

"THE STORY OF ORPHEUS AND EURYDICE":
 AN OMITTED EARTHLY PARADISE TALE

What caused Morris to discard ideas, drafts, even entire narratives from the final four-volume published sequence of The Earthly Paradise? Morris' many drafts reflect mental vigor and deep passion for his most extended literary project: Edmund Gosse once cited Rossetti's claim that Morris had crammed an entire room with the manuscripts of his poems.¹ Whatever the truth of this assertion, Morris did project twelve additional tales designed for inclusion in The Earthly Paradise.²

Of these twelve, he apparently completed three, The Life and Death of Jason, "The Story of Dorothea," and "The Story of Orpheus and Eurydice." The Life and Death of Jason, too long to serve as an individual tale, was published separately in 1867. "The Story of Dorothea" has never been published in full, though its manuscript may be found in the Fitzwilliam Museum. May Morris called it "cold and unconvincing," and excluded it from the fragments and tales printed in volume twenty-four of the Collected Works. K. L. Goodwin has argued that her disapproval was for its references to lust, torture, and prostitution.³

She did, however, publish the third completed tale, "The Story of Orpheus and Eurydice," in volume twenty-four. William Morris' reasons for its earlier omission from The Earthly Paradise remain puzzling. Manuscript drafts indicate that "Orpheus and Eurydice" underwent careful revision,⁴ and he liked two of its songs sufficiently to include them in Poems By the Way in 1891. Orpheus was one of Morris' favorite classical heroes and had been a central character in The Life and Death of Jason; the character of the hero-lover-singer deeply attracted Morris all his life. May Morris comments on the exclusion of "Orpheus":

"The Story of Orpheus," also fair copied for the printers, was finished up before it was rejected by the author as too weighty for the general scheme of The Earthly Paradise.⁵

The Earthly Paradise narrators and characters often reaffirm their belief that preservation in narrative history so transfigures suffering that it becomes a source of consolation, even joy. Morris' assumption that history is formed in mythic cycles of death and regeneration seems clearly to have influenced his fascination with