

Witches and Wicked Objects¹

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It had taken many years under the tutelage of Granny Weatherwax for Magrat to learn that the common kitchen breadknife was better than the most ornate of magical knives. It could do all that the magical knife could do, plus you could also use it to cut bread.

- Terry Pratchett, *Witches Abroad*

The Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art staged an exhibition from 27th July to 3rd November 2013, entitled 'Witches and Wicked Bodies'. In reviewing the exhibition for *The Observer*,² Laura Cumming wrote of Frederick Sandys' 1868 painting *Medea*: 'the dread Medea ought to inspire is completely undermined by those gaudy pre-Raphaelite colours. One sure lesson is that black and white, and graphic night, really set off a witch to best advantage.' Perhaps she is right; prints by Goya and Dürer bombarded the visitor to the exhibition with horrific visions of perverted acts, and from the pages of the *Malleus Maleficarum* came the stuff of nightmares. Nevertheless, when I visited the Gallery, it was those 'gaudy colours' that most caught my attention. On one wall Keomi Gray, Sandys' Romany model, looked at me askance through the eyes of Medea, while another Keomi, this time in the guise of Vivien, looked on (<http://goo.gl/GWvH8U>); and the fiery palette of the former was rivalled by the peacock feathers crowning the latter.



Frederick Sandys, *Medea*, 1868,
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In making the uppermost part of the painting *Medea* glow golden, Sandys effectively uses a single colour choice to represent an entire myth. It is as if the fleece hanging from the trees exudes its eponymous hue. The colour of *Medea* is concentrated in the very centre of the composition, focusing in on the figure's strings of beads of coral and of blue faience. With a fraught gesture she clutches at her necklaces; whether she is suffocated by or taking comfort in them is unclear. With her other hand Medea pours from a cup, and the lower part of the composition is cluttered with other magical accoutrements. In this article I consider the Pre-

Raphaelite paintings presented in the exhibition, as well as others depicting witches, specifically in terms of this magical clutter. I argue that these objects can tell us something important not only about witches and wicked bodies, but about female roles and men's perception of them in Victorian Britain.³ Through exploration of myth and the occult, male gaze turns to female agency, an agency expressed through objects. Furthermore, the symbolism integral to the compositions invites us to explore similar gender relations in the ancient world. I trace the witches back through their myths to the ancient texts in which they appear – to Circe in Homer's *Odyssey* and Medea in Apollonius' *Argonautica* and Euripides' *Medea* – and examine to what extent these Wicked Objects, and their implications for female agency and male responses to it, have their roots in the Greek tradition.⁴

Sandys' *Medea* was submitted to the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition of 1868. Although initially accepted, at the last minute it was excluded from the exhibition – and we have no record of the reason why.⁵ Elzea (2001:186) blames it on the copulating frogs which form part of the foreground jumble. It is interesting that she focuses on one particular element of Medea's magical paraphernalia, and indeed the committee may well have done the same. But was the devil really in the detail, or are the frogs merely a conduit for a deeper threat? I suggest that the problem lay in the very nature of witchcraft as depicted by the Pre-Raphaelites. Their model was not the warts-and-all hag, but the *femme fatale*. In many of the other works on display in the Witches and Wicked Bodies exhibition, witches' sexuality is emphasised, depicted as they are in all manner of scandalous positions which counteract patriarchal definitions of femininity; or by contrast, with drooping and shriveled breasts highlighting their lack or loss of sexuality. Pre-Raphaelite witches, however, are neither obscene nor repulsive, but alluring and beautiful – and it is they who pose the real risk. They embody the *καλὸν κακόν* (Hesiod, *Theogony* 585), the beautiful evil. Like Pandora with her jar, they represent heightened, indeed 'excessive', female agency: a gendered dynamic as unsettling to the Victorians as to the ancient Greeks. It is this issue of agency, specifically as expressed through objects, which interests me here. Witches are apart from the norm; they are either (in the case of the Pre-Raphaelites) impossibly beautiful or (the more frequent motif in the exhibition) unbelievably hideous. However, they are in our midst (just ask someone from Salem). Branding a woman as a witch has throughout history been a way to root out and curtail 'excessive' female agency from within one's own society. A village wise woman is a witch because she has a knowledge of medicine granting her suspect autonomy; an intelligent woman whose judgement turns out to be far-sighted must have used her scrying device, not her common sense; an attractive woman who seduces men must have them under a spell rather than her thumb. The figure of the witch provides a stark antithesis to the Victorian 'angel in the house'.⁶

Sandys' *Medea* captures multiple moments of the Jason myth. Elzea (2001:185) writes: 'the background symbolizes Medea's past, while the foreground presents her in a state of anguish and jealousy preparing with incantations the fatal mixture for impregnating Glauke's dress.' In other words, according to Elzea the background is in an Apollonian mode, the foreground Euripidean. Certainly Medea cuts a tragic figure here, and she is indeed concocting a potion.⁷ However, there is another possibility: that the voyages of the *Argo* are not yet in the past. Medea's head divides the background scene, situating her between the Argonauts and their goal of the Golden Fleece. This could point to her crucial agency in the *Argonautica*, as it is only her potions that allow Jason to reach the fleece and, ultimately, make it home. Indeed, the serpent peeking over her shoulder suggests that her work on these counts is not yet done.⁸ The tragic aspect may stem from Medea's emotional turmoil after leaving her father's house, a flight attributable both to love and to fear (Apollonius *Argonautica* 3.1-4).⁹ The tragedy is then compounded by events upon Jason and Medea's return, and Medea's off-centre gaze in the painting could hint at her perception of the future.

As well as capturing multiple moments, Sandys' *Medea* also incorporates a range of cultures. The Egyptian thread is strong, with scarabs in roundels on the backdrop and as part of Medea's bracelet, and a faience figure of a cat god in the bottom left of the painting. The headdress of interlocking chains and shells seems to Elzea (2001:185) to be 'Hellenic or

perhaps Near Eastern jewellery', and the dress to be 'of exotic origins, possibly West African'. The manuscript cushioning the toads jolts us out of chronology and, as Elzea points out, the combination of magical tools seems straight out of *Macbeth* rather than Greek epic. To a certain extent, this eclecticism may stem from the myth itself, and in particular from Apollonius' telling of it. Apollonius' *Argonautica* is a product of Ptolemaic Alexandria, a city founded less than a century before the poem's composition and inhabited by both native Egyptians and Greek colonists. In the motley crew of the *Argo*, the poem's original Greek audience would have seen traces of their own migrant history, and the Colchians of Book 4 (Medea included) could be mapped onto the Hellenised Egyptians. As Alexander's conquests expanded the boundaries of the known world, so Apollonius presents co-operation and union between Greeks and non-Greeks. Apollonius' Medea is therefore 'the other' in that she is from a far-off land and Jason meets her whilst on a long voyage – but to much of the audience she is culturally not so different, and by conflating Greek and Egyptian mythology and ritual throughout the poem Apollonius brings the rest of the audience closer to the character. Changes in the Hellenistic world had brought women to the fore: queens took on positions of power in the Hellenistic kingdoms, and increasing ethnic diversity had something of a leveling effect on society. This balance between familiarity and otherness is key to both the Greek and the Victorian presentation of the witch. It is a manifestation of the duality of the *καλὸν κακόν*: enticing yet dangerous, attractive yet alien. The figure of the witch presents a particular mode of female agency – and it is an insidious one.

Whichever moment in Medea's story is actually being depicted by Sandys, he had a very good reason not to include Glauke's dress: he had already painted just such a scene in his 1864 *Morgan le Fey*.



Frederick Sandys, *Morgan le Fey*, 1864,
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Morgan is enchanting a robe she has woven herself, which she will send to her half-brother King Arthur in an attempt on his life.¹⁰ Just like the Colchian witch, Morgan is surrounded by vibrant colours and magical ephemera such as an exotic pipe-like device, a burning tripod

brazier, pottery and glass vessels, books, scrolls, a loom-weight and shuttle – and the loom itself, with two owls perched atop it. There is again a mixing of cultures, as the background is composed of an Egyptian-style frieze with animal-headed gods, but interspersed with Celtic or Japanese roundels; a statue of the Hindu god Ganesh stands on the cupboard, and Morgan's overdress is decorated with Pictish symbols. These last were an addition between preparatory drawing and painting, and were a topical one; John Stuart's *Sculptured Stones of Scotland* had been published in 1856 and included the Newton Stone, a copy of which appears on Morgan's dress.¹¹ That the owls perch on the loom harks back to Greek epic as it is Athena, often symbolised by the owl, who teaches Pandora to weave:

αὐτὰρ Ἀθήνην
ἔργα διδασκῆσαι, πολυδαίδαλον ἰστὸν ὕφαινειν·

But [Zeus ordered] Athena to teach her works,
to weave a richly-wrought web.

Hesiod, *Works and Days* 63-4¹²

Perhaps as the symbols of Athena look on, they are also casting aspersions on the wisdom of Morgan's actions; but as a minor detail in the composition they are subordinated to the subject's irresistible agency.

Another painting exhibited under the heading of 'Witches and Wicked Bodies' which utilises an equally eclectic mixing of cultural elements is J.W. Waterhouse's towering composition *The Magic Circle* (1886) – <http://goo.gl/QGzBvD>. Unlike *Medea* or *Morgan le Fey*, the title gives no indication as to the identity of the subject, and her appearance further confuses the issue. She has the hairstyle of an early Anglo-Saxon but a complexion from the middle east, and she holds a crescent-moon *boline*, used by Celtic druids to cut herbs. In evoking many contexts but committing to none, Waterhouse creates something elusive and ambiguous. We don't know who the woman is, we don't know what she is doing, and, thanks to the hazy background, we don't know where (or when) she is. But wherever she is, she is in a powerful female space, strongly demarcated by the circle she draws with a stick. Like Sandys' *Medea*, Waterhouse's witch uses eclectic objects to emphasise her power and agency, yet disguise her identity. The *boline* itself is an interesting choice for magical ephemera. An object used, it seems, in modern Wicca,¹³ it is discredited by proponents of so-called 'kitchen witchcraft' philosophy who argue that, if one has a decent knife, there is no need for a separate tool such as this (the Terry Pratchett quotation with which I started argues much the same thing). The balance between familiarity and otherness that defines many portrayals of the witch is better achieved through domestic objects used in magical ways than through clearly delineated magical objects. This is certainly the case for *Medea* and, as I shall show, for Helen, both of whom operate with textiles and with potions, objects appropriate to their conventional gender roles but used in unconventional ways. Circe with her wand, on the other hand, takes us further into the 'other'.

Despite the lack of explicit identification, there are archaising references in the picture which connect it once again with the classical tradition. Embroidered on the sorceress' skirt is an image of what seems to be a Greek warrior. That the warrior appears to be battling a snake might hint at Jason's encounter with the Colchian serpent in order to take the golden fleece in Book 4 of the *Argonautica*, thus making a *Medea* of the subject. Indeed, Trippi (2002:77) suggests that 'Viewers would have immediately associated Waterhouse's jet-haired sorceress with the acclaimed *Medea* exhibited by Rossetti's disciple, Frederick Sandys'. That a scene is embroidered brings to mind Jason's divinely-wrought cloak, described in Book 1 of the poem (*Argonautica* 1.730-67). Another level of possible connotation, I suggest, is of Helen's weaving in Book 3 of the *Iliad*:

τὴν δ' εὖρ' ἐν μεγάρῳ· ἦ δὲ μέγαν ἰστὸν ὕφαινε
δίπλακα μαρμαρέην, πολέας δ' ἐνέπασσεν ἀέθλους

Τρώων θ' ἵπποδάμων καὶ Ἀχαιῶν χαλκοχιτώνων,
οὓς ἔθεν εἵνεκ' ἔπασχον ὑπ' Ἄρης παλαμάων.

She found Helen in the chamber; she was weaving a great web,
a double-folded purple garment, and working into it the many struggles
of horse-breaking Trojans and bronze-armoured Achaians,
struggles that they suffered for her sake at the hands of Ares.

Homer, *Iliad* 3.125-8¹⁴

In weaving into a cloth the struggles endured on her own account, Helen reveals her proximity to the poet by narrating events unfolding around her, and reflects on her own particular role as instigator of the conflict. It is an object imbued with female power and agency – and we might imagine that Waterhouse's sorceress is wearing that very garment. The connection with Helen revisits the issue of 'excessive' female agency. In the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Helen is not a passive creature being passed from Achaian pillar to Trojan post but an active agent. She is caught between two lives and two men, and as such she becomes a liminal figure, left outside the normal rules of gender, the normal limits of female freedom. That she weaves the events unfolding outside the walls suggests special knowledge, a manipulation of the quintessential female act of textile production that shows her operating within the bounds of her gender yet pushing them.

The possible link with Helen is strengthened by the fact that Helen herself is no stranger to witchcraft. The sorceress could just as easily be a Helen as a Medea. Helen's competencies with potions are revealed in Book 4 of the *Odyssey* as when she and Menelaus offer hospitality to Odysseus' and Nestor's sons, Helen decides to slip in a little magical extra:

ἐνθ' αὐτ' ἄλλ' ἐνόησ' Ἑλένη Διὸς ἐκγεγαυῖα·
αὐτίκ' ἄρ' εἰς οἶνον βάλε φάρμακον, ἐνθεν ἔπινον
νηπενθές τ' ἄχολόν τε, κακῶν ἐπίληθον ἀπάντων.
ὃς τὸ καταβρόξιεν, ἐπὴν κρητῆρι μιγείη,
οὐ κεν ἐφημέριός γε βάλοι κατὰ δάκρυ παρειῶν,
οὐδ' εἰ οἱ κατατεθναίῃ μήτηρ τε πατήρ τε,
οὐδ' εἰ οἱ προπάροιθεν ἀδελφεὸν ἢ φίλον υἱὸν
χαλκῶ δηϊώων, ὁ δ' ὀφθαλμοῖσιν ὄρωτο.
τοῖα Διὸς θυγάτηρ ἔχε φάρμακα μητιόεντα,
ἔσθλά, τὰ οἱ Πολύδαμνα πόρεν, Θῶνος παράκοιτις
Αἴγυπτίη, τῇ πλεῖστα φέρει ζεῖδωρος ἄρουρα
φάρμακα, πολλὰ μὲν ἐσθλά μεμιγμένα πολλὰ δὲ λυγρά·

But Helen, daughter of Zeus, thought of another thing,
and immediately she threw a drug into the wine from which they were drinking,
a drug that banishes pain and allays anger, and makes one forget all evils.
He who should swallow it, once it is mixed in the mixing bowl,
would not for the whole day let tears fall down his cheeks,
not if his mother and father should die,
nor if in front of him they should slay with bronze his brother or his
dear son, and he should see it with his own eyes.
These were the kind of helpful drugs the daughter of Zeus had,
good ones, which Polydamna gave her, wife of Thonus,
from Egypt, where the grain-giving field bears the most
drugs, many good when mixed, but many baneful.

Homer, *Odyssey* 4.219-30

When the *pharmakon* is first mentioned at *Odyssey* 4.220, its nature is not specified. Will it be good? Baneful? Man-slaying? All of these possibilities exist in the Odyssean context, as I shall show in my discussion of Circe's drugs. In the next line we are told what it does: it

banishes pain and anger, and makes one forget all evils. It appears to be good. However, in what follows it seems that the numbness it offers is a little excessive, as not even the deaths of mother, father, brother and child will register. Helen's drug takes away memory – it makes one forget all evils, breaking emotional familial ties thus dulling the desire for *nostos*. When the *pharmaka* are specified as μητιόεντα (helpful) and ἐσθλά (good), then, the adjectives seem a little incongruous. Indeed the drugs come from Egypt where there are φάρμακα λυγρά (baneful drugs) as well as ἐσθλά – how clear is the divide? That line 230 refers to the drugs being 'mixed', μεμιγμένα, hints that the line might be blurred.¹⁵ Again we find the tension between the 'other' and the 'everywoman': the drugs are from Egypt, they are exotic, and their ability to dull pain and make one forget evils shows that they are powerful; yet the poet is careful to point out that they are 'good' and 'helpful', thus defending Helen's credentials as wife and host. Lyons (2012:69) comments of Helen and Menelaus: 'one cannot help wondering if frequent doses of the *pharmakon nepenthes* are required by both husband and wife to endure what must be a rather complicated marital situation.' Perhaps Helen's *pharmaka* are good in that they help her to manage her precarious domestic position. The 'angel in the house' becomes manipulator of memory.

By combining elements from multiple cultures, Waterhouse in *The Magic Circle*, like Sandys in *Medea*, creates a perpetual 'other', but simultaneously creates a sense of universality. In being no-one's woman the sorceress becomes 'everywoman'. This is reinforced by the snake coiled around her neck, which is likely to represent the *ouroboros*, the great serpent that coils around the earth in a circle of life and death. The symbol originated in Egypt, and as such could reinforce the identification of the subject with Medea. It is a symbol which, interestingly, becomes topical in some of the key periods I am discussing here. There was a renewed interest in the *ouroboros* during the Hellenistic period, as the *Chrysopoeia* of Cleopatra the Alchemist gives one of the earliest extant images of the symbol linked with alchemy.¹⁶ Further, it was of contemporary relevance to Waterhouse as a symbol used in the teachings of Helena Blavatsky (1831-91), co-founder of the Theosophical Society.¹⁷ Like Sandys exploring Pictish symbols in *Morgan le Fey* in light of contemporary research, Waterhouse explores this symbol which, appropriately to its meaning, connects the ancient world with his own times. One cultural factor which links the Hellenistic Greeks and the Victorian Brits is that of imperial expansion. Apollonius' *Argonautica* explores the edges of empire, and indeed Luckhurst 2004 analyses accounts of occult phenomena experienced at the imperial periphery in the Victorian period, where 'the line between positive knowledge and folkloric belief became blurred'.

The Victorian relevance of witchcraft is an important issue to be considered. Though the paintings I am considering present witches in an archaising, distancing way, magic was not by any means seen by the Victorians as primitive.¹⁸ On the one side was the law, with the practicing of witchcraft being illegal right up until 1951 (two women were convicted by the 1735 Witchcraft Act in 1944). On the other side was the late Victorian boom in occultism, with groups like the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (a society of practicing magicians) opening temples devoted to the study of the magical arts.¹⁹ It is crucial to note that the Victorian occult was to a large extent associated with women. As just mentioned, the Theosophical Society was founded by a woman.²⁰ The theosophists claimed 'that an "ancient wisdom" existed in the East and that it was being transmitted to the West through the medium of a woman',²¹ a belief that harnesses the 'other' in terms of both gender and geography as discussed in this article. Magical Orders were notable for admitting women as well as men – Mrs. Oscar Wilde's name appears on the parchment roll of members of the Order of the Golden Dawn. Elizabeth Barrett Browning is known to have dabbled in the occult – and her husband is known to have disapproved.²² And women were involved not only in terms of organisation and membership, but in terms of the actual power of the occult. As Trippi (2002:77) notes, 'The widespread perception that women made better mediums for supernatural communication gave them a degree of influence unimaginable in conventional religion.' The role of the medium is supposedly a passive one, as she becomes a conduit for spirit manifestations. However, this superficial passivity is subverted by the influence the 'inspired' medium could then have. Key to this study is the fact that this influence often

manifested itself in terms of objects. Take scrying devices, for example, like the crystal ball painted by Waterhouse in 1902 (<http://goo.gl/Qzaldk>). In the nineteenth century, such devices were often thought to need a woman to operate them. Frederick Hockley, one of the best known occultists of the Victorian era, experimented with scrying with a crystal or mirror – but he would employ a ‘speculatrix’, usually a young girl, to do the actual scrying for him. In Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s poem *Rose Mary* a young woman is instructed to consult a beryl to uncover an ambush,²³ and Rossetti in a letter to his brother William comments on ‘the innocence required in the seer’.²⁴ This specification is interesting in that the power of the occult is ascribed by a man (perhaps a naïve, or at least an overly optimistic one) not to women who transgress the boundaries of their gender roles, but to young girls who operate within them.

Waterhouse painted a more explicitly-identified sorceress in his *Jason and Medea* of 1907 (<http://goo.gl/32NC3v>). This painting was possibly inspired by the re-exhibition of Sandys’ *Medea* at the Academy of 1905. A page in Waterhouse’s sketchbook shows that he had experimented with different poses for the pair, manipulating their power dynamic. He finally settled on a composition which focuses on Medea’s queenly bearing and hypnotic expression, and which has an anxious-looking Jason perched on the edge of his seat clutching his spear. Jason really looks like the *amechanos* anti-hero of the *Argonautica*, hiding behind or leaning for support on the object he should be wielding. While Medea has her witch’s *pharmaka* in hand, she has freedom of agency and of the canvas. Indeed, Apollonius in his *Argonautica* uses the epithet *polupharmakos*, of many drugs, to describe Medea. It is an adjective which characterises Medea in terms of her agent objects, and is one shared by another epic witch, one also of interest to Waterhouse: Circe in the *Odyssey*.

Before discussing the figure of Circe in more detail, it may be worth exploring a crucial intertext which can go some way towards explaining the combinations and connotations mentioned thus far (Medea’s ‘Apollonian’ and ‘Euripidean’ modes, Medea and Helen, Medea and Circe). William Morris’ epic poem *The Life and Death of Jason* was published in 1867 to wide critical acclaim, just one year before Sandys’ *Medea* was exhibited. Morris was intimately familiar with the Greek myth; he read the *Medea* with the Reverend F.B. Guy, and ‘Under his tuition Morris developed into a very fair classical scholar’.²⁵ Indeed, it was a story which was part of mainstream literary consciousness: as Henry James wrote in his review of Morris’ *Jason* for the *North American Review* of October 1867, ‘With the subject all reading people are familiar’.²⁶ As the title suggests, the poem spans both Apollonian (earlier) and Euripidean (later) parts of the myth, drawing together the epic and the tragic into one contemporary reference point. Just how contemporary it was, however, was debated: Joseph Knight in the *Sunday Times* of 9th June 1867 argued that ‘No single idea about it seems to have even the slightest reference to any modern thought or feeling’, and a review in *The Athenaeum* claimed that ‘“The Life and Death of Jason” has nothing in common with the hopes, the interests and the sympathies of modern life.’ On the other hand, a review in the *Spectator* described the poem as ‘A delightful mixture of the old and the new, of Hellenic tradition exercising its peculiar spell over an Anglo-Saxon mind’, and C.E. Norton writes for the *Nation* on 22nd August 1867 that Morris ‘treats his theme not as a Greek poet would have treated it, but as an artist aware of the impassable barrier set up between the ancient and modern moods of feeling and manner of expression. Pouring his old wine into new bottles, he preserves the perennial freshness of its genuine flavour.’ Henry James used similar imagery in his verdict: ‘He has foraged in a treasure-house; he has visited the ancient world, and come back with a massive cup of living Greek wine.’

The focal character of Morris’ *Jason* is, indisputably, Medea, and it may be from the witch herself that this equivocal reception stems. Some critics recognised the contemporary resonance of the figure of the witch and its connotations for female agency (just as this article has endeavoured to do) – some, on the other hand, firmly consigned witches and wicked objects to the mythical past. Norton wrote of Morris’ *Medea*: ‘with a tendency easily explicable by the general direction of modern sentiment, he has been led to dwell too strongly on her lovely womanhood, and has not reproduced the awful and abiding sense of her magic art, and of her ruthless nature’. Her threat is not overt or ugly: this is the *femme fatale*, the beautiful evil. Morris’ *Jason* is notable – and noted – for its pictorial quality: as Norton

commented, 'The most marked characteristic of his poem is its picturesqueness'. Swinburne in the *Fortnightly Review* of July 1867 waxed rather more lyrical, writing: 'The pictures are clear and chaste, sweet and lucid, as early Italian work.' Swinburne effectively interprets Morris' poem as a Pre-Raphaelite painting. This 'picturesqueness' may have inspired Sandys and Waterhouse to take up Medea – and Circe – as subjects, and it is the literary equivalent of the 'gaudy colours' of our exhibition. The focus on the witch's 'lovely womanhood', with the all-too-real power and danger it conceals, may in fact be the updating the critics were looking for.

Morris' *Jason* was received by critics in, as we might expect for a piece of classical reception, comparative terms. However, the poem was aligned not with the *Medea*, nor with the *Argonautica*, but with the *Odyssey*. Knight wrote that the 'Treatment of subject, and the nature of some of the episodes, recall the *Odyssey* – with which, indeed, the book has more in common than it has with any other work.' Norton claimed that '*The Life and Death of Jason* belongs to the same class as the *Odyssey*', and Henry James in his review wrote that 'It is as rich in adventure as the *Odyssey*'. Though Morris was not to produce his own translation of the *Odyssey* for another twenty years, he was already influenced by the epic, and his Odyssean treatment of Jason and Medea acts as a bridge between this witch and her Homeric counterparts.

In Homer's *Odyssey* 10 (220-5), Odysseus' trusted companion Polites advises his comrades to call out to Circe because she is singing and weaving. Though her singing recalls the deadly song of the Sirens (*Odyssey* 12), the fact that she is at the loom gives Circe a conventional, respectable female aspect and ostensibly defuses the threat posed by singing and the proximity to the poet it suggests. The feminine attribute makes Circe approachable, and indeed she turns out not to be lacking in feminine wiles, as she persuades Odysseus to share her bed for a year. However, the combination of singing and weaving is a powerful one; it is shared by Circe and Calypso, both divine women, both manipulators of men and narrative. Through their agent objects, both women successfully pause narrative progression: Circe for one year, Calypso for seven. Furthermore, the motif of weaving itself is not always without its own dangers: Helen's weaving pushes the boundaries of her gender, Medea plots against Glauke with a woven object – and in Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, Morgana le Fey weaves to kill.

More obviously threatening, in that they are more alien, are Circe's drugs and her magic wand. It is with these two objects that she is represented in Pre-Raphaelite depictions of the myth, such as J.W. Waterhouse's 1891 *Circe Offering the Cup to Ulysses* (<http://goo.gl/vMd4wL>). The wand signals Circe's divinity, aligning her with Hermes χρυσόραπις (of the golden wand) who is sent to beg Odysseus' leave from her, and with Athena, who uses a wand to transform Odysseus into his beggar form (*Odyssey* 13.421) and back again (*Odyssey* 16.172). Though Calypso has no wand, she too is visited by Ἑρμῆς χρυσόραπις – that the noun-epithet pairing occurs in Homer only in these two passages (*Odyssey* 5.87 and 10.277) links the two figures and their divine agency. With her wand Circe changes men into animals and back again, just as Athena distorts Odysseus' appearance. Whilst Athena creates a disguise to *help* Odysseus, however, Circe's motives are more ambivalent. In changing men into animals she turns them into possessions – residents of her very own magical farmyard. The 'position as possession' usually ascribed to Homeric women (Roisman 2006:4) is transferred to Odysseus' men, by virtue of a powerful object. Like Ino's veil which takes Odysseus from the immortal to the mortal realm in *Odyssey* 5, Circe's wand takes men across a boundary: this time from man to beast, from independence to subjugation. Unlike Ino's veil, however, a wand is not a standard female accoutrement. Here Homer diverges from Granny Weatherwax's teachings on the value of the humble kitchen knife, and introduces an object which can be nothing but magical.²⁷ With this object, the 'other' begins to overshadow the 'everywoman'.

In Waterhouse's painting, Circe holds both cup and wand aloft in a confident gesture. She controls the space, with the boar at her feet and the tripod and cauldron off to the right suggesting her skills and, specifically, her encounter with Odysseus' companions.

Furthermore, the potency of her objects is multiplied by the reflection of wand and cup in the mirror behind her. In that mirror we also see Odysseus, poised for action yet somewhat bowed, and trapped in Circe's sight – without which the viewer would not see him at all. As in Sandys' *Medea*, the figure of the witch cuts between the hero and his goal; as Medea's head came between the Argonauts and the fleece, so Circe's upper body is poised between Odysseus and his ship – his all-important *nostos*. However, whereas Medea's drugs will be the means by which Jason and his crew will achieve their goal, Circe's potions endeavour to keep Odysseus from his.²⁸ A beautiful woman comes between Odysseus and his homecoming – and the objects she wields show that she is no ordinary woman. This time it is not the 'angel in the house' who is called into question, but the alluring agent woman stopping Odysseus from getting back to her.

It is perhaps worth noting that Circe holds her wand horizontally. Her upheld arms demarcate the female space in the canvas (the majority), just like the sorceress' stick tracing out the Magic Circle, and the horizontal wand completes the circle by almost joining together the two agent objects. Furthermore, as Bertolin (2008:103) argues, Homeric females' utilisation of the horizontal often denotes an attempt to lure men away from the masculine space. The Sirens, for example, are described as sitting in the meadow, among the bones of dead men (*Odyssey* 12.45). Their seated posture suggests enticement rather than open confrontation, and Odysseus has to respond by marking out his vertical masculine space: he is tied to his ship's mast. Similarly, Circe does not attack Odysseus and his companions but lures them in with her singing. It is the men who call to her. Bertolin (2008:105) concludes that 'horizontalities can represent a danger to one's identity, especially in the case of a male hero', so it is fitting that Waterhouse chooses this pose for Circe, who transforms men into beasts – and husbands into lovers.

When Odysseus' men call to her, Circe offers them hospitality. She invites them in, offers them a seat, and prepares food for them. Circe, like Helen in *Odyssey* 4, seems to be following the rules of *xenia* – until she stirs her *pharmaka* into the food (*Odyssey* 10.235-6). The illusion of hospitality is shattered. Odysseus' hapless companions are in the house 'of Circe of many drugs' (*Odyssey* 10.276 Κίρκης πολυφαρμάκου). We are told little about the drugs, nothing about their nature or their origin, only that they are φάρμακα λύγρα which make men forget their fatherland (*Odyssey* 10.236). They are baneful because they take away memory – and in an even more explicit way than Helen's numbing drugs. Such a function undermines the procedure of hospitality and guest-friendship, which is essentially a reciprocal one that depends on remembering past kindnesses in future interactions.²⁹ In using the food she offers to her guests as a vehicle for her machinations, Circe subverts the very mechanism of *xenia*. She completes the subversion by mixing the drugs for Odysseus not in his food but in his drink (*Odyssey* 10.316-17), the cup she offers him in Waterhouse's painting – she has now tainted both. Furthermore, that Circe's baneful drugs take away memory distorts the role of the Homeric woman which is usually to *preserve* memory. Penelope remembers Odysseus and in so doing keeps open his path to his fatherland. Circe, by contrast, wants like the Sirens to take away *nostos* – and, further, to erase memory of the place the heroes are trying to return *to*. The subversive potential of women as food providers is something Tromp 2012 explores in the context of the nineteenth century. She makes a link between séances and Victorian dinner parties, arguing that women's central role as hostesses gave them almost a religious status as mediums. The managing of provisions allowed women to manipulate food and drink, seizing control of their bodies and of the séance and countering the expectation of women's bodies as passive.

Waterhouse returned to Circe as a subject the following year (1892) with *Circe Invidiosa* (<http://goo.gl/jkP1zA>), and again in 1911-14 with *The Sorceress* (<http://goo.gl/34AVS2>).³⁰ In the first of these two paintings, the cup is again the focal point, this time joining up with the landscape. Circe is channeling something elemental and, if we follow Bertolin's schema of the vertical signifying agency, the orientation of the canvas and the line of body and liquid all emphasise the witch's power. The latter painting is rather different. It is as though we stumble across Circe in a moment of dejection, even self-doubt. She is still surrounded by attributes of

her magic, her animals, her potions, her tripod and cauldron and her (anachronistic) spell-book, but she leans on her wand despondently, and the cup has fallen over and spilled its contents. Perhaps at this later stage Waterhouse returned to the later part of the story; this may be Circe *after* Odysseus has continued on his journey. Though essentially an active agent in the epic, we come across her in a moment of inactivity, indeed futility. The power of the witch has been trumped by that of the gods who have commanded her to let Odysseus go.

In both Victorian Britain and archaic Greece, women's social role was characterised by the limitations placed on it. As Trippi (2002:107) writes, 'Homer's characters simultaneously influenced and reflected the Victorians' view of human relations.' They were not involved in the 'main action', whether it be war, politics or education, and as such their agency was inherently restricted. But when did this ever stop a woman? Greek epic and Victorian poetry and art are full of women who push their agency to its limits. The female witch is one manifestation of this testing of boundaries, and indeed it is perhaps no coincidence that in the nineteenth century the rise of spiritualist societies and culture also saw developing agitation for women's rights.³¹ Owen (1989:9) explores the ways in which Victorian mediums both use and surpass gender stereotypes, arguing that the occult 'promoted a species of feminine power whilst at the same time interacting with contemporary concepts of acceptable womanhood'. Basham (1992:108) links Victorian women spiritualists with the spirits themselves, in that women, 'like the spirits, existed within an uncertain medium whose dimensions were simultaneously literal and metaphoric. Without legal rights or representation, they had their own metaphoric power in the vague but persuasive concept of "female influence", an influence that the spirits themselves seemed eager to enhance and promote.' The Pre-Raphaelite vision of the witch is particularly revealing. Sandys' Medea, Vivien and Morgan, Waterhouse's anonymous sorceress and his many Circes: none are perverse, grotesque creatures. They may be witches – but they are still Stunners. They are beautiful, enticing – colourful. They are like Hesiod's Pandora, the original 'beautiful evil', and, like Pandora, they represent the 'male dilemma':³² the tension between sexual desire and economic stability, between family continuity and issues of property and inheritance; the 'can't live with them, can't live without them' paradox. Edward Burne-Jones (who went so far as to make a cult of the witch figure) insisted that women who captivated men with their beauty should not be blamed for their amoral nature: 'don't hate – some things are beyond scolding – hurricanes and tempests and billows of the sea – it's no use blaming them'.³³

The role of the witch is fundamentally a transgressive one, and if mapped onto the 'everywoman' suggests transgressions of domestic boundaries, albeit in (one would assume) subtler ways. Consider, for example, female freedom as expressed through Pre-Raphaelite clothing; the Pre-Raphaelite women are not exactly the fully crinolined and corsetted 'angel in the house'.³⁴ In a society (Victorian or Greek) in which men are well and truly in the limelight, witches lead one to wonder: what is happening in the shadows? Women are treated as objects in Greek poetry. Through social processes as diverse as marriage and the spoils of warfare, women are caught up in a male-controlled network of exchange. The first woman is given to mankind as part of an exchange of tricks between Zeus and Prometheus, and indeed Pandora's very name connects her with gift-giving (*Works and Days* 80-2). The list of prizes Achilles provides for Patroclus' funeral games runs seamlessly from cattle to women to metal, with little differentiation between them (*Iliad* 23.259-61), and when Agamemnon appeases Achilles with gifts, they are animate and inanimate alike (*Iliad* 19.243-6). Foley (2005:105) notes that 'Women play a critical role as objects of exchange between men', and Roisman (2006:4) describes 'Helen's position as possession'. They even have prices put on them, for example Eurykleia is bought by Laertes for the price of twenty oxen (*Odyssey* 1.430-1). In this sense women become more specifically commodities: objects which exist for the very purpose of or find their identity in exchange.³⁵ Josephides 1982 makes the point that when one focuses on 'the gift', i.e. the market and exchange, one is looking at a moment placed in the spotlight: a moment which, through the coming together of protagonists, is put on display. It is in the nature of spotlights that, in drawing attention to some things, they draw attention away from others. Women in early Greek poetry are characters with limited agency, in that they are not the conventionally spotlighted protagonists. This does not mean, however, that

they do nothing behind the scenes. Lyons (2012:19) writes: 'As much as men may define women as exchange objects, there is always the possibility that women will find a way to express their own agency'. That this female agency is often expressed through objects is therefore a subversion of the male viewpoint, as women enact their agency through the very form they themselves are thought by their men to represent.

Tracing women's agency through objects is in essence a pictorial project. However, it is of broader scope than taking note of those objects thrust before our eyes in moments of poetic *ekphrasis*, as it involves following many Homeric equivalents of the kitchen knife. Artists' representations of the female characters with their objects are therefore a valuable resource for picturing the scene. But at such a remove from the stories they depict, the paintings are just as revealing in the way they *re-picture* the scene. Women's use of objects in these Pre-Raphaelite paintings can tell us as much about Victorian Britain as about archaic Greece. It is a mode of analysis that yields results across media, and across millennia. Further, in focusing in on objects, one can begin to peel away layers of reception and interpretation.³⁶ Neither Waterhouse nor Sandys was a Classicist, copying directly from texts of Homer or Apollonius (nor even their Roman successors). The eclectic clutter with which they surround their witches reflects the eclectic sources of the Victorian imagination. Medea merges with Malory's Morgan le Fey and Tennyson's Vivien; toads hop straight out of a Shakespearean setting; druid tools meet faience animal-gods, and spell-books abound.³⁷ Key literary intermediaries such as William Morris' *The Life and Death of Jason* establish a bridge between the ancient Greek world and these artists, and provide 'contemporary' reference points.³⁸ There were also objects which were topical, such as a dress adorned with Pictish symbols, and in some cases *again* topical, such as the resurgence of the *ouroboros*. In this way, like the gender roles and agency they represent, the objects themselves could be simultaneously both timely and timeless.

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² 11th August 2013.

³ For convenience I use this term rather generally. My analysis centres on the latter half of the nineteenth century, this being the locus for most of the paintings I discuss and the period which saw the greatest rise in interest in the occult (Owen 1989:1 calls the 1860s, '70s and '80s 'the golden age of English spiritualism'). I do include a few paintings from just after Victoria's reign, though these connect closely with their Victorian counterparts (I might, I suppose, have used the term 'Fin de siècle'). Further, my focus is on England, as the centre of the Pre-Raphaelite movement even at its (by Waterhouse's time) so-called third generation. Some rather different forces were at work during the same period in Scotland, such as the Celtic Revival in which the occult also played a role. My use of the term 'witch', and related terms such as 'occult', is also necessarily general. As Owen (2004:19) has shown, the term 'occult' for example was in the nineteenth century already 'applied without qualification to activities as diverse as divination (astrology, palmistry, tarot reading, crystal gazing, and so on), sorcery, and black magic...and various kinds of necromancy or spiritualist-related practices' – I follow the Victorians in using catch-all terms, on the grounds that nuancing the various branches of the occult would warrant another article.

⁴ One could discuss the Roman intermediary literary sources, such as Ovid's retelling of Medea's story in his *Metamorphoses*. However, my main focus is on the Greek tradition as the earliest versions we have of these myths – and on a key contemporary source, William Morris' *The Life and Death of Jason*.

⁵ In 1869 Sandys resubmitted the painting and it was hung on the line – it seems that whatever were the committee's reservations, the high esteem in which Sandys was held and the protests resulting from the rejection (by e.g. the critic of the *Morning Post* in his first notice of the exhibition in May 1868, and Swinburne in his *Academy Notes*) were enough eventually to overcome them.

⁶ Term from Coventry Patmore's 1854 poem.

⁷ Medea appears with her potion also in Evelyn De Morgan's 1889 *Medea*, now in the Williamson Art Centre (<http://goo.gl/R4DPWd>).

⁸ Medea is depicted with a serpent also by Val Prinsep in his 1880 painting *Medea the Sorceress*, now in the Southwark Art Collection (<http://goo.gl/ckQ5zs>).

⁹ See also Ovid *Metamorphoses* 7.249, where Medea is torn between love and duty.

¹⁰ For a discussion of the character of Morgan le Fey see Larrington 2006. At p.2 Larrington specifies: 'Enchantresses are not witches; they are sexually attractive women who employ their magic for their own ends, not in the service of Satan'. Within the confines of this article I do not have the luxury of such categorisation, but rather follow the *Witches and Wicked Bodies* exhibition catalogue in using 'witch' as a broad term which encompasses the *femme fatale*, the Satanic hag, the spiritualist and the practitioner of the occult alike (see note 3 above).

¹¹ See Elzea (2001:177).

¹² Hesiod text is taken from West 1966 and 1978 respectively. Translations are my own.

¹³ See 'handbooks' such as Drew 2005.

¹⁴ Homer text is taken from the Allen/Monroe OCT editions (1963). Translations are my own.

¹⁵ It recalls the story of Zeus' jars at *Iliad* 24.527-31, in which Zeus mixes fortunes for men from two jars, one of evils and one of blessings. Indeed Helen herself mentions this ability of Zeus just a few lines later, at *Odyssey* 4.236-7.

¹⁶ See e.g. the introduction to Cheak 2013.

¹⁷ Though the Theosophical Society began in America, it swiftly made headway in Britain too.

¹⁸ See Butler (2003:79-81).

¹⁹ In 1888 the Order opened its first temple: the Isis-Urania temple in London.

²⁰ The Theosophical Society had links with many avenues of female agency in Victorian Britain and beyond. Co-Masonry, a form of Freemasonry that admitted women, was a subsidiary activity of the Theosophical Society in England – see Dixon (2001:1). Banks 1986 studied a set of prominent feminist women from the 1890s to the 1930s, and from her sample almost ten percent joined the Theosophical Society at some point in their careers.

²¹ Dixon (2001:19). Indeed at p.21 Dixon highlights the implications for agency of this 'otherness': 'Blavatsky traded on the fact that theosophy could not be fully domesticated'.

²² See Roberts 2004.

²³ See Hyder 1963 for a discussion of Rossetti's sources. Relevant to this article is the fact that information on scrying was easily attainable in the Victorian period, because of a surge of interest.

²⁴ W. Rossetti (1895 vol.2:246).

²⁵ Mackail (1901 vol.1:26).

²⁶ Most of the reviews from which I quote here can be found in Faulkner 1973.

²⁷ Pace Stanford 1945 who argued that Circe's ῥάβδος is simply a stick to control her animals. The connections with Hermes and with Athena rather suggest that this is an object imbued with magical powers.

²⁸ That Circe's upper body is rather suggestively clad points to the nature of the delay.

²⁹ See, for example, *Odyssey* 4.33-5.

³⁰ Though she is not named in the latter painting's title, it is not quite as ambiguous as *The Magic Circle* – the name 'Circe' was written on the back of the canvas.

³¹ See Owen (1989:1). Kontou (2011:5) deftly summarises the issues at stake: 'How does the occult subvert dominant masculine discourses into a female realm? How did women use the Other world to provide a criticism for contemporary society in which they were central and marginal at the same time?'

³² Brown (1997:26).

³³ Burne-Jones in a letter of 1893 to May Gaskell.

³⁴ This applies to both the women in the paintings, and the women behind them. Janey Morris, for example, wife of William Morris and frequent sitter for Rossetti, was known for her style of Aesthetic dress, with its full sleeves and lack of corsets.

³⁵ Appadurai 1986, van Binsbergen/Geschiere 2005.

³⁶ See further Canevaro 2014.

³⁷ Kontou and Willburn (2012:2) comment on the proliferation of paraphernalia in the occult: 'spiritualism and the occult are not just glimmering and evanescent, but, rather, are also persistent, solid, and even material and often materialistic, entities...the weight of the occult's ephemera reaches into tonnage.'

³⁸ John Ruskin in a lecture of 1869 argued that 'you may obtain a more truthful idea of the nature of Greek religion and legend from the...recent work of Morris, than from frigid scholarship, however extensive.' As a writer of the latter I withhold judgement, but would certainly recommend Morris' *Jason* to any student or scholar of Classics.