A nagging problem for scholars of William Morris concerns the relation between his aesthetics and his politics: while we can see a beautiful integrity in the way that Morris’s beliefs about labour, material, and human dignity inform his multifaceted creative endeavours, the expensive exclusivity of his products has long provoked accusations of hypocrisy. This incongruity does not diminish if we focus on Morris’s literary productions rather than the high-end work of his design firm, nor if we solely consider the literature he produced after his early-1880s conversion to socialism. Indeed, the socialist era of Morris’s creative life seems particularly vulnerable to charges of inconsistency: how, we might wonder, could Morris edit and print the *Commonweal* – the Socialist League’s one-penny newspaper, which advocated the eradication of class, wealth, and private property – while dreaming up the Kelmscott Press, which would produce some of the rarest and most expensive books of all time?

Questions that beleaguer Morris scholarship are, of course, equally problematical in the classroom. In my experience, undergraduate students quickly identify this central paradox in Morris’s work, especially when encountering his material legacy in the rare book room. I intend this article, in part, as an argument for bringing undergraduate classes into what we might call ‘the Morris archive’ – libraries, museums, rare book rooms, and Special Collections that hold Morris materials – and as a
resource of practical suggestions for how best to do that, but I want to begin by addressing some of the broader problems that Morris’s rare books pose for scholars as well as students. As a discipline, literary studies has become increasingly attentive to the history of the book, the culture of print, and archival research and theory, thus it strikes me as a particularly apt moment to reflect upon the pedagogical implications of ‘the archival turn’ for literary studies and for Morris studies in particular.

Let us begin with the Kelmscott Press, which is so obviously relevant to these matters. For most teachers and students today, Morris’s Kelmscott Press books are virtually inseparable from the particular experiential medium of the ‘rare book room’. Such a forum demands our alertness, above all, to their rareness, and while the adjective ‘rare’ invokes uniqueness or exceptionality, it also carries the connotation of elite, privileged, or inaccessible, ostensibly extending these qualities to Morris and his work. Teachers of Morris who wish to acquaint their students with Kelmscott’s material, visual, or print legacy may find this sense of exclusivity to be a serious pedagogical hurdle. My students often feel that Morris’s artistic and political ideas are contradictory, or that he was disingenuously elitist. How, they wonder, could a man who called for educational egalitarianism justify printing books that were numbered, expensive, and rare? How could a man committed to communism spend so much time making such exclusive property? They are keenly alert to what we might call the ‘Kelmscott for all’ dilemma – the problem of reconciling the rare with the shared.

As a producer and collector of rare books, Morris himself struggled to reconcile his love for them with his socialist, egalitarian values. In the years just before founding Kelmscott Press, while actively collecting incunabula and other medieval volumes, Morris often discussed the dilemma that rare books posed for democratic socialists. In an 1891 interview with the Pall Mall Gazette, he argued that rare books were not in themselves anti-democratic, so long as they were held in public libraries:
... if we were all Socialists things would be different. We should have a public library at each street corner, where everybody might see and read all the best books, printed in the best and most beautiful type. I should not then have to buy all these old books, but they would be common property, and I could go and look at them whenever I wanted them, as would everybody else.²

Central to Morris’s vision of socialism was the idea that books of exceptional value could persist in an egalitarian society as a commonly-held good. Most luxury items seemed worthless to Morris, but rare books were art as well as culture – the best that has been thought and said in the world, in Matthew Arnold’s phrasing of the day – and Morris wanted them within easy reach for all. Unlike Henry James, who feared that great art was anathema to classlessness, and unlike Arnold, who held that culture was essentially indifferent to class, Morris believed that the ‘best books’ and the ‘best and most beautiful type’ were necessarily common; in ‘How We Live and How We Might Live’, for example, he claimed that every person has a rightful ‘share of whatever knowledge there is in the world’, and in an 1882 letter he wrote, ‘there can be only one foundation for real art, the desire of the whole people to have it’.³

In the same 1891 interview with the Pall Mall Gazette, however, Morris admitted that he found the British Museum’s library inconvenient: ‘Now I have to go to the British Museum, which is an excellent institution, but it is not enough. I want these books close at hand, and frequently, and therefore I must buy them. It is the same with everybody else, and if they have not money enough to buy them they must go without. Socialism would alter all that’.⁴ This statement prompted the interviewer to ask if the future socialist society must have a hundred British Museums rather than just one; in turn, it begs the question of whether there could ever be enough rare books to supply the abundance of rare book libraries that Morris envisions. In his socialist utopia News from Nowhere, Morris resolves this difficulty by depicting books as an unpopular commodity among people of the future; bibliophiles like Old Hammond are free to live among as many rare
volumes as they like, since most others have little interest in them. One exceptional character even decides to ‘cover [his] walls all over with mediaeval books’, in the manner of wallpaper. The de-popularisation of books is hardly a satisfying socialist policy, however, and Morris’s rather feeble fictional solution is symptomatic of the larger problem that rare books occupy within his social and aesthetic thought.

I want to suggest a partial solution to the challenge that rare books pose for teachers of Morris: not that we take William Morris out of the rare book room, but that we transform the experiential medium of that room itself. For three semesters in 2005 and 2006, I taught a Morris-centred seminar in the Special Collections of Hatcher Graduate Library at the University of Michigan, and I have come to believe that such a course can change the context of Special Collections, and by extension, the subtext of the Morris works held there. This is emphatically not because I consider myself to be opening the pages of Kelmscott to the unwashed masses. (Although I taught this course in a large, publicly-supported university, few of its students represent the dispossessed of capitalist society, as is true of most universities in the United States and the world.) Rather, I have found that teaching Morris in the rare book room helps students grasp – in a fundamentally experiential sense – the materialist and collectivist argument of Morris’s rare books, changing and complicating their sense of what Morris’s work accomplishes.

Of course, the question of what Morris’s Kelmscott books accomplish has not provoked universal agreement among scholars. In his influential Morris biography, E. P. Thompson describes the Kelmscott project as a fundamentally apolitical enterprise, ‘founded in a different spirit from that in which the original Firm had been launched thirty years before. Morris now had no thought of reforming the world through his art ... The Press was simply a source of delight and relaxation’. More recent critics, however, have found in the Kelmscott books a sensibility that is modernist, progressive, and deliberately attentive to materials. Jerome McGann has persuasively argued that, ‘the distinction between physical medium and conceptual message breaks down
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completely' in the Kelmscott books; he calls the Kelmscott edition of *The Earthly Paradise*, for example, a text 'too thick with its own materialities. It resists any processing that would simply treat it as a set of referential signs ... [and] declares its radical self-identity'. Jeffrey Skoblow has likewise contended that the Kelmscott project 'is guided by a rigorously materialist impulse', 'part of a great Romantic-Marxist continuum' involving 'the exploration of objectification, sensory alienation, commodification, and the negative dialectics of resistance'. In line with such readings, I would argue that the Kelmscott books provide more than a poignant trace of Morris's hand, and are a physical instantiation of his arguments about materials and production, so forcefully do they insist upon their status as concrete objects created by the labour of many.

Thus bringing students to the Morris archive gives them a direct encounter with the 'Kelmscott for all' paradox, but also provides a means of understanding this problem in a more complex way. Moreover, I have found that redefining Special Collections as a space for teaching as well as research transforms the implications of the texts held there. Our work together as a class in the rare book room manifests Morris's ideal of a publicly-owned textual inheritance, publicly-accessible art, and publicly-funded institutions for the greater good; it puts into practice Morris's effort to redefine culture in terms of commonality and to show that 'the best' and 'the many' need not be mutually exclusive; it conveys to students that the rare book room and its holdings are shared cultural goods. While I do assign individual research projects involving Morris materials, I also hold classes in a room adjoining Special Collections, so that we can use the books to generate group discussion and exchange. Even the time students spend on their own in Special Collections, researching independent papers and projects, must be done within the parameters of the hours and rules of that shared space, which is a far different experience from the radically individualised practice of internet research.

Before I describe our class's particular interactions with Morris materials, let me take a step back and describe the pro-
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gram under which it was conceived. I taught this seminar while I was a postdoctoral fellow for the Public Goods Council at the University of Michigan; as its name suggests, the Council sponsors fellows who investigate scholarly and pedagogical questions surrounding the idea of the university as a public resource for common benefit, and who engage in innovative teaching to open the resources of the university to undergraduates and the wider population. The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation funds the fellowships, an irony which would not have been lost on Morris, since Mellon made his fortune via late-nineteenth-century industrial capitalism. I was first attracted to this program because Michigan houses the Labadie Collection of Social Protest Material, a research collection rich in the field of nineteenth-century social protest movements. Following my own interest in late-Victorian protest literature, I designed a seminar called ‘Print Culture and Literary Radicalism in Late-Nineteenth-Century Britain’, and was pleased to have the opportunity to immerse students in print culture of the era as an illuminating frame for the study of Victorian literature and politics.

I opened the class with a unit on William Morris, which occupied a third of the semester and set the terms for the rest of the course. When students began objecting to Morris’s ‘hypocrisy’, I became savvier about using the Morris unit to complicate students’ notion of what the rare book room itself represents. With the Labadie Collection at our disposal, I introduced students to Morris’s more ephemeral political journalism alongside his seemingly timeless Kelmscott books: we looked at texts that were born rare, texts that became rare, and texts that had rareness thrust upon them. This material contrast provided the students with an immediate, visceral sense of the complex politics of Morris’s aesthetics. Morris produced his cheap Socialist League pamphlets and penny issues of the Commonweal for a wide and diverse audience in order to meet the immediate socialistic purpose of agitation, education, and propaganda; but ironically, these documents are now rarer, more delicate, and harder to find than the carefully-preserved Kelmscott volumes that were rare
books from the day they were printed. In the Labadie Collection, we were fortunate to have a full and complete run of the *Commonweal*, many other socialist and anarchist newspapers of the era with which to compare it, and many cheap pamphlet editions of Morris’s political prose. This material alone raised key intellectual questions for the students: How does a text become rare? Is there a difference between scarcity and rarity? What are the politics of rarity? The story of how the university came to preserve and collect this political print (following an unsolicited and unwanted gift from Jo Labadie, an early-twentieth-century Detroit anarchist printer with little formal education) is full of enough randomness and chance to engage students’ imagination, and to alert them to key problems of commodity culture and trash that Morris presaged and that we struggle with more vociferously today. The question of what can be appropriately discarded, and whether anything can ever truly be discarded, has, of course, taken on environmental as well as historical and political significance.

Morris may not have planned the obsolescence of his cheap political printings, in the manner of twentieth-century industrial designers, yet endurance was plainly not a motivating goal in their production. The *Commonweal* has held up much better than most radical papers of its day, and as John Bruce Glasier has testified, Morris did try ‘to make the paper in some degree a good example of typographical art, designing for it a simple but beautiful title block, and insisting on good, readable type and consistency of headings and spacing throughout’. Still, William Peterson has called the *Commonweal* ‘a typographically unimpressive periodical’, and certainly the exigencies underwriting its assembly are unmistakably apparent in contrast with the pristine Kelmscott volumes. As he argued in an 1893 interview with the *Daily Chronicle*, Morris felt the prices of the Kelmscott Books were a necessary evil in his efforts to model a form of production driven by sustainability rather than cost: ‘True, the prices are not the prices which Tom, Dick, and Harry can pay. I wish – I wish indeed that the cost of the books was less, only that is impossible if the printing and the decoration and the paper and the binding

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are to be what they should be.\textsuperscript{12} Morris's crumbling propaganda, cheaply constructed and long neglected by preservationists, stands out against the apparently still-new Kelmscott books, making a silent case for Morris's anti-capitalist theories of production with every turn of the page. Subtly, Morris's material print legacy asks us to question a system where equality of access must always necessitate shoddiness and attrition.

Juxtaposing these two modes of print in the rare book room also raised suspicions, however: how could Morris go from writing penny papers for the workers to printing the glorious Kelmscott Chaucer, which originally sold for the extravagant price of £20? This was not only a question of price; students had trouble understanding why the Kelmscott Press purposefully limited its production, despite the fact that most editions sold out before they were even printed. Did this not ensure that the volumes would remain always inaccessible to the masses? Indeed, while Morris defended the high prices of Kelmscott books by referencing their high quality and handmade materials, he also ensured that their prices would remain high for time immemorial by preserving their scarcity. After Morris's death, his Kelmscott executor Sydney Cockerell wrote:

All the woodblocks ... have been sent to the British Museum, and have been accepted with a condition that they shall not be reproduced or printed from for the space of a hundred years. The electrotypes have been destroyed. In taking this course, which was sanctioned by William Morris when the matter was talked of shortly before his death, the aim of the trustees has been to keep the series of Kelmscott Press books as a thing apart, and to prevent the designs becoming stale by constant repetition.\textsuperscript{13}

We might view this gesture as a means of permanently prohibiting mass-produced aesthetics from taking hold at Kelmscott Press, through 'constant repetition', yet it also appears that Morris understood and accepted that Kelmscott trafficked in aura, and that the books' aura emanated from their very inaccessibility, their rareness, their status as 'a thing apart' from all other print documents, despite the apparent elitism of
this appeal.

This aspect of Morris’s legacy troubled my students, but usefully complicated their notions of communism and collectivism, steeped as they are in images of Soviet austerity. Morris imagined a socialism that would retain individual distinction, among persons as well as in production; he believed that rare and unique commodities would be the norm in a healthy socialist society, as paradoxical as this may seem. Certainly, Morris’s effort to marry Ruskinian notions of art and labour with a Marxian analysis of class and capitalism gave him a more difficult task than he would have had if he had advocated a utilitarian socialism, yet it is precisely this difficult melding that makes his ideas so vital today. My students came to grasp this element in Morris’s thought not only by reading his words, but by examining his material legacy. The political and artistic theories expressed in the Morris texts that we read for the course – including ‘Art and Socialism’, ‘How We Live and How We Might Live’, ‘The Manifesto of the Socialist League’, ‘The Society of the Future’, ‘Useful Work Versus Useless Toil’, and News from Nowhere – came to life among the tangible residue of Morris’s œuvre. Morris argues in ‘Useful Work Versus Useless Toil’, for example, that leisure and beauty will proliferate, not decline, in a post-revolutionary society: ‘men who have just waded through a period of strife and revolution will be the last to put up long with a life of mere utilitarianism, though Socialists are sometimes accused by ignorant persons of aiming at such a life’. The Kelmscott books could be said to encapsulate Morris’s fight against utilitarianism, which he saw as a byproduct of capitalism rather than a corollary of socialism. Likewise, reading ‘A Note by William Morris on His Aims in Founding the Kelmscott Press’, students discovered how Morris searched to find the perfect handmade paper and hand-mixed ink for Kelmscott. They also learned of the unionisation of the Press’s workers, and of Morris’s sometimes unsuccessful attempts to balance optimal working conditions with the use of the best materials, demonstrating how Morris struggled to produce post-capitalist books in a society steeped in (and predicated upon) cheap labour and cheap commodities. This makes
Morris especially relevant now: his insistence that the *practice* of production is as important as the *product* has a strong environmental resonance for today’s students, one that they can easily grasp through hands-on contact with his material legacy.

Such crucial hands-on experience, I believe, cannot be wholly replaced by digital replications of the Morris archive. Morris scholars are now working hard to produce the Morris Online Edition, and this project is absolutely necessary and important so that Morris can be accessible to as many scholars, teachers, and students as possible. Most universities, unfortunately, are not wealthy enough to have a rare book library, and some secondary and technical schools may have virtually no library at all. I would, however, urge those teachers who do have access to special collections that include Morris’s work, either in their own institution or a nearby one, to bring students into those spaces, and not to let online developments substitute for students’ immersion in Morris’s material legacy. Even if your own college or nearby universities have no Morris holdings, public and private libraries including Morris’s work exist in a surprisingly extensive range of places, as do temporary Morris exhibitions. During one semester of my course, for example, a travelling exhibit of Morris’s art and design stopped at the Block Museum on Northwestern University’s campus outside Chicago. Our seminar attended the exhibit on a field trip, which gave students an even deeper sense of Morris’s commitment to materials than they could glean from the rare book room. Such experiences allow one to behold values of Morris’s work that are imperceptible online, though material objects can of course never be as wonderfully pervasive as electronic ones.

Even beyond their pervasiveness, online editions have some pedagogical advantages absent from rare book rooms: students can access materials any time at their own convenience, and can use ‘find’ and ‘search’ options to locate particular terms without having to trudge through pages of information. For these reasons, I was grateful that Michigan’s library undertook to digitise its complete run of the *Commonweal* during my time at the university. This digitisation project was not complete, however,
until the third semester that I taught the class, and each semester I assigned a paper that required students to analyse News from Nowhere in the context of its original serial form in the Commonweal. When I initially planned the course, I had hoped to have the Commonweal digitally available for this assignment, but in the end I was surprised by the benefits of having students use the un-indexed print version for their research. Students were forced to familiarise themselves with the journal before forming a specific research question; they had to take the paper on its own terms, rather than cherry-picking evidence for a predetermined conclusion or a prearranged thesis. The assignment asked students to consider literature in an unfamiliar way – as a material artifact, subject to historical otherness and historical contingency; they encountered News from Nowhere at a cultural remove rather than in the neutral field of cyberspace. Certainly, I could not expect students to take on equally complex research projects without digitised materials, but if their conclusions were less sweeping than they might otherwise have been, the process that brought them to those conclusions was, I believe, ultimately more valuable.  

Primary documents such as the Commonweal and the Kelmscott books are not pre-packaged for convenient consumption, like textbooks, nor do they provide contextual information to help students make sense of historical particulars. These challenges can be pedagogically productive, but assigning students to work with such materials will inevitably cause some frustration. Instructors will need to offer a more detailed historical context than is required in other literature classes, as well as more encouragement and direction. Still, I believe that teaching with primary sources in Special Collections is ultimately less centralised and authoritarian than traditional pedagogy, since students are directly garnering information from the literary and historical record rather than from the instructor or a secondary source. When students generate their own means of apprehending and making sense of a literary artifact, they are learning skills that will help them read and make meaning in a world where information is often not as user-friendly as it purports to be.
Another challenge for teachers who wish to mount this kind of class is the culture of rare book rooms themselves: these institutions and the individuals who run them often have different objectives than the teachers and researchers who use their collections, and some may be more concerned with preservation than accessibility. Morris scholars must of course be grateful for the labors of preservationists; compared to many authors, Morris has always been recognised as deserving of careful conservation, which is why we remain rich in his primary materials today. Still, a balance must be struck between protection and access, lest we conserve Morris’s legacy for nobody but a scanner. Undergraduates benefit, moreover, from learning to handle delicate materials in a safe way, since such instruction impresses upon them that Morris’s work is a common inheritance, shared by generations not yet alive. In the past, many librarians would not have viewed undergraduates as appropriate users of rare book rooms, but I believe this is changing today. I have worked with multiple librarians and curators who were genuinely excited to have undergraduates using Special Collections, and who did much to make this kind of teaching practicable. Indeed, some knew a great deal about Morris themselves, and each semester, two or three of my class sessions would be co-taught by librarians. With the turn toward print culture and archival studies among literary scholars, we should recognise that librarians already have a wealth of knowledge on these matters, and can bring a rich new perspective to our classrooms.

Still, from my own research travels, I know that many archivists are unwilling enough to give graduate students access to rare materials, much less undergraduates, who are unlikely to contribute to our collective understanding of these materials via original research. What is needed is a fundamental change in how we view archives and special collections: we should consider them less as repositories of untapped knowledge, awaiting expert interpretation, and instead as continually evolving centres for a common cultural inheritance. Due to digitisation, workaday research questions have become and will continue to become less dependent on the physical space of rare book rooms; we
should view this change as a chance to transform archival and book collections into places for active learning and teaching. This kind of class work demands that students pay assiduous attention to medium and form, which is important training for the information revolution that we are all living through, and it provides them with a stake in a common intellectual heritage existing materially in the world.

In the past, special collections have operated according to a hierarchical, top-down relation to the culture at large; it was assumed that original scholarly research was the best and most appropriate channel through which they might have a public impact. With the astonishing growth of digitisation and electronic editions, however, there is no longer reason to consider such collections as exclusively dedicated to specialists in a given field. Online editions and the archival turn can make a great contribution to our teaching merely by giving us impetus to reconsider the status of the rare book room as a pedagogical tool; this is a recommendation of which Morris himself, surely, would have heartily approved.

NOTES

I would like to thank Kathryn Beam and Kathleen Dow in the Special Collections Library at the University of Michigan, and Judy Connick in Archives and Special Collections at Ohio University, all of whom helped share William Morris materials with my students.

I see Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2002) for reflections on ‘the archival turn’ in cultural studies. Marjorie Stone discussed the archival turn in Victorian Studies at the 2006 North American Victorian Studies Association conference, in a seminar entitled “Victorian Poetry in the Archive: Theory, Practice and Challenges”. Modernist scholars are also engaged in a re-theorisation of the archive: the theme of
the 2006 Modernist Studies Association conference was “Out of the Archive”.


4 ‘Poet as Printer’, p. 92.


from p. 98.

13 Sydney Cockerell, ‘A Short History and Description of the Kelmscott Press’. Published in the Kelmscott edition of A Note by William Morris on His Aims in Founding the Kelmscott Press (1898). Reprinted in The Ideal Book, pp. 79–88; quote from p. 86.


15 WorldCat (www.worldcat.org) is an invaluable resource for finding nearby Kelmscott Press books and other primary Morris materials. The Morris Society website (www.morris-society.org) helpfully lists upcoming exhibitions.

16 This is the only existing digital version of the Commonweal, so far as I know. It is available to the public via Michigan’s online library catalogue, MIRLYN, at http://www.lib.umich.edu/

17 Even without a digitised version, I received some remarkable papers for this assignment. Some students wrote on specific topics, using articles and debates from The Commonweal to interpret Morris’s novel; others focused on the way that the novel was serialised in the journal, paying attention to breaks in the text, juxtapositions, or differences between editions.

A student named Laura Peterson, for example, researched Christianity’s status within Victorian socialism, and recovered the debate in the Commonweal over whether or not the two were incompatible. She used this research to analyse religious and sacred imagery in News from Nowhere, arguing that although Morris’s future socialist society is apparently absent of religion, it maintains the imagery and ritual of Christianity in an effort to appeal to Christian socialists and to those who feared that an atheist movement would never attract the masses.

Another student, named Amanda Dewyer, researched ‘the woman question’ and found both feminist and anti-feminist perspectives in the Commonweal. She argued that
when you consider *News from Nowhere* in the context of its original forum for publication, it puts forth a progressive view of women’s social role, despite the fact the ‘Obstinate Refusers’ chapter was not included in the version that ran in the *Commonweal*. (This chapter depicts the woman artist Philippa, whom Morris added to the book edition, perhaps to clarify women’s elevated status in the future society.)