable to the naked eye yet accessible to the lens” and the way that it “can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself.” The original work of art possesses “the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced” (221). In other words the original has a story, a narrative that a copy can never have. This story is what becomes lost.

Like Morris, Benjamin was a book collector and knew the power of authenticity firsthand. He explains his view in his radio talk “Unpacking My Library” given 27 April 1931. He describes the collector as a kind of seer:

The period, the region, the craftsmanship, the former ownership—for a true collector the whole background of an item adds up to a magic encyclopedia whose quintessence is the fate of his object. In this circumscribed area, then, it may be surmised how the great physiognomists—and collectors are the physiognomists of the world of objects—turn into interpreters of fate.

What Benjamin describes here is the presence of the original--the story of its birth and its connection to a real place and time. A collector can envision this: “As he holds them in his hands, he seems to be seeing through them into their distant past as though inspired” (61). The collector literally holds this history in his hand, encountering materially another place and time, hearing the story of its past.

Morris's concern with authenticity and originality comes through in every aspect of his work from his ideas on the best medieval art to his printing methods at the Kelmscott Press. Morris praised those medieval works that exemplified the values of organicism, harmony, and invention. All of these characteristics pertain to the quality of authenticity. Organic art is both traditional, connected to the past, and vital, connected to the sincere belief of the individual producing the work. Art, according to Morris, reflects the personal connection of the artist to his work, and all good art retains a sense of the individual who produced it. His lectures on art in *Hopes and Fears for Art* (1882) and his socialist-inspired *Signs of Change* (1888) sent a clear message that all people should participate in making and experiencing art (Latham 160). He believed in the possibility of enjoyable work, and mechanical reproduction falls into the category of "useless" because it robs humans of the satisfaction of creatively and freely producing something (*Signs* 149). Organic art displayed a connection of the artist to her community and to her own powers to create and communicate.

The aspect of harmony grows out of the self-knowledge of the artist—her concept of purpose and connection to nature. In his lecture "The Decorative Arts," Morris describes a beautiful form as "in accord with Nature," while an ugly one is discordant (*CW* 22:4). David Latham in "Morris's Ideology of Work and Play" summarizes this concept thus: "The arts provide the means by which humanity maintains its harmony with nature" (157). For Morris harmony was a measurable quality; the more a book or building displayed careful consideration of function and suitability, the more it corresponded with the natural order of things. As Latham notes, "Art is the aesthetic complement of beauty and nature, its creative process being the moral complement of

goodness and godliness” (158). Mechanically produced copies hold no connection to these concepts of “natural” and “purposeful,” as Morris understood these concepts. In his essay “Useful Work versus Useless Toil” Morris goes so far as to call cheaply produced copies “slave wares.” He explains:

But it is a waste of time to try to express in words due contempt of the production of the much praised cheapness of our epoch. It must be enough to say that this cheapness is necessary to the system of exploiting on which modern manufacturing rests. In other words, our society includes a great mass of slaves who must be fed, clothed, housed and amused as slaves and that their daily necessity compels them to make the slave wares whose use is the perpetuation of their slavery. (*Signs* 149)

Morris’s ideas here emphasize the importance of production. How something is made reveals so much about the society that produces it: cheaply made objects can only be produced in a society where slavery (and machinery) is a way of life. As Benjamin puts it, “But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics” (224). Morris had already made this connection by discussing the exploitation of the capitalistic system. By contrast, medieval works were closely tied to their ritual purposes and often displayed original thought and creativity of the working artisan.

Additionally, Morris admired and collected medieval works that displayed inventiveness, which can also be defined as new expression, not simple replication of traditional forms. He looked for exceptional pieces that exceeded simply copying a form by developing and changing it. Morris’s taste for books with unusual and inventive ornamentation, illustration or design found reflection in his Kelmscott books. His application of these values (organicism, harmony and inventiveness) resulted in a product

that moved beyond replication; rather, he emulated the essence of the art, adopting certain aspects of these past works while at the same time displaying his creativity and individuality as an artist. Medieval forms combined with Victorian ones in Morris's work on the *Chaucer*, and often the medieval ones expressed a revolt against Victorian circumstances. This conflict in the visual images inculcates a dramatic tension in the text, which in turn effectuates a contradictory experience for the reader. However, few deny the mastery, individuality, and originality his work display.

Another way Morris showed his concern with the disconnection from authenticity and history was through his production. Rather than simply using a machine to do the work, Morris utilized skilled artisans to do the work, ensuring that these books retained a sense of the craftsman who made them. He used handcrafted materials and hand presses. At the same time he utilized innovative modern methods such as photography in his perfection of the right font and the transferal of handmade decoration and illustration to woodblocks. However, the end product cannot be described as a mechanical reproduction. These books do possess some amount of variation with slight differences in either materials or subtly different cuts in the paper. And Morris did design different bindings for several of the copies and commission some to be printed on vellum. The differences between the copies emphasize Morris's comprehension of production and the way the physical production of a text influences the reception of it. His recognition that the material aspects of a work create the environment of the text also reveals his attempt to recreate an authentic work of art, one with a history and a story.

History is what mechanically reproduced copies lack. Benjamin describes this loss in terms of the conjurer with his idea of "aura." He argues that a work's aura can be

found in tradition, but the existence of numerous copies relocates the source of its meaning. Tradition relates to the function of a work as playing a part in a specific set of circumstances or ritual. Reproduced works do not have the same value as the original because they do not have any connection to tradition:

One might subsume the eliminated element in the term "aura" and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art. One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind. (221)

Although Morris did do reproductions, his practice of limiting his editions addressed this problem of “plurality for a unique existence.” The fact that the “copies” he produced are now treated with such care suggests his idea was somewhat effective in addressing the problem. That various researchers are conducting surveys of these works implies that the copies are treated individually and their histories recorded carefully and preserved. In a sense, Morris’s *Chaucer* copies do retain a sense of “authenticity” because each carries with it a story, a “presence in time and space.” However, the desire for reproductions has not completely unaffected his work in that digital and facsimile copies do exist. These copies “meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation,” and though they resemble the original, they are detached from the authenticity of it. Regrettably, some writers never consult an original *Chaucer* even when writing about it, treating the facsimile as equally authoritative and authentic because it is supposedly an exact copy.

Morris's son-in-law and biographer H. Halliday Sparling made scathing comments about anyone who would let reproductions substitute for originals. His comments, which predate Benjamin's, express the same concern about mechanical reproductions. He writes,

Even the best conceivable reproduction does an injustice to its original, and is to be put up with in the absence of the original; to be taken as an appetizer towards the study of that original, and not as a substitute for it. To reproduce a Morris page, or any other Morris design of any kind, in the true sense of the word *reproduce*, is, indeed, impossible in the absence of identical material and an identical method of handling it. (71)

He goes on to explain that these books are to be “treated as Morris himself treated the work of his predecessors, admired and loved for their own sake, and studied for that which may be learned from them, but not imitated” (71). Sparling describes the material presence of Morris's books, especially their status as original pieces of art.

The tendency to look at a reproduction as an original Benjamin explains in his discussion of sense perception and art, an issue Morris was concerned about. In his collection of socialist essays *Signs of Change*, Morris describes the subversive impact that mechanical reproduction and its corresponding change of perception had on the creation and reception of art. In “Useful Work and Useless Toil” and “Dawn of a New Epoch” Morris details his view of the slavery of the working class to the non-working one. Machines contribute to the “war” between the classes in three ways: first they diminish the number of workers needed, next they diminish the quality of the work done, and lastly they make the work more difficult for the worker (184). Morris also discusses the abuse of women and children in physically taxing circumstances. With the disparity between the classes, little opportunity exists for the making or enjoying of art. Morris

argues for a society that encourages pleasurable labor, the by-product of which is creative and artistic work and equally productive and pleasurable rest.

Benjamin's description of the changes are in terms of cultural shifts in perception after the mechanical age has taken hold, while Morris's writing retains a sense of revolt against those changes he saw coming. Benjamin explains:

During long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity's entire mode of existence. The manner in which human sense perception is organized, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well. (222)

Benjamin describes the transformation in sense perception in those for whom copies, especially photography, was easily accessible. He explains the "contemporary decay of aura" as a desire to "bring things 'closer' spatially and humanely" and to overcome "the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction" (223). The result of this need to bring object closer is a perception whose "sense of the universal equality of things" has increased to such a degree that it "extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction" (223). Morris's production of limited and expensive collections addresses this sensibility, "the universal equality of things." Some writers criticize Morris's socialist sensibilities as flawed because of the inaccessibility of these expensive books for the working class. However, perhaps these editions have less to do with Morris's political agenda as they do with his need to address the problems which drove him to socialism, the most pressing being the disengagement and detachment brought about by mechanical reproduction and the problem of work which he saw as the most important issue to living well.

E.P. Thompson and Fionna MaCarthy, biographers of Morris, read Morris's medievalism as an escapist retreat from the issues of his day, but his work in the *Chaucer* represents his challenge to readers to fight through disengagement. He reintroduces the medieval concept of a sensual and communal experience of a text. Benjamin's discussion of this detachment clarifies the visual voice of Morris's *Chaucer* text. Benjamin describes disengagement in three parts. First the work of art becomes disengaged from an authentic history, but it also loses its original source of meaning (which was communal). Finally, an accompanying change occurs in the ability of the viewer to interpret these objects.

In section five of "The Work of Art," Benjamin outlines the sources of art's meaning especially as a cult object and then describes the way that it has evolved into one of exhibition.

Works of art are received and valued on different planes. Two polar types stand out; with one, the accent is on the cult value; with the other, on the exhibition value of the work. Artistic production begins with ceremonial objects destined to serve in a cult. One may assume that what mattered was their existence, not their being on view. The elk portrayed by the man of the Stone Age on the walls of his cave was an instrument of magic. He did expose it to his fellow men, but in the main it was meant for the spirits. Today the cult value would seem to demand that the work of art remain hidden.

Morris's *Chaucer* edition can also be categorized as a type of cult object. These copies are hidden away and their viewing is ritualized. Morris created these books with the intention of ceremonial and ritual experience. He modeled them after medieval books of prayers that contain constant reference to the oral and ritual experience of the text. Morris's *Chaucer* encourages the oral experience of these texts in the adoption of large borders, decorative letters, and framing in that these forms create a space for the reader to

stop, breathe, rest, much like the pause of a cleric in waiting for the a choric response of the congregation. Additionally, his format encouraged a more meditative approach to reading the text, which counteracted the third aspect of disengagement discussed by Benjamin.

Another by-product of mechanical reproduction, according to Benjamin, is a change in the “reaction of the masses toward art” (234). The major change that Benjamin discusses is a shift away from critical engagement with art and toward a distracted and passive experience of exhibition. He notes, “The public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one” (241). He describes the differences between these two mindsets:

Distraction and concentration form polar opposites which may be stated as follows: A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it. He enters into this work of art the way legend tells of the Chinese painter when he viewed his finished painting. In contrast, the distracted mass absorbs the work of art. This is most obvious with regard to buildings. Architecture has always represented the prototype of a work of art the reception of which is consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction.

Benjamin’s essay discusses the way the masses respond collectively to art, and he describes the dangers of their distracted and uncritical response to it. He explains that art takes over the job of the critic:

Distraction as provided by art presents a covert control of the extent to which new tasks have become soluble by apperception. Since, moreover, individuals are tempted to avoid such tasks, art will tackle the most difficult and most important ones where it is able to mobilize the masses. Today it does so in the film. Reception in a state of distraction, which is increasing noticeably in all fields of art and is symptomatic of profound changes in apperception, finds in the film its true means of exercise. The film with its shock effect meets this mode of reception halfway. The film makes the cult value recede into the background not only by putting the public in the position of the critic, but also by the fact that at the movies this position requires no attention. (240)

What Benjamin describes here is the slow breakdown of vital connection to authenticity through the inundation of copies filled with unprocessed messages. Morris would describe this as a disconnection not only to the world but also to one's purpose, which he described in "Dawn of a New Epoch" as the "exercise of energy in the development of our special capacities" (197).

Morris's *Chaucer* calls for a greater engagement from the reader by calling her into a physical encounter with the text. The senses cannot help but respond to the size, the materials, and the layout of the text. Moreover, Morris uses framing, ornamentation and illustrations in a way that slows down the reading of the text and requires more focus and concentration from the potential reader. The *Chaucer* may encourage meditation but only after it stops us physically and calls us into ourselves. The text teaches its readers how to read by incorporating forms that immediately call the reader into a different reading experience, more open-ended with more potential for a deeper experience of the text. The levels of *lectio divina* describe the kind of reading Morris may have had in mind with the meditation, prayer and contemplation of Chaucer's text. But as a text, *Chaucer* also describes a reengagement with community that Morris also felt was vitally important and lacking in the competitive-based Victorian society.

In addition to calling the reader to greater levels of attention, Morris believed in restoring the ritual value to the text through encouraging a communal experience of it. If the format of the *Chaucer* directs that it should be read aloud, it is because Morris believed in the value of two things: fellowship and experience. First, Morris may have had oral experience in mind when printing *Chaucer*, especially with his placement of the *Tales* at the beginning. Storytellers, pilgrims, and parishioners have in common the

gathering of people and the sharing of experiences. Benjamin details in his essay *The Storyteller* the gradual replacement of oral and communal experience with the solitary in the form of the novel. He explains this dying out as a loss of wisdom, “the epic side of truth,” and the decline in the value of experience (83-5). Morris’s move to operate his press on the medieval guild model, what Benjamin points out as the “most intimate interpenetration of these two archaic types [of storytellers],” reveals his desire to restore common connection through work and encouragement through a community of craftsmen. But he started this type of communal experience with his interest in the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, the establishment of his various firms, and his participation in the Socialist League.

His sensitivity to the issue of fellowship cannot be overemphasized. In fact, as Clutton-Brock discusses in *William Morris: His Work and Influence* Morris saw “fellowship as life and lack of fellowship as death” (244). Clutton-Brock takes this passage from the beginning of the poem when the narrator hears the priest, John Ball, speaking at the foot of the cross. Morris based his “socialist dream-vision” on the failed English Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 whose leader was John Ball. Morris’s John Ball teaches the narrator the necessity of fellowship on earth (Cowan 141):

Forsooth, ye have heard it said that ye shall do well in this world that in the world to come ye may live happily for ever; do ye well then, and have your reward both on earth and in heaven; for I say to you that earth and heaven are not two but one; and this one is that which ye know, and are each one of you a part of, to wit, the Holy Church, and in each one of you dwelleth the life of the Church, unless ye slay it. Forsooth, brethren, will ye murder the Church any one of you, and go forth a wandering man and lonely, even as Cain did who slew his brother? Ah, my brothers, what an evil doom is this, to be an outcast from the Church, to have none to love you and to speak with you, to be without fellowship! Forsooth, brothers, fellowship is heaven, and lack of fellowship is hell: fellowship is life, and lack of fellowship is death: and the deeds that ye do upon the earth, it is

for fellowship's sake that ye do them, and the life that is in it, that shall live on and on for ever, and each one of you part of it, while many a man's life upon the earth from the earth shall wane. (*A Dream* 37-38)

John Ball goes on to describe the benefits of fellowship, describing hell and heaven in terms of relationships. Sorrow shared he describes as “a little change in the life that knows not ill” for those that have friendship. Morris’s practice of working and socializing in groups highlights the importance he placed on fellowship. Books he saw as extensions of the life of a group—second only to a house in their importance.

Books, like other art objects, started out as cult objects that played a part in rituals. Morris’s book design restored the book to its former glory—the object of a type of communal experience. But with mechanical reproduction came the tendency for exhibition because the object became detached from its original setting whether in a temple or cathedral. Benjamin describes the shift from instrument of magic, to instrument of ritual, object of exhibition. This shift relates to what Benjamin discusses in “The Storyteller” as the decline in value of experience. When an object is no longer used for ritual but merely for viewing, its qualitative nature changes.

With the different methods of technical reproduction of a work of art, its fitness for exhibition increased to such an extent that the quantitative shift between its two poles turned into a qualitative transformation of its nature. This is comparable to the situation of the work of art in prehistoric times when, by the absolute emphasis on its cult value, it was, first and foremost, an instrument of magic. Only later did it come to be recognized as a work of art. In the same way today, by the absolute emphasis on its exhibition value the work of art becomes a creation with entirely new functions, among which the one we are conscious of, the artistic function, later may be recognized as incidental. (225)

Morris’s project attempts to address this issue in three ways: by engaging the reader, by creating a space for spirituality, and by emphasizing the need for community.

However, Morris's proposed solution also contains the added complexities in that the illustrations often engage the reader on the level of worship of beauty, or the theology of beauty, as Benjamin writes.

Burne-Jones's dreamscapes and Botecelli-inspired nude figures operate on a different level than much of Morris's page layout and design. Morris's designs remain predominantly medieval while Burne-Jones's illustrations are medieval-inspired but essentially Pre-Raphaelite. Burne-Jones's romantic figures may pertain to what E.P. Thompson describes as the vice of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood: "The impoverished sentimentalizing was based, in the last analysis, upon a refusal (or inability) really to look the facts of capitalist exploitation and class conflict in the face" (54). While Morris may have responded to these problems with a medieval replica, Burne-Jones removed himself from the problem with romantic, elusive figures. When Burne-Jones created melancholy characters to fill the space of a formerly sacred visual narrative, the result is to glorify the vague romantic forms that have no close connection to the traditional values of worship.

However, as Latham argues, romanticism is not without its usefulness for a revolutionary. At the end of his life, romance was the genre in which Morris most frequently composed. Latham explains, "Morris embraced the romance genre as the most self-consciously artistic, the genre least bound by the strictures of verisimilitude, thus freeing himself from the hindrances of reflecting the routine details of a recognizable life" (167). The difference, though, between Burne-Jones's and Morris's romanticism is foundational: while Morris dreamed of a new society with the hope of substantive and qualitative change in his own, Burne-Jones dreamed of a refined and courtly fiction, far

from any type of confrontation of these problems and yet still representative of those very issues.

In his essay on ‘The Society of the Future,’ Morris distinguishes visionaries from dreamers. Visionaries are practical people (190). And he distinguishes art from academicism. Genuine artists are not ‘mere rhetorical word-spinners and hunters of introspection [but are] masters of life’ who ‘make the eyes tell the mind tales of the past, present, and future’” (qtd. in Latham 167). As a storyteller Morris emphasizes the need for the beautiful, the authentic work of art. His production of the Kelmscott *Chaucer* supports the idea that he both foresaw and struggled against the changes, which would occur through mechanical reproduction. At the same time, his message is one that still encourages us today because as Gadamer describes it:

The essence of the beautiful does not lie in some realm simply opposed to reality. On the contrary, we learn that however unexpected our encounter with beauty may be, it gives us an assurance that the truth does not lie far off and inaccessible to us, but can be encountered in the disorder of reality with all its imperfections, evils, errors, extremes, and fateful confusions. The ontological function of the beautiful is to bridge the chasm between the ideal and the real. (15)

The *Chaucer* includes many “paths laid down walking.” How Morris bridged the gap between the ideal and the real tells us more about those things that caused the gap in the first place. Like Plato’s symbol, his artwork calls out to the missing fragment in “an invocation of a potentially whole and holy order of things, wherever it may be found” (Gadamer 32).

When Morris’s makes the “eyes tell the mind tales of the past, present, and future,” he is telling tales of eternity. And if Gadamer’s description of experiencing the work is right, then eternity is in the art. He writes, “when we dwell upon the work, there

is no tedium involved, for the longer we allow ourselves, the more it displays its manifold riches to us. The essence of our temporal experience of art is in learning how to tarry in this way. And perhaps it is the only way that is granted to us finite beings to relate to what we call eternity” (45). Morris’s *Chaucer* teaches readers to tarry, to contemplate eternity. However, I disagree with Gadamer, here. Perhaps dwelling on the work is not tedious for the practiced reader, but for those new to this type of contemplation, the work is difficult. Benjamin’s description of eternity helps explain this difficulty by first quoting Valery’s observation that “it is almost as if the decline of the idea of eternity coincided with the increasing aversion to sustained effort” (93). Benjamin concludes from this statement that death is the strongest source of the idea of eternity, and “if this idea declines, so we reason, the face of death must have changed.” In dying, the storyteller has the greatest authority, but “in the course of modern times dying has been pushed further and further out of the perceptual world of the living” (94). Eternity and death are not the first words with which one would describe Morris’s printed masterpiece; however, his insistence on enjoyment, engagement, and fellowship highlights his realization that these things are important exactly because we cannot be replicated and our experiences are finite and numbered.

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