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of *Cenone*

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Tennyson and Morris Read the Classics: Victorian Portrayals of Cēnone

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Alfred Tennyson once observed that “It is scarcely possible for anyone to say or write anything in this late time of the world to which, in the rest of the literature of the world, a parallel could not somewhere be found”. This statement expresses a notion that was characteristic of the Victorian poets, namely, the idea that all great literature had already been produced by their illustrious literary predecessors. This sense of belatedness was apparently also shared by William Morris, as he explains to the Reader of *The Earthly Paradise* that his tales are like petals of flowers gathered in some distant land and preserved within the pages of his book. Still, this did not prevent the Victorian poets from looking for original approaches to the received literary tradition. A case in point may be the treatment of the story of Cēnone in Tennyson’s “Cēnone” (1842) and Morris’s “The Death of Paris” (1869). Both poems engage in an intricate web of literary echoes and allusions. Classical in their theme and Keatsian in their texture, they yet create two different psychological portrayals of the rejected lover and thus place the Trojan myth in a new perspective.

Alfred Tennyson once observed that “It is scarcely possible for anyone to say or write anything in this late time of the world to which, in the rest of the literature of the world, a parallel could not somewhere be found” (*Memoir* 1 256). This sense of belatedness, characteristic of the Victorian poets, was apparently also shared by William Morris, who explains to the Reader of *The Earthly Paradise* that his tales are like petals of flowers gathered in some distant land and preserved within the pages of his book. Still, this did not prevent the Victorian poets from looking for original approaches to the received literary tradition. One such example may be the treatment of the story of Cēnone in Tennyson’s “Cēnone” (1842) and Morris’s “The Death of Paris” (1869). The aim of this paper will be to see how these two poems explore two lesser-known yet momentous points in the famous myth of the Trojan War and create two distinct psychological portrayals of its female protagonist. Moreover, it seems that the two Victorian poems enter a dialogue not only with the classical tradition, but also with one another, as Morris was acutely aware of the treatment

of the same subject in the earlier poem by the Poet Laureate.

While Helen is famous as the main heroine of the Trojan myth, relatively little is known of the first wife of Paris, the mountain nymph Enone, whom the hero forsakes after Aphrodite promises to give him the most beautiful woman in the world. The major classical works treating of her story are the fifth epistle in Ovid's *Heroides* (1st century A.D.) – the main source for Tennyson's poem – Book 3 of Apollodorus's *Bibliotheca* (2nd century A.D.) and Book 10 of Quintus of Smyrna's *The Fall of Troy* (4th century A.D.), on which William Morris based his tale.¹ In their attempts to explore the background story behind the myth of the Trojan War, Tennyson and Morris may be compared to the Alexandrian poets of the 3rd century B.C., who looked for little-known aspects of the classical Greek myths and presented them from a new perspective. As A. Dwight Culler points out, those poets were particularly interested in “the feminine point of view and dwelt upon the feeling behind the event rather than upon the event itself,” thus trying to create new forms out of the old stories that would be “shapely, intense, learned, and graceful” (91). This description appears to be adequate in the case of the two Victorian poets, who also turn to the old myths for themes and motifs in order to create new works of art. Hallam Tennyson recalls that his father “purposely chose those classical subjects from mythology and legend, which had been before but imperfectly treated, or of which the stories were slight, so that he might have free scope for his imagination,” and he goes on to add that “A modern feeling was to some extent introduced into the themes, but they were dealt with according to the canons of antique art” (*Memoir* 2 13-14).

It is thus both the classical and the modern that meet in the Laureate's early “Enone,” first published in 1832, and later considerably revised for the 1842 edition of *Poems*. The many allusions and echoes of classical texts that reverberate in the poem have already been painstakingly traced to their specific sources in Ovid, Theocritus, Virgil and other ancient writers in Paul Turner's insightful article, “Some Ancient Light on Tennyson's ‘Oenone.’”² In fact, such a tendency to see particular images and phrases in Tennyson's poetry as borrowings from his literary predecessors was already visible in the Victorian epoch and greatly exasperated the poet. In a letter to a friend, he once bitterly observed that their times were populated with “men of great memories and no imagination, who *impute themselves* to the poet, and so believe that he, too,

1 For a discussion of the sources for the poems see Paul Turner's “Some Ancient Light on Tennyson's ‘Oenone’” (57-72) and Florence S. Boos's Introduction to “The Death of Paris” in her edition of William Morris's *The Earthly Paradise* (2: 7-8).

2 See also Markley 59-69; for a discussion of Tennyson's reworking of the pastoral love-lament in “Enone” see Schur 38-47.

has no imagination, but is for ever poking his nose between the pages of some old volume in order to see what he can appropriate" (*Memoir* 1 258). Hence, the subject of my analysis will be the latter of the above-mentioned aspects, the way in which the poet has managed to weave the various images he took from his ancient sources into an original whole, in terms of the rendition of its theme, its structure and its language.

An innovative appropriation of Tennyson's literary models can be seen in the hybrid form of the poem. The lyrical descriptions of the lush valley of *Ida* are offset by the central narrative part, the retelling of the Judgement of *Paris* and the speeches of the three goddesses, which has been presented in retrospect in the monologue of the lamenting nymph. *Ænone*, hidden in a cave, becomes a silent witness to the scene as she may "behold them unbeheld, unheard / Hear all" (87-88), and thus it is she who becomes the focalizer in the poem. It is also in this respect that Tennyson's poem may be likened to the works of the Alexandrian writers, since, as Culler points out, in their attempts to present old stories in a novel way, they employed sophisticated poetic forms such as "the digression or the poem-within-the-poem, with the result that what was formally a subordinate part of the story became thematically the most important" (91).

At first glance, the nymph seems to be another *Mariana* in the moated grange, a passive character abandoned by her unfaithful lover and seeking comfort in the mournful song she sings in the stillness of the valley:

'O mother *Ida*, many-fountained *Ida*,
 Dear mother *Ida*, harken ere I die.
 For now the noonday quiet holds the hill:
 The grasshopper is silent in the grass:
 The lizard, with his shadow on the stone,
 Rests like a shadow, and the winds are dead.
 The purple flower droops: the golden bee
 Is lily-cradled: I alone awake.
 My eyes are full of tears, my heart of love,
 My heart is breaking, and my eyes are dim,
 And I am all awery of my life.

(22-32)

This resemblance to Tennyson's "*Mariana*" is especially prominent in the wording of *Ænone*'s death wish. The refrain – "O mother, hear me yet before I die" – which reappears throughout the poem, and the nymph's declaration that she is awery of her life are an almost exact echo of "I am awery, awery, / I would that I were dead!" repeated over and over again by the maiden in the moated grange. The predicament of *Ænone* is also reminiscent of the situation of another abandoned and bewildered lover, the knight in Keats's "*La*

Belle Dame Sans Merci.” Just as the wretched knight is “so haggard and so woebegone” (6), while on his cheek “a fading rose / Fast withered too” (11-12), so is the nymph portrayed as “wandering forlorn” (15), and “Her cheek had lost the rose” (17). In both cases, the persona’s lament is contrasted with the stillness and ripeness of nature which yet reflects the melancholy mood of the speakers. In “La Belle Dame Sans Merci,” “The sedge is wither’d from the lake, / And no birds sing” (3-4) in preparation for the approaching autumn, while in “Ænone,” “the winds are dead” (27) and “The purple flower droops” (28) in the high noon heat. On the other hand, Ænone herself appears to be the embodiment of the spirit of the valley, the daughter of the “many-fountained Ida” (22) and a River-God (37).

Unlike Mariana, however, the nymph does not remain unchanged throughout the various stages of the poem. Richard Cronin sees “Ænone” as “a threshold poem” (230), where a number of important transformations of both the two main characters and the setting are effected by the fatal choice of Paris. The vale of Ida before and after Paris’s judgement may be perceived as pre- and postlapsarian, whereas the judgement itself may be compared to the scene of temptation in the Garden of Eden (Culler 77, 79). At the initial stage of the poem, the valley is depicted as a sheltered place of joyous co-existence of man and beast, a pastoral retreat where the shepherd in “a leopard skin” (57) lives with his beloved nymph, far away from the towers of the city of Troy. Yet, Paris’s choice and his later departure to claim his royal birthright and a new bride, which would be familiar to Tennyson’s audience from Homer, bring about the destruction of the lovely valley, as the trees are cut down in order to build the ships:

‘O mother, hear me yet before I die.
They came, they cut away my tallest pines,
My tall dark pines, that plumed the craggy ledge
High over the blue gorge, and all between
The snowy peak and snow-white cataract
Fostered the callow eaglet – from beneath
Whose thick mysterious boughs in the dark morn
The panther’s roar came muffled, while I sat
Low in the valley. Never, never more
Shall lone Ænone see the morning mist
Sweep through them; never see them overlaid
With narrow moon-lit slips of silver cloud,
Between the loud stream and the trembling stars.

(203-15)

It is the memory of this irrecoverable damage to her native surroundings that suddenly stirs Ænone to action. Again, this shift in her mood has been rendered metaphorically through the change in the depiction of the landscape.

The imagery of vapours falling slowly down the stream, “the morning mist” (212), and the “narrow moon-lit slips of silver cloud” (214) is replaced with the final image of “All earth and air” that “seem only burning fire” (264), as the “fiery thoughts” (242) of vengeance of the slighted nymph mingle with her dim foreboding of the future destruction of Troy. These, in turn, may also be read as an allusion to another important fact known from the myth, the symbolic representation of Paris as a firebrand in the prophetic dream of his mother, queen Hecuba. Thus, in “Ænone,” the main events of the Trojan War are relegated to the background, while the attention in the poem concentrates on the emotional response to these events in a relatively minor female character of the myth.

Most importantly, though, the modernity of “Ænone” lies in the import of the central scene in the poem, the Judgement of Paris. The disastrous consequences of his choice of Aphrodite’s gift over the worldly power offered by Herè and wisdom represented by Athena may be read as an implicit warning against devoting oneself to the pursuit of sensual beauty devoid of any moral value. It appears that the poet’s choice is voiced in Pallas’s gift of “Self-reverence, self-knowledge, self-control” (142), which Ænone urges Paris to accept. However, such an overtly didactic message is apparently contradicted by the way the goddesses are presented in the poem. The righteous Athena, portrayed as cold and distant, with “her snow-cold breast and angry cheek” (140), is much less appealing a character than the glamorous “Idalian Aphrodite beautiful, / Fresh as the foam, new-bathed in Paphian wells” (170-71), who

With rosy slender fingers backward drew
From her warm brows and bosom her deep hair
Ambrosial, golden round her lucid throat
And shoulder: from the violets her light foot
Shone rosy-white, and o’er her rounded form
Between the shadows of the vine-bunches
Floated the glowing sunlights, as she moved.

(172-78)

Her sensuous beauty is further emphasized by the corresponding depiction of the rich foliage springing up at her feet and the play of light and shade on her skin and among the leaves. As has already been pointed out above, such Keatsian luxuriant imagery also characterizes the presentation of the unspoiled valley of Ida as opposed to the city of Troy. Hence, it seems that Tennyson’s sympathies still belonged with the green refuge offered by the valley and that the dilemma concerning the position of aesthetic detachment versus moral commitment that he should adopt in his further poetic career was not yet resolved at this point.

Tennyson’s “Ænone” is thus not merely a Victorian imitation of the classical pastoral elegy. While the nineteenth-century reviewers mainly criticized

the poem for its apparent incongruities, the views of the present critics appear to be more balanced in assessing its true merits. Theodore Redpath sees the poem as “a wonderfully integrated whole, precise in physical detail, rich in musical resonance, allusive to Greek myth, and a marvellous expression of passionate despair, addressed to ‘many-fountained Ida’, and not to the infatuated and unhearing Paris” (117). For A. A. Markley, the poem exemplifies a successful rendition of the language of the classical works for the Victorian audience. He posits that the poet’s purpose was “to evoke such [literary] passages in order to approximate for the English reader the experience of reading Greek and Latin poetry, and to use a classical story to raise questions about responsible civic behaviour in the modern age” (60). Finally, the poem represents an interesting early experiment in a new poetic form, anticipating the later development of the Victorian dramatic monologue, a form which in itself marks a modern adaptation of the ancient rhetorical device of *prosopopoeia*.

While Tennyson seems to be rather ambivalent in his stance towards his use of the classical sources, the burden of literary tradition appears to be even greater in the case of William Morris’s handling of the story of *Ænone* in one of his *Earthly Paradise* tales, “The Death of Paris.” Morris felt somewhat intimidated by the fact that the myth of *Ænone* had already been treated by his great contemporary. As John William Mackail observes, “Tennyson’s ‘Oenone’ was a poem for which he had a boundless admiration; and in ‘The Death of Paris’ he seems to have an uneasy feeling that the subject was one on which the last word had been already said” (208). And yet, it is Morris’s way of representing the story of *Ænone* and Paris that appears to be the more original of the two. His “The Death of Paris” is based on Book 10 of Quintus of Smyrna’s *The Fall of Troy*, a work which itself is a later and lesser-known sequel to Homer’s great epic.³ Morris briefly sketches the strife of the final month of the Trojan War in his introductory lines in order to provide the context for what interests him the most – the scene of the final meeting of the ex-spouses. Ten years after the events relayed in Tennyson’s “*Ænone*,” the mortally wounded Paris is once again brought to the virgin valley of Ida to beg his once beloved wife to heal him with her god-like powers. The poem thus falls into two main parts, the first one concerned with Paris’s journey to the bosky retreat of *Ænone*, and the second, retelling the meeting itself. Such a division allows the poet to explore the workings of the consciousness in both protagonists.

3 Interestingly, *The Fall of Troy* also served as the source for Tennyson’s “The Death of *Ænone*” (1892), which closely follows the classical text and thus does not introduce new elements into the portrayal of the nymph.

As Paris is carried in a litter and leaves the streets of Troy behind, he crosses the boundary between the world of heroic deeds and the pastoral scenery of his past life. In this way he seems to take a trip down memory lane in both its literal and metaphorical meanings. Weak and befuddled from the effect the poison in the wound gradually exerts on his mental capacity, he dreams of the times when, as a young shepherd, he used to wander in the familiar woodland haunts and first knew the passion of love:

And in meanwhile deepened the languid doze'
That lay on Paris into slumber deep;
O'er his unconscious heart, and eyes shut close,
The image of that very place 'gan creep,
And twelve years younger in his dreamful sleep,
Light-footed, through the awful wood he went,
With beating heart, on lovesome thoughts intent.

(162-68)

Yet, in his feverish state of mind, the memory of the past strangely mingles with the present, and it is Helen who does not respond to the call of his horn with which he would summon *Ænone* to the usual place of their meetings. Moreover, the valley of *Ida* seems to be literally frozen in time. Unlike in Tennyson's poem, it has remained unchanged for those last ten years despite the Trojan War, and, as *Ænone* scornfully points out, "fair is this place / That knew not the beginning of the strife / And recks not of its end" (478-80). Nor has the semi-divine nymph herself been affected by the passing of time, so that she seems to Paris to be "The image of his youth and faith gone by / ... for one short minute born / To make his shamed lost life seem more forlorn" (458-60).

While the meeting of the ex-lovers is only briefly relayed in Morris's sources, here it takes up a major part of the poem. It constitutes a surprisingly insightful study of the vacillations of doubt, renewed hope and resignation in Paris, and of love, hate and jealousy on the part of *Ænone*. The situation in which the two protagonists have found themselves is a difficult one indeed. Paris is here relying on the mercy of his once beloved *Ænone* to restore him to health and life, but as he does not love her anymore, her gift would benefit another woman – Helen. It is for Helen that he risks compromising his honour and inducing the scorn of the nymph, since "life was love, and love too strong that he / Should catch at Death to save him misery" (139-40). At some point, it appears that he even resorts to a lie in order to win the wavering *Ænone* to his purpose but is immediately checked by a strange foreboding: "Then trembling did he speak: I love thee still, / Surely I love thee. But a dreadful pain / Shot through his heart, and strange presage of ill" (400-02). In the end, however, he is overcome by the deadening poison and too weak to fight any longer; thus he dies alone, with the name of Helen on his lips. His death is ironically offset

by the lack of change in the peaceful surroundings: "yet the sky / Changed not above his cast-back golden head, / And merry was the world though he was dead" (593-95).

The portrayal of Œnone is even more complex. The slumber Paris feigns when she finds him in the forest provides an opportunity for the retelling of her suffering in those ten years of loneliness:

Wake not, wake not, before the tale is told!
 Not long to tell, the tale of those ten years!
 A gnawing pain that never groweth old,
 A pain that shall not be washed out by tears;
 A dreary road the weary foot-sole wears,
 Knowing no rest, but going to and fro,
 Treading it harder 'neath the weight of woe.

(267-73)

Morris's heroine is well aware of the power she wields over her unfaithful and unrepentant lover. Her moods fluctuate throughout the poem from the initial anger to hope, pity, scorn, love and hate, "as she, / Half dead herself, gazed on his misery" (335-36). At some point, she is almost ready to yield to Paris's pleas and save his life but his strange reaction makes her suspicious of his true feelings and intentions. In the end, Œnone resembles a wild fury as she wails tormented by her passions and yet names herself his Death, kisses him and runs away against her heart's desire. In this intense, highly charged scene, the interplay of changing emotions has also been rendered through the pitch of their voices and the verbal representation of the non-verbal body language of the characters: their glances of hope, fear and pity, their gestures and the changing physical distance between the ex-lovers.

Thus it seems that in Morris's "The Death of Paris" the story of Paris and Œnone has turned full circle. The deserted and helpless victim of the machinations of Greek gods of Tennyson's monologue has now been presented in the role where her dignity could be properly restored. The poem has been considered one of the most complex and unique tales of *The Earthly Paradise* and has slowly been gaining recognition from Morris's critics. Frederick Kirchoff observes that "for the first time [Morris] is able to satisfactorily handle the figure of a betrayed lover who acts out her feelings with strength and dignity. 'The Death of Paris' is tragic because both characters have valid, but mutually unresolvable needs" (75). Jessie Kocmanova favourably comments on the poem's "plastic verse," "sharply realized characters" and "warmth of humanity," and goes on to oppose these characteristics to "the static plaintiveness of Tennyson" (54). This vivid and realistic rendition of the inner conflict in Morris's protagonists may partly be explained by the fact that in depicting the relations between the estranged spouses, Morris apparently drew on his own personal

experience. Such a biographical background has been provided by Florence S. Boos, who comments on the recurrence of this theme in Morris's poetry written around that time:

During the period in which he revisited with Jane the scenes of their earlier wedding trip, Morris thus wrote intensely and at length about a rejected spouse, and a hero who has returned to situations in which he had once felt intense passion, but now feels mixed attraction and compassion for the regretful and melancholy woman who was its object. (116)

It is no wonder, thus, that Morris found the story of *Ænone* and Paris particularly appropriate to channel his own suppressed emotions of disappointment in love. The suspension of explicit judgement and his apparent sympathizing with both mythical figures reveal a surprising stance on love in an epoch in which marital fidelity was one of the most cherished values (Boos 116).

Tennyson's "*Ænone*" and Morris's "*The Death of Paris*" both exemplify the ways in which the Victorian poets explore the possibilities inherent in recreating a mythological theme for their epoch. In Tennyson, *Ænone*, the spirit of the valley of Ida, may be seen as another representation of a female character who, in his early poetry, often emerges from the lush natural surroundings of the place as an embodiment of its mood. Yet, it is in the poem of the younger Victorian that the psychological portraits of the characters seem to be the more profound and realistic. Morris's *Ænone* may thus be counted among his other ambiguous and complex female characters such as his Guenevere in "*The Defence of Guenevere*" and Gudrun of "*The Lovers of Gudrun*." Moreover, Morris's poem appears to be also more homogeneous in its form, since the device of digression has been here naturally incorporated as Paris's dream visions and *Ænone*'s speech to the seemingly sleeping Paris, thus providing insight into the past emotions of the protagonists.

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