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# WILLIAM MORRIS AND MEDIEVAL MATERIAL CULTURE

by  
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*A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
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# **WILLIAM MORRIS AND MEDIEVAL MATERIAL CULTURE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

IN THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY, when organizations such as the Early English Text Society began making an increasing variety of medieval texts accessible to Victorian readers, the “everyday life” of the past became an important subject of historiography. For many of William Morris’s contemporaries, this project of social history and textual recovery provided welcome evidence to support either narratives of nostalgia for an ordered past or a comforting liberal sense of progress; for Morris himself, however, the everyday life of the medieval past offered an array of radical possibilities for creative adaptation. Morris’s broad reading in newly recovered medieval texts, his library of manuscripts and woodcut books, and his personal experience of medieval domestic architecture were more instrumental in developing his sense of the past than were such artefacts of high culture as the great cathedrals and lavishly illustrated manuscripts, since it was through the surviving items of everyday use that Morris could best approach the creative lives of ordinary medieval men and women.

For William Morris, the everyday medieval “art of the people” was collaborative, de-centralizing, and devoted to process rather than to the attainment of perfection. Morris consistently works to strip ancient texts of their veneer of authority, resisting the notion of the “rare book” as an object of cultural mystery and as a commodity. His response to the art of the past is a radical process, in which reading is not mere “poaching” on the hegemonic territory of capital and cultural authority, but an immersive activity in which any reader can be intimately and actively engaged with the artefact from the earliest moment of its production. Such active reception, however, as diverse and fallible as the individuals who practice it, requires in turn an ongoing creativity in the form of adaptations of, and even collaboration with, the past.

Morris's theory of creative adaptation was consequently itself not static, and this dissertation traces its evolution over Morris's career. In his early poetry, Morris reveals his sense of the limitations of the historical record as his characters grasp simultaneously at fantasies and physical objects to make sense of the crises in which they find themselves, suggesting the incomplete and unstable circumstances of textual reception itself. In the socialist lectures and fiction of the 1880s, Morris makes use of surviving and imagined fragments of medieval material culture and domestic architecture to describe an aesthetic that can embrace creative diversity, co-operation, and even imperfection across historical periods. In the works produced by his Kelmscott Press, the material book itself becomes a collaborative site for artists, illustrators, and editors to work out the active reception and dissemination of the popular reading of the past. Finally, in the romances of the 1890s, Morris describes a diversity of possible social geographies, ultimately articulating a vision of the romance genre itself as a popular art, equally capable of transformation over time as are the artefacts of everyday life that Morris creatively employs in his fictions throughout his career.

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## INTRODUCTION

# **“THOUSANDS OF SMALL FACTS”: MORRIS AND VICTORIAN HISTORIOGRAPHIES OF THE EVERYDAY**

**I**N A LETTER TO ANDREAS SCHEU of September 15, 1883, William Morris recalled the course of his career up to that time, and the seemingly natural progression from being a boy at Marlborough College seeking out “prehistoric monuments” in the countryside in order to eke out the limited education he was receiving, up to his present position as a designer and political activist. Among the central themes of Morris’s reflective letter are the evolution of his socialist conviction out of his belief in the importance of art and the reliance of that evolution upon his changing relationship to history, especially medieval history. One epiphany that occurred to Morris during the period of his writing *The Earthly Paradise* in the 1860s was simultaneously literary and historical: “I had about this time extended my historical reading by falling in with translations from the old Norse literature, and found in it a good corrective to the maundering side of medievalism” (*Letters* 2: 229). With that single scornful adjective “maundering” (“drivelling” according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, though the word seems simultaneously to have here for Morris the other negative connotations of wayward meandering and languid effeminacy), Morris repudiated the largely aesthetic medievalism of his early enthusiasms, of knights and ladies, tournaments and love intrigues, in favour of the more direct, simple social life described in the sagas. Since the kinds of medieval culture and art valued at various times by Morris are an important barometer of the evolution of his political and aesthetic theories, the fact of his attention having turned from the High Middle Ages to the extreme northwest frontier of Europe, from the tomb of Arthur to the ashes of Njal’s homestead, from the eve of Crécy to Gudrun at her loom, is significant indeed. The transformation Morris evokes in this letter is not only a geographical shift of his historical perspective from the centre to the margins but a political one from the grand to the domestic, a social one from the exceptional to the everyday, and an aesthetic shift from the lavish to the simple.

Morris suggests in this letter, then, that after his reading of the sagas his

work had henceforth been informed not only by a new aesthetic, one which recognized the domestic or so-called “lesser” arts as essential to satisfaction, but by a new kind of historiography, one which elevated the practice of everyday life to a legitimate object of historical study. For Morris, that practice was revealed in the work and creativity of everyday men and women, and he never lost an opportunity to proclaim the connection. Elsewhere, in his lecture “Art and the People,” for instance, he exclaims,

The History of Art! What is that history indeed but the history of the World, since it alone tells us of the deeds of the people, and what they thought of and hoped for? through this and this alone can we look upon times past as they really were and see them alive. (*Artist, Writer, Socialist* 2: 385)

As a writer, artist, and collector during a period that engaged in the prolific publication of antiquarian and other historical material on medieval costume, domestic architecture, and social history, at a time when medieval books were still within the means of a knowledgeable prosperous businessman, and when the recovery and publication of hitherto obscure medieval texts from wills to cookbooks was a growth industry, Morris had a great selection of works from which to choose, books that described social life at all phases of the medieval experience. In spite of his admiring comments to Scheu on the subject of Icelandic social life, Morris did not restrict himself to the sagas for his picture of popular domestic architecture and daily life under simpler conditions: a great variety of medieval material culture from many periods and places was readily available to him in primary and secondary form. As he says here, his understanding of the past was filtered through his experience of the history of “Art.” In his view, the material culture of the past was inscribed with the actions of past men and women, as they made and used the objects with which, in processes simultaneously aesthetic and practical, they negotiated their everyday environments.

Morris’s experience of medieval material culture is thus the central focus of this dissertation. Such an approach is useful because it accounts not only for the fact that Morris’s historiography of popular everyday life required a broad and varied body of literary and practical knowledge, but for the manner in which his study of the often incomplete surviving artefacts, architec-



ture, and literature of medieval society led him naturally to contemplate the political implications of the everyday life of the past. In his lecture on “The Art of the People” to the Birmingham Society of Arts and School of Design (19 February 1879), delivered during the very period that he was making the (for him) natural transition from theorist of art to socialist activist, Morris made clear the way in which he valued social history as it revealed itself in the everyday art of the Middle Ages. Reversing the elitism of academic artistic training’s advice to “study antiquity,” Morris cited the recently-established South Kensington Museum (now the Victorian and Albert Museum) as his inspiration rather than the Louvre, and the medieval household artefact rather than the classical marble:

Let us look backward in history once more for a short while, and then steadily forward till my words are done: I began by saying that part of the common and necessary advice given to Art students was to study antiquity; and no doubt many of you, like me, have done so; have wandered, for instance, through the galleries of the admirable museum of South Kensington, and, like me, have been filled with wonder and gratitude at the beauty which has been born from the brain of man. Now, consider, I pray you, what these wonderful works are, and how they were made; and indeed, it is neither in extravagance nor without due meaning that I use the word ‘wonderful’ in speaking of them. Well, these things are just the common household goods of those past days, and that is one reason why they are so few and so carefully treasured. They were common things in their own day, used without fear of breaking or spoiling—no rarities then—and yet we have called them ‘wonderful.’ (*Collected Works* 22: 40)

While Morris is most enthusiastic here about the survival of domestic items—he values above all the item of daily use—he also emphasizes the sense of “wonder” he gains from them, a sense which seems to rely on a network of associations which are only partly aesthetic. Morris always inscribes the everyday artefacts of the medieval past with the circumstances of their historical production and ongoing use, and behind even his most superficially aesthetic pronouncements (“wonderful”) stands his belief that the production and use of art is essentially a shared, social, *popular* matter. As well, Mor-

ris here carefully negotiates the place of the “common” or popular and the unique or individualised artefact. The items he describes are simultaneously of little value and of great value at once: they are mere fragments of historical domestic architecture and could be repaired or replaced with a little effort, while simultaneously they are not “disposable” in the modern sense but shared as heirlooms.

The care and attention that went into the pewter cups, wooden tables, and glass windows of the Middle Ages, in conjunction with their durability and their status as items of shared use, led Morris to see their value as stemming from more than just their beautiful craftsmanship—if, indeed, they are “beautiful” at all. The value of those “common household goods” to him is above all historical, as it relates to a kind of history that shifts its attention from the grand and violent narratives of the chronicle to the recovery of ordinary and predominately peaceful lives: “History (so called),” he claims in the same lecture, “has remembered the kings and warriors, because they destroyed; Art has remembered the people, because they created” (CW 22: 32). Since art in Morris’s vocabulary was associated with the everyday artefact, this comment signifies a further shift from history as it is distilled solely from authoritative “literary” texts to a more suggestive history as it is indicated by things. For Morris, the corpus of the domestic arts was itself now elevated to the legitimate status of a chronicle of social life inscribed upon the artefacts of material culture—a sign that “a different spirit has animated history” (“Architecture and History,” CW 22: 296).

Morris’s focus on ordinary artefacts avoids the oppositional relation of “producers” and “consumers” so familiar in critiques of commodity culture, since he not only foregrounds an interactive exchange between maker and user but believes that men and women can be both at once. Because he imagines a complex and decentralized network of makers, sharers, and users, material culture in Morris’s view is capable of acting as simultaneously a function and a measure of the health of such societies’ social life. It is clear, too, from his consistent emphasis on shared use and collaborative creativity (“made intelligently by *the whole body* of those who live by their labour, *instinct with* their thoughts and aspirations,” as he says in “Art and the People,” AWS 2: 383, my emphasis), that Morris’s theory of creativity is a reaction not only against, as has often been pointed out, the chill elegance of Renaissance neo-

classicism, but against the myth of ecstatic solitary inspiration and the Cult of the Author that was a consequence of Romantic self-fashioning.<sup>1</sup>

Morris's avowed skepticism about "history (so called)" is meant to trigger in his reader a corresponding skepticism about the established narratives of the past, about the kind of history that documented dynastic successions and political infighting on the part of a memorable few individual characters to the exclusion of the lives of the greater mass of everyday men and women, and that concentrated on descriptions of the heroic art of war to the exclusion of the plural arts of peace. His intended sympathetic audience of students and designers were not the only nineteenth-century readers to share his skepticism about history with the popular culture left out, as the popularity of writers such as J. R. Green and Thomas Carlyle attests. David Matthews has pointed out that "antient manners" had been an essential part of the eighteenth-century's antiquarian interest in the relics of the past (32), and from that interest had grown a desire on the part of scholars and amateurs for ever more precise documentation of the material culture of the past. The early Victorian textual scholar Benjamin Thorpe, for example, found the usefulness of *Beowulf* at least in part in its "vivid and faithful picture of old Northern manners and usages" which for Thorpe, as for writers after him such as F. J. Furnivall, often meant the documentation of food and drink (qtd. in Shippey 297-9). The convergence of this long-standing interest in the history of "men and manners" with the age's growing interests in archaeology and social history and with the acquisitive, materialist trends of Victorian consumer culture, along with the establishment of such institutions as that "admirable museum of South Kensington" in 1852, paralleled a growing consciousness in Victorian literary and cultural circles of the great variety of possible kinds of history. Victorian collectors and writers were discovering that there were as many individual stories to be found in the Middle Ages as there had been individuals, and that some of them (as Eileen Power would point out early in the next century) were even recoverable.<sup>2</sup> Morris participates in this under-recognized current of Victorian

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<sup>1</sup> To include Morris among the "Last Romantics," as Graham Hough did, is therefore at least a little misleading.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Reade's *The Cloister and the Hearth*, with its reconstruction of the character and colourful life story of the father and mother of Erasmus, is one example of such an attempt

historiography, one that overlaps with modern historiography in the same place that it had diverged from antiquarianism: in its politicisation of the study of daily life.

The major political historical narratives of the Victorian era were the liberal and the conservative or, as Alice Chandler puts it, “first, a Whiggish celebration of the antiquity of British freedom; and second, and ultimately more influential, a Tory regret for the rejected feudal past” (*A Dream of Order* 2). To support their claims to represent the spirit not only of the age but of past ages as well, each of these models dipped into the history of the nation largely conceived as a struggle for power (what Morris would have dismissed as “the stupid languor and the evil deeds of kings and scoundrels,” CW 22: 31). Both the Whig and Tory models show an impressive durability. As recently as 1990, Raphael Samuel could comment that this method of historiography as a “record of policy and statecraft,” especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, had long been “a dominant one so far as the teaching of history in schools is concerned” (122), with the role of history in education being the creation of public-minded citizens of the modern nation-state. Nonetheless, Samuel gives a number of other examples that show how the kinds of historiography practiced in the nineteenth century also included a great deal of what we would now call “social history.” In fact, both the liberal and the conservative strains of Victorian historiography made use of histories of drink, dress, and social life: Carlyle’s Abbot Samson and the Young England movement, on the one hand, offered up inspiring instances of the positive effects of *noblesse oblige*, while Thomas Babington Macaulay and Matthew Arnold, on the other, found reason for progressive optimism in comparative studies of the growth of a mass media and the spread of education. As Melba Cuddy-Keane notes, there was “a diversity within nineteenth-century historiography that challenged its own [totalizing] practice” (“Varieties” 63), and one place where that diversity found itself in both camps of the grand narrative school was the field of social history.

Both opposing political schools of historiography found much in the recovery of peaceful modes of ancient social life to support their claims. Even dry-as-dust constitutional history, one of Chandler’s examples of the “Whig-

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at recovering the individual lives of medieval people in Victorian fiction.

gish celebration of the antiquity of British freedom,” was symptomatic of a turn away from the more prominent political and warlike narratives to an interest in peaceful institutions and methods of social organization. Recalling Macaulay’s self-congratulatory characterisation of history as “improvement” (in his 1848 *History of England*, or in his essay on Milton), it is safe to say that a dominant narrative of Victorian historiography was the liberal one of progress, with the current age at the pinnacle of development. Rosemary Jann, whose *Art and Science of Victorian History* charts the growth of this optimistic narrative of “scientific” progress in detail, comments that “in defining this growth by nineteenth-century priorities and evaluating past events in terms of their contributions to the present’s triumphant political balance, the Whigs proved as myopic as the *philosophes*” (xxvii). In his introduction to Robert Steele’s *Medieval Lore*, Morris critiques precisely this “Middle-class or Whig theory of life,” (AWS 1: 287), arguing that it was too blinkered by its narratives of progress and of “the self-sufficiency of empirical science” (AWS 1: 289) to encompass the broad medieval understanding of the world collected in eclectic “knowledge-books” such as the one that Steele had edited and abridged (Bartholomaeus Anglicus’s *De Proprietatibus Rerum*).

A related weakness of liberal historiography was that it felt most secure in the study of the extra-material space of abstract legal or constitutional freedoms, and thus ignored the material sphere insofar as possible; witness the grossness of the language (“hustle,” “hoot,” “smash”) with which Matthew Arnold characterised and dismissed the Hyde Park disturbance in *Culture and Anarchy*. It is clear that while Morris participates in a Victorian tradition of social historiography broadly conceived, he has little in common with the main stream of liberal thought on the subject, and not only because of his attachment to radical socialism. Antiquarianism, on the other hand, as Fredric Jameson characterises it, went to a different extreme, retreating to the study of the object abstracted from its social position (collecting “sheer historical facts” as objects of study in and for themselves, requiring no justification, 152). It might be fairer to say that antiquarianism understood the social position of the artefact, but chose to see it only as it symbolically supported the existing order, thus the rarified, selective interests of the antiquarian in aristocratic heraldry, memorial brasses, and the coinage. I therefore take

antiquarianism as representing a “Tory” approach to the material study of the past, one which reinforced a due reverence for symbols of privilege and rigid social roles (a view which, in its most reasonable manifestations, would lend its influence to the Young England movement).

Such symbolising abstraction, as well as such an emphasis on privilege as revealed in stately goods, would have repulsed Morris as much as the abstraction of Whig historiography would have. It cannot be denied, though, that the conservative antiquarian enterprise had contributed a wealth of material evidence that furthered the nineteenth century’s understanding of medieval everyday life and even Morris’s own understanding of the past. Illustrated books by Camille Bonnard<sup>3</sup> and by Henry Shaw on medieval costume, and by John Henry Parker on domestic architecture (MacCarthy 213-4), formed an essential part of the library of William Morris, who adapted their often-genteel knowledge to his radical picture of the social life of the Middle Ages. Indeed, the antiquarians themselves were smelling change on the historiographical wind. Achille Jubinal, for instance, in the preface to his deluxe two-volume folio on *Les Anciens Tapisseries Historiées*, a volume which Morris owned (it is lot 735 in the auction catalogue of his library), reads the illustrative matter in the tapestries of Nancy, Dijon, and others in an antiquarian meditation reminiscent of the old “men and manners” school:

*chasses, festin, tournoi, siège [sic], tout cela est pourtraict au vif, comme aurait dit Montaigne, tout cela nous retrace au naturel la vie de nos pères, nous montre leurs châteaux, leurs églises, leurs costumes, leurs armes et même, grâce aux légendes explicatives, leur langage à diverses époques. (n.p.)*<sup>4</sup>

That “our fathers” wore expensive armour and lived in *châteaux* betrays the aristocratic vantage point from which Jubinal chooses to regard the past here. But Jubinal is also suggesting that the way to read these tapestries is not only as a celebration of the romantic manifestations of aristocratic power, but as “*pourtraict au vif*,” as participating in the kind of realism that, as Roy Strong

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<sup>3</sup> See the studies of Bonnard by Leonné Ormond and Eriko Yamaguchi.

<sup>4</sup> My translation:

“The chase, the feast, the tournament, the siege: it is all, as Montaigne would have said, a living portrait, and it all delineates realistically the life of our fathers, showing us their castles, their churches, their costumes, their arms, and even, thanks to the tapestries’ inscriptions, their language over diverse periods.”



and Francis Haskell have pointed out (in *Painting the Past* and *History and its Images*, respectively), arose out of the early nineteenth century's desire to use the latest archaeological and antiquarian evidence to create an authentic historical aesthetic. And Jubinal's evocation of the various expressions of "*langage à diverses époques*" here even suggests the vernacular's heterogeneity at various times. This philological curiosity on the part of the antiquarian prefigures the Oxford Dictionary "on historical principles," and necessarily accedes to the same view of history that would be an essential part of Morris's later radical reading of historical process as a continual adaptation to material and social change.

By way of contrast, a liberal conscience manifesting itself in what was then known as political economy is discernible in the work of the practicing historian Thorold Rogers, whose mammoth *History of Agriculture and Prices in England* for the period 1259 to 1702 (1866-1902), and its more accessible counterpart *Six Centuries of Work and Wages* (1884) are among Morris's historical sources for his impassioned propagandistic descriptions of the well-being of medieval workers and artisans. Rogers's method is scientific, relying on a broad examination of documents from the period to offer sound insights into the material and social prosperity of the period. Rogers apologises for the dryness of his figures (which, he demurs, "will be distasteful even to the student of economic history") but appeals to patriotic nostalgia, and to the growing consciousness of social history, for the usefulness of his study:

if there had been any inclination to search into the life and doings of the great mass of our forefathers, instead of skimming the froth of foreign policy, of wars, of royal marriages and successions, and the personal character of the puppets who have strutted on the stage of public life, I might have dispensed with this marshalling of facts and figures. But even in English political history, writers have only attempted to deal with the antiquities of forms, and not with the realities which lie beneath these forms; much less have they attempted to revive, as Hallam wished, though he thought the wish hopeless, the life of a single village in medieval England. To do this, even when the materials are discovered, is impossible without facts and figures. (178)

Rogers's renunciation of the "froth" of *grandes affaires* here is significantly

similar to Morris's own, and he shares with Morris an interest in the history of workers and the material possibilities of their daily existence. But Rogers relies on the scientific synthesis of "facts and figures" to absolve him from addressing the political issues at hand; and, indeed, although he points here towards "the realities which lie beneath" the formal institutions of the state, and admits in another chapter that there are many ways that Victorian capitalism could soften its adverse effects if it condescended to learn from the study of economic history, his emphasis on political economy as an abstraction, and his cautious preference for facts over action, places him in the scientific historiographical camp as a kind of liberal equivalent to antiquarianism and the mere "objective" study of the historical thing in itself.

The sociological interest in the past and the desire to gather together as many "facts" as possible to go next to the "figures" of writers like Rogers influenced the field of publishing as well, and the nineteenth century saw the inception of numerous publishing programs in a broad variety of medieval literature, by the Camden Society, the Rolls Society, and the Early English Text Society, among others.<sup>5</sup> Although the politics of such societies were various, the books printed by such societies were increasingly concerned with the minutiae of daily medieval life and local political organization; but one society was the most diverse of all, the most ambitiously comprehensive, and the most hopeful of reaching the mass of Victorian readers. It was in the diverse publishing projects of the originally Christian Socialist F. J. Furnivall, and particularly in those of the Early English Text Society, that the emphasis on "men and manners" became essentially political, more specifically vernacular English and more specifically based on medieval popular culture, than it had been for, say, contributors to the old *Gentleman's Magazine*, or for the turtle-soup coteries of the Bannatyne Club and others.<sup>6</sup> The EETS began to find in the textual artefacts of the Middle Ages the same vari-

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<sup>5</sup> Philippa Levine, in *The Amateur and the Professional*, and Clare Simmons in chapter 2 of *Reversing the Conquest*, give useful overviews of these and other Victorian publishing projects.

<sup>6</sup> In *Reversing the Conquest*, Simmons discusses the way in which much antiquarianism of the *Gentleman's Magazine* kind had concentrated on less-immediately-politicizable Romano-British, and occasionally Druidic, material survivals. These would have been the sort of "pre-historic monuments" that Morris recalls seeking out in the environs of Marlborough College; he would no doubt have been reluctant to admit it, but even his archaeological practice originally owed much to antiquarian methods.



ety of examples of historical social life that Morris would. Even the “historical principles” upon which the New Oxford Dictionary (for which the EETS was founded) was based were necessarily social, for in seeking out textual examples of everyday speech, the editors of the Dictionary and therefore the EETS found it necessary to look for textual examples of language as it was used in everyday situations. The books which its editors handled had been in large part the ordinary resources and popular reading of medieval men and women: missals, devotional works, romances, ballad collections, gild statutes, dietaries, cookbooks, and wills. That editors of many different political stripes—from antiquarian canons to Chaucerian dilettantes to textual scholars—could come together to edit such a great variety of texts attested to the common use of medieval history for various purposes in Victorian England. The Early English Text Society was a big tent that could cover many different ideological perspectives (leading, indeed, to some editions with multiple personalities, such as the large volume on *English Gilds*, 1870, which devoted much of its introductory space to a lengthy but cordial disagreement between Toulmin Smith and Lujo Brentano on the degree and quality of the guilds’ radicalism). Editors from various backgrounds contributed to the EETS’s early publications, and each nineteenth-century scholar seems to have imagined his “forefathers” differently. What they all had in common, however, was an interest in what Frederick Furnivall must have been among the first to call “social history” (in, for example, his 1882 dedication to *The Fifty Earliest English Wills*, x).

The Early English Text Society is thus a Victorian institution which reveals a rapidly splintering sense of the uses to which history could be put in the nineteenth century. The existence of so many voices, medieval and modern, within the Victorian EETS leads me to suggest that although political oppositions certainly contributed to shifts in the focus of historiography, the mass of textual and archaeological examples that had been compiled over the century played an even more significant role in undercutting the old historiographical model of the top-down political chronicle of wars and successions. Liberal narratives which stressed progress towards a future perfect political state and Tory narratives which longed to return to an ideal feudal past of mutual obligation were both undermined by the increasing

recognition that the past was far more rich and complicated than any one individual could have imagined. The distinctions between the major Victorian approaches to history are thus revealed as fluid: in a similar manner, J. R. Green's ideal liberal Germanic institutions of parliamentary representation and William Morris's ideal radical Germanic institutions of face-to-face social organization could be arrived at by differing applications of the same historical evidence.

Lee Patterson has suggested that

the definition and development of the field [of medieval literary studies] were and still largely are governed by an agenda first put into place during the politically motivated recovery of the national literatures during the nineteenth century. Broadly speaking, there is a Middle Ages of the right and of the left, and they entail allegiances that govern most if not all of the critical work at the present time. (*Negotiating* x-xi)

Following upon the Whig and Tory, liberal-scientific and conservative-antiquarian strands of history above, Patterson's suggestion is entirely reasonable; yet there is also a social-historian strain in the field which, in spite of its acknowledged political implications, does not pledge itself to either "agenda," nor even to Patterson's theoretical analogues, "the one a positivism that assumed a causal pressure of context on text, the other a *Geistesgeschichte* that understood all cultural objects as the symptomatic expression of a single, historically specific essence" (xi). The historiography of the Early English Text Society offers one possible alternative to this stark model, as the EETS's editions mapped a constellation of people, texts, and practices from as many phases of the medieval experience as possible. Morris, too, prefers to describe a multiplicity of individuals engaging with a diverse catalogue of materials and interests that shifts over time, expressing a multiplicity of historical essences even within a single narrative.

Patterson's reading is correct, "broadly speaking": those two totalizing mainstream historiographies existed, and continue to exist. But they existed as models which the Victorian social historiography I describe here (which has its modern, more sophisticated, self-aware, and often more overtly politicised equivalents in microhistory, sociology, and cultural studies), was simul-

taneously quietly engaged in complicating. Early twentieth-century social historians such as Marjorie and Charles Quennell, Eileen Power, G. M. Trevelyan, and after them Marc Bloch built their histories on the diverse material and textual resources that the Victorians accumulated: the collections at the South Kensington Museum, for example, or the mass of information on agriculture and production in Rogers's still-cited histories of work and wages, or the enormous corpus of the Early English Text Society after 1864. Twentieth-century writers such as Trevelyan could claim, ambiguously, to be writing "history with the politics left out" (vii), but that very emphasis on the material everyday life of the past was a nod to a radical historiography, since it shifted the sphere of historical interest from Hansard to the home and the hayfield. This was especially true of the Quennells, whose *History of Everyday Things in England* was strongly influenced by Morris's own emphasis on the humble circumstances of use and diverse functions of medieval artefacts. Raphael Samuel reasonably suggests in connection with Marjorie Quennell that the origin of modern politicized social history lies not in the popularising J. R. Green, but in the Arts and Crafts movement (123), and this seems to me to be an observant commentary on the principles informing both Green and Morris. Only an ongoing inquiry into the material existence of the domestic past, and not an adherence to rigid established liberal or Tory institutional narratives, can account for the flexibility and pragmatism revealed in the individual ways that historical people negotiate their everyday lives.

We need look no further than the end of the nineteenth century to find a writer, neither liberal nor Tory, willing to put his name to a politicised manifesto of historiography and material culture. Without that massive new catalogue of material evidence of the everyday life of the past, of, as Rogers puts it, "facts and figures," it is impossible to imagine Morris's friend the anarchist Peter Kropotkin arguing near the end of the century in *Mutual Aid* (serialised in *Nineteenth Century* from 1890 to 1896) that

the masses chiefly used to toil peacefully . . . The epic poems, the inscriptions on monuments, the treaties of peace—nearly all historical documents bear the same character; they deal with breaches of peace, not with peace itself. So that the best-intentioned historian unconsciously

draws a distorted picture of the times he endeavours to depict; and, to restore the real proportion between conflict and union, we are now bound to enter into a minute analysis of thousands of small facts and faint indications accidentally preserved in the relics of the past. (117)

Whether Kropotkin is correct or not about the peaceful tendencies of “the masses” is beside the point; it is sufficient to point out that such a reading of history would have been almost impossible at the beginning of the century, and that his radical historiography was only made possible by the accumulation of a mass of evidence that pointed to the arts of peace as more broadly significant than the arts of war. When Kropotkin describes the historical picture provided by the top-down political record of chronicle and official documents as “distorted,” and finds that the only way to write a truly inclusive history is through the “minute analysis of thousands of small facts and faint indications accidentally preserved in the relics of the past,” his emphasis is on a variety of peaceful neglected remnants over the single glorified violent fact. Here as elsewhere<sup>7</sup> Kropotkin’s own broad reading in geography and history must have been augmented by his personal exposure to the example of William Morris, whose command of historical “small facts” (and his integration of those small facts into his fictions and social theories) has long formed part of his myth and been the subject of many spirited literary and historical *Quellenforschungen* and explanatory notes (Grennan, Lourie).

Although Kropotkin’s deconstruction of nineteenth-century historiography and his consequent advocacy of a study of the history of peace over the study of war was undoubtedly a provocative interpretation of history at the time, it prefigures several well-known strands of twentieth- and twenty-first century work, not only by the social historians that I have already described, but in the more recent theoretical fields of cultural studies and the history or practice of everyday life. In *Everyday Life in Medieval England* (1989), for example, Christopher Dyer felt confident enough of the historical evidence to argue that in the fourteenth century “Most people resisted authority, not by vio-

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<sup>7</sup> For instance, Kropotkin argues in “Mutual Aid in the Medieval City” that “the very fact that of all arts architecture—a social art above all—had attained the highest development, is significant in itself. To be what it was, it must have originated from an eminently social life” (*Mutual Aid* 211).

lent disturbances but by quietly ignoring the regulations and conducting their lives in the way that suited them” (xiii). In one sense this is a radical re-reading of the extant object lessons of medieval history, which is fond of citing the massive legal systems and bureaucracy established by the Norman and Angevin monarchs or the parliamentary importance of Magna Carta; on the other hand, not only had Kropotkin and Morris made note of this quiet resistance in the nineteenth century, it is a major sub-theme of de Certeau’s *Practice of Everyday Life*, where de Certeau argues, for example, in a modern context that the worker disguises work done actively for his own ends and own enjoyment as work ostensibly done in submission to his employer. Kropotkin’s “thousands of small facts and faint indications” also find a parallel in various essays in *The Everyday Life Reader* (ed. Highmore, 2002) in which television sets, bean soup, and bags form occasions for diverse but significant readings of the way individuals negotiate the circumstances in which, daily, they find themselves.

The most useful recent studies of the role of material culture in daily life agree with Morris that none of the patterns or practices associated with it are passive, that men and women, even if they do not now *produce* the articles which they use, are constantly engaged in recontextualising them, in integrating them into the narratives of their own daily lives. In precisely the same manner, Morris integrated the relics of the medieval past into his own fictions and social commentary, and indeed into his own practices of artistic creation, enjoyment, and collaboration. John Fiske cites studies describing the ways in which the habitus of apartment dwellers and of “first generation urbanized Brazilian peasants” may be personalised and given “texture” by the introduction of received, found or bought, material objects to the habitus, and by the ongoing background noise of a television (Fiske 156). Significantly, it is the purchased objects that capture Fiske’s attention—“the everyday culture of the oppressed takes the signs of that which oppresses them and uses them for its own purposes”—and he riffs on the plastic flowers with which the urbanized peasants surround their television set, finding them “deeply contradictory . . . commodity fetishes.” As Fiske recognizes, this recontextualising practice is problematic, for it stems from a situation where “the commodity fetish . . . bears the forces of both the power bloc and

the people” (157). The alienating power of the commodity fetish here is even greater than Fiske lets on: not only do the “urbanized peasants” here stand outside the “power bloc” because of their financial disenfranchisement, but it is possible to read their primary power over material culture—the ability to personalise and rearrange the commodities around them—as itself limited, because they have no active control over the form and quality of those received commodities. Indeed, while the wealthy may be able to afford items of a higher price, and even perhaps of a greater durability, the wealthy themselves are limited to the mere helpless rearrangement of received items. Morris once grumbled that “I have never been in any rich man’s house which would not have looked the better for having a bonfire made outside of it of nine-tenths of all that it held” (“Art of the People,” CW 22: 48), suggesting that every “consumer” is shackled to the machinery of capitalism, the idlest most of all. Where Fiske advocates more theoretical and politically self-aware discussion of the matter—although, acknowledging the privilege of the academic position, he hopes the discussion will “work in a bottom-up direction as well as a top-down” (165)—Morris located his ideal solution as closely to material culture as he could, in a closer relationship on the part of the user to the creation of the artefacts of everyday life, an activist practice that avoided excessive abstraction. It is not a criticism of Fiske to suggest that his inability to imagine a world without mass production is a natural consequence of his historical circumstances. Indeed, one is almost surprised to find William Morris himself, living as he did in the industrialized nineteenth century, capable of imagining a world without artificial flowers.

Even when the nexus between the user and the artefact is not located in a Morrisian pride in having created it, the next best place for such a connection is in the joy of using it. In all his works, theoretical, practical, and literary, we see Morris continually engaged in breaking down this distance between the reader or viewer (or, better yet, participant, for naturally there *are* no passive viewers in Morris’s activist, tactile formula of aesthetic experience); production, appreciation, and use are collaborative acts. As he claims in his lecture on “The Aims of Art,” “men . . . will discover, or rediscover, rather, that the true secret of happiness *lies in the taking a genuine interest in all the details of daily life*, in elevating them by art instead of handing the per-



formance of them over to unregarded drudges, and ignoring them” (CW 23: 94, emphasis in original). If, as Michel de Certeau puts it, the active reader is engaged in poaching on the margins of a received body of literary knowledge, adapting it to his or her own uses, Morris places his reader at the centre of that body of knowledge. Not only is literary adaptation empowering for Morris’s active reader, but the adaptation and renewal of the physical book participates in this kind of extreme poaching as well. Indeed, Morris does not advocate a furtive “poaching” at all, though his view shares something of that practice’s playfulness and activity; his is an immersive practice that breaks down the boundaries between reader and work and even between present and past. In rehabilitating the decorative arts as simultaneously the essential manifestation of domestic life and of the artistic impulse—those fields of art which everyone required, and in which anyone could participate—Morris was also engaged in breaking down the illusionary distinctions between High Art and Low Art, between a passive aestheticism and an immersive, experiential one. His very reliance on the domestic arts and on material culture demands this participatory and ongoing relationship. There are numerous corollaries, all with examples in Morris’s canon: just as in the artefact he prefers the rough signs of creative process to classical finish, so he comes down on the side of the social history of masses as against the grand narrative of the state; and in activism he values an adaptive society with all its faults and fears for the future over the arrogant perfectionism of a Whiggish End of History.

Historical progression, for Morris, is always partial and imperfect: history for him is a process of continuous adaptation which he frequently describes as “organic.” In a letter of 28 November, 1893 to an unknown recipient who seems to have inquired about the best style of architecture to study, Morris asks rhetorically: “As to which style? You cannot study one style by itself: organic architecture is continuous. *In-organic* is mere twaddle, and not worth studying” (*Letters* 4: 110). Morris’s response here is not hedging; on the contrary, this understanding of material “organic” continuity is the theory by which he negotiates the complex accretion of diverse historical examples of material culture. For him, the various surviving examples of medieval craft testify to a multitude of active individual efforts of creativity, use, and crit-

ical activity, and to their varying success in what Morris would call “fitness” or their ability to be smoothly incorporated into their environments.

Much modern historiography, it is true, tends to find such diversity problematic. Grappling with the reductive tendencies in New Historicism, however, Louis Montrose points to the consequent loss of history’s essential dynamics:

To resolve history into a simple antinomy of myriad expendable details and a single irreducible essence is precisely to refuse history—to refuse history by utterly effacing its *constitutive* differences, by effacing those complex historical formations in which not only the details but also the essences are produced, revised, challenged, and transformed. (394-5)

Morris, too, would have come down emphatically on the side of an ongoing active practice, which for him took the form of a diachronic historical process of collaboration based on pluralist synchronic catalogues of material culture. Morris, that is, rejects the single reductive narrative in favour of a diversity of useful things; he rejects the static in favour of the continuous; and he rejects the rigid rhetoric of power in favour of the adaptable rhetoric of negotiation. This diachronic, collaborative, historical process is, in turn, the method which informs my approach to Morris’s own work. As this dissertation will show, although in Morris’s career the enduring politics of socialist practicality eventually transcended the momentary poetics of aesthetic beauty, the tension between politics and poetics in his work was resolved by a gradual process of negotiation rather than by what Montrose would reprovingly remark as a violent conflict between two absolute models.

Montrose further criticises New Historicist practice as orienting “the axis of intertextuality synchronically, as the text of a cultural system, rather than diachronically, as the text of an autonomous literary history” (401). One would think that the synchronically-oriented “axis” would more satisfactorily chart individuality in the text and in the creative impulse than the diachronic view would; but remarkably, as Montrose indicates here, “autonomous literary history” allows the writer or artist a greater independence than does the implication that “culture is a shared system of symbols expressive of a cohesive and closed . . . ideology” (401). Morris still must necessarily arrange his catalogues of medieval material culture synchronically; after all,



however comprehensive it is, each work of fiction can only evoke one historical moment at a time, and can display only by turns the artefacts of Ricardian England, of Charles the Bold's Burgundy, or of the reign of the Queen of Goldburg. Yet Morris does not approach these material environments as they represent each ruler's cultural system, but as they are informed by the people's social practices. Because each historical moment is for Morris shaped by many past and present hands, he always describes the way the artefacts of these societies evoke the persistence of old fashions or the marks of their having been made during various past eras. Morris's method does not hold up textual and material artefacts as symbolic momentary manifestations of an overarching grand theory, but as authentic landmarks integrated into and recognized as part of an ongoing social practice, which he would associate with the dropped "golden chain" ("The Beauty of Life," CW 22: 58, 60) of a recoverable "organic" tradition of craft. The links in this chain simultaneously represent material culture and the human creative impulse. Morris's metaphor of the chain, with its linking of the unit and the whole, can negotiate both the diachronic and synchronic historiographical models simultaneously. Like the existing incomplete body of historical material culture itself, the metaphor of the "golden chain" speaks to an organic tradition that, although it has been discontinued, may be picked up again, since new links can still be added to it.

Through this vision of the artefact as an historically extant object actively appreciated, under circumstances of continuous use, and even requiring active upkeep and constant revision, we can account simultaneously for the integration of medieval traditions into Morris's decorative, literary, and printing projects; for his passion for the preservation and maintenance of historic pieces of architecture; for his historiography of everyday life as a co-operative process of negotiating the material world; for his choice of the leisurely romance as his final preferred literary mode; and above all for the highly personal nature of Morris's relationship to the relics of the medieval past. This strikes me as an extremely useful approach to Morris's social theory in general, not least because if we follow it to its logical conclusion, we arrive at something very like de Certeau's or Kropotkin's construction of the practical masses building up their lives independent of authoritarian

structures. The kind of political engagement manifested in the final analysis, moreover, is consistent with the collaborative social art or “art of the people” that Morris had described throughout his lectures of the 1880s: a quiet, ongoing, popular resistance, as durable as material culture and as organic as history, as opposed to an aggressive momentary outbreak or fleeting act of violence.<sup>8</sup>

This leisurely view of a history of daily life is hard to find in the earliest poems of Morris, which are staccato expressions of individual passion and barren heroism, isolated and stylised by the young Morris more completely than they are historicised and placed in such continuity. Yet it is possible to argue that *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems* (1858) shows Morris working out his aesthetic relationship to an historical past which is as elusive as the personal satisfaction that his characters seek and are denied. This sense of the empty spaces in historical and personal experience in fact offers the possibility of resolution through an active response to such adversity. In her study of Morris’s major early poem, Florence Boos suggests that in *The Earthly Paradise* (1868–70) Morris moves this readerly activity still closer to his later organic theory of change:

The narrators within the poem also reflect this belief in the restorative power of historical understanding. As the year progresses, they feel a growing sense of self-worth, and gradually move toward a closer rapport with their audience. Through their dignified acceptance of the interrelation of happiness and loss, they clarify for themselves and each other the transient and partial nature of both. (*Design* 26)

To find the “restorative power of historical understanding” in Morris’s long poem of 1868–1870 may be premature: that “restorative power” forms a much stronger part of Morris’s socialist writing in the 1880s. Yet Boos’s characterisation of the “growing sense of self-worth” on the part of the creators and

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<sup>8</sup> In his last piece for *Commonweal* in 1890 he advocated an arduous but largely bloodless permanent revolution, an ongoing educational process of “making Socialists,” since he claimed that “palliation” (working within the parliamentary system to make the best of a bad lot), and “partial, necessarily futile, inconsequential revolt, or riot rather, against the authorities, who are our absolute masters, and can easily put it down” (“Where Are We Now?” AWS 2:516) were equally pointless. The lesson for Morris of the Paris Commune and of the massacre in Trafalgar Square was that a sustained collaborative effort, of the kind that raised cathedrals, was the only way to create lasting social change.

hearers of the tales marks a crucial landmark in the development of Morris's method: the telling of stories in an everyday context, like the shared creation and manipulation of cups, books, candles, kirtles, and other everyday objects in Morris's later writing, is a way of adding richness to one's daily activities. Still more important here is Boos's fidelity to the way the stories help the hearers gradually to come to terms with the complex "interrelation of happiness and loss" and her emphasis on the partiality and open-endedness of the process. Morris consistently eschews short-sighted perfection in art and in social arrangements: in art, he favours the fragment or the rude-but-spirited artefact as they bear the marks of ongoing use, while in social organization, he gives both a history and a future to his societies. His utopian fiction *News From Nowhere* (1890), for instance, describes not a perfect society but an "epoch of rest" between implicit epochs of difficulty and strife, where success and failure are to be taken in stride.

The migration of Morris's generic preference from the pointed lyric poetry of 1858 to the leisurely romances of 1888-96 proceeded side by side with his growing interest in social theory, and the coincidence, as he himself suggests in his letter to Scheu, was not accidental. Perhaps out of an intuitive sense that Morris's mature social thought came to value ongoing collaborative striving for permanence over the momentary conflicts and crises of individuals, the secondary literature devoted to Morris in the last twenty years has preferred to deal with his late romances as more representative of "Morrisian" values than his early poetry and as correspondingly more complex. Likewise, when perceptive critics such as Amanda Hodgson (in *The Romances of William Morris*), Florence Boos (in "Morris's Germanic Romances as Socialist History") and Nicholas Salmon (in "A Study in Victorian Historiography") came to deal with Morris's romances, one essential area for discussion was the intersection of Morris's world-creation with the tenets of his political, social, and historiographical theories. Yet most studies find the basis of Morris's historiography in primitivism and in nineteenth-century theories of Germanic social organization. The great diversity of possible methods of social organization exemplified in Morris's romances is rarely seized upon as a primary characteristic of his created worlds, and the historical understanding of the late fiction is either an opportunity for source-study (informing the other-

wise subtle and observant work of Margaret Grennan) or for an enumerative study of Morris's creation of a single realistic medieval world (as when Stephen Eisenman catalogues the imagined medieval population and interiors of *A Dream of John Ball* in the opening pages of his article).

Boos, however, begins her essay on "Morris's Germanic Romances as Socialist History" with the acknowledgement that in all Morris's historical descriptions, he always has the future in mind, a statement that is identical to the "pragmatic concern for the past for the sake of the present and future" which Margaret Grennan points out (20). This is an essential insight with regard to Morris's historicism, which never imagines static states, either of history or of material culture.<sup>9</sup> This dissertation will consequently take the diversity of methods of social organization and the diverse material world of the romances as its focal point, and will aim to identify the multiplicity of associations which each artefact in Morris's fictions and poetry evokes. The modes of social organization that Morris thumbs through, describes, approves of, and occasionally discards are significant as examples of the great variety of possibilities he imagines for creativity and adaptation. Similarly, the material world of Morris's fictions is not an antiquarian exercise, but provides a richly realized environment in which his characters find ways of negotiating the imperfections of everyday life. That environment is itself not static, and the world of Morris's mature social theories and late romances is a world informed by an ongoing process of change in material and social terms. The material artefact in my reading of Morris's fiction, poetry and prose will prove to be more often broadly representative than momentarily symbolic; it will participate in social, collaborative traditions more often than it will manifest the Romantic egotistic impulse of a single famous author or artist. My emphasis on everyday life as an ongoing (sociological and historical) process is one way of overcoming the difficulty of negotiating the constellation of material signs in Morris's work, and of preventing the mapping of that constellation from becoming a mere exercise of connecting dots of convergence with or difference from literary, artistic,

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<sup>9</sup> It is telling, for instance, that Morris reacts strongly to a strain of "economic semi-fatalism" (AWS 2: 504) in socialism in his review of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, and that his most vehement objection to Bellamy's utopia is that it might be seen as containing "conclusive statements of facts and rules of action" (AWS 2: 502).

or historiographical motifs.

This emphasis on continuity and imperfection is crucial to my reading of Morris, but only the emphasis on a material aspect to that historical continuity is original to me. Critics have long noted Morris's refusal to accept finality either in the writing of history or in the making of it. Margaret Grennan even attributed that refusal to the broad experience of past literature and art that was so essential to Morris's descriptive capability, suggesting that his "wide historical reading in both primary and secondary sources had the not uncommon effect of leaving him permanently skeptical of the finality of any picture of the past, however vivid the delineation, however accurate the individual facts" (134). Hartley S. Spatt in his article on "William Morris's Late Romances: The Struggle Against Closure" convincingly locates this kick against finality in Marxist dialectic (110), but it is also part of a more nuanced, organic process, beloved of anarchists and sociologists: the pragmatic negotiation of everyday life. George Woodcock, who once called *News from Nowhere* the only utopia that has consistently appealed to anarchists, makes it clear how uncharacteristic this organicism is in utopian writing: "Utopia is conceived as a perfect society, and anything perfect has automatically ceased growing" (24). Woodcock's comment strikes to the heart of Morris's open-endedness in a way that a derivative invocation of Marxist dialectic cannot. We therefore also have to be wary of readings of Morris that rely on "primitivism" for, although Morris stresses simplicity in most things, and loves to look backward, his sense of history as a continuous negotiation with the circumstances of creativity, and as an organic, individualised, collaborative process, always entails a forward impetus to social change.

That is why my final contribution to this ongoing critical conversation about Morris as a participant in traditions of Victorian social historiography and as a believer in connections among creativity, social history, material culture and everyday life, is the place of an active historical reading experience in this aesthetic practice. We have a great deal of evidence, both anecdotal and archival, surrounding Morris's reading practice and the kinds of texts he read and the illustrated books he knew. That reading practice has much in common with his aesthetic and social historiography. First, Morris's reading and book-collecting take the form, not of a methodical piece-by-

piece uncovering of the veracity of past events, but of an intuitive holistic synthesis of his reading experiences and an active process of incorporating that experience into his fictions and into his articulation of his social theories. Similarly, rather than a solitary, ecstatic immersion in the text, Morris's ideal reading experience was accretive over time, broadly social rather than abstractly philosophical, and was shared with friends as often as it was experienced alone: pleasure itself for Morris was an ongoing communal process rather than an individualistic moment of consuming joy. Finally, the practice of his collecting, in addition to being an attempt to gather together as many exemplars as possible to represent his ideal eras of craft, also shows a decided interest in works that represented daily occupations, or were themselves daily handled. In examining, handling, and sharing those artefacts, Morris again wanted to participate in what he saw as medieval social modes of reading, just as in creating calligraphic manuscripts and finally in printing his own books he tried to advance traditional social modes of making. In his participatory and activist view of art, book creation and active reading function strikingly as examples of the equation of beauty and use that Morris is famous for, each leading as inevitably to the other as the interplay of "study and practice" that E. P. Thompson noted as essential to Morris's work in the decorative arts (102). A critical commentary that is forced to bear in mind simultaneously the complexities not only of textual borrowing but of the overall experience of the material book cannot restrict itself to mere source-study, especially when considering an artist/writer who works in such diverse genres and material forms. Morris himself forces his critics to think across the boundaries of disciplines.

In history, aesthetic, and creative practice, then, William Morris offers a possible response to and way of resolving the historiographical question that Raphael Samuel poses in "Grand Narratives": "Does a more pluralist understanding of the present entail abandoning any unified view of the national past, and indeed, as some anti-racists argue, make any idea of a national past offensive? Does the abandonment of evolutionary schemes of development, and the discredit attaching to notions of historical 'destiny,' mean that the only safe subject to study is 'moments'?" (124). Although, as Salmon and Boos have rightly pointed out, the national past in Morris can sometimes mani-



fest itself in ways as unconsciously systematic as any of his contemporaries (as, for example, when he opposes the Dark Men to the aryan Dale-Folk in *Roots of the Mountains*), I suggest that Morris's historiography can still offer a way of resolving Samuel's equally relevant latter question. Morris's model of history, after all, is not intended to be one of a confrontational "national" past, but an accepting "popular" one; his evocation of the history of everyday life is ultimately based on a pluralist understanding of present and past artistic practices and social organizations. This pluralism does not reduce Morris to the study of isolated "moments," either; his emphasis on practices and on the endurance of the artefacts of material culture means that those moments are not really moments at all, but practices.

Morris, then, imagines not the "destiny" of one ideal society, but an openness to the possibilities of many. The diverse and non-dogmatic utopia of *News From Nowhere* provides a representative example of this kind of open Morrisian environment, both in its physical objects and its individuals. Some such artefacts include the semi-reverent inhabitations of Kelmscott Manor and the British Museum, the speculative new buildings vaguely Saracenic or Byzantine in the future London, and the verses that Morris himself had inscribed over the bed in Kelmscott House, and which he experiences all over again in his vision of the future. The individual characters of *Nowhere* are no less varied, from accepted anachronisms like the reactionary Golden Dustman to those fortunate few who are able to exist entirely, self-reflectively in the present (Ellen), to those who hesitantly, imperfectly, guess at the future (Morris himself). It is clear from these lists not only the diversity of Morris's artistic and human vision and the way that he negotiates individual imperfections across that diversity, but the way his artefacts and characters exist along a continuous spectrum of history, creativity, and everyday activity. Rather than a New Historicist narrative of decoded unconscious ideology, or a Whig historiography of "destiny" revealed in ideal artistic perfection, let alone a Tory nostalgia for *noblesse oblige*, Morris posits a radical social life in which individuals can negotiate their own places in a leisurely way, within larger traditions and communities, through everyday work and creativity.

THE FOLLOWING CHAPTERS are based on several assumptions: first, that Morris's so-called "Medievalism" is not merely an aesthetic pose, but is informed

by a strikingly modern politicised historiography of everyday life; second, that that historiography had its basis in Morris's lifelong study of medieval popular literary and material culture; and finally, that while Morris's historiography evolved over time to become more politicised and more sophisticated in its connection of material culture to everyday life, one thing that remained consistent throughout his career was his desire to internalize in his reading and to comprehend in his creative work the lessons he had learned from the material culture of the Middle Ages. A number of continuities will make themselves clear throughout these chapters: an emphasis on the relationship of the social life to the individual, the recurring theme of imperfections and even failures as they play out in individual histories and in the creation of works of art, and finally an activist, collaborative aesthetic of making and participating valued over a passive, individualistic aesthetic of viewing.

My first chapter argues that, in his early poetry, Morris exploits the fluid and transitory nature of textual reception to evoke a picture of the medieval past which is as partial and fragmentary as the surviving artefacts of medieval material culture themselves. He begins this process in the 1858 volume *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*, by describing characters who play only a small or marginal role in the events of the chronicles, whose physical environments and even existences are subject to decay and destruction. Just as his characters grasp simultaneously at fantasies and physical objects to make sense of the crises in which they find themselves, so Morris reveals the limitations of his own attempts to grasp the historical record. I then discuss some of the ways in which, in the twenty-four narrative poems of *The Earthly Paradise* sequence (1868-70), Morris begins to turn his attention towards the historical circumstances of creativity and everyday work, as well as the ways in which the plot of each of his stories revolves around a particular object. More important, the tales' contextualizing framing fictions and lyric interludes simultaneously destabilize the reader and offer comforting descriptive evocations of recognizable landmarks. This poetic sequence points beyond itself to its audience's reaction, complicating the moral implications of each story and offering a place for the members of the reading and listening audiences to inscribe their own experience upon the



text while reading narrative and history in it. Although *The Earthly Paradise* sequence relies on the same denial of textual, artistic, and material perfection that the earlier volume does, it marks a transition in Morris's thinking on the subject, suggesting a constructive rather than a destructive aesthetic experience, while still resisting the suggestion that the past may be perfectly understood through reading alone.

It is in the socialist writing of the 1880s that the connection between politics and the historiography of daily life in Morris becomes most clear, as he begins to articulate a desire to imagine as fully as possible the social and material life of medieval England. My second chapter will therefore deal with the way that the artefacts of medieval material culture come more and more to the forefront in the lectures and propaganda fictions, particularly in *A Dream of John Ball* (1886-7). In these works, Morris carries out a "realisation" of the past in which the art and domestic architecture of medieval England is marked with the signs of its creation at diverse times to various levels of aesthetic perfection, and occasionally even in fragmentary or incomplete form. This incompleteness is again both physical in terms of the artefacts and imaginative in terms of his own capability to conceive of them, and yet here the descriptions of the relationship of maker to user become more directly interactive and collaborative. Here, too, Morris makes clear the connection between social organization and art, as he describes the ways in which material culture bears the marks of the society and the individuals who create and use it, ultimately extending his sense of the imperfection inherent in even the best art to his open-ended sense of the way that history too is as organic and open-ended as the "tradition of craft" itself.

My third chapter is a case study of one particular kind of medieval artefact, but in another sense this chapter, with its emphasis on the circumstances of the production and experience of the book and the text, is my dissertation's central statement of the convergence of Morris's aesthetic theories, his own everyday creative practice, and his social historiography. The physical book is a useful focal point for the way that Morris handles the relics of the medieval past, since not only do we have plenty of documentation of Morris as a reader and a printer of books, but of Morris as a *sharer* in his own circle, and as his own publisher. In this chapter, I distance my argument from those

critics who stress the elite difficulty of experiencing Kelmscott Press books and who adopt the stance of the book as a fetishistic object; to me, far from being idealised objects, Kelmscott books were conceived by Morris as he imagined all printed books: as objects to be handled and appreciated. This held as true for Morris's collection of early print and manuscript culture as for his own output of mediievally-inspired texts: readability and elegance were as important to the construction of Morris's "ideal book" as were the lavish adjuncts of illustration and decoration for which the Press is known today. Morris conceived of books as objects to be read in a shared environment rather than in the confines of the modern research library, indicating again that his concerns were as much sociological as aesthetic. Likewise, the medieval texts that Morris chose to reprint included works of romance, history, legend, and popular religion, underlining Morris's desire to reproduce a broad and varied picture of medieval popular reading culture. This aspect of the Kelmscott Press is at least as influential as Morris's re-envisioning of the collaborative sociological practice and economics of book production, and both of those in my opinion should be even more significant to his legacy than his expressed aesthetic standards on page layout and type design. But all are linked in their emphasis on readability and in the participation of various talents—practical, editorial, and critical—in the circle of book production, dissemination, and reception.

The late romances, even the last and least historicized, share a sense of history envisioned as process rather than as polished finality. In these romances, I identify a plurality of social geographies which are not only literal locations, but are ways of negotiating everyday life; Morris's characters react in diverse ways to diverse environments, and their methods of social organization are not static but change over time and with personal growth. Similarly, these geographies themselves are subject to transformation, and like a palimpsest their histories and even their connections to Morris's own experience may be read underneath them. In *The House of the Wolfings* (1888), objects are again given activist functions and voices, as they are in the propaganda fictions. The Germanic society of the Wolfings relies upon its shared treasure of material culture to articulate the relation of the individual to the tribe, and the relation of the present to the society's past and future. *The Well at*

*the World's End* (1896), on the other hand, takes advantage of the theme of the quest to describe a variety of possible worlds and a variety of possible tactics for living in and reacting to them. The relationship of men and women to the material culture of the late romances is not teleological; they do not seek out crowns, or beautiful furniture, or even the Well itself to achieve power over others, nor even for the sake of those objects' beauty alone, but because such things show the past traces of human striving and suggest future potential for unselfish co-operation.

Morris's last romance, *The Sundering Flood* (published 1898), reproduces both the social diversity of *The Well at the World's End* and Morris's politicisation of domestic saga in the Germanic romances. I have framed my discussion of *The Sundering Flood* (a romance that is fittingly a fragment, though a completely realised one), as an "envoi," borrowing from Morris's own adaptation of that medieval form at the close of *The Earthly Paradise*. In this section, I reflect upon the ways in which *The Sundering Flood* is partly the natural culmination of previously developed themes in Morris's social thought and partly an incomplete artefact inscribed with its own set of future possibilities. Like Morris's self-conscious envoi to his own book *The Earthly Paradise* (or like the troubadours' to their patrons), this envoi imagines a life for the text beyond the date of its publication. That post-publication life entails more than passive reception; it includes active processes of adaptation, appreciation, and use. As an example of the kind of synthesis of politics, material culture, and literary romance that Morris might have carried on with had he lived to complete still more literary projects, *The Sundering Flood* suggests to its readers that the romance genre itself may be capable of new permutations. This romance thus points beyond itself to future artistic works, by Morris and by others sympathetic to him, that would also "remember the history of the past, make history in the present, and teach history in the future" (AWS 1: 285). Such works would necessarily participate in Morris's vision of a practice of everyday life in which the masses negotiate their everyday lives over time without reference to church or state or to the grander narratives of tyrants and masters. That free creative social life would, in turn, be inscribed upon its domestic artefacts, in the mutually sustaining, ongoing organic process which Morris called, simply, "making history."

CHAPTER ONE

**MATERIAL CULTURE  
AND TEXTUAL INSTABILITY IN THE EARLY  
POETRY OF WILLIAM MORRIS**

*everywhere*

*The knights come foil'd from the great quest, in vain;  
In vain they struggle for the vision fair.*

“Sir Galahad, a Christmas Mystery.”

From the very beginning of his career, William Morris was aware of the barriers to his comprehension of the medieval period. Some of those barriers were a matter of the limited extant record of material culture; others had to do with the social circumstances of the moment of his personal reception of that body of material culture, and the related imperfect capacity of the modern reader to fully understand the historical everyday life of the past. Indeed, much of Morris's career was devoted to coming to terms with the shortcomings of what his biographer J. W. Mackail so approvingly calls “the mediæval method” (1: 180); Morris's greatest successes came later, when he turned the lacunae in his own understanding of the past into a conscious part of his aesthetic, making those gaps into space where creative adaptation could take place, and valuing imperfect process over perfect realization. But in *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems* and in the diverse narratives and framing fictions of *The Earthly Paradise*, Morris shows himself already aware of this difficulty, adopting a number of strategies for dealing with the material and psychological impediments to a complete understanding of the past. He describes, for instance, the frustrations of medieval men and women as they try to reach each other through art and song, evoking a process of incomplete or partial reception on the part of those who are meant to experience the art that is thus created. That incompleteness is intentional, evoking the hazards of textual transmission; in the same way, at the end of *The Earthly Paradise*, Morris's narrator himself suggests an uncertain future for his own text. To me, this instability, simultaneously material and textual, evoking the creation of fragmentary narratives, scraps of song, and partially-imagined objects as well as their uncomfortable recep-

tion, attests to Morris's sensitive negotiation of the limits of historiography in his poetry. Those historiographical limits reflect and even result from the diverse ways in which texts are created and received over time.

Morris's interest in the artefacts of medieval daily life dates from this period of his first creative efforts. In August of 1858, for instance, he went to France with Charles Faulkner and Philip Webb "to buy old manuscripts and armour and ironwork and enamel" (Mackail 1: 137). The detail is evocative but incomplete; the precise artefacts he purchased are unknown, if they were ever more than an enthusiastic intention. Yet earlier, under the influence of Ruskin, Morris had written a personal experience of the medieval material culture of the continent: one of his earliest enthusiastic expressions of sympathy with the medieval worker appears in his work "The Cathedrals of North France: Shadows of Amiens" (1856), which Morris wrote for *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*. In it, he reflects upon the collective piety of the masons who built the cathedral:

those same builders, still surely living, still real men and capable of receiving love, I love no less than the great men, poets & painters and such like, who are on earth now . . . . Ah, do I not love them with just cause who certainly loved me, thinking of me sometimes between the strokes of their chisels? ("Cathedrals" 289-90)

The tone here is at once sentimental ("still surely living") and figurative (the workers live on in the artefacts they create), but the intention bears within it the seeds of what Morris would later imagine as a more secular tradition of craftsmanship. Even at this early date, he was already looking for ways to find a personal connection with the flesh-and-blood artists of the past; the reciprocity here is manifested as a Christian love which would later be quietly transmuted to a humanist "fellowship." This connection is material as well as spiritual. Amiens Cathedral, in which he reads the daily chisel strokes of the workers in the stone around him, is for Morris just one tangible link between past and present. The 1858 trip with its intention to actively collect artefacts of medieval material culture may be read as an attempt to get even closer to the medieval artisan than his tours of the cathedrals of North France had previously allowed Morris to do. And yet, if the collecting expedition of 1858 *had* been an entirely successful venture, we would likely know more about it.

Morris was to spend the rest of his career trying to move ever closer to such nameless artisans and other ordinary men and women of medieval Europe. In the introduction to her edition of *The Earthly Paradise*, Florence Boos posits a tendency that is quite the opposite of Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence." According to Boos, Morris betrays a deep sense of "lack of influence, of temporal immurement and dissociation from his forebears and the deepest sources of human experience" (24). This is a startling reading of an artist and writer whom we have long associated with a profound understanding and wide knowledge of the literature, arts, and history of the Middle Ages. But Boos is right. In spite of, or even because of, its absolutes like "surely" and "certainly," the tone of the passage above is hesitant and yearning ("Do I not love them with just cause who certainly loved me . . .?"), written by a writer questioning how to position himself in relation to a past that he has yet to fully understand. To the very end of his career, Morris would still lament the lack of any primary sources in saga form for the Battle of Hastings,<sup>10</sup> or would rage at the oblivious binder who had neatly trimmed the pages of a manuscript so as to cut off some of the ornament, thereby consigning a piece of history to oblivion. Perhaps because of the very breadth of his reading, Morris well understood the incompleteness of the record of the past, and recognized from the very beginning that textual transmission was often incomplete and fragmentary. A sense of incompleteness and fragility pervades his early poetry, even when its description of the daily life of the past is as completely realized as he can make it. Yet it would also become an essential tenet of Morris's philosophy that the incomplete surviving fragments of past art offered an opportunity to be inspired by them and to build anew around them, and that that process could eventually obviate (at least partially) the "dissociation" that Boos cites here.

Although *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems* (1858) does not attempt the specificity of description that the later fiction does, this volume never-

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<sup>10</sup> Even the ecclesiastical architecture that had captivated him in 1856 was to the writer of 1886 a distraction from the social history that could have been preserved in saga: "all that pomp of religion does not make up to me for the loss of the stories I might have had of how the folk of Middlesex ate and drank and loved and quarrelled and met their death in the 10th century" ("Early England," *Unpublished Lectures* 168). Morris's choice of "Middlesex" here is not random, but microhistorical and chosen with his audience in mind: the lecture was delivered, after all, to the Hammersmith Branch of the Socialist League, in the very county where Morris himself lived.



theless reveals Morris's early attempts to respond to the gaps in the historical record. Poems such as "Concerning Geffray Teste Noir" and "Sir Peter Harpdon's End" use the necessary imperfections of creativity to inform the ways in which Morris's medieval people seek (and often fail) to create a permanent record of their lives, not only aiming to express their own identities, but to make human connections with the past and future just as his imagined masons of Amiens do. The accretive process of compiling the adapted stories that make up the sequence of *The Earthly Paradise* (1868-70) is also a process of adapting and using earlier materials in conjunction with creating new ones, and the process of storytelling itself is seen as a way of "standing in arms against Death," that is, as Boos suggests, of fighting off the oblivion that results from a lack of cultural memory. Indeed, *The Earthly Paradise* itself may be seen as a collection of fragments, as the stories trail off into interludes describing alternately the medieval and modern reception of those stories. And yet Morris uses this framing structure to come to terms simultaneously with the impossibility of the complete realisation of a text and with the related impossibility of the reader's perfect reception of it. The volumes of Morris's early poetry thus describe not only a world of medieval actors, but also of medieval readers, whose interaction with their material environment is grasping and necessarily imperfect, yet constantly active.

### 1.

#### *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*

MORRIS'S SENSE of the incompleteness of the historical record appears in this early volume as the impulse to present the characters in Froissart and Malory as psychological beings, with human weaknesses and private histories, moving against a backdrop of *grandes affaires*. Although Morris later dismissed this volume of poetry as mostly important for "showing my sympathy with history and the like,"<sup>11</sup> his statement signals his interest not in the grander political narrative of territorial advancement and statecraft, but in the kind

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<sup>11</sup> In a letter of August 21, 1883, to Georgiana Burne-Jones after she had urged him to return to writing poetry, Morris replied thoughtfully that "though I admit that I am a conceited man, yet I really don't think anything I have done (when I consider it as I should another man's work) of any value except to myself: except as showing my sympathy with history and the like" (*Letters* 2: 217).

of history that would bring otherwise obscure individuals to the forefront, with all their imperfections and failures intact. Morris's movement to the margins of the chronicles is accompanied by his description in these poems of a cross-section of the little-known, the less-successful, and occasionally the aging flowers of fourteenth-century (itself late-medieval) chivalry. That is why in the Froissartian poems of the volume well-known historical characters like Chandos, Guesclin, and even Jean Froissart himself, whose stories had been so grandly told by the chronicler, appear as incidental figures to Morris's life-size knights and ladies (sometimes signified only by the pronouns "he" and "she") who, under various and intense emotional pressures, do not do great deeds, but small ones, before they die.<sup>12</sup> The immediate settings for those small actions are accordingly understated: besieged keeps ("The Little Tower"), damp provincial churches ("Sir Peter Harpdon's End"), wild neglected thickets ("Concerning Geffray Teste Noire"), and quiet corners of famous courts ("Old Love"). The medieval people who move in these scenes are composed of (as Morris would repeat after Carlyle) "flesh and blood"; they have their favoured items of clothing, armour, and jewelry, and their own mundane concerns: "food and firewood," as Lambert du Bois puts it hopefully in "The Eve of Crécy."

This body of material culture is tinted with the colours of loss, nostalgia, and the yearning for permanence. From the limestone wall of the Poitevin keep, which "comes away like dried mud"<sup>13</sup> in an unpublished passage of "Sir Peter Harpdon's End" (qtd. in May Morris, *Introductions* 1: 24) to the "mouldering castle-wall," the apples which fall prematurely, and the "rotting leaky boat," all in the last stanza of "Golden Wings," the material culture of the *Guenevere* volume is unstable and in constant jeopardy. The fragmen-

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<sup>12</sup> Not all these stories are of failures: in the ending of "A Good Knight in Prison," the knight, Sir Guy, stands "so stiff" that he holds off the "Pagans" long enough to be rescued by Launcelot. And yet the very rarity of such successes in this volume is telling, as is the fact that they are generally triumphs of strength and not of character.

<sup>13</sup> Limestone was often a mortar in medieval castle wall construction, and seems to have made a respectable wall as long as it was used in conjunction with more solid stone; walls of "lym and of ston" and of "lyme and sonde," which sound rather frail but are described as being strong, appear in *The Seven Sages of Rome* and in *Godeffroy of Bolyne* (according to Owings 53). The latter romance at least was familiar enough to Morris that he would later publish it at the Kelmscott Press.



tary, transitory, or momentary nature of these integrated artefacts speaks in part to Morris's intentional problematisation, even at this early date, of his own project of the recovery of the historical everyday Middle Ages. For the poet, as for his fictional protagonists, loss and sad nostalgia are inevitable byproducts of their effort to grasp at permanence. If Morris's early realisation of the past is as historically informed as we have come to expect from him, then in this volume the medieval world is *intentionally* one composed entirely of material fragments, human failures, and stories that only make sense when one looks beyond the individual who recounts them. In the *Guenevere* volume the recurring descriptions of bodies that decay over time, of fashions that alter, and of architecture that requires constant maintenance cleverly parallel Morris's psychological portraits in these poems of passions that fade, loyalties that are betrayed, and gallant plans that must inevitably fail.

Material culture in these poems is as impermanent as the fantasies and, indeed, as the lives of the characters themselves. The pervasive imagery of physical decay in the poems of this volume is applied to bodies and material objects alike; it is no wonder that protagonists like Sir John at the Burgundian court in "Old Love," Sir John of Castel Neuf who narrates "Concerning Geoffrey Teste Noir," and Sir Peter Harpdon and the Lady Alice in "Sir Peter Harpdon's End," yearn for solidity, permanence, and physical human contact, when their material surroundings so often seem to crumble around them. Morris's characters in *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems* are continually made conscious of the physical manifestations of their place in history, as by turns they look backward at missed opportunities, die painfully in the moment, or find themselves in bemused old age. If a sudden violent death is all that can be expected, then these medieval men and women long for a reassuring normalcy, manifested in the physical closeness of their lovers and/or in the maintenance of some semblance of daily routine.

The recurrent retreat of Morris's characters into daydream in the early poetry reflects not only the often-cited "languor" of Pre-Raphaelite medievalism but also Morris's own attempts to place himself in the historical position of his characters. Those characters' daydreams are like the nineteenth-century poet's own fantasies, fantasies which he seems already to

have recognized as historically unconvincing. This manifests itself as a textual instability that mirrors the material instability I have already identified. Isobel Armstrong finds the narratives in this volume

structured with the gaps, elisions and displacements of dream work, where objects are juxtaposed with startling vividness but without relational explanation in an unremitting and almost tiring metonymic intensity, isolated in space. Temporality contracts or expands with dream logic, a subsidiary part of the narrative suddenly assumes disproportionate importance, or it will be arranged as the interventions of multiple, fractured utterances. (“Grotesque” 245)

Armstrong captures here the way in which the action of these poems is simultaneously material or textual and a matter of imaginative creation, and how disorienting the interchangeability and instability of bodies, texts, and emotions can be here. When, in a moment of youthful bravado, Morris in 1856 called his own work “the embodiment of dreams in one form or another” (*Letters* 1: 28), he was reflecting partly on the nebulous nature of his imaginings of the past, partly on the way his work transgressed the permeable borders between fantasy and material reality,<sup>14</sup> and partly on the way his creative impulse was “embodied” in textual or material manifestations. In spite of the fact that this statement positions itself as escapist in the wake of an explicit denial of interest in “politico-social subjects,” his project throughout his career was to place more and more emphasis on the *embodiment* portion of that equation (that is, on the material manifestation of his social ideals, and on the materiality of his created texts), though his characters never cease to “dream” in one fashion or another. His relationship to medieval material culture is thus at the heart of Morris’s aesthetic project from the very beginning.

The desire for permanence in these poems is always couched in physical

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<sup>14</sup> Just as the borders of medieval romance were contiguous with and sometimes palimpsestically imposed upon the landmarks and borders of medieval European geography, so works like “A Good Knight in Prison” withhold the certain knowledge of their historicity until partway through the poem (when the mention of “Camelot” makes it clear that this is not a Froissartian or even historical poem). Indeed, the unlabeled and implicit division of the poems in this volume into the historical, the romance, and the fantastic is a way of destabilizing rather than of reinforcing the reader’s assumptions about how to read them.

terms, material, carnal, or aesthetic. Their protagonists cling to any physical marks of affection or permanence that they can find. The “damp straw” of a sodden fourteenth-century haystack, grotesque names sentimentally attached to hideous seige engines (“the big perriere they call Torte Bouche,” qtd. in May Morris, *Introductions* 1: 22), and medievalising pronouncements of faith in the physical presence of Christ and the saints have all in common a desire on the poet’s part to find or to convey a sense of the tangible forms of medieval material culture, as well as a sense of slippage between the object as it is (or as it is intended to be) and its ultimate reception.

In “Old Love,” for instance, the peevish banter of two old Burgundian knights begins with the re-shaping of a fragment of fourteenth-century material culture in the early fifteenth century, and slides imperceptibly into a broader discussion of social change. When Sir Giles recounts ruefully how “They hammered out my basnet point / Into a round salade” (l. 5-6), he is revealed as a survival from a previous era, forced by peer pressure to adopt a fifteenth-century style of armour. It is almost as though the thought of the ancient fashion of armour brings back associative memories of their youth, as the two interlocutors turn their attention from the hammer that reforms old Sir Giles into a modern knight almost without pause to the social life of the court, and particularly to the duke’s wife. The interest of the speakers is only partly in things; the materiality of the human body is equally their concern. The narrator blazons and dismembers the duchess, describing her “drier” lips (no longer erotically moist), her slacker hands (no longer clinging), her hair a little greyer “as though some dust were thrown on it” (l. 40), and “her tender walking” (l. 58) replaced by a queenly gait. Yet the narrator gains the reader’s sympathy a little when it becomes apparent at the end of the poem that all these physical descriptions are merely a conscious, plaintive attempt to use the imperfections of age somehow to dismiss, or “smutch,” his old love for her. In despite of the Pre-Raphaelite bias in favour of “stunners,” the cult of youth and chivalry is here refreshingly called into question, especially in the last stanza of “Old Love,” when the narrator acknowledges the deceptive facility of his own superficial criticisms:

Ah! sometimes like an idle dream  
That hinders true life overmuch,

Sometimes like a lost heaven, these seem.—  
 This love is not so hard to smutch. (l. 69-73)

The “idle dream” here is a disjunction between imperfect memory and the present existence. The tendency of idealism to “hinder” or complicate “true life” in this stanza is typical of the way this volume negotiates the tension between realism and nostalgic ideals, a negotiation played out in the material present. It is hard to say whether Sir John is successful when he tries to deny his old love; if physical symptoms are anything to go by (“My lady! At that word no pang / Stopp’d all my blood,” l. 17-18), then he has succeeded on one level at least. But the love affair itself, past or present, is undeniable, if perhaps a little dessicated; and while the reminiscences here retain the moist physicality associated with passion in the other poems in the volume, Sir John’s frame narrative is set apart by its attempt at a dry tone of wistful, amused semi-detachment. After commenting on the imminent fall of Constantinople, the narrator inverts the historical focus, eschewing the largest political narrative of the day as ironically “small”:

Within my heart, these things are small;  
 This is not small, that things outwear  
 I thought were made for ever. (l. 26-8)

This aside is purposefully vague; the narrator may be speaking of the aging of bodies, of the changing of fashions of armour and dress, or of the general processes of history (after all, the duchy of Burgundy itself would be subsumed into the French kingdom within the century). At any rate, the endurance or otherwise of the ancient Byzantine Empire is a “small” matter to the speaker; he makes it clear in the next lines that it is the appearance of the “dreaming” duke (l. 32) and the “changed” duchess (l. 35) that occupies his attention. Some few of these passionate young men-at-arms and their ladies will survive into old age, this poem suggests, and may find that their passions have changed, ended, or at least been qualified by marriage, death, or lost opportunity.

Material culture in these poems is often interchangeable with history, and especially with the history of particular individuals. As with the duchess and the “basnet” in “Old Love,” stories are written on the artefact and

even on the human body itself, and body is interchangeable with text. “Concerning Geffray Teste Noir,” for instance, describes the way in which one such story is inscribed across the relics of the past. Lying in ambush by the road in “Verville wood,” with pragmatic “cloths about [their] arms, / Lest they should glitter” (l. 69-70), another Sir John (the poem’s narrator), and his man Aldovrand discover the secular relics of a love affair and a fight in the form of a pair of skeletons among the moss and flowers, a visible manifestation of a personal history of failure:

This was a knight, too, fold  
Lying on fold of ancient rusted mail;  
No plate at all. (l. 76-8)

The “gold rowels to the spurs,” the “quiet gleam of turquoise pale,” and finally “under the coif a gold wreath on the brow” in the next few lines tell the story of a now nameless fallen nobility, while the style of armour (mail rather than plate) dates the story implicit in the old bones to a remoter past. Indeed, the relics appear here at first mainly as an aesthetic object to be read, and their mystery is revealed in a fragmented, associative fashion, first with the mistaken assumption that the skeleton in mail is that of a knight, then with Aldovrand’s recognition that it was a woman’s, followed by the interlude where Sir John recalls with tangible revulsion the violence of the Jacquerie rising. Sir John then describes how he suddenly recognized “The reason why she had on that war-coat, / Their story came out clear without a flaw” (119-20), surmising from the skeletons’ clothing and their attitude the ambush, the valiant defense, the flight, and the death from wounds here in the remote forest. His forensic archaeology complete (and his account may equally be accepted or doubted), while waiting for action Sir John continues to spin out his own romantic associations from the story told by the relics: “Over those bones,” he recalls, “I sat and pored for hours, / And thought, and dream’d” (l. 141-2). Having in his reverie clothed the bones in flesh to tell their own story, he moves from the reconstructed narrative to a fascination with the lady herself, imagining her particularly in tableau “With her dear gentle walking leading in, / By a chain of silver twined about her wrists / Her loving knight” (l. 145-7), a piece of theatrics which Lourie compares (220n) to the particular entertainments at a tournament given by Richard

II in 1390 and described by Froissart. It then becomes clear that Sir John is reading his own past love story into the bones, until Aldovrand's nudge to "Cry out St. Peter now" (l. 181) brings him back to the present.

After weaving this lyric narrative about the relics of the knight and the lady and evoking his own past history,<sup>15</sup> Sir John recounts the manner in which he has commemorated their story in a different, more solid, medium. Morris characteristically cannot resist imagining the artefacts of the fourteenth century as they might appear when they were made, and so the castle he describes here is "new," speaking to the prosperity of the French in the latter years of the war, as well as to the construction of buildings over successive eras:

In my new castle, down beside the Eure,  
   There is a little chapel of squared stone,  
 Painted inside and out; in green nook pure  
   There did I lay them, every wearied bone;  
  
 And over it they lay, with stone-white hands  
   Clasped fast together, hair made bright with gold;  
 This Jaques Picard, known through many lands,  
   Wrought cunningly; he's dead now—I am old. (l. 193-200)

Sir John inhabits the two lovers' world uncomfortably closely, even to the point of physically annexing it to his own domestic space. His collection of the bones may be from the highest motives, honouring the passions of the previous age in a process rather like the translation of a saint's body from one place to another. After all, these are secular relics of a kind, attesting to the high-minded values of chivalric eros and playing the role of a *memento mori*, reminding Sir John of the transitory character of his own passions ("reiterat[ing]," as Carole Silver puts it, "the triumph of fate and death and stress[ing] the denial of the possibility of lasting erotic fulfillment or release," *Romance* 39). But there is something distasteful in the "squared stone," the

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<sup>15</sup> Time in this poem is artfully telescoped so that it describes at least four historical moments: the moment in which the story is being recounted, the moment of Sir John's building the tomb, the moment of his previous love affair, and the moment of the lover's flight. Even in the early poetry, as the example of the remade "basnet" in "Old Love" shows, Morris exhibits his sense that the Middle Ages were not one uniform moment.

chill paleness of the stone-white hands, the “cunning” of the sculptor (how can he and Sir John know what the dead lovers looked like in the flesh?), and above all in the palpable exhaustion of the aged skeletons themselves. The repeated accentual emphasis on “évery wéaried bóne” in the penultimate stanza speaks both to an over-exertion of the antiquarian impulse for completeness and to the desire of the dead to be left in peace.

There is no doubt that Sir John is well-meaning; but his motives may be selfish and his cult of chivalric eros, though aesthetically pleasing, is already a little dated. Amanda Hodgson finds in the death of the named sculptor Jaques Picard, in the narrator’s apparent own approach to death (extrapolated from the last line, “I am old”), and historically in the ironic failure of the story to appear anywhere in the chronicle of Froissart, that “Morris is as sceptical as ever of the possibilities of art capturing and preserving the past” (*Romances* 48). The chapel in “Geffray Teste Noir” is a manifestation of the desire of the characters in this volume to find a physical closeness with each other in an unstable world; and yet the way in which Sir John of Castel Neuf forces these lovers to inform his own happy or unhappy erotic life makes it clear that he has not really done his best to understand them.

That failure of physical connection is characteristic of the yearning bodiliness of the poems of the *Guenevere* volume. The description of Jehane’s lips desperately grazing the sleeve of Robert’s surcoat (“The Haystack in the Floods” l. 133-6) is probably the most striking and best known, while in “The Tomb of Arthur,” Launcelot recalls the physical sensations of his love affair with Guenevere, agonises “if he might but touch / That Guenevere at once!” (l. 98-9), and in the end swoons for lack of a kiss. Even Morris’s Sir Galahad mourns a little unchastely that “no maid will talk / Of sitting on my tomb” (“Sir Galahad, A Christmas Mystery” l. 59-60). The Lady Alice de la Barde in “Sir Peter Harpdon’s End” collapses into nihilism, and recognizes that it is her lover Sir Peter’s ironic destiny only “to fail and fail and fail / and so at last to die and leave me here / Alone and wretched” (l. 713-15), the “Alone” here emphasising the physical separation to which many of Morris’s early heroes and heroines romantically succumb. For Alice, her cold seat upon Sir Peter’s tomb in the “little damp, dark Poitevin church” (l. 669) is the only surrogate she has for the warm touch she and Sir Peter long for and are denied.



Although his relationship with his lieutenant John Curzon is a warm one in a locker-room sort of way, Sir Peter himself near his end longs for a woman's touch—any woman's, if it cannot be the Lady Alice's—, some semblance of domestic order to temper the impersonal political aggression of the war that is about to destroy him.

In "Sir Peter Harpdon's End," Morris again telescopes the action from the great to the small, showing his preference for the margins of history.<sup>16</sup> The lonely defense of the keep and lonelier hanging death of Sir Peter and the social isolation of his lover the Lady Alice are exemplary of the waning years of English influence in France. Its days of grandeur are over, as Sir Peter says to John Curzon, listing to him at length the great variety of fates that have befallen the best-known English soldiers and allies and then finishing, in a kind of inversion of epic precedence, with the Black Prince and the late king, both dead by 1377:

Edward the prince lies underneath the ground,  
Edward the king is dead, at Westminster  
The carvers smooth the curls of his long beard.  
Everything goes to rack—eh! and we too. (l. 44-7)

It is significant that the young present king, Richard II, goes entirely unmentioned here, partly because Sir Peter's intention is largely backward-looking and nostalgic, but also because the English king has little effect on Sir Peter's immediate experience, political or otherwise, thereby isolating Morris's protagonist still further in his futile responsibility on the geographic and political margins. Peter's list seems to end with the passing of Edward III, and with a characteristically Morrisian attention to history as it is inscribed in its monuments.<sup>17</sup> But when Peter includes his own fellowship as a charac-

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<sup>16</sup> David Staines charts Morris's use of Froissart and Malory in "Morris's Treatment of his Medieval Sources in *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*," remarking that "his poetry . . . forsakes the rambling movement of the chronicle history to focus intensely on particular moments which, though they might have happened in the world of Froissart, would never have been recorded by him" (462). The focus on "moments" here is telling, since it speaks simultaneously to the broken narratives and "fragmented utterance" that Armstrong identifies and to the synchronic microhistorical impulse I have identified in Morris's historiography.

<sup>17</sup> The long waves of the beard of Edward III's gilt bronze effigy in Westminster Abbey are unlikely ever to have been seen by Peter, who is isolated on the margins of the Hundred Years' War; this description is an interjection by the nineteenth-century poet, stealing Peter's medieval voice to offer the reader a material location in which to re-experience this poem.

teristically wry afterthought, after the royalty and last in this inverted order of precedence (“eh! and we too”), he is at once placing himself and his company at the very bottom of the scrapheap of history and leaning on them as his own most immediate priority.

Peter is simultaneously a quiet casualty of war and the protagonist of his own individual history, and the question of how (or, indeed, whether) this insignificant knight is to be concretely memorialised like Edward is one of the main themes of the poem’s last phase. As the Lady Alice points out, Sir Peter’s memorials are not public, but private: his tomb is not, like Edward’s, at Westminster, but in a small rural church; he is mourned over by Alice alone; and the popular ballad-singers neglect him. Though the historical “Sir John Harpedon” moves for the most part unobtrusively among the pages of Froissart, Sir Peter Harpdon is not an insignificant individual in Morris’s alternative history of the Hundred Years’ War. At the very least he is representative of an historical pattern, and his small professional failures (at Lussac, where he is unable to rescue Chandos, and here in his brief unsuccessful defense against the French seige) signify the larger faltering of the English campaigns in France.

Sir Peter’s interior life and social life are even more significant, for he exists, not in an historical process, but in his own local moment. According to Sir Peter, the war has come between him and his lover in impersonal fashion, reflected in the cold imperative gestures of authority and command: “If I could but have seen her on that day, / Then when they sent me off!” (l. 82-3). He is left only to fantasise about what excuses he might have been able to make, and how she would then have loved him in return. The return to the present from reverie (not for the last time in this poem) is characterised by Peter’s acknowledgement of his own physical existence in the world, an existence which becomes more precarious the more he examines it: “and I am here— / A sprawling lonely gard with rotten walls, and no one to bring aid if Guesclin comes, / Or any other” (l. 137-40). At its best chivalric loyalty—even the destructive loyalty that holds Sir Peter Harpdon to the keep, his trust and his fate—might have been capable of prefiguring here in a small way Morris’s later more constructive themes of collaboration, co-operation, and fellowship.

It is the theme of social isolation and not that of fellowship that Morris emphasizes here (as elsewhere in these poems), although Sir Peter Harpdon does attempt to turn this very isolation into a strength. His later memorialisation in the church might be a way of finding, if not immortality, then a way of avoiding being forgotten; and yet an alternative tactic is for Peter to make himself into a work of art, and to adapt past examples to articulate his own place in history. He associates his own life, for example, with the popular medieval tale of the great defeat of Troy (which both he and Lambert have, of course, read). Burne-Jones describes a breakfast with Morris where “we talked hard all morning, mainly of one subject, why the mediæval world was always on the side of the Trojans, and of Quintus Smyrnæus, and how Penthesilea came to be tenderly dealt with in ancient tales and tapestries. He was quite happy” (qtd. in Mackail 1: 167).<sup>18</sup> The key to the two artists’ table talk is provided here by Sir Peter, who describes how, for the mere aesthetic strangeness and beauty of having Helen in their town, the Trojans fought desperately, “knowing they were wrong,” to retain Helen: “wherefore, take note / How almost all men, reading that sad siege, / Hold for the Trojans” (l. 205-7). When Peter imagines the future conversation of men about him (just as “We talk of Hector, dead so long ago,” l. 212), he places himself within the heroic framework of the Troy book, and self-consciously aestheticises himself to a greater extent even than Clisson did in ordering Peter’s tomb. Futility has its exquisite charms, and the opportunity to fantasize is one of them.

Peter the unknown medieval man does have a voice, then, and he uses it to aestheticize himself. But the picture he tries to convey of himself is imperfectly understood by others, and he appears at times to be helpless to verbally convey his feelings. As the time of his execution draws nearer, his admission that he is “all wrong, / So wrong and hopelessly afraid to die” (l. 494-5) is choked and inarticulate. Peter may possibly regret what he has done to Lambert (physically and psychologically); or he may realise that Lambert was correct and that in fact Sir Peter’s “life was pleasant to [him]” (l. 386). Either way,

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<sup>18</sup> Penthesilea appears in Lydgate’s *Troy Book* prefiguring Lady Alice’s revenge fantasy as well as the women in armour (Ursula, Bow-May, and others) of Morris’s late romances, and incidentally wearing the bascinet of “Old Love”: “But thei, allas, so sore hir gan assaile / That al tohewe thei han hir basenet” (4.4313-4).

his aestheticisation of himself ends here, shifting from romance to hard fact, and when he desires Sir Oliver Clisson to “send some man, / Some good man, mind you, to say how I died, / And send my last love to her” (l. 479-81), he is admitting the necessity of an intermediary to make up for his own inability to communicate. When the squire describes to Lady Alice the scene of her lover’s last moments (having either passed over or failed to notice the fear of death that Peter himself admits), his emphasis is on interpreting Sir Peter’s body language. It is not only death that has made Peter quiet:

Few words he spoke; not so much what he said  
 Moved us, I think, as, saying it, there played  
 Strange tenderness from that big soldier there  
 About his pleading; eagerness to live  
 Because folk loved him, and he loved them back,  
 And many gallant plans unfinish’d now  
 For ever. (l. 641-7)

Sir Peter’s reduction to a realistic but inarticulate “big soldier” alternately humanizes him and undermines his heroic status, shrinking him to something less grandiose than the chevaliers of romance. His “tenderness” here and his “eagerness to live” (a different thing than his acknowledged fear of death) may be symptomatic of a rather late reordering of his priorities. With the linking of prospective “gallant plans” with the reciprocal love of the previous line, the reader finds that Sir Peter has finally come to recognize (as the Lady Alice eventually does) the insufficiency of the chivalric ideal. It is indeed possible, according to this line of thinking, that everyday domestic felicity, more than the chivalric community of knights, might have been made into the real impulse informing the poem, foreshadowing as it does Morris’s later theme of fellowship in progressive causes. But the terse finality of “for ever” cuts that brief thought short—if indeed Morris’s protagonist ever intended it at all.

The final movements of the poem mark a shift from Peter’s aestheticizing himself to, as the messenger suggests here, the other characters’ attempts to make sense of his life and to memorialize him. This is not the only place where bodies and lives are transformed into texts to be read. We have already seen this process in Sir John poring over the bones in “Concerning Geffray

Teste Noir”; it also appears in “A Good Knight in Prison.” In the latter poem, the knight copes with the alternating trauma and tedium of captivity by aestheticizing it and making his surroundings unreal. To him, the “Pagans” who hold him captive are like “dragons in a missal book” (l. 40); he reduces them to mere bright colours and flecks of paint, “specks of white” and “great plates of burnish’d gold” (l. 44-5), aestheticizing them in order to cope with his isolation.

Just as the effigy of Edward III finalizes the death of the king for Sir Peter, so the squire’s description of Peter’s own memorial marks an end to the halting extended narrative that the Lady Alice alternately demands and refuses to hear (“You know I am so sorry,” the squire gently says, “but my tale is not yet finish’d,” l. 626-7). As the squire finally moves to describe to Lady Alice Sir Peter’s resting-place in the remote Poitevin church, the psychological narrative is finally pinned down to geographical detail and her lover’s death thereby reified for her, since it now has the sense of physical permanence that Morris requires:

He waits,  
 Still loving you, within the little church  
 Whose windows, with the one eye of the light  
 Over the altar, every night behold  
 The great dim broken walls he strove to keep!  
 There my Lord Clisson did his burial well. (l. 649-54)

The church’s rose window (“the one eye of the light / Over the altar”) focuses the gaze of the mourner, the reader, or the antiquarian inward to the tomb of Sir Peter and outward to the keep with which he is indelibly associated. Sir Peter Harpdon is doubly memorialised in stone, not only in the tomb so lavishly provided by the respectful Clisson but in the walls of the keep (here obscure not only in history but literally in twilight or darkness or through extravagant tears, being, as the squire says, “dim”). The “broken walls” Sir Peter “strove to keep” are significant as historical relics that are solid, tangible, and still extant; but they are, after all, only stones, and scattered at that. This dispersal of the relics of the past is paralleled in the way fragments of popular song and popular culture are scattered throughout these poems, in the objects which have diverse significance for Morris’s characters through-

out their various lives, and in the way these stories, ballads, and objects are captured briefly in the wavering attention spans of these diverse survivors of the Hundred Years' War.

The Lady Alice's immediate impulses upon being told of the death of Sir Peter are to withdraw, first into religion and then into fantasy. Alice, like the other characters in the volume, is given to inconclusive reveries; her fantasies, she claims, are "to keep myself from going mad" (l. 657), and in them she mingles the spiritual and the aesthetic at once, turning first in her despair to a Christ whom she tries to conceive of as a physical presence. Instead of following the fashion of daily piety ("I have been many times to church . . . but to-day I wish / To pray another way," l. 658, 660-1), she seeks, with that characteristic Morrisian impulse towards the material, an aesthetic manifestation of the Christ. Like the pilgrim or the seeker after dispersed but tangible holy relics, she adjures, "come face to face, / O Christ . . . From one of many places where you are" (l. 661-2, 664). This emphasis on Christ's diverse physical manifestations,

Either in Heaven amid thick angel wings,  
Or sitting on the altar strange with gems,  
Or high up in the dustiness of the apse, (l. 665-7)

is imagined by Alice almost wholly in aesthetic terms, and her mental image of Heaven may be recalled from some illuminated manuscript (later re-realised by Burne-Jones as the frontispiece to the Kelmscott *Golden Legend*, with the many winged angels welcoming saints into heaven). Morris in "The Shadows of Amiens" found just such another Christ particularised out of various Christs, describing a statue in the porch of the west front of Amiens Cathedral:

The face of the young Christ is of the same character as his figure, such a face as Elizabeth Browning tells of, the face of one who never sinned or smiled: at least if the sculptor fell below his ideal somewhat, yet for all that, through that face which he failed in a little we can see when we look that his ideal was such a one. ("The Churches of North France," 310)

Even the young Morris, so often given to immature aesthetic rapture, recog-

nises and can even relish such a rapture's frequent incompleteness: medieval sculptors, like medieval soldiers, may fall short of realising their ideals, he admits, but in their works those ideals may still be recognized. This permeability of bodies and texts throughout the volume, and the ways in which the walls of the keep, the monument, the chapel, the protagonist, and even Christ himself are constantly reshaped by those who remember them as texts to be read—all this suggests that we are meant to read as earnestly and creatively as Morris's characters do, even if we do so imperfectly.

At the heart of the experience of aesthetic perception in these poems lies the discovery, not of a rapturous perfection, but of diverse imperfections. The "fractured utterance" that Armstrong identifies is not only psychological but textual. The first-hand experience of the material record can also be a moment of slippage or of incomplete comprehension, and this very instability can be empowering, as it is in the half-heard ballad that forms the poem's coda. Outside the house of the Lady Alice de la Barde, the daily life of the Middle Ages goes on oblivious to her thwarted fantasies of desperate deeds, manifesting itself in a multiplicity of conversations, some sympathetic, some musical, others irrelevant. It might as well be a street scene visualised from a moment captured by an illustration in a manuscript:

all the street is humming, some men sing,  
And some men talk; some look up at the house,  
Then lay their heads together and look grave;  
Their laughter pains me sorely in the heart,  
Their thoughtful talking makes my head turn round,  
Yea, some men sing . . . (l. 704-9)

The street ballad of Launcelot that then invades her room through the window is unbearable to Lady Alice. The ballad, Alice suggests, is sung by some soul in the street outside unconscious of the pain he invokes, but it may also be intended as anonymous comfort, another example in this volume of the possible therapeutic power of art. It may even be an oblique tribute to Sir Peter himself, whose tactical valour or prowess is never in question (he once even almost slew Clisson himself, as he reminisces in lines 354-8), though through unluck or slowness he has seldom done much strategic good.

Ultimately the lesson of the street ballad is in its fifth stanza:



Sing we therefore then  
 Launcelot's praise again,  
 For he wan crownés ten,  
 If he wan not twelve. (l. 736-9)

Ten crowns should be enough for any man, Morris seems to be saying here; and any knight worth his spurs may be or appear to be *sans peur*, but very few can be *sans reproche*. Launcelot, here as elsewhere, is the type of the worldly hero, and is praised in spite of or even for his human weaknesses. Likewise in Malory, Galahad is a relatively forgettable character, while the imperfect Launcelot and Palomides remain with the reader long afterward. But it is important to recognize the song as a reminder that even Launcelot is something of a failure, and that the vision vouchsafed Galahad is denied to him.<sup>19</sup> His "sad love" is something for which God "stinted his praise" (l. 729-31) and denied him the sight of the Grail. Just visible beyond the "sad love" of Launcelot here, too, is his ultimately frustrated yearning for Guenevere. Likewise, Sir Peter Harpdon and his intended have had a past but no future, and love only makes partings sadder in Morris's Froissart poems.

Morris's insinuation of the ballad into his narrative is the integration of a medieval artefact of popular culture. It is performative, and thus a more ephemeral kind of artefact than the tangible ones of stone or glass or tapestry. And yet it is also textual: the verse form is adapted (according to Lourie) from the poems of the Thornton manuscript, edited by J. O. Halliwell for the Camden Society in 1844; these so-called "Thornton Romances" were so well known to Morris that he later published three of them individually at the Kelmscott Press. Even at this early date, Morris exploits the fragmentary nature of medieval manuscript culture, first in the way that he adapts the medieval verse form, and second in the suggestion that these poems are themselves fragments of a whole. The singer insinuates in line 745, for instance, that the story of Peter and Alice is the last movement of a lengthier song. Likewise, Godmar in "The Haystack in the Floods" asserts with

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<sup>19</sup> J. M. S. Tompkins, in the context of a discussion of the influence of Browning on Morris's early poetry, uses this passage to suggest that "Browning's presentation of the inevitability and potential value of failure provided spiritual underpinning for the young man's diffidence and self-deprecation" (60). As will be seen, I feel that the role of imperfection in these poems, and especially in Morris's later works, is less incidental and less autobiographical; it may also be more physical than "spiritual."

satisfaction “So, Jehane, the first fitte is read!” (“Haystack” l. 153), situating himself and Jehane as ballad antagonists, and suggesting that Godmar and Jehane inhabit only fragmentary parts of a longer ballad. Morris thus points outside the boundaries of the text to the ongoing histories of his characters, a tactic he would reiterate in the dream-visions of the 1880s and in the historical continuities that are inherent in the late romances.

It is hard to say whether this fragment of song, which suddenly replaces the action of, and forms a coda to, the dramatic poem, is meant to be read as a comforting influence as the poem ends. Lady Alice denies the validity of the song at first, deeming it fantastic or at least out of date. The thought of Christ may have given her comfort, if of a damp, dusty and miserable kind, but she has already implicitly denied that fantasy and romance can be supportive or even useful to her in her moment of loss. The reader has no sense of her reaction after the ballad takes over, since Lady Alice is silenced by it, or at least is silent. Before falling silent, however, she purposely frames the ballad, and perhaps even the poet who writes her, as eliding the distinctions between the heroes of the surviving texts of medieval popular culture and the more modern “big soldier” Sir Peter Harpdon: “They ought to sing of him who was as wight / As Launcelot or Wade, and yet avail’d / Just nothing, but to fail and fail and fail / and so at last to die and leave me here, / Alone and wretched” (l. 711-715). Lourie (210n) traces the phrase “as wight / As Launcelot or Wade” back to Lynet’s mockery of Gareth in Malory; but in their conversation “wight” denotes knightly prowess, while in Morris the suggestion may also be that Peter is as “real” or “corporeal” as the legendary heroes. This reading of Alice’s words reinforces the physicality of Morris’s protagonists alongside their historical existence. Morris is possibly exposing with a certain ironic flair his own art in evoking the past (Launcelot, Wade and Peter all being at least partly fictitious); alternatively, his assertion of Peter as a physical body may be an intentionally naïve statement of belief in the historicity of his recreation of the men and women of the fourteenth century. There may even be a further irony in that the apparently well-known hero “Wade” has now no surviving romance of his own but is only referred to obliquely by others (in Chaucer, in Caxton’s Malory, and in *Widsith*); he is as much a fragmentary piece of medieval popular cul-

ture as the Matter of Troy, the street-ballad, and the recovered tale of “Sir Peter Harpdon’s End.”

Margaret Lourie suggests in her introduction to the volume that “it is for the sake merely of realizing this hallucinated dreamscape and the emotion that attaches to it that Morris multiplies the details of his descriptions in these poems. The details mean nothing other than what they are—the concretizing of an overwrought condition of mind” (17). Although I do not wish to argue that historiographical fidelity is a primary concern of this volume, it should be clear that I do not see the material culture of these poems as playing a role secondary to their psychological content. In these poems, the desire at least for permanence or for the memorialisation of the past is always articulated in material terms. Moreover, the interplay of text and body, of character and artefact, that I have recounted here suggests that the objects themselves actively shape not only the experience of aesthetic perception, but even the very “overwrought condition of mind” that Lourie advances as the primary theme. Finally, the transitory nature of material culture in these poems suggests that deeper forces are at work than even the intention to describe a method of impassioned aesthetic response. The fragmentary textuality of this volume is intentional; the frustrated process of reception suggests that the creativity of these characters is not fully formed. Relying on the instability of texts, on the impermanence of material culture, and on his own sense of the impossibility of complete historical knowledge, Morris makes failure and the hazards of textual reception into strengths of the volume. *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems* looks ahead to the emphasis on process that would be asserted in *The Earthly Paradise* and in the more historically grounded fictions and artistic endeavours that Morris would create as his command of the extant body of medieval material culture increased, and as he became more comfortable with the fact that his personal understanding of the everyday life of the past would by necessity always be partial and incomplete.

## 2.

### *The Earthly Paradise*

THE POEMS OF *The Earthly Paradise* (1868-70) mark the moment when the material everyday life of the past assumed a greater prominence in Morris’s writ-

ing; this moment coincided with Morris's increased activity in the field of design, and with his interest in saga literature. In connection with this period, J. W. Mackail cites Morris's growing sense that "if a man can't compose an epic poem while he's weaving a tapestry . . . he had better shut up, he'll never do any good at all" (Mackail 1: 186). By this comment, Morris not only suggests that a worker ought to be competent in both manual and intellectual pursuits, but that poetry itself is insufficient without the inclusion of a physical dimension to it, either as ornament or text or visual counterpart of another kind.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, Mackail uses this anecdote to illustrate Morris's poetic method as highly social and as tied to his everyday activities, arguing convincingly that Morris had no sympathy for, or even understanding of, "the idea that poetry could or should be cultivated as an isolated and specific artistic product, or that towards its production it was desirable to isolate oneself from common interests and occupations" (1: 186). There was, then, for Morris no illusory distinction between an exalted state of poetic inspiration and the carrying out of mundane tasks, no desire to recollect emotion in tranquility, no bifurcated existence of poet and tradesman. Just as he posed for Launcelot in his friends' sketches, strapped himself into medievalist armour in the cause of art, and integrated the hornbeam trees of his childhood Epping Forest fantasies into poems such as "Shameful Death," so Morris tried to integrate his creative life into his everyday life, in as unconflicted a manner as possible. Not only was the superinscription of personal experience across narrative and imagined environment a way for Morris to stamp his personal life on his poetry, it was also a way of filling in the lacunae of history, of avoiding the abstract or vague. The poet adapts to his material circumstances like anyone else. The idea that the boundaries between storyteller and story could be so permeable is familiar from my discussion of the characters' fantasies in *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*; it is also explored in the framing fictions of *The Earthly Paradise*, which describe the inception and reception of each poem during the long year of alternately medieval and classical storytelling, and

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<sup>20</sup> Jerome McGann (in "A Thing to Mind") and Joseph Dunlap (in "William Morris and the Book Arts Before the Kelmscott Press") have elaborated on the way in which even during this period, long before the establishment of his own press, Morris was already concerned with tying together the formal, material, and social aspects of typography, decoration, illustration, and narrative.

the interludes which evoke the English countryside of Morris's and his readers' own experience. I am aware that this fluidity is perhaps an odd thing to argue in connection with such an intricately-structured poem as *The Earthly Paradise*, and yet Norman Kelvin, in his essay "Patterns in Time," also examines the motif of the "frame" in Morris's work as a device that "is never passive; at the very least it pushes against the movement of the image into past and present, or what is the same thing, it interrupts the movement from the preceding to the following page" (147). We have seen something like this palpable tension between image and meaning, past and present, text and reader in Morris's early poetry already. Kelvin also posits a contrasting "'Organicity' of frame and content" (149) to temper the violence that seems to inform the way the "seemingly passive border is unstable in its role, invading the subject it frames" (164). Kelvin finds many useful examples of this "organic-ity" in the material and literary works of Morris's career, and his reading has a lot in common with the integration of poetry and daily life which I have cited, as well as with Morris's later theory of "architectural creation," where the various components of a building (its furnishings and architecture) work together to create a harmonious whole. I have in mind a still more untidy view of the tension between the marginal interludes and foregrounded narratives, between part and whole, and between the writer and future reader than Kelvin does, due at least in part to the sense I have described here of the diversity and untidiness of history in Morris's works, as well as of the subjective activity of readers. I am also less concerned than Kelvin is with finding an ultimate formal harmony in Morris's works, especially when discussing this early stage of Morris's career, and would therefore also like to locate this poetic collection's importance not in the finished development of its patterns, as a more polished formal critical model might try to do, but conversely in its position as an experiment. The picture I hope to suggest here and throughout this dissertation is of a Morris who is highly conscious of the borders between reader and text, but who often transgresses those borders, extending fantasy into reality, past into present *and future*, and even (as the simultaneous mental and physical creation of poetry and tapestry suggests above) the life of the reader into the life of the text and vice versa. More important, I want ultimately to suggest that in this ongoing mutual

process, it is the unfinished artefact that can best offer possibilities of future active reception and growth.

Even though it is the work for which he was best known in the Victorian period,<sup>21</sup> *The Earthly Paradise* marks a transitional phase in Morris's descriptions of material culture, during a period in which he was still developing his capacity to describe an internally coherent medievalist material culture. In these poems, we find Morris engaged in working out what role art, labour, and human character should now play in his literary works, as well as performing a variety of poetic experiments that are formally adapted from the extant fragments of medieval verse. The extended framing fiction, for instance, a form which he borrowed blatantly from Chaucer and Boccaccio and others, is at this period of Morris's career an opportunity to explore diverse aesthetic possibilities, not only of medievalist language and poetic forms (sometimes rhyming couplets, sometimes rhyme royal), but of the tales' and interludes' various material settings and atmosphere. In my opinion, Morris's particular invocation of Chaucer as his "master"<sup>22</sup> in the envoi to *The Earthly Paradise* owes as much to the position of *The Canterbury Tales* as one of the archetypal poetic fragments as it does to the conventional Victorian understanding of Chaucer as the genial describer of "men and manners" in the medieval past. The idea of Chaucer as social historian is one readily available explanation for the young Morris's attraction to the diverse details in Chaucer's medieval model of everyday life;<sup>23</sup> yet it is also true that the anxious tone of the envoi seems to point towards an understanding of *The Earthly Paradise* as somehow incompletely realised in spite of the fact that, unlike *The Canterbury Tales*, Morris's wanderers and island-dwellers manage to arrive at the end of their allotted year of story-telling. In spite of its tidy arrangement into twelve months, with two balanced tales per month, the

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<sup>21</sup> Even as late as 1890, *The Glittering Plain* was attributed to "William Morris, author of 'The Earthly Paradise'" when it was serialized in *The English Illustrated Magazine*

<sup>22</sup> "Mastery" is a concept that Morris shows himself to be very uncomfortable with in the late romances, but here his use of the term seems to participate in a more innocuous and enthusiastic self-positioning as a writerly "apprentice."

<sup>23</sup> In the tales of *The Earthly Paradise* Morris does begin obliquely to evoke the social history of labour, comments on plenty and dearth in the living conditions of his medieval people, and even describing the origin of various raw materials of craft. His characters are found in the poems variously labouring in the fields or fishing; their larders are sufficiently (but not over-) stocked; and they are shown growing woad and madder for dyeing.



interludes, framing fiction, and especially the envoi suggest that this work is highly conscious of its own incompleteness. Perhaps the very tidiness of the twelve-month pattern made Morris uneasy, given the evocative incompleteness of his medieval textual model. In the fourteenth century, the fashionable dream-vision form (which Morris would later put to such good use in conceiving *A Dream of John Ball* and *News from Nowhere*) exploited just such a psychological untidiness, eliding distinctions between mind and body, sleep and waking, fantasy and personal experience.

*The Earthly Paradise* is a series of retold ancient stories each bookended by what Florence Boos calls the “inner frame” (*Design* 25) where the wanderers and islanders tell their stories in the hall and then react to them. Outside that frame is a sequence of modern (but suspiciously “timeless”) lyric interludes from everyday life. The storytelling “inner frame” is the mortar that holds together the bricks of the story sequence; it is integral to the poem’s design; and yet it unsettles the stories themselves with abrupt transitions in and out of the tales and its consciousness of the manner in which the tales may be variously received by different readers. To resettle his readers, therefore, Morris exploits the outer, lyric interludes to evoke known material survivals of the past, just as he had evoked the gilt beard of Edward III’s Westminster effigy in “Sir Peter Harpdon.” For example, in the interlude for August Morris’s narrator looks from the Roman camp on Sinodun Hill across the Thames to the small town of Dorchester and its medieval abbey church:

Across the gap made by our English hinds  
 Amidst the Roman’s handiwork, behold  
 Far off the long-roofed church; the shepherd binds  
 The withy round the hurdle of his fold,  
 Down in the foss the river fed of old,  
 That through long lapse of time has grown to be  
 The little grassy valley that you see. (l. 1-7)

This was a locale known to Morris, according to his daughter May (*Introductions* 1: 96-7). Morris exploits the English countryside as a landmark of familiarity; the contemplative tone of the interludes is comforting and stabilizing.

And yet it is intentionally ambiguous whether this interlude describes past or present: like the hornbeam trees in “Shameful Death,” the inter-



ludes may equally be medieval reveries or specific experiences of Morris's own. Mackail describes in detail Morris's own excursions on the Thames in 1867 that provided the matter for the June and August interludes (1: 187), and Morris himself later describes the locale in a letter to Oscar Fay Adams, June 12 1889 (*Letters* 3: 72).<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the sheep-folds that Morris describes were significantly still in use in his own time (in Hardy's *Far From the Mad-ding Crowd*, for instance, Liddy's brother is a "hurdler"), so that the interlude with its depiction of everyday work has again the pleasing ambiguity of being alternately or simultaneously ancient and modern, a survival, a revival, or an inhabitation. Implicit in the gap in the stone wall "made by our English hinds" is the intention of the destructive workers: to build in turn with the stone thus quarried. The theory of change over time here may even extend to geological time, with the description of the "foss," or dry ditch, of line 5. Old buildings in Nowhere (even the marginally aesthetic Houses of Parliament) are similarly adapted to new uses, use and beauty being Morris's prime measures of value. Building productively upon the lessons of the material and intellectual past would come to be a key part of Morris's aesthetic and social theories, just as quarrying fragments of material for new books out of old authors had been a time-honoured practice for medieval writers, as Geoffrey Chaucer and the medieval ballad-singer in "Sir Peter Harpdon's End" understood.

Material culture, so historically ambiguous in the lyric interludes, is alternately a stabilizing and destabilizing force in the tales themselves. It has gone unremarked by critics (perhaps because it is obvious) that *The Earthly Paradise* increases Morris's narratives' dependence upon material objects.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The poetic Morris may even be inhabiting the artistic landscape of fragments of his own future reading experience. The use of willow-boughs to create a hurdle or low wall for the sheepfold was at least as old as the Roman Lucius Columella's *De Re Rustica*, and appears in one of the illustrations (f.70) of the fifteenth-century manuscript of Columella later owned by Morris. Such hurdles also appear in Burne-Jones's illustration for the Clerk's Tale in the Kelmscott Chaucer, as well (Griselda is pictured at the well on page 127 with the fence behind her), and in the unused illustration by Arthur Gaskin for the Kelmscott *Well at the World's End* of the marriage of Ursula and Ralph. Though the examples I cite here are all of Morris's later reading experience, they illustrate the continuity of Morris's medievalist aesthetic, and the pattern is clear of a reader dedicated to extracting from his broad reading varied examples of medieval work and everyday life.

<sup>25</sup> The works of Morris's circle overlap with this volume of poetry, too, suggesting a textual cross-pollination of an ekphrastic kind: Burne-Jones's Pygmalion series, for instance, is

Indeed, there is not a single one of these tales which does not hinge on an artefact of some kind that acts to precipitate or to complicate the plot of its tale. The pope's staff unexpectedly blossoms in "Hill of Venus"; one of Rhodope's shoes is stolen by an eagle; the royal garments are lost in "The Proud King"; a statue mischievously accepts a gifted ring in "The Ring Given to Venus"; and the arrows of Apollo in "The Love of Alcestis," when burnt, call up the god dressed plainly in a "homespun coat" (l. 1099). The world of these romances is a strange and capricious one, in which seemingly inert objects act in unexpected ways. But the everyday history of works and days can also be strongly felt here. The description of the daily lives of ancient men and women may be a way of stabilizing the fantastic romance, or perhaps its very innocuousness is a poetic strategy to set off some of Morris's more extravagant romance uses of material culture. Morris's sense of the everyday life of the past appears in many of *The Earthly Paradise's* descriptive passages, always with an emphasis on the difficulty of life in pre-industrial times. The priest in the "Story of Rhodope," for instance, is forced into versatility:

And the priest wrought, a sturdy carle today  
 Within the hay-field or behind the plough,  
 To-morrow dealing with high things enow. (l. 376-8)

The priest is an integrated labourer after Morris's own heart, appearing in the later lectures as his polymath Icelandic chieftains who are equally at home in the field and the fray. Later, he "hath been afloat / Watching the tunnies" (l. 532-3), and all this description is set against the less-than-idyllic background of the year's long striving while "the meal-ark groweth empty" (l. 337).

With the greater textual space afforded by the success of the early volumes of the sequence, Morris also begins to weave descriptions of medieval domestic things into the poems as well, such as homely "beer-cans" and "bannocks" in "The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon" (l. 1247, 1292) or the similar "coarse food" that fills Rhodope's "wallet" ("The Story of Rhodope" l. 694). Gudrun describes vividly how she "woke, and heard withal the neatherd's song / As o'er the hard white snow he went along / Unto the byre, shouldering his load of hay" ("The Lovers of Gudrun" l. 215-7).

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contemporaneous with Morris's treatment of the theme in "Pygmalion and the Image," as his "Laus Veneris" is with "The Hill of Venus."

The acknowledgement of work and of imperfection has its place even in the most idealistic phases of *The Earthly Paradise*, many passages of which describe at length the husbandry and useful plants of the various lands in which the tales are set. The idealised opening passage of “The Ring Given to Venus,” for instance, elaborately describes madder, woad, and eastern Mediterranean molluscs—traditional raw materials of dyeing, a practice which Morris would famously take up within the next decade—all improbably provided by the same environment (l. 17-26).

Yet the very existence of this kind of improbability or impracticality moves my discussion of *The Earthly Paradise* into an important minor key. Such fantastic elements draw attention to themselves in this work, and sometimes undermine Morris’s increasing emphasis on “real” life. John in “The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon,” wandering the wilderness, finds himself at a fruit tree which

Had load of apples: so he ate  
And found them sweet and delicate,  
As ever monk in garden grew,  
Though little care belike they knew.  
But now, when he had had his fill  
Thereof, there marvelling stood he still,  
Because to one bough blossoms clung  
As it were May, but ripe fruit hung  
Upon the other. (l. 2815-2823)

Just as the romance was capable of stretching across two places at once (the “northe Walez” of *Gawain and the Green Knight*, l. 697, is just one such simultaneously fantastic and real geography in the medieval romance), this mingling of springtide and harvest shows Morris’s romance world as capable of existing across several seasons at once. This wondrous garden has plenty of antecedents in medieval poetry: in the *Romaunt of the Rose*, for example, the narrator claims that the earth in the garden there “was of such a grace / That it of floures hath plente, / That bothe in somer and wynter be” (trans. Chaucer, l. 1428-30). But while Chaucerian dream visions and allegories such as *The Floure and the Leafe* (“as me thought I surely ravished was / Into Paradise,” l. 114-5) followed this conventional extravagance, Morris’s tone when dealing

with natural and unnatural wonders, especially in the framing interludes, is often more literal and subdued (to John, the apples are at first merely “sweet and delicate”). Morris seems to include fantastic environments like this one intentionally to draw attention to them as impossibilities. Their unsettling perfection is a purposeful flaw in the design of *The Earthly Paradise*.

To resolve this fantastic improbability, Morris again emphasizes the physical experience of reading and of hearing the stories. The leisurely verse, the casual acceptance of paradox and wonder in *The Earthly Paradise*, the sidelong glances at a possible peaceful daily life, and the characters’ acceptance of the fragility of their existences, all combine to reveal the acts of reading described in these poems as more collected and less frantic than in the *Guenevere* volume, even when the texts that are read hint at sinister ends. Such reading is often still hesitant, imperfect, or disorienting, however, and is based on texts that are every bit as indistinct or surprising in their form. The mariner in “The Lady of the Land,” for instance, halts at a castle wall (built by “men, in better peace than now they are,” l. 52) to gaze calmly upon an almost illegible artefact that describes a serpent seizing a naked, winged figure:

He dimly saw, although the western breeze,  
And years of biting frost and washing rain,  
Had made the carver’s labour well-nigh vain. (l. 61-3)

The dim seeing here is the result of yet another gap in the historical record; the mariner is at least as interested in the carving because of the social as well as the physical marks of its history upon it (it is an heraldic device “After the fashion of another day,” l. 66). “The Writing on the Image” that piques the curiosity and causes the death of the “Scholar” in the tale of that name is also obscure, not in appearance but in the quaint antiquity of a Latin which now requires translation, reading as it does “PERCUTE HIC: which is to say, / In that tongue that we speak to-day, / STRIKE HERE!” (l. 7-9). Ogier the Dane is unsettled by his discovery after his long sleep of a history book that anachronistically chronicles

The deeds of men whom once he knew right well,  
When they were living in the flesh with him:  
Yea, his own deeds he saw, grown strange and dim

Already, and true stories mixed with lies.

(l. 1004-7)

The passing of time certainly amazes Ogier, but it is the transmutation of his contemporaries' "flesh" into story that disorients him here, and the further mutation of those stories from actual events into "true stories mixed with lies" hints at the conceptual depth that Morris intends these poems to have. Not only does he outline the narrative's history as well as its present (a temporality complicated further by the way the lives of Ogier and Charlemagne in this tale coincide with both chronicle and romance), he undermines his reader's faith in the stability of that history—or, indeed, of all histories.

This consciousness of the possibility of overstepping temporal and physical boundaries is mirrored in the inner frame that describes the experience of hearing the beginning and end of each tale. This moment of reception is partialized as well as particularized: the members of the audience are as likely to drift each into solitary reflection as they are to erupt into spontaneous, fluent conversation about successive topics inspired by the story. After the story of "The Proud King," for instance, the listeners do not think so much of a single moral to the story as they do of diverse consequences to their own reception of it:

some smiled doubtfully,  
For thinking how few men escape the yoke,  
From this or that man's hand, and how most folk  
Must needs be kings and slaves the while they live,  
And take from this man, and to that man give  
Things hard enow. (l. 20-25)

It is typical of Morris that he complicates the notion of power here, suggesting that royalty and slavery are practically interchangeable, that it is equally harsh to be forced to "take [*and to*] give / Things hard enow," and that being in a position of authority is as morally harmful as being in one of subservience. Indeed, it is hard to tell whether the "taking" and "giving" here are of blows or of the fruits of labour, so that it is impossible to tell which verb has "king" or "slave" for its subject in the latter two lines. Morris is now beginning to politicise his verse, and its politicisation is based first on the

materiality of “things,” second upon those things’ “hardness” (alternately “harshly given” or “hard-won”), and finally upon an individuation of the reader’s response to a narrative of the exercise of power (which Morris in the late romances would reject as “mastery”). And yet there is also a tone of equanimity and even resignation in this passage which he would abandon in his later fiction.

Morris does describe relatively egalitarian geographies in *The Earthly Paradise*, yet none of them are directly congruent with Utopia. His description of the land in “The Watching of the Falcon” is characteristic of these:

There maids are straight, and fair of face,  
And men are stout for husbandry,  
And all is well as it can be  
Upon this earth where all has end. (l. 12-15)

Morris’s approving allusion to “husbandry” is some distance from the blissful gardens of the *Romance of the Rose*, and he seizes upon “stout” here as a good heroic adjective for him to apply to farmers, engaged in their own ongoing struggle with the resistance in the materials. The clincher “Upon this earth *where all has end*” provides the requisite note of finality and suggests a running theme of the *Earthly Paradise* sequence. The search for the Earthly Paradise in the poem is generally recognized by critics such as Carole Silver (*Romance* 60) to be intentionally incomplete, curtailed not only by the end of the book and of the storytelling year, but by the failure of the wanderers’ quest and the eventual deaths of the storytellers themselves. The only things certain are striving and the ultimate end of human existence, the latter characterised comfortingly in the next lines as the “gift of Death” (l. 16), which puts an end to a long list of medievalised personifications of various human foibles.

Morris’s celebration of the finality of death in this sequence is more than an aesthetic pose or a juvenile nihilism. He uses it as a delimiter of the narrative and performative boundaries of his tales, and as an opportunity to put forth the doctrine of hope which he would use later to such good effect in his socialist propaganda pieces of the 1880s. As Kiartan says in the hall of Olaf, again situating the poem in a secular, material cosmology:

But if nor Christ, nor Odin help, why, then  
 Still at the worst are we the sons of men,  
 And will we, will we not, yet must we hope,  
 And after unknown happiness must grope,  
 Since the known fails us, as the elders say.  
 ("The Lovers of Gudrun," l. 1630-1634)

Morris's choice of the tactile and tentative word "grobe" here is significant: Kiartan's abstract striving after "unknown happiness" is parallel to the more material strivings of an artist attempting to realize the right pattern as it exists in his mind, or of a farmer looking ahead to a full barn to stave off a hard future winter. As Boos puts it in her introduction to *The Earthly Paradise*, creation and love are ultimately for Morris a "moral imperative" (20). All these patterns of artistic and everyday striving are embodied in Morris's versatile and empowering principle of a "hope" that is simultaneously abstract and material, promising and requiring both mental will and physical work.<sup>26</sup>

Implicit in Kiartan's words, too, in spite of his following qualification that he has known no unhappiness *yet*, is his acknowledgement of the possibility of emotional, physical, or aesthetic failure. Not all artefacts are complete; even the complete ones have flaws. Morris likewise refuses to set a final limit on the narrative of the lives of his storytellers; his refusal is partly logistic (it was already the longest poem in the English language, after all), but it is also in tune with the atmosphere of impermanence that haunts the characters and artefacts in his story sequence. Again, he falls back on the natural delimiter, the physical impermanence of all things, when he asks rhetorically

What further then? Meseems  
 Whate'er the tale may know of what befell  
 Their lives henceforth I would not have it tell;  
 Since each tale's ending needs must be the same:

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<sup>26</sup> This is why it is so shocking that the Pope's *hope* fails in "The Hill of Venus" when he hears the climax of Walter's story ("every hope / Failed with that last word," l. 1458-9). The Pope's conjecture about the blooming of his staff is a negative, and almost even a malediction: "just so much hope I have of thee / As on this dry staff fruit and flowers to see!" (l. 1461-2). In the spiritual sense, he has suddenly lost his faith in miracles; in aesthetic terms, he has lost his capacity to wonder.



And we men call it Death. ("Epilogue," l. 4-8)

The refusal to look beyond the immediate ending of the tales is telling. And yet something exists in that blank narrative space; Morris just doesn't fill it in. The reader himself has work to do to supply it.

Although the storytellers are memorably portrayed by Morris as having stood in arms against Death (l. 82), there is a deep ambivalence here. After all, they are also "those, whose bitter hope hath made this book" (l. 9)—a phrase which seems to imply both that Morris links his notion of "hope" to artistic creativity, and that such creativity could have no pretensions to absolute completeness. Indeed, seizing upon the idea of "making this book," it is obvious that hope is linked to *material* creativity. The word "book," an emphatically materialist phrasing (in a way that "poem" or "tale" would not be), is repeated throughout Morris's epilogue. Relying upon that understanding of *The Earthly Paradise* as a "book," Morris situates his collection at its end for his readers to experience in the same way that a medieval text like *The Canterbury Tales* had come to him: as a tangible collection of textual fragments more or less complete. The positive corollary to this is in the visceral response of the readers themselves, as they imagine a world in which men and women are engaged in adapting to their material circumstances. The notion of social solidarity is present here in the communal practice of storytelling to keep off the dark (critics such as Boos and David Latham have taken this to represent *The Earthly Paradise* as prefiguring Morris's later theme of "fellowship"), but it is worth suggesting here that this poem also includes an early version of what would later appear in Morris's lectures and fictions as a materialist aesthetic based on creativity and use.

This sense of the material book as a physical presence is taken further in the reflective "Envoi" which ends the collection, and which adopts the same autobiographical voice and personal tone as are used in the super-narrative lyric interludes. In the envoi, the poet addresses the book directly, sending it on a (possibly futile) journey much like that of the wanderers whom it describes, and giving it instructions for a future possible meeting with Geoffrey Chaucer himself.<sup>27</sup> The book's imagined address to Chaucer is again

<sup>27</sup> The envoi form addresses itself to a person or object. In the case of Morris's "Envoi," it is to both: first to the book, and then, beginning on line 50, to Chaucer himself (in words which Morris's singer is apparently teaching his book to recite).

indicative of Morris's sensitivity to the work's moment of reception. Morris imagines the book speaking directly to the reader, who is the medieval poet himself, although the addressee may also ambiguously be the future reader as well:

Thou, keen-eyed, reading me, mayst read him [the singer] through  
 For surely is there little left behind;  
 No power great deeds unnameable to do;  
 No knowledge for which words he may not find;  
 No love of things as vague as autumn wind;  
 Earth of the earth lies hidden by my clay,  
 The idle singer of an empty day! (l. 71-77)

The book is a medium through which Morris may make another of his many attempts to connect with the flesh-and-blood people of the past. Here, he even imagines his work being read by a particular medieval reader, reversing the moment of the reading experience. The self-effacing pose of mortal hesitancy that the poet assumes here is characteristic poetic humility, but it also supports my thesis that Morris intends this collection to be received as imperfect, for although he claims here that there is "little left behind" (that is, that the poet has poured his entire self into the process—highly unlikely of a prolific writer like Morris, although he may even have believed it at the time), the poet also suggests elsewhere in the envoi that it is possible that the book might "babble" or "die upon the way" (l. 17, 20). The envoi's address to Chaucer speaks to the work's self-consciousness as an artefact that is incomplete or at least imperfect, and as one that furthermore has been assembled by a maker who has his own personal array of creative limitations. The purpose of this "Envoi" (its name suggests a sending on) is for the author to relinquish the book and figuratively to convey it to its audience, which is imagined at various levels of the narrative as being medieval and modern, old and young, famous as Chaucer and obscure as the critics implied in the envoi. Similarly, the book may be alternately "mocked or clean forgot" by its audience (l. 9), and Morris imagines several alternate histories for it, not excluding happy critical success (reaching "The Land of Matters Unforgot," l. 33). But the singer's final statement of purpose is best understood as one that speaks to his historical sense and creative practice:

and if indeed

In some old garden thou [the book] and I have wrought,  
And made fresh flowers spring up from hoarded seed,  
And fragrance of old days and deeds have brought  
Back to folk weary; all was not for nought. (l. 106-110)

The sentiment and the whiff of nostalgia are not strikingly original here. Yet this passage evokes Morris's practice of integrating medieval material into the framework he established (the "hoarded seed" is an even more natural metaphor of organic creativity than the architectural one he would later adopt<sup>28</sup>); it nods to his later collaborative practice (he and the book work creatively together); and it participates in the consciousness of audience which informs the interludes of *The Earthly Paradise*. Most of all this passage evokes Morris's recurrent principle of hope: partial successes are, to the early as to the late Morris, sufficient cause for satisfaction.

While Morris refuses to reveal the future lives of his storytellers except to remind his readers that the universal end is "Death," the envoi does not hesitate to imagine a possible future for the book after the moment of creation. But it includes several possibilities, and the absolute circumstances of the encounter are left quite open. The little fragmentary transhistorical interludes and the abrupt refusal at the end of the poem to assert a single future history for the narrators of the tales are both reflected later in Morris's organic theory of social life and his refusal to imagine an end to history. The relentless physicality of the *Guenevere* poems is tempered in *The Earthly Paradise*, although the tentative connection made here between the artefact as text and the reader, between unfinished materiality and incomplete memory, is retained.

In these stories, artefacts are devices to manipulate the narrative, to underline Morris's characters' delight in beauty, and to reveal their strengths and

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<sup>28</sup> The metaphor is so organic that it may be simultaneously an example and an adaptation of Morris's active reading in one of his "master's" particular surviving works:

For out of olde felde, as men seyth,  
Cometh al this newe corne from yer to yere,  
And out of old bokes, in good feyth,  
Cometh al this newe science that men lere. (Chaucer, *Parliament of Fowls*, l. 22)

imperfections; in his later prose, material culture becomes a site where history is negotiated on a personal and political level. The *Earthly Paradise* is a sign of change in Morris's social outlook: as his aesthetic theory matured, taking on its most strongly politicised features, characters like the "shepherd winding the withy round the hurdle of his fold" or the nameless masons of Amiens would assume greater prominence, while the largely idle knights and ladies typical of the *Guenevere* volume would recede into the background. Morris's emphasis on individual histories over against the grander political narrative was maintained in later years, though in a broader form and with a greater affinity for social history, since his sympathy had never really been with "robber-barons and inaccessible kings with their hierarchy of serving-nobles and other such rubbish" ("The Beauty of Life," CW 22: 56). In these stylised early poems of chivalry and derivative romance the emphasis on everyday lives and human connections among medieval people of often too-literal flesh and blood would prepare Morris for his later sympathy with the experience of the masses who negotiate their lives on a daily basis without regard to state or king. The early protagonists' incompletely-realized fantasies and active aesthetic sense, on the other hand, would grow into something even greater: the conviction that an ongoing and creative engagement with the material conditions of art and everyday life was essential to human happiness.

**“A UNION OF THE ARTS”: MATERIAL CULTURE  
AND MEDIEVAL EVERYDAY LIFE IN MORRIS’S  
SOCIALIST LECTURES AND FICTIONS**

Just as *The Earthly Paradise* brings together disparate pieces of medieval story and integrates them into several temporal frameworks, so during the 1880s, Morris’s writing begins to draw upon ever more wide-ranging examples to illustrate his theories of the relationship between creativity and social life. By this point, Morris’s understanding of medieval primary texts had grown still more broad than it had been in the 1850s and 60s, and he had added to it a growing command of the catalogue of medieval art and architecture; his agenda became correspondingly more ambitious in its scope, encompassing art, architecture, literature, and history. It is at this point that Morris begins to make his most pointed and historically precise statements of his perception of the permeability of the borders, not only between the various decorative arts, but between those arts and the written word. This negotiation of the variety of possible kinds of art and of artistic practices shares its method with his theory that “architectural” design drew together all the various material crafts, and that “a work of architecture is a harmonious co-operative work of art, inclusive of all the serious arts” (“Gothic Architecture,” AWS 1: 266). His theory of material culture in this statement has a lot in common with his understanding of historical social life, in which men and women needed to be capable of various kinds of craft and of work, and in which there could be no true understanding of the life of the past without the recognition that it was complex, and made up of, as Kropotkin would put it, “thousands of small facts.”

The “harmonious, co-operative work of art” is a running theme in Morris’s work, seeming to refer at some times to a process of co-operation on the part of individuals, and sometimes to the arrangement of a beautiful and/or useful array of objects. Moreover, a work of architecture is “inclusive” for Morris and thus diverse and eclectic; it includes interior as well as exterior spaces, items of beauty as well as items of use; and it shows the creative impulses of various hands and the marks of its use at various historical periods. Because Morris always links architecture and history in this kind of

social theorising, it is impossible to underestimate the significance of his narrator's having characterised *A Dream of John Ball* (1886-7), his propagandistic dream-vision of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, as an "architectural dream"—that is, as an immersive personal inhabitation or re-creation of all the facets of past life, just as *News From Nowhere* does its best to imagine the totality of everyday existence under Morris's ideal conditions of social life.

Such an attempt at total reconstruction or extrapolation would necessarily be incomplete, like the surviving fragments of medieval material culture themselves. There can only be, as Morris says in the same lecture, a tantalizing material record that "will remember the history of the past, make history in the present, and teach history in the future" (AWS 1: 285). It is significant that in this description it is the architecture itself, rather than the solitary heroic architect, which remembers, makes, and speaks, and that it endures over time, fulfilling different roles in different epochs. It is equally significant that memory is necessarily partial, creation imperfect, education biased, and utopia tainted. Even this promising "architectural" dream of the social life of England in 1381 naturally fades; the alienation that the narrator of *A Dream of John Ball* feels from this personal experience of past life is social, material, and historical, stemming from a forboding sense that the experience is only partially imagined and necessarily incomplete. In a way, this is the natural result of Morris's emphasis on the diverse artistic life of the past: because he must imagine so many different objects of material culture and aspects of social life in order to complete his description, he is conscious that a complete picture of the everyday life of the past continually fades at the edge of his vision, just beyond his grasp. But he is determined to make the picture as complete as possible in all its component parts, not least because, as he says in his 1889 review of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, "variety of life is as much an aim of true communism as equality of condition" (AWS 2: 507).

### 1.

#### *An Architectural Dream*

MORRIS'S DESIRE to evoke a diverse range of voices and of historical artefacts is paralleled in the opening of *A Dream of John Ball* in the varying degrees of

realisation of the architectural fragments of the past. In that opening framing fiction, the narrator begins by recounting the various fragments of domestic architecture that he has seen at other times in his sleep. His initial characterisation of such dreams as a “peep-show” speaks simultaneously to Morris’s creation of a self-deprecating narrative voice and to the way that past material culture appears in the dream as half-glimpsed through the twin lenses of history and imagination:

This dream [Morris writes] is as it were a present of an architectural peep-show. I see some beautiful and noble building new made, as it were for the occasion, as clearly as if I were awake; not vaguely or absurdly, as often happens in dreams, but with all the detail clear and reasonable. (CW 16: 215)

In spite of his assertion that he sees “all the detail clear and reasonable,” Morris betrays in his next few examples the fact that the examples of medieval architecture he sees are rarely “new made,” and that he most naturally envisions them as existing in a cross-temporal context. Morris sees in his dreams, for instance, “Some Elizabethan house with its scrap of earlier fourteenth-century building, and its later degradations of Queen Anne and Silly Billy and Victoria, marring but not destroying it, in an old village once a clearing amid the sandy woodlands of Sussex,” or an Essex farm complemented by a contiguous “fragment of fifteenth-century domestic architecture.” Characteristic of Morris’s sense of buildings enduring over time with the marks of their use on them, there are, in the single “Elizabethan house” here, the visible signs of five different ages of architecture (or even six if one includes the primal clearing in the Sussex forest). Context is everything for Morris; to him, buildings are always historically accretive products of the places and the times through which they endure.

It is easy to pass off Morris’s claim to have dreamt in medieval vernacular architecture as figurative at best, pretentious at worst. But if he is posing, he is at least consistent: in a letter to Georgiana Burne-Jones of 13 May, 1889 (several years after *A Dream of John Ball* was serialised in *Commonweal*), Morris describes seeing Edington church “like one of my dream-churches, so big and splendid” (*Letters* 3: 57) on a trip to Bradford. In the same letter he notes a fifteenth-century bridge “with a queer little toll-house on it,”



and the big fourteenth-century tithe barn at Barton Farm—“very fine, but I think Great Coxwell is bigger, and I like it better” (3: 58). Like *News From Nowhere* and like Morris’s personal responses to medieval architecture in its various manifestations, *A Dream of John Ball* is a highly personalised vision of the past,<sup>29</sup> a vision informed by an ongoing personal experience of historical domestic architecture and moreover one which, though preferring some examples to others, did not perceive even the barns of the Middle Ages as uniform objects.

Like the qualitative and stylistic variations Morris notes in his personal experience of the surviving relics of medieval architecture, there is a significant sense of progression towards completeness throughout Morris’s list of past dreams on this first page of *A Dream of John Ball*. The dreamer’s list culminates in one single manifestation of an entire medieval town, a mirage which feels like the *Pearl*-poet’s momentary vision of a completely realised but inaccessible New Jerusalem:

as once, when I was journeying (in a dream of the night) down the well-remembered reaches of the Thames betwixt Streatley and Wallingford, where the foothills of the White Horse fall back from the broad stream, I came upon a clear-seen mediæval town standing up with roof and tower and spire within its walls, grey and ancient, but untouched from the days of its builders of old. (CW 16: 215-6)

But this dreamed medieval town, in spite of its placement in a spot which Morris knew personally,<sup>30</sup> is merely an outward shell, like a movie set composed of false fronts; the dreamer makes no mention of inhabitants. The logical next step for the dreamer is a full realisation of the dream, moving inward to the personal experience of medieval interior domestic architecture.

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<sup>29</sup> His contributions to the socialist literature of the 1880s are among the most personal of Morris’s writing, partly because he had reached maturity and was in the mood to be contemplative, but perhaps also because such personal touches (like the “terrible socialist posers” of the framing fiction to *John Ball*, or the debate that opens *News From Nowhere*) helped in a journalistic fashion to maintain a conversational connection with his socialist reading audience.

<sup>30</sup> This palimpsestic sense of place is a repeated motif in Morris’s lectures and fictions. The White Horse Hill near Uffington is another locale which recurs in his lectures and romances as a place where he could see the past rise up through the present like a palimpsest (“The Hopes of Civilization,” CW 23: 62; “Early England,” *Unpublished Lectures* 171; and even *The Well at the World’s End*, CW 18: 19).

The setting of *A Dream of John Ball* is a fourteenth-century village in Kent. In it, the narrator experiences first-hand the furnishings and construction of a medieval tavern, church and home, and is finally, but only momentarily, allowed the nearly-complete inhabitation of the past which had been Morris's own long-standing desire.

Like the “damp, dark Poitevin church” of “Sir Peter Harpdon’s End,” Morris observes individuality in each of his imaginative reconstructions of medieval interior and exterior architecture, making each of varying finish or construction depending on its historical provenance and on the available technology or materials.<sup>31</sup> Will Green’s one downstairs room in *A Dream of John Ball*, for example, is “bigger . . . and handsomer” (CW 16: 258) than the older and more roughly-used parlour of the Rose tavern. Will Green has stone walls on the lower floor of his house, which is as much to say that his home is newer than the Rose—though neither building is as rich as the house of the despised parson, fled in the path of the rebellion, the solid stone of which gives a sign of the well-established worldly wealth of the medieval church while its rounded arches hint at a Romanesque antiquity. Morris’s narrator is impressed by the old oak in the parlour of the Rose, and by its rose-themed wall painting (an ornamental practice in which he himself and his artistic friends worked in their own homes, not to mention on the ceiling of the Oxford Union<sup>32</sup>), but he appreciates still more the increased solidity of Will Green’s sturdy stone walls and the hangings thereon. Those hangings are “coarse loosely-woven stuff of green worsted with birds and trees woven into it” (CW 16: 258), close in spirit to the Woodpecker tapestry which Morris himself had recently completed in 1885; or, perhaps more likely, to the wryly-nicknamed “Cabbage and Vine,” Morris’s much rougher first attempt at tapestry (1879), which now hangs in Kelmscott Manor. In his discussion of the wall hangings in Will Green’s house, Stephen Eisenman points out the “Bird” wall hanging that Morris himself adopted for his own drawing room (Eisenman 92; for a photograph of the drawing room, see Parry, *William Mor-*

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<sup>31</sup> He was an early proponent of conscious attention to construction with local materials (see, for example, “The Influence of Building Materials Upon Architecture” in CW 22: 391-405, given as a lecture in 1892).

<sup>32</sup> For the suggestion that Morris has yet another material inspiration for the parlour of the Rose, H. N. Humphrey’s *Illustrations From Froissart*, see Stephen Eisenman, “Communism in Furs: A Dream of Prehistory in William Morris’s *John Ball*” (92).

ris 230 ). Eisenman's suggestion is indicative of a strong understanding of the way that Morris liked to infiltrate his fictions and social history in general with his personal experience. And yet somehow the "Cabbage and Vine," a homelier example and certainly more "loosely woven" than the finer, later piece that Eisenman chooses to connect with Will Green's house, seems to me more fitting in its "coarseness" as the kind of rough serviceable tapestry that Morris characteristically prefers to describe.

In exterior as in interior, there is variety among the various dwellings Morris finds in his journey to the medieval past. That variety relies upon the individualised variety of ornament and implement, which relies in turn upon the taste and ability of maker and user (both of whom are active participants in Morris's famous equation of beauty and use). And while such diversity has some of its basis in Morris's imprinting of the medieval class structure upon its architecture (he has little good to say of the parson's house, save that some of its old arches are "handsomely carved"), their outward physical descriptions also situate the buildings of the Kentish village in an ongoing fluid historical context. The Romanesque arches of the ancient part of the established parson's house show it to be older than the other houses, while its more recent addition (the hall) shows new money's hardening effect on the division between estates. I have already described how the stone lower floor of Will Green's house situates it even from the outside as being in a more contemporary style than the Rose tavern. But the interiors, too, give clues: wall-painting such as that which appears in the Rose is, according to Morris's source, John Henry Parker's *Some Account of Domestic Architecture in England, from Edward I to Richard II* (48), an older fashion that gives way in the fourteenth century to tapestry like the hangings at Will Green's.

This juxtaposition of various historical styles close upon each other is not accidental: with it, Morris creates a sense of continuity through time, of new styles supplanting old in an organic process. Morris had always been highly conscious of this historical continuity: as he says of the restoration of Tewkesbury Abbey in a letter of 7 June, 1877 to the *Athenaeum*, "I am not quite sure that I should wish to see Tewkesbury Abbey 'replaced in its former state,' or one of its many 'former states'" (AWS 1: 107). In the same way, each successive architectural work described by Morris occupies its own place in history or

in an ongoing tradition of craft, as when the chancel of the village church is described as “so new that the dust of the stone still lay white on the mid-summer grass beneath the carvings of the windows” (CW 16: 218). This fresh dust reflects Morris’s recognition of the artisan’s silent and ongoing role, as does the “varied glazing” in the chancel windows, where the narrator notes in an aside that “one window before me had as yet nothing but white glass in it” (CW 16: 284). The nave, by way of contrast with the chancel, is “somewhat old” (CW 16: 262), a detail which speaks, like the addition to the parson’s house, to the accretive construction of a medieval church (some of the cathedrals took centuries to build).

Morris’s theorised organic historical continuity necessarily created a domestic architecture that is as heterogeneous as the possible range of aesthetic responses to it. Margaret Grennan, whose 1945 work *William Morris: Medievalist and Revolutionary* is highly sensitive to the solidity of material culture in Morris, characterises the church of the Kentish village in *A Dream of John Ball* as “a vision for the secretary of Anti-scrape!” (86), and thus as a complete imagining of the now-fragmentary artefacts of the past. But Morris’s medieval artefacts even when new-made are built on and around past fragments; like the narrator of a medieval dream-vision, which reveals its truths only deceptively in varying degrees, this narrator acknowledges that his own grasp of the past is incomplete. Not only does he see the past in splinters, as the framing passage of the “architectural peep-show” reveals, but he apologetically recognizes his own inconsistencies. In the Rose, certainly a weaker and harder-used exemplar of medieval craft than the church or even Will Green’s house, the wall-painting is “roughly done, but with (it seemed to my unused eyes) great skill and spirit” (CW 16: 221), a passage which suggests that the narrator is aware of the limitations of his own receptivity, and is self-consciously succumbing to the strangeness of the place.

Finally, even this promising “architectural” dream of the social life of England in 1381 naturally fades; the alienation that the narrator of *A Dream of John Ball* feels from this personal experience of past life is social, material, and historical, stemming from a foreboding sense that the whole experience is in fact only partially imagined and necessarily incomplete. In a related rhetorical manoeuvre, the narrator claims only to partly remember the scraps

of balladry sung by the men in the Rose (“thus much I remember of it”). One of those songs is even abruptly cut off by another song outside heralding the arrival of John Ball, and the narrator characterises the first song of Robin Hood that he hears as “one of those ballads which in an incomplete and degraded form you have read perhaps” (CW 16: 224). Just as he infiltrated “Sir Peter Harpdon’s End” with a half-heard scrap of medieval song, Morris again describes the popular culture of the past only obliquely, integrating its fragments of textual architecture into his narrative and wryly accounting for their incomplete state alternately by his narrator’s faulty memory, by a shift in the narrative, and by the hazards of textual transmission and the impermanence of the written word. He finds the same pattern in the adaptation and reception of textual survivals as he does in the re-creation and experience of material ones.

## 2.

### *The Articulate Artefact: Social History and Material Culture*

THE ARCHITECTURAL EXTRAVAGANCE native to the fourteenth-century dream-vision obviously appeals to the narrator’s aesthetic sense, and the dream-frame understandably undermines the reader’s faith in the dream’s historical veracity, but the most successful, and most characteristic, moment of this dream-vision is resolutely materialist and humble: it describes, not a fantastic wonder, but a single documented historical artefact. The narrator finds himself at his deepest point of immersion in the social life of the fourteenth century at the moment when he is partaking physically of a communal meal in the house of Will Green and watching a shared cup go round the table accompanied by toasts to solidarity and “fellowship.” The cup is a tangible thing in which each member of the company can share:

it was of light polished wood curiously speckled, with a band of silver round it, on which was cut the legend, *In the name of the Trinity fill the cup and drink to me.* (CW 16: 260)

Such artefacts of medieval material culture are scattered throughout Morris’s works, described always in such sharp detail, and often given such spe-

cific places and roles in the social fabric. Here it is a symbol of solidarity and continuity: by drinking in their company, Morris shares as far as he can in the fellowship of the workers of the medieval past he so admired. Just as important, that bowl, or “mazer” (so called from its construction out of maple wood), is, as Margaret Grennan remarks,

an actual medieval vessel. It is an illustration in a book Morris undoubtedly read [in fact, it was one of his favourite source-books, according to Fiona MacCarthy 213-4], John Henry Parker’s *Some Account of Domestic Architecture in England*, Oxford, 1853. There it is fully described and its legend given. (Grennan 158n)

The description that Morris gives is almost identical to Parker’s, down to the embossed silver rim and the legend, although Parker gives the wood as being specifically “highly polished maple” (62), and Morris standardizes the spelling for his modern readership.

That “band of silver” around the mazer from which Morris’s medieval socialists drink is, in a way, problematic. Silverwork seems an ostentatious display of wealth for even a “handsome yeoman’s dwelling” (CW 16: 257) in medieval Kent, and Parker’s assurance that “the mazer bowl was a vessel in use among all classes during the fourteenth century” (61) does not entirely reassure the reader of Morris’s historical fidelity here. Morris may have given it to the peasantry of fourteenth-century Kent as a levelling gesture, or as an illustration of his thesis that devotion to the decorative arts was equally distributed among the classes in his favourite period (as he claims in “The Art of the People,” “The throne of the great Plagenet, or the great Valois, was no more daintily carved than the seat of the village mass-john, or the chest of the yeoman’s good-wife,” CW 22: 41); alternatively, perhaps this mazer was just too striking an artefact to pass up. His narrator finds an unmatching “big salt-cellar of pewter” in the centre of the table (CW 16: 258), and that seems to be made of more fitting material; it, too, has its parallel in Parker as “the chief ornament of the board” (59), and Morris has exercised restraint in not making it as “ornamental and grotesque” as it appears in Parker. But Will Green’s mazer is of a richer material for a reason, since its status as an exemplar of craft means that it is designed to be brought out at those moments when ideals are to be remembered and foregrounded (unlike, say, the plain



everyday pewter pots at the Rose tavern). Moreover, it is folkloric and persistent; as an heirloom, it takes the long view. A similar shared, ancient cup appears in Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1873), the "God-Forgive-Me" (91), whose status as a tangible inherited item is as much a part of its importance as the circumstances of its reverently being handed around among the communal drinkers. Like the "hurdles" that make up the sheep folds in both the novels of Hardy and the August interlude of the *Earthly Paradise*, the mazer is partly a revival (resurrected by Morris from a text, in fact) and partly a survival; like Hardy, Morris is interested in those places where present and past moments can be blurred together, and where history pushes itself forward into modern everyday life. Similarly, the Early English Text Society's *Earliest English Wills* (1882), certainly known to Morris, reveals the disposition across generations of many such domestic serving items, including a "maser of a vine rote, the which was my faders" (56) bequeathed by Roger Flore in 1424 to his own son Thomas.<sup>33</sup> If on a social level and on an individual level, Morris modifies the utopian impulse with his acknowledgement that perfection is unattainable, even undesirable, there are values he does hold dear: the survival and revival across time of shared beautiful material things is one; the communal act of sharing drink is another; and a third is the principle of hopeful striving for the future good which Morris's narrator and John Ball here both link to the ideal of "fellowship."<sup>34</sup>

It is typical of the solidity of Morris's medievalism that this cup, a detail in one of his fictions, should stem from the adoption of an actual historical example. As always in Morris, such a relentless particularity is not (or not

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33 Yet another mazer appears in Henry Shaw's *Dresses and Decoration of the Middle Ages*. It is from the reign of Edward III and is inscribed "Sayn Denes yet as me dare, for his lof drink and make good cher" (56). Morris owned many of Shaw's lavishly illustrated works on medieval art and architecture.

34 It is worth suggesting here the way the heteroglot nature of the word "fellowship" evokes a diverse set of historical reader responses. In Malory the word appears describing knightly bands, loosely organized and coming together pragmatically, but bound by personal loyalty; in Langland it refers to Christian communal spirit, and in the Pastons it suggests a more mundane friendship. Morris's readers might react to the word's connotations of free association and comradely warmth; the township of Walthamstowe, which has borrowed "Fellowship is Life" for its motto (conveniently avoiding the less sunny second half of John Ball's gnomic) might intend it in another, more boosterish way; and Morris himself, steeped in the three medieval authors as well as many others, might perceive it in the light of its diverse associations with his personal reading. Better yet, all these responses are not mutually exclusive.



only) intended to underline an antiquarian devotion to historical veracity; rather, the surviving artefacts and landmarks of the past speak in Morris's work to a future social renewal as well as to their social roles in past and present daily life. That "speaking" on the part of the shared cup even turns out to be literal, since the mazer is inscribed with the words "fill the cup and drink to me." The "me" of the legend may be the mazer itself, which (I have suggested) embodies fellowship and the creative impulse. In that sense, the legend on the mazer may represent the subordination of momentary ego to permanent creativity, of individual gratification to participation in the golden chain. Another, sociological, reading is that the cup is literally inscribed with the circumstances of its use: one drinker fills the mazer and drinks to the health of the previous drinker, then passes the mazer on to the next, reading/reciting the legend to his neighbour ("drink to *me*"). Such a ritual is fittingly social and unselfish, but that neighbourly toast is not the same as the exalted commentary that Morris puts in the mouth of his medieval social drinkers, each of whom looks beyond his immediate circle to a larger shared "fellowship" that is geographically or chronologically remote (away in the smithies; ten years in the future; and utopian, respectively). Of course, it seems unlikely that Morris had felt the need to think through these diverse consequences to his narrative, and the legend itself seems not quite to fit either reading. But both interpretations inscribe the medieval artefact simultaneously with the circumstances of its use and ongoing material existence, and Morris was undoubtedly drawn to the mazer as a representative medieval artefact, as well as to its status as an object that integrated language and craft to articulate his vision of a social, multivoiced art.

Each of the speakers at the dinner drinks (pointing his words ambiguously in the direction of the cup or of his neighbour) to a different aspect of the revolution. The dreamer's yeoman host, Will Green, drinks to "the wrights of Kent, who be turning our plough-shares into swords and our pruning-hooks into spears!" The idealistic priest John Ball drinks thoughtfully to "Ten years hence, and the freedom of the Fellowship!" And the dreamer himself, transported to the historical past, drinks characteristically to the utopian far future: "Tomorrow, and the fair days afterwards!" (CW 16: 260).

There is a diversity of sentiment here that relies simultaneously on the same diversity of opinion that marks the “vigorous” socialist debate in the framing fiction of the first pages of *News From Nowhere* (“there were six persons present, and consequently six sections of the party were represented,” CW 16: 3) and on the diversity of interest and ability that Morris felt was essential to creativity.

The message of the cup may be imperfectly understood by each speaker, and each of the hoped-for changes may in the end be imperfectly carried out; but each speaker contributes and in each case the sentiment is more or less fitting. The variety of voices at the table speak within a shared organic social tradition, just as the social theory of Morris sought to make room for “variety of life” under an accompanying “equality of condition” and just as Morris’s vision of architectural construction as “an harmonious co-operative work of art” dehierarchized the multifarious component arts that he felt went into every medieval building. The revolution was to be carried out by a variety of talents working in solidarity, just as *News From Nowhere* was to be populated by a variety of characters not always in stock utopian harmony, and just as a truly “architectural” building was to be made by the collaboration of a variety of crafts. That is, Morris is thinking in terms of collaborative processes rather than of hegemonic goals; and processes, unlike goals, are relatively forgiving of momentary individual imperfections.

In the case of this fourteenth-century communal dinner, the present opinions figure various kinds of abstract social-revolutionary thought and degrees of self-consciousness. Each view is poetically expressed, but each is undermined by a certain limited perspective. The most immediate, visceral view of history is represented by Will Green, who thinks solidly in terms of tools, labour, and the pragmatism of revolutionary violence. John Ball, who at this point in the narrative has strict bounds to his historical sense (which is perhaps self-imposed: “ten years” and only his own generation of radicals), represents the medium-term view. His expectations, when he looks to the success of his “fellowship” and to the possibility of an earthly paradise, are distinctly mundane. And Morris, with his narrator’s own vague but heartfelt toast to a future which he knows to consist of the destruction of the immediate rebellion, reduces himself again, self-deprecatingly, to a “dreamer of

dreams.” In the process he isolates himself purposely but unhappily from a world which, he makes abundantly clear elsewhere, is less self-conscious than his own nineteenth century, and is more likely to leave its creative mark upon the history of everyday life.

If the mazer at the dinner at Will Green’s is the closest Morris comes to a total interaction with the material and social past in *A Dream of John Ball*, the withering of the poppy during the vigil in the church marks that interaction’s decline into abstraction. The cup is an expression of fellowship, a manifest immediate embodiment of shared social ideals. The poppy, on the other hand—held by the narrator alone in a dated Pre-Raphaelite pose—is ambivalent, a mere symbolic interpolation. Unlike the cup, the flower has overtones of ephemerality, representing the narrator’s fading grasp of his tangible “architectural” dream even though, participating as it does in the High Art traditions of Pre-Raphaelitism, it should be exalted as being more philosophical and idealistic than the cup. The flower may be said to represent the narrator’s personal, selfish grasp of the past, as well as his immersion in the long dull theoretical exchanges in which he and John Ball engage. It is no accident that the narrator keeps trying to tear himself away from these abstract discussions with the visionary John Ball and to return to the earthier world of Will Green. The flower is a mute aesthetic symbol rather than an enduring artefact of daily use. The cup, on the other hand, is beautiful, sensual, and articulate.

The poppy to which the narrator so desperately clings is not an organic artefact but, precisely the opposite, a mere literary image. Plucked from the soil, existing momentarily, and decaying, its symbolism rooted in the abstractions of egotistic theoretical imagination, it speaks only to the moment. The poppy wilts in time with the narrator’s relinquishing his utopian vision, while the mazer speaks across generations. And yet the historical Morris, although moving toward a radical, nearly-materialist world-view, felt no need to quite relinquish his Pre-Raphaelite attraction to the beautiful, which after all was necessary to him if he was to evoke the past even imperfectly. The narrator, like any dreamer who is conscious of dreaming, knows that he must eventually give up the solid part of his vision and fall back upon his literary imaginings of the past. As the dream fades into waking, the narrator

reminds me of no one so much as Cervantes, highly conscious of the historical transience of fashion, who felt obliged to make a bonfire of his beloved tradition of romance because he knew its time had come.

### 3.

### *The Shadow of the Coming Commercialism*

THE MESSAGE OF THE MAZER is one of co-operation and fellowship, and yet the reaction of each speaker is as individualized as the artefact is. Each reacts as a single, everyday participant in a popular historical process. The same impulse to a participatory theory of history leading away from grand narratives and towards recreating a people's history of the Middle Ages leads Morris, in reviving the 1381 Peasants' Revolt and the contemporary Revolt of Ghent as essential events of medieval popular history, to disdain the importance of even such (for nineteenth-century historiography) epoch-making affairs as the Saxon shouldering of the Norman Yoke. Had Harald not been defeated at Hastings ("Senlac"), Morris writes,

For my part I doubt if the difference would have been great. In the next two hundred years the real popular history of Europe is comprised in that of the guilds, which after a long struggle established their control over all industry, yet in the end too late to prevent their falling in their turn under the double curse of bureaucracy and commercialism. ("Early England," *Unpublished Lectures* 176-7)

Morris again purposefully overlooks the deeds of kings in his writing of history; elsewhere, he off-handedly dismisses "the various troubles of a new French war of Henry V.'s time, and the War of the Roses," as mere "faction fights" ("Feudal England," CW 23: 56). He seizes instead upon the institution of the guilds to illustrate his theories of medieval social organization, passing over the grand narrative of named kings and knights in favour of co-operative bodies of men largely unknown to the totalizing processes of the historical record. It might be expected that Morris's sympathy would be strongly with the guilds, as associations arranged around both craft and mutual aid, and indeed in his lecture "Art and Industry in the Fourteenth Century" he follows this tack. Critics such as Jennifer Harris, in her intro-

duction to the exhibition catalogue of *William Morris and the Middle Ages*, often rely too heavily on the parallels between Morris's ideal collaborative practice and the closed guilds of the late Middle Ages. Other critics (Margaret Grennan, for example) have discussed in more depth Morris's knowledge of contemporary debates surrounding the guilds' political intentions and significance (Grennan 68-70),<sup>35</sup> and their relation to the ambivalence Morris felt towards the guilds.

The guilds are certainly significant to Morris as corporate bodies meant to build up a network of craft, solidarity and collaborative support outside the established state; but he consciously problematizes their historical significance, acknowledging for example their failure to break through the stratifications of class. Although on the surface the guilds seem to represent an association of artisans working together for mutual aid ("secular combination among free men," as he calls it in "Architecture and History" CW 22: 303), to Morris the guilds unavoidably fall under "the shadow of the coming commercialism:"

as soon as men came into existence that were not serfs, and were not nobles, they had to struggle for *status* by organising themselves into associations that should come to be acknowledged members of the great feudal hierarchy. ("Feudal England," CW 23: 54)

That is, the very principle of organization for "status" that originally drove the guilds would prove to be their downfall, since it necessarily implied working only to become part of the system. That is, Morris suggests, the guilds left the realm of popular history, selling out to and eventually becoming part of the artificial crusts of feudal interest and ultimately of capitalist oligarchy. A strong current of regret runs through Morris's lectures and fictional portrayals of the guilds, as he finds in them the rising middle class and a strain of philistinism and avarice that he cannot condone: another battle lost.

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<sup>35</sup> One such debate took place between Lujo Brentano and Joshua Toulmin Smith in the 1870 EETS anthology of documents of *English Gilds* (a volume which was particularly noted in the auction catalogue of Morris's library as forming part of the numerous EETS books in lot 245). Brentano's portion of the debate suggests that a socialist reading of the role of the guild in medieval society was already current. And yet Morris's own ambivalence is forward-looking; modern scholarship on the guilds such as Anthony Black's is careful to remark the guilds' tendency to oligarchy.

The case of the guilds gives Morris a point of reference for the way in which one institution can play different roles at different points in history, being at one point representative of a popular movement and at other points an isolating force. For Morris, socialism is the co-operative and organic principle, while capitalism leads to rigidity and alienation. When the guilds become rigid and stratified, they leave the organic tradition, and are no longer co-operative. While in *A Dream of John Ball*, the “guilds of craft . . . waxing in the towns” (CW 16: 222) act as a sign of the destruction of the feudal order, Morris’s narrative of the decline of the guilds in “Architecture and History” is a narrative of the growing impersonality of the guild structure and the ushering in of a new era of unsympathetic capitalism. Its symptoms are the stratification of classes within the guild itself, the alienation of the worker from his craft, and the passive violence of an increasingly cold and impersonal system. The parallels with his view of “popular” art as it contrasts with “academic” art are striking; although he does not specifically associate academic art with capitalism, the abstracting principle is the same in each case he describes: the Queen Anne “degradations” which he evokes in the introduction to *A Dream of John Ball*, or the destructive “restoration” of Tewkesbury Abbey which he strenuously opposed in his 1877 letter to the *Athenaeum*. The alienation of a society from its first-hand sympathy with the tradition of craft leads in Morris’s view to unthinking acts of violence perpetrated upon the work of art.

#### 4.

### *Negotiating Violence in Everyday Life*

YET IT IS CLEAR from Morris’s works that he felt violence could often also act as a positive force. Even the work of destruction can be infused with his sense of the tactics of everyday life; strife to him, especially “hopeful strife,” is just like work, another kind of striving. Though Morris’s relish for violent action in his fictions might seem at first to run counter to the quiet social histories that this study foregrounds, to Morris it is on the one hand a natural human flaw (the rascal within all our skins, as he would say) and on the other a way of righting wrongs and negotiating conflicts. In a more positive light, violence may even be seen as an aspect of Morris’s vision of inte-

grated labour and well-roundedness: another possible aspect of variety of life. Morris seems to value it, too, as a kind of direct method of conflict resolution; this has a lot in common with his theory of the worker's first-hand relationship to those who will use the product of his craft. As the narrator and John Ball agree in the nave, looking over the bodies of dead friends and foes from the day's battle (CW 16: 266), conflict in Morris's fiction is always an egalitarian activity, being a direct confrontation between equals—even if skill in the fray is unevenly distributed among his medieval people.

In Morris's view of the Middle Ages, then, bloodshed in defence of the social unit seems to be all in a day's work. Morris often makes this thematic connection between violence and labour, as when he chuckles over an Icelandic anecdote in which "one chief says to his brother one eventful morning: there's the calf to be killed and the Viking to be fought. Which of us shall kill the calf and which shall fight the Viking?" ("Early England," *Unpublished Lectures* 185). Indeed, he writes approvingly in the same lecture, drawing on his store of saga incident (which, it is clear from the following, was not limited to memorable *holmgangs* and the burning of homesteads), that even the aggressive Viking was an integrated labourer:

the greater part of the men who harried England were when they got back home respectable agriculturists; yeomen, or at least landlords who were not ashamed to work with their own hands: Gunnar, one warrior, is represented as sowing his cornfield; Arnkel a very great man in Iceland, mending his own gate: King Sigurd the father of King Harald the Terrible who fell near York before our King Harald, is found in his hayfield helping his men get in his hay harvest: the warriors were shipwrights, housebuilders and armourers, and almost every one could [s]ettle a copy of verses on occasion. (169)<sup>36</sup>

For many critics, the heroic battles in Morris's romances have their root in discourses of Victorian manliness and in the explosive feuds of saga literature. Michelle Weinroth, in *Reclaiming William Morris*, describes saga as a narrative of the sublime, participating in an environment of "ascetic rigour and moral strength . . . a sparse sensuality that he could pit against the excesses

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<sup>36</sup> Compare Carlyle, *Heroes and Hero-Worship*: the "right good fighter was also the right good forest-feller" (38).



of Victorian society” (129). As a characterization of the *tone* of saga (and of Morris’s emotional response to anything he perceived as injustice or philistinism), this is revealing; and yet, as the above passage from “Early England and even Weinroth’s own comment on “moral strength” suggest, the saga was also the art-form that for Morris represented a concern with the everyday actions of conflict resolution and the related theme of a direct interaction with one’s immediate environment. To him, the domestic idiom of saga was as striking as its moments of violence; after all, the protagonists of saga literature appear as often in the role of handiworkers as they do as raiders or fighters. They are polymaths: mediators at the Althing, “shipwrights, house-builders, and armourers” on their homesteads, and, under alternate circumstances, poets and warriors.

The insurrectionist project of the Peasants’ Revolt in *A Dream of John Ball* is likewise remarkable for its spontaneity and for its integration of varied labours, as, for example, when “north away John Litster was wiping the woad from his arms, as who would have to stain them red again, but not with grain or madder” (CW 16: 223). In that description, the vivid blues and reds act as material manifestations of Morris’s twin interests, art and revolution. In the woad-stained fourteenth-century dyer, it is easy to recognise the blue-fisted Morris himself, his hands a “woeful spectacle” (as he wrote to Georgiana Burne-Jones on 4 February, 1877, *Letters* 1: 345) in the course of his experimentations with vegetable dyes.<sup>37</sup> It is also no coincidence to Morris that Wat Tyler had “smitten a poll-groat bailiff to death *with his lath-rending axe* for mishandling a young maid, his daughter” (CW 16: 223, my emphasis). Like the pruning-hooks-turned-spears of Will Green’s toast, or the plough-shares that are being beaten into swords (a phrase which relies upon folk wisdom to imply that the swords will someday be transmuted to plough-shares again), the implements of peace are simultaneously the implements

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<sup>37</sup> Not only does Morris inhabit the Middle Ages here, but they reflect him back at himself in the personae he describes. He seems to be constantly measuring himself personally against the ideal figures he finds, and when direct comparisons are made between his narratorial persona with the inhabitants of the past and future the autobiographical persona generally loses out and fails to fit in, like the self-deprecating narrators of Chaucerian dream-visions. But while Morris is willing to acknowledge the incompleteness of his own historical understanding and artistic accomplishments, it is also true that Morris sees some of his own idealised accomplishments and strengths in the action-oriented Norwich dyer, as well as in the determined utopian dreamer John Ball.

of action. The popular movement is recognizable by its adoption of humble tools: when the villagers of Essex arm themselves, Morris is careful to give them “jacks” for defensive armour of the ordinary kind that had been available to the Pastons,<sup>38</sup> rather than an aristocratic kind of armour not fitting their station (such as Jack Straw’s gleaming plate, which only marks him as a member of the sympathetic vanguard). The entire battle scene is described with a similar attention to everyday incidental detail, from the sound, “a clatter like the riveting of iron plates, or the noise of the street of coppersmiths at Florence,” to the frightened cows and geese wandering the field while the archers ply their bows, according to Morris, “like good workmen at peaceful work” (CW 16: 252). These startling similes and juxtapositions are intentional on Morris’s part: they mute the violent sounds of the battle, tempering and even subordinating its adrenaline rush to the calmer everyday life of craft.

Such similes also recall the “real” work that Will Green and the others carry on daily, marking them as versatile, well-integrated labourers: to reverse Morris’s characterisation of the heroes of the sagas, they are “respectable agriculturists” who are also capable of breaking heads when the situation calls for it. Morris’s rhetoric of fighting as “peaceful work” underlines the ideal organic social organization that he has in mind: where the arbalestiers advance in a line, held together by tyrannical force and military discipline, the longbowmen work alongside each other on looser but more effective principles of free association (and work harder as a result). The battle is a microcosm of broader historical processes for Morris, who also opposed a popular organic tradition to an elite academic institution of material culture, and what he saw as the decentralizing impulse of Germanic social organization to the hierarchizing influence of imperial Rome.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> When Margaret Paston writes to her husband in 1449 (according to Gairdner 1:83, although Norman Davis calls it 1448, 13) counselling the purchase of weapons to fend off a violent incursion, among the items she calls for are such simple pieces of armour: “I sopose ze xuld have seche thyngs of Ser Jon Fastolf, if ze wold send to hym ; and also I wold ze xuld gete ij. or iij. schort pelleaxis to kepe with doris, and als many jakkys, and ye may” (“I suppose you should have such things from Sir John Fastolf, if you would send to him; and also I would you should get two or thre short poleaxes to keep at the doors, and as many jacks, if you may,”). Morris owned Gairdner’s 1872 edition of the Paston letters; it, with Scott’s *Border Minstrelsy*, formed lot 1008 of the auction catalogue of his library.

<sup>39</sup> See Salmon, “A Study in Victorian Historiography” and Kropotkin, “Anarchist Tribute.”

I have no desire to make excuses for the cheerful violence of Morris's romances; it seems to stem in part, as Weinroth suggests, from Victorian constructions of manliness, in part from some of the more direct methods of conflict resolution in the sagas, and in part from a socialist advocacy of revolutionary action, none of which really seem like good reasons to kill people, even in fiction. And yet we might find some redeeming features in the notion of activist doing and making that Morris reiterates throughout his socialist propaganda works, and which also seems to stand behind the domestic heroes of his later romances. As the workmanlike battle cries and the strangely peaceful descriptions of violent rebellion in *A Dream of John Ball* as simultaneously work and "play"<sup>40</sup> show, Morris was eager to portray and even to blend all kinds of human activity in his fictions. He would adopt the same strategy in *The House of the Wolfings* a few years later, with his descriptions of the Wolfings' defense of their home, adopting "work" as an essential component of their battle-cry. To him, violence was itself a kind of work, another part of the diverse requirements of everyday life, and an aspect of the "hopeful strife and blameless peace, which is to say in one word, life" that John Ball wishes the nineteenth-century revolutionary as the vision fades for both of them (CW 16: 286).<sup>41</sup>

## 5.

### *Variety of Life and Equality of Condition*

THE TRANSFORMATION or transition of violence into equality is accounted for by Morris through his belief that everyday life must integrate various kinds of work, play, and social interaction to be truly satisfying. Because Morris's invocation of medieval people eating, drinking, loving, quarrelling, and

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<sup>40</sup> Morris uses the term "play" as often as he uses "work" to describe battle in the romances of the 1880s and 90s; for this, he has Anglo-Saxon precedents. In *Beowulf* for instance, where it appears as "lind-plegan" ("shield-play") in lines 1073 and 2039.

<sup>41</sup> The theme of "hopeful strife" is an adoption of past literary themes in much the same way that "fellowship" is above. Morris repeats his vision of the forward-looking and renewing principle of "hope" throughout his works, from *The Defence of Guenevere* on, and it, too, has its medieval original, in the cardinal virtues and elsewhere. For example, in Caxton's *Order of Chivalry*, it appears as one of the "theological" [sic] virtues: "hope is pryncipal Instrument to vse thoffyce of a knyght / like as the honde of a carpenter is pryncipal Instrument of carpentrye" (EETS edition 92). From the Morrisian perspective, it is hard to resist the crafty use of the homely carpentry metaphor in the second line of this passage.

dying is wrapped in his vision of the diversity of everyday life, he doesn't feel the need to add "making" or "working" because to him, all such activities are part of the same pattern. Although Morris had previously claimed that the "real popular history" of Europe in the late Middle Ages was embodied in the history of the guilds, we have seen how Morris found even that institution problematic. Popular history for him was to be found more particularly in the lives of the unknown men and women who created the objects which they and their peers used every day:

The medieval man sets to work at his own time, in his own house; probably makes his tool, instrument, or simple machine himself, even before he gets on to his web, or his lump of clay, or what not. What ornament there shall be on his finished work he himself determines, and his mind and hand designs it and carries it out; tradition, that is to say the minds and thoughts of all workmen gone before, this, in its concrete form of the custom of his craft, does indeed guide and help him; otherwise he is free. Nor must we forget that even if he lives in a town, the fields and sweet country come close up to his house, and he at whiles occupies himself in working in them, and more than once or twice in his life he has had to take the bow or brown-bill from the wall, and run his chance of meeting the great secret face to face in the ranks of battle; oftenest, indeed, in other men's quarrels, yet sometimes in his own, nor wholly unsuccessfully then. ("Architecture and History" CW 22: 312)

Since the social life of Middle Ages was for William Morris inscribed upon its artefacts of craft, the chief protagonist of this enduring popular history was the artisan, in whom independence, diverse capabilities, and a direct relationship between producer and user combine to create the variety of life and equality of condition that Morris desired to see in society. In this passage, Morris is again breaking down illusory boundaries: between the town and the countryside, the worker and the work of art, and even between that work of art and the tool that creates it (since both are made by the same hand). "Tradition," too, is here a way of eliding the alienation of individuals from each other, even across historical epochs: as he says in "Architecture and History," "dead men guide his hands even when he for-

gets that they ever existed” (CW 22: 300).

Morris’s formula of variety and equality maintains its steady focus upon the immediacy of the artisan’s relationship to material culture: the worker in this passage interacts directly with his tools (to the point of creating them himself), with his raw materials (the evocative formless “lump of clay”), and finally with the user of the finished product. He claims elsewhere in the same lecture that the medieval worker “worked for no master save the public, he made his wares from beginning to end himself, and sold them himself to the man who was going to use them.” His counter-example to this practice of direct personal interaction also comes from the Middle Ages, suggesting again that Morris has kept himself informed of the shortcomings of his preferred historical period:

A forestaller was a man who bought up produce to hold it for a rise, a regrater, a man who bought and sold in the same market or within five miles of it. On the advantages of the forestaller to the community it is scarcely necessary to dwell, I think: as to the regrater, it was the view of the benighted people of the Middle Ages that a man who bought, say, a hundred-weight of cheese for 2d. a pound at nine in the morning and sold it at eleven for 3d. was not a specially useful citizen. (“Architecture and History” CW 22: 304)

Oddly, Morris’s ironic commentary is not in accordance here with modern social historians of the medieval ages, who instead consider the regraters to have been desperate bottom-feeders who entered into the practice out of economic necessity, and who never really profited much from it. But it is useful to note here Morris’s typically solid use of material examples (“a hundred-weight of cheese”), his emphasis on local production (slow food) and his advocacy of a first-hand relationship between the producer and the consumer, without the skimming practice of middlemen.

This rejection of middlemen is the same kind of person-to-person interaction that he finds so appealing about Icelandic methods (negotiated or otherwise) of conflict resolution, and is one of the important themes retained from his earlier romantic medievalism (where, for example, he excels above all at describing the single combat and the love affair *tête à tête*). The direct interaction that Morris advocates between the artisan, his created goods, and

the user of those goods transmutes the stark interpersonal conflicts of the earlier poetry into the mutual co-operation of the mature social theories, so that Morris's characterisation of the medieval artisan as having "No master save the public" here becomes not slavery to a Darwinian free marketplace but a free contribution to the common weal. Although coin changes hands in a rather uncommunist manner, the craftsman, simultaneously artisan and supplier, here finds his place as an essential component of a co-operative and collaborative order which has little or nothing to do with a luxurious and predatory aristocracy.

Just as the medieval artisan (claims Morris) sometimes entered into battle on his own account, so he worked and created on his own account. To Morris, this independence of action characterised the strong undercurrent of "real popular history" that ran as a strong current under the froth of the grand narratives of European history. The headman in "A King's Lesson," for instance, tells how he and his fellows will continue to work on their own terms, when the nobles return to their feasting:

I know not what game and play ye shall be devising for to-morrow as ye ride back home; but for us when we come back here to-morrow, it shall be as if there had been no yesterday and nothing done therein, and that work of that to-day shall be nought to us also, for we shall win no respite from our toil thereby, and the morrow of to-morrow will all be to begin again once more, and so on and on till no to-morrow abideth us. (CW 16: 295)

Morris evokes in the words of the headman the repressive hand of the feudal system; but there is also an undercurrent of independent action in his words, an acknowledgement that the very separation between the two nations of rich and poor can lend the latter a kind of independence. Michel De Certeau calls this *la perruque*, "the worker's own work disguised as work for his employer" (25): the practice whereby the underclasses may continue on their daily lives relatively unshaken by the turmoils of the great. Although there is a lot less optimism in the headman's words than in De Certeau's, there is still determination, and Morris might have found wry sympathy with De Certeau's description of the worker's strategy. And yet the Hungarian vineyard workers in "A King's Lesson" do not passively write back from the mar-



gins acknowledging the hegemonic centre; rather, the headsman suddenly stands up in this passage to dominate the narrative point of view entirely, positioning the life of the worker as the central issue while the noble folk are abruptly, imaginatively, erased from the peasants' daily lives ("it shall be as if there had been no yesterday and nothing done therein"), just as aristocrats play little real part in the narrative of *A Dream of John Ball*. This popular history is ongoing and enduring, while the feuding of exalted individuals is a momentary bubble or, as Morris would say, a "faction fight," and the history of everyday life is a socialist book to which the regnal year is but an antiquarian bookmark.

The existence of the feudal peasant is problematic for Morris in comparison with the life of the artisan: the bleak words of the headsman in "A King's Lesson" suggest that Morris was willing to acknowledge this fact when it suited him, and elsewhere he calls the peasant little better than a slave. But this too is part of his acknowledgement of the variety of life, and in many ways his argument about the unskilled (or, rather, less skilled, since Morris would never have called a worker pruning vines in a vineyard or a farmhand bringing in hay "unskilled") medieval worker has much in common with his description of the life of the craftsman. There is even almost an equality of condition between peasant and artisan, since to Morris the only real difference is in the greater presence of authority in the life of the peasant: "What shall ye lack, when ye lack masters?" asks John Ball in his speech at the cross (CW 16: 237). The vine-cultivating Hungarian peasants in "A King's Lesson" are certainly worse off in their masters than the men of Kent in *A Dream of John Ball* (indeed, the men of Kent themselves are "not so hard bested as those of other shires," CW 16: 236<sup>42</sup>), but even the Hungarian peasants receive the generous leavings of Matthias Corvinus's high picnic table. One of Morris's strengths is that he consistently acknowledges variation among the different kinds of medieval societies, just as he suggests that a cathedral like Tewkesbury Abbey existed in "many former states." His sense of the varying material conditions of history and geography remains with him in each of

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<sup>42</sup> This brief aside of Morris's goes some distance towards obviating Margaret Grennan's objection that in *A Dream of John Ball* he had overlooked the special privileges of the historical peasants of Kent (Grennan 105).



his lectures and propaganda works and into the late fantasies, fulfilling his promise that “variety of life is as much an aim of true communism as equality of condition” (AWS 2: 507).

This relative equality of condition that Morris envisioned as existing behind the diversity of medieval life is made clear in *A Dream of John Ball* through artefacts like the banner of the rebels, which is imprinted with a levelling sentiment that seems to thumb its nose at the grand narratives upon which nobility’s status relies. Like the articulate mazer, it is a tangible object made to *speak*, in the tradition of the inscriptions on medieval (and on Morris and Company) tapestries:

a banner on a high-raised cross-pole, a picture of a man and woman half-clad in skins of beasts seen against a background of green trees, the man holding a spade and the woman a distaff and spindle rudely done enough, but yet with a certain spirit and meaning; and underneath this symbol of the early world and man’s first contest with nature were the written words:

*When Adam delved and Eve span,  
Who was then the gentleman?* (CW 16: 227-8)

Stephen Eisenman has dissected the primitivist sentiment of Burne-Jones’s treatment of this image of Adam and Eve for the first book edition of *A Dream of John Ball* (April 1888), examining the symbolism of the banner and locating the philosophical context of its primitive-socialist sentiment in Victorian anthropology (93). In evoking the images on the banner, Morris imagines the medieval rebels to be making historical connections, creating their own socialist forebears in precisely the same manner that he was attempting to recreate the medieval world in the pages of *Commonweal* in the 1880s, with his essays on the “Revolutionary Calendar: Wat Tyler,” on “The Revolt of Ghent,” and here in *A Dream of John Ball*.

I want to locate the significance of the banner even more strongly in its physical form than in its symbolism and iconography; to me, symbolism seems a natural but almost incidental byproduct of Morris’s process of making, while the description of the picture as “rudely done, but yet with a certain spirit and meaning” is as important as the picture itself. Besides

being a tangible example of the way art can thrust itself onto the stage of daily life,<sup>43</sup> the banner is characteristic of the way Morris sees the most ordinary or “rudely-done” objects as capable of being imbued with a political purpose.<sup>44</sup> The illustration’s having been “rudely done” here places the banner with the Cabbage and Vine in the category of Morris’s happy incomplete successes. The banner of the Hammersmith Socialist League was similarly simply made, even though Morris could have put all the art of the Firm into it.<sup>45</sup> That he did not do so speaks partly to the subsumption of his own ego in the movement, and partly to his desire to show that art did not have to be ornate to be worthy of being made part of daily life, and that political sentiment need not be expressed with high-flown rhetoric and flourishes.

## 6.

### *Past, Present, and Future: Social Permanence and Material Instability*

IT IS CLEAR THAT Morris is not speaking of “kings and scoundrels” here when he imagines the users of these simple objects, but of the kinds of medieval people whom he imagines meeting in the streets of a Kentish village in 1381. The laziness of aristocrats who exist only to consume prevents them from participating in the fulfilling process of that daily life just as much as their perceived class-based arrogance does. Their disconnection from the everyday harms them in material and spiritual ways; it shows up their courtly ideals and *grandes passions* as hollow; and it prevents them from finding true artistic or spiritual satisfaction. Morris’s critique of consumer culture is particularly trenchant because it speaks not only to the circumstances of the use of an item, but to that item’s production and to its status as an historical

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<sup>43</sup> This integration of art into one’s daily life was not original to this period of Morris’s thought: it had been part of the aesthetic movement for decades. Public art was one of the things that Robert Browning, for example, found most inspiring about Italy; recall in this connection Leighton’s painting of *Cimabue’s Madonna Carried in Procession Through the Streets of Florence*, which seizes upon the notion of art carried joyfully beyond the walls of galleries.

<sup>44</sup> Morris and Walter Crane’s designs for *Commonweal* and for the membership cards of the Socialist League are well-known examples, prefiguring today’s d.i.y. radicalization of creativity (the zine, the button, the sticker, and political street theatre).

<sup>45</sup> I am indebted to Linda Parry for this observation.

artefact that represents its society to future generations.

It seems to me that Morris means for us to take the rough and ready artefacts of material culture, marked by the sometimes unhappy circumstances of their making and use, as a way of working through the processes of everyday life. We have seen him clutching at the stonework in the cathedrals of North France in order to come personally closer to the masons who built them, and have seen his characters in the earliest poetry build funerary monuments to connect with the ancient bones of lovers. In *A Dream of John Ball*, the narrator, during the vigil over the bodies in the little Kentish church, does not even attempt to resurrect the medieval body, musing that “‘here is no life nor semblance of life, and I am not moved by it; nay, I am more moved by the man’s clothes and war-gear—there is more life in them than in him’” (CW 16: 265). Surprisingly, John Ball agrees (“Thou sayest sooth”). Although material culture in Morris’s work is historically contingent, imperfectly imagined, and more “enduring” than “permanent,” it provides (as the examples of the mazer and the banner show) an avenue through which artistic ideals may be grasped, social possibilities acknowledged, and weaknesses shored up. Not only do medieval artefacts last longer than medieval bodies, in doing so they acquire and bear the signs of their past use and future potential.

By the free sharing of crafted items such as books, pipes, food, and furniture, individuals negotiate the imperfections of their time, creating a social network of shared beauty and utility that lies outside any top-down organization—thus Morris’s temperamental affinity with Kropotkin-style communist-anarchism, and his stated aversion to static and inorganic varieties of state socialism like Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*. Although his ideals with regard to social organization are pan-historical and eclectic, Morris’s positive thinking on ideal society tends to be rather slippery and general in the end. There is something that isn’t quite satisfying about each various social arrangement that Morris thumbs through and discards over the course of his career, and he seems to know it. “Fellowship” is rather an abstract, if pleasing, notion; there are uncomfortable absences in the social fabric of Nowhere in spite of the garrulous answers of Old Hammond and others; in fact, every form of society that Morris imagines in his fictions and in his propaganda has flaws of some kind, though he still rightly takes delight in

the richness and variety of the possibilities that history (past) and the utopian imagination (future) open up. This uncomfortable impossibility of any perfect social arrangement is precisely why Morris always falls back upon or seizes upon the material artefact as a reminder of personal fulfillment and concrete achievement.

Morris saw the lessons of material culture not only in the moment of the artefact's production and in the moment of its enjoyment, but in the shared relationship between the two. Maker and user, for him, are interchangeable roles, and both participate in a mutual process of work and play. To take one example among many of the way Morris imagines this manifested in practice, he posits the following organic relationship in "Art and its Producers," giving the artefact a moment both of creation and of reception:

The carpenter makes a chest for the goldsmith one day, the goldsmith a cup for the carpenter on another—that is, the carpenter makes for his goldsmith friend just such a chest as he himself would have if he needed a chest; the goldsmith's cup is exactly what he would make for himself if he needed one. Each is conscious during his work of making a thing to be used by a man of like needs to himself . . . The chest and the cup, the house, or what not, may be as simple or as rude as you please, but done in the spirit I have told you of, they will inevitably be works of art. (*"Art and Its Producers,"* CW 22: 344)

Everything is here in this tight hermeneutic circle: the methods of production, the impulse to creativity, the manner of the object's use. To these, Morris adds the individuality and useful everyday nature of his preferred works of art, the possible simplicity, "rudeness," or imperfection of the work of art so created, and above all the highly social nature of art and its production. His opposition to mere consumerism is always clear. In "The Aims of Art," for example, he predicts that "men will find out that the men of our days were wrong in first multiplying their needs, and then trying, each man of them, to evade all participation in the means and processes whereby those needs are satisfied" (CW 23: 94). He connects consumerism with the selfish ego, but production and enjoyment are social.

Morris thus rehabilitates materialism as a social good—but only if, like the mazer, it is social in the circumstances of its ongoing use; or if, like the

“somewhat bubbled” glass in the Bloomsbury of Nowhere (CW 16:101), it bears the marks of the humble effort that went into making it; or if, like the rough Adam and Eve banner, it can be simultaneously uplifting and unassuming. He does not require the material artefact to be lavish, and he certainly does not require it to be perfect; but he does require it to be the product of its time, and he does require it to be individualized and thus diverse. Because of this diversity of material culture and of humanity, Morris’s idealism is always tempered with the realism that May Morris noted in her discussion of his mutable and imperfect utopia:

The only real complaint against *News From Nowhere* was that instead of a Celestial City in a new heaven on a new earth it gave us London and the Thames from Hammersmith to Kelmscott, with dustmen and harvesters and watermen and housemaids at their common rounds and daily tasks as usual. Even a murderer was introduced as still possible. The disappointment caused by this was the measure of the inability of most people to conceive that life could be happy if it were real. (AWS 1: 505)

The shadow of mutability hangs even over carefree Dick, who near the end of the dream ponders autumn’s “shorn fields and empty gardens . . . when one almost believes in death” (CW 16: 206). When critics such as Jeffrey Spear characterise Morris’s utopianism as a “vision of summer” (*Dreams* 230), they underestimate the materiality of Morris’s vision, and Morris’s own commitment to describing life in more than a single season.<sup>46</sup> Never in Morris’s fictions (and not even, recalling at least the oppressed peasantry described in the opening lines of “Geoffray Teste Noir,” in the most highly aesthetic of the early poems) does the earth give up its harvest without work on the part of the people. Even in a utopia, workers can fall ill, as Phillippa the head stonecutter does in *News From Nowhere* (CW 16: 174). The seeking of Morris’s heroes and heroines (especially in the early poetry) is often frustrated, fulfillment coming with a hard price if it comes at all. Just as not every building or tapestry will be a model of artistic perfection, so the sensible men and

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<sup>46</sup> For instance, the Burgdalers in the *The Roots of the Mountains* hunt elk in the snow on skis or “skids” (CW 15: 77), appropriately equipped for the season, and Bow-may appears a few pages later wearing “foul-weather gloves” (CW 15: 84).

women of Morris's fictions are willing to settle for relatively humble satisfaction in their social arrangements—that is, when they do not fail outright, as is the fate of many of the heroes and heroines described in *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*, or indeed is the inferred outcome of the insurrection in *A Dream of John Ball*.

The instability of history is a natural corollary to this consciousness of half-success and possible failure. Ellen in *News From Nowhere* understands that the society she is showing the narrator is as capable of mutation as the seasons are, and that history is not static even in utopia: “Who knows? happy as we are, times may alter; we may be bitten with some impulse towards change” (CW 16: 194). Though the author of *A Dream of John Ball* has a strong sense of social purpose, his narrator still stops to ponder “how men fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name” (CW 16: 231-2). In *John Ball*, as elsewhere in Morris, the willingness to hope and to try, whether it be in art or social change (and whether the attempt brings imperfect success or a failure that can be built upon), is essential to social life. Morris's reliance on process and the consequent validity of even the imperfect attainment of one's goals remains consistent whether on the individual creative level or in the course of larger historical movements. The secretary of Anti-Scrape did indeed, as Grennan remarks, dream of past architectural works in the freshness of their making; but he was self-aware enough to acknowledge that his visions of the social life of the past and the future were themselves incomplete and described a social order in constant transition. Just as his organic society will be forced to look without complacency to history and to an uncertain future for guidance, so the artefacts of the medieval past in Morris's social theory are like architectural fragments that can themselves can only dream of comprising an “harmonious, co-operative work of art.” Their dream, like Morris's, is partial and transitory, but always in constant forward motion.

**THE MIRROR OF EVERYDAY LIFE:  
REPRESENTING THE MIDDLE AGES AT THE  
KELMSCOTT PRESS**

The evidence of William Morris's historical reading in the 1880s and 90s is revealed in anecdotes about his life and work, in the circumstances of his acquisition and use of medieval books, and in the form and content of the books that he printed at his Kelmscott Press from 1890 onward. Morris's reading during this period is an ongoing social practice of sharing rare books and manuscripts that undermines stereotypes of the solitary immersion of a "rare book collector" in his library. This social practice also actively connected the reception of old texts to the process of creating new books, since much of Morris's library was purchased with the aim that it should provide his collaborators with examples of the popular reading and arts of the Middle Ages. In his theoretical pronouncements and throughout the creative process itself, Morris consistently works to strip the book of its veneer of authority, resisting the notion of the "rare book" as an object of high cultural mystery and as a commodity. The reading process that inspired the Kelmscott Press figures forth a radical process, not of reading as mere "poaching" on the hegemonic territory of capital and cultural authority, but as an immersive activity, in which any reader is capable of being intimately and actively engaged with the book from the earliest moment of its production. Morris's theory of reading suggests not a reader who encounters authoritative texts as untouchable objects, but a reader who can approach an historical text and creatively integrate it in a new form into his life and work, as an ongoing source of pride in making and of pleasure in reading. For Morris, the processes of reading, writing, and making are closely inter-related and find their form in the material book. When he claims in "Some Thoughts on the Ornamented MSs of the Middle Ages" that "To enjoy good houses and good books in self-respect and decent comfort, seems to me the pleasurable end towards which all societies of human beings ought now to struggle" (1), he adds the book as a material artefact to the holistic framework of "architectural creation" that he had established in the lectures of the



1880s, as a necessary component of the architectural home which included wall hangings, furniture, and tableware. The diversity of talents which Morris drew on for the Kelmscott Press (typographers, printers, artists, publishers, and binders) also recalls his theory of collaborative architectural creation.<sup>47</sup> In Morris's view this variety within the finished product affects the reader's visceral response to the printed book itself as well as the reader's intellectual response to its textual material. Both these responses were intended to be hands-on, simultaneous, and closely linked to creativity: Morris was engaged in vigorously breaking down the distance between the reader, the book, and the circumstances of its production.

In his lecture on "Art, Wealth, and Riches," Morris elaborates upon this collaborative practice as it forms part of an explicitly politicized "popular art," where the artefact is a product of "the co-operation of many minds and hands varying in kind and degree of talent, but all doing their part in due subordination to a great whole, without anyone losing his individuality" (CW 23: 149-50). This collaborative harmony within the creative process (and probably the process of reception as well) has its theoretical counterpart in Morris's architectural "harmonious co-operative work of art." Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, in discussing the relationship of text to illustration in fin-de-siècle printed books in *The Artist as Critic*, adopts an integrative approach to the interplay of word and image; she refuses to give either literature or visual art precedence, but dehierarchizes both arts through the metaphor of the equal marriage. This kind of convergent criticism seems to me to engage usefully with the spirit of Morris's collaborative social and artistic theories. Such a "bitextual criticism" may be taken even further, in an ongoing process involving the integration of type into the *undecorated* page, the choice of paper and material, the construction of the physical book and binding, textual editing, and finally the ongoing experience of readers at various and numerous points along the historical continuum of the life of the book. Adopting the example of Morris, this critical practice may lead

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47 Edward Burne-Jones's often-cited description of the Kelmscott *Chaucer* as "a little like a pocket cathedral" thus not only evokes the sense of wonder that readers and scholars have long imputed to that book, but participates in Morris's own theories of "architectural" creation. His following comment intentionally underlines this connection to Morris's collaborative theory: "My share in it is that of the carver of images at Amiens, and Morris' that of the Architect and Magister Lapida" (Georgiana Burne-Jones, *Memorials* 2: 278).

not only to a bitextual marriage, but a happily open relationship, Morris's "harmonious co-operative work of art, inclusive of all the serious arts."

By a "popular art," then, Morris seems simultaneously to refer to an ongoing creative process to which any worker is capable of contributing, and a practice that is shared by "many minds and hands" at the points both of creation and reception. William Peterson in his *Bibliography of the Kelmscott Press* adds another dimension to this idea of a "popular art," calling the Press in part an exercise in "intelligent popularisation":

Morris and Ellis were aiming at a readable text of broad literary appeal rather than literary accuracy . . . the care with which they printed literary documents, some of them previously unpublished, is remarkable; the Kelmscott Press was, among other things, a pioneering attempt at intelligent popularisation of literary works that in some instances were drawn from obscure sources. (xxvi)

In his introduction to Robert Steele's *Medieval Lore* (1893), Morris praises Steele's modernization of the Trevisa translation of Bartolomaeus Anglicus as "a famous knowledge-book of the Middle Ages" and "a book both agreeable and useful" (AWS 1: 288). The Kelmscott Press's catalogue of biographies, romances, saints' lives, histories, manuals of chivalry, psalters, and hymns was designed to invoke a similar "agreeable and useful" encyclopedic picture of the general knowledge of the Middle Ages, and even (acknowledging our uncertain understanding of the actual circumstances of medieval literacy) of the period's favourite books. Although this chapter is not dedicated to the rich and evocative narrative matter of Kelmscott editions of medieval books such as *The Recuyell of the Histories of Troy* or *The Golden Legend*, a primary thesis of this chapter is that these works are meant to be understood for their literary content as well as appreciated for their artistic qualities. It should not be forgotten that, in addition to collecting and handling medieval manuscripts, early printed books, and books on medieval art and material culture, Morris also read them. To him, they were relics of medieval popular culture, meant to be experienced as art-objects, as reading copies, and as texts that provided a broad and stimulating picture of the everyday life of the past.

In this chapter, I will deal with the creation of the Kelmscott book in three stages, each one corresponding roughly to a different stage of the inception

and creation of a work within the tradition of this “popular art,” as Morris called it. The first is an activist reading which assimilates past artistic and literary models. The second is a creative process which is aimed at making the physical book both beautiful and readable. The third is a process of dissemination which is aimed at making books of historical or intellectual interest accessible and appealing. All three stages are highly social and collaborative, and based on the notion of a “popular art” in all the senses that I use above. Moreover, throughout this process there is a strong consciousness of the physical book: the accessibility of the work is at the forefront of Morris’s mind at every stage. The Kelmscott Press was an opportunity to study past examples of book production, integrating them into the everyday creative life of the present printer and his collaborators; it was a venue for present artistic creativity based on the historical understanding that came out of that study; finally, it was a medium for disseminating beyond that circle broadly representative texts from the past.

It should not be assumed that these stages were strictly partitioned from each other. The organic tradition assumed by Morris entailed, for instance, that the moment of social reading could galvanize writers, printers, and artists to new creative efforts; that the moment of experiencing the disseminated product could be enriched by previous reading of other related books; and that the active moment of design would have the reader in mind. This blurring of temporal boundaries is one of the strengths of Morris’s method. William Whitla suggests an integrative model of “sympathetic translation” to describe Morris’s simultaneous translation and calligraphic inscription of the sagas as an artistic process which links “the conception and meaning of the book to its production, and, simultaneously, to its social function as a co-operative social act” where the material text provokes creative activity on the part of both reader and producer (29). Whitla’s subsequent reading of Morris’s calligraphic practice as “the mediating act of the scribe that transmits meaning from one culture to another” (29) supports my own argument that for Morris the act of reading is tied to his entrenched sense of the book as a physical object, and that the act of conveying (or, etymologically, *translating*) the book to the reader is an essential aspect of the process. The historicist project of the Kelmscott Press was an earnest re-sending of old books to new readers, like translating the relics of the past from one physical location

to another. Where Whitla emphasizes the moment of production, I emphasize the moment of reception, positing further that the establishment of the Kelmscott Press was rooted in Morris's own sense of having long been the beneficiary of a similar *envoieiment* or translation. Grasping after his own connections to the past and looking always to relate his work to his theory of "organic" artistic creation, Morris integrated his own collection of early printed books into his everyday creative life, and imputed to them the same characteristics that he gave to architectural artefacts, adapting them to his environment and surrounding himself with them in his social milieu. Whitla's theory of "translation" accords with my theory that Morris's reading is an active and social process, requiring the hands-on participation of present readers (alternately as collectors, scribes, printers, illustrators, and editors) to convey past texts to future readers.

Because this process is fluid and adaptive, not one of Morris's Kelmscott books may be said solely to be the final manifestation of his "Ideal Book"; rather, each of them, even the famous Chaucer, is a necessarily experimental and transitional step in Morris's apprenticeship in the book arts. Each of the Kelmscott books contextualises itself by pointing backward to its inspirations in early printing and forward to the possibilities inherent in a closer relationship of the printer to his texts, materials, and inherited models. Since Morris was constantly aware that the design ideal he had in mind was one that could be approached but never attained, the historicist practice of the Press was not systematic or partial but holistic, and thus as "organic" as the very eclectic theory of collaborative cross-temporal architectural creation that Morris had long held. This, to me, is a strength and not a weakness of Morris's historical and artistic understanding. William Morris's "typographical adventure" was a process to be enjoyed as an everyday practice, rather than a teleological process towards an imagined culmination of his life-long project.

### 1.

#### *Reading:*

#### *Collecting and the Everyday Experience of the Book*

WHEN, IN HIS "Note by William Morris on his Aims in Founding the Kelmscott Press," Morris claims that the layout of the page "should be easy to

read, and should not dazzle the eye, or trouble the intellect of the reader” (75), he is suggesting not a passive reading experience, but an active one that breaks down the distance between reader and book.<sup>48</sup> Since one of the prime tenets of Morris’s book-collecting and of his publishing practice was that books were made to be handled and used, the breaking down of these constraints, and thus the breaking down of the distance between past and present, was essential to his view of the way in which reading should ideally occur. As the representative examples I cite here will show, it is possible to come to some conclusions about what Morris felt the reading experience should be like. For him, it was immersive, collaborative, and popular in the sense that everyone could participate in it. It was practical and creative as well as aesthetic and inspirational, and simple rather than complicated. Its examples were not restricted to literature or even to texts themselves, but could include printed histories of dress and architecture and of material culture in general. Indeed, the material being read did not have to be a book at all, but any artefact, since both could be objects of aesthetic and tactile appreciation. The desire to break down the distance between the book and the reader; between present and past; and between reader, author, printer, and artist, was essential to Morris’s publishing enterprise.

Frederick Kirchoff writes that “Critics like Paul Thompson have argued that Morris was fooling himself about the legibility of the books he printed, and ‘that the Kelmscott volumes were books to be collected, not to be read.’ But Morris rarely fooled himself” (“William Morris’s Anti-Books” 94). Kirchoff goes on to argue that Thompson was mistaking readability for the

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<sup>48</sup> Jeffrey Skoblow offers a reading of the Kelmscott Press books in which alienation between the modern reader and the antique text is inevitable, suggesting that “this distance . . . is integral to Morris’s purposes” (246), and staking out a place for the aesthetic experience of the Kelmscott book as a ritual confrontation (or, one might offer, in a utopian manner that can only develop Skoblow’s argument, a collaboration) between the reader and the “aura” of the art-object. Skoblow takes the lush sensual detail of Morris’s works and the seemingly antiquarian use of blackletter to prove his point about Kelmscott books as being consciously demanding; as a result he finds it necessary to argue that *The Wood Beyond the World* is “in a sense an even stranger, more striking case than *The Glittering Plain*” because it is “virtually free of illustration” (252). Since most of the books that came out of the Kelmscott Press were similarly unillustrated, Skoblow’s argument breaks down here. To me, Morris was aiming to simplify rather than to complicate the experience; the attempt to break down the distance between present and past (and between reader, author, and artist) was essential to Morris’s aesthetic and historical sense. Morris did not intend the fetishization of art, but its popularisation.

*speed* at which one can read. Kirchoff's idea that reading slowly is the way to approach Morris's Kelmscott books is useful: it returns to the idea of pleasurable reading and immersion in the text and speaks to the historical understanding of medieval scripts, whose readability relies more upon the reader's ability to adapt than upon his or her innate talents. To Kirchoff's idea that legibility relies upon a measured, patient engagement with or immersion in the page, I want to add the idea of collaborative use, where the reader shares his immersive reading experience with his or her fellows, and creative adaptation is simultaneous with the process of apprehension. This hands-on activist reading practice reinforces Kirchoff's assertion that Morris's works were meant to be read rather than merely to accumulate on the shelf as status symbols. An active reader, in Morris's view, will always resist the commodification of even the most lavish books.

Morris's model of activist reading relied heavily on a particular body of medieval material culture: his collection of manuscripts and printed books. Morris's library was devoted to the collection of exemplars of a particular kind of medieval craft: the physical book was to him an artefact of past ways of making in the same manner that the mazer, Tewkesbury Abbey, or the Coxwell tithe barn were. Just as important, the diverse matter in those medieval books—popular history, popular science, and popular religion—also displayed the history of everyday life as it had been lived by ordinary people. Like Ruskin before him, Morris was fond of commenting on the manner in which medieval art reflected the circumstances of its production, the “hopes and aspirations” and daily concerns of its makers; according to them, those circumstances were ideally to be recreated in modern craft. The choice of works that Morris made in his collecting seems at least to have been made with that practical emphasis in mind. Rodericus Zamorensis's *Speculum Vitae Humanae*, or as Morris prefers it in the vernacular, *Spiegel des Menschlichen Lebens*, published by Günther Zainer around 1475 at Augsburg, for example, may be translated as “The Mirror of Everyday Life.” Morris comments approvingly in his lecture on “The Woodcut Books of Ulm and Augsburg” that this book, “one of the most popular of the Middle Ages, runs through all the conditions and occupations of men then existing, from the Pope and Kaiser down to the field labourer” (AWS 1: 353). The *Menschlichen Lebens*'s relish for describing



everyday occupations such as plowing, study, sleep and waking has plenty of parallel in the illustrations of the Kelmscott Press (the woodcuts of rural scenes by A. J. Gaskin which accompany *The Shepherd's Calendar*, for instance, or Walter Crane's illustration on page 130 of the second edition of *The Glittering Plain* in which, resourcefully, "Hallblithe builds him a skiff"). Morris's description of the *Menschlichen Lebens* from simultaneously the perspectives of text, illustration, and the history of reading as "one of the most characteristic" (AWS 1: 351) of the Middle Ages is at least as significant here as is the possible influence that the variety of life in its woodcuts and textual matter might have had on the illustrations to Kelmscott books.

The kinds of texts that Morris chose for his library were as representative of a broad picture of medieval popular reading as the illustrated books were. In addition to his admiration for the canonical "literary" writers, Morris took an interest in contemporary writers on more humble and bucolic subjects, so that his library included George Turberville's *Noble Art of Venerie or Hunting*, 1575 and Thomas Tusser's charming *Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandrie*, 1672. Needham characterises Morris's collection of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English books (the works of Elizabethan historians and naturalists like John Gerard's 1597 *Herball*, or Berners' 1523 Froissart, or Philemon Holland's Pliny in the 1601 edition) as "falling somewhere between plain reading copies and antiquarian purchases" (24-5). Needham's suggestion reflects the difficulty inherent in attempting to separate Morris's interest in text from his love of design. Morris eagerly supported modern scholarship, so that Chaucer and Froissart appear in modern editions like William Walter Skeat's and E. V. Utterson's, respectively, as well as in the form of historic "antiquarian reading copies" (Morris owned both the 1532 Thynne and 1598 Speght editions of Chaucer). He also collected modern reprints and editions such as the Paston letters in Gairdner's 1872 edition, John Henry Parker's 1859 facsimile of Villard de Honnecourt's architectural sketchbook, and the publications of the Early English Text Society, which he seems to have collected faithfully from its inception right up until the year of his death. The examples I have cited here include gardening, scientific encyclopaedias, histories, romance, private letters, and half-realized architectural drafts, in addition to the very eclectic editions of the EETS. Even apart from his col-



lection of original medieval material, Morris's library offered as broad a textual picture of the social, artistic, and popular literary interests of medieval society as was available to any nineteenth-century reader.

The traces of Morris's reading and reflection may also be discerned in his introductions to medieval texts. In his preface to Thomas More's *Utopia*, for instance, Morris suggests the manner in which the work ought to be received by his intended reading audience of like-minded individuals:<sup>49</sup>

we Socialists should look upon it as a link between the surviving Communism of the Middle Ages (become hopeless in More's time, and doomed to be soon wholly effaced by the advancing wave of Commercial Bureaucracy), and the hopeful and practical progressive movement of today. (AWS 1: 289)

In spite of his resistance to the inclusion of excessive apparatus in the works of the Kelmscott Press, Morris cannot resist recontextualizing *Utopia* in light of his own concerns, arguing here for More's having observed—and even, Morris hints, participated in—the same popular co-operative undercurrent to medieval society that Morris describes in his mature social theories. More important, he ascribes to Thomas More's text the status of an intermediary between modes of social organization, and even hints at the personal experience of More himself, making the humanist into one of his medieval people who observe and participate: “The action of the period of transition from Medieval to Commercial Society with all its brutalities, was before his eyes” (AWS 1: 290).<sup>50</sup> A work which had long had the talismanic status of a Latin humanist classic, Morris recontextualizes in Ralph Robinson's vernacular translation as a document of a society in transition and even as an artefact in which the practices of past daily life may be uncovered.

The diverse body of general literary knowledge in Morris's library formed a textual analogue and companion to the physical historical artefacts of medi-

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<sup>49</sup> There is an amusing anecdote of the headmaster of a grammar school who ordered a number of copies of the Kelmscott *Utopia* as prizes, only to cancel the order after discovering Morris's socialist introduction to the work. Morris's “we Socialists” ironically attempts to dictate rather more uniformity of opinion among his readers than actually existed.

<sup>50</sup> This is consistent with Morris's treatment of More's elsewhere, as when he discusses More's attitude towards the enclosures of the late Middle Ages in his essay on “The Development of Modern Society” (124).

eval book culture themselves, with their attendant diversity of typefaces, paper, bindings, and items of textual or linguistic interest. Morris acquired his picture of early print culture from the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century editions cited above (and others like them) as well as from his more famous incunabula and medieval manuscripts. The latter evoke an equally varied body of medieval knowledge. The classical inheritance is preserved in medieval manuscript form as texts of oratory (Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*), poetry (Vergil's *Aeneid* and *Georgics*), history (Josephus), and agriculture (Lucius Columella's *De Re Rustica*), while medieval science and entertainment appear in the form of the beautifully-illustrated Worksop bestiary, popular vernacular literary manuscripts like the *Roman de la Rose*, and even a medical treatise, in the form of his fifteenth-century French manuscript of Aldobrandino da Siena's dietetic *Regime du Corps*. The Aldobrandino manuscript is one of the more interesting of Morris's medieval objects both for the subject and pictorial matter of the book. The text exposes many aspects of medieval everyday life, including nakedness, childbirth, sex, illness, and diet; in its illustrations, real medieval people work, drink, vomit, eat, bleed. Diet is important to Aldobrandino's book because of its relationship to health, and thus it includes long descriptions of herbology and husbandry, copiously illustrated. Its hybrid character extends as far as lending the volume some of the the naturalistic qualities and whimsical entries that a bestiary might have: a very male ram on f.70r, and a muzzled bear on f.71v. The existence of this manuscript and of others like it such as the Worksop Bestiary and the manuscript of Columella in Morris's library suggests that his introduction to Steele's *Medieval Lore*, in which he argues in favour of the study of the history of science as a way of understanding the popular culture and worldviews of the past, was informed as much by the first-hand experience of medieval material culture as it was by the information contained in modern editions like Steele's.

Psalters and Books of Hours were the most readily available medieval books since they were designed for daily use, and Morris acquired them not only for their status as particular examples of book decoration (some of it very lavish), but for their historical value as examples of medieval popular

culture.<sup>51</sup> Though he was drawn to them for the same reason he was to Voragine's publishing phenomenon the *Legenda Aurea* (the *Golden Legend*)—for their place in the history of medieval “popular religion”—the illustrated Psalters and Books of Hours also served to underline his historicising theory that medieval people took a strong interest and pride in their daily work. In his lecture on “Illuminated Books of the Middle Ages” Morris remarks that

During this period [the first quarter of the thirteenth century], apart from theological and philosophical treatises, herbals, ‘bestiaries’, etc., the book most often met with, especially when splendidly ornamented, is the Psalter, as sung in churches, to which is generally added a calendar, and always a litany of the saints. This calendar, by the way, both in this and succeeding centuries, is often exceedingly interesting, from the representations given in it of domestic occupations. (AWS 1: 341)

It was usual for the Kalendar at the beginning of psalters to contain pictures of people working at seasonal occupations (the Clare Psalter, which Morris owned, is a striking example). In the Kalendar of a thirteenth-century Latin Psalter that belonged to Morris (now Morgan Library M.101), for example, the medallion in the bottom left of each page has a seasonal occupation, and in the bottom right the appropriate sign of the Zodiac. In July, next to the sign of the Lion, a man cuts hay with a sickle (one of Morris's favourite exemplars of good sweaty work, most memorably in *News From Nowhere*). And in January, under Aquarius, a figure is shown resting in mid-winter and eating up the fruits of his labour. To a practical sage like Morris who, when asked his opinion on what would be a suitable decoration for a kitchen, responded “A flich of bacon hanging from the ceiling,” such a book would be of interest indeed. Thus medieval book illustration—informative, illustrative and drawing together seemingly disparate motifs (this example from the Kalendar links temporality, religious observance, and “domestic occupations”)—participates in a concordance of aestheticism and the history of everyday life.

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<sup>51</sup> Christopher de Hamel even wonders whether the Book of Hours may be considered a “book” at all, which suggests that the reading experience of the Book of Hours might be characterised as a moment of reception of *material* culture rather than of “literary” culture.

Morris's fascination with early printed books stemmed not only from his seeing them as exemplars of late-medieval design; he also shows a strong sense of the way such books were disseminated. In his 1892 illustrated lecture on "The Woodcuts of Gothic Books," for instance, Morris comments that the ornamented incunabula he chose to illustrate the lecture were intended to be "popular books" (that is, they differed from "the great theological folioes, the law books, the decretals, and such like" in their audience and price and consequently in their not being ornamented by hand) and that they therefore had "the disadvantage of the rudeness likely to disfigure cheap forms of art" (AWS 1: 319). It would have been very easy for Morris to rely upon the natural awe of the amateur for all things ancient, and thereby to pass over the shortcomings of his favourite period of printing; instead, he draws his listeners' attention to the varying quality, price, and audience as they are revealed in the design of these early printed books. That reiteration of the idea that "cheap" or "popular" books could still be well made is typical of Morris, and speaks to his stated desire to make his own artistic creations widely accessible, at least ideally.<sup>52</sup>

Morris's writing shows a strong sense of the way the books that he collected had been read and understood at the time of their production and subsequent use. He felt that this process of reading and knowing should extend into the present and future as well. In accordance with his theories of history and material culture, Morris's collection of historical print culture was a continually growing resource to be handled, appreciated, and used. In addition to their status as exemplars to support Morris's historical and social theories, his library served on occasion as inspiration for various projects, among them the Press itself. On 15 November 1888, for example, William Morris's neighbour Emery Walker delivered an illustrated lecture to the Arts and Crafts Society on "Letter-press Printing and Illustration," a lecture which made significant use of Morris's own collection of early printed material for its examples of typography and showed Walker's influence on Mor-

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<sup>52</sup> In an interview with the *Daily Chronicle* dated 22 February 1893, Morris confronts this difficulty directly: "True, the prices are not the prices which Tom, Dick, and Harry can pay. I wish—I wish indeed that the cost of the books was less, only that is impossible if the printing and the decoration and the paper and the binding are to be what they should be" (qtd. in Pinkney 71). It is unlikely that Morris was being disingenuous or condescending when he speaks wistfully of sharing his work with "Tom, Dick, and Harry."

ris in its thesis that “harmony of type and decoration” were paramount to the creation of a readable page.<sup>53</sup> William S. Peterson in his important history of the Kelmscott Press credits Walker’s lecture as Morris’s inspiration to begin designing his own typefaces and to establish the Kelmscott Press at this stage of his career (*Kelmscott Press* 74). Walker’s lecture, an open talk given to a circle of like-minded acquaintances, simultaneously marks the moment of the Press’s inception, underlines the importance of the direct aesthetic experience of historical medieval texts to Morris’s printing program, and illustrates the essentially collaborative nature of Morris’s work as a printer and even of his life as a reader.

This integration of his collection into Morris’s and his circle’s everyday life and work is also attested in many incidents and anecdotes about the creative and aesthetic milieu of Kelmscott House. Historical artefacts were so casually to hand that Morris is even said to have thrown a sixteenth-century book through a door in one of his occasional fits of rage (Mackail 1: 215). More than one journalist comments with surprised pleasure on Morris’s willingness to pore over his library’s manuscripts and incunabula with near-strangers.<sup>54</sup> Morris’s intimate handling of what would otherwise be considered historic artefacts, now mainly encountered in research libraries or maintained as commodities by collectors, speaks both to his determined lack of the usual bibliophilic reverence for them and to his desire for immediate experience of the relics of the medieval past. The frustrated sense of historical distance so evident on the part of the poet of 1858 (or even of the dreaming propagandist of 1886-7) was obviated to some extent with the more ready availability of these medieval objects to the older, wealthier and more knowledgeable William Morris, who could afford to surround himself with them. Morris had too much respect for his medieval books as examples of his favourite craft tradition to treat them consciously as workbooks to write in,<sup>55</sup> and to add his own touches to old books would have seemed to him as ahistorical and incongruous as the academic “restoration” of a medi-

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<sup>53</sup> See John Dreyfus, “A Reconstruction of the Lecture Given By Emery Walker on 15 November 1888.”

<sup>54</sup> See the interviews described in Pinkney 55 and 116.

<sup>55</sup> As, for example, John Ruskin did, whose fourteenth-century *Roman de la Rose* manuscript, now Spencer 078 in the Spencer Collection at the New York Public Library, seems to have been violently handled, pen in hand, as a combination primer in palaeography and Old French.

eval church.<sup>56</sup> But in general, his rejection of the academic culture of intimidation surrounding the mystique and commodification of Ancient Books was closely linked to his having taken those books up as useful exemplars of craft and as “tools.”

Morris’s library grew in response to his creative as well as his intellectual desires and needs. Leonhart Fuchs’s herbal *De Historia Stirpium Commentarii Insignes* was, according to the auction catalogue, “held in the highest esteem by Mr. Morris, and continually consulted by him for suggestions of design” (*Catalogue* 54). Just as Morris claimed to have revived the art of tapestry “as anciently practised” by the help of seventeenth-century French treatises (qtd. in Pinkney 100),<sup>57</sup> so he went to various primary sources for models both of design and of technical method, including the practice of gilding and illuminating his own calligraphic manuscripts. Joseph Dunlap writes, for example, that “When it came to dealing with gold, Morris tried various methods dating from the twelfth-century *De diversis artibus* of Theophilus Rugerus to contemporary practitioners” (“William Morris, Calligrapher” 54).<sup>58</sup> The important lesson to be drawn here is that Morris drew on his ancient models not only for their aesthetic impact or for matters of design, but in active practice, integrating them into his method as well as into his output.

Morris’s reading functioned on numerous levels; John Gerard’s *Herbal* (1597), for instance, occupies a middle ground between the antiquarian practice of his collecting, the books he owned for purposes of creative inspiration, and the everyday reading of Morris and his circle. Morris owned Gerard’s book in the first edition of 1597 as well as in the edition of 1636. J. W. Mackail describes how the herbal “supplied useful information about certain dis-used vegetable dyes” (1: 314). And finally, May Morris relates the manner in

<sup>56</sup> He had no such qualms with regard to touching up modern books: there is a presentation copy of his translation of the *Volsunga Saga* (now in the Huntington Library) from Morris to Burne-Jones; someone, probably Morris, has decorated the first page and put “EBJ” in gold at the bottom of it. Morris gave another copy to Philip Webb, personalised with the initials “PW” at the bottom of the first page (Greensted and Wilson 73).

<sup>57</sup> As Tony Pinkney’s note points out, the *Arts et Métiers* series was actually a late eighteenth-century publishing project. Morris’s statement that he went to a seventeenth-century treatise may thus have been a subtle exaggeration on his part of the venerability of his sources. Consciously or not, he was ready to collude in the myth-making surrounding the antiquity of his practices, and to give an exaggerated view how far the arts had “decayed” over time.

<sup>58</sup> Although Dunlap does not cite a source for his anecdote, R. Hendrie’s 1847 translation of Theophilus’ genial and wide-ranging handbook does appear as number 1045 in the auction catalogue of Morris’s library.



which early editions of Elizabethan historians and naturalists were read aloud to the family at Kelmscott House, and how

perhaps the most popular . . . was that of the diligent master John Gerard, the pages of whose Herbal my father would turn, reading descriptions, now beautiful, now quaint, of favourite plants, and when not too nauseous, the uses of them and their virtues. We learnt to know old Gerard well; it was a link of friendship to meet certain uncommon plants that flourished at Kelmscott in his London garden. (*Introductions* 2: 660-1)

Shared performance was thus another way for Morris to integrate books into the everyday life of his circle, and it is clear from this example that his notion of a “popular” text did not restrict itself to the novels of Dickens and Scott that Morris admired. May Morris makes much here and later on of Gerard’s strong emphasis on the local, the varied, and the particular, which are all aspects of the Elizabethan text which must have appealed to Morris as well. The “link of friendship” that May finds in recognizing the plants known by the sixteenth-century naturalist appears here as being of one piece with the experience of the earthy material culture (and horticulture) of the past.

Morris’s own creative reading is inscribed across the books that survive from his circle, some of them original to him, and others of ancient date. One of the most fascinating examples of his activist collecting is a collection of four Early Modern writing handbooks bound together that is still part of the library at Kelmscott Manor (see Osley). In a lecture, Emery Walker showed “a specimen of a lady’s ordinary hand—she was taught to write from the Italian writing-master’s copy-book we saw last week” (qtd. in Osley 359). It is hard not to identify the “lady” with May Morris herself, and to find in this anecdote both a Ruskinian process of education in penmanship inspired by this particular Early Modern volume, and an example of the way Morris’s book collecting spread its practical influence throughout his family and social circle. Morris himself certainly used this collection of writing-books as a model, as is shown in a leaf of handwriting trials (reproduced in, for example, Robinson, plate 7). In the last of various good-humoured assaults on the trial page, he attempts a few lines from the writing-book:



Con le uarie Sorti de littere ordinato per  
 Ludouico Vicentino In Roma nel anno  
 No good at all: it all ran together.

Ludovico Vicentino was the best-known of the four writing-masters who made up the compound volume. Morris improvises upon Ludovico's Italian words here (inhabiting the Early Modern *scrittore*), and joins his own personal English narrative of bemused frustration onto the next line, seamlessly, when he finds the physical process of writing breaking down. His lack of self-consciousness speaks to his readerly immersion in the text, and his calligraphic adaptation of the text makes real his creative response.

## 2. *Making: Collaboration and the Physical Book*

AS WILLIAM WHITLA'S THEORY of "translation" suggests, Morris's calligraphic manuscripts represent the intersection of Morris's reading and his creativity. The scribal colophon to the *Book of Verse* with which Morris gifted Georgiana Burne-Jones on her birthday in August of 1870 underlines both the "co-operative" nature of the creative enterprise and the way that the creation of books (and of art in general) was freely integrated into the everyday life of Morris's circle:<sup>59</sup>

As to those who have had a hand in making this book, Edward Burne Jones painted the picture on page 1: the other pictures were all painted by Charles F Murray, but the minstrel figures on the title-page, and the figures of Spring Summer and Autumn on page 40, he did from my drawings.

As to the pattern-work, George Wardle drew in all the ornament on the first ten pages, and I coloured it; he also did all the coloured let-

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<sup>59</sup> There are plenty of other instances of this shared artistic space in Morris's career, from the occasionally barbed caricatures by Rossetti and Burne-Jones of Morris and others in their circle through to the embroidery of the hanging over Morris's bed at Kelmscott Manor by Jane Morris and Lily Yeats. However imperfect the products of their art, however historically suspect Morris's vision of medieval collaborative practice, and however utopian Morris's attempted integration of art and everyday life, there is no doubt that he and his circle attempted to live it in their own everyday lives.

ters both big and little; the rest of the ornament I did, together with all the writing. (*Book of Verse* 53)

The colophon would become a fixture in the Kelmscott Press books as well, bypassing the modern placement of publication information on the title page. Here Morris's addition of the colophon imitates the practice of the medieval scribe, as well as documenting rather precisely the contributions of his friends, which are many and various.

The mode of production of *A Book of Verse* is thus social in the broadest sense. So is the mode of distribution, and Morris's gifting of the manuscript to Georgiana Burne-Jones is another example of his (possibly conscious) adoption of medieval social patterns. Later, many of the Kelmscott books would also be disseminated as gifts from Morris to his friends. Though medieval books were of course bought and sold (and even relatively mass-produced, in the scriptoria for the universities of Paris), some of the most memorable illustrated or retold scenes in medieval works are of similar book presentations: by Jean de Froissart to Richard II of England (described in chapter 197 of the Berners translation), famously, or by Christine de Pizan a few decades later to Isabeau de Bavière, the Queen of France. When Froissart describes his presentation copy as "fair enlumined and written, and covered with crimson velvet, with ten buttons of silver and gilt, and roses of gold in the midst, with two great clasps gilt, richly wrought" (ed. G. M. Macaulay 430), he does so with a sensual specificity and an attention to the possible pleasures of reading that must have delighted Morris.

Froissart had not produced the entire artefact himself; medieval book production, too, after all, was a collaborative act. A note in MS B[ritish] L[ibrary] Royal 20 C.IV describes the many hands through which the work had passed:

*transiuit per manus .x. videlicet illius qui miniauit in margine, qui illuminavit litteras, qui fecit ystorias, qui fecit collaturas et mundauit, qui religauit, qui deaurauit folia, qui fecit clauos, qui fecit ligaturas, qui deaurauit eas, qui posuit et affixit eas.* (qtd. in Brownrigg xiv)<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> My translation:

[this book] passed through ten hands; that is, those who drew the borders, those who illuminated the letters, who wrote the stories, who collated the pages and made the gatherings, and who laced them; those who gilded the paper, who

Just as Morris was happy to rely upon his friends and acquaintances to contribute “*in margine*” to his own calligraphic manuscripts, he sought out their contributions to the works of the Kelmscott Press. His collaboration with Edward Burne-Jones is much celebrated, but Burne-Jones was far from being Morris’s only illustrator; Charles March Gere, Walter Crane, and Arthur Gaskin all provided illustrations for the Press. Emery Walker was, as the example of his lecture shows, an important influence with regard to typography and design, while the J. and J. Leighton and Doves binderies filled a crucial role that Morris was generally content to leave to others. Each contributed in diverse ways to the harmony of the parts of the page and of the book, and when one includes the tasks of editor and proof-reader, it becomes clear that Morris’s hoped-for intersections of narrative and page design and of text, type, and illustration, were ultimately necessarily the result of interpersonal collaboration. The work of the Press was too large a task for one person alone, in spite of the fact that Morris now receives the lion’s share of the credit. As he himself would say, “no man can build a building with his own hands; every one of those men depends for the possibility of even beginning his work on someone else” (“Architecture and History,” CW 23: 300).<sup>61</sup>

In the relationship of Morris’s creative output to his reading, then, there is no solitary immersion of a single reader in the text. When Morris discusses his library in his letters, he often emphasizes the way his collection is read in a shared environment with his collaborators as well as his social circle, often with reference to the future creativity that might be inspired by it. When Morris writes, for instance, to Charles March Gere on 30 September 1893 that “We must talk about [several of Gere’s illustrations for *House of the Wolfings*] when you come, & perhaps look at some old work” (*Letters* 4: 91), he conjures up an appealing picture of collaborative reading and creativity. It is well documented that Morris guided the Press’s illustrators’ inter-

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forged the tacks, who made the binding; and those who gilded the binding, [and] who arranged and attached it.

I am indebted to Andy Orchard for a suggested reading in this passage.

<sup>61</sup> The standard picture of Morris as the prime mover behind the work of the Press is undermined by T. M. Rooke’s diary account of a “very ghostlike, feeble and old looking” Morris telling Burne-Jones with regard to the *Chaucer* that “If you’d been at all slack over it and hadn’t been as much excited about it as I was, we should never have got through with it” (qtd. in Peterson, *Kelmscott Press* 255). Even a much younger Morris would certainly not have done it alone, for all his legendary energy.

est in medieval material culture in addition to providing an environment (through the creation of his library) for them to experience medieval art.<sup>62</sup> These side-by-side processes of reading narrative and designing ornament evoke a strong sense of the connection between Morris's direct aesthetic experience of old books and his creative interaction with his collaborators, as when he ordered a "German illustrated book" from Alfred Trübner Nutt for Arthur Gaskin, calling it a "business present" (*Letters* 4: 33),<sup>63</sup> or when he pointed Charles March Gere in the direction of his old favourite Camille Bonnard's *Costumes des XIIIe, XVe et Xve Siècles* (*Letters* 4: 43).

The surviving letters from Morris to his illustrators Gere and Gaskin show Morris's often overbearing contributions to their creative process. While at one end of the process, we see him somewhat frustrated with the way the Press's engraver's too-exact adherence to the artist's drawings negates Ruskinian artisanal freedom, at the other we also see him tirelessly commenting upon the efforts of the artists Gere and Gaskin, decisively scrapping some sketches and offering advice on improving the remainder.<sup>64</sup> Morris's advice is often upon the design aspects of the illustrations submitted to him: on the proportion of figures, for example, or on the fall of drapery. But it is with particular relish that he holds forth upon specific details of everyday objects in the works, and comments upon the items' faithfulness to medieval models. Here Morris follows his old pattern of internalising the received artefacts of past craft and then extrapolating from them. His exemplars are again often quite specific, as when he writes to Gere on 9 May 1894 about one of Gere's prospective illustrations for *The House of the Wolfings* (of Hall-Sun seated on the hill, reproduced by Norman Kelvin in *Letters* 4: 158): "only note here that the candle ought to be more obvious, and that no candle before the 18th cen-

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<sup>62</sup> A letter of 4 September, 1894, to Jenny Morris, describes the domestic situation there on that particular day: "Mr. Gere is here at this moment looking over the English book" (*Letters* 4: 201).

<sup>63</sup> "These mediaeval things are so stimulating," he writes to Gaskin (11 April 1893), "with their frank imagination & their grasp of essentials; & the details of costume and furniture are really necessary to be studied." (*Letters* 4: 33). It is also important to note that Morris conveys this book to Gaskin as "useful, not of course to copy," suggesting again that his method is not derivative but holistic or immersive, and that medieval material culture is not only important to the artist for its "details."

<sup>64</sup> He evidently took fewer liberties with the work of Edward Burne-Jones; but then, he and Burne-Jones were often of one accord in artistic matters, having educated each other over a period of collaboration stretching back some thirty-odd years.

tury was ever made straight but so, [he draws it] a *taper* in fact, which shape is much prettier” (*Letters* 4: 157), and he repeats his admonishment a little anxiously a few months later (16 July), complete with yet another rough sketch. Again, Burne-Jones never came in for such condescension; but then, he had obviously gone over this ground already with Morris, for tapered candles figure prominently in Burne-Jones’s woodcuts (on page 472 of the Kelmscott *Chaucer*, for example) and even earlier in his paintings (such as “Princess Sabra Led to the Dragon,” 1866).

Morris’s preference for working from originals (often very particular originals, particularly re-imagined) is also evident in his advice to his collaborators. He writes to Arthur Joseph Gaskin on 3 July 1893 that “There was and I suppose still is an early suit of armour (say about 1460) in the Tower, made for a tall thin legged man: the head piece is a ‘salade’ of fine shape” (*Letters* 4: 65). In the letter, Morris draws the helmet in outline, and recommends that Gaskin sketch it (it appears in one of Gaskin’s prospective illustrations for *The Well at the World’s End*, reproduced in Peterson, *Kelmscott Press* 159). Morris’s estimate of a “tall thin legged man” is amusingly specific: just as he did in his earliest poetry and in his evocation of the medieval worker in the early “The Churches of North France” (from *The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*), he finds himself imagining medieval bodies, filling the extant relics of the past with the human experience of everyday life. The “salade” referred to here by Morris will also be recalled from the narrator of “Old Love,” and it appears as the headgear of choice for numerous knights in Burne-Jones’s Briar Rose series, in the Grail tapestries, and in the Kelmscott *Chaucer*, the model having evidently been internalised by the artist in the manner advocated by Morris here. Unfortunately, in his failure to recommend a different piece of medieval armour than the now-classic “salade” for Gaskin’s inspiration, Morris seems to have been guilty of trying lazily to squeeze Gaskin into the Burne-Jones or early Morris mould, quite against the ideal of artistic freedom and his own stated desire for variety.

Morris certainly attempted to instil his own method into his illustrators: in a letter to Gere of 28 August 1893, he similarly scolds that “I think you are quite wrong with the armour: above all it should not be classical: it wants studying from medieval armour, & then inventing from that” (*Letters* 4: 82).

Morris advocates both the “study” of past material culture and the “invention” of new artistic examples, suggesting a simultaneously immersive and active process. A few days later, Morris suggests to Gere that he should have a “kirtle” made on a medieval model as an example of drapery for his illustrations (*Letters* 4: 84). Whether the kirtle he intended was ever given to (or, in the event, was used as a model by) his illustrator Gere is undocumented. But just as in earlier years Morris required a blacksmith to forge him a bascinet and surcoat (Mackail 1: 120-1), so now in his later years he wanted his collaborators to follow his own model of immersion in past material culture. Whether his method would have worked for anyone other than himself and his immediate circle is debateable (and it is easy to imagine that Gere and Gaskin found the emphasis exasperating, especially since in the end their designs, for *The House of the Wolfings* and *The Well at the World’s End* respectively, went unused and rather unappreciated); but it is evident that right from the beginning of his career Morris felt a need for specific medieval exemplars to work from.

The contributions of artists like Gere, Gaskin, Crane, and Burne-Jones, as well as of the engravers, printers and editors, together ensured (perhaps in spite of Morris’s artistic suggestions!) that each work turned out by the Kelmscott Press is individual in terms of its design. The relationship between the various practical talents that went into the Kelmscott Press imprint is paralleled in the architectural arrangement of the diverse components of the *mise-en-page*. This diversity within and among pages and books is partly because Morris as reader and as artist valued variety in art, and partly because the Press itself evolved throughout its practice. The press might even be characterised as an ongoing experimental exercise, not always with successful results.

Morris began the process of creating books from the most basic unit, the shape of the letter itself. This too was an organic and experimental process. The practice of Morris in the creation of the Golden and Troy types has been described by Peterson as a “painstaking procedure of tracing, drawing, and redrawing photographs” (*Kelmscott Press* 92) of numerous early typefaces. This “painstaking procedure” suggests not an inexorable paring down to perfection, but an ongoing process. Morris’s practice here is almost literally palimpsestic. Holding his white paintbrush after the manner of a scribe scraping



a vellum page with a knife, Morris engaged in redrawing and adapting the historical letters to suit his own moment. When, in a letter of 29 August 1890 to F. S. Ellis weighing between Caxton's Troy book and *Golden Legend* for printing, Morris refers jocularly to his Golden type as the "regenerate type or Jenson-Morris" (*Letters* 3: 198), he is poking a bit of fun at his own theories of history, blending past and present again, and placing his type in printing's organic tradition, just as his other "lesser arts" were meant to take their place in the "golden chain." Morris's type was even more allusive than he lets on here, though, for he had not only borrowed from Jenson's books for the Golden type, but more recognizably from the darker type found in his fellow Venetian Jacobus Rubeus's 1476 edition of [Leonardo Bruni's] *Historia Fiorentina* ("William Morris, Typographer" 78). Likewise, while the blackletter Troy type, according to Dreyfus, was created after "a close study of fifteenth-century founts used by Peter Schoeffer at Mainz, by Gunther Zainer at Augsburg, and by Anton Koberger at Nuremberg" (Dreyfus 79), and although Morris's friends claimed that he had developed the Troy without direct reference to any originals at all, William S. Peterson notes startlingly the influence of the Subiaco of Sweynheym and Pannartz as well ("Library of Emery Walker" 13). This "organic" method of creativity was necessarily eclectic, and it required that Morris immerse himself in the previous type with brush and knife, scraping diligently at the edges of the medieval letter, in a physical process that situates the types of the Kelmscott Press as products of a readerly inspiration that had been moved to attempt connections with past individuals and printing traditions.

Morris's revival of blackletter (the Troy and its analogue in pica, the Chaucer type), a Morrisian rehabilitation of an everyday medieval design, is based, surprisingly for the modern reader, on its readability. John Dreyfus is correct in pointing out that Gothic type was (and is) considered unreadable only because of its unfamiliarity to the modern reader: "Morris largely ignored the fact that . . . such letterforms, however beautifully and skillfully he interpreted them, were bound on account of their unfamiliarity to be considered less readable than roman type" ("William Morris: Typographer" 80). In fact, the Troy type is meant to have a focusing, rather than a mystifying, effect upon its readers, just as the ordinary letters and page designs of the Press



were generally plainer than the famous Chaucer would lead us to believe. Historical blackletter is manifested in a variety of different ways, and each is of a different level of readability to the modern (and indeed, probably to the medieval) eye. Morris himself relied upon this historical diversity of experience to support his theories of readability and of continuous history, noting in “The Ideal Book” that the commonly-used English letter since Wynkyn de Worde, for example, “though a handsome and stately letter, is not very easy reading; it is too much compressed, too spiky, and, so to say, too pre-pensively gothic.” That is, whatever typeface the reader is used to, some examples of blackletter are still more readable than others. Similarly, in keeping with his sense of the possibilities inherent in an “organic” art, Morris continues by pointing out that “there are many types which are of a transitional character and of all degrees of transition” (AWS 1: 314). It is possible to argue that Morris’s practical experience of reshaping medieval letter-forms influenced his historical theory of the way that types could be transformed over time, or conversely that his historical experience of reading medieval books had given him the confidence and knowledge required to audaciously transform those letters himself. It is certainly true that he had retained his sense of the complex continuities of the history of material culture, and the way that it manifested itself in different fashions at different periods, from the very beginning of his career.

As the Press’s body of work grew, the type and the various *entrelac* initial letters (“blooming letters,” or “bloomers”) and ornamental borders that Morris had individually designed for specific works were reused where they seemed fitting. This, too, was in accordance with the practice of the early printers.<sup>65</sup> The reuse of the great “Whan” from the beginning of *The Canterbury Tales* for the opening of *The Floure and the Leaf* (1896) is the most striking example. In the Kelmscott *Chaucer*, the “Whan” takes up a relatively small space on the page of the folio, as the reader’s eye wanders to the lavish borders and illustration that surround and distract from it. In the Kelmscott edition of *The Flower and the Leaf*, on the other hand, the “Whan” takes control of the unillustrated opening. That decoration, it turns out, is even more

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<sup>65</sup> Sydney Cockerell devotes much of the space in the entries to his cataloguing notes of Morris’s library to carefully documenting the reuse of woodcuts within early printed books.

fitting as a central ornament in the simpler context of the medium quarto page—artistically, at least, for the original begins with “When”! The Chaucerian “Whan” crucially jars with the language of the surviving text of “The Flower and the Leaf,” which is indeed medieval in origin but only extant in a sixteenth-century modernised idiom which Ellis and Morris were forced to retain in the rest of the text.<sup>66</sup> Aesthetic concerns and the archaising impulse characteristically won out at the Kelmscott Press when they came into conflict with textual fidelity.

The most lavishly-decorated and -illustrated pages of the Kelmscott *Chaucer* are the exception rather than the rule—not only among Kelmscott Press books in general, but even in the 564-page *Chaucer* itself, which after all had only 87 illustrations. Not every striking page spread relies upon a woodcut or even a border to draw the reader’s eye. In fact, when the woodcuts do distract from the text too much (being, for example, too dark, the reason for Morris’s disappointment with Crane’s first attempts at illustrating *The Glittering Plain*), they may be considered small failures. The Kelmscott “Nature of Gothic” jarringly inserts the spidery, over-detailed nineteenth-century lithograph illustrations of Ruskin’s architectural drawings (for example on pages 97-8); the first page of the Kelmscott *Sigurd the Volsung* (1898) is a hodgepodge of several sizes of type in black and red;<sup>67</sup> the three colours of the *Laudes Beatae Mariae Virginis* are more vivid and more effective on gleaming vellum than on dull paper; and Morris famously regretted having given in to his author and having tried to print Wilfred Scawen Blunt’s *Love-Songs and Lyrics of Proteus* with the *entrelac* initials entirely in red (Parry, *William Morris* 322-3). Conversely, some of the greatest successes of the Press are in their simplest productions and in their least complex page designs. This, too, was the

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<sup>66</sup> Derek Pearsall calls the language of the poem “an improbable admixture of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century forms” (*Floure and the Leafe* 2).

<sup>67</sup> In spite of its relatively austere borders, *Sigurd*, published in 1898 after Morris’s death from designs that he had created (the *Sigurd* might thus be whimsically considered a creative pastiche of surviving fragments of the master’s work), overextends itself in its use of two different sizes of type for the headings. The “Great Primer” Troy type provides the capitals at the top, then the Chaucer (in “Pica,” and thus slightly smaller) in capitals for the subtitle, the Troy in red for the descriptive subtitle “Of the Dwelling of King Volsung,” then back to pica capitals for the first four lines of the poem, following which the Troy is used in black for the body of the text. The addition of flowers to eke out the line of type in the title clutters the line even further, especially since that practice fails to maintain uniformity with the leaves that are used throughout to mark the poetic line endings.

result of sympathetic reading in medieval books. For Morris and his collaborators at the Press, their own ideal was not the nuanced shadings and busy detail of Dürer's most memorable woodcuts, but the straightforward "S" of the beginning of Johann Zainer's *De Claris Mulieribus* of Boccaccio, printed at Ulm in 1473.<sup>68</sup> That white-vine decoration, intermingled with the figures of the serpent, Eve, and Adam, and medallions of the seven deadly sins, is nowhere near so dizzying in its detail as any given ornamented page of the Kelmscott Chaucer with its multiple frames and swirls of acanthus in two or more directions, and yet Morris claimed Zainer's S to be "one of the very best printers' ornaments ever made, one which would not disgrace a thirteenth-century MS." While he praises the decoration's "admirable invention," Morris ends by commenting on the decoration's "full sense of decorative necessities," by which he seems to be referring to the manner in which the ornament, filling the upper left third of the page, embraces the full body of text without overshadowing it. Morris also valued, for their simplicity and straightforwardness, the "as people phrase it, rude cuts" that provide the extra-textual content of the rest of the Ulm Boccaccio (AWS 1: 352).

Morris's approbation of Zainer's S is most evident in the white vines that ornament the pages of works such as the *Psalmi Penitenciales* and the "Ordination of Knighthood," too loosely splashed across the margins to be considered as having been influenced by the tight vines in the margins and initials of fifteenth-century humanist manuscripts. The white-vine method is more effective on the first page of the Kelmscott "Ordination of Knighthood" than it is on that of the edition of Caxton's *Order of Chivalry* (1893) to which Morris's translation of the "Ordination" was a textual afterthought. In the latter, the white vines tightly wrap all four borders of the text like a cluttered picture frame; in the former, the asymmetry of the left-marginal decoration complements the large and small floriated initials and the lines of poetry with their irregular lengths. The varying length of poetic lines was always a challenge to Morris's yearning for a solid block of type; this is one of his successes (the *Psalmi Penitenciales* is another such success in printing the poetic

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<sup>68</sup> Morris calls this book "a very old friend of mine" (AWS 1: 351); it was one of the books that belonged to the early period of his collecting, and he had repurchased it by the time of his work on the Press.

line, but it has the advantage over “The Ordination of Knighthood” of having already been broken up into very short stanzas, each with a title).

Richard Landon has noted (263) the similarity of the decorated borders of Kelmscott Press books to Erhard Ratdolt’s Venetian editions of Appian’s *Libri De Bellis Civilibus Romanis* (1477) and of Euclid (the *Elementa Geometria* of 1482), especially the ones which, like “The Nature of Gothic,” rely on the contrast of white vines on a black background. Every bit as striking are the initials in, for example, Ratdolt’s 1488 edition of Joannes de Thurocz’s *Chronicon Rerum Hungaricorum*, in the narrative of which Morris’s old acquaintance the bibliophile Matthias Corvinus plays a unifying feudal role. As well, Sydney Cockerell claimed that the two borders used in the Kelmscott *Sigurd* were “suggested by the ornament in two Psalters in the library at Kelmscott House” (qtd. in Needham 132); Needham conjectures that one of them was the Huntingfield Psalter. The relative simplicity of those borders (much less dense in their foliation than those of other Kelmscott books) supports the resemblance. The decoration of late-medieval printed books may be read palimpsestically as underlying the decorations of the Kelmscott Press, and so may the decoration and page design of the earlier manuscript period. The same blending process informed early printing, as its earliest exemplars (the Gutenberg Bible or the Mainz Psalter, for instance) were strongly reminiscent of and even, when hand-decorated, indistinguishable from manuscripts. Finally, books were not the only examples of medieval material culture which played a role in Morris’s decorational aesthetic: the backgrounds to the letters in Blunt’s *Love Lyrics and Songs of Proteus* stemmed from a visit to Beauvais Cathedral, “where the great porches are carved with vines,” according to Cockerell in his “Short History and Description of the Kelmscott Press” (85). The works of the Kelmscott Press point outward not only to the medieval books that inspired Morris as a reader, but to the larger body of everyday items of medieval material culture which he had personally experienced.

The productions of the Kelmscott illustrators are more lavish, and have thus drawn more attention, than the simpler designs of unillustrated books like *The Life of Cardinal Wolsey*, *Psalmi Penitentiales*, or *The Flower and the Leaf*. I have argued here that the unillustrated books are as successful in their own way as the illustrated ones; this success, too, is the result of experiencing the

elegant design of printers such as Ratdolt and the Zainers. Yet Morris's and his illustrators' provision of illustrative matter for his texts also supports the notion that medieval material culture and society generally imagined played an important role in the construction of daily life as it appears in the illustrations to the medieval texts of the Kelmscott canon. Medieval domestic architecture and interiors appear throughout the illustrations of the Press: tables, beds, roof-beams, and furnishings of all sorts, chosen with meticulous attention to the particular, especially when Burne-Jones is the illustrator. Exteriors are given no less prominence: towered cityscapes, walled gardens, and romantic wildernesses. The impact of the experience of reading medieval books on Kelmscott illustration is more than textual. The illustration of Boethius tended by Philosophy, for example, recalls numerous similar illustrations in Morris's manuscript of Aldobrandino da Siena (such as the recuperating man asleep in the canopied bed, f.13v., and other more graphic illustrations of bedridden patients vomiting and being cupped or leeches in the following pages).

The philosopher is pictured here in an enclosed bed of the kind which recurs elsewhere throughout the *Chaucer* (on pages 223, 241, 434, 500 and 501), and in other Kelmscott works as well, including the frontispiece to the Thornton romance *Sire Degrevaunt*, which shows Degrevaunt and Melidore in an alcove, with a similar bed behind them. The room in the latter case is framed at the top by the simple roofbeams that emphasize the simplicity of medieval domestic architecture according to Morris ("small, and white, and clean"); facilitate what Morris would have called the "fitness," or stark elegance, of the lines of woodcut engravings; and give the illustrator a useful opportunity to create an illusion of depth. This is the "shut-bed" which Morris makes much of in his translations of the sagas and in *The Story of the Glittering Plain* (where "Hallblithe lay in a shut-bed off from the hall," CW 14: 286), and describes as early as the *Earthly Paradise* (in "The Lovers of Gudrun," for example). Such a bed, essentially a broad shelf in the wall, with a curtain dividing it from the room, is an admirable illustration of the way in which Morris seizes upon particularities: just as the tapered candle catches his imagination in his discussions with Charles Gere, so the "shut-bed" seems to partake of Morris's stated taste for simplicity of design,

and it ends up repeated frequently. The phrase may have been borrowed from George Dasent, whose translations from the Norse Morris enjoyed (such a bed appears in *Gunnlaug* and more famously in *Gisli*). Dürer, in his 1525 woodcut of a “Draftsman Drawing a Portrait” (Panofsky, fig. 310), also has a similar bed in the background. Morris did admire Dürer (he appears in facsimile or original in at least five lots of the auction catalogue), with the qualification that “though his method was infected by the Renaissance, his matchless imagination and intellect made him thoroughly Gothic in spirit” (AWS 1: 346). Morris was naturally eager to capture the premier engraver of the early history of printing for his favoured medieval tradition; but here, at least, Dürer also seems to have preserved one of Morris’s artefacts of medieval domestic architecture.

Other motifs are more specifically recognisable from the woodcuts of medieval books: tables scattered with food and utensils, for example, as on page 139 of the Kelmscott *Chaucer*, or on page 483.<sup>69</sup> The table scattered with food was a commonplace of medieval manuscripts (from banquet scenes in the *Très Riches Heures* to humbler illustrations). Early woodcuts followed the hint given by the manuscript tradition, strewing food including a recognizable boar’s head across the table in the first illustration to Caxton’s 1484 edition of *The Canterbury Tales*. A much less crudely drawn banquet scene appears in part II of Morris’s copy of the *Tristan* printed by Antoine Vérard (Paris, 1506, now in the Pierpont Morgan Library), with knives on the table, round things (representing bread, rolls, and so forth), and plates with the carcasses of various small animals; servants bear more to the table, with birds’ claws sticking out from the dishes (f.30r.). For Morris, who filled his own romances with similar feasts, this sort of relish in convivial scenes was typical of the medieval draftsman’s straightforwardness, and the satisfaction that the medieval artist took in the festive and the everyday; the grotesque, according to this model, has its own honesty and realism.

In “The Ideal Book,” Morris posits the possibility of “architectural arrangement” in book production—that is, a holistic arrangement in which

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<sup>69</sup> Here Pandarus is also shown wearing a houppelonde which, with its dagged sleeves, looks like a medievalist fantasy but is in fact nearly historically accurate, being the fashion of only a decade or two after Chaucer’s death (see, for example, Norris 36).



the various aspects of design work in harmony with each other (AWS 1: 311). Just as the collaborators work together on the book, so these components of the book—text, decoration, illustration—work together in the *mise-en-page*. The “Morrisian” book is a sample of the diversity of the talents of its predecessors, its makers, and its readers. The great variety of ways in which pages were designed and illustrated over the course of the construction of the Kelmscott Press’s catalogue was complemented by the variety of materials and formats used and by the customizability of the outward appearance of the book. Kelmscott Press books come in every format from 16mo to folio (except 12mo), including large, medium, and small quartos. Besides the copies printed on vellum, the Batchelor paper had a variety of watermarks (the Flower or Primrose, the Fish, and the Apple) and textures depending upon the kinds of books to be made. My standard mental image of the outward Kelmscott book is of one in the familiar limp vellum binding<sup>70</sup> with four colours of ties (and sometimes no ties at all, either on purpose or through a later accident of use). Some, however, were bound in stiff vellum, and there was a darker vellum, too, which Morris preferred for the copies bound for him. The bindings were also available in sedate blue paper (half-holland) and, in the case of the *Chaucer*, in variations of the full pigskin binding that T. J. Cobden-Sanderson carried out at the Doves bindery. All this wealth of diversity was in addition to the more personalised bindings that a collector might wish to have made, from the “Silver Kelmscott *Chaucer*” that James Brockman and Rod Kelly describe having created in 1998-2003, to the 1910 Rivière binding in red and brown of the *Chaucer* in the Spencer Collection of the New York Public Library, to the plain and utilitarian frayed brown cloth of one of the British Library’s copies. Not all the fragmentary relics of the past of Morris’s experience were scattered or broken; some had been refined, translated, or recontextualised in other ways, such as the curious copy of the *Spiegel der Menschlichen Behältniss* now at the Pier-

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<sup>70</sup> So familiar is that binding that the recent exhibition on Morris at the Yale Center for British Art in New Haven printed its pamphlet in a reasonable colour facsimile of the limp vellum binding. The design of the vellum binding, incidentally, may have been inspired by medieval bindings like that of Morris’s Zainer *De Claris Mulieribus*, now in the Morgan library, which Morris called “an old friend,” and which was known as the Yellow Book “on account of its stained yellow binding” according to Needham (“Book Collector” 21).



pont Morgan Library, which consists of woodcut impressions without text (Needham calls them, “for want of a better term, proof impressions,” 105) bound together with a manuscript on paper of pen and ink drawings with technical subjects from the Bible, recontextualised by the binder according to a mysterious logic.

Some of those relics were recontextualised by Morris himself, in the sense alternately of his reprinting medieval texts at the Press, and occasionally of physically repositioning the medieval artefact itself. More than once, Morris was able to piece together missing fragments of manuscripts he knew well: the Clifford-Grey Book of Hours, for example, is now complete and in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, because Morris identified two of its missing leaves in the Fitzwilliam’s collection (he sold the book to them with the understanding that he could keep it for the rest of his life, according to an interview in Pinkney 126). Paul Needham describes the reverse process with regard to the Windmill Psalter, which Morris purchased in order to reunite it with its four missing leaves in his collection (42-3). J. and J. Leighton and T. J. Cobden-Sanderson both carried out bindings for Morris of medieval manuscripts such as the Cicero that is now HM 1036, a good example of the way Morris integrated the physical artefact into a modern context (equivalent in his mind, perhaps, to patching the roof of a medieval barn in order to maintain it for future use). And Morris’s copy of the Savonarola *Expositio in Psalmum L* printed by Thierry Martins at Antwerp, 1502 (now in the Morgan Library), is particularly evocative of Morris’s working relationship to the past: it has been bound in the same limp vellum binding with yellow ties that the Doves used for the Kelmscott books. The binding’s non-medieval provenance is most readily betrayed by the use of Batchelor paper (with the Flower watermark) for the endpapers, but the limp vellum is fitting for the early artefact. The rebinding of the Savonarola is a fairly successful collaboration with the past, just as Morris and F. S. Ellis would later position themselves as collaborators with William Caxton when they came to edit his works at the Press.

Not all such reconstructions were successful, and Morris had seen several which aroused his ire: the architectural parallels with his work for the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings are striking. In a 31 May 1895

letter that Kelvin conjectures is to the booksellers Ellis and Elvey, Morris mentions seeing a psalter which “has been clipped so as to injure some of the ornament” (*Letters* 4: 280). Such clipping is not an uncommon occurrence; the medallions in the Kalendar to the Clare Psalter (Morgan M.103, which Morris had purchased a few years before) have also been cut off at the top of the page.<sup>71</sup> It is a reminder that the binding process was in many cases parallel to the process of architectural restoration, with similar abundant opportunities to deface the original artefact. The trimmed and gilt copy of the Kelmscott *Utopia* in the Huntington is a similar case, yet one which replaces carelessness on the part of the binder with over-care: it is tidy and elegant, but somehow sterile and unfaithful to the rough functionality of Morris’s ideal, which prefers serviceable bindings and untrimmed pages. The elaborate tooling and gilt edges of this copy of *Utopia* (from the Zaehnsdorf bindery) may be intended as a loving, opulent tribute to the arts of the small press, but in the end it comes off as a Procrustean attempt to fit the book on a wealthy collector’s shelf. Its binding poses in precisely the elite context that Morris decried; it cannot be said to be perfect, and yet it has been so far cut down it is impossible to be improved upon. Unlike the untrimmed pages of books as they came straight from the Press, in their plain blue half-holland or wrapped loosely in vellum as though in a transient envelope, the Zaehnsdorf-bound *Utopia* has no growth left in it. Yet I think Morris would have acknowledged no right to complain about it, just as he recognized that he could not publically decry the “regraters” speculating in Kelmscott books once they had purchased them (qtd. in Peterson, *Bibliography* 194-5). The fact remained that once sold or given away the books were out of his hands, and if some of them later acquired a new price

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<sup>71</sup> In his lecture on “The Ideal Book,” Morris comments on the way that this kind of trimming could also unbalance the positioning of the block of type on the page:

I have got on my shelves now a Jenson’s Latin Pliny, which, in spite of its beautiful type and handsome painted ornaments, I dare scarcely look at, because the binder (adjectives fail me here) has chopped off two-thirds of the tail margin. Such stupidities are like a man with his coat buttoned up behind, or a lady with her bonnet put on hind side foremost. (AWS 1: 315-16)

The *Spiegel der Menschlichen Behältnis* in the Morgan Library has undergone a similar process, some of the manuscript notes to its woodcuts having been cut off at the top of the page. In some cases, it is impossible to tell whether such trimming is the work of a medieval binder (who, for instance, might want to hide the prick marks the scribe used to rule the paper) or whether it had been done by a re-binder in the intervening centuries.

or form or stain or scar or other mark of individuality, then that was in the nature of the book as a physical object of use, and a testament to its historical value as an artefact of everyday life.

### 3. *Disseminating: Audience, Editing, and the Kelmscott Canon*

THE KELMSCOTT PRESS'S CIRCLE was not only concerned with medieval books as art-objects, but with their texts as well; after all, the mandate of the Press was in part to make literary and other material from Morris's favourite period more accessible to the modern reader. When deciding which books to publish at the Kelmscott Press and how they should be edited, Morris and his main editorial collaborator, F. S. Ellis,<sup>72</sup> show a strong consciousness not only of the kinds of books that had made an impression on them, but on the way in which such books would be received by subsequent readers. In spite of the fact that so many critics have acknowledged the equal importance of text and decoration in the formation of the Kelmscott canon, few have discussed the content of Kelmscott books, preferring to discuss the books' aesthetic qualities. Except for studies of Kelmscott editing practices like Charles LaPorte's essay on "Victorian Editorial Theory and the Kelmscott *Chaucer*" or Curt F. Bühler's quantitative analysis of the editing of the *Psalmi Penitentiales* from its manuscript (a significant article not least because it is probably the first to take a Kelmscott edition seriously as *text*),<sup>73</sup> the "reading interest" of Kelmscott Press books might as well be non-existent. And yet Morris himself felt the textual importance of these books strongly enough to print them, sometimes as rarities (Cavendish's *Life of*

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<sup>72</sup> Morris's son-in-law, Henry Halliday Sparling, also edited several of the Press's books, notably the long Caxton works *The Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye* (1892), *Reynard the Foxe* (1893) and *Godefrey of Boloyne* (1893).

<sup>73</sup> For example, Richard Sylvester, the editor of the Early English Text Society edition of *The Life and Death of Cardinal Wolsey* (1959), writes off the Kelmscott edition of that work as "shot through with errors" (xii n.), a statement which, given the state of the first page of the Kelmscott version, is undoubtedly true. Sylvester's attitude may stem from a self-consciousness that the EETS had taken so long to publish a modern edition, but the wonder is that he took it seriously at all: Derek Pearsall in his edition of *The Floure and the Leafe* includes the Kelmscott edition of that poem dutifully in his bibliography, but in his introduction it is among the nameless modern reprints that "may be briefly dismissed" (6).

*Wolsey*) and sometimes as canonical necessities (*The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*). He chose representative texts that gave an eclectic sample of popular medieval reading: not only popular fiction but popular history, legend, and religion. And in the same way that he had infiltrated his propaganda, poetry, and lectures with medieval artefacts, scraps of balladry, and domestic anecdote, Morris was now positioning his historiography of everyday life at the heart of his publishing practice with regard to his choices of representative medieval texts. He justified his publication of Caxton's translation of Raoul Lefèvre (the *Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye*), for example, in part by its being "a thoroughly amusing story, instinct with mediaeval thought and manners" (qtd. in Peterson, *Bibliography* 27).

The notion of filling a need in historical and literary scholarship was one agenda of the Kelmscott Press that its adherents liked to stress. In his "Memoranda" to the Kelmscott edition of Caxton's *Order of Chivalry*, Morris's friend and editor F. S. Ellis (after lamenting, in imitation of Caxton's own editorial, the loss of the culture of chivalry), claims that "the interest that [this book] has now as an historical document is considerable, and the wonder is that it has not been reprinted before this time in our own days" (151). Ellis's framing of the text as an historical or archaeological document and his and Morris's apparent desire to rehabilitate important medieval works positions the Kelmscott Press not only as a utopian exercise in renewing the collaborative art of book design, but as an original project devoted to scholarly editing and to the reprinting of "lost" or obscure texts representative of medieval social life. In this it recalls the mandate of the Early English Text Society, which took in some cases decades to get around to editing such Kelmscott favourites as the *Order of Chivalry* (EETS 1926), Cavendish's *Life of Wolsey* (EETS 1959), and Caxton's *Reynard the Fox* (1970); the Kelmscott *Godeffroy of Boloynne*, exactly contemporaneous with the 1893 Early English Text Society edition, was a bit of a fluke.<sup>74</sup> Among the Caxton works chosen by the Press, only the edition of *Reynard the Fox* could be said not to have

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<sup>74</sup> H. Oskar Sommer edited Caxton's translations of Le Fèvre's *Recuyell of the Histories of Troy* for David Nutt to publish in 1894, two years after the Kelmscott edition. It is possible that the Kelmscott edition even indicated to Nutt and Sommer that another, more scholarly edition might find buyers. At any rate, the publication of two editions of what might otherwise be considered a niche work within two years suggests that a reading audience of some kind did in fact exist.

been filling a need, since there were a number of nineteenth-century editions of it already.<sup>75</sup>

Philology was of less importance to Morris than was broad literary appeal; in this he was simultaneously representative of the social-historiographical interest of his era and distinct from the more genteel antiquarian taste of the past two hundred years. In the previous century, Edward Gibbon had sympathized with a Caxton who found himself pandering to a low audience: “In the choice of his authors, that liberal and industrious artist was reduced to comply with the vicious taste of his readers; to gratify the nobles with treatises on heraldry, hawking, and the game of chess, and to amuse the popular credulity with romances of fabulous knights and legends of more fabulous saints” (qtd. in N. F. Blake, *William Caxton* 5). Gibbon’s understanding of historical reading communities is shrewd, although his sense of the popular could not differ more from that of Morris, who saw Caxton’s treatises, romances, and legends as being representative of medieval popular reading culture, whether they partook of a “vicious taste” or not. Far from being “reduced” to printing such representative artefacts of late-medieval popular entertainment, Morris actively sought them out.

This impulse to recover and share the everyday reading of the Middle Ages had long been an important part of Morris’s social theories and of Ellis’s medievalist publishing endeavours,<sup>76</sup> and like the Early English Text Society before them they had no desire to restrict themselves to merely “literary” texts, if a work like *Utopia* may even be considered as such. Morris hints to Ellis in a letter of 29 August, 1890 that Caxton’s *Golden Legend* should be chosen over his *Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye* for the first medieval text to come out of the Press because it was the more representative of medieval life and popular religion (*Letters* 3: 198), a view which Ellis took to heart when he edited the work again for Dent’s Temple Classics. Caxton’s otherwise obscure translation of Ramon Llull’s *Order of Chivalry* and the Middle English *Psalmi Penitentiales* now attributed to Richard Maidstone were

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<sup>75</sup> These included Edward Arbor’s 1878 English Scholar’s Library edition of *Reynard*, and the 1884 Bibliotheca Curiosa reprint of Arbor’s edition; Ellis himself provided an adaptation for David Nutt a few years later.

<sup>76</sup> Ellis, for instance, had published works such as Halliwell’s edition of *The Voiage and Travaile of Sir John Mandeville* in 1866, before he had retired from active publishing.

chosen for similar reasons, and *Godefrey of Boloyne* provided an example of a work which partook both of history and romance. Henry Halliday Sparling, writing in 1924, claimed that Morris saw the *Golden Legend* as a “storehouse of much medieval tradition and religious thought, as well as of much folk-lore and many varied marvels” (109). Though Sparling’s adulatory reminiscences are not always trustworthy, here he seems to have captured the reasoning behind Morris’s and Ellis’s choice of medieval texts: they were looking for interest and amusement, for variety, and for neglected documents of medieval popular culture. When Bernard Quaritch, leering quietly, suggested that “Some of the naughty Saints stories will be relished by the numerous readers of Burton’s *Arabian Nights*” (qtd. in Peterson, *Kelmscott Press* 205), he was not quite so out of touch with Morris’s intentions as Peterson makes him out to be. The Kelmscott Press did prefer works that a broad modern audience could both read and find appealing. And although it is hard to tell how “popular” Morris expected his choice of texts to be from a modern standpoint, he certainly emphasized the kind of works that would have appealed to more than one possible medieval reading community. The value of the *Golden Legend* for Morris was in its versatility and its wide-ranging subject matter, as well as in its position at the intersection of popular religion, history, and romance.

Ellis’s edition of the *Golden Legend*, which he reprised in modernized form for the Temple Classics in 1900, is still the only readily available complete text of Caxton’s early English translation of the *Golden Legend*; even a recent online modernized edition relied on Ellis’s text (<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/goldenlegend/index.htm>). Like the Early English Text Society, J. M. Dent’s Temple Classics, David Nutt, and Ellis’s earlier publishing ventures, the Kelmscott Press was taking advantage of what seemed to be a popular interest in readable editions of medieval works among the reading classes. Each publisher took a slightly different share of the market: the EETS’s aims were scholarly, nationalist, and broadly democratic, while David Nutt published upscale volumes like H. Oskar Sommer’s limited edition of Malory or Israel Gollancz’s charming edition of *Pearl* (aimed at a middle-class audience, and including an epigraph specially provided by Tennyson). The Kelmscott editions were distinguished by their emphasis on collabor-



ative design, on sturdy materials, on representative and popular medieval texts, and (following upon all of those) social renewal through reading and making. Morris himself may have overestimated the appeal of some of his texts: despite his personal fame and the press's spreading renown, *Godefrey* did not sell well at all (Peterson, *Kelmscott Press* 193) and the *Vitas* [sic] *Patrum* had to be abandoned altogether for lack of subscribers. To give *Godefrey* its due, its failure may have stemmed from the fact that it was Morris's first attempt at self-publishing, as Bernard Quaritch had sourly predicted at the time (Peterson, *Bibliography* 43). The contemporaneity of the cheaper EETS edition may even have made the Kelmscott edition suffer a little; although this is only conjecture on my part, it would suggest that one possible selling point of the Kelmscott books was indeed the rarity of the texts themselves. At any rate, the rapid sale of works like the *Psalmi Penitentiales* (a letter from Jane Morris to Blunt suggests that he purchase a copy quickly before they are gone) attested that there was certainly a market for beautiful editions of medieval works. But at least in part, the primary intended "reading community" for the Kelmscott books was probably Morris's own large set of admirers, collaborators, and acquaintances. Morris was printing books for his friends.

The Kelmscott Press was conceived as an ongoing project; it continued for some time after Morris's death, and had many more works in mind than the ones which were ultimately published. Sydney Cockerell's list of books contemplated by Morris gives a good sample of the possibilities that Morris had in mind, including a collection of balladry and antique popular song, a Latin Psalter, *Piers Plowman*, *Huon of Bordeaux*, and the *Gesta Romanorum*. It is a diverse list that goes far beyond the more well-known projected Malory and Froissart into religious and historical works that in some cases even the Early English Text Society was as yet many years away from printing. In fact, the Kelmscott canon was open-ended, not exclusively medieval, and capable of almost infinite extension; even the works of Dickens were considered for possible future printing (Peterson, *Bibliography* 152).

Nor had they exhausted the possibilities of even the Caxton canon. The projected Malory would necessarily have been based upon Caxton's version, since the Winchester manuscript would not be discovered until 1934.



An edition of Caxton's translation of Jerome's *Vitas Patrum*, uniform with the *Golden Legend*, was announced in February or March of 1894, relying on the work's rarity to sell it. But, according to May Morris, "the number of subscribers did not justify its going beyond this stage" (*Introductions* 2: 717; see also Peterson, *Bibliography* 148). Cockerell also hints more obscurely at a contemplated edition of Raoul Lefèvre's *History of Jason*, again in the Caxton translation (65).<sup>77</sup> Finally, the projected folio Kelmscott Froissart, based on Berners' translation, is another evocative fragment. Its extant sets of trial pages point beyond themselves to Morris's future projects; its jagged initials, intruding on the block of type like the decorations of a manuscript, suggest a more daring aesthetic for future Kelmscott work as well.

At the Kelmscott Press, editorial arrangement and typographical display were often simultaneous processes of textual organization. Morris's final autograph manuscripts of his translations, for instance, appear to have been carried out with their printing layout already existing in his mind: the manuscripts of *Beowulf* and "The Ordination of Knighthood," both done particularly for the Kelmscott Press, are written as scribal exercises. In spite of their being written on plain notepaper with an ordinary nib, Morris gives his translations simple calligraphic initials (sometimes with instructions for his printer). Morris's consciousness of the translation from script to print here is parallel to his consciousness of the way the work is in process of being translated from one language to another.<sup>78</sup> Two even more direct examples

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<sup>77</sup> Ellis's daughter transcribed the *Golden Legend* from the borrowed Cambridge University Library copy, while for the other Caxton works, the Kelmscott editors worked from transcripts which Sarah Peddie had painstakingly typed out at the British Museum. This is according to the account of Frank Colebrook in *William Morris, Master-Printer* (32), and William S. Peterson suggests that "the story may be apocryphal," since none of the transcriptions are extant and he could find no record of her having been issued a reader's ticket at the Museum at the time (*Bibliography* xxxviii). But in the introduction to the Early English Text Society's *History of Jason* of 1913 the editor, John Munro, states that "In preparing this text for the press, I had the advantage of William Morris's type-written copy of the Romance, a copy which, I believe, he had had prepared for his own press but never used" (vii). So not only did at least one of Sarah Peddie's transcripts undoubtedly exist (adding another worker to the long roll of Kelmscott collaborators), there was also a systematic plan to print more Caxton works at the Kelmscott Press than just the five which ultimately materialized.

<sup>78</sup> It might even be said that his collaborator A. J. Wyatt's manuscript translation of *Beowulf*, from which Morris worked, forms a third layer just under Morris's manuscript translations, which in turn lie under the Kelmscott edition.

of such artistic translation are the *Laudes Beatae Mariae Virginis* (1896) printed from the thirteenth-century Clare Psalter, and the *Psalmi Penitentiales* (1894) printed from a fifteenth-century Book of Hours (now M. 99), both of which were in Morris's collection. In these works the written medieval text of Morris's own experience lies just under the surface of the printed Kelmscott one. Even the natural errors of transcription and typesetting described by Bühler may serve to make the Kelmscott editions distinctive and to give them the same kind of individuality that their manuscript originals have.

Whitla's metaphor of "sympathetic translation" is particularly useful here, since it usefully conveys the sense of the text as an intermediary between the past writer and present reader, allows for a certain amount of freedom on the part of the translator, and generously allows for errors of judgement and taste. Morris and Ellis were determined from the start to give medieval works in their original spelling or, for non-English works, with as historically contemporaneous a translation as possible. Although they did not want to make free with their originals, they needed texts which would be accessible. Caxton fit the requirements satisfactorily there as well. He speaks a language which, as Morris puts it, is a transitional "archaeological" curiosity, "belonging to that curious period in the history of the English language when the old had hopelessly gone to pieces and the new had not yet formulated itself" (qtd. in Peterson, *Ideal Book* 105) and which was likely to be more comprehensible in the original to modern readers than many earlier texts would be. In fact (and possibly on account of their accessibility), translations by early modern authors such as Caxton, Berners, and (later) Philemon Holland seem to have been regarded by Morris as significant English works in their own right, rather than as mere translations of another, more "authentic" text. Caxton's own translations were accordingly used for each of the Kelmscott editions (just as Berners' was the obvious choice for the projected Froissart), and the transcribers relied wholly on Caxton's original texts.

Since he was dealing with translations, F. S. Ellis may even have felt more comfortable as an editor making his own changes to medieval texts like Caxton's or Maidenstone's. Ellis justified his emendations quite reasonably, claiming in his "Memoranda" to the *Golden Legend* that the Kelmscott edition

was “intended to be, not a facsimile reprint, but a new edition of the book” so that “where the text was altogether unintelligible, or absolutely wrong through mistranslation, no hesitation has been felt in correcting it by the Latin original, but instances of the need for this are rare” (2: 1285). In this he differentiated his editing from that of, say, the Bannatyne Club, which had earlier in the century, in publishing its lavish editions, aspired to the elite status of a type facsimile. Works such as *Gawain and the Green Knight* (ed. Madden, 1839) had appeared in this way in print for the first time; but the Bannatyne Club’s intended readership was a small group of rich antiquarians and bibliophiles. Ellis, by way of contrast, claimed that every one of his editorial decisions was aimed at making the text “more readable and intelligible. With this view the contractions of the original are extended, with the exception of the sign ‘&,’ which is retained or extended as required to suit typographical exigencies” (2: 1285). In keeping with his modernising practice, he emended his original silently. Caxton’s “and were cruelle that one of them brake the poynt of hys swerd / ayenst the pavement” (“The Lyf of Saynt Thomas of Caunterbury,” Caxton cvijj), for example, becomes “and were so cruelle that . . .” (Kelmscott 1: 312). Cleverly, Ellis takes this licence based on Caxton’s own words, pointing out that “It may be observed, that in his preface, not only has Caxton sanctioned such corrections, but has earnestly enjoined them, and added a promise of reward” (2: 1285). In his prologue, Caxton does offer to reward active readers, submitting his work “hooly of suche as can & may to correcte it / humbly bysechyng them so to doo / and in so doying / they shal deserue a synguler lawde and meryte / & I shall pray for them vnto almyghty god that he of his benygne grace rewarde them” (*Prologues* 73). Ellis thus puts himself into the position of a collaborator with his medieval author himself, a righteous position indeed, and a comfortable one.

All Ellis’s emendations and changes were silent, in accordance with the principle that the medieval (or medievalist) printer/editor was an active participant in the process of textual exchange. In spite of Ellis’s willingness to emend silently, he was a willing annotator, and there arose a tension among the collaborators as to how much secondary material each edition ought to

contain.<sup>79</sup> Edward Burne-Jones, for one, shared Morris's dislike of extraneous apparatus: in inscribing his copy of the Kelmscott *Chaucer* to his daughter, he writes that "I want particularly to draw your attention to the fact that there is no preface to Chaucer, and no introduction, and no essay on his position as a poet, and no notes, and no glossary; so that all is prepared to enjoy him thoroughly" (qtd. in Robinson 35).<sup>80</sup> As Morris's and Ellis's letters show, Morris was similarly in favour of presenting medieval works with as limited an apparatus as possible—a glossary to the *Psalmi Penitentiales*, for example, that restricted itself to only the hardest "1/2 dozen" words (*Letters* 4: 227)—while elsewhere he encouraged Ellis to modernise the letters yogh and thorn.

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79 In the early years of the Press, Ellis made a concerted effort to include plenty of secondary material in the Kelmscott books he was to edit, but in this he seems to have been thwarted by Morris. During the planning of the *Golden Legend*, for example, he was in contact with the noted bibliographer Edward Gordon Duff. In a letter to Duff, dated from Torquay, 20 March 1892, in the Huntington Library, Ellis writes that "the author-printer kicks much against introductions" and that suspicion of extraneous detail extended to a bibliography of editions of the *Legenda Aurea* which Duff (or perhaps even Ellis, since he refers in the letter to Duff's having agreed to a "request") had suggested as an adjunct to the Kelmscott *Golden Legend*. Ellis writes that

If you could furnish the list by the end of May I should thank you very much indeed. A bibliography of the *Legenda Aurea* in all languages would be a Herculean task. Surely there was no book so often reprinted between 1470 & 1530 as the G. L. and by far the larger part of the editions vary in contents—at least so I think from what I have seen of it. It would make a book of itself and alack! who would accept it as a gift? (DF 268)

But Ellis warns that "the most I could get Morris to print would be a list of English editions as concise as is consistent with accuracy and precision," no doubt foreseeing the objections that Morris would make to the addition of distracting scholarly detail to his book. This was to be no antiquarian exercise.

In the end Morris's objection to the bibliography was ostensibly typographical. Ellis sadly wrote to Duff in September of the same year that

I cannot get Morris to print that very valuable piece of bibliography. The difficulty is that he has not the necessary types or the smaller fount which it would be desirable to use. He said he would get it printed by Whittingham as a separate paper to be given with the *Golden Legend* but whether he will think of it again or not I cannot say—seeing the many irons he has in the fire I am fearful of its getting forgotten & do not like to bother him further on the subject. (DF 268)

Ellis, or Duff, or both, had underestimated Morris's dedication to bibliophilia: a frontispiece by Burne-Jones was more fitting in his eyes than a dry-as-dust bibliography as a companion piece to his beautiful book. Duff's bibliography vanished, perhaps to be incorporated into one of the many accounts of early printing that Duff would publish in the following years.

80 Burne-Jones's implicit theory of reading and enjoyment here conveniently ignores the editorial commentary provided by the other paratexts that Morris and his collaborators included in the Kelmscott *Chaucer*—including, significantly, Burne-Jones's own illustrations!

The inclusion of notes is another feature that varies from book to book in the Kelmscott canon: as time went on, the medieval texts of the Kelmscott Press contained successively less in the way of apparatus, until the *Chaucer*, as Burne-Jones approvingly noted, was published in pristine form, containing none at all. Emendations were likewise silent not only because space was at a premium but because the inclusion or explanation of textual variants would have interfered with Morris's attempt to focus attention on the direct experience of the texts and the books themselves. Because Morris's own experience of the Middle Ages was holistic rather than rigorously specialised, he felt that it was not necessary to know every old word, since context at least would surrender a rough meaning (and if not, Morris always showed himself more than happy to rely upon the etymological fallacy<sup>81</sup>). While Morris would have agreed with Burne-Jones' comment that this practice would make the text more "enjoyable," he was also aiming to allow the reader to find his or her own level in the experience of reading, recognising that each reader would approach the text with a different agenda in mind. Together, the Kelmscott editors, printers, and readers are part of a larger process of the collaborative translation of past literature and material culture.

#### 4.

#### *Conclusion:*

#### *Resisting Commodification at the Kelmscott Press*

MORRIS'S AND ELLIS'S POPULARISING editorial practices offer a possible way to simultaneously resolve debates among book historians about the "readability" of the Kelmscott Press books and debates among modern editors about the Press's scholarly accuracy. Simply put, accessibility was more important than textual accuracy (which, Ellis would cavalierly argue, is dependent anyhow upon a constellation of unreliable texts). Michael Camille, in an essay on the repositioning of medieval texts in nineteenth-century French scholarly contexts, describes among other things how "Carefully classified blocks of print and their footnoted apparatus, together with clearly demarcated beginnings and endings, remade texts written in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries into nineteenth century intellectual commodities" (382). Morris

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<sup>81</sup> See, for example, his translation of *Beowulf*.

and his collaborators were engaged in *re-remaking* those nineteenth-century intellectual commodities into texts and paratexts that would (ideally) not have been entirely alien to either a fifteenth-century reader or a nineteenth-century reader. The result was a publishing practice that, because it relied upon an organic reading experience (integrative of text and paratext) rather than an academic one, was more resistant to the pressures of commodification and conformity than other contemporary reprints of medieval works were. To borrow Camille's terms, the Kelmscott Press aimed to bring back the performative aspect of the medieval text and the consequent emphasis on the reading experience. But such a practice also necessitated (problematically, from the strictest modern editorial standpoint) the stripping of all but the most necessary apparatus from Caxton's works: scrapping bibliographies, trimming glossaries, restricting Ellis's bibliophilic and editorial enthusiasms to the back of the *Golden Legend* and ultimately excluding them almost entirely from the *Chaucer* itself.

Peterson aptly characterises the publishing strategies of the Kelmscott Press as a return to the look and atmosphere of medieval books, and also as a return to a more direct mode of interaction between the modern reader and the medieval text: "only by peeling off the Renaissance and neo-classical layers of cultural interpretation could [Morris] recover something like the Chaucer of the Middle Ages, and this involved both a careful restoration of Chaucer's text (including his spelling) and a return to a more medieval style of typography and ornamentation" (*Kelmscott Press* 235). Peterson's choice of the word "restoration" is unfortunate here, and not only for its architectural associations; after all, Peterson himself suggests provocatively (236-40) that the main copytext for the *Chaucer* was Skeat's modern edition, and only nominally the Ellesmere manuscript; it was certainly not a reprint of the suspect Thynne or the partial Caxton editions, however widely read they had historically been. Likewise, the metaphor here of "peeling off the layers" is a suspect kind of scraping, since the many Pre-Raphaelite and Morrisian paratexts of the *Chaucer* complicate the reading experience a lot. But Peterson's model is preferable to the claims for the "difficulty" of Kelmscott books that critics such as Jeffrey Skoblow have advanced. Morris's emphasis on pleasure is undeniable, and the choices that Morris made (over the objections of edi-



tors such as Ellis) seem to have been made for ease of access rather than in the name of mystification. It would be still more accurate to say that a reader who follows Morris through his immersion in medieval manuscripts, early printed books, and Kelmscott editions, and who takes into account the discourse of collaborative creativity that Morris, his illustrators, and his collaborators carried on in the library at Kelmscott House, must come to the conclusion that Morris was not engaged in the process of creating “intellectual commodities,” nor even aesthetic commodities. He was recovering and preserving (however selectively) what he saw as the popular culture of the Middle Ages in an accessible and non-prescriptive format.

There exists an aesthetic parallel to this project of popular reading and partial editorial recovery in the selective paratexts of the Kelmscott *Chaucer*, where Burne-Jones did us and his collaborator Morris an intentional disservice by not illustrating Chaucer’s *fabliaux*. By the creation of this unillustrated space in the book Burne-Jones betrays his own lack of versatility, failing to do justice to the diversity of Chaucer’s broad humour, and probably making an incidental editorial comment intended to coercively narrow the medieval canon of the Kelmscott Press.<sup>82</sup> Burne-Jones’s (in)action is on the one hand a mistranslation or more charitably a selective reading of his original; on the other, the pointedly missing paratexts put Burne-Jones’s collaborative stamp on the book as irresistably as the illustrations do. If, as Lorraine Janzen Kooistra says in *The Artist as Critic*, the illustrations of the *Chaucer* don’t quite capture Geoffrey Chaucer—being a bit *too* reverent and prescriptive and lacking Chaucerian “irony, wit and humour” (257)—then in that sense even the vaunted Kelmscott *Chaucer* is incomplete, and may be out of keeping with the original intention of the Kelmscott Press to faithfully capture the spirit of its models. And yet the lack of illustration draws the reader’s attention to the type itself, in its leisurely double columns on the folio page; the act of self-censorship suggests that even the apparently atavistic Kelmscott *Chaucer* is a product of the Victorian age; and the intentional lacuna gives the book a pleasing asymmetry. The strength of Morris’s “pocket cathedral”

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<sup>82</sup> Burne-Jones to Swinburne: “Morris has been urgent with me that I should by no means exclude these stories from our scheme of adornment—especially he had hopes of my treatment of the Miller’s Tale, but he ever had more robust and daring parts than I could assume” (qtd. in Peterson, *Kelmscott Press* 247).



is in its status as a landmark or beacon pointing in a certain Morrisian ideal creative direction, rather than any claim it stakes to being itself faithful to its medieval sources or to being an exemplar of design (and quite apart from the claims that generations of scholars and bibliophiles have made for it). If in Jeffrey Skoblow's terms, the modern reconstruction of the *Chaucer* in its dissemination as a demanding fetish object makes its aesthetic success a function of its surprising modernity, in Morris's eyes that success might qualify the work as a victory with a touch of the Pyrrhic about it.

Instead, the Kelmscott *Chaucer*, and indeed the Press as a whole (with its myriad successes and failures and its constant process of growth and experimentation), is an activist monument to the *possibilities* of printing. The Kelmscott *Chaucer* is not an aggressive statement of the ego of one artist but an opus of collaborative optimism, a thing to dream on and a platform from which to work outward. Even the celebrated "pocket cathedral," then, is a fragment—a cherished link in the "golden chain" certainly, but one that relies upon the reader's understanding that the other links in the chain are equally important. This book points beyond itself to the process, context, and traditions of its making and reception, and beyond that to its place in a reimagined canon of medieval popular culture. As Morris himself would say, it has growth in it—but it is only one book among many.

## MATERIAL CULTURE AND THE SOCIAL GEOGRAPHIES OF MORRIS'S LATE ROMANCES

Morris's late romances, written over the period 1888 to 1896, evoke the same variety of creative and social possibilities inherent in historical everyday experience that his mature social theories did. Although the romances adhere to a certain consistently "medieval" aesthetic, there is no one fixed structure of society common to the geographies of Morris's romances, just as medieval material culture and, indeed, social structures themselves were not monolithic but manifested themselves in different ways at different times in diverse locales. Even when he lingers over an exploration of one single imagined culture, Morris always describes alternative possibilities. As he claimed in his lecture on "The Society of the Future," "man must and does create the conditions under which he lives" (AWS 2: 456); his romance protagonists are daily engaged in precisely that activity, as they interact with the world around them, shaping and shaped by it. This creative process of struggle and adaptation to local circumstances accounts for the diversity of the material culture and social geographies of Morris's late romances, and has its temporal analogue in his theory of history as an unfinished process of continual change.

In the "Germanic" romances of this period, *The House of the Wolfings* (1888) and *The Roots of the Mountains* (1890), Morris's protagonists for the most part remain in or near a single detailed locale whose diversity of craft suggests a diversity of hands, even though there are hints of other geographies beyond the borders of the narrative. By way of contrast, the last romances, *The Well at the World's End* (1896), *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* (1897) and *The Sundering Flood* (1898), take advantage of the quest motif to describe a journey through a richly imagined and diverse range of social geographies. There is also an intervening period which includes *The Glittering Plain* (1890), *The Wood Beyond the World* (1894), and *Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair* (1895), works that, although they still evoke the circumstances of medieval everyday life, are concerned more with describing the growth of a central hero. There are thus

at least three distinct phases of Morris's romance writing: the Germanic romances of 1888-90, the heroic romances of the intervening period 1890-95, and the last romances of the two years before Morris's death in 1896. The existence of so many phases over such a short time suggests not only that the diversity of Morris's romances should be more widely recognized by critics, but that he saw the genre itself as organic and capable of evolving into new forms; this will be the subject of my final "envoi," which deals with *The Sundering Flood*. In this chapter, I will discuss *The House of the Wolfings* as a representative example of those Germanic romances which Morris devotes to the description of a single social geography, and *The Well at the World's End* as one of the last romances, devoted to describing a multiplicity of such social geographies. Both these works portray societies that are as diverse as the individuals who shape those societies' material culture and social life, and both works evoke past and future histories outside the boundaries of the text for those societies.

Because of the lavish descriptive detail in these romances, the many-layered historicism of their material and social geographies, and our awareness of Morris's enduring political commitment, the reader's understanding of the relationship between aestheticism, history, and politics in the romances is in constant motion. We must also negotiate the tension between Morris's fascination with the particular (material culture) and his seemingly universalizing desire to describe and find sympathy with social life at all phases of the human experience through his adoption of what is admittedly an old-fashioned, if malleable, form, the romance. The plurality of social geographies in the romances should be a comforting factor here. My reliance on the material and/or textual artefact and on its active reception by those who adopt and use it suggests another way of resolving this difficulty. We can even find a related answer in the flexible genre of romance itself. In *The Secular Scripture*, Northrop Frye differentiates between particularizing, practical history and universalizing, creative ritual or play, giving problematic priority to the latter:

The historian imitates human actions or *praxeis* as such: everything 'practical' that man does, from kings planning wars to peasants digging their fields, may be material for history. There are other types of

action which are symbolic and representative of human life in a more universal perspective, and which the poet is more interested in. For these actions the best term is ritual. (55)

It should be evident by now that work and play, use and beauty, daily activity and ritual moments, are pretty much indistinguishable for Morris, just as he desired the utilitarian and the aesthetic artefact to be one and the same. When, in his propagandistic romances, Morris overwrites the religious space of the chiliastic fresco with a levelling political message (*A Dream of John Ball*, CW 16: 263) and of the medieval “church-ale”<sup>83</sup> with a humanist harvest feast (*News from Nowhere*, CW 16: 208), he is inscribing the possibilities of social cohesion across an established body of cultural rituals. It is a palimpsestic, accretive process, rather than an emblematic moment for exegesis, and like the recovery, reuse, and adaptation of medieval material culture, this process prioritizes open-ended (even in a sense allegorical) receptive activity over static symbolism. This reconciliation of historical and creative processes must be at least part of the reason why, when Frye seeks to escape from the rigid “mythic” aesthetic formulae he has set for himself (through his approval of “creative repetition rather than return,” 177), Morris’s romances are the first examples that spring to his mind.

The romances also suggest the flexibility of received distinctions between politicized and aesthetic fiction. As Christine Bolus-Reichert remarks (74), critics have tended to find in the romances either the marks of Morris’s ongoing political commitment or the signs of a turn to “decorative” fantasy some distance removed from that commitment. Bolus-Reichert adopts the aesthetic standpoint of the second of these approaches, but emphasizes that Morris’s social aesthetic theory does not participate in a solipsistic appreciation of “art for art’s sake.” Following the inward turn of the romance form, Morris instead “prioritizes active over passive looking, for his heroes and his readers. Social transformation now depends on inner sight, visionary dreaming, rather than on the givens of the external world” (74-5). For the paralysed pose of late-Victorian aesthetic appreciation (if it ever existed at all, and not only as a subject for lampoons in *Punch* of Decadents struck dumb by epiph-

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<sup>83</sup> The social historian Christopher Dyer more cynically calls the church-ales “mass drinking sessions to raise funds” (5-6).

anies of blue china), Morris substituted a fluid participatory process of use and enjoyment. The role of the artefact is important here, since it seems to complicate Morris's turn away from the materialism of "the external world" that Bolus-Reichert identifies. For if we take "active looking" as a process of use, and "visionary dreaming" as psychologically a more tactile action than mere "inner sight,"<sup>84</sup> it becomes clear that the historical artefacts so important to Morris as representative touchstones of past methods of making and using are themselves embraced, adopted, and made part of everyday life in Morris's creative outlook, and not in a merely abstract or theoretical manner. In the hands of successive writers and readers, the romance is capable of being remade, just as the popular reading of the Middle Ages was concurrently being re-imagined at the Kelmscott Press.

The importance of historiography in the late romances has been most thoroughly treated in recent criticism by Florence Boos and Nicholas Salmon. Boos's work tends to emphasize the static forms of history as they appear in Morris's late works: the social structures of the Wolfings and of the Dale-Folk are for her representative of particular descriptions from the historiographical works in which Morris was so well-read ("Morris's German Romances as Socialist History"). She notes that in *The Roots of the Mountains*, for example, "emblems and decorations exemplify the static and repetitive features of tribal life, and Morris's loving descriptions of them in *Roots* greatly slow the tale's narrative pace." Likewise, according to Boos, the clan organization of the Germanic tribes recalls public Socialist gatherings in London, "subdivided into larger groups by political affiliations, and smaller ones by local branches, all carrying home-made banners and other emblematic forms of identification" (338). Boos here captures admirably the way Morris makes connections across time periods: the ornamental banners of the clans combine form and symbolic function to perform an emblematic role that symbolises the momentary or permanent alliances that Morris's Germanic people, like the Socialists of the 1880s, found useful.

Boos thus reads the material culture of the late romances as a constellation of symbolic gestures as they point usefully towards Morris's ideals. Her

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<sup>84</sup> Here, I am recalling not only the psychology of the dream-state so crucial to the propaganda romances of the 1880s but Morris's narrator's own handling of, for instance, the glassware in the Bloomsbury Market of Nowhere.

reading of Morris's tribal emblems as objects writing "Socialist history" in the late romances, complete with parallels to bannered gatherings in Hyde Park, testifies as well to the way in which we read Morris as participating in his own historical roleplay. We might easily recall, for instance, the often-cited image of Morris as a boy, riding his pony in the park wearing his "little suit of armour" (Mackail 1: 9). May Morris similarly surprises the casual reader in her introduction to Volume 19 of the *Collected Works* with her assertion that *The Well at the World's End* begins in England, at Morris's own country home ("Kelmscott Manor transformed into the palace of a simple-living kinglet"), and she continues with numerous other examples of this kind of palimpsestic overwriting: "Wulstead is Faringdon on the Berkshire side, but Faringdon with a richer, fairer architecture," and "Ralph met the Champion of the Dry Tree for 'the first time' outside Uffington Church," near "the White Horse Hill" (*Introductions*, 2: 513).<sup>85</sup> Not only does Morris thereby create a history for his imaginative world (a cross-temporal social context for the environment of the quest), but Morris's adoption of the literal Kelmscott Manor as the fictional "Upmeads" which is Ralph's home, and his writing his own experience of the hill at Uffington into his fantastic environment, again reveal Morris's palimpsestic identification of his medievalist fantasies with his present tangible locality.

Yet this very permeability of the borders between Morris's personal experience and his literary efforts suggests to me that enduring artefacts rather than fleeting anecdotes are what make Morris's immersive sense of the past convincing. When Boos writes that ornaments such as the Wolfings' war-horn and the lamp of the Hall-Sun "exemplify the static and repetitive features of

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85 That chalk hill itself appears a little later, but Morris has transformed it into the "Bear Hill," with

strange figures on the face thereof, done by cutting away the turf so that the chalk might show clear. A tree with leaves was done on that hill-side, and on either side of it a beast like a bear ramping up against the tree; and these signs were very ancient. (CW 18:19)

In an 1889 article for *Commonweal*, Morris had characterised the White Horse of Uffington as an example of "the heraldry of the period" of eleven hundred years previous ("Under an Elm Tree," AWS 2: 508). Here Morris makes the figure into a more elaborate and more explicitly heraldic symbol: a tree and two bears rampant, argent on a field vert. The greater complexity of the chalk figures in the romance reflects the richer creativity of Morris's imaginary societies, while the obscurity of the figures' significance provides the region around Upmeads with an elusive sense of its deep past: "these signs," the narrator notes, "were very ancient."

tribal life” (“German Romances” 338), she means it approvingly: such artefacts are stable over time, symbolic of the enviable permanence of Wolfing institutions, and any repetitions in nineteenth-century culture (especially socialist culture) represent for Morris either a persistence or a significant point of coincidence. Despite Morris’s sympathy for permanence, the symbolic or emblematic component of this reading does not quite agree with my reading of Morris’s historiography. The artefact does sometimes appear in Morris’s work as a device that provides him with a symbolic connection to moments in the past. But I want to look beyond such momentary thinking to the long view: some of the artefacts I will discuss here are historically indifferent, but even then the history upon which they depend is itself changing, and they play different roles at different times. In works like *The Earthly Paradise*, the diverse products of medieval craft are devices for manipulating the narrative, for revealing his characters’ strengths and imperfections, and for evoking a sense of the slipperiness of textual reception; in his lectures and here in the late romances, material culture becomes a site where history is negotiated on a personal and political level. Some artefacts survive in whole or in part as exemplars of past design; others are ephemeral and rough. They are inscribed with generations of use, and reveal the adaptability as well as the endurance of the craft traditions and social history of which they are part. “Endurance” does not entail immutability.

Since Morris’s romances became the subject of modern critical study in the 1970s, a recurring subject of debate has been how far they are informed by Morris’s political ideals. Nineteenth-century reviews had occasionally suggested that the romances were an “allegory” of socialism, a characterisation that Morris stoutly denied. My discussion of material culture and everyday life serves to address the important issue of whether the romances are “socialist allegory” simply by concentrating on the place where the romances intersect with Morris’s socialist politics: in the social geographies, the cultures of everyday life, that are revealed in the societies he describes. Of course the romances are politicised: by this point everything was politicised for Morris. But rather than offering stark choices and locating precise static symbolologies or one-to-one parallels with Marxist historiography, my emphasis on a fluid historical process of everyday life revealed through the romances’ materiali-



ties will help to blur the boundaries between reading the romances as socialist *or* as aesthetic, between finding in them either dull historicised work *or* sprightly universalising play. To Morris, all acts of creativity, including (and perhaps especially) those which are imperfect or incompletely realised, are acts facilitating an enduring social cohesion. The lives of Morris's heroes and heroines extend into their narratives' past and future alike, but their success is never guaranteed. Nevertheless, the social geographies of the late romances are flexible, generous, and accommodating.

### 1.

### *The House of the Wolfings*

IT IS A LITTLE STARTLING to find, in light of the emphasis on material culture that I have suggested in Morris's work, that the central event of *The House of the Wolfings* (1889) is the hero's *rejection* of a marvellous artefact. The narrative of *The House of the Wolfings* balances between two poles: the Lamp of the Hall-Sun ("a wondrous lamp fashioned of glass . . . of a fair and clear green like an emerald, and all done with figures and knots in gold," CW 14: 7-8) and the supernatural armor ("a hauberk of rings dark and grey and gleaming, fashioned by the dwarfs of ancient days," CW 14: 24) which Thiodolf puts on in mistaken deference to his lover the Wood-Sun, and which will preserve him artificially in battle, sapping his human strength as a result. The one is representative of the domestic ties that Thiodolf has to his tribe and to his home, while the other denotes a pull towards the life of a demigod, and an abdication of earthly responsibility. Just as the plot-shifts of *The Earthly Paradise* often hinge upon material culture, so too do these of Morris's later romances; and the Goths in *The House of the Wolfings* show their workmanlike appreciation and sensual delight in craft in the same way that many other characters in Morris's late romances do. Their artefacts, made and inherited, influence and define them—but they do so best when they are the product of real, everyday labour.

*The House of the Wolfings* relies from the beginning upon this kind of historical labour, indistinguishable from shared ritual or play. The opening scene emphasizes particularly the kind of work that contributes to the common weal, in its description of the clearing of the forest to establish a Germanic

settlement by a river:

There then in the clearing of the wood that for many years grew greater yearly they drave their beasts to pasture in the new-made meadows, where year by year the grass grew sweeter as the sun shone on it . . . But long before that had they learned the craft of tillage and taken heed to the acres and begun to grow wheat and rye thereon round about their roofs; the spade came into their hands, and they bethought them of the plough-share, and the tillage spread and grew, and there was no lack of bread. (CW 14: 4)

This is the dim foundation-myth of the Wolfings, and it is constructive rather than destructive, evincing no pride in conquest by fire and the sword. Significantly, it also lacks named founding heroes; Morris honours the peaceful collaborative efforts of the folk over the tedious listing and naming of patriarchs and generals.<sup>86</sup> Although much of the rest of Morris's fantastic epic is devoted to bloody strife in defense of the Wolfings' home and to Thiodolf's personal conflict over whether he is willing to sacrifice his personal safety for that of the tribe, it is worth noting here Morris's devotion from the outset to portraying the society as a peaceful Teutonic gens.

The physical house itself, built in this clearing by the river (called the "Roof of the Wolfings," CW 14: 5, to differentiate it from the "House"—the tribe, or gens), comes in for a high degree of descriptive specificity. Several particulars of the Roof of the Wolfings are recognisably Morrisian, such as the hall's construction out of local materials; or the tapestries, "woven cloths pictured with images of ancient tales and the deeds of the Wolfings, and the deeds of the Gods from whence they came" (CW 14: 7); or the "sleeping-places of the Folk" along the aisles (CW 14: 6), which are the recurring "shut-beds,"

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<sup>86</sup> Likewise, his friend Kropotkin, in "Mutual Aid in the Medieval City," published in 1894 in *Nineteenth Century* (though the genesis of the work was almost simultaneous with Morris's Germanic romances), would describe, in terms strongly reminiscent of Morris's own, such early settlements as comprising

societies composed of peaceful agrarian communities, not hordes of men at war with each other. These barbarians covered the country with villages and farm-houses; they cleared the forests, bridged the torrents, and colonized the formerly quite uninhabited wilderness. (154-5)

A strong sense of cross-pollination accompanies the experience of reading these two passages in such different printed sources, Morris's framed as a romance or fantastic work, Kropotkin's appearing as a piece of popular anthropology in a journal of general interest.

translated to the Roof from the sagas. More generally, the description of the Roof of the Wolfings combines early Germanic domestic architecture with aspects and characteristics of a later, more specifically ecclesiastical, pan-European form, the “Gothic” cathedral: the hall, the narrator says, is “like a church of later days that has a nave and aisles.” Thus, the aisles have windows high up in them; two rows of pillars go down the hall “endlong” (CW 14: 6); and at the end where the altar would be is the greatest of the three hearths, the daïs and high table, and the tapestries. The Lamp, guarded by the Hall-Sun, hangs over the daïs at the end. The Lamp is a symbol which is not static, in spite of its representing the peaceful domestic space of the Wolfings’ Roof. The Lamp is integral to the social space and to the social unity; it is not aloof from the action of the novel; in fact, it is capable of being threatened, at which point the Hall-Sun moves it out of the hall, guarding it with her own body. Its position at the culmination of this cathedral-like space is an example of the way Morris overwrites ascetic religious ritual with warmth, repletion, aesthetic pleasure, and a communal sense of history, blurring the distinction between the spiritual and the social senses of place.

The daïs, though elevated and thus seeming to suggest a kind of authority, seems a very crowded place, since it has plenty of room to hold elders, chiefs, and the Hall-Sun herself. The Great Hall was a commonplace of the grander examples of Gothic Revival architecture, inspired by Walter Scott and by sentimental painterly visions such as Daniel Maclise’s *Merry Christmas in the Baron’s Hall* (1838), and sufficiently established by the early nineteenth century to be parodied memorably by Thomas Love Peacock in his portrait of Mr. Chainmail in *Crotchet Castle* (1831) as well as by Trollope in the description of Ullathorne in *Barchester Towers* (1857). All these examples had in common the assumption that the owner of the hall was the lord, handing down favours from a privileged central position. The condescension equally of those who found the shared hall a matter for derision and those who took it as an opportunity to imagine lording it over their own peasants stung Morris to the point that he complained in his 1888 lecture “How We Live and How We Might Live” that

For my part I can’t see why we should think it a hardship to eat with the people we work with . . . I console myself with visions of the noble

communal hall of the future, unsparing of materials, generous in worthy ornament, alive with the noblest thoughts of our time, and the past, embodied in the best art which a free and manly people could produce. (CW 23:23)

Morris's description of the ornate and hospitable Roof of the Wolfings is strongly reminiscent of the "vision" he evokes in this lecture delivered the same year, so that his dehierarchizing reading of past architectural space seems strongly to inform his communalization of future domestic architecture. The inhabitants of More's Utopia eat in their communal halls after that same fraternal manner,<sup>87</sup> though they are called to their meals "by the noise of a brazen trumpet" (ed. Campbell, 94) in a more ordered fashion.

If the hall as a whole is imagined as inhabited by a "Folk," many of the Wolfings' items of daily use carry the memory of social usages and customs that are more particular to certain times and individuals. The very low lintel of the Man's-door, for instance, is

not so high that a man might stand on the threshold and his helmet-crest clear the lintel; for such was the custom, that a tall man must bow himself as he came into the hall; which custom maybe was a memory of the days when the foemen were mostly wont to besiege the hall;<sup>88</sup> whereas in the days whereof the tale tells they drew out into the fields and fought unfenced. (CW 14: 5-6)

The low lintel of the Man's-door is a kind of architectural anachronism or leftover, like the wall-painting in the Rose tavern. Here, the Man's-door illustrates another example of the way in which the everyday life of the Wolfings changes over time, leaving behind its historical traces in their physical surroundings (significantly, with the qualifier "maybe," Morris's narrator frames this as a *conjectural* antiquarian reading). And not only customs but events and moments are chronicled in material culture. After the battle is won, for instance, the Wolfings repair (and even improve) the Roof, "save that they left

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<sup>87</sup> This description of dining-room customs might be one of the ascetic moments that prompts Morris to characterise *Utopia* as giving off "a curiously blended savour of Cato the Censor and a medieval monk" (AWS 1: 291).

<sup>88</sup> Such defences and sieges of the home are a common feature of the domestic sagas (most famously *Njal's Saga*); Morris nods to the genre later in *House of the Wolfings* as well when the Roof of the Wolfings is reclaimed in spite of the Romans' having fired the hall.

the charring and the marks of the flames on one tie-beam, the second from the dais, for a token of the past tidings” (CW 14: 208). This enduring record of a transient moment in the tribe’s history signifies the importance not only of shared experience but of memory, which the Wolfings chronicle not in print or manuscript, but in a specific damaged artefact of everyday life.

The events of the tale are given continuity in history through such artefacts, and through this sense of the relation of custom to place, as when for example the councils of the folk, which Morris naturally calls “Things,” are held out-of-doors “at the due Thing-steads in the Wood aloof from either acre or meadow (as was the custom of our forefathers for long after)” (CW 14: 7). The spectrum of historical change and continuity in *The House of the Wolfings* is established not only through the apparently casual possessive “our forefathers” but through the persistence of institutions, such as the democratic and direct “Doom given by neighbours chosen (whom we now call the Jury) in matters given between man and man” (CW 14: 7). Victorian philologists and literary or social historians often used that phrase “our forefathers” to establish a connection between past and present; it appears in writers as diverse as Thorold Rogers and F. J. Furnivall, and is charged with nationalist and racial sentiment. And yet in spite of the mention of the English “Jury” here, the phrase “our forefathers” might also suggest that the teller of the tale is a less remote descendent of the Wolfings—perhaps even a member of that house of the Wolf described in *The Roots of the Mountains* since, as Nicholas Salmon suggests, that work may show the same society a few centuries later, after the kindred of the Wolf have been forced to migrate again (“Germanic Romances” 72). Morris plays here with the permeability of this romance’s temporal borders, adopting the point of view alternately or simultaneously of the Wolfings, of their descendents, of a late Victorian social historian, and of a socialist who values communal decision-making.

A similar emphasis on primitivism and Germanicism informs the secondary criticism as it deals with the way Morris’s social theories and historiography inform the late fictions; and although I have established my reservations with regard to the “primitivist” reading of Morris, such a reading is useful here as an example of the way in which Morris always sought personally to connect with the past, and to inscribe his own experience and his per-

ception of the possibilities of future social organization across it. Nicholas Salmon takes a slightly different, related tack when he provides a long list (“Study” 63 and *passim*) of the Victorian historical works that were known to Morris. Salmon uses this impressive body of work to identify particular sources for the picture of Teutonic social structures (blood relations, tribal groupings, and formal institutions, 64-8) that Morris adapted to the Germanic societies of the historical romances; to locate the possible specific dates of the action of those romances; and to complicate “Morris’s view of the organic link between the early Germanic tribes and modern Englishmen” (Salmon 73), a major thread that runs through Amanda Hodgson’s study of the late romances (Hodgson 134-6). Two further items can be added to Salmon’s detailed description of Victorian historiography as it pertains to Morris. First, an important intellectual interest of the Victorian historians that Salmon describes (J. R. Green, for example) was, as I have noted, the history of social life. Second, Salmon himself recognises the temporary nature of the societies of the late romances, as well as the continuities among them.<sup>89</sup> The theme, particularly significant to Morris’s historical romances, of the subsumption of the individual in the tribe thus has a parallel in his evocation of the way the individual negotiates his or her place in the ongoing and organic traditions of craft and processes of history, and the way objects of everyday material culture play different roles in the social geography at different times.

It is significant that Morris and Salmon describe the *evolution* of the Teutonic gens: it is a flexible tribal organization much like the ones described by Kropotkin in “Mutual Aid Among the Barbarians” (published in *Nineteenth Century* a few years later in 1892). For Morris as for Kropotkin the strengths of this mode of organization do not lie so much in its enduring qualities as in its fluidity. According to Kropotkin, Germanic society grew in a manner

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<sup>89</sup> Still more radically, Salmon suggests that one shortcoming of the many critical works which seek to find congruences between Morris’s social theories and his romances is that his social theories evolved over time: “Morris’s socialism was never a static phenomenon but one which responded throughout to contemporary political events and his own personal interests and predilections” (“Study” 61). To trace this evolution in Morris’s work would be an important but enormous task; it is enough to note here that such an evolution did exist and that it paralleled Morris’s own theory that social and historical transformation was ongoing and organic, an outlook which seems for Morris to have held as true on the individual and philosophical level as on the social and material.



partaking of Morris's "fellowship": "the gradual extension of the circle of men embraced by the feelings of solidarity. Not only the tribes federated into stems, but the stems as well, even though of different origin, joined together in confederations" (*Mutual Aid* 136). This is a striking articulation of Morris's principle of acknowledging diversity within the varieties of human fellowship. In a like manner the Kentish peasants of 1381 cite the various insurrectionists in other parts of southern England with whom they find common cause, while the Wolfings join in confederation with the other "kindreds of the Mid-mark . . . and of these the chiefest were the Elkins, the Vallings, the Alftings, the Beamings, the Galtings, and the Bearings," with whom they intermarry and associate at various times. This diversity is further accentuated by a reference to "other lesser and newer kindreds" nearby as well as to more distant associations like the Hartings (CW 14: 8), so that the varieties of social organisation partake of the same organic theory of history to which Morris returns again and again; his social geographies vary and mutate in character over time and distance. The Wolfings "in the days whereof the tale tells" (CW 14: 6) are thus just one possible society in the context of Morris's imaginative diversity, liable to change over the years as new associations and customs arise. This organic theory of social change is essential to understanding the way that individuals, created objects, and even societies in Morris's imaginative historiography adapt (or are adapted) to circumstances, change, and grow.

The first appearance of the Wolfings in the tale shows them at their daily occupations, contemplating a particular synchronic moment of the season:

Tells the tale that it was an evening of summer, when the wheat was in the ear, but yet green; and the neat-herds were done driving the milch-kine to the byre, and the horseherds and the shepherds had made the night-shift, and the out-goers were riding two by two and one by one through the lanes between the wheat and the rye towards the meadow. (CW 14: 8)

In its portrayal of a particular moment in the seasonal life of the Folk, Morris's opening scene here recalls similar snapshots of the working life of the past throughout his earlier works. It is a domestic scene of the kind as congenial to Morris's activist vision as is the fashioning of the iron helm into



“the similitude of the Wolf’s head with gaping jaws” which the other Wolfing leader Heriulf “had wrought for himself with his own hands” (CW 14: 56). Thiodolf participates fully in this working life, for he is not only “the wisest man of the Wolfings” and “of heart most dauntless,” but “the best man of his hands” (CW 14: 10), which Morris intends to denote a well-rounded worker as well as a fighter. In battle, with a kind of grim amusement, Thiodolf’s war-cry is to call on “the men of the kindred not to weary in their work, but to fulfil all the hours of their day,” and to imagine their enemies mocking them with ““Ye Wolfing warriors, ye have done your work but ill, / Fall to now and do it again, like the craftsman who learneth his skill” (CW 14: 56). The characterisation of violence in the defence of the social unit as just another kind of hard work to be carried out with relish is characteristic of this romance, and indeed of many of Morris’s later fictions. Thiodolf’s having named his sword “Throng-plough” (my emphasis) participates in another such wry acknowledgement of the admixture of the various kinds of work that Morris’s heroes find necessary. Weapons under this interpretation are just another kind of tool, like the pruning-hooks shaped into spears in *A Dream of John Ball*.

Later, however, Thiodolf will tellingly rather imagine himself at more congenial kinds of work “when this time of battle was over,” participating in seasonal occupations not unlike those generically illustrated in the Calendars of later medieval Books of Hours:

There he was between the plough-stilts in the acres of the kindred . . .  
or smiting down the ripe wheat in the hot afternoon amidst the laughter and merry talk of man and maid . . . or wending the windless woods  
in the first frosts before the snow came, the hunter’s bow or javelin in hand. (CW 14: 105-6)

All this Thiodolf placidly imagines in the time between his idle construction of a little dam solely to create a pool in which to bathe and the destruction of that dam by the force of the water. Morris’s characters are incapable of resting from creative labour of one kind or another; and Thiodolf’s soft laugh at his work’s inevitable undoing is significant of how even-tempered Morris’s characters are in the face of the ultimate negation or at least muta-

bility of historical works and days.<sup>90</sup>

The Wolfings' own material culture and heirlooms, made part of the tribe's daily rituals, contribute to the willingness that Carole Silver identifies on the part of the Goths to "relinquish their individual lives to assure the continuing life of the group" (*Romance* 133). The Roof itself is one such enduring thing, as is the Lamp of the Hall-Sun; it is significant to me that such items do not merely exist, and are not only symbolic, but are actively used, changing over time: the Roof shows the marks of its burning, and the Lamp is moved according to the danger. There is also an array of other, lesser items that show in their production and use the historical marks of different aspects of early-medieval life and commerce. When Thiodolf receives the messenger, before him lies

the great War-horn of the Wolfings carved out of the tusk of a sea-whale  
of the North and with many devices on it and the Wolf amidst them all;  
its golden mouth-piece and rim wrought finely with flowers. There it  
abode the blowing . . . (CW 14: 10)

A similar emphasis on craftsmanship pervades the Anglo-Saxon poems which Morris was currently reading and translating with A. J. Wyatt, in which rings and other gifts cement the bonds of loyalty between leaders and retainers (a relationship probably not quite so egalitarian as Morris has it here). In this case, Thiodolf's winding of the horn emphasizes the Wolfings' solidarity in their common cause with the other tribes of the Mark. The Wolfings show no sign of being a sea-faring people, so the existence of this narwhal's horn in the forests of central Europe gives the war-horn its pride of place as well as an air of romance exoticism which draws invisible social connections outward of historical trade and adventure. This early medieval international trade is hardly unheard-of: the opening lines of *Beowulf* describe the ship-burial of Scyld Scefing, where "Ðær wæs madma fela / Of feor-wegum" (l. 36-7).<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> The Wood-Sun iterates a more nihilistic aspect of this theme of mutability when, a few pages later, she unhappily imagines the inevitable death of Thiodolf and her divine inability to save him:

'A few bones white in their war-gear that have no help or thought,  
Shall be Thiodolf the Mighty, so nigh, so dear—and nought.' (CW 14: 108)

<sup>91</sup> Morris himself, in his translation of this passage, emphasizes the distance that hand-craft could travel in the early medieval period: "From far ways forsooth had the fret-work been led" (CW 10: 180).

Likewise, the inhabitants of Iceland in the sagas are not only homebodies, but travel across the northern Atlantic in the process of creating social and economic networks, and the young men of the Dale in *The Roots of the Mountains* are tempted by the wealth and adventure to be found in the decadent Cities of the Plain.

The ritual of greeting the messenger from upriver with a drinking-horn of mead both reiterates the bonds between the kindreds of the Mark and recalls the guesting traditions of the saga literature which Morris found so congenial. Thiodolf's action is simultaneously highly stylised and spontaneous; his generosity is ritual as well as real. The mead-offering is a conventional gesture, but he has obviously adapted his speech in verse to the occasion, since his last line identifies the messenger personally as one of the Hartings ("And meseems as I behold thee, that I look on a child of the Hart," CW 14: 11). The messenger's rejection of the shared drink is probably less conventional, but he couches it in terms of his duty to his people ("the mouth and the maw that I carry this eve are nought of mine"). Remarkably, he too can articulate this rejection in verse, if a little awkwardly, being quite out of breath, after which he holds up a material sign which calls the Wolfings to fight in defence of the tribe:

Therewith he held up yet for a minute the token of the war-arrow ragged and burnt and bloody; and turning about with it in his hand went his ways through the open door, none hindering; and when he was gone, it was as if the token were still in the air there against the heads of the living men, and the heads of the woven warriors [i.e. those in the tapestries], so intently had all gazed at it; and none doubted the tiding or the token. (CW 14: 12)

The Wolfings' gaze upon the war-arrow in this instance is a shared aesthetic experience as well as a cultural "token" (a word with rich Anglo-Saxon associations, where it generally appears in a religious sense as "tacne," another example of Morris's adoption of religious symbolism to secular ends). Morris's dramatic framing of the arrow against the current and remembered members of the tribe makes the artefact into the reification of this cultural moment in the history of the tribes, just as the various landmarks in Morris's romances participate in history present or past. In this case the arrow

is not a signifier of memory (as the tapestries here are, or the various grave-mounds later on), nor of fellowship (like the mazer is in *A Dream of John Ball* or Steelhead's three arrows in *The Sundering Flood*), although, in a fashion typical of Morris, it seems to participate in both those. The arrow is an active incitement to effort, like the chaplet that betokens the quest in *The Well at the World's End*.

Thiodolf, like Egil Skallagrimson or indeed like most of Morris's favourite polymath saga-heroes, can settle a copy of verses when the occasion requires it; and here he takes the opportunity to give the arrow its voice, promising not only a long hard fight (although a seemingly well-provisioned one), but a return to the hearth at the end:

‘Now Wolfing children hearken, what the splintered War-shaft saith,  
The fire scathed blood-stained aspen! we shall ride for life or death,  
We warriors, a long journey with the herd and with the wain;  
But unto this our homestead shall we wend us back again.’  
(CW 14: 13)

The first line of Thiodolf's speech follows almost precisely the pattern of Byrhtnoth's flyting<sup>92</sup> in the *Battle of Maldon* (“Gehyrst þu, sælida, hwæt þis folc segeð?”<sup>93</sup> he asks in l. 45, ed. Sweet), wherein it is the “folc” speaking through Byrhtnoth. Here the voice of the “folc” speaks through the arrow, as articulated by Thiodolf back to his folk, which is fitting as well, since *The House of the Wolfings* is meant, as Morris put it in a letter of 17 November 1888, “to illustrate the melting of the individual into the society of the tribes” (*Letters* 2: 835-6) and Thiodolf is the figure in whom that process of integration is represented. And so the Wolfings make themselves ready for battle, on the word of an object.

Many of the artefacts in Morris's romances have histories of their own, and his characters enjoy telling them. Wood-Sun tells the story of the hau-berk, for instance, in chapter 26, describing its supernatural origin in the forge of the Dwarf-lord (which on its own, recalling Morris's bias in favour of local materials and healthy circumstances of production, should be enough

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<sup>92</sup> Thiodolf himself is not one for flytings: “nor did he use much the custom of those days in reviling and defiling the foe that was to be smitten with swords” (CW 14: 55).

<sup>93</sup> “Do you hear, sailor, what this folk says?”

to raise the reader's suspicions). The "Lady of the Disir" (CW 14: 171) who bargains with the Dwarf for the hauberk, promising him her body and then reneging on the deal, is probably the Wood-Sun herself, in spite of her second-person narration. Whoever the Lady is, the Dwarf's curse upon the hauberk has its origin in a betrayal of trust:

"Since the safeguard wrought in the ring-mail I may not do away  
I lay this curse upon it, that whoso weareth the same,  
Shall save his life in the battle, and have the battle's shame;  
He shall live through wrack and ruin, and ever have the worse,  
And drag adown his kindred, and bear the people's curse."

The extension of the curse from "that fool of the folk thou lovest" to his entire "kindred" is significant here in light of the tensions throughout the story between the needs of the individual and those of the social unit. When the Lady (now specifically the Wood-Sun) admits her divine apathy towards such human communities, she reveals her amorality:

"Lo, this the tale of the Hauberk, and I knew it for the truth:  
And little I thought of the kindreds; of their day I had no ruth;  
For I said, They are doomed to departure; in a little while  
must they wane,  
And nought it helpeth or hindreth if I hold my hand or refrain."  
(CW 14: 172)

Her perspective is broadly historical, and if the kindred of the Wolf are indeed a fleeting social model (as Salmon points out in his historicist discussion of the Germanic romances), she is ultimately correct. But that, to Morris, is beside the point, since success to him lies in working with the materials to hand to the best of one's abilities, in hopeful striving for the future, however things are to fall out. In Morris's organic theory of history, societies, like individuals, have their temporal as well as their economic limitations—even personal utopias like Nowhere.

The Wood-Sun's abdication of responsibility ("nought it helpeth or hindreth if I hold my hand or refrain") and her rejection of human society for selfish reasons run against all the activist values of Morris's social theory. She promises Thiodolf, for instance, that "No ill for thee, beloved, or for me in

the hauberk lies; / No sundering grief is in it, no lonely miseries" (CW 14: 23). Her words are a transparent sophistry that urges Thiodolf to put the personal above the political, so that later he expresses his misgiving that the hauberk exists "for the ransom of a man and the ruin of a folk" (CW 14: 111). His decision to remove the hauberk is partly a concession to the fatalism of the Germanic hero, but it owes still more to Morris's theory of direct interaction with one's work, one's fate, and one's foes. When Morris praises his ideal medieval people as "sturdy" and "bold" and so forth, he really means that they were activists, adapting to their immediate environment without alienating machinery.<sup>94</sup> So Thiodolf the hero of the folk strips off the alienating hauberk, takes up his sword Throng-plough, and goes out to die in defense of the social unit.

*The House of the Wolfings* ends with a feast in honour of the survival of the community and in memory of its dead heroes. That feast is characterised by the reification of the communal spirit in its material artefacts: "Therein was set forth the Treasure of the Wolfings; fair cloths were hung on the walls, goodly chests were set down in nooks where men could see them well, and vessels of gold and silver were set all up and down the tables of the feast." And by the odorous "sweet gums and spices . . . burning in fair-wrought censers of brass" (CW 14: 206), too, it is apparent that the Wolfings have intended their feast to appeal to all the senses; the stern self-abnegation of knighthood is not for them. The Roof of the Wolfings is even decorated in a manner remote from belligerent Heorot, which is described in *Beowulf* as including (among other things) "heaþosteapa helm, hringed byrne, / þrecwudu þrymlic"<sup>95</sup> hanging close to hand (l. 1239-1246). Morris replaces (or rather augments) them with a more artistic and domestic array of artefacts.

Morris's insistence here on the placement of the "goodly chests" so spe-

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<sup>94</sup> Osberne and Elfhild similarly reject supernatural aid when they throw the sheep-charming pipe back into the cave of the water-spirit at the end of *The Sundering Flood* (CW 21: 246-7).

<sup>95</sup> Morris renders this as "The battle-steep war-helm, the byrnie be-ringed, / The wood [spear] of the onset, all-glorious" (CW 10: 216). If *Beowulf* had been valuable to scholars for its "vivid and faithful picture of old Northern manners and usages" (qtd. in Shippey 297-9), then here the "faithful picture" may be said to have preserved the customary placement of one's tools ready to hand.

cifically for *viewing* emphasizes the aesthetic and high ceremonial nature of the occasion; but it is also clear that, being storage-chests, the Treasure of the Wolfings encompasses items of peaceful work as pointedly as it does those of warlike use. A similar appreciation for the artefacts of daily use appears in, for example, the *Fifty Earliest English Wills*, which had been recently published by the Early English Text Society (1882) and which, even for very wealthy bequests, make very specific arrangements as to the bestowal of beds, pewter pots, brass pots, and brewing equipment (22). Before the mass production of cheap household implements, a great deal of value and future use could be inherent even in one's second-best bed. As representative of the spirit of the gens as the Lamp of the Hall-Sun is, the Treasure of the Wolfings makes it clear that this community has a sensual appreciation for the display as well of the use of its shared possessions, whether harvested, crafted or (as perhaps the more exotic gums burning in the censers hint) expropriated.

The mazer in *A Dream of John Ball* (and the Bear of Bradwardine in *Waverley*, recalling Morris's early and complete acquaintance with Scott) is a similar heirloom, handed down and cherished and brought out for special occasions. The Wolfings also have a mazer to drink from, though they don't call it that. But their own capitalised vessel and the toasts they drink in it are similar in import and social place to those of the fellowship of 1381:

There then they fell to feasting, hallowing in the high-tide of their return with victory in their hands: and the dead corpses of Thiodolf and Otter, clad in precious glistering raiment, looked down on them from the High-seat, and the kindreds worshipped them and were glad; and they drank the Cup to them before any others, were they Gods or men. (CW 14: 206)

Idealism is all very well—the Hall-Sun herself looks forward to seeing the Ragnarok-like day when “the change of the World is at hand” and Thiodolf may draw his sword again<sup>96</sup>—but above all the Wolfings know and love their companions on the earth, especially when those companions have

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<sup>96</sup> Morris adapted the phrase “changed his life” from the saga literature; see, for instance, the death of Helga in *Gunnlaug* (CW 10: 47; he uses it as well in “The Lovers of Gudrun” in *The Earthly Paradise*). Societies, like individuals, have their deaths and renewals in Morris's view.



contributed so much to the social unit. Thiodolf is always praised most for his earthly accomplishments; indeed, when he tries to step beyond his own abilities (the blatant symbolism of his donning the dwarf-made hauberk, an item that betrays its wearer through partaking of a supernatural—or unnatural—ideal of immortality), he “swoons,” entering a trance and thus alienating himself from the world he is meant to work in. Not all artefacts work to further the common weal; plenty of the plots of the *Earthly Paradise* poems are sent awry by objects made or placed by supernatural hands to betray men. But here the Cup belongs in the most complete sense to the Wolfings; and they pledge Thiodolf in it before even the gods for the simple reason that, when faced with the choice of, as John Hollow puts it, “whether to live for himself or die for his people” (86), Thiodolf chooses the self-effacing path of fellowship. It is fitting that Thiodolf’s life and death are celebrated communally in the domestic milieu of the Wolfing Hall, not only because the Hall is (like Heorot) the figurative and real social geography of this romance, and not only because the action of Morris’s romances always returns home in the end, but because Thiodolf’s individual devotion to the tribe is the story’s central theme.

Charlotte Oberg finds the lesson of this romance in “the triumph of liberty over tyrannical forces” (101), forgetting perhaps Morris’s own characterisation of the story (cited above) as having described “the melting of the individual into the society of the tribes.” Morris complicates Oberg’s reading in his already careful negotiation of the relationship of the individual to society. In *The House of the Wolfings*, liberty seems to be able to exist within a generally accepted social framework, society does not tyrannise, and individuals are capable of recognising a greater good. And while Oberg’s reading certainly fits Morris’s (and Kropotkin’s) view of the Teutonic tradition, where free association is preferred over legislation, and the folk-mote over the pronouncements of the court-room, an equally essential theme is the triumph of the local over the global (or, in de Certeau’s terms, of the Tour over the Map). For while the individual is certainly asserted in the heroism and adulation of Thiodolf and Otter, the most important theme of *The House of the Wolfings* is the endurance of co-operation on the local scale represented by the Roof of the Wolfings, where social life is played out through

individuals' interactions with the Roof and with the material culture it encompasses.

## 2.

### *The Well at the World's End*

THE LAST PHASE of Morris's romances is not so focused in its emphasis on the local; the last romances' social geographies are much less static, and their heroes and heroines are more ambitious and wayward, although their main characters still ultimately gravitate towards home. If, as Walter Benjamin puts it, there are two types of storytellers, the Germanic romances may be said to have been written by a farmer who knows one locale intimately, while the last fantasies were written as though by a sailor who passes through many lands as a more or less superficial observer. The historicism of the last romances is also less particularised than that of the Germanic ones, underlining Morris's tendency towards re-envisioning rather than revisiting the medieval form. Walter Crane's illustrations for the 1894 Kelmscott edition of *The Glittering Plain*, for example, make out the setting of that story to be at some times vaguely Carolingian, as the crown and beard of the seated King of the Glittering Plain seem in the illustration on page 77, while at other times the atmosphere is closer (as in, for example, the woodcut of the great knorr on page 10, with the black raven on its sail and the cruel-beaked dragon on the prow) to the Scandinavian travel-saga that Morris's own text seems to suggest. *The Wood Beyond the World* and *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* play out against an always-diverse backdrop of castles and forests and wastelands, with characters who appear and disappear with all the caprice and irregularity of the seekers after the Grail or of those who follow the Questing Beast. *The Well at the World's End* likewise eschews the most faithful kind of historical setting; but there is an historical sense here nonetheless, in the incorporation of social historical elements from various aspects of Morris's medieval reading and in his inclination towards both sensual and sociological descriptions of the material culture of the world he describes.

When Morris turned from the Germanic romances *The Roots of the Mountains* and *The House of the Wolfings*, which are sagas of the local defense of hearth and hall, to the later romances, which are adaptations of the high medieval

romance form, he retained an emphasis on polymath heroes who could hold their own in the garden as well as in the fray. The reader's first cinematic glimpse of Hallblithe in the heroic romance of *The Glittering Plain* finds him at work on his porch in the evening like a saga protagonist "smoothing an ash stave for his spear" (CW 14: 211), a tidy conjunction of manual work with warlike spirit that is meant to show Hallblithe's intimacy with his tools. The everyday tasks of Birdalone in the witch's house in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* are similarly numbered in lengthy detail: "the kine and the goats must she milk, and plough and sow and reap the acre-land according to the seasons . . . and at the dame's bidding must fare alone into the wood now and then to slay big deer and little, and win venison" (*Water of the Wondrous Isles* CW 20: 11). At various times, various kinds of work are required; a similar emphasis on seasonal work entails the occasional migration of Nowhere's people from the city to the country for activities like the hay-harvest (*News from Nowhere* CW 16: 12, 137).

If the last romances lack the local focus, the evocative symbologies, and some of the attendant sense of purpose of the Germanic romances, they make up for it in a lush diversity of description which reveals the breadth of Morris's knowledge and taste and makes the social geographies of Morris's last romances more complex than those of the Germanic ones. Following the generic conventions of medieval travel narrative and quest romance, Morris describes in the last romances a diversity of environments variously congenial and violent, characterised by virtue, corruption, beauty, decay, penny-pinching, and even sexual promiscuity. There is a similar diversity of characters in *The Well at the World's End*: not all are warlike, and they include merchants, ecclesiastics, and labourers. His societies also have their individuating folkloric customs and amusements in the form of song, dance, and pageantry. Even the quest at the heart of the narrative is nebulous and contingent: not every seeker after the Well at the World's End is shown to succeed in the same manner, just as Sir Bors, Sir Percevale, and Sir Galahad find varying degrees of success in pursuit of the Grail. But it is no surprise that after experiencing this diversity, Ralph of Upmeads returns to the humble kingdom he is meant to inherit. Even though the mighty and versatile hero may have anything worldly he desires, a preference for the domestic is one

of the strongest unifying features of Morris's romances.

The hero naturally finds himself informed and changed by his experience of society outside his locale. Marcus Waithe identifies an anti-authoritarian "tolerance" (9 and *passim*) in Morris's social theory, and it is a theme that coincides well with the diverse descriptions of social geographies in the last romances, and with Morris's broad view of historical process and change. This "tolerance" should not be confused with passivity, nor with a non-confrontational attitude to tyranny (what Morris terms in these romances "mastery"). The secular lords, the worldly Church, and the servile, hypocritical monk in *Higham-on-the-Way* all tempt Ralph early on, urging him to take the easy route of submission to co-operate in oppressive systems. In offering Ralph a place as a captain of the Abbot's secular military arm ("nowhere shalt thou have a better livelihood, not even wert thou a king's son"), the monk tests Ralph's desire for material power, an offer which the young hero refuses decisively as either selling out to authority ("I wot not that I am come forth to seek a master," CW 18: 29), or as requiring that he become one powerful participant in a dubious hierarchy (what he calls, with ambiguous humility, "things too mighty and over-mastering for such as I be," CW 18: 30).<sup>97</sup> Ralph drowns out the temptations of the monk by humming a love-song about work ("hard are my hand-palms because on the ridges / I carried the reap-hook and smote for thy sake," CW 18: 35), underlining his resolution to find his own way in the world. Ralph's equal rejection of acquiescence to and assumption of tyrannical authority is shared by all of Morris's heroes and heroines, no matter how consequential their place in their respective social fabrics. His displacement of an offer of "mastery" by a song about effort and sensual love is characteristic of the way Morris's romance protagonists always desire to achieve a possible free way of living, and not to live merely in opposition to an existing repressive one.

The monk's hypocrisy is softened by the kindness with which he treats Ralph even when he is bested by him in debate; and Ralph's parting from the abbey is nothing but friendly and tolerant, even though Ralph

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<sup>97</sup> The worldly power of the Abbey of St. Mary's itself is fleeting, as Ralph finds when he passes through on his way home to find Higham in a power vacuum and a state of paranoia (CW 19: 188-9).

sighed for pleasure when he found himself in the street again, and looked on the shops of the chapmen and the booths of the petty craftsmen, as shoe-smiths and glovers, and tinsmiths and copper-smiths, and horners and the like . . . and surely as he looked on some of the maidens he deemed that Hall-song of Upmeads a good one. (CW 18: 37).

This is the simple, joyful, aesthetic side of the materialism of Morris's romances, and it is clear that it is not the materialism of an utter sensualist, since at many points Ralph rejects mere power and opulence. Later on, Ralph's brother Blaise will also try to tempt him into service, appealing both to his blood relationship and his self-interest—"now come and look at my house within, how fair it is, and thou wilt see that thou wilt have somewhat to fight for, whereas I am" (CW 18: 229)—but in spite of the household tour and the long list of beautiful tapestries and silver vessels, Ralph is characteristically unwilling to fight on behalf of mere consumerism.

The blunt or subtle exercise of authority and economic power is a running theme in *The Well at the World's End*, making itself felt in various ways in the places Ralph visits. Its taint usually manifests itself in material form: at Cheaping Knowe, for example, "Ralph deemed many of the folk fair, such as were goodly clad; for many had but foul clouts to cover their nakedness, and seemed needy and hunger-pinched" (CW 18: 249). It's no wonder that Blaise rates the town as a good one to make money in, but Ralph and Clement Chapman recognise the signs of an odious division between rich and poor, a division that arises from the distinction between thralls whose goods and labour are plundered and the "free men waged for their service" (CW 18: 232) who plunder them. Over the apparent prosperity of the Burg of the Four Friths, too, hangs the shadow of slavery (in spite of which Ralph admires the craftsmanship inherent in the sharp tools or weapons he sees in the shops, although his free instinct is perplexed by the requirement of a permit to buy them). Morris's geographies have their own fantastic economies, and Clement, as befits a well-traveled merchant, describes the economy of the lands that Ralph will experience on the far side of Whitwall in succinct detail as "Little for peace, but much for profit" (CW 18: 233), based on raw resource extraction and baronial depredation. Yet Morris never dwells entirely in absolutes: Clement qualifies his description by saying that "I say

not but we shall find crafts amongst them, and worthy good men therein, but they have little might against the tyrants who reign over the towns” (CW 18: 232).<sup>98</sup> There are no Orcs in Morris.

Goldburg, an unfinished utopian society, is the most evocative of the cities beyond Whitwall, and it comes in for a lavishly detailed physical description, full of the particular nuances that Morris uses to describe the history of domestic architecture as it is revealed in its form and workmanship. As Clement Chapman describes it, the city was built by an idealist lord (whose utopian ambitions are signified at least in part by his desire to “find the Well at the World’s End, and drink thereof”) who died leaving the town, and indeed the society, unfinished. Although it seems the lord had had hopes that the society would be one without masters, it turns out now that although (or because) they are not legally bound to any lord, the “tillers and toilers of Goldburg” have no guarantees of a livelihood, and are taken advantage of by the owning class

so that they toiled and swinked and died with none heeding them, save that they had the work of their hands good cheap; and they [i.e. the owning class] forsooth heeded them less than their draught beasts whom they must needs buy with money, and whose bellies they must fill; whereas these poor wretches were slaves without a price, and if one died another took his place on the chance that thereby he might escape present death by hunger, for there were a great many of them. (CW 18: 262)

The idea that a labourer under modern capitalism has nothing to bargain with but his ability to labour is familiar from the rhetoric of Morris’s lectures; it goes back to the earliest days of trade unions and of the socialist movement. The sentiment in this passage is akin to the same astonishment that John Ball expresses to Morris’s narrator during the vigil in the church in *A Dream of John Ball*: “Wonderful is this thou tellest of a free man with nought whereby to live!” (CW 16: 272).

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<sup>98</sup> There is at least one example of such craft: Clement, in clinically examining the body of Bull’s brother in the wilderness, notes as an almost comical offhand aside that he must have bought his “iron headpiece” at Cheaping Knowe. Whether he can tell by some particular quality of the craftsmanship or by the mere inferiority of its ironwork, he does not say, only that he has “seen suchlike in the armourers’ booths there” (CW 18: 258).

The result is a society which has a recognizable income gap between rich and poor, not unlike the income gap inherent in the outward appearance of Cheaping Knowe, with the great difference that Goldburg carries within itself the physical memory of a time of greater possibilities, inscribed across the gorgeous but incomplete architecture which is appropriated to the use of the ordinary mortals who now live there. What is worse, the *most* ordinary of those mortals seem to be banished from living in the beautiful core of the city to the shanties on the surrounding hills, which, if Morris's Anglo-Saxon allowed it, we would call "favelas":

All around the market were houses as fair as the first they had seen: but above, on the hill-sides . . . were the houses but low, poorly built of post and pan, and thatched with straw, or reed, or shingle. (CW 18: 264)

"Post and pan" architecture, as Morris would have known from such works as Joseph Gwilt's 1842 *Encyclopædia of Architecture*, was composed of beams filled in with clay, plaster, or stone. Predictably, the craftsmanship of the town suffers, too, for its present lack of idealism as much as for the uninspired work that wage-slaves necessarily produce. Although the buildings' exteriors are lovely (no doubt because they had been built with love and care in the cause of free expression), the furnishings built in the present age are ordinary, as Ralph discovers when he turns his aesthetic eye on the domestic architecture of the hostel at which he and his fellowship stay: "as goodly as was the fashion of the building of that house, yet the hangings and beds, and stools and chairs, and other plenishing were no richer or better than might be seen in the hostelry of any good town" (CW 18: 264). The incongruity is historical, a less positive version of the cross-temporal comparisons that Morris's narrators make in the socialist propaganda: the hostel in Goldburg is an old house among new folk, though its inhabitants are like barbarian moderns among the Cyclopean architecture of past times.

The Queen of Goldburg's desire to retain Ralph is at least partly symptomatic of her awareness of her city's social inability to live up to its glazed windows and golden pillars. That is, not only is Ralph (like all Morris's heroes and heroines) hyperbolically attractive to all the women he meets, but, as an individual in active quest of the Well, he partakes of the sense of idealism that the original lord of the town possessed, and could conceivably return Gold-



burg to its real and not merely outward glory. Such a return would according to Morris's artistic theories return the city to active participation in the historical progression of free craft, a participation which had been interrupted. Oberg's comment that "By contrast [with Ralph the "hero-king"], we are told that the foolish King of Goldburg wasted the gifts of the well on pomp and luxury; his portion was death" (124) is less convincing. After all, it is not even clear that the King of Goldburg ever attained the Well; his death comes almost incidentally in battle (which, as Morris would say, could happen to anyone); and his utopian project was unfinished and thus cannot be judged. Tidy poetic justice is not necessarily an ongoing concern for Morris.

The remote militaristic society of Utterbol is the most extreme example of what Ralph's friend Clement Chapman describes as the state of society beyond Whitwall: a community, if it can be called that, held together by the sheer force of will of its violent Lord, who "could not but know that they [his strongest captains] understood how the dread of the Lord of Utterbol was a shield to them, and that if it were to die out amongst men, their own skins were not worth many days' purchase" (CW 18: 290). Utterbol under the sign of the Bear represents Morris's critique of social structures based solely on power and paranoia, as well as his belief that mere "mastery," not only of the strong over the weak, but of men over women (the sexual violence endemic in Utterbol), is a futile exercise. There is no art in Utterbol (or art only of a very debased and dull kind), because there is no hope. Paradoxically, Morris does not waste much time in denouncing the society of Utterbol as corrupt, for several reasons (which again suggest that his greatest objections to Utterbol are on social, rather than on moral grounds). First, its corruption is self-evident, since the community is based on brute force. Second (and perhaps more important), because the corruption is so readily recognizable, the remedy is equally straightforward: only force will suffice. Accordingly, Bull Shockhead overcomes the Lord of Utterbol and is recognised as the new leader, a sensible barbarian for a renewed barbarous (in the not-too-pejorative sense usual to the nineteenth century and to Morris<sup>99</sup>) society.

By way of contrast to all these, Upmeads, which provides the beginning

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<sup>99</sup> See David Latham's article "The Cleansing Flood of Barbarism" and lecture "Between Hell and England" for a discussion of the positive implications of the term for Morris.

and end location for the story, is an appealing place. Its king may nap in the orchard on a beautiful carpet (CW 18: 2) without fear of assassination, and its yeomen and peasants are fearless and free (“stubborn and sturdy vavassors, [who] might not away with masterful doings,” CW 18: 1, but who nonetheless come together in fellowship at the end of the story in defense of their homeland). When the young Ralph must unwillingly remain in Upmeads, he may do so with “at least . . . the bounteous board and the full cup, and the love of kindred and well-willers, and the fellowship of the folk” (CW 18: 5-6), which in Morris’s view are the most valuable components of social life. Like Wethermel in *The Sundering Flood*, or indeed like the Roof of the Wolfings, Upmeads is a domestic locus that embodies only the simplest pleasures. Though it, too, faces threats by the end of the story, it is associated throughout with an abundance of the necessities of life, though not much more than the necessities: it is temperate and fertile, but not inordinately wealthy.

However, as the narrator admits (in agreement with Ellen in *News*), comfortable utopian situations on the geographical margins are not conducive to young adventurous spirits, and here the diverse character of individuals in Morris’s romances makes itself felt. Ralph and his brothers, Blaise, Hugh, and Gregory, in their longing for escape are less than perfect in their domestic affections, and fallible in more ways than that, but that only leaves them room in which to grow. Morris describes wryly, for example, the fighting in the Wood Debateable, in which “the three eldest of them . . . had both ridden therein and ran therefrom valiantly” (CW 18: 3). There are always as many failures as successes in Morris. Blaise, for instance, “wise and prudent, but no great man of his hands” (CW 18: 4), becomes a wealthy chapman, which means he never understands the relationship between production and consumption, and his thoughtless consumerism causes Ralph some discomfort later on. Hugh is described as “over bounteous a skinker” (CW 18: 4), which has the connotation of his being a bit of a glutton, but also the more positive connotation of one who is generous at table; he is later rescued by Ralph, from the service of the Abbey of Higham, and his portrayal there as “somewhat evilly armed” (CW 19: 186) is telling, since he has had his “ups and downs” (CW 19: 190). And Gregory, the “sluggish” one (CW 18: 4), turns monk, which might at least help him to find “mastery over himself” (CW 18: 211). Although

the king has kind words to say about his sons, differentiating them carefully from each other, and about Ralph in particular (though “he is but young and untried,” CW 18: 4), their ends are various and not specified as either good or evil. The characters in Morris’s romances are intended to be as diverse as the societies and the artefacts he describes, nor should those characters be categorised as simple representative types. Their flaws set the narrative in motion; they figure forth different methods of interacting with one’s environment, and of social conversation; when they move from the geographical margins to the centre(s) of Morris’s imagined fantasy environment, and back to the margins again, they do so with a willingness to learn and a disarming openness to success or failure. In the process, the few judgements passed (on fashion, taste, or skill) are on the social or material rather than on the abstractly moral health of the various societies. The catalogue of the brothers serves to establish Ralph as the most well-rounded and deserving of his siblings, but it also conveys Morris’s sense that not everyone will be so well-rounded, or so successful, as his protagonist; or at least, they will be successful in their own manner if they are happy, even if they are incompletely successful by other standards.

Even Ralph deserts his family and would lie about it, at least at first, to his friend Clement Chapman. In this he has the support at least of his “gossip” Dame Katherine, who establishes Ralph’s exceptionality with her gift of the chaplet, a “little necklace of blue and green stones with gold knobs betwixt, like to a pair of beads,<sup>100</sup> albeit neither pope nor priest had blessed them” (CW 18: 11). A resolutely materialist relic (or, as Carole Silver would say, a humanist object), this chaplet signifies the quest of the Well at the World’s End, and the related necessity of relying, instead of on absolutes of spirituality (Katherine conjures him strongly against having the chaplet blessed by a priest), on his diverse friends in the world. The chaplet is not only given to princes: Dame Katherine herself, for instance, is the wife of a merchant. But every true quester after the Well finds a similar chaplet—and every quester has an individual story (some of them not entirely successful, like that of the legendary founder of Goldburg). As Ursula and Ralph look over the bodies of

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<sup>100</sup> Morris calls the rosary at John Ball’s waist a “pair of beads” (CW 16: 228), rather than giving it its latinate name; likewise, the Prioress in the “Prologue” to the *Canterbury Tales* bears “Of smal coral aboute hire arm . . . / A peire of bedes, gauded al with grene” (158-9),

those lost in the “thirsty desert,” Ursula comments that “this army of dead men has not come all in one day or one year, but in a long, long, while, by one and two and three; for thou hast noticed that their raiment and wargear both, is of many fashions, and some much more perished than other, long as things last in this Dry Waste?” (CW 19: 72). Although these failed questers conspicuously lack the chaplets of the quest (CW 19: 71-2), they participate in the same story that Ralph and Ursula do. What is more, the questers are diverse and individualised here; their clothing tells their stories.

Diversity and the acknowledgement of failure and imperfection in individuals and in material culture thus remain in the late romances as unifying factors in Morris’s work. Ralph’s growth is by degrees, and is reflected in the material objects which he attracts throughout the story, each of which represents a different aspect of his personal development: the talismanic “pair of beads” given to him by his gossip; the white robe of the secular pilgrim to the Well; the lettered glaive of the inspired war-leader of Upmeads. Likewise, he learns positive and negative lessons from each society through which he travels. Many of these are to do with the nature of personal freedom, and suit him for his role as a leader of the folk of Upmeads (his return to which is inevitable, as anyone with an acquaintance with Morris’s preferences, or indeed with the structure of fairytales will take for granted).

The quest for the Well at the World’s End is a strange sort of quest, whose significance is never quite explained even upon its attainment; Carole Silver calls it a “new and secular grail to be enjoyed by humanists” (*Romance* 179), underlining the quest’s materialist basis. The sensual and visual aspects of the place where the quest is to be fulfilled are foregrounded in Morris’s telling, and there are plenty of material trappings to its attainment, from the white garments of secular pilgrimage given to Ralph and Ursula by the Sage of Swevenham (“much like to an alb, broidered about the wrists and the hems and collar with apparels of gold and silk, girt with a red silk girdle,” CW 19: 28), to the workmanship of the Well’s “garth” (“it was as if it had been cut out of the foot of a mountain, so well jointed were its stones,” CW 19: 86), to the cup from which they drink the water. Morris’s refusal to reveal the particular individual profit of the quest underlines his determination that the lesson of the Well should be discovered allegorically rather

than symbolically, as an open-ended lesson provided by the reader rather than a single truth.

The cup which Ralph pulls from the cabinet or “ambrye”<sup>101</sup> at the Well is of a familiar design:

a cup of goldsmith’s work, with the sword and the bough done thereon;  
and round the rim was writ this posey: ‘THE STRONG OF HEART  
SHALL DRINK FROM ME.’ (CW 19: 82)

Charlotte Oberg reads the inscription on the golden cup at the Well convincingly as non-passive: the inscription, she points out, “is *not* ‘Those Who Drink from Me Shall Be Strong of Heart.’ That is, all those who are strong in [sic] heart will accept their destined mission, and in the fulfillment of the quest will find what they have always been” (123). Unlike Jean de Meun’s *Rose*, the Well is not an other, but speaks to a recognisable part of the drinker. Unlike Robert de Boron’s *Graal*, the Well is not a panacea, but an affirmation. The only changes Morris describes are material, outward: the drinker from the Well merely gains a youthful glow, is healed of scars (CW 19: 85), and is granted a long life but not immortality (CW 19: 25). The two questers may now be far removed from the world, but it is “To the Earth, and the World of Manfolk!” that Ralph drinks (CW 19: 83). It is no accident that drinking from the Well is one of the turning points in Ralph’s attitude towards home: the quest of the well describes the discovery of a permanent principle rather than a momentary epiphany.

The quest for the Well would be much less appealing if it were only Ralph who achieves it; that Ralph and Ursula achieve the quest and experience the Well together in equal measure (though there’s an uncomfortable degree of worship-love on her part) is appealing not only insofar as it feeds their love affair, but as it represents their collaboration and mutual support. At various times Ralph would turn aside (at the Dry Tree’s deadly pool, for example; or when he almost decides to go back to Upmeads with Ursula with the quest unfulfilled, CW 19: 55), but she keeps him moving forward. Indeed, tasting the Well may be significant mainly as a narrative turning point (the hinge of the palindrome) and a very personal shared event (however ritual-

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<sup>101</sup> An “aumbrye,” or cupboard, appears in Morris’s previous work as remotely as 1867, in *The Life and Death of Jason* (CW 8.444).

ised) between Ursula and Ralph. It therefore transpires that there is nearly as much emotion inherent in the passages describing the several other ritual toasts in the romance, each of which serves to position the protagonists in relation to their social world. That is why drinking from the supernatural Well may not change Ralph and Ursula more than eating and drinking in fellowship with the old hermit does.<sup>102</sup> Drinking from the Bull of Utterbol, a “great golden cup fashioned like to a bull,” is described with a similar level of satisfaction, and with toasts vowing to help those who need it and to purge the land of tyranny (CW 19: 99). The human connections that Ralph and Ursula make along their journey and the activisms that they and their friends promise are manifested in these secular rituals of sharing food and drinking from communal vessels. The relationship of men and women to the material culture of the late romances is not an end in itself, but part of the means to an end, representing individual impetus and sense of purpose. It is significant that Morris’s heroes and heroines do not covet the artefacts they use, just as the ritual cups of the Wolfings and the men of Kent are prized as communal heirlooms rather than consumed in private as possessions. That is why Ralph and Ursula, after drinking from the golden cup by the Well at the World’s End, carefully return the cup to its ambry and “shut it up again” (CW 19: 83) for the next generation of questers.

With the secular nature of the quest for the Well thus established (Galahad, his duty accomplished, dies upon seeing the Grail and his soul is borne immediately up to heaven, but Ralph and Ursula have plenty of unfinished business), it is only natural that the narrative returns in the direction of the place where, in Morris’s social scheme, Ralph and Ursula can do the most good in the world. Their desire to do great things is now focused backward and inward upon Ralph’s own humble kingdom, and here the action of the romance begins to return, like the recitation of the second half of a palindrome, one by one through each of the places along the road back to Upmeads, each of which is seen by Ralph through new eyes that now value the local over the global, work over adventure, the heroic collaboration over the heroic individualist effort.

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<sup>102</sup> This episode was particularly chosen to be illustrated by Arthur Gaskin (the illustration is reproduced in *Letters* 4: 249).



And so, significantly, “Home to Upmeads!” is Ralph’s preferred war-cry in the last chapters of *The Well at the World’s End* (CW 19: 125, 232). After fighting off the enemies of Upmeads, Ralph and Ursula return to a feast at the High House, an opportunity for Morris to exercise the extravagant sensual appeal of romance one last time:

Came they then to the bridge-end and there was no man there, nought but the kine that were wandering about over the dewy grass of even-tide. Then they rode over the bridge and through the orchard, and still there was no man, and all gates were open wide. So they came into the base-court of the house, and it also was empty of folk; and they came to the great doors of the hall and they were open wide, and they could see through them that the hall was full of folk, and therein by the light of the low sun that streamed in at the shot-window at the other end they saw the faces of men and the gleam of steel and gold. (CW 19: 240)

The sensual eye here moves inward from the pasture to the orchard to the courtyard to the hall, so that again the communal roof is placed at the centre of the social unit. Most important, the hall is inhabited by the fellowship of Upmeads, and here Ralph is surrounded in fellowship by all the various people with whom he has associated in defending his home: “the Shepherds, and the Champions, and the men of Wulstead, and his own folk” (CW 19: 240). Upmeads, too, has its named ancestral heirlooms: after the inevitable feast the equally inevitable “great cup called the River of Upmeads” (CW 19: 241) is passed around, and with the cup in his hand King Peter yields to history, making Ralph the new king.

It is tempting to read the narrative of *The Well at the World’s End* as a There And Back Again tale of penetrating to a psychological truth and retreating to the real world, or as Freudian fairytale and the growth of Ralph’s individual self to maturity. It is also tempting to read the diversity of the social geographies of the late romances as an array of consumer choices which Ralph faces (will he be a wealthy merchant? a barbarous slave-driver? a masterful man-at-arms in the service of a rich abbey? a hermit immobilised by grief in the cave of the Lady of Abundance?), all of which he ultimately rejects in favour of a kind of “true chivalry.” These various narratological readings are all reasonable enough and partake, if only in their neatness, of mytho-



graphic criticism, a strategy which had a strong effect on the polished readings of the late romances put forth by critics such as Silver, Hodgson, and Oberg in the 1970s. But even the mythographic method's best-known practitioner, Northrop Frye, finds himself questioning its tidiness in *The Secular Scripture*. For all his lengthy discussion of ascent and descent, journey and return, that formal structure of romance is for Frye "only half the operation. The other half consists of bringing something into the present which is potential or possible, and in that sense belongs to the future" (179). In terms of Morris's world-view, that process is an individual, personal one of enjoying one's worldly experience and an unselfish, active one of looking beyond the present moment to the adaptation of past knowledge and the incitement of future creativity. Indeed, Frye's first example of this kind of "creative repetition rather than return" is from William Morris himself, whose utopians of Nowhere "have not returned to the fourteenth century: they have turned it inside out" (177-8). In this evocation of the permeable temporal borders of romance, Frye saves his mythographic criticism from the solipsism of formula.

I have in mind an even freer, slipperier, more open-ended interpretation of the structure of romance, in which the borders of Morris's social geographies are ever more permeable and indistinct, their blurriness facilitated by the palimpsestic underinscription of Kelmscott itself, by their situation along a cross-temporal historical spectrum, and by the impermanence of their characters and of their artefacts. In spite of the hedonistic sunshine that floods his fantastic worlds, there is an uneasiness and a restlessness about the events, people, and places that Morris describes in his romances. The late romances do conclude with the establishment of ongoing just and peaceful societies, and in their conclusions there is no precise parallel to the unhappy endings of the early romances and poetry (the cleaving battle-axe that abruptly concludes the first-person narrative of the prose "Golden Wings," or the sharp steel across Robert's throat at the end of "The Haystack in the Floods"). Yet the societies of the late romances are often portrayed as being in a wounded or transitional state (as at the end of *The House of the Wolfings*), or else the narrative concludes with rumours of continued strife far off (*The Sundering Flood*) and with the rise of various kinds of tyranny from which

surrounding societies must continually be delivered (*The Well at the World's End*). It is almost as though Morris finds it necessary to quietly undermine his own happy endings so that he can leave his protagonists as well as his readers with further work to do.

Ralph is not the only protagonist who will carry the chaplet of the quest. The cup, the ambry, and the Well will remain in place for others to attain to even after Morris's tale is ended. Ralph's and Ursula's descendants will drink from the River of Upmeads after them in the unwritten future. The buildings of Goldberg, in spite of the city's stasis, are pregnant with the possibility of renewal; even the debauched society of Utterbol shows itself capable of revolution; and the marginal utopia of Upmeads, seemingly stable, will always require work and strife to maintain and defend. All are located across an understood spectrum of historical existence, a garden of forking paths. Such everyday revolutions are only possible in a world where individuals can directly manage their own solutions to the problems that confront them. Artefacts position themselves in the narrative as enduring points of reference, and even as magical actors, but the material culture of the late romances is most significant as the locus for the romances' negotiation of everyday life. Morris's diverse characters—and those who implicitly follow and precede them in history—must and do create the conditions under which they live.

All this suggests that the sense of imperfection, of untidiness, even of fragmentation and destabilization that I have identified as essential to Morris's relationship to medieval material culture is not an aesthetic pose, nor does it stem from a sad nostalgia for the artefacts of the past as they appeared when first made, nor is it even the product of Morris's notoriously profuse process of composition. Instead, Morris's makers, users, artefacts, social geographies, and texts are all part of an ongoing process of creativity, reception, use, and adaptation. The use of specific historical artefacts anchors Morris's ideals more firmly in materiality than they would otherwise be, lending his utopian alternate histories a greater solidity than is usual for ideal societies, but also underlining their susceptibility to decay. His free application of the creative impulse pulls his artistic work in the direction of liberating fancy and destructive freedom; his theory can embrace even the idea

of text and narrative as unstable documents. The tension between the creative impulse and what Morris famously called the “resistance in the materials” (qtd. in Sparling 14) is at the heart of Morris’s theories of art and society, accounting simultaneously for his theories of artistic beauty and imperfection and of the open-ended possibilities of utopia. This is a Morris continually engaged and solidly grounded, simultaneously an archaeologist and an activist to the end, his works in a constant state of mediation between historicist realism and utopian fantasy, between tradition and the possibility of the new, and between materialism and idealism.

My language here seems to return subconsciously but irresistibly to problematic old dyads like that of the real and the ideal, the politicized and the aesthetic, use and beauty, the material text and its reader’s abstract response, even war and peace. But it should be clear by now that Morris’s refusal to choose or even to distinguish among such stark choices offers a useful way of negotiating the fluid history and open-ended reception of texts and of artefacts in general. His emphasis on the most material and useful among the received artefacts of the past, his idealistic elevation of the simplest items of everyday use, his immersive personal approach to experiencing them, and his philosophical acceptance of imperfection in the finished work, all serve to break down hardened hierarchies of authoritative taste and plain utility. More than that, the classic Manichaeian worldview of good and evil itself in Morris’s works is subsumed in the long process of quiet revolution that is the practice of everyday life. Yet Morris’s sense of justice and inclination to activism would never have allowed him to adopt an amoral or relativist worldview. The tangible artefacts of Morris’s imaginary societies, like the inherited material culture of the Middle Ages which inspired them, are intended by Morris to reveal not only the social processes of their use and making, but that long, difficult project of utopian social renewal through individual satisfaction that (in the past, present, and future, respectively) they simultaneously prefigure, represent, and actively insist upon.

ENVOI

**THE SUNDERING FLOOD**

*The End, forgotten much, remembered yet  
Now and again, that all perfection mocks.  
The Earthly Paradise, "L'envoi" (l. 54-5)*

**T**he *Sundering Flood*, Morris's last work of fiction (published in 1898, two years after his death), may be read on the surface as a natural summation of his theories of history and social co-operation as they are quietly worked out in the late romances. Like the early poetry, this romance reveals, in the private histories of its characters, lives lived on the margins of great events; like the poetry of Morris's middle period, *The Sundering Flood* adopts the artefacts of material culture as actors in the narrative; in common with Morris's mature social theories, this last of his works draws upon the domestic idiom of saga, to portray the everyday lives of medieval men and women of diverse abilities who make the best of what they find in their environment. And *The Sundering Flood* reflects the social geographies of the romances as well, in its sense of an environment which manifests itself in various ways in local social structures and in their material culture, and in its sense of a history beyond the narrative ending.

Yet in spite of its tidy relevance to Morris's career, *The Sundering Flood* is evocative of some unfinished business. As May Morris says, Morris died before he had completely realised this romance (*Introductions* 2: 619-20), so that although it does come to a natural conclusion, its narrative is uneven and episodic to an even greater degree than that of the other late romances. Although the possibilities of right social action and organization are, as Amanda Hodgson says, "an organizing force" in this romance (158), it does not pretend to be authoritative. This blurring of the borders between history, saga, and romance suggests that in *The Sundering Flood* Morris is attempting a new, eclectic formulation of the romance genre, undermining its received form and suggesting a further shift of direction for Morris's creative literary aesthetic. In the previous chapter, I described an historical open-endedness in the social geographies of Morris's romances, in which he implies but does not authoritatively pronounce a future for the artefacts, charac-

ters, and social life of his imagined worlds. In this envoi, I want to consider how this historical open-endedness is extended in Morris's last romance by a complementary textual open-endedness suggested by a further erosion of boundaries, by a distancing of the author from the text, and by the imperfect state of this romance itself.

Morris's last romance tells the story of two lovers who, when they meet, are on opposite sides of the river of the Sundering Flood. Osberne and Elfhild nevertheless fall in love, and venture into the world to find each other. The narrative moves from the local to the global and back again, as Osberne journeys from the tiny subsistence farm of Wethermel to the City at the mouth of the Sundering Flood, where he participates in a revolt of the guilds on behalf of the decentralized "Small Crafts" and in opposition to the discourse of authority. The two lovers are inevitably united; and yet Morris's last romance, although finding some narrative closure, refuses historical closure even more than do the romances that precede it. The grander narratives of power are at first characteristically undermined by Morris's elevation of "the Small Crafts" over big feudal business; but even the successful revolt in the City of the Sundering Flood seems to be problematized, as the guilds themselves begin to be tempted into the discourse of authority. Furthermore, not only is the adventurous violence that defines the romance genre critically re-evaluated, but the very artefacts which are meant to define the relationship of Osberne and Elfhild never come into their own as talismanic recognition-symbols, and the shifts of this romance's social geography from a localized, domestic environment to a journey through diverse geographies and back again are less structured than the smooth transitions that mark *The Well at the World's End*. Indeed, the heroic romance form itself is complicated here by this protagonist's ultimate personal preference for a simple domestic life over the public life of a warrior or leader or other "master." This is another overwriting of the boundaries of genre, in the form of an even more pointed amalgamation of the adventure and heroic discovery of the romance form with the domestic idiom of saga than Morris had attempted before.<sup>103</sup>

It is the non-prescriptive nature of Morris's social theories that leads to

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<sup>103</sup> According to Silver (*Romance* 186), the early episodes of Osberne's life are taken from *Synnove Solbakken* (May Morris: "a modern Icelandic novel," *Introductions* 2: 619).

his attraction to romance as a forward-looking genre that willingly transforms beyond its accepted conventions, and as another locus for the kind of active, adaptive reading that he had long advocated. That is why I have not chosen to write a “conclusion” to this dissertation, but an envoi. Medieval authors such as Chaucer and the troubadours addressed the envoi disingenuously to friends or more directly to potential patrons as a method of drawing attention to the author’s position; the envoi was ostensibly a public relations strategy. Continuing and adapting the tradition, we have seen how, in Morris’s own envoi to the *Earthly Paradise*, the narrator shyly addresses his book, sending it on its way, imagining it traveling down a figurative road humbly attired in a patchwork “raiment rent of stories oft besung” (l. 52), alternatively finding success or failure among its readership, and even perhaps meeting Geoffrey Chaucer in the process. My envoi and Morris’s both suppose a readership and an imaginative life for the literary work after it is made public; my envoi in particular shares with Morris’s a desire to complicate any residual reliance on totalizing narratives, leaving mine perhaps even more self-consciously open-ended than his. While Morris’s and Chaucer’s envois both refuse to make absolute demands or to assume the mantle of perfection, their respective forms of envoi share an insistent optimism that the work they leave behind will still endure as artefact and as text marked with the various circumstances of its reception, adaptation, and use over time. In my own envoi I too hope that my emphases on material culture, on creative imperfection, and on an open-ended process of ongoing aesthetic reception will contribute to future critical conversations about Morris’s work.

### 1.

#### *The Uncertainties of Material Culture*

THE MATERIAL LIFE of the opening pages of *The Sundering Flood* participates in this refusal to dictate narrative closure. The divided gold coin shared by Elfhild and Osberne is one such material fragment: Osberne holds it up “between his finger and thumb” and tells its story (CW 21: 42). Then he breaks it in half on his knife with a stone, wraps it up, then resourcefully (and rather erotically) launches it across the river that separates him from Elfhild, after which she retrieves and sensually unwraps the gift “with trembling fin-

gers” (CW 21: 43). Underlying this episode is the moment in *Gisli’s Saga* when Gisli, “the handiest of men and skilled in everything,” divides a silver coin with Vestein as a token of recognition (*Saga of Gisli* 10). In *Gisli’s Saga*, Gisli’s half of the coin inevitably returns to Vestein, although by too roundabout a road to prevent Vestein’s death, which Gisli inevitably avenges and is outlawed. By convention, the divided golden coin should be reunited at the climax of this tale. But unlike *Gisli’s Saga*, and unlike the polished narratives of *The Earthly Paradise*, the narrative of *The Sundering Flood* fails to return for good or ill to this recognition-token which seems to promise so much narrative closure. In similar fashion, the bundle of arrows given to Osberne by his supernatural mentor Steelhead is never needed. That “failure” of narrative closure is partly the result of Morris’s physical inability to complete the story, but even the artefact itself can end in a suspended state in this narrative, neither in nor out of the story.

And yet the heroes and heroines of Morris’s late romance still gravitate, like diviners, to material culture. Imaginatively, they often position themselves against or within the works of art themselves, negotiating the boundaries between art and everyday life and inscribing stories upon them.<sup>104</sup> Elfhild, for instance, reacts aesthetically to the warrior pictured on her half of the coin, telling Osberne delightedly, “such like shalt thou be one day upon a penny, dear child” (CW 21: 43). Elfhild’s comment offers not only an ellision of the boundaries between flesh and material culture, but another alternate history to this alternate history, in which Osberne the natural leader ascends to kingship. And yet this wedding of flesh and precious metal goes un consummated since, like Ralph of Upmeads, Osberne will ultimately reject the notion of seizing a high public position through force or “mastery.” Unlike Ralph, however, Osberne finds his place not in an ancestral castle (which, being a fatherless character in a romance, he might reasonably claim), but in a remote farmstead on the geographical margins. Osberne will never be transformed into a king’s head on a penny; Morris does imagine the possibility, installing extravagant wish-fulfillment as a viable option, but ultimately he leads his character and narrative more humbly down the alternative path

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<sup>104</sup> Ralph similarly lies in bed “still like the image of his father’s father on the painted tomb in the choir of St. Lawrence of Upmeads” (CW 18: 97), dreaming himself as a piece of monumental architecture with personal associations.



of a fulfilled ordinary life.

Material culture does not only promise a future; it commemorates the past as well. That process of memorialisation, however, is equally unstable. When Stephen and Osberne dig a grave and heap a mound for the overbearing brigand Hardcastle whom Osberne has killed,<sup>105</sup> they are not only burying a small tyrant; they are participating in the creation of a new piece of material history for the neighbourhood of their home at Wethermel. Future inhabitants of the area, however, will find it difficult to say just what the mound commemorates. Even as the two heap up the earth, Hardcastle himself is already being remembered by them alternately as a “robber” and a “champion”; as Osberne says, “he died in manly wise, though belike he has lived as a beast” CW (21: 67). Sometimes the grave is called “Hardcastle’s Howe,” and sometimes just “Hardcastle,” and the man himself, in reality little more than a thug, is sometimes imperfectly remembered and sometimes altogether forgotten. The reality of history itself here is as faint in its outlines as the mound itself; history and material culture are capable of remembering heroes and villains alike.<sup>106</sup>

These two examples share a sense of the way the signs of past history are inscribed on material culture, and in both cases the signs are intentionally difficult to read. I imagine two alternative methods by which the reader can approach this indistinctness on the part of material culture in the narrative of *The Sundering Flood* and its refusal to dictate the way its inscription of history should be received. The first approach I want to suggest is political, the second is textual, and both approaches require activity on the part of the reader to come to terms with the resistance to historical and material definitiveness in this romance. The first possible reading here is that Morris hints at the moral ambiguity of the adventurism of the medieval romance, revealing how an infusion of realism into the romance genre, in this case

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<sup>105</sup> This episode, too, may be an overwriting of *Gisli’s Saga*, in which the wandering berserk Bjorn the Black demands Gisli’s brother’s wife, and Gisli kills him in a duel (*Saga of Gisli* 1-2).

<sup>106</sup> There is a similar ambiguity in the story of “Ogier the Dane” in *The Earthly Paradise*, where the men whom Ogier “once knew right well” (l. 1004) whose stories appear to him in the history book could be alternately his friends or his enemies. Likewise, the landmarks of the Wolfings recall to them not only Thiodolf’s strength but his moment of weakness as well, at both “Thiodolf’s Howe” and “The Swooning Knoll” (CW 14: 207).

perhaps from the saga form, can undermine the discourses of authority or “mastery” that the genre has inherited. In the textual reading, the authority that Morris undermines is his own, as he adopts an authorial persona to shed the responsibility of being the sole “auctour” for his text. It is even possible to suggest that Morris imagines active readers who will overwrite his romance geographies with their own, finding their own historical and textual “forefathers” and suggesting a future adaptive history for the genre itself. First of all, however, we need to look at the way that authority is overridden in the narrative itself.

## 2.

### *Uncertain Authorities*

*The Sundering Flood* hints strongly at the moral ambiguities of chivalric literature or nostalgic medievalism, and is more devoted to evoking a narrative of popular history than it is to exalting the glory of the hero. In a related manoeuvre, although the possibilities of right social action and organization are, as Amanda Hodgson says, “an organizing force” in this romance (158), it refuses to be authoritative about what mode of social organization is best. In spite of its adventurous violence, this romance even hints at a weariness with the sporadic action and pointless killing that the genre had inherited from the Middle Ages. Morris suggests, for instance, the ambiguous good of political change (with respect to the revolt in the City of the Sundering Flood), and in the episode of the Knight of the Fish he satirizes the conventional romance’s “custom of the castle.” Osborne’s conscious decision at the end of the story to return to his humble farm on the remotest margins of the world is a more emphatic denial of the assumption of power than is made by any of the heroes of the last romances.

It is significant that Wethermel, where Osborne begins and to which he returns, lies even further outside this discourse of “mastery” than Upmeads or the Kentish village of *A Dream of John Ball*. For one thing, Wethermel is a tiny place on the remote margins of the region of the Sundering Flood. Therein should lie its safety: Hardcastle’s attempt to introduce authority there is jarring not least because it is hard to guess why anyone would want to dominate a subsistence farm of so little consequence. In all Osborne’s conflicts, as

is early established by his duel with Hardcastle, Osberne's tendency is naturally to take the side that opposes authority and aggression. It is revealing that Morris doesn't disagree with the exercise of violence so much as he does with the exercise of authority; this is another of his places of coincidence with the saga literature.

Closer to the centre of the narrative, Longshaw, the home of Sir Godrick, is the keep of a free knight who associates himself with the revolt against tyranny; his quasi-outlaw status makes him an appealing character, as Osberne finds when he catechises him about his politics (CW 21: 146-8). Sir Godrick's association with the greenwood connects him partly with the romantic "chronic rebellion" (Morris and Bax, "Socialism From the Root Up" 502) of the Robin Hood ballads, as when Godrick comments that the outlaws of the wood generally "do but little harm to husbandmen and other poor folk, because such have but little to be robbed of" (CW 21: 147-8). He is also in harmony with the decentralising anti-urban stance of Morris's social theories, which is even connected here with a kind of social environmentalism: as Godrick says, "the city-folk love the forest little, save they might master it and make it their own, wherein they have failed hitherto, praise be to All-hallows!" (CW 21: 145). Morris's naming of the forest around Longshaw the "Wood Masterless" is at first glance a sinister gesture. In fact, since "Master" as noun or as verb is anathema to Morris, whether with reference to environment or to people, the name serves to invert the negative connotations of anarchy and to suggest autonomy.<sup>107</sup> Sir Godrick's renunciation of "mastering"—whether of the forest or of the populace—reinforces Morris's portrayal of him as a pragmatic rather than an overbearing figure.

Because of Sir Godrick's refusal to participate in the discourse of authority, the comical Adventure of the Knight of the Fish (Chapter 41) is as brief in duration as is its uncharacteristically terse description of the local geog-

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<sup>107</sup> In "Socialism From the Root Up," Morris noted approvingly of the early guilds that "in their best days there were no mere journeymen in these crafts; a workshop was manned simply by the workman and his apprentices, who would, when their time was out, become members of the guild like himself; mastership, in our sense of the word, was unknown" (503-4). Morris's recurring philological emphasis on the word "master" is characteristic, displaying as it does his poetic sense of the moral significance of casual phrases. He sometimes approves of the term "master" at least as it relates to particular accomplishment in a field or a work ("master-piece"), but in general has come some distance even from his harmless enthusiastic acknowledgement in the "Envoi" to *The Earthly Paradise* of Chaucer as his "master."

raphy: merely “a fair white castle on a hill” (CW 21: 153). The custom of the castle is that the Knight of the Fish must joust with any large company of knights that passes. Malory’s romances are full of such episodes; as Morris’s contemporary Frederick Ryland had noted in the *English Illustrated Magazine* in 1888, “The arbitrary ‘customs’ which are kept up in various castles, and which are so often done away by the courage of the knights of the Round Table, add to the sense of bewilderment, for their irrationality is so obvious and so gratuitous” (61). Perhaps the custom here at the Castle of the Fish is a little dated or anachronistic even for the fantastic environment on the shores of the Sundering Flood, for the custom has persisted, after all, “these hundred years” (CW 21: 154). But Sir Godrick is not so much bewildered by the custom as impatient with it; fighting, to him, is serious business, and he has “overmuch bitter earnest on hand to play at battle” (CW 21: 154); even the cheerful vigorous “play” of *A Dream of John Ball* and the earlier romances is challenged here. After he and Osberne the “Red Lad” have obligingly vanquished their opponents, Sir Godrick breaks with romantic tradition to brusquely criticise the romantic practice: “Now this comes of fools! Here is our journey tarried, and one man or two, who be not of our foes, slain or sore hurt, and all for nought” (CW 21: 155). Morris’s revaluation of high literary chivalry here is new and significant, and its brevity is telling: Sir Godrick and his captain Osberne have more important things to do and more concrete social changes to accomplish than to celebrate their “mastery” over a single overbearing man with a peculiar institution. They refuse even to linger to share a cup of wine with their noble opponent.

The Adventure of the Knight of the Fish certainly pales in comparison with the brutality of the real violence that takes the lives of the West Dalers during the raid by the Red Skimmers. Nowhere in Morris’s romances is the natural tendency of his protagonists to peace so well expressed as after the battle on the far side of the river, when Wulfstan the “spokesman” of the West Dalers counts the dead (forty-six on their side, and over seven score of the “aliens”). Although Wulfstan boasts that “friends, we have won a great victory,” he provides an immediate shocking counterpoint with the emotional “God and his hallows keep us from any more such!” (CW 21: 130). The captain’s open nearness to tears here undermines the cartoon violence

of the quest-romance with an emotional violence borrowed from saga. The political and street battle for control of the City of the Sundering Flood is equally serious in its tone; Morris complicates the reader's natural sympathy for a popular uprising by describing grimly how "Many a man there was mad and drunk with the slaying" (CW 21: 175). Indeed, it is one of Osberne's own allies who brutally kills the terrified man in the square, silencing him before he can tell Osberne where to find Elfhild and adding another unfinished tale to this romance.

In the alliance of Longshaw with the Small Crafts, Morris negotiates personal charisma with collective action, in the creation of a temporary mutually-beneficial decentralized alliance between Sir Godrick and the guilds of the lesser arts. Sir Godrick is not a clever aristocrat manipulating the uprising for his own purposes, but a leader who sees his interests blending with those of the people, and he expresses that situation in the warriors' cry: "Longshaw for the Small Crafts!" (CW 21: 172). Where the Wolfings' battle cry leads them on to their immediate work, and Ralph's yearns personally towards his distant home, Sir Godrick's contains an exhortation outward to altruism and the autonomy of the decorative arts, connecting beauty, use, and communal ethics. Sir Godrick's great sympathy among the Lesser Crafts of the City, which comprise the guilds of the popular arts, is in keeping with his penchant for dwelling in masterless forests and with his ability to break down the boundaries between classes. When the revolutionary street fighting begins, the war cry which Osberne's and Sir Godrick's followers adopt expresses in miniature Morris's synthesis of his social concerns in this last romance: of popular art with sympathetic heroism; of loyalties to material locales (Longshaw) with the defense of the less tangible co-operative social unit (the Small Crafts); of true nobility with popular culture.

And yet this dispersal of authority is not quite complete; this episode shares with Morris's previous writing a scepticism of the guild as a medieval force for revolutionary change. Now that the King and the Porte (or privy council) are finally made toothless, the King himself eventually to be legislated out as an anachronism and the Porte destined to find itself only one power among many in the city, the guilds may now be free to begin that slide into capitalism which Morris described in such lectures as "The Devel-

opment of Modern Society” and “Art and Industry in the Fourteenth Century.” After all, the tension between the Small Crafts and the Great Crafts in the City persists even after the aristocracy yields.<sup>108</sup> There are only a few hints of that ongoing conflict in the narrative of *The Sundering Flood*; but it is significant that Godrick of Longshaw, though made Burgreve of the City, finds himself abruptly outlawed again by the end of the book, and needs to raise a new army to defend himself (of course, Morris demurs that in that, too, Sir Godrick “fared nowhere save to thrive,” CW 21: 250). This new development serves to underline the instability of modes of social organization: there is no ideal society, only the best possible one for certain historical circumstances. The one thing that does endure is Osberne’s peaceful life at Wethermel: quiet local prosperity is more important than a precarious purchase on global influence. As a commentary on Morris’s view of history, the late episode of Sir Godrick’s return to outlawry emphasises the precarious nature of even Morris’s ideal societies, and the way they must be constantly striven for. The action of *The Sundering Flood*, then, is at a transitional period of history; but, as Morris himself would say, “All continuity of history means is after all perpetual change” (AWS 1: 152). Like the locals’ indistinct perception of the power struggle that is memorialised by Hardcastle’s Howe, times and minds may alter again—and in spite of his unselfishness perhaps even the Small Crafts may not support Sir Godrick gratefully forever.

### 3.

#### *Uncertain Authors*

JUST AS the City of the Sundering Flood stands at an historical crossroads, capable of writing different future histories for itself for good or ill, so *The Sundering Flood* positions itself along an indistinct temporal and geographical border with Morris’s own world, a border that is contiguous and interpenetrative. This blurring has a narrative analogue, too, as Morris materialises both the physical and temporal borders of the text through his creation of a medieval authorial persona. This is not the first time Morris has used the

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<sup>108</sup> This opposition precisely mirrors that in Morris’s 1890 lecture on “The Development of Modern Society,” where “the men of the mean crafts are on the revolutionary side; while the great crafts, led by the mariners, *i.e.*, the shippers, merchants, and so on, are loyalists” (121).



voice of a fictional creator to blur the textual borders of his romances. We have seen him exploit the process of textual transmission, and use the tactic of palimpsestic overinscription to blur time and place in the lyric interludes of *The Earthly Paradise* and to trace the Kelmscott *Psalmi Penitentiales* over a fifteenth-century Book of Hours.<sup>109</sup> Here there is an assumed literal contiguity between the “real” world and the geography of romance. The possibly English author of *The House of the Wolfings* and the certainly English monk-author of *The Sundering Flood* suggest that their romances extend in some way into an England alternatively medieval or modern. By this practice of overwriting, Morris materializes his fictional romance texts, bringing them closer, and yet simultaneously puts those texts at arm’s length, as he devolves their authority upon an invented medieval “auctour” who is not William Morris.

The distinctive voices of Morris’s authorial personae, where they are explicit, speak to the diversity of Morris’s Middle Ages.<sup>110</sup> Where *The House of the Wolfings* is connected to the Victorian age by its Germanic cultural heritage, and *The Well at the World’s End* is in part a personal overinscription of familiar Oxfordshire landmarks, *The Sundering Flood* takes cultural and geographic points of reference (comparing the tributaries of the great Sundering Flood to the quintessential English river) and adds to them a specific authorial role-play or literary imposture:

Other rivers moreover not a few fell into this main flood, and of them were some no lesser than the Thames is at Abingdon, where I, who gathered this tale, dwell in the House of the Black Canons; blessed be St. William, and St. Richard, and the Holy Austin our candle in the dark! Yea and some were even bigger, so that the land was well furnished both of fisheries and water-ways. (CW 21: 2)

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<sup>109</sup> This intentional geographical slippage is common in medieval romance, and is often even effected through the medium of material culture. For instance, William Caxton gives serious credence in the prologue to his 1485 edition of Malory’s *Morte d’Arthur* to the endurance into the fifteenth century of such relics and ruins as “in the toun of Camelot the grete stones & meruayllous werkys of yron lyeng vnder the grounde,” as well as the skull of Gawain in Dover castle (ed. Sommer 2).

<sup>110</sup> In fact, the tone and even the archaic language of these romances take on (sometimes admittedly subtle) variations from book to book. This is a function partly of Morris’s intention to portray a different environment in each romance, and partly of the experimental process of his seeking after a natural medieval idiom.



The assumption or intrusion of an authorial persona has its medieval sanction in literary and historical authors as diverse in their genres and reliability as Chaucer and Froissart, Langland and Hoccleve; Morris had long since shown himself comfortable with such intrusions, manipulating them in various ways in medievalist reveries as different as *The Earthly Paradise* and *News From Nowhere*. Here he genially takes on the role of a clerk, just as he had in *A Dream of John Ball*. This particular clerk, like the worldly monks of Higham-on-the-Way or the priest of “The Story of Rhodope,” has a shrewd eye for the practical economies of food harvesting and transportation. And with typically medieval self-effacement he describes himself as a “gatherer” of tales: that is, as an editor rather than a shaper or originalist, demurring like Chaucer does in *Troilus and Criseyde* to a dubious untraceable “auctour,” collaborating with his real and imagined sources, simultaneously owning literal truth and freedom of embellishment.<sup>111</sup> Not only does Morris materialise his narratorial persona here, then, he develops that persona as a character who shares indistinct boundaries with the world that he describes: as May Morris remarks, the narrator’s framing fiction never returns, and any clear conception of the precise boundaries between his world and the fantastic world that he describes is left intentionally obscure.

Morris takes advantage of this fragility of narrative possibilities when,

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<sup>111</sup> The narrator’s reference to “Black Canons” is to the Augustinian canons (not the friars); this may be an error on Morris’s part for the “black monks” of St. Benedict, to whom Abingdon Abbey traditionally belonged. This association of Morris’s narratorial persona with the “Black Canons,” whether intentional or not, connects his author through sound and perhaps even sense (the Augustinian canons were not a particularly austere order) with the “wanton Chanons” of Roger Ascham’s famous denunciation of romance in *The Scholemaster* (1570). Indeed, if the rewriting of the black monks as “Black Canons” is *unintentional*, then the echo of Ascham becomes still stronger:

In our forefathers tyme, whan Papistrie, as a standyng poole, couered and ouerflowed all England, fewe books were read in our tong, sauynge certayne bookes of Cheualerie, as they sayde, for pastime and pleasure, which, as some say, were made in Monasteries, by idle Monkes, or wanton Chanons: as one for example, *Morte Arthure*: the whole pleasure of which booke standeth in two speciall poyntes, in open mans slaughter, and bold bawdrye: In which booke those be counted the noblest Knightes, that do kill most men without any quarell, and commit fowlest aduouleries by sutlest shifts. (qtd. in Parins 56-7).

Just as he had revelled in a Caxton who was “reduced to comply with the vicious taste of his readers” and to “amuse the popular credulity with romances of fabulous knights and legends of more fabulous saints,” Morris in his romances rehabilitates “pastime and pleasure” as a good, rejecting asceticism and showing himself to be ready and willing as ever to stand up for a popular art, even an “idle” one.

under the honourable protection of Sir Mark the enemy of Longshaw, Elfhild (“the Maiden”) hears an untrue rumour, joyfully received by Sir Mark’s vassals, that Sir Godrick is defeated and Longshaw itself is burned (CW 21: 229). The rumour is convincing in its context; it is almost as though Morris is imagining a possible alternate history to his own fiction. When Elfhild’s companion (“The Carline”) comforts her with the words “every tale is good till [sic] the next one is told,” she is commenting not only on the untrustworthy nature of rumour, but on the open-ended and accretive nature of the romance as a mode and its ability to displace one episode by another without entirely effacing it. As Elfhild does with the king’s head on the golden coin, an active reader can impute any number of possible alternative histories to a single text, and such narratives do not have to be truthful or even desirable; they only have to be suggestive.

When, in her introduction to the *Collected Works* edition of *The Sundering Flood*, May Morris characterises this romance mistily as “half-divined, half-imagined” (*Introductions* 2: 619) her comment is shrewder and less hagiographical in its implications than other commentators’ often stark mythologising of Morris as having stomped in out of the Middle Ages.<sup>112</sup> Her words emphasise, first, the historiographical aspect of Morris’s fiction (“divined”), second the fantastic element (“imagined”), third the consistent interplay between both of those, and ultimately the very limitations of this imaginative process. Because historical divination is necessarily incomplete and fantastic imagination is suspect in veracity, the two “halves” described by May Morris here, the material and the imaginative, don’t make a hermetic whole, so that I suggest that her use of such fragile phrasing may well be intentional. In Morris’s hands, not only is the romance informed by his historical reading (based on his vision of a diversity of everyday life and of material culture of the kind described in my second chapter), but the romance itself, in both its narrative qualities and in its material form, seems to undermine the notion of authorial authority. In the same manner, the textual gap in our sources (or perhaps even Chaucer himself in an intentional gesture) silences the “man

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<sup>112</sup> As when J. W. Mackail, for instance, wrote that “to Morris the Middle Ages, out of which he sometimes seemed to have strayed by some accident into the nineteenth century, were his habitual environment: he lived in them as really and as simply as if he had been translated back to them in actual vision” (1: 132).

of gret auctorite” (l. 2158) who promises so much closure to the narrative of Chaucer’s *House of Fame*. Nor is Malory’s definitive collection, however inclusive, a “perfect” or “complete” *corpus* of Arthurian literature; even it is a disorderly anthology of fragments. Malory’s gathered tales (of Sir Gareth, for instance, which is a story with little to anchor it to the romances that physically border it) rely upon the reader’s finding a mental or physical place for each of them in his or her own recollection of the tradition.

At the very least, the transformative romance seems to require a more open, fluid, and adaptive attitude toward reading than we usually adopt with respect to established genres. Frederick Kirchhoff, in his article on “William Morris’s Anti-Books,” describes the way the late romances participate in a socially and personally transformative process of reading, one which demands that the reader negotiate the material book and the narrative simultaneously. The romances in Kirchhoff’s view “lead beyond themselves to a new view of reality” (100), but as Kirchhoff’s argument itself indicates, there is not just one possible “new view of reality.” *The Sundering Flood*, and indeed the genre of romance itself, is transformative, pointing beyond itself to an unfinished future text or texts, themselves perhaps not perfect, but adding to the tradition in a continual accretive process. This final romance of Morris’s, written and dictated even during his last illness, suggests future possibilities for the genre, including a cross-pollination with saga, infusions of realism and political commitment into fantastic literature, and an aesthetic that allows even the fragmentary utterance to be an evocative force.

This seeking outward toward increasing openness may find a material parallel with Morris’s own calligraphic experiments. Sometimes set aside unfinished or intended to be illuminated later by him or by someone in his circle, his manuscripts are often as fragmentary as his medieval models (some of whose initials still wait upon a long-dead illustrator, while others have been abandoned in a textually unfinished state). The state of incompleteness in Morris’s manuscripts is so reminiscent of similar anticipatory empty spaces in medieval manuscripts that his lacunae might almost be read as an intentional aesthetic pose: Morris as medieval scribe.<sup>113</sup> And yet such

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<sup>113</sup> See, for example, his 1857 treatment of the Grimms’ “Der Eisenhans” (Parry, *William Morris* 301), which leaves an open box for a collaborator to illustrate.

spaces still seem to demand that they be filled in; the early twentieth-century calligraphic completion of Morris's *Aeneid* by Grailly Hewitt was fortunate to happen when it did, since few would now dare to similarly handle that lush manuscript, now commodified by its quasi-sacred Pre-Raphaelite associations and exorbitant price at auction. The blank spaces that now exist in Morris's surviving exercises seem nevertheless to mark places for the future, since collaboration even across generations is a running theme throughout all Morris's exercises in the arts, and Morris's own example shows how the golden chain of the tradition of craft can be picked up again. In a process like the completion of the *Aeneid* by Grailly Hewitt, or like the integration of Morris's designs into the posthumous Kelmscott *Sigurd*, Morris invites us, not to complete him, but to integrate the spirit of medieval material culture into our own everyday lives and to join in the ongoing process of active reading and creative adaptation.

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## AN APPENDIX OF SELECTED INDIVIDUAL BOOKS AND MANUSCRIPTS ASSOCIATED WITH MORRIS'S COLLECTING AND PRINTING

THIS SECTION describes only the manuscripts and unique copies of incunabula that belonged to Morris. I also include some of the autograph manuscripts that Morris used in the translation process, as I describe in my chapter on the Kelmscott Press. Where I have examined an early printed book that Morris knew but which did not itself pass through his library, I have included it in the "Works Consulted" list above.

### *New York, New York. Pierpont Morgan Library*

MS M.43. The Huntingfield Psalter.

MS M. 81. The Worksop Bestiary.

MS M. 99. Book of Hours.

MS M. 101. Psalter.

MS M. 102. The Windmill Psalter.

MS M. 103. The Clare Psalter.

MS M. 132. Guillaume de Lorris, and Jean de Meun. *Le Roman de la Rose*.

MS M. 139. Lucius Junius Moderatus Columella. *De re rustica*.

MS M. 165. Aldobrandino da Siena. *Régime du corps*.

MS M. 533-4. Josephus, Flavius. *Antiquitates Judaicae*.

*Beowulf: Autograph manuscript unsigned of a translation made by A. J. Wyatt for the guidance of William Morris*. Trans. A. J. Wyatt. Autograph MS. MA 3473.

Cockerell, Sydney Carlyle. *Early Books with woodcuts in William Morris's library*, 1896. Autograph MS. PML 76950.

*The Story of Beowulf and first of the kindred of Hrothgar*. Trans. William Morris. Autograph MS. MA003469.

Augustine, Saint, Bishop of Hippo. *De Civitate Dei: de la Cité de Dieu*.

Abbeville: Pierre Gérard and Jean du Pré, 1486-7. PML 343.

Froissart, Jean. *Chroniques*. 2 vols. Paris: Antoine Vérard, ca. 1499. PML 520. PML 514.

Le Grand, Jacques. *The boke of good manners*. Trans. William Caxton.

London: Wynkyn de Worde, 1507. PML 747.

Rodericus Zamorensis. *Speculum Vitae Humanae*. Augsburg: Günther Zainer, ca. 1475. PML 139.

Savonarola, Girolamo. *Expositio in Psalmum L*. Antwerp: Thierry Martins, ca. 1502. PML 653.

*Tristan: chlr de la table ronde*. Paris: Antoine Vérard, 1506. PML 555.

*Spiegel der Menschlichen Behältniss*. Basel: Bernhart Richel, 1476. PML 224.

Voragine, Jacobus de. *Legenda Aurea*. Augsburg: Günther Zainer, ca. 1475. PML 134.

### ***San Marino, California. Huntington Library***

MS HM.1031. Cicero. *Tusculanae Disputationes*.

MS HM.1036. Vergil. *Georgics* and *Aeneid*.

“The Ordination of Knighthood.” Trans. William Morris [of *L’Ordène de Chevalerie*]. Autograph MS. HM 6434.

### ***Toronto, Ontario. John W. Graham Library, Trinity College, University of Toronto***

Aegidius Romanus. *De regimine principium*. Augsburg: Günther Zainer, 1473.