

WRITING
ON THE IMAGE:
READING
WILLIAM MORRIS

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with whom they wanted. The community would have an interest in ensuring the well-being of children, but not in ensuring that women remain locked in unhappy relationships (*Letters* 2:584-5).

The most controversial aspect of Morris's solution to the woman question was his desire to counter what he saw as the destructive attempts of some feminists to emancipate women from motherhood. Morris did not discuss this demand in any depth but he clearly objected to the idea of liberation that lay at its heart. In Morris's view, material change held the key to emancipation: in socialism, he argued, women would have sufficient resources to ensure that both they and their children flourished. With this economic security, women would then be free honestly to explore their sexuality. Admittedly, Morris's economic theory was utopian and he failed to devise any way of realizing this aim apart from suggesting the need for revolution. Nevertheless, his warning that the reaction against motherhood might lead feminists to take a wrong turn was surely prophetic. Morris's fear was that women, frustrated by the constraints of bourgeois society, would find a solution to their problems in the relaxation of marriage laws and the opening up of employment opportunities. Leaving home for work, they would find a kind of equality, but one that left the social and economic fabric of society largely unchanged. The worst possible outcome was that women would end up facing a double burden of paid and domestic work whilst still competing for the favours of men. Suggesting that his feminist opponents had been brought up in an atmosphere of mingled prudery and prurience' (*News from Nowhere* 96), Morris hinted that the rejection of maternal roles would leave women trapped in a system which encouraged promiscuity without legal or social restraint. Morris's alternative vision of the future was romantic, but is it any worse than the existing models that have left 'working' women largely responsible for the care of children while emphasizing the importance of sex as the primary means of empowerment?

The Reception of

William Morris's *Beowulf*

Chris Jones

First published in 1895 by the Kilmessock Press, William Morris's translation of the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf* has had a chequered reception among critics and scholars over the course of the last century.¹ This essay investigates the varied and extreme reactions the poem has elicited since its publication.

'Few people,' Fiona MacCarthy cautions us, 'have had a good word to say for Morris's "Beowulf"' (649). In 1975, Jack Lindsay politely called it 'one of [Morris's] least successful productions' (365); in 1967, Paul Thompson condemned it as 'the worst thing [Morris] ever wrote,' 'incomprehensible,' and 'gibberish' (163). More recently, Michael Alexander, another translator of *Beowulf*, confesses his perverse fondness for one of Morris's lines concerning the hero's fight with Grendel's mother: 'Then she sat on the hall-guest and tugg'd out her sax' ('Sheen on the Mere' 81-2, quoting Morris, CW 10:225). MacCarthy herself adds that *The Tale of Beowulf* is 'Morris at his most garrulous and loose,' concluding that his translation is 'an unexpected failure' (649). Chief among the criticisms are that Morris does not so much translate as transliterate, making the diction obscure and the syntax archaic and affected.

Yet the work was not always judged harshly. An early review by Theodore Watts made great claims for Morris's translation, calling it 'an entire success' and suggesting that the archaisms 'bring his readers far nearer to the original than any later form could have done' (181). When Chauncey Tinker published a critical bibliography of all the translations of *Beowulf* up to 1903, he censured Morris's version for its

strange diction and 'avalanche of archaisms' (108), but admired the accuracy of the translation and metre, concluding that 'Morris's verse is the best of all the "imitative" measures' (109). In 1908, Stopford Brooke floridly praised Morris's versions of *Beowulf*, *The Aeneid*, and *The Odyssey* for the traces of 'Morris's soul flitting through the translations like a dim scent of forgotten leaves' (*Four Poets* 197). However precious this remark may seem, it is insightful: the artist's personality is present in his translation of another's work, but not overbearingly so.

Brooke had made his own translations of Anglo-Saxon poetry for his *History of Early English Literature* (1892), a study read by Ezra Pound in 1904 and 1905 at Hamilton College, New York (Fred Robinson, 'Might of the North' 207). In 1912 Pound published a translation of the Anglo-Saxon 'Seafarer', which was ridiculed by early twentieth-century Anglo-Saxonists. Pound's translation is characterized by many for the same equivocal traits as Morris's translation: archaic inversions ('Bitter breast-cares have I abided' and 'Did for my games the gannet's clamour', *Poems* 64); revived inflexions on the end of verbs ('moaneth' and 'cometh', 65); and translations of Anglo-Saxon words with virtually identical modern English homophones ('reckon' for Anglo-Saxon *wreacan*, 'tell' or 'relate'; and 'mood' for Anglo-Saxon *mod*, despite the word having undergone a considerable semantic shift from its original meaning of 'heart', 'mind', or 'spirit', 64).²

That Morris was one of Pound's first poetic loves is well documented: the poet H.D. recalled how Pound recited 'The Haystack in the Floods' to her with great passion (Doolittle 23). Fred Robinson takes it for granted that, as a translator of Anglo-Saxon, 'Morris was certainly a major influence on Pound' ('Ezra Pound' 272). The similarity of technique between Pound and Morris is illustrated by the following two passages (which do not translate the same lines of Anglo-Saxon):

My lord deems to me this dead life
On loan and land, I believe not
That any earth-weal eternal standeth
Save there be somewhat calamitous
That, ere a man's tide go, turn it to twain.
Disease or oldness or sword-hate
Beats out the breath from doom-gripped body.

Good men did get to them; now war-death hath gotten,

Life-bale the fearful, each man and every
Of my folk; e'en of them who forwent the life:
The hall-joy had they seen. No man to wear sword
I own, none to brighten the beaker beplated,
The dear drink-wat; the doughty have sought to else-whither.

I deliberately delay citing the line references for these two passages, encouraging you first to guess their authorship. Certainly they share much in flavour, mood, and *mod*. The slightly longer line of the second passage may lead you to guess that it is from Morris's hand. It is indeed his translation of 'the lay of the last survivor' from *The Tale of Beowulf* (CW 10:246-7), while the first is from Pound's translation of 'The Seafarer' (lines 65-71).

Pound's translation appeared at the start of his career, and several critics have seen his 'Seafarer' as a formative experiment, important not only to Pound's later style, but to the whole of twentieth-century poetry. The poet Thom Gunn finds in Pound's translation an embryonic rhythmic form, which he considers the most significant technical development in the history of free verse (98). Morris's *Beowulf*, on the other hand, was finished only a year before his death and, despite Robert Boenig's intriguing suggestion that work on the poem may have influenced the lexis of his last romances (11), it is tempting to see the work as a dead-end. Pound's stock as a translator of Anglo-Saxon remains high, while Morris's reputation continues to slump in the doldrums, despite the best efforts of a minority of Morris scholars like Boenig.³

Is the comparatively poor reputation of *The Tale of Beowulf* deserved? Is Morris's version doomed to remain buried, like the hoard in Beowulf's barrow, 'gold in the grit', 'useless to men-folk'? (Morris's translation of phrases from lines 3167-8.) If we can recover something of the philological context in which the translation was produced then we may better understand why it seems so strange and unsatisfactory to many later readers.

Morris's translation appears at the end of a century during which *Beowulf* scholarship had steadily grown in sophistication from a state of near non-existence. An edition of the text did not exist until Thorkelins, published in Copenhagen in 1815, which contained errors of transcription. In 1894, the year before Morris's translation was published, his collaborator, A.J. Wyatt, had produced a thorough and respected edition of the poem, and there had been several other editions

published in England in the interim: (notably by Kemble in 1833 and Thorpe in 1855). By the end of the nineteenth century, British scholars were starting to wrest supremacy of the subject away from German philologists. R. W. Chambers's bibliography of *Beowulf* criticism shows that little secondary literature in English had been published before the appearance of Morris's translation (395–413). Furthermore, Morris was only the ninth full translation into Modern English. Only four of the previous versions were verse (Wackerpath, 1849; Lumsden, 1881; Garnett, 1882; Hall, 1892), the first two in inappropriate rhyming balladic metres. None of the previous translations had been by a major poet (although in 1830, Tennyson had tried his hand at ten lines of the poem, *Poems* 1235) and Morris complained to Wyatt that 'no one can appreciate [the poem] in the present versions' (*Letters* 3:436).

Clearly the comparatively late rise of interest in *Beowulf* in Britain is an important part of the context for Morris's translation. Scholars were beginning to compare the poem to Homer, yet it was still largely unread in the country which had produced it. The imperative of national pride meant there was a need for a serious verse translation of England's earliest epic, as part of the appropriation of the poem from Germanic interests. Morris himself had publicly championed the poem on at least two occasions. In his lectures to the Birmingham and Midland Institute in 1884, he had said that among the songs of the ancient Germanic peoples 'towers majestic the noble poem of Beowulf, unsurpassed for simplicity and strength by any poem of our later tongue' ('Gothic Revival' 57). Addressing the Hammersmith Branch of the Socialist League two years later, he called it 'worthy of a great people' ('Early England' 163). That he intended his translation to reach a wide audience can also be inferred from the absence of line numbers referring to the original poem and by the addition of titles to the numbered fits and marginal summaries of the poem's argument. One is not expected to read the translation in conjunction with a scholarly edition of the text: Morris wished to popularize the poem beyond the confines of the academy.

While English interest in *Beowulf* was slowly gaining momentum, a considerable amount of work had been done on other Anglo-Saxon poems, and even more into the Anglo-Saxon language. In 1880 Tennyson had published his own patriotic version of the Anglo-Saxon poem *The Battle of Brunanburh* (Alexander, 'Tennyson's "Brunanburh"' 151). Morris too had demonstrated a wider awareness of Anglo-Saxon before he and Wyatt began to plan their translation of *Beowulf* in

1892. The 'Early England' lecture of 1886 shows that Morris was already familiar with the lyrics of the Exeter Book, at least in the translation of Charles Elton, whose *The Origins of English History* had been published in London in 1882. In particular Morris marks for special praise the Anglo-Saxon elegy 'The Ruin'. The undoing of the buildings of Roman Britain would appeal to the author of *News from Nowhere*, who entertains the un-building of British cities. The title of 'The Wanderers' prologue to *The Earthly Paradise* recalls another poem from the Exeter Book, 'The Wanderer', which, like Morris's prologue, deals with an old speaker who has gained wisdom through bitter experience, who insists he must not unburden his grief in speech, yet does so, and who hopes to find a paradise (in this case heavenly, rather than 'earthly') at the end of his seafaring.

Morris's interest in Anglo-Saxon poetry clearly pre-dated the *Beowulf* project, but Wyatt accelerated his education in the subject considerably. Wyatt was heir to the great philological enterprise of the nineteenth century, and the general bent of the expert advice he undoubtedly passed on to Morris about diction may be sought in the work of the philologists active during the second half of the century. Many philologists during this period shared a concern for 'native' vocabulary. Purity of an Anglo-Saxon vocabulary, or 'word-hoard,' was frequently advanced as one of the highest goals to which a writer of English could aspire. Apart from nationalistic reasons, strong appeals were made to linguistic science in its support. Richard Trench's immensely popular *On the Study of Words* is typical. (Published in 1851 and into its 26th edition by 1899, it was familiar to a young Morris who encouraged Cornell Price to write a review of it for the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine*, *Letters* 1:13.) Chief among Trench's themes is the Emersonian view that individual words are fossil poems (Emerson 215): when a word's meaning has evolved and changed over time, the 'original' meaning is supposed to be richer and more pregnant; closer in its relationship to the world of referents. Hence, making the etymology of words more visible brings these fossilized poems back to life: 'in words are beautiful thoughts and images, the imagination and the feeling of past ages, of men long since in their graves, of men whose very names have perished' (Trench 5). It follows that the preservation and reactivation of earlier lexis will preserve and reactivate the thoughts and imagination of our ancestors. Trench often seemed to be writing with poets in mind: 'the old and the familiar will often become new in the poet's hands ... he will enrich his native tongue with words

unknown and non-existent before – non-existent, that is, save in their elements' (202). As Trench argued, the use of the etymological roots of 1 new words to coin new words is desirable poetic practice.

Trench's radical opinions soon became the norm. George Marsh expressed similar views in his *Lectures on the English Language* (1859). He repeatedly makes the claim that words of Anglo-Saxon origin are more forceful, fit, and honest than those derived from Latin and Latin-based languages. Etymological knowledge of words derived from Anglo-Saxon reactivates powerful metaphorical associations. He claims to detect an increase in the proportion of 'native' vocabulary in nineteenth-century writers and finds this an encouraging trend. Furthermore, Marsh suggests that even obsolete Anglo-Saxon words are intelligible to modern, native speakers:

Deep in the recesses of our being, beneath even the reach of consciousness, or at least of objective self-inspection, there lies a certain sensibility to the organic laws of our mother-tongue, and to the primary significance of its vocabulary, which tells us when obsolete, unfamiliar words are fitly used, and the logical power of interpreting words by the context acts with the greatest swiftness and certainty when it is brought to bear on the material of our native speech. The popular mind shrinks from new words, as from aliens not yet rightfully entitled to a place in our community, while antiquated and half-forgotten native vocables, like trusty friends returning after an absence so long that their features are but dimly remembered, are welcomed with double warmth, when once their history and their worth are brought back to our recollection. (176)

Such 'nativist', pro-Anglo-Saxon views became predominant in nineteenth-century discourse on language. Morris's 1873 letter to Frederick Furnivall in support of Furnivall's application for the post of Secretary to the Royal Academy demonstrates Morris's strong connections with this philological movement (*Letters* 1:190).⁴ Implicit in these philologists' arguments is that modern, non-Saxon English is in a state of decadence and degeneracy. Morris concurred, for he complained that the English of eighteenth-century poetry is too romantic in terms of the Romance languages and in too high a register to nourish a living literature ('Gothic Revival' 69–70).

It is little wonder that a Victorian poet, steeped in medievalism and the cult of the ancient North, and advised by a philologically minded

scholar, would choose to translate the Anglo-Saxon *earn* not as 'uncle' but as 'eme'; *herian* not as 'praise' but as 'hery'; and, indeed, *seax* not as 'knife' but as 'sax'. Morris is simply part of that movement which thought, like Robert Bridges commending the archaisms in Pound's early poems, that 'we'll get 'em all back!' (as Pound suggests in 'Canto 80'). Morris's style of translation was entirely vindicated by Victorian linguistics: a 'purity' of diction made his words more 'forceful and fit' (George Marsh 105–6, 127) and the use of the oldest forms of words lent his vocabulary a more authoritative purchase on the things it describes.

Two major barriers to our appreciation of this method have interposed themselves since 1895. Throughout the nineteenth-century the search for a language of undecayed, radiantly significant words by investigation of etymological roots was a respectable scholarly pursuit. However, in the twentieth century, Saussurean linguistics undermined the idea that even very old words might have some atavistic bond to their referents. A more specific assault on Morris's nativist methods came in 1940 with J.R.R. Tolkien's critique of translating old words by their modern cognates, a tactic guided by what he termed 'the etymological fallacy' (56). Quite simply, Tolkien argued that such a method ignores the blunt fact of historical linguistic change. 'Mood' no longer means what it once did: to pretend otherwise would require an end to the passage of time.

To a linguist, such etymologizing may be based on fallacious fancy, but the method rarely results in such spectacular failures as the rendering of *seax* (knife) as 'sax'. Morris's choices can be both intelligent and effective. Having defeated Grendel, Beowulf is entertained with the other members of the Danish court by a bard who sings of the terrible blood-feud between the Danes and the Frisians, which culminated in the fight at Finnsburg. The poem tells us that *wig* ('war' or 'battle') takes away almost all of the Frisian thanes (lines 1080–1). Morris translates *wig* as 'war-tide,' presumably expanding the term in order to reproduce the alliterative link between both halves of the line, which was necessary in Anglo-Saxon prosody ('Of world's bliss. The war-tide took all men away,' CW 10:211). Here, 'tide' appeals to its archaic (Anglo-Saxon) sense of 'time': war-time takes men's lives. Yet in a poem so dominated by the sea and seafaring it is hard not to read 'tide' in its more recent sense too. Moreover, 'war-tide' begins to take on an apt ambiguity when we consider that bloody destruction is visited on the Danes and Frisians by the ship-borne arrival of the

former into the lands of the latter, and that the ensuing slaughter is ultimately protracted in part because the winter seas are too inhospitable for the Danes to return. The temporal duration of war may take lives, but the sea itself brings death: the Danes arrive on a tide of war and are prevented from retreating by a contrary tide of war.

In the same anecdote the singer tells how Hnaef, the dead Danish leader, is placed on a funeral pyre. The Anglo-Saxon word is *bael*, normally translated as 'pyre' or 'fire' (the sense of a stack of material survives in a 'bale of hay'). Here, and elsewhere in the poem (the dragon's fire is also referred to as 'bale'), Morris merely modernizes the spelling, translating the two lines as 'Of the bold Here-Scyldings / All yare on the bale was the best battle-warrior' (CW 10:212). The *OED* lists three 'bales': the funeral pyre comes under the second entry, noting it is now '*Obs.* exc. in WMORRIS.' This sense might be comprehended from the context, and a dictionary would clarify the matter, but it is difficult for a modern reader not to consider the relevance of the more current meaning of 'bale,' which the *OED* gives first: that of 'evil,' 'misery,' or 'grief' (as in 'baleful'). This fire (and that of the dragon) may be funeral, but it is also woeful and grievous. Morris's choice of word here suggests a rich range of appropriate meanings.

Earlier in the poem, when Healfdene's sons are mentioned, we are told that 'four bairns are forth to him rined' (CW 10:180). Again, Morris has simply updated the spelling: of Anglo-Saxon *gerimed* ('told,' 'reckoned,' or 'counted'), but it is not too fanciful to note that Healfdene's sons are, metaphorically, rhymes of their father, being similar to him, but not identical. Morris uses the etymological fallacy to create resonances between early and late meanings present in a single 'native' root.

However, we should not presume that Morris always pursued the most 'pure' Germanic form of a word in dogmatic fashion. Polysyllabic, Latin-derived words are not entirely absent from his translation. When Beowulf and his Geatish men first land in Denmark, the road they take to Heorot Hall is said to be *stan-fah* (line 320 of the original). *Fah* has a wide range of meanings, including 'stained,' 'spotted,' 'dappled,' 'shining,' and 'gleaming.' It is difficult to know the precise sense in which the street is *stan-fah*. 'Paved with stone' is one possible solution, but the road may consist of many different kinds of stone, or it could be that the stones variously catch the sun and glint to the eye. Morris boldly opens the fifth fit of the poem with 'Stone-diverse the

street was' (CW 10:189). This compound adjective is far from *stan-fah* etymologically and will not satisfy every reader, but it does plumb unequivocally for a definite interpretation of the problematic word, it is highly imaginative and creative in tackling the Anglo-Saxon, and it produces a memorable phrase. While it is true that words with Romance origins are rare in Morris's *Beowulf*, the inclusion of such exceptions as 'diverse' reminds the reader that Morris is not inflexible in following the nativist linguistic program. Much of the pleasure in reading the work derives from a peculiar kind of tension in anticipating those words which are permitted into the text and those which are kept out.

In terms of its rhythm, Morris's accentual verse is frequently stately, dignified, and entirely appropriate to the original poem. There are lapses, normally due to the introduction of redundant syllables, and these can give an impression of the 'loose and garrulous' verse of which MacCarthy complains. Note, for instance, the expansiveness of Morris's 'There then did they lay him, the lord well beloved' (CW 10:180), with its double adverbial opening and redundant auxiliary verb and pronoun, none of which are licensed by the sparse *aleton þa lefona þeoden* ('then they laid down the dear prince,' line 34). Such a proliferation of unstressed syllables lightens the line and gives a false impression of the sonority of *Beowulf*. Fortunately, much of the verse rises above this tendency. Particularly effective is the manner in which Morris places prepositional particles before a verb, often compounded with the verb so that they are accorded secondary or even full stress: 'who the keel high up-bulded,' 'then was the mood all up-stirred,' 'so uprose the roar,' 'out then spake Beowulf' (CW 10:186, 195, 202, 234). This weighting of particles serves to make the verse more terse: particles which are normally unstressed ('up' and 'out' in the examples above) assume stronger degrees of stress, slowing down the movement of the verse and ensuring that rhythmic periods tend to end more dramatically with strongly stressed syllables ('stirred' and 'roar' for example). It is a pity that later translators of *Beowulf* have not borrowed this technique from Morris.

Syntactically, Morris's translation contains as many archaisms as its lexis. The majority of these are subject and verb inversions and arguably 'poetic' rather than deliberately archaizing. More deviant structures are also used though: the verb-complement-subject order of a line like 'Hung upon hawsers the wide-fathom'd ship' (CW 10:187), has the flavour of the original syntax, despite actually being a

relatively uncommon structure in Anglo-Saxon. 'Stone-diverse the street was' is a more authentic Anglo-Saxon construction and is representative of the kind of grammatical patterns Morris employs.

These 'irregularities' may cause contemporary readers some difficulties, but *Beowulf*, preserved in a tenth-century manuscript, was recorded in language which was already archaic at the time it was written down. (Wyatt believed the composition of the poem to date from about 700 AD [see 266]), and it is impossible to know how remote or difficult it was to an average, tenth-century West Saxon. Arguably, Morris's translation preserves a similar distance between the language of the reader's world and the language of the poem's world. Certainly it preserves some of the linguistic difference that exists between the poem and its modern student, even if such a student is equipped with a working knowledge of Anglo-Saxon. After all, few read *Beowulf* without difficulty; even scholars of the poem have to cope with obscure passages, *hapax legomena*, and variant transcriptions of barely legible sections of the manuscript. A translation which forces a reader to puzzle over some odd syntax or occasionally consult a dictionary is arguably more faithful to the experience of reading the original poem than a translation which smooths out these knots of interpretation. The crucial issue is whether one practice of translation is more desirable than another, or whether several forms of the art can coexist for several purposes.

Clearly then, there is a tension at the heart of Morris's *Beowulf* and the aims which motivated its production. On the one hand, it is written in fulfilment of the desire for a pure and poetically forceful Saxonized diction, part of the project to reinvent a language undiluted by the passage of time. Pulling against this intention is Morris's other purpose: to popularize the earliest national epic with a suitable verse translation which respects the original poem, yet is still readable. To readers a century later, these two aims may seem irreconcilable. Yet in the late nineteenth century there was good reason for supposing that the educated literate classes were increasingly likely to read Anglo-Saxon and be able to interpret Anglo-Saxon-derived words. The position of Anglo-Saxon language and literature on the education syllabus was much debated. George Marsh advocated the teaching of Anglo-Saxon over and above Latin and Greek. James Murray did teach Anglo-Saxon to his schoolchildren at Hawick Academy, long before he took over the editorship of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Murray 54). Throughout the latter years of the century, establishment figures at Oxford

University feared that the new English School, with its compulsory Old English component, would come to replace the study of the classics (Palmer 77, 83, 87, and 92). Justifiably, Morris might have felt that the poetry-reading public would become more familiar with the linguistic resources he uses in *The Tale of Beowulf* as this trend continued (rather as Milton could count on his seventeenth-century audience to appreciate his Latin puns).

Yet the trend did not continue. Partly for ideological reasons there is less sympathy today for a 'pure' Anglo-Saxon diction: the phrase carries distasteful associations of the more brutal agendas in twentieth-century Europe. Moreover, contemporary readers expect much less from literary translations, or at least something much more conservative. A taste for faithful, if unoriginal, prose versions of foreign poems has been cultivated by a diet of the Penguin Classics series and by an educational establishment which enshrined accurate rendering of semantic content under examination conditions as a test of a student's understanding. A century after Morris it is commonly thought that a translator's style and personality should interfere as little as possible in the transmission of the original text to the reader, even though this is logically impossible. Stoppford Brooke's detection of the soul of Morris 'fitting through [his] translations like a dim scent of forgotten leaves' would not be understood today as praise: a translation such as Morris's is simply too ambitious in its aim, regardless of how one judges its execution. Notwithstanding this, Fiona McCarthy's outright dismissal of *The Tale of Beowulf* as an 'unexpected failure' needs modification on two counts. I have demonstrated that Morris's translation is consistent with the main thrusts of philological theory in his time. Furthermore, although some passages may be disappointing, in many instances Morris translates sympathetically and with much skill.

Future translators should find the reception of Morris's *Tale of Beowulf* instructive. The Whitbread Book of the Year award for 1999 was presented to Seamus Heaney for his version of *Beowulf*. Eric Anderson, the chairman of the judges, was reported as saying 'this was a master poet breathing life into a great work of art which has only been known to a small number of academics. He has retrieved a buried golden treasure' (*The Guardian*, 26 January 2000: 1). Such a pronouncement can be compared fairly with Theodore Watts's review of Morris's translation, insisting 'the only modern poet' capable of this difficult task was 'the author of *Sigurd*, the one great epic of the nineteenth

century' (181). Arguably, for all its failings, Morris's *Beowulf* is truer to the original than Heaney's *Beowulf*. Yet Heaney's smooth, idiomatic translation is the translation our age seems to require, whereas the late nineteenth century wanted a translation such as Morris's. How will the reception of Heaney's *Beowulf* compare with that of Morris's a century from now?

NOTES

- 1 Throughout, the translation is referred to as Morris's work. Strictly speaking it is a collaborative effort, undertaken with the scholar A.J. Wyatt, although there is good evidence that both men regarded the creative input as Morris's solely. I wish to thank William Whitta and David Latham for generous advice on earlier drafts of this chapter.
- 2 Morris translated in the same way. See *The Tale of Beowulf* (CW 10:190), where *modþrace* (line 385) is rendered as 'mood-daring'.
- 3 Robert Boenig mounts a partial defence of Morris's *Beowulf*, arguing that, although faulty, the poem is 'the best translation available' (12). P.M. Tilling also mounts a partial defence of Morris's methods, although I am not convinced by his argument that understanding Morris's respect for the original text makes his translation less difficult to read. I thank David Latham for drawing my attention to these two articles.
- 4 Furnivall's role was central. He was the first editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, founder of the Early English Text Society, and the advocate of a purer English in which 'fore-words' (a 'native' equivalent of the Latinate 'prefaces') were to front English books.

15
Morris's Compromises:

On Victorian Editorial Theory and the

Kelmscott Chaucer

Charles LaPorte

A great deal of twentieth-century William Morris scholarship is devoted to celebrating the Kelmscott *Chaucer* as the closest semblance of the medieval manuscript found in printed books since printed books began. This essay proposes to reexamine Morris's difficult position as editor-in-chief of the Chaucer project and, more specifically, to call into question the singleness of purpose we have come to associate with Morris in this role. I begin with the illustrator Edward Burne-Jones's famous commendation of the work to his daughter: 'I want particularly to draw your attention to the fact that there is no preface to Chaucer, and no introduction, and no essay on his position as a poet, and no notes, and no glossary; so that all is prepared for you to enjoy him thoroughly' (qtd in Duncan Robinson 35). This remark is often cited (and correctly, I think) as the most succinct formulation of Burne-Jones's and Morris's shared belief that an illuminated Chaucer in what today would be known as 'clear-text' format (that is, without preface, introduction, notes, glossary, or marginalia) is not only truer to the medieval manuscript tradition than a critical edition, but also truer to the poet's goal of entertaining readers and listeners. Conceivably, Chaucer would have agreed, as he writes in his *Legend of Good Women*: 'For myn entent is, or I fro yow fare, / The naked text in English to declare' (Morris, *Works of Chaucer* 417).

Yet by 1896, the difficulty of using Victorian editorial theory to found a revival of centuries-old bookmaking processes was much greater than has generally been recognized. Surely Morris's choice of 'clear-text' pages is the most straightforward way to revive an older