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THE CLASSICAL SOURCES OF
MORRIS'S *LIFE AND DEATH*
OF JASON

THERE is no more eloquent testimony to the inherent and insistent beauty of the classic legends of Greece than the fact that poets in all times have loved to handle them, and that 'age has not withered' their primal freshness. Some have used these old stories as a gracious cloak for modern thought; others have trusted to their appeal as simple tales of the antique world, innocent of hidden or symbolic meaning. William Morris belongs entirely to the latter class.

It is a little curious that the lengthiest and most sustained verse rendering of a classic legend produced during the nineteenth century should have been the work of Morris, whose name is far more closely connected with mediæval matters than with Greek. We have his own characteristically forcible statement that classical literature did not appeal to him,¹ yet he devoted several of the most fruitful years of his poetic life to the retelling of the stories that are

¹ Mackail, *Life of Morris*, ii. 171: 'I loathe all classic literature.'

told there. Almost the whole of his original work in this field was completed¹ between the years 1866 and 1870, and these years cover one distinct phase of his genius, very different from that which preceded it, and from which it is severed, not only by a silence of nine years but by a complete change in temper and execution.

In the volume of 1858, intense emotions are handled with stern dramatic power; the execution is occasionally novice-like and awkward; there are lines and passages of vibrant music, and lines that rasp like rusty keys in disused locks; but, soaring above all is a certain note of piercing youth and inspiration which Morris never wholly managed to recover.

The originals he used in this early work were those he found in his wide mediæval reading; not one of his poems treats a classical theme, though there is a most happy reference to 'that sad siege' of Troy in 'Sir Peter Harpdon's End.' Morris was, however, planning a cycle of poems on the Troy story; it was soon laid aside, and the fragments which have been preserved show how singularly unlike it was to the work of the classical period proper—the period of *The Life and Death of Jason* and of *The Earthly Paradise*. At the very beginning of this period Morris appears as the perfect master of the art of narrative poetry. There is no work showing the stress of a transitional stage when the poet is

¹ *The First Foray of Aristomenes*, printed in *Athenæum*, May 1876, was written as early as 1866.

struggling to impress form upon poetic material. His verse flows on gently and freely, with what his biographer¹ so happily describes as 'sweet equableness.' There is a loss of virility and dramatic power, balanced by a gain in the direction of technique.

One of the factors in this not wholly explicable change was Morris's study of Chaucer. It was inevitable that one who was feeling after mastery in narrative poetry should look back to the first great maker of it; and the generous explicit avowal of discipleship made both in *Jason*² and in *The Earthly Paradise*³ is justified by the implicit testimony of Morris's workmanship in verse. It is not, perhaps, too much to say that the reading of Chaucer influenced Morris in his choice of theme; for though he nowhere makes use of Chaucerian tales, any one of those in *The Earthly Paradise* (except those of Norse origin) might have been told on the road to Canterbury; and *The Life and Death of Jason* is a later-day pseudo-classical romance, lineally descended from *Troilus and Criseyde*.

Morris had always been instinctively and forcibly attracted by mediæval life and art; and wide and profound reading had so strengthened his natural bent that the love of the Middle Ages possessed him, and was the source from which his multifarious industries of hand and mind drew their being. It inspired him even throughout the years

¹ Mackail, *Life*, i. 173.

² *Jason*, xvii.

³ *Earthly Paradise*, Envoi.

when Socialism held him in its thrall, for the golden fellowship of the thirteenth century was the millennium of his political ideals. Hence it is not surprising that when he chose that poetic form which was most satisfying to mediæval taste, namely the metrical romance, he should have adopted the mediæval attitude towards classical legend. He made no scholarly effort to re-create a correct 'atmosphere' or historically accurate background. Greek myths were valuable and interesting to him, precisely because they were beautiful stories, not because they were the natural out-breathings of the Hellenic spirit, crystallised into forms severely and calmly beautiful.

The poets of the Romantic Revolt have made us familiar with the anomaly of a classic theme handled in a modern romantic manner. Keats and Shelley, and after them Tennyson, Swinburne, and many others have all poured their new wine into old bottles. Morris alone has deliberately given a mediæval colouring to his version of classical myths. The importance of the mediæval element in *The Life and Death of Jason*, and how far it enters into the essence of the poem, will be discussed later; but the licence of setting which Morris allowed himself, and the freedom with which he enlarged, compressed, and even altered the legend of the Golden Fleece, has led to a misunderstanding as to his method of approaching the sources of his poem, which should be dealt with here.

Miss May Morris, in her preface to her father's works,¹ states that Morris used no other authorities for his classical *Earthly Paradise* stories (*Jason* was originally intended for *The Earthly Paradise*) than nursery tales and works of reference such as Lemprière's *Dictionary*, with occasional hints from Ovid and Apollodorus. If we are to take this as a final and authoritative statement, the effort to discover sources for *Jason* in actual classic literature would equal in futility the attempt to discuss politics in a regenerate 'nowhere.' It may, perhaps, be hazarded that the statement owes something to the not unnatural desire to establish an analogy between Morris's practice in dealing with classic legend and that of the poet dearest to all Pre-Raphaelites. Keats, it used to be said, owed all his acquaintance with what he once called 'the beautiful mythology of Greece' to Lemprière's handbook, and it is undoubtedly true that whilst Elizabethan poetry and not the dictionary was his true inspiration, he did not actually consult the original Greek authorities.

With Morris, on the other hand, the case was different. He was unconquerably mediæval in sympathies, but he was too thoroughly an artist to deny in his heart the beauty of classic art, however much he denied it with his lips. He had probably a far greater knowledge and appreciation of the classics than he cared to avow. We are told that he once suggested a felicitous emendation in the text of an ode of Pindar;² we know

¹ Collected Edition, 1910, vol. iii., p. xviii. ² Mackail, *Life*, i. 180.

that he had read the *Medea* of Euripides before he went up to Oxford, and that he left the University with at least that knowledge of Latin and Greek which was requisite to obtain a degree. For many of the classical stories in *The Earthly Paradise* Morris needed nothing but the merest dictionary outlines; but *Jason* is a poem of epic length, and it seems unlikely that when Morris 'turned up' the article on Jason in Lemprière, and found at the end the list of originals from which the editor had compiled his account, he should have refrained from consulting the actual versions of Pindar, Apollonius, Ovid, and others.

We have from Morris himself the explicit statement that he clung 'to the hem of old writers'; and when we find him using a picturesque detail which occurs in Pindar's fourth Pythian ode and is omitted in Lemprière, or setting down a long catalogue of heroes in what is largely the order of Apollonius Rhodius, whereas the order in the dictionary is alphabetical, it seems logical to infer that Morris did not in this instance limit his researches to Lemprière.

The legend which Morris treated at such length was one which had exercised a powerful fascination over the imagination of the Greeks, and accounts of it, or allusions to it, are frequent in their literature. It embodied one of their most deeply bitten characteristics, the desire to probe the unknown. In the later days of their supremacy, their intellectual curiosity and alertness were busied

with theory and speculation; but the story of the Golden Fleece dates from an earlier time when the instinct to explore was leading them to tempt perilous seas and unknown regions, and when the first voyages of Greek sailors to the Euxine gave birth to strange stories about the mysterious northern lands.

The first saga of the Argonauts, which was presumably the authority consulted by Apollonius, is lost; but there is a rapid, business-like account in Apollodorus,¹ whom Morris consulted for several of the tales in *The Earthly Paradise*. From the opening of *The Life and Death of Jason* to the catalogue of heroes (Book iii.) Morris must have had in mind the fourth Pythian ode;² from the catalogue onwards down to the winning of the Golden Fleece he used Apollonius. Ovid has an account of the slaying of Pelias,³ which must have been familiar to him, and may have furnished a few suggestions; but the close of his poem, which deals with the desertion of Medea and her revenge, bears no resemblance to the tragedy of Euripides.

From these materials Morris evolved an organic whole; and, guided by a delicate artistic sense of what was best suited to his purpose, he wove one long strip of tapestry, on which was worked the whole story of Jason's life, from his lusty infancy to his inglorious old age. The very length of *The Life and Death of Jason* (exceeded in its

¹ Apollodorus (in *Mythographi Graeci*, Teubner), i., § 9, 1-9, 28.

² *Pyth.* iv. 70-123.

³ *Metam.*, vii. 159, 349.

day only by *The Ring and the Book*) is noticeable; but taken in conjunction with the simple objective manner of the poet and the exclusion of all that is alien to the story, it becomes remarkable and unique. The poem is like an inspired chronicle, full but not garrulous, and touched with an elusive shadowiness which raises it out of the realm of actuality. It is level and undramatic, and for the most part passionless; its flow is smooth and unimpeded, and no better medium could have been chosen to express the slow inevitable lapsing of time, the sense of which lay then so heavily on the poet's mind and made all things 'smell of mortality.' The dramatic virility of his earliest work had deserted Morris; had it remained, *The Life and Death of Jason* would have contained passages of supreme and compelling power, but it could hardly have achieved that level sustained excellence which is Morris's great glory as a narrative poet, and which is, in part, the result of his masterly ordering of the materials from which he produced his own rendering of the legend.

The poem opens without an invocation to the Muses, and tells in a leisurely low-pitched fashion of the coming of the Minyæ to Iolchos. Morris follows the order of Apollodorus in thus chronicling the earliest incidents in Jason's life in their natural sequence. Both Pindar and Apollonius begin with the reappearance of Jason in Iolchos, and the hero himself is made to outline the story of his own youth. By this device they con-

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centrate the interest upon one dramatic episode; Morris diffuses it over 'the accomplishment of many years.' He describes at length the woodland life of young Jason, and finds an opportunity for the lovely inset picture of Diana's midnight hunt through the starlit forest. This is entirely his own invention, and the remainder of the first book, with its Virgilian vision of Juno, shows how free and unhampered was his handling of his authorities. Even when he is thinking of Pindar, he finds in him suggestion rather than guidance. In the Pythian ode we are told that Jason was carried away to Chiron *νυκτί* (Lemprière gives no notice of the time). Morris expands the mere hint and describes the red torch-light playing on the black-bearded king and the war-horse waiting at his gates; a scene which inspired the young Pre-Raphaelite painter, Oliver Madox Brown, in his first attempt at art. With equal freedom, Morris invents Juno's speech to Jason at the crossing of the Anaurus (Book iii. 70 foll.); but in describing his garb (the woollen tunic of Magnesia) he follows the generally accepted tradition. The detail of the two spears (which is not given in Lemprière's account) is exactly paralleled in Pindar's 'διδύμαισιν αἰχμαῖσιν.'¹

In Pindar's account, Jason spends six days feasting with his friends before he challenges Pelias; in Morris's, he goes at once to the usurper, denounces him as a traitor, and appears to make peace upon the conditions recorded in Pindar.

¹ *Pyth.*, iv. 140.

But here we may say, as Dr. Johnson did of Cowley's odes, that 'the following pretty lines are not such as his [Pindar's] deep mouth used to pour out.' The contributions levied by Morris are here slight, and in no way affect the manner of his poem, which is very different from the divine energy of the Greek.

The debt to Apollonius Rhodius covers a larger area. Moreover, the spirit of *The Life and Death of Jason* is in some degree kindred to that of the Alexandrian school. The barer grandeur of classic ideals was beginning to pass away and to be replaced by a less ordered luxuriance, in which tendencies to what was later known as romanticism might be discerned. These tendencies are clearly seen in the *Argonautica*, most clearly perhaps in the description of the emotional struggle of the heroine; in *Jason*, as is natural, they are more fully developed. On the other hand, however, the mass of antiquarian lore and geographical detail which overweights the account of Apollonius, and betrays the pedantry then fashionable, does not encumber the English version. Morris was always interested in picturesque rite and ceremonial, and had an eye for the workmanship of armour or the architectural lines of a hall, but his use of such decorative details in verse was restrained by a severe æsthetic sense. He realised their value in set descriptions or in vivid illuminating touches; it was part of his endowment as a Pre-Raphaelite to do so; but he would not, like Apollonius, spend more than forty lines in describing

Jason's cloak, or rather in making an inventory of it. Yet his catalogue of heroes is even longer than the Alexandrian's, and bears unmistakable traces of his having consulted him;¹ for from the description of Iphicles to that of Phalerus the order of the Argonauts is identical in Apollonius and in Morris. In other cases Morris breaks the sequence to give prominence to those heroes whose memory has been honoured in literature of a later day, Hercules, Theseus, and Orpheus. Atalanta is not usually included amongst the Argonauts, and Apollonius does not name her, but both Apollodorus and after him Lemprière give her a place in the expedition. In the description which he gives of Cænus, Pirithous, Hylas, and several others, Morris has made use of details from Hyginus,² who has written a *précis* of Apollonius's epic; elsewhere the catalogue in the *Argonautica* has furnished suggestions. It is in this connection that the poet describes himself as 'clinging to the hem of those old singers'; but one instance will show that his poetic fancy played unchecked over what he found in his ancient writers. Apollonius says,³ 'after these came Phlias from Aræthyrea, where he dwelt in opulence, through the goodwill of Dionysius, his father, close to the waters of Asopus.' In Morris this⁴ becomes:

Next Phlias came, forgetful of the hill
That bears his name, where oft the maidens fill

¹ *Jason*, iii. 150, 210.

³ *Argon.*, i. 115.

² Hyginus, *Fab.* xiv.

⁴ *Jason*, iii. 228.

Their baskets with the coal-black clustering grapes
Far on in autumn, where the parched earth gapes
For cool November rain and winter snow;
For there his house stood, on the shaded brow
Of that fair ridge that Bacchus loves so well.

The catalogue itself may be a concession on Morris's part to the traditions of the epic, but it is more probably due to the survival of this tradition in the romances of the Middle Ages. He used great skill to prevent its becoming a mere list of names. Of the sixty-one Argonauts that he describes, only one-third are ever mentioned again by name, and even these, with the exception of Hercules, Tiphys, and a few others, receive only passing notice. Yet the dwelling, lineage, and appearance of each is noted down with the precision of a mediæval chronicler. By describing the heroes as they arrive and pass up the streets to Jason, Morris gives to his picture the movement and life of a pageant; and, lest the procession should become wearisome, he makes a night intervene between the coming of Castor and Pollux and that of Lynceus and the other warriors. It is worthy of notice that the courtly greeting of Hercules to the 'prince' has a quaintly mediæval suggestion:

. . . I, who have won
Some small renown, O Jason, in this land
Come now to put my hand within your hand
And be your man.

The opportunities for geographical digressions which the voyage of the *Argo* afforded might have been a pitfall, but Morris avoided the

danger of making a traveller's note-book in verse. His Argonauts sail directly from Iolchos to Lemnos, but they do not land there, and the madness of the Lemnian women is related by the only surviving man. In Apollonius the Argonauts rest on the island; Jason marries Hypsipyle, the queen, and deserts her, Æneas-like, at the word of the gods. This episode is suppressed by Morris; the solitary Lemnian joins the Argonauts, and his individuality is swallowed up in that dim band of heroes. The visit of Cyzicus, their ill-fated host, follows the Greek version, but the freeing of Phineus¹ from the Harpies who torment him is a good instance of Morris's use of suggestion and suspense. The Argonauts do not learn the secret of their host's misery until they have feasted, but the foreboding of evil weighs them down as they sit at table. Zetes and Calaïs gladly undertake to rid him of the foul Snatchers, like knights claiming a perilous quest. In Apollonius they are less chivalrous; they carefully count the cost and need some reassuring before they will venture forth.

The Argonauts pass safely through the Symplegades, steered by Jason and guided by Juno's 'harmless many-coloured flame.' They sail by the coast of the Euxine, and Morris finds time to watch 'the fair kine grazing' and the trim homesteads; but he does not, like Apollonius, insist on the details of each sacrifice they offer, or on the habits and peculiarities of the races

¹ *Jason*, v. 160 foll.

whose coast-line they sight. Such minutiae were of interest to the Alexandrian poet, but to Morris's readers they would have been tedious. Much that is in the *Argonautica* is omitted, especially the minor incidents in which Jason takes no part. Those which Morris retains, he treats fully, and those which are irrelevant are sacrificed. He could not, however, forego the beautiful idyll of Hylas and the nymphs, but he gives a mediæval and romantic colour to the classic myth.

When Morris came to describe the homeward course of the *Argo*, he threw authorities to the winds. The Greeks themselves were never quite sure how the Argonauts found their way back to Greece. Pindar, with happy vagueness, lets them sail out of the boundless Euxine, round by China and the Indian Sea. In the *Argonautica* they return, with more probability but some confusion, by the Adriatic and Mediterranean. That the Greeks of a generation before Troy should have sailed along the Danube and by one of the rivers flowing north have gained the North Sea, was inconceivable. It was many years after the semi-historic voyage that one of their historians¹ described the rivers flowing south into the Euxine; but he was ignorant of the fact that any of them flowed north, or that there was any sea for them to enter. Morris was violating all actual probability in choosing such a way for the *Argo* to return, but with true mediæval simplicity

¹ Herod., iv. 45-8.

he was ready to import the knowledge of his own age into the ancient classic tale.

It was a touch of genius for the poet thus to connect the old and the new, the hallowed antique legend with the unknown unwritten history of the barbarians; the purple and silver of Greek art with the scrips and 'ugly stone-set' weapons of the primitive northern hordes. He looked through the long perspective of the ages on the two societies, Hellenic and barbarian, with eyes made wise by their after-history. He tells us of the impression that our wild Celtic forefathers made on the Grecian wanderers; but not as one of the Greeks might have told it, for he sweeps aside the fabulous and grotesque stories of the Androphagi and Arimaspeæ. His is the poet's version, and the society he depicts is the far-off ancestor of his own Wolfings and Daylings and their neighbouring clans. There is something very powerful in the conception of this band of the most famous men in Greek legend dragging their huge black ship through frozen regions, oppressed by the strange silence of the icebound landscape, and longing for the tumbling seas and stinging salt wind. By a masterly device Morris increases its impressiveness. He describes the changing scenery of the lands through which they pass, but he never once mentions the name of the region or of any outstanding physical feature. Thus the reader is identified with the wanderers, who were journeying through unknown lands guided on their course by the messenger of the

gods; whilst, on the other hand, he recognises long-familiar places under the veil of mystery and uncertainty which hid them from the Argonauts. Apollonius liked his local references to appeal to those learned in antiquities; Morris preferred to clothe the known with strangeness and indefiniteness.

But were the *Argonautica* a mere monument of antiquarian zeal, it would never have enjoyed the praise of Longinus, Virgil, or Milton; and modern critics have not quarrelled with its high reputation.¹ The epic has other merits, its greatest, as Mr. Andrew Lang pointed out, being that it is 'an original . . . and modern telling of a love story, the first known in literature . . . pure, passionate, and tender.' Yet Morris has contrived to refine and idealise still further the 'love story' of the *Argonautica*, and he does so by departing from the Greek poet's conception of Jason and Medea. In Morris, these two characters alone are prominent, and the others are carefully subordinated to them. In Apollonius, the Argonauts do more than play 'a shadowy third.' They are full of vigorous life;² they brawl and quarrel freely, and often yield a very grudging obedience to Jason. Several of them are sharply defined, and contribute largely by their counsels and initiative to the success of the expedition. Morris, on the other hand, makes his heroes vague and almost indistinguishable. Orpheus sings, Tiphys

¹ Preface to Havell's translation of Longinus, *De Subl.*, p. xxx.

² *Argon.*, i. 1290.

steers, Atalanta hunts; but the others hope, and feast, and toil, in a body, they are only the means by which the *Argo* is either rowed or dragged across country.

Again, Pelias and Æetes are faintly outlined; the interest is centred on Jason. He stands out, a head and shoulders above his fellows, as the ideal leader who inspires all with courage and breasts the danger first himself. His prototype in the *Argonautica* is often hard put to it to retain a divided authority. The heroes would obviously have preferred Hercules as their leader, and indignantly accuse Jason of having got rid of him out of jealousy.¹ When unforeseen difficulties arise, Jason retires to the prow to be melancholy and utter dispiriting remarks, till pricked into action by the gibes of his crew.² He is both cowardly and scheming; he deserts Hypsipyle, deliberately trades on Medea's love, and assassinates her brother, though at her own instigation.³

The hero of the English poem is different; in his early career he has something in common with a pale Tennysonian knight and a 'pious Æneas.' Like Æneas, he is under the protection of a goddess, of whose will he is the instrument; and, since his actions do not wholly spring from his own impulses, he lacks human interest. When Juno ceases to watch over him, his character degenerates, but he is more convincingly human in his struggle between the remembrance of Medea's service to him and Glauce's fresher beauty, than

¹ *Argon.*, i. 341.

² *Ibid.*, iii.

³ *Ibid.*, iv. 465.

at any other time in his career.¹ Generally he is merely handsome, graceful of speech, and fortunate, but he cannot be said to have fully answered Pope's humorous inquiry—whether the hero of an epic must be an honest man or not. Medea, too, is altered in her modern dress. The wild-cat fierceness of her nature is subdued almost to gentleness, she is not outwardly so passionate, but her love for Jason is not less strong nor her anger less to be feared.

Apollonius makes the plot of his epic much more intricate than Morris does. The sons of Phryxus, rescued by the Argonauts and taken back to Colchis, intrigue with their mother, Æetes' sister, to secure Medea's services. Juno applies to Venus to make the Colchian princess fall in love with Jason, and sends Cupid to wound her heart with his fatal arrow. Jason is privy to this scheme and approves of it, and the Argonauts interest themselves to arrange a propitious meeting between their leader and Medea.

Morris sweeps all this intriguing aside. Love, mutually conceived, disinterested, and at first sight, is the hinge upon which his story turns, and to it all other interests are subdued. He abandons the time-honoured convention of the love-god's bolt; he could not, like Chaucer,² treat the matter with sly humour, and the lines which describe the first meeting of Jason and Medea are full of the spirit of modern romance:

¹ *Jason*, xvii.

² Cf. *Troilus and Criseyde*, i. 206 foll.

But while she spoke
 Came Love unseen and cast his golden yoke
 About them both, and sweeter her voice grew
 And softer ever, as betwixt them flew
 With fluttering wings, the new-born strong desires.

Morris adopts the Coleridgian saying that all passions 'minister to Love,' and his Medea risks every natural tie to win the Golden Fleece for her lover. The bitter conflict of feelings,¹ which tore her before she resolved to betray her father to save Jason, is not mentioned; with her, as with Pharamond, 'love is enough.' Unlike the Greek Medea, she does not exact an oath from Jason that he will not leave her to her father's wrath; when he, of his own initiative, offers to swear, she answers, with supreme self-surrender:

Wert thou more fickle than the restless sea,
 Still would I love thee, knowing thee for such.

Apollonius, though he wrote the first modern love-poem, did not venture to such heights as these; but the words of Medea might easily have been uttered by the Grisilde or Custance of Morris's master.

Morris was at pains to soften other aspects of Medea's character. The episode of the murder of Absyrtus, in which she is fabled to have played a monstrous part, is so skilfully doctored by him, that both Medea and Jason are in some sort justified in their action. To have portrayed, unaltered, the Medea of Greek legend, Morris would have needed the gloomy

¹ Cf. *Argon.*, iii. 1149, 745.

power of a Webster. When he wrote *The Life and Death of Jason* he was still in his 'Palace of Art' days and would not admit savage wrong and crime into the dreamy atmosphere of his poem. Had he studied the Icelandic sagas a few years sooner than he actually did, Brynhild or Gudrun might have served as models for Medea.

When Jason has secured the Golden Fleece and he and Medea have regained the *Argo*, Morris ceases to refer to Apollonius. The parts of *Jason* which are most indebted to him are the incidents of the outward journey and the hero's victory over the earth-born and the bulls of Æetes. Here there are one or two verbal echoes, a phenomenon which is rare in Morris. Thus Jason is described as standing

As the stor
 When wind

The earth-born in
 fall

ἢ δρῦες, ἀστ'

A few lines further

Forgot indeed

The phrase in Apollonius

μνήσατο Μηδεί

¹ *Jason*, viii. 293.

² *Argon.*, iii. 1363 (cf. also)

(1)
 (Like)
 As the ground and rocks,
 [when] they are blown
 and shaken by the wind

(2)
 In Jason's account the
 the suggestion of the
 subtle/crafty Medea

For the homeward journey of the *Argo*, Morris, as we have indicated, consulted no original; for the murder of Pelias he could turn to Ovid's account of that incident. In this version the old king allows his nephew to land, and Medea, after deceiving the three tall daughters, herself kills Pelias by the device related by Morris. But the sorceress's secret mission, her change of form, and the strange mystery in which it is shrouded are pure inventions of Morris's imagination, which loved to play over the border line of fact in the magic world of unreality.

For this reason, perhaps, the romantic adventures of Medea's youth, her midnight worship of Hecate, and the nights when she stood bare-headed on the *Argo's* prow swinging her glowing censer and swaying with the lurch of the vessel, appealed to Morris more nearly than the violent and tragic events which are the theme of Euripides' drama. He does not make his Medea rage in fury against her husband and call him accursed before gods and men. Sublime tragic emotion gives place, in the English poem, to a more tranquil, if bitter, regret, full of misery and piteousness. The murder of the children is veiled over, and we are spared the awful sound of their outcry heard from within. The same treatment is accorded to the wonderful passage in Euripides where the messenger relates the death of Glauce and her father. It is noticeable that Morris's Jason is throughout conscious of his sorry ingratitude to the Colchian queen, and

makes no effort to justify his conduct. Jason, in the *Medea*, carefully points out the material prosperity which will accrue to both if he marries Glauce, and deems Medea unreasonable because she resents the plea. Only the social conditions of Greek life would admit of such a situation, and Morris felt himself in nowise bound to reproduce it; his tendency was rather to interpret the classic legend in terms of mediæval life. The towns in *The Life and Death of Jason* have spires and shifting vanes and doubtless 'good red roofs,' as when 'The Sword Went Out to Sea.' The halls are strewn with rushes, and ladies lean over velvet-hung windows to watch the procession of heroes who wear their favours in their helmets. Jason undertakes to fulfil Æetes' hard conditions like a very belted knight. 'He drank and swore for naught to leave that quest.' He enters 'the lists' with ungloved hands, whilst Medea sits in the gallery to view the contest, just as Emily did that of Palamon and Arcite. There could hardly be a happier hunting-ground for anachronisms than this poem, which tells of events that took place when Achilles was still a child in Cheiron's care.

The similes that spring to Morris's mind prove how habitually he lived in the Middle Ages. That in the eleventh book—

And scarcely less
They joyed than he who, lying all helpless
In dreary prison, sees his door ope wide
And half forgotten friends stand by his side—

reminds one of his own 'Good Knight in Prison.' The very diction and phrasing, which seem to have been his natural means of poetic expression, have an archaic ring and produce the effect of a delicately mannered unmodern style. 'But if he wished the Stygian flood to know' or 'did due observance to her body white' might easily occur in Chaucer; whilst the frequent use of 'gan,' 'scape,' and obsolete forms such as 'clomb' or 'bursten' point to the influences in which he was steeped. But the mediævalism of a modern poet must necessarily be eclectic, since it is the product not only of an instinctive attraction but of trained taste and culture. The glaring incongruities which resulted when the Middle Ages grafted their mode of life and thought on that of Greece and Rome, would, if faithfully reproduced, hurt our sense of fitness and decorum; and had Morris been living when Gower wrote he would hardly have escaped from mixing up pagan and Christian ritual in the oddest manner.¹ He would have felt called upon to sermonise or to extract an ingenious moral from the story, wherein the pursuit of the Golden Fleece would probably symbolise the soul's endeavour to obtain some spiritual height. Morris's mediævalism did not lead him to such a pitch of realism; nor, on the other hand, did he aim at reproducing that mystical and sensuous note in mediæval religious love-poetry which few modern poets except Rossetti and

¹ Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, v. 3416, where Jason appeals for help to St. John.

Francis Thompson have managed to recapture. The gods and goddesses in *Jason* are of pure classic breeding, and are worshipped, on all hands, with reverence and perfect credence. They are stately and gracious figures, Vergilian in type, and are personally interested in mortals whose crimes they punish and whose too great prosperity they check. But in his treatment of the supernatural element in Medea's witchcraft Morris departs from wholly classic traditions. Only the beautiful and poetic aspect of the Black Art is shown. The time-honoured flight of Medea through mid-air in a chariot harnessed with dragons was too crude an effect for modern taste, though ancient and mediæval hearers would have relished it. Similarly the ingredients of Medea's cauldron are not 'the fat of unbaptised brat,' 'the juice of toad,' 'the oil of adder' and other gruesome and unhallowed things. She deals with mystic herbs and unknown grains, and a phial wrought of fine gold holds the pale green liquor she distils, whose scent is like the odours that

o'er some poisonous valley blow
Where nought but dull-scaled twining serpents grow.

Morris is here working by suggestion and describing by similes; his magic is allied to that of *Lamia* and is occasionally reminiscent of *The Ancient Mariner*, and of his own tales of wonder written at the beginning and at the close of his literary career.

With so much that is modern and so much

that is mediæval, it may seem that Morris had caught nothing of the spirit of the literature whose legend he was re-telling. It has been indicated that his attitude towards the deities was that of classic writers, but his poem betrays a closer spiritual affinity than this. The delicate brooding melancholy, which is close to the surface in much that he wrote at this time, is a true echo of the darker side of the Hellenic temperament. It is everywhere perceptible in *Jason*, inspiring the lyrics of Orpheus and disturbing the very happiness of love. One instance of this instinctive sympathy with Greek melancholy is startling. Pindar, in one of his Olympian Odes, wrote 'For as much as man must die, wherefore should one sit vainly in the dark, through a dull and nameless age, without lot in noble deeds.' In *Jason* (Bk. iv.) the Lemnian prince promises to go with the Argonauts, adding,

neither have I will
To wait again for ruin, sitting still
Among such gifts as grudging fate will give
Even at longest, only while I live.

H. SYBIL KERMODE.

THE FIRST MORRIS

I

MORRIS's first book begins with a 'But'—

But knowing now that they would have her speak—

and the odd, abrupt jerk of the epithet might have been the soft jar of a delicate lever—disturbing the 'values' of poetry—altering its relations—twitching into a new, sharper perspective the lines of the country into which, through the lattice of letters, the mind of the reader had been accustomed to peer. Now, for a little, the atmosphere of earth ebbs away; and across the drained emptiness the colours leap upon the senses with the parched, uncanny emphasis of dream. It is the brittle atmosphere of fever, prismatic but awry: distance is abolished, details loom relentlessly, little noises, unnoticed before—sighs, rustlings, the tapping of a pulse, the involuntary whisperings of loosened hair—waxing and swelling until their beating fills the brain:

—let the clock tick, tick
To my unhappy pulse that beats right through
My eager body.'