

The Kelmscott Press: To What Purpose?

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Morris always made his aims very clear. For the Kelmscott Press books, he sought the quality of type and its arrangement, that productions might have ‘a definitive claim to beauty’ while being ‘easy to read’.¹ Looking to fifteenth-century printed books as a guide, he grappled with questions of aesthetics, craft, human endeavour, to create what he believed was an art of his own time.² For example, it was not simply in deference to his historical precedents that he used the hand-press. If a machine had existed which would have dealt fairly with his choice of paper and ink, he would have utilised it. However, if he had submitted to the limitations then imposed by machine printing, he would have had to thin his letters, soften his paper and dilute his ink.³ That is, he would have had to betray what he believed to be necessary. Likewise he did not employ woodcuts arbitrarily. He was aware that they were most compatible with type printed in a hand-press, that, as Walter Crane stated, ‘the design in vigorous open line was exactly adapted to print under the same pressure as the type had to undergo. The two were in true mechanical relation, and also in true artistic relation...’⁴

Foremost for Morris, a book must be ‘worth reading to be worth printing’.⁵ Successful communication of ideas by means of the printed word requires legibility and attractiveness; Morris sought such through ‘well-designed type, due spacing of the lines and words, and proper position of the page on the paper’.⁶ These precepts he trusted would create an article which satisfied more than basic utilitarian needs. Leisurely reading, often aloud, was an accepted Victorian practice which formed an integral part of Morris’s life, in the light of which he produced books to be readable, that is, to be read with pleasure. How others have viewed Kelmscott Press books since their inception hinges largely on the changing position of books in society.

The legibility of Kelmscott Press books, particularly those in the Troy/Chaucer type, has been censured since they first appeared. Morris believed critics failed to appreciate the books because they simply looked randomly at pages without becoming accustomed to the different type by reading the text. Ruari McLean suggests that legibility is based upon presentation to select clientèle under select conditions and that to ‘appraise the legibility of anything ... we must know its purpose’.⁷ Morris’s purpose for his books has been clearly presented by Ray Watkinson:

He was not designing and producing books to be read on the train – although a Kelmscott book like *Dream of John Ball* can be read on the train with more ease than most paperbacks. He was producing books to be read at leisure, in one’s home... This is a perfectly proper approach for a designer to make; it cannot invalidate other approaches, nor they it.⁸

Reminiscing in the early 1920s, Halliday Sparling noted then the proclivity of the contemporary reader to ‘read on the run’.⁹ This is even more true of the commuter/computer age. It is also one reason why the Kelmscott Press books have been

relegated to collectors' items rather than fulfilling their purpose as useful articles of artistic merit.

In his essay 'Printing' (1893)¹⁰ Morris explained simply yet in considerable detail the goals for which he strove in his type design and layout. He also explained just as simply his views about the weaknesses in current printed works. He stressed his desire for purity of line, letters possessing correct shape and distinction, printed pages of solidity and proportion, paper and ink of character and quality. He often found modern books not even 'vitaly ugly' but worse – 'helpless and dead'. In contrast, those that he studied as his historical models were 'alive all over', the result 'a visible work of art'.¹¹ One reason for his choice of Batchelor paper was to revive this effect: not only did it take the ink clearly, to produce a distinct type impression, but also the irregularity of surface allowed 'a play of light and shade upon the page which gives it life'.¹² It is only by the deliberate consideration and contrasting of Kelmscott Press books and modern mass-produced books that Morris's points may be absorbed.

Of Kelmscott Press books Fiona MacCarthy has recently highlighted the 'accumulation of initial words, frames for woodcuts, special lettering for title pages, decorative borders and printers' marks';¹³ and William Peterson the 'extensive decoration' such that 'the visual richness of the books has proved a stumbling-block to many in our own century, for it has been argued that Morris's pages are as cluttered as a Victorian parlour'.¹⁴ In fact, most Kelmscott Press books are straightforward, with unobtrusive initial letters and occasional borders. While each book is treated differently, in keeping with its subject-matter, all share an arrangement and placement of type presented by means of a sharply inked impression. It is this that gives them their distinctiveness.

Morris understood the desire of a book collector to 'hold and stroke'¹⁵ acquired wares, but he also looked beyond this: 'let us say concerning the Book, that to coset and hug it up as a material piece of goods, is surely natural to a man who cares about the ideas that lie betwixt its boards...'¹⁶ It is only by reading Kelmscott Press books that one might both experience the ideas of the authors represented and assimilate Morris's beliefs concerning the artistic unity essential to such useful articles.

NOTES

¹ William Peterson (ed.), *The Ideal Book*, (Berkeley: University of California Press 1982), p. 75.

² See 'The Lesser Arts' in A. L. Morton (ed.), *Political Writings of William Morris*, (London: Lawrence & Wishart 1973), p. 44.

³ H. Halliday Sparling, *The Kelmscott Press and William Morris Master-Craftsman*, (Folkestone: Dawson 1975), p. 120.

⁴ Walter Crane, *The Bases of Design*, (London: George Bell & Sons 1904), p. 118.

⁵ *The Kelmscott Press and William Morris Master-Craftsman*, op. cit., p. 91.

⁶ *The Ideal Book*, op. cit., p. 66.

⁷ Ruari McLean, *Typography*, (London: Thames & Hudson 1988), p. 42.

⁸ Ray Watkinson, *William Morris as Designer*, (London: Studio Vista 1967), p. 63.

⁹ *The Kelmscott Press and William Morris Master-Craftsman*, op. cit., p. 1.

¹⁰ *The Ideal Book*, op. cit., pp. 59–66.

¹¹ *ibid.*, pp. 36–37.

- ¹² *The Kelmscott Press and William Morris Master-Craftsman*, op. cit., pp. 61–62.
- ¹³ Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time*, (London: Faber & Faber 1994), p. 618.
- ¹⁴ *The Ideal Book*, op. cit., pp. xxx–xxxii.
- ¹⁵ *William Morris: A Life for Our Time*, op. cit., p. 620.
- ¹⁶ *The Ideal Book*, op. cit., p. 1.