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The Creation of the Kelmscott *Chaucer*

Richard Titlebaum

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS appeared together in European Romanticism. The wit of Byron shared a spirit that animated the spleen of Baudelaire. Delacroix and Turner are both considered romantics, though one painted huge somber historical canvases and the other landscapes iridescent with light. But however dead an issue the quarrels over the definitions of Romanticism may be, one common attitude identifies as spiritual brethren figures as dissimilar as Wagner and Rossetti, Wackenroder and Schlegel, Carlyle and Ruskin: an infatuation with the Middle Ages, often accompanied by the conviction that many of the ills of modern times are an inheritance from the Renaissance. It is because William Morris was not just a printer but the most versatile artist of his time, whose myriad-minded accomplishments owed their inspiration above all to the Middle Ages, that the Kelmscott *Chaucer* may be viewed as the culmination of one whole aspect of the English Gothic Revival. Painter, poet, designer of wallpaper, inventor of the Morris chair, printer, novelist, publicist, translator, socialist — all of these occupations diverted the life of one man and arose from one consistent point of view. From his earliest days Morris breathed in deeply the spirit of the Middle Ages. "I remember," he comments, "as a boy going into Canterbury Cathedral and thinking that the gates of heaven had been opened to me, also when I first saw an illuminated manuscript. These first pleasures which I discovered for myself were stronger than anything else I have had in life!"¹ The Kelmscott *Chaucer*, described by Burne-Jones as a "pocket cathedral," is the artistic crown of a career whose initial vision of the Middle Ages took place, ironically enough, in the same Canterbury Cathedral celebrated five centuries earlier by Chaucer.

Like John Baskerville, William Morris turned to printing in his fifties. But behind the creation of the Kelmscott Press a whole life had been dedicated to resurrecting the medieval ideal of craft. Morris had spent his hours at dye-vats, drawing boards, looms, glass factories,

¹ Wilfred Scawen Blunt, *My Diaries* (New York: Knopf, 1921), I, 229.

and cabinet makers' workshops. He had soiled his hands at the workbench as a calligrapher, designer, illuminator, draughtsman, and wood engraver. He had mastered the arts of stained glass and fresco. He had manufactured wallpaper, figured silks, printed cotton, carpets, embroideries, tapestries, and furniture. No man practiced more faithfully and diligently Carlyle's Gospel of Work. Indeed, no man in his day was more qualified to revive the moribund art of book manufacturing.

To describe the art as moribund is in no way an understatement. Very often while reading old copies of Dickens or Swift one grows appalled by the poor quality of print — and appalled even more by the danger of entering into an advanced state of myopia. The best old edition of Dryden, for example, the eighteen-volume set edited by Sir Walter Scott in 1808, is a monument to scholarship, but it lacks even the rudiments of superior craftsmanship. Before Morris set up the Kelmscott Press, England's accomplishments in the art of making fine books were meager — excluding, of course, Baskerville's epoch-making Virgil published in 1757. The best editions of Caxton are embarrassing when placed next to those published by Aldus Manutius. With the exception of a few isolated editions produced by private presses, such as Longman's *The Diary of Lady Willoughby*, which followed on the heels of Whittingham's revival in 1844 of Caslon's font, or Dr. C. H. O. Daniel's books made in Worcester College at Oxford, Scott's Dryden — elegant, legible, gratifying to the eye, to be sure — represents perhaps the highest point of artistry to which the commercial publisher was willing to rise. Before the establishment of the Kelmscott Press, men like Joseph Masters, an Anglo-Catholic publisher of religious books, had attempted to revive the decadent art. Basle roman, a type based on the early sixteenth-century type of Johann Froben, was cut in 1854 for the Chiswick Press where Morris published *The House of the Wolfings*. It is a pre-Garamond roman, a Venetian rather than an old face, such as was in use in Basle and Lyons down to about 1550. Before the founding of the Kelmscott Press it is a unique attempt to copy an early type.

What sparked the Kelmscott Press was a lecture in 1888 on printing given by Emery Walker at the first Arts and Crafts Exhibition at the New Gallery on Regent Street in London. Before that date Morris, despite his endeavor to revive the handicrafts, had shown only a slight interest in book publishing. To be sure between 1870 and 1875 he had

designed a series of illuminated manuscripts; and he himself possessed a library of incunabula which included choice items such as Vincentius Bellovacensis' *Speculum Naturale* (Strassburg, ca. 1481) and Isidorus Hispalensis' *Etymologiae* (Strassburg, Johann Mentelin, 1473). But the slides accompanying Walker's lecture must have persuaded him that he could remedy the deplorable state of book publishing. Discussing the need for fine printing with Emery Walker, Morris in no way envisioned the grandiose enterprise which was to become the Kelmscott Press. As was typical of him, what started as an experiment, "as a little typographical adventure," culminated in that magnum opus of English books, the Kelmscott *Chaucer*. The speed with which Morris worked is remarkable. Walker's lecture occurred in November. By December of the following year Morris was already designing type, as well as supervising at the Chiswick Press the printing of *The House of the Wolfings*, *The Roots of the Mountain*, and *The Gumlang Saga*. In December of 1890 the last punches of the "Golden" type were cut, and in January of 1891 the trial pages of Morris' romance, *Glittering Plain*, the first Kelmscott book, were finished. During its seven years of existence the press published about eight books a year. The variety is truly impressive, ranging from Tennyson's *Maud*, an octavo bound in limp vellum, to a quarto edition of Swinburne's *Atalanta in Calydon*, from a three-volume edition of Caxton's translation of Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend*, bound in half holland, to Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*, a stunning octavo in limp vellum. And in each instance Morris' hope was to produce not just a book but a harmonious and beautiful object.

Morris' writings on typography, many of which were originally given as lectures before the Bibliographical Society and the Society of Art, reveal a profound knowledge of the history of printing. "One after another," recalls his daughter May,

the old printers passed before us, one after another their splendid pages shone out in the dark room — such things as Boccaccio's *De Claris Mulieribus* by John Zainer of Ulm, with its woodcuts which my father thought could not be excelled for romantic and dramatic force, Schoeffer's *Psalter* of 1457, a Jenson of 1470, a Sweynheim and Pannartz *Livy* (Rome 1469) — books which moved him to repeat more than once that "the first printed books were the best ever done — the first and the last of fine printing."²

² May Morris, "Introduction" to "Note by William Morris on his Aims in Founding the Kelmscott Press," in William Morris, *Collected Works* (London and New York: Longmans, Green, 1910-15), XV, xv.

Morris turned for his models not to Caslon or Baskerville, but to early editions of Jenson and Zainer. His books are a modern variation on the early printed books of Northern Europe, as they in turn were but the mechanical variations of the manuscripts that preceded the invention of movable type. "The Middle Ages," comments Morris, "brought calligraphy to perfection, and it was natural therefore that the forms of printed letters should follow more or less closely those of the written character . . ." ³

Morris, of course, knew that in the early Renaissance humanists such as Niccolò Niccoli and Poggio Bracciolini had revived the ninth-century Caroline minuscule of Cluny and Verona, all the while believing it was more truly "roman" than the book-hand prevalent in the manuscripts of their time. Thus developed the humanist script, as distinguished from the reigning scripts which the Renaissance scholars called "Gothic" or barbarous. A tradition arose that manuscripts of the Latin classics, poetry, and belles-lettres should be written in the humanist script, while books of theology, law, medicine, and logic should appear in the Gothic character. The influence of humanists like Vespasiano di Bisticci, the illustrious book dealer, was so great that a tendency arose to modify the angularities of the Gothic forms to something approaching the grace of the humanist letters. Though the first Gothic type appeared in Venice in 1473, its gradual disappearance signalled the final triumph of the humanists and the New Learning. In the eyes of a Poliziano or a Pico, a Cicero in black-letter Gothic was evidence only of barbaric and vulgar taste. Had Morris been a genuine child of the Middle Ages, instead of a Victorian revivalist, his books would not even have been printed. They would have been written in black-letter Gothic. "In Italy, from about 1400 onward," he writes, "book illustrations became common, going hand-in-hand with the degradation of printing." ⁴ The paradox of the Kelmscott Press is that printing was a craft born in the early Renaissance, the period which for Morris was the root of much modern discontent; and he was therefore bound to treat book production as an extension of manuscript writing.

William Butler Yeats called the Kelmscott *Chaucer* "the most beautiful book in the world." Finished finally on 2 June 1896, the folio was

³ William Morris, "Printing," in May Morris, *William Morris, Artist, Writer, Socialist* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1936), I, 252.

⁴ William Morris, "The Woodcuts of Gothic Books," *ibid.*, I, 325.

in the process of creation for five years and in actual printing for a year and nine months. Yet even while making his *Chaucer*, Morris was his usual busy self, engaged in his metrical translation of *The Heimskringla*, and supervising its production for the Saga Library. What delayed the completion of the book for so long were not Morris' activities, but Burne-Jones's constant elaborations of the designs. When the painter had finally received his own copy, he wrote 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 glossary; so that all is prepared for you to enjoy him thoroughly."⁵ The *Chaucer* is a monument not only to the ideals of the Kelmscott Press and the Gothic Revival, but to Morris' life-long love of Chaucer, whom he had first read as an undergraduate with Burne-Jones at Oxford in 1855. In his writings, especially in *The Earthly Paradise* and in *The Life and Death of Jason*, Morris had already addressed Chaucer as:

And thou, O Master! — Yea, my Master still,
 Whatever feet have scaled Parnassus' hill,
 Since like thy measures, clear and sweet and strong,
 Thames' stream scarce fettered drave the dace along
 Unto the bastioned bridge, his only chain —
 O Master, pardon me, if yet in vain
 Thou art my Master, and I fail to bring
 Before men's eyes the image of the thing
 My heart is filled with: thou whose dreamy eyes
 Beheld the flush to Cressid's cheeks arise,
 When Troilus rode up the praising street . . .⁶

The Victorian Gothic of the Kelmscott *Chaucer* may not be the Gothic of the age of Richard II; but outside poetry itself the Kelmscott *Chaucer* is probably the most eloquent testimony of devotion made by one major writer to another in the whole history of English literature.

"The only work of art which surpasses a complete Medieval book," says Morris, "is a complete Medieval building."⁷ Whereas Pugin and Scott, Morris' predecessors in the Gothic Revival, had the advantage

⁵ J. W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris* (London, New York, and Bombay: Longmans, Green, 1899), II, 325.

⁶ William Morris, "The Life and Death of Jason," bk. xvii, in his *Collected Works* (London and New York: Longmans, Green, 1910-15), II, 259.

⁷ William Morris, *op. cit.* (note 4 above), I, 321.

of a living tradition of architecture behind them, Morris faced problems in creating his book which would have intimidated a man of lesser vitality. First, there was the paper. Morris insisted on an unmixed linen rag. After much searching, he at last chose a Bolognese model of about 1473, which was made for him by Joseph Batchelor. Four hundred and twenty-five copies were printed on paper which even to this day is as crisp to the touch as a brand-new bank note. In addition to these, thirteen copies on vellum were manufactured from a vellum processed from carefully chosen skins of calves. Morris encountered immense difficulties obtaining these skins; for when they are more than six weeks old, they are of no value and must be sent to the sand pit eventually to be made into gloves and boots. Forty-eight copies of the book, including two on vellum, were bound at the Doves Bindery in full pigskin. A total of only four hundred and thirty-eight copies of the *Kelmscott Chaucer* exist in the world. Fortunate is the man who owns an original. He possesses a work of art as harmonious as a medieval cathedral.

One of the triumphs of the *Kelmscott Chaucer* is its typography. During the seven years the press existed Morris made use of three different types. The "Golden," a fourteen-point roman, based on Jenson's famous square-blocked type (Fig. 1), appears in books like *The Golden Legend*. Before creating the "Golden," Emery Walker made enlarged photographs of Aretino's *Historia del popolo Fiorentino*, and Morris then had the type cut (Fig. 2). He himself actually coarsened the Jenson "Golden" by giving it a black-letter twist of strength and color, underlining the fact that he did not want to imitate Jenson but only to work in his spirit. By reviving Jenson's type, he wanted to show that a Victorian was capable of producing a work of art as beautiful as any created in the fifteenth century. What is more relevant as regards the *Chaucer*, however, is the "Troy" type, a great primer or eighteen point, which was first used in *The Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye* (Fig. 3). Heavily influenced by the Gothic type of Peter Schoeffer of Mainz, Günther Zainer of Augsburg, and Anthony Koburger of Nuremberg, the "Troy" type proved much too large, and Morris eventually reduced it to a Pica or twelve point, the type used in the *Chaucer*. The "Troy" and "Chaucer" types are what students of the subject call Fere-humanisticas, one of the three traditional kinds of Gothic letters used in the fifteenth century. By the thirteenth century, Gothic, of course, had already become a distinct style. The medieval scribes, such as Chaucer's "owne scriveyn" Adam, using a

Meminit quippe illius i protagora illū pro periādro cōsti-
tuens. Dicebat autē nō ex uerbis res: sed ex rebus uerba esse
inquirenda: neq; propter uerba res perfici: sed rerū gratia uer-
ba consumari. Defunctus est autē ætatis anno. lxxvii.

Epimenides.

Epimenides ut ait Theopompus: aliq; complures
patrē habuit Phæstium: alii Dosiadē: alii Agefar-
chum tradūt Cretensis genere: gnoso uico oriū-
dus effigē immutasse perhibetur. Missus enim aliqñ a pa-
tre ut ouem rure deferret: meridiano tēpore diuertit ex iti-
nere: atq; i spelunca ubi se iactarat: quinquaginta & septē
annos perpetuo sopore acquieuit. Dehinc somno excitatus
quæsiuit ouē: putabat se enim parū obdormisse: quam cū
nō iuenisset: in agrū reuertit. Cum uero rerū omniū faciem
inmutatā cerneret: agrūq; in alterius ius cōcessisse: stupore
attonitus: & cunctabūdus rediit in oppidū: ibi cū domum
suā uellet ingredi: quis nā esset interrogatus: uixq; agnitus
a iuniore fratre iam uetulo omnē ex illo didicit rei ueritatē.
Potro illius fama per græciam uolante deo esse carissimus
existimatus est. Vnde & Atheniēses cum aliquādo peste la-
borarent: responso a Pythia accepto urbem expiari oportere:
Niciam nizerati filiū misere epimenidemq; ex creta ad-
uocarūt: profectus autē olympiade. xxvii. lustrauit urbem
pestēq; repressit hoc modo. Sumpsit oues nigro & candido
uelere: duxitq; in anū pagū: atq; inde quo uellēt abire per-
misit: his qui illas sequebātur mandās ubi cūq; illæ accubu-
issent: singulas mactare propicio deo: atq; in hūc modū q-
euit lues. Ex eo iā hodieq; per atheniensū pagos aras sine
noīe iueniri certū est: In eius quæ tūc facta est expiationis
memoriā. Alii cām dixisse pestis celonium scelus: liberatio-
nemq; signasse: atq; ideo mortuos duos adolescētes cratinū
& lysiniū: sicq; cladē quieuisse Athenienses ea pnicie liberi

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FIG. 1. Jenson's Roman Type
Diogenes Laertius: *Vitae et sententiae philosophorum* (1475)

SPECIMEN OF AN INDUCTION TO
A POEM.Induction
to a poem

O! I must tell a tale of
chivalry;
For large white plumes
are dancing in mine eye.
Not like the formal crest
of latter days:
But bending in a thou-
sand graceful ways;
So graceful, that it seems
no mortal hand,
Or e'en the touch of Archimago's wand,
Could charm them into such an attitude.
We must think rather, that in playful mood,
Some mountain breeze had turn'd its chief delight,
To show this wonder of its gentle might.
Lo! I must tell a tale of chivalry;
For while I muse, the lance points slantingly
Athwart the morning air: some lady sweet,
Who cannot feel for cold her tender feet,
From the worn top of some old battlement
Hails it with tears, her stout defender sent:
And from her own pure self no joy dissembling,
Wraps round her ample robe with happy trembling.
Sometimes, when the good Knight his rest would take,
It is reflected, clearly, in a lake,
With the young ashen boughs, 'gainst which it rests,
And th' half seen mossiness of linnets' nests.
Ah! shall I ever tell its cruelty,

249

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FIG. 2. The "Golden" Type of The Kelmscott Press
The Poems of John Keats (1894), p. 249



traytour Calcas, which was traytour to the Troians, and said. ¶ Na, A, noble men, what thinke ye to doo ayenste the comandement of the goddes; haue not they promisid to yow the victorie, and will ye now leue hit? Certes that shold be grete folye; take agayn corage to you & fighte ye agaynst the Troians more stronglye than ye haue doon to fore, and cesse ye not tyll ye haue the victorie that the goddes haue promisid to yow. ¶ And than with the wordes of the said Calcas the Grekes toke herte to hem, sayng veryly that they wold mayntene the warre ayenst the Troians whether Achilles helpe hem or not, and that for him they wold not leue.

Of many bataylles that were made on that one side and of that other or to their bothe grete doynage, and of certayn triews, & of the deth of the noble Troyllus that Achilles slewe ayenst his promys & drewe hym at his horse tayll thurgh the oost, & how Achilles slewe the kynge Menon. ¶



AN the triews of two monethis were passid they began to fighte in bataylle right sharpely. There did Troyllus meruaylles of armes for to avenge the deth of his broder; Dares saith in his book that he slewe that daye a thousande knyghtes; and the Grekes fledde to fore hym and the bataylle endured to the nyght that departed hem. ¶ The day folowyng, the fourtenth bataylle began harde & sharpe; there dide Dyomedes meruaylles of armes, and slewe many Troians



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FIG. 3. The "Troy" Type of William Morris
Raoul Lefèvre: *The Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye* (1892), p. [640]

reed pen to write Roman letters, gave Gothic its distinct character. Gothic letters are essentially written forms made with one stroke of the slanted pen. The curves of the Roman letters were reduced to straight lines, very narrow, angular, and stiff, until the written page was made up of rows of perpendicular thick strokes connected at the top and bottom by oblique hair-lines. The Fere-humanisticas, which lasted only for one generation (1459-1485) until it was superseded by the Rotundas script, attained its artistic peak in books by Ulrich Zell of Cologne and Günther Zainer of Augsburg. John Zainer's *De Claris Mulieribus*, says Morris, was "perhaps the first book that gave me a clear insight into the essential qualities of the medieval design of that period."⁸ By comparing the type used by Günther Zainer with that in the Kelmscott *Chaucer* (Figs. 4 and 5), the reader may see how Morris has not just copied his predecessor, but has reinterpreted certain features. Often Morris, in order to make the spaces between the words as nearly equal as possible, uses the ampersand instead of the "and." Günther Zainer's Gothic type has considerable roman tendencies. It was, after all, the formal book-hand of many of the early humanists, notably of Petrarch. The figures are squat, with long heads on short bodies. Morris, however, has made certain of his letters, such as the "O," even more roman than Zainer's. Nor does Morris ever use the long "S" or the "R" that follows the rounded letters in Gothic script.

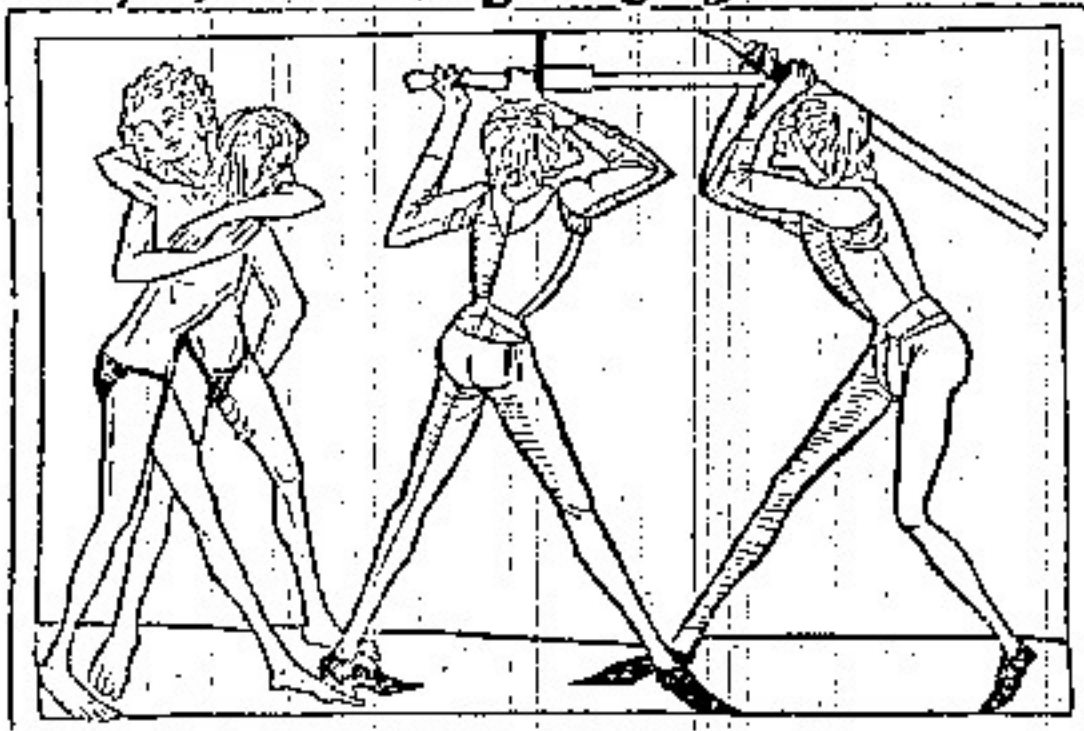
The supreme achievement of the Kelmscott *Chaucer* lies, however, not in its print but in its general format. To understand fully how revolutionary even one illustrated page of the *Chaucer* is, it must be remembered that by 1550 the illustrated book was a thing of the past. The humanists, who hated the Gothic script, hated even more the illustrations that accompanied it. In the libraries of the Medici, the Montefeltro, and the Kings of Naples there was hardly an illuminated book. The Renaissance, as E. P. Goldschmidt argues, rejected the medieval conception of "the book in which the text is accompanied by paintings depicting a scene described in the text."⁹ One may search in vain for a single Latin text printed before 1493 that contains any woodcuts or engraved illustrations. In 1498 Grüninger's "Horace, illustrated with pictures of Roman nobles dressed in the latest fashion and with

⁸ William Morris, "On the Artistic Qualities of the Woodcut Books of Ulm and Augsburg in the Fifteenth Century," *ibid.*, I, 351.

⁹ Ernst Philip Goldschmidt, *The Printed Book of the Renaissance* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1950), p. 27.

schäfferei. dann von einē vergifften morgenaw wer-
tent die rinder alle entreiniget. Dfft bachtet inen die le-
ber an. Sy werdent wurmlig. sy gewinnen zungen
blatern. vnd sunst manigerley. die alle grosses vngemach
vnd sorguältigheyt begerent. Vnd kurtz zereiten
so ist der nutz vngewis. die künereuß gewis. der ge-
win stat in zwiuel. die sorg ist kundlich.

**Das einundzwelfig capitel. Von dem sechsten hant
werck. Theatrica. das ist freuentheil genennet. Vnd
von andern künsten darunder begriffen. Von item
nutz. schaden. vnd sorguältigheyt.**



Alle kunst. Theatrica. ist von tē wort
theatrum. also genennet. Vnd thea-
trū. ist die statt gewesen. dahin sich
das volck sammet die freuten spil zū
sehen. Als oben item zwöbndzwein-
tzigem capitel gesagt ist. Söliches we-
sen zeleben ist zeleite. wa man mit spil
isölicher mah pfleget als sy offte gesözet sind. Wān
als der nateürlich meyster spricht. durch vffne gemei-
ne freuentheil. so werdent die menschen von maniger
anfechtūg vñ begirlicheyt leiblicher wolust gezogenē

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FIG. 4. Günther Zainer (Augsburg, circa 1475)
Rodericus Zamorensis: *Spiegel des menschlichen Lebens*, p. lxvi^v

The
Cookes
Tale
Of this
Tale
mahed
Chaucer
na more

Anon he sente his bed and his array
Unto a compier of his owene sort
That loude dys, and revel and disport,
And hadde a wyf that heeld for contenance
A shoppe, and swyred for hir sustenance....

The wordes of the Hooste to the compaignye.



AND Hooste saugh wel
that the brighte sonne
The arke of his artificial day
had ronne
The ferthe part, and half
an houre and moore,
And though he were nat
depe expert in soore,
He wiste it was the eighte-
tethe day

Of Aprill, that is meesager to May;
And saugh wel that the shadwe of every tree
Was, as in lengthe, the same quantitee
That was the body crect that caused it;
And therefore by the shadwe he took his wit
That Phebus, which that shoon so clere & brighte,
Degrees was fyve and fourty clombe on highte;
And for that day, as in that latitude,
It was ten at the clokke, he gan conclude;
And sodaynly he plighte his hors aboute.
Lordynges, quod he, I waine yow, at this route
The fourthe party of this day is gon;
Now for the love of God and of Seint John,
Leteth no tyme, as ferforth as ye may.
Lordynges, the tyme wasteth nyght and day,
And steleth from us, what pryvely slepyng,
And what thurgh negligence in oure waypige,
Has dooth the stream, that turneth nevere agayn,
Descendyng fro the montaigne into playn.

IF I kan Schec, and many a phileasophre,
Biwillen tyme moore than gold in cofre;
for losse of catel may recovered be,
But losse of tyme shendeth us, quod he,
It wol nat come agayn, withouten drede,
Nameore than wole Malkyns maydenhede,
Whan she hath lost it in hir wantownesse;
Lat us nat mowlen thus in ydelnesse.
Sire Man of Lawe, quod he, so have ye blis,
Telle us a tale anon, as forward is;
Ye been submytted thurgh youre free assent
To stonde in this cas at my juggement.
Acquiteth yow and holdeth youre biheeste,
Thanne have ye doon youre devoir atte leeste.
Hooste, quod he, depardeux Ich assente.
To breke forward so nat myn entente.
Biheate is dette, and I wole holde fayn
At my biheate; I kan no better sayn;
for swich lawe as man yeveth another wight

He shoide hymselfen usen it by right;
Thus wole oure text; but natheles certeyn,
I kan right now no thrifty tale seyn,
But Chaucer, thogh he kan but lewedly
On metres and on ryming craftily,
Hath seyde hem in swich English as he kan
Of olde tyme, as knoweth many a man;
And if he have noght seyde hem, leve brother,
In o book, he hath seyde hem in another,
for he hath toold of lovers up and down
Mo than Ovide made of mencion
In his Epistles, that been ful olde,
What sholde I tellen hem, syn they ben tolde?
In youthe he made of Geys and Helione,
And sithe hath he spoken of everichone
This noble wyves and this lovers eke,
Whoso that wole his large volume sche,
Clepeth the Seintes Legende of Cupide,
Ther may he seen the large woundes wyde
Of Lucrece, and of Babilan Tesbec;
The swerd of Dido for the false Enece;
The tree of Phyllis for hire Demophon;
The pleinte of Dianire and Hermyon;
Of Adriane and of Isiphilee;
The bareyne yle atondyng in the see;
The dreynte Leandre for his Erro;
The teeris of Eleyne, and eek the wo
Of Brixeyde, and of thee, Ladomea;
The crueltie of thee, queene Medea,
Thy litel children hangyng by the hals
for thy Jason that was in love so fals!
O Ypermystra, Penelopee, Alceste,
Your wifhede he comendeth with the beste!
BUT certainly no word ne writeth he
Of thiske wikke ensample of Canacee,
That loved hir owene brother synfully;
Of swiche cursed stories I sey fy!
Or ellis of Tyro Appollonius,
How that the cursed kyng Antiochus
Biraft his doghter of hir maydenhede,
That is so horrible a tale for to rede,
Whan he hit threw upon the pavement;
And therefore he, of ful arysement,
Nolde nevere write in none of his vermons
Of swiche unkynde abhomynacions,
Ne I wol noon rehere, if that I may.
But of my tale how shall I doon this day?
Me were looth be likned, douteles,
To Muses that men clepe Pierides,
Methamorphoseos woot what I mene;
But natheles, I recche noght a bene
Though I come after hym, with hawebake;
I speke in prose, and lat him rymes make.
And with that word, he with a sobre cheere
Bigan his tale, as ye shal after here.

Julius Caesar wearing a turban, was hailed by the humanists as absurd, grotesque and abominable."¹⁰ Four hundred years later William Morris, certainly no admirer of the renaissance humanists, created his own typographical renaissance by recreating a Gothic book.

By a Gothic page Morris meant not just print combined with a picture. "The essential point to be remembered," he says, "is that the ornament, whatever it is . . . should form *part of the page*, should be a part of the whole scheme of the book."¹¹ To Morris even the best of modern books violates this principle. Flaxman's illustrations for Horace, Hesiod, and Dante are a distinct series of drawings designed to be appreciated by themselves, without reference to their incorporation in, or relation to, a printed book. The 1857 edition of Tennyson's poems contains designs by D. G. Rossetti, Millais, and Holman Hunt, but there is no attempt to consider the page as a work of art. Even in Rogers' *Italy* illustrated by Turner, which had such a decisive influence upon Ruskin, the engravings are not an organic part of the page. Books, insists Morris, must be "alive all over." But in fifteenth-century books printed in Gothic type, such as the Cologne Bible (1478-79), the text is a solid column or tower, from which excursions were often made by the imagination of the designer around the ample margins. Each of the eighty-seven illustrated pages of the *Chaucer* contains a text, a frame, and an elaborate floral pattern. It is these, especially the great title page with its inscription, "the works of Geoffrey Chaucer now newly imprinted," which are the glories of the volume. The earliest books invariably lacked a title page. The scribes put the essential information above the first paragraph which often began with the inscription *incipit* or *cy commence* or *Hier begymeth*. Morris designed the *Chaucer* in such a way that when the book is open the title page forms with the opposite first page of *The Canterbury Tales* a harmonious whole of text, woodcut, and flower arabesques. However less attractive the pages without woodcuts and decorations are, the principle is similar. When the book is open, the *recto* and the *verso* page, each with its distinctive proportions of margin — the narrowest margins naturally being inward and at the top, the broadest outward and at the foot — form a double page. An excellent prototype in Gothic print of the unillustrated pages would be Jenson's version of St. Augustine's *De civitate Dei*, published in Venice in 1475 (Fig. 6). That not all the

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹¹ William Morris, *op. cit.* (note 3 above), I, 259.

pages of the Kelmscott *Chaucer* are adorned with Edward Burne-Jones's woodcuts is the only regrettable aspect of the volume.

Morris first met Burne-Jones at an examination in the Hall of Exeter College, Oxford, when they were both undergraduates. Burne-Jones's woodcuts for the *Chaucer* represent the culmination not only of their lifelong friendship but of their long-standing devotion to medieval art — an interest that first began to flourish when they helped Rossetti paint the Oxford Union. Burne-Jones's drawings for the *Chaucer* were first made in pencil. Like many of his great predecessors, he then gave the drawings to a cutter, in this case William Harcourt Hooper, who translated them into lines which were photographed onto a wood block to be engraved into facsimiles. From the period of its great masters, Dürer, Altdorfer, and Holbein, wood engraving had dwindled into an almost lost art, kept alive by a few isolated craftsmen such as Dirk de Bray in Holland, Jean Michael Papillon in France, and Thomas Bewick and William Blake in England. The Kelmscott *Chaucer* represents then the revival not only of Gothic typography but almost of an entire art. The two artists had agreed that the tone of the lines in the drawings should repeat that of the type, and that the same ratio of black to white in any one square inch of the drawings should equal that in any one square inch of the typography. Whether the woodcuts fit with the Gothic typography is, indeed, a delicate question. Burne-Jones himself had some reservations. "I wonder, if Chaucer were alive now, or is aware of what is going on, whether he'd be satisfied with my pictures to his book or whether he'd prefer impressionist ones. I don't trust him. And if he and Morris were to meet in heaven, I wonder if they'd quarrel."¹²

What seems probable is that Chaucer would have been amused by Burne-Jones's woodcuts. Logically, the drawings should have been in the same Gothic style as Morris' type. With a certain amount of casuistry one could argue that if the Italian humanists had not been so hostile to illustrated editions of the classics a fifteenth-century printed *Chaucer* would have contained drawings by some of the *quattrocento* masters and that, therefore, Burne-Jones's Victorian variations on Botticelli and Fillipino fill a definite historical gap. But such an argument cannot mitigate what at times is a jarring conflict between the Gothic type and the Pre-Raphaelite drawings. Even for a greater artist

¹² Georgiana Burne-Jones, *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1906), II, 217.

DECIMVS

Non dicit aliquis ista falsa esse miracula: nec fuisse facta sed miranda et scripta. Quisquis hoc dicit: si de his rebus negat oio uel his esse credendum: potest dicere deos illos carere mortalitate. Non enim se aliter colendos esse persuaserunt: nisi in stabilibus operibus effectibus: quorum et historia gentium testis est: quare de se ostentare mirabile: potius quam uel ostendere potuerit. Unum hoc opere nio: cuius hunc se decemum librum habemus in manibus: si eos suscipimus resellendos: quia uel uita esse uita diuinam negant: uel humana non curare contendunt: sed eos qui nio deo conditi sunt et gloriosissime ciuitatis deos suos preferunt: uel contentos cum esse ipsum citam mundi huius uisibilis et mutabilis inuisibilis et incomutabilem conditorum et uita beate de his que condidit: sed de seipso uerissimum largitorem. Eius enim propheta ueracissimus ait. Unum autem adherere deo bonum est. De sine naque boni inter philosophos querit: ad quod adipiscendum omnia officia referenda sunt. Nec dicit iste mihi autem nimis diuina abundare bonum est: aut insigni purpura et sceptro: uel diademate excellere: aut quod nonnulli etiam philosophorum dicit non tribuerunt: mihi uoluptas corporis bonum est: aut quod melius uel meliores dicere uisi sunt: mihi uirtus animi bonum est. Si mihi inquit adherere deo bonum est. Hoc eius docuerat: cui unum tantummodo sacrificandum: sancti quoque angeli legalium sacrificiorum etiam contestatione muerunt. Unum est ipse sacrificium eius factum fuerat: cuius igne intelligibili conceptum ardebat: et in eius ineffabilem sine corpore complexum sancto desiderio se rebarat. Porro autem si multorum bonorum cultores: qualescunque deos suos esse arbitrentur: ab eis facta esse miracula uel ciuillium rerum historie: uel li-

bris magicis: sicut quod honestius putant chirurgicis credunt: quid cause est cur illis literis nolunt credere ista facta esse: quibus ratio maior debet fides: quanto super omnia est magnus: cui unum soli sacrificandum precipiunt.

Que ratio sit uisibilis sacrificij: quod unum uero et inuisibilis deo offerri docet uera religio. cap. xix.

Qui autem putant hec uisibilia sacrificia deo alio congruere: illi uero inquam inuisibilis inuisibilis et maiora maiora: meliores meliores: inquam sunt parentis et bone uoluntatis officia: profecto nesciunt hec ita esse signa illorum: sicut uerba uel sonantia signa sunt rerum. Quod dicit sicut orantes atque laudantes ad eum dirigunt significantes uoces: cui res ipsas in corde: quia significamus offerimus: ita sacrificantes non aliter uisibile sacrificium offerendum esse nouerunt: quam illi cultus in cordibus nostris inuisibile sacrificium nos ipsi esse debemus. Tunc nobis fauent: nobisque congruunt: atque ad hoc ipsum nos pro suis uiribus adiuuant angeli quique uirtutes superiores: et ipsa bonitate ac pietate potentiores. Si autem illis hec exhibere uoluerimus non libenter accipiunt: et cum ad homines ita mittuntur ut eorum presentia sentiant optissime uecant: sunt de his exempla in his scriptis. Putauerunt quidam deferendis angelis honore uel honorando uel sacrificando qui debetur deo: et eorum sunt admonitione prohibiti: iussique sunt hec ei deferre: cui unum fas esse nouerunt. Imitati sunt angelos sanctos et sancti homines dei. Nam paulus et barnabas in lyconia facto quodam miraculo sanitate putati sunt deum: et ipsi lyconia immolare ueritas uoluerunt: quod a se humilis pietate remouentes eis in

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FIG. 6. Jenson's Gothic Type
Aurelius Augustinus: *De ciuitate Dei* (1475)

than Burne-Jones, Chaucer's writings would have created difficulties in deciding just how to illustrate works of literature as far apart in time as the sixth-century *De consolacione philosophiae* by Boethius and the thirteenth-century *Romaunt of the Rose* by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meung. In a medieval woodcut manuscript book such as Guillaume Fillastre's *Histoire de la Toison d'Or* the leading characters are all drawn in contemporary medieval dress; but some of Chaucer's stories, like *Troilus and Criseyde* and "The Tale of the Clerk of Oxford," take place millennia apart. Burne-Jones's illustrations in no way reconcile the egregious anachronisms with which Chaucer's writings inevitably confront the artist; and by dressing up both his Northumbrian Custance and Egyptian Cleopatra in Victorian *quattrocento* costumes Burne-Jones shows how Pre-Raphaelitism often led to disastrous consequences.

This does not mean that Burne-Jones's woodcuts are a failure. What is remarkable is that despite their uneven quality and many anachronisms, like Emelye's Pre-Raphaelite hairdo and Dido's Gothic palace, they do combine with Morris' typography to give the illusion of a medieval book. Burne-Jones's drawings, which a harsh critic might call pastiches, unfortunately reveal many of the contradictions and faults of Pre-Raphaelitism itself: its love of the mystical combined with an excessive realism, its irrational mixture of antagonistic styles, its sentimentalism—one unforgettable example, an illustration to *The Romaunt of the Rose* which portrays sickly cherubim, half-nude damsels, and Masaccio-like adolescents. Though the dominant style of the drawings owes its inspiration to Burne-Jones's favorite *quattrocento* painters, he could never forget that he was illustrating a Gothic text. Thus the folds of his drapery, rigid and solid like tree trunks, often have the monumental heavy stature of Giotto's paintings. At first glance the elongated bodies recall certain Byzantine prototypes; but further scrutiny will reveal that they are much closer, especially some of the nudes, to figures in mannerist paintings by Bronzino or Parmigianino. In the woodcut to the story about Phillis in *The Legend of Good Women* he follows a convention of the Gothic woodcut by employing a pillar to divide the drawing into two scenes. Now and then, he puts a narrow Gothic column or arch into one of his scenes. And in the illustration to the first book of *Troilus and Criseyde* he metamorphoses Troy into a medieval Norman citadel.

Burne-Jones's visits to Italy obviously made an indelible impression

upon his mind. What makes his woodcuts most unmedieval is his use of linear perspective. At times he will put a window into one of the stark rooms so that the eye is led through it into the distance or he will draw a landscape that recedes into the horizon. Many of these landscapes, especially the barren crags in the drawing to "The Clerk of Oxford's Tale," have the solitary other-worldly quality that appears in early Italian paintings such as Domenico Veneziano's "St. John in the Desert" whose haunting mountains resemble the tumultuous seascape in the woodcut to "The Frankelcyn's Tale," in which Dorigene stares out enigmatically at Stonehenge-like formations rising from the ocean. His many forests of twisted tree trunks, such as the one illustrating "The Knight's Tale," resemble woodcuts from the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*. But more than any other artist it is Botticelli whose influence is most deeply felt in the *Chaucer*. Only a few of the many drawings influenced by the Florentine master can be noted. On page 257 of the *Chaucer* there is a dramatic scene of dancing girls who have the grace, the movement, and the style of the figures in the "Primavera." Illustrating the incident in "The Knight's Tale" in which Palamon visits the Temple of Venus, Burne-Jones draws the Goddess of Love in the vein of Botticelli's famous painting of Venus rising from the sea, a motif that also decorates the first book of *The House of Fame*.

In the Gothic Revival the Kelmscott *Chaucer* occupies a position of excellence that is equalled in other spheres only by Pugin's House of Parliament. At no other point in modern English history could the book have been produced. The drawings Burne-Jones made in the nineties grew out of the Pre-Raphaelite Movement of the early fifties. Roughly one hundred years before the establishment of the Kelmscott Press, Horace Walpole had set up his own printing press, the Officina Arbutana; but despite his own infatuation with the idea of Gothic, his knowledge of the Middle Ages, not to mention its typography, was too limited, indeed, too dilettantish, to accomplish what Morris achieved with the Kelmscott Press. Even Ruskin, though he saw to it that his own books were well composed in Edinburgh roman (cut by Alexander Phemister), was never aroused sufficiently by his own ideas to have a book like *The Stones of Venice* printed in Gothic type. To Morris' contemporaries the Kelmscott *Chaucer* seemed to fall like a pie from the sky; but this was only because a knowledge of Gothic books, unlike a knowledge of medieval culture itself, was relatively uncommon. Carlyle had already prepared the Victorians to appreciate the

world of Jocelin of Brakelond. Ruskin had taught them to see meaning in the smallest stone of medieval Venice. Pugin's revival of Gothic architecture had had repercussions in rural railroad stations and suburban villas. The whole age thrilled to Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* and to Arnold's "Tristram and Iseult." But of Günther Zainer and Conrad Sweynheim little, if anything, was known. As Ruskin himself would have been the first to point out, the love of Gothic had to start in architecture before it culminated in bibliophilia.

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