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# *Femmes Fatale as Mythological Creatures in Romantic and Victorian Poetry*

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## Introduction

In this thesis, I decided to merge two of my passions: mythology and literature. In this work, I delve into the figure of the *femme fatale* in Romantic and Victorian poetry. I analyse in particular *femmes fatales* as mythological creatures in selected works of John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. I decided to include these three poets because I have become familiar with them over the past year and because they use mythology to write about the *femme fatale*. Rossetti, in particular, has a lot of Biblical and mythological elements in his works. In the poems I have selected, he portrays general mythological creatures (the siren in *A Sea-Spell*) and specific ones (Lilith and Circe). Even in the selected poems of Keats and Shelley, there are mythological elements. Keats's *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* (the poem that inspired this thesis), in particular, portrays what I believe is the greatest example of *femme fatale*. The *belle dame* is alluring, seductive and ethereally beautiful, but she is also dangerous and destructive, and will stop at nothing to get what she wants. As I write in the first chapter, the *femme fatale* was considered to be the solution to a problem that nineteenth century women faced, that is the diction between the feminine ideal and the fallen woman. In the first chapter I give a definition of *femme fatale* and I list her most common traits. I make a distinction between the term "*femme fatale*" and "fallen woman" and I introduce the fatal woman as the most common mythological creatures (vampires, witches, sirens). In the second chapter, I first make a general introduction to Romantic poetry, to then delve into the analysis of two poems by Keats (*La Belle Dame Sans Merci* and *Lamia*) and a poem by Shelley (*On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery*). Finally, in the third and last chapter I analyse three of Rossetti's poems (*Body's Beauty*, *A Sea-Spell*, *The Wine of Circe*). I analyse each poem in its entirety with the exception of *Lamia*. The length of the poem does not allow me to analyse it verse by verse, but I want to include it anyway because it gives me a chance to delve into more mythological figures such as Persephone and Lamia herself. This thesis aims at recognizing the figure of the *femme fatale* as a mythological creature in Victorian and Romantic poetry, with the help of some paintings related to the selected poems.

## 1. The *Femme Fatale* and Women during the Nineteenth Century

### a. Defining the *Femme Fatale*

According to the *Cambridge English Dictionary*, the *Femme Fatale* is: “a woman who is very attractive in a mysterious way, usually leading men into danger or causing their destruction.”<sup>1</sup> However, there is not one single definition of what the term *Femme Fatale* actually refers to. Virginia Allen states that “the phrase ‘*Femme Fatale*’ has appeared since 1900, while many of the images to which authors refer when they use it appeared before 1900”<sup>2</sup>. She essentially states that the twentieth century coined the label, while its image was invented in the previous century. Thus, the origin of the term is not clear. Even though the term translates from French, it does not mean that the concept was invented by the French.<sup>3</sup> In his work *The Romantic Agony*, Mario Praz explained some typical traits of the *femme fatale* and mentioned figures such as Matilda, the witch in Matthew Gregory Lewis’s gothic novel *The Monk*, Prosper Mérimée’s *Carmen*<sup>4</sup> and Eugene Sue’s *Cécily*<sup>5</sup>. Praz mentions attributes such as exoticism, irresistibility and sexual cannibalism, and identifies the fatal woman as a sort of mythological creature, a siren or a vampire, that feeds off her lovers and devours her victims. He dedicated an entire chapter on defining the origin of the Fatal Woman, stating that:

There have always existed Fatal Women both in mythology and in literature, since mythology and literature are imaginative reflections of the various aspects of real life, and real life has always provided more or less complete examples of arrogant and cruel female characters.<sup>6</sup>

He then proceeds to mention examples such as Lilith, the Harpies, the Sirens, the Gorgons, Scylla and the Sphinx. However, Praz believes that the *femme fatale* is not a definite and established archetype, like the Byronic hero, but that it changes through time and space. Writers and poets, in fact, did not have one precise example and

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<sup>1</sup> Cambridge English Dictionary, *Femme Fatale*, accessed on 4<sup>th</sup> October 2023

<sup>2</sup> V. M. Allen, *The Femme Fatale: Erotic Icon*, p. viii, quoted in M. Luczynka-Holdys, *Soft-Shed Kisses: Re-visioning the Femme Fatale in English Poetry of the 19th Century*, Cambridge Scholars Pub, Newcastle, 2013, p. 4

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> P. Mérimée, *Carmen*, Michel Lévy, France, 1846, quoted in M. Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, Oxford University Press, 1951, p. 191

<sup>5</sup> E. Sue, *Cécile ou Une femme heureuse*, Urbain Canel, Adolphe Guyot, Paris, 1834, quoted in M. Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, cit., p. 191

<sup>6</sup> M. Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, cit., p. 189

archetype to follow. As Praz writes, “for a type [...] to be created, it is essential that some particular figure should have made a profound impression on the popular mind”<sup>7</sup>, just like the Byronic hero did. However, a particular and definite type of *femme fatale* was never created.

The *femme fatale* archetype is indeed an ambiguous and ambivalent character. She is not human, but a goddess, a siren, an enchantress, that lulls men into desperation and chaos. However, she is at the same time seductive and a source of inspiration, especially for authors and poets all around the world and throughout history. The *femme fatale* archetype dates back to ancient cultures. The Greek Circe, Medusa and Hera, the biblical Lilith, the Sumerian Inanna, might all come to mind. One of her main characteristics is her timeless beauty and attractiveness, always irresistible. She fits perfectly into the beauty standards of every society, no matter where or when that is. Her beauty is not only related to her body shape or body type, but more to an essence, an energy. It is not really the beauty of her body that enchants, but more her energy and attitude. Usually she is depicted with long loose hair, many times red in colour, that went against the social standards of the nineteenth century, when working class-women and upper-class women had to appear composed, with their hair up and they had to wear corsets all the time. That of the *femme fatale* was a freeing sort of beauty, going against what was expected of women. Another characteristic was her charming and alluring behaviour that enchants her victims. Just like a siren, she lures men with her voice and attitude into a sort of “trance” that seems to have the traits of a spell. Once they are trapped, she devours them. Almost all fatal women have some kind of supernatural powers or some shape-shifting abilities. Moreover, she possesses sexual powers. She has a sort of sexuality that is so predatory that men cannot help but be seduced. The *femme fatale* always gets what she wants, one way or another. She is not the silent and passive female of the nineteenth century anymore, but she represents the solution to the problem that nineteenth century women faced: the distinction between the feminine ideal and the fallen woman.

#### b. Femme Fatale or Fallen Woman?

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<sup>7</sup> Id., p. 191

Before proceeding with the concept of *femme fatale*, I need to differentiate the *femme fatale* from the Fallen Woman. It is indeed a very different figure. The latter refers to a woman who has already fallen, a woman who has no chance at redemption and who poses a threat to society, not because she is evil and powerful, but because of the consequences of her sinful behaviour and activities. The *femme fatale*, on the other hand, is a woman who does have a chance at redemption, but her main attribute is that she is the essence of evil and the holder of an irresistible power. In her book *The femme fatale in Victorian Literature*, Jennifer Hedgecock believes that the Fatal Woman offers a solution to the problem that nineteenth-century English women lived with: the distinction between the feminine ideal and the actual fallen woman<sup>8</sup>. Lynn Nead explains wonderfully this concept of Victorian society.<sup>9</sup> She starts the discussion writing about sexuality, saying that “it is a commonly-held belief that sexuality is an overpowering natural force, that it is instinctive and innate. It is believed to be biologically determined and is regarded as the most basic and fundamental drive in the human animal.”<sup>10</sup> She calls this understanding of sexuality “essentialism”, a concept that “has been fundamentally challenged by the theory that sexuality is historically constructed, that it has historical conditions of existence and is socio-culturally determined.”<sup>11</sup>

Sexuality held a different meaning when it came to gender. As Nead states, male sexuality was seen as “active, aggressive and spontaneous” with “a natural and healthy desire for sex”, while the feminine was seen more as “weak, passive and responsive”, mainly related to the male, and that a respectable woman “did not experience sexual drives” but pleasure of reproduction and of satisfaction of her partner. When a woman did experience sexual desire, she was considered “fallen”. Women in the nineteenth century were regarded as domestic creatures, “naturally suited to duties in the home and with children”<sup>12</sup>. They were supposed to offer their male partners comfort and a safe and permanent space, shielded from the chaos of the modern world. Their husbands, who worked in the public sphere, once home, were

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<sup>8</sup> J. Hedgecock, *The Femme Fatale in Victorian Literature: The Danger and the Sexual Threat*, Cambria Press, USA, 2008, Foreword, pp. x-xii

<sup>9</sup> L. Nead, *The Magdalen in Modern Times: The Mythology of the Fallen Woman in Pre-Raphaelite Painting*, Oxford University Press, (Oxford Art Journal, 1984, Vol. 7, No. 1, Correspondences (1984), pp. 26-37)

<sup>10</sup> Id., p. 26

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Id., p. 27

to hide from the outside world. Nead calls this shelter “the place of peace for the man who took the risks outside the sanctuary in the city”. So, the feminine ideal was created around this concept of creating a safe environment for the male. If the home was a place for the ideal woman, the public streets were a place for the deviant, the fallen woman, mostly identified as a prostitute. Nead explains that “female sexuality was organised in terms of a separation between the pure and the fallen. The term “prostitute” [...] could define any woman who deviated from the feminine ideal and lived outside the middle-class codes of morality.”<sup>13</sup>

Prostitution was seen by nineteenth century society as a threat and a public vice. As Nead writes, the prostitute:

stood for many as a symbol of the fears and anxieties of the period - fears concerning economic efficiency, political stability and the development of the empire. During periods of social crisis, anxieties were deflected or displaced on to question of morality. Prostitution frequently became the focus during these moments of moral panic;<sup>14</sup>

So, it was because of the anxieties that Victorian society was feeling that fallen women were punished and perceived as “folk devils”, agents of chaos and social disorder.

Additionally, Nead details three paintings that are a part of the so-called domestic genre, tied with the domestic ideology previously mentioned. These paintings, created by George Elgar Hicks, were exhibited at the Royal Academy of 1863, with the name *Woman’s Mission*. They represent the same woman with three different men: her son (*Woman’s Mission: Guide to Childhood*<sup>15</sup> - Figure 1), her husband (*Woman’s Mission: Companion of Manhood*<sup>16</sup> - Figure 2) and her father (*Woman’s Mission: Comfort of Old Age*<sup>17</sup> - Figure 3). These paintings are yet another example of how women were defined by their relationships to the men in their lives.

As previously declared, the *femme fatale* was a way for nineteenth century women to get out of the dichotomy between the feminine ideal and the fallen woman. It poses an alternative against the limitations posed to women by Victorian society.

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<sup>13</sup> Id., p. 30

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> G.E. Hicks, *Woman’s Mission: Guide to Childhood*, 1863, oil on panel, 25.3 x 20, Dunedin Public Art Gallery

<sup>16</sup> G.E. Hicks, *Woman’s Mission: Companion of Manhood*, 1863, oil on canvas, 76 x 64, Tate Gallery, London

<sup>17</sup> G.E. Hicks, *Woman’s Mission: Comfort of Old Age*, 1863, oil on panel 25.4 x 20.4, Dunedin Public Art Gallery





*Figure 1: G.E. Hicks, Woman's Mission: Guide to Childhood, oil on panel, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 1863*



*Figure 2: G.E. Hicks, Woman's Mission: Companion of Manhood, oil on canvas, Tate Gallery, London, 1863*



*Figure 3: G.E. Hicks, Woman's Mission: Comfort of Old Age, oil on panel, Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 1863*

### c. The *Femme Fatale* as Mythological Creatures ...

I find it crucial, before diving even more into my analysis, to give a sort of definition of myth. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives us the following definition: “A traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events.”<sup>18</sup>

Myths were created to answer existential human questions about the universe and the world we all live in. Questions such as “Where do we come from?”, “What are we doing here?”, “Where do we go after death?” are answered through these folk tales. They were deeply important in the past because they gave ancient civilisations possible explanations for how and when the world was created. In modern times myths have lost that original appeal, in favour of the development of science, highly based on logic. Myths gave humans a sense of faith and of comfort. Believing in stories about gods and magical creatures puts people at ease. There is not, and there never will be, a culture without myths to explain surreal and inexplicable events. I would like to mention *The Power of Myth* by Joseph Campbell, an American writer that worked in comparative mythology and comparative religion, with the help of Bill Moyers in 1991. It is a conversation between the two writers about the origin of myth and its importance in everyday life. Moyers states:

Myths are stories of our search through the ages for truth, for meaning, for significance. We all need to tell our story and to understand our story. We all need to understand death and to cope with death, and we all need help in our passages from birth to life and then to death. We need for life to signify, to touch the eternal, to understand the mysterious, to find out who we are.<sup>19</sup>

I agree with this concept. I believe myths are a way to understand our stories and ourselves. Learning about them is a way to dive even deeper in the history of the world. What Campbell replies with is the idea, despite contrary beliefs, that humans do not actually seek a meaning for life, but an experience of being alive, “so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our own innermost being reality”<sup>20</sup>. He changes the definition of the myth to the experience of life, other than the search for meaning, and he also adds:

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<sup>18</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, *Myth*, accessed on 28<sup>th</sup> September 2023

<sup>19</sup> J. Campbell, B. Moyers, *The Power of Myth*, Anchor Publisher, United States, 1991, p. 16

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

There's no meaning. What's the meaning of the universe? What's the meaning of a flea? It's just there. That's it. And your own meaning is that you're there. We're so engaged in doing things to achieve purposes of outer value that we forget that the inner value, the rapture that is associated with being alive, is what it's all about.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, myths help to achieve that. They are “clues to our deepest spiritual potential”<sup>22</sup>. They help turn inward and they teach what that experience of being alive is.

Another book that gives a solid definition of myth is *Lilith ou la Mère obscure* by Jacques Bril<sup>23</sup>. He states that the meaning of the word myth derives from word and sense, that which only humans among all animals possess. Thus, a myth is a series of words enriched with sense. “It is a discourse, an intention, a message”<sup>24</sup>. He then proceeds to add:

The myth “enacts human characters or *analogues* to human beings”<sup>25</sup>; takes place *over time* even when the phenomenon [...] would be permanent or periodic”; the myth recounts “a fact *preceding* history”; enacts in the form of a *person* an abstract entity, a physical phenomenon or a collective being; and finally, it addresses itself to an audience already previously convinced of the *veracity* of its content.<sup>26</sup>

Therefore, the myth narrates, through the characters, how a reality came to be. It is supernatural beings that tell the stories and adventures of a myth.<sup>27</sup> Bril also mentions Claude Lévi-Strauss' *Anthropologie Structurale*<sup>28</sup>, which says that the myth is an integral part of the language that can be recognized through words. Thus, it depends on speech. Another characteristic that Lévi-Strauss suggests is the fact that the myth is always related to past events that happened even before the creation of the world. These events form a permanent structure that transforms the myth into a universal language. In his book, Bril reports three main attributes that form myths. Myth is, first of all, ahistorical because it is rooted in an inaccessible time. It is not objective because it is founded by psychic mechanisms. And finally, the myth is universal because it is capable of communicating its own specific message without any linguistic barriers.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Id., p. 17

<sup>22</sup> Id., p. 12

<sup>23</sup> J. Bril, *Lilith, l'aspetto inquietante del femminile*, traduzione a cura di Gianpietro Gnesotto, Edizioni Culturali Internazionali Genova, Genova, 1990

<sup>24</sup> Id., p. 13

<sup>25</sup> M. Eliade, *Aspects du Mythe*, p. 14, quoted in J. Bril, *op. cit.*, p. 14

<sup>26</sup> J. Bril, *op. cit.*, p. 14

<sup>27</sup> M. Eliade, *Aspects du Mythe*, pp. 21, 14, 97, quoted in J. Bril, *op. cit.*, p. 15

<sup>28</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropologie structurale*, t. I, 230-232, quoted in J. Bril, *op. cit.*, p. 15

<sup>29</sup> J. Bril, *op. cit.*, p. 17

The word “myth” derives from the greek *μῦθος* (mýthos) meaning “word, tale”. It is made of the Indo-European root *mi-* (to moo), that can be found both in Sanskrit (*mimāti*) and in Ancient Greek (*μυκάομαι*). It expresses the idea of bellowing, or simply making a sound. Jacques Bril writes:

it is surmised that the word “myth” may derive from an onomatopoeic word emitted with a closed mouth *mu*<sup>30</sup>, which takes us back to the earliest individual origins of a preverbal expression, from the time when the human infant seeks in his mother’s arms a first oral and audible communication.”<sup>31</sup>

Now that I have defined the word myth, I am going to be writing about mythological creatures and how they came to be. When thinking about these creatures, what often comes to mind are vampires, sirens, witches, unicorns, fairies, gods and goddesses, the ones from Greek or Egyptian mythology such as Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, Hades, Aphrodite, Iris, Anubis etc. A mythological creature is a creature from mythology and folklore, often equipped with supernatural and magical powers, that usually represent virtues or vices of their own birth country and culture. Some of them were even believed to have existed in real life, especially in the past. It is the case of dragons, unicorns, mermaids. One example could be the Scottish Loch Ness Monster, which seems to have been sighted by many over the centuries. There are many different types of mythological creatures, changing depending on the culture. They can be fully animal such as dragons and basilisks, but they can also be composed of several different animals. These types of creatures can be a combination of animals such as the hippogriff (half griffin, half horse), or they can be half animal and half human such as centaurs (half horse), harpies (half bird), minotaurs (half bull) and mermaids and sirens (half fish). Mythical creatures can also look like humans, but with supernatural powers. It is the case of elves, fairies, banshees, nymphs, vampires and werewolves. One of the most interesting aspects of mythological creatures is their ambivalence, especially when it comes to demons and deities. In this regard, Jacques Bril writes about the duality of these beasts, reporting that “mythical beings will from time to time be invoked and detested, feared and adulated preserving the attitudes they arouse deep traces of this duality.”<sup>32</sup> Bril stresses how this trait can be seen particularly in feminine figures. “It is in female imaginary representations that the

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<sup>30</sup> M. Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque.*, quoted in J. Bril, *op. cit.*, p. 13

<sup>31</sup> J. Bril, *op. cit.*, p. 13

<sup>32</sup> Id., p. 40

ambivalence attributed to supernatural or mythical beings is most evident”<sup>33</sup>. He noticed how the universal female pantheon seems to be split into terrifying figures and motherly figures. However, he states that each female creature, no matter in which category she falls into, has a sort of ambiguity. She is both alluring and dangerous, seductive and terrifying. She seems to blur the line between victim and perpetrator.

The bipolar attitudes that each culture thus manifests in symbolic terms are merely the socialised images of a man’s fundamental attitudes toward a woman: she will be a mother and a prostitute, a virgin and a soldier, a nurturer and a devourer, a seductress and a castrator.<sup>34</sup>

The ambivalence that I have talked about is, in fact, the most important and prominent feature of the femme fatale, a woman that has not yet fallen, a dangerous seductress and a source of inspiration.

i. ... a vampire

I am now going to analyse a few particular creatures and how they relate to the femme fatale, starting with the vampire. In history there have been multiple examples and types of vampires, in literature, folk tales and films. *Dracula*<sup>35</sup> is probably the most notable one, along with more modern vampires such as Edward Cullen in the *Twilight* book series by Stephanie Meyer, or the vampires in the tv series *The Vampire Diaries*. Humans’ fascination with this figure has been consistent throughout centuries. *The Webster Dictionary*<sup>36</sup> gives the following definition: “A blood-sucking ghost; a soul of a dead person superstitiously believed to come from the grave and wander about by night sucking the blood of persons asleep, thus causing their death.”<sup>37</sup> Vampires’ origins date at least as far back as ancient Greece, with stories about creatures who attacked people and drained them of their bodily fluids. In mediaeval times, there were tales of walking corpses that drank the blood of the living and spread plague. Accounts of vampires also date back to the ancient Sumerians and Babylonians from 4,000 B.C. Sometimes, vampiristic traits were associated with certain diseases such as porphyria (sensitivity to sunlight), tuberculosis, pellagra (thinning of the skin) and rabies. Folk tales about vampires were the most popular in eastern Europe, where it was tradition

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<sup>33</sup> Id., p. 41

<sup>34</sup> Id., p. 42

<sup>35</sup> B. Stoker, *Dracula*, 1897

<sup>36</sup> Webster Dictionary, *Vampire*, quoted in J. Bril, *op. cit.*, p. 104

<sup>37</sup> Id., p. 104

to dig up the bodies of suspected vampires.<sup>38</sup> Another myth contributing to this belief was the fake pronouncements of death of people, and because of this:

People who were very ill, or sometimes even drunk, and in a coma or in shock were thought dead and later “miraculously” recovered - sometimes too late to prevent their burial. Belief in vampires led to such rituals as staking corpses through the heart before they were buried.<sup>39</sup>

The word “vampire” derives from the Hungarian *vampir* and from the French *vampire*, a term introduced by French naturalist Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon in 1774 who applied it to a species of South American blood-sucking bat.<sup>40</sup> Legends about vampires have always existed, but they became more prominent with Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. Stoker’s story was probably inspired by Vlad Dracul, born in Transylvania (Romania), ruler of Wallachia from 1436 to 1442, and from 1443 to 1447. Many legends testify to his being called Vlad the Impaler because he liked to kill his enemies by impaling them with wooden stakes and feeding off their bodies, dipping his bread in their blood. Whether or not Stoker was inspired by this figure is debatable, but similarities between *Dracula* and Vlad are obvious. A mention to Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* (1871-72) is crucial since it established the vampire femme fatale. As Nina Auerbach states, “*Carmilla*’s hunger is her own, not the projection of some megalomaniacal creator”.<sup>41</sup> *Carmilla* is a great example of femme fatale: hosted by Laura’s family, she is revealed to be a vampire and she seduces Laura herself. “Her origins are obscure and remote”<sup>42</sup>. She is not directed and controlled by anyone, “she sleeps, prowls, and falls in love on her own authority”<sup>43</sup>.

Jacques Bril affirms that the two main characteristics associated with vampires are their capacity of flying and their cannibalism, traits also associated with the figure of the femme fatale. Flight comes from the metamorphosis of the vampire into a bat, that “inhabiting caves, ravines, hollows, symbolises the desires that harbour the innermost recesses of the psychic world”<sup>44</sup>. The other element is cannibalism. Bril

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<sup>38</sup> A. Eldridge, “vampire”, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2023

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Online Etymology Dictionary*, accessed on 7<sup>th</sup> November 2023

<sup>41</sup> N. Auerbach, *Our Vampires, Ourselves*, Univ of Chicago Pr, 1995, p. 40

<sup>42</sup> *Id.*, 39

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> J. Bril, *op. cit.*, p. 104

mentions the myth of Lilith, who is said to devour men and children sucking their blood.<sup>45</sup>

Victims will especially be men, children, or even women giving birth. This cannibalism aims more at the exhaustion of the victim's life force than mere devouring. The latter, often, is but the conclusion of the sexual exhaustion of the chosen prey or the curse burdening its descendants."<sup>46</sup>

The connection between the figure of Lilith, one of the most notable fatal women, and some vampiric traits is evident. *Femmes fatales* like to inflict pain on others, especially men, to first seduce them, and then to torture and devour them, perhaps, I believe, to get revenge on the patriarchal society, or simply for the fun of it.

ii. ... a witch

I am now moving on to another important figure when analysing the *femme fatale*: the witch. The word "witch" probably derives from the Old English masculine term *wicca*, meaning "man practising witchcraft", and from the Old English feminine term *wicce*, meaning "female magician, sorceress". It also derives from the verb *wiccian* ("to practise witchcraft").<sup>47</sup> Witches in modern days can be found anywhere, from book series to movies, from scary stories to halloween costumes. But their real history is way darker. The first hint at the existence of this figure began in ancient times, when humans tried to explain how the universe worked. Usually this job was given to shamans and priests, someone who could be used as a messenger between the divine and mortals. In Celtic traditions, there's the figure of the druid, a sort of seer and spiritual leader. These "witches" also had a great knowledge of herbalism and astronomy. The hatred and persecution against witches began with the rising of Christianity. There are records of a witch in the Bible in the book of Samuel.<sup>48</sup> It tells the story of king Saul, who, with the help of the Witch of Endor, summoned the spirit of a dead prophet (Samuel) to help defeat the Philistine army. In the tale, the witch predicted the death of Saul and his sons, which met their ends the following day. There are verses in the Bible against divination and using witches to contact the dead, as king Sault did, and in the Old Testament there's a verse that states "thou shalt not

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<sup>45</sup> Id., 63,64

<sup>46</sup> Id., 116

<sup>47</sup> Online Etymology Dictionary, "witch", accessed on 4<sup>th</sup> October 2023

<sup>48</sup> History.com, *History of Witches*, September 2023, accessed on 4<sup>th</sup> October 2023  
[\[https://www.history.com/topics/folklore/history-of-witches#section\\_6\]](https://www.history.com/topics/folklore/history-of-witches#section_6)



suffer a witch to live” (Exodus 22:18).<sup>49</sup> When the Christian Church started to gain hegemony around the world, it started to condemn the “old religion” based on nature and folk traditions, and witchcraft became a crime against God. Things started to get even worse with the publication of the *Malleus Maleficarum* in 1486, written by the Catholic clergymen Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger. The book labelled witchcraft as heresy and it was a guide on how to identify and interrogate witches. It was used by Christians, Protestants and Catholics alike, for more than a hundred years to incarcerate and kill people, mostly women, who presented witch traits. A memorable example is the famous Witch trial that took place in Salem, Massachusetts in 1692. The trial began when two young girls, the daughter and the niece of reverend Samuel Parris, started to experience odd symptoms such as fits, body contortions and uncontrolled screaming. Since the village doctor of Salem couldn’t heal them, he claimed they were bewitched. When many other young women began to experience the same symptoms, mass witch hysteria started to take place. Tituba, an enslaved woman owned by reverend Parris and accused of witchcraft, confessed and accused others of using magic. Between June and October of 1692, a lot of people, mostly women, were hanged or imprisoned.<sup>50</sup>

What links witches with *femmes fatales* is their charming power of seduction and their magical abilities. Just like a witch, the *femme fatale* casts a spell on her victims, who become completely powerless against her. There are many examples of witches in mythology and literature. One is the case of Circe, whose story I am going to describe in the analysis of *The Wine Of Circe* by Victorian poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti, or Medea, Hecate and others. The Graeae (also spelled Graiai) also possess a few witch traits. According to Greek mythology, they are three women, also called The Old Women, who share a single eye and tooth. They were the guardians of the Gorgons, winged female creatures that provoked terror in whoever looked at them, one of which was Medusa. The Graeae are portrayed when Perseus stole the eye from them to get information about Medusa’s whereabouts, before killing her. The Graeae are three, a number commonly associated with witches, especially in Greek mythology. It could be connected perhaps to the triple goddess, maid, mother and crone, a concept usually associated with Hecate, a lesser divinity and the goddess of

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> J. Wallenfeldt, “*Salem witch trials*”, Britannica, accessed on 4<sup>th</sup> October 2023 [https://www.britannica.com/event/Salem-witch-trials]



witchcraft. Not much is known about her, just that she is associated with the night, howling dogs and that she resides in the Underworld. We find her in a scene from Apollonios' *Argonautica* when Jason summons her with the help of Medea, Hekate's priestess.<sup>51</sup> Witches possess that alluring and seductive nature that is also present in the *femme fatale* archetype. They have supernatural abilities, and they use their power to manipulate their victims into doing what they want.

iii. ... a mermaid and a siren

To conclude this chapter I chose to focus on another famous mythological creature: the siren. I would like to start by immediately differentiating between sirens and mermaids. Mermaids are beautiful half-human and half-fish creatures usually depicted as benevolent and peaceful (however that is not always the case), best illustrated by Disney's *The Little Mermaid*, but also in fairy tales and cartoons. The term "mermaid" is derived from the Middle English word *mere*, meaning "sea, lake" and the word *maid* ("maid of the sea").<sup>52</sup> They are present in almost every culture, even if slightly different. In Germanic folklore, for example, there is a version of the mermaid called Melusine, a water spirit that inhabits ponds, fountains, streams, rivers and wells, depicted as half-human and half-serpent. Sirens, on the other hand, are seductive and enchanting winged half-human and half-bird creatures that we mostly meet in Greek mythology. They can be encountered in the famous passage of the *Odyssey*, when Odysseus and his crew sail near the island where the creatures live. Sirens, in fact, are known to have a beautiful and powerful voice that lure sailors to the point of crushing their ships against the rocks. Circe explains to Odysseus that "with their pleasant song [...] the sirens enchant mortals who approach them; and the meadow, their abode, is bordered by a shore completely white with bones and decaying human remains".<sup>53</sup> She encourages Odysseus and his crew to plug their ears with wax in order to resist their song. The hero, driven by curiosity, leaves his own hearing unimpaired and asks his sailors "to bind him to the mast, and to turn deaf ears to his pleas to be released when the Sirens begin their singing".<sup>54</sup> Jacques Bril writes that "sirens seem to be the product of a synthesis between an archaic fairy tale, relating to the dangers of early

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<sup>51</sup> R. Buxton, *The Complete World of Greek Mythology*, Thames and Hudson, 2004, pp. 176-177

<sup>52</sup> Online Etymology Dictionary, "*mermaid*", accessed on 6<sup>th</sup> October 2023

<sup>53</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, XII, 1-200, quoted in J. Bril, *op. cit.*, p. 80

<sup>54</sup> R. Buxton, *The Complete World of Greek Mythology*, cit., p. 319

navigation, and the Eastern image of the bird-woman, who takes possession of living beings to seal their fate.”<sup>55</sup>

He therefore suggests that sirens could also be related to harpies, evil bird-like creatures (half women and half birds) that, according to tradition, kidnap children and souls. They can be found mainly in Greek mythology and Arabic iconography and could be similar to an Egyptian material deity with a vulture head.<sup>56</sup> The seductive characteristic of sirens is a trait often found in femmes fatales. With the power of their voice, they enchant men into doing their bidding and then they devour them. They are often depicted as cruel but fascinating at the same time. They usually sit on top of rocks, with their long hair down, looking for boats passing by. Men cannot help but be attracted to them and that same attraction is their demise. In her book *Soft-Shed Kisses*, Małgorzata Łuczyńska-Hołodys cites Dijkstra’s *Idols* when dealing with sirens, since she writes:

As Dijkstra<sup>57</sup> recounts, sirens and mermaids were believed to be aggressive and predatory; driven by the hunger of nymphomania they personified the regressive, elemental female nature, expressive of death and destruction.

In Greek mythology these creatures either lived in the Heavens or in the Underworld with Hades. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, they are said to be the companions of Persephone, the young goddess who was abducted by Hades and was forced to spend six months in the Underworld every year. Łuczyńska-Hołodys writes: “given wings by Demeter, they [sirens] were to search for the abducted goddess”<sup>58</sup>. I will be diving even deeper into the universe of sirens in chapter three, analysing *A Sea Spell* by Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

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<sup>55</sup> J. Bril, *op. cit.*, p. 80

<sup>56</sup> Freud, *Leonardo da Vinci, A Memory of His Childhood*, quoted in J. Bril, *op. cit.*, p. 81

<sup>57</sup> Dijkstra, *Idols*, 258-263 quoted in M. Luczynka-Hołodys, *op. cit.*, p. 227

<sup>58</sup> M. Luczynka-Hołodys, *op. cit.*, p. 228

## 2. The *Femme Fatale* in Romantic Poetry: John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley

### a. Defining Romantic Poetry

I find it crucial, before analysing the *femme fatale* in selected poems of John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley, to give a definition of Romanticism and Romantic poetry. I delve into Romantic poetry, and explore its defining characteristics, its historical context. Romanticism is a literary, artistic and intellectual movement that emerged in the late 18th century, but that reached its peak during the first half of the 19th century. It is characterised by a profound shift in artistic and philosophical thought, emphasising the beauty of nature, the power of imagination and of personal experience. As Fiona Robertson writes in her essay *Romance and the Romantic Novel: Sir Walter Scott*<sup>59</sup>, the Romantic period was “bounded by a rebirth-death (the French Revolution: 1789)” and “by a death-rebirth (Scott’s death and the passing of the first Reform Act: 1832)”<sup>60</sup>. Romanticism began at the same time as the French Revolution, a movement rooted in the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity, that resonated deeply with Romantic poets and writers. It inspired, in fact, the need for individual freedom and expression, two elements that will become crucial for the Romantics. There was a heightened emphasis on personal expression, evident for example in the works of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who celebrated the power of nature to stir deep emotions and the way such experiences connect us to our inner selves. Romantic poets sought to explore the depths of human emotion, allowing their own feelings and personal experiences to inform their creative process. This marked a deep shift from the rationality and objectivity of the preceding Enlightenment era. Another element of this movement was the rejection of tradition and authority. The Romantics perceived themselves as literary rebels, often critiquing social institutions, just like the revolutionaries had done with the monarchy and the church. They celebrated individualism and nonconformity, valuing the uniqueness of personal experience and perspective. They also drew inspiration from nature as a source of truth, purity, and the divine, becoming a symbol of change and renewal that echoes a

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<sup>59</sup> C. Saunders, *A Companion to Romance: From Classical to Contemporary*, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004, chapter 16 *Romance and the Romantic Novel: Sir Walter Scott* by Fiona Robertson

<sup>60</sup> *Id.*, p. 287

desire for a transformation in society. They held a passion for the natural world, viewing it as a true source of inspiration that created what they called the sublime (the overwhelming beauty of nature).

Another very important element that defined Romanticism was the power of imagination. Poets used imagination to transcend the mundane and envision new ideal worlds. A mention of Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* is crucial because it is a vivid example of the power of imagination to create vivid and fantastical landscapes, where the boundaries between reality and dreams seem to blend together. Fiona Robertson explains how romance seems to indicate "the dominance of fiction or invention over something regarded as 'real'"<sup>61</sup>. Many Romantic poets had a fascination with the otherworldly, embracing elements of the supernatural and the mysterious. This aspect is evident for example in John Keats' *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, which I will analyse in this chapter as well. One of the most important aspects of Romantic poetry is, of course, romance. Romantic poets use romance as a sort of lens through which they explore the complexities of human relationships. It involves not only romantic love, but also a deep adoration for nature. Moreover, as Michael O'Neill writes in his essay *Poetry of the Romantic Period: Coleridge and Keats*<sup>62</sup>, romance "is a many-coloured dome in poetry of the Romantic period, splitting the white light of modal and generic purity into diverse stainings"<sup>63</sup>. What O'Neill states is basically that romance in Romantic poetry has a multitude of different meanings. It introduces various themes, styles and emotions. It could signify a "mode of quest" or "an experience of enchantment involving the conjuring into existence of a bygone era"<sup>64</sup>. Romantic poets, in fact, often depicted the mediaeval era, representing courtly love, chivalry and a certain idealised purity. Romance in Romantic poetry transports the reader to a world of enchantment where the past can be resurrected. He also states that romance could consort with anti-romance, its own "self-ironizing shadow" and that it could contain the "desire to make sense of the past or the present". Moreover, O'Neill adds:

Romance and English Romantic Poetry are more than chance etymological neighbours; they are decisively twinned, living one another's life. Romance [...] yokes together the dissimilar, fusing or holding in tension the ancient and the novel, the marvellous and the ordinary. For a period consumed

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<sup>61</sup> Id., p. 291

<sup>62</sup> Id., chapter 17 *Poetry of the Romantic Period: Coleridge and Keats* by M. O'Neill

<sup>63</sup> Id., p. 305

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

with dreams of political Utopia, romance can be the mirror in which social hopes regard themselves in all their finery - and potential illusoriness.<sup>65</sup>

Thus, romance is not only associated with love stories and novels, but is also closely linked to English Romantic Poetry.

One of the elements that marked the beginning of the Romantic era in English literature was the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads*<sup>66</sup> in 1798, a joint work by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth. It was a collection of poems that exhibited the Romantic themes of the supernatural, the sublime, and the exploration of the inner self. According to Percy Bysshe Shelley, Romantic poetry was the “power of communicating and receiving intense and impassioned conceptions respecting man and nature” and the “words which express what [the poets] understand not”<sup>67</sup>. For him, poets were the “unacknowledged legislators of the world”. In the introduction to *A Companion to Romantic Poetry*, Charles Mahoney reports a passage from Shelley’s *Defence of Poetry*. The Romantic poet writes:

The most unfailing herald, companion, and follower of the awakening of a great people to work a beneficial change in my opinion or institution, is Poetry. [...] It is impossible to read the compositions of the most celebrated writers of the present day without being startled with the electric life which burns in their worlds. They measure the circumference and sound the depths of human nature with a comprehensive and all-penetrating spirit, and they are themselves perhaps the most sincerely astonished at its manifestations, for it is less their spirit than the spirit of the age.<sup>68</sup>

Shelley was a very prominent figure in the second generation of Romantic poets. From his very early life he was fascinated with radical politics and had a great commitment to the ideals of social justice and human liberty. He was always very vocal in the public and political sphere. As Timothy Morton writes in the introduction of *The Cambridge Companion to Shelley*, he was “interested in all aspects of literary culture”<sup>69</sup>. He was born into a wealthy English family, who exposed him to radical politics and Enlightenment ideas. However, Shelley had always been a rebel, even from his early days at Oxford, where he wrote *The Necessity of Atheism* (1811), a pamphlet co-written with Thomas Jefferson Hogg that led to his expulsion from the

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<sup>65</sup> Id., p. 306

<sup>66</sup> S.T. Coleridge, W. Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, Joseph Cottle, Bristol, 1798

<sup>67</sup> P.B. Shelley, *Defence of Poetry*, 2002: 535, quoted in C. Mahoney, *A Companion to Romantic Poetry*, Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, United Kingdom, 2011, p. 1

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> T. Morton, *The Cambridge Companion to Shelley*, Introduction, Cambridge University Press, January 2007, p. 2

university. His works were deeply influenced by the French Revolution, thus they expressed radical and progressive ideas, and by his life struggles. Shelley, in fact, felt a sense of alienation from his family and from society. He “struggled with his resistance to being upper class, his transformation into something of a proto-socialist”<sup>70</sup>. He used a large range of poetic forms, from sonnets (*Ozymandias*, *Sonnet: England in 1819*, *To Wordsworth*, *Feelings of a Republican on the Fall of Bonaparte*) to the pastoral elegy written for Keats (*Adonais*), and often experimented with rhyme and metre.

Another pillar of Romantic poetry is John Keats. Unlike Shelley, he was born into a not so wealthy family. His father was an ostler who married the daughter of the owner of a livery-stabler. Even though Keats’ career as a poet was extremely short (he died at 25), his works have become timeless classics. His influence on English literature extends well beyond his own lifetime. He enrolled as a student at the most prestigious hospital in London and worked as an apprentice to a surgeon. He even got a licence as an apothecary. His true passion, however, lay in poetry, frequently escaping his medical studies to write and study it.<sup>71</sup> Finally, at the age of seventeen (1817) he quit medicine to fully dedicate himself to poetry, though his medical training influenced his poetic imagery and knowledge of the human body. His poetry explores themes of beauty, sensuality and transience of human life. He has a deep appreciation for life’s pleasures. In *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, for example, he immortalises the beauty of an ancient artefact, highlighting the enduring nature of art and the transient nature of life. And again in *To Autumn* he emphasises the beauty of the changing seasons and the inevitability of life’s end. In the next part of this chapter, I am going to focus firstly on two poems by Keats, *La Belle Dame sans Merci* and *Lamia*, and subsequently I am going to analyse Shelley’s *On Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery*.

#### b. John Keats: The Faery’s Child in *La Belle Dame sans Merci*

Before analysing the poem, I would like to quickly overview Keats’ *Femmes Fatales* more generally. All of Keats’s fatal women serve as a powerful symbol of beauty, allure and peril. The exploration of the *femme fatale* archetype in his poetry offers a rich and

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<sup>70</sup> Id., p. 3

<sup>71</sup> S.J. Wolfson, *The Cambridge Companion to John Keats*, Cambridge University Press, May 2006, pp. xxii-xxiii

multi-faced examination of human desires and the complexities of love and attraction. As Małgorzata Łuczyńska-Hołodys writes in her book *Soft-Shed Kisses*, Keats's *femmes fatales* appear “to embody and promise permanence”, but also to “threaten the poet/speaker with destruction”.<sup>72</sup> Even when they do not want to be evil, they are nevertheless dangerous. His characters, in fact, seem to embody both allurement and danger: “The encounter with them can be a door to paradise, but may, at the same time, result in despair, agony and dissolution”. Łuczyńska-Hołodys lists three important features shared by all Keats’s fatal women. The first one is the fact that they all exist in a sort of transitional state, hovering between the realms of reality and imagination, and as a result, the question of whether they provide reality or illusion remains unresolved. The second one provides the fact that the union with them, regardless of the outcome, is a rite of initiation that introduces a person to an unreachable realm. The third and final feature is the fact that intimate interaction with the *femme fatale* signifies a blend of both pain and pleasure.<sup>73</sup> Keats’s *femme fatale* archetype goes through a kind of evolution. The fatal woman in his early poems such as *Endymion* is not the same as the one in his late poems.

I am now going to focus on one of Keats’s fatal women, the “faery’s child” in *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*. The poem tells the tale of a knight who encounters a beautiful but ultimately destructive woman in a dream-like landscape. She is described as “a faery’s child” with “wild eyes” and “honey wild, and manna-dew”. She lures the knight into her embrace, only to leave him “alone and palely loitering” after her spell has taken its toll. Łuczyńska-Hołodys suggests that the poem might have roots in the legend of Tannhäuser, a Christian knight who “encountered a pagan goddess of love and disappeared off the face of the earth, living with Venus in her bower for seven years”<sup>74</sup>. Keats’s inspiration might have also been Alan Chartier’s *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* or the mediaeval ballad *Thomas Rymer*, “which describes how Thomas was taken to the fair Elfland to serve a woman whom he believed to be the Queen of Heaven”<sup>75</sup>. He might also have taken inspiration from John Dovaston’s *Elfin Bride, a Fairy Ballad*, where Merlin is taken by a “White Lady” to a dream-like land. Keats’s knight is also

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<sup>72</sup> M. Luczynka-Hołodys, *Soft-Shed Kisses: Re-visioning the Femme Fatale in English Poetry of the 19th Century*, Cambridge Scholars, Newcastle, 2013, p. 19

<sup>73</sup> Id. pp. 19-20

<sup>74</sup> Id., p. 41

<sup>75</sup> Id., p. 41

taken by a fairy lady to a magical land. Keats's *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* is a lyrical ballad composed by 12 stanzas and written in iambic tetrameters.

O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,  
Alone and palely loitering?  
The sedge has withered from the lake,  
And no birds sing.

O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,  
So haggard and so woe-begone?  
The squirrel's granary is full,  
And the harvest's done.

I see a lily on thy brow.  
With anguish moist and fever-dew,  
And on thy cheeks a fading rose  
Fast withereth too.  
(I - III)

The lady does not appear until the fourth stanza. In this sort of introduction the speaker encounters a knight, however he does not seem to possess the characteristics that are usually associated with knights. He does not look brave, proud or resilient. He is alone and "loitering". He appears to be in a state of deep distress and desolation, and the world around him seems to reflect his physical state. The grass has withered from the lake and there are no birds singing. The speaker is concerned and keeps asking the repeated question "O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms?" and the knight's appearance is also described as "haggard and so woe-begone". The mention of the squirrel's granary being full and the harvest being done suggests that the scene is probably set in autumn. Summer is over, there is no more grass and the world is slowing down and preparing for winter. Therefore, the knight is completely left alone. The third stanza shows the physical symptoms of the knight's distress. The speaker sees a lily, usually a symbol of purity, on his brow that is "moist and fever-dew", so it is damp with sweat and feverish. The fading rose on his cheeks conveys the idea of a once-healthy and vibrant complexion that is now withering and losing its colour. Other than highlighting the knight's physical suffering, these descriptions seem to symbolise a deep emotional and spiritual decline, as if he is withering away with the natural world. At the beginning of the poem the reason why the knight is in this state is unknown. Only in the end is that reason unveiled, and it is discovered that it is indeed the fairy's child the one to blame.



I met a lady in the meads,  
Full beautiful – a faery’s child,  
Her hair was long, her foot was light,  
And her eyes were wild.  
(IV)

The protagonist of the poem finally arrives in the fourth stanza. Now it is the knight who is speaking, answering the original speaker’s questions and telling his tale. He vividly describes his encounter with a mysterious lady in a meadow. She is depicted as beautiful, almost otherworldly, a “faery’s child”. This description alone immediately suggests a sense of enchantment. Readers already seem to be drawn to this mysterious figure. The long and loose hair is a common trait in the *femme fatale* archetype. As I wrote in the previous chapter, ideal upper-class women of the nineteenth century were not supposed to wear their hair down. Doing that was in itself considered an act of rebellion. The lady’s light foot could suggest a graceful and almost ghostly quality to her movements. Her wild eyes seem to hint at an untamed, passionate nature. This is a very crucial stanza as it serves as an introduction to the central figure of the poem.

I made a garland for her head,  
And bracelets too, and fragrant zone;  
She looked at me as she did love,  
And made sweet moan

I set her on my pacing steed,  
And nothing else saw all day long,  
For sidelong would she bend, and sing  
A faery’s song.

She found me roots of relish sweet,  
And honey wild, and manna-dew,  
And sure in language strange she said –  
‘I love thee true’.  
(V - VII)

In these stanzas the two characters seem to be falling in love with each other. First the knight prepares and adorns the lady with a garland, bracelets and a “fragrant zone”. It can be noticed how the woman seems to reciprocate his love, looking at him “as she did love”. The speaker does everything in his power to please and captivate her, and the woman seems to appreciate that, making “sweet moan”. In the sixth

stanza, the knight places the lady on a horse, and for all day long she bends or looks at him with a sidelong glance. This particular scene has been the subject of many paintings throughout the Nineteenth century. One was a sketch made by Dante Gabriel Rossetti in 1855 that illustrates the scene on the sixth stanza (Figure 4). The woman in the painting looks distressed and leans away from the knight. In his essay *Language Strange*, Grant F. Scott suggests that she appears less like a siren and more like a damsel in distress.<sup>76</sup> The knight appears to use the Dame's own hair to trap her. Her body is bent towards the horse's neck, trying to get as far away as she can from the knight. Another sketch is from Rossetti's wife, Elizabeth Siddal (Figure 5). The knight is once again the dominant figure and the woman "has neither the energy nor the will to resist the knight or seek the viewer's eye"<sup>77</sup>. She appears as if she has given up and the knight is the one that has her "in thrall". The first oil painting of this scene was Arthur Hughes's *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* (Figure 6) in which the woman is sitting on a horse but seems like she might fall at any moment. It is like she is being held hostage and is simply accepting it. Scott notices that the painting is unusually dark, especially in the middle foreground, occupied by the horse.<sup>78</sup> Just like in Siddal's sketch, the woman that Hughes paints is a victim, a damsel in distress. A painting that does not depict the woman as the victim, but as a true *femme fatale* is Frank Dicksee's *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* (Figure 7). While also sitting on a horse, the woman in the painting shows everything but surrender. She bends over the horse, looking right into the knight's eyes. She is holding the reins, which signifies that it is her who is in charge of the situation. The man looks almost enchanted and he seems to be feminized. Scott, in fact, suggests that the knight is "as much an object of beauty as the belle dame"<sup>79</sup>. He loses the masculinity that he possessed in Rossetti, Siddal and Hughes's works. Going back to the analysis of Keats's ballad, in the sixth stanza, the woman sings a "faery's song". This element suggests an otherworldly or supernatural quality. It implies that the woman is not a mere mortal but something mystical or magical and this idea is emphasised by the speaker's captivation towards

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<sup>76</sup> G.F. Scott, *Language Strange: A Visual History of Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci"*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Vol. 28, No. 4, pp. 503-535, Winter 1999, p. 507

<sup>77</sup> Id., p. 508

<sup>78</sup> Id., p. 516

<sup>79</sup> id., p. 524



Figure 4: D.G. Rossetti, *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, pencil, pen, and wash, British Museum, 1855



Figure 5: E. Siddal, *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, graphite pencil on paper, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, England, c. 1855





Figure 6: A. Hughes, *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 1863



Figure 7: F. Dicksee, *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, oil on canvas, Bristol Museum, 1902

her. In the seventh stanza, she provides him with “root or relish sweet”, “honey wild” and “manna-dew”. She speaks to him in a strange language, contributing to the idea that she is not entirely of this world. As Łuczyńska-Hołodys suggests, the knight “is a mortal man”, and the woman “belongs to a different, half-mythological, half-magical realm”<sup>80</sup>. Since the knight does not know her language, he interprets it as “I love thee true”.

She took me to her Elfin grot,  
And there she wept and sighed full sore,  
And there I shut her wild wild eyes  
With kisses four.

And there she lulled me asleep  
And there I dream'd – Ah! woe betide!  
The latest dream I ever dream'd  
On the cold hill side.  
(VIII - IX)

The eighth stanza is probably the most important moment of the poem. The mysterious woman takes the knight to her “Elfin grot”, a hidden magical and ethereal place associated with the supernatural. Łuczyńska-Hołodys describes it as liminal, that is “a point between two different worlds”, a sort of transitional place “of promise and fulfilment”<sup>81</sup>. However, it is also the place where the knight’s transformation and enchantment begins. In fact, he seems to start getting sick only after he leaves the grot. Here, the woman starts weeping, perhaps to get the knight’s attention and compassion. It seems to work, because the man starts giving her even more attention, kissing her, and that kiss seems to be the cause of the enchantment. Thus, after that, the knight is lulled into a deep sleep. She uses her enchanting powers to make him fall asleep, just like a siren that lures sailors to their doom. He is now fully enchanted, almost vampirised and she seems to have control of the scene. While asleep, the knight seems to have nightmares, hinted by the expression “woe betide!”, indicating a sense of impending doom or misfortune.

I saw pale kings and princes too,  
Pale warriors, death-pale were they all;  
They cried – “La Belle Dame Sans Merci

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<sup>80</sup> M. Luczynka-Hołodys, *op. cit.*, p. 43

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

Hath thee in thrall!"

I saw their starved lips in the gloam,  
With horrid warning gaped wide,  
And I awoke and found me here,  
On the cold hill's side.

And this is why I sojourn here  
Alone and palely loitering,  
Though the sedge has wither'd from the lake,  
And no birds sing.  
(X - XII)

In the dream, the knight sees pale figures with "starved lips" and "horrid warning gaped wide", possibly the fairy's old victims that warn him of the mysterious lady. They call her "La Belle Dame Sans Merci", which literally translates as "the beautiful lady without mercy". The title alone hints at the figure of the *femme fatale*: a seductive kind of beauty that kills men without guilt or any other feelings besides hunger and lust. The pale kings and princes warn the knight of her powers, saying that he has been enchanted. The term "in thrall" means to be under someone's control or in bondage, like a sort of spell. The word is a favourite of Keats, as Karla Alwes suggests, because it expresses the idea of "simultaneous attraction and repulsion, especially with regard to the female"<sup>82</sup>. The term "death-pale" refers to the ghost-like state of the kings and princes. Perhaps the speaker, seeing these pale figures, believes he has passed away as well. However, he then awakes in the very same place he was found at the beginning of the poem. The desolate landscape, where "the sedge has wither'd from the lake, And no birds sing" mirrors the initial description. It is a full circle. The poem begins with the knight alone and loitering and finishes in the same way. He too looks death-pale now and realises that maybe he is alive after all. "He has joined the army of pale knights, alone loitering in the woods, surrounded by the withering landscape"<sup>83</sup>. He has joined the lady's horde of victims. Anne Mellor, in her book *Complexities*, doubts the fatality of the woman, reading the poem in a male narrative. She believes that the only advantage that the knight gets for viewing the woman as fatal and destructive is the right to tell the story. She writes that:

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<sup>82</sup> K. Alwes, *Imagination Transformed*, 1993, p. 19, quoted in M. Luczynka-Holdys, *op. cit.*, p. 44

<sup>83</sup> M. Luczynka-Holdys, *op. cit.*, p. 44

[E]ven though his harsh dream has become his reality and he remains unloved, unloving, even dying, he gets to tell the story. Male voices and this male's story appropriate and silence the female. We never hear la belle dame's side of the story, what she thought or felt.<sup>84</sup>

Even though he gets to tell the story, the woman seems to be the true protagonist of the poem. It is her who the reader is drawn to and she is the character who stays in the reader's mind afterwards. She has such mysterious characteristics that it is perhaps impossible to silence her, even though she is not the one who narrates. It is true, however, that "the knight played a much more active part in the story than he would like to admit"<sup>85</sup>. The knight chooses to believe the illusion and refuses to see everything else around him. However, when the dream is over, "he transfers all the responsibility to the Belle Dame, casting her as destructive and cruel"<sup>86</sup>.

### c. John Keats: The She-Demon in *Lamia*

Lamia is perhaps Keats's most ambiguous *femme fatale*. On one hand she is destructive and dangerous, on the other, her love for Lycius seems to be genuine. Lamias are mythological creatures often portrayed as half-women and half-serpents and they appear across various cultures and myths, each with its interpretation and characteristics. For example, a children's book called *The Histories of Fours Footed Beastes*<sup>87</sup> describes these creatures as hermaphrodites and covered in scales, with a woman's head and chest, but with hooves instead of feet and with claws in their hands. In Greek mythology, Lamia was a beautiful woman, the queen of Lybia, that attracted the attention of Zeus and bore him a few children. The jealous Hera killed them all and Lamia, in despair, hid in a remote cave where she turned into a monster, eating every child she encountered. Jacques Bril writes that Hera, to better take revenge on Lamia, deprived her of her sleep so much that Zeus granted her the privilege of temporarily removing her eyes and using them whenever she wished. Sometimes she also spied on children, to later devour them.<sup>88</sup> Lamia was also frequently depicted as a witch or as a vampire, sucking the blood of children. In pretty much all cultures, she is

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<sup>84</sup> A. Mellor, *Complexities*, 2001, p. 223, quoted in M. Luczynka-Holdys, *op. cit.*, p. 44

<sup>85</sup> M. Luczynka-Holdys, *op. cit.*, p. 48

<sup>86</sup> *Id.*, pp. 48-49

<sup>87</sup> K. Briggs, *A Dictionary of fairies*, p. 260, quoted in J. Bril, *Lilith, l'aspetto inquietante del femminile*, traduzione a cura di Gianpietro Gnesotto, Edizioni Culturali Internazionali Genova, Genova, 1990, p.

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<sup>88</sup> J. Bril, *op. cit.*, p. 78

considered a sort of *femme fatale*, devouring her victims and causing pain and destruction.

Keats does a great job describing and representing the ambiguity of this figure, starting with the idea that she's neither human nor has a divine nature. She is a serpent who falls in love with a human, wishing to assume a human form herself. The poem opens with a description of a mythical world, mentioning nymphs, satyrs, dryads and fauns. The love story between Lamia and Lycius is framed by the story of Hermes and a nymph. Hermes fell in love with a nymph and started searching for her everywhere. As Łuczyńska-Hołodys writes, Hermes's story has three functions in the poem: symbolically framing the main story, providing information about the female character and differentiating the mythological realm (the forest) from the real world (the city of Corinth).<sup>89</sup> Moreover, in his book *The Finer Tone*, E.R. Wasserman suggests that the story of Hermes and the nymph serves as a "contrast between the perfection of heaven and the evanescent imperfection of earth"<sup>90</sup>, and a contrast between Hermes's story and Lycius's. The god's story reflects on the fact that, while his relationship with the nymph can be possible, Lamia's relationship with Lycius cannot. Hermes and the nymph both belong in the mythological world, thus their relationship does not violate or affect the natural order. Lamia's relationship with Lycius is doomed to fail because they belong to different worlds. Despite being aware of this, however, the woman decides to still pursue the love story.

Until he found a palpating snake,  
Bright, and cirque-couchant in a dusky brake.  
She was a gordian shape of dazzling hue,  
Vermilion-spotted, golden, green, and blue;  
Striped like a zebra, freckled like a pard,  
Eyed like a peacock, and all crimson barr'd;  
And full of silver moons, that, as she breathed,  
Dissolv'd, or brighter shone, or interwreathed  
Their lustres with the gloomier tapestries –  
So rainbow-sided, touch'd with miseries,  
She seem'd, at once, some penanced lady elf,  
Some demon's mistress, or the demon's self.  
(l. 45-56)

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<sup>89</sup> M. Luczynka-Hołodys, *op. cit.*, pp. 57-58

<sup>90</sup> E.R. Wasserman, *The Finer Tone: Keats' Major Poems*, 1953, quoted in T.R. Knipp, *Lamia: An Examination of its Critics and an Attempt at Interpretation*, University College Review, Spring, 1961, Vol. 1, No. 1, (pp. 119-133), pp. 122-123



As soon as Lamia is introduced, it appears obvious that she's not human at all. She is depicted as a "palpating snake", "striped like a zebra". She is "of dazzling hue", emanating a number of colours. She is a "lady elf", a demon. She resembles a "gordian shape", an unsolvable, entangled puzzle from Greek mythology. Keats is using otherworldly words to describe Lamia's inhumanness. She is portrayed as having a complex and intricate form. The use of colours like "vermilion", "golden", "green", and "blue" depict her exotic and enchanting beauty, while the comparisons to a zebra and a pard emphasise her uniqueness. Her eyes are "like a peacock", perhaps adding to her captivating allure. She has distinctive patterns on her body and she is depicted as having "silver moons" that change in brightness or dissolve as she breathes. Both Hermes and the reader are left with a sense of ambiguity and intrigue regarding Lamia's true nature. She seems a "penanced lady elf", or "some demon's mistress", a seductive and dangerous being. She could also be "the demon's self". She is then described wearing a crown, "like Ariadne's tiar". Ariadne was the daughter of King Minos of Crete that, after being abandoned by her lover Theseus, became the bride of the god Dionysus. Her tiara is a symbol of her transformation from a mortal woman to a divine figure. Lamia's tiara, therefore, hints at her own transformation, from serpent to woman. Even though "her head was serpent", she has a human-like mouth, full of teeth. This could symbolise once again her seductive beauty, likening her teeth to precious pearls, further emphasising the duality of her nature. Lamia then strikes a deal with Hermes. She is going to help the god find her beloved nymph in exchange for a favour: "but seal with oaths, fair God!" (l. 88).

"I was a woman, let me have once more  
"A woman's shape, and charming as before.  
"I love a youth of Corinth – O the bliss!  
"Give me my woman's form, and place me where he is.  
"Stoop, Hermes, let me breathe upon thy brow,  
"And thou shalt see thy sweet nymph even now."  
(l. 117-122)

Lamia wishes to become a woman once again to stay with the man she loves. She yearns for a different form and she makes it clear even by the first words she speaks. If she wants to be with her lover, she needs to assume the form of a human being, to fit in in his world. Her need for transformation is hinted further by Lamia's comparison with Proserpine (Persephone). In Greek mythology, Persephone is the daughter of Demeter, the goddess of agriculture and fertility. According to the myth,

one day Persephone was abducted by Hades and taken to his realm. Demeter searched for her and when she could not find her daughter, she neglected her duties to nurture the earth, causing a great famine. Zeus then demanded that Persephone returned to her mother. However, the girl had already eaten Hades's food (pomegranate seeds), finding herself forced to spend six months every year in the Underworld. She therefore is a symbol of continuous transformation.

After being transformed into a woman, Lamia arrives near Corinth and sees Lycius walking home. The man is immediately struck by her beauty and by her words. "For so delicious were the words she sung, / It seem'd he had lov'd them a whole summer long" (l. 249-250). He seems almost immediately enchanted by her presence, so much that he thinks she is a sort of goddess or nymph. When she calls him to look back at her, he does so without any fear. He sees her and he is immediately drawn to her. The line "But Orpheus-like at an Eurydice;" (l. 248) refers to the Greek myth of Orpheus, a musician believed to be the son of Apollo who lost his beloved Eurydice. He attempted to rescue her from the underworld and was told not to look back at her until they were both safely out. The man, however, could not resist the urge and looked back, losing Eurydice forever. The comparison between Lycius and Orpheus gives the idea that the former is willing to risk everything to be with Lamia. Lycius finds himself overwhelmed with desire and longing for her and his only fear is that she might vanish before he can fully express his adoration. Lamia seems to be aware of the power she has over him, and tortures him ever further by saying:

"Thou art a scholar, Lycius, and must know  
"That finer spirits cannot breathe below  
"In human climes, and live.  
(l. 279-281)

She is playing with him, threatening to leave him. She is immediately making their love difficult for him to the point where he is "swoon'd, murmuring of love, and pale with pain" (l. 289). Lycius asks her questions about where she comes from since he thinks she looks like a goddess. He wants to enter a human relationship, in human terms. When she gives him confusing answers, he does not know what to believe in. Therefore, he chooses to believe "whatever for him seems to be the nicest version"<sup>91</sup>. Keats keeps depicting Lamia as mysterious. Knipp believes that Keats wants to

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<sup>91</sup> M. Luczynka-Holdys, *op. cit.*, pp. 59-60

emphasise the fact that Lamia's mythological origins are lost to Lycius because of her beauty.<sup>92</sup> She is so beautiful that Lycius cannot help but be in love with her. Keats keeps emphasising her beauty not because he wants the reader to side with her, but to make clear the reason why Lycius loves her.<sup>93</sup> She seems to be human and inhuman all at once, constantly transforming. Lycius seems to be caught in a sort of trance, created by Lamia herself. He is completely enchanted by her.

When they finally go through Corinth, they meet yet another character, Apollonius, a friend of Lycius that symbolises reason and rational thinking. Lycius hides his face from his friend, and Lamia asks him for an explanation of his behaviour. "Tell me who / Is that old man? I cannot bring to mind / His features" (l. 371-373). The reply she gets is the following:

"Tis Apollonius sage, my trusty guide  
"And good instructor; but to-night he seems  
"The ghost of folly haunting my sweet dreams.  
(l. 375-377)

He is portrayed as a trustworthy mentor and guide to Lycius. Usually, his presence in Lycius's life represents the importance of reason and rationality. In these verses, however, Lycius knows that Apollonius is not going to approve of his relationship with Lamia. The guide can perhaps immediately sense an oddity in Lamia's character. Lycius, however, is blind to the truth. Even when it might be obvious that something is amiss in their relationship, he turns the other way. This first meeting with Apollonius represents Lycius's first rational impulses that something is wrong, but the man neglects it.<sup>94</sup> This is how the first part of the poem concludes.

As Part II of the poem begins, Lycius and Lamia are completely isolated in their house. The first verses immediately tell us that something bad is going to happen to the lovers.

Had Lycius liv'd to hand his story down,  
He might have given the moral a fresh frown,  
Or clench'd it quite: but too short was their bliss  
To breed distrust and hate, that make the soft voice hiss.  
(ll. 7-10)

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<sup>92</sup> T.R. Knipp, *op. cit.*, p. 130

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> M. Luczynka-Holdys, *op. cit.*, pp. 65-66

Lycius hears the sound of the trumpet coming from outside and he is reminded of the outside world. Lamia gets restless because she sees her lover gazing beyond her. To get his full attention back, she starts sighing and moaning and accuses him of having deserted her. "You have deserted me; – where am I now?" (II. 42). Lycius wants to get married and to invite the whole town, but Lamia does not seem to share his sentiment. In fact, if other people enter their home, they might pick up on the oddity of the situation and Lamia certainly does not want that to happen. However, Lycius seems confident in his decision, even becoming aggressive and tyrannical, and insists. The woman finally yields and agrees at the condition that Apollonius is not invited. "Do not bid / Old Apollonius – from him keep me hid" (II. 100-101). The guide is the only person who can see through Lamia's lies and reveal her true nature. Knipp explains that the significance of the character of Apollonius poses a lot of problems for critics.<sup>95</sup> Alexander W. Crawford<sup>96</sup>, for example, suggests that Keats created the guide as a sympathetic character, while Claud L. Finney<sup>97</sup> believes that Apollonius represents Keats's critics who judged his poetry (represented by Lamia). During the wedding, all of the guests seem to be entranced in a trance similar to Lycius's, induced by Lamia's spell that fills the alcohol and the incense. They can now see what he sees. Apollonius then arrives uninvited and Lamia's spell begins to falter. He looks directly at Lamia in the eyes and she grows progressively weaker. She starts exhibiting signs of discomfort and her beauty slowly drains away. Lycius does not understand what is happening and tries in vain to stop Apollonius, who tells him that Lamia is actually a serpent from a mythical world. Just as Lamia vanishes, Lycius falls to his death. Many critics blame Apollonius for it. However, as Knipp writes, Keats only states that Apollonius's presence killed Lamia, and not that he killed Lycius.<sup>98</sup> At the beginning of Part II, the omniscient narrator already hints at how the story is going to end. Lycius is so enthralled with Lamia that he physically cannot exist if she is not there with him.

Lamia is the most ambiguous of all Keats's *femmes fatales* as she is really hard to classify and label. She is a seductress but she has never actually tormented Lycius. Her love for him seems genuine, but she does not know how to love in a human way. She is jealous of everyone and everything, and wants to be the centre of his attention

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<sup>95</sup> T.R. Knipp, *op. cit.*, pp. 125-126

<sup>96</sup> A.L. Crawford, *The Genius of Keats: An Interpretation*, 1932, quoted in T.R. Knipp, *op. cit.*, p. 126

<sup>97</sup> C.L. Finney, *The Evolution of Keats's Poetry*, 1936, quoted in T.R. Knipp, *op. cit.*, p. 126

<sup>98</sup> T.R. Knipp, *op. cit.*, p. 128

all the time. She is afraid that if she lets the outside world in, the magic of their relationship will fade. Lamia knows that she and Lycius are not at all compatible, since they come from two different worlds, but she does not seem to care and proceeds to love him, knowing that she will create her own downfall. She loves Lycius so much that she is willing to risk everything to be with him. Lycius does not seem to care about his reality at all, letting himself be drowned in Lamia's intoxication. And the more time he spends with her, the stronger the spell gets and the deeper his intoxication gets.

d. Percy Bysshe Shelley: On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery

Percy Shelley's idea of love is that it brings a transformation, a change in a social and political way. As I have previously stated at the beginning of the chapter, Shelley had always been very vocal about political and social issues. His concept of love is therefore characterised by its revolutionary spirit. Love has a transformative power, it can change individuals, societies and the entire world. It can be a liberating force that can overthrow even oppression and tyranny. Shelley has always been a revolutionary poet with the desire to challenge and disrupt societal norms. He had a very innovative idea of love and supported non-traditional relationships. In a passage of *Defence of Poetry*, he describes love as "a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action or person, not our own"<sup>99</sup>. There is also an element of narcissism in Shelley's idea of love. He believes that we tend to search for our "ego-ideal"<sup>100</sup> in the outside world. People tend to search for their antitype to fill the void. His concept of love is, in fact, very closely tied to the pursuit of the ideal. Shelley's *femme fatale* reflects this idea of love. She is ambiguous. He believes femininity to be both ideal and fatal. She is both desired and feared and she is a sort of catalyst for transformation. She acts like a muse, inspiring the man's revolutionary spirit and his poetic ideal. The poet ends up merging with her and that is "an experience of love, frequently presented as a transformative glimpse of a quasi-divine, ideal realm, which stimulates artistic creation"<sup>101</sup>. This experience, however,

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<sup>99</sup> J. Shawcross, *Shelley's Literary and Philosophical Criticism*, 2018, p. 131, quoted in M. Luczynka-Holdys, *op. cit.*, p. 80

<sup>100</sup> J.E. Hogle, *Shelley's Poetics: The Power as Metaphor*, *Keats-Shelley Journal* 31 (1982), p. 187, quoted in M. Luczynka-Holdys, *op. cit.*, pp. 80-81

<sup>101</sup> M. Luczynka-Holdys, *op. cit.*, p. 79

leads to a complete annihilation of the self and of the poet's identity. The fatal woman is like a godlike creature that seems to completely enchant the poet, leading him to his doom. She is the sublime, the divine force that brings the poet to fully merge with her. Łuczyńska-Holdys states that this force can have a feminising effect on the poet.<sup>102</sup> For example, in the poem I am about to analyse, the reader, looking at the head of Medusa, seems almost to become the goddess himself.

*On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery* is an ekphrastic poem, a sort of monologue that gives a vivid description of a work of art. The poem is based on a seventeenth century painting that was wrongly attributed to Leonardo da Vinci. However, the poem does not specify whether or not the speaker is describing a painting or the real thing. In order to understand that, the title has to be referred to and it functions as "a double frame placing the reader at several levels of remove from the object of artistic representation, the dangerous head of Medusa"<sup>103</sup>. The poem can be seen as a "reflection" or a "mirror" of the painting, symbolically referring to Medusa's story. According to Greek mythology, Medusa was one of the three Gorgon sisters, originally a beautiful mortal woman. The myth explains that she was raped by Poseidon in the temple of Athena. Athena herself punished Medusa for desecrating her temple, transforming her into a hideous creature with snakes for hair and the ability to turn anyone who looked into her eyes to stone. She was eventually killed by Perseus, who was able to avoid her gaze using a mirrored shield. However, in the poem the thread of Medusa's head is mitigated, it can be looked at without the danger of being turned into stone. Although, the spectator does remain petrified at the sight of her.

It lieth, gazing on the midnight sky,  
Upon the cloudy mountain-peak supine;  
Below, far lands are seen tremblingly;  
Its horror and its beauty are divine.  
Upon its lips and eyelids seems to lie  
Loveliness like a shadow, from which shine,  
Fiery and lurid, struggling underneath,  
The agonies of anguish and of death.  
(l. 1-8)

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<sup>102</sup> Id., p. 85

<sup>103</sup> C. Jacobs, *On Looking at Shelley's Medusa*, *Yale French Studies*, 1985, No. 69, The Lesson of Paul de Man (1985), (pp. 163-179), p. 166

The poem starts with Medusa being objectified. Shelley refers to the mythological creature with the pronoun "it". Medusa's head lies on a mountain peak and gazes at the midnight sky. At this point the reader becomes aware of another person in the poem: the spectator, the speaker who is describing the scene<sup>104</sup>. In fact, in Medusa's vision, she could not see the lands below, because her gaze faces upwards. What strikes the most about this stanza is the contrast between the word "horror" and "beauty". Mario Praz writes in his book *The Romantic Agony*, that "for the Romantics beauty was enhanced by exactly those qualities which seem to deny it, by those objects which produce horror; the sadder, the more painful it was, the more intensely they relished it"<sup>105</sup>. He also adds that it was the general taste of the period, which tended towards "the uncontrolled, the macabre, the terrible, the strange"<sup>106</sup>. The two words are described as divine. Medusa here is transformed into a work of art that exudes both beauty and horror. She is described as something so terrifying that the gazer cannot help but look at it. In her face, in "its lips and eyelids", she has a sort of loveliness that is like a shadow. It is clear that the speaker thinks that her lovely features hide "the agonies of anguish and of death". Even in death, she is tortured, perhaps because of her unfair punishment and faith. In *A Defence of Poetry*, Shelley writes:

Poetry turns all things to loveliness; it exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful, and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed: it marries exultation and horror, grief and pleasure, eternity and change: it subdues to union under its light yoke all irreconcilable things.<sup>107</sup>

Shelley believes that poetry can turn everything lovely, hence including Medusa herself.

Yet it is less the horror than the grace  
Which turns the gazer's spirit into stone,  
Whereon the lineaments of that dead face  
Are graven, till the characters be grown  
Into itself, and thought no more can trace;  
'Tis the melodious hue of beauty thrown  
Athwart the darkness and the glare of pain,  
Which humanize and harmonize the strain.  
(ll. 11-16)

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<sup>104</sup> M. Luczynka-Holdys, *op. cit.*, p. 122

<sup>105</sup> M. Praz, *op. cit.*, p. 27

<sup>106</sup> *Id.*, p. 38

<sup>107</sup> "A Defence of Poetry" in Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, (New York: Norton, 1877), p. 505, quoted in C. Jacobs, *op. cit.*, p. 168

The speaker is meditating on the effects that the painting has on the spectator. The art object works exactly like Medusa: it makes the gazer petrified. Even when transformed into a work of art, she is still dangerous. However, what remains petrified seems to be the soul of the gazer, not the body. Medusa's beauty is so humanising that it has deeply affected the spectator. Shelley acknowledges that it is not the horror of Medusa's face that petrifies the gazer's spirit, but rather the grace. It is her very beauty that leaves the observer in a state of shock and awe. The lineaments of her face remain so much graven into the gazer's consciousness that they seem to merge with the viewer's psyche. The presence of a "melodious hue of beauty" can humanise the "strain" of horror. The last three lines of the stanza can be interpreted in different ways. Łuczyńska-Holdys writes that it is both the beauty of Medusa and her pain that change the speaker's soul.<sup>108</sup> Carol Jacobs, on the other hand, believes that it is only the "darkness and the glare of pain" that "humanize and harmonize the strain".<sup>109</sup> The latter also writes that the gazer being turned to stone is a radical transformation. "He loses his identity, but this is not to say that the Medusa retains hers, for in Shelley's text it is no longer a question of who dominates whom"<sup>110</sup>.

And from its head as from one body grow,  
As grass out of a watery rock,  
Hairs which are vipers, and they curl and flow  
And their long tangles in each other lock,  
And with unending involutions show  
Their mailed radiance, as it were to mock  
The torture and the death within, and saw  
The solid air with many a ragged jaw.  
(III. 17-24)

The third stanza goes back to the painting, describing now Medusa's hair, the snakes. Shelley begins by emphasising the unity of the serpents growing from Medusa's head and comparing them to "grass out of a watery rock". The snakes are called "vipers" which perhaps refer to a more poisonous type of snake, giving to the poem a more eerie and grotesque attribute. Carol Jacobs writes that "the simile of line 17 divests the object of its identity, and that of line 18 leaves it as unlike itself as possible, for it becomes totally other, victim to its own power to transform into stone, a

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<sup>108</sup> M. Luczynka-Holdys, *op. cit.*, p. 123

<sup>109</sup> C. Jacobs, *op. cit.*, p. 168

<sup>110</sup> *Id.*, p. 169



self-reflection gone awry”<sup>111</sup>. They are entangled with each other, curling and flowing with one another. They emanate light. Almost all of Shelley’s *femmes fatales* are described as having some kind of light and radiance.<sup>112</sup> In Medusa’s case this applies perfectly. In the second stanza, for example, the light comes from her head. In the third stanza, it comes from her hair, and this “mailed radiance” seems to have a mocking function. The vipers might be seen as a mockery of the pain and suffering they cause. Despite being beautiful and emanating light, they are bringers of destruction, depicted with a “ragged jaw”. Moreover, “they may mock death in that they are a powerful emblem of regeneration and transformation, visualised in the symbol of a snake shedding its skin”<sup>113</sup>.

And, from a stone beside, a poisonous eft  
Peeps idly into those Gorgonian eyes;  
Whilst in the air a ghastly bat, bereft  
Of sense, has flitted with a mad surprise  
Out of the cave this hideous light had cleft,  
And he comes hastening like a moth that hies  
After a taper; and the midnight sky  
Flares, a light more dread than obscurity.  
(IV. 25-32)

In the fourth stanza two different creatures can be found: a “poisonous eft” and a “ghastly bat”. Jacobs believes that these two creatures represent two different ways to look at Medusa. The eft seems to look at her “from a safe distance, as object”, without interest or danger. The bat, on the other hand, is driven mad by looking at her, and goes through a “radical figural transformation”, along with Medusa herself and the “language that attempts to represent it”.<sup>114</sup> By describing Medusa’s eyes as “Gorgonian”, Shelley hints at her nature. She was in fact one of the Gorgons, three winged, female figures of Greek mythology with serpents in their head. According to Jacobs, the “hideous light” is the “mailed radiance” (III. 22) of the snakes. It is “the source of illumination for a remarkable scene played out before gazing eyes”<sup>115</sup>. Łuczyńska-Holdys believes that the hideousness of the light is caused by the fact that

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<sup>111</sup> C. Jacobs, *op. cit.*, p. 171

<sup>112</sup> M. Luczynka-Holdys, *op. cit.*, pp. 124-125

<sup>113</sup> *Id.*, p. 126

<sup>114</sup> C. Jacobs, *op. cit.*, p. 172

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

it “exposes what many people would like to stay covered”<sup>116</sup>, such as the monstrosity of Medusa’s punishment and faith.

‘This the tempestuous loveliness of terror;  
For from the serpents gleams a brazen glare  
Kindled by that inextricable error,  
Which makes a thrilling vapour of the air  
Become a and ever-shifting mirror  
Of all the beauty and the terror there –  
A woman’s countenance, with serpent-locks,  
Gazing in death on Heaven from those wet rocks.  
(V. 33- 40)

In the fifth stanza there is another reminder of Medusa’s loveliness associated with terror. This concept is perhaps the essence of the entire poem, as it emphasises the concept that the horrifying and the beautiful appear intertwined in Medusa’s portrayal, making her a true *femme fatale*, simultaneously captivating and frightening. The serpents emanate a “brazen glare” that is kindled by “that inextricable error”. Many critics propose different interpretations of this error. For example, Neville Rogers reads it as the physical windings of the serpents<sup>117</sup> while Carol Jacobs views it as “a mistake from which there is no recourse”<sup>118</sup>. Another different interpretation is the one of Jerome J. McGann, who believes that the error refers to Medusa’s sin, punished by Hera<sup>119</sup>. The inextricable error produces a mirror from a “thrilling vapour of the air” that does not stay still, but is “ever-shifting”. It reflects the beauty and the terror of Medusa. Jacobs writes that the mirror “resembles both the painting and poem that take the head of the Medusa as their model; but that reflection is also the image of a work of art produced from within the work of art”. She also explains that the vapour of the air comes directly from Medusa’s slightly parted lips as both her breath and the spoken word.<sup>120</sup> It is in this stanza that Medusa is finally referred to as a human being, as a woman with serpent locks. In fact, up to this point, she has always been referred to with the pronoun “it”.

It is a woman’s countenance divine  
With everlasting beauty breathing there

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<sup>116</sup> M. Luczynka-Holdys, *op. cit.*, p. 126

<sup>117</sup> N. Rogers, *Shelley and the Visual Arts, Keats-Shelley Memorial Bulletin 12* (1961), p. 16, quoted in C. Jacobs, *op. cit.*, p. 173

<sup>118</sup> C. Jacobs, *op. cit.*, p. 173

<sup>119</sup> J.J. McGann, *The Beauty of the Medusa*, p. 9, quoted in M. Luczynka-Holdys, *op. cit.*, p. 127

<sup>120</sup> C. Jacobs, *op. cit.*, p. 174

Which from a stormy mountain's peak, supine  
Gazes into the night's trembling air.  
It is a trunkless head, and on its feature  
Death has met life, but there is life in death,  
The blood is frozen – but unconquered Nature  
Seems struggling to the last, without a breath –  
The fragment of an uncreated creature.

In this additional stanza of the poem, published for the first time by Neville Rogers in 1968, Medusa is again described as a woman. She is gazing at “the night’s trembling air” which Carol Jacobs suggests is the same “thrilling vapour of the air” that creates a mirror. Thus, Medusa is looking at her reflection in a mirror created by herself. In this interpretation, Medusa can be seen as “the artist poet from whose mouth the reflective work of art arises, the object depicted by that work of art, and the beholder of the work of art”<sup>121</sup>.

The Medusa views herself in a mirror that trembles between the “everlasting” and the “ever-shifting”. Everlasting since what she sees might be represented as fixed in the manner of the painting at the Uffizi. But what she gazes on is an image of herself as the beholder of herself as the origin of an image that reflects herself as the beholder.<sup>122</sup>

The line “death has met life, but there is life in death” refers to the idea that, despite Medusa being dead, her serpent-locks seem to be alive and her last breath “still hangs in the air”<sup>123</sup>. Even in the face of death, life still seems to persist, and so does nature who is “unconquered” by death. Even if Medusa seems dead, she still has an effect on the gazer, turning his spirit into stone. Therefore, there is truly something still alive in the Gorgon after all. Shelley’s Medusa is a different kind of *femme fatale*. She does not seem to be completely destructive, but she rather becomes a source of transformation and humanisation, provoking a changing effect on whoever gazes at her.

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<sup>121</sup> Id., p. 175

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> M. Luczynka-Holdys, *op. cit.*, p. 127

### 3. The *Femme Fatale* in Victorian Poetry: Dante Gabriel Rossetti

#### a. Defining Victorian Poetry

In this chapter I will analyse three poems by Dante Gabriel Rossetti. I start by introducing Victorian poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite movement that Rossetti was a member of.

The Victorian era was named after the long reign of Queen Victoria who ruled England from 1837 to 1901. It was a time of profound social, political and economic change, and of technological advancement. The Industrial Revolution, for example, reached its peak during this era and it transformed England into an industrial and economic powerhouse. London quickly became the most important European city, surpassing Paris, who had been “the pivotal city of Western civilization”<sup>124</sup> in the eighteenth century. The city went through a profound change in a short time. From a predominantly agrarian society, Britain shifted to an urban economy that led to innovations such as manufacturing and transportation. This provoked a rapid growth of population in cities and a mass migration of people from rural areas to urban centres, causing overcrowded and unsanitary urban environments. England also saw an increase in wealth. It gained profit mainly from its colonies that by the end of the century made up more than a quarter of the world’s territory, making England the most potent imperial power.<sup>125</sup> Another aspect of the Victorian era was the increase in literacy. Thanks to technological advancements, more books were able to be printed more cheaply, leading to an increase in newspapers, periodicals and books. Many writers opted to publish their works in serial forms, starting with Charles Dickens’s *Pickwick Papers* (1836-1837).<sup>126</sup> Poetry also saw an increase in popularity during the Victorian era. Poems were in fact published in newspapers and periodicals and more people were able to access them. Victorian poetry is deeply rooted in the social and cultural values of the era, but it is also intertwined with the previous Romantic era. In her essay on Victorian Poetics, Carol T. Christ states that:

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<sup>124</sup> S. Greenblatt, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Vol 5, The Victorian Age* (1830-1901), W.W. Norton & Company, New York, N.Y., 2006, p. 3

<sup>125</sup> Id., p. 4

<sup>126</sup> Id., pp. 20-21

[W]e forget that these categories were constructed as a way of defining historical progress towards the modern, from a modern perspective. The poets that we call the Romantics did not think of themselves as Romantics, any more than the Victorians thought of themselves as Victorians.<sup>127</sup>

Victorian poetry actually coincided with Romantic poetry. Many Victorian poets were already alive during the Romantic era, they read the poetry published at that time and grew up with it. There is not a very distinct division between the two. Furthermore, many Victorian poets from the first generation “initially saw themselves as writing in a Romantic tradition”<sup>128</sup>. However, while Romantic poetry mainly focused on themes such as nature, individualism, personal experience and emotions, Victorian poetry delved into the themes of progress, social issues, the complexities of the modern world and the tension between tradition and change. One of the most important innovations of Victorian poetry was the dramatic monologue, a poetic form written in the form of a speech, in which the writer assumes the role of a character and speaks through him/her. It is commonly associated with Robert Browning, who brought it to success with poems such as *My Last Duchess*, *Porphyria’s Lover*, *Fra Lippo Lippi* and others.

Another aspect of Victorian poetry is that it focuses more on gender issues. Sensibility was considered the most important element of Victorian poetic, and this led to believe in the identification of poetry as feminine.<sup>129</sup> Alfred Tennyson’s *Lady of Shalot*, for example, reflects the changing role of women in society. With the rise in literacy, the presence of women writers increased. In *Female Writers*<sup>130</sup>, Mary Ann Stodart explains that while epic belonged to men, lyrics belonged to women. However, some women writers of the Victorian era such as Elisabeth Barrett Browning did not follow this distinction: she, in particular, “did not think of herself as a poet isolated from the contemporary poetry of men”<sup>131</sup>. And she did not want to be called poetess.

The first to view themselves in a new aesthetic, different from the Romantics, were the Pre-Raphaelites, a group founded in 1848 and originally composed of seven members: James Collinson, William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Frederic George Stephens. They were deeply dissatisfied with the artistic

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<sup>127</sup> R. Cronin, A. Chapman, A.H. Harrison, *A Companion to Victorian Poetry*, Introduction: Victorian Poetics, Blackwell Publishing, 2002, p. 1

<sup>128</sup> Id., p. 2

<sup>129</sup> Id., p. 10

<sup>130</sup> M.A. Stodart, *Female Writers*, London: R.B. Seeley and W. Burnside, 1842, quoted in R. Cronin, A. Chapman, A.H. Harrison, *A Companion to Victorian Poetry*, Introduction: Victorian Poetics, cit., pp. 10-11

<sup>131</sup> R. Cronin, A. Chapman, A.H. Harrison, *A Companion to Victorian Poetry*, Introduction: Victorian Poetics, cit., p. 11

norms given by the Royal Academy and wanted to put more attention on the art of earlier periods compared to the Victorian era. The name of the brotherhood, in fact, hinted at a return to the art created by the artists who preceded the Italian painter, Raphael. In the introduction of *The Cambridge Companion to the Pre-Raphaelites*, Elizabeth Prettejohn writes that the word Pre-Raphaelites “refers to the art of an age not precisely before Raphael himself, but rather before his followers and imitators, the ‘Raphaelites’”<sup>132</sup>. They believed that these other artists had a more genuine and detailed approach to the visual arts, and they wanted to bring that to the Victorian context. The group made its first public appearance in 1849 at the London exhibition of that year with literary paintings that drew inspiration from the English Romantic poets’ works. During the first year, the group often accompanied reading and writing to drawing and painting, as confirmed by a diary that was kept by Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s brother, William Michael Rossetti.<sup>133</sup> The group’s literary debut occurred the following year, in 1850, with the publication of *The Germ*, a magazine that contained some of the members’ works. Their literary works mirrored their artistic ideals, focusing on love, beauty and nature and often drew inspiration from mythology, literature, the mediaeval era and the Bible. Critic David Masson believes that the members considered themselves primarily as visual artists, and only secondly as writers, and that they wrote borrowing the procedure from painting.<sup>134</sup> On the other hand, after questioning in what way the relationship between the visual and the literary arts is to be interpreted, Prettejohn concludes that:

Neither the literary nor the visual arts can be said to have taken chronological precedence; still less did Pre-Raphaelitism set up any kind of hierarchy between them. Nor did it prescribe the forms their cross-currents and reciprocities might take. Pre-Raphaelitism was both a literary and an artistic movement; or perhaps it would be better to say that it was neither, in that it refused to recognize the difference as meaningful.<sup>135</sup>

R.H. Wilenski explains wonderfully the procedure that the Pre-Raphaelites used in their art. He wrote that “they began by assuming [...] that no one had ever made

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<sup>132</sup> E. Prettejohn, Introduction in *The Cambridge Companion to the Pre-Raphaelites*, Cambridge University Press, September 2012, p. 1

<sup>133</sup> Id., p. 3

<sup>134</sup> D. Masson, *Pre-Raphaelitism in Art and Literature*, *The British Quarterly Review*, p. 16 (1852), repr. in James Sambrook (ed.), *Pre-Raphaelitism: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 84, quoted in E. Prettejohn, Introduction in *The Cambridge Companion to the Pre-Raphaelites*, cit., p. 4

<sup>135</sup> E. Prettejohn, Introduction in *The Cambridge Companion to the Pre-Raphaelites*, cit., p. 7

sculpture before and that it was their own task to discover the nature of the activity in which they were about to be engaged. They begin [...] at the beginning"<sup>136</sup>. Thus, they created something from nothing, by searching for the nature of that something and without relying on what had been made before.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti is probably the most famous and important Pre-Raphaelite member and he played an important role in the brotherhood. He was a painter as well as a poet. He introduced what Jerome McGann describes as a "typical Rossettian double work"<sup>137</sup>. He produced a painting, and then wrote a poem, usually a sonnet, to complement it. He started his writing journey when he began translating the works of Dante and other Italian stil novisti. The most important piece of work that he translated was Dante's *La Vita Nuova*. Rossetti was so deeply involved in this translation that he even changed his name from Gabriel Charles Dante Rossetti to Dante Gabriel Rossetti and began "to map Dante's life onto his own"<sup>138</sup>. As the poems that I am going to analyse show, Rossetti's literary works are characterised by themes of love, beauty and physical passion with mythological and Biblical elements.

#### b. Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Lilith in *Body's Beauty*

Before analysing the poem, I would like to introduce Rossetti's *Femmes Fatales* more generally. Łuczyńska-Holdys distinguishes two types of fatal women in Rossetti's works: the dangerous ones and the heavenly ones. She calls the firsts "vengeful women". They are powerful and alluring and "they exert power for the sake of dominance and revenge"<sup>139</sup>. The heavenly ones, on the other hand, represent unattainable and idealised female characters who possess an almost ethereal quality and they are the sources for artistic inspiration. This distinction is visible in Rossetti's poetry as well as his paintings. He has a progressive ideal of women, deeply in contrast with the Victorian era. His fatal women are powerful and independent, traits commonly associated with manliness. They stray from the Victorian conception of femininity that viewed women as gentle and nurturing creatures that were expected to be morally pure. In her book *Woman and the Demon*, Nina Auerbach states that the

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<sup>136</sup> R.H. Wilenski, *The Meaning of Modern Sculpture* (1932) (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), p. 84, quoted in E. Prettejohn, Introduction in *The Cambridge Companion to the Pre-Raphaelites*, cit., p. 6

<sup>137</sup> J. McGann, *The poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (1828-1882) 89-102, p. 96

<sup>138</sup> Id., p. 90

<sup>139</sup> M. Luczynka-Holdys, *op. cit.*, p. 196

only women that were worthy of worship were the ones that only behaved as daughters, wives and mothers.<sup>140</sup> Rossetti's *femmes fatales* are deeply involved in their sexual desires and not at all passive. Most of the time, they are the ones in control of the situation and the males are the ones submitted to them. They are irresistible but dangerous. The demonic Lilith described in *Body's Beauty* is the perfect example of this type of woman. The poem is the counterpart of *Soul's Beauty* and is a double work. In fact, it is accompanied by a painting called "Lady Lilith" (Figure 8)<sup>141</sup>. The poem is inscribed on the lower portion of the frame and it is necessary to understand the painting. *Soul's Beauty* is also a double work, accompanied by *Sybilla Palmifera*<sup>142</sup>. The two poems seem to complement each other, one displaying the heavenly *femme fatale* (*Soul's Beauty*) and the other portraying the dangerous one (*Body's Beauty*). The central theme of the poem seems to be enchantment.<sup>143</sup> Lilith casts spells on men and entangles them into her web of golden hair.

Of Adams's first wife, Lilith, it is told  
(The witch he loved before the gift of Eve,  
That, ere the snake's, her sweet tongue could deceive,  
And her enchanted hair was the first gold.  
(l. 1-4)

In the first four verses, there is a reference to Adam's first wife, that is Lilith. According to Jewish folklore, Lilith was considered to be Adam's first wife, before Eve. The myth explains that Lilith became tired of being submissive to Adam and eventually left the Garden of Eden, making a pact with the devil.<sup>144</sup> Jacques Bril explains that Lilith is only mentioned once in the Bible, in *Isaiah 34:14*, a passage that describes the end of the reign of Edom and Earth's return to the original chaos: "Wildcats and hyenas will hunt together, demons and devils dance through the night. The night-demon Lilith, evil and rapacious, will establish permanent quarters"<sup>145</sup>. The description of Lilith as a witch gives her a seductive and alluring quality to her character, hinting at her attempt at seducing Adam. Eve, on the other hand, is depicted as "the gift", as she was a passive

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<sup>140</sup> N. Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon*, 1982, p. 185, quoted in M. Luczynka-Holdys, *op. cit.*, p. 200

<sup>141</sup> D.G. Rossetti, *Lady Lilith*, oil, 37½ x 32 in., Bancroft Collection, Wilmington Society of Fine Arts, Delaware, 1868

<sup>142</sup> D.G. Rossetti, *Sybilla Palmifera*, oil, 38¾ x 33¼ in., Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight, 1866-70

<sup>143</sup> M. Luczynka-Holdys, *op. cit.*, p. 216

<sup>144</sup> *Id.*, p. 208

<sup>145</sup> H.E., Peterson, *The Message*, Isaiah, 34:14, quoted in J. Bril, *Lilith, l'aspetto inquietante del femminile*, *cit.*, p. 59 (Bril uses a passage from the French version of the "Bible de Jérusalem")



and submissive companion to Adam. The two women in this passage seem to be the exact opposite of each other. Eve was created to do the same job that Lilith refused and escaped. She is considered a gift in Adam's eye because, unlike his first wife, Eve is obedient and submissive. Lilith refused to listen to Adam and to be obedient to him, and was then replaced with her opposite. She is mentioned to have a "sweet tongue" that can deceive and manipulate people into doing what she wants, just like the snake deceived Eve, making her eat the forbidden fruit. In Rossetti's *Eden Bower*, Lilith is portrayed as the snake itself. When analysing the poem, Łuczyńska-Holdys suggests that Lilith either seduces the snake or merges with it and assumes its body to enter paradise and bring chaos and destruction to men.<sup>146</sup> The witch is depicted with enchanted golden hair, which could symbolise once again her power and allure. It also implies a mystical and ethereal quality to her beauty.

And she still sits, young while the earth is old,  
And subtly of herself contemplative,  
Draws men to watch the bright web she can weave,  
Till heart and body and life are in its hold.  
(l. 5-8)

The second stanza opens with a contrast between Lilith's youth and the ancient age of the Earth. She seems to possess a timeless and ageless type of beauty. At first, she may seem very innocent, quietly sitting and looking at her reflection. This passage can be seen in the painting that accompanies the poem. The woman is looking at her reflection in the mirror while innocently combing her hair. By only looking at the painting, the viewer finds it hard to imagine her as dangerous. This is why the poem is crucial for its understanding. It is needed to complete the painting. While Lilith might look innocent and contemplative, she draws men into her web of golden hair and traps them until they are so entangled in her that escape is no longer possible. In her essay *Her Enchanted Hair*, Kathryn Colvin explains that the association between weaving and ensnaring is a classic idea in the Victorian mythology of hair, "which associates hair with both spinning and weaving". It is an idea that inspired even Tolkien when he was writing characters such as Galandriel, a Lilith-like figure with long golden hair.<sup>147</sup> Lilith could also be seen as a spider who traps insect-like creatures into her

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<sup>146</sup> M. Luczynka-Holdys, *op. cit.*, p. 209

<sup>147</sup> K. Colvin, *Her Enchanted Hair: Rossetti, "Lady Lilith", and the Victorian Fascination with Hair as Influences on Tolkien*, *Mythlore*, Fall/Winter 2020, Vol. 39, No. 1 (137) (pp. 133-148), pp. 134-136

web. Silke Binias compares her to a female spider who eats her mates after copulation.<sup>148</sup>

The rose and poppy are her flowers; for where  
Is he not found, O Lilith, whom shed scent  
And soft-shed kisses and soft sleep shall snare?  
Lo! as that youth's eyes burned at thine, so went  
Thy spell through him, and left his straight neck bent  
And round his heart one strangling golden hair.  
(ll. 9-14)

In the last part of the sonnet, two types of flowers are mentioned: a rose and a poppy. The rose is commonly associated with beauty, love and passion, and the poppy is mostly associated with memory, sleep and death. Rossetti is using symbolism to describe Lilith. She is as beautiful and as passionate as a rose, but she brings eternal sleep and death on her victims, the symbols of a poppy. Łuczyńska-Hołodys writes:

With the scent of roses (love) and poppies (sleep, death), with her feminine softness and her deceptive kisses Lilith causes men to fall into a state of the hypnotic trance, in which they are summoned to come nearer and nearer, until they are ensnared in the golden web and lost forever.<sup>149</sup>

Rossetti describes how she is able to ensnare men using “soft-shed kisses”, “shed scent” and “soft sleep”. Colvin suggests that the term “shed” refers back to the snake in the first stanza (l. 3). In fact, the imagine of a snake shedding its skin is a symbol of transformation and of deception.<sup>150</sup> Men fall so deeply into her trap that they cannot help but remain trapped in it for eternity. Just by looking at them, Lilith is able to trap and kill them. She is so powerful that her gaze is enough to kill and bend men to her will. The bending of the victim's neck could symbolise his submission to her. Colvin suggests that it is “an image of death by hanging”<sup>151</sup>. I believe it also provides an almost vampiric trait to the scene. The golden hair is mentioned once again, as it strangles the victim.

In *Lady Lilith*, the woman appears to be confident in her beauty, reclining on a chair and combing her long golden hair while looking in the mirror. As written in the poem, roses can be seen in the background, as well as a poppy in the bottom right corner of the painting. Lilith is not looking directly at the viewer, and seems to be self-

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<sup>148</sup> S. Binias, *Symbol and Symptom*, 2007, p. 130, note, quoted in M. Luczynka-Hołodys, *op. cit.*, p. 217

<sup>149</sup> M. Luczynka-Hołodys, *op. cit.*, p. 218

<sup>150</sup> K. Colvin, *Her Enchanted Hair*. *cit.*, p. 136

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

absorbed in her own reflection. Another mirror can be found in the painting, on the top left corner. It seems to be looking at a garden. Jerome McGann suggests that the mirror “magically preserved a memory of the Edenic garden which she fled”<sup>152</sup>. Lilith seems to be aware of her beauty and she uses it to her advantage. Nineteenth century women were not supposed to admire themselves in the mirror like Lilith does in Rossetti’s painting. They were supposed to be humble, quiet, obedient and composed. Lilith, however, is not. She is independent, powerful and is not afraid to express it. Rossetti describes a true *femme fatale*, a woman that goes against what society expects of her. She is not what was considered to be feminine, but men still get seduced and fall into her allure.

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<sup>152</sup> J. McGann, *Lady Lilith*, [rossettiarchive.org](http://www.rossettiarchive.org), accessed on 7nd November 2023, [<http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/s205.rap.html>], quoted in M. Luczynka-Holdys, *op. cit.*, p. 221



Figure 8: D.G. Rossetti, *Lady Lilith*, oil, Bancroft Collection, Wilmington Society of Fine Arts, Delaware, 1868

c. Dante Gabriel Rossetti: The Siren in *A Sea-Spell*

While Lilith in *Body's Beauty* is a *femme fatale* that belongs to the group of vengeful women, *A Sea-Spell* depicts a heavenly *femme fatale* who is deadly but also a poetic inspiration, and she is an artist herself. She resembles Keats's faery's child and Lamia.<sup>153</sup> The protagonist of the poem is a siren who, sitting on a rock, lures a sailor to his death. She possesses an almost otherworldly beauty. She is so beautiful that the sailor falls in love and is drawn to her, despite knowing that she is dangerous. The poem is a sonnet written in 1870 and published in the 1881 edition of *Ballads and Sonnets*. Just like *Body's Beauty*, *A Sea-Spell* is a double work, associated with the homonym painting created in 1877 (Figure 9).<sup>154</sup> Łuczyńska-Holdys believes that the poem might be inspired by two famous works of Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and *Kubla-Khan*. What appears similar between Coleridge's poems and Rossetti's work is the mention of the mariner and of the sea-bird. In fact, the final part of Coleridge's *Kubla-Khan* starts with: "A damsel with a dulcimer / In a vision once I saw" (ll. 37-38). Thus, Rossetti probably created the painting with this passage in mind.<sup>155</sup>

Her lute hangs shadowed in the apple-tree,  
Whole flashing fingers weave the sweet-strung spell  
Between its chords; and as the wild notes swell  
The sea-bird for those branches leaves the sea.  
(l. 1-4)

The first lines of the poem depict the siren playing her lute beneath an apple tree. The reader is immediately transported into the scene. The *femme fatale* is playing an instrument and with it she is producing an enchanting melody. This melody seems to get stronger and stronger as "the wild notes swell". It gets to the point where even the creatures of the sea ("the sea-bird for those branches leaves the sea") get enchanted and leave their natural habitats to listen to the music. Her spell is so powerful that it leads animals and men alike directly to her. The siren seems to have

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<sup>153</sup> M. Luczynka-Holdys, *op. cit.*, p. 223

<sup>154</sup> Rossettiarchive.org, "A Sea-Spell (for a Picture)", [[http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/23-1869\\_s248.raw.html](http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/23-1869_s248.raw.html)], accessed on 7nd November 2023

<sup>155</sup> M. Luczynka-Holdys, *op. cit.*, p. 224



full control over the instrument and knows exactly how to use it to her advantage. In her article *Bound by Sound*<sup>156</sup>, Karen Yuen explains that music during the Victorian era was considered to be a feminine art, as well as an aesthetic ideal. She writes that this was because a large number of middle-class women studied music as a part of their education, and the majority of middle-class men avoided it altogether. In fact, men had to focus on more important activities as they had to be “disciplined, industrious and responsible”.<sup>157</sup> Thus, music became associated with women. She also adds that all aspects of music were divided into “feminine” and “masculine”.

Composing, conducting, critiquing and theorising were ‘masculine’ because they required sustained mental effort, which, according to popular belief, could handicap the reproductive capabilities of women. Performing was ‘feminine’ or ‘masculine’ depending on where it was being done (public/private space) and who was performing.<sup>158</sup>

Rossetti applied this belief in *A Sea-Spell*, embodying the feminine aspects of music in the siren. The sailor, in fact, only hears the siren’s melody when he surrenders his life and his masculinity to her.<sup>159</sup>

Another interesting aspect of this poem and of these first lines is that Rossetti mentions the biblical element (just like he did in *Body’s Beauty*) of the apple-tree. Just like the apple tempts Adam and Eve, the siren’s music tempts the mariner, who cannot resist her call and meets his doom.

But to what sound her listening ear stoops she?  
What netherworld gulf-whispers doth she hear?  
In answering echoes from what planisphere,  
Along the wild, along the estuary?  
(l. 5-8)

This stanza presents a series of questions that remain unanswered. The speaker begins to question the origin of the siren, which appears to be mysterious. It evokes a sense of the unknown. In my view, what is very interesting here is the use of the word “stoops”, that means “to bend one’s head or body forwards and downwards” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). It is as if the siren is not just passively hearing, but leaning in to actively listen and pay close attention, perhaps searching for something in particular.

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<sup>156</sup> K. Yuen, *Bound by Sound: Music, Victorian Masculinity and Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, Critical Survey, Volume 20, Number 3, 2008, (pp. 79-96)

<sup>157</sup> Id., pp. 82-83

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Id., p. 92

The word “netherworld” hints at the supernatural. The speaker seems to believe that she is from another world. I believe these lines possess a haunting and almost creepy element. The words “gulf-whispers”, “echoes” seem to allude to otherworldly presences. The term “planisphere” also hints at the supernatural, at something almost celestial. According to Greek mythology, in fact, sirens lived either in the heavens or in the underworld.<sup>160</sup> Rossetti seems to take this knowledge into consideration, making the siren appear as if she is from the heavens.

She sinks into the spell: and when full soon  
Her lips move and she soars into her song,  
What creatures of the midmost main shall throng  
In furrowed surf-clouds to the summoning rune:  
Till he, the fated mariner, hears her cry,  
And up her rock, bare-breasted, comes to die?  
(ll. 9-14)

In the last part of the poem, the siren finally “sinks into the spell” and begins her cry and her summoning. The verb “soar” might perhaps allude to a sense of metaphorically flying to a higher spiritual realm. She does not just begin to sing, but she seems to transcend to a celestial realm. And because her song is of celestial origin, her power is so strong that creatures from all over the sea hear her “summoning rune”. This provides an almost mystical element to her song. Her cry is like an ancient magical invocation. The concluding lines of the poem see a tragic ending. The mariner hears the siren’s call and dies. I previously mentioned that the siren resembles Keats’s Lamia. However, there is also a substantial difference between the two. Lamia was in love with Lycius and because of it she enchanted him. She was purposely aware of what she was doing. The siren, on the other hand, did not mean to enchant the mariner. She was just doing what she was created to do: sing her powerful spell. She did not know the mariner, who although he came to her enchanted, he desired to hear her singing.<sup>161</sup> Thus, the siren does not seem to be the one to blame for the tragic ending. Łuczynska-Holdys writes that the creature does not intentionally seduce men to trap them, but that she embodies a different kind of danger: “she stands for both inspiration, traditionally imagined as a woman, and a personified female creative power”<sup>162</sup>. I believe that Keats’s Lamia also shares some similarities with the mariner.

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<sup>160</sup> M. Luczynka-Holdys, *op. cit.*, p. 224

<sup>161</sup> *Id.*, p. 228

<sup>162</sup> *Id.*, p. 229

Lamia knew that her relationship with Lycius was not going to end well, but she pursued it anyway because her love for the mortal was strong. The mariner knew that the siren's song was dangerous, but he was so enchanted that he did not care. He was enchanted by her spell, just like Lamia was enchanted by her love for Lycius. Another aspect of the poem is that it does not explicitly confirm the woman's identity as a siren, but the reader is able to understand it anyway through the constant sea references that the poem contains.

I previously argued that *A Sea-Spell* is a double work. The painting depicts a young woman playing an instrument, probably a lute. An interesting aspect about this work is that the woman is portrayed not as a siren, but in human form, with long red hair and a flower crown on her head. There is the sea-bird, probably a seagull, and the apple-tree described in the poem. The woman is depicted with long red hair, just like the majority of Rossetti's works. Łuczyńska-Hołodys finds the painting rather disappointing when compared to the poem. In fact, the siren in the painting looks lifeless. Her eyes are open but she does not seem to see her surroundings.<sup>163</sup> I agree with this concept. The siren looks almost like a doll. She is playing her instrument without even looking at it. It is as if she is a marionette who is being controlled and moved by someone else. Just like *Lady Lilith*, *A Sea-Spell* does not portray the character of the poem. She does not look like the powerful siren and *femme fatale* described in it.

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid.





Figure 9: D.G. Rossetti, *A Sea-Spell*, oil paint on canvas, Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1877

d. Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Circe in *The Wine of Circe*

The last poem that I am going to analyse is based on Edward Burne Jones's painting *The Wine of Circe* (Figure 10)<sup>164</sup>, created from 1863 to 1869. It portrays the goddess Circe before the arrival of Odysseus, making some magical vials while surrounded by panthers. According to Homer, Circe is the daughter of Helios, the god of the Sun, and of the nymph Perse, and lives in solitude in the island of Aiaia. When Odysseus arrives at the island, he sends his companions to inspect it. The men meet Circe, who gives them a potion that transforms them into animals. When Odysseus is about to reach them, he meets Hermes, who warns him about Circe's powers and gives him a magical herb that will make him immune to the goddess. Circe then becomes a great house guest and reverses her spell, transforming Odysseus's companions back to a human form.<sup>165</sup> Circe is perhaps one of the best examples of *femme fatale*, as she is the epitome of ambiguity. On one hand, she is a terrible seductress who transforms men into animals. On the other hand, she helps Odysseus and his companions, hosting them in her house for over a year, and even falls in love with the hero. And when they decide to leave the island, Circe does not hinder them and even offers her help. However, this interpretation does not work for every version of Circe.

In the *Aeneid*, Virgil depicts her as a dangerous and powerful creature, who is not ambiguous, but just evil.<sup>166</sup> Moreover, Ovid's version of Circe in the *Metamorphoses* portrays her as a simple jealous, vindictive and violent woman.<sup>167</sup> Yvonne Rodax suggests that, although a divine creature, Circe is not very much different from a human woman. She feels the same emotions that a normal woman would feel. She falls in love and when Odysseus leaves she feels sadness.<sup>168</sup> Over the centuries, Circe has been depicted as a witch, as a goddess and as a seductress. At the end of the nineteenth century, she became a true *femme fatale*, representing a

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<sup>164</sup> E. Burne-Jones, *The Wine of Circe*, watercolour on paper, 70 x 101.5 cm, private collection, 1863-1869

<sup>165</sup> I. Berti, *Le metamorfosi di Circe: dea maga e femme fatale*, Status Quaestionis, Rivista di studi letterari, linguistici e interdisciplinari, 2015, Vol. 1, No. 8, pp. 110-140, pp. 111-113

<sup>166</sup> Id., pp. 117-118

<sup>167</sup> Id., p. 119

<sup>168</sup> Y. Rodax, *In Defense of Circe*, The Virginia Quarterly Review, Autumn 1971, Vol. 47, No. 4, pp. 581-596, p. 582

disturbing model of femininity that was very widespread and feared by the deeply misogynistic culture of the time.<sup>169</sup> Edward Burne-Jones viewed her as an intelligent sorceress<sup>170</sup>, and that is exactly how he portrayed her in *The Wine of Circe*. The homonym poem by Dante Gabriel Rossetti is an ekphrastic sonnet based on the painting.

Dusk-haired and gold-robed o'er the golden wine  
She stoops, wherein, distilled of death and shame,  
Sink the black drops; while, lit with fragrant flame,  
Round her spread board the golden sunflowers shine.  
(l. 1-4)

The first few lines of the poem give an exact representation of the painting. There is a woman with dark hair, wearing a golden robe who is bent towards the wine. Just like in *A Sea-Spell*, Rossetti uses the verb “stoops”, indicating her concentration of the task. The wine is described as “distilled of death and shame”, perhaps referring to Circe’s victims, who drank it unaware of the future consequences. She is putting “black drops” in the drink, preparing the potion for when Odysseus’s companions arrive on the island. Although Circe does not know her future guests, she knows the nature of men and she wants to be prepared. Rodax writes: “If a visitor demonstrated in the beginning that he was out to make a beast of himself, she, as a lone female, had to rely on her wits”<sup>171</sup>. As a lone female living on her own, Circe had to rely on her powers and intelligence to defend herself against a man. If he acted like a beast, that is what he would become. Sunflowers can be seen on the left of the painting, shining while she prepares the potion. The flowers are an element of symbolism as they are usually known for their association with the sun. I believe this might allude to her nature as she is the daughter of the sun god, Helios.

Doth Helios here with Hecatè combine  
(O Circe, thou their votaress?) to proclaim  
For these thy guests all rapture in Love’s name,  
Till pitiless Night give Day the countersign?  
(l. 5-8)

Although Circe is usually considered the daughter of Helios and the nymph Perse, there are some versions of her myth in which she is the daughter of the goddess

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<sup>169</sup> I. Berti, *Le metamorfosi di Circe: dea maga e femme fatale*, cit., p. 130

<sup>170</sup> Id., p. 138

<sup>171</sup> Y. Rodax, *In Defense of Circe*, cit., p. 582

Hecate. In *Library of History*, Greek historian Diodorus Siculus writes: “After this [Hecate] married Aeëtes and bore two daughters, Circe and Medea”<sup>172</sup>. In the poem, Rossetti seems to allude to the fact that she might be the daughter of Hecate and Helios. Circe and Hecate, in fact, appear to have some similarities. Both of them are associated with magic and witchcraft. Rodax suggests that Circe was “in league” with the Underworld, that is with Hades, the Night, Hell, Chaos and Hecate herself, although she does not state that she is her daughter.<sup>173</sup> In these lines, the speaker is asking Circe whether or not she is devoted to the two gods, Helios and Hecate. Rossetti narrates how Circe’s guests seem to experience pleasure in Love’s name, until they drink the wine and the poison takes effect, transforming them into animals: “Till pitiless Night give Day the countersign” (l. 8).

Lords of the hour, they come. And by her knee  
Those cowering beasts, their equals heretofore,  
Wait; who with them in new equality  
To-night shall echo back the sea’s dull roar  
With a vain wail from passion’s tide-strown shore  
Where the dishevelled seaweed hates the sea.  
(ll. 9-14)

The speaker finally describes the arrival of Odysseus’s companions. Rossetti refers to Circe’s victims as “cowering beasts”, depicted in the painting as black panthers. They are waiting near her for their “equals” to arrive and be transformed into beasts as well. Just like the sea, Odysseus’s companions will roar with the other victims. I believe “the dishevelled seaweed” to be Odysseus because he is the one waiting on the shore for his companions to come back. According to the myth, in fact, Odysseus sent his companions to check the island. However, they stumble into Circe who transforms them into animals, while Odysseus awaits on the shore. He might perhaps hate the sea after sailing for so long and having lost many companions.

What Burne-Jones painted and what Rossetti wrote about is a true *femme fatale*, full of ambiguity, that has had different interpretations throughout the centuries. Christian allegorists adopted Ovid’s interpretation of Circe, removing all of the positive aspects and viewing her as a demonic figure.<sup>174</sup> However her ambiguity makes her

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<sup>172</sup> D. Siculus, *Library of History*, book IV, translated by C.H. Oldfather, *Harvard University Press*, 1946, (4.45.3)

<sup>173</sup> Id., p. 586

<sup>174</sup> I. Berti, *Le metamorfosi di Circe: dea maga e femme fatale*, cit., p. 120



also a positive figure. Although seductive and dangerous, Circe is a lady. Her love for Odysseus was faithful and pure and “once given, her word was her bond, and she went out of her way to help the Ithacan wanderers, even against her own desires”<sup>175</sup>. Sometimes she is compared to the character of Calypso. However, as Berti explains, Circe was not as possessive as Calypso was. She did not hold Odysseus hostage for seven years against his wish. When the hero wanted to leave the island, Circe let him go and even helped him and his companions.<sup>176</sup> What Burne-Jones and Rossetti depict is a menacing *femme fatale* who is prepared for the worst. Even if she does not know her arriving guests, she already prepares her potion to potentially turn them into beasts, just like she already did to her past victims. However, her myth shows that she is also capable of good things such as offering her home to Odysseus and his companions for a whole year. She is a *femme fatale* whose ambiguity completely defines her.



Figure 10: E. Burne-Jones, *The Wine of Circe*, watercolour on paper, private collection, 1863-1869

<sup>175</sup> Y. Rodax, *In Defense of Circe*, cit., p. 583

<sup>176</sup> I. Berti, *Le metamorfosi di Circe: dea maga e femme fatale*, cit., p. 116

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