

# Victorian response to *Earthly Paradise* tales

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Critics responded to William Morris's *The Life and Death of Jason* with fulsome praise for its alleged narrative simplicity, Chaucerian charm, and romantic avoidance of serious social issues. The legacy of this acclaim was mixed, for many readers of *Jason* sought to find in *The Earthly Paradise* more of the same. Contemporary critical identification of *The Earthly Paradise* with *The Canterbury Tales* misled still more, for Morris's model was not Chaucer the comic satirist, but the Chaucer of 'Troilus' and the dream poems. *The Earthly Paradise* lacked the dramatic qualities of *The Canterbury Tales*, but offered in their stead forms of nostalgia, meditation, and a conscious thematic harmony foreign to Chaucer's intent.<sup>1</sup>

The *Earthly Paradise*'s reception was also complicated by the considerable evolution which occurred during the poem's serial publication in three volumes. Some reviewers read more than one volume at once, and some preferred one volume to another; but many tended to assume that succeeding volumes simply continued the tone of their predecessors. Serial reviewing also encouraged readers to concentrate on the separate tales rather than the structure of the entire sequence, a natural bias, but one which also detracted from appreciation of the poem as a whole.

Those readers who tried to survey individual volumes did often make serious efforts to define the poem's changing tone, and occasionally they gave qualified approval to Morris's new manner. The best Victorian commentaries on Morris's poem often clarify those aspects of it which seemed most tangential or hostile to contemporary literary conventions. Some of their observations are acute and revealing, but the overriding failure to relate tales across the seasons and volumes set limits which persisted until the last decade of the century.

The March-August tales of *The Earthly Paradise* appeared as volume I in 1868, the September-November ones were issued as volume II in

December 1869, and volume III,\* of the December-February tales, appeared in December 1870. The comments on the first volume predictably resembled the earlier *encomia* for *Jason*:

It may be doubted whether any poet of our day equals Mr. Morris in enabling his reader to see the objects which are presented to him (*Athenaeum*, 30 May 1868).<sup>2</sup>

Mr. Morris's central quality is a vigorous and healthy objectivity; a vision and a fancy ever penetrated by the colour and light and movement of external things, just as they stir and penetrate the painter . . . There is no English poet of this time, nor perhaps of any other, who has so possessed this excellent gift of looking freshly and simply on external nature in all her many colours, and of reproducing what he sees with such effective precision and truthfulness (*Fortnightly Review*, June 1868).<sup>3</sup>

Again, Morris's chief merit was said to be his revival of the clear, unsubjective narrative manner of the past:

. . . how worthy he proves himself of his master's Chaucer's mantle, and how good is his claim to be a reviver of a style of poetry as well adapted to the taste of our generation as the mass of the moralistic, disquisitional, and subjective poetry of our day . . . there is a fairer chance for poetry to be read and appreciated and taken back into favour by a busy material age, if its scope is distinct and direct, its style clear and pellucid, and its manner something like that of the old rhapsodists, minnesingers, and tale-tellers who in divers climes and ages have won such deserved popularity (*Saturday Review*, 30 May 1868).<sup>4</sup>

Other reviewers agreed:

It is Mr. Morris's happy and peculiar faculty to cast utterly aside the complex questionings that vex our modern poetry . . . he hardly ever touches on matters of speculation, and when he does so, it is with a very light hand.<sup>5</sup>

His purpose is rather to watch the movements or the calms on the surface of the waters, without an answer to the questions of that inner life which dwells beneath it.<sup>6</sup>

Morris fairly escapes from our turmoil and materialism by this flight to the refuge of amusement and simple art . . .<sup>7</sup>

At times, this tone could veer into robust self-parody. For Alfred Austin, Morris's was the perfect poetic work to read on a summer day, which he described in the rhapsodic prose of a travelogue:

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\* By the time the last volume came out, the first, now in its fifth edition, had been divided into 2 volumes, each containing, as did II & III, three months.

Under a blossoming thorn, stretched 'neath some umbrageous beach, or sheltered from the glare of noon by some fern-crested Devonshire cliff, with lazy summer sea-waves breaking at one's feet—such were the fitting hour and mood in which—criticism all forgot—to drink in the honeyed rhythm of this melodious storier. Such has been our happy lot; and we lay before this giver of dainty things thanks which even the absence of all personal familiarity cannot restrain from being expressed affectionately (*Temple Bar*, November 1869).<sup>8</sup>

Implicit condescension to this 'poet who is willing and able to amuse us' with his poetic hookah is never far from such 'praise':

. . . when the hour for lotus-eating has come; when we stroll up the land beneath its banks of honeysuckles and roses, or watch the 'tremolar della marina' from the beach; or when we light the lamp and draw the curtains after a hard day's work on some autumn evening, comes the turn of the poet who is willing and able to amuse us. It is then that we seek for verse which can soothe the wearied mind with images of beauty, which can be enjoyed without effort, and which condescends to be entertaining. When next such an hour comes to us, may Mr. Morris' promised volume come with it! (*Blackwood's*, July 1869)<sup>9</sup>

Morris's personal intensity aside, there are few resemblances between lotus-eaters and Morris's anguished singer, ardent lovers, and aged, self-critical Wanderers.

Austin then carries these assumptions to their orotund conclusion:

. . . not only has he not produced great poetry—he has evaded the conditions on which alone the production of great poetry is possible . . . we should be compelled to pronounce him . . . the wisely unresisting victim of a rude irreversible current; the serene martyr of a mean and melancholy time.<sup>10</sup>

This is doubletalk; someone who does not try to 'produce great poetry' is not 'wisely unresisting', but weak or mediocre. Morris seldom commented on his reviews, but drily remarked of this one that its only true critical statement was that he and other contemporaries had been influenced by the Romantic poets.<sup>11</sup> The reviewers' passion for 'untroubled entertainment' was their own, not Morris's.

Others, who hoped to formulate a less moralistic aesthetic, saw in Morris's new style an opportune platform for their views. Walter Pater's admonition to burn with 'a hard gem-like flame' was written in a review of volume one of *The Earthly Paradise*. Pater was *The Earthly Paradise's* most perceptive early reviewer, the most conscious of the poem's attempt to control grief, and the first to see in its interwoven use

of classical and romantic motifs something more than murmurous storytelling. In particular, his astute description suggests that Morris's poetic work may not have been so 'simple':

One characteristic of the pagan spirit these new poems have which is on their surface—the continual suggestion, pensive or passionate, of the shortness of life; this is contrasted with the bloom of the world and gives new seduction to it; the sense of death and the desire of beauty; the desire of beauty quickened by the sense of death.<sup>12</sup>

Unlike most other critics, Pater did not patronize Morris's poetic sensibility as quaint epigone, but considered it an attempt to give poetic form to contemporary fears of ravaging time. He was also one of few critics who expressed sincere interest in the unusual mixture of attitudes and cultures encompassed by the poem's frame:

It is precisely this effect, this grace of Hellenism relieved against the sorrow of the middle age, which forms the chief motive of *The Earthly Paradise*, with an exquisite dexterity the two threads of sentiment are here interwoven and contrasted . . . Even in Mr. Morris' earliest poems snatches of the sweet French tongue had always come with something of Hellenic blitheness and grace. And now it is below the very coast of France, through the fleet of Edward III, among the painted sails of the middle age, that we pass to a reserved fragment of Greece, which by some *θεία ῥύχη* lingers on in the Western Sea into the middle age. There the stories of *The Earthly Paradise* are told, Greek story and romantic alternating, and for the crew of the 'Rose Garland' coming across the sins of the earlier world with the sign of the cross and drinking Rhine wine in Greece, the two worlds of sentiment are confronted (*Westminster Review*, October 1868).<sup>13</sup>

He was likewise one of very few to defend the poem's length:

Yet here mass is itself the first condition of an art which deals with broad atmospheric effects. The water is not less medicinal, not less gifted with virtues, because a few drops of it are without effect; it is water to bathe and swim in.<sup>14</sup>

The poem does not, Pater wrote, flee or evade modern life, but attempts to present a world-view which looks beyond earlier orthodoxy and security for 'the sense of death and the desire of beauty'.

Of this wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the hope of art for art's sake, has most; for art comes to you professing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake.<sup>15</sup>

Note that in this context 'art for art's sake' is not intended to be

dilettantism or aesthetic insularity, but a considered response to the brevity of life. Of course at some point in the review, Pater does come to use *The Earthly Paradise* as a nominal framework for his own views, and his statements eventually become so general and diffuse that they would apply to many poetic works of the period.

Though volume II of *The Earthly Paradise* (September through November) included the sober tales of Paris, Gudrun, Rhodope, and Bharam, 'The Man Who Never Laughed Again' most critics strained to praise Morris for the 'light' qualities which their predilections had led them to expect.

Probably none have sought more earnestly to relate these stories simply as stories, and certainly none have imparted to them a more touching charm . . . (G.W. Cox, *Edinburgh Review*, January 1871).<sup>16</sup>

His purpose is rather to watch the movements or the calm on the surface of the waters, without an answer to the question of that inner life which dwells beneath it (*Westminster Review*, April 1871).<sup>17</sup>

Nor will they [readers who like the charm of his first volume] in what is now presented to them, deem that aught of this charm is diminished through the circumstance that style and manner are no longer novel, for . . . the ear drinks in with unalloyed delight the simple, sweet, picture-like rhapsodies of a practised gesture (*Saturday Review*, 11 December 1869).<sup>17</sup>

Some readers again did observe the text's more somber tone. Dante G. Rossetti, for example, wrote in an 1869 letter to John Skelton that:

In some parts of it the poet goes deeper in the treatment of intense personal passion than he has yet done . . .<sup>18</sup>

Rossetti was of course more aware than most of the sources of this 'intense personal passion'. Likewise a few reviewers, perhaps sensing what had moved Pater, responded somewhat more warily to Volumes II and III:

Vague longing, reveries intermingled with reminiscence and foreboding, moods of languour half mental and half physical, the involved reluctations of the will and dreamy seizures of the spirit, these are not matters with which a modern Chaucer should too much occupy himself; and we think Mr. Morris does occupy himself with them too much in this volume . . . for ourselves, at least, although our author's mellifluous garrulity in simple narration has never seemed tedious for a moment, we must confess that the recital does seem to flag from time to time in the psychological passages.<sup>19</sup>

Certainly the path Mr. Morris has chosen has dangers as well as delights peculiar to itself . . .<sup>20</sup>



More conventional reviewers sometimes showed a sense that their expectations had been betrayed. Unfocused disappointment led them alternately to chastise Morris for his alleged escapism and his melancholy:

The volume altogether is perhaps scarcely up to the level of the former volumes . . . . Mr Morris must remember that the sweet monotony and dreamy harmonious lingering of the strain is apt to weary the multitude, which has not time for those subtle fitnesses of style and atmosphere which are the highest enjoyment of art; and it is for the multitude—not for the critic, nor the amateur, not that limited class which alone has leisure and capacity to enter fully into a poet's finer meanings—that the poet ought primarily to write. He must satisfy their broader, larger, more simple judgment, not neglecting the others; for unless it is in him to charm the common mind as well as the refined, no poet can reach any real greatness (*Blackwood's*, May 1870).<sup>21</sup>

The *Athenaeum* of December 1869 praised Part III,<sup>22</sup> but the reviewer of Part IV chided Morris for his 'mood of doubt and fear as to the future', which

is among other moods natural to man, and has been fitly said and sung by many men; but we say that in a book of fanciful tales, to thrust it upon us persistently and unmercifully, is neither wise nor artist-like . . . . Such a view may admit of grave and careful discussion: such a view may be permitted some brief lyrical expression in poetry; but that it should be dominant in such a book as this is truly unfortunate.<sup>23</sup>

The *Academy* reviewer, G. A. Simcox, was more perceptive:

Mr. Morris has always been the poet of moods rather than of passions, of adventures rather than of actions; and this characteristic is still to be traced in the third instalment of his great work; though there is a nearer approach to the familiar source of human interest. Yet even now there is a curious abstractness and remoteness; for all the figures that move through the daydream seem not so much to feel as to sympathize; they see themselves with other eyes, and feel for themselves and for strangers . . . . In the autumn tales a still greater development is given to the contemplative emotions which succeed each other, while the incidents to which they correspond are minimized in each of the tales except the last . . . . It is the triumph of our author's art to admit and use to the utmost the intensity of the situation, and yet to elude all agitation and excitement to maintain one weird trance unbroken from the first line to the last.<sup>24</sup>

Simcox also differed from many twentieth-century critics in his admiration for 'Rhodope' and the much-maligned 'Acontius and Cydippe'; in the latter case, he praised Morris for his ability to 'undramatise the story'

without loss of interest.<sup>25</sup> He also tried to assess the poem's unusual psychological features, and to find words other than 'monotony' or 'beauty' for its strange mixture of intensity and remoteness:

As it is, we have a poem which is mystical without a single miracle; for the atmosphere of the story impresses us more than the figures which move through it.<sup>26</sup>

One trait common to almost *all* the many reviewers of *The Earthly Paradise* is a reluctance to assess the work as a whole. One senses that many simply assumed Morris had written twenty-five narrative poems with attached miscellaneous lyrics, so no such final evaluation was needed. After all, *The Canterbury Tales* itself seemed to many Victorians such an anthology, and, more modestly, contemporary collections such as Longfellow's *Tales of a Wayside Inn* made no serious claims to an overriding plan or focus.

The almost universally glib, gleefully reductive reading of Morris's famous 'Apology' also hurt. Every hostile critic since the work appeared has cited the singer's ironic claim to be an 'idle singer of an empty day' with credulous asperity. That the 'Apology' is a consciously ironic, even severe commentary on the nature of literary composition, and not a naive disclaimer of serious purpose, seems to have occurred to few. Nor did any contemporary critic remark that the singer's assertiveness grows markedly as the cycle evolves.

Another aspect of *The Earthly Paradise*, one which doubtless troubled Morris's Victorian audience, is mentioned obliquely in reviews: the representation of romantic and marital love is almost agonized in the entire work, but most especially in the autumn tales. Reviewers who complained of the poem's excessive 'subjectivity' very likely had both the (sexual) content of the protagonists' emotions, and their intensely inward, despairing focus in mind. The spring and summer tales were provided with what might be called shotgun happy-endings, and the earlier, more didactic variations on the playbill of troubled and languishing lovers, cold heroines, and morally ambiguous succubi could still be reconciled to conventional expectations of the time. But the autumn and winter figures—Paris, Oenone, Rhodope, John, Acontius, Cydippe, Bodli, Kiartan, and Gudrun—suffer deep internal conflicts not only in their responses to *love*, but to the proposition of love's *existence*. Proffered love is questioned, rejected, or accepted in an atmosphere of perplexity and guilt. Standard problems of thwarted love resonate with deeper crises of self-esteem and ultimate questions about first and last things. Rhodope needs to be *able* to feel love for her parents, Paris to

*understand* that his love for Helen is more important to him than his life. Perhaps it disturbed the more conventional among Morris's readers even more that love is represented as a process, not an accomplishment: that one of a pair may relent as the other hardens, or both be victims of emotions which neither can anticipate or resolve.

It is this suspensive, unfinished quality to Morris's erotic and affective psychology in *The Earthly Paradise* that contemporary critics called 'unmanly', and some of their twentieth-century descendants 'masochistic'. For Morris these emotions were an infinite source of unsolved human problems, and their confrontation a form of integrity and secure history of the self. This doctrine of respect for an intensity which may eventuate in utter failure seemed to embarrass Morris's fellow Victorians. In *The Earthly Paradise*, it conflicted directly with their strong hints that he provide for them a revived Chaucerian narrative of the outward, unsubjective, and pleasingly 'simple'. The belief that marriage for love inevitably brings happiness was also a fiercely cherished Victorian fantasy, and poetic qualifications or counterexamples, such as Browning's 'Any Wife to Any Husband', or 'By the Fireside', were seldom as popular as their author's more sentimental works.

May Morris and others have noted that Morris's creation of dream women became a kind of quasi-religious act, an introspective confirmation of the self's capacity to endure hardships and despair in search for something which might transcend—or transfigure—ordinary human life. Such yearnings recall Socrates' descriptions of 'love' in the *Symposium*, as a limiting, almost impersonal search for whatever refracted glimmers of transcendence we can find. Like the divine 'madness' of the *Phaedrus*, the activity itself becomes a form of soul-making. The beloved is a shifting, half-remembered paradigm of real, surmised, and projected recollections brought by sheer force of moral creativity into some focus and human alignment. When the creation fails, its 'beloved' remains unindividuated, intangible, and remote; yet one can always look off to it as something elemental and trustworthy, like Socrates' *daimon*. As these familiar platonist comparisons suggest, there is nothing particularly Victorian or non-Victorian about a tendency to imagine such a love-evoking presence as an extra-orthodox sensuous/religious/ethical ideal. But the private 'religions' constructed by individuals of different periods will of course call on different culturally available symbols and forms. Morris's sensibility was obviously too unchristian for many of his readers; oddly, in a period of intense lip-service to both classical and biblical culture, it may have been too classical and (in the sense I've sketched) religious as well.



I would even argue that exactly those aspects of Morris's aesthetic sensibility in *The Earthly Paradise* which aroused most alarm in his audience—its preoccupations with extramundane dream states, and with the potential energies of frustrated love—continued to hold deep significance for him, and even to influence his wider interests and later socialist convictions. Morris's next major work, *Love Is Enough* (1871), his most intense, private poem, was again reviewed with high praise for its formal and experimental qualities, but tactful distaste for the vulnerability and intensity of its central themes. It is quite possible that the absence of any serious audience for Morris's newly formulated perceptions and beliefs influenced his decision to delay for several years the writing of new poetry for publication. Morris never lacked readers, but they seemed more and more to demand what he least wished to say.

It would of course have been possible to return to a more accomplished simulacrum of his earlier manner; but Morris wrote less to hold a large audience, than to explore forms and express a sense of loss. Consideration for others and desire for privacy prevented him from publishing the sorts of emotional soliloquies and descriptions he inserted as direct, personal lyrics in 'Acontius and Cydippe' and 'The Death of Paris'. Eventually, he may have exhausted the use of such narrative frames to express his doubt, and a part of his motive for writing fell away—at least for time.

Finally, the creator of *The Earthly Paradise's* miniature amphitheatre of narrators and hearers must have felt rather acutely the lack of a responsive audience. Eventually, his desire to overcome personal and moral barriers in human relationships as well as poetry led him toward other goals whose coherence seemed clear to him, if not to others: translation of major literary works of an 'obscure' hyperborean culture; support for architectural conservation and revolutionary socialism; and the epic and seasonal cycles of *Sigurd the Volsung* (1876) and *The Pilgrims of Hope* (1885).

In effect I have argued that the immense *Earthly Paradise* paradoxically offers a kind of miniature of the range and complexity of Morris's poetry. Its systematic use of multiple narrators and audiences in the frame sharpens the poem's sense of shared experience, and imposes a structure on its temporal and other discontinuities. Fate, not indecision, becomes increasingly responsible for loss, and there is a finer equilibrium between leisure and struggle, imagination and action. Perfect experience of physical love also fades in importance as a poetic prerequisite for ideal love and identity with natural cycles and patterns.

As his mature style developed, Morris clarified earlier motifs and strategies for presenting human identity in time, and exchanged early distance and set locale for alternately blurred and surreally focused objects, often seen in a state of tension. Such shifts seem to reflect his growing conviction that loss and dislocation can be understood in recurrent myths which express the community of human emotion through time.

Morris's identification of freedom with participation in communal and historical reality recalls Browning and Ruskin among his literary contemporaries, and his qualified identifications of sexual solace with ultimate peace and tranquillity suggest Tennyson and Rossetti. Beyond these partially shared traits, Morris's tendency to express, even embody a processive dialectic in his poetry was one of the most significant characteristics of his literary development. As a young man he set brief poems and prose romances in a static medieval past, but by his mid-thirties he had begun to experiment with narrative epics whose narrators and actors revolve in complex temporal sequences.

The temporal structure of these epics is held together by mythical, thematic, and structural patterns, and their histories are both detailed and abstract: at their best, they become a joyous process of memory, legend, and story which deepens and releases human emotion. Processive arguments seem to have been Morris's answer to an assertive individualism which he found inherent and troubling in the romantic literary tradition, and poetic re-enactment of history deepened his ability to understand and create a future history and personal identity.

For the poet of *The Earthly Paradise*, history serves several purposes. It can clarify our present duties, not by suggesting concrete actions, but by defining appropriate emotions. It can counterbalance pain and reinforce the past. And the task of its retrieval and preservation can serve a future in which our lives are lived in growing fellowship with the young, who will experience like passions in their turn. Authorial point of view in *The Earthly Paradise* is progressively clarified, so that it is easier, for example, to decide whether to judge or identify with Walter than Admetus, Bellerophon than Jason. In the final tales of the cycle, people aren't eternal, but love is; natural human forces validate love, whether it is successful or not.

Morris's work contains some of his period's more interesting poetic portrayals of women, though these are much more restricted than his presentations of men. The passionately calculating heroine—Gudrun,

Sthenoboea—is a uniquely Morrisian pattern. In the narrative frame, tension between the sexes is sometimes undercut by goodwill towards the young of the opposite sex—as Morris inscribed a poem to his daughters Jenny and May in their copy of *The Earthly Paradise*.<sup>27</sup>

Some qualities which the Victorians admired in the poem are still evident: its swift fluency; its fusion of romantic fantasy and sense of loss; its appreciation of landscape. Other qualities are representative of Victorian literature: its direct musicality; its sense of discovery and exploration of other cultures; its moral earnestness and belief in heroism; its fascination with erotic sublimation.

Morris was nearly unique among Victorian poets in his view of the *poet as historian*: not a romantic individual, but one among a *community* of artists, living and dead, who have borne the immense responsibility of narration and creation. *The Earthly Paradise* lacks the astounding verbal subtlety of Tennyson's lyrics, or the intellectual density of Browning's finest monologues, but its singer's more self-effacing ironies create a hall of mirroring audiences and points of view.

In 'How I Became a Socialist' Morris later characterized himself as 'a man . . . careless of metaphysics and religion';<sup>28</sup> by contrast to Tennyson, Browning, or Hopkins, he simply ignored the limitations of any religious orthodoxy. His collective view of heroism already offered a more democratic alternative to Carlyle's domineering élitism, and he enlarged the notion of heroism to admit a few limited female analogues, absent from the writing of Carlyle and Tennyson. His poem is both celebration and plea, elegy and invitation to form a common artistry of sympathy, vulnerability, and love, and his writing in general is one of the century's fullest, most radical poetic expressions of a secular communal faith.

An 'aged man', the old historian in *News From Nowhere*, describes the dominating emotion of its new personal and social world as follows:

. . . the world was being brought to its second birth; how could that take place without a tragedy? Moreover, think of it. The spirit of the new days, of our days, was to be a delight in the life of the world; intense and overweening love of the skin and surface of the earth on which man dwells, such as a lover has in the fair flesh of the woman he loves . . .<sup>29</sup>

Similarly, the ideal woman of *Nowhere*, 'the most unfamiliar to me, the most unlike what I could have thought of',<sup>30</sup>

. . . laid her shapely sun-browed hand and arm on the lichened wall as if to embrace it, and cried out, 'O me! O me! How I love the earth, and the

seasons, and the weather, and all things that deal with it, and all that grows out of it,—as this has done!”<sup>31</sup>

In a rare departure from self-effacement, in one of his last essays (1894), Morris described himself as follows:

... if I may mention myself as a personality and not as a mere type, a man of my disposition ... with a deep love of the earth and the life on it, and a passion for the history of mankind.<sup>32</sup>

So Morris’s wry *persona* at last removes for a moment his public mask to acknowledge, at the end of *The Earthly Paradise*:

—No little part it was for me to play—  
The idle singer of an empty day.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Morris’s contemporaries exaggerated the resemblance between Morris’s *Earthly Paradise* and Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, but failed to note the extensive parallels with the frame and structure of the *Decameron*. Mackail and others noted that Boccaccio’s storytellers were likewise refugees from the plague, but do not explore related parallels in the frame, proem, interconnective passages, and arrangement of the tales. Nevertheless, Morris was well aware of the kinds of topics Boccaccio and Chaucer had found appropriate for inclusion in introductions, connective passages, narrative tales, farewells, and defenses of the poet’s art.

The analogies between Morris’s ‘Apology’ and Boccaccio’s ‘Proem’ are especially striking; though many *contrasts* remain.

For example, there is no parallel in *The Decameron* to the Wanderers’ and idle singer’s slowly gained detachment, tranquility, and gratitude for life. In his use of sources, Morris effectively followed his own (succinct) advice:

Read it through, then shut the book and write it out again as a new story for yourself (CW, XVII, xxxix).

<sup>2</sup> No. 2118, p. 753.

<sup>3</sup> June 1868, p. 714.

<sup>4</sup> 30 May 1868, p. 730.

<sup>5</sup> Unsigned review, *Spectator*, March 1870, xliii, p. 332.

<sup>6</sup> G. W. Cox, *Edinburgh Review*, January 1871, cxxxiii, p. 243.

<sup>7</sup> E.C. Stedman, *Victorian Poets*, Boston: Houghton and Osgood, 1875, p. 375.

<sup>8</sup> November 1869, xxvii, p. 45.

<sup>9</sup> *Blackwoods*, July 1869, p. 73.

<sup>10</sup> *Temple Bar*, November 1869, xxvii, p. 51.

<sup>11</sup> Letter to F.S. Ellis, 18 August 1869: ‘Many thanks for your letter again, and

the *Temple Bar*, which did not excoriate my thin hide in spite of a tender contempt with which Mr. Austin seemed to regard me. Commercially I ought to be grateful to him and am so; from the critical point of view I think there is so much truth as this in his article, as that we poets of today have been a good deal made by those of the Byron and Shelley time . . .' (Henderson, *Letters*, p. 28).

<sup>12</sup> *Westminster Review*, XC, October 1867, p. 308.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 307.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 307.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 312.

<sup>16</sup> *Edinburgh Review*, CXXXIII, January 1871, p. 243.

<sup>17</sup> *Saturday Review*, 11 December 1869, p. 771.

<sup>18</sup> *Letters of D.G. Rossetti*, ed. O. Doughty and J. Wahl, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965, II, p. 688.

<sup>19</sup> *Pall Mall Budget*, December 1869, iv, p. 27.

<sup>20</sup> *Spectator*, March 1870, xliii, p. 333.

<sup>21</sup> *Blackwood's Magazine*, CVII, May 1870, p. 73.

<sup>22</sup> *Athenaeum*, 25 December 1869, p. 868.

<sup>23</sup> 17 December 1870, no. 2251, p. 795.

<sup>24</sup> *Academy*, February 1870, i, p. 121.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>26</sup> One startling exception to this pattern is George Saintsbury, who championed Morris's poetry in vol. 3 of his 1910 *A History of English Prosody*. Of Jason's heroic couplet, to others 'dragging' or at best 'mellifluous', he asserts:

. . . it may be safely pronounced, the best example of the decidedly, but not excessively, enjambed couplet that we have (p. 323).

#### And of *The Earthly Paradise*:

. . . in the first volume, as well as for the others which followed it with such extraordinary rapidity, considering the bulk and the goodness of the work they contained, Morris by no means confined himself to this fresh and admirable vehicle of verse-narrative . . . it is nearly impossible to imagine a finer narrative medium, if the narrative is made the first object. Nor should it be forgotten that, on the just artistic principle of continuing the interposed joints in the same outline as the frame, the 'Month' pieces (containing some of the best poetry of the whole) are also in couplet partly, though the poet has recognised the need of something more, for that best poetry, by adding stanza-doublets, as it were, in some cases . . .

But neither of these things, good as both are, seems to me to be Morris's chief prosodic achievement as yet. I find this in the strangely and delightfully 'refreshed' decasyllabics in which he has clothed most of what seem to me the best things in the book: 'The Watching of the Falcon', the incomparable 'Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon', and the 'Ring Given to Venus'. With the unerring instinct of the great prosodic poets he has caught, made fast, and developed a form and function of this oldest of



pure English metres which had scarcely ever been achieved before, save by Gower in the Medea passage, and by Keats in the 'Eve of St. Mark' (pp. 324–25).

Saintsbury's third volume also has an epigraph from one of Morris's early prose romances ('Mary rings!' from *The Hollow Land*).

<sup>27</sup> 'Written in a copy of *The Earthly Paradise*', CW, XXIV, pp. 343–44.

<sup>28</sup> CW, XXIII, p. 280.

<sup>29</sup> CW, XVI, p. 132.

<sup>30</sup> CW, XVI, p. 182.

<sup>31</sup> CW, XVI, pp. 201–202.

<sup>32</sup> CW, XXIII, p. 280.