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The defence of Medea: The subversion of the femme fatale trope in William Morris's *The Life and Death of Jason*[1]

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Abstract

William Morris (1834-1896) was one of the Victorian artists whose work extended beyond the totality of art that was cherished by nineteenth-century critics. Particularly in his early oeuvre, Morris engages with the political and cultural discussion on women's emancipation and utopian society through the use of Arthurian and Hellenic traditions. The following article provides a detailed reading of William Morris's portrayal of Medea in *The Life and Death of Jason* (1867). Contrary to the established association of Medea as a femme fatale, Morris's depiction of the Colchian princess escapes the vision of femininity characterised by devouring sexuality, manipulation, and the urge to destroy men. Similarly to *The Defence of Guinevere* (published in 1858), *The Life and Death of Jason* refrains from a direct condemnation of Medea, who attempts to navigate her experience of betrayal and dishonour. Thus, the article attempts to examine how Morris reused Hellenic tropes to discuss the complexity of the female experience that transgresses the boundaries of time and place.

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Keywords

William Morris, femme fatale, Victorian Hellenism, C19, Medea, literary revisionism

Obrona Medei: Obalenie motywu femme fatale w *The Life and Death of Jason* Williama Morrisa

Abstrakt

William Morris (1834-1896) był jednym z wiktoriańskich pisarzy i artystów, których twórczość wykraczała poza dziewiętnastowieczny trend syntezy sztuk. W swojej wczesnej poezji Morris angażuje się w kulturową dyskusję na temat emancypacji kobiet i społeczeństwa utopijnego, wykorzystując do tego tradycje arturiańskie i hellenistyczne. Poniższy artykuł zawiera szczegółową analizę tekstu Williama Morrisa *The Life and Death of Jason* (1867), w którym poeta przewrotnie reinterpretuje postać Medei w kontekście motywu fatalnej kobiecości. Co ważne, Morris nie przestawia jej jako stereotypową femme fatale z pożerającą seksualnością, skłonnością do manipulacji i nieodpartą chęcią do niszczenia mężczyzn, ale ukazuje ją jako postać wewnętrznie skonfliktowaną, posiadającą szeroką wiedzę oraz szukającą aprobaty innych. Podobnie jak we wcześniejszym tekście Morrisa *The Defence of Guinevere* (opublikowane w 1858 roku), *The Life and Death of Jason* powstrzymuje się od bezpośredniego potępienia kobiety, która próbuje zmierzyć się z doświadczeniem zdrady i hańby. Tym samym, w artykule podjęto próbę zbadania, w jaki sposób Morris wykorzystał motywy hellenistyczne do omówienia złożoności kobiecego doświadczenia, które przekracza granice czasu i miejsca.

Słowa kluczowe

William Morris, femme fatale, hellenizm wiktoriański, XIX wiek, Medea, rewizjonizm w literaturze

1. Introduction

In July 1867, Algernon C. Swinburne published his review of William Morris's long narrative poem *The Life and Death of Jason* (1867), underlining that Morris's take on the Greek myth is filtered through the English sensibility that, perhaps above all, values restraint rather than a magnified expression of passion and tragedy. As Swinburne argues,

> Mr. Morris has an English respect for *temperance and reserve*;[2] good things as drags, but not as clogs. He is not afraid to tackle a passion, but he will not move an inch from his way to tackle it. Tragedy can never be more than the episode of a romance, and romance is rather to his taste than naked tragedy. He reminds us of the knight in Chaucer cutting sharply short the monk's tragic histories as too piteous for recital, or the very monk himself breaking off the detail of Ugolino's agony with a reference to Dante for those who can endure it (1867: 23).

While Swinburne appreciates Morris's medievalist writing style[3] that involves a rich use of colour and lavish descriptions of places and rituals, what draws his attention is Medea that constitutes the pivotal character in the poem, or Swinburne writes, she is "the root of romance". As Swinburne notices, it is Medea who propels the narrative of *The Life and Death of Jason* since that her portrayal remains ambiguously multifaceted and idiosyncratic:

> 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

[2] Emphasis mine.

[3] In "Morris, Modernism, and Romance" David G. Riede argues that the early writings of Morris have adopted John Keats's immature narrative style, present for instance in *Endymion*. As Riede writes, "Even Swinburne, who admired Morris's "river of romance" that "flows on at full, but keeping well to its channel," noted that the untroubled fluency of such poetic technique might profit by setting itself some difficulties […] to overcome" (1984: 103).

> the poet called on that great poet's memory who has dealt with the terrible and pitiful passion of women like none but Shakespeare since (1867: 23).

Swinburne contends that what contributes to the poem's overall sense of tragedy is the dwindling status of the Colchian sorceress, from the queen and the witch to an average woman. In *The Life and Death of Jason*, Morris reworks the vision of Medea, depicting her not as a purely malevolent figure as she is traditionally viewed; instead, he traces the story of humiliation that triggered her reaction. Therefore, Morris does not directly judge Medea's responses, but he subtly empathises with his heroine, or at least, as Florence Boos notes, "suspends his judgement" (2021: 78).

While most previous studies focus on Morris's rendition of femme fatale in *The Defence of Guinevere* (for example Elizabeth Helsinger's excellent article "Lyric Colour: Pre-Raphaelite Art and Morris's The Defence of Guenevere" and incredibly compelling analyses by Florence Boos in "The Defence of Guenevere: A Morrisean Critique of Medieval Violence" and "Sexual Polarities in 'The Defence of Guenevere'"), this study offers a detailed examination of the image of not-deliberately-fatal Medea in *The Life and Death of Jason* which, surprisingly, has been overlooked in the research on Morris's poetry.

As I wish to show in the article, what Morris does with the image of Medea is a profound subversion of the heroine's status. Although the title of the poem implies that it describes the life of Jason, it is Medea's story that Morris makes central to the plot. Such a shift of focus – from hero-Jason to heroine-Medea – becomes symptomatic of the artist's vision of the alternative society where women can be as skilled and as brutal as men. What is more, Medea conventionally embodies the femme fatale trope – an alluring but dangerous woman who destroys men for the sake of annihilation. However, Morris's rewriting does not illustrate her as fully malignant. My close reading of the text reveals how Morris cleverly subverts the depiction of Medea

pertaining to the cultural images of the femme fatale and consciously goes against the established notions of fatal femininity, characterised by a devouring sexuality, manipulation, and an irresistible urge to ruin men. Similarly to *The Defence of Guinevere* (published in 1858), in *The Life and Death of Jason,* Morris refrains from pointing directly at the villain of the story. Still, he presents the story from a different vantage point, portraying the circumstances that lead Medea to the murder of her children.

2. Femme fatale trope: Changes, features, and contexts

The femme fatale trope, although ubiquitous in the cultural representations of women, seems to encompass everything and, at the same time, nothing. For decades, cultural and literary critics have been struggling with the clear-cut definition of a fatal woman, primarily noting that there would be no fatal woman without the ideal one. Therefore, the basic premise is that of the dichotomy between idealisation and demonization of women. In *The Romantic Agony* Mario Praz assumes that the emergence of the Fatal Woman trope was particularly visible in the mid-nineteenth century:

> During the first stage of Romanticism, up till about the middle of the nineteenth century, we meet with several Fatal Women in literature, but there is no established type of Fatal Woman in the way that there is an established type of Byronic Hero (1951: 191).

Likewise, Silke Binias claims that there is no common denominator for dangerous women (2007:34). However, the cultural criticism of fatal womanhood usually emphasises a threatening sensuality, destructive behaviour, and a dangerous allure for men (Bade 1979: 3-9). In a similar vein, Virginia Allen notes that the image of femme fatale is not only centred on the "remoteness from human being" and the "intent to destroy" (1983: 2-4) but also serves as the expression of the struggle between sexes that is accelerated by "lust, tainted with corruption and perversion"

(1983: 4). Furthermore, John Raymond Miller provides an interesting yet not exhaustive typology of femme fatales in fin de siècle culture, dividing them into "conscious and unconscious" (1974: 80). Miller argues that conscious fatal women are "actively seeking destruction, downfall and vengeance" (1974: 89) whereas the unconscious ones do not want to willingly cause harm. However, as Binias convincingly posits, Miller still operates on the straightforward categorisation of fatal women, "ending up with two neatly labelled and mutually exclusive drawers for convenient storage of all samples" (2007: 35).

The femme fatale motif has gained momentum since the emergence of feminist criticism, particularly in terms of the power struggle between men and women. As Miller and Bork suggest, a fatal woman is not only driven by physical dominance but also aspires to gain psychological and spiritual control over her male victim (Miller 1974: 67, Bork 1992: 61). Correspondingly, Maria Moog-Grünewald maintains that the images of femme fatale personify male anxiety about the connection between the woman and her feral and uncontrollable nature (1983: 244-250). Furthermore, a fatal woman is both repelling and alluring for a man. As Wolfson argues, the encounter with a fatal woman serves as an escapist mechanism from the social and rational life of a man (1991: 47-85). That is to say, the wild and untamed qualities of a fatal woman entice the rational and domesticated man, offering a temporary alternative to middle-class reality (Binias 2007: 38). As Binias informs, the femme fatale could be characterised by both excess (in terms of beauty, sexual allure, power) and lack (heart, compassion, emotions) (2007: 38). She seems irresistible to men, but she also preys on the inexperience of her lovers. She indulges in her sexuality, but she is also barren and indifferent to human feelings. She derives pleasure from inflicting pain, revealing her predatory instincts. However, looking at the literary revisions of femme fatales, it must be stressed that the Victorian renditions are not only dominated by the erotic man-eaters but also by the images of independence, unattainability, ambiguity, and ambivalence. As

Julie Gossman points out, "[f]emale characters branded as femme fatales perform roles in order to survive, to seduce, or to manipulate others, to get what they want, yet any 'pretence' to better their position is received as immoral and invites male scorn" (2020: Introduction).

Gossman's argument echoes William Morris's approach to femme fatales in that their destructive attitude enables them to deal with the imbalance of power between men and women. As Florence Boos explains, between 1867-1876, there was a shift in Morris's way of representing femme fatales. In the initial period of his literary career (the 1850s), he tended to see women more as victims of oppression and discriminatory structures of society. With time, he started to concentrate on stories that involved women who were either indifferent to men and male desire or who were driven by revenge, passion, and violence that could "destroy the objects of their former attachments" (Boos 2021: 78). In his later writings, Morris focused primarily on the femme fatale, who is capable of irreparable harm to make a statement about individuality and independence. Thus, reworking the image of Medea in the mid-1860s allowed Morris to explore the trope of fatal womanhood that is not defined by the association with men but by the recognition of one's identity.

3. Medea in William Morris's *The Life and Death of Jason*

According to the myth, Medea was a barbarian princess, a sorceress, and supposedly a niece of Circe from the ancient land of Colchis. She fell in love with Jason, a leader of the Argonauts who embarked on a quest for the Golden Fleece. Having fallen in love with Jason, Medea set off on a journey with the Argonauts and, thanks to her magic skills, helped them retrieve the Fleece. However, due to Jason's political ambitions, Medea is deserted and humiliated by her husband and, thus, she "has murdered her way into a privileged place in the history of the imagination of the West" (Hall 1999: 42). Especially in Euripides's drama, Medea becomes the wronged woman who seeks

revenge on her estranged husband and his new bride Glauke, the daughter of King Creon. The sorceress grows enraged and poisons the golden robes and the coronet that she sends to Jason's new wife. As a consequence, Glauke and her father die. The tragedy ends with Medea killing her sons and escaping Corinth on a golden chariot. Surprisingly, Euripides's version tries to shed a sympathetic light on Medea's predicament and, as Fritz Graf stresses, Medea "is in no way the witch that Ovid and Seneca later make her out to be" (1997: 30).

Morris was no stranger to classical mythology and he extensively consulted numerous sources such as Apollonius Rhodius's *Agronautica*, Pindar's *Odes*, Euripides's *Medea*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, or Seneca's version of Medea (Whitla 2021: 314-316) which proves his in-depth and fastidious research into the myth. Florence Boos maintains that Morris plays with several conventions known among the classical scholars, tailoring these inspirations to present Medea equally humanly and heroically (2016: 45-46). Initially, the name of Morris's rewriting was *The Deeds of Jason,* which would presumably blame Jason for what happened in the myth. In contrast, the second title – *The Life and Death of Jason* – incorporates more ambiguity into the narrative, implying that the tragedy of marital breakdown and its consequences may constitute an integral part of life, without a straightforward indictment of either Jason or Medea.

Morris chooses to represent Medea as a figure that constantly shifts and changes. She is not pigeonholed into specific roles; instead, the particular scenes in the poem disclose different aspects of Medea's personality. He puts emphasis on three dimensions of her character: a regal ancestry, magical abilities, and her struggles as a wife and a lover, therefore demonstrating her being torn between different roles and concerns. Contrary to nineteenth-century pictorial representations and similarly to the revisions done by women writers, Morris offers the vision of a passionate, fearless yet deeply troubled Medea.

The Colchian princess is introduced in Book VII, where Jason arrives at Æa, her original home and the leading city of

ancient Colchis. From the very beginning, Morris describes Medea in terms of her regal position as a princess and he does that in an almost courtly manner. Morris rejects framing her as the barbarian; instead, she is perceived as "a lovely queen"[4] (Book VII, l. 34); "a royal maid" (Book VII, l. 94), and the king's daughter (Book VII, ll. 35-38). Even Medea's appearance differs from her conventional interpretation in the nineteenth century as the exotic Other[5]. Morris portrays Medea as having a "golden head" (Book VII, l. 48) and "a fair face" (Book VII, l. 92) which, despite being more faithful to Euripides's tragedy, was rather an unusual manoeuvre for the Victorian period. Such characterisation would imply her being a model Victorian Angel in the House who possesses a delicate appearance that was ideologically ascribed to virtuous women and, traditionally, Medea remained in opposition to that ideal.

Yet, contrary to the seemingly subtle imagery, Book VII discusses a growing desire between Medea and Jason. As Morris writes:

> but while she spoke
> Came Love unseen, and cast his golden yoke
> About them, both, and sweeter her voice grew,
> And softer ever, as betwixt them flew,
> With fluttering wings, the new-born strong desire;
> And when her eyes met his grey eyes, on fire
> With that which burned her, then with sweet new shame
> Her fair face reddened, and there went and came
> Delicious tremors through her
> (Book VII, ll. 85-93)

Medea's image of the Angel in the House is instantaneously refuted. In fact, passages like "new-born strong desire" (Book VII, l. 89) her being "on fire with that which burned her" (Book VII,

[4] All passages of *The Life and Death of Jason* are taken from the 1895 edition, available online on *William Morris Archive*.

[5] Compare with Amy Levy's "Medea: A Fragment in Dramatic Form", published in *A Minor Poet and Other Verse* (1884).

ll. 90-91) "sweet new shame" (Book VII, l. 91) or "delicious tremors" (Book VII, l. 93) reveal that Medea recognises her passion for Jason and the images related to consuming infatuation dominates Book VII. Such a portrayal of Medea hints at her being a determined woman, not scared of her desires since she is the one who enters Jason's chamber to give him the magic potion that would protect him. As Medea explains:

> O Prince, she said, I came
> To save your life. I cast off fear and shame
> A little while, but fear and shame are here.
> The hand thou holdest trembles with my fear,
> With shame, my cheeks are burning, and the sound
> Of mine own voice: but ere this hour comes round,
> We twain will be betwixt the dashing oars,
> The ship still making for the Grecian shores.
> Farewell till then, though in the lists to-day
> (Book VII, ll. 413-421)

She is committed to supporting Jason and willing to sacrifice everything – her homeland and her comfortable life on the island – only to help him obtain the Golden Fleece. As Book VIII suggests, Medea, without much thinking and driven by her sudden and intense emotions, leaves her home and goes on the quest to tame the brazen bulls:

> And so, being come to Jason, him she found
> All armed, and ready; therefore, with no sound,
> She beckoned him to follow, and the twain
> Passed through the brazen doors, locked all in vain,
> Such virtue had the herb Medea bore,
> And passing, did they leave ajar each door,
> To give more ease unto the Minyæ.
> So out into the fresh night silently
> The lovers passed, the loveliest of the land;
> But as they went, neither did hand touch hand,
> Or face seek face; for, gladsome as they were,
> Trembling with joy to be at last so near

> The wished-for day, some God yet seemed to be
> 'Twixt the hard past and their felicity
> (Book VIII, ll. 464-476)

As the text implies, Medea embarks on a journey with Jason, despite the initial awkwardness and shame. Interestingly, this appears to be a vision of a woman who is, on the one hand, extremely devoted to her lover but, on the other hand, there are already hints of Medea's more authoritative side as "[s]he beckoned him to follow" (Book VIII, l. 465). Morris, by portraying their relationship as idyllically happy and strangely transfixing, makes the reader sympathetic towards Medea. Primarily, she wants to be Jason's companion, not the enemy – thus, to help him, she resorts to her knowledge of magic.

A strong association of Medea with herbal witchcraft – "herb Medea bore" (Book VIII, l. 467) – is a recurrent and predominant theme in the narrative. Contrary to Augusta Webster's interpretation of Medea in "Medea in Athens" (1870), Morris does not avoid representing the Colchian princess as a powerful and knowledgeable sorceress; conversely, he warns the readers that magic can function not only as a tool for creation but also as a means of destruction. Book VII contains a lengthy and detailed passage where Medea brews a magical potion that Jason uses to obtain the Golden Fleece. Morris draws a rather conventional picture of a magic ritual where Medea transforms into the commander of natural forces, devoid of fear and apprehension ("As though she made for some place known full well" (l. 149) and "With eager steps, not heeding fear or pain" (l. 153). Firstly, she goes alone at night, in the dark ("The yew-wood's darkness, gross and palpable" (l. 148)) which reveals a strong belief in her own skills as a witch as well as her lack of fear of the unknown. Secondly, she creates an ointment in the magic circle in the middle of the forest ("Showed in the midst a circle of smooth grass,/Through which, from dark to dark, a stream did pass" (ll. 156-157)), which is an ancient setting for occult ceremonials.

Thirdly, she brews the potion from plants, proving her expertise in herbal magic; it is also hinted at the crown that Medea wears:

> but when again she came
> Into its light, within her caught-up gown
> Much herbs she had, and on her head a crown
> Of dank night-flowering grasses, known to few.
> But, casting down the mystic herbs, she drew
> From out her wallet a bowl polished bright,
> Brazen, and wrought with figures black and white,
> Which from the stream she filled with water thin,
> And, kneeling by the fire, she cast therein
> Shreddings of many herbs, and setting it
> Amidst the flames, she watched them curl and flit
> About the edges of the blackening brass
> (Book VII, ll. 174-185)

Furthermore, while Medea prepares the magic concoction, she waits patiently and carefully for the magic to happen ("Set it alight, and with her head bent low/Sat patiently, and watched the red flames grow" (ll. 163-164)). Truly, such a scene reminds us that she is not an impulsive and reckless woman, but she is capable of acting methodically and consistently. Additionally, Medea's meticulous ritual relies heavily on her own body since she uses it as a kind of vessel – as Morris describes, Medea "[t]ook up some scarce-seen thing from off the ground/And thrust it in her bosom, and at last/Into the darkness of the trees she passed" (Book VII, ll. 170-173). Hence, Medea's involvement not only encompasses mental support to retrieve the Golden Fleece, but she utilises her witchcraft and her own physicality to protect her beloved.

Nonetheless, the final invocation to the goddess Hecate, who becomes the patron of Medea, appears symptomatic for the rest of the narrative as it betrays the slight doubt that starts to creep into her heart. Kneeling after the ritual, Medea asks Hecate (goddess associated with witchcraft and sorcery) for counsel; yet the goddess is silent. Medea, desperate for any response, starts

to realise that perhaps Hecate does not answer because she already knows that Medea has made the mistake of going with Jason. As Medea pleads, "dost thou, dread one, see/About me somewhat that misliketh thee?" (Book VII, ll. 205-206).

Another example that shows Medea's magical power is the bewitching influence of music. The Colchian sorceress, who oversees the quest, tames the bulls by playing:

> the golden strings [of the harp],
> Preluding nameless and delicious things […]
> Peace, for he cometh! O thou Goddess bright,
> What help wilt thou be unto me this night?
> So murmured she, while ceaselessly she drew
> Her fingers through the strings, and fuller grew
> The tinkling music, but the beast drawn nigh
> Went slower still, and turning presently
> Began to move around them in a ring.
> And as he went, there fell a strange rattling
> Of his dry scales; but as he turned, she turned,
> Nor failed to meet the eyes that on her burned
> With steadfast eyes, and, lastly, clear and strong
> (Book IX, ll. 65-87)

Medea functions here as an enabler and thus a true hero of the story. Without her magical abilities and great courage, Jason would not be able to steal the Golden Fleece. Moreover, without Medea's encouragement and company, Jason would not be able to snatch the Fleece. Truly, Morris continuously demonstrates Medea's competence through a series of detailed descriptions of her dabbling with black and white magic. Contrary to black magic, white magic is usually performed for selfless purposes, to heal or to protect somebody. Given that distinction, Medea resorts to the occult but, at this point in the narrative, it is not to hurt anybody. In his rendition of witchcraft, Morris develops almost a romantic image of Medea as an artist, whose creativity might save others. Like the Romantic tradition that saw art as a redemptive force, her music saved Jason from being killed,

indicating that her magic might be a force for good. In general, Medea does not use her magic to harm anyone, thus her label of being a femme fatale seems entirely displaced. Only provoked by unfaithfulness and humiliation, she brings chaos and destruction with the use of sorcery.

Notably, Medea's position as a witch makes her a leader of the quest, an active heroine and not a passive maiden who goes on a journey only to adore her lover. She displays a more decisive side of the character, showing her knowledge of how the world operates. The beginning of Book IX informs that Medea is fully aware of the consequences of her actions:

> O love, turn round, and note the goodlihead
> My father's palace shows beneath the stars.
> Bethink thee of the men grown old in wars,
> Who do my bidding; what delights I have,
> How many ladies lie in wait to save
> My life from toil and carefulness, and think
> How sweet a cup I have been used to drink,
> And how I cast it to the ground for thee.
> Upon the day thou weariest of me,
> I wish that thou mayst somewhat think of this,
> And 'twixt thy new-found kisses, and the bliss
> Of something sweeter than thine old delight,
> Remember thee a little of this night
> Of marvels, and this starlit, silent place,
> And these two lovers standing face to face
> (Book IX, ll. 4-18)

She becomes aware that she might have stayed at home and her life would be more comfortable back there. Instead, she decided to give up that comfort. Such passages indicate that Medea is not driven by any hidden motifs but by affection, which is amplified by Jason's enthusiastic declaration of love. However, she ambiguously responds to her husband's words:

> Wert 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 when she beholds our bliss
> (Book IX, ll. 22-25)

Echoing Hecate's silence during the magical ritual and her plea for assistance, the Colchian princess subconsciously knows that despite a strong attachment to Jason, there is a Fortune that might change everything, even the love between them. This response, ambivalent at first, confirms Medea's wisdom; in fact, she might resemble a humble and a meek woman, who recognises that her bliss might be immediately ruined by the workings of gods beyond her control.

More importantly for the vindication (or defence) of Medea, she only witnesses the atrocities of the quest and is not an active participant in it. To shed a positive light on Medea, Morris drastically alters the original storyline where it is the Colchian princess who murders her brother Absyrtius; in his retelling, it is done by Jason. By manipulating the plot, Morris takes the blame from Medea, turning her into a passive observer of the crime, not its perpetrator. She tries to persuade herself that Fortune and gods are on her side, believing that love conquers all. Nevertheless, she starts to have doubts, being torn between her family and her husband:

> The foundress of their triumph and renown,
> And to her lover's side still drew anear,
> With heart now swelled with joy, now sick with fear,
> And cheeks now flushed with love, now pale and wan,
> As now she thought upon that goodly man,
> And now on the uncertain, dreadful Gods,
> And now upon her father, and the odds
> He well might raise against the reckless crew,
> For all his mighty power full well she knew;
> No wonder therefore if her heart grew cold,
> And if her wretched self she did behold,

> Led helpless through some old familiar place,
> With none to turn on her a pitying face,
> Unto the death in life, she still might win;
> And yet, if she should 'scapethe meed of sin
> This once, the world was fair and bright enough
> (Book IX, ll. 332-347)

The final passages of Book IX act as a foreshadowing of the tragedy that unfolds in the subsequent books. In the earlier parts of *The Life and Death of Jason,* Medea absconds a femme fatale status. She devotes her talents, intelligence, and wisdom to assisting Jason in his quest. Her talents are versatile – she is a gifted herbal witch, a royal princess, a woman-musician whose music allows her to reclaim the Golden Fleece. Nevertheless, closer to the end of Book IX, Morris's verses hint at Medea's dissatisfaction, growing identity crises, and the uncertainty about her position as a wife and mother.

Being decidedly humanitarian towards Medea, Morris portrays her as one of the wise women, among Hecate and Circe (Boos 2016: 57), thus ignoring the male protagonists of his narrative. In the traditional myth, Circe was the one who cleansed Medea and Jason from the burden of killing Medea's brother; in the poet's reinterpretation, only Medea receives counsel from Circe (a goddess and herbal sorceress). What is more, Circe plays a dubious role since she is brutally honest with Medea and, thus, incredibly helpful for the grounding of Medea's identity (Boos 2016: 47). While the silent Hecate planted the seed of doubt, Circe's warning is openly articulated. As Circe tells Medea, she will be remembered mainly for her tragic encounters:

> Weep not, nor pity thine own life too much:
> Not painless shall it be, indeed, nor such
> As the Gods live in their unchanged abode,
> And yet not joyless; no unmeasured load
> Of sorrows shall thy dull soul learn to bear,
> With nought to keep thee back from death but fear,

> Of what thou know'st not, knowing nought but pain
> (Book XIII, ll. 315-321)

Apart from the premonition that Medea will suffer and advising her to run like Daphne ("Gird up thy raiment, nor run slower now/Than from the amorous bearer of the bow/Once Daphne ran (Book XIII, ll. 349-351)), Circe assures her that "Thy name shall be a solace and a song" (Book XIII, l. 334), thus comparing her to a heroic figure whose deeds will bring strength for others. Again, the reference to the commemorating and redeeming power of music confirms that Medea's fearlessness will consolidate her superior position. Even though these words do not bring any consolation to Medea, such an episode signals that her predicament will be widely recognised and sung about forever. Consequently, Circe becomes Medea's tutor who informs her – with "[a] fair face shuddering and afraid" (Book XIII, l. 354) – that she should leave the island. Medea does not feel more empowered by the knowledge she received; instead, as Boos argues, "Circe's predictions effectively enhance Medea's character and stature within the poem, but her absolution brings chilling foreknowledge of ineluctable guilt" (2016: 49).

Book XVII witnesses Jason's transformation into the antihero of the narrative, simultaneously uncovering Medea's desire for revenge. The account involves three main episodes – Jason marrying Glauke (King Creon's daughter), Medea's filicide, and Jason's death. As Morris's retelling goes, Medea, Jason, and their two sons have been living in Corinth for ten years until Creon takes over the throne. The city's ruler tries to manipulate Jason to marry Glauke and, after initial hesitation, Jason falls under the spell of Glauke's youthful beauty. Despite the brief moment of clarity of mind, he calls himself

> O 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
> (Book XVII, ll. 399-404)

Jason decides to abandon Medea nonetheless. Accusing himself, he candidly praises Medea's powerful traits, like wisdom, truth, constancy, beauty, and faithfulness.

In the latter part of Book XVII, the narration transforms into the forthright accusation of Jason because he sacrificed his family bliss in exchange for a temporary political prestige. The moment Medea is given the divorce bill, her initial despair is replaced with wrath and the resolution to kill her sons, declaring that "thou shalt die--his eyes shall see thine end./Ah! if thy death alone could end it all!" (Book XVII, ll. 918-919). However, Morris omits the episode where Medea murders the children in the presence of Jason. This kind of alteration proves his rather biased attitude toward Medea, making the whole plot more tailored to the vision of her being a desperate woman, but never a brutal one.

4. Conclusions

Morris constructs his defence of Medea on the basis of a subverted image of a femme fatale that pictures not a spitefully malevolent woman but rather a woman blinded by love and passion. In his version, Medea remains a disheartened sorceress, misled by the promise of affection and companionship. Throughout the poem, Morris's poem convinces the readers that Medea is not a consciously fatal woman who deliberately seeks to destroy Jason just because she wants to do so. Only after the betrayal of her beloved does she reveal a threatening and dangerous facet of her personality. Therefore, the cultural status of Medea as a femme fatale is dismantled in Morris's narrative.

Morris redeems Medea in various ways. Firstly, he makes her one of the pivotal characters in the story without mentioning her in the title, therefore, subverting the expectations of readers

– they encounter the wise Medea and not the ruthless one, defined by her culturally established vision as a child-killer. Secondly, taking advantage of the genre of his text (a long narrative poem), Morris adopts conventions of the mythological storytelling, but he strongly draws attention to the past of the Colchian princess that would explain her subsequent actions. He mentions her magical talents, the royal heritage, and divine guidance, which are ultimately taken advantage of by Jason. Although Morris remarks on Medea's witchcraft, he portrays her as a skilled sorceress who can use her magic to achieve something good, not to cause devastation.

Morris crafts a narrative that tells the reader what may happen when the abused woman is capable of retaliation, punishing those who exploited her. Consequently, *The Life and Death of Jason* might be Morris's nineteenth-century attempt to create a literary commentary on the potentially dreadful aftermath of the inequality between sexes.[6] Despite his interest in the issues of gender equality, Morris's empathy and "the suspension of judgement" (Boos 2021: 78) is only towards the Colchian sorceress, without focusing on Jason's perspective. Despite that, Morris's text testifies to his deep fascination with proto-feminist criticism, the destruction of the family, and the experience of women who might be labelled as fatal. As the poet shows, these women, rather dubiously, attempt to navigate their way through betrayal and dishonour.

[6] Morris's interest in socialism, utopia, and materialism has been widely discussed in multiple scholarly works. For the further discussion see: Anna Vaninskaya's "Janus-Faced Fictions: Socialism as Utopia and Dystopia in William Morris and George Orwell," Elizabeth Carolyn Miller's "William Morris, Extraction Capitalism, and the Aesthetics of Surface," Michael Holzman's "Anarchism and Utopia: William Morris's *News from Nowhere*," or Jerome McGann's "'A Thing to Mind': The Materialist Aesthetic of William Morris".

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