

UNWEAVING THE RAINBOW: THE TABOO WOMAN
IN THE POETRY OF COLERIDGE AND KEATS

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UNWEAVING THE RAINBOW

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ABSTRACT

The present thesis is a study of the problematic role of the Muse figure in relation to the Romantic quest for poetic identity. In general, the Romantic quest is riddled with the problem of domesticating the wayward Muse, with whom the male quester-poet never seems to be perfectly at home. This project of domestication is doomed, however, by the "treacherous" mutability of the Muse-principle, which turns the Romantic quest into a discourse of contradiction. To illustrate this, I will examine the figural patterns of confrontation between the quester-poet and the female Muse figures in selected works by Coleridge and Keats, focusing in particular on two major poems, "Christabel" and "Lamia."

In analyzing the English poems, I will draw from various elements of Chinese culture and appropriate them to the purpose of my study. In the context of my cross-cultural reading, the Romantic Muse is a kindred spirit to the "Mysterious Female" of the Taoist Way, who clearly represents the maternal principle of transformation. The "natural" emblem of the Way is the rainbow. An analysis of the rainbow in its various and conflictual forms of signification will help unravel the Romantic myth of organic harmony. The latent tension inscribed in the individual work's figural patterns

reveals, apart from the sexual polemics underlying its symbolic structure, the ideological struggle within that elusive centre of contradiction known as the human subject. The conflicting elements which drive the Romantic quester's unstable ego in diverse directions become manifest in the literary works symptomatically, in the form of linguistic discrepancies. The result of all this textual complexity is not the construction of organic wholeness (as the New Critic would claim), but the unravelling of the Romantic myth of a unified self in the very process of the quest for self-identity.

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INTRODUCTION

The world in which we find ourselves has often been depicted as a dualistic one, split with a whole chain of binary opposites which are conveniently marshalled under categories of gender difference. Typical of such gender differentiation is the traditional Chinese concept of yin and yang. According to the common definitions of these two words, yang denotes the "positive"--the male, the sun, and the principle of life, whereas yin signifies the "negative"--the female, the moon, and the principle of death. Such arbitrary categorization is, of course, no index of any eternal or irreversible truth; nor does it represent the dialectical nature of Taoism, one of the earliest sources of yin-yang symbolism.¹ In the Taoist classic, Tao Te Ching, Lao Tzu (c. 400 B.C.) describes Tao (the "Way") in terms of "mutual arising" of being and non-being (II), arguing that the transformation of opposites into each other is the movement of the Way (XL). Through constant disruption and reversal of binary oppositions, the Taoist text exemplifies a discourse of

¹ As a matter of fact, it is largely due to Confucian scholars' metaphysical misinterpretations that the yin-yang polarities were made to represent fixed dichotomies, so that they could stabilize the hierarchical order of the ruling patriarchy.

contradiction, in which the elements of yin and yang confront and inter-penetrate each other in a perpetual process of transformation.²

The above remarks on Taoism suggest a convergence of Taoist and materialist dialectics, which regard the unity of opposites as the basic principle of contradiction. According to materialist dialectics, the law of contradiction, that is, "the division of a unity into mutually exclusive opposites and their reciprocal relation" (Lenin 382), resides in the process of development of all things. The materialist view of the unity of opposites emphasizes the struggle underlying their dialectical identity; in this respect, it is explicitly opposed to all idealist approaches to contradiction, be they in the form of a Hegelian synthesis or of a Coleridgean

² This dialectical view of transformation, I would argue, is the kernel of Taoist philosophy. Take, for example, Lao Tzu's explanation of the concept of *hsiang sheng* ("mutual arising"):

When everyone knows beauty as beautiful,
there is already ugliness;
When everyone knows good as goodness,
there is already evil.
"To be" and "not to be" arise mutually;
Difficult and easy are mutually realized;
Long and short are mutually contrasted;
High and low are mutually posited;...

(Tao Te Ching II. Trans. A.W. Watts)

What the above passage demonstrates is the identity (or unity) of opposites, which resides not in their selfsameness, but in their interdependency, interpenetration and, in given conditions, in their mutual transformation into each other. For a detailed explication of the dialectical notion of identity, see Mao's article "On Contradiction."

"reconciliation of opposites." Whereas the idealist outlook aims at a transcendental realm of identity, continuity and wholeness, the materialist outlook presents a world of difference, disruption and plurality. Accordingly, materialist dialectics explain the phenomenal world by analyzing the inherent contradiction in every form of being, which is the motive force of change and development.

The real question, therefore, is not how to get around the symbolic system of dualism, but how to confront the metaphysical boundaries of binary opposites with the dialectic of contradiction. In this respect, post-structuralist criticism poses a serious challenge to the symbolic order based on binary oppositions. As Terry Eagleton points out, "by a certain way of operating upon texts-- whether 'literary' or 'philosophical'--we may begin to unravel these oppositions a little, demonstrate how one term of an antithesis secretly inheres within the other" (133).

Having outlined the theoretical bearings of my thesis, I should introduce its main subject, which deals with contradiction in the quest romance. The focus of my study is the problematic figure of the Romantic Muse, who, in various guises, both embodies and endangers the Romantic ideal of self-identity. Contrary to all idealistic conceptions of women by the Romantics, the female Muse figures often reveal some disturbing power arising from the tabooed region of the male imagination. In general, the Romantic quest is riddled with

the problem of domesticating the wayward Muse, with whom the male quester-poet never seems to be perfectly at home. In my use of the word, "domestication" refers specifically to a form/function of masculine power: it implies not only the housing and taming of something wild and alien, but also the naming of the Other as private property of the Self. This project of domestication is doomed, however, by the "treacherous" working of the Muse-principle, which turns the Romantic quest into a discourse of contradiction. To illustrate this, I will examine the figural patterns of confrontation in selected works by Coleridge and Keats, focusing in particular on two major poems, Christabel and Lamia.

In analyzing the English poems, I will draw freely from elements of Chinese culture and appropriate them to the purpose of my study. As I hope to make clear from the outset, the primary interest of my approach lies in the possibilities of meaning produced by inter-textual, cross-cultural reading of given texts, not in the "correctness" of interpretation. The meanings thus produced may have little to do with the author's intentions, nor do they "naturally" stem from the "text in itself." As a matter of fact, post-structuralist critics, like Terry Eagleton and Tony Bennett for instance, have challenged the illusory notion which privileges the "text

in itself" as "the issuing source of meaning."³ As Eagleton rightly points out, "What constrains interpretation ... is not text but context" ("The 'Text in Itself'" 117). By "context" Eagleton means not merely the historical circumstances under which the literary work was originally written, but "the whole set of discourses, systems and practices" which give rise to divergent and conflictual interpretations of the same text (117). For Tony Bennett, "the text does not occupy a position but is always and forever installed in a field of struggle, mobilised, placed, positioned, articulated with other texts in different ways within different critical practices which...themselves play into and register effects within neighboring areas of ideological struggle" ("Text and History" 229). From a clearly reader-oriented point of view, Bennett calls for a radical programme of reading, arguing that the aim of literary criticism is "not a question of what texts mean but of what they might be *made to mean* politically" (229). Explicating Derrida's theory of deconstruction, Bennett writes:

The very structure of the written text is such that it carries with it a force that breaks with its context; and, indeed, with each of the contexts in which it may be successively inscribed during the course of its history. It cannot be limited by or to the context of the originating moment of its production, anchored in the intentionality of its author... (227)

³ For an illuminating discussion of this issue, see "The 'Text in Itself': a Symposium," Southern Review 17.2 (1984): 115-146.

The post-structuralist view of the dynamic mutability of language helps to explain, from a linguistic perspective, the inherent contradiction between the quester-poet's possessive desire and the unmasterable potentiality of the Muse-principle, which is usually embodied by enigmatic female figures in Romantic poetry. The gendering of a linguistic property into a feminine object/obstacle of desire indicates that what we are dealing with is not a pure issue of language. In examining the construction of the Muse figure and the function of that gendered signifier, we must come to terms with the ideological contradictions underlying the Romantic discourse of desire.

In the context of my comparative approach, the Romantic Muse is a kindred spirit to the "Mysterious Female" of the Taoist Way, who clearly represents the maternal principle of transformation. In Tao Te Ching, Lao Tzu refers to the Way as "the Mother of the myriad creatures" (I) and compares it to an immortal spirit called *Hsuan P'in* (VI). The word *Hsuan* denotes "dark, deep and mysterious"; *P'in* originally means the female sexual organ, and stands in general for the female. Thus the "Way" is conceived as a creative "void" (i.e. *wu*) from which the myriad creatures issue forth:

The spirit of the valley never dies.
This is called the Mysterious Female;⁴
The gateway of the Mysterious Female
Is called the root of heaven and earth.

⁴ Literally *Hsuan P'in*, or "the uncanny womb."

Dimly visible, it seems as if it were there,
Yet use will never drain it.

(Tao Te Ching VI)

For all the maternal attributes described above, the fundamental nature of the Taoist Way is androgynous, wherein lies the seed of contradiction. In Tao Te Ching, the Way is described as "confusedly formed" (XXV), containing within itself the elements of both yin and yang. The "natural" emblem of the Way is the rainbow. In keeping with the Taoist conception of *hsiang sheng* ("mutual arising"), ancient Chinese believed that the rainbow was born of a confrontation between yin and yang. Translated into Romantic terms, the Chinese rainbow could easily be misread as signifying, metaphorically, a reconciliation of opposites into a visionary whole.⁵ As the title of my thesis suggests, however, the purpose of this study is not to celebrate the Romantic ideal in its own terms;

⁵ In The Two Hands of God, Alan W. Watts associates the emblematic rainbow (or "Light-flower") with the Taoist idea of *wu* ("void"). As Watts explains, "The rainbow is 'void' because it has no independent existence of its own," but is an effect of "a certain relationship of sun, moisture in the atmosphere, and observer" (70). For Watts, the "rainbow-world" presented by Taoist philosophy epitomizes a transcendental state of oneness--"a transparent void" as Watts calls it--in which the perceiving mind and the universe perceived become fused into one harmonious whole (69). This essentially "romantic" reading of the rainbow is put in question, however, by the classical Chinese texts which spell out the significance of the rainbow in terms of a confrontation between yin and yang. For, instead of representing the ideal of oneness, the yin-yang symbolism inscribed in the Chinese rainbow often reveals the ideological contradiction underlying the symbolic code of representation in the Chinese texts. I shall return to this point in the next chapter, when I examine the gender-specific nature of the Chinese rainbow.

rather, it is to illustrate the inherent contradictions of the Romantic ideology. An analysis of the rainbow in its various and conflictual forms of signification will help unravel the Romantic myth of organic harmony. Analogous to the Chinese rainbow, its Romantic counterpart is also born of a dialectical unity of opposites, by which I mean the contradiction between the male imagination and the female Muse-principle.⁶ To unweave the rainbow, then, is to show the moments of frustration when Apollo's bow is broken from inner strain, or when Adam awakens from his dream and finds it false. The latent tension inscribed in the individual work's figural patterns reveals, apart from the sexual polemics underlying its symbolic structure, the ideological struggle within that elusive centre of contradiction known as the human subject. The conflicting elements which drive the Romantic quester's unstable ego in diverse directions become manifest in the literary works symptomatically, in the form of linguistic discrepancies, or what a New Critic would call irony, ambiguity and paradox. The result of all this textual complexity is not, however, the construction of organic wholeness (as the New Critic would claim), but the unravelling

⁶ The masculine aspect of Romantic imagination has been variously described by the Romantics themselves. Blake calls the imagination "the Real Man"; Coleridge relates it to the god-like creativity of "the Infinite I AM"; Keats compares the imagination to "Adam's dream." On the other hand, the Romantic Muse-principle is represented by the mysterious female in different guises. (cf. Keats's "demon Poesy," Shelley's "witch Poesy," etc.)

of the Romantic myth of a unified self in the very process of the quest for self-identity.

The Critical Choice: Construction vs. Deconstruction

According to Northrop Frye, "literature belongs to the world man constructs, not to the world he sees" (The Educated Imagination 8). Frye's remarks on this subject indicate that, along with all the constructs of human civilization, literature springs from the desire to cultivate and possess nature, thereby changing it from a mere environment into a home. Unless we, as readers of literature, acquire the ability to construct an organically unified world of vision "out of what we see" in the labyrinth of literary text, we are in a significant sense homeless. The biblical myth of the Fall has condemned us to a world of physical nature permeated by death and sin; against this fate, Frye argues that literature can be a way towards salvation by offering a secure accommodation for human nature proper.

It seems safe and proper, therefore, to take a constructive approach to literature, which is "a world that we try to build up and enter at the same time" (Frye, Educated 29). Granting the validity of this general observation, which views literature as an on-going project rather than a completed work, we should nevertheless point out its limitations. Frye's own theory of literature suggests that nothing can be built out of nothing; and that the construction

of a home involves not only the desire to have it, but also the skill to design it and the material means with which to build it. We need, in other words, an architect's blue print to begin with. It is with this preconceived design, or conceptual framework, that Frye's archetypal criticism is primarily concerned. In spite of Frye's ingenious mapping and sweeping vision of the literary plain, there is a "blind spot" which deserves our attention. To put it in a simple way, the main weakness of Frye's theory of literature lies in its assumption of an autonomous literary order, which stems from a transcendent desire within "human nature proper." This myth of a universal human identity is illusory, however, as a moment's reflection on our literary experience will show. There is no absolute, universal standard for a "proper" human nature, not only because human desires may change in both form and content in different times and cultures, but also because people living in the same time period and the same place may desire different things. To misquote the cliché, a man's meat can be a woman's poison. In addition to differences of desire based on gender, there are also differences based on race, class, nationality, sexual preference, etc.--all of these variables intersecting in complex and contradictory ways.

Even if we accept the idea that it is a universal human desire to build a home, there still remains the question as to where and how. The fact is that, in entering the world of literature, we do not usually experience the feeling of being

"shipwrecked on an uninhabited island in the South Seas" (Frye, Educated 2). Instead, we may find ourselves entangled in a world of on-going struggle for living space due to over-population. We may, indeed, find ourselves trapped in a labyrinth of existing texts, which is constructed in such a close, oppressive manner that we would want to poke a hole in it in order to get out. Under such circumstances, the move towards a deconstructive practice, which marks a departure from normative criticism, is no more perverse than the need for fresh air in a close room. Although deconstruction can be used as a new weapon for "purely" academic purposes to facilitate competition, or it can stimulate and enhance some literary anarchists' delight in disorder, the radical nature of a deconstructive practice always has political implications. It is precisely this political dimension--although often unrecognized--that makes deconstruction a highly controversial undertaking: while some have criticized deconstruction (i.e. a certain kind or "school" of deconstruction) for its "serene linguistic nihilism"⁷ and apparent lack of political orientation, others have associated this critical method with positive political actions.⁸ In the latter case, deconstructive criticism, like feminist re-readings of literary texts, stems from a sense of

⁷ A phrase used by Bloom to describe American deconstruction. See also Terry Eagleton's critique of the "Yale School of deconstruction" in Literary Theory 145, 184.

⁸ See, for instance, Michael Ryan and Christopher Norris.

dissatisfaction with the established order of things, and expresses a genuine desire for change. It is not merely a "formal device" or "disciplined perverseness," as Harold Bloom's theory of misprision suggests, motivated by the same anxiety of influence that drives the strong poet (or critic) into a ritualistic quest and "compels him to an otherwise unnecessary inclination or bias in his work" (Anxiety 65). Bloom's observation may be accurate in diagnosing a certain dis-ease in literary criticism, deconstructive or otherwise; preoccupied, however, with the struggle into being between strong-willed individuals, Bloom overlooks the fact that our critical activities are to a great extent conditioned, shaped and distorted, not by individual "will to power," but by larger social/cultural forces beyond our control.⁹ Nor does Bloom take into account the role of ideology in literary criticism. Here I am using the term "ideology" in a double sense: on the one hand, there is the all-pervasive force of ideology in general,¹⁰ to which we are all subject. On the other hand, there exist, within the general category of ideology, divergent and often conflicting ideological forms

⁹ Jerome McGann argues that "criticism must analyze, self-critically, the effect which those [ideological state] apparatuses have in shaping, and distorting, our critical activities." See The Romantic Ideology 159.

¹⁰ For definitions of ideology in its general sense, see Althusser 160; Belsey 52; Eagleton 172-73.

and discourses," in which we are consciously engaged.

In contrast to Bloom, Louis Althusser, in his article "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," closely analyzes the dominant role of ideology in relation to the human subject. It seems that, for Althusser, the functioning of ideology depends on both false consciousness and political unconsciousness; in either case, the individual human subject is reduced to the status of a puppet, whose seemingly free action is actually controlled by the invisible hand of ideological state apparatuses. The main difficulty with Althusser's view of ideology lies precisely in this: while emphasizing, quite rightly, I think, the power of dominant ideology in constituting the individual subject, Althusser does not sufficiently account for the positive and active role we can assume in our conscious efforts to challenge the existing ideological state apparatuses, so as to change the dissatisfying social and political reality. Between Bloom's apolitical exaltation of individual will and Althusser's implicit denial of individual effort, we need to find a theoretical balance, which will enable us to move from the realm of necessity towards the realm of freedom. Needless to say, in a world built out of conflicting discourses, there is no absolute ground for an ideological concept like freedom. It does not follow, however, that the only business we can do as

¹¹ Cf. McGann's definition of ideology as "a coherent or loosely organized set of ideas which is the expression of the special interests of some class or social group" (5).

human subjects is to contemplate, in a "wise passiveness," our inevitable state of subjection to the omnipotent rule of ideology. Since there is no way of escaping ideology (in Althusser's own words, "man is an ideological animal by nature" [171]), should we not confront it in a more militant way?

To the above question, feminist criticism has provided a positive answer. By offering a searching critique of patriarchal ideology inscribed in the symbolic order of language, and by a radical, often subversive, re-reading of familiar literary texts, which lays bare their inherent contradiction rather than their presupposed unity, the feminist discourse exemplifies a productive mode of deconstruction as well as a positive attitude toward ideology. "The result,"--to borrow Norris's remark on Marxist deconstruction--"is not merely a reversal and passive mirroring of existent power-relations, but an active production of alternative discourse, alternative programmes for political involvement" (207).

According to materialist dialectics, "there is internal contradiction in every single thing, hence its motion and development" (Mao 26). From a post-structuralist point of view, this would mean that all human constructs, including social institutions and literary texts, are potentially open to deconstruction. The radical implications of materialist dialectics invite a re-vision of the Marxist idea of progress and regeneration. In a critique of Ludwig Feuerbach and

classical German philosophy, Engels pushed the Hegelian dialectics to a radical conclusion: "all that exists deserves to perish" ("Ludwig Feuerbach" 199). His argument for this striking proposition is worth quoting:

Just as Knowledge is unable to reach a complete conclusion in a perfect, ideal condition of humanity, so is history unable to do so; a perfect society, a perfect "state," are things which can only exist in imagination. On the contrary, all successive historical systems are only transitory stages in the endless course of development of human society from the lower to the higher. Each stage is necessary, and therefore justified for the time and conditions to which it owes its origin. But in the face of new, higher conditions which gradually develop in its own womb, it loses its validity and justification. It must give way to a higher stage which will also in its turn decay and perish....For it [dialectical philosophy] nothing is final, absolute, sacred. It reveals the transitory character of everything and in everything; nothing can endure before it except the uninterrupted process of becoming and passing away, of endless ascendancy from the lower to the higher, (199-200)

The Marxist notion of progress based on binary oppositions such as "higher" and "lower" is not totally compatible with a deconstructive practice. And yet, by putting both critical theories and practices in a socio-historical perspective, dialectical materialism helps to unravel the myth of a transcendent, self-contained literary domain. Where there is contradiction, there is conflict; in the world of literature, linguistic and formal conflicts are both forms and means of ideological struggle. As for the literary critic, his/her job is not merely to describe the potential dynamics of literary texts, but to actively engage in the process of

producing meanings. Engaged in this way, deconstruction is not perversity, because its ultimate goal is not to unravel or destroy all positive meanings. On the contrary, it is part of a productive--if subversive-- process of transforming the old into something new, or something different.

Constitutive Negation--Articulating the Radical Woman

To my knowledge, the most radical definition of woman comes from the French feminist Julia Kristeva. In defiance of the symbolic order of language, Kristeva proposes a "semiotic discourse," which is analogous to the role of the radical woman:

In social, sexual, and symbolic experiences, being a woman has always provided a means to another end, to becoming something else: a subject-in-the-making, a subject on trial....If women have a role to play...it is only in assuming a negative function: reject everything finite, definite, structured, loaded with meaning, in the existing state of society. Such an attitude places women on the side of the explosion of social codes: with revolutionary movements.¹²

In light of the above remark, I will examine the role of Woman in a different form of signification: Chinese written characters. By "Woman" I mean the female radical 女 (Nu, or "woman"), a gendered signifier which can not only transform itself into divergent forms, but also combine with other

¹² "Oscillation du 'pouvoir' au 'refus,'" interview by Xaviere Gauthier in Tel Quel 58 (Summer 1974), trans. in Marks and Courtivron 166-67.

linguistic elements, whether radicals or not, in the production of different meanings. I should point out that what I propose to examine is not a pure issue of language. Owing to its pictographic nature, the Chinese language can vividly illustrate the problematic relationship between abstract/symbolic order and material/cultural situations.

Earlier in this section, I have briefly discussed Frye's association of literature with the human process of civilization, through which an alien environment can be changed into a home. As all human endeavour to establish a home seems to spring from the desire for security and proper settlement, we may first examine the ways in which these two concepts are constructed in written Chinese. Here are the two Chinese characters denoting "security/good order" and "propriety/settlement" respectively: 安 好 . Upon scrutiny, we find that the conception of both good order and proper settlement has to do with the domestication of the radical 女 (woman). Good order is established, so the ideograph suggests, when 女 (woman) is "well enclosed" in the 宀 (house); and proper settlement consists in a single-handed (扌) control over the woman: 好 .

Related to the idea of domestic order is the institution of marriage. The Chinese characters for marriage are gender-specific, thus vividly dramatizing the matrimonial situation. The masculine character for marriage is 娶 , depicting a hand holding the ear of the woman; the feminine character for

marriage is 嫁, depicting a woman attached to 家 (home). Upon entering her master's house, the woman is given a new name: Fu (wife, or married woman),¹³ represented by the written character 婦, which depicts a woman with a broom (帚). The traditional Chinese explanation for this is that to clean the house is a woman's wifely duty (*Shuo-wen*, 259). A resistant reader, however, may suggest that the broom could also be used as a vehicle for female flight/fight.

What all these characters point to, in a rather blatant manner, is the silent inscription of patriarchal ideology in the Chinese written language. Undoubtedly, the ways in which women are named and placed in language bear witness to the oppression of actual women in patriarchal societies, which deserves our critical analysis. In the context of the present thesis, however, I will mobilize the power of "woman" as a figure for a deconstructive discourse. By analyzing the subversive role played by the female radical (i.e. 女) in the construction of written Chinese, we can see how a patriarchal sign system is undermined from within. In this respect, Derrida's remark on deconstruction may help to illuminate my

¹³ The earliest Chinese lexicon *Shuo-wen chieh-tzu* (121 A.D.) defines the character Fu in terms of "obedience" (259). This feminine "virtue" is spelt out in full by another authoritative Chinese lexicon *Kang-hsi tzu-tien* (II,47):

According to *Chiao Te Sheng*, a woman (i.e. Fu) is one who is subordinate to man: before marriage, she should obey her father and brothers; once married, she should obey her husband; if widowed, she should obey her son.

point:

The movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures. Inhabiting them in a certain way...Operating necessarily from the inside, borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure, borrowing them structurally...

(Of Grammatology 24)

In like manner, the radical Woman inhabits written Chinese. It is obvious that the Woman I am talking about is not pure lack or absence; rather, she is a tangible presence, which, once named and placed, will constantly haunt the male-dominated discourse like its guilty conscience. I should also point out that the female signifier in Chinese does not quite correspond to the concept of "*l'Écriture féminine*" advocated by Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva. Appropriating various forms of psycho-linguistic approaches, these critics either locate the feminine aspects of language in women's female sexuality, or associate these aspects with pre-Oedipal "*jouissance*"--the blissful infantile fusion with the Mother's body. Ann Rosalind Jones remarks that, for Kristeva, the semiotic discourse presents "an incestuous challenge to the symbolic order" by "asserting...the writer's return to the pleasures of his preverbal identification with his mother" (363). As my analysis of the Chinese written character makes clear, the radical Woman in our present discussion is a social/cultural product, constituted in and by the symbolic order, yet possessing the potential power to expose the self-

contradictoriness of the patriarchal code of signification. As a subversive inmate trapped in the symbolic edifice of language, the radical Woman epitomizes a female-oriented discourse which may best be described as "constitutive negation"¹⁴ of the Name-of-the-Father.

The act of naming has always been a means of exerting power or control over the named. Confucius tells us that, to use language, one must first be able to name correctly. For, "without proper naming, the language can never go smooth" (Lun-yu I-chu 13:133-34). Here Confucius was not merely teaching the art of rhetoric; his primary concern was the reinforcement and stabilization of the existing hierarchy of power through the use of a phallogocratic language.¹⁵ The feat of naming correctly, however, seemed to be a great challenge even to the Chinese saint. While boasting his freedom from all perplexities at the age of forty, Confucius was embarrassed by the riddle of women. By way of a solution, he merely put them into the category of the lowly and the base and complained

¹⁴ I borrow this phrase from Michael Ryan, who suggests that "One key to deconstruction...is constitutive negation (that identity is limited by what makes it possible). In positing itself, a concept like idealism necessarily betrays itself....Its proper presence...is haunted by a constitutive alterity; from the outset, it is given over to absence and nonidentity" (76). The idea of "constitutive negation" is also implicit in Derrida's remark I have quoted in the text.

¹⁵ Cf. "Let the King be indeed a king; the minister a minister..." (Lun-yu 12:11, 128).

that "women and the lowly are most difficult to deal with."¹⁶

For centuries patriarchal societies have privileged the male as the naming subject, and relegated the female to the position of the named object. And yet, the fact that man must depend on woman for the conception or embodiment of patriarchal mores reveals a latent challenge to man's authority to name. It also gives lie to his alleged self-sufficiency as the norm. Furthermore, if good order and security (安) must be based on the entrapment of woman, then what the word secretly signifies can only be a negation of its manifest meaning: instead of good order and security, the character virtually betrays a sense of suppression and insecurity. By the same token, the word 娶 (propriety, settlement) is neither proper nor settled, as the hand (扌) grabbing at the woman suggests an impending combat rather than a proper settlement. The two characters defining the matrimonial relationship between man and woman reveal a similar case of contradiction. As earlier mentioned, the verb for man's marriage to a woman enacts a violent seizure of property (in the form of a woman), while the verb designed for woman's marriage to man emphasizes her docile attachment to the home. Upon closer scrutiny, however, we notice that the radical woman (女), albeit married, still remains an "oblique


¹⁶ Lun-yu (17:191). I shall return to this association of woman with the lowly and the base, when I examine the biblical myth of the fall, which reduces both woman and the serpent to the state of creeping creatures.

radical"¹⁷ outside of the house (外), and the inhabitant of the house is actually a pig (猪). Apparently, the oblique and oppressed position of the radical woman in the verbal construction of the male-female relationship attests to the presence of male-domination in a phallocratic language; on the other hand, such a position also exposes the inadequacy of patriarchal ideology in fleshing out its own values. As Michel Foucault points out, "discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy" (100-101).

As a result of this inherent contradiction, a concept such as "good order" (好) cannot stand critical scrutiny without betraying its lack of stability. For, in establishing itself as the norm, it is doomed to self-defeat by virtue of its "constitutive negation"--a loose stone, so to speak, placed at the very foundation of the phallic pagoda. To put it another way, the radical Woman's "homely" contribution to the symbolic edifice of peace and security only serves to highlight the linguistic conflicts within it, thus allowing us to see the rift between the image and the concept, or between the signifier and the signified.

At this point I would briefly consider Freud's notion of

¹⁷ This is a literal translation of the etymological term P'ien-p'ang, which perfectly defines the radical Woman's position in this case. Needless to say, what this "oblique radical" stands for is more than a linguistic property.

the "uncanny," as it has a clear bearing on our present discussion. In his article "The 'Uncanny,'" Freud provides an exhaustive study of two German words, "*heimlich*" ("homely") and its apparent opposite, "*unheimlich*" ("unhomely"). According to Freud, the word "*heimlich*" inhabits two different categories of ideas. In the first category, "*heimlich*" is related to the idea of domestication. It describes something "belonging to the house or the family, or regarded as so belonging (cf. Latin *familiaris*)" (125). Hence the association of "*heimlich*" with animals that are "tame, companionable to man" and with an "intimate, homelike" atmosphere which can "[arouse] a sense of peaceful pleasure and security as in one within the four walls of his house" (126). Such homeliness can be found, to quote Freud's example taken from the German dictionary, in "A careful housewife, who knows how to make a pleasing *Heimlichkeit* (*Häuslichkeit*) out of the smallest means" (126). Here we may recall the "*heimlich*" role assigned to the Chinese radical Woman, who is not only regarded as "belonging to the house," but also physically "surrounded by close walls" so as to embody the familiar paradigm of "peace" and "security"--  .

This is only one side of the coin, however. To understand the full meaning of "*heimlich*," we must examine the second category of ideas, where the word signifies what is "concealed, kept from sight...obscure, inaccessible to knowledge" (Freud 130, 131). The shift in meaning from the

"familiar, friendly, intimate" to the "untrustworthy...hidden and dangerous" reveals the potential trouble a familiar signifier is capable of creating under certain conditions (as is evident, for example, in such phrases as "to steal away *heimlich*"; "to sigh or weep *heimlich*"; "to behave *heimlich*.") Thus Freud observes, "*heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops towards an ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*" (131). The key to this dialectical unity of opposites, Freud suggests, lies in Schelling's uncommon definition of the "uncanny" (i.e. "*unheimlich*"): "'*unheimlich*' is the name for everything that ought to have remained ... hidden and secret and has become visible" (129). The real danger, then, lies not so much in something that is "concealed" as in the "treacherous" potentiality of that something to transform from a state of concealment to that of exposure. This kind of "uncanniness" is clearly exemplified by the uncanny role of the Chinese radical Woman: in fleshing out the patriarchal conception of domestic order (cf. *Heimlichkeit*), the Chinese radical Woman is capable of exposing the latent contradiction inscribed in the symbolic construction of such order as visible object, thereby providing a "weird" case for our scrutiny.¹⁸

¹⁸ I am indebted to Susan Sage Heinzelman's "Hard Cases," which contains an illuminating discussion of Freud's idea of the "uncanny." In her article Heinzelman associates the "weirdness" of literature by women with the "ability to speak with a voice that is other than the voice of the patriarchy" (65). Like the Freudian example of the "uncanny," a "weird" case by Heinzelman's definition is clearly related "to that

There is another sense in which Freud's notion of the "uncanny" can be brought to bear on the Chinese radical Woman. In the above-mentioned essay, Freud associates the word *unheimlich* with "the terrifying" (123), capable of evoking "a fear of death" and "a certain lustful pleasure" (151). What Freud had in mind is the ambivalence about the Mother, whose womb, now deemed an "*unheimlich*" place, is nevertheless "the entrance to the former *Heim* [home] of all human beings" (152-53). As Freud points out, "the *unheimlich* is what was once *heimlich*, homelike, familiar; the 'un' is the token of repression" (152-53). This alienation of the mother imago¹⁹ Freud explains primarily from a psychological perspective. In the present discussion, I will examine its significance in connection with the symbolic repression of the female body in language.

In playing out her designated role in a phallogentric discourse, the radical Woman (女) seems to suffer an internal split as well. This is evident in her double identity as both Mother and Taboo. The catchword for taboo is the character 忌 (wu), while the concept of "mother" is represented by the character 母 (mu). According to the earliest Chinese dictionary, Shuo-wen Chieh-tzu, the idea of motherhood is

which will not remain silenced, suppressed" (69).

¹⁹ By "alienation" I mean the suppressive process of gender construction whereby the "Mother" is relegated to the state of "Other."


represented by the radical Woman with two "teats" added to her bosom-- 𡚩 --which indicate her ability to "suckle a child" (259). Hence the "idea of fecundity, of multiplication."²⁰ To the image of a nurturing mother, we may contrast her secret double, the Taboo Woman-- 𡚩 . Originally, this ideograph denotes "a woman who has sinned" (Shuo-wen 265). This is visually conceivable, as the written character depicts a woman with a "mark of sin" on her breast. By extension, the character also signifies "prison of the guilty woman," who is seen to be "placed under lock and key--for misbehaviour" (Wieger 170). Elaborating on the Chinese gloss, Wieger writes, "Each palace had a place reserved for that purpose. The persons thus confined were utterly unemployed, and saw nobody. Hence the derived meanings, to avoid, to abstain, inutility, nothingness" (170). Thus, the Taboo Woman's mark of sin has also become a token of repression.

Despite such severe prohibition, there is no way for the Taboo Woman to embody the prohibitive law without breaking it: for, in order to function as Taboo, the radical Woman must make a public display of the very "sin" which has necessitated her removal from everybody's sight. Once again, we are confronted with something "uncanny." Obviously, the naming of the radical Woman as Taboo does not make her a pure "nothing"

²⁰ S.J. Wieger, Chinese Characters, 171. I am indebted to Wieger's illuminating documentation of the etymological origin and signification of Chinese characters, especially as some of the original Chinese texts are not readily accessible.

as her tabooed name indicates. Instead, her embodiment of contradiction only makes her an incarnation of the maternal Way, in which the elements of yin and yang confront and interpenetrate each other in a perpetual "war- embrace" (Coleridge "What is Life?" 8).

A closer examination reveals that it is the male principle, or the Father's law, that has nullified the radical Woman (女) by a single phallic stroke — . In I Ching (Book of Changes), the source book of ancient Chinese philosophy based on yin-yang symbolism, the male principle is represented by a whole line ("—") known as "yang-hsiao." The pure essence of the male principle is represented by the Ch'ien Hexagram ☰ , which stands for "what is great and originating, penetrating, advantageous, correct and firm" (I Ching I 57). Needless to say, a less educated imagination cannot possibly conceive all these "good" qualities in a barren image like ☰ ; to the unsophisticated eye, one might add, the Ch'ien Hexagram may resemble prison bars more than anything else. This perverse view of the well-established symbol is no less valid than any other interpretation: if anything, it points to the arbitrary nature of literary symbolism; it also suggests that the pure male essence can be totally oppressive and prohibiting--a fact that is completely left out of account in the I Ching text describing the Ch'ien Hexagram. Nevertheless, the oppressive nature of yang is silently--and emphatically-- exposed by the Taboo Woman 女 .

To elaborate on the significance of this exposure, let us re-visualize the image of the Mother--  . In this ideograph, the straight masculine line is bent and broken into two curved lines, leaving a visible "gap" in between. This disruption or discontinuity of the yang line suggests the emergence of yin, the female principle, represented in I Ching by the symbol of a broken line -- . The implication of this change is worth pondering: to my mind, it epitomizes the way in which one aspect of a contradiction can not only penetrate, but also transform into its opposite, thereby changing the established order and seemingly fixed nature of things. Translated into Taoist terms, this contradiction would indicate a dialectical interaction--or "mutual arising" (i.e. "Hsiang-sheng")--of binary opposites, in which the state of wu (i.e. absence, "not having"; "nothing") cannot exist without the function of its opposite, yo (i.e. presence, "possessing"; "something"). To be specific, without the obtrusive presence of the yang stroke, the radical Woman simply has no occasion for committing "sin." On the other hand, without sinning against the prohibitive law represented by the masculine signifier, the radical Woman cannot begin to be a nurturing Mother. Once the imposed mark of sin is transformed into a symbol of nourishment, the tabooed "otherness" of the female body will prove to be fecund motherhood.

The dual image of the radical Woman is reminiscent of the

Magical Mirror described in the Chinese classic Dream of the Red Chamber.²¹ On one side of the mirror is the image of a seductive lady; on the other side is a hideous image of Death. In the context of the novel, we can read in the mirror the Buddhist admonition on the vanity and nothingness of *Hung Ch'en* ("red dust," i.e., the world of mundane reality), which can be boiled down to the single message that all worldly pleasures are vain because they inevitably lead to and end in death (cf. the fate of the fallen Adam, whose name in Hebrew means "red clay"). From the perspective of my argument, however, the metaphorical mirror seems to yield a different meaning.

What we see in the Magical Mirror is a microcosm of literature built out of the male imagination. According to Northrop Frye, literature is born of "two dreams, a wish-fulfillment dream and an anxiety dream" (Educated 43). When "focussed together," however, the double dream does not necessarily present what Frye calls "a fully conscious vision," like Adam's dream made truth. Instead of producing a harmonious fusion, it often betrays a sense of unresolved conflict. As a result, what comes through Adam's double dreaming is an evasive and illusory vision of Eve, ambiguous, distorted, and self-contradictory. Harold Bloom pokes a finger into the inherent contradiction underlying the male imagination when he observes that, "[i]n the wholeness of the

²¹ See Dream, Chapter 11, 113-14.

poet's imagination, the Muse is mother and harlot at once" (Anxiety 63).

The same can be said, of course, of the Chinese radical Woman. In analyzing the gendered construction of written Chinese, I have delved into the oldest taboo of language, to seek out and let "loose" the radical Woman. In so doing, however, I found my role in playing the quest hero both pretentious and self-flattering. It is a delusion on the part of the quester to think that there is always a maiden in distress, waiting somewhere for her rescue. The fact is that the radical Woman, as an active agent of transformative power within the symbolic order of language, is something that can never be locked up within the forbidden palace. Our literary history reveals that, in her myriad metamorphoses, this rebellious spirit has plagued the patriarchal domain for centuries, disrupting its "good order" and haunting its dream of eternal harmony. This discovery impels me to further explore the taboo of language, in both Chinese and English literature. My initial finding from this cross-cultural study is the affinity between the Chinese radical Woman and her western counterpart, the elusive Romantic Muse. Within the given context, the dual image of the radical Woman as Mother /Taboo (母/毒) can be seen as a linguistic manifestation of the Taoist "Way"--the "Mysterious Female" born of a confrontation between yin and yang. Similarly, the ambivalent portrayal of the Romantic Muse provides a centre of

illumination, which enables us to see the self-contradictoriness of the Romantic ideology.

The Romantic Dilemma

Critics have observed the ambivalent image of the Romantic woman from various perspectives. In light of Freud's theory of narcissism and ego psychology, Barbara A. Schapiro relates the image of the Romantic woman to the poet-quester's narcissistic "ego-ideal," which stems from a "desire for refusion" with the mother. Schapiro regards this regressive desire for oneness with the "womblike ideal world" as a wishfulfilling fantasy, "incapable of leading to any realistic social or moral order" (The Romantic Mother 8). In Shelley's poetry, Schapiro argues, the visionary fusion with the ideal female figure always leads to dissolution and death. In Keats, however, Schapiro finds that the tendency towards idealization is frequently checked and finally balanced by an "intense desire to confront reality." According to Schapiro, Keats's affirmation of the reality principle enabled the poet to achieve self-identity in a changing world of pain and loss. This achievement of personal integration is reflected by a harmonious vision of the world of nature. Keats's late poem "To Autumn," Schapiro suggests, illustrates this "success in its integration of the regressive, feminine, and melancholic feelings with assertive, masculine, and affirmative ones, and in its balanced harmony of life and death images" (60).

"Thus," Schapiro concludes, "the organic harmony between humanity and Nature, the integrated relationship between self and environment, and the formation of an autonomous identity, an integrated self, often represent the end achievement of the most successful Romantic poems" (130).

This conclusion is debatable, however, not only because it celebrates the Romantic achievement in the Romantics' own terms,²² but also because the alleged "organic harmony between humanity and Nature" is frequently undermined and put into question by the very poems which set out to pursue this goal as an ideological project, but fail to arrive at "the end achievement." As a matter of fact, the Romantic view of Nature, like the Romantic image of Woman, is profoundly ambivalent because of its inherent contradictions. What is more, by gendering "regressive, melancholic" feelings as "feminine," and "assertive, affirmative" ones as "masculine," Schapiro only reiterates the traditional categorizations of gender, which is clearly a function of patriarchal ideology. Equally problematic is Schapiro's endorsement of the Romantic ideal of an autonomous, unitary self. In emphasizing the importance of achieving individual identity through mature object relations, Schapiro tends to underplay the inherent contradictions within the split subject constituted in/by

²² See McGann's Romantic Ideology for a critique of this current critical problem.

language.²³

In this respect, the Lacanian discourse of desire has a special bearing on the Romantic quest for self identity, especially because the subject of the quest-romance is "at least partly the romance of language itself" (Parker 226). According to Lacan, language is "what hollows being into desire." As Eagleton explains, "the ego is a function or effect of a subject which is always dispersed, never identical with itself, strung out along the chains of the discourses which constitute it" (Literary Theory 169). Lacan speaks of desire as being motivated by, and directed toward the "Other" which points to a central void within the self (Literary Theory 174). By the same token, the Romantic outcry of desire "I want! I want!"--inscribed in Blake's illustration of a man reaching to the moon--reveals the creative "void" (want=desire=lack) at the centre of the male imagination. Furthermore, it also belies the poet's god-like image of permanence and self-sufficiency.

The conflict which underscores Blake's articulation of

²³ The notion of a unified, coherent self has been challenged by critics of different persuasions. Expounding the universality of contradiction, Engels says: "life consists precisely and primarily in this--that a being is at each moment itself and yet something else. Life is therefore also a contradiction..." ("Anti-Dühring" 167). For Brecht, "the continuity of the ego is a myth. A man is an atom that perpetually breaks up and forms anew" (Brecht on Theatre 15). Explicating Althusser's notion of the human subject, Eagleton also describes human individuals as "the product of many different social determinants, and [they] thus have no essential unity" (Literary Theory 171).

desire can be detected in Coleridge as well. Much as Coleridge desires to create a visionary world of organic wholeness, his idealistic theory of imagination is undermined by unresolved tensions and disparities in his own poetry. Moreover, the formulation of the theory itself is cast in dubious light. While celebrating the creative power of poetic imagination, Coleridge nevertheless designates this power to a "secondary" status, since it is "an echo of [a repetition]" (Biographia Literaria 167). In other words, the creative faculty which makes the poet a God-like figure is not so original after all; it is doubly removed--to use the Platonic notion--from the original act of creation in "the infinite I AM." From a materialist point of view, "the infinite I AM" itself is not really an act. Rather, it is only a gesture of transcendence, an empty signifier that generates yet infinitely evades--like the function of "différance"--the logocentric discourse of presence. At the centre of Coleridge's poetic theory is a profound contradiction: "the infinite I AM," which appears to be a permanent "Being," is in effect a creative "void" opening up toward the endless process of becoming.

In a sense, the romantic quest for permanence is not far from the Taoist Way, the essence of which is mutability and transformation. To elaborate on this point, I would recall the Taoist dialectic of *yo* (being/presence) and *wu* (non-being/absence). Tao Te Ching begins with a paradox:

The Way ("Tao") that can be spoken of is not the enduring and unchanging Way; the name that can be

named is not the enduring and unchanging name. Nameless, (the "Tao" was) the beginning of heaven and earth; Being named, it was the mother of the myriad creatures. From its constant absence, one can observe its mystery; from its constant presence, one can observe its manifestations.

(Tao Te Ching I)

The above passage explains the Way in dialectical terms, seeing it as a unity of opposites: the Way is both nameless and named, and it is forever empty yet forever full ("The Way is empty, yet use will not drain it." Tao Te Ching IV). The mutual dependency of *yo* and *wu* is described in Tao Te Ching by a vivid metaphor:

Shape clay into a vessel;
It is the space within that makes it useful.
Cut out doors and windows for a room.
It is the holes which make it useful.
Therefore profit comes from what is there;
Usefulness from what is not there.

(XI)

Paradoxically, the Taoist concept of *wu* (i.e. "void" or "what is not there") is not pure "lack" or "nothing." What it really signifies is the creative potentiality of *Hsuan P'in*, the "Mysterious Female" who brings the myriad creatures into being. In other words, the Taoist "void" can be productive in the same way as the post-structuralist "absences" or "gaps" are constitutive of (sub)textual meanings. It is the nameless reservoir of the myriad names; it is the abstract course which can be fulfilled only through the whole gamut of concrete/diverse discourses. From this perspective, we may observe that the Romantic discourse of self can never be self-contained, but will always merge into the discourse of non-

self: for, what the "infinite I AM" signifies, in fact, is the infinite yearning for "something evermore about to be" --a changing process of signification which will inevitably negate any conception of a static Self.

The Romantic imagination is "secondary" not only because it lacks "priority in creation" (as Coleridge's theory suggests), but also because what it creates is, as Shelley observes in his "Defence," only "a feeble shadow of the original conceptions" (Shelley's Poetry and Prose 504). By pointing out the rift between the image and the imaginary "real" (i.e. the transcendent "idea"), Shelley's description of the creative process virtually undercuts the Romantic notion of poetry as a medium of transcendence. In an attempt to flesh out the "original conceptions" of essential Beauty in poetic language, the Romantic quester finds no way to address the Muse--even as his own Psyche or Soul of Soul--without making her a "shadowy" figure of representation.²⁴ Insofar as

²⁴ It is characteristic of Shelley to conceive the female Muse figure as a symbol of some beautiful ideal, uncontaminated by mundane reality. Such idealistic conception, however, is often undermined by its material embodiment in concrete images. This contradiction seems to underscore Shelley's ambivalent metaphor in the following lines:

The One remains, the many change and pass;
Heaven's light forever shines, Earth's shadows fly;
Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,
Stains the white radiance of Eternity,
Until Death tramples it to fragments. (Adonais 460-64)

Through the dialectical interplay of "light" and "shadows," we can trace the prismatic figure of the Romantic Muse, who, representing the immanent principle of transformation, will inevitably "stains" the pure light of transcendence.

Romantic ideology is gender-specific, the poetic Muse always turns out to be something "other" than is desired.

As I shall illustrate, desire and repression are twin aspects of the Romantic dilemma centred on the Muse figure. The repression of desire is motivated by fear, because the potential fulfillment of desire prefigures its termination,²⁵ thus threatening the death of the imaginary Self. To be one with the Muse-principle implies a dissolution of the stable ego in the fluidity of transformation. In other words, fusion with the mother imago--which signifies the immanent principle of experience rather than a transcendent ideal-- indicates not so much a narcissistic regression as an impersonal process of generation.

On more than one account, then, Schapiro's conclusion fails to do justice to her insightful observation of a crucial Romantic phenomenon, that is, "the ambivalent relation between the self and its parental imagoes--the divided and unresolved inner condition that the Romantics first began to explore" (130-31). This inner contradiction lies at the centre of the Romantic quest for identity, and reflects ideological

²⁵ I am indebted to Margaret Homans for her illuminating remarks on the contradiction inherent in the Romantic quest. As Homans points out, "The romantic quest is always doomed, for it secretly resists its own fulfillment: although the hero of Alastor quests for his dream maiden and dies of not finding her, his encounter with the Indian maid makes it clear that embodiment is itself an obstacle to desire, or more precisely, its termination" (Bearing the Word 107). Cf. Parker's definition of "Romance as a form which both projects an end and defers its arrival" (201).

conflicts that cannot be easily smoothed out by an idealistic reconciliation or psychological re-integration.

The advent of post-structuralism has put into question the whole system of thinking based on binary oppositions. Needless to say, we cannot do away with binary opposites through any idealistic solutions. We must, however, recognize the dialectical relationship between a whole chain of opposites such as self and other, home and environment, or male and female. If, for example, the word "mother" has meaning only in relation to its opposite, the "father," then the idea of the maternal Muse figure as inhabiting some purely transcendental domain, or representing what Schapiro calls "the womb-like ideal," is illusory. It becomes useless to talk of the Romantic Mother without considering her relation to the father figure. By the same token, it is misleading to relate the maternal image only to the imaginary phase--an autonomous domain of the pleasure principle beyond the reach of the Father's law. The relationship between the Romantic Mother (or the Muse-principle) and the Father (who stands for the deep-rooted patriarchal tradition) can be explained as a dialectical unity, the Muse-principle being the constitutive negation of the Father's law. Confronted with both "parental imagoes" which represent the conflicting aspects of his poetic identity, the quester-poet's mind thus becomes a site of contradiction.

To further explore the implications of this Romantic

dilemma, I would briefly consider Harold Bloom's provocative theory of literary belatedness, which regards poetry as a form of "family romance." According to Bloom, the belated poet's relation to his precursor and to the Muse is analogous to the male child's relation to his father and mother. Like the child's oedipal fantasy, the strong poet's desire is to "rescue" the Muse, by "giving her a child or making one for her," so as to gratify his "wish to be the father of himself." From this Freudian premise, Bloom draws the conclusion that "all quest-romances of the post Enlightenment...are quests to re-beget one's own self, to become one's own Great Original" (*Anxiety* 64). This is, however, an impossible task: in his anxiety for self-fulfillment, the quester-poet turns to the Muse for aid, only to discover his "lack of priority in creation." As Bloom explains, the belated poet finds that "his word is not his own word only, and his Muse has whored with many before him" (*Anxiety* 61). It is in this context that Bloom makes the striking remark that the poetic Muse is both mother and whore.

The split image of Bloom's Muse points to the inherent contradictoriness of the Romantic imagination, which is closely related to the visionary female. We may recall, for example, Keats's idealistically conceived dream-goddess (Cynthia/Diana/Phoebe) in *Endymion*, or the awe-inspiring Moneta, whose moon-like face reveals a darker vision of the Muse characteristic of Keats's late romances. Shelley's

visionary women, from the "veiled maid" in Alastor to the "Shape all light" in "The Triumph of Life," represent the changing phases of the same Muse-principle. Coleridge's portrayal of the female Muse figure, such as the shadowy image of the "woman wailing...beneath a waning moon" in "Kubla Khan" or the serpent-woman lurking in the midnight wood in Christabel, is more ominously ambiguous than idealistic. Obviously, the Romantic Woman is not a homely object of easy consumption, something "nobly planned"-- according to Wordsworth's programme of domestication--"for human nature's daily food."²⁶ Neither is she a pure "Phantom of delight." As a cultural construct, the Romantic Muse figure actually inhabits two conflicting spheres of discourse simultaneously: on the one hand, she is sublimated into a pure vision of beauty in the poet-quester's wishfulfilling fantasy; on the other hand, she often reveals herself as a disturbing power emerging from "reality's dark dream." Although an inmate of the poet's inmost soul, she tends to metamorphose into humanized non-humans (e.g. Geraldine and Lamia), whose enigmatic identity remains a "known unknown." Such paradoxical phrasing suggests the unsettling nature of the Muse-principle, which is often experienced as an alien "other" within the poetic self. Commenting on the quester-poet's ambivalent feelings towards the poetic Muse, Bloom writes:

The poet thinks he loves the Muse out of his


²⁶ See Wordsworth, "She was a Phantom of delight."

longing for divination, which will guarantee him time enough for fulfillment, but his only longing is a homesickness for a house as large as his spirit, and so he doesn't love the Muse at all.

(Anxiety 61)

In a sense, the Romantic quest for identity is motivated by an intense feeling of homelessness, which gives rise to the desire to build a visionary paradise out of pure imaginative power. To extend Patricia A. Parker's observation on Keats's poetry (208-09), we may say that "the housing of the imagination" is a preoccupation of all the major Romantics, whose ideological project is primarily concerned with the transformation of an environment into a home. The gigantic effort of the Romantic quester to achieve this goal culminates in Wordsworth's arduous pursuit of a marriage between Mind and Nature, the latter being metaphorically identical with the Romantic woman or the Muse-principle. For all his professed love of Nature, Wordsworth's celebration of the "organic harmony" between Mind and Nature is secretly plagued by unresolved tensions, which become manifest in his later poems like "Peele Castle."²⁷ Coleridge, on the other hand,

²⁷ The latent tension between mind and nature can be detected in Wordsworth's early lyrics as well. Take, for example, the poem "Lines Written in Early Spring." In keeping with Wordsworth's aesthetic theory, the palpable design of this lyric is to contemplate "the beauty of the universe...in the spirit of love" (Literary Criticism 51) for the "particular purpose...of giving pleasure" (50). To achieve this aim, the poet has applied the principle of selection, whereby only "the fairest and most interesting qualities of nature" (52) can enter into a reciprocal communication with the mind. Coupled with this is the use of metre, also regarded as a means of producing pleasure. As we read the poem, however, we cannot fail to hear, among the "thousand blended

contributes to the Romantic project by introducing the idealist concept of imagination, which attempts to resolve contradictions through "reconciliation of opposites." In spite of its miraculous device, however, the Coleridgean architecture of imagination, like Kubla Khan's "sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice," is not really a secure home for the poetic mind to settle in: even with the uncanny woman well-confined under the roof, Kubla's pleasure-dome offers him no more peace of mind (he is troubled by "ancestral voices prophesying war") than the Chinese ideograph denoting peace--. This darker aspect of Romanticism is further exposed, often in a self-conscious manner, in the poetry of Shelley and Keats.

Nowhere else is the Romantic quester's transcendental desire more frustrated than in Shelley's poetry. This is largely due to the inherent contradiction between the Shelleyan ideal of oneness on the one hand, and the symbolic representation of such an ideal on the other. We can trace this contradiction in the problematic quest for the Muse figure, who signifies both the conception of the ideal and its materialization. The former demands an idealization of the

notes," one lamentable note of discord. For "what [is] painful and disgusting in the passion" cannot be completely removed from the scene, and it is not always "a task light and easy" to maintain the precarious "over-balance of pleasure". In terms of metre, the emphatic spondee in the line "And I must think, do all I can" gives us the feeling that the pleasure thus produced does not come spontaneously, but is called into service by a strenuous effort of the "imaginative Will."

poetic Muse and a radical displacement of history; the latter, being caught up in the web of ideological contradictions, time and place specific, is impotent of any transcendental flight. Hence Shelley's lamentation that "The winged words on which my soul would pierce /Into the height of love's rare universe /Are chains of lead around its flight of fire" (Epipsychidion 588-90). The radical shift in figurative language--from imaginary freedom ("winged words") to symbolic confinement ("chains of lead")--calls attention to the implicit irony in the Romantic discourse of desire. In Shelley's poetry, the symbolic language which bodies forth the quester-poet's ideal union with the female Muse figure often betrays a primacy of male projection, which is clearly at odds with the author's professed ideas of love, freedom and equality. This discrepancy between concept and image, or rift between the word and its referent, is a telling symptom of the Romantic ideology's impotence to transcend material reality.

As I have mentioned earlier, Bloom's theory of poetic influence presents the literary scene as a battlefield of power struggle between strong-willed individuals. Accordingly, for Bloom, the Romantic quest for identity becomes a ritualistic gesture, a "formal device" which leads nowhere. As Bloom puts it, "we journey to abstract ourselves by fabrication. But where the fabric already has been woven, we journey to unravel" (Anxiety 64-65). To me the above description sounds truer of a certain form of deconstructive

criticism practiced today than of the Romantic quest for identity. For one thing, the Romantic quest is not merely a "formal device"; it is an ideological--and often explicitly political (as in the case of Shelley)--project undertaken by the Romantic poets to achieve specific goals. For the Romantics, the writing of poetry is not a word game, but "serious warfare."²⁸ This warfare seems to take place on two different planes simultaneously: on the one hand, the Romantic questers are consciously engaged in various ideological projects with a view to transforming social reality. In this respect, the role of the poet-quester has been described as "the chivalric saviour" (Ross 32). On the other hand, however, the Romantic questers are often plagued by unconscious forces, both internal and external, which conspire to thwart their professed projects. This contradiction becomes manifest in moments when the chivalric quester turns out to be the anti-hero, or is simply impotent to carry out his knightly task. Among those invisible forces against the quester-poet, the most deadly one is the father's law--the symbolic order encoded in the established forms of literature. From this perspective, Bloom's emphasis on the formal aspect of the quest romance brings to our attention a significant issue.

²⁸ I am indebted for this argument to Marlon B. Ross's illuminating article "Romantic Quest and Conquest." As Ross points out, "With the Romantics, poetry becomes serious warfare,...for the Romantics believe that on their individual visions...depends not just the fate of a party or nation, but the fate of humanity itself" (31-32).

When we confront a discrepancy between form and content, form is a better index to ideological identity than content. It is so because the contradictions inherent in Romantic poetry's ideological project are fully displayed only through its formal realization.

As Marxist critics (Eagleton, McGann and Macherey, to name a few) have pointed out, the literary text is not a pure expression of ideology; rather, it is a dramatic "staging" of ideological contradictions. My earlier analysis of the Chinese characters may serve to illustrate this kind of ideological *mise en scène*, which Macherey describes as "an operation which has an inbuilt disadvantage since it cannot be done without showing its limits, thereby revealing its inability to subsume a hostile ideology" (88-89). As we have already seen, the discrepancy between the signifier (e.g. 鎖, a tangible image suggesting repression and violence) and the signified (in this case the idea of propriety and security) is such that the word contains within itself a latent negation of its established meaning. Thus, what we might call a "palpable design" is virtually deconstructed by its own execution in language. The contradictoriness inscribed in the Chinese written character is suggestive of a similar contradiction between Romantic poetry's ideological project and its linguistic materialization. This contradiction is fully exposed by the "uncanny" figure of the Romantic Woman, as I shall illustrate in the subsequent chapters on Coleridge and

Keats.

In a broad sense, we may say that the world built out of language is a site of irreconcilable contradictions, which makes it possible for us to transform what we see in a productive and meaningful way. In so doing, there is no need to play the role of a disinterested observer and assert that the text will deconstruct itself. It is the reader who deconstructs the text so as to achieve specific goals. As the art critic E. H. Gombrich has convincingly argued, the innocence of the eye is a myth, for "all seeing is a purposeful activity."²⁹

²⁹ Gombrich, Art and Illusion 326. In The Element of Drawing, Ruskin argues that "The perception of solid Form is entirely a matter of experience. We see nothing but flat colours; ...The whole technical power of painting depends on our recovery of what may be called the innocence of the eye; that is to say, a childish perception of these flat strains of colour, merely as such, without consciousness of what they signify...." Gombrich dismisses Ruskin's theory of innocent seeing as a myth, by arguing that "we can never neatly separate what we see from what we know" (298), and that all seeing involves choosing and interpreting. The same is true, of course, of reading.

CHAPTER 1

The Transformation of the Rainbow-Serpent


The white rainbow-serpent, clad in rich array,
Why should she appear in this Hall?
Having obtained the potion of immortality,
Why could [the Divine Archer] not keep it for good?

"Heavenly Questioning"
Ch'u Yuan (338-278 B.C.)

In the introduction, I have related the Romantic discourse of contradiction centred on the Muse figure to the dialectical confrontation between yin and yang engendered by the Taoist Way. Before I can develop such cross-cultural readings further, however, it is necessary to trace the transfiguration of this yin-yang confrontation in Chinese myths and other literary works, especially as most Western readers will be unfamiliar with such texts.

Let us begin by examining a weird case, namely, the bisexual texture of the rainbow. It was an old Chinese belief that the rainbow manifests itself in a double refraction: the bright-colored arch, known as *Hung*, is the male; its dim sub-pattern, known as *Ni*, is the female (Hsiao P'ing 71). Such peculiar gendering of the rainbow is not, of course, a neutral observation of a natural phenomenon. Once assimilated into the symbolic code of binary opposition, the gender-specific

refraction of the rainbow signifies, I shall illustrate, not so much the interplay of primordial forces as a power struggle motivated by sexual polemics.

In Chinese culture, the rainbow shares a mythical identity with the serpent.¹ To explore the origin of this identity, I will briefly analyze the linguistic formation of the serpent and the rainbow in written Chinese. In the earliest form of the Chinese language known as *Chia Ku Wen* (pictographs inscribed on oracles' bones), the word "rainbow" is depicted as a two-headed serpent: . In modern Chinese, the word "rainbow" (虹) still retains its serpentine root (worm/reptile), and belongs to the same radical category as the word "serpent" (蛇) in Chinese dictionaries. The main body of the character 虹 (rainbow or literally, "worm work") denotes the reptile's "work" or "effect" (工), whereas the essential part of the character 蛇 (serpent) signifies its otherness: 它 ("it"/"other").

To romanticize the exotic nature of the Chinese rainbow-serpent, one might argue that it epitomizes the transformation--or "working out"--of the unhomely "other" into something the human mind would feel at home with. Furthermore, one might associate the transformative character of the

¹ Again, I am referring to the concept of identity as defined by Marxist dialectics. To be specific, identity is a special feature of contradiction, which manifests itself in the interdependency of opposites and their transformation into one another in given conditions.

serpentine rainbow with the Romantic imagination, which is concerned, as Frye has argued, with the transformation of an alien environment (the domain of "other" or "it") into a home. It should be pointed out, however, that readers with different cultural backgrounds may not share the same response to a literary image; and the Chinese rainbow (虹) may not have the same aesthetic appeal as its English counterpart. For one thing, instead of being "capable of making all disagreeables evaporate" (Keats, Letters 1:192), the Chinese rainbow has no way to conceal its serpentine tail 虺 , a reminder, as it were, of its otherness. Here we have yet another example of the *unheimlich* ("uncanny")--a quality which Freud has associated with the female body. As we shall see, the conception of female otherness is not a psychological phenomenon only. It is also related to the symbolic construction of gender in patriarchal myth-making.

I

Why should the Chinese rainbow attach itself to a serpentine root (known as an "oblique radical" in Chinese etymology)? This question brings us back to the myth of a maternal creatrix, who is, I believe, the mythical incarnation of the Way.

In Chinese mythology, the "mother of all living" is known as Nu Kua. The character "Nu" (女) simply means "woman," but the character "Kua" is charged with multiple connotations,

ranging from a frog to a beauty.² To trace the origin of this mythical female figure, we must dig up from historical relics the obscured phases of her being. T'ai P'ing Yu Lan (c. 200 B.C.) records that "when Heaven and Earth had opened forth, but before there were human beings, Nu Kua created men by patting yellow earth together" (qtd. in Yuan 59). In contrast to the biblical myth of genesis, which relegates Eve to the status of "the second sex" (Eve is named "Woman, because she was taken out of Man." [Genesis 2:23]), the creation myth in Chinese mythology is centred on a female figure who is also the prototype of the serpent woman. According to Shan-hai Ching (c. 2000 B.C.), "Nu Kua had a serpentine body and a human head, and was capable of seventy transformations in the course of a day" (qtd. in Yuan 59). Shuo Wen Chieh Tzu (121 A.D.) describes Nu Kua as "a divine woman of ancient times, who transformed the myriad creatures" (260). The transforming character of this ancient goddess deserves special attention, as it is the fountainhead of the metamorphoses of serpent ladies and rainbow maidens in later literature. It also provides a mythical background for the identification of Nu Kua with other powerful female figures in ancient Chinese mythology, including Nu Ho, otherwise known as the "Moon-mother," and the Divine Woman of Kao-t'ang, who reveals

² The probable cognates of "Kua" include "water-worn hole," "hiding place," and "frog." See Schafer 30-31.

herself in the form of a rainbow-goddess.³

In tracing Nu Kua's primal identity, the modern Chinese poet-scholar Wen I-to suggests that both Nu Kua and the Divine Woman of Kao-t'ang (whom Wen identifies with Nu Kua) are variant guises of some "general ancestress" of ancient Chinese civilization ("Kao-t'ang" 116). Wen speculates that the prototype of this Great Mother might be Hsi Wang-mu (also known as Hsi Mu, "Mother of the West"). Another scholar of Chinese mythology also maintains that Nu Kua shares a mythical identity with Hsi Wang-mu (Kiang 51). In general, Chinese scholars have found it difficult to make a clear distinction between these mythical women,⁴ and the labyrinth of existent studies only leads us to the conclusion that the identity of the Great Mother in Chinese mythology is plural from the very beginning. Within the compass of this thesis, it is neither possible nor congruent with my argument to pin down the multiple identity of the Great Mother to a single name. Ultimately, we have to accept Lao Tzu's stand-in-for method in

³ I am indebted to Hsiao Ping's "Nu Wa Kao," esp. 384-385, for the identification of Nu Kua with other maternal deities in Chinese mythology.

⁴ This is probably due to the fragmentary character of Chinese mythology, which, like the Taoist Way, is "confusedly formed" and therefore cannot be reduced to a coherent vision under a single system of signification. As ancestral Mothers of ancient matriarchal societies inhabiting different parts of China, Nu Kua, Nu Ho, Kao-t'ang and Hsi Wang-mu have relative individuality, but their mythical identities tend to be merged with each other because of their fundamental affinities.

naming the "Mysterious Female": "I do not know her name, but would call her the Way-shower" (Tao Te Ching XXV). From the Taoist perspective, the search for the "correct name" (which is of crucial importance for Confucius) or fixed identity of the "Mysterious Female" is pointless and futile, for "the name that can be named is not the eternal or unchanging name" (I). Like the moon-goddess Ishtar of Babylonia, who has many different names, or Isis of Egypt, who has been called "She of the ten-thousand Names," the maternal creatrix in Chinese mythology also embodies the changing phases of the Moon under different names. In what follows, therefore, I shall discuss the interrelated myths of the serpent-woman, the rainbow-lady and the moon-goddess as different manifestations of the Great Mother, who is analogous to the Triple Muse-principle.⁵

In her original phase of being, the Chinese moon-goddess clearly enjoyed a primacy in relation to her cosmic opposite, the archetypal Sun.⁶ So in Shan-hai Ching Nu Ho is described as the "Moon-mother" who "gave birth to the sun as well as the moon" (qtd. in Hsiao 60) Commenting on the mythical identity between Nu Kua and Nu Ho, Hsiao P'ing claims that "Nu Kua is

⁵ I found Robert Graves's discussion of "the Triple Muse" particularly interesting, as it presents a parallel to the Chinese myth of the Moon-woman. See The White Goddess 383-408.

⁶ Compare Robert Graves's discussion of the Moon-woman (388), who "is the mother of all things." Like Nu Kua, this Moon-woman also has a male serpent (cf. Fu Hsi) as mate or consort.

undoubtedly a moon deity" (385); but as the ancestral Mother, she is also a rainbow goddess of fertility, worshipped by primitive people as bringer of sunshine and the rain (329).⁷ So in Huai Nan Tzu (c.1200 B.C.), Nu Kua is portrayed as "riding a thunder chariot drawn by the cloud-dragon" (qtd. in Hsiao 63). A silk painting unearthed from the Han Tombs at Ma-wang Tui presents a similar portrayal of Nu Kua, in which she presides over the sun-charioteer Hsi Ho, who drives the fire dragon, and the moon-charioteer Ch'ien-o (i.e. Ch'ang O), who is riding on the cloud dragon.⁸

Nu Kua's cosmic power is also manifest in her repairing of the heavens and the earth. Huai Nan Tzu records that "In very ancient times, the four pillars of heaven were broken down and the corners of the earth gave way. Thereupon Nu Kua fused together stones of five colours to repair the heavens, and cut off the feet of the tortoise to set right the four extremes of the earth" (qtd. in Yuan 60). The heroic role Nu Kua played in fighting what looks like a cosmic earth-quake is a reminder of her militant character, for Nu Kua is also known as the sun-shooter and the killer of the black dragon during the floods (Yuan 60). This draws our attention to "the

⁷ Another illuminating study, which analyzes Nu Kua's relationship with her male counterpart Fu Hsi, is Wen I-to's "Fu Hsi Kao" (3-68).

⁸ This image of Nu Kua is analogous to the unearthed portrait of Hsi Wang-mu, in which she is attended by a toad (the moon-spirit) and a three-footed crow (the sun-bird). See Hsiao 63, 441.

terrible aspect" of the Great Mother, which is also evident in the original image of Hsi Wang-mu.

According to Shan-hai Ching, Hsi Wang-mu lived in a cave (later known as "moon cavern") in the Jade Mountain. She "had a human shape, a leopard's tail, a tiger's teeth, and was good at wailing" (qtd. in Yuan 200). To western readers, this portrayal of the "Mother of the West" may look as weird as the image of Keats's Lamia, who is "striped like a zebra, freckled like a pard...." Or they may recall Coleridge's uncanny "woman wailing for her demon lover." For Chinese scholars, however, Hsi Wang-mu was simply dressed in her totemic make-ups and costumes, which ancient matriarchs usually wore during the performance of primitive rites (Hsiao 447, 453, 454). As for her "wailing," it has been suggested that it may be a way of laughing or singing. One critic describes Hsi Wang-mu as "gifted with a very nice voice, and fond of singing wild tunes in a moving way" (Li Fa-lin 85). Following this line of interpretation, Hsiao P'ing goes so far as to call her "a lyric soprano" (453). The tendency to smooth out--or repress--the Great Mother's "weirdness" is not a modern phenomenon only. As early as Han times, Hsi Wang-mu was already "naturalized," that is, culturally re-constructed, into a woman "in her thirties, of modest height, who is peerless in her divine gracefulness and rare beauty" (Han Wu Nei Chuan qtd. in Hsiao 443).

For all this beautiful transfiguration, we should not

lose sight of the "negative" aspect of the Great Mother. For, apart from her benevolent role as a goddess of birth, harvest, sexual love and immortality, Hsi Wang-mu is also a fearful goddess of death, punishment, plague and disease.⁹ In sum, what the original Hsi Wang-mu represents, among other things, is the unfathomable forces of Nature beyond human control. The later (and more familiar) image of Hsi Wang-mu as a beautiful gentlewoman (who became King Mu's mistress) is a cultural construct which has little to do with Mother Nature.

So far we have dwelled mainly on the Great Mother's primary phase of being, that is, before the usurpation of her reign by the paternal deities. In this phase, the mythical female's triple identity as the serpent-rainbow-moon goddess was not yet contaminated by the Name-of-the-Father. With the historical encroachment of patriarchy, however, the powerful female figures in Chinese mythology were relegated to a minor status, while their images suffered a general degradation.


In Joseph Campbell's prestigious volume entitled The Masks of God: Oriental Mythology, the labyrinth of Chinese mythology is neatly charted with a list of "the Great Ten," that is, the ten mythical Chinese patriarchs who are obviously "masks of God" the Father.¹⁰ I was more than surprised at the

⁹ According to Shan-hai Ching, Hsi Wang-mu is in charge of "heaven's scourge and earthly torture of five kinds."

¹⁰ See Campbell "Chinese Mythology" (Chapter 7 of The Masks of Gods: Oriental Mythology), esp. 382-92.

total absence of Nu Kua, the "Empress of Yin," her reign being taken over by her male consort Fu Hsi, who ranks first among the ten towering figures. Campbell's presentation of Chinese mythology, in short, is one in which the Great Mother's name is erased.

The maltreatment Nu Kua and other female deities have suffered at home, however, is worse than negligence or dismissal. As early as the second century B.C., there were already attempts to diminish or efface the distinguished role of this maternal figure. Despite Nu Kua's obvious female identity indicated by her name, Confucian myth-makers did not hesitate to suggest that Nu Kua was in fact a male relative of Fu Hsi, the "Nu" (女) being merely a surname (Yuan 59). This curious speculation is contradicted not only by other written sources of mythology, but also by artistic relics unearthed from ancient tombs. In accordance with the legendary account that Fu Hsi and Nu Kua were twin brother and sister who married each other during the deluge, and that both "had a serpentine body and a human head," most of the unearthed relics (e.g. stone reliefs and silk paintings of Han times) depict Nu Kua and Fu Hsi as two snake figures in a conjugal union with their serpentine tails intertwined. Significantly, Fu Hsi is often portrayed with the sun in his hand, while Nu Kua holds in her hand the moon. Some Chinese scholars and archaeologists maintain that, apart from indicating the gender of Fu Hsi and Nu Kua, these relics also provide evidence of

this primordial pair's division of office as sun-god and moon-goddess.¹¹ As the Chinese for the "sun" is *T'ai Yang* (literally, "ultimate yang") and the moon is known as *T'ai Yin* ("ultimate yin"), we may infer that the union of Nu Kua and Fu Hsi was also meant to symbolize cosmic harmony through the unity of yin and yang. Such being the aesthetic design, there is little wonder that no one seems to have questioned the problematic relation between the image and its referent. To elaborate on the implications of this primordial scene, I would relate the intertwined image of Fu Hsi and Nu Kua to the original form of the rainbow, as shown in the curious pictograph , which depicts two serpents with their bodies intertwined. From this perspective, the serpentine embrace of

¹¹ At this point we may readily observe the parallel between the Chinese twins and their Western counterpart, Apollo and Artemis (see Robert Graves 390). Also illuminating is Hsiao P'ing's remark on the relationship between Nu Kua and Fu Hsi:

It seems most likely that, before Fu Hsi took over her role, Nu Kua was the first to become the supreme deity of the sun and the moon...worshiped by some primitive clan or group of tribes in the south. In the east, a similar situation occurred to Nu Ho (i.e. Hsi Ho), who "gave birth to the sun and the moon," but later became the wife of Emperor Tsun. Along with social development, especially the maturation of the patriarchal system, came the division of deities into male and female, husband and wife, yang and yin, and the establishment of the former's superiority over the latter. As a result, Fu Hsi and Emperor Tsun became deities of *T'ai Yang* (i.e. sun-gods), whereas Nu Ho (the "Moon-mother," later known as Ch'ang O) and Nu Kua became deities of *T'ai Yin* (moon-goddesses) (384-85. Translation mine.)

Nu Kua and Fu Hsi portrayed by ancient artists provides a mythical clue to the rainbow's double refraction.

As I have mentioned earlier, the bi-sexual rainbow has been traditionally interpreted as signifying a confrontation between yin and yang. More often than not, however, the male-dominated discourse on the rainbow often reflects men's ambivalent (mis)conceptions of women. Thus the rainbow (or *Ni*, to be exact)¹² is regarded as "the goddess of little women" (T'ai P'ing Yu Lan xiv), or simply called *Mei Ren* ("Beautiful Woman"). A "Beautiful Woman," however, is not always a blessing, but could well be a "Belle Dame sans Merci." Throughout the long history of Chinese literature, a beautiful woman is frequently crowned with the odd compliment *Ch'ing Kuo*, which means, quite literally, "destroyer of the state." A seventeenth century collection of myths and legends, Feng Shen Yen I, explicitly portrays Nu Kua as a state-destroying beauty: in that book, a statue of Nu Kua triggers King Chou's erotic fantasy, which leads eventually to the fall of the

¹² In the original Chinese text, the word *Hung* is used for "rainbow," which may cause some confusion, because the subject it actually refers to is *Ni*, otherwise called *T'zu Hung* ("female rainbow"). In a sense, this confusion is inevitable, since the rainbow itself is "confusedly formed," containing elements of both yin and yang. Chinese men of letters tend to use the word *Hung* as a general term for "rainbow," just as English-speaking people use the word "man" (or the pronoun "he") to stand for both men and women. To avoid such confusion caused by male-centred discourse, I will substitute the word "*Ni*" wherever the female rainbow is the subject of discussion in the Chinese texts.

Shang Dynasty.¹³

Such uninhibited flight of the male imagination is not without precedent. One case in point is the alleged seduction of the mythical monarch Yu by the Lady of Mount Tu,¹⁴ whom Shih Chi (c. 104 B.C.) identifies with Nu Kua ("the Lady of Mount Tu is called Nu Kua.") This anecdote came as something of an embarrassment to Confucian scholars of later times, since Yu was known to be a virtuous hero at the time of the great Deluge.¹⁵ During his flood-control project, Yu successfully led the flooding waters to the sea and drove the snakes and frogs (both reminiscent of Nu Kua) to the marshes.

It is important to note that, in Chinese culture, serpent women, or dragon ladies, are closely related to various forms of water, as water is commonly believed to be the essence of women.¹⁶ As Edward H. Schafer observes, "serpents have been

¹³ This anecdote is described in Chapter 1 of Feng Shen Yen I (1-6).

¹⁴ According to Wen I-to, the Goddess of Mount Tu is identical with the rainbow-goddess, known as the Divine Woman of Kao-t'ang ("Kao-t'ang" 100-116).

¹⁵ Even today, the story of "Great Yu who Conquered the Flood" is still a canonized text for Chinese school children. The story tells us that, during the whole period when he was kept away from home by the flood-control project, Yu was so devoted to his work that he passed by his house three times without stepping in to say hello to his wife.

¹⁶ Western iconology also connects woman with water, a fact that feminist theory has tried to recuperate in a positive way. In "The Laugh of the Medusa," for example, Helene Cixous uses water imagery to describe upsurging female creativity--a power which can turn "demonic" as a result of

associated with water in early belief in most parts of the world....the transformation of dragon into rainbow, or of rainbow into goddess, was a fact of customary belief in ancient China" (1). Incidentally, western readers of the Taoist classic Tao Te Ching will find it a reservoir of water imagery--so much so that Alan Watts names his book on Taoism "The Water-Course Way." With the establishment of political patriarchy in post-classical Chinese society, Confucianism became dominant in the sphere of ideology, while Taoism was relegated to the status of "sub-culture." It is no coincidence, then, that the Chinese language and literature should suffer a general degradation of water imagery. For example, the Chinese word Yin (陰), which was originally used to describe uncontrollable floods, has also come to mean excessive sexuality. It has, indeed, become a catchword for carnal sin in connection with the female body. In Chinese a promiscuous woman is called "Yin Fu," and to prostitute is to "sell Yin"; by extension, all temptresses of men are referred to as "disastrous water." Two variant forms of water, rain and cloud, combine to form a stock metaphor Yun-yu ("cloud-rain"), a literary cliché for erotic love or pornography. The origin of this expression is the myth of the Divine Woman of Kao-t'ang, to which I shall return in a moment for further discussion.

suppression.

The contamination of water imagery attests to masculine prejudices against women in an increasingly male-dominated culture. This kind of misogyny is not confined to sexual relationships only; its social and political implications are more revealing. As we trace the gradual corruption of Nu Kua's image from a resourceful Mother to a potential whore, we are also reviewing the increasing dominance of patriarchal ideology in feudal Chinese societies. Although the original glory of the serpent-woman had waned into a misty shadow in post-classical literature, the fear of the female power still loomed large in the fantasies of the ruling male. According to historical records of the T'ang Dynasty (618-906 A.D.), imperial palaces were often haunted by creatures from the water regions. T'ang Shu ("The Book of Tang") reports that, in the year 634, "a great snake was seen several times in Lung-yu. Snakes are portents of womankind" (T'ang Shu 36: 10b qtd. in Schafer 28). In the summer of 713, when a great snake and a large frog appeared near a palace hall, the soothsayer noted, "snakes and frogs are both of the yin kind. They have appeared at a hall of the court, which is not their proper place" (Schafer 28).

Apart from her animal incarnations, the dethroned female deity would at times reveal herself in the form of the rainbow. For some reason the white rainbow (i.e. Ni) was regarded as a special threat to the masculine essence of yang: "The white rainbow is the halo around the sun. Its omen is:

the wife mounts the husband--a manifestation of yin dominating yang."¹⁷ "The rainbow signifies attack: the pure yin essence attacking yang" (Shih Tien qtd. in Wen 92). Whether present or absent, *Ni* was a constant reminder of women's treacherousness: "The rainbow disappears: [the omen is] the woman is depraved and treacherous. The rainbow manifests itself: the woman is wanton and unfaithful" (I Chou Shu qtd. in Wen 92). Not only is *Ni* the cause of domestic trouble; it is also regarded as an evil omen of social disorder: "The white rainbow is the origin of all disasters and turmoil....The white rainbow portends war" (Chin Shu: Tien Wen Chih qtd. in Hsiao 71). As T'ang Shu amply illustrates, the various manifestations of the rainbow were intricately related to political power struggle, including usurpation, assassination and treason within the royal family.¹⁸ Ultimately, then, the "Beautiful Woman" known as *Ni* also turns out to be a "*Ch'ing Kuo*"--the destroyer of the state.

The misogynous discourse centred on the ill-omened *Ni* fully exposes the self-contradictoriness of patriarchal ideology in fleshing out its codes of signification. If the rainbow is a joint product of yin and yang, then it cannot represent pure yin. When the rainbow is seen as pure female

¹⁷ Ching Fang I Chuan, cited in Wen I-to's well-documented study of the rainbow's various significations (see "Kao-tang" 92-93).

¹⁸ I am indebted to Edward H. Schafer for this information. See Schafer 18, 22.

essence of yin at its worst (e.g. as "pure yin attacking yang" or "the wife mounts the husband"), what it really signifies is the uninhibited projection of yang, the projection, that is, of man's fear of female power. By a Taoist dialectic of reversal, one absolute term of a contradiction can transform into its direct opposite. Hence Lao Tzu's maxim that "reversal (i.e. transformation of opposites into one another) is how the Way moves" (Tao Te Ching XL).

In a sense, the female rainbow-serpent (*Ni*) shares a "negative" identity with the Taboo Woman behind bars (i.e. ~~女~~), not only because they are both made to represent the negative female essence, but also because they bear the same mark of sin--the projective violence of yang. Thus the confrontation between yin and yang inscribed in the rainbow provides us with yet another example of the imposition of Taboo.

II

For centuries, the rainbow goddess known as the Divine Woman of Kao T'ang has remained one of the most uncanny figures in Chinese literature. As a haunting presence-in-absence, she is both a source of poetic inspiration and a cause of disturbance. The myth of this prismatic figure was first recorded in poetic form by Sung Yu (c. 3rd century B.C.), a court poet of the ancient state of Ch'u. In his prose introduction to "Rhapsody on Kao T'ang," Sung Yu tells how, while strolling on Wu Shan ("Witch Mountain") with the King of

Ch'u, they caught sight of "a coil of mist, now pointing steadily skywards like a pinnacle of rock, now suddenly dissolving and in a single moment diffused into a thousand diverse shapes" (Sung Yu 65). Puzzled by this strange phenomenon, the King asked, "What Cloud-spirit is this?" In reply, Sung Yu told the story of "Morning Cloud." Long ago (so the poet tells his royal company), a former king visited the Witch Mountain on a similar occasion. When he was sleeping, a mysterious woman "coiled" into his dream to offer him "the service of pillow and mat." (In one version of the poem, this seductive figure introduces herself as Turquoise Courtesan, daughter of the sun-god.) Such a phantom of delight was not to stay, however, any longer than the duration of a dream. Before leaving the ancient king, the lady-spirit said: "My home is on the southern side of the Witches' Hill, where from its rounded summit a sudden chasm falls. At dawn I am the Morning Cloud; at dusk, the Driving Rain. So dawn by dawn and dusk by dusk I dwell beneath the southern crest" (65).

The visionary encounter enjoyed by his predecessor entices the belated King of Ch'u to desire the same, and he asks more about the "Morning Cloud" and her dwelling place. Here is Sung Yu's description of the enigmatic lady:

"Still is she and somber as a forest of all pines, where tree stands close to tree; but soon she kindles with a shimmering light; as when a beautiful lady, looking for her lover, raises lawn sleeves to shade her eyes from the sun. Suddenly her being is transformed; swiftly now she races as a chariot whirled onward by galloping steeds, with

feathery flags outspread. From the rain a darkness she borrows, and from the wind an icy breath. But soon the wind has dropped, the rain has cleared, and Morning Cloud has vanished from the sky" (66).

Despite her alluring gesture of love, the rainbow-goddess's obscure figure and icy breath suggest something unnerving about her nature. Furthermore, her sudden transformation and vanishment from the scene also cast in doubt the King's prospective meeting with her. As Sung Yu's depiction of the Witch Mountain makes clear, the place where the lady-spirit is supposed to have offered her "homely" service is most *unheimlich*: "Broad is it and vast; parent and home of ten thousand creatures. Its summit is in the realms of Heaven; its base is founded in the deep. Its marvels cannot be told, nor its giant prodigies rehearsed" (66). While embodying the unfathomable power of the Divine Woman herself, the Witch Mountain also points to the affinity between this mythical figure and the "Mysterious Female" (or "uncanny womb," which the term "*Hsuan P'in*" literally means) of the Way, the latter being described as "Mother of the myriad creatures." As Schafer has rightly pointed out, Sung Yu's Divine Woman of Kao T'ang is "a literary version of an ancient cosmic myth--a nameless goddess of the formless mists, pregnant with possibilities. She has much in common with the *Tao*, while also reminding us of that great creatrix Nu Kua" (37).

While the radiant spectrum of the rainbow is reminiscent of Nu Kua's divine property, especially her well-celebrated

virtue of restoring the heavenly orders, it also reveals her potential power to undo the same orders she is said to have consolidated: for, the way in which Nu Kua healed the celestial "wounds"--by filling the rifts and gaps in the heavens with vaporized stones of five colours--is a way of sublimation which can easily transform into a state of dissolution. In Chinese poetry, the transformation of this serpentine creatrix into the rainbow goddess is often represented by a figural sublimation of mineral imagery (i.e. "stones of five colours") into its ethereal counterpart--the prismatic clouds, which have become a token of the Divine Woman's mutable identity.

As the narrative proper unfolds itself, the Divine Woman is nowhere to be found. Her complete displacement by the landscape leaves at the centre of the poem a conspicuous gap. It is not, however, a pure lack or empty space. Rather, the apparent absence of the lady-spirit only makes her latent power more strongly felt, albeit in a diffuse way:

To what shall I liken this high and desolate hill?
 In all the world it has no kin.
 The Witches' Mountain
 Knows no such terraces, such causeways of coiling
 stone.
 Climb the treeless rocks, look down into the deep,
 Where under their tall banks the gathered waters lie.
 After long rain the sky has cleared afresh.
 A hundred valleys hold concourse! In silent wrath
 Mad waters tussle, the high floods
 Brim abreast and tumble to their home.

 Above, a rainbow glistens on the hill's grave crest;
 Below, a void whose chasms seem
 Bottomless, save for the voice

Of pine-trees carried upward on the wind. (66-67, 69)
 In its awe-inspiring aspect, the Witch Mountain seems to match the romantic sublime. Obviously, this is not exactly what the King would expect: initially seduced by the prospect of sensual pleasures awaiting his "pillow and mat," he finds instead all his senses drowning in a turbulent sea of rage. As "the pebbles grind their flinty sides, grate and churn /With a din that shakes the sky,"

Great waves go floundering;
 They run, they leap into the air, they dance;
 Scrimmage like clouds, could clouds echo
 With cataractine roar. (67)

So the poem goes on, in a relentless manner, to map out the arduous path toward the shrine of the Divine Woman:

Climb higher, look afar.
 Tall cliffs by their dizzy winding
 Confound the eye.

 Bear-wise clambers the traveller, slinging from tree
 to tree.
 Will the climbing never be ended?
 Sweat pours from his limbs;
 He stops, he is bewildered, dares not move.
 Loneliness besets him, disappointment and weak
 irresolute grief.
 Often in such a case
 The soul is changed, fears causeless come,
 Hearts fabled stout, of Meng Fen and Hsia Yu,
 Forget their boldness. (69-70)

The quest for a Beautiful Woman--which may lead to no end--is a common theme in the masculine discourse of desire; what is worth noting in this particular case, however, is the way in which the quester is transformed, both physically and mentally. The image of a climbing bear is not simply a vivid

way of troping: in the given context, it may also be read as an oblique allusion to the metamorphosis of the mythical hero Yu. The ancient legend has it that, while fighting the floods, Yu unwittingly assumed the form of a bear, which caused the Lady of Mount Tu to flee out of fear and distress. Yu pursued his mistress into the mountain, where she suddenly turned into a rock and gave birth to a son, whose name *Chi* means "rift" or "split open" (Yuan 223).

The above anecdote not only provides a useful clue to the mythical identity between the Lady of Mount Tu and the Divine Woman, but also draws attention to the significance of stone-imagery in Sung Yu's description of the Witch Mountain:

...here are great boulders split
In hideous escarpment, leaning crags,
And cliffs from whose disrupted crest
Rock slithers after rock
Into a chaos of disastered stone. (69)

As a result of this "hideous" split, the stony offspring of Witch Mountain all seem to turn demonic in a nightmarish vision:

For suddenly (whence came they?)
Flock bestial legions, hairy multitudes,
Creatures magically spawned, children of ghost or god,
Some winged, some footed; all terrible, huge and
strange,
Beyond the power of tale to tell. (70)

This sudden transformation of imagery is followed by an equally abrupt shift in the narrative, which cuts short what seems to be an endless quest by forcing it into a climactic act of conquest:

Last come the serried huntsmen, knee to knee,
 Many as the stars of heaven. For winged hunt
 The word is passed...
 Suddenly, through stroke invisible, blood spurts on
 haunch or claw.
 The huntsman's work is ended; the carts are heavy
 with prey.
 Such is the Mountain of Kao T'ang. (71)

The forceful wind-up of Sung Yu's narrative proper certainly presents a faster way of proclaiming the desired object of the quest, but the business at hand is not all that simple. "Should my lord desire to hunt there," says the poet, "he must needs practise long abstinence and fasting, and by augury select the day and hour." More significantly, the poet adds, the King must assume the properties of the rainbow goddess herself: "His banner must be woven with clouds; his streamers must be fashioned like the rainbow...." If all these proper rituals are observed,

Then the wind shall rise, the rain shall cease, and
 for a thousand leagues the clear sky shall be
 unfurled. And when the last cloud has vanished, he
 shall go quietly to the place of meeting. (72)

Meeting whom or what? The answer would seem to be too plain to warrant the question. And yet, if the cloud is the very token of the rainbow goddess's identity, then what awaits the King in a cloudless sky can only be a barren dream. The poet-narrator allows us no time, however, to think twice about this unsettling implication, which is quickly smoothed over by what sounds like a ceremonial hymn to the ruling monarch:

Thereafter shall my lord the King deal kindly for
 ever with the thousand lands, sorrow for the wrongs
 of his people....No longer shall the apertures of

his intelligence be choked; to his soul's scrutiny
all hidden things shall be laid bare. His years
shall be prolonged, his strength eternally endure.
(72)

According to Schafer, the ancient King's dream encounter with the rainbow-goddess "adds an element of divine sanction to his rule, and so brings prosperity to his land and people" (74). Taking it at face value, one might argue that the myth also seems to sanction, in domestic terms, man's omnipresent control over his wife. So Schafer remarks, "Not only can the soul of a man on a distant journey visit his wife in a dream and make her pregnant, but his spirit can effectively cohabit with her after his physical death" (74). Although such wishful fantasies can be found in both Chinese and English literature (cf. Keats's anxiety-stricken poem "This living hand"), I do not share Schafer's view that "this is the inner and ultimate meaning of the Wu shan [i.e. Witch Mountain] fable." For, instead of granting "divine sanction" to the ruling male, the Divine Woman's seductive gesture of submission only serves to thwart the masculine will to power represented by the quester-king. The subversive role played by Sung Yu's rainbow goddess seems to have a profound impact on the treatment of the Witch Mountain theme by later poets. As a matter of fact, Schafer's citation of the T'ang poems on the myth has provided ample illustration of this point. The key-note running through these poems is not one of mystical union or mutual rejuvenation, but of desolation and nostalgic longing. One good example is the

following poem by Ch'i-chi:¹⁹

The shaman mountain is high,
 The shaman woman uncanny:
 As rain, she brings the sunset, oh! as cloud, she
 brings the dawn.
 The King of Ch'u is worn and haggard, his soul near
 to extinction:
 An autumn gibbon bawls and howls--the sun goes on to
 evening;
 Red-auroral clouds and purple mists clot on the aging
 walls.
 A thousand cliffs, a myriad gullies, their flowers all
 split open;
 But I feel that despite subtle fragrance they lack the
 right colors.
 I cannot tell what travellers have gone this way in
 past or present times:
 But have any men passed by this spot without the
 feelings of autumn?
 The clouds deepen, her temple is far--no use to seek
 it out;
 The twelve peaks' tops pierce through to the deep blue
 of the sky.

The obscure implications of Sung Yu's text also seems to
 have caught the attention of Li Po, whose poem on the same
 subject ends with an explicit comment on Sung Yu's poem:²⁰

Turquoise Courtesan, daughter of heaven's god:
 Prismatic soul transformed to clouds of dawn,
 Coiled gently into dreamy nighttime,
 No heart to face the Lord of Ch'u.

A brocade coverlet blankets the autumn moon,
 A damask matting voids the orchid scent.
 Dim and dark: who can plumb it to the end?

¹⁹ Ch'i-chi, "Wu-shan Kao," Chuan T'ang Shih 847:9586.
 Translated and cited in Schafer, 84.

²⁰ Li Po, "Kan Hsing," Chuan T'ang Shih 183:1863. Cited in
 Schafer, 80. For an illuminating discussion of the water
 goddesses (including the rainbow goddess of Witch Mountain) in
 T'ang poetry, see Chapter 3 of Schafer's The Divine Woman. The
 T'ang poems quoted in that chapter shed much light on the myth
 of the rainbow-goddess, even though they do not always lend
 support to Schafer's interpretation of the myth.

An insubstantial tale--the text of Sung Yu.

Line 4 of Li Po's poem, which Schafer translates as "No heart to face the Lord of Ch'u," could also be read as meaning "heartless towards the Lord of Ch'u." The rainbow goddess is "heartless" because, in fleshing out the quester-king's wishfulfilment dream, she has virtually transformed the illusory wholeness of the male imagination into a significant "void." By the same token, Sung Yu's text is "insubstantial": despite its surface design of the conventional quest romance, which opens with an erotic dream and closes with a triumphant --if contrived--note of conquest, the "prismatic soul" of the desired female object remains inaccessible from beginning to end. By building a "pleasure dome" in empty air, Sung Yu's poem virtually hollows out the quester-king's possessive desire at the same time it seems to promise its fulfillment.

III

The transfiguration of the female rainbow-serpent from a beautiful goddess into a treacherous *femme fatale* brings us to the quotation from Ch'u Yuan's "Heavenly Questionings":

The white rainbow-serpent, clad in rich array,
Why should she appear in this Hall?
Having obtained the potion of immortality,
Why could [the Divine Archer] not keep it for good?

The above questions allude to the romance between two mythical figures--Ch'ang O, the Moon goddess, and Shen I, the Divine

Archer who is also a sun-god. Ch'u Yuan's oblique allusion to Ch'ang O as "Pai Ni" (translated as "the white rainbow-serpent") provides one more clue to the mythical identity between the Moon goddess and the white rainbow. This identity is further confirmed by the silk painting unearthed from Han Tombs, which depicts the Toad-in-the-Moon (the moon spirit) with a whitish cloud of breath issuing from its mouth. Furthermore, both the Toad (Ch'ang O) and the white rainbow-serpent are variant forms of Nu Kua. The latter, as earlier mentioned, is a moon-deity closely related to both snake and frog.²¹ With this observation, we may now turn to the myth of Ch'ang O.

Western readers of classical Chinese poetry cannot fail to notice a peculiar sense of melancholy and homesickness which is frequently associated with, or evoked by, the image of the moon. This moon-centered lyricism was a major trend in Chinese poetry for many centuries. In a sense, the moon-goddess is the Chinese poetic Muse. Blake's outcry of desire - "I want! I want!"--is anticipated and spelt out in full by the T'ang poet Li Po, who wrote "I want to climb the blue heavens and embrace the bright moon."²² Incidentally, Li Po's

²¹ Schafer suggests that Nu Kua "may have been a frog goddess" (31). Hsiao P'ing also maintains that the serpent and the frog are variant forms of Nu Kua. In an unearthed Han engraving, Nu Kua is portrayed as holding a moon with a frog and a snake in it (387).

²² Li Po, "A Farewell Banquet for Shu Yun." For an English translation of this poem, see Innes Herdan, 100.

legendary death is translated by Ezra Pound into one of his imagist verses:

And Li Po also died drunk.
He tried to embrace a moon
In the Yellow River. (Personae 117)

Pound's "matter-of-fact" account reminds us that Li Po's moon-oriented death by water was not unprecedented. We recall that Ch'u Yuan, who found a pattern of immortality in the "dying into life" of the moon, also drowned himself in quest of his spiritual abode.

Significantly, all the maternal figures in Chinese mythology, including Nu Kua, Nu Ho and Hsi Wang-mu, were moon deities worshiped by people of different nationalities in ancient China. To modern Chinese readers, however, the most familiar name of the moon-goddess is Ch'ang O. By common assent, the moon-goddess is a rare beauty, albeit a short-lived one.²³ And, despite a T'ang poet's assertion that in her natural charms "Ch'ang O has no powder or eyebrow-paint" (Li Shang-yin 102), the moon-goddess has never been quite free from thick ethical make-up and heavy moral costumes imposed upon her by her male admirers of different times. Like the white rainbow, whose serpentine tail reveals its weird otherness, the moon-goddess Ch'ang O also has something

²³ A popular rhyme-riddle about the moon goes like this:

There was a beauty without a peer,
Who saw her prime at fifteen;
She'd taken to illness at twenty-eight,
And at thirty she returned to yin. (i.e. died)

uncanny about her. As early as Han times, some myth-maker had already made out this beautiful goddess to be a toad, a lame one at that. To trace the origin of this weird transformation, we must go back to the earliest records of the ancient myth. According to Huai Nan Tzu, Ch'ang O was the wife of Shen I, a legendary hero who bears some resemblance to the Greek sun-god Apollo.²⁴ The story goes that "Shen I obtained a Potion of Immortality from Hsi Wang-mu. Ch'ang O stole the potion and fled to the moon. Nothing could make up for the loss" (Huai Nan Tzu qtd. in Yuan 200). To the above text a later Han editor added "Ch'ang O took up her abode in the moon, thereupon she was transformed into a toad. This is the Spirit of the Moon" (Yuan 200).

Although the original myth of the moon contains no explicit ethics of any kind, Ch'ang O's metamorphosis into a toad can easily evoke polemical interpretations. Struck by the unsightly form of the moon spirit, a myth-maker of later times invented the tale of "Liu Hai sporting with the Golden Toad." According to this legend, the Immortal Liu Hai--in all probability a surrogate of Shen I--possessed a "three-legged toad, which would convey him...to any place he wished to go. Occasionally the creature would escape down the nearest well, but Liu Hai had no difficulty in fishing it out by means of a

²⁴ Like Apollo, Shen I is a sun-god, and both can metamorphose into a sun-bird (the crow). The heroic deeds of both Shen I and Apollo include the killing of a great serpent.

line baited with gold coins" (Williams 403). This is, I believe, a down-to-earth variation of the original flight-to-the-moon motif, and expresses the wishfulfilment dream of all patriarchal "immortals." By having the three-legged toad (the moon spirit) under their tight control and thwarting its attempt to escape, they seem to be making up for the Divine Archer's irretrievable loss.

"The moon is lame," Campbell tells us in his "Chinese Mythology" (391); the same could be said of Chinese women in the old days. They were crippled (thanks to the invention of foot-binding) so as to be better kept under a roof, and in safe hands, too-- 牢 靠 ("secure and proper"). Incidentally, the story goes that the practice of foot-binding was introduced by Yao Niang (970 A.D.), a beautiful concubine of the Southern T'ang monarch, who compressed her feet to form an arch resembling the "new moon" (Williams 281). Such ludicrous myths about the moon and its earthly counterparts must be totally rejected or re-written because, while reflecting patriarchal ideology and the position of women born to male-dominated societies, they also reduce a vital archetype of the female principle to false stereotypes of femininity at the expense not only of women, but of art in general. As a kind of self-reflecting mirror, the myths of the moon created by a male-oriented tradition often reflect nothing but men's reflection (or projection) upon women; they are doubly removed from real womanhood.

Two modern versions of Ch'ang O's story deserve a brief consideration, as they highlight the ideological polemics engendered by the myth of the moon-goddess. In his authoritative Ancient Chinese Mythology, Yuan K'o explicitly turns the story of Ch'ang O into a moralizing fable. Yuan's highly imaginative re-creation of the myth portrays the Divine Archer Shen I as a super-hero, who is cheated out of his prospective immortality by his wife Ch'ang O. The author's moral condemnation of Ch'ang O's theft and flight to the moon is fully revealed through his elaborate description of her metamorphosis:

No sooner had Ch'ang O reached the Palace of the Moon than she felt a change in her body: her spine began to shrink, while her belly and waist swelled out to the extreme degree. Her mouth widened, her eyes became larger, her neck and shoulder were contracted together, and her skin was covered all over with sacs which looked like copper coins....In a moment this exceedingly beautiful goddess was transformed into a most ugly and most detestable toad. It all happened because of her selfishness (199).

To wind up the moral, Yuan K'o tells us that "henceforth Ch'ang O will have nothing but loneliness for company. This is the severe punishment for the unfaithful wife who has betrayed her husband" (200).

In comparison with Yuan's heavy-handed allegorization, which virtually relegates the moon-goddess to the status of the Taboo Woman, Lu Hsun's satirical tale "Flight to the Moon" presents a quite different version of the myth. For all his apparent lack of seriousness in retelling the old tales, it is

obvious that the author's purpose is to make the past serve the present, by using mythical figures as masks for the modern stage. Although the utterances and actions of these transfigured personae may still echo their mythical past, they are simultaneously charged with a modern consciousness, and can therefore reflect present-day issues and concerns. Needless to say, this kind of re-visionist myth-making is not Lu Hsun's invention. In a broad sense, the history of mythology in any culture can be traced as an ever-lasting process of re-vision. As Joan Coldwell points out, "interpretation of a myth in any period reflects the concerns and interests of its time" ("The Beauty of Medusa" 422).

Accordingly, the Divine Archer in Lu Hsun's story is presented as a frustrated husband, while Ch'ang O appears to be a nagging housewife who is bored beyond endurance by the dull routine of her death-in-life existence. Apart from her boredom, a strong motivation for her flight is the "fact" (Lu Hsun's invention) that she is on the brink of starvation. It so happens that Shen I is such a good archer that he is running out of game, having killed off most of the animals around. As a result, Ch'ang O is given nothing to eat but "noodles with crow sauce the whole year round" which she can no longer stomach. It is conceivable that, to Ch'ang O, the very sight of "crow sauce" must be an eyesore, because it is reminiscent of the dead spirit of the sun (crow is the sun-bird). Furthermore, we may recall that Ch'ang O herself was

once a prey of Shen I's game hunting. According to a neglected version of the legend, the Divine Archer captured Ch'ang O, who was originally a river nymph, by shooting an arrow into her hair (Werner 182). This anecdote reveals that, even before her flight to the moon (which makes her a cosmic incarnation of Taboo to the male imagination), Ch'ang O has already been subject to the penetrating violence of yang.

A significant invention in Lu Hsun's treatment of the myth is the moon-shooting anecdote, which describes the Divine Archer's attempt to re-capture his wife by force. If we regard the sun-god's bow and arrow as symbolic of masculine domination, then the significance of Ch'ang O's flight will become clear in the moon-shooting scene. For, once in the moon, Ch'ang O is no longer vulnerable to the tyranny of her domineering husband. Now she can look calmly at Shen I's fury and smile at his malice. This is implied in the image of the moon that "hung there peacefully, shedding a calm, even brighter light, as if completely unscratched" (27). She can even pay back his curse with irritating mockery:

[Shen I] threw back his head to hurl an oath at the sky. He watched and waited. But the moon paid no attention. He took three paces forward, and the moon fell back three paces. He took three paces back, and the moon moved forward....They looked at each other in silence (27).

It is only at this moment of face-to-face confrontation that Shen I realizes his powerlessness and finally gives up his vain attempt to conquer what is beyond his reach. The Divine

Archer's glory is gone, though he does not think his loss unredeemable. We do not know if the sun-god will carry out his proposed journey to the moon, or whether a reconciliation is possible in Ch'ang O's moon-lit domain. At any rate, the "unfaithful" wife has won the day and achieved her goal.

By way of summary, we may briefly consider the profound question Ch'u Yuan asks about the moon:

What kind of virtue does the Moon possess
That enables her to die into life?

It seems to me that the key to this question is the implicit identity between Ch'ang O and two maternal figures, Nu Kua and Hsi Wang-mu. As mentioned earlier, these two figures are both closely associated with the moon. In examining the myth of the moon-goddess, we should not overlook the significant role Hsi Wang-mu plays in Ch'ang O's flight to the moon. After all, it is Hsi Wang-mu's Potion of Immortality that has brought about a profound change in Ch'ang O's life. If the powerful potion extracted from the fruit of the Immortal Tree has tempted Ch'ang O into stealing, it has also enabled her to fly. The interlocking motifs of immortality and female "treacherousness" (in the form of theft/flight) calls for a re-vision of Ch'ang O's story. By virtue of her "infidelity," the moon-goddess epitomizes the subversive role of the radical Woman. Just as the tabooed Woman (~~女~~) can turn her "mark of sin" (一) into a nurturing source of life (一一), so the moon-goddess's alleged unfaithfulness opens the gateway

towards immortality. This is the kind of immortality we witness in the ever-changing phases of the moon, in which death is a necessary condition of life in a dialectical process of transformation.

The above re-vision of Ch'ang O's myth will inevitably undermine the celestial prison-house our literary tradition has built up for her--Kuang-han Kuong ("Palace of Eternal Coldness") in the moon. Over many centuries, Chinese poetic conventions have made the image of Ch'ang O a cosmic mirror of countless women in confinement. Hence the T'ang poet Li Shang-yin's concern for her loneliness:

Are you sorry for having stolen the potion that has set
 you
 Over purple seas and blue skies to brood through the
 long night? (102)

But why should Ch'ang O be sorry? For Ch'ang O, the moon is not a physical place in which the body is trapped, like her previous confinement under her husband's roof. Rather, it is a spiritual space for the whole psyche to play out its infinite potentialities. Although the apparent weirdness of her transformation into a toad can easily play into the hands of patriarchal myth-makers to reinforce their moral censorship, it also bears out the theme of alienation. By alienation I do not mean her alleged loneliness as "punishment" for her unfaithfulness, but the alienating (i.e. dehumanizing) effect of the male imagination. In this sense, the alienation of the moon-goddess is a symptom of masculine

repression of the female Muse-principle. In Chinese mythology, this female principle of transformation is best embodied by the maternal moon deity, Nu Kua, who is the immortal spirit of "Hsuan P'in" made flesh. It is Ch'ang O's deep yearning for re-union with the alienated Mother of All Living that has motivated her flight to the moon.

Ch'ang O's transformation symbolizes her merging into the maternal Muse-principle. This is why she has become a paragon of poetic inspiration. For the creative mind, "desiring the exhilaration of changes," will naturally and necessarily shrink "from the weight of primary noon, /The A B C of being" (to quote Wallace Stevens), and fly into the moon-lit fluidity--the X Y Z of becoming. What the moon signifies, in the final analysis, is the dialectical process of "dying-into-life" which gives meaning to immortality.

IV

To trace further the transmutation of the white rainbow-serpent, I shall examine the story of the White Snake, a Chinese lamia who has never vanished from the literary scene ever since her appearance in the tenth century A.D.²⁵

The story of the White Snake is generally believed to have its origin in folk legends about the West Lake in the city of Hangchow. One of the best-known versions of the tale

²⁵ For an exhaustive study of the lamia story in both Asian and European literature, see Nai-tung Ting 145-191.

is the prose story by Feng Meng-lung (1574-1646), entitled "Madam White Forever Confined under Thunder-Peak Pagoda."²⁶ In this story, the White Snake is presented as Madam White, a widow who, in her self-introduction, mentions no other relations except a high-ranking brother.

The story goes that a pious handsome youth, Hsu Hsuan, during one of his religious pilgrimages, was overtaken by clouds and mists and was caught in the rain. Towards dusk he encountered two women on the water, Madam White and her maid-companion Emerald. After this chance meeting Hsu was entrapped in an intimate relationship with Madam White which led eventually to their marriage. Infatuated as he was by Madam White's bewitching beauty, Hsu never seemed to love his wife whole-heartedly: her mysterious conduct involved him in criminal proceedings and other miseries before he was told, by a monk called Fa Hai ("Law Boundless"), that he was at the mercy of a serpent-woman. Overwhelmed by fear, Hsu sought aid from Law Boundless, who finally turned Madam White into her serpent form and had her "confined" under the Thunder Peak Pagoda. To put the reader's mind at peace, the story-teller says the stone pagoda was "so solid and enduring that, for thousands of years to come, the white snake would be prevented from afflicting the world" (260).

²⁶ An English translation of Feng's story can be found in H.C. Chang 205-261. All quotations from Feng's story (with page number in parenthesis) refer to Chang's translation.

The purpose of Feng's story, as the title of his collection indicates, is to "admonish the world"; and the moral is neatly spelled out by Law Boundless's verse preaching:

Of woman's beauty and charms, beware, you worldlings!
 For female charm leads to enslavement by passion.
 The unsullied mind is proof against evil's
 encroachment
 And decorous behaviour wards off wicked designs.
 Hsu Hsuan, who surrendered himself to woman's beauty,
 Was involved in scandal and criminal proceedings;
 And were it not for a monk's timely intervention,
 The white snake would have swallowed him, bones and
 all. (260)

The motif of the *femme fatale* in Feng's story reveals that women's beauty, however adorable an erotic-object of masculine desire, is also subject to men's condemnation.

In Feng's story, the condemnation of Madam White as an evil spirit does not lie in the explicit moral only; it is carefully woven into the story's structure of imagery. Foreshadowing the impending danger of yin, the story begins with an allusion to the flood, and the first encounter between Hsu and Madam White takes place by the water, on an evening of clouds and rain (cf. the seductive rainbow-goddess of Witch Mountain). Hsu's infatuation is partly the effect of his seductress's wine--the fatal drink which, as the virtuous sage Yu predicted, would cause many to lose their states (Campbell 389). Although Madam White's somewhat degraded status will not give her the chance to really destroy a state, she is nevertheless described as a "state-destroying" beauty. Along

with her wine, Madam White's fruits come "in a stream," and in due time her own delicate features are smuggled into fruit imagery such as "cherry lips" and "pomegranate-seed teeth." It is common practice, of course, in both Chinese and English literature, to associate sex with food, so it is no surprise to find feminine beauty described as being "eatable."²⁷ As a seductress, Madam White is "at once wanton and coquettish," so much so that Hsu, in a state of delirious infatuation, feels like "fish in water." This expression is a stock-metaphor for sexual love; in the context of our present discussion, however, it is subject to an ironical twist. In praise of Yu's significant (and symbolic, too) flood-control which saved thousands from drowning, a prince of Liu once said, "were it not for Yu, should we not all be fishes?" (Campbell 390, citing Tso Chun). And it is not long before Hsu finds himself drowning in the "disastrous water." Seized by horror, the husband can do nothing "but fall on his knees" before his wife and howl, "Goddess or devil--whatever you be, spare my life!"

To be sure, this farcical scene is meant to be a serious demonstration of "yin dominating yang"--a threat that our forefathers saw in the white rainbow. To reinforce this goddess-turning-monster theme, the story-teller gives us a most ghastly visual presentation of the ill-omen:

Inside, it was dark...on the bed a serpent coiled

²⁷ So in his poem "To Fanny", Keats asks: "Who now, with greedy looks, eats up my feast?"

up like a bucket, its head reared towards the skylight... its scales shone with a cold white light which lit the room. (254)

Unlike Lamia's impassioned lover, who, having "drunk her beauty up," becomes truly intoxicated and cannot live without the illusory rainbow, Madam White's cowardly husband proves to be a sober fish who manages to survive the unweaving of the rainbow by virtue of his "quest for emptiness"--the ultimate ideal of Buddhism.

It should be pointed out that the story of Madam White is only one of the earlier versions of the white snake legend. As its religious overtone and overt moralization indicate, the story is obviously a product of its own time, and reflects many of the social concerns and ethical assumptions of Confucian-Buddhist culture. Apart from Feng's treatment of the legend, there exists an important eighteenth century version in poetic drama, written by Fang Cheng-pei. According to Naitung Ting, Fang's lyric drama was based on an earlier play entitled Thunder Peak Pagoda (1738), which started "a sentimental tradition in which the lamia was presented as being truly in love and thus worthy of sympathy" (188).

In spite of her serpent origin, Mistress White in Fang's play seems to have been purged of all her demonic attributes (which are evident in Feng's story), and becomes a devoted wife. This change of character is evident in Act XVI. In accordance with the local custom, Hsu urges his wife to drink a mixed wine on Tuan Yang (the Dragon Boat Festival). Knowing

well the dangerous potency of her husband's wine, Mistress White nevertheless drinks it because, as Ting observes, "she will not displease her husband" (180). Fang's portrayal of Mistress White as an obedient wife is a radical revision of Feng's Madam White, the lustful lamia figure who urges Hsu to drink in order to achieve her seductive purpose. After drinking the wine at her own peril, Mistress White manages to retire to her chamber; while sleeping, however, she is unwittingly changed into a serpent, at the sight of which her husband dies of fear.²⁸ This anecdote not only shows the dear price Mistress White has to pay for the purchase of her feminine virtues, but also exposes the dire consequence of the husband's loving tyranny. Ironically, we see that Mistress White's selfless surrender to her husband's egocentric pleasure does not enhance her "humanity and agreeableness," as Ting seems to think, but only reveals her state of alienation.

Despite his aesthetic design to repress the "weird" otherness of the serpent-woman, Fang's (re)construction of Mistress White into a pure woman fails to create an integrated image of her. The self-contradictoriness of Mistress White's character is worth pondering. On the one hand, it may be seen as a reflection of the emotional and psychological split within the female subject, which is typical of women born into male-dominated societies as "the second sex." On the other

²⁸ Mistress White eventually revives him, though, with a live-giving herb which she obtains at the risk of her life.

hand, it points to the linguistic discrepancies in Fang's characterization of Mistress White. These discrepancies, in their turn, are symptomatic of the ideological contradictions inscribed in the construction of femininity by patriarchal culture.

A more radical departure from Feng's prose version of the White Snake legend is the twentieth century play The White Snake by Tien Han. If we compare Tien's play with Feng's story, we will immediately notice the thorough-going transformation the snake spirit has undergone in modern Chinese theatre. Significant changes are found in plot as well as in characterization. In Tien's play, the encounter between Hsu Hsuan (now called Syu Syan) and the White Snake takes place on the occasion of Ching-ming, a traditional ritual of offering sacrifice to the dead. On his way home after paying tribute at the grave of his dead mother, who "is buried behind Ling Yin Mountain," Syu meets the lady whose name is White, and who looks "like a goddess going home." To allegorize this encounter scene, we could see in Syu an "Everyman" figure on his spiritual pilgrimage in quest of the lost Mother, who seems to have merged into the image of the White goddess. Incidentally, the Chinese expression "Ling Yin"--a common name for Buddhist temples--literally means "obscured deity" or "hidden spirit," while its sound also suggests "divine yin." Thus, right at the beginning of the play, Lady White already gives us the impression of a potential mother figure. Although

a "snake spirit" by birth, Lady White is so humanized as to become a paragon of feminine virtues. This is clearly indicated by her newly-acquired name, Bai Su-jen, which means "white pure chastity."

By comparison, the character of Lady White's female companion seems to undergo a different change. In Feng's story, Emerald is presented as a sweet-tempered servant girl whose main role is to "patch up" the lovers' quarrels. All the sweet blandishments of the former Emerald are found missing in her modern counterpart--Little Blue. Enraged by the tyrannical order of law and the resultant sufferings of its female victims, the blue snake becomes, as it were, a "Medusa" figure of revenge. The important role played by Sister Blue in the modern play deserves special attention, because it points to the repressed aspect of Lady White's own character. In a sense, Sister Blue can be seen as Lady White's dark double, on whom are projected the inner drives and desires of a suffering wife. To illustrate this point, I will briefly examine the scene entitled "The Broken Bridge."

Prior to this scene, Syu had abandoned his wife and taken refuge in Fa Hai's Golden Mountain Monastery. In an attempt to get him back, Lady White and Sister Blue flooded the Golden Mountain but were forced to retreat, as Lady White was already pregnant and did not have enough strength to withstand Fa Hai's dragon staff. Flying from the fight, the two snake spirits now find themselves at the Broken Bridge, where Lady

White first met Syu in the rain. In the given context, the setting can easily evoke some symbolic associations. Apart from suggesting the broken relationship between husband and wife, and the latter's heart-breaking grief ("my heart has shattered in pieces!"), the image of the broken bridge may also remind us of Lady White's mythical identity as the female rainbow-serpent, who has broken Law Boundless's prohibitive taboo by virtue of her potential motherhood.

Against this symbolic setting, the dramatic action on the foreground seems to take on an extra significance. Just as the snake sisters are talking about Syu's heartless betrayal, the latter makes his ill-timed appearance on stage. Sister Blue unsheathes her sword in a rage, at the sight of which Syu flees for his life. The cold flash of Sister Blue's upraised sword reveals the potent power of the Taboo Woman; it also enables us to reevaluate the ill-omened rainbow in a new light. Sister Blue's impulsive gesture of revenge serves to externalize Lady White's emotional complexity caused by her faltering husband, whom she calls "my loved and hated one." Thus the double vision of the twin snake spirits adds an extra dimension to the conflict of the scene.

As antagonist of the play, Fa Hai ("Law Boundless") proves to be the real villain, although still in the guise of a saint. The tyrannical law Fa Hai represents is sterile and death-dealing, because it is based on the principle of eternal stillness and fixity which denies any possibility of change.

So to Fa Hai a female snake-spirit--a creeping creature--should forever be kept down, never being allowed to rise to a human stance. Since such arbitrary law is opposed to the emancipating principle of transformation, Fa Hai is, from a feminist point of view, a representative of patriarchal oppression.

The highlight of the play is the flooding of Golden Mountain Monastery, which is completely absent from Feng's story. This scene is a successful revision of Madam White's grim threat that she would drown the whole city in "blood-streaked water" should Hsu betray her. The story-teller's portrayal of Madam White as a malicious wife is obviously meant to remind his reader of the potential peril of "disastrous water." In Tien's play, however, the raging waves and the whole army of water spirits are conjured up, not to play havoc with innocent lives, but to besiege Fa Hai's stronghold of injustice and hypocrisy. Just as the flashing sword in the Broken Bridge scene compels a fresh look at the "white rainbow," so the upsurging billows wash away the conventional concept of "disastrous water"--an age-old stereotype of female depravity--and turn the tables completely upon the mythical patriarch. Figuring the anti-hero of the scene, Fa Hai bears little resemblance to the ancient flood-control monarch except as a demonic parody. On the other hand, the martial valour displayed by the Snake sisters and the host of water spirits flooding the stage makes the scene a

triumphant parade of female heroism.


Another significant addition to the original plot of the story is scene 15, where Lady White has become a real mother, and her baby (whose name "Meng-jiau" implies a "dream") is one month old. In a general atmosphere of festivity, Fa Hai suddenly appears to shatter her dream of happiness. As we shall see, the central conflict of this scene is skillfully woven into a symbolic confrontation between yin and yang.

When Syu sees his wife's image reflected in the round mirror, his praise of her beauty is a clear allusion to the moon:

This mirror fills me with some good cheer
The beauty of my wife is still so clear
like some good goddess in her own bright sphere.

The image of Lady White as a bright moon goddess is naturally related to the festive occasion called "Men-yue" ("full moon," i.e. the traditional celebration of the day when a baby is one month old). It would seem that the rise of her "full moon" promises the fulfillment of a long-cherished dream. With the intrusion of Fa Hai, however, the moon is confronted by the threatening sun--in the form of Fa Hai's "Golden Bowl." To explicate the latent meaning of this confrontation, I would borrow Campbell's description of the moon in another context:

The full moon, rising on the fifteenth day of its cycle, directly faces the orb of the setting sun. The direct light of the sun wounds the moon at that moment, which thereafter wanes. (391)

If the phallic wound inflicted upon the moon by the setting sun symbolizes the imposition of Taboo on a cosmic scale, then we can see its concrete embodiment when Lady White--a nurturing mother--is "confined by the Golden Ray of the Golden Bowl." This is not, however, the end of the battle. As a matter of fact, Lady White does not feel disheartened, because she knows that the vital part of her snake spirit can never be defeated or confined. That vital part is no other than the White Snake's secret double--Little Blue, a rebellious spirit who is still at large. The triumph over patriarchal oppression is fully celebrated in the final scene, "The Fall of the Tower." In the midst of "billowing clouds" and "raging water"--a powerful reminder of the previous flooding scene--the "female demon" has brought with her "all the cave spirits to revenge [her] sister." After a fierce battle the Tower God is defeated and the "Thunder Peak Pagoda" is destroyed by fire. With the "second coming" of the Blue angel of revenge, the snake spirits' arduous quest of self-fulfillment has come full circle. It is significant that the play ends with reunion, not between husband and wife, but between Lady White and Sister Blue. The emancipation of the White Snake by her Blue counterpart marks a significant departure from the conventional pattern of the quest romance. To explore its radical implications, we need to have a thorough re-vision of the Taoist symbol:  (*Tai-chi*, or "ultimate polarity of yin and yang"). The more I contemplate, the more it seems to merge

into the image of two snakes which combine to create a "full moon"--a manifestation of the female Muse-principle. What this implies is not a rejection of yang as a necessary component of androgynous unity. Rather, it is a negation of its name proper, that is, as a primal signifier of masculine essence on which is based the patriarchal construction of gender.

As "the tower falls" and the White Snake "appears gracefully from some colorful clouds," we are once again reminded of the mythical rainbow-serpent. It seems clear that, no matter what new forms Lady White will take in the process of literary production, this Chinese lamia will always embody the spirit of Nu Kua, the Divine Woman in perpetual transformation.

V

In her various guises, Nu Kua--the Chinese "Mother of All Living"--can be seen as a mythical incarnation of the Taoist Way. Being a "nameless" (or unnameable) "void" (i.e. wu), the Way is described as an omnipresent female spirit; once named, it becomes a fecund "mother" (i.e. "母"): ²⁹ "the Way begets one; one begets two; two begets three; three begets the myriad creatures" (Tao Te Ching XLII). It is important to point out that, figuring the immanent principle of transformation, the maternal Way has no essential identity as, for example, the

²⁹ See Tao Te Ching VI. I have briefly discussed the maternal attributes of the Way in the Introduction.

platonic One seems to have. Taken as pure concept, what the Way signifies is a pure lack of being, that is, a positive negation of self-identity. And yet, the Taoist text makes clear that the Way is anything but pure concept, since it has virtually no transcendent existence apart from its immanent manifestations. Instead of symbolizing the transcendental domain of Oneness, the maternal Way actually inhabits the phenomenal world of the Many, where the primordial confrontation between yin and yang becomes materialized in concrete forms. It is one thing to contemplate the generative power of a maternal principle in abstract terms, but it is quite another thing to hypostatize such principle in concrete experience. One case in point is the linguistic abuse of the radical Woman in written Chinese, which bears witness to a patriarchal culture's deep-rooted fear of the female power. As we have already seen, one woman (女) is unsettling enough to disrupt the peace and security of the symbolic order. When two women are seen together (女女), more trouble will ensue (女女 means "quarrelling," "mutual slandering"). Worse still, a gathering of three women (女女女) will constitute a capital crime (the word 女女女 denotes "treason," "treacherous," "sexual intrigue" or "infidelity"--all punishable by death). Ironically, the Taoist Way of multiplicity, though conceived as a life-giving female principle, could only lead to death when practiced by the radical Woman in actual discourse.

In Chinese literature, the radical Woman is best

represented by Nu Kua, whose triple identity has haunted the patriarchal dream of peace and security for two thousand years. A kindred spirit to Nu Kua in Western culture is the three-personed Eve, who is designated to be man's daughter/bride/mother all in one. For the benefit of future readings, it is useful to look at the figure of Eve in more detail here.

In tracing the origin of Eve's identity, we learn from the biblical myth that she is originally created by God to be a "help meet" for Adam. From the moment Eve enters the male-dominated paradise, however, she is doomed to the fate of a misfit. The "otherness" of Eve, which constitutes a potential threat to the established order of Eden, seems to linger in Marvell's mind when he reflects on the beauty of the Garden--Adam's original bride--and complains, "after a place so pure and sweet, /what other help could yet be meet" ("The Garden"). "Meet" or not, Eve does not always sweeten herself to the taste of her "author." Insofar as Eve is made from Adam's rib, she is more of a daughter than a wife. As for her motherhood, it comes to pass only after the Fall. According to Milton's version of the biblical myth, the Fall is brought about by the intrusion of a third party--the devil who seduces Eve in the form of a serpent. This fatal encounter immediately turns what seems to be domestic discord into high treason, which proves to be Adam's undoing. Prior to the Fall, a secret connection between the serpent and Eve is foreshadowed in Book II of

Paradise Lost, where Milton describes an encounter between Satan and his serpentine daughter--Sin. The mythical identity of Sin is suggested by Milton's implicit allusion to Hecate--"the Night-Hag" and "the Snaky Sorceress." In Greek mythology, Hecate is known as the dark moon goddess, who "is partly snake in form...and is always accompanied by baying hounds" (Harding 63, 255). With this image we may compare Milton's portrayal of Sin-- "a formidable shape" which

...seem'd Woman to the waist, and fair,
 But ended foul in many a scaly fold
 Voluminous and vast, a Serpent arm'd
 With mortal sting: about her middle round
 A cry of Hell Hounds never ceasing bark'd.
 (Paradise Lost 2:650-54)




What makes Sin so formidable to Milton's imagination, so it seems to me, is not her serpentine body, but her "mortal sting"--a token of death-dealing power. Armed with this fatal weapon, Milton's Sin becomes a prototype of the phallic woman. It is worth noting that the alleged seduction of Sin by Satan, who fathered her through purely intellectual means, is analogous to the serpent's seduction of Eve. Insofar as Sin is born out of Satan's brain, we may say that what Sin represents is not carnal crime, but "thought-crime." By the same token, Eve falls not on account of her sensuality, but because of her awakened consciousness. It is precisely Eve's awakened consciousness that instantly leads to the downfall of the blissful Garden state. To quote Frye's remark on the magic world of romance, "Wonderland depends on an unawakened Alice"

(English Romanticism 132). Furthermore, Eve's potential "infidelity" to the original design of God also foreshadows the death of her "author." This makes her the prototype of the Romantic Muse or "demon Poesy." As I shall illustrate later, the Romantic Muse born of the male imagination can never remain faithful to her "lawful" creator, but will always break loose from what Cixous would call "the great arm of parental-conjugal phallocentrism" (876). After the Fall, the image of Eve becomes fatally intertwined with Sin in the male imagination. What the Miltonic tradition leaves out of account is that, on the reverse side of the myth, Sin is virtually a victim of ravishment, her very name (which is itself a "mortal sting") being a phallic gift thrust upon her by "All th'Host of Heav'n":

...back they recoil'd afraid
At first, and call'd me Sin, and for a Sign
Portentous held me.

(Paradise Lost 2:759-61)

This naming of Sin can be compared to the naming of the radical Woman in Chinese. I have earlier commented on the act of naming as a means of exerting power over the named. By looking into the basic element of the Chinese sign-system--the written character--we can see how much projective and repressive violence is involved in establishing the Name-of-the-Father. It seems clear to me that one of the earliest victims of rape by patriarchy is the radical Woman, whose tabooed body bears witness to the phallic wound inflicted by

the masculine stroke — , the "great, originating and penetrating" essence of yang. This aggressive yang signifier, once projected onto the yin substance, produces the form of the "phallic woman"--  --which can plague the male imagination to such an extent that it is then relegated by patriarchy to an emblem of Sin. Paradoxically, the projection of Sin onto Woman not only prefigures death, but also heralds regeneration. It signifies, as the transformation of Wu () into Mu () suggests, the opening up of a phallic wound -- the seal of Sin--into fecund motherhood, thus turning the patriarchal code of signification up-side-down.

The dual image of the radical Woman as both Mother (cf. Eve) and Taboo (Sin) helps to illustrate the contradiction inherent in patriarchal sign-systems centred on the "transcendental signifier," which I would relate in the Chinese context to the emblem of yang. The mythical incarnation of yang is the male serpent, which manifests itself either in the person of the sun-god (i.e. Fu Hsi),³⁰ or in its ethereal form of *Hung*, the bright arch of the rainbow. To elaborate on the significance of this serpentine emblem of yang, I would compare it with the Egyptian concept of the male serpent inscribed in the Pyramid Texts. According to the Egyptian myth, the male serpent is a symbol of immortality.

³⁰ For centuries the Chinese emperors had two honorable titles, one is *Chen Lung* ("the Genuine Dragon"), the other is *Tien Tzu* ("the Heavenly Son").

"As the divine phallus in perpetual erection he [the male serpent] was the Tree of Life, or *axis mundi*, a Pole passing through the centre of heaven and earth--that is, Father Heaven coupled to the Goddess's 'hub'" (The Woman's Encyclopedia 908). The above image of the *axis mundi*--the alleged "Tree of Life"--bears a striking resemblance to the construction of ~~☿~~, the Taboo Woman. Whereas the Egyptian myth tells only one side of the story, its Chinese counter-myth provides the other side through a dialectical reversal. For, the double identity of the radical Woman (~~☿~~/~~☿~~) reveals that the "*axis mundi*" (symbolized by the yang stroke "—") can signify neither life nor immortality without undergoing a thorough transformation. In an attempt to proclaim its absolute power to name, the masculine signifier only prefigures the principle of self-negation.

Because of her latent power to break the paternal law (failing which the radical Woman cannot become a real mother -- ~~☿~~), the phallic Woman (cf. ~~☿~~) has long been regarded as a castrating "monster." Here we may recall Erich Neumann's description of "the Terrible Goddess." Commenting on the "negative" attributes of the Mother imago, Neumann observes that "the terrible aspect of the Feminine always includes the uroboric snake woman, the woman with the phallus, the unity ...of life and death" (170). In western culture, the mythical variants of this snake woman can be easily multiplied. Apart from the dark moon goddess Hecate and the Miltonic Sin already

mentioned, other serpentine female figures include Medusa, the petrifying monster, and Lamia, the blood-sucking vampire. As the prototype of all serpentine women, "the Terrible Goddess" has been portrayed as a merciless castrator, who "attracts the male and kills the phallus within itself in order to achieve satisfaction and fecundation" (171). Thus this fatal woman "rules over desire and over the seduction that leads to sin and destruction" (172).

Such nightmarish fantasy about the Terrible Mother tells us that, while embodying the ultimate goal of masculine desire, the regenerative female power also threatens to undercut the root of masculine identity. It is probably for this reason that Eve's conception should be accompanied by greatly multiplied sorrow, and "in sorrow" she should "bring forth children" (Genesis 3:16).

In spite of God's--or man's--severe sentence against the Mother of All Living, one may argue that Eve is virtually Adam's real saviour: it is her "wayward" disobedience that brings about the "fortunate fall," thus delivering her "author" from the sterile immortality of a Tithonus. From a materialist point of view, death--physical as well as "spiritual"--is the necessary condition of regeneration.³¹ In terms of literary production, we may say that the real

³¹ The Chinese concept of immortality is largely based on the cyclical process of life (yang) and death (yin), as is evident in the moon's perpetual "dying-into-life" observed by Ch'u Yuan.

immortality of the author and his work lies in the potential "infidelity" of the Muse-principle, which tempts generations of readers into the saving grace of "sin." Hence Harold Bloom's argument of misreading: "We know that we must be misinterpreted in order to bear living, just as we know we must misinterpret others if they are to stay alive" (Poetry and Repression 140).

In general, the myth of the fall is shot through by a profound contradiction: what seems to promise eternal life may lead to a death-like torpor, and what prefigures death can also bring hope and regeneration. Accordingly, the Romantic project to build a perfect and eternal paradise through visionary imagination is doomed because of this inherent contradiction: the elements of death, which the Romantics attempt to keep out of the domain of art, are already within it; they are, indeed, the constitutive negation of the seemingly self-enclosed garden. To illustrate this point, we may recall Coleridge's internalization of the temptation scene in "Dejection Ode" ("Hence, viper thoughts, that coil around my mind,/Reality's dark dream!"). As Coleridge's telling imagery reveals, the seductive serpent (in the form of "viper thoughts") is inseparably entangled with the mind. In other words, the "viper thoughts" are no intruder from without: they are in a sense produced by the mind which contains within itself a treacherous element of death. To extend Coleridge's metaphor, we may say that the poetic mind which the viper

thoughts "coil around" is the very Tree of Knowledge--deep-rooted in patriarchal literary tradition, yet capable of bearing the forbidden fruit of "sin." By sin is meant, let me stress this point, not sexual intrigue but mental "infidelity" to the prohibitive law of the Garden State. The self-enclosure of art in a perfect state of transcendence is a Romantic myth which the Romantics themselves began to unravel.

CHAPTER 2

The Other Tongue: Geraldine and the Language of Taboo

In his book on Coleridge, Reality's Dark Dream, Beverly Fields observes that "all Coleridge's major poems tell the same story: the story of paradise lost" (57). Man lost his paradise, so the biblical myth of the Fall tells us, as a result of temptation by Woman, whose name "Eve" identifies her as the "mother of all living." This association reminds us of another generalizing remark by Fields that, for Coleridge, "all women are one woman," namely the Mother, who is experienced as either "good" or "bad," or as a confusion of the two. According to Fields, the split image of Woman as "good" and "bad" mothers is a projection of man's own ambivalence. This last point is thought-provoking: why, we may ask with Schapiro, is the Romantic self so ambivalently projected onto Woman? Fields--among other critics who take a psychoanalytic approach to Coleridge's poetry¹--attempts to explain this ambivalence in terms of a psychic split within the poet, and to locate the cause of this inner split in the preoedipal mother-child relationship. The difficulty with this approach is that, in focusing on the unconscious, pre-

¹ These critics include Schapiro, Ware, Fruman and Wormhoudt.

linguistic, psychic origin of literature, these critics tend to overlook the fact that literary texts are not mere expressions of infantile fantasies or projections of psychic patterns, but are linguistic constructs of human consciousness. As such their meanings are produced and reproduced in different socio-cultural contexts, which cannot be adequately explained in psychological terms. In what follows, therefore, I will take a different approach to the ambivalent portrayal of woman in Coleridge's poetry. Instead of relating such ambivalence to the poet's psychic problems, I will explore its significance in terms of linguistic /ideological contradictions. Through a cross-cultural reading of the text, we can see that the problematic conception of Woman in Coleridge exposes the same kind of contradiction as does the dual image of the Chinese radical Woman, who is ambivalently constructed as both Mother and Taboo.

As we have already seen, in Chinese culture, the repression of female power is most vividly enacted by a whole chain of ideographic constructs centred round the radical Woman. For fear of this "oblique radical," Chinese patriarchy decrees that she should be well guarded even as a child. The Chinese character 囹, which has the radical Woman "wall'd round" in what looks like "a spirit-jail secure" (Coleridge,

"Limbo"), is used as a term of endearment for little children.² At the age of marriage, however, the radical Woman is so marginalized that we actually find her an outsider of the "home": 家. This re-vision of the ideograph suggests that, for the radical Woman, marriage does not necessarily mean subordination or attachment, as the character 嫁 seems to imply. Instead, it may signify a breakthrough: it marks the beginning of her exile, or deviation, from her prescribed gender role. With this picture in mind, I will now turn to Christabel, a major poem for our investigation in the present chapter.

Christabel: A Reading

The opening scene of the poem introduces the theme of marriage with a gloomy note: through dim moonlight and chilly night air we see a woman wandering outside of, but "not far from home."³ Why should Christabel, "whom her father loves so well," leave the father's house, in which she is sheltered "safe and free"? As the narrative unfolds, we realize that the heroine's night journey is motivated by a secret desire, which has to do with the fulfillment of a dream. To be more

² To this we may compare the character 囚, which depicts a person (人) placed in exactly the same situation, but means "prisoner" or "imprisonment."

³ Cf. the Chinese character 嫁, the feminine form of "marriage," in which the radical Woman is seen to be outside of 家 ("home").

specific, Christabel has come out to "pray" for her betrothed lover, whose identity remains curiously ambiguous. Whatever Christabel's love object may be, we may infer, from Coleridge's own hint, that "'tis not to be had at home." Since the notion of "home" is so important for the Romantics, we need to have a closer look at Sir Leoline's household, so that we can better understand his meek daughter's deviation in stealing outside the pale of the father's domain.

Upon entering the paternal territory, the first thing that comes into sight is an ancient animal--the dutiful watchdog:

Sir Leoline, the Baron rich,
Hath a toothless mastiff bitch;
From her kennel beneath the rock
She maketh answer to the clock,
Four for the quarters, and twelve for the hour;
Ever and aye, by shine and shower,
Sixteen short howls, not over loud;
Some say, she sees my lady's shroud. (6-13)

The mastiff bitch cuts a sorry figure in this passage: we see that she is so tamed by age as to be totally harmless (she is "toothless" and therefore not to be feared⁴), and that she is so tuned to the time that she can only function mechanically, like the tolling of the castle bell. The last line, however, indicates something unsettling about her. To "some" people (including the poet-narrator himself perhaps?) the dog's weird manner of articulation recalls a painful memory, that is, the

⁴ Cf. William Hazlitt's satirical remark: "Is she a sort of Cerberus to fright away the critics? But--gentleman, she is toothless." See Jackson 206.

death of the mother ("she sees my lady's shroud"). This draws to our attention the latent connection between the mastiff bitch and the dead mother. Beverly Fields argues that the mastiff bitch might be regarded as a surrogate mother in Sir Leoline's household: "in a poem where every persona has a double, the double for Christabel's dead mother might be the mastiff bitch, who would then be taken as the mother of Geraldine" (69). Such doubling as Fields suggests may cause confusion, however, unless we further examine the very different ways in which this ancient animal is related not only to the dead, "good" mother, but also to the living, "bad" mother (i.e. Geraldine). To me the identity between the mastiff bitch and the two mother figures can be explained in terms of contradiction, that is, as a dialectical unity of opposites.

What do we learn from the mastiff bitch, whom William Roberts, a contemporary reviewer, mistook for a "picturesque old lady" (Jackson 225)? This confusion is not totally unreasonable, since the watchdog's routine life is punctuated by all the feminine "virtues" one might expect of a housewife under the strict discipline of domestication. These virtues include meekness (the toothless hound is so perfectly tamed that no visible trace of her "wild" nature remains), submissiveness (she performs her daily duty "from her kennel beneath the rock"), constancy (she "maketh answer to the clock...ever and aye, by shine and shower") and, last but not

least, an unfailing sense of propriety (she utters precisely "sixteen short howls, not over loud"). Having summarized the faithful watchdog's way of living, we may now consider the crucial question: why should the hound's muffled articulation evoke the image of "my lady's shroud"?

Fields thinks that "[the hound] is the first image in the poem that overtly expresses the supernatural" (68). "Overtly," to be sure; but underneath the explicit construction of the supernatural tale of horror, we may trace some undercurrent which springs from the world of the natural. Upon closer scrutiny, what appears to be a parody of gothic nightmare may merge into "reality's dark dream": the domesticated hound may be a disfigured mirror reflection of Christabel's dead mother, whose life was shrouded by the same kind of repression as befalls the mastiff bitch.

If this be the case, in what sense can we also associate the mastiff bitch with Geraldine? One significant clue to this question is the unusual change in the hound's manner of expression upon Geraldine's entry into Sir Leoline's house:

Outside her kennel, the mastiff old
Lay fast asleep, in moonshine cold.
The mastiff old did not awake,
Yet she an angry moan did make.
And what can ail the mastiff bitch?
Never till now she uttered yell
Beneath the eye of Christabel.
Perhaps it is the owlet's scritch:
For what can ail the mastiff bitch? (145-53)

The mastiff bitch's angry moan (presumably in reaction to Geraldine's passing notice) has been commonly interpreted as

yet another supernatural touch in Coleridge's gothic tale, one more piece of evidence that Geraldine is an "evil spirit." To my mind, however, the weird sound made by the watchdog is an ambivalent sign of both recognition and rejection. What the ancient hound recognizes in Geraldine is a previous bond which has now been broken, but not quite forgotten. For Geraldine is implicitly associated with Hecate, whom Erich Neumann describes as "the snake-entwined moon goddess of ghosts and the dead." According to Neumann, "[Hecate's] principle animal is the dog, the howler by night, the finder of tracks, which ...is the companion of the dead" (170). By virtue of her domestication under the patriarchal roof (or rock, to be exact), the female hound is no longer an agent of "the terrible aspect of the feminine." Nevertheless, she still can, by instinct perhaps, sense the approach of her former ally. This recognition seems to evoke within the mastiff bitch a mixed feeling of rage and pain. There is nothing supernatural, however, in the kind of emotional complexity expressed by the dog's "angry moan." Instead, it is a natural symptom of repression. There is a tone of anger, for the hound must denounce, as safeguard of the paternal domain, her obscure connection with the Terrible Mother, whom she has learned to guard against as evil. On the other hand, the "moan" is not really an outburst of rage, but betrays more of pain than despair. What ails the mastiff bitch, in other words, is not only the intrusion of "evil," but the recognition--with

"unconscious sympathy" perhaps--of a former identity. In conclusion, we may say that the mastiff's uncanny reaction to Geraldine exposes the alienating effect of domestication. As we shall see in the second part of the poem, the dire consequence of this alienation is further exposed, in its most terrifying aspect, in the metamorphosis of Christabel.

II

To Christabel, the father's house is apparently associated with the idea of peace and security. In taking Geraldine home, Christabel believes that the same paternal protection will be extended to the maiden in distress, and that she will be escorted "safe and free /Home to [her] noble father's hall." Sheltered under the paternal roof, Christabel herself has been living in a well-guarded state--if not quite what Marvell calls "the garden state"--ever since she was born a motherless child. Sir Leoline's castle gate is "ironed within and without," safeguarded by "an army in battle array." Inside the castle, so Christabel tells Geraldine, "all our household are at rest, /The hall as silent as the cell." Granting the hushed tranquillity of the father's domain, we should nevertheless observe, in passing, that the apparent stability and peacefulness of this patriarchal household is accompanied by unmistakable signs of repression and violence. Furthermore, the head of the house, who is "weak in health, /And may not well awakened be," can still evoke the feeling of

fear and create a stifling atmosphere even in his retired state:⁵

Sweet Christabel her feet does bare,
And jealous of the listening air
They steal their way from stair to stair
Now in glimmer, and now in gloom,
And now they pass the Baron's room,
As still as death, with stifled breath! (166-71)

Following Christabel's steps, Geraldine presently finds herself in one particular cell, namely, Christabel's private chamber. As if anxious to let her new room-mate have a better view of this "lady's chamber meet," Christabel takes pains to trim the lamp which "burns dead and dim." With the help of the flickering light, a significant detail of Christabel's chamber is exposed to the viewer's scrutiny. This is the carved angel, whose feet are chained--thanks to the carver's ingenious design--so that they become the bearer of light:

The moon shines in the open air,
And not a moonbeam enters here.
But they without its light can see
The chamber carved so curiously,
Carved with figures strange and sweet,
All made out of the carver's brain,
For a lady's chamber meet:
The lamp with twofold silver chain
Is fastened to an angel's feet. (175-83)

This telling image points to the implicit analogy between the fettered angel and Christabel: both are engaged as means of

⁵ I do not intend to create a political allegory out of what has been held to be a psychological drama in Christabel, but the stifling atmosphere of Sir leoline's household and the latent tension therein undoubtedly have symbolic connotations. Chinese readers of my generation might well recall the kind of death-like torpor created by political despotism.

enlightenment, but the illumination they bring to the scene is the light of irony. There is little wonder that, finding herself in this "spirit jail secure," Geraldine should "[sink] down upon the floor...in wretched plight."

The poet-narrator's repeated assertion that, once inside the castle, Christabel and Geraldine are "right glad" because they are "so free from danger, free from fear"--which they obviously are not--can only enhance the reader's sense of irony. The irony lies in Christabel's playing the role of the quest hero in bringing the maiden out of danger, while she virtually introduces a most "treacherous" element into her father's household. This situation can be interpreted as dramatic irony, intended by the author to expose the heroine's naive blindness to the danger she is incurring upon herself by taking home an "evil spirit." This is not, however, the kind of irony I am talking about. The character of Geraldine, in spite of--and because of--her mythical identity with various aspects of the Terrible Mother, is not inherently evil; the potential danger she brings to the father's household is totally different from that traditionally associated with a vampire figure. Rather, the irony of this situation results primarily from an unwitting liaison between the "angel" of the house and the "demon" who is actually her secret double,⁶ a

⁶ Paul Magnuson argues that "Geraldine is a psychological double whom Christabel has constructed unconsciously in her dream" (102).

liaison which threatens to subvert the father's law on which the black/white categorization of romance is based.

To elaborate on this point, I shall return to the scene of rendezvous between Christabel and her "demon lover"--Geraldine. The setting of this meeting--the chilly night air, the "small and dull" moon darkened by grey cloud, and above all, the "broad-breasted, old oak tree"--not only helps create a gloomy atmosphere befitting the gothic tale, but also provides clues to the mythical identity of Geraldine. Within the framework of conventional symbolism, we may readily associate this mysterious lady in white (cf. "a damsel bright,/Drest in a silken robe of white,/That shadowy in the moonlight shone") with the "White Goddess." And yet, her "shadowy" figure, analogous to the dim moon veiled by the "thin grey cloud," also reminds us of Hecate the dark moon goddess. According to the classical myth, Hecate is also the goddess of the road, and of crossroads in particular. From this perspective, we see that Christabel's encounter with Geraldine does indicate the turning point in her life. Moreover, the meeting with Geraldine occurs at the crossroads of Christabel's night journey, a situation which implies a mental dilemma or a moral choice. If so, how do we account for the fact that the encounter with Geraldine actually takes place under a "huge, broad-breasted, old oak tree"? The answer to this question is not far to find, either. Figuring the archetypal phallic woman, Milton's Sin also shares a


mythical identity with Hecate. As the image of Hecate becomes fused with that of Sin, the crossroads situation may also merge into the temptation scene. What is involved in both cases, of course, is the moral dilemma. So far everything goes smoothly on the well-trodden path of conventional symbolism. It seems that, tied up with a whole chain of symbolic associations, Geraldine is destined to act out the negative role of the fatal woman. This is, however, only one side of the story. Before we start investigating Geraldine's "evil" doings, we need to examine the way she gets "settled" in that fatal role in the first place.

Upon Christabel's query, "How camest thou here...And who art thou?" Geraldine begins to narrate her own story:

My sire is of a noble line,
And my name is Geraldine:
Five warriors seized me yestermorn,
Me, even me, a maid forlorn:
They choked my cries with force and fright,
And tied me on a palfrey white....(79-84)

The violent manner in which Geraldine is initially "placed ...underneath this oak" seems to have disturbed few critics--if any--who are familiar with the convention of the gothic romance. Fields, for example, dismisses Geraldine's story in a matter-of-fact way: "Of course she is not to be trusted; the whole of her account may be a lie...she is after all an evil spirit" (71). Against this kind of pre-judgment, I would reopen the case so that the convicted may be given a fair hearing. In view of the fact that the "film of familiarity"

has blurred many a "competent" reader's vision of justice, I would venture to re-examine the significance of Geraldine's story, by translating it into a language foreign to the traditional symbolism in English literature.

Why should Geraldine be brutally seized by five warriors? It has been suggested that, in Coleridge's poetry, the number five might be metaphorically associated with the five fingers of a hand (Fields 183n). This interesting suggestion coincides with my argument about the placement of the radical Woman. Let us recall our earlier discussion of the Chinese character , an ideographic code of decorum whose visual enactment (the ideograph depicts a hand grabbing at the radical Woman) deconstructs its designated meaning (i.e. proper/settled). What this ideograph reveals is the self-contradictoriness of the symbolic sign structure: ironically, the meaning "proper" is established only by means of violence which is most improper. Geraldine's story testifies to the same kind of projective violence. Unlike the inexperienced Christabel, the sophisticated critics of the poem have shown little surprise in finding Geraldine where she is, largely because we have learned to regard the temptation scene (with the archetypal image of Taboo--the forbidden tree) as the "proper" place for the serpent-woman. And yet, the violence Geraldine suffers at the hands of her abductors not only exposes the injustice of her "settlement," but also challenges the critics' pre-conception of propriety in literary

symbolism.

The notion of propriety, or validity, in literary criticism is comparable to the sense of decorum in a civilized society: in both cases, the final criterion of judgment is convention. The common view of Geraldine as a female vampire, a lamia figure, and so on, has been accepted as "proper" interpretation, largely because such a reading is validated by the well-established conventions of literary symbolism. In a male-dominated culture, the "malestream" of literary conventions ultimately stems from the Name-of-the-Father. Incidentally, it is a long patriarchal tradition, in Chinese culture, to judge a person's goodness or badness on the sole basis of his/her family (i.e. paternal) background.⁷ If we look into Geraldine's family background, however, we will discover that this "evil" woman is not really an alien monster springing out of a dark wilderness. Instead, she is born of/into a well-established patriarchal tradition, since her father is "of a noble line"--the English equivalent of "the great, originating and penetrating" emblem of yang: "——." As we have already seen, it is precisely this aggressive male essence that has named the Chinese radical Woman (女) as

⁷ Hence the old Chinese saying, "A dragon breeds dragons and a phoenix breeds phoenixes; a mole's offspring can dig holes." During the "Cultural Revolution" this feudal maxim became a sacred creed for the Red Guards, who accordingly classified people, on the sole basis of their family (i.e. paternal) backgrounds, into the so-called "five red classes" and "five black classes."

Taboo (~~女~~) by a single stroke. The English counterpart of the Chinese Taboo Woman is Satan's daughter, Sin, the serpent-woman with a "mortal sting." As offspring of the same lineage (i.e., victims of paternal ravishment), Geraldine's given name also bears the aggressive character of the male. According to Arthur Wormhoudt, the name "Geraldine" contains a masculine root "Gerald," which means "spear wielder" (27)⁸ As the poem's symbolic structure unfolds itself, this hidden spear within Geraldine's name--like the yang spear ("—") planted in the bosom of the radical Woman (~~女~~)--becomes a submerged metaphor for the deadly power of the phallic woman, which poses a constant threat to the "innocent" world of Christabel. From this perspective, we can trace the central contradiction of Christabel through the figural conflict between the submerged "spear" and its opposite, the recurring image of the shield.⁹

⁸ Ironically, this phallic gift becomes a fatal weapon of revenge in the form of Geraldine's serpentine stare.

⁹ The Chinese term for "contradiction" is Mao-tun, which literally means "spear-shield." This term is derived from a classical Chinese parable which goes like this:

There was once a man selling a spear and a shield. Praising the solidness of his shield, he said: "This shield of mine is so solid that nothing can penetrate it." Presently he was boasting about the sharpness of his spear, saying, "my spear is so sharp that it can penetrate anything." Hearing all this, a passer-by asked, "suppose you attack your shield with your spear, what will happen then?" To this the man made no answer. (Han Fei Tzu qtd. in Yu Shih 157)

III

Hush, beating heart of Christabel!
 Jesu, Maria, *shield* her well!
 She folded her arms beneath her cloak,
 And stole to the other side of the oak.
 What sees she there? (54-58, emphasis mine)

Through the mysterious air of suspense, the image of the shield--disguised in its verbal form--clearly foreshadows the emergence of some impending danger. Believing herself divinely "shielded" (her folded arms figuring the cross), Christabel "stole" across the invisible boundary of graceland, and there she first encountered Geraldine, the female "spear wielder."

Although "a maid forlorn," Geraldine seems to betray some unsettling signs of aggressiveness upon her first appearance. Her exceeding beauty, with "wildly glitter[ing] ...gems entangled in her hair," is described as "frightful ...to see."¹⁰ We also notice that, in contrast to the fettered feet of the Angel already mentioned, Geraldine's "blue-veined feet" are "unsandal'd." This image, according to Schapiro, has "destructive, perhaps phallic, associations" (73). If this is true, then we must face the contradiction, namely that the

¹⁰ In his book on Christabel, Arthur H. Nethercot associates Coleridge's description of Geraldine with "the conventionalized drawings of serpents with designs of brilliant jewels in their heads" (92). Schapiro, on the other hand, thinks that "the 'wildly' glittering gems that are 'entangled' in her hair also suggest erotic as well as unbridled and potentially violent passions" (73). As we have already seen, the Chinese serpent-woman Nu Kua and her ethereal counterpart, the rainbow goddess Kao T'ang, are also associated with stone imagery, although its symbolic implications in the Chinese context are quite different.

destructiveness of the phallic "spear" also points to a dangerous potential behind the "shield." We remember that, after bringing Geraldine home, Christabel "doth bare" her own feet so that they can "steal their way" together within the father's domain. Taken literally, these two gentlewomen's way of stealing--that is, "softly tread[ing]" around the house--is hardly disturbing, let alone "destructive." In a figurative sense, however, Geraldine represents the wayward Muse whose "unsandal'd," "blue-veined feet" point to a subversive undercurrent within the poem's surface narrative.

Immediately preceding the two ladies' partnership in theft, another significant incident also illuminates the "spear-shield" contradiction. As Christabel leads Geraldine through the hall, something unusual catches the former's eye:

The brands were flat, the brands were dying,
Amid their own ashes lying;
But when the lady passed, there came
A tongue of light, a fit of flame;
And Christabel saw the lady's eye,
And nothing else saw she thereby,
Save the boss of the shield of Sir Leoline tall
Which hung in a murky old niche in the wall.
O softly tread, said Christabel,
My father seldom sleepeth well. (156-65)

Christabel's visual fixation on "the lady's eye" and on her father's shield highlights not only the poem's figural conflict, but also the heroine's inner contradiction. Critics have easily recognized the ominous connotation of the lady's eye. In view of its association with the flaming "tongue of light," and especially its fascinating effect on Christabel,

the image of the eye clearly suggests Geraldine's serpentine quality. Throughout the poem, it is mainly through her serpentine eye that Geraldine--the submerged "spear"-- reveals her fearful power."

Christabel's simultaneous fixation on the lady's eye and her father's shield betrays an emotional dilemma which can be compared, I think, to what Frye calls a double-focused dream vision. Underlying this dual vision is a dialectical conflict

" Psychoanalytic readings of the poem have brought an important theory to bear on the above scene. Elaborating on the concept of voyeurism, or "oral-visual relationship," Schapiro has pointed out the significant connection between eye/light and breast/milk. Psychoanalytic critics generally agree that the wish to "drink in" with the eyes is analogous to the desire to "suck at the breast." Preoccupied with the mother imago, however, these critics tend to assimilate every image into the archetypal Mother, thus confusing the real terms of contradiction inscribed in the poem. For Wormhoudt, for example, Christabel's wandering away from her father's house symbolizes a rejection of "the mother image represented...by the castle," and her taking Geraldine home "is really a defense against, an attempt to deny, a still more basic rejection of the mother image" (23). By the same logic of argument, Wormhoudt sees the boss of Sir Leoline's shield as resembling "the nipple of a breast", so the father's shield becomes "a convenient symbol for the mother" (25). In keeping with Wormhoudt's suggestion, Schapiro also regards the shield as a breast image. In this respect, the only difference between these two critics is that, whereas Wormhoudt associates the shield with the protective, good mother, Schapiro relates this image to the vengeful bad mother. In both cases, the real owner of the shield, the father, seems completely elided. Yet there is something even more confusing: in Schapiro's eyes, Sir Leoline himself, like his castle and shield, undergoes in due course a similar transfiguration and becomes, "once again, a loved and hated mother-figure"(74). This kind of reductive reading is far from convincing, because it fails to pay enough attention to the poem's figural patterns of confrontation. It is necessary, therefore, to re-examine the spear-shield contradiction inscribed in the above passage.

between desire and fear. With its maternal (light/ milk) and serpentine (flaming tongue) associations, Geraldine's eye is at once fascinating and threatening. Thus, it evokes within Christabel a mixture of desire and fear for the mystery she represents. The ambivalent feeling toward the potential mother, who has now become the "uncanny" other, conjures up the vision of the shield, which clearly symbolizes paternal power. The shield image is also associated with both fear and desire: it counterpoints the emotions aroused by the eye image in reversed order. To be more specific, insofar as the lady's eye kindles--as it does the dying brands--the spark of desire in Christabel, the shield may be associated with her fear of paternal censorship. On the other hand, as the aggressive "tongue of light" reflected in the lady's serpentine eye also evokes fear of transgression, the vision of the shield may arise from Christabel's involuntary wish for paternal protection. As we can see, this inner "spear-shield" contradiction is resolved in favour of the former, for the secret desire for the mother figure clearly gets the upper hand, even though it does not completely overcome the fear of the father. This is the reason why, in stealing their way across the hall, Christabel cautions the lady to "softly tread," lest her father's rest be disturbed. Because of this knowing conspiracy, the potential danger of the "spear" is

considerably reinforced,¹² and the protective power of the shield is undermined from within.

The spear-shield contradiction culminates in the poem's climactic moment of revelation, when, upon Christabel's earnest proposal to share the bed with her, Geraldine eventually comes to undress herself:

Beneath the lamp the lady bowed,
And slowly rolled her eyes around;
Then drawing in her breath aloud,
Like one that shuddered, she unbound
The cincture from beneath her breast:
Her silken robe, and inner vest,
Drop to her feet, and full in view,
Behold! her bosom and half her side--
A sight to dream of, not to tell!
O shield her! shield sweet Christabel! (245-54)

The above scene has engendered so much critical controversy that it is impossible to obtain a clear view of it without confronting, one way or the other, the critical tangle around the central mystery. Apparently, critics have been tempted into seeing the disrobed Geraldine as the "phallic Mother" in her most terrifying aspect. The poet-narrator's exclamation "O shield her! shield sweet Christabel!" is meant to imply--or

¹² It is worth noting that in Chinese, softness contains within itself an element of hardness, as the word 𣎵 (soft/docile) is made up of a spear on top of a tree. According to Taoism, the idea of softness/docility is associated with latent strength rather than weakness, and what appears to be weak may overcome the strong: "Nothing in the world is softer than water, but it has no better in overcoming the hard" (Tao Te Ching LXXVIII). In light of this, the seeming meekness of the Romantic Woman may reveal the same subversive power as the submissiveness of the radical Woman. Take, for example, the silent withdrawal of Keats's "Belle Dame", or the vanishing of Lamia. In both cases, the paternal power to name is defeated/negated by its own projective violence.

evoke--a sense of danger arising from the vision of Geraldine's breast. The image of "her bosom and half her side." which Nethercot readily identifies with "the mark of the beast," has given rise to a whole spectrum of demonic associations.¹³ To justify the commonly held view of Geraldine as an evil figure, critics have resorted to Coleridge's original version, which contains a more explicit description of Geraldine's bosom as "hideous, deformed, and pale of hue." Before the revision was made, the deleted line immediately following "Behold! her bosom and half her side" had run: "Are lean and old and foul of hue." In view of the explicit tone of disgust, there seems to be no doubt about the author's intended attitude towards Geraldine. In the manuscripts, the "mark of the beast" is unambiguously named and therefore easily identifiable. The revised version, however, undermines or even overturns the author's initial design by removing the line which Hazlitt regards as "the keystone that makes up the arch" (qtd. in Nethercot 33). As a result of this deletion, an explicit token of evil becomes an enigmatic sign that challenges every critical attempt to pin it down to a single meaning.

Now we must face the baffling question: what exactly does Geraldine's bosom signify? All we know from the text is that it is "a sight to dream of, not to tell." Does this mean that

¹³ For a comprehensive survey of this spectrum, see chapter IV of Nethercot's The Road to Tryermaine.

the sight is so terrifying--like a nightmare--that no words can describe its horror? Or does it reveal some "fatal" attraction that one can only "dream of" but must remain silent about? It seems that both meanings are possible. If so, what is the nature of that horror or that attraction? To me the poet-narrator's reticence about the sight is not merely a rhetorical device, meant to create an eerie feeling of suspense which will make the reader "shiver." Rather, the ambiguity of the sight may reflect some mental or emotional dilemma on the part of the viewer, a conflicted state of mind comparable to that described in "The Pains of Sleep," where we get "desire with loathing strangely mixed /On wild and hateful objects fixed" (23-24). Furthermore, the linguistic indeterminacy about Geraldine's bosom clearly has a deconstructive effect. The way Geraldine's mark is described --"a sight to dream of, not to tell"--is both evasive and provocative: it apparently points to something significant, but does not really mean anything definite or specific. In fact, by erasing the line containing the explicit detail, Coleridge virtually hollows out a well-established literary symbol--"the mark of the beast" derived from the Bible--into an empty signifier. Needless to say, no signifier can be really empty in actual discourse, because it is constantly filled with meanings through divergent modes of signification. In this respect we may recall our earlier discussion of the Taoist Way. Conceived as "the mysterious female," the Way is

"empty, yet use will not drain it" (Tao Te Ching IV). It is constantly named yet remains forever "nameless." Similarly, Geraldine's mark also defies the act of naming. The way Wilson Knight describes it--as a token of "some nameless obscenity" (84)--is self-contradictory, because to call it "obscenity" is already to name it--a rather violent way of naming at that. While pointing out the arbitrary nature of naming based on traditional value systems, we should guard against the nihilistic tendency to contemplate Geraldine's mark from a purely linguistic point of view. In view of the critical history of the poem, it is misleading to talk about Geraldine's "seal of sorrow" as if it were nothing but a pure mark, or simply an empty space devoid of any meaning. Rather, we should admit the fact that Geraldine's symbol-laden bosom has long been made a battle-field for contending views. Bearing her "mark of shame," the disfigured phallic Mother is no more a "still unravished bride" than the Taboo Woman (i.e. ~~she~~) is a "pure" linguistic sign. Repressed and degraded, both attest--as victims and witnesses--to the ideological contamination of patriarchal cultures.

IV

Upon revealing her bosom to Christabel, Geraldine makes a grave statement:

"In the touch of this bosom there worketh a spell,
Which is lord of thy utterance, Christabel!
Thou knowest to-night, and wilt know to-morrow,

This mark of my shame, this seal of my sorrow."
(267-70)

The "conventional" interpretation of this remark is to regard Geraldine's spell simply as the black magic of a witch, or a vampire, whose powerful influence prevents the victim from exposing their evil. An alternative approach to the enigmatic spell is suggested by Freudian critics (including Wormhoudt, Schapiro and Durham) who have attempted to explain the significance of Geraldine's supposedly "mutilated" bosom in terms of the pre-oedipal mother-child relationship. According to Wormhoudt, for instance, the "horror" of the scene arises from "the unconscious infantile fantasy of the phallic mother which is a part of the complex which lies at the basis of oral masochism."¹⁴ Wormhoudt relates the speech-inhibiting spell to the phallic mother's denial of her milk, which can make the child a "denier of words" (27). From basically the same premise, Schapiro argues that "the scene...vividly expresses the anger and terror associated with the original oral experience" (77). In her article entitled "The Mother Tongue: Christabel and the Language of Love," Margery Durham draws on Coleridge's notebooks to support her interpretation of the poem. The theoretical kernel of Durham's argument is the psychoanalytic assumption that the infant's physical contact with the mother is "the source of symbol formation and

¹⁴ For a detailed description of this infantile fantasy, see Wormhoudt 26-27.

therefore of language and culture" (170). Durham believes that Coleridge's speculative notes lend support to this psychoanalytic conception. "For Coleridge," Durham observes, "culture begins at the breast, and language is indeed the mother tongue" (169).

Reading Durham's remark with the disrobing scene in mind, we are confronted with a puzzling question: why should the maternal breast turn out to be such a sight of ambiguity --or rather, a site of contradiction? Like Wormhoudt, Durham explains Christabel's vision of "the wounded breast" in terms of preoedipal fantasies, and relates the spell to the infant's "feeding problems" (173, 182). Elucidating Melanie Klein's psychoanalytic theory in simple terms, Durham observes that "feeding problems can...create stuttering and, at last, silence" (173). The limitation of this theory, when applied to the analysis of literary texts, lies in its neglect of the paternal influence (symbolic rather than literal) in the process of symbol formation. By comparison, the Lacanian theory of language, especially its account of the father's role in the transition from the "imaginary phase" to the "symbolic order," is more persuasive and illuminating.¹⁵ In Lacan, the father/law and the symbolic order are metaphorically identical, the latter being a reservoir of patriarchal ideology marked by arbitrary division and

¹⁵ For a brief account of Lacan, see Terry Eagleton's explication in Literary Theory 164-69.

hierarchical difference. As we shall see in the second part of the poem, Christabel's double vision of the breast is directly related to the repressive nature of the paternal law.

Within the context of my comparative approach, the ambiguous vision engendered by the phallic mother's breast is analogous to the dual image of the radical Woman. The purpose of this comparison is to emphasize, once again, that what we are viewing here is more than a psychic complex anchored in pre-oedipal fantasies. Rather, the split image exposes a linguistic conflict within the symbolic order, which is itself a cultural construct. By identifying Geraldine--the "phallic mother"--with the Taboo Woman, I hope to re-locate the discourse centred on the "phallic mother" outside the pale of psychoanalysis, so as to expound the significance of the term in a different context. A consideration of the Taboo Woman will expose Geraldine's disfigurement in a new light: it will enable us to see the unfairness of blaming the phallic mother for "denial of her milk." The construction of the Chinese character ~~封~~ reveals that it is patriarchal prohibition that has barred the maternal breast from her nurturing function. Instead of talking about the pre-oedipal child's feeding problems, therefore, I suggest we should treat the post-Edenic quester's malnutrition as a symptom of cultural dis-ease.

As we have already seen, the Taboo Woman's mark of sin is both a sign of violence and a token of repression (for the yang spear "—" also signifies the lock on her prison cell).

Similarly, Geraldine's "mark of shame"--a result of her brutal abduction and placement--also becomes a "seal" of her sorrow (cf. "they choked my cries with force and fright"). In her attempt to lift the seal so that both her shame and sorrow are exposed, Geraldine has to brave great pain as well as inner conflict: "Deep from within she seems half-way /To lift some weight with sick assay" (257-58). What she is lifting, so to speak, is the same seal of censorship that has cancelled the radical Woman as Taboo. In revealing her secret to Christabel, Geraldine seems determined to break the taboo at any cost. If so, why should she cast a speech-inhibiting spell on her confidant? Obviously, this contradiction cannot be explained away by the conventional interpretation which sees the spell as the witch's black magic. In fact, such interpretation is valid only on the assumption that Geraldine's "mutilated" breast is a mark of her evil identity. If, as I have suggested, we see her mark rather as an evidence of victimization, then we must reconsider the nature of the spell.

If we listen to Geraldine's words more attentively, we will find that the spell has a clearly masculine overtone. It is, as Geraldine tells Christabel, "lord of thy utterance" (emphasis mine)--that is, a kind of paternal control over her

speech.¹⁶ In view of this gender-specific metaphor, the psychoanalytic readings that relate the spell to the mother's denial of her milk (which causes difficulty or loss of speech) seem to be off the mark. For one thing, the spell as Geraldine describes it is figuratively related to the father rather than the mother. Furthermore, instead of creating stuttering or silence, this lordly spell does not really forbid Christabel from speaking eloquently. It only decrees that she speak--against her better knowledge--"the language of love" alone:

Thou knowest to-night, and wilt know to-morrow
 This mark of my shame, this seal of my sorrow;
 But vainly thou warrest,
 For this is alone in
 Thy power to declare,
 That in the dim forest
 Thou heard'st a low moaning,
 And found'st a bright lady, surpassingly fair;
 And didst bring her home with thee in love and in
 charity,
 To shield her and shelter her from the damp air.
(269-78)

The visual effect of the above passage (the only passage in the poem that has a telling shape) is reminiscent of George Herbert's "Easter Wings." For illustration, here is the second stanza of that shape poem:

My tender age in sorrow did begin;
 And still with sicknesses and shame
 Thou didst so punish sin,
 That I became
 Most thin.
 With thee


¹⁶ My argument here coincides with Karen Swann's, which relates the spell to "masculine prohibition." See her article " 'Christabel': The Wandering Mother and the Enigma of Form" 549.

Let me combine,
 And feel this day thy victory;
 For, if I imp my wing on thine,
 Affliction shall advance the flight in me.

Reading these two passages together, with their visual forms superimposed one upon the other, we can sense a touch of irony filtering through this "montage." Just as the divine wings facilitate the angelic speaker's imaginary flight in Herbert's poem, the lordly spell also enables Christabel to flourish into verbal eloquence. And yet, the very "power" that seems to broaden her speech--in form (i.e. line-length) at least--is located in a line which is the "most thin" in the passage. If we take the hint from Herbert's poem that what is "most thin" is also "most poor," we will see that, by a similar visual effect, the seeming abundance of the "language of love" dictated by the spell is undercut by the poverty of the power that generates it.

In brief, as long as Christabel does not expose the secret about the mark on Geraldine's breast which is Taboo, "all will yet be well." As a token of paternal censorship, the spell signifies not only the repression of the phallic mother (the real source of her sorrow being sealed), but also her domestication ("bring her home...to shield her and shelter her") through sublimation ("in love and in charity").

One sample product of this kind of "housing" programme is the mastiff bitch. As we have seen earlier, this watchdog incorporates the paternal spell to such perfection that she

virtually becomes a living echo of the castle-bell. It is precisely this castle-bell that casts a spell of death-like torpor over the whole house. This brings our attention to the way the name "Christabel" is made to chime with the "spell" (267-68) at the very beginning of Geraldine's grave admonition. We have reason to feel uneasy about this perfect rhyming, especially because these two words also echo the "castle-bell." Upon closer scrutiny, we can find an implicit affinity between Christ-a-bel and the castle-bell, since both the belle and the bell belong to, and inhabit, the father's domain. In addition, the name Christabel contains all the alphabetic elements--c,a,s,t,l,e,b--that make up the castle-bell. In a sense, Christabel sounds very much like a sublimated form of the castle-bell: if the tolling of the castle-bell proclaims the established paternal order ("hence the custom and law began" 338), the same code of signification is inscribed in Christabel's indoctrinated ways of thinking and speaking. By virtue of sublimation "in a finer tone," Christabel's naive belief in her security () under the father's roof miraculously broadens into a vision of heavenly peace and love enveloping all men under the celestial dome:

...this she knows, in joys and woes,
That saints will aid if men will call:
For the blue sky bends over all! (329-31)

This is, to be sure, "the language of love," which is learned--I suspect--not so much at the mother's breast as from the church father's preaching. According to Klein's

psychoanalytic view, the function of this kind of language is both reparatory and redemptive: it enables us, as Margery Durham argues, to reshape "Mother Nature," who is "fallen, deadly, in league with the devil,"¹⁷ to our heart's desire. Hence Schapiro's rather optimistic comment on the sky-dome image: "Coleridge thus ends hopefully, with the benevolent maternal image of a blue sky bending attentively and lovingly over all" (78).

In emphasizing the note of hope, Schapiro's reading seems less than sensitive to the ironic undertone with which Part

¹⁷ These are words Durham has used to describe Geraldine, whom she identifies not only as "Mother Nature," but also as "everyone's tragic flaw" (189). To some extent, the psychoanalytic theory of reparation can be seen as a "scientific" version of the Romantic project of redemption, which involves both the domestication of the Muse principle and the sublimation of Mother Nature. It is a grand illusion on the part of the Romantic quester that, through possessing the Muse-principle, he could re-establish the original "garden state"--albeit with words--upon the ruins of a fallen civilization. In "Kubla Khan," for instance, we witness a tendency towards sublimation, whereby the poet attempts to construct a visionary paradise in the air:

Could I revive within me
Her symphony and song,
To such a deep delight 'twould win me,
That with music loud and long,
I would build that dome in air,
That sunny dome! those caves of ice! (42-47)

The symbolic action in "Kubla Khan" strives for a reconciliation of opposites. As the poet's wish is expressed in the subjunctive mood, however, his chance of success is very much in doubt. Moreover, the shadow of Khan's pleasure-dome floating on the waves also seems to prefigure the vulnerability of the airy paradise built out of the male imagination.

One is concluded. This subtle tone of irony, which seems to hover between the lines, is characteristic of the poem in general and often undercuts the explicit "message" of the text. An elaborate trope for this deconstructive tendency is to be found in the opening of Part Two, which begins with a description of the castle-bell:

Each matin bell, the Baron saith,
Knell us back to a world of death.
These words Sir Leoline first said,
When he rose and found his lady dead.
These words Sir Leoline will say
Many a morn to his dying day.

And hence the custom and law began
That still at dawn the sacristan,
Who duly pulls the heavy bell,
Five and forty beads must tell...
(332-41)

The solemn atmosphere is broken, however, by "three sinful sextons' ghosts," who "fill up the space between" each pious stroke with mimicking notes of their own. To reinforce this triple mockery of the sacristan's "doleful tale," the "devil" himself sends back "a merry peal." It is significant to note that, while the castle-bell recalls the dead mother and the life-in-death existence of Sir Leoline, the "merry peal" from the devil awakens Geraldine and gives her both courage and vitality:¹⁸

The air is still! through mist and cloud
That merry peal comes ringing loud;
And Geraldine shakes off her dread,

¹⁸ In his book Eros and the Romantics, Gerald Enscoe makes an insightful remark that "the demonic forces become identified with the only signs of life in the castle" (54).

And rises lightly from the bed. (360-63)

To translate the poem's intricate symbolism into an allegory of language, we may say that the castle-bell represents the symbolic order based on the father's law, whereas the mocking echo from the unholy trinity and the devil's "merry peal" conspire to bring about its deconstruction. In view of the subversive role Geraldine plays within Sir Leoline's house, we may as well admit that she is "in league with the Devil."

What kind of overtone can we hear from the unison between Christabel and the castle-bell, the two chiming together under the lordly spell? To answer this question we must re-consider the symbolic function of the castle-bell. Throughout the poem, the castle-bell serves to highlight the poem's central contradiction, because it is associated not only with the theme of love/marriage but also with that of death. As a recurring motif of love-in-death, the castle-bell is closely related to the dead mother. For illustration we may recall Christabel's following account of her mother:

I have heard the grey-haired friar tell
How on her death-bed she did say,
That she should hear the castle-bell
Strike twelve upon my wedding-day. (198-201)

As if in answer to the mother's death-bed wish, Christabel's first meeting with Geraldine--at the "witching" hour of midnight, as Nethercot puts it--was heralded by the tolling of the castle-bell. Under the "broad-breasted, old oak tree" with

"rarest mistletoe" growing on it, Geraldine had no sooner introduced herself than she began asking for Christabel's hand:

I thought I heard, some minutes past,
 Sounds as of a castle bell.
 Stretch forth thy hand (thus ended she),
 And help a wretched maid to flee. (100-103)

The above passage can be read as a prelude to the intricate relationship between Christabel and Geraldine, whose coming together foreshadows domestic trouble in Sir Leoline's house. As we shall see later, Geraldine is not merely the involuntary carrier, but also the positive destroyer, of the spell. Insofar as the spell functions only through the touch of her bosom, we may say that the phallic woman is the constitutive negation of the paternal spell that has banned her as Taboo. To lift the Taboo planted within her bosom (cf. ~~the~~), Geraldine needs the help of Christabel, her secret sharer. Our earlier analysis of the character ~~the~~ reveals that the "proper" settlement of the radical Woman has much to do with the hand (~~the~~). By the same token, we have seen that Geraldine also suffers a heavy-handed settlement (she was "ruthlessly seized" and dumped at the spot of sin by the five ruffians who stand for the symbolic hand). In asking for Christabel's hand, however, Geraldine is actually seeking a re-placement. Significantly, it is Christabel who first opened the iron gate for Geraldine, and then, "with might and main /Lifted her up, a weary weight,/ Over the threshold of the

gate" (130-32). This revealing detail has been interpreted in terms of sexual symbolism (Fields 75), or in moral terms as indicating that "evil cannot attack one unless one allows it to enter by one's own act and permission" (Nethercot 155). In light of the suggestion that Geraldine is Christabel's psychological double (Magnuson 102), we may say that Geraldine also figures the Taboo within Christabel that has to be lifted. In Coleridge's poetry, the recurrent image of lifting some internal weight not only brings together the two female figures in Christabel, but also betrays some "unconscious sympathy" between Coleridge himself and his female characters. Just as Christabel has "lifted...a weary weight" in the form of Geraldine, and later Geraldine herself endeavors to "lift some weight with sick assay" from her bosom, so the poet in "Dejection Ode" also yearns to "lift the smothering weight from off [his] breast."

The Taboo Woman (~~♀~~) shares a dialectical identity with the Mother (~~♀~~). This identity helps illuminate the role of Geraldine, the serpent woman, as a mother figure. Upon her first appearance in the poem, Geraldine's potential identity as both Mother and Taboo is obliquely indicated by her association with the "broad-breasted, old oak tree." What this image signifies, among other things, is a site of contradiction: it contains a dialectical unity of opposites, symbolized by the convergence of the nurturing breast of the

Mother and the mortal fruit of Taboo.¹⁹ In this complex image

¹⁹ In tracing the "psychological roots" of the classical myths of the Fall, Durham points out the affinity between the forbidden fruit and the maternal breast and makes the following comments:

Tasting the forbidden fruit (so like the breast in appearance and in function) brings the knowledge of good lost and evil got, but also of good to be restored--on the symbolic, therefore communal or cultural level now and, Klein would argue, through the work of the human imagination (191).

But why should the nurturing breast have the same deadly function as the forbidden fruit? To solve this puzzle we need to examine Durham's interpretation of the poem's moral vision, which contains a stern judgment of the "phallic mother":

As Mother Nature [Geraldine] is fallen, deadly, in league with the Devil, even while she bears her sad disfigurement. In secular terms she is both the victim of death (since nature is what dies) and its cause. Even if we admit that Christabel, being natural, is corruptible by herself, Geraldine precipitates and epitomizes that condition. She is everyone's tragic flaw, as Christabel is our image of innocence (and at last, beyond the scope of our present study, of redemption) (189).

The above interpretation is largely in keeping with the Romantic view of redemptive imagination and the Romantic conception of physical Nature (i.e. the darker, material aspect of Mother Nature). Because of this ideological affinity, Durham's reading is uncritical of Coleridge's treatment of the female characters in "Christabel." It is interesting, however, to see the way Durham attempts to smooth out the poem's unresolved contradictions through evasion and exclusion. By using a concessional syntax ("even while she bears..."), Durham casually by-passes the causal relationship between the disfigurement of Geraldine (who represents "Mother Nature") and her "fallen," "deadly" and "demonic" nature. Furthermore, the crucial question of how Christabel's innocence (which is lost in the course of the poem) could be redemptive is left undiscussed. I suspect that it is a question not only "beyond the scope" of Durham's study, but also beyond the poem's own ideological grasp. This is probably the reason why Coleridge left the poem unfinished. As it now stands, it is difficult to see in Christabel the image of redemption.

of life and death, we see at once the source of desire and the cause of fear.

Geraldine's ambiguous identity reflects the Romantic quester-poet's ambivalence towards the Mother/Muse. For the Romantic idealist, the quest for the lost Mother (who is both the cause and the object of desire) will inevitably lead to knowledge of the material world of experience, permeated by death and sin. As such knowledge poses a potential threat to the visionary paradise within (cf. "viper thoughts" arising from "reality's dark dream"), it is the poetic equivalent to the biblical myth of the Fall. In this context, we can see that Christabel's "fall" from innocence is also related to the acquisition of knowledge ("Thou knowest to-night, and wilt know to-morrow,/ This mark of my shame, this seal of my sorrow"). What Christabel knows, however, is Taboo--"a sight to dream of, not to tell!" Within the context of the biblical myth, Geraldine's statement that "in the touch of this bosom there worketh a spell" seems to echo, ironically, the divine admonition against transgression and its fatal consequence. This association is put into question, however, by the ambiguous nature of the spell, which is riddled with conflicting implications. The irony is that, for the spell to "work," the transgression must have already taken place. In other words, the imposition of the spell only guarantees its doomed destruction. Furthermore, the "spell," which could be read as a warning against the touch, also suggests the

attraction of the touch. As such it could signify the fascinating effect, rather than the fatal consequence, of the touch. Thus Geraldine's bosom represents a dialectical complex in which the tasting of the forbidden fruit and the nurturing at the mother's breast become two aspects, the manifest and the latent content, of the same ambivalent dream.

This ambivalence implies a double discourse on the biblical myth of the fall: apparently, breaking the taboo imposed by the father's law brings "the knowledge of good lost and evil got" (Durham 191). Hence Christabel's feeling of guilt ("Sure I have sinn'd") upon waking in the morning. It is important to note, though, that this guilty feeling is clearly an internalization of patriarchal censorship that has not only banned the female body as Taboo (~~cf.~~), but also outlawed any form of female union (cf. ~~cf.~~). On the other hand, the touch of Geraldine's "mark of shame"--which signifies the breaking of Taboo--brings into full play her potentiality as a mother figure. Despite the critical scandal that Geraldine might be Christabel's male lover in disguise,²⁰ their night together is described mainly in terms of mother-child relationship:

And lo! the worker of these harms,
That hold the maiden in her arms,
Seems to slumber still and mild,
As a mother with her child. (228-31)

²⁰ This scandalous suggestion has been attributed to Hazlitt. As Karen Swan points out, the rumour that Geraldine was intended to be a male lover in disguise "is a subterfuge masking the real scandal of Christabel--that Geraldine is a woman" ("Literary Gentlemen" 406).

By calling Geraldine "the worker of...harms" and describing her arms as Christabel's "prison," the poet-narrator seems to be reminding the reader (or himself, perhaps) that Geraldine is meant to be an incarnation of Sin, and whoever touches her will become a sinful prisoner, or Taboo-- ~~✗~~ . If this is indeed Coleridge's intention, then we must say that his moral design is seriously undercut by its linguistic execution. There is no trace of harm, for instance, in the description of Christabel's "after-rest" in Geraldine's arms:

... oft the while she seems to smile
 As infants at a sudden light!

 No doubt, she hath a vision sweet.
 What if her guardian spirit 'twere,
 What if she knew her mother near? (317-28)

Whatever invisible "harm" Geraldine might have done during her one-hour mission, its immediate effect on Christabel seems to be both enlightening and revitalizing. At this point we may recall the light/milk association made by psychoanalytic critics such as Wormhoudt and Schapiro. Considering the "sudden light" that beams over the smiling Christabel, it would make more sense to see Geraldine as a nurturing mother rather than "the bad, denying mother" that Schapiro has so frequently made her out to be.²¹

The transfiguration of Geraldine in Christabel's dream-

²¹ Commenting on Geraldine's remark "In the touch of this bosom there worketh a spell/Which is lord of thy utterance, Christabel," Schapiro observes: "the bad, denying mother thus takes her revenge" (77).

like vision illustrates the dialectic of reversal, which is analogous to the transformation of ~~♂~~ (Taboo) into ~~♀~~ (Mother). Contrary to the divine prohibition against transgression, we may learn, with Christabel, that the breaking of Taboo imposed by the phallic law (—) does not lead to death. Instead, it lifts the seal on the mother's breast, thus opening up the gateway towards regeneration.²²

There remains one more question to ask: who might "her guardian spirit" refer to in the above passage? In the given context, this "guardian spirit" appears to refer to Christabel's dead mother, although the only tangible "mother near" to Christabel is Geraldine. The implication of a potential identity between Geraldine and the "guardian spirit" reveals a contradiction between the two maternal figures. Immediately preceding the undressing scene, there is a visionary confrontation between Geraldine and the "ghost" of Christabel's mother, which seems to be conjured up only to expose Geraldine's "evil" identity. Upon the entry of the dead

²² By way of explaining Christabel's apparent unrest while sleeping in Geraldine's arms, the poet-narrator suggests that " 'tis but the blood so free / Comes back and tingles in her feet." Despite its unsettling implications, Christabel's experience seems to be a "dying-into-life" which begins, significantly, with her naked feet. The unrestrained measure of freedom Christabel learns from her secret double (the dark Muse figure) counterpoints the light-bearing angel's chained feet--a figure of imprisonment which is reminiscent of Keats's poetic Muse (cf. "On the Sonnet": "If by dull rhymes our English must be chain'd, / And like Andromeda, the Sonnet sweet / Fetter'd...").

mother (whose presence is invisible to Christabel), Geraldine suddenly starts to speak a weird language:

"Off, wandering mother! Peak and pine!
I have power to bid thee flee....
Off, woman, off! this hour is mine--
Though thou her guardian spirit be,
Off, woman, off! 'tis given to me." (205-6; 211-13)

The tension between Geraldine and the dead mother has been interpreted as "a struggle between the good- and bad-mother symbols which are vying for dominance in Christabel's (that is Coleridge's) unconscious" (Wormhoudt 25; see also Schapiro 76). The battle lines between "good" and "bad," however, are not as clear as they appear to be. As a matter of fact, we have reason to wonder why the struggle should be staged at all. For one thing, it is the dead mother who has expressed her wish to hear the castle-bell on the eve of Christabel's wedding. Furthermore, the ghost of Christabel's mother does not come uninvited; both Christabel and Geraldine wish that the mother were present. If, as Wormhoudt suggests, the night Christabel spends with Geraldine "is to be her wedding night since the mother has actually appeared"(25), why should Geraldine feel threatened by the "wedding guest" who is also a kind of go-between? One plausible explanation is that the mother's spirit, finding on the predicted wedding night that her daughter has got the wrong person, attempts to protect her by "active intervention" (Enscoe 46-47). The "good" mother's protective gesture (though invisible to us) proves to be quite ineffectual: in apparent defiance of this "guardian spirit,"

Geraldine claims: "I have power to bid thee flee." And yet, it is the mother's "wine of virtuous powers" that gives Geraldine renewed strength:

Again the wild-flower wine she drank
 Her fair large eyes 'gan glitter bright,
 And from the floor whereon she sank,
 The lofty lady stood upright. (220-23)

Could this mean that Christabel, by offering Geraldine the "cordial wine" her mother has made "of wild flowers," has unwittingly contributed to the defeat of her mother's spirit? If we take the "guardian spirit" as referring to the ghost of Christabel's mother, is it possible, then, that this lost spirit--defeated partly by the virtuous powers of her own wine--should reappear to bring "a vision sweet" to her daughter sleeping in her enemy's arms? In addition to this apparent lapse in logic, we have also noted the ambiguous identity of the "guardian spirit," since the title could refer to both Geraldine and the mother's spirit. In view of this ambiguity, are we to infer that Geraldine has replaced the dead mother as Christabel's "guardian spirit"? Or is it, rather, that Geraldine and the "wandering mother" are the same "guardian spirit" in different guises? The discrepancies we have so far examined put into question the symbolic dichotomy between the "good- and bad-mother." More significantly, the self-contradictoriness of the text also challenges any critical attempt to see the poem as a unified work. The ambiguous identity of Christabel's "guardian spirit" suggests

that, underneath their apparent conflict, the dead mother and Geraldine may actually conspire to undermine the poem's (or the critic's) ideological design which attempts to pin them down in binary opposition.

The whole issue of identity is cast into greater doubt by the tone of uncertainty in which the suggestion is made: "what if her guardian spirit 'twere,/What if she knew her mother near?" (327-28, emphasis mine). As though to dismiss--or counterbalance--this dubious association, the poet-narrator makes what appears to be a strong assertion:

But this she knows, in joys and woes,
That saints will aid if men will call:
For the blue sky bends over all!
(329-31, emphasis mine)

The rhetoric of self-correction, whereby any transgression of thought is checked and brought back into the "proper" track, is not unfamiliar in Coleridge's poetry. Take, for example, the following passage from "The Eolian Harp":

Full many a thought uncall'd and undetain'd,
And many idle flitting phantasies,
Traverse my indolent and passive brain,
As wild and various as the random gales
That swell and flutter on this subject Lute!

And what if all of animated nature,
Be but organic Harps diversely fram'd,
That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps
Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,
At once the Soul of each, and God of all?

But thy more serious eye a mild reproof
Darts, O beloved Woman! nor such thoughts
Dim and unhallow'd dost thou not reject,
And biddest me walk humbly with my God,
Meek Daughter in the family of Christ!
(39-53, emphasis mine)

Christabel, like the "meek Daughter" depicted above, also figures both the ideal "Woman" and the poet's better self. Ironically, in both cases, it is the "wild," "unhallow'd" thoughts--whose satanic nature is hinted at by serpentine imagery in the "Dejection Ode"--that seem truer to the heart's desire. The confrontation between the "animated nature" (in every sense a mother figure) and God, like the figural conflict between "the lady's eye" and the father's shield, betrays a latent contradiction in Coleridge's poetry.

The same contradiction can be traced in the ambiguous relationship between Geraldine and Christabel. As we follow these two female characters into the second part of the poem, we find increasing tension between them which eventually deteriorates into open enmity. This drastic change occurs, we observe, with the symbolic transition from the nocturnal dream world into the world of broad daylight. Significantly, the dawning of the day also heralds the entry of the father.

V

As dawn breaks upon Sir Leoline's castle, the sacristan's "warning knell" tolls Christabel back into the world of consciousness. She wakes and finds herself in a "fallen" state: "Sure I have sinn'd!" (381). On the other hand, the devil's mocking echoes coming "through mist and cloud" fill Geraldine with renewed energy: upon hearing the "merry peal," Geraldine "shakes off her dread,/And rises lightly from the

bed" (362-63). The first thing Geraldine does after getting up is worth noting: she "puts on her silken vestments white, /And tricks her hair in lovely plight" (364-65). The function of this descriptive detail is two-fold: by showing what Geraldine does, it obliquely tells us what she is, depicting her as a fatal temptress disguised as a maiden in distress. The key to Geraldine's treacherous identity is her "lovely plight," a telling pun--we have seen her "in wretched plight" in Part One--which turns her mental suffering into physical attractiveness. In other words, we are led to read Geraldine's distress as a means of seduction. Seen in this light, even the clothes Geraldine "puts on"--presumably to conceal her secret mark--seem to yield a double meaning. While the "silken vestments" apparently indicate some soft, smooth texture befitting a lady of fine quality, the same could also carry the negative connotation of some cold, slippery surface. The symbolic implications of the colour white is equally ambiguous: it could symbolize the chastity of a virgin bride, or connote the fatal pallor of the "White Goddess" (cf. the image of "Life-in-Death" in The Ancient Mariner).

It should be pointed out that, by virtue of the ambiguities examined above, it is not Geraldine alone who gets shortchanged. As a matter of fact, each linguistic device against the fatal woman can function as a two-edged sword. For example, the same "lovely plight" that falsifies Geraldine's distress can also compromise Sir Leoline's fatherly intention

toward Geraldine. We may legitimately suspect that, instead of being motivated by genuine sympathy for the distressed maiden, the Baron is tempted by her physical allure into such an exaggerated display of chivalry that he not only "[forgets] his age," but also forgets his pious "devotion" to his dead wife.

Against this cynical view one might argue, in Sir Leoline's defense, that the Baron's chivalric attitude toward Geraldine stems from his manly friendship, deep-rooted albeit broken, with her father. Indeed, the baron's first sign of emotion upon hearing Geraldine's story comes with his recognition of the name-of-the-father:

But when he heard the lady's tale,
And when she told her father's name,
Why waxed Sir Leoline so pale,
Murmuring o'er the name again,
Lord Roland de Vaux of Tryermaine?

.....
Sir Leoline, a moment's space,
 Stood gazing on the damsel's face:
And the youthful Lord of Tryermaine
Came back upon his heart again. (403-7; 427-30)

Apparently, the function of the above lines is to underscore the paternal aspect of Sir Leoline's relation to Geraldine, lest the reader should read "the cheerful wonder in his eyes" upon seeing "so bright a dame" as a sign of sexual infatuation. One might even argue that, in Sir Leoline's eyes, Geraldine is not so much a woman as a figure, since her person and her story have only a figurative function, that is, as a stand-in for another person and another story. Just as the

daughter's tangible presence momentarily fades into the remembered face of her father, so the story of female victimization is instantly replaced by the story of male friendship. The latter theme, being one that Coleridge clearly feels more at home with, helps produce what he calls "the best & sweetest Lines [he] ever wrote" (Collected Letters 3:435):

Alas! they had been friends in youth;
But whispering tongues can poison truth;
And constancy lives in realms above;
And life is thorny; and youth is vain;
And to be wroth with one we love
Doth work like madness in the brain.
And thus it chanced, I divine,
With Roland and Sir Leoline. (408-15)

Thus the poet-narrator readily appropriates female affliction into the service of male discourse. To counterpoint the phallic mother's "mark of shame," he shows us the fathers' "scars" of noble suffering and "marks" of enduring affection (421-26). In a fit of rage, the aged knight swears by "the wounds in Jesu's side" that he will avenge "the child of his friend" on her abductors by "[dislodging] their reptile souls / From the bodies and forms of men" (442-43). The metaphorical identification of Geraldine's abductors with Sir Leoline's own foes (both are described by serpentine imagery) suggests the baron's self-projective reading of Geraldine's story in terms of his own experience.²³ Once absorbed into the manly themes

²³ I am indebted to Richard A. Rand's "Geraldine," which examines the figurative function of Geraldine's story and Sir Leoline's self-projective reading of it from a linguistic, and

of gallantry and friendship, the dubious tale of the maiden in distress becomes a luring introduction to Sir Leoline's heroic drama: it gives him the opportunity to reassert his shaken ideal of constancy, thereby facilitating his imaginary flight--within the Fryean conceptual framework--from the fallen world of physical nature into the higher realm of "human nature proper." Furthermore, the poem's structural design seems to set the discourse of male relationship over against that of female relationship, elevating the value of the former at the expense of the latter. While the Baron's proposed reconciliation with Geraldine's father prefigures the restoration of male friendship based on the masculine code of honour, the open hostility between Geraldine and Christabel suggests that female companionship, with the implied sexual element in it, can only lead to domestic disaster. Serving as a foil to the patriarchal ideal of constancy, female relationship is thus relegated to the "sinful" state of mutability. At this point we may recall the disastrous "coming together" of the Chinese radical Women (cf. ~~RR~~ and ~~RR~~), which amounts to "mutual slandering," "sexual intrigue" and "treason." By making a capital crime out of female companionship (i.e. ~~RR~~, "treason"), the patriarchal code of signification only proves itself guilty of what Cixous calls

deconstructionist, point of view. My point here is that the same phenomenon can be explained from a feminist perspective.

"the greatest crime against women."²⁴ This is not to suggest, however, that Christabel and Geraldine will settle "properly" in their designated roles within the symbolic edifice built out of the male imagination. Although the phallic woman (cf. ~~cf.~~) has always been regarded as "negative" constitution of male discourse, this "negative capability" does not merely lie in pointing back to the "positive" virtues of the male.²⁵ Rather, the negative role played by the radical Woman shows that female contribution to the discourse of man can only be subversive, as it constitutes a positive negation of phallocratic ideology.

Accordingly, Geraldine's entry into Sir Leoline's house foreshadows the disruption of domestic order based on the father's law. The first sign of trouble is Christabel's weird behaviour in broad daylight, which totally spoils Sir Leoline's chivalric show. In reaction to the noble hospitality

²⁴ Cf. Cixous: "Men have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies.... They have constructed the infamous logic of antilove" ("The Laugh of the Medusa" 878).

²⁵ In "The Laugh of the Medusa," Helene Cixous suggests that

If woman has always functioned "within" the discourse of man, a signifier that has always referred back to the opposite signifier which annihilates its specific energy and diminishes or stifles its very different sounds, it is time for her to dislocate this "within", to explode it, turn it around, and seize it (887).

of her father, who welcomes the distressed maiden with open arms, Christabel unexpectedly falls into a "dizzy trance":

...a vision fell
 Upon the soul of Christabel,
 The vision of fear, the touch and pain!

 Again she saw that bosom old,
 Again she felt that bosom cold,
 And drew in her breath with a hissing sound.
 Whereat the Knight turned wildly round,
 And nothing saw, but his own sweet maid
 With eyes upraised, as one that prayed.

The touch, the sight, had passed away,
 And in its stead that vision blest,
 Which comforted her after-rest
 While in the lady's arms she lay,
 Had put a rapture in her breast,
 And on her lips and o'er her eyes
 Spread smiles like light! (451-53; 457-69)

The double vision of Geraldine's bosom is symptomatic of Christabel's inner conflicts, which can be usefully compared with the mental afflictions described by the lyric speaker in "The Pains of Sleep":

Desire with loathing strangely mixed
 On wild or hateful objects fixed.
 Fantastic passions! maddening brawl!
 And shame and terror over all!
 Deeds to be hid which were not hid,
 Which all confused I could not know
 Whether I suffered, or I did:
 For all seemed guilt, remorse or woe,
 My own or others still the same
 Life-stifling fear, soul-stifling shame.

 Such punishments, I said, were due,
 To natures deepliest stained with sin,--
 For aye entempesting anew
 The unfathomable hell within,
 The horror of their deeds to view,
 To know and loathe, yet wish and do!
 (23-32; 43-48)

This "uncanny" confession made in the poet's own voice

underscores the weird nature of Christabel's split vision.²⁶ On the surface, the vision of "that bosom old" seems to be a function of moral censorship upon a "fallen" consciousness. This vision "falls"--a heavy weight, we may assume--upon Christabel to reinforce the imposition of taboo, as the sight of Sir Leoline embracing Geraldine can be read as a re-enactment of Christabel's own "seduction" by Geraldine the night before. Seen in this light, the hissing sound Christabel makes would appear to indicate her feeling of repulsion at her father's seduction by the phallic mother, whose "bosom cold" figures the forbidden fruit. If this interpretation of the manifest content of Christabel's vision were the only legitimate one, we may indeed sum up the poem's moral design with Margery Durham's well-formulated remark:

Tasting the forbidden fruit (so like the breast in appearance and in function) brings the knowledge of good lost and evil got, but also of good to be restored--on the symbolic, therefore communal or cultural level now and...through the work of the human imagination (191).

While illuminating one aspect of the Romantic imagination, Durham's reading prudently leaves out its "other" aspect(s). As Christabel's contradictory visions illustrate, the product

²⁶ At this point we may recall Schelling's definition of the word "uncanny" (i.e. *unheimlich*): "*Unheimlich*" is the name for everything that ought to have remained...hidden and secret and has become visible" (quoted in Freud 129).

of the male imagination, because of its double refraction analogous to the Chinese rainbow, is often blurred and distorted with conflictual implications which do not fit so neatly into the mythical framework of paradise-lost-and-regained.

It is worth noting, for one thing, that Christabel's hissing is produced by "[drawing] in her breath" at the revision of Geraldine's bosom, which she has now come "to know and loathe." And yet, the curious manner of Christabel's expression suggests that what appears to be Taboo may be a displacement of the nurturing mother, "that vision blest" which has "put a rapture in her breast." From this perspective, the apparent sign of repulsion may actually signify a repressed desire to receive nurture at the mother's bosom, which Christabel may still "wish and do." This unconscious desire can find no outlet, due to repression, except through some "demonic" distortion. And yet there is nothing supernatural about it; rather, the hissing sound is a necessary outcome of oral/moral starvation. For, without lifting the seal of Taboo imposed on the maternal breast, all that Christabel can draw in is empty air. In this sense, we may agree with the psychoanalytic assumption that "feeding problems" can impair one's linguistic articulation, although it seems off the mark to put the blame either on the "phallic mother" or on the pre-oedipal child. Instead, the so-called "feeding problems," insofar as they have a bearing--which is

metaphorical rather than literal--on the issue of language, are directly related to patriarchal prohibition. As a result, we see in Christabel a double split--the image of a split self (in the sense that the auditory gives lie to the visual) coupled with a split tongue: while her praying gesture may give Sir Leoline the illusion that "his own sweet maid" can still speak the language of love, her snake-like hissing betrays a dangerous signal of the "other" tongue, namely, the language of Taboo.

At this point we may recall Durham's remark on the Coleridgean association of the maternal breast with the acquisition of language. In view of Geraldine's "wounded breast" and Christabel's split tongue, Durham's argument seems to make sense only in a "negative" way. For, instead of teaching the language of love, the phallic mother can only breed that of hate:

The maid, alas! her thoughts are gone,
 She nothing sees--no sight but one!
 The maid, devoid of guile and sin,
 I know not how, in fearful wise,
 So deeply had she drunken in
 That look, those shrunken serpent eyes,
 That all her features were resigned
 To this sole image in her mind.
 And passively did imitate
 That look of dull and treacherous hate! (597-606)

So drastic is this transfiguration--especially in view of Christabel's remembered "vision blest" of the previous night --that it can only be described as "demonic." The usual interpretation of Christabel's strange discomposure is that

she is "possessed," through the working of Geraldine's evil spell, by this vampire figure. Unable to expose the "horror" she experienced with Geraldine, Christabel becomes instead the evil she sees. This interpretation seems to be supported by the poet-narrator's feeding metaphor (i.e. Christabel's degeneration into a hissing creature occurs after she has "deeply...drunken in" Geraldine's serpent eyes), which clearly hints at the poisonous effect of being "nurtured" by the phallic mother, the incarnation of Taboo.

Earlier in this chapter, I have suggested a figurative identity between Geraldine--the "phallic mother"--and the Chinese Taboo (𡇗), the radical Woman barred from her maternal productivity by the masculine stroke of yang (—). By translating a literary figure clad in rich ambiguities into an ideographic image of stark visibility, I want to underscore the inscription of phallocratic ideology in the symbolic code of signification, which constitutes the linguistic taboo in the first place. What is more, the identity between Coleridge's poetic persona and the Chinese written character suggests that, as a literary symbol, the phallic woman's "bosom old" is not the cause but the effect of cultural contamination.

The linguistic Taboo, as the character 𡇗 illustrates, is born of a confrontation between yin (the "promiscuous" female body 𡇗) and yang (the prohibitive male emblem —). In this sense we may say that the language of Taboo is also the

discourse of contradiction engendered by sexual polemics. From the male point of view, Christabel's story signifies, like Keats's "La Belle Dame sans Merci," the poet-quester's entrapment by the fatal woman in his quest for self-identity. In a sense, to watch Christabel's demonic transfiguration in her "dizzy trance" is to witness Adam's dream turning into a nightmare. Apart from representing "Mother Nature [who] is fallen, deadly, in league with the Devil" (Durham 189), Geraldine embodies, aesthetically, the "daemonic" aspect of the wayward Muse ruling over the "other" area of language, which constantly threatens to engulf the "autonomous" domain of the poetic self.²⁷ As we have seen, the mythical archetype of the "daemonic" Muse is the "Terrible Goddess" who "attracts the male and kills the phallus within itself in order to achieve satisfaction and fecundation" (Neumann 171).

Needless to say, this male-oriented discourse centred on the castration fantasy is by no means self-sufficient. For, in asserting its will to power, the phallocentric discourse of "yang" has no way to express itself without confronting--or even generating--its opposite, hence the contradiction that "a being is at each moment itself and yet something else" (Engels 167). In fact, the misogynous vision of a castrating female monster only betrays the impotence of the male imagination to

²⁷ For a definition of the "daemonic" (as opposed to the "Romantic") imagination, see Lawrence Kramer's "That Other Will: The Daemonic in Coleridge and Wordsworth."

suppress its constitutive negation, the subversive Muse-principle which is always open to the discourse of "yin." By "yin" I mean the potentiality of the Muse-principle to subvert the self-enclosed identity of male writing, thereby revealing its "other" side, that is, the suppressed dimensions of female experience. This confrontation of yin and yang in the sphere of language is analogous to the bi-sexual texture of the Chinese rainbow.²⁸ As we have seen, the montage produced by the rainbow's male pattern and female sub-pattern is not a vision of organic harmony, but a dialectical unity of opposites epitomized by the radical Woman's tabooed image--
 ✱. The double refraction of the rainbow (i.e. Huang and Ni) is suggestive of the contradiction inherent in Romantic poetry's double discourse. In a broad sense, to unweave the rainbow is to unravel the interlocked myths of a unified self and the organic unity of the literary text.

VI

From the perspective of the "yin" discourse, the narrative of Christabel can be read as a dramatization of the heroine's darkening quest for self-identity, motivated by the unconscious desire to escape the repressive law of patriarchy. Christabel's dream-like wandering in the "midnight wood"

²⁸ Cf. "The rainbow manifests itself in a double refraction: the bright-colored arch, known as Huang, is the male; its dim duplicate, known as Ni, is the female" (Hsiao 71).

suggests a psychic, rather than literal, journey into the dark recesses of her mind, where she first encounters her secret double "on the other side" of a "broad-breasted, old oak tree." To illustrate the latent significance of the encounter scene, I would quote a less well-known poem by Coleridge's great-great-niece, Mary Elizabeth Coleridge:

The Other Side of a Mirror

I sat before my glass one day,
 And conjured up a vision bare,
 Unlike the aspects glad and gay,
 That erst were found reflected there--
 The vision of a woman, wild
 With more than womanly despair.

Her hair stood back on either side
 A face bereft of loveliness.
 It had no envy now to hide
 What once no man on earth could guess.
 It formed the thorny aureole
 Of hard unsanctified distress.

Her lips were open--not a sound
 Came through the parted lines of red.
 Whate'er it was, the hideous wound
 In silence and in secret bled.
 No sigh relieved her speechless woe,
 She had no voice to speak her dread.

And in her lurid eyes there shone
 The dying flame of life's desire,
 Made mad because its hope was gone,
 And kindled at the leaping fire
 Of jealousy, and fierce revenge,
 And strength that could not change nor tire.

Shade of a shadow in the glass,
 O set the crystal surface free!
 Pass--as the fairer visions pass--
 Nor ever more return, to be
 The ghost of a distracted hour,
 That heard me whisper, "I am she!"

The above poem helps to illuminate the intricate

relationship between Christabel and Geraldine. The unambiguous articulation--"I am she!"--makes explicit a secret identity which, in Christabel, can only be inferred from oblique clues. Significantly, the woman entrapped behind the crystal surface of the mirror not only reflects the protagonist's dark self, but also reveals that suppressed self in the image of Taboo: whereas the woman's "hideous wound" is analogous to Geraldine's "mark of shame," her "speechless woe" reminds us of the speech-inhibiting spell that befalls Christabel.

The identity between Christabel and Geraldine compels us to re-examine Christabel's transfiguration into a hissing creature, which usually drives home the theme of "demonic possession" underlying the gothic tale of terror. As we have already seen, critics have readily associated Geraldine with the "demon" that holds Christabel in thrall and causes her apparent degeneration. There is nothing new, of course, in such an accusation: charges of this kind have plagued the "terrible feminine" for thousands of years. In Chinese culture, we have the radical Woman turned into Taboo by the yang stroke, which signifies both her ravishment and her banishment. The mythical variants of the radical Woman--the ancient Empress of Yin, Nu Kua, the rainbow goddess of Witch Mountain, the Moon goddess Ch'ang O, and the serpent woman, Madam White--all suffer a similar fate. In Western culture, representatives of the "terrible feminine" include Milton's Sin, the serpentine female with a "mortal sting," and the

equally formidable Medusa and Lamia. All these phallic women are feared and condemned as female monsters. On the other side of the story, however, they are all victims of male violence. They have turned "demonic" and are relegated into Taboo as a result of, or as "punishment" for, having been raped by the tyrannical male gods. Figuring the serpent woman as well as the phallic mother, Geraldine suffers the same injustice as all the demonic females examined above, who are no more victimizers than victims of patriarchal oppression.

From this perspective, I will re-examine the so-called "demonic possession" of Christabel, not as a supernatural phenomenon of vampiric mesmerism, but as an uncanny case of alienation. This alienation exposes, I shall argue, the dire consequence of patriarchal ownership, which involves as much projective and repressive violence as the brutal conquests of the ancient gods. One common form of patriarchal ownership is the domestication of the feminine, motivated by the masculine desire to fulfill the Self through possessing the female Other. The tyrannical nature of such possessive desire is not readily detectable, because it often proclaims its will to power in the name of love, and under the most civilized facade of peace and order.²⁹ To explore the implications of

²⁹ One case in point is the "housing" and "proper settlement" of the Chinese radical Woman (cf. 亂 女), which vividly exposes the way the domestication of the feminine is encoded in the patriarchal conception of peace and order.

Christabel's weird behaviour, I will compare it with a similar case of "demonic possession" which befalls the heroine of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story, "The Yellow Wall Paper."³⁰

Like Christabel, "The Yellow Wall Paper" was also regarded by its contemporary readers as a gothic tale of terror. The story is told from the perspective of the first-person narrator, a "sick" woman who is undergoing some nerve cure prescribed by her physician husband. The husband's "good sense" plus his professional knowledge convince him that his wife has "no reason to suffer" (1150), and so he decides that no better "cure" can be offered than what may best be described as "soft confinement"³¹--"soft" in the sense that every trace of harsh treatment is cushioned by apparent display of love and care. As the narrator says, "He [the husband] is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction" (1149). Cherished as a man's private property rather than a human being, the protagonist is carefully kept in "a haunted house," where she is cut off from social contacts and "absolutely forbidden to work" (1149). Though a loving mother, she is denied even the right to take care of her own child. At this point we may recall the fate of the Chinese Woman-behind-Bars (~~女~~). As the gloss for the

³⁰ Gilman's story is reprinted in The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women 1148-61. All subsequent quotations of the story with page numbers in parenthesis are from this edition.

³¹ This is a literal translation of "Ruan Jin," the Chinese for "house arrest."

ideograph ~~the~~ makes clear, "The persons thus confined were utterly unemployed, and saw nobody. Hence the derived meanings, to avoid, to abstain, inutility, nothingness" (Wieger 170). In a sense, Gilman's story breathes life into the stark image of Taboo, so that it becomes one with the living woman. When we first find the narrator of "The Yellow Wall Paper" shut up in a room with barred windows, she is on the brink of a hysteric breakdown. The repeated question-- "what can one do?" "what is one to do?" (1148)--has a tone of increasing irritation and despair as the woman finds herself trapped in a helpless situation. It is under such hysteria-inducing circumstances³² that the woman's "slight hysterical tendency" worsens into obsessive hallucinations of the most weird kind.

Apparently, the heroine's growing obsession with the yellow wall paper in her room seems to indicate her gradual descent into insanity. But the sick woman's startling discovery in the yellow wall paper reveals the grim truth about her own life that compels us to re-examine the real

³² For an illuminating survey of several feminist readings of "The Yellow Wall Paper," see Jean E. Kennard's "Convention Coverage." Feminist critics of the story have rightly related the narrator's mental afflictions to the oppressive social milieu in which she is trapped. I am also indebted to Karen Swann's discussion of hysteria in relation to Christabel, in her brilliant article "Christabel: The Wandering Mother and the Enigma of Form."

nature of her alleged madness.³³ After many hours of obsessive study of the yellow wall paper's complicated patterns, the protagonist eventually makes a thrilling breakthrough: in a rare moment of illumination by moonlight, the predominant front pattern of the yellow wall paper becomes bars, and the obscure sub-pattern turns out to be a woman! Needless to say, the narrator's extraordinary discovery is not pure hallucination. Rather, it marks her awakening to the dark reality underneath her apparently secure and peaceful life. Like Mary Coleridge's despairing woman trapped "on the other side of the mirror," the woman behind bars in the yellow wall paper is a mirror image of the narrator's own captivity--physical as well as mental--under the oppressive rule of patriarchy represented by her seemingly loving husband. In both cases, what the protagonist sees is the suppressed "other" aspect of the ordinary, socially constituted self. Just as the subversive subtext can disrupt the unity of the text, so this dark self plays a similar role in unravelling the unitary identity of the conscious self. By projecting onto the wallpaper all the miseries inflicted upon her sex, and by joining the woman-behind-bars in an imaginary struggle against the strangling front-pattern, Gilman's protagonist has realized her potential power to break the taboo in defiance of

³³ As Jean E. Kennard points out, feminist critics tend to relate "the concept of madness... to patriarchy since female madness is read as a result of patriarchal oppression" (79).

the prohibitive law.

In "The Yellow Wall Paper," we can trace a figural pattern of confrontation, which is skillfully woven into images of alternating lights. Throughout the story, the image of the moon serves to highlight the heroine's inner feelings and her female perspective, whereas that of the sun is symbolically associated with the overbearing power of the ruling male. One peculiarity about the wall paper, the narrator says, is that "it changes as the light changes" (1156), and it is by moonlight that the "dim sub-pattern" (i.e. the woman-behind-bars) is first revealed to the narrator. Our earlier discussion of the moon-centred myth shows that the moon is not merely a mirror of female confinement/alienation, but also a source of female strength. Just as the Chinese moon-mother's Potion of Immortality frees Ch'ang O from the Divine Archer's domestic tyranny, so the moonlight in Gilman's story has the same emancipating effect on the entrapped inmate of the house. In revealing the female "sub-pattern" behind the bars, the moonlight virtually gives birth to the protagonist's rebellious anti-self. In this sense, what seems to be the "mad" woman's moon-struck hallucination is in fact the landmark of her self-emancipation.

On the surface, the weird manner in which the woman breaks free from her prescribed "self-control" seems to indicate her complete possession by the "demon" within her.

Underneath the explicit narrative of gothic horror, however, is a grim parody of the conventional plot of quest romance. We might, perhaps, imagine the unhappy woman as a transfigured princess, imprisoned behind the iron bars in an isolated castle. Now the question is whom we should expect to assume the role of the chivalric knight. At the moment of crisis, the husband does give a try. But, as we are cautioned at the beginning of the story, to expect "romantic felicity ... would be asking too much of fate" (1148). The man breaks in, apparently coming to the woman's rescue, but he only lets fright get the better of him, and there he faints and falls. The sorry figure the husband cuts for himself adds a final touch of irony: in losing consciousness in a most "unmanly" manner, he unwittingly slips back into his habitual, "manly" role--to function as an obstacle right across his wife's path. There the story ends, but the "mad" woman's creeping process goes on. With this startling image in mind, we may now draw some parallels between the protagonist of "The Yellow Wall Paper" and Christabel.

To begin with, both Christabel and Gilman's heroine are objects of male possession, and as such they are placed in "soft confinement": the former is securely sheltered in her father's iron-gated castle, the latter is virtually kept in an attic with barred widows. Like the protagonist of "The Yellow Wall Paper," Christabel has apparently "no reason to suffer"; and yet, both women do suffer, mentally as well as

emotionally. Well-guarded as men's private property, both women are in fact victims of patriarchal repression and censorship. As a result, the heroine of "The Yellow Wall Paper" suffers a kind of hysteric hallucination. Likewise, Christabel's "dizzy trance" is symptomatic of the same mental affliction. In both cases, the female protagonists undergo what seems to be a "demonic" transfiguration, whereby they begin to manifest serpentine attributes: Christabel's speech degenerates into a snake-like hissing, while the heroine of Gilman's story is reduced to a creeping creature. Such radical breaches of decorum may be interpreted as a sign of insanity, but the subversive and rebellious nature underlying these women's apparent "madness" reveals the suppressed dimension of female power. This volcanic power within the ordinary self is often experienced as a demonic "other" which cannot be controlled by the conscious will.³⁴ In Christabel as well as

³⁴ The following passage from Helene Cixous's "The Laugh of Medusa" (876) sheds much light on the emotional complexity of women born into male-dominated society:

I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs. Time and again, I, too, have felt so full of luminous torrents that I could burst--burst with forms much more beautiful than those which are put up in frames and sold for a stinking fortune. And I, too, said nothing, showed nothing....I was ashamed. I was afraid, and I swallowed my shame and my fear. I said to myself: you are mad! What's the meaning of all these waves, these floods, these outbursts? Where is the ebullient, infinite woman who, immersed as she was in her naivete, kept in the dark about herself, led into self-disdain by the great arm of parental-conjugal phallocentrism,

"The Yellow Wall Paper," the inner splitting of the female subject is directly related to the imposition and internalization of patriarchal ideology, which relegates every trace of female "otherness" to the demonic region of Taboo. As we have seen, both Christabel and the narrator of "The Yellow Wall Paper" have turned "monstrous" due to the alienating (i.e. dehumanizing) effect of patriarchal ownership.

There is, however, an apparent difference between Christabel and Gilman's protagonist. The protagonist of Gilman's story clearly identifies herself with her double in the yellow wall paper, and their positive alliance develops into an open rebellion against her jailor-husband. Speaking in the voice of her anti-self, the narrator tells her husband: "I've got out at last, ...And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" (1161). By contrast, the secret liaison between Christabel and Geraldine hardly outlasts the night. As dawn breaks into broad daylight, the ambiguous relationship of Coleridge's female characters seems to break into open enmity. Apparently enthralled by Geraldine's "look of dull and treacherous hate," Christabel implores her father: "'By my mother's soul do I entreat / That

hasn't been ashamed of her strength? Who, surprised and horrified by the fantastic tumult of her drives (for she was made to believe that a well-adjusted normal woman has a...divine composure), hasn't accused herself of being a monster?

thou this woman send away!'" (616-17).

Within the framework of conventional readings, Christabel's hostile plea can be interpreted as a positive sign of her moral innocence, or as a corruptible soul's endeavour towards redemption. The ideological assumption underlying such readings is that the conflict between Christabel and Geraldine represents a moral struggle between good and evil. Such pre-conceived battle lines are disrupted, however, by the transformation of these two female figures into each other through constant exchange of roles. In view of the "unconscious sympathy" between Christabel and Geraldine (who is also a displaced "wandering mother"), I would interpret Christabel's plea as indicating a desperate attempt to free the externalised "anti-self" from Sir Leoline's possessive desire. The baron's "parental-conjugal" embrace, which beguiled Christabel's good mother into a creed of self-effacing love, has now become a token of the Taboo Woman's "seal of sorrow." What enables Christabel to translate the paternal language of love into a weird tongue is Geraldine's serpent gaze.³⁵ The effect of this treacherous enlightenment

³⁵ As I mentioned earlier, the opening scene implicitly associates Geraldine with Hecate, the dark moon goddess. Accordingly, the image of the moon--which "looks both small and dull" through "the thin grey cloud"--is metaphorically identical with Geraldine's serpent eyes, which are also described as "small" and "dull." It is important to note that Geraldine's gaze seems to have a negative function (it makes Christabel hiss and shudder) only in the presence of the father. To such "maddening" effect we may contrast the "mothering" role of the same figure, which can make Christabel

is no less subversive than the madness-inducing moonlight in "The Yellow Wall Paper": it awakens Christabel from her sheltered innocence, and opens her eyes to the grim reality that she is trapped in the same soul-stifling situation as her dead mother had been. This knowledge is Taboo because it threatens the patriarchal idea of peace and good order, which relegates Woman to the status of man's private possession. Significantly, just as Geraldine (who has now apparently assumed the role of a meek daughter) is being securely locked into Sir Leoline's arms, Christabel herself is suddenly "seized" by fear and pain:

She shrunk and shuddered, and saw again--
 (Ah, woe is me! Was it for thee,
 Thou gentle maid! such sights to see?) (454-56)

What exactly does Christabel see that is so repulsive as to make her shrink and shudder? Why should Sir Leoline's gesture of chivalry evoke such a strong aversion from his "gentle maid"? As the poet-narrator suggests, Christabel's apparent deviation is caused by "forced unconscious sympathy." In light of Gilman's story, we may assume that it is the same kind of sympathy that drives Gilman's narrator into identifying with the woman-behind-bars. In Christabel, the identification between the two female figures involves a dialectical reversal of roles: while Geraldine is acting out the role of a domesticated "Angel in the House," Christabel has unwittingly

smile in sleep "as infants at a sudden light."

assumed the identity of the Taboo Woman. As two sides of the same coin, they conspire to expose the pain and terror behind the peaceful facade of "romantic felicity." In other words, Christabel's strong aversion results not from witnessing the father's seduction by a "phallic mother," but from realizing the "demonic possession" of the Taboo Woman by patriarchy.

In a metaphorical sense, the unsettling roles played by the romantic women is a vivid "staging" of the tremendous difficulty for the male imagination to domesticate the elusive Muse-principle. This partly explains why the female Muse figures in the quest romances are often portrayed as "treacherous" and "untrustworthy." To the male imagination, female mutability is "treacherous" because it represents the potential power of the Muse-principle to subvert the established code of symbolic representation. In this respect, we may recall Bard Bracy's account of his strange dream, which envisions a "war-embrace" of the dove and the snake:





...in my sleep I saw that dove,
That gentle bird, whom thou dost love,
And call'st by thy own daughter's name -
Sir Leoline! I saw the same
Fluttering, and uttering fearful moan,
Among the green herbs in the forest alone.

.....

I stooped, methought, the dove to take,
When lo! I saw a bright green snake
Coiled around its wings and neck.
Green as the herbs on which it couched,
Close by the dove's its head it crouched;
And with the dove it heaves and stirs,
Swelling its neck as she swelled hers!

(531-36; 548-54)

Just as these two metaphorical opposites become inextricably

entangled in Bard Bracy's dream vision, so the two female characters in Coleridge's poem share a dialectical identity. In light of our previous discussion of the ideographic metamorphoses of the radical Woman, I am inclined to see Christabel and Geraldine as manifestations of the same Mysterious Female placed in different situations by the symbolic order. We may, for instance, associate the sheltered innocence of Christabel with the ideograph . I have earlier examined this ideograph in connection with the Romantic project to domesticate the Muse principle. As we have already seen, the latent contradiction inscribed in that Chinese character (i.e. a "palpable design" of peace actually signifying unrest/dis-ease) is vividly dramatized, in Coleridge's poetry, by the latent tension underlying the "housing" of the Romantic Muse in her various guises, from the "woman wailing for her demon lover" under Kubla Khan's pleasure dome, to the angelic Christabel who steals outside home and brings trouble into her father's house. In both cases, the "good order" of the symbolic edifice is undermined by its constitutive negation. By the same token, I would associate the initial placement of Geraldine--that is, her violent seizure and deposition at the spot of sin--with the ideograph  (proper settlement). In defiance of the "propriety" of such settlement, Geraldine begins to take on the dual identity of the radical Woman as  / , thus revealing not only Christabel's inner conflict, but the

inherent contradictoriness of the male imagination. Functioning as the same Woman in different guises, the two female figures in Christabel virtually conspire to deconstruct the symbolic order in which they are both trapped. Their coming together predictably causes domestic trouble, but the nature of this trouble turns out to be far more devastating than the encoded "mutual slandering" (~~the~~) between two women. What dishonours Sir Leoline's chivalric offer to accommodate Geraldine is something "more than woman's jealousy." That something has much to do with the "wandering mother," whose shadowy presence as the "third" woman reinforces the power of the female company. It is precisely this "treacherous" female trinity (cf. the triple identity of the radical Woman-- ~~the~~) that hollows out the Romantic project of domestication. The Muse-principle, as Keats would have agreed, is something that "cannot to the will /Be settled."³⁶

³⁶ Keats, "Epistle to Reynolds." I shall examine this poem in detail in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

Playing Woman's Part: The Imprisoned Liberty of Keats's Muse Figures

By "playing woman's part"--as Lamia does--the Muse figures in Keats's poetry conspire to unweave, through inhabiting, the bright arch of the Romantic rainbow projected from the male imagination. The prismatic transformation of the Muse-principle reflects the unstable character of poetic identity, which always seems to evade a static formulation. Owing to the chameleon poet's negative capability, the potential power of Keats's Muse figure (even though "chain'd...and fettered" ["On the Sonnet"]) is brought into full play, as is manifest in such quest romances as "La Belle Dame sans Merci" and Lamia. By examining the symbolic patterns of confrontation between the male quester and the female Muse figures in these poems, we can gain some insight into "the imprisoned liberty" (Endymion 1:456) of the Romantic Woman.

"La Belle Dame sans Merci"

The complexity critics have found in Keats's "La Belle Dame" seems to centre on the identity of the female figure. In keeping with the convention of quest romance, which has been

defined as "the genre of simplified or black and white characterization" (Frye, Fables 74), we can begin our inquiry with a simple and naive question: is she a fatal woman or a maiden in distress? The title of the poem obviously suggests a femme fatale--an identity easily recognizable to readers familiar with conventional romances, notably Spenser's Faerie Queene.¹ From this perspective, the knight's encounter--and consequent enchantment--with such a figure has been seen as an obstacle to be overcome on his way towards self-fulfillment.² When we first see the knight-at-arms--through the interlocutor's eyes--we cannot fail to notice symptoms of some disease which is not so much physical as symbolic: the lily-and-rose metaphor provides an index to the knight's noble ancestry (cf. Spenser's Redcrosse knight with his emblem of red and white). On the other hand, this knightly emblem appears in a diseased form--"a lily...with anguish moist and fever-dew" and "a fading rose." Apparently, this is a suggestion of the knight's present "fallen" state as a result of his enthrallment with the fairy lady. Apart from this consumptive fever, it is suggested that the knight's quest is entirely fruitless: we see him "palely loitering" in a season when "the squirrel's granary is full /And harvest's done."

¹ See Douglas Bush, ed. Selected Poems and Letters 344; Karen Swann, "Harassing the Muse" 38.

² Evert, for example, sees the knight as a victim of "enchantment by a demon" (245).

Other clues indicating the protagonist's neglect of his knightly duty include his seeing "nothing else all day long" except the enchantress who eventually "lulled [him] asleep." The grave "moral" of the knight's misadventure is spelled out in his anxiety dream, articulated by what appear to be the fatal woman's male victims: "La belle Dame sans Merci /Hath thee in thrall!" Seen in this light, the knight-at-arms emerges from his ghastly dream a defeated hero, or anti-hero: his experience in the Lady's "elfin grot" and resultant death-like torpor can be read as a parody on the quest of Christ, whose descent to hell "is usually symbolized in art as walking into the open mouth of a dragon, and when he returns in triumph he carries a banner of a red cross on a white ground, the colours typifying his blood and flesh" (Frye, Fables 77). The above interpretation, though largely in agreement with the conventional symbolism of quest romance, is necessarily a partial one. Whatever cogency it has is achieved only by a purposeful act of reading, which strives to produce a unified whole out of disparate elements. This mode of reading is exemplified in the poem by the interlocutor, whose eyes do not merely register flat colours with Ruskinian innocence, but instantly translate them into highly conventionalized symbols in the very act of seeing:

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

"La Belle Dame Sans Merci" is the bitter-sweet fruit of Keats's mature imagination. In this poem, the working of imagination can be compared, to extend Keats's own metaphor in Fryeian terms, to a double-focused dream of the post-Edenic Adam who awoke and found it false. The critical moment in this poem is the naming of the lady. We note that the name "la Belle Dame sans Merci" is first spelled out for the knight by the pale kings and princes, whose grave admonition instantly shatters the knight's innocent vision of love and turns it into a nightmare. There is nothing original in the name itself, of course, which is merely an echo of a literary tradition. What is worth pondering is the gap between the word and its referent. In what sense, the naive reader may ask, is the enigmatic lady "la Belle Dame sans Merci"? Taking the Knight's account of his meeting with the lady at face value, we see the lady as "full beautiful," as her relation with the knight appears to be one of enchanting love. Though "a faery's child," the lady also acts like a nurturing mother: she feeds the knight with natural food and attends upon his sleep. This apparently innocent vision of love, however, turns out to be a delusion in the second part of the poem. The enchantment is dispersed by the intrusion of the paternal voice, which at once pronounces the lady to be a fatal seductress--an identity reminiscent of the fallen Eve. Although this act of naming appears to have vanquished the visionary lady at one stroke, it does not really free the knight from his enthrallment. On

the contrary, the real deathly spell is cast on the knight, not by the visionary lady herself, but by the name imposed upon her. In other words, what has the knight in thrall is "La Belle Dame sans Merci," a catchword for a long-established literary Taboo centred on the image of Woman. As a result, the knight is left "palely loitering" in the limbo between two dream worlds, a situation which has been rightly called "a scene of instruction" (Swann 81).

For all the vividness of the scene, the nature of the instruction remains as ambiguous as the enigmatic lady. This is largely due to the fact that, in Keats's poem, the black-white characterization of conventional romance is disrupted, not by a simple reversal, but through a dialectical interaction between opposites. It would be reductive to characterize the two dream worlds represented by the fairy lady and the ghostly company in terms of fixed categories, such as good and evil, life and death, innocence and experience, illusion and reality. For one thing, the seemingly idyllic encounter between the knight and the lady is not a pure world of innocence, but is overshadowed by latent tensions and conflicts. While the lady is described as beautiful, innocent, caring and loving, there are also hints of her seductive and alien nature. She speaks a strange language, she sings in a luring manner, she weeps and moans for inexplicable reasons, and she eventually "kills" the knight's consciousness by lulling him asleep. It is worth

noting that the knight seems to feel particularly uneasy about the lady's "wild, wild eyes," which he shuts with a highly calculated, ritualistic gesture of chivalry. Given the ambiguous character of the lady even in what appears to be the knight's wishfulfilment dream, it seems that the nightmarish vision of the pale kings and princes is not so much an intrusion upon the knight's wishful fantasy as an objectification--or exposure--of his repressed fears.

In her illuminating analysis of the poem, Karen Swann reveals a sub-text of the enchanting romance, by detecting signs of "harassment" in the knight's seemingly chivalric attitude towards the lady (81-92). In light of Swann's reading, we may conclude that the knight's impulse to "bind" the lady--albeit "with lovely chains" as Swann nicely puts it --betrays his unwitting internalization of the patriarchal code of poetic power, which dictates the taming of the Muse. What seems unconvincing in Swann's argument, however, is her suggestion of a "knowing" conspiracy between the knight and the royal company with regard to the lady. Swann's feminist impulse to defend the lady against harassment leads her to interpret unsympathetically the knight's loss as gain. According to Swann, what the knight "gains at the end of the poem--accession to an all-male community"--could be "the true object of his quest" (90). Thus the knight deliberately harasses the lady "in order to conjure up the warning voices, in order to be interrupted, in order, finally, to become one

of the gang" (90). Whereas both the knight and the knowing poet are on their way towards "a community of poetic masters," the lady--who is identified with the Romantic Muse--"gets 'nothing' from this encounter--it works to her disappearance" (92). Swann explicitly identifies the Romantic muse with the Lacanian Woman, who "exists only as a delusive fantasy" in the world constituted by the symbolic order of language. In emphasizing "the gender-neutral subject's enthrallment in the symbolic order" (90-91), Swann seems to overlook the subversive role La Belle Dame--the gender-specific Muse -- plays in undermining "the deathly law." Unlike Lacan's "Woman," the lady in Keats's poem is not so much a "fantasmatic construct" as a constitutive negation of the symbolic order. Conceived as the Muse-principle, yet bearing the seal of Taboo, La Belle Dame represents, not "the imaginary unity of identity," but rather a dialectical unity of opposites. Her name "la Belle Dame sans Merci" is "surely" a mark of Sin; and yet, the only evidence of her sin is the ghastly warning emerging from the knight's anxiety dream, in which the accused lady is nowhere to be found. Moving from the first part of the poem into the second, we cannot fail to notice the contrast between the lady's tangible presence in the former and her virtual absence in the latter. Seeing the lady as a victim of masculine harassment, Swann interprets her disappearance in terms of loss. For all the harassment the lady suffers in the poem, I would argue that La Belle Dame is

not simply a victim of masculine domination, but is also the source of a different type of power. Figuring the Romantic woman, her vanishment from the knight's nightmare world is not a sign of defeat; on the contrary, it leaves at the centre of the poem a significant "void"--in the Taoist sense of the word--which fully exposes the obtrusiveness of the paternal ravishment. Not only does her virtual absence from the scene hollow out the warning voice which names her as a *femme fatale*, it also impels us to reconsider the true meaning of the name imposed upon her. La Belle Dame is a fatal woman without pity, because she silently revenges herself by condemning her ravishers to an infernal gloom, in light of which we see not only the projective violence the ghostly company have done to her, but also their doomed failure to possess her through the act of naming. For to name her is not to tame her, much less to vanquish her. Bearing the father's name, "La Belle Dame sans Merci" cannot remain "unravished" by simply rejecting her long-established identity. And yet, as an embodiment of the poetic Muse trapped in the symbolic order, the lady has the potential power to subvert the Name-of-the-Father by turning its conceptual violence into a productive "void."

Karen Swann rightly observes that Keats's poem is "about the unmasterability of language," but her argument makes no distinction between language and the symbolic order, and her over-emphasis on Everysubject's inevitable submission to the

latter unwittingly helps to reinforce the power of the paternal law. To me the identity between language and the symbolic order, or between the mother tongue and the father's law, is analogous to the identity between the lady--who figures the Muse-principle--and her name "La Belle Dame sans Merci." The rift between the two indicates that no identification can be made without some ironical twist. Such identity may best be understood as contradiction, that is, a unity of opposites. At this point we may once again recall the Taoist dialectic of the named and the nameless, or of being and nonbeing:

Knead clay in order to make a vessel.
Adapt the nothing (i.e. empty space)
therein to the purpose in hand, and you
will have the use of the vessel.

(Tao Te Ching XI)

If the lady's name "La Belle Dame sans Merci" indicates her long-established identity in the literary tradition, then her absence from the naming scene virtually opens up a free space within Keats's over-wrought, yet "still unravished" poem. From this dialectical perspective, "the unmasterability of language" manifests itself not in the subject knight's inevitable submission to the "deathly law," but in the paternal figure's impotence to pin down the enigmatic lady, who represents, metaphorically, the estranged aspect of the mother tongue and the shadowy "Other" of the symbolic order at once. As such, the Romantic Muse-principle is, like the misty presence-in-absence of the Chinese rainbow goddess, a

perpetually elusive yet perpetually haunting reality that exists only to frustrate every male quester's desire for complete possession. For all their alleged "gains," the all-male community--the knight-at-arms and the pale kings and princes--are real losers. They are victimized, not by the wasting power of love or deceptive nature of imagination, but by the prohibiting character of their phallogocentric discourse. If the deadly pallor of the knight and the ghostly company is symptomatic of what Schapiro calls "oral deprivation," it is no fault of "a withdrawing and denying mother"; rather, the pale kings and princes are victims of a self-inflicted famine. They are starving because, by adhering to the masculine code of signification, they have denied themselves nourishment from the vital resources of the mother tongue.

As "Everysubject," the knight's estrangement from his mother tongue is dramatized by the "otherness" he finds in the lady--her "fairy song," her "language strange," and her "wild, wild eyes." In retrospect, the knight's "kisses four" with which he shuts the lady's eyes seem less like a gesture of courtly love than a defence-mechanism motivated by masculine fear of, and desire for, the mysterious female Other. And yet, in sealing the Muse-principle's "wild" openness--a path towards productive "infidelity"--the knight is doomed to a sterile state of alienation.

Lamia

According to Wasserman, the thematic structure of Lamia hinges on "a contrast between union with essence under the conditions of the ideal world and union with essence in the world of mutability." From this premise, Wasserman goes on to comment:

Hermes and the nymph on the one hand, and Lycius and Lamia on the other, form two independent narratives, and the presence of Lamia in both is hardly a cohesive force to cause the two themes to play upon each other in the reader's mind. Once Lamia has been granted her wish to return to human form, Hermes and the nymph are irrelevant to the subsequent action; nor do they even linger as an ironic backdrop against which Lycius and Lamia act out the tragedy of human yearning for an immortality of passion. (158)³

Wasserman's remarks draw to our attention the radical discrepancy between the prefatory idyll, in which the nymph is securely enveloped in a dreamy atmosphere of immortal love, and the romance "proper," which witnesses Lamia's "fall" into the hands of mortal men. The limitation of Wasserman's argument is that it makes no attempt to explore the inter-connection between the two seemingly "independent" narratives.

³ In his interpretation of Lamia, David Perkins reiterates Wasserman's view, saying that "the significance of [the Hermes] episode...is that the human world does not in any way participate in it....It has no necessary, organic connection with the story that follows. In a rather artificial way, it is used to introduce the main story. But it is then dismissed" (265). Like Wasserman, Perkins seems to dismiss the prefatory episode more readily than the poem's thematic structure would warrant.

Admittedly, Lamia's presence in both is not "a cohesive force" to bring the two disparate discourses into a harmonious whole. Rather, Lamia embodies a disruptive force which "cannot refer to any standard law /Of either earth or heaven" ("Epistle to Reynolds" 81-82). The dynamic mutability Lamia displays throughout the poem is "demonic," because it can only play havoc with the "proper" code of symbolic representation. By participating in both the idealistic world of myths, and the material world of human experience, Lamia has only a "negative" role to play, that is, to bring the two levels of existence to "play upon"--or collide into--each other in the reader's mind, so as to lay bare the contradiction inherent in the poem's double vision.

Right at the beginning, the fairy tale style of the Hermes episode entices the reader into an immortal world of ideal love, but at the same time betrays its illusory nature. Like the opening of Shelley's Witch of Atlas, the Hermes episode undercuts its own myth of transcendence with subtle irony.⁴ Unfolding its timeless myth "upon a time," the opening narrative shows us that no human construct can evade the

⁴ I am indebted to Stuart M. Sperry's Keats the Poet for suggesting the parallel between Keats's Lamia and Shelley's Witch of Atlas. As Sperry points out, the opening passages of both poems bear witness to "the loss of unified awareness...that has taken place through time and the usurpation of mythology by history"(294-95). For a brilliant analysis of this sense of historical progression--or rather, degradation--in the Hermes episode, see Marjorie Levinson 262 ff.

shadow of history. In spite of its apparent lack of human concerns, the idyllic world of the Hermes episode is obviously filtered through a consciousness of both time and change. Thus the self-conscious construction of the "immortal...perfect conditions" can only present an imperfect idealization of mutable human existence, a translucent veil, so to speak, which reveals more than it conceals:

Upon a time, before the faery broods
 Drove Nymph and Satyr from the prosperous woods,
 Before King Oberon's bright diadem,
 Sceptre, and mantle, clasp'd with dewy gem,
 Frighted away the Dryads and the Fauns
 From rushes green, and brakes, and cowslip'd lawns,
 The ever-smitten Hermes empty left
 His golden throne, bent warm on amorous theft...

(1:1-8)

Against a mythical background of power struggle, Hermes emerges a quest hero in search of his invisible beauty. It has been suggested that Hermes represents the true poet, as opposed to Lycius, who is a mere dreamer (Stevenson 247). There is something ironic, however, in seeing Hermes in the role of the quester-poet. Originally a phallic deity, Hermes is also the god of theft and commerce. Significantly, Hermes's passionate pursuit is described as "amorous theft," a phrase which undercuts his mission by connecting it with the Olympians' womanizing enterprise, the latter being compared to a dishonest trade. In view of this, we may say that Hermes's quest is motivated, not by his yearning for "union with essence," but rather by his desire to possess the female love-object as private property. It is precisely the notion of

private ownership that gives rise to the related motifs of rivalry and jealousy in the Hermes episode. For the nameless nymph, though "still unravished," is the object of desire pursued by "all hoofed Satyrs" and "languid Tritons." The very thought of the nymph's desirability and possible possession by others kindles within Hermes a "celestial" fire, which is a mixture of desire, frustration and "painful jealousies":

Ah, what a world of love was at her feet!
 So Hermes thought, and a celestial heat
 Burnt from his winged heels to either ear,
 That from a whiteness, as the lily clear,
 Blush'd into roses 'mid his golden hair,
 Fallen in jealous curls about his shoulders bare.
(1:21-26)

The familiar lily/rose symbolism recalls the symptom of ailment we have witnessed in the knight-at-arms, whose wish-fulfillment dream with the fairy lady is cut short by the intrusive warning of the ghostly company. One implication of that nightmarish vision is the belated quester's anxiety, as Harold Bloom would have it, that his muse might have "whored with many before him" (Anxiety 61). Unwittingly following in others' footsteps in pursuit of the unmasterable Muse figure, the knight has also learned to repudiate her as "La Belle Dame sans Merci." And yet, as our earlier analysis of the construction of the Chinese Taboo ~~of~~ indicates, the charge of infidelity against Woman only underscores the projective violence of masculine power in establishing the Name-of-the-Father. On the other hand, we have also seen how much the patriarchal code of signification depends--to its own

disadvantage--on Woman to body forth its ideological conceptions, such as the notions of peace and security. Before her materialization into tangible presence, the invisible nymph is largely a phantasmatic ideal in Hermes's wish-fulfillment dream. By the same token, Lamia is conceived --or rather, misconceived--as a potent agent of the pleasure principle, whose business is to gratify Hermes's possessive desire: "Thou shalt behold her, Hermes, thou alone, /If thou wilt, as thou swearest, grant my boon!" (1:110-111). In giving the "unravished bride" away as private possession, Lamia entices the god of commerce into a bargain in terms of exchange. The direct result of this deal, however, is the exposure of the tension between the male quester and the female object. This puts into question Wasserman's view of the Hermes episode as representing a perfect "union with essence." Such idealistic abstraction tends to smooth out the latent conflict of the episode, which can be illustrated by an analysis of the poem's figural patterns.

In Lamia, all the male characters are figuratively related to Apollo and the image of the sun. By contrast, Lamia and the nymph are associated with the moon, and a cluster of images which are traditionally related to the "feminine" essence of water: mists, clouds, and the rainbow. In her address to Hermes, Lamia flatteringly compares this phallic deity to the morning sun:

I dreamt I saw thee, robed in purple flakes,

*Break amorous through the clouds, as morning breaks,
And, swiftly as a bright Phoebean dart,
Strike for the Cretan isle...* (1:76-79, emphasis mine)

The function of Lamia's rhetoric is worth pondering. It not only highlights the symbolic affinity between Apollo and Hermes, but also prefigures the latter's conquest of the nymph. The comparison of Hermes to "a bright Phoebean dart" reminds us of the penetrating power of the Chinese sun-god, Shen I ("the Divine Archer"), who captures his bride-to-be (i.e., the water nymph who later becomes the moon-goddess Ch'ang O) by shooting an arrow into her hair. Struck by the intensity of Hermes's "adoring" gaze (cf. Apollo's "loving" kiss in Shelley's Witch of Atlas), the nymph, "like a moon in wane, /Faded before him, cower'd, nor could restrain /Her fearful sobs..." (1:136-138). These unmistakable signs of the nymph's aversion--symbolic as well as physical--suggest the potential violence involved in her ravishment. It shows that the nymph is neither pure "essence" nor mere commodity for exchange, but is imbued with human feelings ("Pale grew her immortality, for woe /Of all these lovers, and she grieved so..." 1:104-105). The note of tension is instantly smoothed out, however, by a palpable evaporation of disagreeables:

But the God fostering her chilled hand,
She felt the warmth, her eyelids open'd bland,
And, like new flowers at morning song of bees,
Bloom'd, and gave up her honey to the lees.
Into the green-recessed woods they flew;
Nor grew they pale, as mortal lovers do.
(1:140-145)

This is, as Keats would have agreed, a "solution sweet,"

and its credibility is beyond question. For "It was no dream; or say a dream it was, /Real are the dreams of Gods, and smoothly pass /Their pleasures in a long immortal dream" (1:126-128). There is, however, a tinge of irony filtering through the last line, which prevents the mortal readers from being hoodwinked by the god's wishful fantasy. After all, the muffling of the nymph's "fearful sobs" cannot completely erase what has already been implanted on the reader's consciousness; if anything, it only accentuates the note of contrivance in the easy-flowing lines, which seem to be a reminder of Apollo's "throbbing throat's long, long melodious moan" (1:75). And yet, the fulfillment of Hermes's desire will not suffer the scrutiny of "unlovely eyes," for it only leads to the dissolution of both the desired object and the quester himself. So ends the god's idyllic romance; and the reader, albeit in a "willing suspension of disbelief," is left with nothing to contemplate but a void.

To contemplate the "void"--in the Taoist way--is not to empty the scene of its significance, or to deprive the sign of its meaning. It is, rather, to realize the wholeness of the Romantic imagination, which involves, in Taoist terms, a "mutual arising" of "yo" (presence, having, being) and "wu" (absence, lack, nothing). As Tao Te Ching amply illustrates, there exists a dialectical relationship between being and non-being, something and nothing, presence and absence. So Lao Tzu says, "Profit comes from what is there, usefulness from what

is not there" (XI). As a god of profit, Hermes depends, for the fulfillment of his possessive desire, on "what is there" under his eyes--the tangible presence of the love object. To achieve this he must turn to Lamia, who, embodying the female Muse-principle, has the power to bring the invisible nymph into physical existence. Once there, however, the nymph cannot stay unchanged as permanent presence. Instead, the materialization of Hermes's object of desire only leads to the instant evaporation of "what is there" into a significant void, the use of which is to generate meaning out of absence, or "what is not there."

To be more specific, the void left by the vanishing of Hermes and the nymph not only reveals the illusory nature of their ideal union, but also betrays the repressed aspect of the idyllic episode. As we shall see later, this repressed aspect (or "what is not there") is further exposed by Lamia's ill-fated romance with Lycius. In retrospect, we may say that the nymph's ravishment by an immortal god prefigures the victimization of Lamia under human conditions, the latter being a deconstructive re-vision of the former. The similar roles played by the nameless nymph and Lamia point to their implicit identity, as both represent, in a figurative sense, the poetic Muse of Keats's quest romance.

The dialectical interaction between Hermes and Lamia/nymph points to a recurrent pattern of confrontation between Apollonian imagination and the female Muse-principle,

not only in Keats's Lamia, but in the quest romance in general. The same confrontation can be observed, for example, in Shelley's Witch of Atlas. In that poem, Apollo, in the guise of "the all-beholding Sun," clearly figures the male imagination in its utmost intensity. On the other hand, the mother of the lady-witch can be seen as representing the Muse-principle of transformation: the ravishing "kiss" of Apollo--in an attempt to put a seal of love on her as private possession--only releases her dynamic power of metamorphosis.⁵ The radical transformation of her identities epitomizes the potentially infinite process of signification. In a sense, Shelley's rainbow-maiden is virtually identical with

⁵ Shelley's lady-witch is analogous to Sung Yu's Divine Woman of Witch Mountain, whose "prismatic soul" has evaded every male quester's imaginary possession. Apart from the poetic treatment of the myth by Sung Yu and the T'ang poets (which I have discussed in Chapter 1), a legendary tale about the rainbow maiden provides a significant clue to her further transformation since her disappearance from the King of Ch'u's dream encounter. The story tells how a woodcutter in the Shou-yang ("Primal Sun") Mountain saw a rainbow descend at evening to drink at the source of a river. In a moment she was transformed into a young woman, and was captured by the commander of a frontier garrison. This uncanny incident was reported to Ming Ti (literally "Emperor of Brightness"). And this is what happened next:

Ming Ti...summoned her into his palace and saw that she was excellently beautiful of face and form. To his question she said, "I am a daughter of Heaven. I have come down among men for a brief period." The theocrat wished to force his favour on her, at which she showed extreme distress. He then ordered his attendant to press close and hold her tight. With a sound like a bell or stone chime she changed herself into a rainbow and so ascended to the sky ("Chih Yen," T'ai P'ing Kuang Chi, qtd. in Schafer 132).

"Incestuous Change."

In Shelley's poetry, the manifestations of mutability in human life are often associated with cloud and moon imagery. So in the poem "Mutability," the lyric voice (in the first-person plural) sings: "We are as clouds that veil the midnight moon...."⁶ The identity between the rainbow-maiden --an incarnation of Mutability--and the Cloud can be seen in the latter's self-introduction:

I am the daughter of Earth and Water,
 And the nursling of the Sky;
 I pass through the pores, of the ocean and the shores;
 I change, but I cannot die--
 For after the rain, when with never a stain,
 The pavilion of Heaven is bare,
 And the winds and sunbeams, with their convex gleams,
 Build up the blue dome of Air--
 I silently laugh at my own cenotaph,
 And out of the caverns of rain,
 Like a child from the womb, like a ghost from the tomb,
 I arise, and unbuild it again.--

("The Cloud" 73-84)

Figuratively, the Cloud spirit can be seen as representing a deconstructive force which cannot be "housed" by the airy dome built out of sunbeams. It is important to note that the Cloud associates the rainbow dome (cf. Huang, or "bright arch") with the idea of death, and sees the deconstruction of it in terms of a spiritual resurrection. This motif is anticipated by an earlier image of the cloud as "a brooding dove," which presents a radical re-vision of Milton's "Heav'nly Muse" in

⁶ Translated into the vocabulary of Chinese mythology, this would mean that mutable mortals are all made in the image of Ni, the white rainbow-serpent which is metaphorically identical with the spirit (or "breath") of the moon.

Paradise Lost. The Miltonic Muse, who is identified with the Holy Spirit and invoked to "justify the ways of God to men" (1:26), clearly represents the projective and constructive power of the male imagination ("...Instruct me, for Thou know'st; Thou from the first /Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread /Dove-like sat'st brooding on the vast Abyss /And mad'st it pregnant." Paradise Lost, 1:19-22). In Shelley's "Cloud," the masculine character of Milton's Muse is transfigured into a predatory image of the rising Sun, which closely parallels Keats's portrayal of Hermes both as "a bright Phoebean dart" and as a bird of prey:⁷

The sanguine Sunrise, with his meteor eyes,
And his burning plumes outspread,
Leaps on the back of my sailing rack,
When the morning star shines dead;
As on the jag of a mountain crag,
Which an earthquake rocks and swings,
An eagle alit one moment may sit
In the light of its golden wings. (31-38)

This depiction of the sun from the Cloud-daughter's female perspective points to the dramatic irony in Apollo's self-portrayal as a "transcendental signifier":

I am the eye with which the Universe
Beholds itself, and knows it is divine.

...I arise; and climbing Heaven's blue dome,

⁷ In Lamia, we see the "dove-footed" Hermes "on his pinions lay, /Like a stoop'd falcon ere he takes his prey" (1:66-67). The predatory image of Hermes foreshadows the latent violence in his conquest of the nymph. Incidentally, the animal-incarnation of the Chinese sun-god is the Golden Bird, otherwise known as "Yang Li," which is obviously a phallic symbol.

I walk over the mountains and the waves,
 Leaving my robe upon the Ocean foam.
 My footsteps pave the clouds with fire; the caves
 Are filled with my bright presence, and the air
 Leaves green Earth to my embraces bare.

.....
 I feed the clouds, the rainbows and the flowers
 With their aetherial colours...

("The Song of Apollo" 31-32; 7-12; 19-20)

The arrogant figure Apollo cuts for himself calls attention to the link between Apollonian imagination and patriarchal power in various forms, including ideological despotism and aesthetic ravishment. Needless to say, the sun itself is not an immutable, permanent presence, as its light changes with the passage of time. One case in point is Wordsworth's "Immortality Ode." When the visionary gleam, the splendour of the morning sun "trailing clouds of glory," fades into "the light of the common day" and then changes into the sober coloring of the sunset through clouds, the shifting imagery of light betrays a rift between idealist illusion and stark reality.⁸ In Keats's poetry, this latent conflict is further exposed with an increasing sense of irony.

II

Critics have usually associated Lamia with the poetic imagination. This association corresponds to Keats's well-

⁸ Shelley uses a similar tactical metaphor (morning sun) in "Lines Written Among the Euganean Hills" and "The Hymn to Intellectual Beauty." Cf. also the image of the sun in Keats's "To Autumn."

known metaphor: "The Imagination may be compared to Adam's dream--he awoke and found it truth" (Letters 1:185). The beauty-turned-truth dream, however, is only an idealistic projection of male desire, which is rarely born out by the materialization of the Muse figure. In this respect, we may recall the Chinese rainbow's double refraction. As we have already seen, the Chinese rainbow is the joint "working" of the serpentine twins, Huong and Ni, which produces the bright, "masculine" arch and its dim, "feminine" duplicate, or sub-pattern. As far as Keats's poetry is concerned, the above analogy suggests that, to comprehend the self-contradictoriness of the male imagination, we must examine what Keats calls "the repeti[ti]on of its own silent Working" (Letters 1:185), which I would identify as the deconstructive process engendered by the female Muse-principle.

The subversive role played by the Muse figure--in this case Lamia--invites a probing into the other aspect of the Romantic imagination. In his book The Quest for Permanence, David Perkins sees Lamia as a symbol of "the visionary imagination," which is condemned because "the vision deceives" (264). Perkins's view reminds us of the common association of Lamia with illusion of one kind or another. What exactly is the nature of the illusion that Lamia is made to embody? To me Lamia represents (i.e. exposes by enacting) the illusory nature of woman's imaginary existence constituted by the male imagination. For it is an illusion, largely entertained by

male-oriented discourse, that the Romantic woman can ever embody the pure "essence" of the male imagination. Throughout the poem, it is Lamia's business to help unweave the very illusion she appears to body forth.

If Lamia is "deceptive" by nature, it is because there is nothing really "natural" about her, whether we take her as a serpent or a woman. The ornate description of her serpentine beauty only serves to highlight its weirdness. At the same time, it also reveals Lamia's elusive character as an artifact. For what seems at first glance a well-rounded, "flowery tale"--a "beauteous wreath," as Hermes calls it--turns out to be a multi-textured body of indeterminacies which has no fixed identity, and evades any black-white characterization associated with the conventional romance:

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.

(1:47-56)

The narrative uncertainty about Lamia's identity reflects the poet's lack of control over what seems to be his own creation. For, although Lamia can be taken as an objective correlative of the poet's "gordian complication of feelings," as Waldoff has suggested (163), her name and her "gordian shape" indicate a more complicated identity, or state of existence, than the

poetic mind can accommodate. As an incarnation of the Muse-principle, Keats's rainbow-serpent can never be confined to its original conception, but will always change its prismatic patterns in the process of representation. On the other hand, the weird mixture of Lamia's physical features betrays the radical contradiction underlying the conceptualization of this serpent-woman: while "her head was serpent" (the fountainhead, so to speak, of "viper thoughts"), "she had a woman's mouth with all its pearls complete" (1:59-60). "Her throat was serpent" (1:64); but then, unlike the traditional lamia, who is unable to speak her woes, Keats's Lamia is gifted with a woman's sweet voice "for Love's sake." The description of her eyes, however, is a telling sign of her "miseries":

And for her eyes: what could such eyes do there
But weep, and weep, that they were born so fair?
As Proserpine still weeps for her Sicilian air.
(1:61-63)

The association of Lamia with the queen of Hades is worth pondering: it not only alludes to the story of Proserpine's abduction by Pluto from her native vale of Enna, but also reminds us that the prototype of Keats's serpent-woman, the lamia of Greek mythology, is also a victim of rape. Furthermore, the comparison of Lamia's misery to that of Proserpine provides a clue to the possible motivation of other female weepers in Keats's poetry. Consider, for example, the ravished nymph, who utters "fearful sobs"; La Belle Dame, who "wept and sigh'd full sore"; and Madeline, who, on seeing

Porphyro, "began to weep /And moan...." All these images of women are shot through with a sense of alienation. As I have suggested, the cause of female alienation in Romantic poetry is often related, directly or indirectly, to the victimization of women by masculine power. If we take the Belle Dame's "sweet moan" as a sign of pain caused by the knight's harassment,⁹ then we may see her weeping and sighing in the same light, not as a feigned gesture of seduction, but as a genuine expression of sorrow. More specifically, it may be her silent way of telling a repressed story of female victimization, since her language sounds "strange" to the knight, who arbitrarily translates it into a token of love. As we have seen, this wordless communication also fails; for, in a moment of narcissistic blindness,¹⁰ the only response the knight can give is to "shut the window" of communication altogether: "And there I shut her wild, wild eyes /With kisses four." In the revised version, the last line of this stanza reads "So kiss'd to sleep," thus highlighting the ironic reversal of the "Sleeping Beauty" motif. In brief, for the male quester to secure the "unperplex'd delight and pleasure" of romance, he must shut out any unsettling sign of female

⁹ See Karen Swann's illuminating discussion cited above.

¹⁰ At this point we may recall the unfeeling husband in "The Yellow Wall Paper," who cuts short his wife's complaints (which he obviously sees as all moonshine) "with a big hug," saying "But now let's improve the shining hours by going to sleep, and talk about it in the morning" (1155).

affliction.

Although we may agree with Frye's sober observation on romance, that "wonderland depends on an unawakened Alice," Keats's sleepers may not have the innocence to dream of a wonderland in the first place. As a matter of fact, the knight's sleep with the Belle Dame only serves, paradoxically, to heighten "the wakeful anguish of the soul" ("Ode on Melancholy" 10). In this we can see the fairy lady's "treacherousness": by inducing the nightmarish vision which reveals at one stroke her name and her "seal of sorrow," she not only exposes the alienating effect of her ravishment, but also reveals her "demonic" power to turn into "cloudy trophies" all her ravishers, past and present.

Like the "Belle Dame sans Merci," Lamia has been constructed as a "thing of bale" long before her reconstruction in Keats's romance. As the narrative makes clear, the apparent cause of Lamia's sorrow is her entrapment in the "serpent prison house," which she describes as a "wreathed tomb."¹¹ Obviously, the poet-narrator sees Lamia's present state of being as a form of confinement, presumably for some undefinable sin in her past. Hence the speculation that Lamia might be "some penanced lady elf, /Some demon's mistress, or the demon's self." Misreading Keats's ambivalence as a sign of

¹¹ In the same sense, we may add, as the bright arch of Huong is a tomb for Ni, or the "blue dome of air" is a "cenotaph" for Shelley's Cloud.

his "fundamentally hostile attitude" towards Lamia, one unsympathetic critic spells out Lamia's "essentially demonic nature" in a more explicit manner:

Like Eve after the Fall, Lamia is fatally experienced. Like Milton's Satan, who also assumed the form of a serpent, she is a permitted agent of temptation and testing. Like Coleridge's Geraldine, who no doubt influenced her portrayal, Lamia is all the more terrible for her blithe affectation of innocence, is essentially "cruel," and her preternaturally bright eyes have a demonic intensity of purpose. (Warren Stevenson 245)

According to Lamia's own account, however, she was simply "a woman." If so, then her serpent form--the alleged penitence for her nameless sin--would actually signify a violation of her true nature. Commenting on the radical ambivalence of Lamia's nature, Douglas Bush remarks that "Lamia is at the same time a beautiful woman who loves and should be loved, and an evil embodiment of the wasting power of love, a *belle dame sans merci*" (111). John Middleton Murry, clearly identifying Keats with Lycius, says that "Keats himself did not know whether she [Lamia] was a thing of beauty or a thing of bale"(159). To a large extent, the contradiction (or confusion) engendered by Lamia's enigmatic identity not only reflects Keats's own ambivalence, but also suggests the polemical construction of the serpent-woman, a cultural process in which both the poet and the reader participate.

III

In western culture, the association of woman with the

serpent usually has a negative connotation, because it reminds us of the biblical myth of the Fall. When Eve yields to the temptation of the serpent, she is breaking the Father's law which defines her womanhood. This breach is the cause of her "fall" from what Frye calls "human nature proper" into "physical nature," a lower level of existence permeated by death and sin. Representative of this "fallen" nature is the serpent, the alien "other" which also constitutes the "base." Incidentally, the serpent's lowly and earthy position is not a natural choice of its own, but is imposed--according to the holy scripture--by the Father's decree: "Thou art cursed above all...upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life" (Genesis 3:14). On the other hand, it is also by the Father's decree that woman and the serpent become enemies ("And I will put enmity between thee and the woman"). As the biblical myth of the Fall suggests, the western serpent was condemned not so much for producing carnal sin as for advocating thought crime. This crime is punishable by death because it threatens the very existence of the paradisaal state.

From a different cultural perspective, however, the image of the serpent-woman may evoke a very different response. Instead of associating Lamia only with the fallen Eve and Satan, or for that matter, with the devil's serpentine daughter, Sin, we may relate her to the Chinese serpent-woman, Nu Kua. In the context of our comparative approach, Lamia's

potentiality for metamorphoses is analogous to Nu Kua's transformative power. We recall that Nu Kua is the "one who transformed (or gave birth to) the myriad creatures," and she is "capable of seventy transformations in the course of a day." It should be pointed out that the English verb "transform" does not convey the multiple meanings of the original word "hua," which means--apart from "transform"--"dissolve," "assimilate," "intermingle," "regenerate" and "enlighten." The generative power of the Chinese serpent-woman motivates a probing into the "other" aspect of the Eve-serpent identity beyond the mainstream of biblical culture. Here we find that the Chinese serpent-woman's name "Nu Kua" and her maternal attribute of "hua" chime with the Gnostic identification--based on the Aramaic pun--of Eve, the Teacher, and the Serpent (*Hawah*, Mother of All Living; *hawa*, to instruct; and *hewya*, Serpent) (Pagels 30-31, qtd. in Walker 906). All this suggests a close affinity between Nu Kua and Eve, the latter being "the mother of all living."

Seen in this light, Lamia's "serpent prison house" may indicate, not the serpent-woman's penitence, but the post-Edenic reader's own confinement to "the Great Code" sanctioned by the Father's law. In other words, it is our own culturally constructed "fallen" consciousness that makes the serpent-woman fall. A cross-cultural examination of the same archetype or cluster of images will heighten our awareness of the arbitrariness, as well as self-contradiction, within a

symbolic system of signification.

In parallel to Nu Kua's identity with the rainbow/moon-goddess, Lamia's serpentine body is interwoven with images of both the moon and the rainbow. As our earlier discussion of the Chinese myths illustrates, the moon and the rainbow have been traditionally related to the "negative" (or yin) attributes of Woman (ranging from promiscuity to treason), which pose a constant threat to the stability of patriarchal power. In Lamia, as well, the same cluster of "yin" images symbolize the mutability of Lamia, who, like Keats's "poetic Character," has no essential self-identity, but "is continually in for [sic]--and filling some other Body" (Letters 1:387). Thus we see Lamia's "rainbow-sided" body "full of silver moons, that, as she breathed, /Dissolv'd, or brighter shone, or interwreathed /Their lustres with the gloomier tapestries" (1:51-53). It is worth noting that, as long as she stays alive, Lamia will continue to enjoy the interplay of light and shade, which produces the ever-changing patterns of her prismatic form. She cannot help it, that is, any more than she can refuse to breathe. For Keats's serpent-woman, then, mutability is not a mark of sin, but is a necessary condition of life.

The relationship between Lamia and Hermes can be compared with that between Nu Kua and the serpentine sun-god, Fu Hsi. As I have suggested, the intertwining image of this primordial pair (as portrayed by ancient artists) not only signifies the

dialectical unity of yin and yang, but also corresponds to the double refraction of the bi-sexual rainbow. In Lamia, this unity of opposites manifests itself in the mutual dependency and inter-penetration between the serpent-woman and her male counterpart, Hermes, whose phallic power is symbolized by the serpent rod. If Lamia is conjured up (in Hermes's "immortal dream") to help fulfil his masculine desire, then Hermes, in his turn, also plays an indispensable role in initiating Lamia into her second womanhood.

Within the symbolic code of signification, the culturally constructed "woman"--as well as all the symbolic constructs pertaining to the "feminine"--has always been relegated to a secondary status. This places her in the role of the female rainbow (i.e. Ni). Significantly, Lamia's transformation into a woman is effected by Hermes's "Caducean charm." At the touch of the serpent rod, the rainbow-serpent is first thrown into a sort of "purgatory blind," in which "her elfin blood in madness ran, /Her mouth foam'd...Her eyes in torture fix'd." The violent decomposition of Lamia's serpentine body is striking indeed:

She writh'd about, convuls'd with scarlet pain:
A deep volcanian yellow took the place
Of all her milder-mooned body's grace;
And, as the lava ravishes the mead,
Spoilt all her silver mail, and golden brede;
Made gloom of all her frecklings, streaks and bars,
Eclips'd her crescents, and lick'd up her stars:
So that, in moments few, she was undrest
Of all her sapphires, greens, and amethyst,
And rubious-argent: of all these bereft,

Nothing but pain and ugliness were left.

(1:154-164)

Sperry sees Lamia's metamorphosis as "a brilliantly comic if somewhat bitter parody of Keats's whole early sense of the nature of poetic creation" (303). He further observes, "To compare the fiery pangs of Lamia's etherealization with the 'fierce convulse' and 'wild commotions' of Apollo's dying into life at the end of *Hyperion* is to understand how a serious conception had become a subject for deliberate travesty" (303). The comparison Sperry makes between Lamia and Apollo is a very important one. In emphasizing the seriousness of Apollo's transformation over against the comic element in Lamia's, however, he seems to overlook the ironical effect of the former and the grave implications of the latter. To elaborate on this point, it is necessary to examine in some detail the relevant scene of confrontation in Hyperion.

IV

In Book III of Hyperion, Apollo is met by the "awful Goddess" Mnemosyne, who is the mother of the Muses. Although Apollo is hailed as "the Giant of the Sun," his self-portrayal reveals a darker image reminiscent of the "ever-smitten" Hermes in Lamia:

For me, dark, dark,
And painful vile oblivion seals my eyes:
I strive to search why I am so sad,
Until a melancholy numbs my limbs;
And then upon the grass I sit, and moan,
Like one who once had wings. - O why should I

Feel curs'd and thwarted, when the liegeless air
Yields to my step aspirant? (3:86-93)

The tone of anxiety is typical of the Keatsean questers, whose "negative capability" is often mixed with a latent fear of creative impotence. Apollo's eager questioning also reveals his dependence on the Muse figure for his self-realization. On the other hand, Mnemosyne's maternal, moon-like presence clearly has a nurturing function (she has been "the watcher of [Apollo's] sleep and hours of life"). Metaphorically, her face becomes a source of illumination, capable of offering enlightenment through its "silent Working":

Mute thou remainest - Mute! yet I can read
A wondrous lesson in thy silent face:
Knowledge enormous makes a God of me. (3:111-13)

In his eagerness to take over the omniscient power from the Muse figure and to claim his godhood, however, Apollo seems barely prepared for the violent confrontation that ensues:

"Creations and destroyings, all at once
Pour into the wide hollows of my brain,
And deify me, as if some blithe wine
Or bright elixir peerless I had drunk,
And so become immortal."--Thus the God,
While his enkindled eyes, with level glance
Beneath his white soft temples, steadfast kept
Trembling with light upon Mnemosyne.
Soon wild commotions shook him, and made flush
All the immortal fairness of his limbs;
Most like the struggle at the gate of death;
Or liker still to one who should take leave
Of pale immortal death, and with a pang
As hot as death's is chill, with fierce convulse
Die into life... (3:116-130)

The above passage vividly enacts the transformative power of the maternal Muse-principle. The effect it has on the male

god is no less drastic than a change of gender. Paradoxically, for the "Giant of the Sun" to become "the Father of all verse," he must forego his symbolically constructed male identity and assume the maternal virtue of regeneration that the Chinese poet Ch'u Yuan (338-278 B.C.) has attributed to the moon ("What kind of virtue does the moon possess /That enables her to die into life?"). As our earlier discussion of the moon-centered myth in Chinese literature suggests, the moon's regenerative power is directly related to the Potion of Immortality from Hsi Wang-mu ("Royal Mother of the West"), who is generally believed to be a moon deity. The Chinese myth gives no account as to how the moon-mother's immortal potion has come into the possession of the sun-god Shen I ("the Divine Archer"). All we know is that, "having obtained the Potion of Immortality," the Divine Archer failed to "keep it for good," for the magic drug was taken (in the double sense of "drinking in" and "stealing") by his wife Ch'ang O. The Potion of Immortality enabled Ch'ang O to fly to the moon, where she became the moon-goddess. Implicit in Ch'u Yuan's question about the moon (or literally "the night's light") is the figurative identity between the moonlight and the maternal Potion of Immortality. The immortal process of regeneration Ch'u Yuan sees in the moon's ever-changing phases invites a re-vision of the "spirit of yin," which I have associated with the female principle of transformation. In brief, the moon-centered myth implies a positive negation of the primal and

permanent value of yang, or the male principle symbolized by the archetypal sun.

By "stealing" the immortal potion, which restores her freedom from captivity and facilitates her reunion with the maternal principle of regeneration, Ch'ang O not only enacts the subversive role of the female Muse, but also thwarts the sun-god's possessive desire.¹² Despite the dubious charges of "theft" and "infidelity" against the moon-goddess, Ch'ang O's story shows that stealing and flying are means of female emancipation. For the real object that motivates the moon-goddess to "steal" is not the sun-god's private property, but her own freedom. Being a stolen object herself, Ch'ang O has every reason to break the phallogentric code of decorum. To free herself from a state of passive subordination--the "feminine" role traditionally assigned to the moon in relation to the sun--Ch'ang O must steal/fly outside of her confinement, in the same manner that Christabel would "steal" from her father's castle into the moonlit wild. The kind of "stealing" exemplified by the moon-goddess is a rebellion against patriarchal ownership which turns the female subject into mere object of masculine desire.

The Chinese myth of the moon sheds much light on the significance of the confrontation between Apollo and Mnemosyne

¹² At this point we may recall the moon-shooting scene of Lu Hsun's story "Flight to the Moon," which exposes the Divine Archer's impotence to re-capture the moon-goddess.

in Hyperion. Like the Divine Archer, Apollo also receives, so to speak, a powerful potion of immortality from a maternal figure. In addition, he virtually takes--even as the moon-goddess Ch'ang O does--the immortal dose ("...as if some blithe wine /Or bright elixir peerless I had drunk, /And so become immortal"). Figuring the Mysterious Female of the maternal Way, the Triple Muse-principle (Hsi Wang-mu/Nu Kua/Ch'ang O) in Chinese mythology generates and enlightens the myriad creatures in a constant process of transformation. In like manner, the Muse figure in "Hyperion" also brings about a profound change within her beholder. Significantly, the effect produced by the maternal potion of immortality on the western sun-god is different from that on the Chinese moon-goddess. Hsi Wang-mu's Potion enables Ch'ang O to fly into the moon, where she becomes one with the female principle; by comparison, Mnemosyne's elixir also initiates Apollo into an imaginative flight, but of a different nature. For, instead of consolidating his self-contained male identity, the striking effect Mnemosyne's potion produces on the sun-god virtually amounts to a symbolic castration: by forcing open his mind to both "creations and destroyings" of the mutable world of experience, it hollows out Apollo's self-exaltation to transcendental Godhead. From a dialectical point of view, life and death are inseparable aspects of the same process of regeneration. In a sense, what Mnemosyne has done to Apollo can also be seen as an act of emancipation: through

his confrontation with the awful Muse figure, Apollo is actually delivered, albeit with tremendous pain, from the prison-house of Self into the whole area of signification which is notably "other" than the phallocentric discourse.

According to Susan J. Wolfson, the original manuscript of this passage contains the following lines, which describe Apollo's painful re-birth in terms of female experience:

[Roseate and pained as a ravish'd nymph -]
 Into a hue more roseate than sweet-pain
 Gives to a ravish'd Nymph [new-r] when her warm tears
 Gush luscious with no sob.¹³

As Wolfson points out, "Apollo's transformation is registered in sensory effects exceeding those of an exceedingly feminine nymph" (319). Although this "effeminacy of style" (so Hazlitt describes it) has embarrassed some contemporary critics,¹⁴ it would be more unnerving for the male imagination to contemplate the implicit act of castration as a source of

¹³ Wolfson quotes these cancelled lines to illustrate what Hazlitt sees as Keats's artistic flaw ("an effeminacy of style, in some degree corresponding to effeminacy of character"). See "Feminising Keats" 319.

¹⁴ Leigh Hunt, for example, finds "something too effeminate and human in the way Apollo receives the exaltation which his wisdom is giving him" (Indicator 2, 352. Cited in Wolfson 319). Wolfson's brilliant comment on Hunt's reaction is worth quoting:

The verse of Hyperion bothers Hunt not just because of its breach of decorum (gods should not act thus) but because of its breach of gender (men should not act thus)--even though his pairing of the adjectives human and effeminate is sufficiently striking to imply a tentative subtextual critique of the inhuman purchases of manliness (319).

beauty. This is probably the reason why Keats had made the awkward attempt to re-gender his symbolically castrated god into a ravished nymph, so as to produce an aesthetic experience--for the male reader, of course--at the expense of a female victim of rape. And yet, in casting the alleged "Father of all verse" in a "feminine" role, the scene of confrontation between Apollo and Mnemosyne gives lie to the creative priority of the Apollonian imagination.¹⁵ The linguistic gap thus opened between the image and the concept also provides a measure of the internal contradiction the quester-poet must go through in the process of "soul-making." This process involves a dialectical intercourse between the

¹⁵ In his book The White Goddess, Robert Graves gives an interesting account of the Sun-god's usurpation of poetic office:

The legendary origin of Japanese poetry is in an encounter between the Moon-goddess and the Sun-god as they walked around the pillar of the world in opposite directions. The Moon-goddess spoke first, saying in verse:

*What joy beyond compare
To see a man so fair!*

The Sun-god was angry that she had spoken out of turn in this unseemly fashion; he told her to return and come to meet him again. On this occasion he spoke first:

*To see a maid so fair--
What joy beyond compare!*

This was the first verse ever composed. In other words, the Sun-god took over the control of poetry from the Muse, and pretended that he had originated it - a lie that did Japanese poets no good at all (393).

masculine Self and the feminine Other--both culturally constructed--wherein lies the wholeness of the Romantic imagination. Emphatically, this is not to suggest a harmonious fusion of opposites. Rather, the extreme pangs suffered by Apollo bear witness to the inner split resulting from the painful necessity of self-contestation.

If Apollo's agonizing rebirth in Hyperion embodies a serious conception of the creative imagination, then Lamia's transformation can be seen as enacting an equally serious misconception of the Muse-principle. Apparently, the function of Hermes's ravishing power is not to produce "pain and ugliness." As Keats makes clear in one of his letters, "the excellence of every Art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty & Truth" (Letters 1:192). Accordingly, Hermes's purgatory power seems to have a twofold function: the construction of Lamia's "proper" womanhood (by the male imagination) as "a thing of beauty," and the suppression of her potential power as a serpent (or "reptilian other/it").

From this perspective, Lamia's violent metamorphosis is a demonstration of--and struggle against--the tyrannical "intensity" of projective imagination. Although deemed necessary for the creation of Beauty, such intensity can be both oppressive and reductive. By reducing the serpent-woman to "nothing but pain and ugliness" before her sublimation into

constructed beauty, the transformation scene virtually exposes the repressed aspect of the confrontation between the male quester and the female Muse figure, which refers back to "what is not there" in Hermes's idealistic union with the nymph.

Lamia's transformation into a "full-born beauty" can be usefully compared to the construction of the Chinese rainbow, otherwise called *Mei Ren* ("beautiful Woman"), which is born of a confrontation between yin and yang. Analogous to the double refraction of the Chinese rainbow, Keats's "lady bright" can be seen as a joint product of the "Caducean charm" of Hermes's serpent-rod and Lamia's "gordian shape." As a result, this airy lady is radically ambivalent in character. On the one hand, the evaporation of Lamia's serpentine features seems to sublimate her into some disembodied feminine essence ("...in the air, her new voice luting soft, /...Borne aloft /With the bright mists..." [1:67-69]). This sublimation makes Lamia a kindred spirit to the Chinese rainbow goddess, whose "prismatic soul" figures the creative "void" at the centre of the male imagination. On the other hand, Lamia's physical reconstruction turns her into a bundle of sensuous pleasures which, while promising to body forth feminine beauty, also betray signs of uncanniness. So we see in Lamia "A virgin purest lipp'd, yet in the lore /Of love deep learned to the red heart's core" (1:189-90). The sexual overtone of the above description clearly has some unsettling implications. According to Robert Gittings, the portrayal of Lamia as "a

lovely graduate...in Cupid's college" indicates that she is "an unmarried woman with full sexual experience" (491).¹⁶ Following Gittings's suggestion, we find that the only plausible clue to Lamia's sexual initiation before her encounter with Lycius is the passage describing her violent reaction to the "charm" of Hermes's serpent-rod. It is Hermes who has taught Lamia what it means to be "a real woman." For Lamia, to become "old Adam's seed" is to be born a sinner, "a virgin whore or demonic Eve," as one critic calls her (Stevenson 245). It is to be deprived of "all her milder-mooned body's grace" and stripped of all her rainbow hue, which marks her primal identity with the mysterious female principle. The attempt to purge the serpent-woman of her "otherness" can have a negative effect, however, for it only drives her dynamic potentiality (symbolized by her "many senses" and "a hundred thirsts") underground, where it becomes "demonic."¹⁷ In a sense, it is the effect of Hermes's serpent-rod that motivates Lamia's seductive/subversive power.

Lamia's metamorphosis signifies her re-construction as the second sex before entering the human world of experience. It also figures a different kind of "dying-into-life": the

¹⁶ As Gittings points out, "Graduate was the slang term for 'an unmarried woman who has taken her degree in carnal love'" (491n).

¹⁷ In Tien Han's The White Snake, the suppressed aspect of Lady White (the Chinese Lamia) is externalised by Sister Blue-the "female demon" (so the Tower God calls her) of revenge.

death of her imaginary self as pure essence and the birth of her new existence as Woman. In this connection, her half-playful speech to Lycius reveals the contradiction inherent in her constructed womanhood:

"Thou art a scholar, Lycius, and must know
That finer spirits cannot breathe below
In human climes, and live: Alas! poor youth,
What taste of purer air hast thou to soothe
My essence? What serener palaces,
Where I may all my many senses please,
And by mysterious sleights a hundred thirsts appease?
It cannot be - Adieu!" (1:279-286)

The tone of mockery is underscored by a teasing gesture of transcendence: lacking the ethereal wings of a spirit, Lamia "rose tiptoe with white arms spread," thus betraying her blood-and-flesh materiality as a "real woman." In so doing, Lamia also makes a caricature of woman's imaginary role as the winged vehicle for the male imagination.¹⁸ The significance of Lamia in Part Two--if not the entire poem--lies precisely in her "playing woman's part," a treacherous role which turns Hermes's visionary dream into an existential nightmare for his mortal counterpart, Lycius.¹⁹

¹⁸ As a Muse figure, Lamia has gone a long way from the poet's earlier ideal. For there was a time, Keats recalls, when

My muse had wings
And ever ready was to take her course
Whither I bent her force
Unintellectual, yet divine to me....
(*"To - [Fanny Brawne]"*)

¹⁹ We may compare Lamia's gendered role as a "real woman" with the reconstruction of the White Snake from a lustful seductress into a submissive wife. If, in "playing woman's

V

This bitter re-vision of the "Beauty-turned-Truth" formula culminates in the unweaving of the rainbow-serpent by Apollonius in the naming scene, which parallels the naming of the fairy lady in "La Belle Dame," but with an even more disastrous consequence. The confrontation between Lamia and Apollonius has usually been read in terms of binary oppositions, such as illusion and reality, passion and reason, imagination and philosophy, and so on. Sperry, for example, sees Apollonius as representing "the power of science" (304), and takes Lamia as "the essence of imaginative perception" (307). Thus the poem's central conflict becomes one between rational science and poetic imagination. The difficulty with this reading is that the way Apollonius solves the "knotty problem" known as Lamia has little to do with natural science. By calling Lamia "a serpent!"--that is, by reducing her to the status of "other" --Apollonius epitomizes the kind of naming (as well as a way of seeing) which is

part," Lamia must be so "subdued" as to "[love] the tyranny," her Chinese counterpart, Lady White, also has to pay a high price for the purchase of her feminine virtues. We recall that, even though she "feel[s] trapped" with the dangerous cup of wine her husband is forcing upon her, Lady White nevertheless drinks to Hsu's health for fear that "the love between [them] might not stand." The disastrous consequence of Lady White's self-effacing obedience also has a parallel in Keats's "Lamia." As we shall see, Lamia's compliance with Lycius's vanity to show off his beautiful "prize" proves to be equally devastating: it leads not only to the dissolution of the female object of desire, but also to the death of the male self.

typical of patriarchal ideology.²⁰ Surely this is not compatible with the way Newton defines his rainbow. If anything, the ruthless intensity of Apollonius's "insight" is reminiscent of the penetrating yang spear that has produced the Taboo Woman (cf. ~~the~~):

...the sophist's eye,
 Like a sharp spear, went through her utterly,
 Keen, cruel, perçant, stinging...
 "A serpent!" echoed he; no sooner said,
 Than with a frightful scream she vanished.
 (2:299-301, 305-306. Emphasis mine)

In articulating Lamia's name "proper," Apollonius is trying to lock her up in her "serpent prison-house," a phallogentric taboo imposed on the female "other." Just as the radical Woman's identity as Taboo is constituted by the phallic stroke of yang, so the identification of Lamia as "a serpent" is a function of Apollonius's serpentine gaze. The penetrating "potency" of Apollonius's "demon eyes" provides a demonic version of what Wordsworth has called "the light of common day"; it also bears comparison to the striking power of Shelley's Apollo ("The sunbeams are my shafts with which I kill /Deceit, that loves the night and fears the day"). In short, Lamia's state of alienation reflects the alienating

²⁰ As we can readily see, the role played by Apollonius in Lamia closely resembles that of Fa Hai ("Law Boundless") in the White Snake legend. Apollonius's self-justification for his intrusion ("from every evil /Of life have I preserv'd thee to this day, /And shall I see thee made a serpent's prey?"[2:296-98]) is similar to the reason Fa Hai gives for his "timely intervention." In their different guises, both Fa Hai and Apollonius represent the prohibitive law of patriarchy.

aspect of the male imagination represented by Apollonius, which is a component part of patriarchal reality.

As we have seen, the act of naming has always been a form of power struggle.²¹ In the symbolic world of romance, we can detect a great deal of projective violence, albeit veiled in aesthetic forms, in the naming of the female subject. To spell out the father's law, naming is ravishing. This has become a rule in the masculine power games of conquest and courtship--which are two aspects of the discourse of contradiction. Ironically, while the ravishing power of language is every male quester's desire, the paternal law erected by that very power is by no means a blessing. In Lamia, this contradiction is exposed, first by the implicit conflict between Hermes and Jove, and then, in a more dramatic fashion, by Lycius's open hostility against Apollonius. Like the knight-at-arms, Hermes and Lycius represent, in their different levels of existence, the belated quester-poet. On the other hand, the paternal figures, Jove and Apollonius, are reminiscent of the ghostly company emerging from the knight's

²¹ Commenting on "naming" and categorizing as instruments of power, Sheila Rowbotham attacks the power of naming as a "false power which avoids and actually prevents us thinking about the complexities of what is happening by covering it up in a category....Once named, historical situations and groups of people can be shuffled and shifted into neat piles, the unnamed cards are simply left out of the game" (65-66). Rowbotham's insightful observation was fully illustrated by the recent political turmoil in China, when the scattered bodies of pro-democracy demonstrators, who came from all walks of life, were neatly piled up and disposed of after being "named" as "a handful of counter-revolutionary thugs."

nightmarish vision. Hermes's frustration (he is "ever-smitten") clearly suggests his belatedness, for, to initiate his quest, he has to steal "light" from his prohibitive predecessor, Jove:

From high Olympus had he stolen light,
On this side of Jove's clouds, to escape the sight
Of his great summonner... (1:9-11, emphasis mine)

The metaphorical conflict between "light" and "sight" on the one hand, and the "masculine" rhyming of these two words on the other, point to the contradiction (involving both struggle and identity) between the quester-poet and the paternal figure. If we take "light" as symbolizing enlightenment (or source of vision), and "sight" as signifying perception itself, then we can see the predominant role that "light" plays in shaping one's ways of seeing. In a practical sense, all seeing depends on light. This partly accounts for Hermes's dependence on--as well as departure from--the light-giving Jove, a contradiction which is further reflected by Lycius's ambivalent attitude towards Apollonius. Having "stolen light," Hermes must "escape the sight" of Jove; similarly, Lycius has to "blind" himself "from [the] quick eyes" of Apollonius. While acknowledging that Apollonius is his "trusty guide /And good instructor," Lycius nevertheless confesses to Lamia his fear of repression: "to-night he seems /The ghost of folly haunting my sweet dreams" (1:375-377).

Symbolizing the established authority of patriarchy, the paternal figures Jove and Apollonius also represent,

metaphorically, the malestream of literary tradition. In a sense, the serpent-woman's "prison-house" is largely constructed by this patriarchal tradition. On the other hand, Hermes's re-construction of Lamia into "a real woman," which paves the way for her domestication by Lycius, signifies the quester-poet's endeavour to rescue the poetic Muse from her state of alienation. This chivalric enterprise is doomed, however, by its inherent self-contradictoriness. Despite the Romantic quester's heart-felt sincerity, the "fev'rous citadel" of love is by no means "safe and free" for the poetic Muse to settle in. For the real assault often comes from within rather than from without. In other words, the quester-poet's amorous gesture of protection is often nullified by the predatory character of his possessive desire. Take, for example, the rhetoric of love by Porphyro, a representative of Keats's quest heroes:

"My Madeline! sweet dreamer! lovely bride!
 Say, may I be for aye thy vassal blest?
 Thy beauty's shield, heart-shap'd and vermeil dyed?
 Ah, silver shrine, here will I take my rest
 After so many hours of toil and quest,
 A famish'd pilgrim, --saved by miracle.
 Though I have found, I will not rob thy nest
 Saving of thy sweet self; if thou think'st well
 To trust, fair Madeline, to no rude infidel."
 ("The Eve of St. Agnes" 334-342)

Porphyro's passionate utterance is tempered with a curious overtone of religiosity, whereby the female object of desire is enshrined in a beautiful ideal. Still, we can hear a note of disharmony: as the rhetoric of devout worship modulates

into that of amorous robbery, the image of the "silver shrine" is hollowed out by that of an empty "nest." By seducing Madeline (and the reader) into the difficult judgment between "a famish'd pilgrim" and a "rude infidel," Keats's romantic quester virtually betrays the treacherousness of the masculine code of fidelity.

The self-contradictoriness underlying the Romantic discourse of desire reminds us of the Chinese term for contradiction--*Mao-tun*²²--which literally means "spear-shield." Within the phallogentric code of signification, the metaphorical spear and shield belong to the same ideological weaponry, hence the inherent contradiction we witness in the masculine power games of conquest/courtship. From a different perspective, this self-contradictory discourse also exposes the female object of desire to a two-fold peril. Insofar as the Romantic ideal of love is based on the notion of private ownership, as is evident in both Keats's poetry and his letters,²³ no chivalric facade can shield the female love

²² For an explanation of this Chinese term, see Chapter 2, fn.9.

²³ See, for example, Keats's letter to Fanny Brawne:

I shall still love you--but what hatred shall I
have for another! Some lines I read the other day
are continually ringing a peal in my ears:

To see those eyes I prize above mine own
Dart favors on another--
And those sweet lips (yielding immortal nectar)
Be gently press'd by any but myself--

object--be it Fancy or Fanny--from masculine ravishment. As a matter of fact, the Romantic project of domestication often proves to be a more civilized form of domination, whereby the female inmate is alienated, as private possession, by the tyranny of love. This adds an extra dimension of irony to Keats's observation that

Love in a palace is perhaps at last
More grievous torment than a hermit's fast. (2:3-4)

The above remark, which opens the romance proper between Lycius and Lamia, undermines their palace of love by its ironic tone of disenchantment. What is more, it also prefigures the tension underlying the relationship between the two lovers. By reminding us that "too short was their bliss /To breed distrust and hate" (2:9-10), the poet-narrator leaves no doubt as to the illusory and transient nature of Lycius's love. Although Lycius can double his bliss by looking into Lamia's "open eyes, /Where he was mirror'd small in

Think, think Francesca, what a cursed thing
It were beyond expression! (Letters 2:123-24)

In another letter to Fanny he writes: "Do not think of anything but me....you must think of no one but me....You must be mine to die upon the rack if I want you" (2:290-91). The following poem provides yet another example:

I cry your mercy--pity--love!--aye, love!
Merciful love that tantalises not,
One-thoughted, never-wand'ring, guileless love,
Unmask'd, and being seen--without a blot!
O, let me have thee whole,--all,--all--be mine!
("I cry your mercy...")

paradise"(2:46-47), his visionary abode actually amounts to a parody of Marvell's "happy garden state."²⁴ The symbolic setting of their romance, described as a "purple-lined palace of sweet sin," betrays a sense of uneasiness which clearly belongs to a post-edenic Adam. In an attempt to "unperplex bliss from its neighbour pain"--which Lamia has obviously failed to do--Lycius's re-assertion of love only underscores his egocentricity:

"My silver planet, both of eve and morn!
 Why will you plead yourself so sad forlorn,
 While I am striving how to fill my heart
 With deeper crimson, and a double smart?
 How to entangle, trammel up and snare
 Your soul in mine, and labyrinth you there
 Like the hid scent in an unbudded rose?"
 (2:48-54)

The above speech strikes a chord with Porphyro's impassioned rhetoric. In both cases, we witness the intensity of the masculine desire for self-fulfillment through complete

²⁴ On the other hand, the following stanza from Marvell's "Garden" can be read as a satirical comment on Lycius's narcissistic self-image mirrored in Lamia's open eyes:

"Such was that happy garden state,
 While man there walked without a mate:
 After a place so pure and sweet,
 What other help could yet be meet!
 But 'twas beyond a mortal's share
 To wander solitary there:
 Two paradises 'twere in one
 To live in paradise alone."


As Leon Waldoff points out, Lycius's love for Lamia "is ultimately a form of self-love"(167). I shall further explore the implications of Lycius's egocentric reflection later in this section.

possession of the female love-object. A closer examination reveals that the troping is riddled with self-contradictoriness. If we take the "unbudded rose" as figuring the poet-quester's aspiring "soul," then we must observe that it is not likely to bloom without letting go "the hid scent," the latter being a metaphor for the female Muse-principle. There is a further discrepancy between the image and the concept. The scent is an organic--though invisible--property of the rose; Lamia, however, is by no means a natural inmate of Lycius's soul. Ironically, the poetic emblem of love (i.e. the rose) with which Lycius identifies himself is also a symbol of entrapment for Lamia. The use of such words as "entangle," "trammel up" and "snare" indicates that only by forceful means can the female object of desire be secured as man's material property.

Paradoxically, no property can be reclaimed as private without public recognition. As Lycius himself makes clear, the value of his "prize" can be materialized only through some kind of public show:

"What mortal hath a prize, that other men
 May be confounded and abash'd withal
 But lets it sometimes pace abroad majestic,
 And triumph, as in thee I should rejoice
 Amid the hoarse alarm of Corinth's voice.
 Let my foes choke, and my friends shout afar,
 While through the thronged streets your bridal car
 Wheels round its dazzling spokes." (2:57-64)

The above speech by Lycius is crucial to an understanding of his economy of desire, according to which the institution of

marriage and the establishment of property-ownership are two sides of the same coin.²⁵ The connection of these two concepts is not Lycius's whimsical invention, of course, but has been inscribed in the symbolic code of signification for thousands of years. At this point we may recall the Chinese character for marriage, .²⁶ This ideograph, which literally means "take woman," vividly illustrates the masculine rite of matrimony by depicting a hand grabbing at the ear of a woman. As we have seen, a literary example of this barbaric ritual of courtship/conquest is the capture of Ch'ang O by the Divine Archer. Both the Chinese ideograph and the myth of Ch'ang O yield some insight into the latent conflict between Lycius and Lamia. For illustration, I would highlight the striking manner in which Lycius prepares his bride-to-be for their prospective marriage:

His passion, cruel grown, took on a hue
Fierce and sanguineous as 'twas possible
In one whose brow had no dark veins to swell.
Fine was the mitigated fury, like
Apollo's presence when in act to strike
The serpent - Ha, the serpent! certes, she
Was none. She burnt, she lov'd the tyranny,
And, all subdued, consented to the hour

²⁵ I am indebted to Marjorie Levinson for this argument. As Levinson points out, "In order to constitute Lamia as a property (as opposed to something in the order of a natural resource), Lycius must first establish his ownership. He must publicly and legally secure his goods, hence his insistence on marriage, as on a very public reception" (278).

²⁶ As earlier mentioned, this ideograph is designed exclusively for men. As for women, marriage means something different. This is evident in the feminine word for "marriage," which depicts a woman attached to a home.

When to the bridal he should lead his paramour.
 (2:75-83. Emphasis mine)

The figural pattern of confrontation underlying the above passage is a recurrent one within the poem's overall structure of imagery. On the one hand, the comparison of Lycius to Apollo refers back to the nymph's ravishment by Hermes, who is likened to a "bright Phoebean dart"; on the other hand, it prefigures the "conquest" of Lamia by Apollonius, whose penetrating eye is described as a "sharp spear." As if by a slip of the tongue, the narrative allusion to the myth of Apollo fighting the serpent--certainly a curious way of describing a man's proposal of marriage²⁷-- betrays at once the implicit identity between Lycius and Apollonius (who is, after all, Lycius's "trusty guide"), and Lamia's potential otherness as a serpent, which must be vanquished before Lycius can take her as a "real woman" (i.e. as both a "treat" and a "prize"). Metaphorically, the reference to the myth of Apollo

²⁷ One interesting parallel to this is Browning's portrayal of the egocentric Duke ("My Last Duchess" 54-55), who concludes his proposal of marriage by pointing to the statue of Neptune "taming a sea-horse." In the context of our present discussion, Browning's Duke provides an extreme example of aesthetic tyranny, which decrees the murder of life to secure the "permanence" of art as private property. On the other hand, the last duchess can be seen as a symbol of the wayward muse, who makes nothing of her husband-jailor's "nine-hundred-years-old name" (which figures the long-established patriarchal tradition), and whose "looks went everywhere." Ironically, the Duke's possessive desire can be fulfilled only by physically eliminating his "object" of love. Even so, the unmasterable smile of the last duchess's life-like portrait still remains a haunting memory of the Duke's failure to reclaim absolute control over his wife.

highlights the contradiction between the projective violence of the Apollonian imagination and the unmasterability of the Muse-principle. As Keats's poem reveals, the sublimation of Woman into an ideal soul-mate and the suppression of her "wild" nature are inseparable aspects of the Romantic project of domestication.

By holding a public wedding, Lycius has vainly hoped not only to show off his bride, but also to secure, through the wedlock proper, what he (mis)takes as his private property. The tragic ending, however, shows the deadly consequence of his delusion about Lamia's true character. In a sense, the seed of catastrophe had been sown by Hermes even before Lycius's encounter with Lamia. For, in re-constructing Lamia into a "real woman, lineal indeed /From...old Adam's seed" (1:332-333), the god of profit not only offers Lycius (his earthly counterpart) a free bonus for the taking, but also leads him into a double jeopardy. This statement seems to contradict Lycius's paradisaic bliss, doubly enhanced by Lamia's mirroring eyes (2:46-47). As I have earlier suggested, however, this is precisely where Lycius is taken in. If, as Marvell observes with nostalgic regret, after the original Eden (Adam's divinely conceived bride), no "other help could yet be meet" ("The Garden"), then we can see the grave mistake Keats's male persona makes in believing that Woman can ever be a man's sweet "treat" (1:330). My capitalization of "Woman" is emphatically not to make the word a mere token of profit,

which, according to Lao Tzu, depends on "yo" ("presence," "having," or "something"). Rather, I am calling attention to the other use of the word "Woman," not only as a culturally constructed signifier of gender difference, but, more importantly, as a paradigm for the deconstructive tendency/process within the patriarchal code of signification. Once again, I am thinking of the Chinese radical Woman. As constitutive negation of the patriarchal sign-system, the radical Woman epitomizes the dialectic of contradiction based on "the mutual arising of yo and wu." Accordingly, the meaning of the word "Woman" in our present discussion depends on "wu" ("absence," "lacking," or "nothing") as much as on "yo." From this premise, I shall briefly re-examine Lamia's real womanhood in relation to Lycius.

The narrator-poet's dubious assertion that Lamia "lov'd the tyranny" imposed upon her has been interpreted, in positive terms, as a device to arouse sympathy in Lamia's favour (Sperry 308), or as a token of her "humanization" (Dickstein 242). Implicit in these sympathetic readings, however, is an unstated agreement to Lamia's domestication, even without endorsing the tyrannical means by which the taming of the female "other" is carried out. Although Lamia's apparent submission to masculine power could easily be read as indicating a woman's blind passion (for "she burnt," so we are told), it could also imply nothing but a wishful desire, on the part of man, to make woman a slave of masculine love. In

this case, the submissive image of Lamia reflects, not a woman's real character, but the male narrator's false representation of femininity.²⁸

In his book on Keats, Watkins makes some curious comments on Lamia's character:

...from the very beginning she is masculine-dependent; her pleasure in life depends upon her ability to attach herself to masculinity, which controls the world, and the way to do this, she knows, is by making herself into a prize that the masculine ego would want to win....Thus it is that "she lov'd the tyranny" (2:18) exercised over her by Lycius; though it is tyranny, it is at least attention (152).

In spite of the many illuminating points Watkins has made in his analysis of the poem, the logic of the above argument is mind-boggling. To me it is as good as saying: better be raped than let alone: though it is violence, it is ravishing. Instead of seeing Lamia's submissive attachment to Lycius as a hallmark of her "humanization" or her need for "attention," I would argue that it is a function of her alienation (i.e. dehumanization) under the tyranny of love. For all her apparent submissiveness, Lamia is not simply a pathetic plaything at the mercy of masculine control. Although the taming of her "wild" nature seems to have reduced the rainbow-serpent to the alleged feminine essence of water (she "wept a rain of sorrow" before consenting to Lycius's proposal, which

²⁸ As is evident in Keats's remarks about women in his letters, e.g. "women love to be forced to do a thing" (Letters 2:164).

leads to her ultimate evaporation), there is a trace of "treacherousness" underlying the weeping figure. Apart from the ready association with Proserpine (1:61-63), the Belle Dame, and even Coleridge's woman wailing under Kubla Khan's pleasure dome, the water imagery itself could be an unsettling sign in connection with the serpent-woman.²⁹

According to Taoist philosophy, what appears to be weak and docile does not necessarily indicate lack of strength. On the contrary, the weak and the docile often prove to be more powerful than the strong and the hard. Throughout Tao Te Ching, Lao Tzu repeatedly uses the metaphor of water to illustrate his paradoxical maxim that "The Tao moves in reversal and works through weakness" (XL). The Taoist dialectic of reversal, which is manifest in water's subversive strength-in-weakness and resistance-in-submission, sheds much light on the female power in various forms of signification.

As for Lamia's dependence on masculine power, I would argue that her apparent submission to her domineering lover (who is determined "to reclaim /Her wild and timid nature to his aim" 2:70-71) is analogous to the "proper settlement" (cf. 卺) of the Chinese radical Woman. Just as the radical Woman needs a hand (夬) to perform her unsettling role within the patriarchal sign-system, so Lamia must depend on masculine power to play out her "woman's part." Like the Chinese radical

²⁹ See my discussion of water-imagery in the section on Chinese myths, esp. the legend of the White Snake.

Woman, Lamia, who figures the Romantic Muse, represents both the suppressed "second sex" and the subversive sub-text, that is, the "other" aspect of Romantic poetry's self-representation. In other words, the story of Lamia signifies both the victimization of actual women by patriarchy and the deconstruction of the phallogentric discourse by its constitutive negation.

VI

To sum up, let us briefly return to the naming of Lamia in the final scene. As the Chinese "saint" Confucius has recognized, the feat of naming--especially when the female and the lowly are involved--could be a very tricky thing. Ironically, by calling Lamia a "serpent," Apollonius unwittingly strikes the truth that Woman is always "other" than she is supposed to be. Once named, Lamia becomes, like La Belle Dame sans Merci, a significant "void." As such, both are comparable to the female principle of transformation which Lao Tzu describes as an immortal spirit ("The spirit of the valley never dies; this is called the Mysterious Female.") As we have seen, this female spirit reveals itself in various forms, ranging from the Chinese rainbow-goddess to the English cloud maiden (cf. Shelley's "Cloud": "I change, but I cannot die.") From this perspective, we may say that Lamia's vanishment is not death, but transformation into a different mode of existence. It signifies a total disruption of the established

order of things through a dialectical reversal, whereby fixed binary opposites, such as being and non-being, having and lacking, presence and absence, something and nothing, are mobilized into a perpetual process of transformation. Lamia's vanishment from the naming scene is a positive negation of the paternal law which constitutes the imaginary female identity, either as a "thing of beauty" or as a "thing of bale." Finally, Lamia's vanishment from the wedding also thwarts the possessive desire of her lover ("[his] arms were empty of delight" 2:307), who has hoped to make a profit out of her visible presence. Thus, instead of taking his bride through wedlock, Lycius is fatally taken in--or wrapped up--by an empty signifier of his vain ideal of love: "in its marriage robe, the heavy body wound" (2:311). Underlying the interlocking motifs of love and death, we can feel the inescapable burden of mortal reality which lends a tragic weight to Keats's later romance.

"Whither fled Lamia" no one could tell, but the void left by the dissolution of Keats's rainbow-serpent will always be of great use to generations of readers in the production of new meanings. So it is with the maternal principle of the Way, which is "empty, yet use will not drain it."

(In) Conclusion

The uncanny nature of the Romantic Muse draws attention to what Keats calls the "silent Working" of imagination, which often turns out to be a constitutive negation of the poet's "palpable design." As we have already seen, this deconstructive element is clearly at work within Kubla Khan's "pleasure dome," a paradigm of the Romantic imagination. Another example can be found in Keats's verse epistle "To J.H. Reynolds, Esq."

To me the great interest of this epistle lies not only in its stark vision of physical Nature, but, more importantly, in its vivid staging of the creative mind besieged by conflicting factors in divergent directions: "Things all disjointed come from north and south" and "every other minute vex and please" (4-5). In a conversational style, the poem unfolds a series of fragmented, strangely juxtaposed mental sketches, among which the most uncanny is perhaps the vision of "Two witch's eyes above a cherub's mouth" (6). This weird image reminds us of Lamia's plaintive eyes looking out of her "wreathed tomb" (for "her head was serpent"), and her "woman's mouth with all its pearls complete." We recall that, while Lamia can "whisper woman's lore so well" that her words come "as through bubbling honey," her eyes seem to betray a different story: "What could such eyes do there /But weep and weep.../As Proserpine still weeps for her Sicilian air" (1:61-

63). Another ready association, of course, is the mesmerizing potency of Geraldine's serpentine eyes. From the outset, then, we can detect some "treacherous" female presence, which seems to haunt the poet's mind in various "shapes, and shadows, and remembrances." In an attempt to "escape these visiting" from the dark shadows of reality, the poet conjures up a symbolic edifice of art, which he hopes to consecrate in the spirit of the sun:

O Phoebus! that I had thy sacred word
 To show this Castle, in fair dreaming wise,
 Unto my friend, while sick and ill he lies!
 (30-32)

The invocation to the sun-god (who is referred to as the "Father of All Verse" in Hyperion) clearly reflects the masculine desire to secure (or "seize") the ideal vision of beauty through Apollonian imagination, which would grant him the magic power of conquest and enthrallment, "like Urganda's sword." In this respect, we may recall Keats's lamentation, in a later poem "To - [Fanny Brawne]," for the loss of his imaginative power. There was a time, the poet recalls, when "My muse had wings, /And ever ready was to take her course / Wither I bent her force." But now he finds himself betrayed, like the knight-at-arms, to a "monstrous region" where "bad flowers have no scent, birds no sweet song." In a moment of desperation the poet makes a poignant appeal:

O for some sunny spell
 To dissipate the shadows of this hell!

The poet imagines that, with the power of pure imagination

(i.e. the "sunny spell"), he could regain both his "old liberty" and his lost property--the "lady bright":

O, let me once again these aching arms be plac'd,
The tender gaolers of thy waist!

The irony in the above gesture of love is self-evident. What is worth noting, however, is the poet-lover's radical ambivalence towards the female love object, whose identity is by no means easy to define. Taken as a phantasmatic effect of the "sunny spell," the bright lady is reminiscent of Lamia who, after being transformed by Hermes into a "full-born beauty," is also called a "lady bright." On the other hand, it is precisely the haunting memory--or presence-in-absence--of this "brilliant Queen" that has brought the dark shadows of an existential hell. This is the reason why the poet wants "to kill it and be free," or to lock the visionary beauty forever in his wishfulfillment dream: "Enough! Enough! it is enough for me /To dream of thee!" As we shall see presently, the figurative conflict between the "sunny spell" and the dark shadows (cf. Coleridge's "sunny dome" and "caves of ice") is a recurrent motif in the epistle "To J. H. Reynolds, Esq.," which deserves further analysis.

In a highly imaginative fashion, the poet describes two particular paintings to his friend. The first picture is generally believed to be Claude Lorrain's "Sacrifice to Apollo" (Colvin 264; Sperry 120; Evert 198):

The sacrifice goes on; the pontiff knife
Gleams in the sun, the milk-white heifer lows,

The pipes go shrilly, the libation flows...
(20-22)

Significantly, the "sunny" quality of Keats's word-painting is highlighted by "the pontiff *knife*" (emphasis mine), a glaring image which points not so much to the "human devotion" (as Evert calls it) to the male god, but rather to the female "sacrifice" (in a secular sense of the word)--the heifer--in the Apollonian ritual of love. Evert has found "serenity and self-sufficiency" in the alleged "harmony of vision objectified in the scene of sacrifice and in the hymn of praise" (198). It is difficult to accept this idealistic reading, however, in view of the disparate images of implicit violence and blood-shed (the dazzling knife vs. the "milk-white heifer"), which, juxtaposed with the shrill music and flowing libation, conspire to strike a note of discord in the reader's mind. With our fresh memory of Lamia's wedding ceremony, we might even wonder if we are not witnessing yet another scene of "misery [dressed] in fit magnificence" (2:115). This pattern of disharmony becomes more complicated in Keats's imaginative depiction of the second painting, "The Enchanted Castle."

According to Sperry, the original picture by Claude (also known as "Landscape with Psyche and the Palace of Amor") is one that exemplifies "those aspects [of the sublime] associated with...peace, security, happiness, and a sense of repose" (122). Such conceptualization of Claude's "Enchanted

Castle" reminds me of the symbolic architecture of peace and security in written Chinese, as is epitomized by the construction of the character 家. Incidentally, Sperry's book on Keats includes an illustration of Claude's original painting, which facilitates our comparison in visual as well as symbolic terms. In Claude's picture, the towering castle (or "the Palace of Amor") occupies a conspicuous, central position, flanked by shadowy trees which create a misty background. On the left-hand side of the castle, we see a female figure (Psyche) seated in the midst of darkness. The relational structure of "The Enchanted Castle" can be compared to that of the Chinese ideograph 嫁, which denotes the feminine form of marriage. This character implies that, for the Chinese Woman, marriage has a double meaning: while designating her subordination (or attachment) to a house, it also reveals her marginalization as a misfit or outsider. In this connection, we may recall our earlier discussion of the theme of marriage in Christabel, which opens on a scene with a female figure stealing outside of a castle into the dim wood. As we have already seen, what motivates Coleridge's heroine to wander "beyond [the] proper bound" of the paternal domain is anything but a sense of peace and repose.

The above re-vision of Claude's "Enchanted Castle" points to some disturbing element in what appears to be "a charmed and charming dream vision" (Evert 200). In view of this, Keats's representation of Claude's original design-- which

turns the "Palace of Amor" into a kind of haunted house --can be seen as a radical elaboration of its unsettling implications. Even a casual comparison between Claude's "Enchanted Castle" and Keats's re-construction of it will reveal a notable difference, namely, the absence of Claude's female figure from Keats's landscape. Upon scrutiny, however, we find that the apparently missing woman is actually displaced by some intangible female presence, whose power can be felt only through its effect. In Claude's picture, the female figure is portrayed as an outsider in relation to the Enchanted Castle; in Keats's poem, her physical dissolution from the surface scene virtually signifies her complete absorption into the "giant pulsing underground," where she becomes a subversive element within the symbolic edifice.¹ The figural structure of Keats's word-painting epitomizes the deconstructive process within the Romantic imagination, which, like the "Enchanted Castle," is itself a cultural construct.

To trace the disfiguration of the female image, we need to look more closely at the architectural structure of Keats's "Enchanted Castle":

¹ I am indebted to Sperry for his illuminating comment on the image of "some giant pulsing underground," which betrays the tension between "surface placidity" and "underlying disorder" (123). See also David Luke, "Keats's Notes from Underground." The displacement of the female figure in Keats's poem has a similar effect to the transfiguration of Sung Yu's rainbow goddess into the misty landscape of Witch Mountain, which turns the King of Chu's possessive desire into an endless quest.

Part of the building was a chosen See,
 Built by a banish'd Santon of Chaldee;
 The other part, two thousand years from him,
 Was built by Cuthbert de Saint Aldebrim;
 Then there's a little wing, far from the sun,
 Built by a Lapland witch turn'd maudlin nun;
 And many other juts of aged stone
 Founded with many a mason-devil's groan.
 (41-48)

Commenting on the above passage, Evert observes that "not only is the building the product of different designers but also, judging by the cultural implications of their assigned identities, the motives of its builders were different" (201). Evert's illuminating remark calls attention to the parallel between Keats's symbolic edifice, which shows no sign of self-integrity or intrinsic harmony, and the poetic mind, which we have seen from the outset to be riddled with a "hateful seige of contraries" (Letters 1:369). From a slightly different perspective, we may compare the architectural history of the building with the multi-dimensional and conflictual nature of literary production, which involves a dialectical process of construction and deconstruction. The metaphorical identity between the poetic mind and the literary artifact suggests that the "private" sphere of imagination (or what Frye would call "home") is virtually constituted in/by larger socio-cultural contexts ("environment"). In a sense, there can be no clear-cut boundary between private and public, or for that matter, between "home" and "environment."

Given the primary concern of our present discussion, I would choose to get around the grand facade of Keats's

visionary edifice (i.e. its "chosen See"), and focus instead on its potentially disturbing aspect. I am thinking of the "little wing" built by the witch-turned-nun. The obscure nature of this wing (which is "far from the sun") seems to match the dubious character of its female constructor, whose identity as witch-turned-nun suggests as radical a contradiction as the disjointed image of "two witch's eyes above a cherub's mouth." Whether we take the witch's contribution to the symbolic edifice as a token of penitence or servitude, its "silent Working" cannot be viewed in the same light (i.e. sunlight) as the "chosen See." Along with the "other juts of aged stone / Founded with many a mason-devil's groan" (47-48), the obscure wing seems to undermine the peace and serenity of the entire building; for, instead of offering a shelter of repose, it only furthers the poet's imaginative flight in a different direction:

The doors all look as if they oped themselves,
 The windows as if latched by fays and elves,
 And from them comes a silver flash of light,
 As from the westward of a summer's night;
 Or like a beauteous woman's large blue eyes
 Gone mad thro' olden songs and poesies.

(49-54)

In his analysis of the poem, Evert maintains that "The tone of these lines is chiefly pastoral and serene" (202). Although he is fully aware of the "few jarring notes"--such as the image of the mad woman--he considers them as "inadvertent lapses" and attributes the "fault" to the poet's morbid mood. In order to keep intact the "atmosphere of chivalry, fairyland, and

verdurous nature," Evert has to marginalize the disruptive female presence: "the woman and her condition are not the intended focus of attention. The woman, for poetic purposes, is merely an adjunct of her eyes, the flashing of which serves as one limb of a simile of which the other is the appearance of the castle windows" (203). As for the woman's madness, Evert argues that it is meant "to convey not insanity but rapture, for the image's function is parallel with that of the sunset image which precedes it" (203). Thus inspired by the image of the sun, Evert is able to naturalize Keats's "perverse" image of woman. By reading signs of female affliction in terms of poetic reverie, he has considerably smoothed out the latent tension of the passage. In so doing, he provides us with yet another example of the kind of aesthetic ravishment which is characteristic of Apollonian imagination. And yet, the tone of serenity Evert's reading attempts to create is precisely what is not there in Keats's description of the castle. This is evidenced not only by the mysterious working of some invisible power within the castle (49-50), but also by the ambiguous "silver flash of light" coming from the latched windows. In keeping with his thematic focus on Apollo and Apollonian imagination, Evert locates the source of this light in the setting sun. The real issue with the light imagery here, however, is not so much its source as its effect. Granting the projective power of the "all-beholding Sun" (Shelley, Witch of Atlas 58), we should note

that, confronted by a light-refracting medium (i.e. the window panes, or symbolic "eyes" of the castle), the sunlight seems to undergo a radical change not only in colour, but also in quality. Significantly, the metaphorical transfiguration of the Enchanted Castle into a mad/ravished woman occurs not in broad daylight, when the power of Apollo (the "Father of All Verse") is at its prime; rather, it takes place at a transitional point between light and dark, when the westward journey of the sun is about to end in "the dark void of night" (71). By implication, the silver light seen in "a summer's night" already connotes a dialectical reversal: it negates the significance of the sun (as a transcendental signifier) by calling to mind a different kind of illumination, namely, the light of the moon.

The transfiguration of light imagery, coupled with the comparison of the "silver flash of light" to a mad woman's "large blue eyes," invites a re-vision of the conventional association of the moon (luna) and madness (lunacy). It reveals that, as a cosmic symbol of masculine ravishment, the sun is directly responsible for charging the moon with madness-inducing power. By the same token, we may infer that female madness (symbolized by the blue-eyed woman who has "Gone mad /Thro'olden songs and poesies") is largely the effect of Apollonian imagination. At this point we may recall Christabel's weird fascination with Geraldine's "serpent eyes," which is clearly a function of the "dizzy trance"

induced by Bard Bracy's dream-vision of the snake and the dove; or we may recall the moon-struck scene in "The Yellow Wall Paper," where we find a woman "gone mad" as a result of her entrapment in "a haunted house [which reaches] the height of romantic felicity" (1148). A more distant analogy is Ni, the white rainbow which Ch'u Yuan has associated with the moon-goddess. Confucian sooth-sayers tell us that the white rainbow, especially that seen at night, portends "pure yin dominating yang."² This ill-omened female rainbow reminds us of the potent female power engendered by the spirit of the moon. As an archetypal symbol of the Muse-principle, the moon is not a passive receptor/reflector of sunlight, but is an active agent of transformation, capable of producing a different kind of light. In this sense, the illumination coming from the moon is a constitutive negation of that from the sun. It is probably for this reason that the moon-goddess also becomes a cosmic manifestation of Taboo, charged with theft, fickleness, infidelity, and ultimately, madness. Hence her identity with Erich Newmann's "terrible" Mother as a castrating monster who, like the tabooed radical Woman (~~she~~), "attracts the male and kills the phallus within itself" (171).

Admittedly, the above speculations may strike Evert as even more "perverse" than Keats's association of Claude's

² See my earlier discussion of Ni in Chapter 1.

Enchanted Castle with a "beauteous woman.../Gone mad"; for, worse than Keats's case, where imagination is brought "beyond its proper bound," this is "clearly a derangement not of nature but of mind" (Evert 210). However, like the sign of female madness (or "rapture" as Evert would have it) registered by the castle windows, this kind of derangement is a direct effect of--and reaction against--the aesthetic ravishment epitomized by the "sober colouring" of the phallocratic sun.

Implicit in the poem's figural patterns is a symbolic confrontation between yin and yang, which is underscored by the poet-narrator's troubled awareness of the deconstructive tendency within his own imagination:

O that our dreamings all, of sleep or wake,
Would all their colours from the sunset take:
From something of material sublime,
Rather than shadow our own soul's day-time
In the dark void of night. (67-71)

The above plea echoes an earlier invocation to the sun-god: "O Phoebus! that I had thy sacred word /To show this Castle, in fair dreamingwise, /Unto my friend" (30-32). In both cases, we witness the Romantic quester-poet's desire to retain the power of Apollonian imagination and its dominance over poetic creativity. Such desire cannot be fulfilled without complete possession of the Muse-principle. In "Kubla Khan," for example, Coleridge expresses the same desire by turning his thought to the female Muse figure: "Could I revive within me /Her symphony and song...I would build that dome in air, /That

sunny dome! those caves of ice!" (42-47). As Coleridge's theory of imagination makes clear, such imaginative power largely depends on "the conscious will" (Biographia Literaria XIII. 167). For all its efforts to "idealize and to unify," the Coleridgean will to power (inscribed in Kubla Khan's "decree") collapses from inner strain, and the paradisaical vision breaks off abruptly in a moment of "holy dread." By comparison, Keats's quester-poet is bold enough to venture beyond the pale of the "sunny spell" into a new area of discourse:

Things cannot to the will
Be settled, but they tease us out of thought;
Or is it that imagination brought
Beyond its proper bound, yet still confin'd,
Lost in a sort of Purgatory blind,
Cannot refer to any standard law
Of either earth or heaven? (76-82)

By yielding his conscious will to the unmasterable process of imagination, Keats's poet proves his negative capability of playing the role of the Romantic anti-hero. Paradoxically, this "unmanly" disposition seems to bring him closer to the Muse-principle symbolized by the unsettling forces within the Enchanted Castle, whose silent workings conspire to disrupt the self-enclosed serenity of the building ("the doors all look as if they oped themselves"). Thus, instead of building a visionary palace above physical Nature, the poet only compromises his "domestic" bliss by bringing home the "fierce destruction" which is an inescapable aspect of existential reality:

I was at home
 And should have been most happy, - but I saw
 Too far into the sea, where every maw
 The greater on the less feeds evermore. -
 But I saw too distinct into the core
 Of an eternal fierce destruction,
 And so from happiness I far was gone.

(92-98)

The scene of destruction Keats envisions is not a mere reflection of external nature; rather, it is an objective correlative of the poet's internal conflicts which, like Coleridge's "viper thoughts," pose a constant threat to the harmonizing faculty of creative imagination. This is why the poet-narrator is so anxious to free himself from the intrusion of "reality's dark dream": "Away, ye horrid moods! /Moods of one's mind!"(105-106). Here again we see an irreconcilable contradiction: if there is no way to tell a dreamer from his dreams, then it is equally impossible to shield the mind from its moods. The moods are described as "horrid," because they seduce the mind into imaginative "sin" ("I sin against thy native skies" ["On Visiting the Tomb of Burns" 14]). On the other hand, these horrid moods, or "gordian complication of feelings" as Keats elsewhere calls them, are no other than the offspring of the mind. At this point we may recall that Milton's Sin, the prototype of the serpent-woman, is also born of Satan's brain. In both Coleridge and Keats, the internalization of serpentine imagery prefigures the inevitable "Fall" of the poet's self-enclosed paradise within.

As we have already seen, the "treacherous" aspect of

imagination is most frequently associated with the female Muse-figures in Romantic poetry. While representing the ultimate object of desire in the Romance quest for poetic identity, the Romantic Woman is also a cause of great anxiety to the quester-poet. As a result, the Keatsean quest for the female Muse-principle--motivated by the "wakeful anguish of the soul"--only leads to the discovery of her "immortal sickness." This phrase from a crucial passage in The Fall of Hyperion betrays the quester-poet's ambivalence about the Muse-principle. As our earlier discussion of Hyperion indicates, the immortality granted to Apollo by the maternal Muse figure lies in a negative capability of merging into the mortal process of transformation, which foreshadows death as well as regeneration. In The Fall of Hyperion, Moneta's "wan face," which "works a constant change," can be seen as a moon-mirror reflecting the quester-poet's own dis-ease in realizing the inescapable law of mutability presiding over life and art alike. In other words, the sign of sickness Keats detects in Moneta's face is symptomatic of the quester-poet's "homesickness"--or alienation--from the Muse-principle.

To the Romantic quester, the female Muse-principle embodies the whole of Woman: like Adam's dream made flesh, she is mother, daughter, bride all in one. As our analysis of the Chinese radical Woman indicates, however, the plurality of female identity is by no means a pure blessing to the male

imagination.³ The poetic Muse is mother/bride, in the metaphorical sense that she is married--or yoked--to the patriarchal literary tradition based on the symbolic order. Figuring the mother tongue ravished and repressed by the Father's law, the maternal Muse-principle brings the poetic self into being. In this sense, the poetic self is contained within the Muse-principle, the latter being not so much a preoedipal womb-like ideal as a cultural milieu. In other words, the Muse is larger than the poet's Mind, as she also accommodates many other minds. Here we can already detect the seed of trouble: for Bloom's belated poet bent on establishing his strong identity, this fact could cause enough anxiety to arouse the suspicion that the Muse has "whored" with many others besides him. On the other hand, this promiscuous Muse is also a daughter to the quester-poet, in the sense that she is misconceived as offspring of the poetic mind, just as Sin is born out of her father's brain. Above all, the Romantic Muse is cherished by the male poet as his own Psyche (or "soul of soul"), as is evident in Keats's attempt to build her a home "in some untrodden region of [his] mind" ("Ode to Psyche" 50-51). And yet, even his Psyche true is potentially "loose" (cf. "a casement ope at night"): once made public, the Muse figure cannot be confined within the poet's mental temple as private thought. Instead, she is eager "to let the warm love

³ Cf. ~~the~~ ^{the}, company of three women denoting sexual intrigue or treason.

in," that is, her temple is open to the readers' visitations. As a matter of fact, if the poet's word is not his own word only, neither is his mind, insofar as that mind is constituted in--and accessible only through--language, an ever-changing medium of communication.

In his quest for poetic identity, Keats's poet of negative capability seems at times to have erased the boundary between Self and Other altogether. Thus for Keats, the poetical Character has no personal identity: "it is not itself--it has no self--it is everything and nothing--It has no character--it enjoys light and shade" (Letters 1:387). If the chameleon Poet cannot be confined to any fixed identity, neither can the poetic Muse. For it is impossible for the quester-poet to get out of the prison-house of Self without "letting loose" the Muse. So the poet writes, "Ever let the Fancy roam, /Pleasure never is at home...Open wide the mind's cage-door, /She'll dart forth, and cloudward soar" ("Fancy" 1-8). The above lines pose a radical challenge to the conventional notion of "home" as a secure place for the female inmate. To illustrate Keats's departure from his literary heritage, we need only to recall Herrick's "To his Muse": "Wither mad maiden wilt thou roame? Farre safer 'twere to stay at home."

Much as Keats's quester-poet wants to free his Muse--as a necessary condition for poetic creativity--from the chains and fetters of the literary tradition, his chivalric endeavour

is contradicted by his desire to domesticate the Muse as private possession. At the core of this contradiction is the radical ambivalence about poetic identity. As Keats's letters make clear, the poetic Character's negative capability is not so much an occasion for celebration as a cause of anxiety. If Wordsworth's strong poet manages to achieve his visionary conquest through strenuous effort to repress the latent tension between Mind and Nature, then Keats's poetic Character can only parody--with self-irony, perhaps--the sublime ego's longing for poetic control by making a ghastly gesture towards the love object:

This living hand, now warm and capable
Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold
And in the icy silence of the tomb,
So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights
That thou wouldst wish thine own heart dry of blood
So in my veins red life might stream again,
And thou be conscience-calm'd--see here it is--
I hold it towards you.

[Lines Written in the Ms. of *The Cap and Bells*]

Apparently, the above poem is addressed to a real woman, Fanny Brawne, not to the poetic Muse. And yet, in Keats's poetry as well as his letters, Fanny and Fancy are metaphorically--and psychologically--identical. In a desperate attempt to reclaim the seizing power of imagination, the poet-quester only betrays his dependence on the Muse figure for self-fulfillment. The intensity of the poet's possessive desire is fully illustrated by the following lines in "I Cry Your Mercy":

I cry your mercy--pity--love!--aye, love!

Merciful love that tantalises not,
 One-thoughted, never-wandering, guiltless love,
 Unmask'd, and being seen--without a blot!
 O! let me have thee whole,--all--all--be mine!

The Romantic ambivalence about the Muse revealed in Keats's contradictory lines highlights a fundamental contradiction which can be explained in light of Marx's analysis of capitalism. In brief, the Romantic dilemma is symptomatic of the contradiction between the public character of literary production on the one hand, and the private character of ownership on the other. The former puts into question the legitimacy of the latter. As embodiment of the ever-changing process of signification, the Muse-principle can never be securely locked within the author's "unique" vision. It is precisely this unsettling disposition of the Romantic Muse that makes her a kindred spirit to the Chinese radical Woman in exploding the symbolic sign systems. Just as the "housing" of the radical Woman (♀) --in the name of "peace"-- betrays a sense of insecurity,⁴ so the Romantic project to domesticate the Muse--as a token of "love"-- reveals the homelessness of the poetic self.

As a result, the Romantic quest for poetic identity (which is constituted in/by language) will inevitably merge into the perpetual process of transformation. In Chinese

⁴ With the shadow of the radical Woman (cf. the "Goddess of Democracy" in Tien-an Men Square) still looming large, the present regime in China can have no peace of mind until all the "treacherous" elements she left behind are securely "housed."

culture, this process is epitomized by the dialectical fluidity of the maternal Way, which enjoys a "natural" affinity with water in all forms of manifestation. The wisdom of Taoist philosophy, inscribed in the paradox that "The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name," yields much insight into Keats's dying wish that his tombstone should bear no other inscription but "HERE LIES ONE WHOSE NAME WAS WRIT IN WATER." With such profound self-negating wisdom, Keats's poet of negative capability is able to smile, without bitterness,⁵ at the illusory "end" of his life-long quest. This is the spirit of Shelley's Cloud, who "laughs at [her] own cenotaph"--the "blue dome of Air" built by sunbeams--with the knowledge that "I change, but I cannot die."

In light of the above discussion, let us reconsider the implications of the rainbow. Metaphorically, the Romantic rainbow, as a joint-product of the varying light of signification and the prismatic mist of self, is born of a dialectical confrontation which is the motive force of its evolution. As the light changes in time, the rainbow will also change its refractive patterns. The rainbow metaphor thus illustrates the transformative character of both the Romantic text in itself, and the Romantic self as text. In the final

⁵ According to Walter Jackson Bate, Keats's tombstone was "sentimentally embellished" by his friends with an epitaph which interprets the poet's death-bed wish in terms of his "bitter anguish at the neglect of his countrymen" (this phrasing was later altered to "bitterness of his heart") (Bate 694 f.25).

analysis, neither the text nor the self can have a static, autonomous identity, as both must realize their potentiality (cf. "the infinite I AM") in an ever-changing process of signification in which old forms will evaporate and transform into new ones under different conditions. In a sense, there is an obvious parallel between the romantic quest for identity and the reading process which endows the quest with infinite possibilities of meaning.

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