Teaching
William Morris

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Chapter Seventeen

Morris for Many Audiences

Teaching with the William Morris Archive

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Over the years I have introduced Morris's works to a variety of groups—political gatherings, undergraduate and graduate students, conference attendees, and general cultural audiences. As a teacher I've assigned his essays, shorter and longer poems (among them *Sigurd the Volsung* and *The Pilgrims of Hope*), early prose tales such as "The Story of the Unknown Church" and long prose narratives such as *The Water of the Wondrous Isles,* and even his comic skit, "The Tables Turned, or Nupkins Awakened." Audience matters; graduate students have seized on all of these eagerly and have submitted essays on such topics as gender ambiguity in "Concerning Geffray Teste Noire," Morris's Icelandic diaries as an exploration of masculinity, or "The Unknown Church" as a response to the Crimean War.

For my most numerous audience, however, that of undergraduate students, my attempts to present Morris's literary works have met with varying degrees of success: the medieval settings can seem remote; rhymed poetry can elicit impatience; women's domestic roles in *News from Nowhere* evoke feminist censure; and even in an age of science fiction, *Nowhere*'s call to remake our future can discomfit those partial to marriage plots and conflict. In each situation, however, some students seem to take Morris's artistic aims and political insights to heart, and for these his works embody ideals seldom found elsewhere in the curriculum. In what follows I will describe approaches and teaching aids that have worked well and others I am still developing or would like to attempt. These share some common elements: they are highly visual; they present questions or puzzles to answer; they emphasize the interdisciplinary aspects of Morris's work; they focus on the details of a specific text; and/or they take the form of a project or group effort. Most of these approaches rely on online materials accessible to all teachers of Morris from the

online William Morris Archive or from the art galleries and study questions available on my teaching website.[1]

THE DEFENCE OF GUENEVERE AND RELATED ARTWORKS

When teaching *The Defence of Guenevere,* before we discuss any of the poems, I ask one of the students to present a brief biography of Morris, after which I show slides of Morris and Co. textiles, tapestries, stained glass, and illuminated manuscripts.[2] Explaining all the available images would consume more than a class session, so for brevity I select out a few examples of the Firm's earlier and later styles, asking students if they can imagine any possible correlations between Morris's designs and his poetry (e. g., patterns of entrapment and release). Viewing examples of Morris & Co. stained glass enables them to see the Arthurian and romance interests of Morris's generation of Pre-Raphaelites, as in the 1862 "Tristram and Isoude" sequence. And as preparation for "The Defence of Guenevere" and "King Arthur's Tomb," we consider the many embedded symbols in Morris's painting of Jane Burden in "La Belle Iseult," in which Iseult stands by her bed gazing toward her opened breviary, as she holds open her unclasped belt with its serpentine buckle. After discussing "King Arthur's Tomb," it seems helpful to compare Morris's version with Dante Gabriel Rossetti's watercolor, "Arthur's Tomb," in which Arthur's eerily lifelike effigy gazes stonily at the lovers as Lancelot reaches awkwardly toward a reluctant Guenevere. Students find Morris's poem more sympathetic to the lovers, and its presentation of their agonized quarrel adds psychological nuances less available in a drawing.

The poem that seems to evoke the most immediate response, however, is "The Haystack in the Floods," and I have found no visual equivalent for its grim narrative of frustrated desire and butchery set amid the Hundred Years' War. Students are interested in Jehane's rejection of Godmar's "offer" to spare the life of her lover Robert in exchange for accepting his advances, and this prompts debate on what may be her motives and why an alternate choice could have seemed even worse.[3]

THE KELMSCOTT PRESS

After reading any selection from Morris's 1858 *The Defence*, it seems natural to consider how the older Morris reinterpreted his youthful work after a gap of thirty-four years. The Kelmscott Press version of *The Defence* is startling in its bold rearrangement of text features: its disregard of line and stanza breaks, its
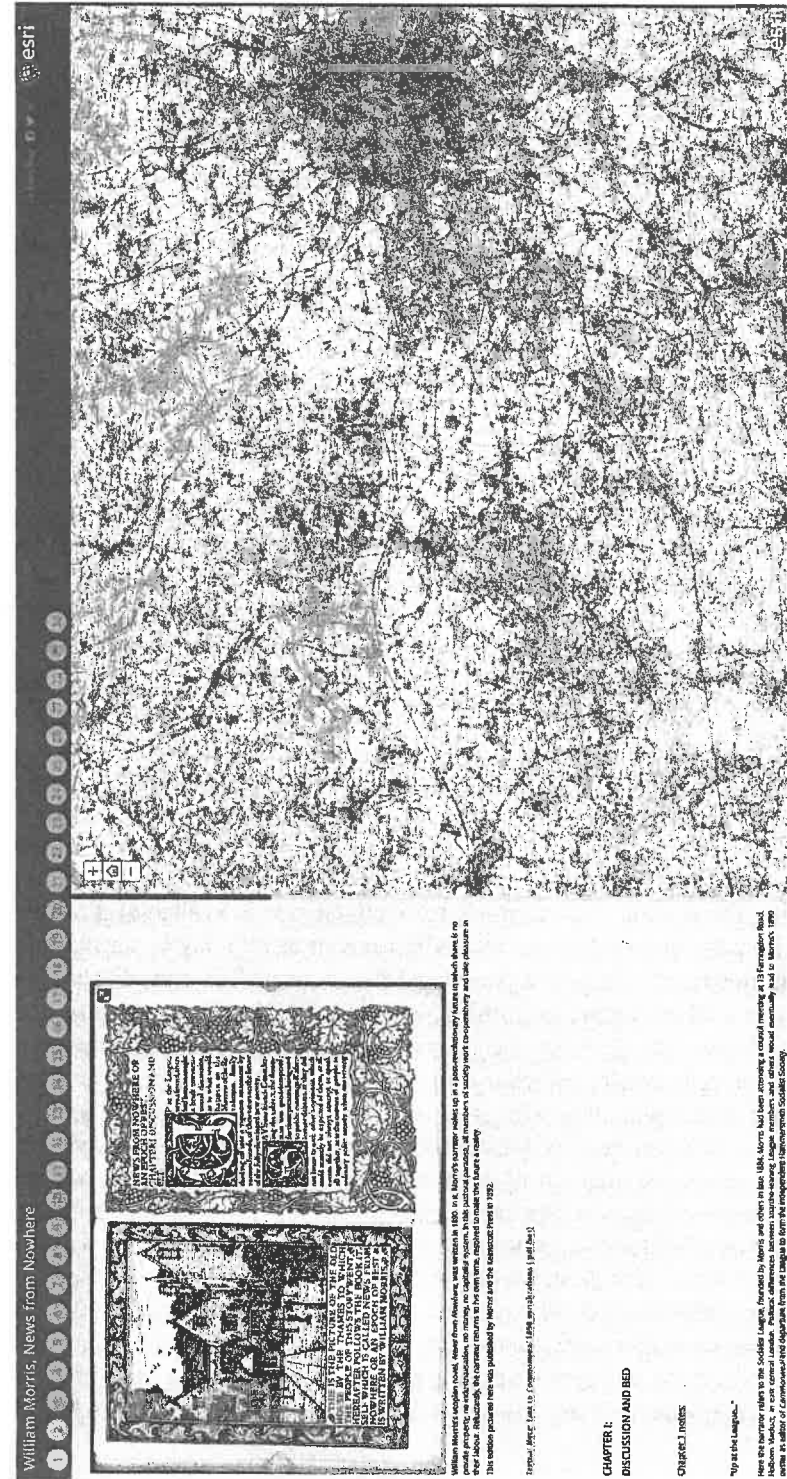

Figure 17.1. Map of the route traced in *News from Nowhere*, designed to illustrate each stage of Guest's journey, be keyed to the text, and include scroll-over notes.

rearrangement of white space, and its use of vivid black, white, and red coloring to suggest intensity and violence, as well as its exhibition of the familiar Kelmscott Press features of non-serif font, ornamented initials, and the careful placement of leaves and other ornaments to limit white space.[4]

The examination of selected Kelmscott Press pages leads to a discussion of what aesthetic goals may have prompted Morris's typographical innovations, and how the worlds of art and typography had changed between 1858 and 1892. At this point I show students selections from my gallery of Kelmscott Press images, pointing out the increasing sophistication of the lettering, borders, and title pages between 1891 and 1896, as well as Morris's rare experiments with blue and red lettering and his care to preserve symmetry and balance within each opening (double-spread page) of the text. All this segues into examining the symbolism and artistry of the title page of the iconic Chaucer, in which the medieval tax collector is refashioned as a solitary poet who listens to singing birds within his rural garden, as he stands by a well imaging his sobriquet as "the well of English undefiled." In conclusion I then show some of the Kelmscott Press's large decorated word initials, and I find students enjoy puzzling out the letters in such tours de force as "Whan," "Whilom, "Then," and even the mildly parodic "O Hateful."

VISITING SPECIAL COLLECTIONS: THE MOST POPULAR CLASS SESSION OF THE SEMESTER

Viewing slides of Kelmscott Press books provides an excellent preparation for visiting the Special Collections department (if one is available). For this visit the librarian and I select samples of nineteenth-century books for display, including illustrated volumes of poetry and fiction as well as periodicals, fine press books, and of course, everything published by Morris or issued by the Kelmscott Press. The librarian and I provide some background on nineteenth century printing technologies (changes in paper, bindings, and techniques for illustration), and explain why Morris reacted against earlier nineteenth-century print formats. We also describe his use of vellum and other bindings, the choice of ink and paper, the creation of decorative initials and a colophon, and his elegant patterning of spaces, text, and ornament within each page and opening.

At this point the students examine each book. I prepare a handout of questions to help focus their thoughts (see appendix A) and assign a one page response essay. These responses have been gratifyingly enthusiastic, exhibiting a sense of personal discovery. In this day of digitization, seeing and handling an antiquarian book can give surprising pleasure, and for some students this visit may have been their first chance to examine a nineteenth-century book.

NEWS FROM NOWHERE IN ITS NINETEENTH-CENTURY SETTING: AN ILLUSTRATED JOURNEY

North American students who have never seen London or visited England can lose much of the humor and pleasure of Guest's travels through a city and countryside well-known to *News*' original audience. Moreover much of the utopian meaning of the text is conveyed through exhibiting the many ways in which *Nowhere*'s imagined future London and Oxfordshire countryside both resemble and differ from their 1890 counterparts. To help bridge this gap, along with others I have created an illustrated *News from Nowhere*.[5] Presenting at least part of this sequence in class enables a teacher to explain some of the text's many contemporary allusions.

At a basic level, it is important to understand *News*'s sociology and geography, as the characters make their way eastward from Morris's Hammersmith home (the Guest House) through the more prosperous Kensington and from thence to crowded Piccadilly, after which they pass through the central gathering place of Trafalgar Square, visit the more intellectual reaches of Bloomsbury and the British Museum, and at length navigate what would have been in the 1890s an impoverished region of tenements and open sewers. And finally, the sequence during which Dick, Guest, Ellen, and Clara row northwest up the Thames enables students to see concrete examples of the bridges, waterways, buildings, and landscapes that Morris wished to preserve.

Several of the characters' observations are rendered clearer by images: why did Morris find the underground railway so dirty and noisy, for example (for this, see the photograph of a nineteenth-century train interior); why was Guest surprised at the absence of poor "country" people in Hammersmith market (see the image of contemporary farmworkers); or what may have prompted his recuperation of the Palace of Westminster as a hub for recycling (photograph of the Houses of Parliament and discussion of why Morris might have disapproved of Charles Barry's design). Other places in the text require more complicated explanations, however, and these are much aided by images: Chapter 10's references to Fourierism and phalansteries are helped by some knowledge of what a phalanstery would have looked like; and Old Hammond's remarks on the blending of town and country are more meaningful in the context of contemporary ideas on how to mitigate the contrasting limitations of both urban and rural life, as publicized later in the decade by Ebenezer Howard in his *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*.

Old Hammond's forceful attack on the waging of imperialist wars to feed the "World Market" and his references to explorer Henry Morton Stanley are usefully glossed by understanding that the latter's forays into "darkest Africa" were on behalf of the notoriously brutal King Leopold of Belgium,

ruler of the Belgian Congo; the illustrated *News* depicts the king and Stanley, the latter with a black servant.

In the context of US mass incarceration and for profit prisons, one of *News from Nowhere*'s most relevant contributions is its repeated condemnation of the use of imprisonment as a means of social control, as in chapter 7, where Dick exclaims after learning that nineteenth-century governments have imprisoned peaceful protesters, "And how could [people] look happy if they knew that their neighbors were shut up in prison . . . Prisons indeed! O no, no, no!"[6] Morris's critique here always elicits some protest from my students, who are inured to a high level of imprisonment, but it also prompts discussion of the flaws of our current severe drug laws and excessively punitive penal system. The illustrated *News* depicts drawings of prisoners on a treadmill and the interior of a nineteenth-century prison.

Finally, it would be difficult to appreciate the book's conclusion without a sense of the exterior of Kelmscott Manor, as in chapter 31 Ellen places her arms on one of its lichened walls and exclaims, "Oh me! O me! How I love the earth, and the seasons, and weather, and all things that deal with it and all that grows out of it—as this has done!"; or its interior, the site of Guest's profoundly sad reflections on human history: "And even now . . . my heart is sickened with thinking of all the waste of life that has gone on for so many years!"[7] Likewise the painful rupture of the final dinner scene is mirrored in the simplicity of the small Kelmscott Church and its surrounding cemetery, where six years later Morris himself would be interred. The series thus ends fittingly with a photograph of Kelmscott church and the gravestone designed by Philip Webb for his friend.

Although the illustrated *News from Nowhere* has been upgraded since its inception, the quality of images could use further updating, and I hope to continue to improve it. As the next section indicates, I am also working on a version of the illustrated *News* that will link to a larger digital map of Guest's journey.

A COURSE BASED ON THE WILLIAM MORRIS ARCHIVE

As one of the great nineteenth-century theorists of work and pleasure, Morris observed in "The Society of the Future" that there were two approaches to a problem, "the analytical [theoretical] and the constructive [creative]," and that he himself favored the latter method.[8] A digital archive would seem an ideal site for combining these two approaches: the setting of abstract "analytic" goals and their practical "constructive" application. Moreover in the spirit of Morris such a project should be cooperative, as he advised, "[F]ind

out what you yourselves find pleasant, and do it. You won't be alone in your desires; you will get plenty to help you in carrying them out, and you will develop social life in developing your own special tendencies."[9]

In 2016 the Iowa Digital Studio suggested that I offer an English department graduate course in the Digital Humanities using the William Morris Archive as the basis for student projects. In what follows I will describe the mixed results.

My goals for the course were multiple. Although I wanted students to enjoy acquiring some new techniques, I also wished them to learn to appreciate editing as a process. More importantly, I hoped to inspire enthusiasm for the complexity of Morris's texts, and for the added value of approaching them in multiple contexts: through examining his processes of composition, learning from the insights of earlier commentators, researching their literary or mythological contexts, or pondering the philological implications of his word choices. I hoped that in experiencing the difficulties of digital editing, they might also come to grasp its importance and to set about conceiving and designing such projects on their own.

To these ends, we read and discussed several articles on editorial and digital scholarship by Jerome McGann, Elena Pierazzo, Johanna Drucker, and others. I then walked them through the William Morris Archive in detail, explaining what problems we had faced and noting the many items still needing correction or implementation. We also benefitted from a session offered by a visiting scholar, Matthew Hannah, who demonstrated the use of Juxta, a versioning program that simplifies the comparison or collation of textual variants; and Voyant, a software program which enables analysis of word frequency and juxtapositions in attractive visual forms. In addition, the project manager of the Whitman Archive, Stephanie Blalock, visited our class to demonstrate the purposes and nature of TEI-coding, usefully laying out some uncertainties and obstacles which the Whitman Archive had faced in applying its principles. A Digital Studio presentation explained some of the features of Omeka, a file management and indexing program that after June 2020 will house the William Morris Archive, and a digital librarian explained to the graduate students how to use features of Arcgis, a map-creating program.

Each graduate student was asked to create a project during the semester. My own preference would have been for class members to complete an edition of one of the Archive's yet unedited texts, working either singly or collaboratively to prepare as many of the following as possible: an introduction, a corrected text, annotations, transcriptions of earlier drafts, a list of variants, and supplemental materials such as contemporary reviews, critical commentaries, or maps. Since a digital edition can be completed in stages, the addition of even a few of these elements would nonetheless have constituted progress

toward a future completed work. Such a project, I believed, would have the advantage of actual use value; it would offer immediate practice in editing; and ideally it could become part of the Archive and thus provide its creators with a digital publication.

As it happened, the graduate students chose to prepare in collaboration a map of the route traced in *News from Nowhere*, designed to illustrate each stage of Guest's journey, be keyed to the text, and include scroll-over notes. As they began, they quickly learned to use basic features of the necessary mapping programs, and they readily created an initial map of the relevant sites as they now exist through Google, and keyed these places into an Excel list of places and images. At this point, however, the project foundered: delay was caused by the search for perfect maps of 1890 London and Oxford, allegedly only available in downloadable form from the National Library of Scotland, and which when obtained were, in the end, far too detailed for use. Moreover the enjoyment of map programs in theory didn't translate to the ability to find the relevant 1890s-era images to include; most of the annotations remained unwritten, and even the completed ones couldn't be uploaded until someone could determine how to deal with the characters' multiple returns to the same place. I myself could only provide editorial material, and in the end, everyone was dependent on the digital librarian's technical expertise to upload their material. Clearly the way of the digital is strewn with delays, and at semester's end the map-cum-commentary remained unfinished.

At the course's conclusion, to my relief the students politely claimed that all their efforts had been rewarding and educational. I believe that they did benefit from experimenting with several software programs and exploring the steps needed to create a text-linked map, and doubtless they gleaned something about the physical environs of the imagined future Nowherean society. I couldn't avoid the recognition, however, that for these students technology had constituted its own end, taking precedence over content. And although in some metaphysical sense the journey and not the arrival matters, surely one measure of success is the completion of a usable product.

Perhaps not coincidentally, the course's one clear accomplishment was created using a slightly older technology. Doctoral student Kyle Barton created a twitter account that posted several times weekly and garnered 412 followers. @MorrisArchive successfully publicized our efforts, and its #OTD [On This Day] feature also promoted some of Morris's interesting lesser-known writings. In the period surrounding the 2016 elections, it may also have made its own modest contribution to the wider political discourse, as Mr. Barton observes:

> We had not intended on using [the Twitter account] to recirculate Morris's political observations. However, while curating daily tweets we began lifting from Morris's "Notes on News" his brief, almost proto-tweet entries from *The*

William Morris Arch. @MorrisArchive · Feb 18
#OTD in 1888, Morris pbd "Notes on News" decrying the grievous state of #womensrights concerning their own bodies.
morrisedition.lib.uiowa.edu/Commonweal/188...

> An instructive example of the way in which bourgeois law regards woman is furnished by the action which Lord Howard de Walden brought against Major Burrowes on the 4th inst. The "noble" lord's wife was lying at death's door with peritonitis. The least excitement might have been fatal to her. Lord Howard de Walden is given to drink, and when intoxicated insists on entering his wife's room. As this might cost her life, her brother, Major Burrowes, finding other means of argument of no avail to induce the inebriated peer to remain outside his wife's door, knocked him down. Hence the prosecution.
>
> The magistrate thought the assault justified it would appear. But the husband was not bound over to refrain from violating his wife. It is apparently one of the privileges of matrimony that the husband, no matter how drunken, has a right to force himself upon his "property," even if he knows that fatal consequences may result. "May not a man do what he likes with his own?"

Figure 17.2.   MorrisArchive Tweet, February 18, 2017.
Reproduced courtesy of the William Morris Archive.

Commonweal in which he reflected on the political problems of his moment. We quickly discovered just how relevant Morris's words remain. . . . Morris's thoughts on protest, police violence, and civil rights—amongst other issues—urgently speak to us of his moments and ours. They allow us to share his outrage, commitment to resistance, and hope.[10]

FINAL REFLECTIONS

In association with the North American Victorian Studies Association and several academic libraries, Dino Felluga and others have set up a prepackaged template for creating a short scholarly edition with an associated timeline at COVE (Central Online Victorian Educator), and if sent the materials they will help upload them.[11] If I were to attempt a digital graduate course again, or indeed any course with a serious digital component, I would suggest the cooperative editing of the poem "The Defence of Guenevere," or any other short selection, as a text in COVE, with annotations, variants, critical references, and a timeline. The students who contributed materials to a composite and uploaded site would have a sense of completion; a link to their edition could be placed on the Archive; and the world would have a useful teaching aid. Along the way students would experience the complexity of a single Morris text as it reaches out to multiple contexts in the medieval, artistic, and contemporary worlds. Such a project would form a pragmatic compromise between the ambition to join the world of digital editing within

a limited timeframe, and the need to provide commentary as well as develop specific technological skills. Kyle Barton and I have prepared a pilot version of a *Defence* poem, "Concerning Geffray Teste Noire" in such a COVE edition; once one learns the correct protocol for uploading, preparing the notes and illustrations is relatively straightforward and enjoyable.

Despite setbacks, I remained convinced that of Morris's works, *News from Nowhere* would most benefit from an annotated digital map to be used as a teaching aid. With some technical help I have continued to develop this, and a version of *News from Nowhere* created in the program "Story Maps" (storymaps.arcgis.com) is now available on the William Morris Archive.[12] Ideally, such an interactive map might inspire many short writing assignments at several levels of difficulty; at the simplest, beginning students might be asked to answer such questions as, "What stage of Morris's journey most interested you, and why?" Though such queries were of course asked and answered long before the advent of modern computers, I hope that contemporary students may pursue these answers more readily when enabled to trace Guest's journey in vivid topographical, pictorial, and digital form.

APPENDIX 1: SAMPLE ASSIGNMENT FOR SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

Please look through all the volumes on display, paying special attention to features of binding, page design, fonts, illustrations, paper quality, and choice of text. Four of the books are forgeries—Robert Browning's *Cleon* and *Gold Hair*; and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *The Runaway Slave* and *Sonnets*.

For your next ICON posting, please write an essay in which you respond to several of the following questions:

What are some differences in the materials used for the bindings, and their quality and style? Do you notice changes as the century progressed? Is there a pattern to which kind of bindings and covers were used for which type of works?

What do you notice about the use of illustrations, and how does this change over the course of the century? What are some especially fine examples of illustrations and illustrated books?

Do the illustrations supplement and enhance the text, or are they on different or general subjects? (You might give an example of each.)

Notice especially the illustrations by Arthur Hughes, George Cruikshank, John Everett Millais, and Gustav Doré. Which types of subjects did each tend to illustrate?

What do you think of the quality of pictures in the *London Illustrated News* and other periodicals? Why did such illustrations cease to be used?

What do you notice about the paper used? The ways in which the pages are sewn into the binding? Are some of these bindings too tight or too loose?

Be sure to look at several examples of William Morris's Kelmscott Press books. What do you think may have prompted him to establish a press to make handmade books? What is different about these books? (e. g., the paper, ink, fonts, colophons, choice of texts) What seem to have been some of his principles of design?

Compare Kelmscott Press books published earlier and later in the Press's existence (1891–1896). What changes do you notice? Are there ways in which Kelmscott Press books may have influenced later book design?

After examining the forgeries, can you guess why the well-known bibliographer Thomas Wise may have chosen to issue these particular books in postdated editions rather than say, Tennyson's *Poems* of 1842 (which contained "The Lady of Shalott" and "The Lotus Eaters")?

What would be some motives for issuing a forgery? How might they have been detected?

Please select a volume, or volumes, that you find especially interesting, and describe its notable features.

NOTES

1. http://morrisedition.lib.uiowa.edu [after June 2020, http://morrisarchive.lib
.uiowa.edu]; and http://victorianfboos.studio.uiowa.edu.

2. https://victorianfboos.studio.uiowa.edu/art-galleries ["William Morris and the
Decorative Arts," "The Pre-Raphaelites"].

3. https://victorianfboos.studio.uiowa.edu/william-morris-defence-guenevere;
and https://victorianfboos.studio.uiowa.edu/william-morris-haystack-floods.

4. http://morrisedition.lib.uiowa.edu/Poetry/Defence_of_Guenevere/Images/
guenevere1892/jpeg/pageflip1-50.html.

5. http://morrisedition.lib.uiowa.edu/NewsNowhere_Illustrated/production/
NewsfromNowhere/index.html; and http://morrisedition.lib.uiowa.edu/news.html
[after June 2020, http://morrisedition.lib.iowa.edu/news.html].

6. *See* http://morrisedition.lib.uiowa.edu/NewsNowhere_Illustrated/production/
NewsfromNowhere/chapter07.html.

7. See http://morrisedition.lib.uiowa.edu/NewsNowhere_Illustrated/production/
NewsfromNowhere/chapter31.html.

8. William Morris, "The Society of the Future," in *The Political Writings of William Morris*, ed. A. L. Morton (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1979), 190.

9. Ibid., 194.

10. Kyle Barton, "Morris in Our Times," *Useful and Beautiful* (2017.1): 17–18.

11. See https://editions.covecollective.org.

12. http://morrisedition.lib.uiowa.edu/newssupple.html, "An Argis Story Map." I
am indebted to Sean de Vega for his help in completing this digital edition.

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