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Clothes from Nowhere: Costume as Social Symbol in the Work of William Morris

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Clothing has always played an important symbolic role in utopian and dystopian works ranging from Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), in which adults wear coarse, simple garments and leave jewellery and silks to children and criminals, to Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986), in which colour-coded uniforms indicate function and class. *News from Nowhere*, the utopian romance published by William Morris in 1891, is no exception. Thomas Carlyle, whose work Morris admired, wrote in *Sartor Resartus* (Tailor Retailored) that 'Society is founded on clothes' (159). In this work, Carlyle established costume as a legitimate metaphor for interpreting social structure. Morris's understanding of the symbolic significance of costume, coupled with his personal interest in the design and creation of textile, made clothing a natural vehicle to communicate his vision of a post-revolutionary society. According to Fiona MacCarthy, one of the things that first attracted Morris to Edward Burne-Jones, back in their Oxford days, was that 'they already spoke a shared language of clothes as social protest' (56). As a visual expression of Morris's artistic and political concerns, costume transcends its functional role in *News from Nowhere* to reinforce his expression of the dream of social revolution.

In *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome*, which he wrote with E. Belfort Bax, Morris defends the importance of human adornment: 'Though the question of costume may seem a petty one, it has much to do with the pleasure of life' (234). If the purpose of a Utopia is to show a 'good place' then it is no surprise that costume is part of the pleasure of the new socialist world of Nowhere. What exactly do the inhabitants of

requested; however, because Conrad began *Heart of Darkness* in 1898 (although the idea for the novel may have originated earlier during Conrad's own Congo trip in 1889-90), some link between the river journey in *News from Nowhere* and that in Conrad's work may be possible, if indeed, *News* was the book requested. In 1897, as Kelvin notes, Conrad began his friendship with Robert Cunningham-Graham, a follower of Morris (*Letters* 2:617).

Pertinent here is Morris's list of books which he considered to be more important than literature because 'they are in no sense the work of individuals, but have grown up from the very hearts of the people' (*Letters* 2:515). For further observations by Morris on art and individualism see 'Art under Plutocracy' (*CW* 23:166-9). Significantly, in keeping with its cooperative society, the most severe punishment in Nowhere is the isolation and silence of the traditional school ritual of being sent 'to Coventry' (189).

For an in-depth analysis of the role of bourgeois realism in *News*, see Laura Donaldson.

As well, Morris argues in the context of slavery and imperialism in several of his letters and lectures dealing with the 'Eastern Question'; for example, see *Letters* 1:330-1 and his 'War and Peace' lecture (*AWS* 2:53-52).

For an intriguing examination of the map as propaganda, see Geoff King, specially his chapter 7, 'The Imperialist Map: Beyond Materialism and Idealism' (137-66).

Morris's Utopia wear? The narrator, William Guest, describes their dress as 'somewhat between that of the ancient classical costume and the simpler forms of the fourteenth-century garments, though it was clearly not an imitation of either' (*News from Nowhere* 53). The bright beauty and practical simplicity of design are the antithesis of the Victorian fashion Morris considered 'so hideous' that it indicated his era's 'degradation in the scale of life' ('Makeshift', AWS 2:471). The costume of Morris's Utopia is a return to that of the heroes of his romances, *The House of the Wolfings* and *The Roots of the Mountains*, because the egalitarian ideals embodied by these tribal communities of Goths provided Morris with a model for a new society. Since Morris believed that apparel reflects attitudes, he insisted that the social revolution that transforms the political and economic structures of a society must also change the costume of its people.

Morris's choice of utopian costume might be dismissed merely as a reflection of his personal taste and his affection for all things medieval. According to Philip Henderson, 'Morris still lived the most important part of his life in the Middle Ages, and gave the impression of having strayed into the nineteenth century by accident' (xxi). His attraction to the period apparently began in childhood with a fondness for a suit of armour, a prop that allowed him to participate in the world of medieval splendour he had discovered in the novels of Sir Walter Scott. This fancy for the Middle Ages was reinforced by his exposure to Gothic architecture in Essex, and became a developed aesthetic through his association with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood who displayed an almost mystical devotion to this era in history. Yet, it was not until after his conversion to socialism in 1883 that this personal vision took on added significance because it gave him a social framework in which to place his aesthetic ideals.

However, as Peter Stansky among others points out, Morris was not 'foolishly romantic about the past' (124), nor was his admiration for the Middle Ages unqualified. He recognized the oppression and superstition that darkened this period in history, but this did not deter him from admiring its positive characteristics including costume that combined beauty with practicality as a reflection of popular art. The hope he found in socialism gave the past he admired new meaning and purpose. The apparel he adored became a concrete symbol of the political doctrine he espoused and the ideal lifestyle he hoped to bring about. In both his artistic and political activities, Morris committed himself to the revolutionary side of the socialist movement in which

the influence of Marx, 'the author of the most thorough criticism of the capitalistic system of production,' and Engels, 'his life-long friend' and collaborator, was deeply felt (Morris and Bax 230-1). Engels closes *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* with a quotation from Lewis H. Morgan: the new society that follows revolution 'will be a revival, in a higher form, of the liberty, equality, and fraternity of the ancient gentes' (237). A close look at the clothing in *News from Nowhere* reveals how costume becomes symbolic of these three hopes of revolution: liberty, equality, and fraternity.

Morris believed the end of oppression and poverty that was to follow a socialist revolution would bring with it many liberties. The most basic of these liberties that Morris was to claim as the right of all the people was a healthy body. In fact, as Naomi Jacobs points out, Morris goes a 'remarkable' step further in his 1884 lecture 'How We Live and How We Might Live' to include beauty as a part of health (26): 'Yes, and therewithal to be well-formed, straight-limbed, strongly knit, expressive of countenance - to be, in a word, beautiful - that also I claim' (CW 23:17). Indeed it would be difficult to find a more healthy, wholesome, handsome group than the characters who populate his socialist romances. However, Morris carefully includes glimpses of those suffering under an economic system based on tyranny and greed to ensure the full impact of the contrast. Guest returns from his journey to the future to meet a Victorian factory worker, 'his eyes dull and bleared; his body bent, his calves thin and spindly, his feet dragging and limping' (*News* 227-8). The development of industry may have brought prosperity to England in the eyes of the world, but it brought wretchedness to many in the working class, creating what Carlyle called a 'Communion of Drudges' (*Sartor Resartus* 322). Guest describes the costume of the pathetic old man he meets upon returning to his own time as 'a mixture of dirt and rags long over-familiar to me' (228). In the socialist Utopia envisioned by Morris, the working man exchanges poverty for wealth, in the original sense of well-being, illness and premature aging for a healthy body, and ugly rags for beautiful attire.

No longer forced to sell themselves to survive as they did under the old capitalist system, workers can use their new-found leisure towards the creation of art, including the art of self-adornment. Bright colours, beautiful embroidery, and delicately handcrafted girdles and buckles grace the new costume. This loveliness comes as a welcome contrast to the ugliness of the Victorian period in which, according to Morris,

'the general colour of the crowd is a dirty sooty black-brown-drab with a few spots of discordant and ill-chosen bright hues' ('Makeshift,' AWS 2:471). In a post-revolutionary society, everyone would be free from both poverty and ugliness. Shabby and vulgar goods will no longer be produced in the hope that someone will want them. In the future, 'the tyranny of convention will be abolished; reason and a sense of pleasure will rule' (Morris and Bax 234).

The most obvious victim of the tyranny of convention in costume was the Victorian woman, subjected as she was to a frightening combination of figure-shaping contraptions and overwhelming ornamentation. Most Victorian men, on the other hand, wore 'some version of the plain, dark, uniform three-piece suit' (Steele 52), a costume that marked its wearer as professional, intelligent, and practical, in contrast to the female fashion which suggested vanity, frivolity, and fragility. Elsewhere, Morris comments that in all 'bad periods (as in the present), an extreme difference is made between the garments of the sexes' (Morris and Bax 234). This discrepancy introduces the question of equality or, as the Victorians called it, the Woman Question.

Guest is thrilled to find that the female inhabitants of Nowhere are 'clothed like women, not upholstered like arm-chairs' (53). Their loose kirtles and flowing gowns, unlike the corsets, crinolines, and bustles of Victorian fashion, do not inhibit activity and comfort. The women of Nowhere are free to row a boat, carve masonry, and participate in haymaking. In Morris's historical romances, the women don male garments to facilitate the even more strenuous activities of hunting and war. In *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome*, Morris differentiates between bad and good costume: bad costume always 'either muffles up or caricatures the body; whereas good costume at once veils and indicates it' (234). Female Victorian attire that accentuated the bosom, falsified the slenderness of the waist, and shrouded the legs in yards of petticoats was at once prudish and lascivious, a tension that kept women in a desired state of submission as sexual objects. With the abandonment of private property that was to follow the social revolution, the idea of woman as the property of man was also to be abolished. She would no longer be his toy to be delicately kept and prettily dressed.

However, equality in costume implies neither a confusion of gender nor a denial of sexuality. In fact, eroticism is very much a part of Nowhere, as Jan Marsh, Ady Mineo, and Michael Holzman point out. According to Holzman, Ellen is dressed lightly not because of poverty

but 'for aesthetic and, one suspects, erotic reasons' ('Pleasures' 34). Ellen tells Guest that in another age she would be 'wrecked and wasted in one way or another, either by penury or luxury' (223), but now she is free to live in the fullness of her beauty as an equal citizen. In the new society, sensuous appreciation is not eradicated, but rather enhanced by becoming a privilege of both sexes. Just as Dick can compliment Clara for the skin 'white as privet' under her gown (163), Clara can boldly admire 'his splendid form at its best amidst the rhymed strokes of the scythes' (170). Both men and women are encouraged to dress beautifully, and both are allowed to admire the opposite sex without shame.

Equality of the sexes, though important to Morris, pales in comparison with the necessary equality of function that is to be the very foundation of a new classless society. As John Reed remarks in *Victorian Conventions*, 'Fashion was only one part, but an important one in a complicated code of distinction between the classes' (334), a point which William Marshall reiterates: 'As the task of identifying oneself with a class grew in difficulty, the attempts that many made to accomplish it increased in intensity, and clothes became a fully developed social symbol' (94-5). Guest assumes that the waterman he meets must be some 'specially manly and refined young gentleman' (47) and the dustman must 'be at least a senator' (60) because of the magnificence of their attire. He discovers that they do dress more humbly when their jobs require it, in accordance with a rhythm of energy and rest, but in Nowhere, where all are equal, dress becomes an expression of taste rather than class. Boffin does receive some good-natured teasing for dressing so 'showily,' with 'as much gold' on him as a baron of the Middle Ages' (60), but his choice is respected. Old Hammond's choice of threadbare blue serge, Morris's own habitual costume, is similarly accepted. Since all are equal, individuals wear whatever they choose, and the new society encourages them to wear that which is most beautiful. Even the haymakers in the field are dressed 'gaily and with plenty of adornment' (185) in contrast to the 'wretched skimpy print gowns' of the haymakers Guest remembers from his own time (169).

Morris believed that the equality between sexes and classes of the post-revolutionary society would extend beyond political borders to create equality among nations. Because people would no longer be coerced into artificial groups by the pressure of commercial competition on an international scale, they would be free to develop

their own lifestyle. Guest is surprised to discover from Old Hammond that the new political system serves to enhance rather than destroy variety, 'men and women varying in looks as well as in habits of thought; the costume far more various than in the commercial period' (117). No longer threatened by tyranny or competition, citizens may allow costume to become, once again, a matter of taste rather than coercion.

Fraternity, the final component of the threefold hope of revolution, was for Morris the ultimate goal of communism, but one that could not be achieved without liberty and equality. In his writing, costume comes to symbolize a fraternity between the individual and the natural world, the communal past, and other members of the human community. Where is the difficulty, Guest is asked, in accepting a world where men and women are free, happy, and 'most commonly beautiful of body also, and surrounded by beautiful things of their own fashioning and a nature bettered and not worsened by contact with mankind?' (159). He can hardly believe that Nowhere is the England he once knew, purged and revitalized. The workshop has become a garden; people have finally learned to live in harmony with nature. A recurring symbol of this harmony is the presence of flowers. Almost without exception, the women of Nowhere appear carrying bouquets or wearing flowers in their hair or on their figure. A group of gaily clad haymakers makes the meadow look 'like a gigantic tulip-bed' (178). The seasons are often the topic of conversation and the people are clearly in tune with nature's cycles. Guest sees a young woman dressed in green 'in honour of the season' (63) and Clara and Dick dress in brightly embroidered silks so as not to make the 'the bright day and the flowers feel ashamed of themselves' (168). Members of this new society are pagans in the original sense of the word with a 'delight in the life of the world [and an] intense and overweening love of the very skin and surface of the earth' (158).

Everywhere he turns, Guest discovers visual delights, what he once described as 'forms and intricacies that do not necessarily imitate nature, but in which the hand of the craftsman is guided to work in the way that she does, till the web, the cup, or knife look as natural, nay as lovely, as the green field, the river bank, or the mountain flint' ('Lesser Arts,' CW 22:5). The desire for harmony with nature that is so central to his utopian vision permeates all of Morris's creations from book design to wallpaper. He believed 'everything made by man's hands has a form, which must be either beautiful or ugly; beautiful if

it is in accord with Nature, and helps her; ugly if it is discordant with Nature, and thwarts her' (CW 22:4). Art in alliance with nature, Morris argues, awakens us to the 'eventfulness of form in those things which we are always looking at' (CW 22:4-5), things we might otherwise be tempted to take for granted or abuse. This awareness informs Morris's significant contribution to environmental thought as explored by several scholars including Paddy O'Sullivan, who contends that Morris is 'one of our greatest ecological thinkers' ('Struggle' 5), Dennis Bartels, who argues that 'the need for remediation of human-induced environmental degradation,' which reaches its fullest expression in *News from Nowhere*, 'was a constant theme in the writings of William Morris' (39), and Nicholas Frankel, who relates Morris's ecological perspective specifically to his understanding of design:

In essence, *News from Nowhere* argues, the heightened environmental and moral consciousness that would constitute the humane mainstream of a new social order – at present, merely a revolutionary dream – could be brought about by a greater attention to art through the decoration of everyday life. *News from Nowhere* is by no means an isolated phenomenon, and represents the culmination of some thirty-four years' work in decorative design. (66)

By way of example, Frankel draws attention to 'the ecological world view driving the book's textual features' (79), most notably the floral borders that both 'lean heavily on "live" forms commonly found in nature' and 'actualize and interpenetrate the novel's "text"' (79). In the frontispiece illustration for the Kelmscott edition of *News From Nowhere*, showing a well-built house surrounded by gardens, trees, and birds all framed by a floral border, we catch a glimpse of how culture and nature might harmoniously coexist. In the frontispiece illustration for the Kelmscott edition of *The Wood Beyond the World* (fig. 8.1), in which the bare arms and feet of a woman, her loosely flowing hair and simple gown, and the charm of her verdant adornment all seem to merge with and echo a garden-like setting and floral border, we begin to see how this 'full sympathy between the works of man and the land they were made for' ('Lesser Arts,' CW 22:17) might apply to the realm of costume. Here is the Maid in a paradisaical 'fair place' full of fruit trees, walking upon a greensward that is 'both thick and much flowery' (Wood 192) and adorned, like the women of Nowhere, beautifully and simply with Nature's loveliness:

The Maid arose and said: Now shall the Queen array herself, & seem like a very goddess. Then she fell to work, while Walter looked on; and she made a garland for her head of eglantine where the roses were the fairest; & with mingled flowers of the summer she wreathed her middle about, and let the garland of them hang down to below her knees and knots of the flowers she made fast to the skirts of her coat, and did them for arm-rings about her arms, and for anklets and sandals for her feet. (*Wood* 192-3)

Walter is understandably worried by the ephemeral nature of her embellishment: 'But as to this flowery array of thine, in a few hours it shall be all faded & nought' (194), but because the maid is 'wise in hidden lore' (195) she is able to magically keep all 'as fresh and bright as if it were still growing on its own roots' (194-5).

In the penultimate chapter of *The Wood Beyond the World*, two neighbours debate the merits of the maid's garments. One argues that despite her fairness she is 'somewhat worse clad than simply. She is in her smock, man, and were it not for the balusters, I deem ye should see her barefoot. What is amiss with her?' (249). The other responds 'as to her raiment, I see of her that she is clad in white & wreathed with roses, but that the flesh of her is so wholly pure & sweet that it maketh all her attire but a part of her body, and halloweth it, so that it hath the semblance of gems' (250). Like the tanned barefoot young women of Nowhere who, Guest realizes, are 'very lightly clad ... from choice, not from poverty' (*News* 173), the maid lives in full fraternity with the natural world. She is, as Clara says, 'dressed deliciously for this beautiful weather' (177). In striking contrast, the costume of a Victorian woman (fig. 8.2) consisted of cage-like undergarments, voluminous frills and flounces, and a shawl, bonnet, and parasol designed to protect and separate her from the natural environment as one 'brought up in affected ignorance of natural facts, reared in an atmosphere of mingled prudery and prurience' (*News* 96).

By the end of *The Wood Beyond the World*, the 'wizardry' that allowed the Maid to maintain the freshness of her floral adornment has departed from her (258), but that magic is replaced by art. 'Clad she was now, as when she fled from the Wood beyond the World, in a short white coat alone, with bare feet and naked arms; but the said coat was now embroidered with imagery of blossoms in silk and gold' (258). Having travelled the two-way street between nature and art that exquisitely joins humans with the environment they inhabit,

we return to Dick's belt buckle: 'of damascened steel beautifully wrought' (*News* 47) and Bob's surcoat of 'light green with a golden spray embroidered on the breast' (51). An art that honours nature's 'eternal recurrence of lovely changes' ('Lesser Arts,' *CW* 22:10) while defying time, argues Morris, 'will make our streets as beautiful as the woods, as elevating as the mountain-side: all the works of man that we live amongst and handle will be in harmony with nature, will be reasonable and beautiful' (*CW* 22:27).

Our two great teachers in these matters 'must be Nature and History' ('Lesser Arts,' *CW* 22:15). Fraternity with nature implies a fraternity with the past. Men and women must go to the roots of the mountains to discover their heritage. *News from Nowhere* reveals that the *significant* human history is not that of the rise and fall of governments, but rather the childhood of the world, because, as Morris points out, 'it is the child-like part of us that produces works of imagination' (*News* 132) and reveals our capacity for play and for hope. This fabric of fairy tale lends romance to daily life. Ellen, the 'fairy' of Nowhere (179), warns against being 'too careless of the history of the past' (214) because the awareness that darkness may return must govern the way we live in the light. Therefore, history must be approached with understanding. Just as the garments of Nowhere are inspired by ancient classical costume and those of the fourteenth-century without being 'an imitation of either' (53), the past is to be muse and not master. 'Let us therefore study it wisely; be taught by it, kindled by it: all the while, determining not to imitate or repeat it' ('Lesser Arts,' *CW* 22:16).

Morris is careful to stress that equality and fraternity do not signify a monotonous sameness. The inhabitants of Nowhere would have been surprised by the largely similar and sombre dress of the workers under China's Maoist regime. 'Variety of life,' wrote Morris in his review of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, 'is as much an aim of a true Communism as equality of condition, and that nothing but an union of these two will bring about real freedom' (*AWS* 2:507). Old Hammond assures Guest that variety is encouraged in Nowhere: 'You see in matters which are merely personal which do not affect the welfare of community - how a man shall dress ... and so forth - there can be no difference of opinion, and everybody does as he pleases' (118). Initially, it is not easy for Guest to accept the brilliant kaleidoscope of costume that he encounters in Nowhere because his sensibilities have been dulled by the 'sombre greyness, or rather

rownness of the nineteenth century' (164). Slowly, he begins to see the appropriateness of the beautiful variety. Clara explains that the citizens of Nowhere do not stop at merely making clothes comfortable. 'Is there anything wrong, she asks, 'in liking to see the coverings of our bodies beautiful like our bodies are?' (165).

Sameness in dress is not only a sign of the tyranny of fashion but also a symbol of the authority that once oppressed the people. Hammond remembers the blue-coated policemen and the red-coated soldiers who committed violence against unarmed crowds in Trafalgar Square (108). Under the old political system a uniform, a scrap of cloth of a certain colour, empowered men to wound and kill, but Morris dreamed of a time when people would no longer have to tremble before the 'helmeted flunkies of the rich' ('London in a State of Siege,' 206). In Utopia, 'the tatters and rags of superannuated worn out Symbols' described in *Sartor Resartus* (280) have been discarded, and the old symbols of division and tyranny are a thing of the past. Fraternity is the ultimate aim of communism, but it does not mean uniting to oppress, or denying individuality, but rather a joining of different elements into a strong, new, creative whole. The costume that Morris envisioned for a post-revolutionary world is an expression of the triple hope of the revolution: freedom from the harsh rags of drudgery; equality between sexes, classes, and nations; and finally, fraternity with the natural world, the mythic past, and the human community.

As an artist with an integrated and holistic vision, Morris was actively involved in fields that ranged from decorative design to social design. His efforts to transform aesthetic ideals into reality are reflected not only in his creation of a design company but in his encouragement of the costume often called Pre-Raphaelite or Aesthetic Dress as an alternative to the Victorian fashion he detested. Though adopted by a small circle of artists, aesthetes, and health buffs, this loose-fitting apparel was largely ignored because, as one fashion historian expressed it, 'Women were in no mood to progress thus backward' (Steele 152). Morris would have seen the irony in that choice of words; he did not wish to regress, but to progress into a future that incorporated the best of the past. He believed that 'the world cannot go back on its footsteps, and that men will develop swiftly both bodily and mentally in the new Society' ('Society of the Future' 189).

Morris's choice of costume in *News from Nowhere* is more than an expression of his personal nostalgia for a bygone era of romance. The

costume functions as a constructive symbol that embodies the 'manners' of a new society, which Morris defined as 'the art of living worthily' ('Lesser Arts,' CW 22:22). Though filled with detail, the utopian vision Morris offers is not 'descriptive' but 'constructive,' to use the terms of Northrop Frye ('Varieties' 117). He is not merely describing 'something that does not exist,' but is offering a hypothetical construction of the literary imagination, not just sharing a dream, but 'communicating a vision' ('Varieties' 117). *News From Nowhere* is not a blueprint but an imaginative rendering based on the belief that the external aspects of a society are a reflection of internal attitudes. Morris longed for a world in which all 'miserable makeshifts,' including 'rotten raiment which does not shelter,' would be replaced by that which was 'necessary and decent,' appealing and uncorrupted. 'No one would make plush breeches when there were no flunkies to wear them, nor would anybody waste his time over making oleomargarine when no one was compelled to abstain from real butter' ('Useful Work versus Useless Toil,' CW 23:103-4;118). By renewing the vision of liberty, equality, and fraternity, he wished to restore the hope.

According to Morris, when 'it's nobody's business to see to it or mend it,' people will persist in 'making the world hideous' (my emphasis, 'Lesser Arts,' CW 23:24, 25). 'What too are all poets and moral teachers but a species of metaphorical tailors?' asks Carlyle in *Sartor Resartus* (325). Because he dreamed of 'mending' the world he loved, Morris worked long and hard to promote popular art, equality of condition, and variety of life. Hampered by the overwhelming difficulties of being a socialist visionary in a capitalist reality, he experienced limited success in his ventures. It was only through his imagination that he was fully able to re-tailor the world.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 8.1 Edward Burne-Jones. Untitled drawing of Maid in the Wood, with border by Morris. *The Wood Beyond the World*. Hammersmith: Kelmscott Press, 1894. Frontispiece.

Fig. 8.2 Anon. 'Dress and the Lady.' *Punch* 23 August 1856: 73.