

## William Morris and *Gesta Romanorum*

"When you are using an old story," Morris once observed, "read it through, then shut the book and write it in your own way." This was his practice, especially to be seen in the composition of the medieval tales in *The Earthly Paradise*. What happens after he has "shut the book"? He seizes upon certain features of the story, often from several versions of a traditional tale, and proceeds in his craftsman's style to shape it to his liking. He omits an episode or a character, shifts the emphasis by small and apparently unimportant details of description, alters the tone and structural rhythm by addition and excision. He decorates: his decoration, unlike Tennyson's, is always pictorial, and devoted to intensifying a mood; it is never verbal virtuosity, never allegorical. His daughter recalls his saying, "You know, my dear, Wordsworth's primrose by the river's brim is quite good enough for me in itself; what on earth more did the man want it to be?"<sup>1</sup> The same might have been said of his respect for the intrinsic qualities of the folk tales he retold.

And yet he did make the tales his own. The dreamlike and almost monochromatic atmosphere of beauty and melancholy with which he invests his stories resulted chiefly from Morris's special characteristics of technique and feeling. His technique substitutes the picture for the action, the mood for the passion; his cast of feeling leads him to insist (in Pater's phrase) on the desire of beauty quickened by the sense of death. These are the limitations—their possibly biographical origin need not concern us here—through which Morris achieved his own triumph in *The Earthly Paradise*. Nowhere are they more characteristically evident than in the three tales derived from *Gesta Romanorum*.

Morris's first acquaintance with this important medieval collection of tales (which he listed, along with *The Thousand and One Nights*, as one of his "bibles")<sup>2</sup> was made through a French version, *Le Violier des Histoires Romaines*, edited by G. Brunet for the "Bibliothèque Elzevirienne" in 1858. This was an edition of the earliest French translation of *Gesta Romanorum*, which had first been printed in 1521 after circulating for some years in manu-

<sup>1</sup> May Morris, *William Morris, Artist, Writer, Socialist* (Oxford, 1936), I, 430.

<sup>2</sup> "The Hundred Best Books," *Pall Mall Budget*, 4 Feb. 1886, p. 6.

script.<sup>3</sup> Somewhat later he acquired the handsome volume edited for the Roxburghe Club by Sir Frederic Madden in 1838.<sup>4</sup> Both Brunet and Madden included a good deal of critical annotation in their editions, making it possible for Morris to take advantage of the early scholarship on the subject. Both editors cited parallels and analogues for each tale, with references to much medieval lore as illustrative material. Morris followed such references with absorbed interest, and could later describe himself without presumption as "fairly steeped in medievalism generally."<sup>5</sup> It was most fitting that the first three tales told in the framework of *The Earthly Paradise* by the Wanderers, who brought with them to the nameless colony of Greek survivors in a distant sea the traditions of fourteenth-century Europe, should be adapted from *Gesta Romanorum*, one of the richest treasuries of medieval narrative.

Compiled in the early fourteenth century and variously attributed to monks in England, France, and Germany, *Gesta Romanorum* was enormously popular: the standard edition of the Latin version records 111 manuscripts in Latin and 30 in vernacular translations.<sup>6</sup> The collection takes the form of Roman history, in which each story is assigned to an Emperor who is usually the hero of the piece. But there is of course no trace of historical accuracy in *Gesta Romanorum*. The chronology is wildly confused: in Tale 59 of the French version, for example, Socrates, Alexander the Great, and the Emperor Claudius are represented as contemporaries. To make these pleasant stories respectably edifying, the compilers attached a moral to each, often in terms of far-fetched allegory only remotely related to the events of the tale. The stories, derived from historical chronicles, lives of the saints, oriental tales, and earlier compilations of fiction, were widely used by preachers and homilists; they were also much read, as the state of the manuscripts shows, for entertainment. Thus the Wanderer who tells the first of the medieval tales in *The Earthly Paradise* introduces it as the sort of story told "about the yule-tide fire"; it is based directly on *Gesta Romanorum*.

#### I. "The Man Born to be King"

The tale of "The Man Born to be King" as Morris found it is a composite elaboration of several related stories which have all been traced to a Sanskrit original, the widely disseminated tale of the child of fortune who carries a

<sup>3</sup> See Brunet's introduction to the *Violier*, pp. xxi-xxii.

<sup>4</sup> *The Old English Versions of the Gesta Romanorum, Edited for the First Time from Manuscripts in the British Museum and University Library, Cambridge*. With an Introduction and Notes by Sir Frederic Madden. Printed for the Roxburghe Club. London, 1838. Madden, head of the Department of Manuscripts at the British Museum, 1837-1866, is best known for his "discovery" of *Sir Gawayne and the Grene Knight*.

<sup>5</sup> J. W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris* (London, 1922), I, 203.

<sup>6</sup> H. Oesterley, ed., *Gesta Romanorum* (Berlin, 1872), pp. 5-8.

letter ordering his death, but triumphs in the end.<sup>7</sup> It is perhaps the finest example in *The Earthly Paradise* of Morris's ability to select such characters and incidents as could be worked into a well-knit narrative, and of his ability to invent characters and incidents of his own. This invention is always, as I have said, supplementary and subordinate to the derived plot and to the created mood.

Morris encountered the story in the *Violier*, Chapter XX, with the title "De Tribulacion et Misere." Madden prints the tale twice: it is Tale 48 in the Harleian MS. 7333 and Tale 29 in the second version (Add. MS. 9066). In the Lombardic chronicles attached to the history of St. Palagyan (Pelagius) in the *Legenda Aurea* (which Morris was later to print at the Kelmscott Press), this tale of fortune's child appears in a form almost identical with that of the *Violier*, and was probably borrowed directly from this well known collection of Jacobus de Voragine. The French and English forms of *Gesta Romanorum*, which differ in some respects, were Morris's source for a good part of "The Man Born to be King."

In the *Violier* the Emperor Conrad, benighted on a hunting expedition, seeks lodging at the sylvan home of Count Leopold, who had fled from the court some years before to escape the Emperor's anger. Conrad is received and served by Leopold's wife, "qui estoit preste de faire son enfant." During the night the child is born; the Emperor's rest is disturbed by a mysterious voice which thrice cries "Take!" then "Yield!" and finally "Flee! for the child that is just born shall be thy son-in-law!" On the following day Conrad orders his servants to kill the child and bring him its heart. They take pity on it and leave it in a tree, presenting the Emperor with a hare's heart, satisfying him that the child is dead. A nobleman finds the boy and adopts him; his beauty and cleverness later attract Conrad's notice, and he suspects that this may be Leopold's son. He sends the youth to his queen with a letter instructing her to have the bearer killed. But the boy (as in all versions of the story) falls asleep on the way. The cruel command is altered by a priest, who substitutes the words "Donne nostre fille le plus tost que tu pourras à ce bel enfant."<sup>8</sup> The queen obeys; the marriage is celebrated, and Conrad, when he hears the news, submits to fate and accepts the boy as son and heir.

The English version, entitled "Dolfinus A Wise Emperoure," differs in two important respects from the *Violier*. The monarch Dolfinus seeks shelter at the cottage of a forester, whose son, the child of fortune, is thus lowly born. Again, the motivation is more carefully indicated in the English version. The

<sup>7</sup> For an exhaustive study of this motif in folklore, see J. Schick, *Das Glückskind mit dem Todesbrief* (Leipzig, 1912-1932); see also "The Miller's Son; or, Destiny" in W. A. Clouston, *Popular Tales, Their Migrations and Transformations* (London, 1887), pp. 458-466.

<sup>8</sup> *Violier*, p. 67.

Emperor examines the new-born boy and notices a mark on his forehead, by which he later identifies the youth and sends him, not on suspicion alone, to be killed. In other respects Madden's *Gesta* and the *Violier* generally agree.

Two other sources known to Morris may be indicated here. The most important is "Li Contes dou Roi Coustant L'Empereur," the first of five tales published by Moland and D'Héricault in the "Bibliothèque Elzevirienne" in 1856.<sup>9</sup> Morris's literary associations with this book were long and fruitful. He first read it, as we learn from a letter of Swinburne's, while engaged in the decoration of the Union at Oxford. Two of the tales were used in the composition of *The Earthly Paradise*: that of Coustant, in "The Man Born to be King," and "Li Amitez de Ami et Amile," which was completed as "Amys and Amillion" but is now lost. Later Morris translated four of the tales into prose and printed them at the Kelmscott Press in 1896 as *Old French Romances Done into English by William Morris*.<sup>10</sup>

"Li Contes dou Roi Coustant L'Empereur" was first printed by Moland and D'Héricault from a manuscript of the thirteenth century.<sup>11</sup> It purports to be the history of the birth and nurture of the Emperor Constantine, and to explain the origin of his name. The tale contains the requisite elements of the *Glücks-kind* category: the prophecy, the Emperor's attempt to frustrate it, the *Todesbrief*, and the final triumph of the child of fortune. Muselin, last of the pagan monarchs, passes a house in Byzantium where a woman is in labor; her husband, a Christian, foretells to the Emperor that her son will marry the princess, born shortly before. The Emperor sends a knight to fetch the boy, wounds him, and orders that he be thrown into the sea. Instead he is left by the tender-hearted knight at the gate of an abbey, where the monks care for him. His wound is so difficult to cure that the monks are somewhat shocked by the physician's fee: *et après fist li abes l'enfant batisier, et li mist à nom Coustant, pour çou k'il sanbloit k'il coustoit trop au garir*.<sup>12</sup> After fifteen years the abbot introduces the boy to Muselin, who recognizes him by his great scar and takes him into his service. Coustant is sent to Byzantium with the letter of death; he falls asleep in the palace garden, where the princess, admiring his beauty, changes the letter. The marriage takes place, and Muselin makes Coustant his heir, to become the first Christian emperor.

One further form of this story contributed to Morris's poem. In Benjamin Thorpe's *Yultide Stories, A Collection of Scandinavian and North German Popular Tales and Traditions* (London, 1853), which also furnished the chief source for "The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon," Morris found

<sup>9</sup> L. Moland and C. D'Héricault, eds., *Nouvelles Françaises en Prose du XIIIe Siècle* (Paris, 1856).

<sup>10</sup> Mackail, *op. cit.*, II, 297-298.

<sup>11</sup> See *Catalogue Générale des Manuscrits Français* (Paris, 1902), II, 358.

<sup>12</sup> *Nouvelles Françaises*, p. 11.

a northern variant of the tale, entitled "Rich Peter the Huckster."<sup>13</sup> In this version the child of fortune is destined to marry the rich huckster's daughter. To prevent the fulfilment of the prophecy Peter places the child in a chest and sends it floating down a river, where it is found and adopted by a miller. Later the boy is found by Peter, sent off with the usual letter, and falls asleep on the way; the letter is changed by some robbers. Instead of ending happily at this point, however, the tale continues with the exploits required of the youth in order to keep his bride and inheritance. The same tale, with the father-in-law-villain a king, appeared in the Grimms' *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* as "Der Teufel mit den drei goldenen Haaren."<sup>14</sup>

Morris was introduced to Thorpe's collection at Oxford, where he also read the same scholar's *Northern Mythology*. His devotion to the famous collection of the brothers Grimm was especially strong: he later listed "Collections of Folk Tales, headed by Grimm and the Norse ones," as among his "bibles."<sup>15</sup> The closely related versions of the story in Grimm and Thorpe should, I think, be regarded as direct sources for "The Man Born to be King."

Four distinct bodies of material—two versions of *Gesta Romanorum*, the tale of Coustant, and the Germanic versions of Thorpe and Grimm—were thus the stuff with which Morris worked in shaping the first of the Wanderers' tales. His selection of incident is directed toward the characteristic effect in Morris's narrative verse, a series of framed tableaux which have often suggested the comparison of his work in this *genre* to the weaving of tapestry. At the same time he draws from each source the elements which form a closely knit tale. The sense of fate is the unifying thread in this story: Morris's argument indicates it at the start:

It was foretold to a great king, that he who should reign after him should be low-born and poor; which thing came to pass in the end, for all that the king could do.

Muselin, in the tale of Coustant, is skilled in astrology, and is able to confirm predictions:

Il savoit asés d'une siense c'on apielle astrenomie, et si sot dou cors des estoilles, des planètes et da la lune; si veoit bien ès estoilles pluseurs miervalles. . . . Il savoit molt d'ars et de conjuremens.<sup>16</sup>

So Morris's king is king of sages and patron of astrologers. The prophecy is

<sup>13</sup> *Yuletide Stories*, pp. 315-324. Thorpe's translation is from P. Asbjørnsen and J. Moe, *Norske Folkeeventyr* (Christiania, 1850).

<sup>14</sup> Grimm, no. 29. For originals and analogues see J. Bolte and G. Polivka, *Anmerkungen zu den Kinder- und Hausmärchen der Brüder Grimm* (Leipzig, 1918).

<sup>15</sup> *Pall Mall Budget*, 4 Feb. 1886, p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> *Nouvelles*, pp. 4-5.

made by an unknown man, who disappears after making his prediction. This incident follows the tale of Coustant, in which the prophet is a learned clerk, versed in the art of divination. Morris's first picture, the interview between the king and the little wizened soothsayer with deep-set glittering eyes, in a close shaded by gray-leaved olive trees, opens the tale with a sense of inescapable fate. The Wanderer who tells the story gives the key-note in the last line of his preamble, "Hearken a tale of conquering destiny."

The next incidents are found only in the English *Gesta Romanorum*. The king passes the night at the cottage of a poor forester; the heightened effect of deriving the destined heir from lowly parents, as in the English *Gesta*, rather than from a fugitive nobleman, as in the *Violier*, was not lost on Morris. The king's dreams, the mysterious voices crying "Take" and "Give up," are related to the prophecy by the appearance of the wizened sage in the last of the three dreams; he makes his prediction again and vanishes with a mocking smile.

In the king's first attempt to dispose of the boy fated to succeed him, Morris followed the versions in Grimm and Thorpe. In both these tales the child is bought with gold and set afloat in a box, in which he drifts to a mill and is adopted by the miller. In Morris's poem, as in Grimm and Thorpe, the king visits the mill after the boy is grown, learns his identity from the miller's account, and takes him away under pretense of enlisting him in courtly service.

At this point Morris introduces an episode partly original and partly based on the tale of Coustant. The anonymous chevalier in the French tale becomes the wicked squire Samuel, who is commanded to murder Michael (Morris's name for the child of fortune).<sup>17</sup> The squire bungles his task: frightened by the ghostly ringing of the little bell which monks carry when they bear the Host to some dying Christian, he leaves the boy with a knife plunged into his side. The monks, as in the *nouvelle*, heal and adopt him, and eventually take him to court, where the king identifies him on recognizing Samuel's knife. Morris again follows the tale of Coustant in the final episode by having the princess herself change the death-letter, instead of acting as the mere puppet of the other versions.

The composite derivation of "The Man Born to be King" heightens the dramatic quality of the tale by giving it a three-act structure. The triple recurrence of the king's efforts to frustrate destiny emphasizes the relentless force which he is opposing. Three times he has the child in his power: once, as in Grimm, he sets it floating down a stream; again, as in the *nouvelle*, he leaves

<sup>17</sup> Several Ethiopian versions of the tale (J. Schick, *op. cit.*, I, 338ff.) relate the incidents to the Archangel Michael. Morris's name for the boy is apparently a coincidence: see Joseph Jacobs' introduction to Morris's prose translation in *Old French Romances* (London, 1896), pp. xiii-xiv.

it wounded and dying; finally, as in all forms of this tale, he sends the youth off with the death-letter. This triple structure, effected by a combination of sources, is Morris's own.

His additions fill out the barely sketched characters of the originals, often (as we have said) in the direction of subdued melancholy. For example, the miller in Thorpe's version sells the boy readily for six hundred dollars, a purely business transaction. Morris's miller lets Michael go for the boy's own good, and the miller's wife shows rough pathos in her farewell:

For that I have been glad  
By means of thee this many a day,  
My mourning heart this hour doth pay.

Again, in *Gesta Romanorum* and the other versions the king accepts the *fait accompli* of his daughter's marriage at the end of the tale somewhat stoically. Morris's king regrets his attempts to fight against fate, and the sacrifice of happiness his anxiety had brought. He could have been happy:

But now—but now, my days wax dim,  
And all this fairness have I tossed  
Unto the winds, and all have lost  
For nought, for nought! yet will I strive  
My little end of life to live;  
Nor will I look behind me more,  
Nor forward to the doubtful shore.

Here a modern regret and disillusionment color the simple outlines of Morris's medieval sources.

His additions are also decorative and pictorial. There are passages of hard and accurate rendering in the Pre-Raphaelite manner, as in the description of the forester's hut on the morning after Michael's birth:

On straw the poor dead woman lay;  
The door alone let in the day,  
Showing the trodden earthen floor,  
A board on trestles weak and poor,  
Three stumps of tree for stool or chair,  
A half-glazed pipkin, nothing fair,  
A bowl of porridge by the wife,  
Untouched by lips that lacked for life,  
A platter and a bowl of wood;  
And in the further corner stood  
A bow cut from the wych-elm tree,  
A holly club, and arrows three  
Ill-pointed, heavy, spliced with thread.

In a more flowing and brightly-colored style are passages such as the account of Michael's journey to the valley of the Castle of the Rose. In such descriptions Morris's passion for "the pleasure of the eyes" is pre-eminently justified. The work has, as Pater remarked in his review of *The Earthly Paradise*, "the loveliness of things newly washed in fresh water."<sup>18</sup>

## II. "The Proud King"

In the second of the tales told by the Wanderers, Morris follows *Gesta Romanorum* through all the incidents of the plot. The story of Jovinian's pride and of his miraculous punishment was widely known from the thirteenth century. Chaucer's egregious friar in "The Somnours Tale" uses the example of Jovinian in chiding a reluctant donor. Those that "swimmen in possessioun," he says,

Me thinketh they ben lyk Jovinian,  
Fat as a whal, and walkinge as a swan.

The adventures of Robert, King of Sicily, a closely related form of this tale of the cure of pride, were the subject of an English metrical romance of the fourteenth century. A miracle play, now lost, entitled *Kynge Robert of Cicyle*, was acted at Lincoln in 1453 and at Chester in 1529. Later Leigh Hunt published a prose version of the story (1848), and Longfellow's verse rendering appeared as "The Sicilian's Tale" in *Tales of a Wayside Inn*, 1863. In these tales King Robert, while attending mass, ridicules the passage in the Magnificat,

Deposuit potentes de sede,  
Et exaltavit humiles.

Thereupon he falls asleep, and on waking is changed beyond recognition; an angel takes his place on the throne, and forces the king to serve as fool for two years. Only after he has truly repented of his pride is Robert allowed to resume his reign.

The tale of Jovinian, like the tale of Robert, is ultimately derived from oriental sources.<sup>19</sup> The version in *Gesta Romanorum* was versified by Hans Sachs in 1549; it was also used as the plot of a French play, "Moralité de l'orgueil et presumption de l'empereur Jovinien," now lost, which was printed in 1584.<sup>20</sup> Finally a rendering of the story from *Gesta Romanorum* into somewhat awkward Spenserian stanzas, "Jovinian the Proud," was published in

<sup>18</sup> "Poems by William Morris," *Westminster Review*, XC (Oct. 1868), 309.

<sup>19</sup> See H. Varnhagen, *Ein indisches Märchen auf seiner Wanderung durch die asiatischen und europäischen Litteraturen* (Berlin, 1882).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28; *Violier*, p. 136n.



1847, attributed by Halkett and Laing to Leigh Hunt and Thomas Powell. I have mentioned only those treatments of the tale which appeared before *The Earthly Paradise* was published, sufficient to show that here, as in "The Man Born to be King," Morris was following one of the most widely known of European stories in writing his poem on Jovinian.

"The Proud King," however, is not a composite tale. Except for one dramatic change, possibly derived from the story of Robert of Sicily, Morris's version is taken directly from *Gesta Romanorum*. Madden printed two English translations from British Museum manuscripts in his collection: Tale 23 from Harleian MS. 7333, and Tale 1 from Add. MS. 9066. The two manuscripts show no significant variation in plot. The French translation, "Du peché d'orgueil, et comment les orgueilleux souvent parviennent à humilité," is Chapter LVII in the *Violier*; it agrees point for point with the English *Gesta*.<sup>21</sup>

Jovinian is Emperor of Rome—there was of course no historical emperor so called, and Morris sets his story "in a far country that I cannot name"—rich, powerful, and haughty. In the words of the English *Gesta*, "Hit happit that he thoughte in a night, as he lay in his bed, whethir ther be any God withoute me?" On the following day, hot and tired after hunting, Jovinian bathes in a brook, and an angel steals his clothes and horse. Jovinian first seeks aid at the house of one of his knights, but the porter is naturally suspicious of the naked stranger and the knight fails to recognize his sovereign. Flogged, imprisoned, and finally banished for lese majesty, Jovinian at last succeeds in getting admission to the palace. But he is still unrecognized; a mysterious stranger reigns in his place, accepted by the Empress and by the court, and Jovinian is dragged through the town at a horse's tail as an example to impostors. Still filled with outraged pride, he next demands aid of a hermit, his confessor. The holy man spurns him as a devil in human form. This last rebuff brings him at length to his senses; he repents, and the hermit, recognizing him, hears his confession. When Jovinian returns to the palace, the courtiers and even the Empress are unable to decide which is the true Emperor. The heavenly impostor now announces that he is Jovinian's good angel, and has tamed the monarch's pride for his soul's salvation. The angel disappears, and Jovinian reigns more humbly henceforward.

In this dramatic sermon against the worst of the seven deadly sins, "wherein the fable is excellent," as Emerson wrote, "and the story fits this and all times,"<sup>22</sup> Morris makes only such changes as fill out the bare outline of *Gesta Romanorum*. He introduces variety into his account of the three rebuffs which Jovinian suffers, at the hands of the knight, a powerful duke, and the courtiers

<sup>21</sup> Madden, *op. cit.*, pp. 66-73, 269-277; *Violier*, pp. 135-136.

<sup>22</sup> *The Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston, 1914), X, 246.

at the palace. The scene at the knight's gate is thus treated in the English version:

He yede to the knyghtis hous, and knockede atte the yate; and the porter asked of him what he wolde. Then he seid, "Let me yn, withoute lenger delay; for I am your Emperour." Then anon the porter openyd the yatis; and when he saw him nakede, he seid to him, "What art thou?" "Your Emperoure," quod he. "Thou liest," quod the porter, "and therefore thou seist that thou art Emperour, thou shalt appere afore my lorde."<sup>23</sup>

Morris relieves the passage with a wry irony which is the nearest thing to humor in *The Earthly Paradise*. The porter peeps through the wicket at the naked king:

"What dost thou, friend, to show us all thine hide?

We list not buy today or flesh or fell;  
Go home and get thyself a shirt at least,  
If thou wouldst aught, for saith our vicar well,  
That God hath given clothes even to the beast."  
Therewith he turned to go, but as he ceased  
The king cried out, "Open, O foolish man!  
I am thy lord and king, Jovinian;

Go now and tell thy master I am here  
Desiring food and clothes, and in this plight,  
And then hereafter need'st thou have no fear,  
Because thou didst not know me at first sight."  
"Yea, yea, I am but dreaming in the night,"  
The carle said, "and I bid thee, friend, to dream,  
Come through! here is no gate, it doth but seem."

Instead of repeating the scene of the suspicious porter, as the sources do, Morris shifts Jovinian's next rebuff to the roadside, where the unhappy monarch claims the loyalty of a duke whom he has loaded with honors. In *Gesta Romanorum* the nobleman treats Jovinian with harsh cruelty, commanding as follows:

"Pourtant que tu usurpes et appropries à ton tiltre le nom d'empereur, qui est cas de lèze-majesté, tu seras mys en prisons au pain et à l'eaue." Ainsi fut il fait. Il fut en prison, de pain et d'eaue substanté, puis fut tyré, batu, flagellé et banny de toute la terre.<sup>24</sup>

Morris transfers the emphasis, with heightened effect, from physical suffering to humiliation, anguish of the mind. The duke, instead of having Jovinian whipped, merely tosses him a coin stamped with the wretched king's own likeness.

A dramatic change introduced at the end of the poem was apparently

<sup>23</sup> Madden, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

<sup>24</sup> Violier, p. 139.

adopted by Morris from the tale of Robert of Sicily. In *Gesta Romanorum* the angel reveals his device to the whole court:

"Doncques," dist l'empereur putatif, "escoutez: cestuy pour vray est l'empereur vostre seigneur. Il estoit mys en orgueil pour son honorificence, par quoy Dieu l'a flagellé en luy ostant la notice des hommes jusques à tant qu'il ayt faict penitence. Je suis son bon ange, garde de son empire tant qu'il a esté en estat de penitence vertueuse, qui jà est accomplie; soyez à luy obeissant, car c'est vostre droict seigneur." Et cela dit, l'ange se disparut.<sup>25</sup>

This is a lesson to the courtiers, but somewhat irrelevant to the central character of the tale. In the story of Robert, the reinstatement of the king after his humiliation is effected by miracle; nobody else knows of the change, and Robert himself confides the secret of his adventure to a chronicler just before his death, to be used as a lesson to his successors.<sup>26</sup> So in "The Proud King" the angelic substitute arranges Jovinian's return in such a way that no one, not even the queen, suspects the change. The king also resolves to leave his story to posterity:

Yea, lest I die ere night come, this same day  
Unto some scribe will I tell everything,  
That it may lie when I am gone away,  
Stored up within the archives of the king.

This concentrates the interest upon Jovinian himself, to the end of the tale. It is a judicious alteration of *Gesta Romanorum*.

By continually shifting the emphasis in his poem (which the Wanderer-narrator attributes to the monks at Peterborough, as a story told while the cathedral was being built) Morris fills out the skeleton of the *exemplum* with an emotional simplicity and integrity which produces a fine unity of effect. Jovinian emerges as a three-dimensional character—lifelike, one might almost say alive, but for the dreamlike atmosphere of *The Earthly Paradise*. As Morris remarked in his introductory "Apology," he proposed to "sing of names remembered, / Because they, living not, can ne'er be dead."

### III. "The Writing on the Image"

The third of the Wanderers' tales, "The Writing on the Image," said by its narrator to be taken from a book of "mystic lore," is also derived largely from *Gesta Romanorum*. It is the shortest and simplest of all the tales in *The Earthly Paradise*, and in it Morris follows his sources most closely. The tale appears as No. 3 in Madden's *Gesta*, with the title "Emperor Deoclicianus"; in the

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>26</sup> See Leigh Hunt's prose version in *A Jar of Honey from Mount Hybla* (London, 1848), p. 79.

*Violier*, Chapter XCVI, it is called "De la memoire de mort, et comment on ne se doit point delecter ès choses temporelles."<sup>27</sup>

The earliest known form of this short tale is included in William of Malmesbury's chronicle *De Gestis Regum Anglorum*, an early twelfth-century history which combined much lively anecdote with much authentic fact. Morris knew and admired the work, in J. A. Giles's edition of 1848. In his list of the most valuable books, mentioned above, which he contributed to the *Pall Mall Gazette*, Morris included William of Malmesbury along with "some half-dozen of the best Icelandic sagas," with this comment: "Uncritical or traditional history: almost all of these books are admirable pieces of tale-telling: some of them rise into the dignity of prose epics."<sup>28</sup>

In his chronicle (Book II, Chapter 10) William gives an account of the attempts of Pope John XV to restrain the presumptuous crimes of Ethelred, King of the English in the tenth century. The mention of the Pope easily distracts the historian from his subject: "it is better to dilate on such matters," he explains, "than to dwell on Ethelred's indolence and calamities." Hereupon he embarks on a long digression on the career of one Gerbert, who, born in Gaul and educated as a monk, learned the arts of sorcery and astrology from the Saracens, and finally became Pope by the assistance of the devil. He died horribly when Satan at length claimed his victim. Among Gerbert's exploits, as related by William, is an adventure with a mysterious statue inscribed "Percute hic." Gerbert interprets the inscription and marks the spot indicated by the shadow of the statue's outstretched hand at noon. Accompanied by a page he visits the place at night and opens the ground by magic. A splendid palace is revealed, filled with treasure and lighted by a brilliant carbuncle at which a young archer takes steady aim. The palace is inhabited by golden images, with a golden king and queen at table. William continues:

While the exquisite art of everything ravished the eyes of the spectators, there was nothing which might be handled though it might be seen: for immediately, if any one stretched forth his hand to touch anything, all these figures appeared to rush forward and repel such presumption. Alarmed at this, Gerbert repressed his inclination: but not so the servant. He endeavoured to snatch from off a table a knife of admirable workmanship; supposing that in a booty of such magnitude, so small a theft could hardly be discovered. In an instant, the figures all starting up with loud clamor, the boy let fly his arrow at the carbuncle, and in a moment all was in darkness; and if the servant had not, by the advice of his master, made the utmost dispatch in throwing back the knife, they would have

<sup>27</sup> Madden, *op. cit.*, pp. 8-9; *Violier*, pp. 249-251. On Morris's possible use of the Abbé Huc's *Voyage en Tartarie et Thibet* in composing this tale, see May Morris, *op. cit.*, I, 403-404.

<sup>28</sup> *Pall Mall Budget*, 4 Feb. 1886, p. 6.

both suffered severely. In this manner, their boundless avarice unsatisfied, they departed, the lantern directing their steps.<sup>29</sup>

This striking passage is the most probable source for the tale in *Gesta Romanorum*. The monastic compilers, who included a complete moralization with every tale, altered the conclusion for their own purposes. In the moral application, the image represents the devil; the clerk who explores the palace is any covetous man who sacrifices himself to the sin of avarice; the archer is death, the carbuncle is human life, and the treasures are worldly possessions. With such an interpretation, the hero cannot be allowed to escape. In Madden's *Gesta* the tale ends thus:

He sterte to the borde, and tooke a faire gilte cowpe, and put it up; and anone the man with the bow sheet to the charbunclestone, so soore, that it yede on sundre, and tho was all the light agone, and the hous was fulle of dorknesse. And whenne the clerke saw this, he wepte soore, for he wiste not how to passe out, for dorknesse; and therefore he dwelte ther stille, and ther he endyd his life.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to this grim conclusion, the author of the *Gesta* made some minor alterations in the tale. The hero is alone in his exploration of the enchanted palace. The archer bears an inscription on his brow (with allegorical intent): "Je suis qui suis, et aucun ne peult mon arc éviter, et mesmement ce charbon qui si fort reluyt." The English version omits this inscription, and makes no mention of the bewitched inhabitants of the palace; there is merely a passing reference to "so many riche iewelis and marvelous thingys that no tunge cowde telle."

In his treatment of the tale, Morris follows the French *Gesta* and William of Malmesbury. His short prose argument, which states that "a Scholar . . . discovered great marvels, but withal died miserably," is directly reminiscent of the conclusion in the *Violier*: "Le clerc . . . ainsi mourut au palais miserablement." Two significant changes by Morris should be noted. The subterranean figures make no objection to the scholar's collecting a large number of valuables in his wallet; the archer lets fly his arrow at the carbuncle only when the scholar, just before leaving, attempts to carry off a great green jewel. This heightens the dramatic tension of the tale: the hero might have escaped but for this final indiscretion. At the end of the tale, in Morris's version, a great storm arises (on the night of the scholar's adventure) and the statue, with all traces of the entrance to the palace, is obliterated. An image of Jove is set up on the

<sup>29</sup> J. A. Giles, ed. *William of Malmesbury's Chronicle of the Kings of England* (London, 1848), pp. 171-72. The episode was also narrated a century later, in nearly the same form, by Vincent of Beauvais, *Speculum Historiale*, Book XXIV, Chapter 98.

<sup>30</sup> Madden, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

spot by the superstitious folk of the town, but it too has long since vanished.

The coloring which Morris gives to the tale is characteristic of *The Earthly Paradise*. The allegory, definite and minute, of *Gesta Romanorum* is gone. There is no punishment here of the cardinal sin of avarice, but rather a melancholy example of the shortness of life, the vanity of human wishes, the mockery of human knowledge. The tale is told by Laurence, a cynical old Swabian priest, who had read it in his youth:

It made me shudder in the times gone by,  
When I believed in many a mystery  
I thought divine, that now I think, forsooth,  
Men's own fears made, to fill the place of truth  
Within their foolish hearts.

The scholar enters the underground palace with an agnostic's indifference to eternal salvation, and a passionate desire for earthly happiness:

What lovely days may yet be mine!  
How shall I live with love and wine  
And music, till I come to die!  
And then—who knoweth certainly  
What haps to us when we are dead?  
Truly I think by likelihead  
Nought haps to us of good or bad;  
Therefore on earth will I be glad  
A short space, free from hope or fear;  
And fearless will I enter here  
And meet my fate, whatso it be.

Laurence had been an alchemist, as the Prologue of *The Earthly Paradise* tells us, in search of the philosopher's stone and the elixir of life; the failure of the Wanderers' quest for the fountain of eternal youth has left him bitter and disillusioned perhaps more completely than his fellows. His passing remarks in "The Writing on the Image" show this. The wooden statue stands for centuries:

Fear little, then, I counsel you,  
What any son of man can do;  
Because a log of wood will last  
While many a life of man goes past,  
And all is over in short space.

Even the stone image of Jupiter, set upon the site of the mysterious events of the tale, cannot last for ever. The ending of the poem emphasizes not the folly of avarice, but the futility of life:

But now, this tale in some past day  
Being writ, I warrant all is gone.  
Both gold and weather-beaten stone.

Be merry, masters, while ye may,  
For men much quicker pass away.

Morris's treatments of *Gesta Romanorum* may properly be called transcriptions, or—to borrow another metaphor from music—transpositions into a minor key. The simple didactic apologues are reworked by his craftsmanship, subdued by his melancholy and paganism, until they become, in his own telling phrase, "the embodiment of dreams."

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