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William Morris and the Kelmscott Chaucer: Design, Production, and Conservation Analysis

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**WILLIAM MORRIS AND THE KELMSCOTT CHAUCER:
DESIGN, PRODUCTION, AND CONSERVATION ANALYSIS**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF THE ARTS**

**PROFESSOR JULIET KOSS
PROFESSOR MARY MACNAUGHTON**

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Introduction

When presented with a work of art, it is the conservator's job to understand an object as completely as possible. A book is made as much of motivation and artistic philosophy as it is leather and linen, and studying the historical background of a work gives crucial insight into how and why a book was made. The choices made during production by an artist or group of artisans directly contribute to the condition of the book and how it survives the centuries; unsound craftsmanship or unstable materials will cause a book to disintegrate as it ages, whereas excellent handiwork and chemically inert archival materials will help preserve a book for years. The materials and techniques used are often deliberate choices on the part of the bookmaker, not necessarily with longevity in mind, but often for a specific purpose related to their goals. For a commercial printer with large orders to fill quickly, quality of material might be sacrificed in order to have vast quantities of paper and ink readily available. But at an independent printing press founded by William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones at the end of the nineteenth century, materials were chosen for their integrity, beauty, and handcrafted authenticity in order to create the most spectacular printed works since the Renaissance.

The Kelmscott Press was a miniature revolution in its time, which is exactly what Morris and Burne-Jones had planned for it to be. When they began printing books towards the end of their long, successful careers in the decorative arts, they sought to recreate the techniques of the medieval printers and bookbinders whose work they had long held as the standard of excellence. While contemporaneous printers were moving towards mechanized processes and experimenting with the new labor-saving technologies in order to print quickly and in bulk, Morris and Burne-Jones emulated the great printers of the 15th century like Nicolas Jenson and William Caxton, both in technique and visual style. The results were stunning; run after run of elaborately

decorated, beautifully designed books came from the press, with buyers and collectors clamoring to acquire every volume. The paper was handmade from cotton and linen rag in the era of mass-produced wood pulp paper, the ink recipes could easily have been recreated in a medieval monastery, and the engravings transcended mere illustration and became full-scale illuminations. Each book from the press was a neo-medieval marvel; the press itself represented a bastion of elegant and diligent artistry in the age of mass-production. Despite the elevated standard to which every Kelmscott publication was held, however, one book stands head and shoulders above its fellows in size, beauty, and craftsmanship: *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, Now Newly Imprinted*, Morris's and Burne-Jones's masterwork, a copy of which now resides in the Scripps College Denison rare book collection.

The Kelmscott Chaucer is certainly the most visually splendid book to come out of the press as well as one of the largest, a massive 554 pages long with cover dimensions of 17 x 12 inches. It contains 87 woodcut illustrations by Burne-Jones, each one surrounded by Morris's scrolling borders, the text itself printed in a font called "Chaucer" struck especially for the monumental work.¹ The copy in the Denison rare book collection is one of only 438 copies, and passed through the hands of several collectors before it reached Scripps College through a donation by Los Angeles rare book collector John I. Perkins that included every Kelmscott book. The Denison Chaucer was rebound 30 years after it was printed, and is now housed in a high-quality leather binding courtesy of bookbinder Alfred de Sauty and the Extra Bindery of Chicago. But what is most fascinating about the Chaucer, aside from its obvious value as a work of art, is how well it has survived the past century. The pages remain supple and perfectly intact, the ink is vivid and uncorrupted, and the leather cover and binding are both in perfect condition

¹ Robert Milevski, comp. *Bibliographical Description and Bindings of the Princeton copies of the Kelmscott Chaucer* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2005).

aesthetically and functionally. This impeccable status after over one hundred years can be partially attributed to the great care with which it was treated during its lifetime, but the book's remarkable longevity is a direct result the material decisions made by William Morris. Morris's decisions in turn derive from his own reverence of craft, which shaped his philosophy from a young age and guided both his artistic and social endeavors throughout his life.

This thesis examines in detail the creation story of the Kelmscott Chaucer, tracing the origins of this great book through the history of William Morris's life and philosophy over the course of fifty years, then explaining how the book was made, and finally providing a conservation-based analysis of the Denison copy. The first chapter discusses Morris's development as an artisan and designer, following him from his Oxford years and original friendship and partnership with Edward Burne-Jones through to his death in 1896, the same year the Chaucer was printed. Craft as both an occupation and a concept became integral for Morris very early on, and influenced his opinions and beliefs throughout his life. It therefore serves as an effective lens through which to contextualize his motivations for his major projects, such as his original failed attempt at printing and bookmaking, his famous and successful Morris & Co. design firm, his involvement in the Anti-Scrape movement's efforts against the Victorian restoration of Gothic buildings, his deep commitment to Utopian Socialism, and finally the Kelmscott Press itself. The chapter also searches for the beginnings of the Chaucer itself, and why Morris would have chosen that work to be the focus of his efforts.

Morris's dedication to craft above all else led him to govern the creation of the Chaucer with a stringent set of guidelines and a perfectionist's eye for the materials that built it, which are the focus of the second chapter. Once Morris's motivations for creating the Chaucer have been established, it is important to examine how his beliefs regarding design and artisanship were

translated into the artistic decisions he made for its printing. This is where ideas and materials intersected, where Morris dictated every step of the book's creation in accordance with his ideas of how books should be made. The selection of inks, the type of press, the design of every letter and capital, the materials with which the books would be bound, every piece of the Chaucer was either executed by Morris himself or by another artisan following his exact stipulations. The chapter examines the reasoning behind his decisions and how they connect back to the philosophies discussed in the first chapter.

The final chapter is an in-depth analysis of the copy of the Chaucer in the Denison rare book collection from a conservation standpoint. It focuses on the book's condition as it exists today, and provides background for the conditions under which it was kept during its time at Scripps. Mainly, it examines the Chaucer in the context both of other works from the Kelmscott Press in the Denison collection and other copies of the Chaucer at other institutions, specifically the four copies housed in the Princeton library and Edward Burne-Jones's daughter's copy in the British Library. This provides a baseline for assessing what damage to any of these copies can be attributed to storage conditions, binding style, or material failure. The condition report of the Denison Chaucer shows the long-term consequences of Morris's artistic decisions in its creation, and how they have affected and will continue to affect the longevity of the book.

Chapter I: William Morris and the Creation of the Kelmscott Chaucer

On August 8, 1896, the Kelmscott press was abuzz with activity. Every engraving block had been cut and every letter of hand-designed type had been set, and the Kelmscott printers were finally beginning the printing of what would become the capstone achievement of the Press. The printers locked the first intricately carved block into the bed of the Albion printing press--perhaps after taking a moment to marvel at the delicately scrolling vines twining themselves through the backwards lettering--before they lightly daubed ink onto its surface and made the first proof on paper. While checking the print quality, they would have read the lines “The works of Geoffrey Chaucer now newly imprinted”(Figure 1). Despite the excitement, an air of trepidation must have hung over the workshop as the printed raced against the failing health of the man who had painstakingly painted each of those beautiful vines, who had himself designed that title, and whose life’s work had culminated in the creation of the press. Less than two months later, William Morris, co-creator and driving force behind what would be hailed as the greatest masterpiece in modern typography, died. He left the Kelmscott Chaucer as his enduring legacy, the embodiment of all that he stood for, a gargantuan achievement almost a half-century in the making.

A massive undertaking, the Chaucer was the product of Morris’s final artistic endeavor, the printing press named for his beloved country home in the small town of Kelmscott. Morris and his long-time friend, the painter and illustrator Edward Burne-Jones, had started the press in 1891 in order to create beautiful medieval-style books. While his friends who had known him through his painting, poetry, interior design, and political activism may have dismissed it at the time as yet another Morris escapade, the Press and the resultant Chaucer had developed for

nearly fifty years in the minds of both men. The two had met in 1852 as they matriculated at Exeter College, Oxford, both aiming for the priesthood.² Eventually, both would renounce their original plans when they discovered three major influences that would set the tone for their careers: the writings of the famous art critic John Ruskin, the polemics of Thomas Carlyle, and the collection of medieval manuscripts and incunabula in Oxford's Bodleian library.

Both men were avid admirers of all things medieval, which for them had less to do with feudal history than with the gilded impression of the era they formed while reading Pre-Renaissance fiction and poetry and examining the beautiful objects in the Oxford collection. But because it was such a renowned collection, Oxford's library would have contained a carefully curated selection of the most beautiful books available and the most celebrated poetry and legends. Thus, every work experienced by the two young men would have been the best examples of their medium, leading Morris and Burne-Jones to imagine a medieval utopia where the finest materials and highest quality craftsmanship and artistry was widespread and readily obtained, where any man could develop his skills until he could create at that same exalted level. With this ideal in mind, they readily absorbed Ruskin's lamentations on the sad state of Victorian art in tandem with the great medieval poetry of Geoffrey Chaucer, Pliny, and William Shakespeare. Their enjoyment of the first two was framed by Carlyle's rhapsodizing on the contemplative life of a medieval monk, which he contrasted with the evils of Victorian capitalism. However, according to Peter Stansky, one idea of Ruskin's resonated particularly with Morris: "Ruskin advanced the idea which became crucial to Morris's thinking: there was a virtue in the lack of perfection of roughness in the Gothic craftsman or sculptor, for it reflected

² Peter Stansky. *William Morris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 12.

the humanity of the art and the pleasure the maker took in the work.”³ Between Ruskin and Carlyle’s lionization of the past and the beautiful works that surrounded them at Oxford, Morris and Burne-Jones developed an idealized picture of the Middle Ages in which quality and artisanship replaced what they saw as the soulless mechanization of their own Victorian era. As Stansky explains, “It was around this time that he and Burne-Jones came to the conclusion that the world of the present was unsatisfactory, that shoddy was king, and that they must engage in a holy war against the age.”⁴ This “holy war” waged on behalf of the craftsman against the epoch of industrialism would continue throughout their lives, as they would continue to strive for what they felt was the medieval standard of excellence against the tide of labor-saving mechanization.

This early infatuation with the arts of the Middle Ages left Morris and Burne-Jones wide open to a second major influence on them, the teachings of the charismatic young painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti. He welcomed the two idealistic young men as his acolytes, and they became ensconced in the inner circle of the rebellious Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. The original Pre-Raphaelites Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Holman, Hunt, and John Everett Millais had taken wholeheartedly to the teachings of Ruskin that had so inspired Morris and Burne-Jones, and had created an entire artistic movement that emphasized the return to natural inspiration and Early Italian Renaissance aesthetics.⁵ The Brotherhood was protesting against the highly standardized and suffocating academic painting traditions of the age, for reasons Ruskin himself summed up succinctly:

We begin by telling the youth of fifteen or sixteen that Nature is full of faults, and he is to improve her; but that Raphael is perfection and that the more he copies Raphael the

³ Stansky, 13.

⁴ Ibid., 12.

⁵ Andrea Wolk Rager. ““Smite this sleeping world awake”: Edward Burne-Jones and the Legend of Briar Rose.” *Victorian Studies*. no. 3 (2009): 438-450.

better; that after much copying of Raphael he is to try what he can do himself in a
 Raphaelesque but yet original manner...And we wonder why we have no painters.⁶

This sentiment typifies the Pre-Raphaelite attitude towards not just the Academy standards but towards Victorian society as a whole. They decried what they saw as the mass-production of inauthenticity, and saw the Academy's obsession with imitation as representative of a larger trend of cultural complacency that afflicted the greater population.

Like Morris and Burne-Jones, the Pre-Raphaelites idealized the Middle Ages, imagining them as a haven of the sacred handicraft before the arrival of machines and factories. Their paintings directly portrayed this, with Hunt's and Millais' work focused largely on history painting and Rossetti's on allegorical portraiture, and with all three artists focusing on natural detail and an early Renaissance referential style. It was during their stint within the Brotherhood that Rossetti began strongly encouraging Morris and Burne-Jones to pursue painting. Although Rossetti himself was a prolific poet, he told the younger men that poetry was passé. He is quoted in Thompson as saying, "If any man has any poetry in him, he should paint, for it has all been said and written, and they have scarcely begun to paint."⁷ Before long, Edward Burne-Jones had given up pursuing an Oxford degree to pursue painting, and Morris left his apprenticeship at an architecture firm to dedicate his life to the arts.⁸

This confluence of art, poetry, and medievalism embodied by the Brotherhood cemented two fundamental concepts for Morris: that his taste for the idealized Middle Ages was not only valid but essential to navigating the Victorian Era with integrity, and that art was the best avenue for him to exercise his passion for the era and what it meant to him. As he tried his hand at

⁶ Ruskin quoted in Duncan Robinson. *William Morris, Edward Burne-Jones, and the Kelmscott Chaucer* (London: Gordon Fraser, 1982), 4.

⁷ E.P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (London: Merlin Press, 1977) 45.

⁸ Stansky, *William Morris*, 10.

painting (with limited success), poetry (to eventual widespread acclaim), and domestic and interior design (with prints and designs that are still being produced over a century later) he was always emulating the art and the literature of the Middle Ages. As a young man learning to paint among the Pre-Raphaelites, Morris's most famous subject was Iseut from the legend of Tristram and Iseut, the model for which was his future wife and Pre-Raphaelite muse, Jane Burden. Burden was considered to be a great beauty by the Pre-Raphaelites for her slender frame, long neck, and flowing raven curls; she was one of the favorite models for the Brotherhood, who selected muses that they thought looked the most like medieval maidens. Morris's painting of her is neo-medieval to the core; the subject Iseut from one of the great legends, and the style in which it is painted suggests the hard lines, exaggerated perspective, and elongated figure of a pre-Renaissance tapestry or engraving (Figure 2).

Like his painting, Morris's poetry often referenced or retold classical or biblical myths or medieval legends, and the language emulated archaic poets while evoking the Romanticism of the time. The influence of the poets he had devoured as a student at Oxford was evident, and Morris himself was very open about his admiration for Chaucer's work and his purposeful implementation of a Chaucerian writing style. One of his early books, *The Earthly Paradise* (published 1868), aside from becoming a great critical and market success, was also the impetus that would compel Morris towards typography as a medium.

Morris's urge towards printing and bookmaking surfaced when he first became an established and respected poet; far earlier than many would think since Morris's most famous printing efforts were still 20 years away. Around the same time as *The Earthly Paradise* was being written and published, Morris once again contracted his friend Edward Burne-Jones to join him in creating a version of the text made specifically to emulate the early printed incunabula

that they had both loved at Oxford.⁹ Morris's vision for the finished book was sprawling, featuring hundreds of engravings made from Burne-Jones's drawings, with large friezes and ornate borders encircling the pages of Morris's already expansive poetic work, his medieval inspiration for the designs immediately apparent (Figure 3). In his chronicle of the project, *The Book That Never Was*, Joseph Dunlap drew a parallel between this initial effort and the great works to come: "This sounds like a striking anticipation of the Kelmscott Press masterpiece, the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, on many of whose pages the designs of Burne-Jones form a frieze above two columns of poetry set in the gothic Chaucer type face. The illuminated manuscripts and incunabula that they both loved are quite likely the source of the format."¹⁰

The two men began working feverishly on their designs for the book, meeting every Sunday so that Morris could read his poetry aloud to Burne-Jones, who would work on the sketches for the planned engravings.¹¹ Burne-Jones even created a little cartoon of the weekly scene, featuring Morris (or as Burne-Jones had nicknamed him, "Topsy")'s rotund and imposing figure with his shaggy mop of hair reading poetry aloud while Burne-Jones (or as Morris called him, "Ned") sat in a chair off to the side, listening with his head down (Figure 4). The two began collaborating with the publishers at Chiswick press realize their joint vision. However, this was never to be. Given their inexperience with the medium, their ambitious designs, and the extremely high standards of execution they had set for their project, the book would never be finished.¹² Within its ruin, however, can be found both the artistic and ideological birth of the Kelmscott press, and from the surviving friezes printed at Chiswick it is easy to see *The Earthly Paradise* as the direct progenitor of the Kelmscott Chaucer.

⁹ Joseph R. Dunlap, *The Book That Never Was* (New York: Oriole Editions, 1971): 1.

¹⁰ Dunlap, 36.

¹¹ Ibid., 12.

¹² Ibid., 40.

Morris's passion for craft extended into every aspect of his life; this coupled with his indefatigable artistic energy made him eager to experiment with and master every new artistic medium he could find. In the case of the abandoned printing of *The Earthly Paradise*, Dunlap hypothesized that one of the reasons the project failed was because Morris had decided to take over the engraving of all of Burne-Jones's drawings, despite the fact that they had already contracted with an engraving firm for the carvings and that Morris had never cut a block in his life.¹³ He took to the task with enthusiasm and managed to create a beautiful series of engravings, proofs of which still survive, as does another Burne-Jones "Topsy" cartoon featuring Morris bent over his desk, fixated on engraving the block amid piles of little carving tools (Figure 5). This sudden urge to jump into a craft that he had never tried before, to be part of every aspect of a project, was typical of Morris's behavior. He believed that the work itself was ennobling and empowering, and whenever he encountered a new medium he felt the need to connect with it first hand, regardless of how little he may have known about it. As W.H. Bowden, an acquaintance of Morris's, relayed to Morris's first biographer, Halliday Sparling: "When the type came in from the founders, he was very anxious to help lay it in the cases; but not having served his time in the business, more often than not put the type into the wrong box. It was very amusing to hear him say to himself; 'There, bother it, in the wrong box again!'"¹⁴ He also believed that handcraftsmanship lent pride in one's work that would guarantee good quality, which is part of the reason that the industrialization of Victorian society bothered him so greatly. As Peter Stansky was careful to note, "Morris, one should emphasise, was never adamantly against machines, but he certainly thought of them as second best", and it was true--not so much because he did not believe that machines could be helpful, but he felt that the quality of work

¹³ Dunlap, 18.

¹⁴ Sparling quoted in Robinson, 18.

that was created by someone who was wholly invested in their craft would be sacrificed for unskilled (and thus uninvested) labor in the name of quantity.¹⁵ In the case of *The Earthly Paradise*, however, this quality only hastened the downfall of the project since his insistence on doing the massive amount of work himself was consistent with his beliefs but not with completing work quickly enough for the Victorian publishing industry.

Hand in hand with his belief in the value of artisanship was Morris's emphasis on the functional. As a young man he had been influenced by the poetic works of John Keats, a poet who, according to eminent Morris biographer EP Thompson, was always torn between the creating of art for art's sake or art that was useful and accessible; Morris decided to compromise between the two, creating a domestic design aesthetic with an emphasis on beauty and craftsmanship.¹⁶ To him, there was great value in an object that was not only artistically made but also served a purpose, a creed he himself laid out concisely when he famously decreed, "Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful and think to be beautiful."¹⁷ His functionalism served him very well in his next great venture, the highly successful design firm Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co., which created for its clients everything from furniture, textiles, tapestries, and stained glass windows. Each of these things served a useful purpose as well as looking beautiful and—as Morris would make sure—being of the highest quality.

The firm was another chance for Morris to explore many different mediums, most of which were revivals of medieval art forms. The Morris & Co. aesthetic was unique, simultaneously ornate and utilitarian; the magazine "The Spectator" said of the firm, "Morris has become a household word for all who wish their material surroundings to be beautiful yet

¹⁵ Stansky, *William Morris*, 13.

¹⁶ Thompson, 20.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 75.

appropriate for homely use, 'neat not gaudy', English in taste, not French."¹⁸ He earned a great reputation, especially through his design for textiles, chintzes and wallpapers. His highly detailed floral style stemmed directly from the scrolling vegetal decoration that encircled medieval illuminated pages and capitals. Through his work with the firm Morris would learn cloth dyeing, master the art of textile design, understand the mechanics of stained glass window-making, and exercise huge influence in reviving not only the craft of tapestry but also the market for it. In each of these mediums, an idealized medieval aesthetic prevailed.

Tapestry excited Morris especially, to the extent that he had a loom set up in his home and was often found in the wee hours of the morning weaving feverishly while composing poetry aloud, another habit that Edward Burne-Jones immortalized in a "Topsy" cartoon (Figure 6). He once famously remarked that "If a chap can't compose an epic poem while he's weaving tapestry, he had better shut up; he'll never do any good at all."¹⁹ Morris & Co. featured another close partnership between Morris and Edward Burne-Jones, who was responsible for all the designs of figurative tapestries and stained glass windows, the two men working side by side once again to spread their ideal of functional medieval beauty across the British design market. This focus on the beautiful yet functional work of art made them a natural fit for the craft of book-making, as a book is both a vessel for literature or information and a working machine, which must remain readable above all else.

It was through his work with the firm that Morris became involved in one of his pet causes, the fight against the Victorian Restoration movement in favor of the preservation of the buildings they were trying to restore. It is important to make the distinction early between

¹⁸ Stansky, *William Morris*, 13.

¹⁹ Gillian Naylor, ed., *William Morris by himself: Designs and writings* (London: MacDonald & Co Ltd, 1988), 63.

restoration and preservation, for while there is a tendency to use the words interchangeably in modern vernacular the difference meant the world to William Morris. In the case of this movement, “restoration” referred to the complete renovation of many of the ancient buildings that populated the cities and countryside of Victorian Britain, remaking the monuments to fit the architectural sensibilities of the time.²⁰ “Preservation” of the old buildings would mean executing the absolute minimum intervention necessary to stabilize and protect them so that they could be enjoyed and appreciated without forcing the viewer to see them through a lens of Victorian taste, and at the same time keeping the historical architectural record intact.

Restoration in this sense infuriated Morris, who rightly saw the movement as a gradual effacing of the beautiful Gothic past to which he was so attached, a past that he felt England should preserve and cherish. So committed was he that he founded an organization to combat this problem—the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings—in 1877, nicknamed the Anti-Scrape, and was heavily involved in the anti-Restoration movement for years.²¹ This passion of his carried over into his work with Morris & Co., where he firmly stated his position in a letter to a client who had inquired about a possible order of stained glass windows:

We are prepared as heretofore to give estimates for windows in churches and other buildings, except in the case of such as can be considered monuments of Ancient Art, the glazing of which we can not conscientiously undertake, as our doing so would seem to sanction the disastrous practice of so-called Restoration.²²

Like so many of his other passions, Morris’s anti-Restoration stance stems directly from his desire to preserve and honor the artisanship of the past. As a vocal opponent of all things

²⁰ Stephan Tschudi Madsen. *Restoration and Anti-Restoration* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1976), 15.

²¹ Thompson, 223.

²² Naylor, 200.

Victorian, the Restoration movement struck a very personal chord with Morris, as everything he hated about his era--namely industrialized soullessness--was literally trying to replace everything he revered about the past.

However, while Morris became a known adversary of the Restoration movement, the cause that often overshadows all other ideals of his in popular memory is Morris's avid and highly active interest in socialism. He was a part of two major socialist organizations at the time, first the Social Democratic Federation and later, after a schism had split the federation, he joined with the seceding faction to form the Socialist League.²³ Morris and his colleagues gave lectures, authored polemics and pamphlets, and attended large protests. Morris became the editor of the League's regular publication, the newspaper "Commonweal". When the League suffered a second schism, Morris and several of his associates formed the Hammersmith Socialist Society. Many scholars who study Morris consider this one of the most important and striking aspects of his character, not the least of which is noted scholar EP Thompson, a socialist himself, who asserted throughout his acclaimed biography of Morris that it was socialism that was the defining thread that ran through Morris's ideology.²⁴ The fact that Morris was a socialist seems to have been of particular curiosity to those who study his life and work, most likely due to the rocky reputation that Socialism enjoyed during the 20th century and how surprising scholars might find it that such rebellious and progressive politics belonged to a man who, by all accounts, worshipped a feudal past.

Though at first it is easy to be surprised, an overview of Morris's fundamental ideologies leads to the conclusion that his involvement in socialism is totally in-character for him: he valued, above all else, the relationship between a man and his craft. Morris had a very specific

²³ Thompson, 299.

²⁴ Ibid., 55

idea of what that relationship should be, and expressed as much in his essay *Useful Work versus Useless Toil*:

A man at work, making something which he feels will exist because he is working at it and wills it, is exercising the energies of his mind and soul as well as of his body[...]Not only his own thoughts, but the thoughts of the men of past ages guide his hands; and as part of the human race, he creates[...] All other work but this is worthless; it is slave's work—mere toiling to live, that we may live to toil.²⁵

The rapidly industrializing capitalistic Victorian workplace was moving away from specialized, skilled labor and towards factory workmanship, where a worker was forced to complete repetitive and tedious tasks as though he were part of a machine, with no regard to whether he would gain any fulfillment through his occupation. Morris found this appalling, saying, “Men were not intended to work with the accuracy of tools, to be precise and perfect in all their actions. If you will have that precision out of them, and make their fingers measure degrees like cog wheels and their arms strike curves like compasses, you must inhumanize [*sic*] them.”²⁶ To remove a worker's agency in his task was to remove the humanity that made the work of the Middle Ages so great, and to rob a man of his ability to take pride in the things he produced.

To Morris, the ideal society was an egalitarian yet medievalized (that is, de-industrialized) community where a worker could dedicate himself to artisanship, and not have his potential reduced to mechanical repetition, and he would not stand for a society built on a foundation of men and women who would be kept suppressed and unskilled forever. His main aim in his pursuit of socialist goals was to create a society where everyone would be able to

²⁵ William Morris, *Useful Work versus Useless Toil*, Norman Kelvin, ed. *William Morris on Art and Socialism* (Toronto: Dover, 1999) 130.

²⁶ Thompson, 36.

achieve a livelihood the way Morris himself had, through craft and education; “We are always in these days endeavoring to separate the two;” he said, “we want one man to be always thinking, and another to be always working, and we call one a gentleman and the other an operative; whereas the workman ought often to be thinking, and the thinker often to be working, and both should be gentlemen, in the best sense.”²⁷ It is easy, then, to understand why Morris pursued socialism; it perfectly fit the idealized world he wanted to see.

Given his persistent dedication to advancing a medieval craft aesthetic and determination to master any medium he attempted, the birth of the Kelmscott press is hardly surprising. Books were what had captivated Morris and Burne-Jones during their days at Oxford, and when Morris himself had become an established author with The Earthly Paradise, their immediate instinct was to try and create a book modeled after those that had inspired them. They had failed in that project, but twenty years later they had both grown considerably as craftsmen through their work both independently and with the firm. Their resources had also expanded, and they now had the time and money to create the high quality publications that they had dreamed of. However, all of this potential lay unrealized until Morris’s friend and socialist colleague Emery Walker, who was one of the co-founders of the Doves Bindery and Doves Press, helped revive Morris’s enthusiasm for the craft.²⁸ By the late 1880’s, the fervor that had gripped Morris and Burne-Jones twenty years prior was back in full force. However, even before Walker rekindled the spark, the urge to create beautiful books had already begun to resurface in Morris’s life, through his love for manuscripts.

Manuscript had fascinated Morris since his time in the Bodleian library back in his Oxford days, where he had taken up the craft and practiced by copying from the manuscripts in

²⁷ Thompson, 36.

²⁸ Robinson, 10.

the collection²⁹. His talent had been so evident that he had greatly impressed two of his idols; Rossetti even remarked that, “In all illumination and work of that kind he is quite unrivalled by anything modern that I know of, Ruskin says that [he is] better than anything ancient.”³⁰ In the decades preceding the Kelmscott Press he had started re-teaching himself the art. He began taking manuscript seriously after the failure of his first printing endeavor with The Earthly Paradise, as recounted by Adela Roatcap Spindler:

As a young man, Morris had copied historical examples of calligraphy; but at age thirty-five he decided to take up calligraphy seriously, with a view to developing his own scripts for handwritten books. Two of the five scripts he developed were based on Renaissance humanist or "roman" minuscule, and the other three were based on Renaissance humanist cursive or "italic." He modeled his letterforms on 16th-century Italian writing manuals, such as Ludovico Vicentino degli Arrighi's *Il Modo de Temperare le Penne*.³¹

As was his way, Morris threw himself into the craft and practiced it diligently, and in the early half of the 1870's he completed three manuscripts: a Book of Verse (1870), the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam (1873), and Odes of Horace (1874). He designed his own script to evoke, as Spindler mentioned, those he admired so much in his favorite ancient works (Figure 8).

However, it soon became clear to Morris that manuscript was not a practical way to execute the large-scale “beautiful books” he had had always envisioned (despite the major accomplishment that was the completion of three full manuscripts, Morris would never finish the eighteen others he had started), which is why typography would eventually triumph for him in the end, though

²⁹ Adela Spindler Roatcap, "William Morris: The Art of Printed Letterforms." *Letter Arts Review* 2 (2002): 18.

³⁰ Ibid., 19.

³¹ Roatcap., 19.

Morris was a bit reluctant to capitulate.³² Spindler asserts that “William Morris’s first love was calligraphy, and that typography [...] was for him a means to an end.”³³ Morris would come to love and appreciate as well as master the craft of typography, although when the press first started he still had his reservations: “Pleased as I am with my printing”, he wrote to a friend in 1891, “when I saw my two men at work on the press yesterday, with their sticky printer’s ink, I could not help lamenting the simplicity of the scribe and his desk [...] and I almost felt ashamed of my press after all.”³⁴ Luckily, typography would prove to be a more than worthy match for Morris’s talents, and his enthusiasm for the project only grew as the project went on.

As the press became a burgeoning reality in 1891, Morris began planning his Chaucer and the font he decided to design for it especially. The works of Chaucer had been present throughout Morris’s life, from his early readings of the text at Oxford to the wardrobe that Burne-Jones had decorated with scenes from “The Prioresses Tale” in the rooms he and Morris shared when they had left school to Morris’s own admission of Chaucer’s heavy influence on his own poetry.³⁵ It was a matter of course for Morris that they would not only print the Chaucer on the press, but that it would be an absolutely spectacular work containing the best that he and Burne-Jones could put into it. It would not be until four years after they had started the press that this monumental work would be completed, but it was waiting for them from the beginning.

Again the two men met on Sundays to read poetry and design illustrations, just as they had twenty years prior during their attempt at The Earthly Paradise, but when they sat down to plan the Chaucer they were much better prepared. By the time the Chaucer went to print, the Kelmscott Press had already executed limited editions of dozens of different publications,

³² Stansky, *William Morris*, 53.

³³ Roatcap, 18.

³⁴ Robinson, 8.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

including many of Morris's own works in addition to Shakespeare's sonnets, Rossetti's poetry, and reprints of Caxton's greatest printing endeavors.³⁶ The type was struck, Burne-Jones's drawings were surrounded by Morris's intricate florid embellishments were carved in wood by noted engraver William Harcourt Hooper (who, as luck would have it, had moved next door to Emery Walker, two doors down from the press), and the gorgeous edition of the works of Chaucer began to materialize.³⁷

The finished Chaucer is a creation of breathtaking beauty. Within the edition of 425 copies printed on paper and 13 printed on vellum, there are a limited few who were fully bound in embossed white pigskin in accordance with Morris's designs, the title gleaming softly in gold along the top. When the book is open, the viewer is drawn into the curling vines and lush illustrations of the illuminated pages, and the pages that feature no embellishment are equally beautiful for the strength of the pure type on the page, punctuated at intervals with a large florid capital. The effect is definitely medieval, but is infused with the passion and style of two reluctant Victorians, both of whose life's work had been converging on this point. Edward Burne-Jones himself lovingly sums up the fifty-year journey, saying "When Morris and I were little chaps at Oxford, we should have just gone off our heads if such a book had come out then, but we have made at the end of our days the very thing we would have made then if we could."³⁸ The Chaucer truly does embody everything that the pair stood for, but it is undeniable that the ideal that had driven Morris all his life, from medium to medium, from the Pre-Raphaelites to the Hammersmith Socialist Society and the Anti-Scrape, propelled this truly spectacular book into

³⁶ *Kelmscott: A collector's choice, The John J. Walsdorf Collection of William Morris in Private Press and Limited Edition* (Washington, DC: BH Blackwell, Ltd, 1980), 32.

³⁷ Robinson, 14.

³⁸ Robinson, epigraph

being. For Morris, fulfilling one's humanity through craft was paramount, and the Chaucer represented everything he had stood for. It was his crown jewel, and it remains his masterpiece.

Chapter II: Building the Chaucer

William Morris's fascination with craft and quality was the direct inspiration for his decisions regarding the creation of the Chaucer. "Quality materials" at the Kelmscott press meant that every element of the book-making process they used had to be handmade by an artisan, preferably with little to no involvement of machines or chemicals, and adhering to medieval standards. Morris and Burne-Jones were aiming for the same standard of excellence that they had encountered in the Bodleian manuscript collection. They had fallen in love with the art of bookmaking while thumbing through volumes that were centuries old, yet still functional, readable, and beautiful. Much as he had done with crafts such as tapestry and stained glass, Morris wanted to revive medieval-style printing to produce books that would last as long as those of his pre-Renaissance role models.

Morris and Burne-Jones's previously mentioned misadventure in printing—the failed edition of Morris's *Earthly Paradise* with the commercial Chiswick press in 1866—cemented their determination to execute to the standard they had been unable to achieve then. The main issues in that attempted run had been what they considered substandard ink, paper, and font choice. They had gone through the commercial printer Chiswick press, but had been so disappointed in the results that they had scrapped the effort. This time, however, they had the resources from Morris & Co. to fund their quest for the handmade, they had the engraving expertise of William Harcourt Hooper, and they had the printing and binding guidance of Emery Walker, co-founder of Doves Bindery, which would bind many Kelmscott publications.³⁹

In addition to this new arsenal of connections and materials, Morris and Burne-Jones had had 20 years to mature in their respective crafts. They were established artisans and could

³⁹ Dunlap, 12

therefore make more consistent and reliable decisions when it came to their shared work. Their vision for their beautiful books had also had two decades to solidify, during which time Morris had rekindled both his passion for writing manuscript and his acquaintance with the ancient volumes that had inspired him in the first place. In doing so he had taken stock of what made books last, as well as what made them beautiful; in his mission to create books as visually striking as the manuscripts he loved he only accepted the closest approximations possible of the same materials, and as a result his creations would last as well. The Chaucer was held to the highest standards of material quality, as it was planned to be the crowning achievement of the press from the start, and as such Morris would accept nothing short of perfect craftsmanship in all aspects of its creation.

The first step in the process was to find the right paper to print on. Manuscripts were often written on vellum, but vellum was prohibitively expensive, and while it was an ideal writing surface, it did not take printer's ink well and was very difficult to work with effectively. This exact dilemma led to the majority of Gutenberg bibles being printed on paper, which is a much easier substrate for printers to use.⁴⁰ Paper not only allows the type to impress into the surface, it also absorbs ink in a much more reliable and secure fashion than vellum does. Since the illuminations in the Chaucer (as in all Kelmscott publications) was a printed engraving rather than gilded or painted, it was much more practical to use paper for the majority of the print run. However, vellum does make for a much more valuable product, as well as lending an air of medieval authenticity to the work. It is for this reason that Morris insisted on printing 15 editions of the Chaucer on vellum, although that is only a small percentage of the entire 438 copies

⁴⁰ William S. Peterson *The Kelmscott Press: A History of William Morris's Typographical Adventure* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 143.

printed in total.

Therefore, the type of paper used for the press was one of the most important material decisions that Morris had to make. He wrote an entire essay explaining these choices, in which he outlined his process clearly:

On this head I came to two conclusions: first, that the paper must be wholly of linen (most hand-made papers are of cotton today), and must be quite 'hard,' i.e., thoroughly well sized; and 2nd, that, though it must be 'laid' and not 'wove' (i.e., made on a mould made of obvious wires), the lines caused by the wires of the mould must not be too strong, so as to give a ribbed appearance. I found that on these points I was at one with the practice of the papermakers of the fifteenth century; so I took as my model a Bolognese paper of about 1473. My friend Mr. Batchelor, of Little Chart, Kent, carried out my views very satisfactorily, and produced from the first the excellent paper which I still use.⁴¹

Linen paper was the obvious choice for a monumental printed work, as the long, soft fibers of linen rag made paper that was much stronger and more flexible than the thin paper made from wood pulp that was used in commercial publications. This would ensure the paper's longterm survival, as thick paper made from cloth is much less prone to stiffening over time, making it far less brittle and less susceptible to breakage than the wood pulp paper.

Mr. Batchelor did indeed take on the task of making the paper for the press, which was a feat in itself for several reasons. In addition to his 15th century recipe, Morris was adamant the paper be “untouched by a chemical bleach”, that time and care be devoted to its lifting by a “skilled and unhurried workman”, that the frames for the papermaking be hand-woven to rid

⁴¹ Morris, 5

them of “monotonous regularity” and that the paper be air-dried with no added heat.⁴² Even without these stipulations against many labor saving processes, it is notoriously tricky to hand-make paper to be used with moveable type, as any inconsistencies in the texture of the paper could damage the soft metal letters when the type and the paper are pressed together. But Mr. Batchelor succeeded, and produced three versions of his hand-made paper, each with a different watermark: the Flower, the Apple, and the Perch. Morris was most pleased with the Perch paper, and used it for the Chaucer.⁴³

The next ingredient in printing was the ink. As with the paper, Morris wanted black ink made with little to no chemical additives, as close as possible to the medieval methods. He was also incredibly picky about the quality of the black, and refused several English and American inks initially, as the English blacks were too red and the American blacks too blue. Eventually he found the Jaenecke firm in Hamburg that made ink from lampblack and linseed oil, which was not only the most “pure” and traditional method but also yielded a satisfactory black.⁴⁴ As with the paper, the quality and makeup of the ink is a major contributor to how the book and its contents will last over time. For something as intensely decorated as the Chaucer, the ink would command all of the attention and tell the whole story, both literally with the words and visually with the overall design scheme. While it may seem unnecessary for Morris to be so concerned with the quality of blackness in the ink, the sheer amount of it—especially in the Chaucer—demanded that it be perfect. In addition to its visual quality, it was imperative that the ink contained no chemical additives that could create problems in the future, such as fading over time, transferring between pages if the book was kept closed, or corroding through the paper as it

⁴² Robinson, 17

⁴³ Robinson, 18

⁴⁴ Ibid., 21

aged.

The lampblack and linseed oil method was considered the best, not only for the deep and unfading quality of its color but also for the care with which it was made. To make the ink, the linseed oil had to be carefully boiled to a uniform consistency to make it the correct temperature for the emulsion of the lampblack pigment. The process was slow, and the heat had to be precisely monitored in order to prevent darkening of the oil itself from excess cooking. It also became impossible to manage the boiling oil at quantities over 100 kilos, which made it hard to mass-produce. This made it an impractical choice for commercial printers, especially newspaper printers, who depended on churning out editions by the hundred every day. Just as the paper in commercial books and papers had gotten thinner and cheaper—and therefore poorer in quality—so was linseed oil binder replaced with several cheaper alternatives, such as paraffin oil, coal-tar, turpentine, and even soap. However, these were what Morris would call evidence of the Victorian “shoddiness” that typified the products of industrialized industries, and he would not be alone in doing so. A contemporaneous guide to the makings of linseed oil-based inks and paints even states that “For better class printing, however, [these substitutes] have not been made suitable. For that we have still to restrict ourselves to a vehicle of boiled linseed oil only.”⁴⁵

Once all the book-making materials had been gathered, there was the matter of the press itself. Despite the fact that typography was essentially the mechanized version of the manuscript art he had so passionately tried to recreate, there was still plenty in his new medium for Morris to invent and design, and he kept the mechanical aspects to a bare minimum. No soulless rolling-drum newspaper press would do for Kelmscott; an Albion hand-press was acquired secondhand, different from the apparatuses used by Gutenberg and those who followed him only in that it was

⁴⁵ Andes, Louis Edgar. *Oil Colours and Printers Inks: A Practical Handbook*. (London: Scott, Greenwood & Son, 1903), 186

made of cast iron and not wood (Figures 10 and 11).⁴⁶ Referring to Morris's fifteenth-century printing hero William Caxton, biographer Halliday Sparling claimed that, "Except for the change from wood to iron and the substitution of levers for the screw, this press was essentially similar to Caxton's; indeed at the end of an hour or so, Caxton would have been comfortably at home with the press as a whole"(Figure 12).⁴⁷

The quest for the perfect materials and machines was only the first step in the detailed master plan that Morris had for the Kelmscott books, especially for the Chaucer. Even before he became well versed in the printing process, Morris had very strict ideas about what made books beautiful—everything from each serif and curve of each font to the spacing between the words was carefully considered. In a lecture he delivered on book design in the 1892, Morris explained his thoughts on what made a book beautiful:

An illustrated book, where the illustrations are more than mere illustrations of the printed text, should be a harmonious work of art. The type, the spacing of the type, the position of the pages of print on the paper, should be considered from the artistic point of view. The illustrations should not have a mere accidental connection with the other ornaments and the type, but an essential and artistic connection...This is the only possible way in which you can get beautiful books.⁴⁸

This precision in the design process lay in direct contrast to the shoddy output of the Kelmscott's contemporaries, which Morris found lacking at best and vulgar at worst. "I see what a lot of difference there is," he lamented, "between the work of the conceited numbskulls of today and

⁴⁶ Andes, 187.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 18

⁴⁸ Morris quoted in Peterson, *The Kelmscott Press*, 53.

that of the fifteenth and sixteenth century printers merely in the arrangement of the words...”⁴⁹

The spacing of words was one of Morris’s biggest complaints about contemporary printing, as he felt that in their hurry to produce large outputs printers neglected the appearance of the type itself. He wrote and spoke extensively on the subject, stating, “Modern printers, even the best, pay very little heed to these two essentials of seemly composition, and the inferior ones run riot in licentious spacing, thereby producing, inter alia, those ugly rivers of lines running about the page which are such a blemish to decent printing.”⁵⁰

As if to anger Morris and his fellow medievalists further, in addition to their deficiencies in craftsmanship it was the fashion at the time to for those same “conceited numbskull” commercial printers to imitate medieval and gothic printing down to faux-Chaucerian spelling in the colophons. A particularly egregious example of this practice comes from the publishing firm Falkner & Sons: “Concernynge thys Boke, and ye Impryntyng thereof, it hath ben done wythe cunnyng Crafte by Maister George Falkner & hys Sons...after ye style of daies longe gone bye insomuch as MAISTER WILLIAM CAXTON hymself maye have ben ye imprynter.”⁵¹ This sad imitation of the same medieval manuscript tradition that Morris revered was exactly what he was trying to combat with the Kelmscott press.

The design for the fonts was another crucial element in Morris’s vision for the Chaucer. One of the main reasons he and Burne-Jones had been unsatisfied with their earlier efforts on “The Earthly Paradise” was that they felt that the Basel font used by the Chiswick press did not adequately provide the medieval bombast that they had envisioned for the work. Emery Walker provided the means for overcoming this obstacle, as he had his own press and bindery at his

⁴⁹ Robinson, 18

⁵⁰ Morris, 7

⁵¹ Peterson, William S., ed. *William Morris: The Ideal Book*. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), 201

disposal. He offered Morris the services of his punch-cutter, Edward Prince, who would carve the letters that Morris designed into a metal “punch,” a model of the letter which would then be hammered into a piece of softer metal to create the mold necessary for pouring the lead, tin, and antimony alloy that would form the individual pieces of type.⁵² This was a huge breakthrough for Morris and Burne-Jones, in that it freed the press of having to work within existing, non-satisfactory fonts and design the font they felt fit their material best.

The first typeface designed for the Kelmscott press was the Golden Type, based on the Roman fonts of Renaissance printer Nicholas Jensen, specifically his “Pliny.” Morris had photographic enlargements made of Jensen’s lettering and closely followed his style when executing his designs.⁵³ Thin and elegant, this deliberately legible typeface was purpose-built for the reprinting of William Caxton’s “The Golden Legend,” for which the font was named. Elegant and clean, the Press used Golden Type for works that were less medieval in spirit, including one Morris’s own books, *News From Nowhere*. Golden Type was the Kelmscott answer to the accusations of illegibility and excess leveled against medieval and neo-medieval printed books and manuscripts, proving that illuminated books had a place in the functional yet beautiful Morris aesthetic.

After the Roman Golden Type was struck, Morris designed a Gothic font based on the one used to print the Gutenberg Bible. Originally intended for the Chaucer, the heavy black-letter font was first used to print William Caxton’s translation of Raoul Lefevre’s *Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye* while the Chaucer was still in development. Because of its initial appearance in this text, the font was named “Troy”. The font was ideal for the more medieval works of the Kelmscott press, as it retained much of the characteristic squared edges and thick, calligraphic

⁵² Robinson, 15

⁵³ Ibid., 17

curves of Gothic manuscript lettering. Despite its more elaborate design, though, Troy font was still clearly legible, with a commanding presence even on an unadorned page where the text was presented in two columns, another stylistic cue from Gutenberg. However, the font was also prohibitively large for a work as lengthy as the Chaucer. Original test prints for the Chaucer with Troy font made it clear to Morris that if they were to use the font the Chaucer would have to be several volumes long, which would have compromised his overall vision for one monumental book of Chaucer's works. This setback resulted in the creation of an entire new set of type for the Chaucer, which was actually the original Troy type cut to a smaller and thinner pica size. The smaller font, named "Chaucer," allowed all of Chaucer's works to fit into one book, with the type and illuminated capitals appearing in two columns (Figure 12).⁵⁴

Finally, when all the paper had been made and all the ink had been printed onto the pages using the handmade fonts designed especially for the purpose, then came the binding. The most integral factor in a book's longevity, a sound binding determines how long and how well the book can function as not only a work of literature or of art, but as a simple machine. For decorative specialty binding, the Kelmscott Press turned to Emery Walker, one of the co-founders of both the Kelmscott Press and the Doves Press and Bindery, which he helped start with another famous Victorian printer and bookbinder, T.J. Cobden-Sanderson.⁵⁵ The Doves Bindery as an organization shared many beliefs with the Kelmscott Press; they emphasized high quality and pure materials in conjunction with beautiful visuals. While their overall design aesthetic tended to be much more spare and simple than that of the heavily decorated Kelmscott publications, the bindings proved an elegant complement to the riots of vegetation and illustration between their boards. The vast majority of the Kelmscott Chaucer print run was

⁵⁴ Robinson, 18

⁵⁵ Ibid., 14

bound very simply, not by Doves but by the firm of J. & J. Leighton, using a tightback tape binding.⁵⁶ The pages were divided into sections or “quires”, which were then sewn together with linen thread over five linen strips or “tapes” to form the spine of the book. The tapes were then glued into a simple linen and board cover and the spine of the cover was glued directly to the book, so there was no gap between the sewn pages and the soft linen spine. This was the standard binding of J. & J. Leighton, and every book that was printed at Kelmscott had at least a partial run bound in this manner.⁵⁷ Linen is a very sturdy and relatively inert material, and has been used for binding thread and bookcloth for centuries.

However, the most famous and precious editions of the Chaucer were bound in a different manner, and this is where T. J. Cobden-Sanderson created one of his bindery’s most lasting legacies. While most of the print run was done by J. & J. Leighton, Morris originally wanted to design four deluxe bindings for a small section of the edition. All of these would feature white pigskin, two would be executed by Doves, and two by J. & J. Leighton. Of this original plan, it appears that only one of these plans, a full pigskin binding from Doves, was executed in quantity, although several one-off copies exist that show examples of other designs.⁵⁸ Morris himself designed the tooling for the elaborate cover. The pigskin binding was slightly different in structure from the simple linen binding in that it was bound on cords, and not tapes. Where linen tapes make for a flat spine, cords were small sections of thin rope that the binder would use to anchor his stitches, and when the book was bound they would create raised bands on the spine of the book. The binding was still tightback, in that the pigskin was formed over the cords so that it was glued directly to the cords and to the spine, but instead of

⁵⁶ Milevski, Robert, comp. *Bibliographical Description and Bindings of the Princeton copies of the Kelmscott Chaucer*. (Princeton: Princeton University, 2005), 1

⁵⁷ Ibid., 2

⁵⁸ Peterson, 163

lightweight board the covers were made of oak and covered entirely in the white leather.⁵⁹ This has become the iconic image of the Chaucer, huge and white, its cover as finely decorated as its pages (Figure 13).

There were also several specialty versions of the famous white binding made for specific people. Cobden-Sanderson himself took the opportunity to design his own personal pigskin cover for the book; his elegant tooling and gold leaf are fine and delicate where Morris's style is aggressively decorated, but both covers serve the books very well (Figure 14). While it is easy to presume that the pigskin covers would last the decades while the linen covers would crack and fail, both methods have been more than adequate in keeping the book safe and in one functioning piece. However, it is true that books bound with leather tended to remain in better condition for longer, as will be discussed in the conservation analysis of the Denison Chaucer, so these deluxe bindings served the longevity of the book as well as its aesthetic beauty.

While the great book was still in progress, Edward Burne-Jones wrote to Charles Eliot Norton that the book "will be a little like a pocket cathedral".⁶⁰ While the massive Chaucer could hardly be considered "pocket," it was indeed the enshrinement of everything that Burne-Jones and Morris had valued in its creation. Because of the immense care and devotion they lavished on this project coupled with their joint talent, vision, and monetary resources, the "pocket cathedrals" still inspire awe to this day.

⁵⁹ Milevski, 4

⁶⁰ Robinson, 25

Chapter III: Conservation Analysis of the Denison Chaucer

The Kelmscott Chaucer is a remarkable material achievement as well as an artistic one. It is true that in the grand scheme of book longevity the Chaucer is not old, at least not compared to the medieval inspirations for the work, but over a century after its creation it shows remarkable material stamina. The copy of the Chaucer in the Scripps College Denison rare book collection is a stellar example of how the manuscript has survived over the years (Figure 15). The Denison copy of the Chaucer is still in remarkable condition for its age, and it is not the only one.

According to the official census of Kelmscott Chaucers, it is estimated that nearly all of the books of the 438-copy press run survive to this day. The attention Morris paid to detail shines through when looking at the Denison copy—where the pages of other antique books are stained or brittle, the Chaucer's are still white and flexible; where the ink in contemporaneous publications has faded, Morris's remains vivid and uncorrupted. The Scripps College Chaucer was rebound in 1928, and no longer has its original Dove's or Leighton binding, but the collection also houses examples of every publication printed at Kelmscott, so it is possible to examine how the original bindings have survived over the century as well.

The Denison copy of the Chaucer came to Scripps in 1942, when the entire 6000-volume John I. Perkins collection was given to the school. The collection, which formed the backbone of what is now the Denison rare book collection, contains a copy of every book printed at Kelmscott, the majority of which retain their original bindings. It is important to note the conditions under which the Kelmscott books—especially the Chaucer—are kept in the Denison library when considering how well the book has survived. The Rare Book room in Denison is climate controlled, the low humidity and low temperature environment carefully maintained to discourage dampness and its resulting molds, but also to avoid any fluctuations in temperature

that could strain the materials of the books themselves. Leather and wood are especially prone to expanding and contracting with changing temperatures and humidity, and the constant movement causes cracking and powdering, compromising the strength of the covers, leaving the binding and text block vulnerable. Denison's precautionary climate system has prevented these problems in the collection, including the entire collection of Kelmscott publications. The Chaucer is housed in a specially made box with a velvet interior, most likely made when it was rebound and custom fitted to the rebound copy. It is always stored in its box and is only removed, relatively infrequently, for study or for short-term display. Patrons of the Rare Book room are required to wash their hands before handling any of the books in the collection, and when the books are opened the covers are supported with foam wedges in order to cradle the spine of the book and reduce strain on the binding. The book itself is rarely displayed opened for long periods of time, protecting the elaborate illuminations from undue light damage and fading. Thus, for the past seven decades the Chaucer has been kept in the optimum environment for ensuring its survival.

The Scripps College Chaucer has a relatively foggy provenance compared to the other books in the collection, and it is unclear how many times it changed hands between the Kelmscott Press and Scripps College. What is established is that John I. Perkins purchased the Chaucer from Dawson's Book Shop, a purveyor of rare editions and finely bound books in Los Angeles, in 1937. The bill of sale from Dawson's is preserved in the back of the book, and indicates that Dawson's had purchased the Chaucer from the collection of an E.H. Lupton, Jr. of Lawrence, Kansas (Figure 16). Any owners previous to Mr. Lupton have not been documented in the Scripps Collection. Further documents inserted in the Chaucer state that it was rebound in Chicago in 1928 at the RR Donnelley Press, specifically in their then-newly founded Extra Bindery. The Extra Bindery was a small sub-project of the large, commercial Donnelley Press

that focused on the art of hand-bound books, and produced fine bindings for rare or limited edition books. R.R. Donnelley established the bindery in 1921 as a way to keep the craft of book binding alive in the states. He recruited the prominent British bookbinder Alfred de Sauty to head the project and run the bindery, and de Sauty became the primary designer for the fine bindings the workshop produced.

De Sauty himself was responsible for the design of the rebound Chaucer, a project important enough for everyone who had a hand in rebinding it to inscribe their names in the book by hand, alongside de Sauty's signature (Figure 17). Why it was rebound in the first place is not documented, although it is possible to speculate by examining the condition of the book. The Chaucer was printed in 1896, meaning that at the time of its rebinding in 1928 it was only 32 years old. The textblock itself is in perfect condition, so it is unlikely that the original binding was somehow damaged beyond repair or destroyed, as it would have been difficult to irreparably damage the binding of a book while sparing its contents. What is known is that the edges of the pages are not gilded, a trait that applied to many of the deluxe bindings that graced a small portion of the editions, especially the work of Cobden-Sanderson and the Doves Bindery. The edges of the pages are undecorated, and many still retain their slightly irregular deckle edge (a remnant of the paper-making process, caused by the paper pulp spilling over the edge of the mold—the “deckle”—to form a wavy edge), indicating that they were not trimmed when the book was rebound. If no gilding exists on the original edges of the textblock, it would suggest that the pages had never been gilded, and therefore unlikely to formerly be part of a deluxe binding. It is also important to note that even in the cases where the textblocks were not gilded, it would have been a strange decision to discard one of the fine bindings created by Leighton or Doves in favor of a lesser-known binder in America unless something had corrupted the binding,

which, as stated earlier, seems unlikely from the stellar condition of the pages. It is then somewhat likely that this book was originally sold with the typical blue and white linen Leighton binding—which was very practical but not terribly eye-catching—and once it entered private hands, the collector may have commissioned a more unique binding for their edition of the Chaucer. The collector who sent the book to de Sauty obviously prized their purchase, even going so far as to commission a custom-made case along with the new binding to contain the work and protect it.

Both the case and the rebinding have served the book well in preserving its condition. Cases especially help protect book covers from the everyday wear that comes from typical book storage and use, like surface abrasions from being removed from and re-inserted between other books, the pressure on the bottom of the spine from the weight of a book stored vertically, or fading from prolonged exposure to light if the book is taller than its fellows. It is common practice in book conservation to create cases for books that are already suffering from these problems to avoid exacerbating them in the future, but the collector who commissioned the case for the Chaucer managed to preemptively avoid those problems. As a result, the new binding is in incredibly fine condition. The cover is still smooth and unabraded, and retains its black and gold-tooled decoration (Figure 18). Even though the book is stored vertically, the cushioning on the inside of the case helps alleviate some of the weight that would normally rest on the boards and the spine, sparing the bottom of the book any undue stress. The outer corners of the boards are also still perfectly straight and square, since the case has protected them from the impacts and pressures that result in the buckled and curled corners that are typical of antique books. The case itself is in solid structural condition, but over a century of handling and storage (even though the majority of that time has been spent in optimal storage conditions) have taken its toll on the

surface integrity of the leather, which is abraded, scratched, and even missing in places along the corners and edges (Figure 19). Luckily, because of the case, the book it contained was spared that same damage.

In looking at the Chaucer's new binding and how it has lasted over time, it is important to consider how other books from the Kelmscott Press have fared with their original bindings. As it is likely that the Denison edition of the Chaucer was purchased from the press with the linen and blue board Leighton binding, other Kelmscott books that retain their Leighton cover serve as a useful point of reference for how the Chaucer could look now if it had not been rebound. The Denison collection contains every Kelmscott book, and it was therefore easy to find multiple original bindings for comparison. Many of the books had similar problems and the amount of damage was consistent across much of the collection, so the typical problems of the original Leighton bindings are represented here by the Kelmscott edition of one of Morris's translations of Icelandic legends, *Grettir the Strong*.

Grettir also arrived at Denison with the John I. Perkins collection, and has been kept in the same environmental conditions as the Chaucer for the same amount of time. However, while the book is in perfect structural condition, there is a marked difference in its overall appearance compared to the Chaucer. As stated earlier, the bindings are comprised of blue book board encased at the spine in white linen, the titles of the books printed on paper labels and then pasted onto the linen. This may sound like a flimsy way to bind some of the greatest printed work since the Renaissance, but structurally the majority of the collection is sound; the bindings are all in working order, and most damage is purely aesthetic. Linen and board are the primary building blocks of any archival binding—though they are generally covered by bookcloth or leather—so while the covers look simple and insubstantial, they are actually quite strong and have kept the

collection functional. However, there is very little to protect the books from the same stresses that were spared the Chaucer by its hardy case. The bottoms of the boards suffer cracking of the outer blue layer, exposing naked cardboard on the edges and in the corners. The corners themselves have crumpled around the text block. The once-white linen has absorbed the dirt and oil of generations of hands along the spine and the blue dye of the boards on the covers, so that the spine is now a dirty brown and the linen on the covers is now a darker blue than the faded boards. The unprotected textblock is vulnerable to any moisture in the air, and despite Denison's carefully climate-controlled space some of the books have the characteristic warp of water damage along the edges of their pages (Figures 20-23). It is important to note, however, that these are all surface defects—while they may be unsightly, they have little bearing on the overall condition of the book, which could still be considered perfect. The bindings function well, the linen spines have not cracked or separated, and all the pages are still firmly in place and easily turnable and legible. For century-old books with a very simple binding, the fact that all the damage is relatively shallow is a testament to the high quality of the materials and the techniques used in their creation.

Despite the good condition of its fellows, it is fortunate that the Chaucer was rebound. The damages suffered by the other books in the collection were still minor, but they are also much smaller books. *Grettir the Strong*, for example, is about a quarter of the length of the Chaucer and a few inches shorter in both the length and width of the pages. The Denison Chaucer, by comparison, is 564 thick, handmade pages long (including its 13 endleaves), and approximately 17"x12" when bound. It is a large, heavy book. Therefore, boards that suffer minor damages and stresses under the weight of a smaller book like *Grettir the Strong* would be prone to greater damage under several times that weight. The traditional gap between the bottom

of the boards and the edges of the pages would start to buckle if kept vertical for too long, and the spine would start to sag as the heavy textblock pulled the tight-backed cloth binding downward. The Princeton University rare book collection contains four copies of the Kelmscott Chaucer, two with either full or partial pigskin bindings (the full by Cobden-Sanderson, the partial by Leighton), and two with the Leighton blue board bindings. The condition for the full pigskin binding is listed as “extremely fine,” for the partial as “very good;” both of the listings for the blue board copies describe worn bindings, missing and detached end leaves, and abraded and warping boards, problems that will only be exacerbated with further aging.⁶¹ It is likely that the same fate would have befallen the Denison Chaucer if it had not been rebound; as it is, though, the book remains in excellent condition and is likely to remain so for much longer than its fellows.

A great binding is useless if the textblock it contains is not of the same caliber. Due to Morris’s extreme diligence in both the quality of the ink and of the paper, however, the Chaucer’s pages are still perfectly flexible, and the ink is as crisp and vividly black as the day it was printed. This is the result of Morris’s quest for Renaissance-era materials and techniques for both paper and ink, and Mr. Batchelor’s Perch paper and Jaenecke’s lampblack ink have served the Chaucer extremely well. Morris’s decision to employ rag paper was especially important in the Chaucer’s longevity. Rag paper is made from cotton and linen cloth that has been beaten into a long-fibered pulp. The pulp is then gathered on wire frames, drained, pressed, and dried to form a very flexible and soft paper, the long fibers of the cloth interlocking to give the paper strength. This directly contrasts to the contemporaneous commercial method of papermaking, where paper made from wood pulp was becoming widely used as a result of the industrialization

⁶¹ Milevski, 2-6.

of the publishing industry. Victorian wood-pulp paper was very thin, with only slightly more substance than the onionskin paper of the 20th century. Wood was far more plentiful than linen and cotton rag, and wood pulp has extremely short fibers, which made for a smooth and uniform printing surface, ideal for printing in bulk on the rolling presses used in commercial publishing.

Despite these initial laborsaving benefits, as the books aged the problems with the Victorian papermaking methods became woefully clear. An 1886 commercial edition of Chaucer's poems from the Honnold-Mudd Library of the Claremont Colleges illustrates the shoddy product quality that Morris so decried. The binding, tooled book cloth over board, is sound; this book's main failing is in what the cover contains. The text block is composed of 638 pages, more than the Kelmscott Chaucer, but is a much more compact volume as each page is translucently thin and extremely brittle. The short fibers of the wood pulp were unable to maintain flexibility as they aged, rendering the paper extremely prone not to tearing but to breakage. The pages are breaking off from the thread that attaches them to the binding; a too-emphatic page-turn or an accidental fold in one of the leaves is liable to snap off a piece or an entire page (Figure 24). In addition to the wood pulp's failings, this problem was exacerbated by the chemical treatments to which the wood pulp was subjected before it was made into paper, including an intense bleaching process that rendered the fibers even weaker. The result is a book that will literally crumble as it ages.

The Denison Chaucer is a beautifully preserved example of the excellence and diligence of the Kelmscott Press. Even after a century the Scripps College copy of the Chaucer remains in perfect condition. Its rebinding, case, and the environment in which it was kept all played an enormous role in extending its long life, but none of those measures would be necessary if Morris had not created something worth protecting. Morris's work stands on its own, still as

functional and beautiful as it was more than one hundred years ago.

Conclusion

The story and continued life of the Kelmscott Chaucer represents so much more than just the making of a beautiful book. From an art historical perspective, it is the result of a unique set of circumstances that put the right people together in the right place and time and gave them the motivation to create something outstanding. As a work of art, it was the careful selection of pure materials and time-honored methodologies coupled with diligent execution that made it a technical masterpiece. Examining it as a conservator, the philosophy behind its birth and the techniques used to make it are inextricably intertwined to create an object with the material fortitude to last hundreds of years. The discipline of conservation is not just the isolated analysis of an object's condition; it is about understanding everything the object is saying, from its origins to its present day state, so as to best predict and ensure its future state. The Chaucer is a particularly important example of how ideologies and circumstances can dictate the choices made by artists and artisans, which in turn determine how effectively their creations will survive.

The Kelmscott Press and the men who founded it remain one of the best examples of how the interconnected nature of art and artistic philosophy can translate into material longevity. William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones admired beautifully made books all their lives, but more importantly they valued the authenticity that came with the handmade. They had spent their lives fighting against the advancing tide of industrialization, studying the great crafts of the past in order to start a movement to revive them, not just imitate them. Morris's efforts were especially effective in that regard; cloth-dyeing, tapestry weaving, stained glass making, and finally printing were all briefly resurrected through his tireless work to make Victorian society aware of the artisanship they were exchanging for the shallow conveniences of mechanization. The success of the Kelmscott Press was a monumental achievement in an age that was actively

discouraging everything that made it great, and it is a testament to the unrelenting drive of the men who carved out an uncompromised niche of high caliber handicraft in a factory-based world.

Obviously, passion is not the only ingredient needed to make a masterwork. However, the creators of the Kelmscott Press transformed their passion for craft and beauty into an impetus towards absolute perfection. These men were no mere dilettantes wishing for something pretty, Morris and Burne-Jones were both high caliber talents in their respective professions who had studied the medieval manuscripts and printed works they wished to emulate for decades before succeeding in the medium. Their attempts in printing *The Earthly Paradise* had given them insight into what they needed to accomplish in order to complete their printing projects to their satisfaction. Thanks to Morris's successful design firm, they had the financial resources to translate their talent and experience into the materials they wanted: medieval-style handmade paper, medieval-style ink, three of their own custom-made typefaces, a simple hand press, professionally executed engravings, and the services of two of London's finest binderies. For the Chaucer, Burne-Jones illustrated 87 scenes from the collected poems, and Morris designed every scrolling border and embellished capital, as well as the typefaces themselves. This was extreme dedication, far beyond what it would have taken to make just any pretty book. Morris's and Burne-Jones's values and beliefs are not just interesting historical detail, understanding them crucial to understanding how and why the Chaucer was created, and therefore why it has lasted.

From a conservation perspective, the Denison copy of the Kelmscott Chaucer is perfect. This is not only because it is a beautiful work of art, but also there is literally not one problem with the book, aesthetically or structurally. It is true that much of what has kept it that way over the centuries is careful storage and upkeep by its various owners, all of whom treasured the work

and considered it worth protecting. The expensive rebinding work and custom-made case are evidence of an unknown collector who prized their copy enough to invest heavily in its future when it was barely three decades old, long before its value would have begun to increase with age. It now rests in a collection of rare books, where it is one of the most important works, and is kept in a carefully controlled environment to protect it even further. Luckily for the survival of their printed legacy, Morris and Burne-Jones's enthusiasm for their work seems to have evoked the same enthusiasm in their customers. However, even the most protected and carefully handled book cannot be saved if the materials are unsound or the workmanship is careless and sloppy. This is evidenced by the much lower quality commercial copy of Chaucer's works found in circulation at Honnold-Mudd library, where even though the environment is climate controlled and relatively low stress, the paper is failing—crumbling and breaking out of its binding. The Honnold-Mudd Chaucer is exactly the type of imitative, inauthentic product that Morris and Burne-Jones were protesting with their revival of high quality printing, and their efforts resulted in a much longer-lasting book.

The Kelmscott Chaucer is rightly considered the pinnacle of post-Renaissance book design; aesthetically it is stunning, the text beautifully laid out according to Morris's stringent stipulations, and multiple pages are elaborately decorated with scrolling borders and detailed illustrations. But just as important as the overall design scheme of the book is the careful way it was made. Beautiful designs are useless if the substrate will not support them over time, if the paper were to crumble or the binding were to fail all of Morris's and Burne-Jones's work would be irreparably damaged. The Chaucer still lives though, and it continues to represent so much. From an art historical perspective, it is the symbol of a small but determined resistance against the unstoppable march of industrial progress. From an artistic perspective, it is a beautifully

executed tribute to the great printing and illuminating traditions of the medieval past. From a conservation perspective, it is a testament to the strength of quality materials and time-honored techniques. In fact, one of the only aesthetic defects in the whole book is the discoloration of the edges of the beautiful title page; the once-ivory margin of the page has turned slightly brown, where generations of readers and scholars have turned directly to it over and over again (Figure 25).

Appendix of Figures



Fig. 1: The title page of the Kelmscott Chaucer (1895)



Fig. 2: "La Belle Iseut" by William Morris, featuring Jane Burden Morris (1858)

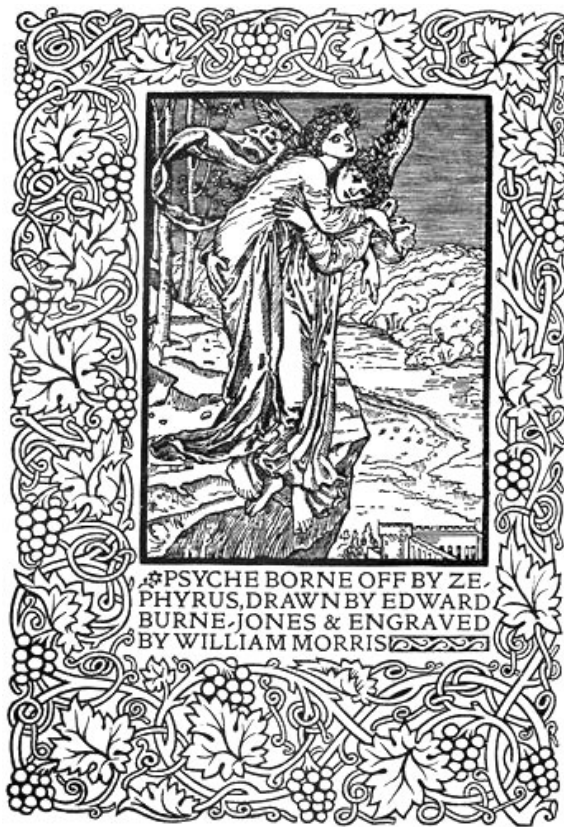


Fig. 3: “Psyche borne off by Zephyrus”, A surviving proof of an engraving made for The Earthly Paradise, with scene drawn by Edward Burne-Jones, illuminated and engraved by William Morris (1869)



Fig. 4: “Topsy and Ned reading poetry” by Edward Burne Jones (1869)



Fig. 5: “Topsy engraving a block for The Earthly Paradise”, by Edward Burne-Jones (1868)



Fig. 6: “The Arming and Departure of the Knights” tapestry by Morris & Co., designed by William Morris with figures by Edward Burne-Jones (1890)

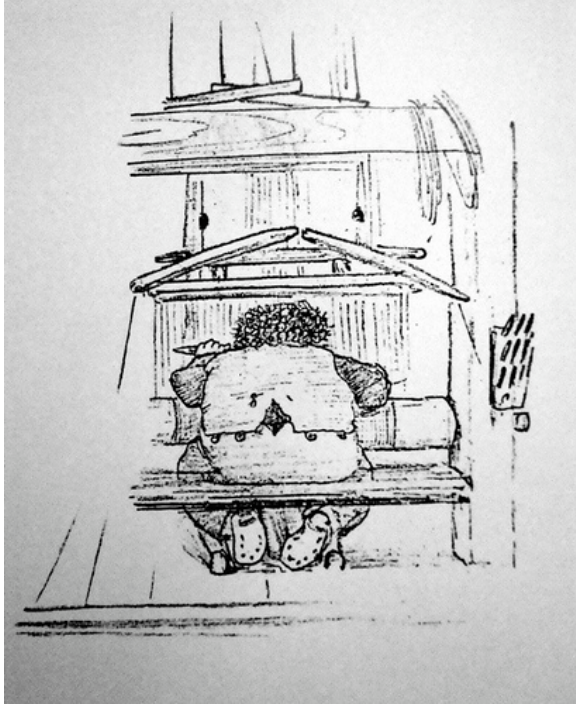


Fig. 7: “Topsy at his loom” by Edward Burne-Jones (1870’s)

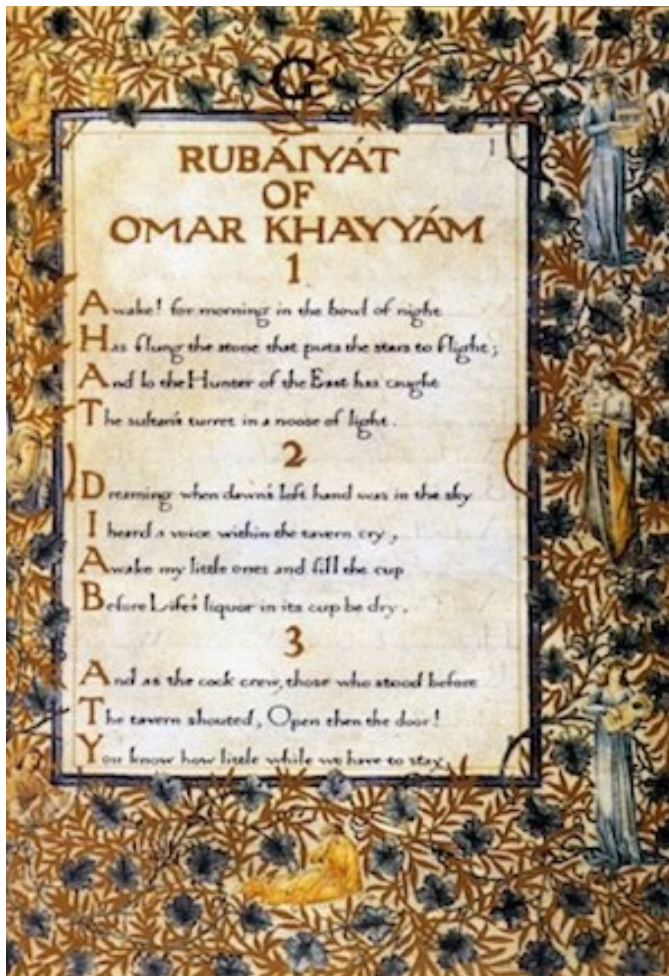
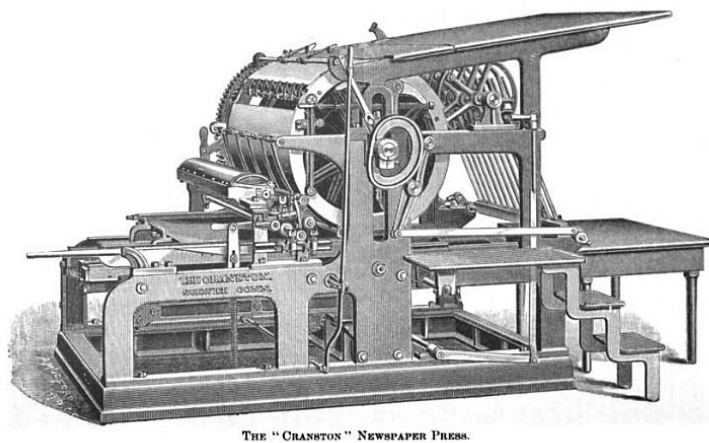


Fig. 8: The opening page of William Morris's manuscript version of the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam (1870's)



CYLINDER PRESSES.

Fig. 9: A Cranston rolling-drum newspaper printing press (1890)

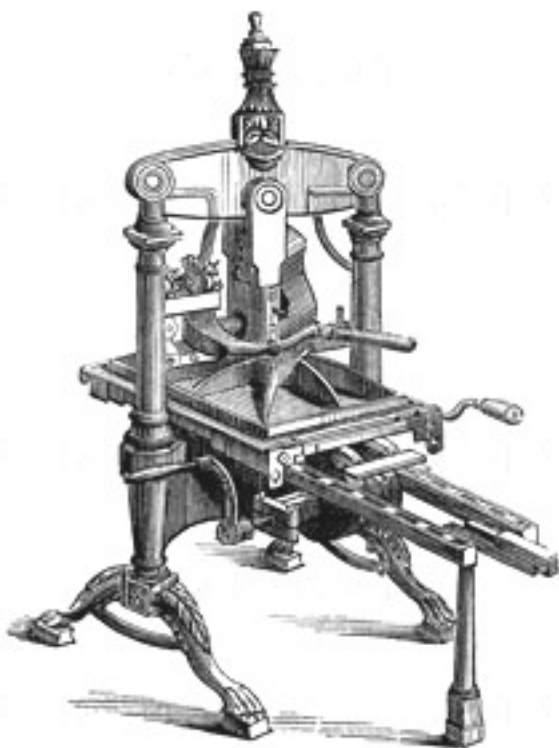


Fig. 10: A cast-iron Albion hand-press (1890's)



Fig. 11: An engraving depicting William Caxton and his hand-press (19th c.)

This is the Golden type.
This is the Troy type.
This is the Chaucer type.

Fig. 12: A sampler of the three Kelmscott typefaces designed by William Morris (1894)

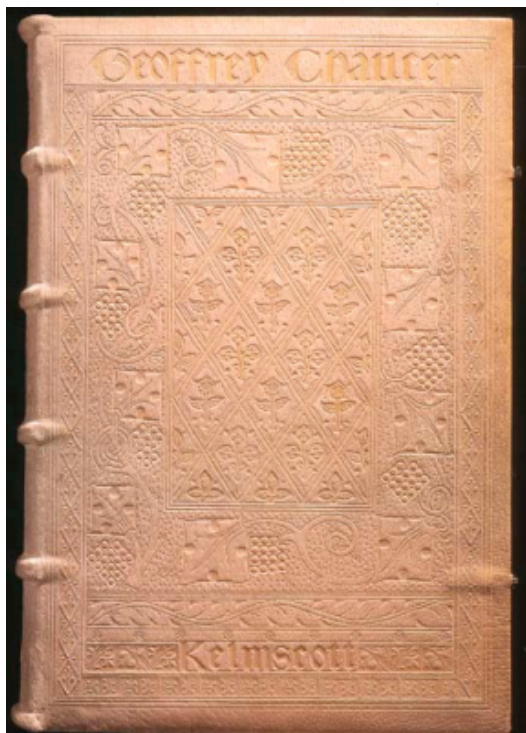


Fig. 13: The white pigskin binding featured on some editions of the Kelmscott Chaucer, designed by William Morris and executed by Doves Bindery (1895)

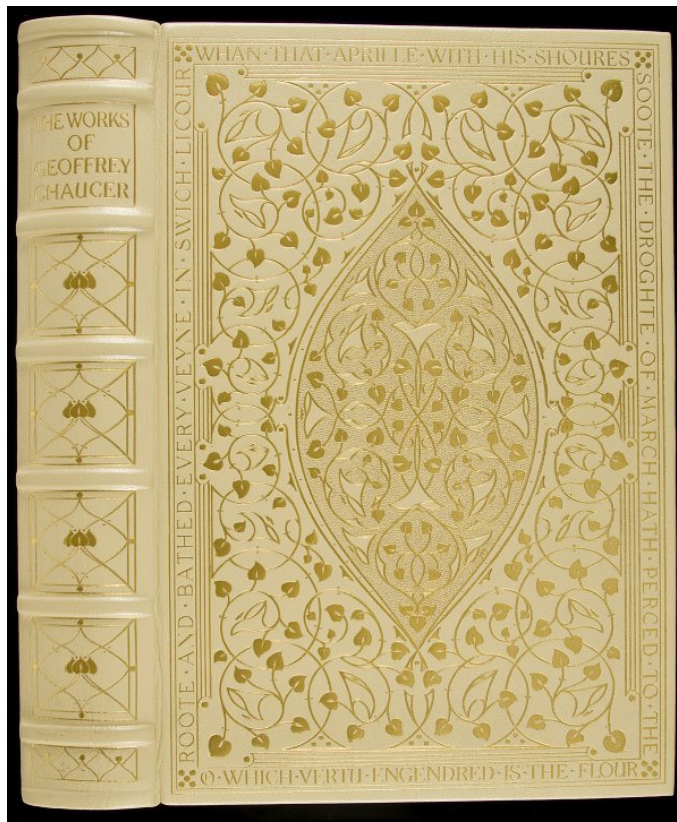


Figure 14: The white pigskin binding designed by T.J. Cobden-Sanderson for his personal copy of the Chaucer (1896)



Figure 15: Denison Chaucer with Alfred de Sauty binding, printed 1896, rebound 1928

Old and Rare Books, Art Books
California, Association Items

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Address *2170 W. 24th St* Co. of Feb-1

CHARGE

HOW SENT?			CREDIT OF SALE	
COP.	AUTHOR	TITLE	PRICE	COST
1	<i>Morris</i>	<i>Route of the Mountains</i>	<i>2.50</i>	
1	"	<i>Charles Kelmscott</i>		
	<i>From the collection of</i>			
	<i>E. H. Lupton, Jr.</i>			
	<i>Lawrence, Kansas</i>			

BB

Figure 16: Receipt of sale from Dawson's book shop to John I. Perkins, citing Lupton as former owner, 1937

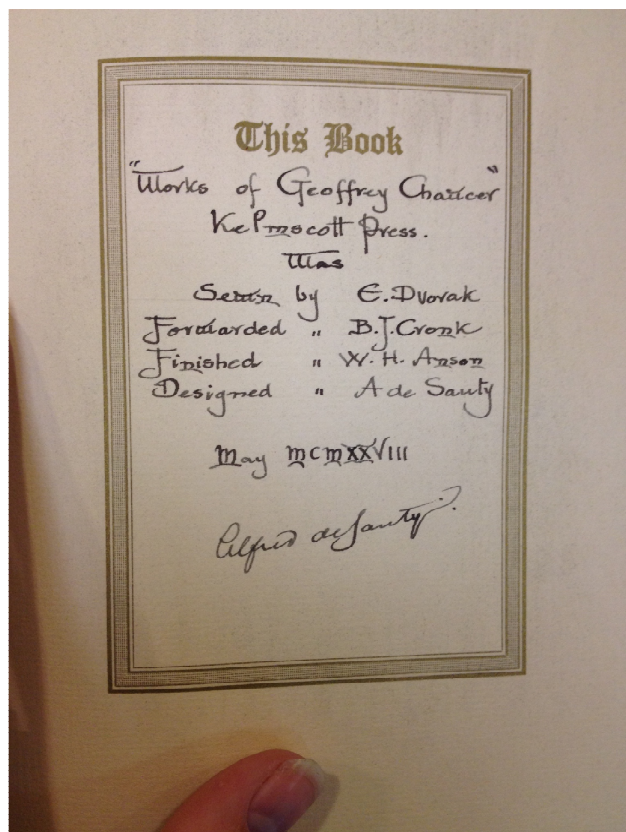


Figure 17: Signatures of the binders from the Extra Bindery and designer Alfred de Sauty, 1928

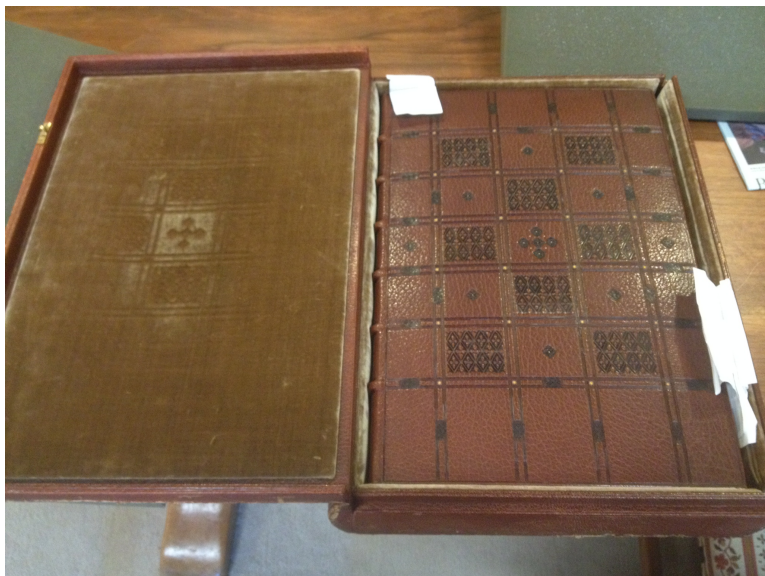


Figure 18: The Denison Chaucer in its case

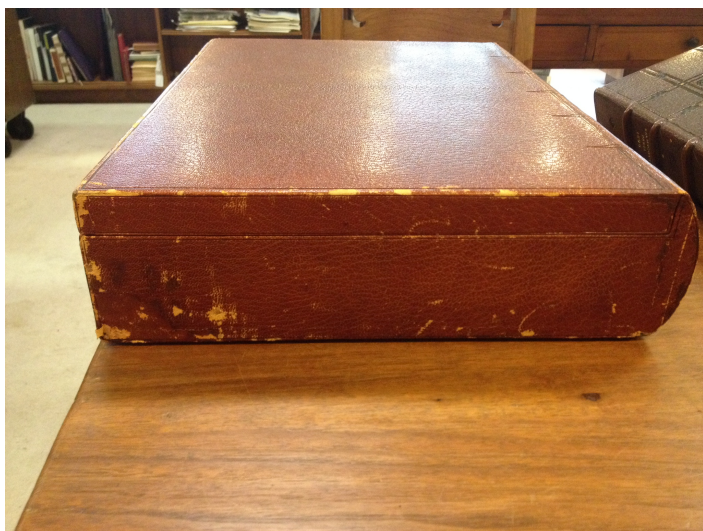


Figure 19: Abrasions and scuffs on the leather of the case



Figure 20: Exposed cardboard on Grettir the Strong



Figure 21: Linen spine and paper label, Grettir the Strong

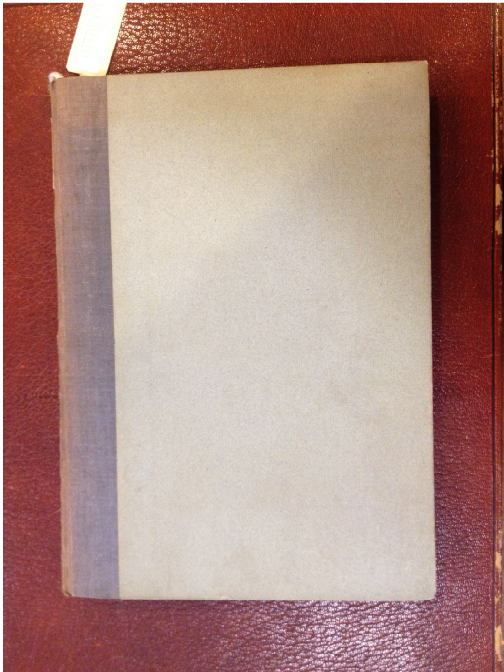


Figure 22: Blue board cover and discolored linen binding, Grettir the Strong



Figure 23: Evidence of water damage in the textblock, Grettir the Strong

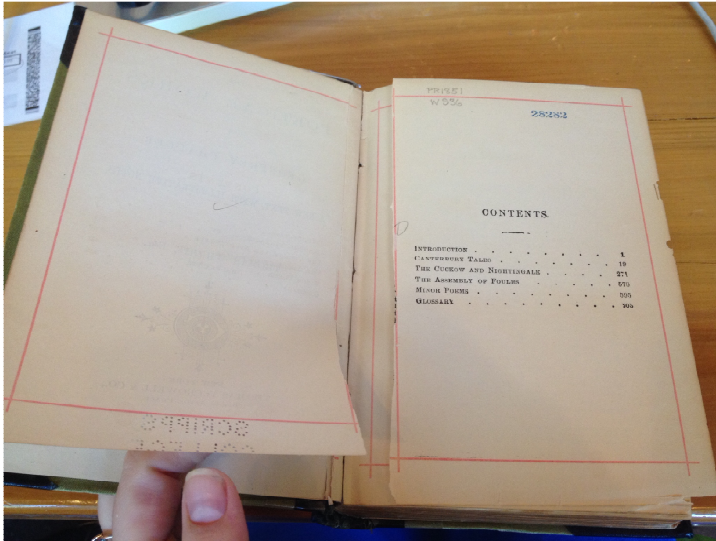


Figure 24: Evidence of breakage in contemporaneous commercial printing, 1886



Figure 25: Discoloration in margins of Chaucer title page compared to the adjacent pages

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