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Devoted to the Work of  
William Morris



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# Morris and the Book Arts before the Kelmscott Press

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## I



IN AN August night in 1855, on the quays of Le Havre, William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones committed their lives to the service of art. Though the latter followed his original decision to become a painter, Morris' choice of an architectural career lasted less than a year; but during that time he began to explore the crafts of clay modelling, carving in wood and stone, and illuminating. Though the arts of the book were not foremost in his mind until he turned to printing, there were several periods in his life when he gave them serious attention and worked at them diligently.

Several strong interests which pervaded all his work are evident in Morris' practice of the book arts: his passionate love of nature and his feeling of kinship with all forms of life that come from the earth; his love of beauty and his realization of its necessity for the proper furnishing of a humane society; and his delight in certain periods of the past, especially in the works of the Middle Ages and in the spirit he found in the Icelandic sagas. His distaste for nineteenth-century civilization is well known. He used the past as a symbol of dissent, a method of protest, and, in the arts at least, an inspiration for reform. His keen sense of the continuity of man's life on the earth included the continuity of man's communication by means of the book, whether written or printed, rich with color or austere in black and white.

While still undergraduates, Morris and Burne-Jones were fired with enthusiasm by two illustrations—both printed from wood blocks as was usual in the nineteenth century before photoengraving prevailed. Neither one, as printed, appears particularly remarkable today, but both stood out for the young men above the ordinary illustrations of their time. They spent hours poring over a contemporary rendering of Dürer's "The Knight, Death, and the Devil" as it appeared in La Motte Fouqué's *Sintram and his Companions*, and they were so impressed by Rossetti's drawing for his friend William Allingham's poem, "The Maids of Elfen-Mere," that Morris "at once set to work at drawing on wood and cutting the designs himself" (Mackail, I, 87).

Morris went no farther with wood engraving at this time, but after he and Ned were settled in London he continued at the British Museum the close attention he had given to illuminated manuscripts at the Bodleian Library, and he produced at least three brief texts written in a gothic letter and colorfully decorated with medievalistic initials and borders. Late in 1856, Rossetti wrote of Morris to Allingham: "In all illumination and work of that kind he is quite unrivalled by anything modern that I know—Ruskin says, better than anything ancient."<sup>1</sup> Here Rossetti referred indirectly to a popular recreation that was very much the fashion during the middle years of the century in the full tide of the Gothic Revival and the renewal of interest in religious art and church decoration. In the 1840's men like Owen Jones and Henry Noel Humphreys, under the influence of medieval examples, designed small volumes with gothic lettering and varied kinds of illumination. The next step was the publication of do-it-yourself manuals which proved to be extremely popular, reaching a high point in the 1860's.

Though Morris was participating in a popular art form, he did not illuminate Biblical passages or inspirational texts as was commonly done. In a letter of August, 1856, Burne-Jones remarked that Morris "is now illuminating 'Guendolen' for Georgie" (Mackail, I, 108). "Guendolen" is a short poem which appeared first in the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* as "Hands" (p. 452) and later as a song in his longer poem "Rapunzel." This was not the last manuscript that Morris illuminated for Georgiana Macdonald, later Burne-Jones. The script in which "Guendolen" (Plate 5) was written is related to the textura gothic letter of the fourteenth century with its vertical stress, the avoidance of curves, and the "feet" on most of the separate vertical strokes. The letters, however, tend to be awkward and their placement on the page is uneven. Some of the initials have Lombardic attributes; not all of them go beyond the pencil stage. Little faces and grotesque beasts may be seen in the decoration, and the border of red, blue, and gold with leafy offshoots looks as though it were alive. There is nothing balanced or static about the manuscript. It shows the headlong energy of a young man full of admiration for the medieval book and possessed of a good eye for color.

During the summer of the same year, Robert and Elizabeth Browning spent two months in London. Through Rossetti, Morris and Burne-Jones met them, whereupon Morris wrote out and illuminated for them two stanzas of a song which occurs in *Paracelsus*, lines 190-205 (version of 1849). The writing resembles the script in which he wrote "Guendolen." Large initials on gold backgrounds introduce each stanza, and the red and blue borders terminate at

<sup>1</sup>Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti to William Allingham, 1854-1870*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill (London, 1897), pp. 193-194.

the top in grotesque animal heads. Slender line decorations between the stanzas give this manuscript a more open appearance than the more densely decorated "Guendolen."

Except for a blank space that may have been intended for a miniature, the text of the third manuscript of this period is denser than either of the others—perhaps because it is in prose. Its two crowded columns, in a similar gothic letter, recount the beginning of Grimm's tale, "Der Eisenhans," sometimes translated "The Iron Man," in what appears to be Morris' own version. Decorations in the text include foliage, heads, and beasts, while in the margin a tangle of spirals springs from the large initial. This initial shows a castle wall and a figure in a cage, portraying the predicament of Eisenhans. Louisa Macdonald Baldwin wrote to May Morris in 1911 that Morris had given her this piece of illuminating when she was a child, about 1857.<sup>2</sup>

These early endeavors show Morris' joy in decorating the written page as the forms and colors of nature and the Middle Ages guided his mind and hand. Mackail, who saw two of the manuscripts, felt that the lettering was defective, but that they were "remarkable not only for an all but complete mastery of colour, but for the genius with which they reproduced the tone and spirit of the early medieval work" (I, 276). They were indeed the visual counterparts of the poetry in the *Defence of Guenevere* and the stories he wrote for the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*.

Morris' next evidence of interest in the book arts came a few years later after the founding of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co. had determined the direction of his career—that of fighting the commercial civilization he hated on its own ground and with its own weapons. About 1864, he made the acquaintance of Frederick S. Ellis, a dealer in manuscripts and rare books, from whom he purchased incunabula, especially those with woodcut illustrations. Soon he decided to emulate the great printers of the fifteenth century in a project of his own—a large edition of his *Earthly Paradise*, which he was then writing, with illustrations by Burne-Jones. The resulting folio would be published by his firm. William Allingham, who visited the two men in the summer of 1866 when they were deeply engaged in the project, commented that Burne-Jones's "work in general, and that of Morris too, might perhaps be called a kind of New Renaissance."<sup>3</sup>

To Morris the illustrations were an integral part of the undertaking. "Morris always had a yearning for illustrations to his poems," May Morris

<sup>2</sup>British Museum, Add. Mss. 45347, fols. 61-63. See also May Morris' comments in *CW*, IX, xix. The present owners of "Eisenhans" and "Guendolen" are unknown. The song from *Paracelsus* is in the Huntington Library.

<sup>3</sup>William Allingham, *A Diary*, ed. H. Allingham and D. Radford (London, 1907), p. 140.

says; "he saw the stories in brilliantly defined pictures, and desired that other people should do so, too. There is nobody but Burne-Jones who can do them," he often said" (*AWS*, I, 402). This led to his noting on the margins of the verse narratives the pictures that he wanted his friend to draw. A count of 320 the existing marginal notes plus additional lists yields the figure of 320 subjects, which is probably incomplete. Burne-Jones records that he drew 102 pictures for the *Earthly Paradise*, but this figure cannot be taken literally.<sup>4</sup> In any case, one can gain from these estimates some idea of the goal which the partners wished to attain. Forty-six illustrations for the "Story of Cupid and Psyche," perhaps the first of the tales that Morris wrote, were engraved on wood blocks, and of these about thirty-five were cut by Morris himself.

A comparison of the resulting pictures with contemporary wood engraving, even with the best done for the much admired illustrators of the 1860's, shows that Morris and Burne-Jones were working in quite a different tradition. They thought all wood cutting since Bewick (died 1828) had been "wrong in principle,"<sup>5</sup> but examples from the early days of printing were certainly in their minds also. Though Burne-Jones, while drawing the pictures, had by him a copy of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (Venice, 1499), the prints that resulted from the engraved blocks are more akin to the darker, denser work of the German wood cutters of the fifteenth century than to the lighter illustrations of Italy. Whereas woodcuts printed in the masterpiece of Aldus show figures, furnishings, and architecture existing in all-encompassing light, the figures of "Cupid and Psyche" stand or move in shadowy interiors or beneath overcast skies. This characteristic is emphasized by the use of strong parallel lines for shading whether indoors or out, whether on the earth or in the deep realm of Proserpine, and it gives a consistent tone to the whole sequence that illustrates the tribulations through which the naive Psyche passed before she was granted a place among the gods of Olympus. Significantly, the two pictures of this final happy event are larger and brighter than their predecessors. The "vale beset with heavenly trees" is unshadowed and clear with a full diffusion of light.

The darkness and weight of the cuts came about when the light pencil drawings of Burne-Jones were engraved on the block by Morris and his friends. Here and there minor details were changed in the cutting. Independence on the part of the engraver was quite unusual at this time. Indeed, commercial-engravers took pride in their ability to reproduce every line of the artist's pen. To the extent that they "drew" rather than copied with the graver, Morris and his friends followed Bewick and preceded by some years the revival of wood engraving as an art.

<sup>4</sup>Joseph R. Dunlap, *The Book that Never Was* (New York, 1971), p. 13.

<sup>5</sup>William Michael Rossetti, comp., *Rossetti Papers, 1862-1870* (London, 1903), p.

Once the cutting was well under way, the partners wanted to see how the book would look when printed. A proposed layout exists on a small card at the Fitzwilliam Museum in which the upper left and lower right quarters of the page are occupied by rough sketches for illustrations, while horizontal lines below the former and above the latter indicate poetry. Trial pages were set up at the Chiswick Press both in Caslon type and in Basel, a type face derived from one used by Froben about 1500; but neither gave the desired result. "The effect was very disappointing," wrote Mackail. "The page, while not without a certain quality of distinction, suffers from technical defects, in both typography and wood-cuts, which are all the more emphasized by the high mark aimed at" (I, 190). Mention was made in the *Studio* for October, 1898 of "four folio pages with the illustrations running as a frieze across the top of the double columns of well-printed type on each page."<sup>6</sup> These trial pages, long thought to have been lost, came to light recently. The illustration (Plate 6) shows the use of Caslon headings, the text in Basel, and a characteristic Chiswick Press initial sharing the page with an engraved block which was later divided to provide two smaller pictures. The page measures nine and a half by fourteen and a half inches (the pages printed in Caslon are half an inch shorter), and when one realizes that the volume would have contained upwards of six hundred pages, the magnitude of the venture becomes evident. Had it been completed, the *Earthly Paradise* of the 1860's would have been as arresting a volume for its day as the Kelmescott Chaucer was in 1896. It would have owed next to nothing to contemporary publications but would have been one more skirmish in Morris' crusade against the taste of his time. Morris hoped to bring before the eyes of Victorian England something of the magnificence manifested by certain early printers as they worked in the manuscript tradition, but he saw that with the types and typography available in the 1860's he could not realize this hope, so the project was abandoned. "The beautiful editions of later days were already in his mind, but indeed the time was too early," wrote George Wardle, business manager of Morris and Co., who had engraved two of the blocks.<sup>7</sup> All that remained of the dream of "lots of pictures" in the spirit of the spacious works of the fifteenth century was a wood engraving printed on the title page of the trade edition of the *Earthly Paradise*. In it three female musicians, two holding lutes and one a rebec, stand in the classic pose of the Three Graces among flowers by a low wall. The combination of medieval figures and musical instruments in a classic pose symbolizes not only the contents of the *Earthly Paradise*, but also the treatment of the illustrations that were actually engraved (Plate 7A).

<sup>6</sup>"The Cupid and Psyche Frieze by Sir Edward Burne-Jones at No. 1 Palace Green," *Studio*, 15, No. 67 (October, 1898), 3.

<sup>7</sup>Brit. Mus., Add. Mss. 45350, p. 2. For the later history of this venture and the use of the blocks, now owned by the Society of Antiquaries of London, see Dunlap, above, and A. R. Duffy, Introduction to William Morris, *The Story of Cupid and Psyche* (London, 1974), I, 1-30.

Fitzwilliam Museum differs from the other in having the words of the first stanza printed in capitals—a custom that Morris used both in manuscripts and at the Kelmscott Press. In both trials, however, the thin contemporary modern type face is overwhelmed and utterly outclassed by the strong combination of heading, initial, and borders.

The trial pages, then, show in no uncertain terms the collision of two worlds: one in which little imagination guided the formation of the unspread type face, and another of abundant, unquenchable imagination inhabited by Morris and Burne-Jones. These pages vividly represent the battle waged by Morris and his companions against what they detested in the nineteenth century as the typographic incarnation of their crusade engaged the enemy on both flanks. It was as yet an affair of outposts; the advantage remained with the established forms; but two decades later the major engagement brought far different results.

Morris, however, was resourceful. When the typography of the seventies successfully resisted his efforts to decorate it, he retired to the outer area and spread a band of foliage across the front cover of the book (Plate 7B). This band, which encompasses the letters of the title, is two and a quarter inches wide and is made up of interlaced willow and myrtle, stamped in gold on dark green cloth. Its design is in the style of the borders intended for the interior, and its technique similar to that used in his second *Dwellers at Eyr* manuscript and others. This was not the first time Morris had taken an interest in cover designs. In 1870 his friend, the architect Philip Webb, covered the exterior of Morris' translation of the *Story of the Völsungs and Niblungs* with a striking design of vines, blossoms, birds, and some rabbits. About the same time, Aynor Vallance says, "Morris had cut from his designs a set of punches for the hand-tooling of leather bindings."<sup>10</sup> Though the punches were lost, the richly ornamental effect of their floral rows may be seen stamped in gold on the red leather binding of the *Rubáiyát* which Morris wrote out and illuminated for Georgie Burne-Jones in 1872.<sup>11</sup> The design is tighter than, say, that of his earlier Daisy wallpaper since elements of one line penetrate into the other, but it does not have the movement shown by Webb or by his own subsequent work.

## II

"I remember as a boy," said Morris toward the end of his life, "going into Canterbury Cathedral and thinking that the gates of heaven had been opened unto me, also when I first saw an illuminated manuscript. These

<sup>10</sup> Philip Webb, *William Morris: His Art, His Writings and His Public Life* (London, 1898), p. 374.  
<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, Add. Mss. 37832. See illustration in Vallance, facing p. 378.

Morris sensed at this time what few others appreciated, that adding illustrations or decoration to a text set in a weak type face brings incongruous results.<sup>8</sup> Coherent book design was not common, and good drawing did not improve typography. Only in the later years of the century were voices heard advocating, and attempts made to bring about, improvement in the appearance of the ordinary book in England. The book types available to Morris at this time were thin and without distinction, but, as the designers at the Rampant Lions Press found when they sought a type in which to print the Clover Hill edition of the *Story of Cupid and Psyche*, even modern type faces cannot sustain the weight and force of Morris' engraving as well as the type which he subsequently designed for the Kelmscott Press.

Their failure to produce an illustrated book did not daunt the friends. Though the *Earthy Paradise* was published in the style of the day in three volumes from 1868 to 1870, in 1871 they tried again. Morris wrote a long, intricate poem entitled *Love is Enough* for which he designed two initial letters and seven floral borders. Burne-Jones designed one border featuring putti, and at least one full-page illustration. As before, Morris took the engraving tools in hand and cut all of the foregoing except the illustration which was not put on wood until it was used in the Kelmscott Press edition. Whereas Burne-Jones had provided the original designs for the earlier project, both men contributed to this one. At this time Morris was deeply involved in his manuscript illumination, so it is understandable that flowers, fruit, and foliage, though strictly limited by the restraints of the wood block, should appear in the designs for the borders and the initials of the new endeavor. Mackail states that Morris planned to fill in these borders, in some copies, with colors and gilding "so that it would have been another illuminated book with the text printed, not written" (I, 286). Morris designed these borders and initials before the white-vine and acanthus period of his illuminating began about 1874; hence the growths in them are not heavy (Plate 8).

Once again, however, the imaginative designs of Burne-Jones and Morris collided with jejune current typography, as can be seen on two trial pages which have survived (Plate 9).<sup>9</sup> Both sheets were set up as rectos and contain the same text which is set off with the same initial and borders. Beneath page headings, a large initial L, entwined in a wreath, dominates the upper part of the poem, while the border of putti, and one made up of apples and leaves, flank the text area on the right and left respectively. The trial page at the

<sup>8</sup> A striking example of this point may be seen in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* (London, 1862) in which the strength of the frontispiece and wood-engraved title page, designed by her brother Dante Gabriel, is in direct conflict with the feeble typography of the succeeding pages.

<sup>9</sup> Fitzwilliam Museum, 1085; William Morris Gallery, K775.

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pleasures which I discovered for myself were stronger than anything else I have had in life."<sup>12</sup> A dozen years or so after his first attempts, Morris took up the practice of calligraphy and illumination as a Sunday occupation, and between the years 1869 and 1875 he turned out an astonishing amount of work for a man who was running a business, designing patterns, writing poetry, learning the Icelandic language and translating its sagas, as well as taking two long journeys to Iceland. He produced, according to Alfred Fairbank, "more than 1500 pages of careful writing in several styles of script, and a great deal of ornament."<sup>13</sup> His manuscripts comprise a few finished items and many incomplete ones, including fragments and trial pages. They range from single sheets to his longest sustained effort of 254 pages, and they demonstrate both his fertility of design and his sure use of color.

Before entering this creative period, however, Morris gave several indications of his interest in the forms of letters. Throughout the second half of the 1860's Morris was writing and rewriting the extensive poetical narratives of the *Earthly Paradise*. On the borders of these sheets he would occasionally sketch flowers, leaves, and other decorations while composing his lines, and sometimes he drew letters or wrote words which were clearly calligraphic in intention. Instances of this practice may be seen on his longhand manuscripts for the "Story of Rhodope" and "Bellerophon in Lycia."<sup>14</sup> On page six of the former, Morris sketched several capital letters within squares, set on leafy backgrounds. Though the probable date for the writing of "Rhodope," 1868, is early for Morris illumination, these initials look most remarkably like the kind of designing he was doing in color a year or so later. The margins of "Bellerophon" (1869) contain many letters and words which show a progression from sans serif lettering on pages fifty and fifty-one to a calligraphic cursive after page eighty with ascenders that curve to the right and slanting hairlines on certain lower case letters. The same progression may be seen in Morris' manuscripts.

The colophon to the *Dwellers at Eyr* states that the *Eyrbyggja Saga* was the first Icelandic saga Morris read with Magnússon when they began their collaboration in the autumn of 1868. He wrote his translation in longhand except for a few pages in the middle when he switched temporarily to an upright, non-cursive script which, if not entirely regular, shows Morris exercising care both in the formation of the letters and in the massed effect of them on a page. This is perhaps the first attempt by Morris to write a text in roman letters.

With one guarded exception,<sup>15</sup> all writers who mention Morris' decorated manuscripts consider *A Book of Verse*<sup>16</sup> to be his first one. This is because it is the first to bear a date. According to the colophon, Morris began it in February and completed it in August, 1870. A study of their lettering and decoration, however, suggests that the incomplete *Story of the Dwellers at Eyr* and the *Story of the Völsungs and Niblungs*,<sup>17</sup> also incomplete, preceded it. When Morris wrote it he could handle a flat-nib pen better than when he wrote the *Eyr* manuscript.

The *Dwellers at Eyr* (Plate 10) begins with a script that seems to have been developed partly from the lettering introduced into the longhand translation and partly from an acquaintance with the writing books of Arrighi and Tagliente which he is known to have owned. Though his ascenders bend to the right, and a few of the capitals resemble letters written by these sixteenth-century masters of the chancery script, he did not use the thicks and thins of calligraphic lettering. In the later pages an improved facility in the use of the pen becomes evident, and he initiates the habit of placing slanting hair lines at the base of the left hand strokes of h, k, m, and n. The opening words, "HERE BEGINS THE STORY OF THE DWELLERS AT EYR," are written in swash capitals. They look rather like the work of an enthusiastic beginner who indulges in a variety of curls and twists in his efforts to make the letters look fancy. Capital letters of this kind do not look well when brought together to form words, and these do not. Whatever they lack in style, however, they make up in verve. Between the title and the text are set two rows of unattached floral sprays—a "powdered" design—and the chapter heading in a different script that shows it was added later. Characteristically the text begins with a large initial, a golden K on a background of dark green reeds and red and white blossoms. At the head of each chapter Morris painted similar initials with floral backgrounds, and added marginal decorations beside them. Part way through the existing pages, headlines in a roman script with serifs and tall straight ascenders make their appearance. Though they were doubtless done after the text was written, they show that Morris could handle different letter forms concurrently.

Also undated, the *Story of the Völsungs and Niblungs* (Plate 11) seems to follow the *Dwellers at Eyr*. The lower case letters, with curved ascenders, diagonal hairlines, etc., are formed like those in the later pages of the latter manuscript. The capital letters, however, begin as *Eyr* forms, but eventually lose unnecessary curls and strokes. The margins of the first page are filled with rows of flowers amid which stand eight medieval maidens holding

<sup>15</sup>Fairbank, p. 58.

<sup>16</sup>Victoria and Albert Museum, L. 131-1953, Reserve Case AA. 17.

<sup>17</sup>Bodleian Library, MS. Eng. misc. c. 265 and MS. Eng. misc. d. 268.

<sup>12</sup>Wilfred Scawen Blunt, *My Diaries* (London, 1919), I, 283.

<sup>13</sup>"A Note on the Manuscript Work of William Morris," in *The Story of Kornak the Son of Ogmund*, trans. William Morris (London, 1970), p. 56.

<sup>14</sup>Brit. Mus., Add. Mss. 45304 and Add. Mss. 54301.

musical instruments. Unfortunately none of the flowers and only one of the figures was painted: a young woman in a long red robe who is wielding a pair of cymbals. The initial that begins the text is actually a miniature showing Sigurd sitting on the head of the slain Fafnir. It was painted by Morris' friend Charles Fairfax Murray. Though Morris wrote out about five-sixths of the saga and painted initials for a dozen chapters, he left a great deal of decoration uncolored, especially the stylized flowers formally arranged between the chapters.

Apparently Morris did not care about relating his decorations to the turbulence and grimness of the saga. He may have felt that "earth abides" despite dark passion and cruel tragedy. Be that as it may, it was on the first page of a few copies of the translation of the same saga, the one published in 1870 for which Philip Webb designed the cover, that Morris experimented with illuminating a printed page. He filled the margins with parallel lines of pink and blue flowers separated by tufts of grass; he framed the text with four poles in a manner reminiscent of some title-pages of the day; and he decorated the introductory initial with a slender plant. Here again the contrast is evident between the decoration of a book in which the artist is aware of, and controls, all elements involved, and decoration applied to a book where he does not.

Since all indications suggest that the manuscript of the *Story of the Vikings and Niblungs* was written in part or entirely in 1870, the reason that work on it ceased before more was done may be that he decided to present Georgiana Burne-Jones with an illuminated collection of his poems. He commenced work on *A Book of Verse* (Plate 12) in February, 1870 and completed it in August in time for her birthday. In addition to Morris' poetry and decoration, Burne-Jones painted one illustration, Fairfax Murray painted several, and George Wardle did all the many colored letters—a cooperative venture in the medieval tradition, though not in the medieval style. On the title page a mass of willow leaves and other greenery envelop the lettering, a miniature of Morris by Murray, and a group of female musicians—four this time. On the calligraphic pages, text, flowers, and foliage share a restrictive rectangle. Indeed, the lines of verse sometimes must burrow into the abundant growths. Various shades of green predominate, and though the mood of many of the verses is pensive or melancholy, the decoration is alive with spring freshness and color. On the first ten pages of the text, for which he used the script in which he had written the *Viking Saga*, Morris repeated the powdered ornamentation, but thereafter a fundamental change took place. The regular rows of separated sprays and blossoms are replaced by integrated growths that rise from the base line of the rectangle and fill the right side of it, often reaching into the space between the stanzas or joining the foliage already there. Henceforward, rooted, growing, expanding floral

growths became fundamental to the decoration of Morris' pages as, among others, the border designs for *Loye is Enough* and for the volumes of the Kelmscott Press bear witness. The same change may be observed in his designs for wallpapers.

Whether or not one may equate this change from disconnected and static to unified and "active" design with the reassurance Morris found in the friendship of Georgie Burne-Jones during the period when his wife's affair with Rossetti was at its height, it is certain that between 1870 and 1874 he wrote and illuminated four manuscripts expressly for her, two of which exceeded two hundred pages in length. The subtle expression of feeling in the rather flat title of his first present, *A Book of Verse*, is not apparent until one realizes that in the earliest version of Fitzgerald's translation of the *Rubáiyát*, a text that Morris subsequently illuminated for Georgie, the familiar stanza reads:

Here with a Loaf of Bread beneath the Bough,  
A Flask of Wine, a Book of Verse—and Thou  
Beside me singing in the Wilderness—  
And Wilderness is Paradise enow.

In the colophon to his next gift, a second *Story of the Dwellers at Eyr*,<sup>18</sup> Morris stated that he completed the writing and ornaments on April 9, 1871. The saga itself occupies 239 pages, while the prologue, epilogue, index of names, and so on, bring the total number of pages to 254. On the first page, massive ornamentation surrounds the text area, which is set off by a frame of blue poles. The text is introduced by six lines of handsome golden roman capital letters. Such a large work obviously could not be as continuously decorated as its predecessor, so Morris began each chapter with colored initials on flowery backgrounds accompanied by foliage and flowers rambling into the generous margins. He enclosed the songs sung by characters in the saga with foliage, and in a few of them one sees certain broad-leaved spiraling growths which appear to be the ancestors of the opulent twining acanthus that he used freely later on. In the lettering of the latter half of the work, Morris developed a twist at the top of the ascenders which gave them not only the curve to the right, but also a serif slanting to the left. An examination of the writing and the page numbers in this manuscript demonstrates that nearly half the text is made up of leaves written originally for the earlier version of the same saga. He discarded the pages written in the earliest script and used nearly a hundred that show the later version. He had to rewrite almost fifty pages, and these are done in the style of the pages that follow the borrowings. The *Eyr* manuscript is the longest one that Morris completed and is the outstanding one in his earlier style.

<sup>18</sup>Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery, 92'20.



later manuscripts Morris obscured his large initials with tangled vines. Each tale in *Three Icelandic Sagas* is provided with one, and at times the vines decorate the adjacent margins as well. Morris mentioned his interest in the white vine decoration in a letter of March 26, 1874, to Fairfax Murray, saying that he had "taken rather to the Italian work of about 1450 for a type" (IX, xxx, Plate IV). He did not say, though he may have known, that the fifteenth-century illuminators borrowed the vines from Italian manuscripts of the 1120's. Vines were used also by such printers as Ratdolt to decorate the borders of early printed books. Other manuscripts on which Morris worked in this period show that he tried calligraphic variations and some elaborate decorations. Sometimes he brought it off; sometimes the ornate quality can be distracting and a page will seem more contrived than alive. Perhaps Morris had some such thoughts about 1874 as he prepared to work on what proved to be his last two illuminated manuscripts. The *Three Icelandic Sagas*, nearly as long as the *Eyr* saga, clearly dominates this penultimate phase of Morris' work.

Morris' last phase could be called his classical phase. Heretofore his texts had been drawn chiefly from the sagas, and he used some of his own poetry as well. The *Rubádyát* was the main exception. His last two manuscripts, however, were in classical Latin, not translations. The *Odes* of Horace (1874, Plate 15) and the *Aeneids* of Virgil (1875, Plate VIII),<sup>21</sup> though different in script and decoration, show that Morris was exercising an increased control over his pen, and was seeking new forms in lettering, arrangement, and ornament. Unfortunately he completed neither one and never again applied himself seriously to this form of art.

The Horace is a small volume, about six and a half inches high, written in a small, condensed, pointed italic hand, with gold, silver, red, or blue capitals scattered through the text. Each ode, and there is almost one to a page, begins with a large initial entangled in vines which flood into the left margin and are surrounded by crowds of gold discs with rays around them—a medieval feature for classical poetry. The effect is strikingly rich. In this manuscript the acanthus as a decorative force is evident for the first time (Plate VII), especially where the blue and green leaves billow in the margin of the first page of *Liber* II, much as they do on the Merton Abbey tapestries—Flora, Pomona, and the Woodpecker—ten years later. Though not painted, they also surge about the margin of the first page of *Liber* III. Of the elaborate introductory pages to each of Horace's divisions of his *Odes* which were part of Morris' decorative scheme, only one was completed. In

<sup>21</sup> *Q. Horatii Flacci Carminum*, Bodleian Library, MS. Lat. class. e. 38; *P. Virgiliti Maronis Aeneidos*, Doheny Library, St. John's Seminary, Camarillo, California. The latter was finished by Graily Hewitt, Louise Powell, and Fairfax Murray. See *A Pre-Raphaelite Aeneid of Virgil. An Essay in Honor of the William Morris Centenary* 1934 by Anna Cox Brinton. Los Angeles, privately printed for Mrs. Doheny by Ward Ritchie.

Even with his borrowing, the work on the *Story of the Dwellers at Eyr* was an enormous undertaking for the leisure time of a busy man, but before he finished it he had begun work on another gift for Georgie, the *Rubádyát of Omar Khayyám* (Plates III and 13). Although it is a small volume of twenty-three pages, it was not finished until October, 1872. Among the undated manuscripts to which he may have given his attention during this time are several which show him developing a roman script which he had under control by the time he put pen to vellum for Georgie. He used Fitzgerald's first version, as mentioned above, which he took from a copy that Swinburne had given to Burne-Jones.<sup>19</sup> It is a small book, six inches in height, but it is one on which he lavished some of his richest ornamentation. The spring green of *A Book of Verse* has given way to the full tide of summer with its flowers and fruits clearly painted, bringing color to every page and aggressively taking precedence over the small roman letter with tall ascenders in which he wrote the text. May Morris termed it a jewel-like book. "It is a flower-garden turned into a book, wonderfully natural, wonderfully harmonious" (CW, IX, xxii). In three places Morris filled the margins of facing pages with quantities of willow and similar leafage in striking combinations of green and gold, inhabited by girls with musical instruments once again. At the end of the poem two larger figures holding a scroll bearing the words "TAMAM SHUD" began life as members of the frieze of angels designed by Morris for Jesus College Chapel, Cambridge. Like his first gift, this was a cooperative work: Burne-Jones and Fairfax Murray brought their talents to assist Morris with much of the figure work.

A second *Rubádyát*, this one for Burne-Jones, done in 1872-1873, has many similar features. The floral decoration is more restrained, though still plentiful, and there are no margins shining with golden willows. There are, however, six miniatures by Burne-Jones, most of them depicting affectionate couples, but otherwise having little to do with the poem. The roman script is more clearly written and its ascenders rise higher.

For his fourth gift, Morris brought together three Icelandic sagas into a manuscript of 240 pages (Plates V and 14).<sup>20</sup> Since he completed it in February, 1874, it is clear that he must have done most of the writing in 1873. The script is one that appears in some of his later manuscripts: an italic-related letter a good deal heavier than those he had used in previous manuscripts, in which the flat-nib pen emphasizes the thick strokes both in the lower case and in the idiosyncratic, sometimes awkward, capitals. In his

<sup>19</sup> Georgiana Burne-Jones, *Memorials of Sir Edward Burne-Jones* (London, 1906), II, 33. The manuscript is now Brit. Mus. Add. Ms. 37832.

<sup>20</sup> Fitzwilliam Museum, MS. 270.

addition to the acanthus border, the small letters of the ode that begins the second Book are overwhelmed by a large, vine-clad initial and seven lines of gold and silver capitals. Though the subsequent pages are heavily ornamented, the balance between the writing and the ornament is better preserved. Morris actually finished the calligraphy for the *Odes*, but finally gave up trying to decorate all 183 pages. Assistance from Burne-Jones and Fairfax Murray was restricted to drawing and painting some heads and little figures in quite a classical fashion for the margins of the four elaborate pages.

Plans for the great Virgil got under way in 1874 and work went on for more than a year. Morris wrote out nearly half of the text while Burne-Jones designed twelve large pictures, one for the opening of each Book, and a number of large initials to be ornamented by Morris. As Burne-Jones described the project late in 1874: "It is to be wonderful and put an end to printing."<sup>22</sup> Indeed, this undertaking in some ways is reminiscent of their cooperation on the illustrated *Earthly Paradise*, and again a masterpiece of the book art evaded them. For this work Morris appropriately used a roman script, but it differed from his previous romans in that the upper curves of a, m, n, and other letters are flatter, and the ascenders are in better proportion to the rest of the letter, which, in turn, is larger than in earlier manuscripts. The writing is open, uncrowded, and regular. It has a classic breadth and serenity, and it stands as his culminating achievement in this branch of the arts. Colored capitals resembling those in the *Odes* in form and hue sprinkle the text. The monumental appearance of the pages is preserved by keeping the text area intact, moving initials several lines high into the margins. These richly ornamented marginal initials differ, for the most part, from anything Morris had designed before. Some have a formal background, some have none, and some that have it wander out of it. Though vines have vanished and willow leaves are rare, the acanthus is noticeable, not only as an ornament, but at times an initial is made up entirely of acanthus leaves. One of the very large initials that has survived is a Q with a figure in it.

Before he ceased to work on the manuscript, Morris painted for the first page a picture Burne-Jones had designed: Aeneas with spear and shield talking with red-gowned Venus. It is quite clear from this picture that Burne-Jones had now turned from portraying the human figure normally to the long-necked, attenuated types that became his specialty. It is the only one he did for Morris in the period we have been surveying. Below the illustration, Morris lettered the opening lines of the *Aeneid* in roman capitals in a rectangle that calls to mind an inscribed tablet of ancient Rome, thus emphasizing classical details rather than mixing them with the medieval as he did in the *Odes* of Horace.

<sup>22</sup>Burne-Jones, II, 56.

Morris, then, was well launched on his second attempt to achieve a masterpiece of the book art when other concerns interfered. He wrote Fairfax Murray that his work on the Virgil manuscript was slowing down because he had begun a translation of the *Aeneid* (published November, 1875; Mackail, I, 319). Mackail, however, attributes its abandonment to Morris' "absorption in dyeing and dye-stuffs" (I, 318), which he was now studying in order to improve the colors for his firm's woven fabrics. Whatever the reason or reasons, we shall never know the direction in which his maturing craftsman-ship and his ability to contrive fresh ways of handling familiar elements might have led him. Understandably, he chose to spend his energies on art for use that could be duplicated; and by this art he is known. Even today the richness of his manuscript decoration and the extent of his creativity in this field of art are neither known nor appreciated. This is not surprising since each manuscript, whether complete or not, is unique, and reproductions of pages have been few and usually not in color.

The roots of Morris' manuscripts lie in the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the fruits of the earth. Whatever he took for his pages—script, decorative motifs, foliage, flowers—he made his own with overflowing originality. His decoration, to be sure, is far better than most of his calligraphy, and as we have seen, sometimes dominates it. Morris controlled all aspects of design and production, and with his own hands brought his ideas to reality without dependence on the designs of others unless he requested assistance. He used no gothic lettering in this period, but chose to work in the tradition of the humanist manuscript which, it is true, reached back to Rome for its capitals and to the Carolingian period for its lower-case letters. The devotion of Morris to beauty and his pleasure in creating it could scarcely be better illustrated than in the way, over half a dozen years, he spent many long hours of intense artistic creativity with pen and brush in endeavors that required exceptional concentration, clearness of eye, and steadiness of hand in the practice of an art made up of small elements, all for the delight of a few pairs of eyes.

Graily Hewitt, the eminent English scribe, who completed the text of Morris' *Aeneid* manuscript, said of Morris' work:

With the MSS. one is at once aware . . . of a grasp, a largeness, a lavishness and delight in them, as in every enterprise he undertook, for admiration of which there seem no words. Everything is on the grand scale, regardless of time, trouble or money to be spent on them. . . . These MSS. show little of the Gothic tendencies of later book work; but the Renaissance methods are fresh as all his work is fresh, with an originality which probed to the essential bottom of the business and then burst upwards again with irrepressible vitality.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup>"The Illuminated Manuscripts of William Morris," in *Three Papers on William Morris*, ed. Holbrook Jackson (London, 1934), pp. 3-4, 10.

It may not be entirely coincidental that the triumph in 1874-1875 of the vigorous white vine and the powerful spirals of acanthus over the slender willow and its companions parallels contemporary changes in Morris' attitudes and career. His shift from powdered and static to growing and moving floral design in 1870 has already been touched on. In 1873 he gained a measure of spiritual peace after his second visit to Iceland. In 1874 he was able to dispense with the increasingly unwelcome presence of Rossetti at Kelmscott Manor, and to undertake the distasteful but necessary task of turning Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Company into Morris and Company. In the next few years he began to lecture and to participate in public affairs. The uncertain man of the late 1860's who spent the firm's money on wine and books<sup>24</sup> had gained needed self-confidence and become the strong, decisive, influential man whose works were appreciated and whose words were listened to, whether approvingly or not. Whatever the value of this parallel, the artistic side of the change was visible to the public in three wallpapers: Powdered and Willow of 1874 (Plate 16) and Acanthus of 1875 (Plate 17); and it may be seen today in the library of the Oxford Union Society building, redecorated by Morris and Company in 1875, where long thin leaves are spread over the ceiling while a spiral of acanthus rises up the side of the slanting roof supports (Plate 18).

Until late in the 1880's when, with the encouragement of Emery Walker, Morris focused his attention again on the book arts, his time and energy were expended elsewhere. Except for the cover designs for the pamphlet, *Principles of Socialism* (1884), he showed no interest in the appearance of books, even when Henry Stevens, Kegan Paul, and others were advocating improvement. The latter even suggested in 1883 that Morris might design a new type face. In 1888, the autumn of Emery Walker's lecture for the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, Morris became involved with the typography of his *House of the Wolfings*, and in the following year with that of the *Roots of the Mountains*. He designed covers for a one volume edition of the *Earthly Paradise* (1890) and for the *Saga Library* (Vol. 1, 1891). The story of the Kelmscott Press takes over at this point. Its ancestry lies in the desire and attempts of Morris to create books, painted or printed, in the fine traditions of past masters, but in his own idiom which was neither medieval nor Victorian. Though he could not lavish on his printing the color and forms he gave his printed books, his vigor of design and abundance of invention are evident in both periods.

<sup>24</sup>Warrington Taylor, letter quoted in Henderson, p. 84.

All of Morris' works in art and literature, commerce and social action, were done with the purpose of bringing into the nineteenth century, for which he had little sympathy, his dream of a freer, friendlier, more humane society in a suitably furnished world. The place of books in this world may be seen in a statement he made, late in his life, in an unfinished essay on medieval manuscripts:

If I were asked to say what is at once the most important production of Art and the thing most to be longed for, I should answer, A beautiful House; and if I were further asked to name the production next in importance and the thing next to be longed for, I should answer, A beautiful Book. To enjoy good houses and good books in self-respect and decent comfort, seems to me to be the pleasurable end towards which all societies of human beings ought now to struggle.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup>William Morris, *Some Thoughts on the Ornamented MSS. of the Middle Ages* (New York, 1934), p. 1.