



mythLORE A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 22
Number 1

Article 6

10-15-1997

"I Seek No Dream ... But Rather the End of Dreams": The Deceptions of *The Story of the Glittering Plain*

Norman Talbot

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>

 Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Talbot, Norman (1997) "I Seek No Dream ... But Rather the End of Dreams": The Deceptions of *The Story of the Glittering Plain*," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 22 : No. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol22/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to:
<http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>



Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

Albuquerque, New Mexico • Postponed to: July 30 – August 2, 2021



Abstract

Detailed examination of William Morris's story, especially of its hero Hallblithe.

Additional Keywords

Morris, William—Characters—Hallblithe; Morris, William. The Story of the Glittering Plain

"I Seek No Dream . . . But Rather the End of Dreams"

The Deceptions of *The Story of The Glittering Plain*
NORMAN TALBOT

The vicissitudes and ironies of William Morris' literary reputation are remarkable both in their fascination and their frustrating longevity. As I prepare my edition of his first non-historical fantasy, *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, for the admirable British William Morris Library, I laugh more than I cry. A little more.

A significant example is the standard and enthusiastic biographer of Morris, Philip Henderson, who in 1967, in his biographical debate as to whether Morris was in love with Georgiana Burne-Jones, evokes the romances with scrupulous and consistent incompetence;

Morris, who peopled his late romances with idealised young girls, and whose *Story of the Glittering Plain* is a land of eternal youth spent in the delights of free love, gives one the impression... of a man 'with an intense capacity of feeling starved by circumstance.' (143)

Take, first, the idea that they are peopled with "idealised young girls". In one romance, certainly, much is made of the heroine's virginity: in *The Wood beyond the World*, the hero isn't allowed even to touch her until her Lady, a wicked witch, is dead. And yet, since the said hero has a very passionate time with the said witch in the meantime, on the Maid's instructions, and since it is left highly ambiguous whether this sweet young thing does or does not murder the said witch-Lady afterwards, all idealisations are very savagely undercut. The Maid's confidence trick, faking it as a fertility goddess to get the lovers a safe-conduct through the country of the Bear tribe is typical — and memorably unidealised.

Not that Henderson mentions the existence of *Wood*, so even this dubious example can't be what he bases his assertion on. He refers, however ineptly, to six of the ten romances; two of these have no major female character (*A Dream of John Ball* and *The Story of the Glittering Plain*) and in the unfinished *The Sundering Flood* the chapters about Elfhild's adventures are the unfinished part.

So we are left with the two big books, *The Well at the World's End* and *The Water of the Wondrous Isles*. In *Well*, no one could rationally describe the dangerous Lady of Abundance who seduces Ralph as ideal, so Henderson must mean the untried and impulsive working-class lass Ursula. As with Birdalone (in *Water*), to love Ursula you have to discard all respect for knightly quests and aristocratic masculine morality: these girls bring down the idealists, though they might be more encouraging to the radical working-class.

Henderson's second point, about the arcadian loveliness of the title location of *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, is superficially true, but this "land of eternal youth" becomes a prison for the story's hero, who hates the place, and spends the central part of the book trying to escape from it — he even prefers the fatal desert beyond where he would die of hunger and thirst.

Odd, isn't it? Henderson's book is called *William Morris, His Life, Work and Friends*, and you'd have thought he ought to pay a bit of attention to the last decade of that life and work, in which Morris starts two new careers. In the one, he founds Kelmscott Press, to become the first and finest designer and printer of beautiful books, and in the other he writes the ten prose romances that are the start of the very genre that inspires Mythopoeic Societies, because in them Morris invents that cultural terraforming, or alternative-world-making, that Tolkien was to call "secondary creation". And Kelmscott Press, of course, printed them.

Like any story-teller, Morris had ancestors. His two heroic-age fantasies, *The House of the Wolfings* and *The Roots of the Mountains*, owe something to Peacock's much underrated Welsh romance *The Misfortunes of Elphin*, and his unwise decision to make a battle scene the pivot of both *Roots* and *Child Christopher and Goldilind the Fair* may have been influenced by Scott. Even more important is the influence of popular folktale, medieval romance, and saga. But Morris' thickly-forested, thinly-populated quasi-medieval Europe of forest and mountain, river and sea-strand, is on the whole unlike any naturalistic country, not least because specific sorts of magic, especially perception-magic wielded by women, work there, as do *loci amoenus* (magical places) and, rarely, power-objects.

One further quotation from Henderson will give a firmer indication of the abyss in which criticism of Morris romances languished before the bracing influence of *The Lord of the Rings* irradiated the whole fantasy field. Yes, it was doing so even as Henderson wrote (though he didn't notice). At any rate, he felt perfectly entitled to dismiss all the Morris romances as "just a little silly", by the economical device of quoting the first third of the first sentence of one of them! On the only other occasion that he quotes a romance it is *The Story of the Glittering Plain* that he chooses — and not because he has allowed himself to be prejudiced by acquaintance with the text! He says it is,

a story of the search for the land of eternal youth, though, charac-

teristically, Hallblithe... is only bent upon his quest for a lost maiden whose image he is shown in a painted book — “standing in a fair garden of the spring with the lilies all about her feet, and behind her the walls of a house, grey, ancient, and lovely.” (343)

He could not have got it very much wronger: Morris is subverting exactly this kind of sentimental quest-romance, and the beguiling “love” born of images rather than intimate and mutual knowledge.

To put it briefly, Hallblithe never sought the land of eternal youth, and hated it when he was tricked into travelling there. He was “bent upon his quest,” but it was for his sweetheart, a girl he had known intimately, and loved since childhood: “I know not of any book that lieth betwixt myself and my betrothed.” And the reason why he was beguiled to the Glittering Plain was that its lovesick princess had fallen in love with *his* picture in such a book.

Then where did Henderson find his quotation? Since he had only glanced at the book, he might have found it anywhere. It comes, significantly, from the chapter, “Hallblithe Builds Him a Skiff”, when the hero, working to leave the Glittering Plain, has a dream of the princess who had drawn him there. Now no longer lovesick, she encourages him to leave: she shows him the book with his picture in, that had caused her crush on him, but now she emphasises the pictures immediately following. His abducted childhood sweetheart is the girl pictured “standing in a fair garden in the spring...”; the opposite picture shows Hallblithe himself, steering a little boat, which becomes his way of escape from the Glittering Plain.

The narrative of Plain takes us to the title location and back, with a brave young hero. Since every scene of the story has Hallblithe in, he is protagonist as true focaliser of the action, but he is also heroic in terms of conduct: against mighty odds, he shows unswerving fidelity to his quest, his girl, his people and his own moral standards. He also looks the part: his bearing and clothes stand out as those of an indomitable warrior. More than usually handsome, he can impress most people, especially women, by his looks and style as much as by his powers of persuasion.

But he is also the anti-hero, an exile and misfit, the butt of mockery, jeers and buffoonery, the beguiled victim of plots and purposes he doesn't understand. Alien, he prowls beauty, majesty and tenderness that he cannot begin to appreciate. Worse, he is a sullen and belligerent menace, never without his murderous weapons even in a country where the only other weapon is the King's ceremonial “deedless sword”, and ready to pick a fight when everybody else is feasting, dancing and embracing. This melancholic obsessive casts a gloom over the happiness of innocent, loving folk who never did him any harm but continually go out of their way to help him, cheer him, and offer him their unconditional love. In the Glittering Plain he ungratefully strives to leave and reject all its beauty, and almost leads the two lovers who try to be his companions into death.

In the spring of 1891, while writing *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, Morris had his first severe illness; it was correctly diagnosed as diabetes. At that time there was not only no hope of a cure for diabetes, but no insulin or other effective treatment. The ironies of his love-life, the prospect of future debility, and the probability that very few years of life remained to him, naturally found a place in his fiction. In May that year, *Plain* was the first book he published from his new and much-loved Kelmscott Press. Its theme is of course mortality, and its axioms are that you'd have to be a damn fool not to be tempted by the glittering legend of an Earthly Paradise of eternal youth, love and unselfish happiness — and a damner fool to be seduced by it. The first speech of the oldest of the three questers who start the *Story* puts the matter directly:

though the days of the springtide are waxing, the hours of our lives are waning; nor may we abide unless thou canst truly tell us that this is the Land of the Glittering Plain: and if that be so, then delay not, lead us to thy lord, and perhaps he will make us content. (211-212)

This king has long ago left the mighty kingdom he once ruled; one of his companions had similarly left the realm of which he had been the uniquely successful general, and the third had abandoned a career as the most brilliant rhetorician and lawyer of his culture. Fame and glory are doubtful, hard-earned and brief, but sorrow and death are sure.

But this is not just another attempt at that old chestnut, the quest for a Promised Land, a Heaven on Earth. As a young poet Morris had been there and done that: his *Earthly Paradise* had had the biggest critical and popular success of any long poem in English. The wanderers in the frame-tale of those mighty volumes did not find rest in a land of perennial youth, happiness and peace, though they met some excellent stories. Now, in his last years, Morris offers us three wishful-thinking questers who achieve their quest, but their guide, the hero, escapes it. Their quest frames his story as a contrast.

As his name announces, Hallblithe wants nothing more than home:

But Hallblithe wondered, and he laughed and said: “Wayfarers, look under the sun down the plain which lieth betwixt the mountains and the sea, and ye shall behold the meadows all gleaming with the spring lilies; yet do we not call this the Glittering Plain, but Cleveland by the Sea. Here men die when their hour comes, nor know I if the days of their life be long enough for the forgetting of sorrow; for I am young and not yet a yoke-fellow of sorrow; but this I know, that they are long enough for the doing of deeds that shall not die. And as for Lord, I know not this word, for here dwell we, the sons of the Raven, in good fellowship, with our wives that we have wedded, and our mothers who have borne us, and our sisters who serve us. Again I bid you light down off your horses, and eat and drink, and be merry; and depart when ye will, to seek what land ye will.”

They scarce looked on him, but cried out together mournfully:

“This is not the Land! This is not the Land!” (212)

There are serio-comic elements in this contrast, in both the unison chanting of the obsessed questers and the adolescent smugness of the very young male warrior's summary of what life and community are all about. As his Story starts he is emblematically engaged in fitting his male-prowess spear with a new shaft, and after the strangers have clopped off on their archetypal search he indulges in some charming adolescent posture when he hears the girls coming back from seaweed-gathering at the shore. He pretends he doesn't realise they are there, so that Hostage, his girl-friend, will creep up to surprise him, and then tease him for his inattention. But she is not there. She has been kidnapped by black sea-raiders in a black ship, and suddenly he is "a yoke-fellow of sorrow".

When he hears of the kidnapping, Hallblithe of course sets off to rescue his betrothed, but he first offers a memorable, self-dedicatory mime of the silent, implacable warrior:

As for him he turned back silently to his work, and set the steel of the spear on the new ashen shaft, and took the hammer and smote the nail in, and laid the weapon on a round pebble that was thereby, and clenched the nail on the other side.(215)

He bears this spear all through his journey to the Isle of Ransom, then to the Glittering Plain and even into the lifeless desert beyond, and back to the Plain once more. Though he leaves it to moor his boat on his return to the Isle, it is even then returned to him, and goes home with him.

In the outward stages of this double-figure-eight journey, it is clear that Hallblithe is being manipulated. Those who kidnapped the Hostage were emphatic that her engagement to a man of the Raven clan was sufficient identification. Then at the very scene of the kidnapping a boat waits, steered by Puny Fox, the champion liar and chief rogue of the Viking-like ravagers from the Iceland-like Isle of Ransom, to which he leads the quester. Thence he can only go to the Glittering Plain, because that is the only destination anyone will take him to, and it so happens that a very old man is being taken there the very morning after Hallblithe arrives. What a coincidence! But to make assurance double sure, on the first night that he sleeps on the Isle a vision of his betrothed is sent to him, and she assures him that she expects to be taken to the Glittering Plain. The vision is as misleading as the false dawn to which it wakes him, since she is at that very moment imprisoned in the women's bowers a few miles away.

The spear he completes at the moment of his outsetting stands not only for a young man's ardour, in terms with which Dr Freud has made us familiar, but also for home and loyalty, since we first see Hallblithe making it by his own home-taught skills, while seated at his own family porch. It signifies that the man who bears it is striving manfully for his own place and his own people. As the quest develops, though, it also expresses the fierce and resentful wrath of a fighting-man whose efforts are constantly brought to nothing by mystery, or frustrated by

deceit. As frustration, it is totally unsuitable for fighting in a small rowboat, when that infuriating psychopomp Puny Fox is mocking and beguiling him by turns.

But the spear has a third signification: it marks him as the threatening, obsessive, ungrateful alien — even the potential regicide — amid the peaceable and weaponless dwellers on the Glittering Plain.

This triply-determined spear makes Hallblithe a complex kind of hero, and as such reduplicates the narrative ironies that stem from the symbolism of his family name. His clan-or house-emblem, the Raven, gives a tough and menacing edge to what would otherwise be a handsome young man. Probably it signifies a people very ready to define itself by battle if need be. Puny Fox's offputting compound of disarming sympathy and medicinal mockery, that keeps Hallblithe travelling towards the Isle of Ransom instead of killing Fox (or more likely dying) in the boat, develops a series of kenings, seriously comic and more or less ingeniously poetic epithets, based on Hallblithe's name. Like a skald he prides himself on ringing the changes on the theme every time he addresses the young "raven."

But ravens are not only bloodthirsty and ill-omened battle-crows and carrion-eaters: they are wise and perceptive birds, monogamous mates and devoted parents, brave dwellers on perilous and barren crags. It is at least partly by intention that his gibing serves to prepare Hallblithe to endure the public ridicule and reproach of the mock-battle in which his people are shamefully bested, in the feast-hall on the Isle of Ransom. Nor is it always a bad thing to hear the mortal warning in a raven's croak. Like a raven, Hallblithe travels to the Glittering Plain by following a very old ex-chieftain of the Ravagers on his last voyage. As "Grandfather", once the heroic war-leader Sea-Eagle, feels his death hard upon him and is carried wellnigh moribund to the shore, Hallblithe hovers over him, looking his best and fiercest:

Then he set his foot on the gunwale of the ship and leapt down lightly into the boat, and none hindered or helped him; and he stood upright in the boat, a goodly image of battle with the sun flashing back from his bright helm, his spear in his hand, his white shield on his back, and thereon the image of the Raven... (250)

One of the first things he notices about the joyous and peaceable inhabitants of the Glittering Plain is that any mention of death is anathema to them, and at first he tries not to spoil their day:

Said Hallblithe "is this land called also the Acre of the Undying?"

As he spake the words the smile faded from the damsel's face; she and her fellows grew pale, and she said: "Hold thy peace of such words! They are not lawful for any man to utter here. Yet mayst thou call it the Land of the Living."

He said: "I crave pardon for the rash word."

Then they smiled again, and drew near to him, and caressed him with their hands, and looked on him lovingly... (253)

The cost of the happy, liberated life of the Glittering

Plain, it seems, includes fear of and revulsion from death, total obedience to the King, and progressive amnesia about their own past lives, or anything that might draw their minds away from their present ease and happiness. The girls admit that "we have nought but hearsay of other lands. If we ever knew them we have forgotten them." (253) They can only dimly remember what other people, new to the Plain, mean by "winter"! Later they explain that his fiancée might be on the Plain for all they know, "For such as come hither keep not their old names, and soon forget them what they were." (254)

The King has absolute power over the imagination of his subjects:

"And that King of yours," said he, "how do ye name him?"

"He is the King," said the damsel.

"Hath he no other name?" said Hallblithe.

"We may not utter it," she said; "but thou shalt see him soon, that there is nought but good in him and mightiness." (254)

Self-restraint cannot long subdue Hallblithe's antipathy to the unchanging serenity of the Glittering Plain. When a big man walks jauntily out of the woods, "full-limbed, most joyous of aspect" (251), to throw his arms around our hero and announce that, "I am the Sea-Eagle of old days," Hallblithe is as wary of the rejuvenation as of everything else in the Undying King's realm. He stands leaning on his spear "with smiling lips and knitted brow" amid the rejoicing girls, as Sea-Eagle selects a lover — until Sea-Eagle makes the mistake of urging him to make his own selection.

Then stirred Hallblithe's heart within him and he said: "O Eagle of the sea, thou hast thy youth again: what then wilt thou do with it? Wilt thou not weary for the moonlit main, and the washing of waves and the dashing of spray, and thy fellows all glistening with the brine? Where now shall be the alien shores before thee, and the landing for fame, and departure for the gain of goods? Wilt thou forget the ship's black side, and the dripping of the windward oars, as the squall falleth on when the sun hath arisen, and the sail tugged hard on the sheet, and the ship lieth over and the lads shout against the whistle of the wind? Has the spear fallen from thine hand, and hast thou buried the sword of thy fathers in the grave from which thy body hath escaped? What art thou, O Warrior, in the land of the alien and the King? Who shall heed thee or tell the tale of thy glory, which thou hast covered over with the hand of a light woman, whom thy kindred knoweth not, and who was not born in a house wherefrom it hath been appointed thee of old to take the pleasure of woman? Whose thrall art thou now, thou lifter of the spoil, thou scarer of the freeborn? The bidding of what lord or King wilt thou do, O Chieftain, that thou mayst eat thy meat in the morning and lie soft in thy bed in the evening? O Warrior of the ravagers, here stand I, Hallblithe of the Raven, and I am come into an alien land beset with marvels to seek mine own, and find that which is dearest to mine heart; to wit, my trothplight maiden the Hostage of the Rose, the fair woman who shall lie in my bed, and bear me children, and stand by me in field and fold, by thwart and gunwale, before the bow and the spear, by the flickering of the cooking-fire, and amidst the blaze of the burning hall, and beside

the bale-fire of the warrior of the Raven. O Sea-eagle my guester amidst the foemen, my fellow-farer and ship-mate, say now once for all whether thou wilt help me in my quest, or fall off from me as a dastard?" (256-7)

This is by far Hallblithe's longest speech, and its fierce Viking values, delivered in so harsh, implacable and beautiful a rhetoric, makes the girls of the Glittering Plain shrink from him, tremble and grow pale. We are entitled to feel the same, since the ethic he celebrates is based on remorseless theft by pitiless violence. But as with Hallblithe's attitude to women in his first long speech, we don't have to agree with him to see why he argues this case. His auditor's blood-stained glory was as a Viking, who claimed the right to die by the sword as readily as to live by it.

Hallblithe's purpose is of course to force Sea-Eagle to remember his pride in his sworn word, the heroic "fame" that had conditioned his past active life in the outside world, and it works. Even though Sea-Eagle has an excellent reply, he makes (and keeps) the promise Hallblithe needs. Yet still the hero's raven-voice adds an ominous prediction:

So it is, shipmate, that whereas thou sayest that the days flit, for thee they shall flit no more; and the day may come for thee when thou shalt be weary, and know it, and long for the lost which thou hast forgotten. (257-8)

This hero of gloom wanders the length and breadth of the Glittering Plain in his incessant search for his betrothed, rather as Hamlet stalks through Elsinore's wedding finery dressed in funereal black, or Scrooge glowers through the festive streets of London's Christmas. His physical beauty makes his obsessive intensity forgivable, up to a point, but what is worse is that he proves the King is unable to find a gift to make everyone happy. In this Land of Heart's Desire, one heart at least does not desire it.

Just as everyone on the Isle of Ransom seemingly conspired with the wishes of the Undying King to get Hallblithe to the Glittering Plain, everyone on the Plain seems to help him at least partly because the King is so kindly disposed to him. The King is splendid, an archetype of gracious and benevolent loveliness:

His face shone like a star; it was exceeding beauteous, and as kind as the even of May in the gardens of the happy, when the scent of the eglantine fills all the air. When he spoke his voice was so sweet that all hearts were ravished, and none might gainsay him. (260)

The king is always accessible to his "children," his subjects, and is confident that his power can gratify any wish they have. But Hallblithe is not used to kings, and resents having been decoyed and beguiled into the Plain: he cannot speak to this hyper-charismatic and adorable absolute ruler in the joyously grateful way everyone else does:

Said Hallblithe: "O great King of a happy land, I ask nought of thee save that which none shall withhold from me uncursed."

"I will give it to thee," said the King, "and thou shalt bless me. But what is it which thou wouldst? What more canst thou have than the Gifts of the land?" (261)

If it seems significant that the hero talks of curses and the King, his deathless opponent, of blessing, there is no rule in fantasy that heroes have always to be nice, or even sophisticated. What the irresistibly charismatic King's offer amounts to is a series of lofty equivocations about the woman who "would" have him, and he "should" or "ought to" have. In the last stage of Hallblithe's beguiling he has to spy demeaningly upon a beautiful, suffering and love-lorn lady. This is the King's own daughter, who has fallen in love with a picture of Hallblithe in a splendidly illuminated book. He is ashamed, but he is also angry, for it is clear that she is, in her selfish arrogance, the cause of the kidnapping and all the attendant deceptions that brought him there:

... for I deemed that this eve at least thou shouldst come, so many and strong as are the meshes of love which we have cast about thy feet. Oh come tomorrow at the least and latest, of what shall I do, and wherewith shall I quench the grief of my heart? Or else why am I the daughter of the Undying King, the Lord of the Treasure of the Sea? Why have they wrought new marvels for me, and compelled the Ravagers of the Coasts to serve me, and sent false dreams flitting on the wings of the night?... (266)

Like most powerful people, she is in the habit of indulging her own whims, and she has clearly insisted upon her father indulging them too. There is little "love" in this crush upon a man she has never met, and whose life she is prepared to lay waste; nor does she even mention her innocent "rival", whom she has given into the hands of violent and lecherous ravagers entirely habituated to rape, murder and slave-trading.

Hallblithe is justified in his misery and resentment, and even in mentioning death to the Sea-Eagle's lady:

"Take me whither ye will; but now nought availeth. I am a captive in a land of lies, and here most like shall I live betrayed and die hapless."

"Hold thy peace, dear friend, of such words as those last," said she, "or I must needs flee from thee, for they hurt me sorely." (267)

There follows another fruitless audience with the King, in which it becomes clear that he is indeed not a mortal monarch, but a kind of Elf-King. Like his daughter, he has no trouble at all in mentioning death, that topic from which he so tenderly shields his subjects. His loving-kindness is inhumanly, and ominously, controlled:

Hallblithe saw that the King was angry, tho' he smiled on him; yet so coldly, that the face of him froze the very marrow of Hallblithe's bones: and he said within himself: "This King of lies shall not slay me, though my anguish be hard to bear: for I am alive, and it may be that my love is in this land, and I may find her here, and how to reach another land I know not." So he turned from the face of the King as the sun was setting...(269)

Hallblithe's wanderings through the King's country are at last helped by the Sea-Eagle and his lady, who accompany him to the border of the Plain, where sometimes especially dedicated questers find their way in. He

is dedicated enough to find his way out, but the barren desert that stretches beyond the magical barrier would soon have killed him but for his being found by the three sad wanderers who had begun (and seemingly framed) the story with their longing for "the Land". Since the desert offers only death, Hallblithe has to turn back with the wanderers, and sure enough this Tir nan Og renews their youth, happiness and peace of mind. Unfortunately, their warm gratitude cannot help our hero.

Hallblithe's struggle against the Glittering Plain culminates in his building a boat, a technological task which is beyond both the needs and the concentration-span of the Undying King's subjects: they can plan and build small pleasant huts and more commodious tents, and their weaving and dyeing are obviously excellent, but why should they take the trouble to go out on the sea, to fish, row or sail? Their land offers them all they can possibly want, as the King claims.

And that is another dimension of *Plain*. Morris had resigned from the Socialist League in 1890, and consequently been dismissed as editor of its paper, *Commonweal*, but carried on funding it in its new, anarchist phase until November so as to make sure the final installments of *News from Nowhere* were published there. That splendid Utopia, his crucial contribution to socialist discourse, is a major work in its own right.

But in *Plain*, his next work, Morris discovers that he has unfinished business with that *Nowhere*, whose happy, industrious and free-loving citizens, retaining their youth and beauty for most of a very long life-span, are so like the King's subjects in the paradise of the Glittering Plain. Both populations enjoy light labour, much craftwork, music and dancing, and especially eating, drinking and loving their neighbours in "days of peace and rest and cleanness and smiling goodwill". The King would of course be intolerable in *Nowhere*, but he can claim as justly as Old Hammond that,

in this land no man hath a lack which he may not satisfy without taking aught from any other. I deem not that thine heart may conceive a desire which I shall not fulfil for thee, or crave a gift which I shall not give thee. (261)

Hallblithe fears that a passionate vision, of the ploughing at home in Cleveland, means his death. In desperation he asks permission to leave the Land, but the King cannot imagine that anywhere else is worth living in:

Where else than in this land wilt thou find rest? Without is battle and famine, longing unsatisfied, and heart-burning and fear; within it is plenty and peace and goodwill and pleasure without cease. (272)

In practice, this arcadian regime rules over and exploits the violence and chaos of other lands: the Undying King is the master of the slavers and ravagers of the Isle of Ransom. As for "longing unsatisfied", the King's spoiled daughter, the young hero she has fallen in love with, and his fiancée are all suffering from this, and the cause is in the royal privilege, both high-handed and sneaking, which the King has indulged.

In Nowhere, love was the only remaining cause of misery and crime. In the Plain too, the lover bears the tokens and the disposition of death. Indeed, Hallblithe defies the Plain because he is as ready to embrace death as life. By luck or some other power, as is perhaps implied by the mysterious "great shout" that wakes him in mid-ocean, he sails back to the Isle of Ransom, and so falls in with Puny Fox, who plans the strange charade which leads to his truth-telling triumph in the feast-hall.

Their plan has consequences which ratify the power of love, but its only inspiration seems to come from Fox's irascible and long-dead great grandfather, with whose tomb and territory Fox identifies, and whose unquiet spirit gives him power, and has taught him shape-shifting and other perception-magics.

The romance celebrates this death-based purpose and power, this readiness to live a wholly mortal life. It is by converting the skills of mortal lying into his personal truth that Hallblithe brings Hostage at last home to their folk, accompanied by a Puny Fox at least sufficiently reformed to be able to endure being in the same room as the truth for a little while.

Compare this joyous and confident life, in which Hallblithe becomes the blood-brother of the best of the Ravagers, with the thinning out of value and meaning on the Glittering Plain, whose people can only endure the intensity of Hallblithe's rebellious longing because they start to forget him as soon as he goes away. The ardent Princess, though she seems eventually to recover from her agonies of longing, expresses the horror of extended life-span without content, and without death:

"Yea, why is the earth fair and fruitful, and the heavens kind above it, if thou comest not to-night, nor to-morrow, nor the day after? And I the daughter of the Undying, on whom the days shall grow and grow as the grains of sand which the wind heaps up above the sea-beach. And life shall grow huger and more hideous round about the lonely one, like the ling-worm laid upon the gold, that waxeth thereby till it lies all round about the house of the queen entrapped, the moveless unending ring of the years that change not." (266)

A life worth living must not seek to control the future by a rule of deathless power. Morris finds he does not want "an epoch of rest" to run down the vitality of human beings. Even the life of robbery with violence, boasting and bullying, destruction of the homes and enslaving of the bodies of the helpless, seems preferable.

On the Isle of Ransom, Hallblithe and the Hostage make sure of each others' identity by a shared story from their childhood which uses the snake brooding on gold very differently, because their life-experiences are fleeting and therefore more truly treasured:

"If thou art Hallblithe, tell me what befell to the finger-goldring that my mother gave me when we were both but little."

Then his face grew happy, and he smiled, and he said: "I put it for thee one autumntide in the snake's hole by the river, amidst the roots of an old thorn-tree, that the snake might

brood it, and make the gold grow greater; but when winter was over and we came to look for it, lo! there was neither ring, nor snake, nor thorn-tree: for the flood had washed it all away." (316)

The life-style of Hallblithe and his people, like their long-lost "fame," may not be in every detail to your taste, but remember, the Glittering Plain is quite as conclusively lost by now, for us humans. Could any young couple be happier to lose the gold and its increase? And who would prefer the slow ebbing away of meaning as the great snake of eternity encircles identity in its moveless coils?

Works Cited

Morris, William. *The Story of the Glittering Plain and Child Christopher*. ed., with introduction, notes and glossary, by Norman Talbot. Bristol: William Morris Library, Thoemmes Press, 1996.

Morris, William. *Collected Works*, in XXIV volumes. London: Longmans 1914-1917. *Story* in volume XIV, *Child* in XVII, *Dream* in XVI, *Flood* in XXI, *House* in XIV, *Mountains* in XV, *News* in XVI, *Water* in XX, *Well* in XVIII and XIX, *Wood* in XVII.

Henderson, Philip. *William Morris: His Life, Works, and Friends*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967.

Peacock, Thomas Love. *The Misfortunes of Elphin* (1829), Felinfach: Llanerch 1991.

Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (1604), ed. Cyrus Hoy. New York: Norton, 1962.

Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1954.

**UNDISCOVERED
TREASURE**

Whether for general reading, research, personal delving or collecting, you have a wealth of rich treasures awaiting you in the Back Issues of MYTHLORE

**All Mythlore back issues are available.
An (x) indicates scarce or xerox copy.**

N°1,2 (x) \$3.50 ea.; N°3,4 (x) \$3.00 ea.;
N°5 (same issue as Tolkien Journal N°12) \$2 ea.;
N°6-9 (x); N°42 & N°44 (short, supplemental issues) .25¢ ea.; N°10 to current issue (except N°42 & N°44) \$4.00.

**Why not order the subject index,
and see for yourself**

**SUBJECT INDEX to the first 50 issues, 2lpp.
offprint (from N°51), research tool, \$2 ea.**

**Special Offer: A complete set of issues 1-50 (a \$160 value) for \$130.00, which includes postage.
Send your orders for back issues to: Mythlore,
1008 N. Monterey St.,
Alhambra, CA 91801, USA**