

Medea and Circe as 'Wise' Women
in the Poetry of
William Morris and Augusta Webster

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The most popular literary works of William Morris in his lifetime were *The Life and Death of Jason* (1867) and *The Earthly Paradise* (1868–70). Seven reprintings of *Jason* appeared before Morris revised it in 1882, and eight more by 1923 (Forman). In 1942, E.K. Brown characterized *Jason* in his introduction to a standard anthology of *Victorian Poetry* as 'one of the most beautiful and one of the best constructed poems in modern literature' (463).

In this essay I will not try to vindicate such assertions (though they seem to me more defensible than later canons might suggest), but examine instead Morris's 'defence' of Medea and Circe, his implicit indictment of the 'hero' Jason in 'life and [in] death,' and resonances between his portraits of these two 'wise women' and counterparts in the work of Augusta Webster. An uncertain feminist but temperamental egalitarian,¹ Morris portrayed Medea as a woman thwarted in the exercise of substantial powers and abilities, and driven to madness by the injustices she suffered at Jason's hand; the example of this interpretation influenced subsequent Victorian representations of classical heroines in significant ways.

'The Deeds of Jason' was the eleventh-begun and first-completed of Morris's early drafts for *The Earthly Paradise*, and he published the finished verse narrative in decasyllabic couplets as *The Life and Death of Jason* in 1867. The new work's central metaphors of lifelong travel aptly reflected his emerging preoccupations with the pleasures of the senses, the intricacies of craftwork, and the complex labyrinths of greed and overarching ambition. He also dwelt at length on topography,

anthropology, and the mechanics of ancient navigation, and provided long poetic tracking shots of the Argonauts' awe and fear when they encountered snow near the Black Sea,² and their labours to transport the vessel overland on rollers and 'a stage with broad wheels.' Morris's epic also abounded in quasi-cinematic set-pieces – the 'Snatchers'' fierce attacks on the helpless Phineus, Glauce's agony in her poisoned robe, and Pelias' dismemberment and incineration in a cauldron – but the underlying detachment of his descriptions often suggested that allegorical resonances interested him more than familiar mythical plots.

Many critics have commented on the abrupt transition from Morris's 'spasmodic' style in *The Defence of Guenevere* to the narrative mode of *Jason* and *The Earthly Paradise*,³ but fewer have observed the 'medieval' preoccupations with love and struggle he transposed into the new work's 'classical' setting. The anxiety and oppression of Guenevere in 'The Defence,' Ella in 'The Dream,' Alice of 'Sir Peter Harpdon's End,' and Yoland of 'The Tune of the Seven Towers' evolved into Medea's brooding struggles, and her travails in turn evolved into the *aporiai* Gudrun, Rhodope, and Stenoboea faced in *The Earthly Paradise*. The more daedal aspects of Medea's 'sorcery' lingered on in rather different forms and venues, in the enchantments of Birdalone, Habundia, and other 'wise' and 'cunning' women of Morris's later prose romances.

Critical Responses to Morris's Portrait of Medea

Jason was conspicuously well favoured in the later fame of its reviewers. Twenty-four-year-old Henry James, for example, proclaimed in the *North American Review* that Morris had 'foraged in a treasure-house ... visited the ancient world, and come back with a massive cup of living Greek wine':

From the moment that Medea comes into the poem, Jason falls into the second place, and keeps it to the end ... Without question, then, she is the central figure of the poem, – a powerful and enchanting figure, – a creature of barbarous arts and of exquisite human passions. Jason accordingly possesses only that indirect hold upon our attention which belongs to the Virgilian Aeneas. (688)

James also went out of his way to contrast Morris's work with the then-controversial poetry of Algernon Swinburne, but Swinburne

himself praised Morris's *Review*:

The root of the romance here, where it was needed for dramatic invention and to fair and sensible truth, has been no poet for centuries of this noble poem is the saviour, she has shrunk before entering the tragic memory [Chaucer] who I of women like none but

Among *Jason's* twentieth-century critics, it is noted that Morris's portrayal of the story' (39), and Caro victimizer, Medea and he not. She remains ... the center of the story even found in Med

Medea's charming of the Argonauts is considered as emblematic of the Orphic tradition ... is in tune with the necessary force of the cosmos, as in Morris's ideal of heroism

These iconographic questions and one researches their origins in its classical sources have been known that Morris consulted Rhodios's *Argonautica*, Pindar's diction of the tale, but he also drew on *Heroides*, Seneca's *Medea*, and Apollodorus.

The principal source for the powerful woman was Claudius Lemprière.⁴ Charles Beynon commented on Apollonius' sy

himself praised Morris's portrait of Medea highly in the *Fortnightly Review*:

The root of the romance lies of course in the character of Medea, and here, where it was needfullest to do well, the poet has done best ... For dramatic invention and vivid realism of the impossible, which turns to fair and sensible truth the wildest dreams of legend, there has been no poet for centuries comparable. But the very flower and crest of this noble poem is the final tragedy at Corinth. Queen, sorceress, saviour, she has shrunk or risen to mere woman; and not in vain before entering the tragic lists has the poet called on that great poet's memory [Chaucer] who has dealt with the terrible and pitiful passion of women like none but Shakespeare since. (19)

Among *Jason's* twentieth-century critics, Peter Faulkner has observed that Morris's portrayal of Medea's humanity 'enhances the pathos of the story' (39), and Carole Silver that, 'Slayer and slain, victim and victimizer, Medea and her fate ... move ... the reader as Jason's does not. She remains ... the center of interest and sympathy' (52). Charlotte Oberg even found in Medea mythic forms of *ananke*:

Medea's charming of the dragon guarding the golden fleece may be considered as emblematic of her power over Time, or Chronos, who, according to the Orphic theogony ... was a serpent ... The witch Medea ... is in tune with Necessity, the unseen but finally omnipotent motive force of the cosmos, and it is therefore she who truly represents Morris's ideal of heroism in *The Life and Death of Jason*. (85)

These iconographic qualities actually become more striking when one researches their origins, as several underappreciated scholars of its classical sources have done (Kermode; Arscott; Mench; Gibbs). It is known that Morris consulted Lemprière's *Classical Dictionary*, Apollonius Rhodios's *Argonautica*, Pindar's *Odes*, and Euripides' *Medea* for his redaction of the tale, but he may have drawn also on the *Odyssey*, Ovid's *Heroides*, Seneca's *Medea*, Diodorus's *History*, and the *Argonautica* of Apollodorus.

The principal source for his decision to focus the legend on a single powerful woman was clearly Apollonius, mediated in part through Lemprière.⁴ Charles Beye, a twentieth-century classicist, has commented on Apollonius' sympathetic portrait of Medea as follows:



Medea is ... more active and decisive than Jason is anywhere. The result is to constitute her as a hero, at least equivalent to Jason in the narrative ... Peculiarly enough, for all the vivid characterization of his crew, Jason is quite alone. Into this void emerges Medea who develops in the fourth book into Jason's absolute equal, if not superior, in power, energy, and daring. (135)

In other passages, Beye contrasted Medea with less active counterparts such as Penelope, Helen, and Dido, and interpreted the Fleece itself in Apollonius's version as an emblem of sexual consummation, a reaction which effectively collapsed the erotic-encounter-and-adventure plot into a single, somewhat reductive allegorical frame (155-6).

Morris almost certainly found his predecessor's portrait of Medea congenial, but he also revised it in pointed and interesting ways. Apollonius's Medea set marriage as an apparent condition for her aid, but Morris suppressed such quasi-'Victorian' preoccupations with marital status,⁵ echoed rather quaintly in Henry Ellison's 'The Story of Aeson Transformed by Medea: A Heathen Fable Christianly Moralized' (1851). So pointed was Morris's indifference to such matters, in fact, that his contemporary Henry Hewlett solicitously assured readers of the *Contemporary Review* that 'in more than one passage wherein the limits of propriety are stretched to the full, it is evident that there was the strongest temptation to exceed them ... One is bound not to pass without notice these signs of his restraint' (107-8).

'Restrained' or not, Morris created a Medea who was untrammelled by thoughts of prudence or safety as she set sail with nearly sixty men and Atalanta, the only female Argonaut. Even more pointedly, she dismissed Jason's nervous promises of lifelong devotion as they warily made their way towards the well-guarded fleece:

Nay ... let be;
 Were thou more fickle than the restless sea,
 Still should I love thee, knowing thee for such;
 Whom I know not, indeed, but fear the touch
 Of Fortune's hand. (9.21-5)⁶

Such passages enhanced Morris's expressions of respect or sympathy for his heroine, and rendered her characteristic self-awareness more plausibly essential to the tale's evolution.

In the *Argonautica*, Medea's brother Absyrtus.⁷ It is Absyrtus; but Medea's godlike sister, Circe.⁸

But since upon us you
 My brother's death,
 My father's godlike
 May wash our souls

Jason also assumed the role of a hero, and he and Medea visit the island of Circe, and he and Medea visit Circe and he and Medea visit Circe and he and Medea visit Circe forth alone, to seek aid from the wise of women, and there / Are but lost men who watch her stride through the beasts' that importune only by her headband and

Circe was also an immortal and Apollonius's *Argonautica* intermittently helpful in the island's *hetairai*, for down the garden path she came not forth, but for the baneful of tooth and claw

Lemprière's Circe de Apollonius's rather sanely learned what she had done hast thou planned ... but my hearth, for never a flight' (4.740-9). Morris she must sacrifice a human 'many a jar of unmixed Sun,' after which 'the forget.'

Morris's Circe also sorrows she is able to and complexities of

Medea and Circe

In the *Argonautica*, Medea incited Jason to kill and dismember her brother Absyrtus.⁷ It is Jason who in Morris's text decides to kill Absyrtus, but Medea seeks absolution for them both from 'my father's godlike sister,' Circe:⁸

But since upon us yet lies heavily
My brother's death, take heed that we must see
My father's godlike sister; no one less
May wash our souls of that blood-guiltiness. (12.259-62)

Jason also assumed a distinctly protective role in the *Argonautica* and he and Medea visited Circe together,⁹ but Morris's Medea ventures forth alone, to seek audience with the 'God-begotten wonder, Circe ... the wise of women,' and warns the Argonauts that 'all that wander there / Are but lost men and their undoers fair.' Her shipmates then watch her stride through 'close-set ranks' of 'golden-collared sad-eyed beasts' that importune her 'with varying moan and roar,' protected only by her headband of 'Pontic Moly' (13.65-6, 89-90, 97, 96, 98, 107).

Circe was also an irredeemably vicious seductress in *The Odyssey* and Apollonius's *Argonautica*,¹⁰ but she is an essentially honest and intermittently helpful if ambivalent figure in *The Life and Death of Jason*. The island's *hetairai*, for example – not Circe herself – lead their victims down the garden path 'Into the dark cool cloister, when again / They came not forth, but four-foot, rough of mane, / Uncouth with spots, baneful of tooth and claw' (13.171-3).

Lemprière's Circe declined to expiate Jason and Medea at all, and Apollonius's rather sanguinary counterpart rebuked Medea when she learned what she had done: 'Poor wretch, an evil and shameful return hast thou planned ... begone from my halls ... and kneel not to me at my hearth, for never will I approve thy counsels and thy shameful flight' (4.740-9). Morris's Circe, by contrast, simply tells Medea that she must sacrifice a hundred 'milkwhite bulls,' a hundred sheep, and 'many a jar of unmixed honied wine' to her grandfather, 'the all-seeing Sun,' after which 'the deed thy Jason's spear has done / Mayst thou forget.'

Morris's Circe also regrets that she cannot avert the crimes and sorrows she is able to foretell, and broods deeply about the burdens and complexities of her foreknowledge, much as the Icelandic

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spámaður Guest does when a graceful young woman serves him a meal in 'The Lovers of Gudrun':

'What more? What more? I see thy grey eyes ask,
What course, what ending to the tangled task
The Gods have set before me, ere I die?
O child, I know all things, indeed, but why
Shouldst thou know all, nor yet be wise therefore?
Me knowledge grieves not, thee should it grieve sore;
Nor knowing, shouldst thou cease to hope or fear. (13.291-7)

'But though full oft thou shalt lift hands in vain,
Crying to what thou know'st not in thy need,
... yet oft, indeed,
Shalt thou go-nigh to think thyself divine ...
For joy of what thou dreamest cannot die.
Live then thy life, nor ask for misery,
Most certain if thou knewest what must be. (*Earthly Paradise* 322-9)

Circe tells Medea bluntly that her least humane and most vengeful acts will be most remembered, but tries to reassure her – not very persuasively – that 'thy name shall be a solace and a song, / While the world lasts.' She also outlines a bitter theodicy of divine deception which has close parallels in 'The Story of Orpheus and Eurydice':

Wherefore the Gods, wishing the earth to teem
With living wills like theirs, nor as a dream
To hold but beauty and the lives of beasts,
That they may have fair stories for their feasts,
Have given them all forgetfulness of death,
Longings and hopes, and joy in drawing breath,
And they live happy, knowing nought at all,
Nor what that is, when that shall chance to fall. (13.303-10)

In Lemprière's as well as Apollonius's texts, Circe brusquely commanded Medea to leave. In Morris's version, she simply urges Medea to depart for her own safety ('Gird up thy raiment, nor run slower now / Than from the amorous bearer of the bow / Once Daphne ran,' 13.349-51), and offers a parting declaration of her affection ('And well I love thee, being so wise and fair,' 13.343).

In effect, Morris's sophisticated counterpart roles for the boy-Jason – 'fair face shuddering and save.' Circe's predictions stature within the poem knowledge of ineluctable

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Morris's abandonment of Jason')¹¹ marked an impl antiheroic undoing, and especially clear in the wc defection, Medea's rever, *Ring*-like tragedy of ris 'tremble[s] in the telli estrangement of Chaucer'

Jason, Medea, and their rest and peace' in Corint Jason to divorce Medea at first:

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Creon persists, however, Glaucus's youthful beauty stories. After he decides t ten years' space' (and the he calls himself in a brief

In effect, Morris's Circe becomes Medea's teacher – a more sophisticated counterpart of Charon and Juno, who had played similar roles for the boy-Jason – and as a result Medea fled the island, her 'fair face shuddering and afraid,' and 'set herself her own vext soul to save.' Circe's predictions effectively enhance Medea's character and stature within the poem, but her 'absolution' brings chilling foreknowledge of ineluctable guilt.

Jason's Betrayal and Medea's Revenge

Morris's abandonment of his early draft's initial title ('The Deeds of Jason')¹¹ marked an implicit shift of focus from heroic 'feats' to their antiheroic undoing, and this change in the tale's tonalities becomes especially clear in the work's conclusion. Book 17's account of Jason's defection, Medea's revenge, and Jason's death form a quasi-medieval, *Ring*-like tragedy of rise, fall, and betrayal, which the narrator 'tremble[s] in the telling' and compares with the passion and estrangement of Chaucer's 'Troilus and Creseyde.'

Jason, Medea, and their two sons have enjoyed 'ten sweet years of rest and peace' in Corinth,¹² before Creon, the city's ruler, pressures Jason to divorce Medea and marry his daughter Glauce. Jason protests at first:

What is there dwelling above ground
That loveth me as this one loveth me? ...
For me she gave up country, kin, and name,
For me she risked tormenting and the flame,
The anger of the Gods and curse of man;
For me she came across the waters wan
Through many woes, and for my sake did go
Alone, unarmed, to my most cruel foe ...
Making me king of all my father's lands:
Note all these things, and tell me then to flee
From that which threateneth her who loveth me. (17.126–7, 135–44)

Creon persists, however, and Jason finds himself quickly intrigued by Glauce's youthful beauty and flattered by her artless interest in his stories. After he decides that his love for Medea has been 'dying in the ten years' space' (and the narrator-chorus interjects, 'Alas for truth!'), he calls himself in a brief moment of lucidity a

wavering traitor, still unsatisfied!
 O false betrayer of the love so tried!
 Fool! to cast off the beauty that thou knowst,
 Clear-seeing wisdom, better than a host
 Against thy foes, and truth and constancy
 Thou wilt not know again, whate'er shall be! (17.399-404)

In the end, he sends Medea a gratuitously graceless bill of divorcement, offers her money, condemns her as a recidivist sorcerer, and makes no mention of the future fate of their two sons (exiled with their mother in Euripides' play). The only 'reason' he can contrive for this abandonment is that 'the times are changed, with them is changed my heart' (17.763)

Morris had to find and adapt non-Apollonian models for all of this, for the *Argonautica* concluded with Jason and Medea's return to Greece. Some potential sources were particularly ill-suited to his revisionist purpose – the quasi-vampiric exultation of Seneca's Medea, for example, as she contemplated the murder of her sons:

At last,
 powers of nature, you have been appeased.
 This is a real wedding-day of joy.
 The crime is now complete ... But no:
 I am not yet avenged ... And against my will
 a sense of pleasure subtly penetrates
 my being, and it grows, constantly grows.
 It lacked only one thing to be perfect.
 He should have seen it ... For any criminal act
 is just a waste without him here to see ...

If, even now, there is, unknown to me,
 some fetus spawned by you inside my womb,
 I'll use this sword and tear it out with steel ...
 Enjoy your crime,
 my aching heart, enjoy it to the full.
 The day is mine; I urge you not to hurry.
 We are using the time that we were given. (5.985ff, 1010ff)

No chorus comments on this sadistic rant, but the scene does conclude with Jason's rather apt parting taunt: 'Wherever you may go, you will be proof that gods do not exist.'

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Two little helpes
 Smiling as thoug
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Instead, he focused his narrative lens with solicitous care on Medea's incoherent maternal grief:¹⁵

What! when I kneel in temples of the Gods,
Must I bethink me of the upturned sods,
And hear a voice say: 'Mother, wilt thou come
And see us resting in our new made home,
Since thou wert used to make us lie full soft,
Smoothing our pillows many a time and oft?' ...
'O sons, with what sweet counsels and what tears
Would I have hearkened to the hopes and fears
Of your first loves ...
But now, but now, this is a little hand
Too often kissed since love did first begin
To win such curses as it yet shall win ...
Praise to the Gods! ye know not how to curse.' (17.927-56)

Lemprière provided a laconic and rather legalistic summary of the basic plot outlines Morris followed (with one exception) in his entry for 'Jason':

Jason's partiality for Glauce, the daughter of the king of the country, afterwards disturbed their matrimonial happiness, and Medea was divorced, that Jason might more freely indulge his amorous propensities. This infidelity was severely revenged by Medea, who destroyed her children in the presence of their father [a plot element omitted by Morris]. After his separation from Medea, Jason lived an unsettled and melancholy life. (319)

Morris constructed his protective 'defence' of Medea along similarly forensic lines, as a plea of temporary insanity, or at least tragic confusion. The result – as Martha Mench wryly noted – effectively 'subdued [Medea's] ferocious nature while retaining her ferocious deeds' (206).¹⁶

Jason beneath the Mast

In Morris's redaction, Jason's 'unsettled and melancholy life' is not nasty or particularly brutish, but it is certainly short. He briefly considers suicide, restrains himself when his old nurse comforts him,

and wanders in distraction where he loses himself in counterfactual regret:

ah, if I could
But once again her v
From death and mar
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Morris effectively dr focus on Jason's faith awareness of his action a very-deep virtue in M lashed himself more fir have killed him, and he genuine hero.

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Webster's 'Medea'

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Webster was the wife Michael Rossetti, and ar and she had already pu translation of Euripides' / for her interest in the d: the wider Pre-Raphaelit *The Life and Death of Jaso* to undertake her transla have prompted her to ad

and wanders in distraction out to the Argo, beached near Corinth, where he loses himself for a moment in wistful reminiscence and counterfactual regret:

ah, if I could but see
 But once again her who delivered me
 From death and many troubles, then no more
 Would I turn backward from the shadowy shore,
 And all my life would seem but perfect gain. (17.1271-5)

Morris effectively drew back his lens in the poem's final lines to focus on Jason's faithlessness, lack of resolution, and wavering awareness of his actions' irrevocability. Constancy of attachment was a very deep virtue in Morris's moral order: had his epic protagonist lashed himself more firmly to the Argo's sustaining mast, it might not have killed him, and he might have enjoyed the 'life and death' of a genuine hero.

In any event, Jason reaches the 'shadowy shore' soon thereafter, for the Argo's mast falls on him later that night. The Corinthians discover his broken body in the dawn ('Beneath the ruined stem did Jason lie / Crushed, and all dead of him that here can die,' 17.1337-8), and decide to return the Argo to the deep, as a fit offering 'to the Deity / Who shakes the hard earth with the rolling sea' (17.1363-4).

Webster's 'Medea' and Other Victorian Classical Heroines

Morris's recalibration of the legend's scales of guilt did not go unnoticed at the time. In *Portraits* (1870), Augusta Webster supplemented a powerful poetic portrayal of a reluctant and embittered prostitute, 'A Castaway,' with two dramatic monologues by Medea ('Medea in Athens') and Circe ('Circe').¹⁷

Webster was the wife of a Cambridge barrister, a friend of William Michael Rossetti, and an early advocate of significant feminist reforms, and she had already published a novel, three volumes of poetry, and a translation of Euripides' *Medea* (1868).¹⁸ Clearly indebted to the Brownings for her interest in the dramatic monologue, she was also a member of the wider Pre-Raphaelite circle who would almost certainly have read *The Life and Death of Jason*. Morris's example may have encouraged her to undertake her translation of *Medea*, and the appearance of *Jason* may have prompted her to add these two classical monologues to her *Portraits*.

Most of *Portraits'* reviewers preferred 'Circe,' in fact, in which a passionate but narcissistic sorceress expresses her disgust at her unfortunate victims, allegedly transformed by their own coarse and petty natures into the beasts they have become. She awaits with impatience the arrival of a more worthy lover, as the storm that shipwrecks Ulysses' vessel rages in the poem's last lines:

Another burst of flame – and the black speck
Shows in the glare, lashed onwards. It were well
I bade make ready for our guests to-night. (208–10)

The exiled protagonist of 'Medea in Athens' denies at first that she is moved by the news of Jason's death she has just received ('And this most strange of all, / That I care nothing'), but quickly belies this in extended reveries in which she fantasizes that the dying Jason remembers their lives together, regrets his betrayal, and pleads for a final reconciliation ('Where is Medea? Let her bind my head,' 128). Webster's thought-experimental conversation also provides a wistful antiphon to Morris's earlier reconstruction of Jason's last conscious moments, quoted above:

ah, if I could but see
But once again her who delivered me
From death and many troubles ...
How I should clasp again my love, mine own ...
And with the eyes of lovers newly wed,
How should we gaze each upon each again. (17.1271–3, 1290, 1292–3)

In Webster's reverie, Jason's wraith remembers Medea's confidence when they were young, and sailed together toward the deadly Symplegades (wandering rocks):

And now he speaks out of his loneliness,
'I was afraid and careful, but she laughed:
"Love steers," she said; and when the rocks were far,
Grey twinkling spots in distance, suddenly
Her face grew white, and, looking back to them,
She said, "Oh love, a god has whispered me
'Twere well had we drowned there, for strange mad woes
Are waiting for us in your Greece": and then
She tossed her head back, while her brown hair streamed

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past ("Ten years togeth
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ghost:

Lo, I a
The wretch thou say'st
Who, binding me with
In the midnight templ
From home and father
When have I
When cruel, save for t
Wilt thou accuse my g
Mine or thine, Jason?

She blames him more fc
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Oh, soul of n
How shall I pardon th
Never could I forgive
Never could I look on
That slew them and n
What is thy childless
Thou foolish angry g
Would I could wrong
And see me happy. (2

Go, go; thou mind'st r
And then I hate thee
By which none weeps

She has not, of course, ar
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Gold in the wind and sun, and her face glowed
 With daring beauty; "What of woes," she cried,
 "If only they leave time for love enough?" (56-67)

In her loneliness and isolation, Medea cherishes the integrity of things past ("Ten years together were they not worth cost / Of all the anguish?"), and formulates a complex apologia in response to Jason's ghost:

Lo, I am

The wretch thou say'st; but wherefore? by whose work?
 Who, binding me with dreadful marriage oaths
 In the midnight temple, led my treacherous flight
 From home and father? ...

When have I been base,
 When cruel, save for thee, until - Man, man,
 Wilt thou accuse my guilt? Whose is my guilt?
 Mine or thine, Jason? (206-10, 215-18)

She blames him more for her guilt than for his own, for her shame and grief are unassuageable, and she ends the poem with a bitter valedictory:

Oh, soul of my crimes,

How shall I pardon thee for what I am? ...
 Never could I forgive thee for my boys;
 Never could I look on this hand of mine
 That slew them and not hate thee. Childless, thou,
 What is thy childlessness to mine? Go, go,
 Thou foolish angry ghost, what wrongs hast thou?
 Would I could wrong thee more. Come thou sometimes
 And see me happy. (218-19, 229-35)

Go, go; thou mind'st me of our sons;
 And then I hate thee worse; go to thy grave
 By which none weeps. I have forgotten thee. (267-9)

She has not, of course, and never will.

Webster departed from classical sources in ways that strongly suggest Morris's example, but she also explored Medea's retrospective

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emotions in strikingly original and nuanced ways, tempered with deeply held beliefs in the centrality of motherhood to human life. Webster's complex monological portrait of Medea's self-loathing can hold its own with Browning's best monologues.

In 'Xantippe' (1871), an ostensibly very different classical monologue, Amy Levy recast another, less sanguinary figure's life circumstances along more pointedly feminist lines. Xantippe, Socrates' widow, bitterly recalls on her deathbed her husband's cold condescension and dismissal of her place in the life of the mind. Once she had hoped to participate in the school's free-ranging debates, but Socrates' sometime friend and would-be lover Alcibiades had dismissed her, and sneered that

woman's frail –

Her body rarely stands the test of soul;
She grows intoxicate with knowledge; throws
The laws of custom, order, 'neath her feet. (168–71)

Worst of all, Socrates himself – the 'midwife,' the lover of wisdom, who knew that he did not know – sarcastically agreed, and ordered her out of the room. Then

in my bosom there uprose
A sudden flame, a merciful fury sent
To save me; with both angry hands I flung
The skin upon the marble, where it lay
Spouting red rills and fountains on the white;
Then, all unheeding faces, voices, eyes,
I fled across the threshold, hair unbound – ...
Flooded with all the flowing tide of hopes
Which once had gushed out golden, now sent back
Swift to their sources, never more to rise. (212–22)

Webster's and Levy's adaptations of very different classical sources also marked the emergence of a new revisionist motif, which deserves independent study in its own right: that of retrospective critique from the margin. Other realizations of this genre can be traced in Michael Field's poems in the voice of Sappho ('Long Ago,' 'Circe at Circaeum'), Edward Dowdon's 'The Prayer of the Swine to Circe,' H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt*, Sylvia Plath's 'Medusa,' Adrienne Rich's 'I Dream I'm the Death

of Orpheus,' Margarete 'Persephone Abducted,' At least two late twentieth-century retellings: Seymour in *Medea* (1988) and *Modern Retelling* (1998) prose of the interior life

I have tried to demystify the economy of William M. F. Bryant's *and Death of Jason* emblematic sensibility, and that of the strong-willed, tormented Gudrun in *The Earthly Song*, and the 'Lady' in *Characterize the figure of sexual autonomy and conventional in their time*

I have also argued for compensatory justice – Jason's death – made of emerging feminist counter-Medea figures were not less brutal, more reflective anticipation of Webster's bond between Circe and of both, as flawed sage

Finally, I have suggested 'life and death' expressions to companionate as with his impassioned companion James's much-quoted glimpse into a world where will be called upon not simply to feel, to look,

It may not be altogether explorations of classical his view of these affective more remarkable than motifs of some of his revisionist poetic port

of Orpheus,' Margaret Atwood's 'Circe/Mud Poems,' Rita Dove's 'Persephone Abducted,' and Diane Wakoski's *Medea the Sorceress* (1991). At least two late twentieth-century novelists, moreover – Miranda Seymour in *Medea* (1982), and Christa Wolf in her powerful *Medea: A Modern Retelling* (1998) – also provided complementary accounts in prose of the interior life of the Argonaut's most able science-officer.

I have tried to demonstrate in this essay that the revisionist sexual economy of William Morris's portraits of Medea and Circe in *The Life and Death of Jason* embodied newer, more egalitarian forms of poetic sensibility, and that these insights persisted in later portraits of strong-willed, tormented, and 'interesting' women – Stenoboea and Gudrun in *The Earthly Paradise*, the 'other' Gudrun in *Sigurd the Volsung*, and the 'Lady' in *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*. Morris did not characterize the figure of Medea in feminist terms, but her (relative) sexual autonomy and canny powers of uninhibited action were unconventional in their time.

I have also argued that Morris's intuitive empathy and sense of compensatory justice – rather drastically expressed in the emblem of Jason's death – made oblique but significant early contributions to an emerging feminist counter-tradition. Morris's and Webster's Circe and Medea figures were more interesting than their classical prototypes – less brutal, more reflective, and more ambivalently 'wise.' In partial anticipation of Webster's insights, Morris also took care to craft the bond between Circe and Medea in ways which added to the dignity of both, as flawed sages with insights into a future neither could alter.

Finally, I have suggested that Morris's cool examination of Jason's 'life and death' expressed his emerging beliefs about 'heroic' adherence to companionship as well as erotic 'fellowship' – ideals which underlay his impassioned commitment to socialism, and effectively belied James's much-quoted remark that *The Life and Death of Jason* opened 'a glimpse into a world where [the jaded intellects of the present moment] will be called upon neither to choose, to criticise, nor to believe, but simply to feel, to look, and to listen' (692).

It may not be altogether unexpected that Morris's earliest poetic explorations of classical settings expressed a preliminary version of his view of these affective and pragmatic ideals. It may be somewhat more remarkable that these ideals seem to have anticipated major motifs of some of his feminist successors, and prefigured a subgenre of revisionist poetic portraiture that lives on a century after his death.

NOTES

- 1 Critical examinations of Morris's views on women appear in Sylvia Strauss; Florence and William Boos; Jan Marsh, 'Concerning Love'; Fiona MacCarthy, 685-8; and Florence Boos, 'The Socialist New Woman.'
- 2 A description of snow and ice near the Euxine Sea appeared in Ovid, *Tristia*, III.x.13-4, 17-8, 25, 29-32, and Martha Duvall Mench notes that 'it is not impossible that Ovid's forced exile in a land which was bound within itself by winter cold suggested to Morris the Argonaut's winter encampment beside the frozen river' (88-9).
- 3 E.P. Thompson, 114-7; Michael Holzman; Florence Boos, 'The Evolution of William Morris's "Prologue: The Wanderers"'; David Latham, 'Literal and Literary Texts: Morris's "The Story of Dorothea."'
- 4 Another early counterpart of Morris's kinder, gentler Medea appeared in her moving epistolary appeal to Jason in Ovid's *Heroides* XII: 'I do not implore you to go forth against bulls and men, nor ask your aid to quiet and overcome a dragon; it is you I ask for, - you, whom I have earned, whom you yourself gave to me, by whom I became a mother, as you by me a father' (195-8). An allusion to the legend's grim eschatology appears only in the letter's conclusion, when Medea feels 'something portentous, surely ... working in my soul' (212).
- 5 Medea promises, 'And I will lull to sleep the guardian serpent and give you the fleece of gold; but do thou, stranger, amid thy comrades make the gods witness of the vows thou hast taken on thyself for my sake' (*Argonautica* 4:87-9). In Morris's version, Jason and Medea hastily arrange their wedding to propitiate Alcinous, king of Phaeacia, whose support they need on their return journey.
- 6 By contrast, Morris simply describes Jason after the return to Iolchos as 'wedded to the fairest queen on earth' (17.457).
- 7 Apollonius's Medea tells him: 'I will beguile Absyrtus to come into thy hands ... Thereupon if this deed pleases thee, slay him and raise a conflict with the Colchians, I care not' (4.415-20). In the event, however, Absyrtus 'dyed with red his sister's silvery veil and robe as she shrank away ... And the hero, Aeson's son, cut off the extremities of the dead man, and thrice licked up some blood and thrice spat the pollution from his teeth, as it is right for the slayer to do' (4.474, 477-9).
- 8 In the *Argonautica*, Zeus, not Medea, had commanded that the Argonauts seek out Circe: 'Zeus himself, king of gods, was seized with wrath at what they had done. And he ordained that by the counsels of

- Aeaean Circe they shot
of blood and suffer cou
- 9 'Jason drew with him th
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Medea 'cast her robe [c
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quivering with fear' (4.7
 - 10 In the *Argonautica*, 'with
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 - 11 Morris's first draft of 'T
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 - 12 Morris suppressed Len
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 - 13 Morris presumably con
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 - 14 At one point, Morris's l
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In one hour knows
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Since swift forgetfu
 - 15 Euripides' Medea also

Aeaeon Circe they should cleanse themselves from the terrible stain of blood and suffer countless woes before their return' (4:558ff).

- 9 'Jason drew with him the Colchian maid ... Medea hid her face in both her hands, but Jason fixed in the ground the mighty hilted sword with which he had slain Aeetes' son' (4.688-9, 696-9). After the interview, Medea 'cast her robe [over her eyes] and poured forth a lamentation, until the hero took her by the hand and led her forth from the hall quivering with fear' (4.749-52)
- 10 In the *Argonautica*, 'with blood [Circe's] chambers and all the walls of her palace seemed to be running, and flame was devouring all the magic herbs with which she used to bewitch strangers whoever came; and she herself with murderous blood quenched the glowing flame, drawing it up in her hands ... And beasts, not resembling beasts of the wild, nor yet like men in body, but with a medley of limbs ... monsters shapeless of form followed her (662-81).
- 11 Morris's first draft of 'The Deeds of Jason,' now housed in the Huntington Library, MS 6434, breaks off in Book 7.
- 12 Morris suppressed Lemprière's rationale for the couple's departure, that Colchian resentment of Medea's sorceries had driven them into exile.
- 13 Morris presumably considered the traditional account of the children's murders too integral to omit, and did not avail himself of other alternatives, in the histories of Aelian (cited by Lemprière), and in Pausanias, who had the citizens of Corinth kill Medea's children, then hire Euripides to indict their mother (Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 2, trans. W.H.S. Jones and H.A. Ormerod [Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1935], 2.iii.6-11).
- 14 At one point, Morris's Medea also tells herself casuistically that she has saved Glauce from the betrayal she herself has experienced:
- at least I save thee this -
 The slow descent to misery from bliss ...
 And faint hope lessening till it fades away
 Into dull waiting for the certain blow ...
 And surely but a poor gift thou hast lost.
 The new-made slave, the toiler on the sea,
 The once rich fallen into poverty,
 In one hour knows more grief than thou canst know ...
 Kindly I deal with thee, mine enemy;
 Since swift forgetfulness to thee I send. (899-917, passim)
- 15 Euripides' Medea also dilates in effusions of self-pity before she com-

men appear in Sylvia
 h, 'Concerning Love';
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Sea appeared in Ovid,
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 and which was bound
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manded that the Argo-
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mits the murders: 'Give me your right hands to kiss, my children, give them to me! O hands and lips so dear to me, o noble face and bearing of my children! ... I can no longer look at you but am overwhelmed with my pain (5.1070-7); 'Come luckless hand, take the sword ... Do not weaken, do not remember that you love the children, that you gave them life ... even if you kill them, they were dear to you. Oh, what an unhappy woman I am!' (5.1244-50).

- 16 In the process, Morris also scrapped assorted continuations of the legend, in which Medea is rescued, is escorted in a divine chariot to Athens, becomes the wife of Aegeus, and bears a son Medus (Lemprière, 'Medea').
- 17 In 1870 the reviewer for the *Examiner and London Review* wrote dismissively that 'there is a calmness and a coldness about Mrs. Webster's Medea, which scarcely suggest the portrait of the burning passionate woman which the genius of Euripides has bequeathed to us. The agony here depicted is intense, but it does not adequately represent the revengeful tigress of Greek story' (qtd in Christine Sutphin, ed., Augusta Webster, *Portraits and Other Poems*, 418-21). An enlarged edition of *Portraits* was published in 1893, and the *Athenaeum* review of this enlarged edition did not mention the classical poems at all (Sutphin, in Webster 421-3).
- 18 Webster published her novel *Lesley's Guardians* under the pen name Cecil Home in 1864, and used the same pseudonym for *Blanche Lisle and Other Poems* (1860) and *Lilian Gray, A Poem* (1864). *Dramatic Studies* (1866) and *A Woman Sold and Other Poems* (1867) appeared under her own name.

M Gender and Morris's 'Pygmalion'

The myth of Pygmalion has a resonance for the Pre-Raphaelite movement and literature, and connects to the classical and sexual politics of the time. 'Pygmalion and the Statue' is a poem that explores the relationship between aesthetic idealism and the same time it demonstrates the tendency of the social, economic, and political conditions of the time as well as the tendency of women that was characteristic of the time.

Morris's 'Pygmalion' is one of four tales of *The Earthly Paradise* in which the sculptor who turns women of his island into prostitutes for daring to live a celibate life while he remains beautiful. 'Than ever I saw so exquisite that I had a bride who is 'the living prayer literally and the

beneath
Grew soft, its ivory
And yielded to his
Wax of Hymettus