

Studies in Medievalism

Leslie J. Workman, Editor
328 West Church Street
Oxford, Ohio 45056

Studies in Medievalism

Volume 1

Spring 1979

Number

Contents

"The Fictions of Romantick Chivalry": Samuel Johnson's
Attitudes to the Middle Ages
Edward Tomarken

The Condition of England Past and Present:
Thomas Carlyle and the Middle Ages
Rosemary Jann 1.

Dante Retailored for the Nineteenth Century:
His Place in Ruskin's Thought
Martin Bidney 3.

The Medieval Tales of William Morris' *The Earthly
Paradise*
Florence Boos 45

Tess of the d'Urbervilles as Arthurian Romance
S. L. Clark and
Julian Wasserman 55

Editorial 1 Notes on Contributors 4 Forthcoming

Issues 14 Conference Organization 32

Address Correction/Return Postage Guaranteed

Medievalism in England

14 Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*, ed. George Ford and Sylvère Monod (New York: Norton Critical Edition, 1966), p. 44.

15 To see how decisively Ruskin swerves away, in these examples, from the mainstream of Dante criticism, one need only consult the relevant articles in Paget Toynbee's monumental *Dictionary of Proper Names and Notable Matters in the Works of Dante*, ed. and rev. by C. S. Singleton (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1965). Also instructive in this context is the first lecture in *Ethics of the Dust* (1866) entitled "The Valley of Diamonds" (*Works* XVIII, 209-220). Here Ruskin presents, for the edification of schoolgirls, a little allegorical neo-Dantean wealth-inferno, with Dante's wealth-god Plutus taking the place of Satan himself. It is a lively piece of writing: the journey of the greedy through arctic wastes in pursuit of an illusion has a strange resemblance to the last part of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

16 See John D. Rosenberg, *The Darkening Glass: A Portrait of Ruskin's Genius* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), p. 70.

Florence Boos

The Medieval Tales of William Morris' *The Earthly Paradise*

William Morris' *The Earthly Paradise* is one of the most extended, complex, and moving of Victorian poetic sequences, but a series of critical trivializations and historical ironies condemned it until recently to obscurity and faint praise. In its own day *The Earthly Paradise* was not only popular with Victorian readers of poetry but greatly admired by contemporary literary critics, who inadvertently undermined its reputation by fervently extolling a characteristic it did not have: escapist refusal to treat real human problems. To a critical generation which had just absorbed Tennyson's sexually and politically conservative Christian-allegorical *Idylls* and Browning's intricate *Dramatis Personae*, Morris' *The Life and Death of Jason* and *The Earthly Paradise* seemed by contrast anti-didactic relief from lucubration, in Swinburne's words, "fresh as wind, bright as light."¹ For example, Henry James intended to praise Jason when he wrote "To the jaded intellects of the present moment . . . it opens a glimpse into a world where they will be called upon neither to choose, to criticize, nor to believe, but simply to feel, to look, and to listen."²

In some sense James was of course correct; Morris' eclectic appreciation of mythologies from several periods and cultures, when combined with his belief in the inherent goodness of the natural world and human sexuality, did not ask readers "to choose, to criticize, [or] to believe" by standards of Victorian bourgeois morality and religious doctrine; but it was not for this reason less deeply moral, sericous, or intensely preoccupied with the human processes of choice, growth, and acceptance of loss. Earlier Morris' *Defense of Guenevere* had been relegated to obscurity by captious vilification, and *The Earthly Paradise*'s eventual decline was deepened by meretricious and misleading praise. It is not surprising that the next critical generation, weary of an aesthetic of decorative insularity, rejected someone presented to them as an archpoet of decoration, as a weaver of verbal tapestries, and as a dreamer of dreams. Works such as Jason, when they were read at all, tended to support these interpretations, while the psychologically complex dream tales of *The Earthly Paradise* were ignored or misread.

Studies in Medievalism, vol. I, no. I, Spring 1979.

As tastes changed, it also became increasingly difficult for readers to endure long evenly-paced narratives. A century which came to desire its lyricism in concentrated, short, paradoxical bursts found unacceptable a repetitive narrative poem of 42,000 mellifluous lines modelled loosely on the structure of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*; and most critics dismissed Morris' work with contemptuous censure for its facility and length. Douglas Bush, for example, remarked archly that if length were the criterion, the chapter on Morris in his *Mythology and the Romantic Tradition in English Literature* (1936) would be the longest of all; if merit, the shortest. In a 1959 article, "The Mood of Energy and the Mood of Idleness," Robert Wahl took it as given that *The Earthly Paradise* illustrates "The Mood of Idleness," and cited as evidence random quotations from the "Apology" and various tales. Paul Thompson patronized *The Earthly Paradise* as good train reading, although "it is not always easy at the end to remember what was read" (it would take a concentrated reading on the Orient Express to complete *The Earthly Paradise*). Again and again the principal narrator's self-characterization as an "idle singer of an empty day"--a complex assertion subject to ironic interpretation, and one of several self-characterizations by one of the poem's many narrators--has been cited in virtually every critical discussion of Morris as evidence of the passive and escapist nature of the poetry of his middle period.

Most hostile critics give little evidence of having persevered past the "Apology"; it may indeed have been easier to condemn *The Earthly Paradise* than to read it. Interpretation of the poem is rendered complex by its ambitious framework, interlocking themes, and contrasting commentary. The principal narrator's apology and envoi provide an outer frame: before each month's tale appears a lyric which records his stoic response to the passing year, and between each tale a description of weary, hopeful, or chastened reactions on the part of auditors and narrators. Thus, the stories are doubly distanced; the complaints create a countermovement to the tales and represent a deeper emotional reality whose meaning the hearers themselves often cannot verbalize. There are twenty-four tales, narrated alternately by a band of Wanderers and the rulers of a Greek city. The Wanderers are fourteenth-century Europeans who have fled the bubonic plague of their homelands, toiled away lifetimes in search of a world of perfection and immortal life, and finally been welcomed by a band of hospitable descendants of the ancient Greeks. The two groups agree to exchange tales learned from their forefathers: the city fathers recount twelve medieval-classical tales, and the Wanderers respond with twelve medieval tales derived from folklore and travel narratives of England, Germany, Brittany, Scandinavia, and even Persia. Each

"classical" tale is paired with a medieval one; and each story is given a specific month of the year and position in the narrative sequence. Such intermixture of cultures, seasons, lyrics, plots, and themes allows for contrasts, parallels, and progression in unlimited permutation.

No scheme of categories can account for each of the several hundred variants and parallels within the tales, but the stories may roughly be grouped according to five thematic patterns:

1. Narratives which describe successful quests for love, of which there are at least six: "Atalanta's Race," "Pygmalion and the Image," "Acontius and Cynippe," "Cupid and Psyche," "The Ring Given to Venus," and (with some qualifications) "The Hill of Venus."
2. Tales of successful heroes: Jason, Bellerophon, Hercules of "The Golden Apples," and Perseus of "The Doom of King Acrisius."
3. *Moral exempla* or tales of failed purpose, among them the Wanderers' "prologue." The Wanderers' attitudes evolve as the poem progresses, and many critics have overestimated the significance of this prologue to the poems' ultimate tone and intention.
4. A less clearly definable group which might be called tales of love found and lost. These include "Ogier the Dane," "The Watching of the Falcon," "The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon," "The Death of Paris," and "The Man Who Never Laughed Again." In these tales the protagonist finds love or an ideal state, leaves it, then returns chastened to seek it again. These include several of *The Earthly Paradise's* most original and intensely dreamlike tales and seem to reflect preoccupations that were recurrent and compelling to Morris.
5. A final group which might be called "tales of happy fortune unsought." These include "Rhodope," "The Fostering of Aslaug," and "The Man Born to be King." The protagonists of these tales do not search for love or happiness, but are sought out by them.

Some patterns can be discerned. The moral tales (3. above) were all written early; Morris apparently wearied of didacticism even when it reproved avarice. Narratives of successful love (1.) and heroic tales (2.) are both early and late, but tales of love won and lost (4.) and happy fortune unsought (5.) are both relatively late. All tales of successful heroism are classical, as are most poems of successful love. Love-found-and-lost poems, *moral exempla*, and tales of good fortune unsought are almost all medieval.

The love-won-and-lost pattern appears with increasing frequency in the later tables (and reappears in modified form in the dream-wanderings of the prose romances). The tales of good fortune unsought form a pleasant coda to Morris' more troubled and ill-fated narratives; like the tales of love won and lost, these are relatively late in composition, and anticipate the prose romances in manner and motif.

The medieval tales in these two groups seem to me so attractive that I wonder whether the critics who complain of "monotony" have read them. Two of these, "Ogier the Dane" (August) and "The Fostering of Aslaug" (December) are, respectively, tales of love found and lost and happy fortune unsought; together they express Morris' central preoccupation with transmitting a sense of violent discontinuity and change to an experience of regeneration and resurrection after loss. In the remainder of the paper I will discuss them in some detail, first "Ogier" and then "Aslaug."

Several of Morris' artistic purposes are shown by the way in which he reshaped his source for "Ogier the Dane," *Le Comte La Vergne de Tressan's* tale of Ogier in *Corps d'extraits de Romans de Chevalerie* (1782).⁶ Morris was probably attracted to the tale by its mention of Avalon, for him an ideal image of the garden refuge beyond time as an "earthly paradise." The theme of the return to life after one hundred years was familiar from Tennyson's 1842 "The Day Dream"; it was later reworked in "The Briar Rose" series (1871-90) by Morris' close friend Edward Burne-Jones. The plot of *La Vergne de Tressan's* "Ogier" juxtaposed timeless ecstasy with an unexpected reencounter with oneself in a past age. In Morris' revision such dream-like intermingling of forms of consciousness and dislocation of identity lead ultimately to acceptance of an ideal love beyond time and space. Ogier becomes a romantic allegory of psychological transformation in a hero who gains, loses, and regains an original love.

Ogier is born of grief and pain; his mother has died in childbirth and, as the poem opens, the king his father sits inconsolable beside the bier. Near dawn his nighttime vigil is eased by trance-like sleep, and six supernatural female beings enter the room and confer on the infant Ogier the promise of six gifts: courage and goodness, strength, success, gentility, sexual attractiveness and, most significant of all, love of the sixth and most beautiful fairy "within the happy country where I dwell" (214).⁷ The narrator swiftly bypasses Ogier's heroic life of battles and triumphs to present him as a hundred-year old man, shipwrecked and alone on a deserted island, an aged Romantic survivor of the sort familiar from "The Ancient Mariner," "Manfred," or Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*. Ogier

regrets that he must die apart from his beloved wife, but achieves a state of dispassion and detachment from the life he must leave. After what seems likely to be his last night on earth he awakes, refreshed at dawn and cheered by thoughts of a possible new existence, and sees a vision of light. A boat approaches over the water and carries him in it to a fair garden, where the fairy who had pledged her love, Morgan le Fay, gives him a ring which confers perpetual youth. He is then permitted to join the life of the gods, for Morris a state almost invariably associated with timeless and mutually joyful romantic union. Ogier at first is ambivalent: "to the deeds that he was wont to do / Did his desires still turn" (231). Later he learns that he must return to earth as God's agent of salvation for the French people, and is deprived of all memory of natural and supernatural pasts; returned to mortality, he reads chronicles of past events and persons once familiar with a sense of confusion about his own identity and position in time. As the "Ancient Knight," he wins the love of the soon-to-be-widowed Queen and saves Paris in battle. Before a marriage can be consummated with the widowed Queen, he is visited by his former love, Morgan le Fay, who places on his head a crown conferring memory and immortality. The consciousness of his past earthly life is now oppressive, and he wonders how he can have left their ideal life, but she reassures him, "Come, love, I am not changed" (253):

And then the place was void, and they were gone;
How I knew not; but this I know indeed,
That in whatso great trouble or sore need
The land of France since that fair day has been,
No more, the sword of Ogier has she seen. (255)

Thus Ogier experiences two earthly loves and a supernatural one, but must return once to the Cave and jeopardize his existence in fulfillment of duty. His shifts in loyalty from wife to fairy to Queen and back to fairy are not presented as infidelities but confusions, forms of male sexual mutability of a sort which later will be crucial to the plot of *Sigurd the Volsung*. The protagonist is disoriented, not unfaithful, and the sense of powerful emotions shifting beneath conscious will adds to the dream-like quality of the narrative.

In "Ogier the Dane" Morris thus has altered his source to emphasize the desirability of sexual experience and love above achievement in the outer world. His protagonist has become good and noble as well as strong and fearless and is presented not only in courtly and social relationships, but alone, in meditation on the nature of life or confrontation with death and removed from the world to an ideal garden of joyous response to a perfect beloved. These are characteristic Morrisian patterns; in tale after tale he subordinates sources to themes of kinship, goodness,

solitude within nature, and transcendence of time in physical love. Above all, in "Ogier the Dane" Morris creates the atmosphere of trance- and dream-states characteristic of his best work.

"The Fostering of Aslaug," the *Earthly Paradise's* medieval tale for December based on the *Saga of Ragnar Lodbrok*, is a myth of periodic regeneration and renewal. Like Ogier, Aslaug is born in pain; she is the daughter of Brynhild, brought forth after Sigurd has left her and directly before she and Sigurd are consumed together in the fiery ring. The tale is introduced by an evocation of her parents' tragedy:

That mighty sorrow laid asleep,
That love so sweet, so strong and deep,
That as ye hear the wonder told
In those few strenuous words of old,
The whole world seems to rend apart.

The story of Aslaug is thus important for Morris as part of one of the deepest and most moving tales of all time, the basis for his *Sigurd the Volsung*.

The contrast between death and rebirth is emphasized in the choice of Aslaug's guardian, the aged Heimir, Brynhild's foster-sire and a mighty lord as well as musician. In order to prevent her murder by the enemies of her parents, Heimir builds a large harp in which to carry the infant and, disguised in humble clothing, flees with her enclosed inside. When Heimir pauses for rest or Aslaug frets, he plays the harp to her, and the golden-haired Aslaug dances happily to its music. The harmony of old warrior and tiny maiden speaks of human love and continuity: "her babbling mirth / Had mingled with his low deep speech" (27). Unfortunately the two stop for the night at the cottage of the surly and avaricious Grima, who notices some gold beneath Heimir's rags and persuades her husband to murder him as he lies asleep in the barn. The evil couple force open the harp and discover Aslaug, whom they raise to a life of servile drudgery. Though the maiden grows into radiant beauty, her life is marked by one peculiar circumstance; from the time of Heimir's murder she has never spoken. Fearing that Aslaug's beauty may attract men and eventually deprive her household of its slave labor, Grima forbids Aslaug to bathe herself; but as Aslaug tends sheep, she wanders off by herself, soliloquizes on her parentage, her memory of the murder, and her desire for love, and bathes herself in preparation for a new life. Meanwhile a ship has anchored nearby, and its sailors report Aslaug's overpowering beauty to their prince, Ragnar. The prince requests that she visit him, she complies, and they fall immediately in love. In response to his suggestion that "thou seemest such an

one / as who could love," they kiss, and she speaks for the first time: "May it be so, fair man, that thou / Art even no less happy now / Than I am" (48). The Prince desires her to accompany him to his homeland, but she determines that their love requires a test of separation and subordination to serious purpose; he must depart to perform "some deed of fame," but on the homeward journey she will await him. Aslaug then mourns his absence, accepts the possibility that he may never return, and meditates on her aspiration to make of her sorrow "a tale / That midst of all woes shall yet prevail / To make the world seem something worth" (55). The Prince returns and again Aslaug meets him at the water's edge; as with the union of Ogier and Morgan le Fay, the male partner's performance of heroic exploits has freed the lovers to go forth. After their first night together the lovers recount to one another their dreams; each is granted a vision of Sigurd and Brynhild. In Aslaug's dream her mother says of their daughter to Sigurd, "Well worth she is our love divine" and blesses her marriage to Ragnar, second in worth only to Sigurd; in Ragnar's, the parents step through a ring of fire to hand him a lily, which changes the surrounding wasteland to a verdant, blossoming world. Thus affirmed, the lovers' union is absorbed into the original mythic cycle.

In reworking the *Saga of Ragnar Lodbrok* Morris once again chooses sparsely from a complex and heterogeneous series of events, and ignores the economic and political ambitions of the Prince in order to concentrate on the latter's response to sexuality and romantic love. In the *saga*, Ragnar's desire for the maiden, called there Kraka, is purely physical, while Morris endows the lovers with fervent and mutual passion. Central to Morris' interpretation is the motif of King Cophetua and the beggar maid, highborn prince and beautiful peasant maiden, which appears throughout his works from the earliest prose tales onward, and may have reflected an idealism which partly motivated his own marriage. In the *saga* the Prince considers marriage to another woman of apparently higher rank, but returns to Kraka when she is able to prove her royal parentage--an opportunist vacillation which Morris would have found inconsistent and demeaning. Just as Morris augments Ogier's character with goodness and magnanimity, he adds heroic purposefulness to the character of Ragnar, who has in the *saga* no noble aspiration to worthy deeds. Although the Grima of the *saga* is likewise malicious, Morris sharpens the contrast of evil old hag with fair young woman. This witch/maiden polarity represents a pattern in Morris of old crones or witches who malevolently imprison young female love,⁸ from Rapunzel and the witch in *The Defense of Guenevere* to the witch wife and Birdalene in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*. The beauty of the child Aslaug's

community with music and nature, the intense emotion of the lovers' courtship and dreams of Sigurd and Brynhild's blessing, and the careful placement of Aslaug's story within the Sigurd-Brynhild cycle--all result from Morris' reinterpretation of the story as a myth of miraculous rebirth in deprivation.

"Ogier the Dane" and "The Fostering of Aslaug" each illustrate some of Morris' characteristic transformations of medieval legend in *The Earthly Paradise*. With some exceptions, the medieval tales of its framework allowed Morris more freedom for radical interpretation than the classical tales, perhaps because he was conscious that the plots of the latter were more familiar to his audience, but also because Morris had from adolescence preferred medieval narratives such as Malory and Thorpe to Homer and Virgil, a temperamental affinity which may have encouraged him to impose mythic preoccupations on the variety of medieval legend. In these *Earthly Paradise* tales, Morris formed allegories of the ability of youth and nature to transcend winter and death, the theme which dominated his later work from *Love is Enough* through the prose romances. The early poems of Morris' juvenilia and *The Defense of Guenevere* had emphasized defeat and fear of disintegration; the medieval *Earthly Paradise* tales were written in a transitional stage when Morris first developed the dominant characteristics of his mature manner. Many of the narratives are sympathetic romantic poems of considerable subtlety, and their evocations of sadness, loss, and joy in unexpected rebirth constitute some of the best and most attractive unread Victorian poetry. As *The Earthly Paradise* revolves from spring to spring, it leads its readers and auditors to tempered hope both for love won through sorrow and for happy fortune deserved but unsought.

Footnotes

- 1 A. C. Swinburne, review in *Fortnightly Review*, July, 1867, viii, reprinted in Peter Faulkner, ed., *William Morris: The Critical Heritage* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 61.
- 2 Henry James, unsigned review, *North American Review*, October, 1867, cvi, reprinted in Faulkner, ed., p. 76.
- 3 Douglas Bush, *Mythology and the Romantic Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1936), p. 297. Bush's bias is distinctly hostile to Pre-Raphaelitism. He continues, "Whether the Pre-Raphaelites contributed something distinctive and vital to English poetry, or only to the history of English poetry, the contribution was made over and over again in many volumes; and all the possible critical judgments on these writers have likewise been uttered over and over again in many volumes." The Pre-Raphaelite criticism to which Bush refers now seems sparse in contrast to what has appeared since he wrote these words.
- 4 Paul Thompson, *The Work of William Morris* (New York: Viking, 1967), p. 171.
- 5 Recently several theses, the most comprehensive of which is Robert Stallman's *The Quest of William Morris* (Oregon, 1966), have begun to decipher the poem's complex structure. Also long sections of Jessie Kocmanova's *The Poetic Maturing of William Morris* (1964) and Blue Calhoun's *The Pastoral Vision of William Morris* (1975) are devoted to the poem, and a 1975 article by Carole Silver, "The *Earthly Paradise*: Lost" (*Victorian Poetry*, 13, nos. 3 and 4) attempts a summary of its intentions. These few interpretations differ substantially: Silver finds in the tales a growing recognition of failure and loss; Calhoun perceives a seasonal progression from joy through loss to renewed achievement and peace; and Stallman sees a progression from vain desire to acceptance of the transience of identity.
- 6 4 tom., Paris, 1782. For information on Morris' use of medieval legends in *The Earthly Paradise*, the best source is Ralph Bellas' 1960 University of Kansas dissertation, *William Morris' Treatment of Sources in The Earthly Paradise*.
- 7 Page citations are to Morris' *Collected Works*, edited by May Morris (London: Longmans, 1910-15), vols. II and IV.
- 8 For a discussion of the Jungian aspects of this motif, see Max Wickert, *Form and Archetype in William Morris, 1855-1870*, unpub. diss., Yale University, 1965.

⁹ For a debate on the extent to which the prose romances and juvenilia reflect the sense of fragmentation and failure, see Kenneth L. Deal, "Acts of Completion: The Search for Vocation in Morris's Early Prose Romances," Frederick Kirchhoff, "Heroic Disintegration: Morris' Medievalism and the Disappearance of the Self," and Florence Boos, "Morris' Juvenilia: Preparation for *The Defense of Guenevere*," to be published by the William Morris Society in a special supplement on Morris' Pre-Raphaelite period: 1855-1858.

S. L. Clark and Julian Wasserman
Tess of the d'Urbervilles as Arthurian Romance

"It's a curious story; it carries us back to mediaeval times."¹

Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* focuses on a character who represents the conjunction of two distinct periods of time, the late nineteenth century and the eleventh-century period of the Anglo-Norman conquest. As a result of this confluence of time, Tess is double cursed: both by her own "fallen" state and by the state to which her family has fallen over the centuries. Her parroting of modern doctrinal statements (which she does not, unfortunately, understand) and her dogged acceptance of misfortune and injustice mark her as one in whom the past of medieval history and legend plays the dominant role and, moreover, determines her fate. Thus, her love must be seen not only in the context of the present but also in the context of how the past has evolved into the present.

Hardy does more than associate Tess broadly with medieval tragic heroines;² he explicitly associates her with the figure of Isolde in order to make ironic parallels between the two time periods more forceful. This association, which makes Tess a reworking of the medieval Tristan legend, may readily be seen by comparing Tess to Hardy's drama, *The Famous Tragedy of the Queen of Cornwall*³ and to Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan*, to which Hardy refers on the play's frontispiece. *Tess* and *The Queen of Cornwall* both vary the Tristan and Isolde story line in the same places, and these variances represent Hardy's conception of how society has developed since medieval times: it is the lack of change in society rather than the abundance of changes which should be most obvious to the sensitive reader. In fact, Hardy's belief in continuity and similarity over time finds an echo in his "Profitable Reading of Fiction," where he states that good fiction

may be defined as that kind of imaginative writing which lies nearest to the epic, dramatic, or narrative masterpieces of the past. One fact is certain: in fiction there can be no intrinsically new thing at this stage in the world's history.⁴