

The Kelmscott Press and Its Legacies

A one-day symposium hosted by The William Morris Society

6 November 2021

Venue: St Bride Foundation, London

Keynote speakers: Dr Marcus Waithe (University of Cambridge), 'Pocket Cathedrals: Craftsmanship, Architecture, and the Kelmscott Press'; Yoshiko Yamamoto (Arts & Crafts Press, Tacoma)

Programme:

The Texts and Editors of the Kelmscott Press

Yuri Cowan, Norwegian University of Science and Technology

The Kelmscott Press has most often been celebrated and discussed from the perspective of craft and design, and for being the inspiration for many small presses in the century-and-a-quarter since its founding. But it is sometimes forgotten that these were books that were intended to be read, and that in some cases Morris was even choosing to print texts that were not at all available in modern editions. With the exception of Curt Buhler's 1945 article on the relationship of the Laudes to its manuscript copytext, Charles LaPorte's 2007 essay on 'Victorian Editorial Theory and the Kelmscott *Chaucer*', and my own 2014 article on editing Caxton for the Kelmscott Press, discussions of the Press as a textual project have been few and far between. Even off-hand references are rare, as when, for example, Richard Sylvester, the editor of the Early English Text Society edition of *The Life and Death of Cardinal Wolsey* (1959), wrote off the Kelmscott edition of that work as 'shot through with errors' (xii n.). Although, given the state of the first page of the Kelmscott version, that characterisation of the text is undoubtedly true, Sylvester's attitude may stem from a self-consciousness that the EETS had itself taken so long to publish a modern edition. And yet 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'.

However, even such dismissive accounts of the editing process behind the books suggest that the Kelmscott Press should be recognised as a project that worked to create an expansive and expandable canon of medieval literature (indeed, the same is true of the body of more contemporary works such as the poems of Keats, Shelley, and Morris's friends, although those books will not be the focus for this paper). This paper will therefore take seriously the Press's textual editing process, as well as the choices made around the inclusion or exclusion of apparatus in the Kelmscott books, and will work to move those aspects back to the fore as essential aspects of the Press's practice. Finally, it will reveal the often relatively quiet roles played by editors and transcribers such as F. S. Ellis, Henry

Halliday Sparling, and Sarah Peddie, in establishing the texts for Morris's project. Like the technical and creative input provided by Morris's more well-known collaborators like Emery Walker, and Edward Burne-Jones, their contribution to the textual output of the Kelmscott canon further reveals the sizeable social networks that stand behind the work of the Press.

The relationship between Morris's material aesthetic and his politics: *Art Under Plutocracy revisited through four new Morris letters from 1883–1884*

Robin A. Wilson, Keble College, Oxford

In 1883, Kenneth Macaulay, a director of Chance Brothers Glass in Smethwick approached William Morris asking him to speak to the members of his fledgling organisation, the West Bromwich Institute. Newly discovered, previously unpublished letters found between the pages of a book from an Oxford University library reveal Morris's side of the conversation relating to the lecture he eventually delivered in February 1884 entitled *Art Under Plutocracy* and covering his then emerging socialist ideas.

The series of letters begins in September 1883 with Morris accepting Macaulay's invitation to speak, and proposing a date, topic and title for his lecture. The fourth and final letter in the correspondence is the longest, and was written in 1884 after Morris had spoken to the Institute. Macaulay had written to Morris asking a series of questions, to which Morris responds with a spontaneous but complete and concise summary of his nascent socialist ideas as they relate to the visual aesthetics and art process that he had covered in his lecture.

These letters predate the publication of the text of *Art Under Plutocracy* and so represent a unique insight into Morris's mind at the time that his politics were still evolving from the insights gained from his arts and crafts business. Although Morris wrote very many letters, which have been subsequently well documented, only one comparable example exists from this liminal early period of Morris's emergence as a political figure.

This paper places the new letters in the context of what we already know about this vital period in Morris's social thinking.

Profitable anachronisms and interstitial spaces: a social anthropology of contemporary hand-press printing and a teaching and learning model for Universities

Robin A. Wilson and R. Fairfax-Cholmeley, Bodleian Bibliographic Press

Why do people choose to continue to work with technologies that might at first seem outdated, inefficient and unprofitable? Hand-press printing often uses craft methods which are slow to acquire, labour intensive, and might appear easier to replicate using modern digital technologies than ancient presses, inks and moveable type. Despite all this, hand-press printing continues to thrive in various

forms, and somewhat surprisingly the authors have had considerable success embedding hand-press printmaking and other seemingly 'traditional' crafts within research and teaching practice at the University of Oxford.

Part methods paper, part case-study, the authors draw upon a decade of printing practice, teaching and research undertaken in the unusual dual role of anthropologist-artists working at the interface between craft and research.

This paper uses social anthropology's method of participatory observation with a range of printmakers, students and institutions to reflect on what it means to create printed matter by hand in the present time. The discussion examines the degree to which contemporary hand-press printmaking can still be regarded as a socially compelling, personally worthwhile and economically viable activity. It concludes by proposing a sustainable and viable teaching and learning model suitable for Higher and Further Education institutions based on our pilot work re-incorporating hand-press printing and other craft activities into teaching at Oxford.

The Kelmscott Facsimile Works and New Book Cover Designs: Dialectical Propositions

David Mabb, Goldsmiths

The presentation will look at six art works made using William Morris's Kelmscott Press facsimiles and a new series of book cover designs. The first Kelmscott Press facsimile is from the exhibition *David Mabb & Henrik Schrat* (2013), at a now defunct artists run project space Lobe, Berlin, which appropriated *The Wood Beyond the World*. The second work, *Announcer*, appropriates the Kelmscott *Chaucer* and was exhibited at the Focal Point Gallery (2014) and the William Morris Gallery (2015). Associated with the Focal Point Gallery exhibition a print 'beaT bouT' was produced also appropriating the Kelmscott *Chaucer*. The fourth work *About Two Worlds* was shown at Handel Street Projects (2016), and appropriates *The Wood Beyond the World*. A print was also produced for this exhibition *Maid with Two Squares* which appropriates the image of the *Maid* from the woodcut frontispiece after a design by Edward Burne-Jones, from *The Wood Beyond the World*. And lastly *Somewhere* (2017), which appropriates *News from Nowhere*.

The presentation will end with a recent and ongoing series of book cover designs for Haymarket Books, Chicago, Historical Materialism Book Series (2021) that cannibalise previous work using Morris wallpapers and textile designs for use as artwork for the covers.

Unexpected Legacy: William Morris and Magical Realism

Peter Tanner, University of Utah

William Morris was dead, to begin with. He died in Hammersmith, England in 1896. There is no doubt that he never met the famous Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges, born three years after Morris's death, and half a world away in Buenos Aires, Argentina in 1899. Nevertheless, Morris's legacy and that of the Kelmscott Press reach across the years connecting to Borges in Argentina, and through his work to one of the most significant tropes and literary styles in Latin American literature: magical realism. This unexpected legacy was forged through Borges's connection to William Morris and the Kelmscott Press.

This paper will trace the connection between Morris and the Kelmscott Press to Borges and magical realism. It will further describe how this connection eventually prompted the creation of a unique fine press artists' book by contemporary artist and hand press expert Richard-Gabriel Rummonds in collaboration with both sculptor Arnaldo Pomodoro and Jorge Luis Borges, who selected specific poems about Anglo-Saxons in homage to the influence that English literature, and in particular his critical analysis of Morrisian literary and craft artistry, had upon his work. It is this paper's position that William Morris and the Kelmscott Press have produced an unexpected legacy that is hitherto uninvestigated in Latin American literature. It will be argued that Morris's importance extends to Latin American magical realism. It was through Borges's insightful critical analysis that Morris's work was received, reinterpreted and reconstituted and had a significant formative impact upon authors of magical realist works.

Useful and Beautiful: Arts and Crafts Aesthetics, Aestheticism, and Interpretation in the the Kelmscott *Chaucer*

Brandiann Molby, Loyola University Chicago

Book lovers, scholars, collectors and publishers have long celebrated the experience of reading Kelmscott Press books, which are defined by their integration of heavy borders of vines and flowers, stylised medievalising illustrations, distinctive typefaces, and dense blocks of text into a single work of art. Despite this widespread appreciation, scholarship has not addressed the extent to which Kelmscott Press designs inform the reader's own interpretation of the texts they present. In this paper I argue that the hermeneutics of Kelmscott books are two-fold. First, through an examination of Morris's lectures, I maintain that the distinctive treatment of text and image in Kelmscott book designs participates in the user-oriented, Arts and Crafts interpretive model that William Morris established over his long career as a designer and a craftsman and that goes to the very heart of Morris's aims for revolutionary socioeconomic change. Second, I argue that the reader's interpretive relationship to Kelmscott books can also be understood in terms of *fin-de-siècle* aesthetics. Drawing on the work of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Oscar Wilde and Walter Pater, I contend that the unification of text, image and decoration in Morris's designs for the Kelmscott Press participates

in the late-nineteenth century turn away from Victorian perspectival mimesis, with its social and ethical engagement of the viewer, towards the *fin-de-siècle* emphasis on the viewer's own sensory experience of the work of art. My paper concludes with a reading of the opening pages of the Kelmscott *Chaucer* to demonstrate that its craftsman-created integration of form and function and text and image centers the interpretive process on the reader's individual, sensory experience of the useful and beautiful.

William Morris and Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Kelmscott Press and the Concept of Genius in the Nineteenth Century

Tracy Messerve, Arthur D. Jenkins Library, George Washington University
Museum and Textile Museum

Much has been written about the aesthetics of the books printed by The Kelmscott Press, particularly the famous Kelmscott Press *Chaucer*. However, less has been written about Morris's reasoning behind his choices for which authors to print through his press, and what these choices might say about Morris's intentions for his own design legacy. In an era obsessed with the idea of genius, Morris's inclusion of authors such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge is not inconsequential: he was including a man he thought of as a genius and yet also leaving a lasting expression of his own genius for future generations by printing books that were intended to be pieces of art.

The People of the Press

John Stirling, Trustee, The William Morris Society

In this presentation I will argue that the publication of a series of books requires rather more than one man's 'typographical adventure'. Whilst acknowledging the significance of Morris's contribution – there wouldn't be a Kelmscott Press without him - I will suggest that we are in danger of 'deifying' Morris and neglecting those around him: without whom there would – again - not be a Kelmscott Press. There are over thirty people who can be easily identified and I have, no doubt, missed other candidates. In developing this theme I will discuss Weinroth's argument that the Press might be regarded as a co-operative, 'guild-like', venture and an embodiment of Morris's ideas of socialist education. In doing so I hope to present a different light on the Press itself given that much of its output was produced after he had died.

'To see things as he saw them': Burne-Jones visionary illustrations for the Kelmscott Chaucer

Sarah Hardy, Curator, De Morgan Collection and Trustee of the William Morris Society

Artist, designer and craftsman Edward Burne-Jones created 87 woodblock illustrations for the Kelmscott *Chaucer*. Rather than simply meeting William Morris's requirement for illustrations which were 'decorative and ... story-telling', Burne-Jones created timeless illustrations which purposefully avoid narrative to act as portals directly to Chaucer's imaginary dream-visions. In this talk, I will focus on the *Chaucer* illustrations which depict Chaucer falling asleep and entering a dream. Without exception, these illustrations feature visual devices which give the illusion that they occupy a world beyond the page. Burne-Jones created his own symbolic lexicon and manipulated the construction of the book to go beyond the traditional value of book illustration and create a physical manifestation of Chaucer's dreams.

Book tickets [here](#)