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The medieval ideal: Utopian medievalism in the life, thought, and works of William Morris

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THE MEDIEVAL IDEAL: UTOPIAN MEDIEVALISM
IN THE LIFE, THOUGHT, AND WORKS
OF WILLIAM MORRIS

An Abstract of a Thesis
Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Benjamin Michael Kimball
University of Northern Iowa
May 2022

ABSTRACT

Interpreting the past often reveals as much about the interpreter as it does about the subject they interpret. This was the case with William Morris and his utopian mythologization of the Middle Ages. His art, writings, politics, and philosophy are suffused with a utopian vision of the medieval past. It runs through the whole body of his work and even in affected his personal life. It became a lens through which he could understand the world around him, a source on which he could draw for his political, social, and artistic critiques of Victorian Society. Through three different vantage points, Gender, Art, and Work, this thesis looks at the role of the Medieval in his thought. It considers its effect on his understanding of gender and his marriage. It considers also how it shaped his perception of Work, leading him to idealize the medieval guild system and the craftsman. Finally, it looks at how medieval Art shaped what he perceived as quality Art and how in turn that played an important role in his political thought and activism.

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Entitled: The Medieval Ideal: Utopian Medievalism in the Life, Thought, and Works of William Morris

has been approved as meeting the thesis requirement for the

Degree of Master of Arts

Date Dr. Thomas G. Connors, Chair, Thesis Committee

Date Dr. Jennifer McNabb, Thesis Committee Member

Date Dr. Cheryl Xue Dong, Thesis Committee Member

Date Dr. Jennifer Waldron, Dean, Graduate College

DEDICATION
In Memory of Cathia Ann Kimball, My mother

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INTRODUCTION

The Victorian Medievalist romanticization of the Middle Ages as a lost Golden Age has often been portrayed as an inherently conservative activity. The art, writings, politics, and philosophy of William Morris offer a challenge to that perspective. His positive and frankly utopian treatment of the Middle Ages has often been portrayed as at odds with his political beliefs and activities, a holdover of his youthful romanticism. For Morris however this simply was not the case; his mythologization of the Middle Ages was not secondary to his political and philosophical views as a Socialist but deeply entwined with how he approached Socialism, politics, art, and even his personal life. For William Morris, the Medieval world became a lost utopia upon which he could construct his literary, artistic, political, and even philosophical challenges to nineteenth-century British capitalism. Morris's Medieval utopia rested on many different ideas, but three key themes emerge from his creation of an idealized vision of Gender, Work, and Art in his ideal world. Gender and women's roles occupied an especially important and fluid place in Morris's conception of the Medieval, one which evolved throughout his life. Work and Art are nearly inseparable in Morris's writings and his thought; for him, all work would ideally create Art and even common household items should be works of art. The centrality and interconnectedness of these two concepts in his literary and artistic work hardly shifted as he aged; they were as vital to him during his time with the Pre-Raphaelites as they were once, he came under the influence of Marx and Socialism. If anything, they became virtually inextricable from that activism, through his work in the Arts and Crafts Movement, and his role in the development of the Socialist movement in England.

Understanding how Morris came to these views first requires a look at the popularity of the Middle Ages as a subject in Romantic literature and how it influenced Morris's youth. From the reprinting of medieval works like Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* to the rise of popular new medieval-themed works by popular authors like Sir Walter Scott, the 19th century saw a sustained revival of interest in the Middle Ages. The Victorian era also saw continued intellectual and religious interest in the Medieval, as can be seen in the rise of the Oxford Movement in the Anglican Church, the popular appeal of Gothic Revival architecture, and the writings of influential writers and critics like John Ruskin and Thomas Carlyle. Even more important for Morris was the emergence of Medievalist artistic movements, particularly

the Pre-Raphaelites, whose company Morris sought out as a young man. Morris was part of this movement of intellectual and artistic fervor that mythologized the Middle Ages into a lost utopia that had been swept away by modernism. Like his hero John Ruskin, William Morris found in the Middle Ages a golden age of art and craft that was destroyed by the Industrial Revolution. From there Morris took part in this Ruskinian attack on modernism through his association with the Pre-Raphaelites and ultimately in the Arts and Crafts Movement, embodied in his construction of Morris & Company as an attempt to put the ideas of Ruskin the Pre-Raphaelites into practice.

In actively attempting to bring these Ruskinian and Pre-Raphaelite ideas to life, Morris became the driving force behind the Arts and Crafts Movement, even as his fellow Pre-Raphaelites began to distance themselves from these more radical programs. This paved the way for Morris's discovery and embracement of Socialism where he found ideas and views that already broadly fit with his perspective. The influence of Marx on Morris was minimal, by Morris's words he had not even read Marx before proclaiming himself a socialist.¹ Turbulence in his personal life from an unhappy marriage drove him to become an active force in the development of British Socialism through the 1880s, and a prominent figure until he died in 1896. Throughout it all, Morris remained deeply involved with creating his imagined Medieval utopia whether in art, literature, or commerce, one shaped by Ruskin's thought and expressed in literary works inspired by Medieval romances but offering strong socialist rebukes of Victorian society and capitalism. Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890) presented his vision of a Medieval utopia as the future of a post-capitalist society.² The villains in his posthumously published *The Sundering Flood* (1897) are merchants who are even more powerful than the tyrannical king they nominally serve.³ Throughout his life, Morris turned to the Middle Ages as an imagined canvas on which he illustrated his vision for how Victorian society could solve the problems caused by industrialization and capitalism.

¹ William Morris. "How I Became a Socialist," in *The Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. XXIII*, (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1915), 277-278.

² William Morris, "News from Nowhere," in *The Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. XVI*, (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1910), 3-211.

³ William Morris, *The Sundering Flood* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1898), 1-373. Babel.Hathitrust Digital Library, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc2.ark:/13960/t7hq3z84v>

To Morris industrialization and capitalism were the intertwined threats of the Victorian era. Capitalism describes the social, political, and economic system that surrounds industrialization and makes it possible. Morris is also quite clear that he believes to be inherently destructive and exploitative even describing capitalism as a war “Not of competing nations, but of competing firms”.⁴ He is also quick to associate the capitalist or “Master” with theft.⁵ To Morris capitalism industrialized work and in so doing transformed it from the process of creating art to the process of destroying it and demeaning human lives. His reactions against industrialization are perhaps best contextualized within the events of his life as he watched traditional crafts swept away in favor of mass-produced factory produce.

William Morris was born in 1834 into a relatively well-off Welsh family.⁶ When he was thirteen his father passed away unexpectedly at a young age and after having established himself and the Morris family as well off and prominent figures in their community.⁷ Importantly most of that wealth came from mining particularly the Devon Great Consols.⁸ After his father’s death, Morris attended Marlborough College while there he struggled to fit in and became involved with the Oxford Movement.⁹ As an adult, Morris attended Oxford University with his friends including Edward Burne-Jones there still under the influence of the Oxford Movement they engaged in many activities to preserve that movement.¹⁰ What overthrew the Oxford Movement for Morris was his first encounter with the writings of John Ruskin.¹¹ By the end of his years at Oxford Morris had made the decision to not become a clergyman which put him at odds with his mother and led him away from the influence of his family.¹² At that stage, Morris had decided to become an Architect and became an employee of George Edmund Street’s architectural firm.¹³ Morris’s involvement with the Pre-Raphaelites came about during this period through the influence of his

⁴ William Morris. “How We Live and How We Might Live,” in *The Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. XXIII*, (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1915), 10.

⁵ William Morris, “Useful Work versus Useless Toil,” in *The Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. XXIII*, (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1915), 101-104.

⁶ Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 1-3.

⁷ J.W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris, Vol. I*. (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1901), 5-12.

⁸ Edward P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (Oakland: PM Press, 2011), 22-23.

⁹ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 29-46.

¹⁰ Thompson, *Romantic to Revolutionary*, 23-25.

¹¹ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 69-71.

¹² MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 95-96.

¹³ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 102-104.

friend Edward Burne-Jones who had come into contact with Dante Gabriel Rossetti.¹⁴ For Morris, this represented the start of a new phase in his life one that would be dedicated to his particular interpretation of Pre-Raphaelite and Ruskinian ideas and beliefs.

Under Rossetti's influence, William Morris abandoned architecture and briefly attempted a career as a painter.¹⁵ It was during his short-lived career as a painter that Morris met and married his wife, Jane Burden.¹⁶ It culminated in the Red House and with that the formation of what would become William Morris & Co.¹⁷ His investment in this new business also put him in a bad position as Great Devon Consols began to produce less and less money for the Morris family to live on.¹⁸ Consequently, Morris devoted himself to William Morris & Co. in ways that his partners and friends did not because it had become his primary source of income.¹⁹ His relations with the Pre-Raphaelites also became strained during this period especially when Rossetti and Jane ran off together in 1870.²⁰ In the early 1870s following his wife's infidelity, he visited Iceland and there came under the influence of Icelandic and Norse literature.²¹ The mid to late 1870s saw Morris's business thrive as the rich and middle classes turned to Morris to provide decoration for the interior of their homes.²² This contributed to Morris's growing interest in political radicalism which culminated with his joining of the Democratic Federation in 1883.²³ He swiftly grew dissatisfied with that organization however and helped found the Socialist League.²⁴ But by 1889 the Socialist League had come under the control of a group of Anarchists who expelled Morris from the League.²⁵ The 1890s saw Morris found Kelmscott Press and invest in reviving Medieval literature.²⁶ He died in 1896 bed-ridden and suffering from Tuberculosis in Kelmscott.²⁷

¹⁴ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 113-115.

¹⁵ Thompson, *Romantic to Revolutionary*, 44-45.

¹⁶ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 135-137.

¹⁷ Mackail, *The Life of William Morris*, 139-155.

¹⁸ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 171.

¹⁹ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 241-242.

²⁰ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 341-342.

²¹ Mackail, *The Life of William Morris*, 200-201.

²² MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 410-412.

²³ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 462-464.

²⁴ Thompson, *Romantic to Revolutionary*, 342-349.

²⁵ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 580-583.

²⁶ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 608-614.

²⁷ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 667-670.

There has been a great deal of ink spilt on the life, times, and influence of William Morris, including scholarly works which cover a broad range of subjects about him and his work. It may be worthwhile, to begin with the many biographies about his life, which have been written almost continuously since Morris's death in 1896. The first was written by his friend J.W. Mackail's *Life of William Morris* (1901) –Mackail was also the son-in-law of his lifelong friend and collaborator Edward Burne-Jones. Mackail was chosen by Morris's estate to write the official biography of William Morris.²⁸ Twenty years later, a fellow Socialist, J. Bruce Glasier wrote the hagiographic *William Morris and the Early Days of the Socialist Movement* (1921), displaying his deep respect for Morris.²⁹ Both Mackail and Glasier's early biographies drew in part on personal recollections of Morris. The next major biography of Morris became one of the most influential, E.P. Thompson's *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (1955), which has shaped the discussion of William Morris's life and particularly his political activism ever since.³⁰ In this respect Thompson is responsible for one of the limitations in the scholarly discussion of Morris's life and career through Thompson's dismissal of Morris's art and Medievalism as symptomatic of a romanticism that was both secondary to and in conflict with Morris's political goals.³¹ The most important recent biography and one of the most thorough is Fiona MacCarthy's *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* (1995).³² MacCarthy's work benefits from the publication of Morris's complete letters which allow her to shine a light into Morris's personal life to a far greater degree than Thompson was able to achieve. Her work also benefits from a more holistic picture of Morris's life and career than Thompson's interpretation.

William Morris's Medievalism has attracted attention in scholarly literature, as early as Margaret R. Grennan's *William Morris: Medievalist and Revolutionary* (1945).³³ Most of the scholarship on Morris's

²⁸ J.W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris, Vol. I.* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1901), 1-375; J.W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris, Vol. II.* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1901), 1-350.

²⁹J. Bruce Glasier, *William Morris and the Early Days of the Socialist Movement* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1921.), 1-173.

³⁰ Thompson, *Romantic to Revolutionary*, 1-810.

³¹ Thompson, *Romantic to Revolutionary*, 1-810.

³² Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995),1-681.

³³ Margaret R. Grennan, *William Morris: Medievalist and Revolutionary* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1945), 1-155.

Medievalism has been of more recent origin and more varied in its discussion of the peculiarities of Morris's Medievalism. Carole Silver's *Romance of Morris* (1982) offers a breakdown of Morris's literary Medievalism but concentrates so much on his fiction that it misses the context of Morris's personal life, art, and political endeavors.³⁴ Jennifer Harris's essay "William Morris and the Middle Ages" from *William Morris and the Middle Ages* (1984), places Morris in the context of the Victorian revival of interest in the Middle Ages.³⁵ More recent looks at Medievalism in Morris's life, like Yuri Cowan's essay "'Paradise Erthly' The Dream Vision of John Ball" in *Writing on the Image: Reading William Morris* (2007), have established a trend of focusing most discussions of Morris's medievalism on his literary output in isolation from other areas of his life.³⁶

Gender in the writings and thought of Morris is an area of scholarship on Morris which has received a great deal of attention. In *Gender at Work in Victorian Culture: Literature, Art, and Masculinity* (2005), Martin Danahay devotes two pages to Morris in a chapter otherwise about John Ruskin.³⁷ J.A. George's essay, "From King Arthur to Sidonia the Sorceress: The Dual Nature of Pre-Raphaelite Medievalism", discusses Morris's portrayal of women as part of a broader look at his fellow Pre-Raphaelites.³⁸ Many discussions of his thoughts on women and gender focus on the negative aspects. In contrast, Lori Campbell's essay "Where Medieval Romance Meets Victorian Reality: The 'Woman Question' in William Morris's *The Wood Beyond the World*" portrays his thoughts on Women and their role in Victorian society perhaps too positively.³⁹ In her essay "Socialist Fellowship and the Woman

³⁴ Carole Silver, *The Romance of William Morris* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1982), xi-192.

³⁵ Jennifer Harris, "William Morris and the Middle Ages," in *William Morris and the Middle Ages*, ed. Joanna Banham and Jennifer Harris (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 1-17.

³⁶ Yuri Cowan, "'Paradise Erthly': John Ball and the Medieval Dream-Vision," in *Writing on the Image: Reading William Morris*, ed. David Latham (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 137-154. Accessed October 10, 2020, ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy.lib.uni.edu/lib/rodlibrary-ebooks/detail.action?pq-origsite=primo&docID=4672385#>

³⁷ Martin A. Danahay, "Chapter 6: John Ruskin, Digging," in *Gender at Work in Victorian Culture: Literature, Art and Masculinity* (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), 125-142. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy.lib.uni.edu/lib/rodlibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=4758914>

³⁸ J.A. George, "From King Arthur to Sidonia the Sorceress: The Dual Nature of Pre-Raphaelite Medievalism," in *Victorian Gothic: Literary and Cultural Manifestations in the Nineteenth Century*, eds. Ruth Robbins and Julian Wolfreys (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 90-108.

³⁹ Lori Campbell, "Where Medieval Romance Meets Victorian Reality: The 'Woman Question' in William Morris's *The Wood Beyond the World*," in *Beyond Arthurian Romances: The Reach of Victorian Medievalism*, eds. Jennifer A.

Question”, Ruth Kinna likewise offers a positive analysis of Morris’s views on women and their equality.⁴⁰ Campbell and Kinna’s arguments complicate any simplistic dismissal of Morris’s view of women, even if they are not quite enough to exonerate him. Some recent scholarship also examines his thoughts on Masculinity. Richard Frith’s essay, “The Worship of Courage: William Morris’s *Sigurd the Volsung* and Victorian Medievalism”, is perhaps most useful, especially in its consideration of the relationship between violence and masculinity in Morris’s writings.⁴¹

The role of work in Morris’s life and thought is an area that is surprisingly lacking in scholarly discussion. Among recent scholarship, Ruth Kinna’s essay “William Morris: Art, Work, and Leisure” (2000), provides the most thorough discussion of the interconnections between Art and Work in his construction of Work.⁴² John Stirling’s essay “William Morris and Work as It is and as It Might Be” (2002), contains a useful discussion about how Morris hoped to reshape work in his ideal future.⁴³ In “The Obstinate Refusers: Work in News From Nowhere” (1990), Ray Watkinson looks at work in one of Morris’s most important literary works.⁴⁴ Finally, David Latham’s “To Frame a Desire: Morris’s Ideology of Work and Play” (2007) offers a rather salutatory look into Morris’s understanding of work.⁴⁵

Palmgren and Loretta M. Holloway (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2005), 169-190. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy.lib.uni.edu/lib/rodlibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=307633>

⁴⁰ Ruth Kinna, “Socialist Fellowship and the Woman Question,” in *Writing on the Image: Reading William Morris*, ed. David Latham (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 183-196. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy.lib.uni.edu/lib/rodlibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=4672385>

⁴¹ Richard Firth, “The Worship of Courage: William Morris’s *Sigurd the Volsung* and Victorian Medievalism,” in *Beyond Arthurian Romances: The Reach of Victorian Medievalism*, eds. Jennifer A Palmgren and Lorretta M. Holloway (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 117-132. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy.lib.uni.edu/lib/rodlibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=307633>

⁴² Ruth Kinna, “William Morris: Art, Work, and Leisure,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 61, no.3 (2000): 493-512, <https://doi.org/doi:10.2307/3653925>

⁴³ John Stirling, “William Morris and Work as It is and as Its Might Be,” *Capital & Class* 26, no.76 (Spring 2002):127-144, <https://doi.org/doi:10.1177/030981680207600105>

⁴⁴ Ray Watkinson, “The Obstinate Refusers: Work in News From Nowhere,” in *William Morris & News From Nowhere: A Vision for Our Time*, eds. Stephen Coleman and Paddy O’Sullivan (Bideford, Devon: Green Books, 1990), 91-106.

⁴⁵ David Latham, “To Frame a Desire: Morris’s Ideology of Work and Play,” in *Writing on the Image: Reading William Morris*, ed. David Latham (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 155-172. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy.lib.uni.edu/lib/rodlibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=4672385>

Scholarly work examining Morris's art is abundant. As the author of several articles and books about him, Linda Parry is the most important writer in the field.⁴⁶ There is quite a bit of literature on the Arts and Crafts Movement, discussing its history, growth and William Morris's role in the movement. Of these Gillian Naylor's *The Arts and Crafts Movement* (1971) is perhaps the most useful and the most detailed in discussing Morris's role in launching the Movement, while also offering valuable insight into the connection between it and the Pre-Raphaelites.⁴⁷ There are also many works on the Pre-Raphaelites. Tim Barringer's *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites* (1999) explores the intellectual underpinnings of the movement.⁴⁸ The rich scholarship on Morris provides a solid foundation for exploring different aspects of his imagined Medieval utopia in more depth.

Any study of Morris must rest on the abundance of primary sources from Morris's pen. Among his works of poetry and fiction, this thesis draws particularly on his early poems, "The Defence of Guenevere" (1858), "King Arthur's Tomb" (1858), and the multi-volume epic *The Earthly Paradise* (1858-1870), the last considered during his greatest poetic work during his lifetime.⁴⁹ After that comes Morris's two most explicitly socialist works *A Dream of John Ball* (1888) and of course his great work *The News from Nowhere* (1890).⁵⁰ Besides these works of fiction and poetry, Morris produced many essays, lectures, and other nonfiction covering a wide variety of topics. Critical to this study is his essay, "Feudal England" (1887), which presents his understanding of Medieval history and explains why he holds Medieval society in higher esteem than the Victorian era.⁵¹ Another essay "Useful Work versus Useless Toil" (1884),

⁴⁶ Linda Parry, *William Morris Textiles* (New York: V&A Publishing, 2013), 7-300; *William Morris*, ed. Linda Parry (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996), 6-367.

⁴⁷ Gillian Naylor, *The Arts and Crafts Movement: A Study of its Sources, Ideals and Influence on Design Theory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), 7-194.

⁴⁸ Tim Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 7-169.

⁴⁹ William Morris, "The Defence of Guenevere," in *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems: Garland English Texts Number 2*, ed. Margaret A. Lourie (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1981.), 45-53; William Morris, "King Arthur's Tomb," in *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems: Garland English Texts Number 2*, ed. Margaret A. Lourie (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1981), 54-64; William Morris, *Earthly Paradise Vol. II, 7th Edition* (London: Ellis & White, 1873), 2-334. Babel.HathiTrust Digital Library, [https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.\\$b254697](https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.$b254697)

⁵⁰ William Morris, "A Dream of John Ball," in *The Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. XVI* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1912), 215-288; William Morris, "News From Nowhere," in *The Collected Works of William Morris Vol. XVI* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1910), 3-211.

⁵¹ William Morris, "Feudal England," in *The Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. .XXIII* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1910), 39-58.

provides a detailed discussion of Morris's views on work, and labor, and digs deeper into his criticisms of capitalist society.⁵² Finally, his lecture "Art and Socialism" (1884) sets out Morris's understanding of Art and capitalism's role in undermining and destroying it.⁵³ Another critical set of sources are *The Collected Letters of William Morris Volume I: 1848-1880*, and *The Collected Letters of William Morris Volume II: 1881-1884*.⁵⁴

This thesis is organized around three principal chapters, each focusing on a different aspect of Morris's thought and the role of the Middle Ages in those concepts. The first chapter considers Gender in his writings and Medievalism, examining the influence of Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites on Morris's views. It looks especially at the ways in which women are idealized through his vision of the Middle Ages. From there it goes on to consider how these views influenced his marriage, how they changed over the course of his life, and how his marriage might have also affected these views. It also discusses Morris's something of Morris's writings on Masculinity and its intersections with his Medievalism.

The Second Chapter focuses on work in Morris's thought and how it was connected with Morris's idealized vision of the Middle Ages. It begins by first considering his understanding of Work and its relationship with Art. From there it moves on to consider Morris's thoughts on how work should be organized and how that compared with the ideas of John Ruskin. This turns then into a consideration of hierarchy in Morris's writings and his thoughts on the different kinds and forms of work. Finally, the Second Chapter closes out with a consideration of Morris's more problematic thoughts on women and work.

The Third Chapter discusses how Morris's Art and his writings about it made Art central to Morris's interpretation of the Middle Ages. It begins with a consideration of his definition of art, and its role in his political thought. From there it traces the various major periods in Morris's production and

⁵² William Morris, "Useful Work versus Useless Toil," in *The Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. XXIII* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1915), 98-120.

⁵³ William Morris, "Art and Socialism: A Lecture Delivered before the Secular Society of Leicester, 23rd January, 1884," in *The Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. XXIII* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1915), 192-214.

⁵⁴ William Morris, *The Collected Letters of William Morris, Vol. I: 1848-1880*, ed. Norman Kelvin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 3-596 ; William Morris, *The Collected Letters of William Morris, Vol. II: 1881-1884*, eds. Norman Kelvin and Gale Sigal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 3-365.

involvement in art. First by considering his work on the Red House alongside his fellow Pre-Raphaelites. This is followed by a discussion of William Morris & Company from its early days into its incredible success, and how the struggles and successes of this period affected Morris. Then it follows Morris in his final years, through his active leadership in the British Socialist Movement and his founding of Kelmscott Press.

This thesis argues that Morris's vision of the Medieval is far-reaching yet curiously consistent throughout his life and that the importance of this vision of the Middle Ages to Morris is critical to understanding how he interpreted himself and the world around him. To reconstruct Morris's understanding of the Medieval this thesis considered three different areas of his thought: gender, work, and art. It investigates as well how the Medieval, gender, work, and art informed his family life and career. These three different areas in Morris's thought interacted with each other and his interpretation of the Middle Ages to create a complex and at times contradictory vision of the past and present.

CHAPTER ONE:
GENDER AND MEDIEVALISM IN THE LIFE AND WORKS
OF WILLIAM MORRIS

The complex mixture of socialism and medievalism in the writings and thought of William Morris produced many contradictory and conflicting ideas and beliefs. Perhaps nowhere is this more apparent than when his writings deal with gender, and especially when he writes on women. On one hand, Morris can be quite explicit in his support for the equality of women, as can be seen in his letter to George Bernard Shaw in 1885, where Morris says, “Nor do I consider a socialist a man at all who is not prepared to admit the equality of women”.⁵⁵ But other writings, such as his Medievalist vision of the future in *News From Nowhere* (1890), find the inhabitants of his future medievalist utopia reacting with amusement at the discussion of women’s emancipation, seeing it as an oddity of Victorian Britain that women needed to take action to assert their rights.⁵⁶ This happened because in Morris’s utopia they viewed the gendering of work as the result of natural inclinations rather than a result of social pressure.⁵⁷ Gender in the writings of William Morris is a complex and evolving topic throughout his career and while many aspects of his views on the subject changed throughout his life one consistent element remained in his views, their unintentional self-contradiction. Morris claimed to uphold women’s equality with men while at the same time making statements and holding beliefs that clearly weaken the idea of that equality. His views on gender were the result of a blending of his brand of Medievalism and Victorian attitudes translated through the influence of John Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and later Socialism.

Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites shaped Morris’s conception of gender in profound ways, through his consumption of Ruskin’s writings and his tutelage under various Pre-Raphaelite artists, like Dante Gabriel Rossetti. The Pre-Raphaelite’s idealized Medievalist vision of women left a lasting impact on Morris’s understanding of women, in his writings, family life, and marriage. Even though Morris remained

⁵⁵ William Morris to George Bernard Shaw, March 18, 1885, in *Collected Letters of William Morris Vol. II:1885-1888*, eds. Norman Kelvin and Gale Sigal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 404.

⁵⁶ William Morris, “News from Nowhere,” in *The Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. XVI*, (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1910), 59-62.

⁵⁷ Morris, “News from Nowhere,” 59-62.

committed to this Pre-Raphaelite vision of women, some of his views shifted and he came to favor women's equality. Yet he failed to abandon some of the more troubling aspects of the Pre-Raphaelite view of women. Morris's conception of men and masculine identity was grounded heavily in two key themes, work, and desire. In Morris's thought, these were two deeply interrelated concepts, and they had serious implications for Morris's understanding of masculinity and work. These thoughts about men would influence Morris's thought on Work and so shape his more Socialist writings. The lingering influence of the Pre-Raphaelites would also carry forward into his conception of women and women's roles in the Socialist Movement, driving him toward a contradictory position of both supporting women's equality and their role while at the same time clinging to the view that women had their own roles and place separate from men.

Morris's conception of gender and especially its relationship with his vision of the Medieval is complex. Contradictory and unstable. The deep influence of John Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites on Morris meant that he created a rigid and idealized vision of women. Yet Morris's ideas also diverged from those of his fellow Pre-Raphaelites as he took his own particular perspective toward idealizing women. When this ideal vision of womanhood clashed with the realities of his marriage cracks began to form in his worldview. These lingering effects can be seen in his later writings and the changes to his understanding of gender and women in his later years. Yet many aspects of his understanding of gender remained consistent throughout his life. Regardless of the problematic impact this romanticized vision of women and gender had on Morris's marriage and his perspective on women in general is easy enough to see. As it seems that its core Morris could see his vision of what a woman and marriage was rather than who his wife was and what his marriage looked like from an outsider's perspective. To really dig into Morris's views on gender and the ways in which they changed over the course of his life it is perhaps best to first look at the relationship which so defined his understanding of women, his marriage to Jane Burden.

The Marriage of Jane and William Morris

There many places where an analysis of Jane and William Morris's marriage could begin, but one of the most telling is Morris's poem "Praise of My Lady" (1858), written for and about Jane Morris, his

wife, which continues Morris's theme of sympathy for female desires.⁵⁸ This is best seen in the line: "Her lips are parted longingly... So passionate and swift to move, To pluck at any flying love, that I grow faint to stand and see."⁵⁹ He seems here to be quite honestly holding up his wife's desires as something good, such that it fills him with love and desire for her.⁶⁰ Romantic and sexual desire play an important role in the poem as Morris describes his feelings of desire for Jane, turning her into a canvas on which to paint his own desires, making her into an object.⁶¹ Morris's Medieval fantasy also takes a role in this as throughout the poem he further reinforces the Pre-Raphaelite ideal of submitting to the Lady out of love for her, by speaking of how he has already done so and encouraging other men to "kneel before her".⁶² Besides showing the continuing influence of the Pre-Raphaelite Medievalism in Morris's writings, it also offers a hint of how it affected his marriage and family life.

This fits how E.P. Thompson, and Fiona MacCarthy describe Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites approach to women. E.P. Thompson argues that the idealized image of women that Morris's early Medievalism inherited from the Pre-Raphaelites poisoned his ability to have a healthy and stable marriage with his wife.⁶³ Fiona MacCarthy builds on Thompson by showing how the Pre-Raphaelite idealization of women led to them to reduce women to an image of "beauty", and that was all she was or could hope to be.⁶⁴ Indeed MacCarthy suggests that a large part of Morris's motive in marrying his wife was for his perception of her beauty.⁶⁵ This fits in with E.P. Thompson's suggestion that there was an almost narcissistic element in the Pre-Raphaelites' approach to women, even as they argued and idealized equality in romantic relationships.⁶⁶ Morris even idealized female desire and passion. This raises the question role female desire and passion played in how other Pre-Raphaelite envisioned women. For most of them it

⁵⁸ William Morris, "Praise of My Lady," in *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems: Garland English Texts Number 2*, ed. Margaret A. Lourie, (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1981), 173-175.

⁵⁹ Morris, "Praise of My Lady," 174.

⁶⁰ Morris, "Praise of My Lady," 174.

⁶¹ Morris, "Praise of My Lady," 173-175.

⁶² Morris, "Praise of My Lady," 174-175.

⁶³ Edward P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (Oakland: PM Press, 2011), 74-76.

⁶⁴ Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 137.

⁶⁵ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 137.

⁶⁶ Thompson, *Romantic to Revolutionary*, 65.

seems to have registered hardly at all, except when dealing with the idea of the fallen woman, then the realm of female passion becomes more significant to the Pre-Raphaelites. This creates in J.A. George's view a paradox Morris's treatment of women and female desire, as he clearly idealizes his wife Jane Morris, often in Medievalist terms, which as George notes came alongside a view of women as predatory and dangerous creatures.⁶⁷

Certainly, there are inherent problems in Morris's literary treatment of women. Fiona MacCarthy finds that Morris's "Pygmalion and the Image", from his *Earthly Paradise* (1868-1870), raises deeply uncomfortable questions about Morris.⁶⁸ The poem is about the Greek myth of a sculptor who creates a woman of marble, falls in love with her, and marries her when she comes alive.⁶⁹ MacCarthy suggests that in some respects this poem is reflective of Morris's relationship with his wife, wherein she was an image of "beauty" to be loved and nothing more.⁷⁰ To MacCarthy, Morris's embracement of the idealization of women, as personifications of love and beauty had a deeply unsettling effect on his relationship with his wife. She became an object like Pygmalion's statue, who was not be loved as an individual but as an ideal. More a work of Morris's own hand or fantasy than a real woman. There is something to this rather unsettling picture as it drives home the discomfoting aspects of Morris's Medievalist idealism and how it shaped his approach to women.

The reduction of a woman to an object allowed her to become a receptacle for the romantic desires, and artistic passions of the Pre-Raphaelites, including Morris. Interestingly for Morris his elevation of female desires seems to have played into this reduction of women into images. In part because while he acknowledges female desire, he seems in his early poetry to reduce women to their romantic and sexual desires. He also denies that women possess any deep artistic passions, or has he puts it in an interview given late in life "they do not excel in the arts or inventive power".⁷¹ No doubt he inherited this from John

⁶⁷ George, "From King Arthur to Sidonia the Sorceress," 92-94.

⁶⁸ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 138.

⁶⁹ William Morris, *Earthly Paradise Vol. II, 7th Edition* (London: Ellis & White, 1873), 246-274. Babel.Hathitrust Digital Library, [https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.\\$b254697](https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.$b254697)

⁷⁰ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 137-138.

⁷¹ Sarah A. Tooley, "A Living Wage for Women", *The Woman's Signal*, 19th April, 1894, in *We Met Morris: Interviews with William Morris, 1885-96*, ed. Tony Pinkney, (Reading: Spire Books, 2005), 93-94.

Ruskin who also denied rather bluntly that women had the capacity to create art.⁷² For Morris this denial of female artistic passions is an important difference between men and women, as the desire to create art is central in his view to the human condition, or perhaps more accurately it is central to masculine identity in Morris's perspective. By shutting women's desires out of the realm of art, Morris leaves women with only romantic desires and passions which allows them to be more easily transformed into objects of masculine desire. This turns Morris's self-proclaimed submission to his wife from a male submission to the power of women into a submission to the Medieval vision of her. Nonetheless Morris's positive treatment of women's desire does seem to go hand in hand with a recognition of limited domestic female agency.

Which does make interesting one line in his poem *Praise of My Lady* (1858), "Her Great Eyes...looking out afar, waiting for something, not for me."⁷³ Here he seems almost to admit that his wife was not in love with him but had eyes for someone else, however it was written nearly a decade before it is generally believed he became aware of his wife's infidelity.⁷⁴ This line from *Praise of My Lady* suggests that either Morris was remarkably prescient, or that even early in their relationship Morris was aware of problems between him and his wife. It may also reflect the shadow which Dante Gabriel Rossetti cast over Jane and Morris's marriage. Fiona MacCarthy even notes that while there is no evidence to suggest the two became lovers before the late 1860s there are clear implications that Rossetti and Jane were attracted to each other early on in their acquaintanceship.⁷⁵ After Morris's death Jane later admitted to having never loved William Morris, and had married him for the benefits that his higher social class and money bring her even if she had no romantic interest in him.⁷⁶ For Jane it was the simple reality that she felt forced by societal expectations to marry Morris on the grounds of the benefits she would receive rather than on grounds of her own personal feelings.⁷⁷

⁷² Rachel Dickinson, "Of Ruskin, Women, and Power," in *Persistent Ruskin: Studies in Influence, Assimilation and Effect*, eds. Keith Hanley and Brian Maidment (New York: Routledge, 2012), 54. EBSCOhost, https://login.proxy.lib.uni.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=504330&site=ehost-live&ebv=EB&ppid=pp_53

⁷³ Morris, "Praise of My Lady," 173-174.

⁷⁴ Thompson, *Romantic to Revolutionary*, 157.

⁷⁵ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 141.

⁷⁶ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 141.

⁷⁷ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 141.

The final collapse of Jane and William's marriage happened according to E.P. Thompson sometime between 1867 and 1870, when Jane finally turned to Rossetti⁷⁸ After spending for most of the year with Rossetti Jane returned to her husband and Fiona MacCarthy seems to believe that when she returned Morris and his wife reached an understanding wherein he would tolerate her infidelity with only a few restrictions.⁷⁹ This would fit claims that Morris was indifferent to traditional concepts of marriage, and that he willingly accepted his wife's infidelities as part and parcel of the nature of love. Supporting this claim are some of Morris's own comments on marriage, such as an 1885 letter to George Bernard Shaw wherein he attacks traditional concepts of marriage saying that they at present amount to little more than "prostitution or... legalized rape".⁸⁰ Though it is worth noting that Morris makes these comments when informing Shaw that he rejected an article Shaw wrote attacking marriage.⁸¹ It also ignores a possible alternate interpretation of this letter that Morris was rather bitter about how his marriage had turned out, and had become rather skeptical of marriage. In the letter Morris comments, "as long as women are compelled to marry for a livelihood real marriage is a rare exception".⁸² This letter is suggestive of Morris's bitter feelings about marriage and suggests perhaps that he has come to believe that society has forced women to marry for reasons other than love. In any case, there are clear indications that during the late 1860s and early 1870s Morris was becoming disillusioned in his friendship with Jane's then-lover Dante Gabriel Rossetti, to which Fiona MacCarthy points to one of Morris's letters to artist Edward Burne-Jones's wife in 1869.⁸³ The Letter is only a fragment but it describes Morris's annoyance with a male friend who is unnamed, and his unwillingness to seek the individual's company with certain of his other friends present.⁸⁴ As Jane and Rossetti's relationship became more intense, she eventually began living with him in

⁷⁸ Thompson, *Romantic to Revolutionary*, 157.

⁷⁹ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 256-259.

⁸⁰ William Morris to George Bernard Shaw, March 18, 1885, in *Collected Letters of William Morris, Vol. II: 1885-1888*, eds. Norman Kelvin and Gale Sigal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 404.

⁸¹ William Morris to George Bernard Shaw, March 18, 1885, in *Collected Letters of William Morris, Vol. II: 1885-1888*, eds. Norman Kelvin and Gale Sigal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 404.

⁸² William Morris to George Bernard Shaw, March 18, 1885, in *Collected Letters of William Morris, Vol. II: 1885-1888*, eds. Norman Kelvin and Gale Sigal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 404.

⁸³ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 252-253.

⁸⁴ William Morris to Georgiana Burne-Jones, October, 1869, *Collected Letters of William Morris, Vol I: 1848-1880*, ed. Norman Kelvin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 97.

a remarkably blatant fashion.⁸⁵ During that time Morris sent her several letters which asked her to return home, but she ignored them.⁸⁶

Jane Morris's own letters trace the decline of their marriage, perhaps most tellingly in their differing treatment of her husband and her lover. In a striking letter from 1869 she worries about the health and wellbeing of Rossetti, having heard that he was sick.⁸⁷ She writes a whole paragraph on Rossetti in that letter, but only a sentence or two about her husband, which she justifies by saying that Morris has sent his own letter to the friend.⁸⁸ While the next letter assures her friend that Rossetti's health is recovering, and asking that friend what she thought of Rossetti's poetry, it also includes a few lines describing her husband's latest work but complains that it is not a continuation of his epic *Earthly Paradise*.⁸⁹ Its noteworthy that her critique of his new work is tied into praise for his *Earthly Paradise*, but both are followed up by her glowing praise of Rossetti's poetry and an encouragement to read it.⁹⁰ She also worries about Rossetti and whether he will take care of his health.⁹¹ In both these letters Jane's focus seems to be more on Rossetti than her husband, with any discussion of Morris seemingly an obligatory nod toward his presence her life or a critique of his latest endeavors. Where she talks about both Rossetti and Morris it is Rossetti she seems more interested in discussing with her friend. Morris on the other hand is either a footnote, or subject to some admittedly minor criticism.

This indifference to Morris comes out in several of Jane's letters, such as one letter she sent to their mutual friend architect Philip Webb in 1871, where she finds it "rather odd" she has received no news of her husband since his departure for Iceland.⁹² This is in contrast to her letters documenting her concerns

⁸⁵ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 254-258.

⁸⁶ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 256-259.

⁸⁷ Jane Morris To Susan Sedgwick Norton, December 21, 1869, *Collected Letters of Jane Morris*, ed. Frank C. Sharp and Jan Marsh (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2013), 37.

⁸⁸ Jane Morris To Susan Sedgwick Norton, December 21, 1869, *Collected Letters of Jane Morris*, ed. Frank C. Sharp and Jan Marsh (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2013), 37.

⁸⁹ Jane Morris To Susan Sedgwick Norton, May 14, 1870, *Collected Letters of Jane Morris*, ed. Frank C. Sharp and Jan Marsh (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2013), 40.

⁹⁰ Jane Morris To Susan Sedgwick Norton, May 14, 1870, *Collected Letters of Jane Morris*, ed. Frank C. Sharp and Jan Marsh (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2013), 40.

⁹¹ Jane Morris To Susan Sedgwick Norton, May 14, 1870, *Collected Letters of Jane Morris*, ed. Frank C. Sharp and Jan Marsh (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2013), 40.

⁹² Jane Morris to Philip Webb, July 25, 1871, *Collected Letters of Jane Morris*, eds. Frank C. Sharp and Jan Marsh (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2013), 47.

about Rossetti's physical or mental health.⁹³ Rossetti receives considerably greater attention and care whenever she mentions him, while Morris becomes a relatively minor figure in her letters, hardly a central figure in her life. This difference in treatment reveals how deeply her feelings towards the two men differed.

Morris's letters to Jane, and his discussions of her in his letters are very different, especially during the period when they separated. In the Spring of 1870 Jane abandoned Morris for Rossetti and did not return to their shared home until 1871.⁹⁴ Throughout that period Morris wrote her several letters. If none of them were confrontational but they all conveyed rather clearly Morris's desire to save his marriage.⁹⁵ In the first of these letters Morris thanks her for writing to him, and keeps the letter short and focused mostly on trivial things, like his having come down with a cold and his dislike for Easter. Only towards the end when he mentions his intention to come visit her is there any hint of tension.⁹⁶ A letter he wrote her eleven days later is much more revealing. Once again he thanks her for writing and discusses more personal matters, including a female friend's "bland flatteries" before saying that "I shall certainly come ... fetch you up when you are ready to be fetched".⁹⁷ It's clear that Morris is trying to reach out to her and save the marriage and end their separation. It is curious that he brings up the unwanted "bland flatteries" from a female friend at the end.⁹⁸ He may have been trying to make her jealous by showing that he had female admirers or create a parallel and emphasize his own fidelity to her in an effort to convince her to come home. Nonetheless it is in Jane's hands to come home and fix the marriage. Morris wrote her many such letters in the period all of them attempts to reconcile, and in Fiona MacCarthy's view demonstrate Morris's reluctance for open confrontation.⁹⁹ Something which may be reflected in some of

⁹³ Jane Morris to William Bell Scott, July 9, 1872, *Collected Letters of Jane Morris*, eds. Frank C. Sharp and Jan Marsh (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2013), 49.

⁹⁴ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 254-259.

⁹⁵ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 254-259.

⁹⁶ William Morris to Jane Morris, April 15, 1870, *Collected Letters of William Morris, Vol. I: 1848-1880*, eds. Norman Kelvin and Gale Sigal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 115-116.

⁹⁷ William Morris to Jane Morris, April 26, 1870, *Collected Letters of William Morris, Vol. I: 1848-1880*, eds. Norman Kelvin and Gale Sigal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 117-118.

⁹⁸ William Morris to Jane Morris, April 26, 1870, *Collected Letters of William Morris, Vol. I: 1848-1880*, eds. Norman Kelvin and Gale Sigal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984) 117-118.

⁹⁹ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 254-259.

Morris's later work, take for example his portrayal of the married couple Dick and Clara from his *News From Nowhere* (1890). After Clara left Dick for another man, he remained unphased by the event and was unaffected enough by it to reconcile with her later.¹⁰⁰ This offers a view into something of Morris's views on masculinity.

Nonetheless, what emerges from this picture of Jane and William Morris's marriage is the image of a fantasy made into reality. Their marriage is almost a variation on the story of Pygmalion, except that instead of stone Morris made use of a real living woman. In time however, Jane asserted herself and in taking her life into her own hands shattered Morris's idealistic understanding of women, and especially of his wife. Morris's medievalist mythologization of his wife had its roots in the thought and influence of John Ruskin as well as in the medievalist fantasy of the Pre-Raphaelites. Therefore, it is perhaps worthwhile to turn around and consider what John Ruskin's thoughts about gender were in order to develop a deeper understanding of how Morris mythologized gender and especially how he created this fictionalized vision of his wife.

John Ruskin on Gender

For William Morris as for many other writers and artists of the period, John Ruskin was one of the most important writers and thinkers of the nineteenth century. In his own essay 'How I Became a Socialist', Morris describes Ruskin as his "master" and one of the few before his encounter with "practical socialism" who seemed to be taking action against the dominant order in Britain.¹⁰¹ Morris's encounters with other writers from period was often negative, John Stuart Mill for example dismissed except for the fact that Morris found his arguments Socialism to be an effective argument for it.¹⁰² Thomas Carlyle is perhaps the only other figure besides Ruskin who receives a positive treatment from Morris. But Carlyle presence in Morris's work is minimal he is noted by Morris as a fellow opponent of the direction that

¹⁰⁰ Morris, "News from Nowhere," 55-56.

¹⁰¹ William Morris, "How I Became a Socialist," in *The Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. XXII* (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1915), 277-279.

¹⁰² Morris, "How I Became a Socialist," 277-278.

“civilization” in Morris’s day was taking.¹⁰³ There is however one interesting treatment of Carlyle and Ruskin worth mentioning here and that is that in letter Morris produced a List of recommended books of which Ruskin and Carlyle are the only modern thinkers that he lists.¹⁰⁴ Ruskin’s importance over Carlyle’s is however evident with Morris noting that he recommends “especially the ethical and politico-economical parts”.¹⁰⁵

The influence of John Ruskin on Morris’s thought is immense and is most especially obvious when considering Morris’s views on art and work, whereas in the realm of gender Ruskin’s influence is less immediately obvious. In part this may be that both Morris and Ruskin were more than anything else focused on the nature of work and art, which had ramifications for their discussions of masculinity. When discussing women however Morris and Ruskin were both generally silent, only discussing it in a few of their more obscure writings. Otherwise, their perspectives on women can only really be inferred from how their writings dealt with women, and how they treated the women in their own lives. In this Morris seems to mirror at least some aspects of Ruskin’s views on gender, as both men had unhappy married lives. A key difference is that the dysfunction in Ruskin’s unhappy marriage has been central to much of the discussion of his views on women and gender, Morris’s unorthodox married life and its implications for his thought have tended to be glossed over or ignored.

John Ruskin’s views on masculinity and gender are bound up in his conception of work. Ruskin idealized physical labor as properly masculine work, something which Morris himself embraced (as will be discussed later in this chapter).¹⁰⁶ In his book *Gender at Work in Victorian Culture* (2005), Martin Danahay argues that for Ruskin this idealization of physical labor as masculine also came with a degradation of Ruskin’s own intellectual work, which he implied was not truly work, as he described himself as an

¹⁰³ Morris, “How I Became a Socialist,” 278-279.

¹⁰⁴ May Morris, introduction to the 1915 edition of *The Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. XXII*, by William Morris (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1915), xij-xvj.

¹⁰⁵ May Morris, introduction to the 1915 edition of *The Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. XXII*, xij-xvj.

¹⁰⁶ Martin A. Danahay, *Gender at Work in Victorian Culture: Literature, Art and Masculinity* (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 2005) 125-127. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy.lib.uni.edu/lib/rodlibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=4758914>

“idler”.¹⁰⁷ This degradation of his own writing and intellectual pursuits as “idleness”, seems to stem in part from the reality that there were women who did more physically demanding work than Ruskin.¹⁰⁸ In this rests a considerable part of Ruskin’s struggle with gender, as in his thought there was a very stark division between the male and female gender. According to literary critic Sharon Weltman he seems to have believed that men and women had complimentary roles in society.¹⁰⁹

The anxieties which plagued Ruskin over the relationship between men and women revolved around the threat which the industrial revolution offered to real masculine work.¹¹⁰ This fear influenced Morris’s understanding of the relationship between masculinity, work, and the changes that industrialization brought to the act of work. For Ruskin and Morris the threat of industrialization was the mechanization of labor, which in their minds emasculated male laborers.¹¹¹ This fear fueled some of Ruskin’s more infamous activities including, according to Danahay the Ferry Hincksey Road project, wherein he had his Oxford students set to work creating a road.¹¹² In Danahay’s view this was an effort by Ruskin to use the ‘masculine labor’ of making a road to break down the barriers between social classes and replace them with a bond forged through work, and rejection of idleness.¹¹³ Mark Girouard offers a completely different interpretation viewing the Hincksey Road project as a product of Victorian conceptions of chivalry, and the Gentlemen’s code which saw service to the British Empire as the highest calling for a Victorian gentleman.¹¹⁴ Whether any Victorian conceptions of chivalry influenced Ruskin, it is clear that for him the issue in relation to masculinity was the value of physical labor in fixing the ills of Victorian society. For Ruskin it was a way to reassert masculinity in the face of industrialization, and in his mind would reverse the negative effects that industrialization had on masculinity. Its diminishment of

¹⁰⁷ Danahay, *Gender at Work*, 127-128.

¹⁰⁸ Danahay, *Gender at Work*, 127-128.

¹⁰⁹ Sharon Aronofsky Weltman, *Ruskin’s Mythic Queen: Gender Subversion in Victorian Culture* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1998), 16-19.

¹¹⁰ Danahay, *Gender at Work*, 140-141.

¹¹¹ Danahay, *Gender at Work*, 141.

¹¹² Danahay, *Gender at Work*, 131-132.

¹¹³ Danahay, *Gender at Work*, 131-132.

¹¹⁴ Mark Girouard, *The Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 222-223.

skilled physical labor and the loss of artisanal skills these were the things which Ruskin saw slipping away under the steady march of industrialization.

While Ruskin idealized ‘masculine labor’ as a solution to the ills of Victorian society, women were instead idealized in domestic life. Interestingly in the view of literary scholar Sharon Aronofsky Weltman, Ruskin mythologized women’s dominance of the household by describing women as Queens, invoking the medieval into in his discussion of gender.¹¹⁵ Ruskin’s emphasis on limiting women’s roles to the domestic space has generally led to highly negative interpretations of his views over the years.¹¹⁶ According to Weltman, even as Ruskin kept women solely in the domestic sphere, he nonetheless opened up and complicated the understanding of women’s roles in society.¹¹⁷ This view is also supported in Amelia Yeates’s article “Ruskin, Women’s Reading, and Commodity Culture” (2008).¹¹⁸ In Weltman’s view this is made clear through Ruskin’s description of women as Queens, as Ruskin is here invoking an idealized notion of medieval chivalry, that men were required to bow to the authority of women.¹¹⁹ For Ruskin (and others), chivalrous men submitted to wills of women not because the women had any ability to enforce it but because men willingly surrendered that authority out of love.¹²⁰ This concept greatly influenced how William Morris and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood related to women, leading them to idealize women, ultimately viewing them according to E.P. Thompson, as “the soul of the man”.¹²¹ Such an extreme idealization had many consequences for Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites and their thought on and relationships with women.

While the influence of Ruskin’s writings and thought on how William Morris and the Pre-Raphaelite envisioned women is important, their own relationships with women are also revealing. Their

¹¹⁵ Weltman, *Ruskin’s Mythic Queen*, 103-123.

¹¹⁶ Amelia Yeates, “Ruskin, women’s reading, and commodity culture,” *Nineteenth-Century Prose* 35, no. 1 (2008). *Gale Academic OneFile* (accessed May 29, 2021) https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A201085870/AONE?u=uni_rodit&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=31cdf955.

¹¹⁷ Weltman, *Ruskin’s Mythic Queen*, 3-22.

¹¹⁸ Amelia Yeates, “Ruskin, women’s reading, and commodity culture.” *Nineteenth-Century Prose* 35, no. 1 (2008). *Gale Academic OneFile* (accessed May 29, 2021) https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A201085870/AONE?u=uni_rodit&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=31cdf955.

¹¹⁹ Weltman, *Ruskin’s Mythic Queen*, 119.

¹²⁰ Weltman, *Ruskin’s Mythic Queen*, 119-121.

¹²¹ Thompson, *Romantic to Revolutionary*, 65.

idealization of women did not create healthy marriages, neither in the case of William Morris's to Jane Burden nor Ruskin's tumultuous and infamous relationship with Effie Gray.¹²² Ruskin's failed marriage to Effie set an uncomfortable standard that carried into his relationships with other women, and in general set the tone for how he interacted with women.¹²³ Ruskin already had an ideal expectation of what a wife should be, a woman committed to domesticity and devoted to her husband, he expected Effie Gray to settle into this role.¹²⁴ When the real Effie Gray proved unable or unwilling to live up to his expectations, perhaps aided by Ruskin's inexplicable failure to ever consummate their six year marriage, things fell apart.¹²⁵ Factor in the dismissive ways in which Ruskin also understood women, like his denial that women possessed creative abilities, and it raises questions about the impact Ruskin's views on gender had on his disciples. Did they contribute to the often-troubled relationships which Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites had with women, though Ruskin alone cannot be blamed for all the problematic aspects of how the Pre-Raphaelites and Morris related to women. While they took their cues from him, the Pre-Raphaelites developed their own ideas about women, and applied them in ways and places that Ruskin would likely never have considered. Even so, for William there was no one more important than Ruskin, in shaping his thought on almost every subject including gender.

Stunners: The Pre-Raphaelite Ideal of Womanhood

E.P. Thompson summed up the Pre-Raphaelite conception of women as containing "the soul of men", providing inspiration for their art.¹²⁶ This reduction of women to objects is at the heart of the Pre-Raphaelite view of women; they even developed their own slang to describe their ideal woman, "Stunner".¹²⁷ There were many "Stunners" who served these roles for the Pre-Raphaelites, among them

¹²² Dickinson, "Of Ruskin, Women and Power," 53-54.

¹²³ Dickinson, "Of Ruskin, Women and Power," 53-54.

¹²⁴ Jennifer M. Lloyd, "Conflicting Expectations in Nineteenth-Century British Matrimony: The failed Companionate Marriage of Effie Gray and John Ruskin," *Journal of Women's History*, 11, no.2 (1999):86. *Gale Academic OneFile*, (accessed February 4, 2022), https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A55983688/AONE?u=uni_rodit&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=790313e2.

¹²⁵ Lloyd, "Conflicting Expectations in Nineteenth-Century British Matrimony," 86.

¹²⁶ Thompson, *Romantic to Revolutionary*, 65.

¹²⁷ Debra Mancoff, *Jane Morris: The Pre-Raphaelite Model of Beauty* (Rohnert Park: Pomegranate, 2000), 11.

Elizabeth Siddal, Annie Miller, and William Morris's wife Jane Burden.¹²⁸ The Pre-Raphaelite held that physical appearance revealed an individual's inner nature, and consequently that artists should seek out models similar in character to their intended subject.¹²⁹ This stemmed in part from the Pre-Raphaelite understanding of Ruskin's writings about Nature; artists needed to find truth in nature.¹³⁰ For Ruskin this had very deep roots in his conception of art, which he saw as a way to represent the truth, which in turn led him to emphasize the need to turn to nature for inspiration.¹³¹ To Ruskin the natural world, plants and landscapes served as an inspiration but the key principle came to be to draw from the artist's life from world around them.¹³²

In the view of literary scholar J.A. George the Pre-Raphaelite emphasis on physical appearance revealing a person's inner nature helped create two related but contradictory views of women amongst the Pre-Raphaelites, one which envisioned ethereal courtly Ladies, and another which reviled some women as "fleshly" manipulative creatures of desire.¹³³ This may in some sense explain the Pre-Raphaelite fascination with the idea of the "fallen woman" a subject which inspired paintings by both John Everett Millais and Gabriel Dante Rossetti.¹³⁴ J.A. George notes the contradictions in this Pre-Raphaelite dualist vision of women, and he offers up Jane Morris as an example.¹³⁵ To George, Jane Morris sits in a position where she can be interpreted by the Pre-Raphaelites, as both an ideal woman, and a 'fleshly' one.¹³⁶ There's something to this as Jane Morris's life and choices certainly pushed back on many of the more problematic aspects of the Pre-Raphaelite view of women. Her actions also perhaps pushed back against her husband's vision of her as well.

¹²⁸ Mancoff, *Jane Morris*, 7-13.

¹²⁹ Mancoff, *Jane Morris*, 9-11.

¹³⁰ Mancoff, *Jane Morris*, 8-9.

¹³¹ Tim Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 55-57.

¹³² Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites*, 55-57.

¹³³ J.A. George, "From King Arthur to Sidonia the Sorceress: The Dual Nature of Pre-Raphaelite Medievalism," in *Victorian Gothic: Literary and Cultural Manifestations in the Nineteenth Century*, eds. Ruth Robbins and Julian Wolfreys (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 92-95.

¹³⁴ Laurence des Cars, *The Pre-Raphaelites: Romance and Realism*, trans. Francisca Garvie (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 2000), 52-53.

¹³⁵ George, "From King Arthur to Sidonia the Sorceress," 92-95.

¹³⁶ George, "From King Arthur to Sidonia the Sorceress," 92-95.

Nonetheless to her contemporaries Jane Morris became the epitome of the Pre-Raphaelite “Stunner”; Author Henry James even described her as the living incarnation of the Pre-Raphaelite woman.¹³⁷ Henry James was commenting at least in part on her physical resemblance to Pre-Raphaelite paintings of women, though her similarity to the Pre-Raphaelite ideal went deeper than physical beauty.¹³⁸ It was Jane’s bearing, her character more than anything else which convinced the Pre-Raphaelites that she was their ideal, she was commonly described as aloof, and her beauty striking and unusual.¹³⁹ Henry James in describing a visit to the Morris household described Jane as “this dark silent medieval woman”, whose household was “quaint and remote from actual life”, an image of the medieval in the modern world.¹⁴⁰ Indeed, William Morris’s only surviving painting (1858) depicts Jane as Iseult, showing that at least at the beginning of their relationship he envisioned Jane as an “Ideal Medieval Woman”.¹⁴¹ Nonetheless to many outside of the Pre-Raphaelite circle that meant that she was often perceived as ugly for striking and unusual looks and before her introduction to the Pre-Raphaelites her sister was considered more beautiful.¹⁴² But the Pre-Raphaelites, and most importantly William Morris, saw her in a different light and so when Jane married she also took on the role of the ideal Pre-Raphaelite “Stunner”.¹⁴³

The relationship between Jane and William Morris was a fraught one, damaged very deeply by the Pre-Raphaelite ideals about women which Morris had embraced. As to some extent Jane’s purpose in the relationship was to be a work of art, and some outside commentators, including George Bernard Shaw, said that ‘To be beautiful’ was part of what was expected of her in the marriage.¹⁴⁴ The uncomfortable power dynamics in their marriage extended even beyond this reduction of her to just her physical appearance, as

¹³⁷ Thompson, *Romantic to Revolutionary*, 75.

¹³⁸ Henry James to Alice James, March 10, 1869, in *Letters of Henry James, Vol. I*, ed. Percy Lubbock (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1920), 17-18. Babel.Hathitrust Digital Library, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.hwkn3l?urlappend=%3Bseq=59>

¹³⁹ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 136-137.

¹⁴⁰ Henry James to Alice James, March 10, 1869, in *Letters of Henry James, Vol. I*, ed. Percy Lubbock (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1920), 17-18. Babel.hathitrust Digital Library, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc2.ark:/13960/t0vq2t624?urlappend=%3Bseq=59>

¹⁴¹ George, “From King Arthur to Sidonia the Sorceress,” 92-94.

¹⁴² MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 136-137.

¹⁴³ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 136-137.

¹⁴⁴ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 137.

Jane Morris came from a working-class background to Morris's middle-class origins.¹⁴⁵ This was not an entirely uncommon practice and several of the Pre-Raphaelites found their models, and often wives among working-class women.¹⁴⁶ This led to some comparisons of Morris and Jane's relationship to the Greek myth of Pygmalion which, as biographer Fiona MacCarthy notes, was perhaps tellingly adapted in Morris's own work *The Earthly Paradise* (1868-1870).¹⁴⁷ The troubling power dynamics of this relationship, and its implications further inspired George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion* (1912).¹⁴⁸ But if the issues inherent in Morris and Jane's relationship are to be considered in more depth, and the issues inherent in Morris's views on women are to be dealt with at all it is best to shift focus now from the thought of the Pre-Raphaelites as a whole to William Morris as an individual.

The Defence of Guenevere & The Idealization of Women

To discuss William Morris's intellectual thought it is worth considering his literary works during his Pre-Raphaelite period. Published in 1858, *The Defence of Guenevere* was one of William Morris's first forays into the world of literature and poetry. To get it off the ground Morris paid for its publication himself, but this unfortunately led to a number of mistakes and errors going unnoticed.¹⁴⁹ John MacKail, Morris's official biographer, notes that at the time of its publication *Guenevere* went entirely unnoticed save for one or two reviews, one of which described it as a Pre-Raphaelite oddity.¹⁵⁰ This limited critical response was coupled with a failure to sell more than a handful of volumes, leaving Morris with unsold copies as late as 1871.¹⁵¹ The work's failure presumably contributed to Morris's reluctance to follow it up with another volume of poetry or literature until the late 1860s. Nonetheless, in more recent times there have been more than a few scholars who have found *The Defence of Guenevere* one of Morris's best works, including E.P. Thompson.¹⁵² Yet what makes this work so fascinating is its approach to and treatment of

¹⁴⁵ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 136-137.

¹⁴⁶ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 136-138.

¹⁴⁷ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 138.

¹⁴⁸ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 138.

¹⁴⁹ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 142-145.

¹⁵⁰ J.W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris, Vol. I*. (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1901), 129-130.

¹⁵¹ MacKail, *Life of William Morris, Vol. I*, 130.

¹⁵² Thompson, *Romantic to Revolutionary*, 61-86.

women, an approach which presents a very stark contrast with Alfred Tennyson's similarly Arthurian *Idylls of the King* (1859). At first glance Morris's view seem to run counter to the Pre-Raphaelite ideals of womanhood.

The Defence of Guenevere is rather simply a dialogue between Guenevere and the Knights of the Round Table as she strives to defend herself from accusations of adultery.¹⁵³ It begins with Guenevere standing accused by Gauwaine before the knights. She opens her defense by comparing her predicament as similar to being forced to choose between two pieces of good, fine cloth and not knowing which will be better.¹⁵⁴ For if one cloth would damn her while the other might redeem her, she asks the knights then how they would know which is the better choice than she did.¹⁵⁵ She goes on to assure them that Gauwaine had lied in his accusation before launching into a description of how she felt when first seeing Launcelot, knowing that his presence had changed her life forever.¹⁵⁶ After describing then the feeling of euphoria at meeting Launcelot, she admits to kissing him before again denying that these old reminiscences mean anything, and saying once more that Gauwaine was lying about the adultery.¹⁵⁷

At this point Guenevere asks them whether if she had committed adultery would her conscience allow her to lie, and she points out to Gauwaine that he starting to pity her.¹⁵⁸ She asks him then if he is going to kill her, and challenges him to provide the proof of his claim.¹⁵⁹ When he offers up bed clothes with blood on them that he claims is Launcelot's, she counters by reminding the knights that she was the prisoner of Mellygraunce the night before, and bloodstains occurred because of Launcelot's injury while fighting to rescue her.¹⁶⁰ She then calls on the knights to make no further accusations against her, and she even asks them if they see any lie in her.¹⁶¹ Then she goes on to say that Launcelot only stayed with her

¹⁵³ William Morris, "The Defence of Guenevere," in *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems: Garland English Texts Number 2*, ed. Margaret A. Lourie (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1981.), 45-53.

¹⁵⁴ Morris, "Defence of Guenevere," 45-53.

¹⁵⁵ Morris, "Defence of Guenevere," 45-53.

¹⁵⁶ Morris, "Defence of Guenevere," 45-53.

¹⁵⁷ Morris, "Defence of Guenevere," 45-53.

¹⁵⁸ Morris, "Defence of Guenevere," 45-53.

¹⁵⁹ Morris, "Defence of Guenevere," 45-53.

¹⁶⁰ Morris, "Defence of Guenevere," 45-53.

¹⁶¹ Morris, "Defence of Guenevere," 45-53.

because she had been left alone, and after she asked him to stay that she might forget for her troubles for a time and “be like children again”.¹⁶² Although she admits being caught with him, she makes one final reproach of Gauwaine, before Launcelot arrives to defend her at the poem’s end.¹⁶³

One of the things that makes the poem stand out so well is its blending of two themes, painting Guenevere and her distress in a sympathetic light, while alluding to her guilt. The poem hints that she has indeed committed adultery with Lancelot, but it also tries to explain why she betrayed Arthur. Morris frames her affair with Launcelot as a choice between “Love, and its lack”.¹⁶⁴ Guenevere goes on to describe her marriage as, “a little word, scarce ever meant at all.”¹⁶⁵ In effect Morris is framing Guenevere’s affair from her perspective and striving to paint in a relatively positive light. Though in some ways his portrayal of Guenevere’s affair fits into the Pre-Raphaelite dialogue around the “Fallen Woman”, however Morris’s sympathies clearly lie with Guenevere’s desire for love.¹⁶⁶

That sympathy for love is made especially apparent when Guenevere describes her relationship with Launcelot as “Glorifying all things”, in comparison to her lackluster marriage to Arthur.¹⁶⁷ What becomes interesting in Morris’s writing here is that he has stripped ideal love from the bond of marriage and placed it between the woman and her lover, separate from any requirement of matrimony. So the poem itself becomes largely a parable of the intensity and inescapability of love and desire, one which Morris implies no one can escape.¹⁶⁸ This seems to be at the root of the sympathy with which Guenevere is treated and to imply that Morris does not view her as immoral for falling prey to something she cannot control. This point is reinforced by Morris’s second Arthurian poem, *King Arthur’s Tomb* (1858), which was published as a sequel in the same as *The Defence of Guenevere*.

This second poem serves in many respects as a continuation of the themes of *The Defence of Guenevere*, however *King Arthur’s Tomb* instead jumps to the ending of Guenevere and Launcelot’s affair

¹⁶² Morris, “Defence of Guenevere,” 45-53.

¹⁶³ Morris, “Defence of Guenevere,” 45-53.

¹⁶⁴ Carole Silver, *The Romance of Morris* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1982), 24-25.

¹⁶⁵ Morris, “Defence of Guenevere,” 47.

¹⁶⁶ Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites*, 94-100.

¹⁶⁷ Morris, “Defence of Guenevere,” 47.

¹⁶⁸ Silver, *Romance of Morris*, 13-24.

where the two now wrestle with its consequences, as King Arthur's kingdom collapses. It follows Launcelot's arrival at a nunnery, and his encounter with Guenevere, both characters are bitter and unhappy, with Guenevere feeling that they must end their relationship.¹⁶⁹ This decision on Guenevere's part to end their relationship seems to be more the source of the pain the two characters feel than the actual consequences of their deeds.¹⁷⁰ Charlotte Silver offers the interpretation that Guenevere is portrayed as striving to save herself and Launcelot by ending the affair, but the end seems to bring them only more suffering.¹⁷¹

The suffering Launcelot and Guenevere go through seems largely self-inflicted rather than a divine punishment, even though Guenevere invokes the idea that she is being punished by God.¹⁷² This ties *King Arthur's Tomb* together with *The Defence of Guenevere* into a narrative about the overpowering nature of love and desire, and consequently Morris seems to portray Guenevere at worst as a victim of love's overwhelming power. However, another interpretation of these two poems, is that what condemns Guenevere is not the love itself but the institutions of society and culture that prevent its realization. Institutions that place Guenevere in a loveless marriage or place her loyalty to Arthur under surveillance and open her to judgment and criticism when she fails to live up to the standards demanded of her. This is where Morris's ideas seem to collide with and contradict Pre-Raphaelite tendencies, as in the standard Pre-Raphaelite view the woman should regret her fall from grace.¹⁷³ Morris's Guenevere doesn't really seem to regret it and it is here then that Morris's poems reach their most radical point.

In *King Arthur's Tomb* clearly rebukes of the pressures of society that keep Guenevere and Launcelot apart, forcing her to go back to the Convent and mourn a husband she did not love, and leaving Launcelot bereft and alone. In this story, Morris offers a critique of society and societal expectations of women, leading to these tragic and unhappy ends. E.P. Thompson also notes this theme, commenting that is

¹⁶⁹ William Morris, "King Arthur's Tomb," in *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems: Garland English Texts Number 2*, ed. Margaret A. Lourie (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1981), 54-64.

¹⁷⁰ Morris, "King Arthur's Tomb," 54-64

¹⁷¹ Silver, *Romance of Morris*, 25-30.

¹⁷² Morris, "King Arthur's Tomb," 54-64.

¹⁷³ Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites*, 94-100.

fear of society or “sin” that drives Guenevere to remorse than any actual regret.¹⁷⁴ Though for Thompson this is more or less a youthful romantic revolt against society by Morris rather than any deeper or sustained challenge to gender norms.¹⁷⁵ Regardless of whether Morris intended this pair of poems as a critique of Victorian society and its treatment of women or they were just a youthful challenge its restrictions, the views and treatment of women diverge from the common Victorian and even Pre-Raphaelite perspective on women.

The best example of how Morris diverges from standard Victorian perspectives on gender is to compare him with another famous Victorian writer who often used Medieval imagery in his work, Alfred Tennyson, most especially in his work *Idylls of the King* (1859). In the last few sections of the poem “Lancelot and Elaine”, wherein Lancelot realizes his affair with Guinevere as morally wrong and sees Guinevere and her love as inferior to the tragic and faithful Elaine.¹⁷⁶ Yet Tennyson’s strongest condemnation of Guinevere comes in the poem “Guinevere”, which shares with Morris’s *King Arthur’s Tomb* its setting in the nunnery where Guinevere has cloistered herself after the affair was brought to light.¹⁷⁷ In the course of the poem Tennyson’s Guinevere seems to truly repent her affair and even hopes for reunion with Arthur in Heaven.¹⁷⁸ By contrast Morris’s Guinevere repents only because of societal expectations and remains deeply tormented by her abandonment of Lancelot.¹⁷⁹ This can also be seen in how Tennyson’s Guinevere repudiates the desire that led to her affair with Lancelot choosing instead to embrace the lofty figure of Arthur.¹⁸⁰ A choice which Tennyson has her frame as, “I yearned for warmth and colour which I found in Lancelot-- now I see thee what thou art, Thou art the highest and most human too.”¹⁸¹ This differs drastically from how Morris frames Guenevere’s view of the choice in *King Arthur’s*

¹⁷⁴ Thompson, *Romantic to Revolutionary*, 71.

¹⁷⁵ Thompson, *Romantic to Revolutionary*, 68-71.

¹⁷⁶ Alfred Tennyson, *Idylls of the King* (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1899), 94-95. Babel.HathiTrust Digital Library, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.b000736601>

¹⁷⁷ Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, 130-138.

¹⁷⁸ Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, 130-138.

¹⁷⁹ Morris, “King Arthur’s Tomb,” 54-64.

¹⁸⁰ Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, 130-138.

¹⁸¹ Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, 130-138.

Tomb, she feels damned for her affair with Launcelot, and yet Morris has her say of their eventual parting “I shall go mad, or else die kissing him...Let me lie down a little while and wail.”¹⁸²

While Tennyson has his Guinevere repent her affair with Lancelot and turn back to Arthur, Morris has Guenevere personally and emotionally destroyed by abandoning her affair. These stark differences can be traced back to Morris’s idealization of women and love, he ties women and love together to such a degree that what takes the greatest precedence in his Arthurian poems is the love between Guenevere and Launcelot not the immorality of their affair. Tennyson however treats the affair as immoral and wrong something to be put aside and for which Guinevere must repent.¹⁸³ It is interesting that for Tennyson it is Guinevere who needs to repent the affair, while no reference is made to Lancelot’s need to repent.¹⁸⁴ Only in the poem *Lancelot and Elaine* does Lancelot seem to repent the affair, but the issue which Tennyson seems to have Lancelot bemoan is not the immorality of the affair, but that Guinevere is less worthy than Elaine.¹⁸⁵ What makes this so for Tennyson seems to be that Guinevere is engaged in an affair, but Elaine is faithful. Which creates a double standard when it seems that Lancelot’s mistake is to involve himself with Guinevere and her inferior love, not that he is involved with a married woman.

Morris however treats Launcelot and Guenevere as equals in their relationship and leaves both equally tormented by being parted at the end in *King Arthur’s Tomb*.¹⁸⁶ What is clear is that Tennyson has no sympathy for Guinevere or her adultery. He paints it as lessening her character, and only once she has repented it does she seem to improve as an individual.¹⁸⁷ Morris however views her situation with sympathy and paints the problem with the affair as not being Guenevere and Launcelot’s love but the hurdles which society has placed in their way. How society derails Guenevere and Launcelot’s love is the source of the conflict and suffering in Morris’s work, not their affair.

¹⁸² Morris, “King Arthur’s Tomb,” 54-64.

¹⁸³ Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, 130-138.

¹⁸⁴ Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, 130-138.

¹⁸⁵ Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, 94-95.

¹⁸⁶ Morris, “King Arthur’s Tomb,” 54-64.

¹⁸⁷ Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, 130-138.

This characterization of Guenevere's affair by William Morris is born in large part from the Medievalist worldview that he inherited from the Pre-Raphaelites, and John Ruskin which reduced women to mere images or perhaps objects of love. While many historians have commented on the disconcerting aspects of this view of women, E.P. Thompson focused in particular on the role of love in Morris's and the Pre-Raphaelite approach to women.¹⁸⁸ In Thompson's view the Pre-Raphaelites and Morris idolized love or this particular vision of it to such an extent that it turned women into narcissistic receptacles of reduction for the love of men.¹⁸⁹ Thompson argues that what the Pre-Raphaelites are truly interested in here is the intensity and feeling of Love. For Morris, this created a fascination with the love affair of Launcelot and Guenevere.¹⁹⁰ There is perhaps here a comparison to the Medieval idea of Courtly Love, which certainly seems to be part of what Thompson is suggesting in his discussion of the Pre-Raphaelite conception of love. In many respects Morris's views on women seem to be very strongly aligned with the Pre-Raphaelite understanding of womanhood but there are some differences.

The greatest difference leads back to J.A. George's commentary on the dual nature of the Pre-Raphaelite approach to women, one which uplifted some but reviled others for their "fleshly" desires.¹⁹¹ An aspect of this can be seen in their fascination with the concept of the "fallen woman" which inspired many Pre-Raphaelite works.¹⁹² Where Morris seems to be different from the Pre-Raphaelites is that while they are all fascinated with the "fleshly" desires of women, the Pre-Raphaelites would have joined Tennyson in condemning them. Morris, by contrast, seems almost celebratory of the "fleshly" desires of his Guenevere, and defines the problem as society's response to the affair, not her desire. In some sense this does line up with the Pre-Raphaelite they certainly joined Morris in idolizing women and love, Morris seems more willing to accept that women had desires themselves, beyond just being the objects of love for men. In the bigger picture whether his views are that much more progressive than his fellow Pre-Raphaelites is more complicated, as while Morris seems to have at least acknowledged and even celebrated women's agency in

¹⁸⁸ Thompson, *Romantic to Revolutionary*, 65.

¹⁸⁹ Thompson, *Romantic to Revolutionary*, 65.

¹⁹⁰ Thompson, *Romantic to Revolutionary*, 65-71.

¹⁹¹ George, "King Arthur to Sidonia the Sorceress," 92-95.

¹⁹² des Cars, *The Pre-Raphaelites*, 52-53.

the *Defence of Guenevere*, there are still troubling aspects to his marriage that cast doubt on those views. He cast his wife into the role of a medieval noblewoman out of a medieval romance. Through their relationship and indeed in his early works like the *Defence of Guenevere* he seems to have almost played out a medieval fantasy of romance. The consequences of this for his marriage and his perception of women and romance suggest that at least major part of the problems in his marriage lay in his preoccupation with a fantasy vision of his wife.

Courage: Masculinity and Violence in the Thought of William Morris

The crisis in Morris's marriage and the collapse of any romantic relationship between him and Jane seems to have precipitated a change in his approach to gender, women, and masculinity. This can first be seen in his poems of the late 1860s and early 1870s carried a mournful tone of failed romance. It was a prominent theme in several poems from his first real success literary success *The Earthly Paradise* (1868-1870).¹⁹³ E.P. Thompson suggests that Morris's desire to create the idealized romantic relationship that his literature had portrayed ultimately drove the failure of Morris's marriage.¹⁹⁴ In other words Thompson argues that what Morris desired was to recreate the relationship between Launcelot and Guenevere between himself and Jane Morris. In doing that however he more accurately played the role of Pygmalion, loving not his wife but the image of her that he created. There has already been some discussion of how Morris's perception of women as image or receptacles for Masculine desire affected his views on women, but how this view and some of its attendant beliefs shaped Morris's conception of masculinity is equally important. It also provides a window into Morris's broader conception of manhood, though a discussion of the relationship between masculinity and work in Morris's thought will have to wait for Chapter 2.

Central to Morris's conception of Gender, is the idea of desire or passion. From the Pre-Raphaelites he inherited a view of women which turned them into objects of romantic desire for the man. Though Morris respected the reality of female desire in *The Defence of Guenevere* and other writings, the reduction of women in Morris's thought into objects of desire also reduced men into creatures of desire. In Morris's understanding men are ruled by their desire and their passions be they romantic, vengeful, or

¹⁹³ Thompson, *Romantic to Revolutionary*, 153-158.

¹⁹⁴ Thompson, *Romantic to Revolutionary*, 157-158.

artistic. One of the works in which Morris explores these concepts in the most depth is his poem *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs* (1876). The intertwining of masculine desire and violence in Morris's poem comes together in his vision of courage, which in Morris's mind subdues desire, yet at the same time is driven by masculine desire.¹⁹⁵ Morris claims to have seen this reflected in Medieval Icelandic culture, which he interprets as suggesting that self-restraint of emotion was favored over open expression of feeling or desire.¹⁹⁶

Morris's discussion of desire takes many forms in his writing, though a common word he uses for it is "energy" which he most often uses to describe the artistic impulse in human nature.¹⁹⁷ According to literary scholar Ingrid Hanson violence in *Sigurd the Volsung*, stems from a free or unconstrained desire or "energy." What becomes important for Morris then is that Courage is a controlled act of violence or desire.¹⁹⁸ Hanson also points out that Morris seems to have allowed and even expected the women in *Sigurd the Volsung* to also engage in acts of Courage and Violence.¹⁹⁹ To Hanson this suggests to some degree the all-consuming nature of Morris's conception of masculinity, such that it absorbs even the women into it by allowing them to engage in violence and passion just like the men.²⁰⁰ In literary scholar Richard Firth's view this can be tied to Morris's perception of the Icelandic Sagas as "Folk art", the productions of an entire community.²⁰¹ This ties in with Hanson's argument that the absorption of women into Morris's conception of courage stems from Courage and masculinity becoming the defining aspect of their greater community.²⁰²

¹⁹⁵ Ingrid Hanson, *William Morris and the Uses of Violence, 1856-1890* (New York: Anthem Press, 2013), 71. ProQuest Ebook Central. <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy.lib.uni.edu/lib/rodlibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1190919>

¹⁹⁶ William Morris, "The Early Literature of the North-Iceland," in *The Unpublished Lectures of William Morris*, ed. Eugene D. Lemire (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1969), 185-186.

¹⁹⁷ William Morris, "The Aims of Arts," in *Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. XXII* (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1915), 83-84.

¹⁹⁸ Hanson, *The Uses of Violence*, 95.

¹⁹⁹ Hanson, *The Uses of Violence*, 95.

²⁰⁰ Hanson, *The Uses of Violence*, 89-91.

²⁰¹ Richard Firth, "The Worship of Courage: William Morris's Sigurd the Volsung and Victorian Medievalism," in *Beyond Arthurian Romances: The Reach of Victorian Medievalism*, eds. Jennifer A Palmgren and Lorretta M. Holloway (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 128-129. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy.lib.uni.edu/lib/rodlibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=307633>

²⁰² Hanson, *The Uses of Violence*, 95.

In Hanson's view, Morris's use of violence in *Sigurd the Volsung* shows variety of different expressions of masculinity.²⁰³ Hanson finds different performances of masculinity in Morris's presentation of several conflicting visions of masculinity, they are each different performances of masculinity.²⁰⁴ In essence Hanson is invoking the idea of performative masculinity, and arguing that differing acts of violence perform different aspects of masculinity.²⁰⁵ For Morris the concept of "Courage" defines how he portrays positive performances of masculine or manly behavior. In some of his later socialist writings, Morris asserts that art is an expression of Courage.²⁰⁶ Nonetheless, there is a vital connection between courage and violence in Morris's work, which Hanson connects to his belief in the "animal life of man".²⁰⁷ An example of this in Morris's Sigurd comes from an early passage describing the character Sigmund's anger and desire for vengeance against the King who had his father killed, and left Sigmund himself to be killed by wolves.²⁰⁸ This rage leads Sigmund to identify himself with the wolves, and even describe himself as a wolf.²⁰⁹ In Morris's mind this was a metaphor for human passion or desire which Morris saw as dominating men.

The connection between desire and violence is that violence is an expression of desire, and what makes an act courageous in Morris's *Sigurd* is that Courage is that it is a controlled act of desire and violence.²¹⁰ In Firth's view, Morris found this vision of Courage identified with self-control within Icelandic literature.²¹¹ Though Hanson suggests that Morris's vision of manhood and masculinity does leave room for a lack or loss of self-control, even if only temporarily.²¹² In *Sigurd*, for example, while overcome by madness and anger Sigmund attacks and almost kills his son Sinfiotli. Sinfiotli survives to forgive his father and two move past the incident.²¹³ The connections between this passage and role of

²⁰³ Hanson, *The Uses of Violence*, 84.

²⁰⁴ Hanson, *The Uses of Violence*, 83-84.

²⁰⁵ Hanson, *The Uses of Violence*, 83-84.

²⁰⁶ William Morris, "The Aims of Art," 96-97.

²⁰⁷ Hanson, *The Uses of Violence*, 72.

²⁰⁸ William Morris, *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1891), 23-24. Babel.Hathitrust Digital Library, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc2.ark:/13960/t5fb5657n?urlappend=%3Bseq=38>

²⁰⁹ Morris, *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung*, 24.

²¹⁰ Hanson, *The Uses of Violence*, 72-73.

²¹¹ Firth, "The Worship of Courage," 129-130.

²¹² Hanson, *The Uses of Violence*, 73-75.

²¹³ Morris, *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung*, 37-39.

passion in manhood, go back to Morris's understanding of men as being ruled by their baser passions and desires. This is made clear when Sigmund and Sinfiotli are described as "were-wolves" in the passages preceding Sigmund's madness induced attack on his son.²¹⁴ Hanson suggests that what saves Sigmund and Sinfiotli from being ruled solely by their desires is their companionship, or to use a term that Morris might have preferred, their fellowship.²¹⁵ In effect Morris's vision of how the inherent violence of masculinity is controlled and shaped into courage is through human fellowship, in a sense Morris's vision of masculinity is rather communal. This entwines itself rather deeply with Morris's conception of work, and the organization of human and particularly masculine society.

There is another interesting note about Morris's conception of masculinity, violence, and courage to be found in *Sigurd*. As Hanson points out, Morris tells of the degeneration of Fafnir who began as human but through his cowardice and especially his greed was corrupted into a serpent.²¹⁶ One parallel between Fafnir's story and Sigmund's is that both attacked a family member, though Fafnir killed his father, and began the first steps towards the loss of his manhood and humanity through that uncontrolled act of violence.²¹⁷ Morris connects this act of violence, and Fafnir's greedy desire and portrays it as the beginning of Fafnir's self-destruction. By contrast Sigmund's madness induced attack on his son does not lead his own loss of humanity. Hanson views the key difference as being Sigmund and Sinfiotli's fellowship, which in some sense is true as it acts to bring Sigmund back from the brink of his worst passions.²¹⁸

For Morris, masculinity was defined by violent passions and desires, which in his poetry often led to acts of violence. In this worldview Men were less able to restrain themselves from acting on their passions; only when they could draw on Courage could that masculine "energy" or passion be redirected to some more worthy purpose. Because men could not escape their passions, and the only way for any kind of self-control or restraint came from the community. This is shown in a famous passage from his utopian

²¹⁴ Morris, *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung*, 37-39.

²¹⁵ Hanson, *The Uses of Violence*, 74-75.

²¹⁶ Hanson, *The Uses of Violence*, 75.

²¹⁷ Morris, *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung*, 96-97.

²¹⁸ Hanson, *The Uses of Violence*, 74-75.

News From Nowhere, where a man driven by his passions and desires commits a murder.²¹⁹ In this idyllic future society, the only sources of friction are human passions and desires, and the motive behind the murder turns out to be unrequited love.²²⁰ This is the perspective which shaped much of Morris's thought about masculinity. Men were like animals, ruled by passions, which Morris viewed as at least partially inescapable. He does however seem to believe there are ways to control or direct these passions to more useful ends, particularly through Artistic expression and work as will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

The Woman Question: Socialism and Women in the Mind of William Morris

While most of Morris's thought on gender, whether masculine or feminine stemmed from his involvement with the Pre-Raphaelites, his embracement of Socialism in 1880, coupled with problems in his marriage forced him to reconsider and debate his views on women. The British Socialist Movement in the 1880s was sharply divided and filled with conflicting opinions about Women, women's roles, and Feminism.²²¹ Morris set out to form alliances with Feminists in the Movement to achieve common goals, particularly when it comes to the realm of women's labor, a point that will be discussed more in Chapter 2.²²² Taken at face value Morris's support for women and women's rights is clear as day. However, when his discussions of women's rights are considered more carefully, contradictions and complications emerge. An 1880 letter to George Bernard Shaw on the issue of marriage shows this particularly well. While Morris is very explicit in his belief in women's equality with men throughout the letter, even saying that in his view a man who did not see women as equals was not a true socialist.²²³ Yet Morris's motive for sending the letter was to reject an article Shaw had written attacking the institution of marriage, seeing Shaw's views as too radical.²²⁴ Although he suggests in the letter that he doesn't want it to be used to undermine

²¹⁹ Morris, "News from Nowhere," 165-166.

²²⁰ Morris, "News from Nowhere," 165-166.

²²¹ Owen Holland, *William Morris's Utopianism: Propaganda, Politics, and Prefiguration* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 54-64.

²²² Holland, *William Morris's Utopianism*, 55-56.

²²³ William Morris to George Bernard Shaw, March 18, 1885, in *Collected Letters of William Morris, Vol. II: 1885-1888*, eds. Norman Kelvin and Gale Sigal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 404.

²²⁴ William Morris to George Bernard Shaw, March 18, 1885, in *Collected Letters of William Morris, Vol. II: 1885-1888*, eds. Norman Kelvin and Gale Sigal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 404.

the Socialist movement, one might argue that Shaw's attack on the institution made Morris personally uncomfortable. To dig into the influence of the Socialist movement on Morris's writings and thought about women requires then a consideration of a broad range of his later works, including, *News From Nowhere* (1890), *The Wood Beyond The World* (1894), and *The Waters of the Wondrous Isles* (1897). In these last works, the complexities and contradictions of Morris's unique mix of Medievalism and socialism emerge. The ways in which Morris both attacks Victorian views of women, and then turns around reinforces them, become apparent. Sometimes he does this within the same section of the book.

Before those last two works can be considered, his great work of Medievalist Utopianism, *News From Nowhere* (1890) must be tackled. In it literary scholar Lori Campbell finds Morris drawing connections between the problem of restrictions on women's legal rights in Victorian society and possible solutions available through his understanding of Socialism.²²⁵ In the Chapter entitled "Concerning Love", Morris states unequivocally that in his utopia women and men are not legally bound in any way to one another, and are free to pursue their own ends.²²⁶ However, At the same time however Morris's narrator notes that many women are still carrying out traditionally feminine roles, this trouble the narrator who is subsequently admonished for it by being asked whether he views "women's work" as lesser to "men's work".²²⁷

From the perspective of Lori Campbell, *News From Nowhere* attacks the restrictiveness of Victorian legal measures towards women, while it also reinforces Victorian gender roles in other ways.²²⁸ This is reflected in Morris's comments about women's roles in the society of Nowhere and certainly in his assumption that in a world where they have no obligations to do so, a large number of women would still carry out domestic roles similar to those in his own time. His discussion of the role of women also slips into

²²⁵ Lori Campbell, "Where Medieval Romance Meets Victorian Reality: The "Woman Question" in William Morris's *The Wood Beyond the World*," in *Beyond Arthurian Romances: The Reach of Victorian Medievalism*, eds. Jennifer A. Palmgren and Loretta M. Holloway (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2005), 176-178. ProQuest Ebook Central. <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy.lib.uni.edu/lib/rodlibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=307633>

²²⁶ Morris, "News from Nowhere," 59-62.

²²⁷ Morris, "News from Nowhere," 59-62.

²²⁸ Campbell, "Medieval Romance Meets Victorian Reality," 176-178.

a vision of his old idealization of women, as companions and objects of love, and in motherhood.²²⁹ One consequence of this is that he dismisses the idea that women in his utopian future might choose not to have children.²³⁰ Noted Morris Scholar Jan Marsh dismisses *News From Nowhere* as unfortunately being a “masculine vision of paradise”.²³¹ This lies at the root of the problem in *News From Nowhere*, that for all of Morris’s seemingly legitimate belief in Women’s equality he still clings to his old Pre-Raphaelite view of women.

Earlier in the “Concerning Love” chapter, however, he rejects the idealization of romantic relationships, describing that as “Calf Love”, indicative of an immature understanding of desire.²³² His failure to fully cast off the shackles of his Pre-Raphaelite view of women is rather clear in that he still places romantic or sexual desire as central to the relationships between Men and Women.²³³ Jan Marsh notes that the Narrator of Morris’s *News From Nowhere* tends to view all of the women characters through the lens of desire.²³⁴ Even Morris still defines all his female characters through the lens of desire, yet an interesting critique still emerges: an explicit rejection of the commercialization of desire.²³⁵ This sets the stage for Morris’s rejection of Capitalism’s influence on gender relations.

Morris addresses capitalism’s impact in *The Wood Beyond the World* (1894). Lori Campbell argues persuasively that the entire work functions as an attack on Gender roles in a Capitalist society.²³⁶ She argues that the hero of the story, Walter mirrors in many ways the traditional expectations of a Victorian capitalist gentleman.²³⁷ Interestingly a major part of the plot revolves around Walter’s submission and subjugation to two powerful female characters, the villainous Mistress and the Maid, his eventual lover, which leave him at their mercy.²³⁸ Morris’s most interesting ideas on gender come to the forefront in

²²⁹ Morris, “News from Nowhere,” 60-62.

²³⁰ Morris, “News from Nowhere,” 60-62.

²³¹ Jan Marsh, “Concerning Love: News from Nowhere and Gender,” *William Morris & News from Nowhere: A Vision for Our Time*, eds. Stephen Coleman and Paddy O’Sullivan (Bideford, Devon: Green Books, 1990), 121.

²³² Morris, “News from Nowhere,” 57-58.

²³³ Morris, “News from Nowhere,” 55-62.

²³⁴ Marsh, “Concerning Love,” 121-124.

²³⁵ Morris, “News from Nowhere,” 58.

²³⁶ Campbell, “Medieval Romance Meets Victorian Reality,” 169-190.

²³⁷ Campbell, “Medieval Romance Meets Victorian Reality,” 182-190.

²³⁸ Campbell, “Medieval Romance Meets Victorian Reality,” 182-190.

Walter's relationship with the Maid. This appears in one interaction when the Maid orders Walter to wait and stay hidden while she carries out her own plan get them past potential enemies, Walter acquiesces calling her "Master".²³⁹ This use of the word "Master" is interesting as in Morris's writing, "Master" almost always has negative connotations in his works, but he uses it quite liberally to describe Walter's role in his and the Maid's relationship.²⁴⁰ It's use drives home what Morris sees as a negative imbalance in their relationship and fits with similar ideas that Morris expresses in *News From Nowhere*. In that work's utopian future, a character says that "Men have no longer any opportunity of tyrannizing over the women, or the women over the men".²⁴¹ These seem to suggest at the minimum that an imbalance of power between men and women, one way or the other, is viewed negatively in Morris's eyes.

Throughout the *The Wood Beyond the World*, there are numerous other times where Walter is at The Maid's mercy, right up until the roles are reversed near the end when Walter is made a King.²⁴² Then as Campbell notes the roles are reversed between the two characters and the Maid is placed at Walter's mercy.²⁴³ At that point, she submits herself to him and pleads that he, "suffer [the Maid] to be thy servant".²⁴⁴ Walter of course accepts her submission to him, and a book which revolved so heavily around the flipping of power dynamics between Walter and the female characters of the Maid and The Mistress returns back to traditional Victorian ideas about gender.²⁴⁵ However, Campbell argues that Morris does not intend the reader to be happy with this return to traditional gender norms in the relationship between the Maid and Walter.²⁴⁶ Instead she argues that it is meant to be a sign that he is still very "immature".²⁴⁷ Something Campbell suggests that Walter represents the average Victorian man, his immaturity may be a

²³⁹ William Morris, *The Wood Beyond the World* (London: Lawrence and Bullen, 1895), 198-207. Babel.Hathitrust Digital Library, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.32106012646599>

²⁴⁰ Morris, *Wood Beyond the World*, 216-217.

²⁴¹ Morris, "News From Nowhere," 59.

²⁴² Campbell, "Medieval Romance Meets Victorian Reality," 182-190.

²⁴³ Campbell, "Medieval Romance Meets Victorian Reality," 182-190.

²⁴⁴ Morris, *Wood Beyond the World*, 256.

²⁴⁵ Campbell, "Medieval Romance Meets Victorian Reality," 182-190.

²⁴⁶ Campbell, "Medieval Romance Meets Victorian Reality," 182-190.

²⁴⁷ Campbell, "Medieval Romance Meets Victorian Reality," 182-190.

sign that he is unable to escape the capitalistic worldview he had inherited from his status as a merchant's son.²⁴⁸

It's tempting here to read Morris's intention here as being to show Walter's failure to grow beyond the imperfections of his own world. Whether such a reading of *The Wood Beyond the World* is valid remains less clear. For example it is striking that after the passage where the Maid offer herself as a Servant to Walter, his reply puts her at a far more equal status "Sweetheart this is now thy place...by my side".²⁴⁹ This ties in with the more problematic gender elements that Campbell notes in Morris's work, such as his defining the Maid by her love for Walter.²⁵⁰ This comes up in many places in the work, with her assertion that "My joy...is for the love of thee".²⁵¹ This resolution looks a lot like Morris's old Pre-Raphaelite conception of women, as does Walter's willing submission of himself to the Maid's authority throughout most of the novel, so it seems as though Morris is still holding to his old ideas about men and women which he has always believed.²⁵² Nonetheless If Campbell's suggestion is accurate, and Morris truly intends the reader to be unhappy with the ending, and with the problematic power dynamics between the Maid and Walter, it raises the possibility that Morris is repudiating at least some of his old Medievalist idealization of women, and instead recasting those ideas to show the problems with gender roles in the Victorian era. Yet not everyone shares this interpretation of *The Wood Beyond the World*, Owen Holland dismisses *The Wood Beyond the World*, out of hand as presenting a particularly uncomfortable view of gender relationships.²⁵³ This rejection of the *The Wood Beyond the World* is certainly valid if it is meant to be taken purely at face value; if on the other hand it is meant to be a more subtle attack on Victorian gender roles, then it takes on a significantly more radical meaning. The possibility of an even greater change in Morris's views on gender and women is made even more explicit in one of his last novels

²⁴⁸ Campbell, "Medieval Romance Meets Victorian Reality," 169-190.

²⁴⁹ Morris, *Wood Beyond the World*, 257.

²⁵⁰ Campbell, "Medieval Romance Meets Victorian Reality," 182-190

²⁵¹ Morris, *Wood Beyond the World*, 198.

²⁵² Campbell, "Medieval Romance Meets Victorian Reality," 182-190.

²⁵³ Holland, *William Morris's Utopianism*, 81.

The Waters of the Wondrous Isles (1897) follows a female heroine, Birdalone, and it is Morris's most explicit attack on Victorian gender roles.²⁵⁴ Certainly it is one of Morris's most radical later works and has received a great deal of attention for its handling of female characters.²⁵⁵ It also works as a repudiation of how many of his earlier works treated women, for unlike most Morris's earlier female characters, Birdalone active in shaping her fate.²⁵⁶ She seeks out adventure throughout the novel, and while she is supported by male helpers at various points, they never undermine her capability or agency as a hero.²⁵⁷ The overarching theme of the book is her growth into adulthood, and every one of her adventures involve her growth as a character a rise in her maturity.²⁵⁸ It's significant that most of Birdalone's important relationships in *The Wondrous Isles* are with other women, like the kindly Habundia, her adoptive mother, to the villainous witch, as well as various friends.²⁵⁹ There are several interesting passage from the witch, who offers Birdalone the chance to become a great beauty for the purposes of drawing men in and gain for herself "the sweetness of love or the glory of dominion".²⁶⁰ This plays into themes present in several of Morris's other works particularly *News From Nowhere* and the claim: "Men have no longer any opportunity of tyrannizing over the women, or the women over the men".²⁶¹ It unveils Morris's concern with power imbalances between men and women in their relationships, something that seems to have preoccupied Morris for years by that point. However, by the end of his life he had found that not just that men could abuse women, but that women could also abuse men. It is on the latter that Morris focuses most heavily in *The Wondrous Isles*, suggesting his fear of women's ability to mistreat men weighed more heavily on him, perhaps after years of an unhappy marriage, than did the more common of systemic ways in which men mistreated women. It raises the possibility that his bitterness about his marriage's collapse may have changed his thinking about women and gender relationships even in his old age.

²⁵⁴ Campbell, "Medieval Romance Meets Victorian Reality," 178-180.

²⁵⁵ Holland, *William Morris's Utopianism*, 80.

²⁵⁶ Campbell, "Medieval Romance Meets Victorian Reality," 178-179.

²⁵⁷ Campbell, "Medieval Romance Meets Victorian Reality," 178-179.

²⁵⁸ Silver, *Romance of Morris*, 182.

²⁵⁹ Silver, *Romance of Morris*, 182-183.

²⁶⁰ William Morris, *The Waters of the Wondrous Isles* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1897), 44-45. Babel.Hathitrust Digital Library, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044086850070>

²⁶¹ Morris, "News from Nowhere," 59.

The Wondrous Isles focuses most on the relationships which Birdalone has with other women, especially the influence of her two conflicting mother figures in the kindly Habundia and the villainous Witch.²⁶² Even so, it's significant that throughout the narrative Birdalone is free to shape herself and is not portrayed as a simple object of desire.²⁶³ Indeed, most of most of the female characters in the book have more agency to choose different course than in most of Morris's other novels.²⁶⁴ Nonetheless *The Wondrous Isles* does continue to reflect many of Morris's old Pre-Raphaelite ideas about women, although the character who most equates women with objects is the villainous witch. Yet the book has many passages which reflect a view of women as idealized objects. Take for example a passage near the middle of the book wherein Birdalone is able to convince a group of men to let her enter a Castle that women are barred from entering.²⁶⁵ The man who permits Birdalone to enter describes her as "exceeding fair" and goes on to describe her beautiful "sweet voice, and the goodliness of her face and eyes".²⁶⁶ Such Scenes continue to reinforce something of a Pre-Raphaelite conception of women in his final works, even in the one most famous for challenging traditional ideas about women.

In all, *Waters of the Wondrous Isles* continues many of the same themes about women that may be found in most of Morris's works. While his Pre-Raphaelite conception of women is still alive and well, it has changed enough that Morris has to some degree embraced the idea of women's equality. The problem is that he still hangs onto this Pre-Raphaelite focus on desire and passion, which necessitates that women become objects of masculine desire. As far back as *The Defence of Guenevere* (1858), Morris was developing his own views on women even acknowledging and celebrating to some degree female agency, albeit only in the realm of the pursuit of romantic love. In the effect this had on his marriage it meant that his views were little different from those of other Pre-Raphaelites and resulted in his inability to properly relate to his wife, because instead of relating to her as a person he perceived as an idealized object. She was like Pygmalion's statue, a blank slate onto which he could project whatever vision he wanted. In the years

²⁶² Campbell, "Medieval Romance Meets Victorian Reality," 178-179.

²⁶³ Silver, *Romance of Morris*, 182-186.

²⁶⁴ Silver, *Romance of Morris*, 182-184.

²⁶⁵ Morris, *The Waters of the Wondrous Isles*, 148.

²⁶⁶ Morris, *The Waters of the Wondrous Isles*, 148.

after his wife's infidelity, Morris became more distrusting of women, as his fears about women holding power over men seem to suggest. Nonetheless as a Socialist, he supported women's equality with men, at least in principle, even if he never fully accepted the full implications of that equality. Throughout his life, Morris remained committed to a belief that Women and Men were fundamentally different in mind and character, partly because of his Pre-Raphaelite associations and presumably drawing from the broader impulses of his own time.

William Morris's problematic views on Gender are complex, and even contradictory. They were shaped by ideas he developed from his association with the Pre-Raphaelite movement, and admiration for John Ruskin. He also developed his own ideas by diving deeper into the implications of Pre-Raphaelite gender conceptions of women. The Pre-Raphaelite focus on desire readily shaped their conception of women, and certainly it shaped Morris's own understanding of women and his relationship with his wife Jane. This understanding led Morris to enter a relationship which may have been doomed from the outset by Jane's indifference to him and his own unapologetic idealization and objectification of her. Curiously, Morris also developed his own ideas about gender built on the Pre-Raphaelite focus on desire, in that he saw men and women as defined by their desires. This turned women into objects for masculine desire even though Morris at times acknowledged that they had their own desires. This was something which he celebrated as young man in love, but later came to see as suspect when his wife turned to other men. If he saw men as creatures ruled mainly by their desires, which might be controlled by the bonds of fellowship, he thought that men could never be fully free from their desires. Throughout his life and work, Morris's conception of gender remained grounded in his own idealized vision of the Middle Ages. This vision's effect on his family life, and on the evolution of his views about women speak for themselves, testifying against the healthiness of these views, and offering a reminder that Morris's medievalism spoke more often to his own time than any accurate depiction of the Middle Ages.

CHAPTER TWO:
THE JOY OF WORK: WORK AND MEDIEVALISM
IN THE MIND OF WILLIAM MORRIS

The role and nature of work in William Morris's mythologized vision of the Middle Ages and its place in his construction of socialism is critical to understanding the inner workings of both aspects of his worldview. Work occupies a central role in Morris's utopian mythologization of the Medieval world, beginning with the disfunctions in the Victorian approach to work that he found responsible for the evils of his time. To Morris the Middle Ages, particularly in England, became a lost time of skilled craftsmen and artisans, organized in their guilds, and all wiped away by the capitalism and industrialization.²⁶⁷ The reasons behind this mythologization of the Medieval Craftsman and the guild system lies in Morris's conception of work. For him work was meant to serve two functions: To be useful or to be beautiful. The goal of all forms of work should be the production of either something necessary or a work of Art and most often it was preferable to achieve both things. This is the idea at the center of Morris's conception of work, and it is related to his ideas about desire. The previous chapter discusses how Morris's views on gender were shaped by his tendency to define gender in the light of human, usually male, desire. For Morris, desire is the creative impulse in the realm of work, that is, the human desire to make art. This desire to create should be at the heart of all forms of human work. This understanding has many implications which relate not only to Morris's view on gender in work, but also in how he frames and discusses the relationship between Art and Work.

Work also sits at the heart of Morris's understanding of Socialism, such that his view of work is vital to his construction of socialism. The core of Morris's ideas about work stems from his great hero and chief influence, John Ruskin.²⁶⁸ Even so, Morris differed from Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites on the nature and purpose of work in several important ways. First, Morris believed work should be a pleasurable,

²⁶⁷William Morris, "Feudal England," in *The Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. .XXIII* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1910), 39-58.

²⁶⁸ Martin A. Danahay, "Chapter 6: John Ruskin, Digging," in *Gender at Work in Victorian Culture: Literature, Art and Masculinity* (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), 126-127. ProQuest Ebook Central. <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy.lib.uni.edu/lib/rodlibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=4758914>

desirable, or joyful activity.²⁶⁹ Second, by comparison to most of the other Pre-Raphaelites Morris was committed to putting these theories into practice in ways that his fellow Pre-Raphaelites were not.²⁷⁰ This led to the foundation of William Morris & Co., commonly called the “Firm” by him and his associates.²⁷¹ From Morris’s artistic work and writings sprang the Arts and Crafts Movement, which combined Morris’s Medievalist, Socialist, and artistic ambitions into an artistic movement that came to have widespread influence. The material and aesthetic effects and consequences of this movement, though they spring from Morris’s treatment of work, are better addressed in the third chapter covering Art Morris’s Medieval imagination.

Breaking down Work in Morris’s thought is a complex endeavor. While a chronological look might reveal some things about how his understanding of work changed over time, this chapter’s approach is to break it down based on certain themes in Morris’s writing that relate, either explicitly or tangentially to Work. These themes range from his idealized vision of fellowship among workers and the important role of desire or Joy in Work, to the threat of the elite, all of which are components of Morris’s larger dialogue on and around work. There is also a hierarchy which Morris bakes into his understanding of work, that there are greater and lesser crafts that someone can develop the skills to do. Gender also plays a part, both in the role of masculinity in work, and Morris’s conception of women’s work, both of which have strong connections to Morris’s hierarchy of different crafts. Before tackling all of this it is best to begin with the very core of Morris’s understanding of work, and the influence of Ruskin on that understanding.

The Nature of Work in Morris’s Thought: Work as Joy

Much like his views on gender, the core of Morris’s ideas about work stem from the influence of John Ruskin, much like his views on gender. But where most of Morris’s ideas about women seem to have been shaped through the influence of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, his ideas about work were inspired his own individual reading of Ruskin. Ultimately, Morris took a radically different path from Ruskin in

²⁶⁹ Danahay, *Gender at Work*, 126-127.

²⁷⁰ Gillian Naylor, *The Arts and Crafts Movement: A Study of its Sources, Ideals and Influence on Design Theory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), 98-103.

²⁷¹ Naylor, *The Arts and Crafts Movement*, 100-103.

interpreting the nature of work, despite his initial similarity to Ruskin, as Martin Danahay argues in explaining Ruskin's thought.²⁷² From Danahay's perspective the key difference between the two is Morris's belief that work should become a "leisure" activity.²⁷³ While there is some truth to this conclusion Danahay's discussion of Morris's thought on work is limited and his emphasis on leisure can be rather misleading, since he only briefly addresses that Morris saw work as a creative activity.²⁷⁴

To Morris, work ideally expressed the natural human impulse to create, the natural desire or "energy" to make something expressed in "something worth its exercise".²⁷⁵ While Morris did, as Danahay notes, regularly refer to work as leisure, and seemed to fear "idleness," the suggestion that Morris understood work as simply leisure, ignores much of Morris's own writings on work.²⁷⁶ Danahay's emphasis on leisure is challenged by perhaps the most famous statement Morris made about art, "Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful".²⁷⁷ While Morris is discussing aesthetic beauty in this quote (a topic which will be revisited in some depth in the next chapter), it has implications for how Morris thinks about work, which are developed in his other writings. Morris regularly discusses the need for "useful work", particularly in his essay "Useful Work vs. Useless Toil", which offers two important facets for "useful" work.²⁷⁸ Useful work may be simply useful or necessary, or it may produce something beautiful. This should suggest from the beginning that, while leisure is part of Morris's conception of what work should ideally be, it is not the only aspect of his understanding, as he conceives some forms of work as only fulfilling necessary functions rather than creating "beauty". Simplifying Morris's view of work as fulfilling a creative need to simple leisure seems to ignore, the depth and breadth of work in Morris's thought.

²⁷² Danahay, *Gender at Work*, 125-128.

²⁷³ Danahay, *Gender at Work*, 126-127.

²⁷⁴ Danahay, *Gender at Work*, 126-127.

²⁷⁵ William Morris, "The Aims of Art," in *The Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. XXIII* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1915), 90-91.

²⁷⁶ Danahay, *Gender at Work*, 126-127.

²⁷⁷ William Morris, "The Beauty of Life," in *The Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. XXII* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1914), 76.

²⁷⁸ William Morris, "Useful Work versus Useless Toil," in *The Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. XXIII* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1915), 98-120.

Another issue for Danahay is how clearly Morris's ideas about work needing to be pleasurable were drawn from Ruskin, especially Ruskin's multivolume work the *Stones of Venice* (1851-1853).²⁷⁹ The most important part for Morris was Ruskin's chapter on "The Nature of Gothic", which Morris published as a separate volume in 1892.²⁸⁰ In Morris's preface, he presents *The Nature of Gothic* as "one of the most important things written" by Ruskin, because "the lesson which Ruskin here teaches us, is that art is the expression of man's pleasure in labour".²⁸¹ The significance of Morris's own interpretation of Ruskin is worth remembering as there were serious differences between how the two men construct the nature of work. The core idea that work's ultimate purpose should be to produce art is present in the thought of both men, and Ruskin too references the need for men to derive pleasure from their work.²⁸² Yet pleasure is more central to Morris's understanding of work than Ruskin's because of differences in how the two men constructed their ideal society, and the role work played in that vision. While Morris placed greater emphasis on the need for pleasure from work, it seems to have been more tangential to Ruskin's ideas about work

Morris discusses the nature of work, and especially the need for it to be pleasurable, at some length in *News From Nowhere*, primarily in Chapter XXVI entitled "The Obstinate Refusers". In it the narrator encounters a group of masons, made up mostly of men, but including two women, in the middle of constructing a stone house and decorating it with carvings.²⁸³ Yet before Morris's narrator even encounters the masons he first comes upon a group of women who are engaging in "friendly bickering" with the masons, complaining that the builders have eschewed the traditional task of haymaking in favor of working with stone.²⁸⁴ Throughout the chapter, the work of the masons is treated with bemusement by outside

²⁷⁹ Lionel Lambourne, *Utopian Craftsmen: The Arts and Crafts Movement from the Cotswolds to Chicago* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Inc. 1980), 13-14.

²⁸⁰ Lambourne, *Utopian Craftsmen*, 13.

²⁸¹ William Morris, preface to 1892 edition of *The Nature of Gothic: A Chapter From the Stones of Venice*, by John Ruskin (London: Ballantyne, Hanson, & Co. 1900), vii. Babel.Hathitrust Digital Library, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/gri.ark:/13960/t21c5cs1p?urlappend=%3Bseq=13>

²⁸² John Ruskin, *The Nature of Gothic: A Chapter From the Stones of Venice* (London: Ballantyne, Hanson, & Co. 1900), 13. Babel.Hathitrust Digital Library, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/gri.ark:/13960/t21c5cs1p?urlappend=%3Bseq=29>

²⁸³ William Morris, "News from Nowhere," in *The Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. XVI* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1910), 172-176.

²⁸⁴ Morris, "News from Nowhere," 172-173.

observers but taken seriously by the “builders” themselves. The narrator is warned that the masons “will be glad to see you-if you don’t hinder their work”.²⁸⁵ This is further reinforced by the gruff ways in which the masons respond to the narrator’s inquiries, including one who politely asks to be left alone so that she can focus on her work.²⁸⁶ The leader of the masons proves more talkative and is quite happy to discuss their hard work and how they hope to finish the house soon, so that then they might help with the “wheat harvest”. A few jokes are made about how working with stone is harder than harvest work.²⁸⁷ This feeds into another theme of the chapter: the obvious joy and pleasure that the workers get out of their work, which is exemplified through Morris’s description of the female mason’s “beloved work”.²⁸⁸ The masons serve to highlight one of the core ideals of Morris’s perception of what work should ideally be, joyful, or pleasurable and more specifically that the joy in work should derive from the “reward of creation”.²⁸⁹

The understanding of work as a pleasurable and joyful activity has many implications for how people should carry out work in Morris’s thought. Much of this derives, of course, from what Morris thinks is wrong with work in the industrialized Victorian society of his own day. In his essay “Useful Work versus Useless Toil”, Morris offers two different though interrelated critiques. The first revolves around the ways in which capitalism impoverishes the working class by forcing them to mass produce goods that are either useless or of subpar quality.²⁹⁰ Morris describes this work as “useless toil”, because in his eyes it is the result of the rich forcing the working classes to mass produce unnecessary goods at wasteful rates, while forcing them to buy inferior products for themselves.²⁹¹ Here Morris touches on the theme of class in society, which holds a central place in how he understands work, and the evils of a capitalist society. Morris emphasizes especially the wastefulness of this class system, and most importantly the disconnect between wealth and the actual goods which are produced.²⁹² As Morris sees money and the goods as totally

²⁸⁵ Morris, “News from Nowhere,” 172-176.

²⁸⁶ Morris, “News from Nowhere,” 174.

²⁸⁷ Morris, “News from Nowhere,” 175-176.

²⁸⁸ Morris, “News from Nowhere,” 176.

²⁸⁹ Morris, “News from Nowhere,” 91.

²⁹⁰ Morris, “Useful Work versus Useless Toil,” 103-104.

²⁹¹ Morris, “Useful Work versus Useless Toil,” 101-104.

²⁹² Morris, “Useful Work versus Useless Toil,” 109-110.

separate entities, such that he sees much of the “wealth” produced from the goods as fictional or inflated because there is little interest in the actual quality of the goods or the value of the work that produced them.²⁹³ This culminates in Morris arguing: “In other words, our society includes a great mass of slaves... and that their daily necessity compels them to make the slave-wares whose use is the perpetuation of their slavery.”²⁹⁴ In this Morris is in fact towing the Pre-Raphaelite perspective on the effects of industrialization on work and art.

Morris’s own unique thoughts on the nature of work show more clearly in his second critique of contemporary labor: “As long as work is repulsive it will still be a burden”.²⁹⁵ In Morris’s mind, the problems of capitalism and work are not just confined to the ways in which capitalism suppresses the working class, but the way in which capitalism perverts their relationship with work. By making work an unpleasant activity, it transforms how people relate to work. Morris sees work as an inherent human drive, something which everyone needs to do to express their individual creative energies.²⁹⁶ This restriction on the need to be creative is something which Morris expects will fall away once capitalism has been overthrown. Its replacement with socialism will allow work to be joyful and pleasurable, an exercise of creativity, creating a utopian society from Morris’s point of view.

In talking about the potential consequences of Morris’s perception of work a pleasurable activity it is important to consider Morris’s discussions of “attractive labour”.²⁹⁷ In Morris’s vision of post-capitalist work, “the first thing which we shall think so necessary... will be the attractiveness of labour”.²⁹⁸ Once capitalism is gone, work will again become a creative and joyful act, something that Morris frames as the restoration of “attractive labour”.²⁹⁹ To Morris this means that work must either have “some obviously useful end” or be an enjoyable hobby or pastime.³⁰⁰ This leads to an essential piece of Morris’

²⁹³ Morris, “Useful Work versus Useless Toil,” 109-110.

²⁹⁴ Morris, “Useful Work versus Useless Toil,” 103-104.

²⁹⁵ Morris, “Useful Work versus Useless Toil,” 107.

²⁹⁶ Morris, “Useful Work versus Useless Toil,” 107-108.

²⁹⁷ Morris, “Useful Work versus Useless Toil,” 108-111.

²⁹⁸ Morris, “Useful Work versus Useless Toil,” 111.

²⁹⁹ Morris, “Useful Work versus Useless Toil,” 108-111.

³⁰⁰ Morris, “Useful Work versus Useless Toil,” 112.

understanding of pleasure in work what he defines as “Popular Art”, by which he means “that side of art which is...done by the ordinary workman while he is about his ordinary work.”³⁰¹ This concept is key to understanding what Morris means when he says that work should be pleasurable and be the product of natural human creative energies. In other words, the ultimate product of all forms of work should be art, and by “art” Morris here means the small creative touches which an artisan adds to improve and make the objects of their labor beautiful.

By contrast, Morris finds the capitalist construction of work, with its failure to appreciate aesthetic beauty, wrong-headed. He argues that appearances are vital to making a beautiful product, an unsurprising view for man to whom art and design were central parts of his world view. In his essay “A Factory as it Might Be”, Morris envisions not just how a factory might be made better for the worker, but how it could be designed to be aesthetically pleasing.³⁰² Yet to see Morris’s aesthetic as extending only to physical appearance would be misleading, since the process of creation in making an object is just as important to him. In his discussion of the ideal factory, Morris argues that it will make work pleasant, provide education to the young, and facilitate the growth of the “fine arts”.³⁰³ This interrelationship of art, aesthetics, and work in Morris’s mind is more thoroughly examined in Chapter 3. Nonetheless there is one final point about the nature of work in Morris’s thought that needs to be addressed here, and that is his emphasis on the physicality of work.

Exercise and physical labor are emphasized repeatedly in Morris’s discussions of work. For example, the masons in *News From Nowhere* believe the work of building a house instead of assisting with the harvest to be more strenuous and satisfying than harvesting grain.³⁰⁴ Much of Morris’s understanding of physical labor revolves around his understanding of skilled labor, a topic which will be discussed later in this chapter. However, when discussing skilled labor, Morris emphasizes the individual’s work with their own hands, and by implication, their physical ability to work. This comes out especially well when Morris

³⁰¹ Morris, “Useful Work versus Useless Toil,” 113.

³⁰² William Morris, “A Factory as it Might Be,” in *William Morris: Centenary Edition, Stories in Prose, Stories in Verse, Shorter Poems, Lectures and Essays*, ed. G.D.H. Cole (New York: Random House, 1934), 647-649.

³⁰³ Morris, “A Factory as it Might Be,” 649-654.

³⁰⁴ Morris, “News from Nowhere,” 172-176.

discusses the chief impact of technology on physical labor, which is to turn skilled laborers into unskilled ones by removing the need for their work.³⁰⁵ It's worth noting that Morris is not totally opposed to technology, rather his issues are with the impact that technology has had under capitalism on the way in which work is done, as Ray Watkinson notes.³⁰⁶ Indeed in same paragraph as he condemns " 'labour-saving' machines" as a capitalist excess, he notes the potential value of technology to reduce the time spent on "unattractive labour".³⁰⁷ As Watkinson argues the key problem that technology represents in Morris's construction of work is the way in which capitalism has severed it from its natural function, that technology has served to isolate humanity and human work from nature.³⁰⁸

The final point worth making here are the very explicit connections Morris makes between physical labor and masculinity, perhaps most clearly found in his discussion of back-breaking and unpleasant work.³⁰⁹ As Morris says of it that "we may suppose that special volunteers would be called on to perform it, who would surely be forthcoming, unless men in a state of freedom should lose the sparks of manliness which they possessed as slaves."³¹⁰ This emphasis on masculinity and physical labor is common throughout Morris's thought and is, as Danahay, notes the result of John Ruskin's influence on Morris's conception of work.³¹¹ Both Ruskin and Morris tied physical work very explicitly to men, and as will be explored later in this chapter that had a very interesting impact on how Morris understood women and work, through his belief in the superiority of male workers in performing skilled physical labor compared to the abilities of women workers.³¹² This also presages Morris's hierarchical tendencies when delineating the nature of work, creating a hierarchy of workers and kinds of work. This affects both how Morris's perceives women's work and justifies the lofty status Morris gave to skilled manual labor and to the male workers he perceives as being better suited for it. Such hierarchical tendencies in Morris's discussion of

³⁰⁵ Morris, "Useful Work versus Useless Toil," 117.

³⁰⁶ Ray Watkinson, "The Obstinate Refusers: Work in News from Nowhere," in *William Morris & News From Nowhere: A Vision for Our Time*, eds. Stephen Coleman and Paddy O'Sullivan (Bideford, Devon: Green Books, 1990), 97-98.

³⁰⁷ Morris, "Useful Work versus Useless Toil," 117.

³⁰⁸ Ray Watkinson, "The Obstinate Refusers," 97-99.

³⁰⁹ Morris, "Useful Work versus Useless Toil," 117-118.

³¹⁰ Morris, "Useful Work versus Useless Toil," 118.

³¹¹ Danahay, *Gender at Work*, 126-127.

³¹² Sarah A. Tooley, "A Living Wage for Women," *The Woman's Signal*, 19th April, 1894, in *We Met Morris: Interviews with William Morris, 1885-96*, ed. Tony Pinkney, (Reading: Spire Books, 2005), 92.

work create a paradoxical situation for him. His writings swing back and forth between creating a deeply hierarchical vision of work and workers, centered on different kinds of Crafts and levels of skill, and offering a stirring defense of the common worker and the need for them to come together in fellowship as equals. It is this vision of a common fellowship of the working classes that brings Morris's understanding of work and society into conflict with Ruskin's ideas on the subject.

Masters and Fellowship: Hierarchy in Work for Morris and Ruskin

Morris's work "Dawn of a New Epoch" (1886) contains a call to action "Why have masters at all? Let us all be fellows working... for the common good."³¹³ This is in keeping with a central aspect of Morris's understanding of work and society, his firm and adamant rejection of hierarchy. In his "Useful Work versus Useless Toil", Morris's denounces the evils and abuses of the "manufacturer" who forces the workers to submit to his "Mastership" in order to earn a livelihood.³¹⁴ Morris's description of the upper class of Victorian society as one "which does not even pretend to work", making it abundantly clear how much Morris disdains hierarchy and class in work and society.³¹⁵ Such a view contrasts quite sharply with Ruskin's views about the working classes and work, which take on a paternalistic character. In his classic *Unto this Last* (1860), Ruskin argues that a "Master" in a domestic household should be kind to his servants to elicit better service from them.³¹⁶ In this dialogue Ruskin focuses more on the potential consequences for the employer or "Master" than on the suffering of the servant, even if he is also clear that it is more humane to treat the servants better rather than work them to the bone.³¹⁷ These differences help set the stage for a rather stark contrast between the worlds the two men construct around work, and how they perceive work should be carried out.

³¹³ William Morris, "Dawn of a New Epoch," in *The Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. XXII* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1915), 123.

³¹⁴ Morris, "Useful Work versus Useless Toil," 109.

³¹⁵ Morris, "Useful Work versus Useless Toil," 104.

³¹⁶ John Ruskin, "Unto this Last," in *The Works of John Ruskin: Library Edition Vol. XVII*, eds. E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1905), 28-30. Babel.Hathitrust Digital Library, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/pst.000019372921?urlappend=%3Bseq=178>

³¹⁷ John Ruskin, "Unto this Last," 28-30.

For Morris, workers should be “fellows” united by the “common good” through their work, and he vehemently despises “Mastership” as an “artificial authority” standing in the way of the “Harmonious Association” which he envisions to be the best form of society.³¹⁸ By contrast, Ruskin does not question the idea of a hierarchy; indeed he even defends “Mastership”, arguing that the “Master” and “Labourer” can be in opposition to each other or united depending on circumstance.³¹⁹ Ruskin’s argument ultimately boils down to the belief that the “Master” should behave appropriately towards their employees by paying them a fair wage and not over-working them.³²⁰ Yet he never questions why there needs to be a Master or why someone should have power over someone else, something which explains Ruskin’s focus on top-down reform.³²¹ It may underlie why Ruskin felt it was his duty to be active force for reform, and certainly explains his paternalistic attitudes and behavior throughout his career as a proponent of social change.³²² His views on hierarchy and class are perhaps best summed up in a statement he gave before Parliament, “I want to teach every man to rest contented in his station, and I want all people, in all stations, to better and help each other.”³²³ This adds some weight to Danahay’s interpretation of Ruskin’s famous road building project for his Oxford students as an effort to build positive feeling across class boundaries by bringing the upper class to the level of the working class and giving them an appreciation for manual labor.³²⁴ All of this stands in contrast with Morris’s own views about hierarchy and work.

Morris deeply resented the idea that the rich could have “mastership” over the workers. For example his reluctance to use the word “Manufacturer” to describe them because they did not make anything at all, merely supplying the means for the worker to produce goods.³²⁵ In his discussion of the evils of the rich, he weaponizes the Middle Ages by comparing industrialized society with the feudal past

³¹⁸ Morris, “Dawn of a New Epoch,” 123-125.

³¹⁹ John Ruskin, “Unto this Last,” 27-28.

³²⁰ John Ruskin, “Unto this Last,” 27-28.

³²¹ Eileen Boris, *Art and Labor: Ruskin, Morris and the Craftsman Ideal in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 4-7.

³²² Naylor, *The Arts and Crafts Movement*, 30-31.

³²³ John Ruskin, “Appendix IX: The Public Institutions Committee, Evidence of John Ruskin, Tuesday, March, 20 1860,” in *The Works of John Ruskin: Library Edition Vol. XVI*, eds. E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1905), 480. Babel.Hathitrust Digital Library, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/pst.000004900153?urlappend=%3Bseq=622>

³²⁴ Danahay, *Gender at Work*, 132-135.

³²⁵ Morris, “Useful Work versus Useless Toil,” 109.

and arguing that the key difference is that now there is a significant material difference between the rich and the poor.³²⁶ Indeed, Morris's usage of the word "Master" to describe the rich serves as a direct connection to the Medieval past, as Morris equates the rich of his day with the nobility of the Middle Ages and argues that both are products of a system of "Mastership".³²⁷ To Morris this emphasized that hierarchy was an unnatural, and that Medieval feudal lords had in some sense paved the way for modern Businessmen and capitalists.³²⁸ This is also supported in Morris's historical writings, like his "Feudal England" (1887). In the final sections of that essay, Morris paints feudal nobles as leading English Society down the path to capitalism by turning towards methods of profit, which ultimately "exploits [the worker] very much more than the customs of the manor of the feudal period."³²⁹

In Morris's fiction and nonfiction, the word "Master" and the concept of "Mastership" serve to describe both the evils of Victorian elites and feudal lords. A clear example of this emerges from Morris's Medievalist novel *A Dream of John Ball* (1888). Its narrator encounters the Medieval preacher John Ball and listens to him deliver a sermon on the evils of the "Masters."³³⁰ Morris's John Ball decries "the rich men that eat up the realm" and asks whether the world would be better without "Masters" Ball then provides numerous examples of how life would improve if the serfs were free from the "Masters".³³¹ Indeed, *A Dream of John Ball* is rife with a discussion of the evils of "Masters". The most profound of these discussions comes near the novel's end when Morris's narrator describes the future to John Ball.³³² They discuss how the "Masters" will work to suppress and degrade workers to a wretched state, and how this is the nature of "Mastership" to oppress.³³³ A key part of this oppression is the ability of the "Masters" to take away the products of the work that serfs or Laborers created.³³⁴ This connection between

³²⁶ Morris, "Dawn of a New Epoch," 124-126.

³²⁷ Morris, "Dawn of a New Epoch," 124-125.

³²⁸ Morris, "Dawn of a New Epoch," 124-126.

³²⁹ William Morris, "Feudal England," 56-57.

³³⁰ William Morris, "A Dream of John Ball," in *The Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. XVI* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1912), 235-237.

³³¹ Morris, "A Dream of John Ball," 235-237.

³³² Morris, "A Dream of John Ball," 276-279.

³³³ Morris, "A Dream of John Ball," 276-279.

³³⁴ Morris, "A Dream of John Ball," 282-284.

“Mastership” and theft is a critical theme for how Morris frames the elite; whether as feudal lords or industrialists he portrays them as idle men who through force are able to steal the wealth created by the workers.³³⁵ This theme appears not just in *A Dream of John Ball*, but throughout Morris’s work where he draws these connections between “Masters” and theft, while offering his solution to the threat of hierarchy, his concept of fellowship.

Morris defines fellowship very eloquently in the words of the title character in *A Dream of John Ball*: “Fellowship is Heaven, and lack of fellowship hell.”³³⁶ For Morris fellowship becomes the foundation on which to build a new society in which work is redefined: “Let us be fellows working in the harmony of association”.³³⁷ This meant for Morris that work must be organized by “Association”, so that workers must be able to freely associate in their work. Somewhat paradoxically this means that the workers must also work for the “common gain”, according to Morris.³³⁸ This is one of the contradictory aspects of Morris’s “Association” or fellowship of workers: that they cannot be compelled to work, and that they should also work toward the common good.³³⁹ This leaves room for the question of what would happen if one worker wished to carryout an action that the others deemed to not be beneficial to the common good. Yet Morris attempts to reconcile these differing positions by saying “[the workers] must have only one enemy to contend with—Nature.”³⁴⁰ By which he means that only the natural world, and its threats, including animals, natural disasters, diseases should be the only threat to human lives. As it seems he believes this possession of a common enemy in nature would remove any possible internal and human threats to human society. As in Morris’s mind once all the artificial forms of compulsion are wiped away, steps should be taken prevent the accumulation of wealth and development of a new class of the rich.³⁴¹ This leads Morris to believe that the individual worker must realize and accept that he needs to work

³³⁵ Morris, “Useful Work versus Useless Toil,” 101-104.

³³⁶ Morris, “A Dream of John Ball,” 230.

³³⁷ Morris, “Dawn of a New Epoch,” 123.

³³⁸ Morris, “Dawn of a New Epoch,” 132-133.

³³⁹ Morris, “Dawn of a New Epoch,” 133-34.

³⁴⁰ Morris, “Dawn of a New Epoch,” 133.

³⁴¹ Morris, “Dawn of a New Epoch,” 134.

alongside others to achieve his goals so that his aims become to some degree one with the goals of the group.³⁴²

Morris seems to believe here that “when [the worker] has his right senses”, he will realize “that he is working for his own interest when he is working for that of the community.”³⁴³ In other words Morris believed that someone who is sane will realize that they will receive a greater benefit from working alongside others rather than striving to achieve their ends on their own. This parallels ideas which Morris expresses in *The Dream of John Ball*, that “the proud...rich man.. is in hell already because he hath no fellow”.³⁴⁴ Likewise, in “Dawn of a New Epoch”, he writes that the worker “is worthless without the cooperation of his fellows”.³⁴⁵ These quotations drive home the importance of fellowship in Morris’s mind and the threat posed by hierarchy. For Morris good work or art is something that could only be achieved by a group of workers in “Association” with one another.³⁴⁶ A point that circles back to Morris’s distaste for the elite or “Masters”, and for the assumption some were destined to rule over others. In his mind the individual pursuing their own ends to the detriment of the group was both a “Master” in the making, and self-destructive for having cut himself off from the rest of humanity. “Masters” were individuals willing and happy to exploit the labor of the working classes.³⁴⁷ Throughout Morris’s writings, he associates Masters and Mastership with theft. In *News From Nowhere*, he describes the “Masters” who once ruled the society as “fleecing” the workers of their labor.³⁴⁸

The tension between community and creativity is present in Morris’s construction of fellowship and work, because quite clearly in his ideal society work is something done for the “common gain” or common good in his society.³⁴⁹ Yet Morris also idealizes work as the process through which human creative energies bring forth art, which places its emphasis on the individual worker’s creative desires.

³⁴² Morris, “Dawn of a New Epoch,” 133.

³⁴³ Morris, “Dawn of a New Epoch,” 133.

³⁴⁴ Morris, “A Dream of John Ball,” 231.

³⁴⁵ Morris, “Dawn of a New Epoch,” 133.

³⁴⁶ Morris, “Dawn of a New Epoch,” 133-134.

³⁴⁷ Morris, “News from Nowhere,” 125.

³⁴⁸ Morris, “News from Nowhere,” 125.

³⁴⁹ Morris, “Dawn of a New Epoch,” 133.

Likewise, the fact that in Morris's ideal society there would be no compulsion except those imposed by nature, such as growing crops or treating disease.³⁵⁰ Yet there is an expectation by Morris that the individual will submit to the needs of the community because the result of doing so will benefit everyone.³⁵¹ This suggests, if only in the subtext, that creativity should be sacrificed or made subordinate to the common good. This creates a problem for Morris then as he advocates quite strongly for the freedom of individuals to be creative only to suggest that fellowship and society should place restraints on that creativity. It means that in effect Morris is presenting through his discussion of work a highly individualized vision of work asserting the importance of that worker's creative freedom and the need for work to be pleasurable. But this comes into conflict with the other half of Morris's vision which emphasizes the community and communal good. Both visions lead Morris to create his own idealized version of a Medieval guild.

Morris's describes the kind of organization best suited to organize a community's work as an "Association", a collective of individuals freely choosing to work together for the "Common Gain."³⁵² The tension inherent between the ideal of freedom for the individual and the value of the "common gain" is an important one to remember, especially considering Morris's emphasis on the individual craftsmen, and their craft.³⁵³ Morris constructs a mythology around the Medieval craftsmen, especially as it relates to their guilds. He views the medieval guilds as historical precursors to his proposed "Association" of workers, actually describing them as "Attempts at Association".³⁵⁴ Morris's essay "Art and Industry in the Fourteenth Century" (1890) offers the deepest insight into his understanding of medieval guilds. There he describes, the medieval city, craftsmen and guilds in some detail, describing them and what they produced.

³⁵⁰ Morris, "Dawn of a New Epoch," 133-134.

³⁵¹ Morris, "Dawn of a New Epoch," 133.

³⁵² Morris, "Dawn of a New Epoch," 133-134.

³⁵³ Morris, "Dawn of a New Epoch," 133-134.

³⁵⁴ William Morris, "Art under Plutocracy," in *The Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. XXIII* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1915), 173.

More importantly he argues that the medieval period was a time before the “seeds of decay” took root and ruined society.³⁵⁵

As Morris looks at the medieval craftsman, he digs very deeply into the medieval guilds, making even more explicit his belief that they were “Associations” of workers.³⁵⁶ He differentiates between “Craft-Guilds” and other “Guilds”, describing the craft guilds as actually representing the workers while the other Guilds became part of the elite institutions of Medieval Society.³⁵⁷ There is a nationalistic element which emerges in how Morris differentiates between the “Northern” and “Romanized” societies in Medieval Europe. He argues that guilds were products of “Northern” culture and blames “Romanized Feudalism” for preventing the growth of the guilds in southern Europe.³⁵⁸ Morris implies that Northern European societies, particularly England and Iceland, were more democratic than southern European societies.³⁵⁹ For Morris, an idealized understanding of medieval guilds became a model how work could be organized and a preferable alternative to the ways in which work was organized in his own day.

Yet there is still a tension between Morris’s description of the medieval guild as a model for how work should be organized in general and his idealization of the craftsman as artist. On one hand it is very clear from early on that Morris idealizes work as a joyful exercise which produces art, and this strongly implies an individualistic view of work. Joy comes to workers because as artists they enjoy exercising their craft. Ultimately, though, the individual creativity of artists will conflict with attempts to organize and coordinate their work, a good example of which can be seen in the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and the early period of Morris’s own business. Artistic fulfillment or creative desire must conflict with Morris’s desire to emphasize fellowship and community in how work should be organized. A deeper understanding of the tensions in Morris’s writings around work, hierarchy, and medievalism requires a closer examination of how Morris describes individual craftsmen, distinguishes between different kinds of work, and creates a

³⁵⁵ William Morris, “Art and Industry in the Fourteenth Century,” in *The Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. XXII* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1914), 378-379.

³⁵⁶ Morris, “Art and Industry in the Fourteenth Century,” 379-383.

³⁵⁷ Morris, “Art and Industry in the Fourteenth Century,” 383-385.

³⁵⁸ Morris, “Art and Industry in the Fourteenth Century,” 382-385.

³⁵⁹ Morris, “Art and Industry in the Fourteenth Century,” 382-385.

hierarchy of crafts and arts. An exploration of these areas will show how he attempts to reconcile his adoration for skilled craftsmen with his socialist ideals about community and equality.

Craft and Craftsmen: The Artist and The Hierarchy of Craft in Morris

That the Craftsman was a central part of Morris's understanding of work is impossible deny. In "Making the Best of It", he tells his readers, "Look upon me as a craftsman".³⁶⁰ In that essay, Morris asks to be seen in the same light as any other worker, or more particularly as any skilled worker.³⁶¹ While Morris's desire to be seen as a representative and even a spokesman for craftsmen is part of his ardent support for the idea of a fellowship and community of workers, his clear emphasis on the skilled worker reveals a hierarchical element in his thought. This stems from the implications of Morris's own beliefs about Capitalism, namely what capitalists "really do is to reduce the skilled labourer to the ranks of the unskilled".³⁶² Morris's discussion of work and labor tends to focus on skilled workers, while unskilled workers and their suffering is dismissed as a byproduct of the engines of capitalism which will disappear when its replaced with a socialist utopia. Nonetheless, what Morris does is create a hierarchy between skilled and unskilled work that has many consequences for how he talks about work.

Skilled work is central to Morris's mythologized vision of the Medieval Craftsmen. For Morris, work was pleasurable; this notion coupled with his complicated relationship with hierarchy in work, led to his idealized Craftsmen. Morris constructs a myth based on his belief that when skilled workers perfected their chosen Craft, the products of that work were art in and of themselves.³⁶³ In his essay "The Aims of Art" (1886), Morris vividly explains his ideas and understanding of the Medieval Craftsmen. He acknowledges that Middle Ages were not a free or ideal time to live for anyone, whether they were "Serfs or Gild-Craftsmen".³⁶⁴ The downsides of medieval life in other Morris works as well, especially *A Dream*

³⁶⁰ William Morris, "Making the Best of It: A Paper Read Before the Trades' Guild of Learning and the Birmingham Society of Artists," in *The Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. XXII* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1914), 81.

³⁶¹ Morris, "Making the Best of It," 81-82.

³⁶² Morris, "Useful Work versus Useless Toil," 117.

³⁶³ William Morris, "Making the Best of It," 86.

³⁶⁴ William Morris, "The Aims of Art," in *The Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. XXIII* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1915), 89.

of *John Ball*, where much of the plot involves a discussion of the evils of feudal Lords and frequent allusions to Victorian industrialists and businessmen. In “The Aims of Art”, however Morris’s discussion of the “Gild-Craftsmen” makes several points about the differences between Medieval art and the products of modern work.³⁶⁵ When he finds medieval art and work were products of the social oppression of those days, he points out that such oppression is active in his own time.³⁶⁶ Morris suggests that the key difference between Medieval work and Victorian work is that the “Medieval Craftsman” had greater freedom in his work.³⁶⁷ In Morris’s view, the oppression which the “Medieval Craftsman” faced was obvious and did not enter into or affect the actual process of work.³⁶⁸ This meant that the “Medieval Craftsman” could make his work “Pleasurable”.³⁶⁹ This critical to Morris’s mythology of the Medieval Craftsman, that their work could still be a pleasurable exercise even despite the oppressive nature of Feudal society.

The concept of work as a pleasurable activity to Morris sits at the heart of his understanding of work. Almost every aspect of how Morris critiques work in Victorian Society and how he constructs his own alternative is caught up in this understanding of work as pleasure. The idea of work as pleasure is also important to the construction of the individual Craftsman, as a lone individual pursuing a form of work pleasurable to themselves. Ruth Kinna’s article on work in William Morris’s thought argues that Morris’s emphasis here on the importance of pleasure for the individual worker stemmed from his own individual experience of work as a pleasurable activity.³⁷⁰ Kinna also discusses the importance of work as a “voluntary” activity in Morris’s thought.³⁷¹ These two aspects, pleasure and choice in work, were the foundation for Morris to construct a vision of work focused on the individual artisan. John Stirling’s article on work in the thought of William Morris uses the episode of the Masons or “Obstinate Refusers” from

³⁶⁵ Morris, “The Aims of Art,” 89-90.

³⁶⁶ Morris, “The Aims of Art,” 89-90.

³⁶⁷ Morris, “The Aims of Art,” 89-90.

³⁶⁸ Morris, “The Aims of Art,” 89-90.

³⁶⁹ Morris, “The Aims of Art,” 89-90.

³⁷⁰ Ruth Kinna, “William Morris: Art, Work, and Leisure,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 61, no.3 (2000): 494-499. <https://doi.org/doi:10.2307/3653925>

³⁷¹ Ruth Kinna, “William Morris: Art, Work, and Leisure,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 61, no.3 (2000): 493-512. <https://doi.org/doi:10.2307/3653925>

News From Nowhere as an example³⁷² Stirling emphasizes how the episode shows that in Morris's vision of the future the primary arbiter of what work an individual chooses to do is the individual themselves and their own desires and feelings on the matter.³⁷³ This illuminates rather well the role of the Craftsman or worker in Morris's thought, and how he relates them to work. They become an individual artisan who has chosen to work and honed their skills to a great degree, an artist who chooses a craft fit to their own talents and desires.

The tensions here between Morris's understanding of independent work and his vision of how it should be organized cooperatively should start to become clear, when thinking about the role of the Craftsman or Artisan in Morris's thought. They take on a heavily idealized role for an independent skilled craftsman, as found throughout his writings. How can this coexist with Morris's idea of fellowship and community, which involves a submission of the individual's desires to the common good.³⁷⁴ There is an emphasis throughout Morris's ideas about community of the voluntary nature of this submission.³⁷⁵ There is no questioning however of what would happen if someone did not voluntarily submit to the common good. Morris doesn't seem to consider how or why someone might reject submitting to the will of the community. Instead, Morris makes the assumption that everyone or even the majority would voluntarily submit to the common good in his utopian future.³⁷⁶ That assumption is at the root of the problem because Morris seems to not consider that there is or might be a tension between the individual and the community. This seems especially curious when considering Morris's use of the term "Master" to describe individuals who have set themselves against the community, by trying to exert their personal desires over other individuals. While in the majority of cases Morris uses the word "Master" for a member of the elite, he also uses it to describe skilled Craftsmen on rare occasions.³⁷⁷ He even described John Ruskin, the man who

³⁷² John Stirling, "William Morris and Work as It is and as It Might Be," *Capital & Class* 26, no.76 (Spring 2002): 135-136. <https://doi.org/doi:10.1177/030981680207600105>

³⁷³ John Stirling, "William Morris and Work as It is and as It Might Be," *Capital & Class* 26, no.76 (Spring 2002): 135-136. <https://doi.org/doi:10.1177/030981680207600105>

³⁷⁴ Morris, "Dawn of a New Epoch," 133-134.

³⁷⁵ Morris, "Dawn of a New Epoch," 133-134.

³⁷⁶ Morris, "Dawn of a New Epoch," 133-134.

³⁷⁷ William Morris, "Architecture and History," in *The Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. XXII* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1914), 304.

most influenced his thought, as “My Master”.³⁷⁸ What emerges from all this is a contradictory picture of clashing ideas about the individual, community, and hierarchy.

Resolving the contradictions between Morris’s individualistic understanding of work, and his desire for a more communal approach to organizing work requires a look at the role of hierarchy in his view of work. In principle, Morris rejected and detested hierarchy, as his attacks on Masters, Mastership and the elite in his works show rather well. In place of it, Morris points to fellowship and a community of workers as an alternative. But the centrality of the individual remains especially important in their ability to choose the kind of work they perform. This freedom to choose their own work seems to bring the individual into conflict with the fellowship, because it raises questions about what happens when the individual does not wish to perform the same work as the rest of the community. Morris himself when discussing this possibility seems to brush it aside saying that the craftsman is “part of a harmonious whole: he is worthless without...his fellows”.³⁷⁹ Morris argues that the craftsman “ought to feel...that he is working for his own interest when he is working for that of the community.”³⁸⁰ Both of these statements suggest that the individual worker or craftsman’s needs or desires are never in contradiction to those of the rest of the community. Morris also makes it abundantly clear that work should be voluntary: “Labour will be free from all compulsion”.³⁸¹ This creates a tension between Morris’s vision of the highly individualistic craftsman uncompelled in their pursuit or work, and his desire for a communal fellowship which requires the worker to subject themselves to needs of the greater community. If Morris seems aware of this tension at times, he does not seem to acknowledge the possible contradictions between his idealized craftsman and his vision of fellowship.

One of Morris’s concepts that might mitigate these tensions is his emphasis on the importance of “variety of work”.³⁸² For him the ability to change up the kinds of work one performs makes work more

³⁷⁸ Morris, “How I became a Socialist,” in *The Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. XXIII* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1915), 279.

³⁷⁹ Morris, “Dawn of a New Epoch,” 133.

³⁸⁰ Morris, “Dawn of a New Epoch,” 133.

³⁸¹ Morris, “Dawn of a New Epoch,” 134.

³⁸² Morris, “Useful Work versus Useless Toil,” 112.

enjoyable, with Morris suggesting that a worker can probably master “at least three crafts”.³⁸³ Morris also seems to take for granted that this would be the case as well with workers who would enjoy “cultivating the earth”.³⁸⁴ This faith in variety of work helps explain his ability to gloss over the tensions and contradictions between the communal and individualistic aspects of his vision as it allows the worker to both perform the work they enjoy while carrying out important communal work. Morris tends to think of communal work in terms of heavy physical labor like agricultural work.³⁸⁵ Nonetheless, Ruth Kinna’s article notes the centrality of variety in work in Morris’s thought, finds that he blames the consequences of capitalism for the reduction of work to a few mindless tasks.³⁸⁶ Morris despises the industrial factory, where the worker is “always doing one minute piece of work, and never being allowed to think of any other”.³⁸⁷ For Morris, the ability of the worker to perfect and develop skills in a variety of “Crafts” or different kinds of work is critical. Indeed, he suggests that it makes possible the creation of “Popular Art”, the perfect products made by an individual Craftsmen.³⁸⁸

The idea of Craft occupies a key role in Morris’s discussion of work because he uses “Craft” to refer to different forms of work. Once again, his hierarchical tendencies can be seen in his creation of a hierarchy of Crafts. In his essay “The Lesser Arts” (1877), Morris is at draws delineations between the “Great Arts”, and the “Lesser Arts”.³⁸⁹ The “Great Arts”, as Morris defines them are “Architecture”, and “Sculpture and Painting”.³⁹⁰ In the essay, these receive significantly less attention than the “Lesser Arts” or “Decorative Arts”, which Morris defines as “comprising the crafts of House-building, painting, joinery and carpentry, smith’s work, pottery and glass-making, weaving and many others”.³⁹¹ It’s noticeable that painting appears in both categories, which ties into another theme in Morris’s hierarchy of Crafts: his

³⁸³ Morris, “Useful Work versus Useless Toil,” 112.

³⁸⁴ Morris, “Useful Work versus Useless Toil,” 112.

³⁸⁵ Morris, “Useful Work versus Useless Toil,” 112.

³⁸⁶ Ruth Kinna, “William Morris: Art, Work, and Leisure,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 61, no.3 (2000): 498-499.

<https://doi.org/doi:10.2307/3653925>

³⁸⁷ Morris, “Making the Best of It,” 115.

³⁸⁸ Morris, “Useful Work versus Useless Toil,” 112-113.

³⁸⁹ William Morris, “The Lesser Arts,” in *The Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. XXII* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1914), 3-4.

³⁹⁰ Morris, “The Lesser Arts,” 3-4.

³⁹¹ Morris, “The Lesser Arts,” 3-4.

distaste for “Arts more specially of the intellect”.³⁹² Although these comprise the “Great Arts”, Morris’s dismissal of them as purely intellectual work ultimately makes them inferior to other forms of work.³⁹³

Now it would be wrong to suggest that Morris completely despises intellectual pursuits and high art, but in his hierarchy of Craft they become significantly less worthwhile in Morris’s eyes than other kinds of work. Central to Morris’s hierarchy of Craft are handicrafts, or the so-called “Lesser Arts” mentioned above.³⁹⁴ Several factors draw Morris’s attention to these kinds of Craft. For one, he associates it with the average worker and finds in it the “Popular Art” which he believes represents the expression of individual people’s joy in their work.³⁹⁵ Morris understands the production of these handicrafts by skilled Craftsmen as bringing together “Manual Skill and High intellect”.³⁹⁶ Part of Morris’s reaction against the fine arts was that he thinks the “Great Arts” separate themselves from the “Lesser Arts” in the belief that they represent and require greater intelligence than other forms of art, creating an unfortunate separation between Artist and “Handicraftsmen”.³⁹⁷ Indeed one of the critical elements which Morris emphasizes when discussing Handicrafts is how they balance mental and physical work.³⁹⁸

If handicrafts which require Craftsmen to possess intelligence and creative skill according to Morris, manual labor serves as exercise. Morris tends to envision this kind of work as agricultural labor and romanticizes it, arguing that “There are few men...who would not wish to spend part of their lives in the most necessary and pleasantest of all work—cultivating the earth”.³⁹⁹ This attitude turns up in Morris’s discussion of work in *News From Nowhere*, where the Masons are thought odd for choosing not to harvest and make hay, though they express an enthusiastic willingness to harvest wheat.⁴⁰⁰ This is where Morris’s positive description of these different kinds of work ends; for him there are either skilled crafts which blend mental and physical work, or there is useful but hard work which becomes a sort of exercise for people.

³⁹² Morris, “The Lesser Arts,” 3-4.

³⁹³ Morris, “The Lesser Arts,” 3-4.

³⁹⁴ Morris, “The Lesser Arts,” 3-4.

³⁹⁵ Morris, “The Lesser Arts,” 6-8.

³⁹⁶ Morris, “The Aims of Art,” 90.

³⁹⁷ Morris, “The Lesser Arts,” 8-9.

³⁹⁸ Morris, “Useful Work versus Useless Toil,” 112.

³⁹⁹ Morris, “Useful Work versus Useless Toil,” 112.

⁴⁰⁰ Morris, “News from Nowhere,” 174-175.

Ranking beneath agricultural labor in Morris's estimation are intellectual work and then repetitive work. Morris describes the repetitive work found in modern factories as one of the more despicable products of capitalism in that it forces a worker to do only one particular kind of work all day, "turning [the worker's] life into a Prison-torment".⁴⁰¹

The collision between a hierarchy of labor and Morris's desire for a communal working environment ultimately lead to an odd sort of alternative hierarchy of work. At the top is skilled work, done by individual skilled Craftsmen who are Masters of their Craft. Below that is manual work, often agricultural labor, which is necessary for society. Beneath them are repetitive work and intellectual work which Morris implies will fall away in favor of the skilled Craftsmen. He sees both intellectual work and repetitive work as unfortunate outgrowths of capitalism that create an unnatural separation between the different Crafts. All this leaves Morris with his hierarchical vision of work, centered around the individual and with only a vague idea of communal spirit or association holding society together. It also throws intellectual pursuits aside and they become secondary to Craft. Almost everything that Morris discusses about work discussed can be applied specifically to male workers, since throughout his writings he tends to refer to workers as male or masculine. Yet women work, too, and how Morris perceives gender and work is again affected by his hierarchical tendencies.

The Masculinity of Work and the Problem of Womanhood

The importance of masculinity in Morris's conception of work cannot be understated because it is a basic assumption throughout his writings on work. He explicitly ties his ideas about work to men and masculinity through statements about "the right of every man to have fit work to do", or assertions that "All men's work shall be fit for free men".⁴⁰² He continually assumes that workers are male, and female workers rarely appear in any of his writings. These assumptions also go hand in hand with his emphasis on physical labor; for Morris, properly masculine work required physical exertion. Consider Morris's discussion in "The Aims of Art" about whether a male worker should make use of machinery in his

⁴⁰¹ Morris, "Useful Work versus Useless Toil," 112.

⁴⁰² Morris, "Making the Best of It," 86.

work.⁴⁰³ While Morris's concerns about the use of machinery in work should not be taken as indicating that he is totally opposed to their use, as he admits that "There are some things which a machine can do as well as a man's hand".⁴⁰⁴ His fear is that machines will undermine the artistic value of the male worker's labor. This clearly relates to his belief that all work is a creative act that produces art, and Morris ties this explicitly to masculinity and masculine work: "Real art is the expression by man of his pleasure in labour".⁴⁰⁵

This explicit connection between creativity and masculinity in Morris has consequences for his views on women and women's work are made apparent. In an 1894 interview Morris gave to *The Women's Signal* a feminist newspaper he doubted that women had the creative ability to "excel in the arts or inventive power," arguing that "You haven't got a female Handel...nor a first-rank woman painter."⁴⁰⁶ There also seems to be a connection to Morris's belief that the physical differences between men and women mean that women fundamentally lack the physical strength for certain kinds of work, offering as an example weaving and Tapestry making.⁴⁰⁷ This leads Morris conclude that women could not perform the same tasks as his skilled male weavers and tapestry makers because women lack the strength and dexterity of the male workers.⁴⁰⁸ This where Morris's hierarchical tendencies in his writings on work collide with his views on gender, and the role of physicality in Morris's vision of work. These first appear in the clear distinctions between the physical capabilities of male and female workers that Morris draws, and in his doubts that women could compete with his male workers. At a minimum he believes women's creative abilities, like their physical strength, to be inferior to those of their male counterparts. Both are ideas which taken in the broader context of Morris's beliefs about work and art are very limiting, although not

⁴⁰³ Morris, "The Aims of Art," 86-87.

⁴⁰⁴ Morris, "The Aims of Art," 86.

⁴⁰⁵ William Morris, "The Art of the People," in *The Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. XXII* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1914), 42.

⁴⁰⁶ Sarah A. Tooley, "A Living Wage for Women," *The Woman's Signal*, 19th April, 1894, in *We Met Morris: Interviews with William Morris, 1885-96*, ed. Tony Pinkney (Reading: Spire Books, 2005), 93-94.

⁴⁰⁷ Sarah A. Tooley, "A Living Wage for Women," in *We Met Morris: Interviews with William Morris, 1885-96*, ed. Tony Pinkney (Spire Books, 2005), 92.

⁴⁰⁸ Sarah A. Tooley, "A Living Wage for Women", in *We Met Morris: Interviews with William Morris, 1885-96*, ed. Tony Pinkney (Spire Books, 2005), 92.

uncommon for the times. They suggest that women are lesser than men, because in Morris's view they lack two key qualities vital to doing work that will produce art. They also reinforce the association in Morris's mind between masculinity and work, by assuming that women lack the same capacity to perform work that men naturally possess.

Morris does not completely disparage women's abilities. Later in his *The Women's Signal* interview, he acknowledges that "women's talents vary", and admits that they can be men's intellectual equals.⁴⁰⁹ Yet intellectual work ranks low in Morris's hierarchy of work, and he believes that women lack the capacity to perform the kind of work he ranks the highest. Instead, he suggests that women's differences predispose them to a different kind of work, managing a household and performing other domestic duties which he defends as equal to masculine forms of work.⁴¹⁰ This emphasis on different kinds of gendered work for women and men is reflected in later works such as his great utopian novel *News from Nowhere*. In it, he portrays women as naturally inclined to perform housework, writing that "It is a great pleasure to a clever woman to manage a house."⁴¹¹ This attitude is reinforced in his interview with *The Women's Signal*, where he finds that women are best suited for household management.⁴¹² Nonetheless, later in *News From Nowhere*, Morris portrays women doing other kinds of work, Philippa and her daughter Kate appear as skilled carvers working with a team of masons.⁴¹³ As Jan Marsh notes in her essay on the novel, they are the exception to the rule as no other skilled women workers appear. Excluding Philippa and Kate, the other women in the book all prefer household work to other forms of labor.⁴¹⁴ This is further compounded by Morris's attempts to frame domestic work as equal to the kinds of work assigned to men. An episode from *News From Nowhere* provides a particularly instructive moment of this: the narrator

⁴⁰⁹ Sarah A. Tooley, "A Living Wage for Women," in *We Met Morris: Interviews with William Morris, 1885-96*, ed. Tony Pinkney (Spire Books, 2005), 93-94.

⁴¹⁰ Sarah A. Tooley, "A Living Wage for Women," *The Woman's Signal*, 19th April, 1894, in *We Met Morris: Interviews with William Morris, 1885-96*, ed. Tony Pinkney (Reading: Spire Books, 2005), 92-94.

⁴¹¹ William Morris, "News From Nowhere," 60.

⁴¹² Sarah A. Tooley, "A Living Wage for Women," *The Woman's Signal*, 19th April, 1894, in *We Met Morris: Interviews with William Morris, 1885-96*, ed. Tony Pinkney (Reading: Spire Books, 2005), 92-94.

⁴¹³ Morris, "News from Nowhere," 173-176.

⁴¹⁴ Jan Marsh, "Concerning Love: News From Nowhere and Gender," *William Morris & News from Nowhere: A Vision for Our Time*, eds. Stephen Coleman and Paddy O'Sullivan (Bideford, Devon: Green Books, 1990), 119-121.

learns that women still almost exclusively manage households, and he questions whether this right.⁴¹⁵ Yet one of the other characters tells the narrator that his problem with domestic work is that he views it as lesser than masculine work and it becomes clear that the point of the passage is that the narrator himself is ignorant to think that women would desire to do otherwise than manage households.⁴¹⁶ In this way Morris tries to establish the equality of women's work with men's work, yet at the same time he draws very clear boundaries between the two genders.

Morris's attempts to establish a separate but equal gendered division of work ultimately creates a contradictory set of ideas about women and work. As while he strives to place domestic work on the same level as other kinds of work, his blunt dismissal of women's capacity for creativity and the creation of art is problematic.⁴¹⁷ He even goes so far as to say, "You haven't got a female Handel, you know, nor a first-rank woman painter".⁴¹⁸ His argument that there have been no great women artists to rank with Handel is troubling for many reasons. Ruth Kinna notes that he worked with many skilled female artists at William Morris & Co., and yet he categorized the art and artistic talents as "Domestic work".⁴¹⁹ Morris's specific mention of painting here also raises another issue, as while Morris does revere painting as an art form, he tends to categorize it as one of the forms of Art which had sundered itself from physical work to its own detriment.⁴²⁰ In Morris's mind, painting requires only intellectual and creative ability, which to considerable extent he denies that women possess. Ruth Kinna also points out that Morris finds that women's lesser capacity for creativity even extends to the kitchen as they did not make good cooks.⁴²¹ Remarkably, he told his biographer and friend J.W. Mackail, that women had never "invented a new dish or failed to half spoil an old one".⁴²²

⁴¹⁵ Morris, "News from Nowhere," 60.

⁴¹⁶ Morris, "News from Nowhere," 60.

⁴¹⁷ Sarah A. Tooley, "A Living Wage for Women," *The Woman's Signal*, 19th April, 1894, in *We Met Morris: Interviews with William Morris, 1885-96*, ed. Tony Pinkney (Reading: Spire Books, 2005), 93-94.

⁴¹⁸ Sarah A. Tooley, "A Living Wage for Women," *The Woman's Signal*, 19th April, 1894, in *We Met Morris: Interviews with William Morris, 1885-96*, ed. Tony Pinkney (Reading: Spire Books, 2005), 94.

⁴¹⁹ Ruth Kinna, "Socialist Fellowship and the Woman Question," in *Writing on the Image: Reading William Morris*, ed. David Latham (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 186. ProQuest Ebook Central. <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy.lib.uni.edu/lib/rodlibrary-ebooks/detail.action?docID=4672385>

⁴²⁰ Morris, "The Lesser Arts," 3-4.

⁴²¹ Kinna, "Socialist Fellowship and the Woman Question," 186.

⁴²² J.W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris, Vol. I* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1901), 224.

While Morris's views about women's work present many clear issues to us today, he did believe that a woman's natural skill in running a household could extend to the managing of a business.⁴²³ In his *Women's Signal* interview with Tooley, Morris notes that women can be good business owners but are "a little stingy".⁴²⁴ This curious statement leaves one wondering what led Morris to make it, and whether Morris's appreciation for women's skills managing a business stemmed from his wife's role in William Morris & Co. Jane played a significant role in managing the business, as comes out in a letter to where she discusses her role in the firing of a man named Buller.⁴²⁵ It seems after Jane delivered the note firing him, she refused to feed him and he refused to accept his dismissal William Morris stepped in. He only removed Buller after a vicious argument about which Jane said, "I asked no questions for I saw no corpse".⁴²⁶ The letter alludes Jane's role in feeding the employees, somewhat ironic given Morris's view of female cooks. A letter written around 1880 finds her stepping in to show the business to a visitor, having done so while Morris was not present.⁴²⁷ She writes to inform this visitor that Morris will be unable to meet with him, but offers other times that the two men could meet.⁴²⁸ These letters show some of the roles that Jane played in William Morris & Co., which surely contributed to Morris's conception of women as business managers. Whether this belief led Morris to give his wife a greater role in the business or Jane's capabilities led him to believe that women excelled as business managers it is clear Morris's problematic assumptions about women and work could lead him to some positive, if peculiar, at least when it came to women's capacity in managing a business.

Jane Morris's letters shed light on other areas of her husband's about women and work. In a letter discussing her husband's plans for a possible loss for William Morris & Co, wherein he would reorganize

⁴²³ Sarah A. Tooley, "A Living Wage for Women," *The Woman's Signal*, 19th April, 1894, in *We Met Morris: Interviews with William Morris, 1885-96*, ed. Tony Pinkney (Reading: Spire Books, 2005), 93-94.

⁴²⁴ Sarah A. Tooley, "A Living Wage for Women," *The Woman's Signal*, 19th April, 1894, in *We Met Morris: Interviews with William Morris, 1885-96*, ed. Tony Pinkney (Reading: Spire Books, 2005), 93.

⁴²⁵ Jane Morris to Cornell Price, February 11, 1880, in *Collected Letters of Jane Morris*, eds. Frank C. Sharp and Jan Marsh (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2013), 107.

⁴²⁶ Jane Morris to Cornell Price, February 11, 1880, in *Collected Letters of Jane Morris* eds. Frank C. Sharp and Jan Marsh (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2013), 107.

⁴²⁷ Jane Morris to Moncure Daniel Conway, May 20, 1880, in *Collected Letters of Jane Morris* eds. Frank C. Sharp and Jan Marsh (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2013), 110.

⁴²⁸ Jane Morris to Moncure Daniel Conway, May 20, 1880, in *Collected Letters of Jane Morris*, eds. Frank C. Sharp and Jan Marsh (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2013), 110.

the work so that men would make shoes and women would sew.⁴²⁹ Jane's reacted badly, saying that if "I refuse...I'll be a refractory pauper and tear up my clothes every day".⁴³⁰ It is clear from the end of the letter that Jane exaggerating for humor her displeasure with work, asking her correspondent to "Excuse a most pauper-like letter".⁴³¹ Nonetheless, she is clearly displeased with the prospect of having to sew for the business, and although it's not obvious whether Morris's push for it to be the women that sew is part of the issue. Whether that issue lies in Jane's unhappiness with Morris's clearly gendered division of labor, or from her dislike of sewing, a form of work she clearly abhorred remains unclear.

Morris's approach to women and work was affected by many ideas which make for uncomfortable reading today. He starkly divided work along gendered lines, viewing certain kinds domestic or household work as activities which women were naturally inclined to and defining physical and artistic work as masculine. While Morris seems to have believed that this did not make household work rank any lesser, his difficulty in accepting that women had artistic abilities confirms that he did view women's work as lesser. Morris's denigration of women's creative abilities is made even worse when considering just how important he considered creative desire to be, such that seems as though to him when were in some sense inherently lesser beings. His views here get complicated and even contradictory, for example when he views cooking as being outside household work and as an art. His argument that women's skills at managing a household also predisposed them to be better business managers represents a view which seems to have positive implications for women's capacity to work. At the same time this potential positive does in light of his hierarchy of work seem to be lesser than either physical or skilled labor. Throwing even this one positive into a darker light, clearly overshadowed by the more troubling aspects of his views on women and work.

Morris's understanding of work as a concept is at its core surprisingly simple: work is the process of creating art. The complexities of Morris's understanding of work begin to emerge in the implications this

⁴²⁹ Jane Morris to Cornell Price, October 1878, in *Collected Letters of Jane Morris*, eds. Frank C. Sharp and Jan Marsh (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2013), 78.

⁴³⁰ Jane Morris to Cornell Price, October 1878, in *Collected Letters of Jane Morris*, eds. Frank C. Sharp and Jan Marsh (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2013),78.

⁴³¹ Jane Morris to Cornell Price, October 1878, in *Collected Letters of Jane Morris*, eds. Frank C. Sharp and Jan Marsh (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2013),78.

view for the individual worker, because it turns work into an act of artistic expression. Morris attempted to define every kind of work and craft this way with very few exceptions. He sought confirmation of his beliefs about work and society in his mythologization of the Middle Ages, leading him to idolize the Medieval craftsman and the guild system. In his telling, the Middle Ages became this golden era when artisan workers were truly free to express themselves through their work. By Morris's own day such a utopia was far in the past and modern work could only produce ugly and unnecessary things because work in a capitalist society was driven by the demand and whims of the elite. Yet his idealization of the Middle Ages and the Guild system led to contradictions in Morris's understanding of how work should be organized. While Morris decries the elite and social hierarchies, he at the same time creates a hierarchy among different kinds of work. Even in his idealization of the Craftsman he creates a hierarchy of workers. The contradictions that this hierarchical discussion and explanation of the different kinds of work and workers creates come into conflict with Morris's strong invective against the elite. The implications of Morris's hierarchical construction of work for his views on gender are another area where contradictions emerge for Morris. He divides different kinds of work on gendered lines and remains unwilling to accept that women's creative and artistic impulses and desire are on the same level as men's artistic impulses.

If Morris's understanding of work at first seems quite simple, deep contradictions emerge as one explores its implications, especially when Morris's mythologization of the Middle Ages collides with his ideas about work should be organized. More contradictions emerge when Morris's views on work and gender interact. When the hierarchical implications of Morris's thought on work combine with his views on gender, especially women and work, they unveil an uncomfortable look at how his views on work and gender interact. Ultimately Morris's views on work become paradoxical when they interacted with his other fundamental areas of his thought: his adoration of the Middle Ages, his hatred of hierarchy, and his problematic views on gender and women.

CHAPTER 3:
AESTHETICS AND PRACTICE: ART IN THE WORKS, LIFE,
AND THOUGHT OF WILLIAM MORRIS

Art is important to understanding William Morris's view of the world, and the idealized vision of the Middle Ages which he presents in his literary and artistic works. It is through a romanticized lens of art that Morris sees not just the Middle Ages but the whole world, including his own era. This puts art at the center of Morris's critique of Victorian society, as he blames the degradation of art in his own time to the brutal hierarchy of a capitalist system.⁴³² His ideas about art also plays a vital role in Morris's construction of work as he believed that work should naturally produce art.⁴³³ The role of art even had a very deep effect on Morris's understanding of women and gender, as the influence of the Pre-Raphaelites on his vision of womanhood can well attest. The central role of art in Morris's rose-tinted vision of the Middle Ages, and indeed in his thought on society, politics, and socialism is found throughout his own writings. Yet none of this offers an understanding of what art meant for Morris, how he defined it, how he thought about it, or how he put his ideas about art into practice.

For Morris art was vital to his critique of capitalism. In writings like his 1884 lecture "Art and Socialism" (1884), it is the way in which capitalism or "Commerce" destroys art that he is most vocal in attacking.⁴³⁴ It is important then to offer a definition of art to make sense of how Morris uses and discusses it in his writings. Morris never offered a specific definition of art but in his 1886 essay "The Aims of Art" (1886), he described its purpose: "The Aim of Art is to increase the happiness of men, by giving them beauty and interest of incident to amuse their leisure".⁴³⁵ To Morris one of Art's most important values is its purpose and function in society. Defining what Morris means by art is critical to understanding his thought, and it is clear from his writings that it has a close relationship with his concept of beauty.

⁴³² William Morris, "Useful Work versus Useless Toil," in *The Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. XXIII* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1915), 112-114.

⁴³³ Morris, "Useful Work versus Useless Toil," 113-114.

⁴³⁴ William Morris, "Art and Socialism: A Lecture Delivered before the Secular Society of Leicester, 23rd January, 1884," in *The Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. XXIII* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1915), 192-193.

⁴³⁵ William Morris, "The Aims of Art," in *The Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. XXIII* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1915), 84.

The clearest definition Morris ever offered for Art was to describe it as “beauty and incident”.⁴³⁶ Put another way, art is a particular incidence or occurrence of beauty. Defining art as the result of creating an object or instance of beauty raises a variety of new questions. First it raises the question of what qualifies as beautiful in Morris’s worldview, how he defines and understands beauty. There is also a fascinating interrelationship between beauty and nature in Morris’s writings. In “The Aims of Art” Morris describes “Nature” as a teacher for the artist, arguing that once society changes: “Nature, relieved by the relaxation of man’s work, would be recovering her ancient beauty and be teaching men the old story of art”.⁴³⁷ Finally there is how creative work fits into Morris’s understanding of Art. Art becomes the result of making something, of bringing something into reality. In that light, it makes sense that art becomes the vehicle through which Morris tries to resurrect the Middle Ages.

In Morris’s understanding, art becomes the practical result of creating an object. In this light, art becomes the realization of an artist’s creative desires. This helps make some sense of how Morris understood his own works of art, how they served to bring to life his vision of the Middle Ages, and how they provided a way for Morris to put his ideas into practice. Understanding art through this lens makes it easier to understand Morris’s central role in founding and running what would eventually become his business William Morris & Co.⁴³⁸ It also helps explain his works of literature, and the founding of Kelmscott Press, which also served as ways of bringing his vision of the Middle Ages to life. According to Fiona MacCarthy, Morris made this explicit in discussing the purpose behind the founding of Kelmscott Press: creating books as beautiful as the illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages.⁴³⁹ This practical ability of art to bring an artist’s vision to life enthralled Morris. The role of art in bringing anyone’s vision to life drew Morris’s attention to what he called “Popular Art”, which resulted from the craftsman’s adornment of their work.⁴⁴⁰ Popular art’s connection with rewarding forms of work in Morris’s mind is

⁴³⁶ Morris, “The Aims of Art,” 90.

⁴³⁷ Morris, “The Aims of Art,” 93-94.

⁴³⁸ Gillian Naylor, *The Arts and Crafts Movement: A Study of its Sources, Ideals and Influence on Design Theory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 100-103.

⁴³⁹ Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 609-610.

⁴⁴⁰ Morris, “Useful Work versus Useless Toil,” 113.

quite clear, and it is through this concept that Morris relates the connections between his ideas about art and work.

Recognizing the role of art in Morris's thought, and the ways in which art affected the more practical and real aspects of Morris's life can help to illuminate Morris's understanding of the Middle Ages, and even his thoughts on socialism. To break these ideas down it is best to consider some of the important concepts at play in Morris's understanding of art: his ideas about aesthetics and design, his understanding of beauty, and its relationship with nature, as well as the concept of Popular Art and through it the interrelationship between work and art in Morris's thought. These concepts found their concrete expression throughout Morris's long artistic and business career from its beginnings with the Red House, to his early days with the "Firm", the height of his career with William Morris & Co., and his final years with Kelmscott Press. In each period it is useful to consider the individual particular crafts that he practiced during each period, ranging from textiles, stained glass, furniture, and wallpaper to bookbinding and printing. Examining the trajectory of Morris's artistic career through the lens of his understanding of art will illuminate the role of Medievalism in his life, art, and writings. The place to start is the idea of beauty in Morris's thought.

Popular Art: Creating Beauty in the Mind of Morris

Beauty is a central part of Morris's construction of Art. In fact, in the clearest definition that Morris ever provides for art he describes it as "Beauty and incident –i.e., art".⁴⁴¹ Beauty itself is however less defined in Morris's writings. In "The Aims of Art", Morris writes: "the guardians of this beauty...have ignored it utterly, have made its preservation give way to the pressure of commercial exigencies".⁴⁴² In the "Aims of Art" beauty is a nebulous concept associated with art but otherwise undefined. Later in the same essay Morris laments that "the beauty and romance have been uselessly, causelessly, most foolishly thrown away."⁴⁴³ This is a theme that shows up in his writings, that Victorian society has rejected beauty. In his lecture on "Art, Wealth, and Riches" (1883), he sarcastically asks: "Why has civilized society in all that

⁴⁴¹ Morris, "The Aims of Art," 90.

⁴⁴² Morris, "The Aims of Art," 85.

⁴⁴³ Morris, "The Aims of Art," 86.

relates to the beauty of man's handiwork degenerated from the time of the barbarous, superstitious, unpeaceful, Middle Ages?"⁴⁴⁴ This focus on beauty as under attack by Victorian society and capitalism is important to understanding the role of art in Morris's writings because this perception of the loss and degeneration of beauty in his own time spurred Morris's critique of his society and the engines of industry that he saw as governing it. This critique helps define the role that the idea of beauty plays in Morris's, and it plays into his definition of Popular Art.

The concept of Popular Art and its relationship to beauty revolves around the role of handicraft and work in Morris's notion of art. These concepts are quite central to Morris, particularly their relationship to art as the process through which it is created. The importance of the creative process for Morris can be found in his "Useful Work versus Useless Toil" (1884): "The craftsman, as he fashioned the thing he had under his hand, ornamented it so naturally...that it is often difficult to distinguish where the mere utilitarian part of his work ended and the ornamental began."⁴⁴⁵ Morris claims that this creativity began with the worker's desire for "variety in his work" and resulted in was the production of something beautiful.⁴⁴⁶ Morris defined the beauty of Popular Art as "that side of art which is...done by the ordinary workman while he is about his ordinary work."⁴⁴⁷ In essence it is the art which arises when the average worker perfects and decorates the product of their work.⁴⁴⁸

In this model, a simple object like a chair would be perfected, by adding decoration alongside anything that might strengthen the chair so that it would be more than just a functional chair but also an aesthetically pleasing object. Idea about decorative art and design play a large role in Morris's understanding of what he describes as "decorative, noble, popular art".⁴⁴⁹ This idealization contributes to Morris's rejection of the fine arts like painting and sculpture in favor of the crafts or what Morris called the

⁴⁴⁴ William Morris, "Art, Wealth, and Riches: An Address Delivered at a Joint Conversazione of the Manchester Societies at the Royal Institution, Manchester, 6th March 1883," in *The Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. XXIII* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1915),149.

⁴⁴⁵ Morris, "Useful Work versus Useless Toil," 113.

⁴⁴⁶ Morris, "Useful Work versus Useless Toil," 113-114.

⁴⁴⁷ Morris, "Useful Work versus Useless Toil," 113.

⁴⁴⁸ Morris, "Useful Work versus Useless Toil," 113-114.

⁴⁴⁹ William Morris, "The Lesser Arts," in *The Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. XXII* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1914), 27.

“Decorative Arts” like carpentry, pottery, glassmaking and so on.⁴⁵⁰ For these reasons, Popular Art becomes the main vehicle through which much of Morris’s ideas about art were carried out as he sees the fine arts as having lost their connection to work that the “Decorative Arts” still possess or have the capacity to possess.⁴⁵¹ Interestingly this commitment to design and aesthetics which underlies Morris’s concept of Popular Art had roots in Pre-Raphaelite ideas.⁴⁵² The Pre-Raphaelites were at least nominally committed to some of the same ideas as Morris in valuing design and aesthetics as something artists should strive for in their work.⁴⁵³ Morris’s ideas about these values in Popular Art led to a lifelong commitment to put them into practice, especially as he became a leading figure in the Socialist movement in Great Britain.

There is also a strong connection made between Popular Art and Morris’s construction of Work, in large part through the connection between art and pleasure in his writings and his understanding of work as a pleasurable act. The strength of this connection can be seen in the associations Morris draws between decoration, work, and Popular art. In his essay “Useful Work versus Useless Toil” (1885), Morris argues that: “We must begin to build up the ornamental part of life...on the basis of work undertaken willingly and cheerfully...in other words, even the commonest, must be made attractive.”⁴⁵⁴ This passage highlights these connections through its emphasis on the “ornamental”, and the need for “labour” to be “attractive”.⁴⁵⁵ That this emphasis parallels his outline for Popular Art later in the same essay is worth remembering because it serves to reinforce the centrality of these ideas in Morris’s thought. All of which shows just how vital Morris’s idea of Popular Art was vital to his own conception of work, as he saw it as part of the natural outgrowth of pleasure in work. As workers who enjoyed their work would put in the extra labor to perfect the product of their work and by so doing, they would produce a work of Popular Art in Morris’s mind. Morris associates here the concept of Popular Art with decoration or design. For Popular Art is in effect that decoration or design which takes a work beyond just functionality and into the realm

⁴⁵⁰ Morris, “The Lesser Arts,” 3-4.

⁴⁵¹ Morris, “The Lesser Arts,” 3-5.

⁴⁵² Naylor, *The Arts and Crafts Movement*, 98-100.

⁴⁵³ Naylor, *The Arts and Crafts Movement*, 98-100.

⁴⁵⁴ Morris, “Useful Work versus Useless Toil,” 111.

⁴⁵⁵ Morris, “Useful Work versus Useless Toil,” 111.

where ornamentation is as much part of its role as its usability. The role of beauty in Popular Art in Morris's mind underlies the role that it plays as a concept in his writings.

The decline of Popular Art as a beautiful form of art in the Victorian era was an important part of Morris's critique of his own time, and especially of capitalism. In "Useful Work", he even goes so far as to say that "[Popular Art], I repeat, no longer exists now having been killed by commercialism".⁴⁵⁶ Morris adds onto this critique that Victorian art has declined considerably through "the disappearance of popular art from civilization."⁴⁵⁷ It becomes this lost, almost mythical artform that has been destroyed by capitalism, and perhaps more importantly it also becomes something that can only be found in the past. Morris identifies it as something which vanished from society after the Middle Ages, which he associates with a golden age of handicraft work.⁴⁵⁸ In this Morris is reflecting a tendency of the Pre-Raphaelites for whom the Medieval period represented a golden age, and they saw the Renaissance as being the start of the downfall of European Art.⁴⁵⁹ For this they blamed the Renaissance artist Raphael as setting in motion trends in European Art which they sought to check by looking back to the Medieval era for inspiration.⁴⁶⁰ This sets the stage for the importance of the Medieval period in Morris's idea of Popular Art, for Morris's sees it as a last golden age of Popular Art.

In Morris's writings the Middle Ages become the last period in which art, specifically popular art, flourished. He asserts that during the Medieval period the artist was the worker and had both "the knowledge of art and the practice of producing it".⁴⁶¹ This theme repeatedly shows up in Morris's discussion of work and craft, as he believed that work should be both physically and mentally engaging. As Jeffrey Petts's article on Morris's theory of aesthetics puts it, for Morris, art was "good work".⁴⁶² This also

⁴⁵⁶ Morris, "Useful Work versus Useless Toil," 113.

⁴⁵⁷ Morris, "Art, Wealth, and Riches," 149-150.

⁴⁵⁸ Morris, "Art, Wealth, and Riches," 149-150.

⁴⁵⁹ Laurence des Cars, *The Pre-Raphaelites: Romance and Realism*, trans. Francisca Garvie (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 2000), 14-20.

⁴⁶⁰ des Cars, *The Pre-Raphaelites*, 14-20.

⁴⁶¹ William Morris, "Art and Labour," in *The Unpublished Lectures of William Morris*, ed. Eugene D. Lemire (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1969), 105.

⁴⁶² Jeffrey Petts, "Good Work and Aesthetic Education: William Morris, the Arts and Crafts Movement, and Beyond," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 42, no. 1 (2008): 30-45. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25160264>.

meant that the conditions in which art was produced were critical. In Morris's essay *A Factory as it Might Be* (1884), he describes the factories in a future socialist society as being places of art and beauty.⁴⁶³ In contrast to Popular Art, Morris was dissatisfied with the fine arts like "Architecture, Sculpture, and Painting" which had become "more specially of the intellect".⁴⁶⁴ He felt that these arts had become objects of intellectual work and thus had become cut off from decorative work.⁴⁶⁵ Petts's article points to Morris's unhappiness with traditional artistic exhibitions, noting that Morris believed they cut the arts off from the average person.⁴⁶⁶ This sits at the heart of Morris's dissatisfaction with the intellectualizing of art, that it made much of art inaccessible to ordinary and into the province of the elites.

According to Morris, this had not been the case in the Medieval period because the workers had control over the time and effort they put into their work, which transformed it into art.⁴⁶⁷ Jeffrey Petts discusses how Morris emphasized artists as part of a community then, as well as individual artisans, and stressed the nature of art as part of a communal enterprise.⁴⁶⁸ For Morris, the idea of fellowship as found in the Medieval guild was central to his vision of art and the Medieval. He sees the Middle Ages as a period when his vision of Popular Art and its attendant ideas about work came closest to reality.⁴⁶⁹

This interpretation of history set the stage then for much Morris's art and work, as he strove to revive this lost Medieval golden age of Popular Art. He also explicitly connects this vision of popular art to socialism and believes that popular art can only grow in the future under socialism.⁴⁷⁰ In his essay "The Socialist Ideal" (1891), Morris explains the connections between Socialism, Art, and the Middle Ages. He argues that the decline of Popular Art in the Victorian era can be explained by the understanding that: "Art was once the common possession of the whole people; it was the rule in the Middle Ages that the produce

⁴⁶³ William Morris, "A Factory as it Might be," in *William Morris: Centenary Edition, Stories in Prose, Stories in Verse, Shorter Poems, Lectures and Essays*, ed. G.D.H. Cole (New York: Random House, 1934), 646-649.

⁴⁶⁴ Morris, "The Lesser Arts," 3-4.

⁴⁶⁵ Morris, "The Lesser Arts," 3-4.

⁴⁶⁶ Jeffrey Petts, "Good Work and Aesthetic Education: William Morris, the Arts and Crafts Movement, and Beyond," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 42, no. 1 (2008): 41-42. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25160264>.

⁴⁶⁷ Morris, "Art and Labour," 105-106.

⁴⁶⁸ Jeffrey Petts, "Good Work and Aesthetic Education: William Morris, the Arts and Crafts Movement, and Beyond," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 42, no. 1 (2008): 30-45. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25160264>.

⁴⁶⁹ Morris, "Art and Labour," 116.

⁴⁷⁰ William Morris, "The Socialist Ideal," in *Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. XXIII* (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1915), 261.

of handicraft was beautiful.”⁴⁷¹ This is a central part of what defined Popular Art in Morris’s mind, it was art made by and for the average person. It was most emphatically not art made for the elite. For Morris the last in period in which art for the average person flourished was the Middle Ages. He believed that the art and products of the Victorian period were very different, and his view they were made “ugly” by the very nature of their production. By contrast, in Medieval art “it was the act of war and devastation that grieved the eye of the artist then”.⁴⁷² If Morris connects violence, war, and destruction to ugliness in the Middle Ages, he also brings it forward into his critique of his own time. He describes capitalism as a kind of “commercial war”, which is constantly waged, destroying nature and beauty.⁴⁷³ For Morris, the great problem of capitalism is that it has turned decoration from a common thing into a “luxury”.⁴⁷⁴ The result has been that Popular Art, has disappeared since the golden age of the Middle Ages swept away by capitalism.

Morris found hope for a return of Popular Art in his vision of a socialist future. He connects a return to popular art to his ideal of fellowship among workers, by arguing that “no worthy popular art can grow out of any soil other than this of freedom and mutual respect”.⁴⁷⁵ In this, Morris ties his concept of popular art to socialism, for the fellowship and free association of workers was a central component of how he envisioned work would be done in a socialist future; in his 1884 lecture “Art and Labour”, he defines socialism as “universal cooperation.”⁴⁷⁶ This also reflected his interpretation of Medieval guilds. While he acknowledged that they were hierarchical and even forced workers to join them they served as Morris’s exemplar of a fellowship of workers nonetheless.⁴⁷⁷ He viewed the craft guilds as “democratic” because all who joined could eventually become Masters, and no one was condemned to stay on the bottom rung.⁴⁷⁸ Morris also connects the Medieval guild to Popular Art, and argues that the freedom of the guild craftsmen

⁴⁷¹ Morris, “The Socialist Ideal,” 256-257.

⁴⁷² Morris, “The Socialist Ideal,” 257.

⁴⁷³ Morris, “The Socialist Ideal,” 257-257.

⁴⁷⁴ Morris, “The Socialist Ideal,” 257-258.

⁴⁷⁵ Morris, “The Socialist Ideal,” 261.

⁴⁷⁶ Morris, “Art and Labour,” 116.

⁴⁷⁷ Morris, “Art and Labour,” 103-106.

⁴⁷⁸ Morris, “Art and Labour,” 103.

to control their work allowed them to produce the beautiful art of the Middle Ages.⁴⁷⁹ So the period became an inspiration for Morris, conceived as the last era in which his concept of popular art could be imagined. On an intellectual level this was the root of Morris's interest in the Medieval or perhaps this was the role that his vision of the Middle Ages was crafted to fulfill. This vision of Popular Art, with its emphasis on design and aesthetics is a critical part of Morris's construction of the Medieval, and of his broader approach to art. Yet for Morris this was not just words on paper; Morris desired to bring his ideas into reality. Much of his life and work focused on putting these ideas about art into practice. To begin understanding that aspect of Morris's life and art, it is necessary to consider the place where it all began for Morris, the site of his first serious endeavor into the realm of Popular Art. This was the Red House, the family home he created with the assistance of his Pre-Raphaelite friends.

The Red House and the Pre-Raphaelite Aesthetic

In an 1861 letter, Morris says of his Red House: "You will see that I have started as a decorator which I have long meant to do when I could get men of reputation to join me, and to this end mainly I have built my fine house."⁴⁸⁰ In the letter he describes the Red House as the fruition of his efforts to become an artist and a designer, and indeed it is with the Red House that the story of his artistic and business career truly begins. For while Morris spent the earlier years of his life experimenting with art, and even participated in decorating Oxford Union in 1857, it was in the building and decorating of the Red House that Morris truly put in to practice his ideas about art.⁴⁸¹ He described the house as a way of bringing to life his ambitions as a designer.⁴⁸² The Red House served as a stepping stone for Morris, and marked the beginning of putting his ideas about art, design and decoration into practice.

Any discussion of the Red House begins with a consideration of the Pre-Raphaelites, since many of them participated in its creation. Morris's friend the architect Philip Webb designed the house, while

⁴⁷⁹ Morris, "Art and Labour," 105-106.

⁴⁸⁰ William Morris to Frederick Barlow Guy, April 19, 1861, in *Collected Letters of William Morris, Vol. I:1848-1880*, ed. Norman Kelvin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 36-37.

⁴⁸¹ Fiona MacCarthy, "The Designer," in *William Morris*, ed. Linda Parry (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996), 36.

⁴⁸² William Morris to Frederick Barlow Guy, April 19, 1861, in *Collected Letters of William Morris, Vol. I:1848-1880*, ed. Norman Kelvin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 36-37.

Morris, his wife Jane, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Ford Madox Brown, and Edward Burne-Jones decorated it.⁴⁸³ According to E.P. Thompson, this endeavor was the origin of the “Firm”, which grew out of what Morris required to decorate his own home.⁴⁸⁴ According to Gillian Naylor, the home’s design reflects a Pre-Raphaelite approach to design.⁴⁸⁵ As the Pre-Raphaelites dabbled in the application of design to common everyday objects in ways that clearly informed Morris’s emphasis on decoration in his concept of Popular Art.⁴⁸⁶ As Naylor notes, in practice the Brotherhood preferred the traditional fine arts. When Ford Maddox Brown submitted his decorated furniture for a Pre-Raphaelite exhibition in 1859, it was rejected.⁴⁸⁷ Before Morris’s arrival, the Pre-Raphaelite interest in design and decoration had been largely theoretical. With his involvement, this began to change and the first steps towards what would come to be called the William Morris & Co.

Writing to his former teacher Frederick Barlow Guy in 1861, Morris announced the formation of a new business, saying that he used the construction of the Red House to bring a group of artists to work together.⁴⁸⁸ While there is scholarly debate over the Firm’s origins, it is clear that it grew out of ideas about design, decoration, and art which were already present in the Pre-Raphaelite Movement.⁴⁸⁹ Likewise, it is agreed that William Morris was central to the Firm’s formation, and that the construction of the Red House began Morris’s push to bring Pre-Raphaelite ideas about design into reality.⁴⁹⁰ In his biography of Morris, J.W. Mackail notes that Morris saw it “not merely as a place to live in, but as a fixed centre and background for his work”⁴⁹¹ What the Red House and the Firm had in common was that both were projects driven by William Morris’s involvement and both were about realizing his ideas about art. This meant that Morris invested far more of his own time, money, and energy in these projects, especially in the Firm, than

⁴⁸³ Edward P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (Oakland: PM Press, 2011), 92-93.

⁴⁸⁴ Thompson, *Romantic to Revolutionary*, 90-93.

⁴⁸⁵ Naylor, *The Arts and Crafts Movement*, 98-100.

⁴⁸⁶ Naylor, *The Arts and Crafts Movement*, 98-100.

⁴⁸⁷ Naylor, *The Arts and Crafts Movement*, 98-100.

⁴⁸⁸ William Morris to Frederick Barlow Guy, April 19, 1861, in *Collected Letters of William Morris, Vol. I:1848-1880*, ed. Norman Kelvin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 36-37.

⁴⁸⁹ Naylor, *The Arts and Crafts Movement*, 98-101.

⁴⁹⁰ Thompson, *Romantic to Revolutionary*, 92-94.

⁴⁹¹ J.W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris, Vol. I* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1901), 139.

did his Pre-Raphaelite associates.⁴⁹² Nonetheless, it is worth looking at the actual work and art put into the Red House by Morris and his friends.

Many different Pre-Raphaelites participated in the making of the Red House, chief among them Morris's friend, Philip Webb, the architect who designed the layout and shape.⁴⁹³ According to Fiona MacCarthy, Webb and Morris chose the location of the Red House due the presence of an orchard on the site.⁴⁹⁴ Much like Morris, Webb had an appreciation for the Medieval period and which came out in his design of the Red House.⁴⁹⁵ Later in life, Morris describes the Red House as "a house very mediaeval in spirit".⁴⁹⁶ Mackail notes that the Red House was designed to be radically different from other houses of the time it. Instead of being a "square box", as Morris described other Victorian houses, the Red House was to be "an L-Shaped building, two-storied, with a high-pitched roof of red tile".⁴⁹⁷ The wife of Pre-Raphaelite Edward Burne-Jones and Pre-Raphaelite herself, Georgiana Burne-Jones described the outside of the Red House in vivid detail "The House was strongly built of red brick, and red tiled: the porches were deep and the plan of the house was two sides of a quadrangle. In the angle was a covered well".⁴⁹⁸ Mackail describes the outside of the Red House as "plain almost to severity, and depended for effect on its solidity and fine proportion".⁴⁹⁹ MacCarthy agrees with Mackail in describing the Red House as plain, but she also notes that it was intentionally playful, and the first building Webb designed after becoming an "independent architect", and consequently this new freedom allowed Webb to express his love of the Medieval more freely in his design of the building.⁵⁰⁰ For Morris the Red House was meant embody his vision of the Medieval period. It also fulfilled its chief purpose as a personal refuge and place where his goal of restoring

⁴⁹² MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 170-171.

⁴⁹³ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 154-155.

⁴⁹⁴ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 154.

⁴⁹⁵ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 155-156.

⁴⁹⁶ William Morris to Andreas Scheu, September 15, 1883, in *Collected Letters of William Morris, Vol. II: 1881-1884*, eds. Norman Kelvin and Gale Sigal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 228.

⁴⁹⁷ Mackail, *The Life of William Morris, Vol. I*, 141.

⁴⁹⁸ Georgiana Burne-Jones, *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones, Vol. I: 1833-1867* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1904), 209. Babel.Hathitrust Digital Library, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044108412545?urlappend=%3Bseq=263%3Bownerid=27021597768450776-269>

⁴⁹⁹ Mackail, *The Life of William Morris, Vol. I*, 142.

⁵⁰⁰ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 155-156.

the golden age of art might be carried out. As Mackail notes, Morris wanted the house to serve as a “fixed centre” for his art.⁵⁰¹

While the exterior of the Red was rather plain, its interior boasted decoration by his distinguished friends and associates. Philip Webb assisted in creating some of the furniture for the Red House, including “the great oak dining-table, other tables, chairs, cupboards, massive copper candlesticks, fire-dogs, and table glass of extreme beauty”.⁵⁰² Edward Burne-Jones planned series of murals using tempura meant originally to consist of seven paintings that would recount the events of medieval romance called Sir Degrevaunt, but only completed three paintings.⁵⁰³ His mural of a wedding feast depicts William and Jane Morris presiding as the King and Queen in that painting.⁵⁰⁴ Dante Gabriel Rosetti provided a series of paintings portraying Dante and Beatrice from Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.⁵⁰⁵ Another of Morris’s associates, Charles Faulkner helped paint designs on the walls and ceilings.⁵⁰⁶ The Red House was in some sense a group project, though it is clear that Morris’s mind and energy were behind the greater part of the work.

The dominating influence and energy of William Morris can be seen throughout the Red House, a particular example of which can be seen in the art that William Morris and his wife Jane produced for the house. William Morris started, but never finished an Arthurian mural depicting Sir Lancelot, Sir Tristram, and Iseult, using himself, his wife, and his Pre-Raphaelite friends as models.⁵⁰⁷ Together, the couple produced most of the textiles for the Red House, as Jane discovered her natural talent for embroidery.⁵⁰⁸ This inspired an overly ambitious project to create a dozen embroidered friezes depicting famous Medieval and Classical women, inspired by Geoffrey Chaucer’s poem the *Legend of Good Wimmen*, undertaken by Jane Morris, Georgiana Burne-Jones, Jane’s sister Elizabeth Burden, Georgiana’s sister Alice, among other women associated with the Pre-Raphaelites.⁵⁰⁹ According to MacCarthy, William was the force behind this

⁵⁰¹ Mackail, *The Life of William Morris, Vol. I*, 139.

⁵⁰² Mackail, *The Life of William Morris, Vol. I*, 143.

⁵⁰³ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 158.

⁵⁰⁴ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 158.

⁵⁰⁵ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 159.

⁵⁰⁶ Georgiana Burne-Jones, *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones, Vol. I*, 209.

⁵⁰⁷ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 159.

⁵⁰⁸ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 160.

⁵⁰⁹ Linda Parry, *William Morris Textiles* (New York: V&A Publishing, 2013), 19-20.

effort and had proposed that the friezes include symbolic trees, although only St. Catherine's ended up including one.⁵¹⁰ Seven embroidered friezes were eventually completed. According to Linda Parry, they used a medieval technique to create the embroidery, first drawing out the intended image on linen and then cutting the image out for use on a higher quality silk or wool.⁵¹¹ Morris himself also created several textiles for the Red House, perhaps the most interesting pattern among them depicting daisies.⁵¹² It drew on from a Medieval manuscript of *Froissart's Chronicles* that Morris had studied, and would be a common design that Morris would use throughout his later work.⁵¹³

The Red House and its decoration were the culmination of a great deal of work by Morris, his friends, and family, but many of them were rather critical of the design and decoration of the Red House especially in later years. Two decades later, Morris himself in describing the Red House is rather positive and concluded that creating it opened his eyes to the lack of quality decoration in Victorian Britain at the time.⁵¹⁴ Jane Morris could be less positive in discussing the house. In a letter to Rossetti, she dismissed her textile frieze: "I should hate to see the thing about again, it is worth nothing at all".⁵¹⁵ But most artists are similarly dismissive of their early works. During the creation of the Red House, Rossetti was also critical or perhaps he simply hoped to torment Morris. As from very early on in their friendship Rossetti seemed to delight in tormenting Morris.⁵¹⁶ As according to Mackail, Rossetti mocked Morris's work with textiles saying "Top has taken to worsted work".⁵¹⁷ The insult here requires some explanation, "Topsy" was nickname that Morris received from Rossetti and the other Pre-Raphaelites referring to the fact that if annoyed or teased enough he would blow his top at them.⁵¹⁸ "Worsted work" meanwhile refers to a form of embroidery which Rossetti is implying is demeaning work.⁵¹⁹ While Morris had set aside space to inscribe

⁵¹⁰ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 160-161.

⁵¹¹ Parry, *Morris Textiles*, 19.

⁵¹² MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 159-160.

⁵¹³ Parry, *Morris Textiles*, 19.

⁵¹⁴ William Morris to Andreas Scheu, September 15, 1883, in *Collected Letters of William Morris, Vol. II: 1881-1884*, eds. Norman Kelvin and Gale Sigal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 228-229.

⁵¹⁵ Jane Morris to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, undated, in *Collected Letters of Jane Morris*, ed. Frank C. Sharp and Jan Marsh (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2013), 96.

⁵¹⁶ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 128-129.

⁵¹⁷ Mackail, *The Life of William Morris, Vol. I*, 154.

⁵¹⁸ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 78-79.

⁵¹⁹ Mackail, *The Life of William Morris, Vol. I*, 154.

his personal motto “If I can”, Georgiana Burne-Jones remembered Rosetti instead wrote “If I can’t” for his own amusement.⁵²⁰ Morris himself never became overly critical of the work on the Red House; the closest he came is the admission in 1883 that he had the “conceited courage of a young man” when he set out to found the Firm.⁵²¹ Even this confession has less to do with the Red House itself than with his later feelings about the Firm.

Morris only spent five years of his life at the Red House, largely because of the cost its upkeep and the hospitality for its many visitors.⁵²² Before leaving it, he had planned to add an additional wing to serve as a residence for his friend Edward Burne-Jones’s family, a project that was tied up with constructing a new set of workshops for the burgeoning business of the Firm near the Red House.⁵²³ The plan failed after several personal tragedies forced Edward Burne-Jones to withdraw.⁵²⁴ This ultimately proved the death knell for Morris’s own plans there.⁵²⁵ He found that he could either keep the house and abandon his business or keep the business and abandon the house, but he could simply no longer afford both.⁵²⁶ Giving up the Red House was a deep personal loss for Morris, such that according to Mackail: “After he left it that autumn, Morris never set eyes on it again, confessing that the sight of it would be more than he could bear.”⁵²⁷

In some respects, the Red House was just as much a failure as it was a success. Many of the home’s decorative projects were never completed. One seven of the planned friezes depicting historical women were completed; although designs for two more survive and third half-finished frieze also survive but neither of the others were even begun.⁵²⁸ The unfinished Friezes exemplify both the driving ambition behind the plans for the Red House and the ultimate failure to achieve its intended goal. That it was never

⁵²⁰ Georgiana Burne-Jones, *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones, Vol. I*, 209.

⁵²¹ William Morris to Andreas Scheu, September 15, 1883, in *Collected Letters of William Morris, Vol. II:1881-1884*, eds. Norman Kelvin and Gale Sigal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 228.

⁵²² Mackail, *The Life of William Morris, Vol. I*, 162-164.

⁵²³ Mackail, *The Life of William Morris, Vol. I*, 162-164.

⁵²⁴ Georgiana Burne-Jones, *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones, Vol. I*, 283.

⁵²⁵ Mackail, *The Life of William Morris, Vol. I*, 162-165.

⁵²⁶ Mackail, *The Life of William Morris, Vol. I*, 162-165.

⁵²⁷ Mackail, *The Life of William Morris, Vol. I*, 165.

⁵²⁸ Parry, *Morris Textiles*, 19-20.

completed, and that much of its decoration came from artists learning new mediums all contributed to the feeling among some of Morris's associates, not least his wife, that the house's decoration was an amateurish failure.⁵²⁹ Ultimately Morris could not afford the house, its experimental nature and his own modest means put him in dire straits. There is an irony in a house that began as an expression of Morris's vision of art but ended up lost to the mundane reality of his finances. The fantasy home that couldn't survive in the face of reality in many ways presaged the personal issues, disagreements and finances would tear apart Morris's idealized vision of the Firm.

The Firm

"The Firm" was the colloquial name that Morris and his associates gave to their joint business, officially called Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Company.⁵³⁰ In an 1883 Letter, Morris attributes the foundation of the firm to his experience of struggling to find the furniture and decoration which he desired for the Red House.⁵³¹ In response, he and several of his associates founded the Firm, each of them having an equal share of ownership in the business.⁵³² The Seven founding members were Morris, Philip Webb, Edward Burne-Jones, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Charles Faulkner, Ford Madox Brown, and Peter Marshall an eighth member, a Pre-Raphaelite named Arthur Hughes backed out.⁵³³ From the beginning however Morris had a more serious financial stake in the business, investing heavily in it at the expense of his shares in the Great Devon Consols his only other source of income.⁵³⁴ His financial investment coupled with his deep personal investment in his vision of what the Firm meant that Morris was almost from the beginning the heart and soul of the business. MacCarthy suggests that in its early days the Firm resembled the sorts of social clubs and societies that the Pre-Raphaelites had previously joined or formed, and consequently few of them took their involvement in the Firm very seriously, as the Firm seemed to be little more than a

⁵²⁹ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 161.

⁵³⁰ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 166.

⁵³¹ William Morris to Andreas Scheu, September 15, 1883, in *Collected Letters of William Morris, Vol. II: 1881-1884*, eds. Norman Kelvin and Gale Sigal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 228.

⁵³² MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 166.

⁵³³ Mackail, *The Life of William Morris, Vol. I*, 144-148.

⁵³⁴ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 171.

recreation of their previous and less than formal associations.⁵³⁵ For financial reasons, Morris could not help but take the business seriously, as for him it became the main source of income for himself and his family.⁵³⁶ His decision to cut losses with the Red House, as Mackail argues, showed Morris choosing business over the brick and mortar expression of his artistic vision.⁵³⁷ Yet Mackail ascribes it to his striving to gain “the power of guiding his life”.⁵³⁸ For him, the business represented the ability to work and produce art according to his vision, while the Red House was ultimately just an early expression of it. So, Morris committed his energies to making the Firm a success and using it to realize his vision of art and design.

Mackail’s biography of Morris quotes the original “circular” which announced the formation of the firm.⁵³⁹ As a manifesto, it laid out the ideas motivating the Firm, asserting that it had become necessary that “Artists of reputation” should participate in “Decorative Art”.⁵⁴⁰ It dismissed existing decorative and design firms by arguing that customers want “work of a genuine and beautiful character”.⁵⁴¹ Besides attacking the state of art and design, it touted the various kinds of products that the Firm could produce for their customers, including “Mural Decoration”, “Carving”, “Stained Glass”, “Metal Work”, and “Furniture”.⁵⁴² In his letter to Frederick Barlow Guy, Morris included a copy and asked him for “a list of clergymen and others, to whom it might be any use to send a circular”.⁵⁴³

The Firm’s original catalogue included a wide variety of kinds of art. The original “Circular” listed five different kinds, but its most successful products were their embroidery and stained glass which won awards at London’s International Exhibition of 1862.⁵⁴⁴ They also brought commissions from famous artists, and soon others began to engage the Firm’s services.⁵⁴⁵ Its stained glass became well known,

⁵³⁵ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 169-170.

⁵³⁶ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 241-242.

⁵³⁷ Mackail, *The Life of William Morris, Vol. I*, 163-164.

⁵³⁸ Mackail, *The Life of William Morris, Vol. I*, 164.

⁵³⁹ Mackail, *The Life of William Morris, Vol. I*, 150-152.

⁵⁴⁰ Mackail, *The Life of William Morris, Vol. I*, 150-151.

⁵⁴¹ Mackail, *The Life of William Morris, Vol. I*, 150-151.

⁵⁴² Mackail, *The Life of William Morris Vol. I*, 151.

⁵⁴³ William Morris to Frederick Barlow Guy, April 19, 1861, in *Collected Letters of William Morris*, Vol. I:1848-1880, ed. Norman Kelvin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 36-37.

⁵⁴⁴ Pat Kirkham, “The Firm: Morris & Company”, in *The Beauty of Life: William Morris & The Art of Design*, ed. Diane Waggoner (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2014), 35.

⁵⁴⁵ Kirkham, “The Firm: Morris & Company,” 35.

boasting early designs from Rosetti, Burne-Jones and Ford Madox Brown and popular for churches but also for residences and public buildings.⁵⁴⁶ Over time, Rosetti produced fewer designs but Morris and others took up the slack.⁵⁴⁷ Philip Webb was crucial in the development of the Firm's work with Stained Glass as initially he knew the most about it, so he selected the craftsman who did the actual work of making the glass early on.⁵⁴⁸

Even so, Morris exercised a tight control over the production of stained glass. Fiona MacCarthy argues that he felt that the golden age of stained glass was the fourteenth and fifteenth century and that Victoria Glass was inferior.⁵⁴⁹ She also notes how Morris strove to make sure that his stained glass told stories, drawn from the Bible or Medieval legends.⁵⁵⁰ Martin Harrison argues that when the Firm dealt with religious themes in their stained glass, they favored themes that had a history in art.⁵⁵¹ Morris's insisted on purchasing glass from a firm that made it nearly the same way as it had been made in the Medieval period.⁵⁵² In a letter to John Ruskin written in 1883, Morris outlines the exact process that he and his firm used for the production of stained glass.⁵⁵³ In the letter Morris is also fairly clear on the point that the process he and his firm used differ from the Medieval method of painting stained glass in only one area.⁵⁵⁴ This being a very specific point about how they created "flesh-coloured glass" as they used a "reddish enamel" paint to stain "White glass", and on rare occasion used it for other "pale orange tints".⁵⁵⁵ As a consequence, stained glass is an area which demonstrates both Morris's commitment to creating quality art and how his idealization of the Medieval led him to insist on mimicking Medieval methods of making

⁵⁴⁶ *A Brief Sketch of the Morris Movement and of the Firm Founded by William Morris To Carryout his Designs & The Industries Revived or Started by Him* (London: Privately Printed for Morris & Company, 1911), 17-18.

Babel.Hathitrust Digital Library, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/ucbk.ark:/28722/h2bz0w?urlappend=%3Bseq=23>

⁵⁴⁷ Martin Harrison, "Church Decoration and Stained Glass," in *William Morris*, ed. Linda Parry (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996), 106.

⁵⁴⁸ Harrison, "Church Decoration and Stained Glass," 106.

⁵⁴⁹ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 177-179.

⁵⁵⁰ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 178-179.

⁵⁵¹ Harrison, "Church Decoration and Stained Glass," 107.

⁵⁵² MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 178.

⁵⁵³ William Morris to John Ruskin, April 15, 1883, in *Collected Letters of William Morris, Vol. II:1881-1884*, eds. Norman Kelvin and Gale Sigal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 184-187.

⁵⁵⁴ William Morris to John Ruskin, April 15, 1883, in *Collected Letters of William Morris, Vol. II:1881-1884*, eds. Norman Kelvin and Gale Sigal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 186.

⁵⁵⁵ William Morris to John Ruskin, April 15, 1883, in *Collected Letters of William Morris, Vol. II:1881-1884*, eds. Norman Kelvin and Gale Sigal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 186.

stained glass. For Morris art was inextricably connected to the process of its creation, authenticity to the process of creation became as important as the final product.

Stained glass was one of the two main product areas which heralded the future success of the Firm.⁵⁵⁶ The real start of that success began with the respected architect G.F. Bodley, who engaged their services in producing stained glass for the churches that he designed.⁵⁵⁷ Bodley's decision established the Firm's credentials, while also providing it with regular work throughout the 1860s.⁵⁵⁸ Another important area of success was the Firm's wallpaper. Morris's "Daisy" design would go on to be the Firm's best and longest selling product.⁵⁵⁹ Another success for Morris may have come from the way in which the early Firm was run, as scholar Pat Kirkham has described it as having a pervading sense of "brotherhood".⁵⁶⁰ Fiona MacCarthy emphasizes how the early Firm revolved around the masculine groups of friends which Morris had constructed.⁵⁶¹ These both suggest that the early Firm tried to demonstrate a concept key in Morris's conception of work, the centrality of fellowship or association of craftsman working and producing art. For Morris, the early Firm reflect what he envisioned as the ideal way work should be carried out. Though his vision of fellowship seems to have been successful for a while, the reality soon proved to be unworkable and unpleasant in time.

During the early years, the Firm struggled for financial success, and Morris became resentful of his business partners.⁵⁶² Morris's passion had always been at its center and he had been its main driver, so it may have been only natural that most of the original partners had drifted back to their own interests and fields of work.⁵⁶³ By 1874, Morris began taking complete control over the Firm and removing inactive partners.⁵⁶⁴ He felt justified in doing this for a variety of reasons, but in large part because he had always

⁵⁵⁶ Harrison, "Church Decoration and Stained Glass," *William Morris*, 106.

⁵⁵⁷ *A Brief Sketch of the Morris Movement*, 17-19,
<https://hdl.handle.net/2027/ucbk.ark:/28722/h2bz0w?urlappend=%3Bseq=23>

⁵⁵⁸ Harrison, "Church Decoration and Stained Glass," 107.

⁵⁵⁹ *A Brief Sketch of the Morris Movement*, 23,
<https://hdl.handle.net/2027/ucbk.ark:/28722/h2bz0w?urlappend=%3Bseq=23>

⁵⁶⁰ Kirkham, "The Firm: Morris & Company," 34.

⁵⁶¹ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 170-171.

⁵⁶² MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 341-342.

⁵⁶³ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 341-342.

⁵⁶⁴ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 341-342.

been the one most dedicated to it and his livelihood most depended on its continued financial success.⁵⁶⁵ This opened a rift between the partners with Webb, Faulkner, and Burne-Jones backing Morris's decision and Rosetti, Marshall, and Madox Brown resisting it.⁵⁶⁶ The dispute became increasingly bitter as the three opponents engaged a lawyer.⁵⁶⁷ In the end they reached an agreement in which Morris paid each former partner a 1,000 pounds. Burne-Jones, Faulkner and Webb all refused their payout, content to let Morris keep the money.⁵⁶⁸ The settlement did not resolve the bitterness and anger that had poisoned the relationship between Morris and the partners who had resisted.⁵⁶⁹ In the case of Morris's relationship with Rosetti, it is easy to wonder if Morris was motivated by revenge on a man who was carrying out a flagrant and open affair with his wife. Yet Morris's relationship with many of his Pre-Raphaelite associates had never been particularly good, in fact he had regularly been the butt of the joke for most of them.⁵⁷⁰ By the 1870s, one wonders whether he had finally had enough and decided to take steps to set his house in order. Morris did not just distance himself from friends who had overstayed their welcome but also solidified his control over the Firm which had been the focus of his energy since its founding. Now that the Firm was entirely his, he began its reconstruction as William Morris & Company.

William Morris & Co.: Art and Socialism in Practice

Once Morris was firmly in control of his business, its fortunes began to change and he finally began to see his financial assets grow for the first time since he had invested in the Firm.⁵⁷¹ Indeed, by the late 1870s William Morris & Co.'s success was obvious, its goods could be found not just in Britain but around the world.⁵⁷² While many factors contributed to that success, almost all of them lead back to Morris himself and his deep personal commitment to the business as a vehicle for his artistic and creative impulses

⁵⁶⁵ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 341-342.

⁵⁶⁶ Kirkham, "The Firm: Morris & Company," 36.

⁵⁶⁷ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 342.

⁵⁶⁸ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 342.

⁵⁶⁹ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 342-347.

⁵⁷⁰ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 78-79.

⁵⁷¹ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 394-395.

⁵⁷² Kirkham, "The Firm: Morris & Company," 36-37.

and ideas. His financial investment in the business and famous drive to work also greatly contributed.⁵⁷³ More than anything, his creativity drove its success as he poured his energy into one new creative project after another, developing the designs and works of art that would carry the business forward.⁵⁷⁴ He also marketed his business through brochures that presented its products as good investments for their high quality and taste.⁵⁷⁵ Regardless of what particular engine really drove the business's success. It is clear that it was Morris's personal investment in the business and standards of quality that launched it to the heights it would eventually achieve.

By the late 1870s, William Morris & Company's designs were sought after by British aristocrats and other Victorian elites as a way of proving their good taste.⁵⁷⁶ Demand had ballooned such that by the 1880s the business expanded to cater to the middle-class as well. Its wallpapers were especially popular.⁵⁷⁷ Morris was ambivalent about this success and seems to have had some distaste for his wealthier clients.⁵⁷⁸ Many examples of this abound in his letters. In a letter to his daughter in 1883, he complained about such a client: "I am sorry to say that she is sadly stupid; and I believe monstrously rich... Hurrah therefore for the social revolution!"⁵⁷⁹ In another letter to her he whines about the "tiresome Mrs. Clark" who had ordered curtains, but whose requests prompted him to write: "Really when one sells a body porridge one should not be expected to put it into their mouths with a spoon".⁵⁸⁰ While Morris may not have had a high opinion of his wealthier clients or have enjoyed interacting with them, the prominence and success of his business required such interactions, at least on occasion. For his business had managed to become a way for the wealthy and the middle-class to show off their good taste. The transformation of Morris's business into a mainstay of the Victorian bourgeoisie and elite taste in design seems to have left Morris somewhat uneasy

⁵⁷³ Charles Harvey and Jon Press, "The Businessman," in *William Morris*, ed. Linda Parry (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996), 51.

⁵⁷⁴ Harvey and Press, "The Businessman," 51-54.

⁵⁷⁵ Harvey and Press, "The Businessman," 51.

⁵⁷⁶ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 410-412.

⁵⁷⁷ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 412-513.

⁵⁷⁸ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 411-412.

⁵⁷⁹ William Morris to Jenny Morris, July 21, 1883, in *Collected Letters of William Morris, Vol II: 1881-1884*, eds. Norman Kelvin and Gale Sigal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 208.

⁵⁸⁰ William Morris to Jenny Morris, March 24, 1885, in *Collected Letters of William Morris, Vol II: 1885-1888*, eds. Norman Kelvin and Gale Sigal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 408.

about his art and work.⁵⁸¹ It may have struck him in these interactions that his dream of making high quality art for the masses was not possible and without a doubt it grinded on him that his work had simply become another cog in the machine of Victorian Britain.

Adding to Morris's ambivalence about his newfound respectability in 1877 he was approached by the University of Oxford to become Professor of Poetry, a largely honorary position.⁵⁸² He refused the post in a letter in which he outlined his reasons for declining it.⁵⁸³ Morris' first objection was that "It seems to me that the practice of any art rather narrows the artist in regard to the theory of it".⁵⁸⁴ At the end of the letter, Morris questioned the post's academic viability, asking "whether the professor of a wholly incommunicable art is not rather in a false position".⁵⁸⁵ This letter shows Morris's feelings about art and his work during this period, the growing intensity of his dislike for his work's sudden popularity and respectability in Victorian Britain. Morris felt that his newfound respectability conflicted with realizing his vision of art. As to him it seemed as if accepting his new status would require him to turn his back on putting his art and work into practice. This conflict drove Morris toward political activism as he increasingly believed that his vision of art was unachievable in the Victorian world.

Morris never abandoned his fascination with the production of applied arts, as his long interest in dyeing and textiles demonstrates. His interest in dyeing goes back to the beginning of the Firm and his desire to revive medieval techniques of dyeing. His interest in dyeing stemmed from a deep-seated hatred of the new factory dyes which were replacing organic and traditional methods of dyeing.⁵⁸⁶ In his essay, "Of Dyeing as an Art" (1893), Morris concluded that the production of these new industrial dyes, "while doing great service to capitalists in their hunt after profits, has terribly injured the art of dyeing, and for the

⁵⁸¹ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 411-412.

⁵⁸² MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 374.

⁵⁸³ William Morris to James Richard Thursfield, February 16, 1877, in *Collected Letters of William Morris, Vol I: 1848-1880*, ed. Norman Kelvin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 347.

⁵⁸⁴ William Morris to James Richard Thursfield, February 16, 1877, in *Collected Letters of William Morris, Vol I: 1848-1880*, ed. Norman Kelvin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 347.

⁵⁸⁵ William Morris to James Richard Thursfield, February 16, 1877, in *Collected Letters of William Morris, Vol I: 1848-1880*, ed. Norman Kelvin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 347.

⁵⁸⁶ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 351.

general public has nearly destroyed it as an art.”⁵⁸⁷ Later in the same essay Morris differentiates between “the *commercial process* and the art of *dyeing*”.⁵⁸⁸ This reflects his approach to art, like his efforts in stained glass, aiming to preserve or revive medieval techniques. Morris’s experimentation with different methods for creating natural dyes was intended to preserve and restore traditional dyes.⁵⁸⁹ For him, capitalism had undermined and ruined art, and the only way to revive it was to restore traditional arts.

Morris’s interest in dyeing was part of a deeper commitment to reviving traditional artforms centering on textiles. Here, too, Morris engages in similar efforts to preserve art forms from the destruction wrought by capitalism. His work as a pattern designer and with organic dyes were just part of this effort.⁵⁹⁰ Morris experimented a variety of different ways of creating textiles, including embroidery, tapestry weaving and carpet making. In her book on Morris’s textiles, Linda Parry found that he seemed to have been interested in textiles fairly early on and viewing them as vital to decorating a home.⁵⁹¹ Morris’s earliest experience with textiles was with embroidery during his brief time working at George Edmund Street’s architectural firm, but it inspired him to study embroidery and launched a lifetime of work with textiles.⁵⁹² In discussing Morris’s early interest in embroidery, Mackail describes how he developed his knowledge of embroidery by identifying the best quality tools and materials to sharpen his skills until he had mastered the art.⁵⁹³ Although textiles were not central to the early financial success of the Firm, many of the women associated with it focused their efforts on embroidery.⁵⁹⁴ Linda Parry suggests that this discrepancy was because the early textiles were personal work meant for members of the Firm rather than for public consumption.⁵⁹⁵ Morris’s work as a pattern designer began with his role in providing the designs for most of the textiles produced by the Firm even before its reorganization.⁵⁹⁶ His drive to develop greater

⁵⁸⁷ William Morris, “Of Dyeing As An Art,” in *Arts and Crafts Essays* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1893), 197-198. Babel.Hathitrust Digital Library,

<https://hdl.handle.net/2027/gri.ark:/13960/t43r28w5j?urlappend=%3Bseq=221>

⁵⁸⁸ Morris, “Of Dyeing As An Art”, 198.

⁵⁸⁹ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 351-352.

⁵⁹⁰ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 357-359.

⁵⁹¹ Linda Parry, “Textiles,” in *William Morris*, ed. Linda Parry (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996), 224-225.

⁵⁹² Parry, *Morris Textiles*, 14-16.

⁵⁹³ Mackail, *The Life of William Morris, Vol. I*, 129.

⁵⁹⁴ Parry, “Textiles,” 225-226.

⁵⁹⁵ Parry, “Textiles,” 226.

⁵⁹⁶ Parry, “Textiles,” 226-227.

skills and depth of knowledge led him to experiment with different kinds of textiles and techniques for creating them. By the mid-1870s, he was exploring carpet making, developing a formidable knowledge of its techniques and eventually recruiting and training employees in their production.⁵⁹⁷

The pinnacle of Morris's work with textiles revolved around tapestry weaving; for him, this was the highest form of textile work and the one into which he poured the most energy.⁵⁹⁸ In his essay "Textiles" (1893), he describes tapestry weaving as "the noblest of the weaving arts", which may have been because, according to him, making tapestries did not require anything "mechanical".⁵⁹⁹ He thought a tapestry should "be looked upon as a mosaic of pieces of colour made of dyed threads", while emphasizing the detail that made it beautiful.⁶⁰⁰ Part of the attraction of tapestries for Morris was that he found it an art form which rewarded his approach to pattern. In his essay "Some Hints on Pattern Designing" (1881), Morris argues that: "Definite form bounded by firm outline is the necessity for all ornament".⁶⁰¹ This is also reflected in his comments on tapestry design, where he asserts that "nothing vague or indeterminate is admissible."⁶⁰² All this explains why tapestries seemed to him the highest form of textile, because they required the kind of design work that he saw as ideal. Morris also felt that tapestry had peaked during the Medieval period when they achieved this ideal.⁶⁰³

Like much of his other later art, Morris's work with tapestries brought him into conflict with others who were part of the Victorian revival of craft, even leading him into conflict with Queen Victoria.⁶⁰⁴ Around the time that he began developing tapestries for his company, Victoria set up the rival Windsor Tapestry Works.⁶⁰⁵ In an 1877 letter, insultingly refers to her as the "Widow Guelph", claiming that she had "been enticing our customers from us & has got an order for tapestry that ought to have been

⁵⁹⁷ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 403-404.

⁵⁹⁸ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 406-407.

⁵⁹⁹ William Morris, "Textiles," in *Arts and Crafts Essays* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1893), 23. Babel.Hathitrust Digital Library, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/gri.ark:/13960/t43r28w5j?urlappend=%3Bseq=47>

⁶⁰⁰ Morris, "Textiles," 23.

⁶⁰¹ William Morris, "Some Hints on Pattern Designing," in *The Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. XXII* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1914), 199.

⁶⁰² Morris, "Textiles," 23.

⁶⁰³ Morris, "Textiles," 23-24.

⁶⁰⁴ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 406-407.

⁶⁰⁵ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 406-407.

ours”.⁶⁰⁶ This serves as a reminder that Morris’s interest in reviving traditional, especially medieval, forms of art was shared by others during this Victorian period. The difference between Morris and a competitor like the Queen lay in his deep personal commitment to the quality of his work and his efforts to authentically recreate the methods of medieval craftsmen. What he saw as less pure attempts by his rivals, or the casual interest of the Victorian Upper and Middle classes in his work, all offended his sensibilities.

This personal ambivalence about how his work was seen by Victorian society, coupled with the struggles that Morris often faced in recreating art in a Medieval style, contributed to his embracement of Socialism. His ideas about art, especially his much-vaunted concept of Popular Art, were impossible to achieve under a Capitalist system. This argument is most clearly stated in Morris’s essay “The Socialist Ideal” (1891), where he lays out what is wrong with art in his own time: “It is the art of a clique and not of the people. The people are too poor to have any share of it.”⁶⁰⁷ He points to the lack of decoration on everyday objects used by normal people, and finds that the period neglected “art as a necessity of human life” instead packaging it as a “luxury”.⁶⁰⁸ This gets at the core of Morris’s discomfort with his business’s popularity with the rich and the middle classes, recognizing that his products had not become Popular Art he idealized, but rather art displayed by the elite as a luxury goods. This made him cynical about the possibility of art existing under capitalism. Morris saw that in “the relation of the modern world to art, our business is now and for long will be not so much attempting to produce definite art, as rather clearing the ground to give art its opportunity.”⁶⁰⁹ For him, capitalism created obstacles to putting his vision into practice and achieving his artistic goals. The realization that his dream of what art should be was untenable under a capitalist system led him to embrace socialism, since for him to put his ideas about art into practice he needed a society organized along altogether different lines than imperial Britain. To bring that dream into reality motivated Morris’s Socialist activism from the 1880s to his death.

⁶⁰⁶ William Morris to Thomas Wardle, October 24, 1877, in *Collected Letters of William Morris, Vol I: 1848-1880*, ed. Norman Kelvin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 403.

⁶⁰⁷ Morris, “The Socialist Ideal,” 260.

⁶⁰⁸ Morris, “The Socialist Ideal,” 260.

⁶⁰⁹ Morris, “The Socialist Ideal,” 262.

Socialism, the Kelmscott Press, and the Final Years

There is a tendency in Morris scholarship to find a sharp break between Morris's Socialism and his art, even if it means ignoring the explicit connections that he drew between them in his later writings, including "The Socialist Ideal" (1891), "Art under Plutocracy" (1883), and "Art and Socialism" (1884). The most critical work for understanding Morris's decision to take up an active Socialist role can be found in his lecture "Art of the People" (1879), where he proclaims: "That thing which I understand by real art is the expression by man of his pleasure in labor."⁶¹⁰ This is the cornerstone of his understanding of both Work and Art, as Morris expresses it well before he began to take an active role in promoting Socialism.⁶¹¹ Morris's conception of Art, and especially his understanding of Popular Art played a central role in his decision to embrace Socialism. Morris's career as a committed Socialist was brief, lasting only from 1883 until his death in 1896, but during that time he became a central figure in the world of British Socialism. MacCarthy stresses how radical Morris's decision was at a time when Socialism had only been embraced by a small minority in Britain and there were almost no organizations that embraced it.⁶¹² His decision to become a Socialist is laid out in his essay, "How I Became a Socialist" (1894), which makes clear that he had not even read Marx at the time and that his motives lay within his own personal ideals.⁶¹³ In the essay's opening, Morris explains that "what I mean by Socialism is a condition of society in which...all men would be living in equality of condition, and would manage their affairs unwastefully, and with the full consciousness that harm to one would mean harm to all."⁶¹⁴ This clearly reflects the conditions which Morris posits as necessary for Popular Art, and art in general, to flourish, something Morris makes clear in the final lines of the essay: "[Art's] roots must have a soil of a thriving and unanxious life".⁶¹⁵ In his life, he set out to make to this possible, putting his ideas about Art and Socialism into practice by joining the

⁶¹⁰ William Morris, "Art of the People," in *The Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. XXII* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1914), 42.

⁶¹¹ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 420-421.

⁶¹² MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 462-464.

⁶¹³ Morris, "How I Became a Socialist," in *The Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. XXIII* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1915), 277-278.

⁶¹⁴ Morris, "How I Became a Socialist," 277.

⁶¹⁵ Morris, "How I Became a Socialist," 277.

Democratic Federation. In the same essay, he reiterates that capitalism “destroyed art.”⁶¹⁶ The Democratic Federation had been founded and led by Henry Hyndman, who saw in Morris a useful recruit to bolster the reputation of his newly formed organization, though he was not necessarily prepared for Morris’s enthusiasm for Socialism.⁶¹⁷

By 1884, Morris and many other Socialists had become dissatisfied with the state of the Democratic Federation and with Hyndman himself.⁶¹⁸ There were disagreements between Hyndman other over strategy of getting members elected to Parliament, which Morris opposed as the wrong direction as he preferred building up Socialism on a local level.⁶¹⁹ Another serious issue was Hyndman’s support for the British Empire, while Morris and other Socialists opposed its growth on grounds of principle.⁶²⁰ This ultimately led to the breakup of the Democratic Federation, culminating in Morris and his supporters abandoning the group.⁶²¹ Morris was initially reluctant to leave the Federation and later expressed some regret over it.⁶²² Yet he quickly organized the Socialist League and also created its journal, *The Commonweal*. It was Morris’s money which funded the new League’s activities.⁶²³

Morris would spend a great deal of time editing the *Commonweal*, and it consumed a great deal of energy as he wrote many of its articles as well as sorting and editing the many submissions sent to it for consideration.⁶²⁴ The journal served as the vehicle for some of his later literary work beginning with his epic novel, *A Dream of John Ball* (1888), which was first serialized in the paper from 1886 to 1887.⁶²⁵ Morris’s editorship came to an end in 1890 when Anarchists managed to seize control of the Socialist League, and oust him from his editorship.⁶²⁶ Severing ties with Morris ultimately proved costly as he had been the one footing the League’s bills, but he watched morosely as the Anarchist drove his organization

⁶¹⁶ Morris, “How I Became a Socialist,” 277-279.

⁶¹⁷ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 464-472.

⁶¹⁸ Thompson, *Romantic to Revolutionary*, 342-349.

⁶¹⁹ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 493-494.

⁶²⁰ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 494.

⁶²¹ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 501-503.

⁶²² MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 501-503.

⁶²³ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 504-506.

⁶²⁴ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 511-515.

⁶²⁵ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 546-547.

⁶²⁶ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 580-583.

into the ground.⁶²⁷ It is perhaps unsurprising that in his final years, Morris's energies turned toward his literary work as a vehicle for his Socialist politics, while also creating a press that in many ways paralleled the work of his company.

William Morris explained his aim in founding Kelmscott Press: "I began printing books with the hope of producing some which would have a definite claim to beauty".⁶²⁸ Naturally, for Morris, his deep and abiding love for the Medieval informed both his belief that the period's books were the most beautiful and his desire to resurrect that style in his own Press.⁶²⁹ As a young man, he had tried his hand at illuminating manuscripts and had been very taken with Medieval manuscripts at that time.⁶³⁰ He also published novels like *Roots of the Mountains* (1889) with Chiswick Press, well-known for its quality books.⁶³¹ Editing the *Commonweal* gave him experience as a chief editor and some idea of what would be required in running his own printing press.⁶³² Morris's goal of making his books beautiful meant that the books published by Kelmscott Press were heavily ornamented, and covered in design much like the Medieval books which he so admired.⁶³³ Kelmscott Press also benefited from the same determination he brought to every attempt to recreate the beauty of Medieval art through a commitment to high quality materials.⁶³⁴ This can be seen his efforts to get paper of the same quality as that of his Medieval manuscripts, particularly those produced in the 1470s in Northern Italy.⁶³⁵ Morris decided that he needed linen paper so he used a manuscript he described as a "Bolognese of about 1473", as the model for the paper that he wanted and had a paper mill owner produce based on it.⁶³⁶ Clearly, Kelmscott Press serves as

⁶²⁷ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 580-583.

⁶²⁸ William Morris, "A Note By William Morris on His aims in founding the Kelmscott Press," in *The Kelmscott Press and William Morris Master Craftsman*, ed. H.H. Spalding (London: Macmillan and Co., 1924), 135 Babel.HathiTrust Digital Library,

<https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015011806398?urlappend=%3Bseq=183%3Bownerid=13510798896747825-207>

⁶²⁹ Morris, "A Note By William Morris," 135.

⁶³⁰ Diane Waggoner, "Art of the Book," in *The Beauty of Life: William Morris & the Art of Design*, ed. Diane Waggoner (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2003), 89-90.

⁶³¹ Waggoner, "Art of the Book," 92-93.

⁶³² John Dreyfus, "The Kelmscott Press," in *William Morris*, ed. Linda Parry (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996), 310-311.

⁶³³ Dreyfus, "The Kelmscott Press," 311-312.

⁶³⁴ Dreyfus, "The Kelmscott Press," 311-312.

⁶³⁵ Dreyfus, "The Kelmscott Press," 312.

⁶³⁶ Morris, "A Note By William Morris," 135-136.

another example of Morris's adoration of the Medieval and his desire to resurrect the arts and preserve the techniques of that period.

Morris's literary efforts, particularly his novels, during this late period of his life, are also worth exploring as they blend Morris's love of the medieval and his socialist politics. As Carole Silver notes, most of these later works are products of Morris's socialist imagination of a utopian future.⁶³⁷ Silver also argues that these works were strongly inspired and influenced by medieval romances, which were now infused with Socialist ideas.⁶³⁸ For example, Silver discusses how Morris creates a contrast in many of his later romances between cities dominated by evil capitalists or Masters while the countryside would be dotted with agrarian villages organized communally.⁶³⁹ This plays into a particular mythology that he created in his Novels, one which projected socialism into a quasi-Medieval past or future.⁶⁴⁰ *News From Nowhere* (1890), represented the ideal future for Morris and it is for the most part an agrarian semi-medieval future, based around the communal organization of agrarian communities.⁶⁴¹ Morris's utopian and medievalist novels became the mainstay of the Kelmscott Press, about equaling in number the medieval texts it published.⁶⁴² All of Kelmscott's books were decorated with a Medieval aesthetic, so that even his vision of the future *News From Nowhere* came wrapped in medieval bindings, continuing his efforts to revive the art of the Medieval period.⁶⁴³ In the end Kelmscott Press and Morris's later novels became yet another avenue for Morris's artistic and political impulses. Even in his old age, William Morris could not find it in himself stop and rest. Instead, he felt driven by the need to put his ideas about art into practice.

Art was a vital part of Morris's worldview, which served many ideological functions for him on an intellectual level. It was the ideal result of pleasurable work; but that was threatened by the evils of capitalism in his own day. Its centrality also masked how poorly defined as a concept it was in Morris's thought, even though it was tied tightly to his concepts of beauty and nature. Better thought out was

⁶³⁷ Silver, *Romance of William Morris*, 157.

⁶³⁸ Silver, *Romance of Morris*, 160-161.

⁶³⁹ Silver, *Romance of Morris*, 160-161.

⁶⁴⁰ Silver, *Romance of Morris*, 157-163.

⁶⁴¹ William Morris, "News from Nowhere," in *The Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. XVI* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1910), 87-90.

⁶⁴² MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 615-617.

⁶⁴³ MacCarthy, *Morris: A Life*, 618-619.

Morris's concept of Popular Art as decorative art which was produced by everyday people turned artisans. His concept of Popular Art was perhaps the driving factor in Morris's thought and putting it into practice played a central role in Morris's life. In his mind, Art could only be expressed when it had been made, and so it needed to be brought to life. The drive to bring Art and his ideas about it into reality drove so much of Morris's artistic, literary, and business career and it lay at the heart of his political activism. This worldview never left him, that art should be the center of this world, and he never stopped trying to make it real.

CONCLUSION

William Morris's vision of the Middle Ages is the product of many different influences in his life. Chief of these influences was the writings and thought of John Ruskin, whom perhaps more than any other figure left a deep impact on Morris's worldview. The Pre-Raphaelites also left their mark on Morris, shaping his future artistic career and setting him down the path that would see him found William Morris & Company. The ideas of contemporary socialists also influenced Morris's career and the Arts and Crafts Movement. Yet his utopian medievalism also influenced his life and writings by providing him a foundation which he could draw upon to support his ideas or a canvas on which he could paint his utopian ideas. He could look back to the Middle Ages and point to his romanticized vision of the Guilds as proof that his ideas about "Association" were not just flights of fancy but something that had precedent in the historical past.⁶⁴⁴ Medieval Art became a standard against which the art of his own age could be found lacking.⁶⁴⁵ Morris's utopian vision of the Medieval even inspired his vision of the future as he imagined the world returned to an idealized rural agrarian lifestyle in his *News From Nowhere* (1890).⁶⁴⁶ There were many different ways in which Morris's view of the Middle Ages could and did interact with his art, thought and family life.

This thesis reconstructs Morris's imagined Middle Ages in the context of three different areas of his thought, Gender, Work, and Art. Each offers a different, though thoroughly interconnected, vantage point on Morris and his vision of the medieval past. Beyond that, however each of these different areas also offer insight into how Morris's utopian medievalism affected his family life and career. Gender offers an especially clear view of how Morris's Medievalism affected his family life and thought. As he constructed his understanding of gender in light of his love of the Middle Ages, women became the objects of an idealization that turned them into objects of love and men became creatures driven by their desires. The idealization of women had particularly serious implications for his marriage and helped destabilize it as he

⁶⁴⁴ William Morris, "Art under Plutocracy," in *The Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. XXIII* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1915), 173.

⁶⁴⁵ William Morris, "The Socialist Ideal," in *Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. XXIII* (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1915), 256-257.

⁶⁴⁶ William Morris, "News from Nowhere," in *The Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. XVI* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1910), 3-211.

built his vision of an ideal wife and romance while his wife pursued a different reality which challenged his visions. Furthermore, this association of humanity with its desires, especially ones that stimulated its creative impulses fed into how Morris constructed his ideas about work. To him the purpose of work was the expression of the creative desire in humanity but because he gendered his ideas about desire and human nature, he came to define these drives as more masculine than feminine. His denial that a woman could ever become a great artist reflects the reality that his vision of work was fundamentally biased and gendered, asserting that creativity was the realm of the man.⁶⁴⁷ This did not prevent him from allowing that some women might have creative impulses in artistic areas he thought more properly masculine, but they were outliers in Morris's view.⁶⁴⁸

Morris's thought about work also offers a perspective on how he used medieval history in advocating for his own ideas. The Middle Ages became a wellspring to which he could turn for inspiration in his battles against capitalism and industrialization. The influence of his utopian medievalism went much deeper than just inspiring Morris about how he might resist the rot of Victorian Society. It served to him as proof that his ideas about work and art were operative in history. He could and did acknowledge that the Middle Ages were not an ideal period of history, but he believed that despite this they had been freer and more creative than in his own time.⁶⁴⁹ For proof of this he interpreted the medieval guilds as a predecessor to his own concept of "Associations" of loosely organized workers.⁶⁵⁰ Another aspect that allowed him to imagine the guilds as part of his romanticized vision of the medieval past was the role of the artisan and craftsman. Morris saw Work in the Middle Ages as something that could still escape the domination of the elites which consequently meant that art or what he called "Popular Art" was still possible. This meant that in his mythologized interpretation of the medieval the guilds became the great bastions of art, the last place in which work was ideally organized and the only place where the dedicated craftsman flourished.

⁶⁴⁷ Sarah A. Tooley, "A Living Wage for Women," in *We Met Morris: Interviews with William Morris, 1885-96*, ed. Tony Pinkney (Spire Books, 2005), 92-94.

⁶⁴⁸ Morris, "News from Nowhere," 173-176.

⁶⁴⁹ William Morris, "Art and Labour," in *The Unpublished Lectures of William Morris*, ed. Eugene D. Lemire (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1969), 105-106.

⁶⁵⁰ Morris, "Art under Plutocracy," 173.

In Morris's thought, Art serves a variety of functions, although most prominent of these is a justification for his rejection of industrialization, capitalism, and the mores and mainstream politics of the Victorian era. He argues that the Industrial Revolution had cast true art by the wayside, rejecting it in favor of ugly and useless products manufactured on a massive scale.⁶⁵¹ For Morris, understanding Art becomes a justification for rejecting industrialization and capitalism as they had all but destroyed real art. The Middle Ages were envisioned as the last true flowering of art and Morris regards the period as a source to return to for artistic inspiration. In life, he found in the medieval a lost golden age of art that he spent the better part of his career and life trying to revive, through the Red House, William Morris & Company, Kelmscott Press and finally in his socialist utopias.

Gender, Work and Art each reveal different facets of Morris's utopian medievalism and they unveil something of how Morris's mythologized Middle Ages interacted with reality of the Victorian . They each offer a different look at how Morris constructed not just the Middle Ages but also how he viewed the world he lived in. He saw in industrialization the destruction of what was best in art and work. In his period, Art and with it anything beautiful became the realm of the elite forever outside reach of the majority. For laborers, work ceased to be a source of joy but instead a source of misery and in the worst cases it became a "prison-torment".⁶⁵² In Morris's worldview, art and work are so intimately tied that they are practically part of the same concept or two sides of the same coin. These two concepts interact with Morris's medievalism in much the same way both driving his rejection of capitalism and industrialization in Victorian Society. Gender meanwhile presents a more complicated and fluid picture of Morris, as its relationship to his more radical thoughts on work is complicated. It plays into and helps create a hierarchy of work in his thought, something that has its roots in Morris's belief that women are less capable than men in the more physical and creative forms of work which he esteems so highly, while at the same time claiming that women and women's work are equal to men and men's work.⁶⁵³ His denial that women's

⁶⁵¹ William Morris, "Useful Work versus Useless Toil," in *The Collected Works of William Morris, Vol. XXIII* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1915), 113-115.

⁶⁵² Morris, "Useful Work versus Useless Toil," 112.

⁶⁵³ Sarah A. Tooley, "A Living Wage for Women," in *We Met Morris: Interviews with William Morris, 1885-96*, ed. Tony Pinkney (Spire Books, 2005), 92-94.

creativity is on the same level as men's is critical in undermining the case for his full belief in women's equality. Throughout his writings he emphasizes the centrality of creativity and the creative impulse in human nature. That he is really talking about the nature of masculinity and manhood means that on some level he denies that women possess any real or deep capacity for creativity. This denial means that for all his talk of the equality of men and women, he denies that the aspect of human nature that he considers most important is something women possess on the same level as men. When Morris suggests that women's creative drive is lesser than men's, he contradicts both his own claims to support the equality of women and his own rejection of hierarchy in work. Contradictions great or small are perhaps an inevitable part of anyone's worldview, let alone one founded a very specific and personal interpretation of the Middle Ages.

Morris's utopian vision of the Middle Ages is complicated and at times contradictory, but it is not without its appeal. For Morris, it must have provided him comfort and an assurance that his own ideas were not just something new, but rather the rebirth of old values and beliefs. It certainly helped him by convincing him that his attempts to put his ideas about art and work into practice were more than just novel attempts at organizing work, but were instead the revival of forms of art and work that had been destroyed by industrialization. His embracement of Socialism was driven by many causes but perhaps most clearly it was the realization that his utopian vision of artist craftsmen was not viable under capitalism. He would have learned this lesson over the course of the 1870s as he entered into bitter struggles with his one-time friends among the Pre-Raphaelites over William Morris & Company.⁶⁵⁴ Ironically it may have been the unvarnished success of William Morris & Company during the late 1870s and 1880s that convinced him that his utopian vision of the medieval was impossible to achieve.⁶⁵⁵ During this time, it became clear that his art would be unable to reach ordinary people and instead had become the domain of the elite who alone could afford it. Morris's realization of this failure of his efforts shines a light on at least one of the motives behind his political activism as he saw it as a way to put his ideas about art into practice. His tendency to see the world through the lens of his utopian medievalism colored how he approached the contemporary

⁶⁵⁴ Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 341-347.

⁶⁵⁵ Pat Kirkham, "The Firm: Morris & Company," in *The Beauty of Life: William Morris & The Art of Design*, ed. Diane Waggoner (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2014), 36-37.

world, driving him to tinge a wide swath of his writings with bits and pieces of the Middle Ages and draw on it to define how he handled his art.

Morris's medievalist worldview influenced him as a thinker, an artist and a socialist. It provided him not just with a foundation on which to build significant aspects of political and social thought but also drove significant aspects of his activism by providing him with a justification for his own unique critiques of Victorian society, industrialization, and capitalism. Its influence on Morris goes much deeper however as it even had an effect on his family life, particularly his marriage to Jane Burden. His commitment to a utopian vision of the Middle Ages combined with the influence of the Pre-Raphaelite conception of pure womanhood led him to an idealized vision of his wife that contributed rather significantly to the downfall of their marriage. It led him to pay more attention to the idea of his wife than the reality: She became a receptacle for his love and desire and while he did not deny the existence of her feelings and emotions, he just assumed that she would always return his love. This failure to foresee the issues in his marriage came about because Morris could only see his vision of what his marriage is, not the reality. To some degree his medieval vision also shaped how Morris constructed his home in the Red House and how he ran his businesses. Given the deep and broad influence of this utopian medievalism on him, it is clear just how deeply it affected him and his life. Ultimately, any serious consideration of William Morris needs to confront his relationship with the medieval in order to gain any deep insights.

The importance of Morris's utopian medievalism in understanding him is something that has often been neglected by some scholars. E.P. Thompson is perhaps the one most guilty of this. His work foregoes a serious analysis of the Medieval in Morris's writings as he dismissed it as a romantic fantasy that Morris never fully escaped and little else.⁶⁵⁶ This approach fails to consider the very real importance of both art and the medieval in shaping his political activism. More recent scholarship has trended toward a more careful and balanced interpretation of the medieval, art and socialism in Morris's writings. Fiona MacCarthy's biography is an excellent example of this but is far from alone as at least on some level most scholars will acknowledge the medieval in Morris.⁶⁵⁷ But this trend usually focuses in on one aspect while just skimming

⁶⁵⁶ Edward P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (Oakland: PM Press, 2011), 1-810.

⁶⁵⁷ Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 1-681.

the surface of the medieval in Morris's broader thought. But there is still a trend to ignore the role of the medieval in some areas of Morris's political thought, as while Ruth Kinna's excellent article on work in Morris's thought provides a thorough analysis of work as a concept, it neglects the role of the imagined medieval past in developing and defending Morris's vision of work.⁶⁵⁸ More importantly since Margaret Grennan's *William Morris: Medievalist and Revolutionary* (1945), there hasn't been any serious effort to holistically interrogate Morris's medievalism.⁶⁵⁹ It has been dealt with on the periphery of books and articles focused on other topics and aspects of Morris or which focus in on one aspect of Morris's medievalism. While his utopian vision of the Middle Ages is not his only legacy, it is critical to developing an understanding of who Morris was and what his writings represent: his unique interpretation of the past and a demonstration of how that vision of the medieval shaped his life.

⁶⁵⁸ Ruth Kinna, "William Morris: Art, Work, and Leisure," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 61, no.3 (2000): 493-512, <https://doi.org/doi:10.2307/3653925>

⁶⁵⁹ Margaret R. Grennan, *William Morris: Medievalist and Revolutionary* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1945), 1-155.

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