



Where Have All the Manuscripts Gone? Morris's Autographs in Diaspora

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In the days before the typewriter all that we know of printed materials was, of course, first inscribed manually. But Morris was an extreme case of *philographia*, in his study of medieval manuscripts, his calligraphic one-of-a-kind 'artist's books' and his extensive preparations for what would become published materials in several handwritten forms – as pencilled drafts in small notebooks; penned drafts on lined pages; handsome fair copies, often on larger, more durable paper; delicately traced illuminated texts with decorated initials; copies of his poems neatly written out for friends; and finally, as corrected page proofs for the Kelmscott Press. Morris was as productive in this realm as in many others, and contemplation of the sheer enormity of the preserved drafts and calligraphic art works which he inscribed in his lifetime – *tens of thousands* of pages of them – staggers the mind.

Morris must thus have spent many hours of his busy days and nights in the physical labour of composing, rewriting and copying his extensive literary output into more legible or attractive forms (even exclusive of his voluminous correspondence, documented in five large volumes of his published letters, with a sixth forthcoming). Moreover he apparently enjoyed these acts of inscription, as testified by the precision of his firm, bold yet attractive fair copies, often of near-calligraphic quality. In later

life he could well have afforded a private secretary to copy his literary works, and there are a few rare instances of such replicas, but mostly he preferred that the pleasures and responsibilities of composing his writings, in the most literal and physical as well as imaginative senses, should be his.

Dispersal of these manuscripts began shortly after his death, however, when Morris's executors included some in the large posthumous sale of his books and incunabula.¹ In general, though, the executors seem to have considered books as more valuable than autograph writings, which were viewed as personal items, and thus remained the property of Jane Morris. Although Jane gave calligraphic manuscripts of Morris's *Halfdan the Black* and *King Harald* to Wilfrid and Lady Anne Blunt in 1897, a later letter reveals that she valued those which remained, as she wrote to an unidentified recipient on 26 July 1907: 'I can only say that I could not think of parting with any of my precious M.S.S.'²

After her death, however, May apparently began to give away or sell off many of her father's autographs. For example, she gave manuscripts to John Quinn, a New York collector who, for a brief period, had seemed to express romantic interest in her, and she apparently sold many others, convinced she could 'borrow them back' when needed. Her motives were probably not entirely financial, since at Jane's death she had inherited her mother's share of Morris's estate – perhaps the welter of inherited artefacts was simply too overwhelming for her to conceive an entirely coherent plan. Moreover she must be credited with eventually leaving behind the Morris autograph materials which became the May Morris and Robert Steele Bequests at the British Library, and with bequeathing Kelmscott Manor and its contents to Oxford at her death (from whence the Morris autographs it contained have travelled to the Society of Antiquaries).

May Morris may also not have envisioned that manuscripts sold to someone in Wolverhampton in central England would end up some 5,300 miles to the west in Pasadena, California, or, worse, divided – virtually shredded – among many remote repositories; or considered that sale to private collectors might make these materials unavailable for decades, even permanently. Nor was May Morris the sole owner of Morris autographs, and separate, well-intentioned attempts to secure their own Morris keepsakes for posterity by Emery Walker, Charles Fairfax Murray, Sydney Cockerell and Georgiana Burne-Jones and her children have likewise contributed, somewhat ironically, to limiting their availability. As the editor of the William Morris Archive, over the past several years I have made efforts to partially remediate this diaspora insofar as is now possible – that is, by photographing Morris's manuscripts for regrouping on the Archive with other versions of the same text. In the rest of this article I will describe the extent and possible consequences of this initial dispersal, and suggest some ways in which we might nonetheless still examine and benefit from



Figure 1: Map of Morris MSS. in the United Kingdom and the United States

these scattered memorials (see Figure 1).

As indicated on the map, Morris autographs are located in libraries in England (in Leeds, Cheltenham, Oxford, Cambridge and several repositories in London), in the United States (in Amherst, Massachusetts; New Haven, Connecticut; Newark, Delaware; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Austin, Texas; Iowa City, Iowa and Pasadena, California), in Amsterdam in the Netherlands (home of the records of the Socialist League and some of Morris's socialist essays) and in several private collections. Most notorious among the latter is the case of Andrew Lloyd Weber, who, in order to increase the value of his multi-million pound acquisition, is unwilling to permit any access to or photography of Morris's illuminated *Aeneid*, said to be Morris's calligraphic masterpiece. And we do not even know how many literary drafts or illuminated manuscripts there are or were. In one striking case, a near calligraphic-quality manuscript believed to have been at Kelmscott Manor has simply disappeared (the second volume of a three-volume translation of the Old French *Lancelot of the Lake*); one can only hope that at some point it will resurface (see Figure 2).

This dispersal is a practical problem for anyone seeking to gather such images, of course, but such difficulties pale in comparison to its effects on scholarship, and perhaps even to some degree on Morris's posthumous reputation. Documentary source materials inspire interested questions in those who study them; for example, it is especially valuable to be able to trace an artist's composition through several stages. In the decades of the mid-twentieth century, when close readings, the exploration of poetic development and attention to revisions were prized – an era which witnessed the creation of variorum editions for authors such as Wordsworth, Keats and Gerard

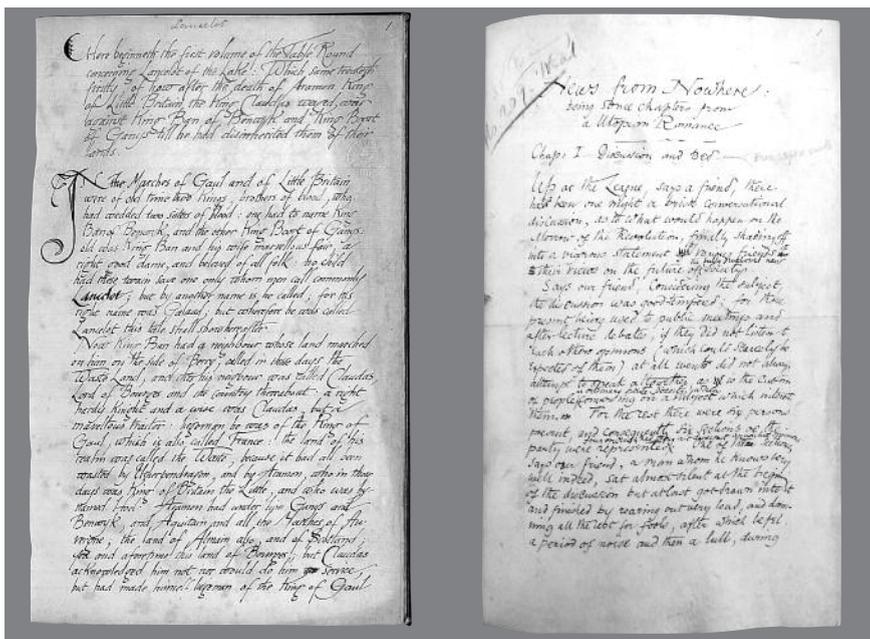
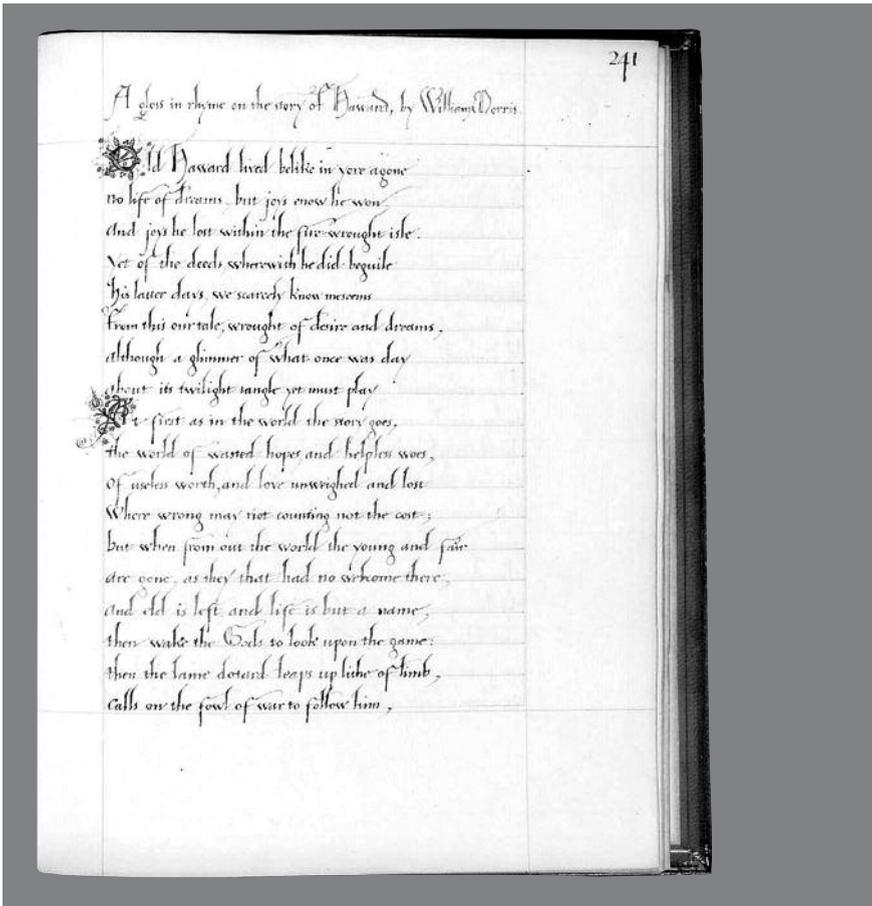


Figure 2 (left): *The Story of Lancelot of the Lake*, calligraphic manuscript, folio 1, Society of Antiquaries London, MS 905.4, vol. 1. Figure 3 (right): Version of *News from Nowhere*, manuscript fair copy, folio 1, Morgan Library MA 4591

Manley Hopkins – Morris’s alleged untroubled facility with words made his works less attractive as subjects of serious study: who could care about the artistry and composition practices of a man who simply published his first drafts? As late as 1967 a major critic could proclaim that Morris’s casual facility in writing made his long poems themselves unworthy of study.³ In these latter days, surrounded by piles of manuscripts (metaphorically speaking), the assumption that Morris’s poetry and prose were casually composed rather than the results of herculean and sustained efforts now seems close to ludicrous.

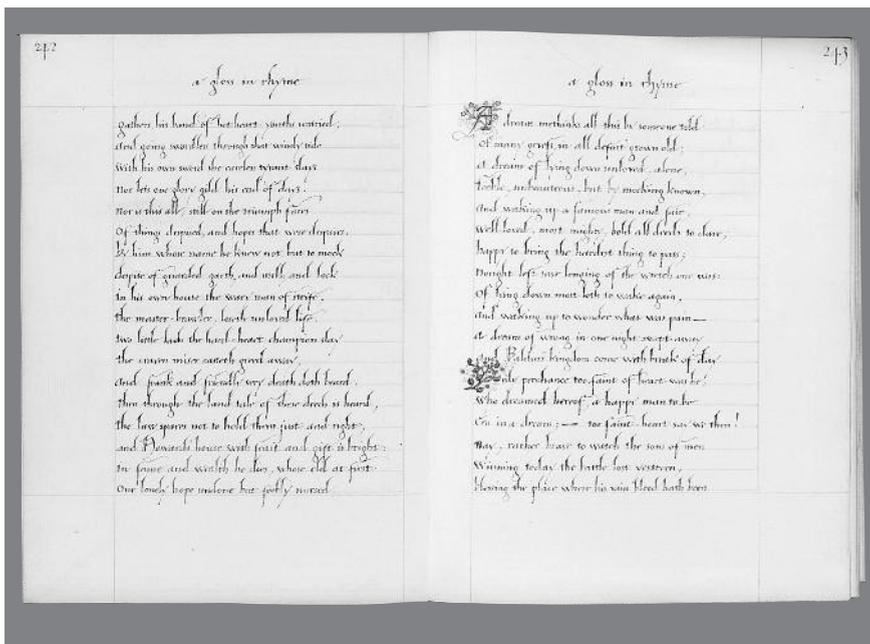
All these dispersions may also have encouraged the view that the artefacts of Morris’s labour should be seen as a collection of rare and now expensive collectors’ curios rather than witnesses to meaningful coherence. In general more (but not all) of the drafts for the prose romances seem to have gone to the United States, as well as many (but not all) drafts for the longer socialist writings such as *Hopes and Fears for Art* (Yale), ‘Socialism from the Root Up’ (the Morgan Library) and, amazingly, two drafts of *News from Nowhere* (recently purchased by the Morgan Library from a British collector) (see Figure 3). Most but not all of the drafts for the early poems remained in England, divided between the Fitzwilliam and British Libraries, although a few



Figures 4-5 (above and right): 'A gloss in rhyme on the story of Howard, by William Morris', from *Howard the Halt*, ff. 241, 243, Fitzwilliam, MS 270

others have ended up in Austin, Texas and Pasadena. Similarly, several generations of *Earthly Paradise* drafts and fair copies are divided between Cambridge, London, New Haven and Pasadena, with separate notebooks from the same set of contemporaneous early drafts in Morris's large round hand now found in three locations.

The translations are likewise largely scattered, with the classical ones (the *Iliad*, the *Aeneid*) moving westward, and the Icelandic ones, in some cases embodying Morris's collaborations with Eiríkr Magnússon, now found in all manner of places from Leeds to Cheltenham to the Society of Antiquaries to the Bodleian to the Huntington Library. It is a pleasant surprise to learn that many interlaced drafts for Morris's 1873 poem *Love Is Enough* have been preserved, if unread, since the early



twentieth century in the Huntington Library in Pasadena, revealing that this rather abstract and opaque, if lovely poem, was built up almost by sound alone, emotively plotless to its core. Yet any glimmer of a pattern – say, of the retention of most early MSS. in the United Kingdom and of most later ones in the United States – is confounded by the vast depository of Morris’s later socialist essays and related documents in the British Library.

A further consequence of the difficulty of accessing Morris manuscripts is that even now it is difficult to know the extent of what Morris wrote. As a young woman, inspired by the efforts of Christopher Ricks, Richard Altick, William Fredeman and others to tame the corpora of other major Victorian poets, I first entered the British Library with the apparently modest aim of preparing a checklist of Morris’s poems with a view to a future collected edition (note: only his *poems*, not his writings more broadly). I was, at the onset, quite surprised to find about fifteen unpublished Morris poems, a fifty-six page *Socialist Diary* of considerable historical interest, and seven unpublished essays (one still unpublished), hiding in plain sight in Britain’s foremost repository. Forty years later this checklist – ongoing, digitised and available on the Archive – would, if printed out, be at least 600 pages. Yet an actual determination of the *number* of Morris’s poems remains elusive – in mathematical terms, perhaps, provable yet indeterminate – and rendered more difficult by the impossibility of gathering pages of related content into one location.

In yet another of the many quirks of dispersal, the Burne-Jones family trustingly donated their materials to the Fitzwilliam Museum Library via Sydney Cockerell, Morris's exquisitely organised assistant at the Kelmscott Press who later became the curator of the Museum. This seems to me to have been a generous act with unintended consequences – for how could Georgiana have known that these materials would be both preserved and cordoned off from the public in succeeding years in the Founder's Library, an obscure and (literally) shaded room off the main floor of the Fitzwilliam Museum (with entrance permitted only by advance appointment and limited information available on the Fitzwilliam Library or Museum's websites). The Fitzwilliam forbids photography of 'bound manuscripts', a category which by definition includes most of Morris's works in their possession, lovingly bound or rebound by his friends. Their holdings include items collected by Charles Fairfax Murray, Morris's original fair copies of the 1871 and 1873 Icelandic *Journals*, written out with excisions marked for publication and inscribed to Georgiana, and several especially fine calligraphic manuscripts presented to Georgiana. Never available to the wider public, these latter have, as far as I know, never been reproduced, and I have met only one other person who has actually viewed any of them (Gary Aho, a former president of the William Morris Society in the United States).

So what might one find? On a recent visit to the Founder's Library I was delighted to encounter what I believe to be a hitherto uncollected Morris poem – never reproduced in his lifetime, and since buried within the lovely illuminated manuscript of his translation of *Howard the Halt* (see Figures 4-5) which he presented to Georgiana circa 1874. Karl Anderson and William Whitla have documented the extent to which Morris not only translated the sagas but attempted in material ways to replicate the practices of the skalds through his diction, meter, calligraphy and even his critical approach to his own creative works. A recent article by Ian Felce explains Morris's attempts not only to employ the words of his source text but also the principles of skaldic craft, using both drottnvaett verse forms and kennings, a form of circumlocutory metaphor which even for medieval Icelanders would have required interpretation.⁴

Morris was also given to directly personal poetic responses to the Icelandic past, for example, in his 'Iceland First Seen', 'Gunnar's Howe Above the Grave at Lithend' and two sonnets to Grettir Asmundson ('Nay, with the dead I deal not, this man lives'). May Morris had failed to publish another poignant poem, 'O Fair Gold Goddess', composed in the voice of a putative skald, Vilhjálmr Vandraedaskáld ('William the Troubled Skald'), after learning from Old Norse scholar Dame Bertha Phillpots that this highly personal poem was after all not a translation but an original composition.⁵ In the same way, no one, apparently, had cared to note and print the gloss on *Howard*

– quite understandably, considering its imprisonment in the Fitzwilliam Founder’s Library. Whatever its merits or deficiencies as a poem, Morris’s tribute embodies his efforts not only to preserve the memorials of a previous Icelandic transcriber-poet but to assume for himself the skaldic persona – to embed his observations and emotions directly and physically within the medieval text he has both translated and rendered in artistic form.

Why did Morris select this particular tale for commentary, among the many he translated? *Howard the Halt* is the first story included in volume one of the *Saga Library*; perhaps with characteristic ambition Morris had initiated a hand-illuminated version of what would later become the six-volume printed version of the *Library*, and, as we have seen, by including his commentary on the first selection he would have been proclaiming his intention to follow the precedent of earlier scribes. Yet this answer merely deflects one remove further the question: why was *Howard the Halt* chosen as the first tale of the *Saga Library*’s twenty-one translation sequence?

As saga aficionados may recall, Howard had been a warrior of distinguished lineage, happily married to Biargey and extremely attached to their sole offspring, a promising, strong and good-hearted youth named Olaf. Howard had been previously lamed in a fight, and thus his sobriquet, ‘the Halt’. Far worse, however, was the psychological blow when an influential neighbouring thug Thorbiorn, along with his henchmen, ambushed and murdered Olaf from jealousy at the youth’s popularity and good reputation; moreover, after this violent deed, Thorbiorn had further crushed Olaf’s skull and preserved the jawbone and teeth in a sack. So grieved was Howard at his son’s death that he lost all interest in life and took to his bed for the better part of three years. Biargey urged him to ask for compensation from Thorbiorn at the annual Thing, or Law Court, as was the Icelandic custom after an unprovoked slaying, but when Howard did so Thorbiorn instead opened the sack and threw Olaf’s jaw and teeth into the bereaved father’s face.

At this further affront Howard was stung to action, and with Biargey’s assistance he gathered their relatives and mounted numerous counterattacks. In addition to killing Thorbiorn, he and his kindred also slew certain of the latter’s attendants and family members, and the account of these counterattacks consumes ten of the saga’s twenty-four chapters. Such mayhem at last aroused protest (though not as much as might reasonably have been expected), and the relatives of the slain and others, among them the elderly priest Thorarin, brought the case to the Thing’s highest judge, Guest Oddleifson. The latter ruled that Howard’s killing of those known to cause mischief, including Thorbiorn, had been justified; on the other hand, Howard’s party had also killed two innocent men, and these deeds were to be set against the murder of Olaf. Nonetheless, all those involved at any level were to be exiled from the region

during the elderly Thorarin's lifetime, so that the latter need not fear any recurrence of blood-feud. Ironically Howard prospered in his new Icelandic homestead, and later benefited from emigration to Norway, where he settled in peace, befriended the new and renowned monarch Olaf Trygvison, and converted to Norway's newly proclaimed religion of Christianity. At Howard's request, after his death his kinsman Thorhall built a church in his memory, using wood Howard had brought from Iceland.⁶

What Morris writes in response to this tale of bloodletting and survival is not literary criticism proper, but a testimony to what for him was the enduring importance of the saga's themes. As he recounts the tale, these include a middle-aged man's attempt to overcome inaction, depression and crippling loss:

[242v] Old Haward lived belike in yore agone
no life of dreams, but joys enow he won
And joys he lost within the fire-wrought isle [...].

[243] A dream methinks all this by someone told
of many griefs, in all despair grown old;
A dream of lying down unloved, alone;
feeble, unbeauteous, but by mocking known,
And waking up a famous man and fair,
Well-loved, most mighty, bold all deeds to dare;
happy to bring the hardest thing to pass;
Nought left save longing of the wretch one was:
Of lying down most loth to wake again,
And waking up to wonder what was pain –
A dream of wrong in one night swept away
And Baldur's kingdom come with break of day[.]

Only perchance too faint of heart was he;
Who deemed hereof, a happy man to be
E'en in a dream; – too faint heart say we then!
Nay, rather brave to watch the sons of men
Winning today the battle lost yestreen,
Blessing the place where his vain blood hath been.

[243v] Yea, lacked he all good hap whose fond desire
Smoldering a while, broke out at last in fire

To burn long after all his woe was done,
Lighting a little space of yore agone.

Morris here engages in what literary critics would call ‘strong interpretation’, even (pace Harold Bloom) ‘misprision’, since the saga does not present Howard as suffering romantic loss (‘a dream of lying down unloved, alone’) but the death of his son. Moreover, though as a former warrior he may have taken satisfaction in revenge and a restored reputation, these could scarcely resurrect his heir, sweep wrong away in one night, or bring him or the world closer to Baldur’s kingdom of justice. Arguably Morris has instead responded to his hero with deep empathy for the latter’s sense of personal loss, finding in his sudden transformation from immobility to action a fable of the possibility of finding renewed purpose in later life. This was a message which might have seemed heartening to a man who, in 1874, newly returned from two Icelandic trips and now solely responsible for Morris and Co., still grieved his wife’s perceived lack of love for him in the period before beginning his labours on behalf of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (1877 ff.), the Eastern Question Association (1876-78), the Social Democratic Federation (1883-84), the Socialist League (1885-90), the Hammersmith Socialist Society (1891-96), *Commonweal* (1885-90) and the Kelmscott Press (1891-96).

Morris’s approach to *Howard the Halt* is clearly not one favoured by literary critics today. It might be described as one of personal application. Morris takes the saga to heart as a model for emulation and reflection, rather as a nineteenth-century reader or auditor might have absorbed a sermon. Even if one’s utopian desires are only fleetingly realised, the poem asserts, these give intensity to one’s life and linger after death, irradiating one’s struggles with retrospective meaning, and for one’s successors, ‘Lighting a little space of yore agone’.

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In summary, a mixture of necessity, happenstance and a few questionable decisions has made the task of making sense of Morris’s arduous composition practices as well as the range of his stunning and exquisite calligraphy more difficult, even confounding answers to such seemingly simple questions as: ‘How much did Morris write?’. But perhaps a revenant Morris would have said that the struggle to retrieve a lost past – in this case, the passion and craft behind the many incarnations of his writings – echoes the kind of time travel he himself had practised in returning to the worlds of the Peasant’s Revolt, the myths of ancient Greece or the sanguinary feuds of medieval Iceland. Etched into but never fully expressible through the media of paper, vellum,

pencil, pen and brush, these physical evidences of Morris's intense creative purposes may yield yet more penned but unpublished writings for discovery, or, less mundanely convey a trace of his spirit across intervening time.

NOTES

1. See Yuri Cowan, 'Morris as a Book Collector', in *The Routledge Companion to William Morris*, ed. Florence S. Boos (New York: Routledge, forthcoming).
2. Morgan Library MA 1894, with a 19 September 1897 letter to Lady Anne Blunt; *The Collected Letters of Jane Morris*, ed. by Frank C. Sharp and Jan Marsh (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2012), p. 404.
3. 'The pervading weakness of all Morris's poetry was that it was written with insufficient care'. Paul Thompson, *The Work of William Morris*, 2nd edn (London: Quartet Books, 1977), p. 208.
4. Karl Anderson, 'Scandinavian Elements in the Works of William Morris', unpublished PhD Dissertation, Harvard University, 1940; William Whitla, "'Sympathetic Translation" and the "Scribe's Capacity": Morris's Calligraphy and the Icelandic Sagas', *Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies*, 10 (Fall 2001), 27-108; and Ian Felce, 'The Old Norse Sagas and William Morris's Ideal of Literal Translation', *Review of English Studies*, 67: 179 (2016), 220-36.
5. Ruth Ellison, 'An Unpublished Poem by William Morris', *English*, 15 (Autumn 1964), 100-102.
6. Ingrid Hanson, in *William Morris and the Uses of Violence, 1856-1890* (London: Anthem, 2013), argues that Morris's literary works reflect a commitment to the transformative power of violence. Though this argument neglects Morris's many literary works centred on more peaceful themes, it is hard to ignore the relentlessly violent content of the Icelandic literature to which he was deeply attracted.