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DE SIRENIBUS: AN INQUIRY INTO SIRENS FROM HOMER TO SHAKESPEARE

Harvard University PH.D. 1983

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DE SIRENIBUS:
AN INQUIRY INTO SIRENS FROM HOMER TO SHAKESPEARE

A thesis presented

by

Siegfried Walter de Rachewiltz

to

The Department of Comparative Literature

in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the subject of
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DE SIRENIBUS: AN INQUIRY INTO SIRENS FROM HOMER TO SHAKESPEARE

The motif of the Sirens is examined from several different perspectives and in a number of cultural and historical contexts. Chapter I is devoted to a close analysis of the Siren episode in the *Odyssey*; it is argued that the Sirens not only represent a problematization of the Nature/Culture opposition, but also embody a mode of song which threatens the very narrative structures and conventions of the *Odyssey* itself. Chapter II explores the various literary and iconographic metamorphoses which the Sirens undergo in post-Homeric classical tradition. Chapter III, devoted to the Christian interpretations of Sirens, deals with patristic writings, with allegorical bestiaries, and with the iconographic traditions of medieval ecclesiastical art: it traces the gradual transformation of the Siren from birdmaid into mermaid and her emergence as a symbol of heresy. Chapter IV builds on this context of Christian interpretation in order to analyze the Siren in Canto 19 of Dante's *Purgatorio*: it is contended that she represents a particular fusion of the classical Siren with the medieval notion of worldly blandishments. Chapter V examines Platonic and neo-Platonic versions of

the Sirens as heavenly muses in reference to the poetry of Petrarch, Bembo, and Aretino. Chapter VI in turn discusses Boccaccio's treatment of the Siren myth in his Genealogia and its influence on Renaissance mythography. Chapter VII follows the various avatars of the Siren as enchantress in the romances and epics of Pulci, Boiardo, Ariosto, Tasso, Spenser, and Camões. Chapter VIII discusses the Siren as emblem and the emblem as Siren in the Renaissance and touches on the Siren as common printer's mark of the period. Chapter IX treats Shakespeare's image of the Siren/mermaid. Also included are the following appendices: a brief survey of Siren scholarship in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, an excursion into the motif of Sirens in folklore, and a representative sampling of Siren iconography from Greek antiquity through the Renaissance.

Sereine est d'itel estre
Qu'ele chante en tempeste;
Ço fait richeise el munt
Quant riche ume cunfunt
   C'est chanter en tempeste
Quant richeise est sis maistre
Que om pur li se pent
E ocit a turment.
La sereine en bel tens
Plure e plaint tuz tens:
Quant om dune richeise
E pur Dé la depreise,
[I]lores est bele ure
E la richeise plure.
Saciez ço signefie
Richeise en ceste vie.

Phillipe de Thaün
(twelfth century)

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CHAPTER I

THE HOMERIC SIRENS

When Odysseus returns from Hades to Circe's island, Aiaia, the goddess takes him aside and, after listening to his account of his visit to the Underworld, tells him of the dangers that lie ahead on his homeward voyage:

> Then the queenly Circe spoke in words and addressed me:
> "So all that has been duly done. Listen now, I will tell you
> all, but the very god himself will make you remember.
> You will come first of all to the Sirens, who are enchanters
> of all mankind and whoever comes their way; and that man
> who unsuspecting approaches them, and listens to the Sirens
> singing, has no prospect of coming home and delighting
> his wife and little children as they stand about him in greeting,
> but the Sirens by the melody of their singing enchant him.
> They sit in their meadow, but the beach before it is piled with boneheaps
> of men now rotted away, and the skins shrivel upon them.
> You must drive straight on past, but melt down sweet wax of honey
> and with it stop your companions' ears, so none can listen;
> the rest, that is, but if you yourself are wanting to hear them,
> then have them tie you hand and foot on the fast ship, standing
> upright against the mast with the ropes' ends lashed around it,
> so that you can have joy in hearing the song of the Sirens;
> but if you supplicate your men and implore them

to set you
free, then they must tie you fast with even
more lashings.
"Then, for the time when your companions
have driven you past them,
for that time I will no longer tell you in
detail which way
of the two your course must lie, but you yourself
must consider
this in your own mind. I will tell you the two
ways of it.
(*Od*. XII, 36-58)[1]

Neither at this point nor anywhere else in the *Odyssey* are the Sirens described in greater detail, nor is anything said about their origin, ancestry, appearance or location; the only further information is provided by the use of the dual form in line 52 of Book XII, which implies that they were two in number and which should therefore be properly translated as "so that you can have joy in the song of the two Sirens."[2]

This tantalizing scarcity of information in the *Odyssey*, contrasted with the manifold appearances of the Sirens in later literature and with their numerous (and often contradictory) representations in Greek art, have fascinated scholars to such an extent that the number of exegetical writings about them has by now become almost impossible to survey. But in spite of all the plausible interpretations and explanations which have been set forth, the only agreement that has been reached is that up to this day no one has found a satisfactory answer

to the question of what exactly the Homeric poet had in mind when he sang of the Sirens.[3]

Interpreters of the Odyssey have generally proceeded on the assumption that Homer and his audience knew more about the Sirens than today's reader--in fact, they have often argued that the reason Homer treats them so succinctly is because they were so familiar to his audience that he did not need to go into any detail when telling of them.

As plausible as this may sound, there really is no evidence to support such a view, for we do not know what--if anything--Homer's audience envisaged when they heard the name "Siren." On the contrary, Homer's treatment and use of the Siren motif strongly suggests that he knew less about them than a contemporary reader might. (After all, he could not draw on the mass of Siren scholarship which we can peruse today.) It was precisely because neither the singer of tales nor his audience knew much about the Sirens that Homer was able to turn them into such suggestive and ambivalent presences, endowed to the utmost degree with the power of vagueness. This is ultimately the reason why Homer chose characters like Circe and Kalypso from the vast pantheon of minor female divinities which populate Greek mythology, for it gave him the freedom he needed to

suit them to his story, rather than having to suit his story to a clearly defined, preexisting character. Had there been a well-known myth or genealogical tradition relating to the Sirens, he would have been more or less obliged by the laws of oral composition to give an account of it. And had he done so, it is likely that the Sirens would have lost much of their allure.

In the face of all this it might seem futile to address this question once more, which is probably why the entire Siren problem seems to have been laid to rest in recent times. As John Pollard, summing up the main theories about Sirens set forth by scholars over the ages somewhat disconsolately concedes in 1965, "the whole Siren problem seems past solution in the absence of literary evidence. The main difficulty . . . is that the monuments . . . fail to support a consistent theory."[4] Without disagreeing with Pollard's analysis, I would like to suggest that there perhaps exists another way of approaching the whole Siren problem. We should, first of all, avoid speaking of _a_ Siren problem, for this implies that one answer can or should be found which will explain the meaning of all the Sirens in literature, folklore, and art. In the light of the contradictory evidence one inevitably confronts, such an answer is clearly not

called for. Ironically, the error in the vast majority of attempted Siren-explanations is closely related to the danger that the Sirens represent for Odysseus and has to do with a particular kind of narcissism. Most explicators have not resisted the temptation of "listening to themselves," that is, they have set up a theory--which very often was quite valid for _one_ aspect or, more precisely, for one particular context within which the Sirens appeared--and have then proceeded to reduce all the known instances of Sirens to that single theory. This forcible attempt to find a common denominator for all the Sirens in literature and art has resulted in a variety of distortions and dead ends--distortions which, in fact, make up most of what has come to be called the "Siren problem." The only other way to approach the problem appears to be that of rephrasing the original question concerning the Sirens; that is, not to ask about their meaning _in toto_, but rather to inquire how different authors and artists have used this multiform sign in their respective semiotic fields.

Odysseus and the Sirens

Increasingly, classical scholars have become aware of the fact that in order properly to understand single

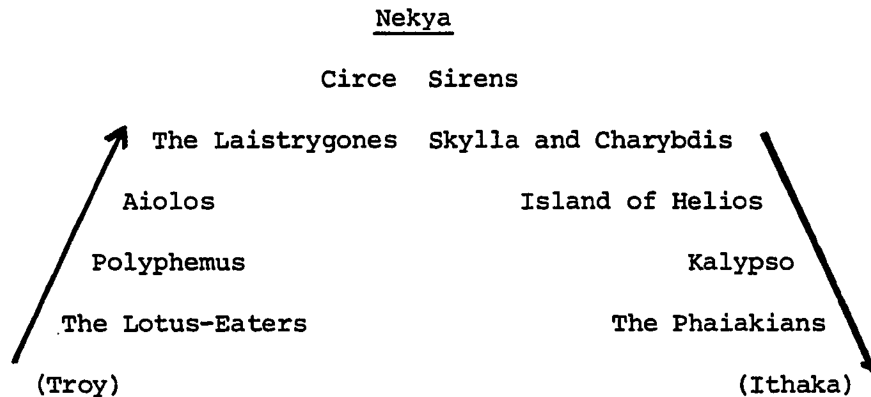
episodes of the Odyssey, it is necessary to have a clear grasp of the laws which govern the composition of an oral epic as a whole and in particular of the technique of elaboration and expansion of single themes. The theme in oral poetry--as Albert Lord has pointed out--"does not have a single 'pure' form either for the individual singer or for the tradition as a whole. Its form is ever changing in the singer's mind, because the theme is in reality protean; in the singer's mind it has many shapes, all the forms in which he has ever sung it, although his latest rendering of it will naturally be freshest in his mind. It is not a static entity, but a living, changing, adaptable artistic creation."[5] In other words, the Siren episode may well have come about through the rearrangement and recombination of a number of thematic elements which are present not only throughout the Odyssey, but also in the folkloric sources on which its author(s) presumably drew. Though the Siren episode is not a "theme" in Lord's strict sense of the term, his comments nevertheless may throw some light on the possible genesis of the Siren story and its role within the Odyssey as a whole.

Given the dynamics of oral composition, as described by Albert Lord, one should therefore be aware that any

attempt at isolating any single episode of the song will do violence to the text as a whole; thus one cannot really divorce the Sirens from Circe, Kalypso or any of the other obstacles or seductions Odysseus has to overcome on his way home. One should also keep in mind that the section of the Odyssey known as the Wanderings--in the course of which Odysseus meets the Sirens--probably drew on a vast array of folktale motifs which were adapted, combined or expanded in order to suit the Nostos and the character of Odysseus. One should therefore not expect to find any direct correspondence between any given episode in the Odyssey and a particularly type of folktale, but rather a fragmentation of various folktales and a condensation of different motifs into what became--in the long process of oral composition and transmission--a new organic tale, the tale of Odysseus' Wanderings. I shall try to show, in a later chapter, what kinds of folktales--and possibly, what kinds of folk-beliefs--might conceivably have furnished some of the elements that went into the making of the Wanderings.

If we proceed from the assumption that the Siren episode in the Odyssey can only be properly deciphered within the entire code or context of the Wanderings, it will be helpful to diagram the chronological (diachronic)

sequence of encounters or stations within the Wanderings, in order to underscore possible (synchronic) parallels and symmetries in the narration:



There are five encounters--beginning with Odysseus' entrance into what W. B. Stanford has called Wonderland[6] (a name as good as any for the supernatural realm of the Wanderings)--which lead forward to the central episode of the *Nekya*, the visit to the Underworld. Five more encounters mark the journey of Odysseus out of Fairyland on his way home to Ithaca. Gabriel Germain has pointed out other symmetries as well: both on the way to Hades as on the return from it, the crew's disobedience causes an "almost-return" to fail dismally (Aiolos and the Island of Helios). In both directions Odysseus encounters cannibalistic monsters, a loving goddess and a benevolent king.[7] But for our purposes, what the above diagram

especially reveals is that the Circe and Sirens episodes occupy a symmetrical position. Both frame the central descent into the Underworld; both may be said--at least structurally--to guard the *limen* to Hades.

The visit to Hades takes up the central portion of Odysseus' wanderings. It is a turning point in more than one way, for it provides the singer with a narrative pivot. In order to be able to resume his song, his hero, Odysseus, has to reach an end in order to change course and resume his journey which will now be *out* of the Otherworld (and back to Ithaca). The *Nekya* and the subsequent inversion of direction have their parallels in the most ancient epic songs (e.g., Gilgamesh cycle) and in numerous types of folktales, where the hero's task is to descend into the Underworld either to gather supernatural information or to steal a supernatural gift which will help him (a) to find his way home and (b) to restore order (i.e., to be fully recognized) once he gets there.[8]

Returning to the structural symmetry and to the similarities between Circe and the Sirens, one will want to focus, first of all, on the *Leitmotif* of magic and enchanting song. When the first division of Odysseus' companions, led by Eurylochos, reaches Circe's house, the first thing they hear is her song:

> They stood there in the forecourt of the goddess with the glorious
> hair, and heard Circe inside singing in a sweet voice
> as she went up and down a great design on a loom. . . .
> (X, 220-222)

Circe's song and her weaving are an integral part of her character and denote her divinity: singing and weaving are her "habitual" mode of being; it is what she does when mortals are not caught in her web. When they are ensnared, the spider weaver rushes in for the kill, and leaves them dangling like forgotten flies in her web. There is no question that her song--inextricably tied to her weaving--acts as a lure for her unsuspecting victims, and this is shown by the eagerness with which Odysseus' men (with the exception of the wary Eurylochos) want to meet her:

> . . . Now Polites leader of men, who was
> the best and dearest to me of my friends, began the discussion:
> "Friends, someone inside going up and down a great piece
> of weaving is singing sweetly, and the whole place murmurs to the echo
> of it, whether she is woman or goddess. Come, let us call her."
> So he spoke to them, and the rest gave voice, and called her,
> and at once she opened the shining doors, and came out, and invited
> them in, and all in their innocence entered . . .
> (X, 224-231)

Circe's sweet song makes them forget their precautions, and soon they find themselves penned in pigsties. Thus

one can say that Circe's song, like that of the Sirens, is a deceptive bait and that it represents an alluring and comforting temptation for the desolate survivors of the Laistrygonian debacle. The erotic overtones of this temptation are fully revealed further on, when Odysseus mounts "the surpassingly beautiful bed of Circe" (X, 347). Even though one may be entering the realm of speculation, there is evidence to suggest that the Sirens' song too is perceived as a feminine temptation, regardless of whether Homer thought of the Sirens as bird-ladies or simply as two beautiful maidens. (I personally have been convinced by Károly Marót that the Homeric poets conceived them as wholly anthropomorphic enchantresses).[9] Throughout Greek mythology, magic song--like weaving--appears to be a feminine prerogative, distinguishable from the more instrumental music of Orpheus or the narrative song of the bard. Circe's song, like Kalypso's, is "song accompanied by the loom," and the medieval mermaid accompanying her song with a comb seems to be a direct descendant of this alluring combination. Penelope's scheming at the loom, as she weaves a deceptive web for the suitors, would also seem to belong to this category of snares.

The close relation between Circe and the Sirens is

further underscored by the fact that, as we have seen, it is Circe who foretells Odysseus' encounter with the Sirens and offers him precise instructions as to how to resist their fatal lure. (Circe's further instructions contain considerably fewer details as far as the precise means of eluding the dangers ahead are concerned; after she has warned him at length against the Sirens, she tells Odysseus that "you yourself must consider this in your own mind" [X, 57], i.e., she leaves him certain options.) Significantly Circe's instructions vis-à-vis the Sirens echo the instructions given to Odysseus by Hermes on how to overcome Circe's deceptive lures: while he tells him "the details of what to do" (X, 292) and reveals "all the malevolent guiles of Circe" (X, 289), Hermes also bids him not to "refuse the bed of the goddess" (X, 297), i.e., he invites him to take pleasure in Circe just as Circe with her ruse invites him to "have joy in hearing the song of the Sirens" (XII, 52).

Like the narration of his encounter with Circe, Odysseus' narration to the Phaiakians of his encounter with the Sirens is a repetition of something that has already been (fore)told, a "twice-told tale" (XII, 453). In fact, the Siren episode is (fore)told twice, since Odysseus repeats Circe's instructions to his crew, and

then narrates the episode twice, once to the Phaiakians (and to the Homeric audience) and finally, in Book XXIII, to Penelope. It might be interesting, at this point, to compare Circe's instructions with Odysseus' version of these instructions to his crew and with his narration of the Siren adventure in the palace of Alkinoös.

The narrative feat of the Nekya, telling of a place where memory has to be revived through a sacrificial blood-offering, is followed by another mnemonic feat, Odysseus' detailed account of it to Circe. The passage from one kind of narrative (Odysseus' account of Hades) to another kind of narrative (Circe's prophetic instructions) retains the emphasis on memory and detail:

> But when the sun went down and the sacred darkness came over,
> the men lay down to sleep all by the ship's stern cables,
> but she, taking me by the hand, made me sit down away from
> my dear companions, and talked with me, and asked me the details
> of everything, and I recited all, just as it had happened.
> Then the queenly Circe spoke in words and addressed me:
> "So all that has been duly done. Listen now, I will tell you
> all, but the very god will make you remember.
> You will come first of all to the Sirens, . . .
> (XII,31-39)

". . . But the very god will make you remember" (". . . μνήσει δέ σε καί θεὸς αὐτός)--this is almost an invocation

to the god of memory, echoing the very first line of the Odyssey, and in closer narrative proximity, also echoing Antikleia's urging of Odysseus to remember what she has told him about the afterlife in Hades: ". . . but remember these things for your wife, so that you may tell her hereafter" (XI, 223-224). Odysseus--and we shall come back to this--must remember in order to retell.

In retelling Circe's instructions to his companions, Odysseus emphasizes the fact that he alone is to listen to the song of the "magical Sirens":

> First of all she tells us to keep away from the magical
> Sirens and their singing and their flowery meadow, but only
> I, she said, was to listen to them, but you must tie me
> hard in hurtful bonds, to hold me fast in position
> upright against the mast, with the ropes' ends fastened around it;
> but if I supplicate you and implore you to set me
> free, then you must tie me fast with even more lashings.
>
> (XII, 157-164)

In fact, Circe had only suggested that he might want to take joy in hearing their song; Odysseus makes it sound much more like an ordeal or a test which he alone must undergo. However, Circe's suggestive warning does not necessarily stand in the way of the interpretation, frequently set forward, of the Siren episode as a conscious

allegory of the temptations of secret knowledge, akin to the forbidden fruit on the Tree of Knowledge in Genesis 3:5.[10] What makes one wary of this interpretation is that we do not find, in the Homeric world, any trace of a notion like forbidden knowledge such as one finds it in the Old Testament or even in the Orphic mysteries. The privileged or hidden knowledge which exists in the *Odyssey* is here to be gained and uncovered by means of ruses and rites: its discovery (like the solving of riddles) is a feat and not a sin. At times it is a gift--such as Athena's and Hermes' instructions and warnings--at other times, booty, such as the information reft from Proteus by Menelaus (IV, 383-570), and, to a certain extent, the prophetic instructions elicited from Teiresias in the house of Hades. If anything, the song of the Sirens would belong in this second category, for Odysseus can be said to have stolen it by listening to it with impunity--but, as we shall see, the Sirens cannot bestow knowledge. Thus the interpretation of the Siren episode as an initiatory passage--as is already suggested by Greek artworks of the fifth century B.C. which depict Odysseus sailing past the Sirens with an embroidered *kredemnon* hanging from the stern of his ship[11]--will have to be simply considered as a later reading and placed in

the same category as the Christian allegorization of Odysseus and the Sirens. On the other hand, there is no question that Odysseus' theft of the Sirens' song adds even more luster to his accomplished thievery--undoubtedly inherited from his grandfather, Autolykos "who surpassed all men in thievery and the art of the oath" (XIX, 395-396). And, in the sense that the Wanderings may be seen both as a quest for stories to tell and as a quest for authority lost through overlong absence (i.e., Odysseus' Nostos involves the overcoming of divine obstacles but also the acquisition of a divine mandate to reconquer his wife and his estate), one can certainly say that the Siren episode represents one more task accomplished by the hero on his journey through the Otherworld.

In passing on Circe's instructions to his crew, Odysseus omits Circe's more detailed account of the danger posed by the song of the Sirens to memory and willpower, and also omits some details about their dwelling place. Circe's elaborate warning is telescoped into two lines: ". . . she tells us to keep away from the magical Sirens and their singing and their flowery meadow . . ." (XII, 158-159). As Odysseus explains it, it is primarily a problem of safely crossing an unavoidable passage, similar to the passage through Skylla and Charybdis. But in fact,

the real issue is how Odysseus will approach the Sirens and yet retain his distance.

What can be said about the danger posed by the Sirens' song?

> Σειρῆνας μὲν πρῶτον ἀφίξεαι, αἵ ῥά τε πάντας
> ἀνθρώπους θέλγουσιν . . .
>
> You will come first to the Sirens who are enchanters
> of all mankind . . .
>
> (XII, 38-39)

They bewitch whoever comes their way; the verb θέλγω (enchant, bewitch) is used also in connection with Circe, when Hermes warns Odysseus of her enchanting drugs (X, 291); in the *Odyssey* it is also used to describe the staff of Hermes ". . . with which he *mazes* the eyes of those mortals whose eyes he would maze . . ." (V, 47-48); similarly, in the *Iliad* (XIII, 435) Poseidon casts a blindness upon Alcanthous and Pallas Athene *mazes* the wits of the suitors (XVI, 298). Finally, the swineherd Eumaios entreats Odysseus--disguised as an old tramp--not to "spell him with lying words" (XIV, 387).[12]

The Sirens' bewitching is definitely an act of magic, closely related to Circe's bewitching potions and is performed exclusively through the sweet melody of their singing:

> . . . ἀλλά τε Σειρῆνες λιγυρῇ θέλγουσιν ἀοιδῇ,
>
> but the Sirens by the melody of their singing enchant him.
>
> (XII, 44)

What is interesting, however, is how Circe describes this danger to the mind essentially as a danger which threatens domesticity, particularly in her surprising evocation of an Ithacan family idyll--

> that man . . . has no prospect of coming home and delighting
> his wife and little children as they stand about him greeting . . .
>
> (XII, 42-43)

which puts the Sirens against the family and thus against social order. (This evocation is surprising because it comes from Circe, who--unlike Kalypso--is certainly no model of domesticity.) The Sirens' song thus represents a danger to mind and memory and (therefore) to the social order--but it also represents an ineluctable threat to the very life of those who hear it:

> They sit in their meadow, but the beach before it is piled with boneheaps
> of men now rotted away, and the skins shrivel upon them.
>
> (XII, 45-46)

Odysseus, instructing his crew, mentions, as we saw, "the magical Sirens and their singing and their flowery meadow" (XII, 158); (Lattimore's translation of θεσπέσιος as "magical" appears somewhat of a compromise solution;

the word implies divine song or utterance, and thus should probably be rendered as "divinely sounding"; however, the word is also used to indicate something prodigious or wondrous).[13]

The flowery meadow is thus mentioned both in Circe's instructions and in Odysseus' summary of them; with or without bones, this twice evoked flowery meadow has an ominous ring to it. Today's reader might take it to be a euphemism for a cemetery, and he would not be too far off the mark, for this meadow unmistakably recalls the asphodel meadow by the streams of Okeanos, the dwelling place of the dead (XI, 539; XXIV, 13), and other distant meadows such as that of the clear-singing Hesperides.[14] What makes this meadow more ominous than, for example, the flowery meadows on Kalypso's island (V, 72) is that it appears to be the permanent habitat of the Sirens: they sit in it and appear almost tied to it, since it is implied that they do not attempt to move closer to the beach (or, as later art would have it, fly and perch on Odysseus' ship) but simply "direct their sweet song" (XII, 183) to Odysseus as soon as they see his ship approaching.

The motif of death is thus underscored by the flowery meadow, the boneheaps on their shore and, to a certain extent, by the windless calm surrounding their island:

". . . but immediately then the breeze dropped, and a windless calm fell there, and some divinity stilled the tossing waters" (XII, 168-169). The stilling of the winds and of the waters is a well-known motif in Greek literature and folktale in general and serves to signal some ominous place or event.[15] Here, the windless calm recalls the still air of Hades (cf. XI, 636-640) and, even more, Odysseus' arrival at Circe's island, when some god (τις θεὸς) guided his ship into a fit harbor, "in silence" (X, 140-143). In the Siren episode, the windless calm may also be said to be a physical correlative to the utter loss of volition produced by the Sirens' song. Something similar is hinted at when Odysseus' crew have to "dash their oars in the gray sea" in order to escape the dealers of oblivion known as the Lotus-Eaters (IX, 104).

The Sirens, as we were saying, dwell on an uncultivated meadow, i.e., in nature. In terms of their dwelling they are thus closer to the unmitigated natural habitats of Skylla and Charybdis than to those of the other inhabitants of the Odyssean Otherworld; even Polyphemos, who is as close to nature and as removed from culture as you can get,[16] is somehow linked to culture by his dairy products and his primitive communal organization

centered around the family (IX, 115). As forces of nature, the Sirens also distinguish themselves clearly from Circe, who inhabits a house of polished stone, beautifully furnished with divine accoutrements.

The Sirens' position at the extreme end of the nature-culture opposition is underscored by the "boneheaps of men now rotted away" on their beach. If one considers the importance attributed to proper burial in Homeric eschatology, one may realize the shocking effect which all these unburied boneheaps must have had on Homer's audience. The Sirens therefore may be said to represent death not mediated or ritually modified in any way by culture. (Being swallowed up the sea, in contrast, seems to have been considered as some form of burial; death through "cannibalism," on the other other hand, was presumably never taken into account in real life.) The withered, shriveling skins on the bones of the Sirens' victims strongly suggest death through dehydration; in Lévi-Straussian terms, one might say that the victims here are cooked (by the sun) but not eaten, while Polyphemos eats the "inedible" (i.e., human flesh) uncooked, and the Laistrygones cook and eat the "inedible." Circe, on the other hand, is closer to the Sirens, for she changes her victims into food (porkers) which she does not eat.

What is of real interest, however, is the fact that the antidote to the Sirens' lethal song entails a curious mixture of nature and culture:

> Then I, taking a great wheel of wax, with the
>   sharp bronze
> cut a little piece off, and rubbed it together
>   in my heavy
> hands, and soon the wax grew softer, under the
>   powerful
> stress of the sun, and the heat and light of
>   Hyperion's lordling.
> (XII, 173-176)

Odysseus' kneading of the wax is elaborately described--it could almost come out of a ritual practice or a recipe book--but of course the wax comes from the realm of nature (closely linked to the magic power of honey), though it is "cooked" (melted) under the powerful rays of the sun.

The accentuated presence of sunlight and heat in the Siren episode has led a number of scholars to interpret them in naturalistic terms, that is, as embodiments of the dangers of sunstroke on the open sea and similar perils. O. Crusius' identification of the Sirens with midday-demons (δαιμόνια μεσημβρινά, i.e., embodiments of the noonday heat),[17] set forth in 1891, found a surprising number of followers, in spite of the well-attested fact that the notion of such fiendish beings belongs to a much later demonology, of which one can find no trace in ancient Greek beliefs. A solar link does exist, and I shall return

to it in my inquiry into the possible folkloric sources of the Wanderings, but it points towards Circe, the daughter of Helios, and the identification of supernatural light and sound in folktales--not towards meridian demons or sunstrokes.

Having stopped their ears with prophylactic wax, Odysseus has his companions tie him to the mast. The crew is thus now in a state similar to that they were in when Circe gave Odysseus her confidential instructions. At that time they were asleep; now they are deaf to everything including the song of the Sirens. Intent in their rowing, they are presumably not even able to see the Sirens and the flowery meadow. But sight is almost banished from this episode anyway; even distances are given in auditory terms--"But when we were as far from the land as a voice shouting carries" (XII, 181-182), and, further on, ". . . when we could no longer hear their voices and lost the sound of their singing . . ." (XII, 197-198). Though the Sirens see the ship, Odysseus does not mention seeing them at any point. Tied upright to the mast, he is literally "all ears"; like a sail filled by the wind, he stretches out to receive the "full blast" of the magic song, while his companions duck as they bend over the oars.[18]

When Odysseus and his men escape from the cave of Polyphemos, it is Odysseus who ties his men to the sheep (IX, 427-431, 463-464) while he clings on with his hands to the fleece of the ram. Here instead it is his men who must tie him and we hear of this act of tying four times: first, in Circe's instructions; second, in Odysseus' instructions to his crew (he adds the "hurtful" bonds); third, when he is actually lashed against the mast; and, finally, to underscore the superhuman attraction which the Sirens' song exerts on Odysseus, when Perimedes and Eurylochos fasten him with even more lashings because he has been signaling with his brows that he wanted to be set free (XII, 193-194). This emphasis on bondage and lashings is not without significance, for the Sirens' name itself evokes binding and enchainment. It does not really matter whether the name Seirenes derives etymologically from σειρή (cord), from σεῖρος (scorching) or from the Phoenician word šîr (song)--this is a vexata questio which will continue to puzzle etymologists for times to come. But in the light of the great number of so-called significant names in the Odyssey, it appears highly probable that the Homeric audience would in any case have associated Σειρήν with σειρή and thought of them as "the two binding ones." Nor can one say that the notion of "magic bonds"

is foreign to the *Odyssey*: Circe is, among other things, a mistress of knots, and while Odysseus dwells with her on Aiaia, she teaches him some of these intricate, secret knots. When the Phaiakians heap gifts in a chest for their visitor Odysseus, he fastens the chest "nimbly with an intricate knot, whose knowledge the lady Circe had taught him" (VIII, 448). The *Odyssey* abounds with images of nets, knots and nooses: think of the treacherous snare which Hephaistos spins "like spider webs" around his bed in order to catch his unfaithful wife *in flagrante* (VII, 276-281), and of the nooses, made from the "cable of a dark-prowed ship," with which Telemachus hangs the faithless maidservants (XXII, 465-472), or of Penelope's endless web, which purports to be a shroud for Laertes and is, *de facto*, a snare for the suitors.

The song of the Sirens is thus a binding song: like the song of the Furies in the *Eumenides* "it is maddening, deranging, will-destroying; it binds the mind (desmios phrenôn), it withers the victim"[19] (Aesch., *Eum*. 328-329). Odysseus counters their spell almost homeopathically, for he anticipates their strategy by tying himself up, so as not to be tied by them. This is not the only instance where a danger is warded off "homeopathically"--in order not to be killed and eaten like animals by Polyphemos

(". . . slapped them, like killing puppies, against the ground . . ." [IX, 281-290]), Odysseus and his men become "almost-animals" by tying themselves to the bellies of his sheep; Circe's poison is similarly neutralized by Hermes' counter-poison Moly; stopping the ears of his men with "sweet wax" to make them immune to the "honey-sweet voice" of the Sirens may be seen as countering sweetness with sweetness.

Thus (dis)armed, Odysseus and his crew penetrate the sound barrier of the Sirens, and we finally hear "what song the Sirens sang":

> "Δεῦρ' ἄγ' ἰών, πολύαιν' 'Οδυσεῦ, μέγα κῦδος 'Αχαιῶν,
> νῆα κατάστησον, ἵνα νωϊτέρην ὄπ' ἀκούσῃς.
> οὐ γάρ πώ τις τῇδε παρήλασε νηΐ μελαίνῃ,
> πρίν γ' ἡμέων μελίγηρυν ἀπο στομάτων ὄπ' ἀκοῦσαι·
> ἀλλ' ὅ γε τερψάμενος νεῖται καί πλαίονα εἰδώς.
> ἴδμεν γάρ τοι πάνθ' ὅσ' ἐνί Τροίῃ εὐρείῃ
> 'Αργεῖοι Τρῶές τε θεῶν ἰότητι μόγησαν·
> ἴδμεν δ' ὅυσα γένηται ἐπι χθονί πουλυβοτειρῃ."
> (XII, 184-191)

W. B. Stanford has pointed out the euphony of the Sirens' song:

> The consonants are carefully spaced between vowels to avoid hard clashes, specially in 184-5; assonance and alliteration are cleverly modulated; all the vowels are exploited in turn in 184. Note the markedly anapestic rhythm in 184, due to the sense-pauses before πὄλῦᾱῑν and μέγα κῦδος: this is perhaps designed to suggest lyric verse.[20]

This remarkable song has of course posed certain

difficulties to translators of the Odyssey; I should like to quote Robert Fitzgerald's interesting interpretative solution, for he translates the Siren-verses as an actual song, heightening its lyric inflections:

> This way, oh turn your bows,
>   Akhaia's glory,
> As all the world allows--
>   Moor and be merry.
>
> Sweet coupled airs we sing.
>   No lonely seafarer
> Holds clear of entering
>   Our green mirror.
>
> Pleased by each purling note
>   Like honey twining
> From her throat and my throat,
>   Who lies a-pining?
>
> Sea rovers here take joy
>   Voyaging onward,
> As from our song of Troy
> Greybeard and rower-boy
>   Goeth more learnèd.
>
> All feats on that great field
>   In the long warfare,
> Dark days the bright gods willed,
>   Wounds you bore there,
>
> Argos' old soldiery
>   On Troy beach teeming,
> Charmed out of time we see.
> No life on earth can be
>   Hid from our dreaming.[21]

According to Cicero (De Finibus 5, 18)

> the attractions of the song lie not merely in vocum suavitate and novitate quadam et varietate cantandi, but also because multa se scire profitebantur, ut homines ad earum saxa discendi cupiditate adhaerescerent.[22]

As previously mentioned, the notion of the Sirens as a conscious allegory of the temptations of knowledge has found wide acceptance over the ages--but let us take a closer look at precisely what kind of knowledge is promised by the Sirens and what its acquisition implies.

They begin their song with a flattering reference to Odysseus, proffering the kind of praise he might expect to receive at the end of his journey: "Come this way, honored Odysseus, great glory of the Achaians" (184); they then invite him to enter into tradition, that is, to repeat the actions of former travelers: "For no one else has ever sailed past this place . . . until he has listened to the honey-sweet voice that issues from our lips" (187-188). This already is a grim half-truth, and what follows is an outright lie: "then goes on, well pleased, knowing more than ever he did" (188-189). Finally they suggestively hint at the kind of information Odysseus might be interested in: "for we know everything that the Argives and Trojans did and suffered in wide Troy through the gods' despite" (189-190). And if that were not bait enough, ". . . Over all the generous earth we know everything that happens" (191).

One might conjecture that the Sirens are offering to sing of Odysseus' deeds at Troy (their version of the

Iliad) or to recite the Nostos of one of his many companions. But in fact, as Todorov has pointed out, the Sirens' song "is a song about itself," about their "feigned speech"[23] which is already working its (real) charm on the "feigned victim," Odysseus. The knowledge they promise is a lie, because in order to acquire it, one must die. In the Odyssey, knowledge is only considered valid when it is also a mandate to act: all the knowledge Odysseus has been acquiring up to now, either through prophecies or through instructions, has been mandatory, that is, he has been told what to do and what not to do in order to reach Ithaka again. In the Nekya he has also received some information about the afterlife, but we have already noted how this information was framed by a precise instruction to remember and to convey it to someone else, i.e., by a further mandate.

The Sirens, by contrast, do not offer any instructions on how to continue the journey; they just promise that the journey will continue after the song. Thus, while the Odyssey never separates song and prophetic instructions from action--positing a reciprocal validation whereby the song is ratified by the deeds it narrates and the deeds in turn are ratified first by being prophesized and then by being sung--the song of the Sirens would make you believe

that the two could exist independently of each other. Thus their song might be termed a false prophecy, having no outlet into the reality of further action (or further narration).

The rhythm of the Odyssey reflects a constant interplay of narrative techniques, which Todorov has defined as speech-as-action, speech-as-narration and feigned speech.[24] Another way of looking at this rhythm would be as an interplay between foretelling, doing and retelling, i.e., prophecy, performance and song, where a strict chronological sequence is superfluous inasmuch as prophecies can be revealed after they have come to completion, at which point they usually entail a recognition--Circe's and Polyphemos' recognition of Odysseus, or Alkinoös' recognition that the Phaiakians will ferry no other mortal after Odysseus (XIII, 180). The Sirens' song represents a lull in this rhythm, that is, the danger that the song, and the journey, might break off prematurely. Thus we see that the Siren episode highlights a very important issue in the Odyssey and, indeed, in Greek culture as a whole--i.e., the complex interrelations of speaking (or singing, lying or prophecy) and doing. The Sirens' song is murderous precisely to the extent that it tends to dissociate the realm of language from the realm of action.

Another way of looking at this episode is in terms of the reciprocity of gifts which governs all dealings between guest and host in the Odyssey. Odysseus is narrating his wanderings to Alikinoös and his court: this is his gift to the Phaiakians and they in turn add gift upon gift for Odysseus as he continues with his narration. These gifts are very important, for Odysseus does not want to return empty-handed from the Otherworld--indeed, he would be quite willing to postpone his final return for as long as a year, if he could thereby increase his booty of gifts (XI, 355-361). He, the wanderer, can only offer his story in exchange for hospitality and gifts. This is what he does in the palace of the other benevolent king, Aiolos, to whom he tells "all the tale as it happened" (X, 16) and who gives him a present which, had his companions been capable of "containing their desire" as Teiresias warns *him* to do (XI, 105), would have conveyed them safely back to Ithaka.

On the other hand, when the "rightful gifts to strangers" (IX, 268) are refused, Odysseus counters with a false story and a false gift: this is what he does with Polyphemos, when he tricks him with the story of Nobody and the deceivingly potent wine. In addition, he and his crew steal Polyphemos' sight and sheep. Similarly, when

the Sirens cast out their baiting song, Odysseus outtricks them, swallows the bait and makes off with it, i.e., he steals their feigned gift. In Hades the reciprocity of gifts is retained, but the roles between guest and host are reversed: here it is the guest who must proffer sacrificial gifts (i.e., blood) in return for a prophetic story. On his return from Hades, Odysseus narrates the *Nekya* story to Circe and in exchange receives instructions on how to steal the song of the Sirens. It is not necessary to insist on this notion of theft--one might also call it a conquest--the important thing is that the stolen song should continue to exist, incorporated into another song. At this point one would expect that the Sirens, like bees bereft of their sting, would either die or cease their singing--just as the Sphinx killed herself once her riddle was solved--and indeed, later tradition tells of the suicide of the Sirens and their transformation into rocks after Odysseus had passed them by, and tricked them out of their song.

Another dimension of the curious exchange that takes place between Odysseus and the Sirens involves the paradoxical interplay of the themes of exteriority and interiority throughout the episode. Everything in it points to the prevalence of surface, from the mirror-like

surface of the sea in the windless calm to the shriveling skins on the bones of the unburied heaped along the shore. As opposed to the dark viscera of Hades, Polyphemos' and Skylla's cavern, the treacherous harbor/trap of Lastrygones or even Aiolos' enclosed island, the island of the Sirens leaves everything open and exposed, almost prefiguring the exhibitionist mermaid of the Middle Ages, brazenly baring a nonexistent womb with her outstretched tails. When the German Minnesänger Gottfried von Strassburg has the Sirens dwell on a "magnetic mountain," which inexorably pulls the ships to its cliffs

> als der agestein die barken
> mit der syrenen sange tuot[25]

he combines what in fact are two closely related motifs: the magnetic island or mountain, like the Sirens is nothing but polished surface exerting an irresistible pull on the ships which penetrate its magnetic field. In the encounter between Odysseus and the Sirens, we find surface pitted against surface, for by stopping their ears Odysseus' companions become as unapproachable and impenetrable as the Sirens. And yet, as we know, there is a paradoxical opening--a sort of Achilles' heel--between these two surfaces: Odysseus' unstopped ears, through which he ingests and interiorizes the song of the Sirens thereby

"domesticating" what has been described as the ultimate danger to domesticity. In other words, Odysseus vanquishes the problematic exteriority (or superficiality) of the Sirens by at once mirroring them (i.e., by presenting them with a counter-surface) and interiorizing them in the act of "eating" or consuming their song. Indeed, Odysseus emerges with a kind of double victory, for not only has he been able to ingest the song that was to have eaten him, but he also subsequently includes it within the narration of his own adventures. He has managed to translate the sirens into words of his own story.

Summing up these observations on the Odyssean Sirens, I should like to point out once more their kinship with Circe, with whom they share the power of spellbinding song, which, as we first meet her, makes her "whole place murmur to the echo of it"--δάπεδον δ' ἅπαν ἀμφιμέμυχεν (X, 227). Indeed, the Sirens' close structural, geographic and narrative proximity to Circe--and perhaps even their dual number--makes them appear like an amplified echo of the song of the "shining goddess." They are also, one might say, Circe's parting gift to her mortal lover . . . a parting song.

But if the Sirens, like Circe, represent the seductive powers of song, one might well ask what <u>kind</u> of song or

singing is specifically at issue here. And this brings us back to the suggestion W. B. Stanford makes when he speaks of the markedly anapestic rhythm of line 184 of the Siren's song and adds that this might well be "designated to suggest lyric verse."[26] If indeed we are dealing with a song here (that is, with words set to a melody, as Fitzgerald's translation seems to intimate), and not primarily with the telling or reciting of a tale, then the Sirens could conceivably be interpreted as engaging in a form of poetry that poses a danger not only to Odysseus, but to the epic poet or storyteller himself. For just as the Sirens threaten to impede the onward course of the Odyssean journey in various fashions--the lack of wind, the ensnaring song, the sun-baked corpses and Odysseus' bonds are all instances of _immobilization_--so the song that they sing may also represent a danger that the epic poet runs, namely, that his tale will somehow be swerved from its rightful narrative course, or simply grind to a halt, immobilized by the lure of lyric (self-)enchantment. Although this hypothesis involves a certain degree of anachronism (in Homer's day, and even in Aristotle's day, "lyric" is not yet a genre that exists in sharp opposition to "epic"),[27] and although there is of course no historical evidence that lyric

poetry was ever perceived as endangering epic in Greek culture, the Sirens nevertheless seem to suggest a kind of singing and/or telling that is dangerously "Other."

I have already noted how the Sirens violate the norms of exchange governing linguistic interactions in the *Odyssey*: their song transgresses the laws of reciprocity between host and guest (or speaker and listener), just as its non-prophetic, non-instructional aspect threatens to divorce the realm of language from the realm of action, to dissociate saying from doing--since there is no way their song can be realized in or as *deed*. But the very fact that the Sirens promise Odysseus an account of the Trojan War and of the *Nostoi* of his companions makes them a curious *Doppelgänger* of the Homeric bard himself--the implication perhaps being that their lies, their flatteries and their seductions are a dangerously counterfeit version of those communal values conveyed by the epic singer of tales to his audience. It is perhaps significant in this respect that Odysseus listens to their song alone, apart from the crew: his isolation on the mast (and the fact that the Sirens address their flattering melody exclusively to him, as it were, *ad hominem*) further underscores the difference that separates their song from the communally oriented tale of the bard (and, for that

matter, from Odysseus' own narration of his adventures to the Phaiakians). Although it is therefore tempting to construe the Sirens' song in terms of a conflict between private and/or subjective poetic utterance (generally associated with lyric) and the fundamentally public storytelling of the epic bard, this interpretation tends to allegorize the song of the Sirens excessively by imposing modern concepts (such as the opposition between "lyric" and "epic," "private" and "public") onto a text where these may not be operative distinctions. The foregoing remarks are offered, then, not in order to _reduce_ the significance of the Sirens (i.e., to claim that they "stand for" this or that), but rather in order to suggest the plurality of perspective which their episode in the _Odyssey_ can elicit--a plurality which, as we shall see, is borne out by the history of the Siren motif from Homer onwards.

If, as already suggested, the song of the Sirens is in some sense a counterfeit version, or enchanted mirror, of the epic storytelling of the bard, it seems at the same time to embody the problematic lure of something altogether Other. And here we encounter what is perhaps the central enigma of the Sirens, that is, the fact that they seem to be associated with an essential _paradox_, and that their

attributes (and this will emerge clearly in their post-Homeric iconography) are at once composite and contradictory. For no other figures in the *Odyssey* are associated to the same extent with the perils of unhumanized, unacculturated Nature (viz., the unburied dead, the flowery meadow, the threat to familiality and domesticity, the isolation of their isle) *and* at the same time endowed with those very skills or aptitudes which seem most valued in the social and sacred economies of Greek culture, i.e., those arts of language and of song which, significantly enough, the Sirens share with the bard.

This paradoxical fusion of the terrors of undomesticated Nature and of the highest achievement of human Culture within the figure of the Sirens would seem to point in two different directions, each entailing a divergent interpretation of the significance of their song. On the one hand, the Sirens could represent (or point back to) a concept of song as a natural power--which has its source *in* nature, i.e., that is not a human invention but is rather bound up with the deepest energies of the cosmos. As evidence to support such an interpretation one could point at the notion of shamanistic chants as a secret language which the neophyte must learn (or

steal") from nature itself. Mircea Eliade, for example, cites the Carib tradition, according to which

> the first piai (shaman) was a man who, hearing a song rise from a stream, dived boldly in and did not come out again until he had memorized the song of the spirit women and received the implements of his profession from them.[28]

Károly Marót sees to point in the same direction when he associates both Muses and Sirens with the Ukrainian "water-queens" which at night rise to the surface of the sea to sing. According to tradition, "some people write down what they hear and thus all songs are spread out among the living."[29] The concept I am referring to entails a notion of all songs as magic song, and stresses the role of the poet as listener, i.e., as a divinely inspired mediator between the realm of the sacred and the realm of the human.

On the other hand, the Odyssean Sirens may also be seen as reflecting an awareness--indeed, a self-consciousness--about the fact that song is not something given to the singer by divine or natural agency, but is something actively made or crafted by the poet and his tradition. The Odyssey is a remarkably sophisticated and self-reflexive text, full of allusions to the very act of telling and to the art of singing. And in a sense, the Sirens may be construed as representing the very

dangers of poetic artifice, that is, the tendency of the poem to be ceaselessly mirroring itself and its making, thereby perhaps forgetting its divine origin and its role as mediator between the world of the gods and the world of the human community.

The song of the Sirens, as we have seen, is closely associated with tying, knotting, weaving and spellbinding, all activities which are closely cognate to the very processes the bard engages in when performing his tale--as is further evidenced by the etymological derivation of *text* from *texere* (to weave) and *textus* (tissue). Although, as Albert Lord warns us, we should be wary of imposing modern notions of poetic authorship or creation onto a poem composed according to traditional conventions of oral performance,[30] the Sirens might suggest the dangerous lure that a certain *textuality* poses to the epic bard, that is, the danger that he will become so entranced with the sheerly musical or rhetorical textures of his poem that he not only risks losing the narrative thread of his tale, but also risks losing contact with his audience and his community. Whether or not the song of the Sirens can be said to reflect the dangers of excessively self-indulgent poetic artifice or the lure of self-reflexive textuality of course remains open to argument. But I have mentioned

this possibility merely to underscore further what seems to be the fundamental paradox which informs the entire Siren episode. On the one hand, they appear to be associated with the unmitigated forces of Nature (and hence are linked to the terrifying threat of sheer Otherness, or Death); on the other hand, they seem to embody the seductive lures of Culture--the pleasures of poetic artifice and euphony, the enchanting lies that sweet, melodious language can lead us (at the peril of our own lives) to mistake for truth. And it is therefore perhaps no accident that in later Christian tradition, the Sirens will come to emblematize all that which is most problematic (or most ambiguous or most diabolical) for the orthodox Christian worldview--heresy, perversion and, most tellingly, the lure of the flesh and the lure of the printed page.[31]

NOTES

Chapter I

[1] *The Odyssey of Homer*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (New York: Harper & Row, 1965; Torchbook edition, 1965), p. 186. Unless otherwise noted, this translation will be used throughout.

[2] The dual form is also used in XII, 167: "Σειρήνοιϊν." Otherwise Homer refers to them with the plural. See W. B. Stanford, ed., *The Odyssey of Homer*, 1947; rpt. London: St. Martin's Press, 1977, I, 406-407.

[3] For a survey and brief discussion of the main theories about Sirens, see Appendix A.

[4] John R. T. Pollard, *Seers, Shrines and Sirens: The Greek Religious Revolution in the Sixth Century B.C.* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1965), p. 143. See also Pollard, "Muses and Sirens," *The Classical Review*, 66 (1952), pp. 60-63.

[5] Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), p. 94.

[6] Stanford, I, 351.

[7] Gabriel Germain, Essai sur les origines de certains thèmes Odysséens et sur la genèse de l'Odyssée (Paris: P.U.F., 1954), p. 333. The use of a diagram was suggested to me by Germain's example.

[8] See Lord, pp. 166-169.

[9] Káróly Marót, *Die Anfänge der Griechischen Literatur. Vorfragen* (Budapest: Ungarische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1960), pp. 106-211.

[10] Stanford, I, 412.

[11] Described by Jane Ellen Harrison, *Myths of the Odyssey* (London: Rivingtons, 1882), p. 152 (plate 37).

[12] Georg Authenrieth, *A Homeric Dictionary*, trans. Robert P. Keep, rev. Isaac Flagg (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958), p. 137.

[13] Authenrieth, p. 137.

[14] See Gerald K. Gresseth, "The Homeric Sirens," Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association, 101 (1970), p. 209.

[15] See Arnold Pischinger, Der Vogelgesang bei den griechischen Dichtern des klassischen Altertums (Eichstätt: Ph. Brönner, 1901), p. 59.

[16] He is described as resembling "a wooded peak of the high mountains seen standing away from the others" (IX, 191-192) and, further on, is shown sleeping in the ordure "sprawled out through his sheep" (IX, 298).

[17] Otto Crusius, "Die Epiphanie der Sirene," Philologus, 50 (1891), pp. 93-107.

[18] See for example the depiction of the Siren episode cited by J. Harrison, p. 152 (plate 37).

[19] Aeschilus, Eumenides 328-29, as cited by G. K. Gresseth, p. 208.

[20] Stanford, I, 412.

[21] Robert Fitzgerald, trans. The Odyssey (New York: Anchor Books, 1963), p. 215.

[22] Stanford, I, 411.

[23] Tzvetan Todorov, The Poetics of Prose, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 58.

[24] Todorov, pp. 56-63.

[25] Gottfried von Strassburg, Tristan und Isolt, ed. H. F. Massmann (Leipzig: Göschen, 1843), v. 8115, p. 204.

[26] Stanford, I, 412.

[27] See Gérard Genette's discussion of these generic divisions in Introduction à l'architexte (Paris: Seuil, 1979).

[28] Mircea Eliade, Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 97.

29 Marót, p. 46.

30 Lord, pp. 129-31.

31 Since completing this chapter, I have come across an article which further corroborates, while adding considerable philological nuance to, the broad outlines of the argument I have tried to present here. Pietro Pucci, "The Song of the Sirens," Arethusa, vol. 12, no. 2 (Fall 1979), pp. 121-29, convincingly demonstrates, on the basis of minute textual analysis, that the song of the Sirens is essentially Iliadic in nature, i.e., that it contains formulae and specific lexical elements which are only found in the Iliad and nowhere else in the Odyssey. Since the Sirens promise Odysseus that they will sing of his deeds at Troy, Pucci concludes that "the implication is obviously that the poet of the Odyssey considers the divine inspirers of the Iliad to possess the attributes of the Sirens rather than the attributes generally granted to the Muses . . . In this way, by incorporating their Iliadic song into the poem, the Odyssey appropriates the Iliad with a gesture of disavowal" (p. 126) because the musean memory of the Sirens "becomes forgetfulness of the present, and spells only grief, pity, and death. Against this Iliadic song, the Odyssey asserts a memory that fulfills the present, grants successful knowledge, and insures earthly, though controlled, pleasure" (pp. 128-29).

CHAPTER II

SOME NOTES ON POST-HOMERIC SIRENS

In the following pages the reader will find a brief account of some of the "metamorphoses" the Odyssean Sirens underwent in post-Homeric times. Since many of these changes involve the Sirens' function or significance vis-à-vis the Otherworld and the dead, it will be helpful to look at the Odyssean Sirens once more, this time in terms of their function in the Homeric notion of the afterlife. The Odyssean Sirens play no part in the Nekya, nor is it said anywhere explicitly that they are creatures of Hades (as opposed to the "gorgonish head" in XI, 635). However, there is evidence to suggest that Homer and his predecessors incorporated a fair number of motifs in the Wanderings which reflect popular beliefs about the Otherworld and the afterlife.[1] The boundary between what W. B. Stanford called Wonderland[2] and the land of the dead is a shifty one; in folklore the two usually tend to overlap. What matters here is how the Homeric audience viewed the afterlife, and that seems to be accurately reflected in the Nekya. The dead--"dim, querulous vestiges of the living"[3]--flit about in Hades, a dark "place without pleasure" (XI, 94), situated somewhere "underneath the earth's secret places"

(XXIV, 204), beyond the river Okeanos. Here, together with numberless nameless dead, we also find the heroes and heroines of the past; here Minos judges the dead (we are not to understand that Minos punishes misdeeds of mortals, but rather that he arbitrates over disputes that may occur in the house of Hades).[4] The eternal--almost Dantesque--punishments of the great "villains" of mythology such as Tityos, Tantalos and Sisyphos have nothing to do with later notions of Hell and/or Paradise.

On the other hand, the Odyssey mentions the Elysian Field at the limits of the earth, where cool breezes provide refrigerium and there is "never much snow or rain";[5] however, in order to enter this paradiso terreste one needs good connections, i.e., Menelaos will be translated there because he is the son-in-law of Zeus. The reason this "paradise at the limits of the earth" is not given much evidence in the Odyssey may be that the Homeric audience thought it should more properly belong to Fairyland, or, as Hesiod claimed, to a distant Golden Age. Indeed, paradisal islands are prominent in the Wanderings (including those of Menelaos); thus we find a shepherd's paradise in the description of distant Libya, "where the rams grow their horns quickly" and the sheep give birth three times a year (IV, 85-86)--a seaman's

and a farmer's paradise on Scheria, the island of the seafaring Phaiakans, where "pear matures on pear," etc. (VII, 112-132). Kalypso's fragrant isle, with its four fountains running in sundry directions, seems to prefigure Christian notions of the *paradiso terrestre*. Circe's and Aiolos' isles also have paradisal aspects: however, all these places, in the *Odyssey*, belong to Fairyland--they are not the places mortals go to after they die.

The *Odyssey*--and this is what we would like to stress--does not know of a "paradisal" afterlife for mortals, and thus it cannot accommodate any kind of paradisal music, which is reserved for the gods on Mount Olympus. On the other hand, the *Odyssey*, though savage enough in the narration of the deeds and misdeeds of gods, men and monsters, bars its gates to the horde of sinister demons, child-snatchers, fiends and uncanny specters which appear to have haunted Greek popular religion from Homer's days up to our time. Great importance is given to *piety* and to the right performance of rituals, especially those involving gifts, burials and sacrifices--but we find very little *deisidaimonia*, that is, "superstitious fear," in the *Odyssey*. Most of all, the *Odyssey* reiterates again and again that the sufferings a man must endure are either caused by his own mistakes

or by the somewhat inscrutable will of the gods--but certainly not by fiendish spirits randomly roaming about.

This notable absence of demonology in the Odyssey can best be explained in terms of Homer's audience, landed noblemen who wanted to hear about the deeds and adventures of one of "their" heroes, and not about "things that go bump in the night" (which is not the same as saying that Homer's audience was beyond superstition; it simply was not a subject fit for a heroic epic).

The conclusion one can draw from what we have said so far is that the Odyssey does not warrant an identification of the Sirens as "Muses of the Otherworld" (Buschor's Musen des Jenseits),[6] since there is no paradise for the dead where they could intone their honey-sweet songs; nor does the Odyssey justify their inclusion in the host of Keres and similar demons that play such a conspicuous role in Greek popular religion, and, least of all, their identification as soul-birds, fashioned after the well-known Egyptian model (Weicker's Seelenvogel).[7] It is not to be ruled out that in post-Homeric times some of the notions here mentioned came into play, though we would tend to view the changes

in the function of post-Homeric Sirens as mere changes of accent, which can be explained without having to resort to otherwordly Muses, soul-birds or Keres.[8]

After Home had endowed his two Seirenes with the power of magic song and had placed them on an island without a name, it became necessary to give them a "family" and to name their island. It was Hesiod, the poet-farmer and great systematizer of mythology, who discovered the Sirens' island on his maps: it lay off the Western coast of Italy and was called Anthemoessa, i.e., "rich in flowers." Hesiod also mentioned their power to "enchant the winds."[9]

This is all we have from the eighth century B.C. In the second half of the seventh century, the lyric poet Alcman, addressing himself to a young lady in Sparta, composed a verse in which "the Muse sings, the clear-voiced Siren."[10] Ernst Buschor wanted to use this fragment as evidence that the Siren was another kind of Muse--a Muse of the Otherworld.[11] (In the absence of other evidence, I would consider this verse simply as a compliment to the addressee of the poem, the Spartan girl addressed as "Muse." All one can really deduce with some degree of certainty from Alcman's fragment is that he did not regard the Sirens as Keres or

soul-snatchers.) The comparison of someone's song--and by extension, of speech and poetry--to that of the Sirens, became a literary commonplace quite early, as is attested by Pindar's compliment to the girls of Thebes, "whose singing is like that of the Sirens."[12]

Let us return now to the Sirens' genealogy. The first one to mention their father was Sophocles, according to whom it was Phorcys, the "greybeard of the Sea." One rather suspects that he had to adopt the Sirens *nolens volens*, since he was already responsible for a great number of "monsters," including Echidna, the Hesperidean Serpent, the Erinyes and, last but not least, the Sphinx. Sophocles' fragment in which he mentions the "old greybeard" reads thus: "I went to the two Sirens, the daughters of Phorcys, who sang the songs of Hades" (the speaker is, presumably, Odysseus).[13] Here we could have an indication that the notion of Hades had--if not changed--at least been expanded so that it could include the songs of the Sirens. However, the songs of Hades could only be dirges and laments, as the ones intoned by the Muses at the funeral of Achilles (*Odyssey*, XXIV, 47-64). These dirges have nothing in common with the spellbinding song of the Odyssean Sirens, nor is there anything in Sophocles to justify the notion of heavenly

singing in some blissful afterlife. The association of Sirens with dirges is repeated in a play of Euripides, where Helen, mourning over the destruction of Ilium and the deaths she has caused, calls upon the Sirens to attend her mourning with "Libyan harp, with pipes, with lyres," to match the dirges intoned by Persephone.[14]

By the end of the fourth century B.C. the "foreign" enchantresses of the Odyssey have become familiar and respectable personifications of the lament for the dead. And even though mourning did not really suit the bird-legged ladies, they became popular as funerary monuments; the examples of "mourning Sirens" that have come down to us, especially from the third century B.C., are the closest thing to Kitsch one can find in Greek art. The highpoint was probably reached by Alexander the Great, who "over the grave of his beloved Hephaestion, raised hollow Siren-figures in which were hidden the musicians who were to make lamentation."[15]

Fortunately, the Orphics and the Pythagoreans had been elaborating a mystic doctrine of the soul, in which music played a central role. Thus when Plato, following in the footsteps of the Pythagoreans, looked about for some suitable mythological figures to illustrate his notions of the soul's wanderings through the universe, he

freed the Sirens from the funeral parlors to which they had been relegated and relocated them in outer space, there to intone the music of the spheres. In the famous "myth of Er" (Republic, Book X), Plato describes the function of his cosmic Sirens: on their journey through the universe, the souls reached a

> . . . light straight like a pillar, most resembling the rainbow but more brillant and pure. To this light they came in a day's march; and there at the middle of the light they saw the ends of its chains stretched from heaven; for this light was the bond of heaven and held together all the revolving vault like the undergirdings of ships-of-war. From the ends was extended the Spindle of Necessity, through which all the orbits were turned; . . . it is as if there were one great whorl hollow and scooped-out right through, and another one smaller fitting exactly within it, and a third and fourth and four more. . . .
>
> The spindle revolved turning as a whole in the same movement, but within the whole as it revolved the seven inside circles revolved quietly in the opposite direction to the whole. . . . The spindle itself was turned on the knees of Necessity.
>
> Perched above upon each of the circles is a Siren carried round along with it, and singing one sound, one note, so that from all the eight there was one concord.[16]

On this cosmic carillon the Sirens are accompanied by the Fates, who sing of the past, the present and the future, and from time to time give a push to the spindle to keep it turning.

Plato's "mechanical Sirens" did not fare very well, not even with his followers. They could not forget

that the Odyssean enchantresses were ultimately destructive beings, and thought it would have been more decorous to put the Muses in their place. Plutarch tried to justify Plato's choice by explaining the symbolic meaning of his cosmic Sirens in these terms:

> . . . the power of their music is not inhuman or destructive; as souls depart from this world to the next, so it seems, and drift uncertainly after death, it creates in them a passionate love for the heavenly and divine, and forgetfulness of mortality; it possesses them and enchants them with its spell, so that in joyfulness they follow the Sirens and join them in their circuits. Here on earth a kind of faint echo of that music reaches us, and appealing to our souls through the medium of words, reminds them of what they experienced in an earlier life.[17]

But he concludes that Plato is in fact calling the Muses "Sirens," because they "speak the divine truths in the realm of Death."[18]

In Plato's allegory of the afterlife, the Sirens do not have an existence of their own, they are hardly more than figures of speech. However, one realizes how important it was to have in one's own tradition, such a malleable sign, one that could be easily detached from its context and made to function in a new one: this was only possible because the Odyssey had established, once and for all, that the Sirens should dwell in ambiguity, thus making them free to cross boundaries of

meaning at will; this freedom was, one might say, also their destiny.

Let us return now to Plato's allegorical Sirens: Plutarch's explanation does not seem to have reassured all the skeptics and so Proclus, another Neoplatonist, had to come up with another interpretation, which clearly separated Plato's Sirens from those of Homer. And in the process, he also thought of a way to account for the Sirens of the Underworld. According to the division of the world among Zeus, Poseidon and Hades, he explained, there are three different, corresponding kinds of Sirens: the Sirens of the heavenly spheres (i.e., Plato's), the worldly Sirens (Homer's) and the Sirens of the Netherworld (Pluto's).

By now the Sirens are swarming out all over the Hellenic world, endowed with numerous different names, genealogies and myths. What one might call "cargo-cults of the Sirens" spring up in various places, especially in the area where the ancients had thought the Sirens really dwelled, i.e., the western coast of Italy. Lycophron of Chalcis (325 B.C.) speaks of the Italic cult of the Sirens; he calls them "a sterile nightingale that kills Centaurs," referring to a legend according to which the Centaurs, having been defeated by Heracles, fled to Italy and, while resting in the Gulf

of Naples, heard the song of the Sirens, were enchanted, forgot to eat and died. Lycophron also tells of the grave of the Siren Parthenope in the vicinity of Naples, to which offerings were made yearly.[20]

Legends of this time have the Sirens commit suicide after being defeated by the music of Orpheus (others credit Odysseus with having caused their death). Their bodies were washed ashore in different places on the Italian coast. As one might have expected, there soon arose a fierce competition as to who really had the true relics of the Sirens: Naples, Posidonia and Terina each claimed to possess their graves. Diotimos thought he would lend the Neapolitan Siren greater authority by instituting a yearly torch-race in her honor.[21]

The names of the three Sirens who were worshiped on the southern Tyrrhenian coast of Italy were Parthenope (the "virginal"), Leucosia (the "white goddess") and Legeia ("she of the bright voice"). The names of the Greek Sirens that have been passed down to us are Himerops ("she whose voice awakens desire"), Thelxinoe (the "enchantress"), Aglaope ("she of the glorious voice") and Peisinoe (the "seductive").[22] As one can see, the names tend to reflect the notion of enchanting voices associated with the brightness and the white foam of the sea.

We do not know when and where the legend arose which made the river-god Achelous father to the Sirens. Achelous, who had the body of a dragon-fish and horns on his head, is said to have lost one of his horns in a fight with Heracles. From the blood that dripped from the horn the Sirens were born.[23] Other genealogies have Achelous father the Sirens with Sterope or, alternatively, with the Muse Terpsichore. Thus we see the association of water and song (or music), found in some of their names, repeated in these genealogies. Appollonius of Rhodes in Book IV of the _Argonautica_ tells of how Jason and his companions approached the island of Anthemoessa,

> where the clear voiced Sirens, daughters of Acheloüs, used to beguile with their sweet song whoever cast anchor there, and then destroy him. Then lovely Terpsichore, one of the Muses, bore, in union with Achelous; and once they tended Demeter's noble daughter still unwed, and sang to her in chorus; and at that time they were fashioned in part like birds and in parts like maidens to behold.[24]

At the approach of the Argonauts, they "send forth their lily-like voices"; Orpheus, however, plays his lyre and with his music overcomes their song.

Just as the context with Orpheus appears to be a late literary invention, so the story of the Sirens as playmates of Persephone seems to be a literary

corollary to the rape of Persephone. In Roman times the tale will be told of how they were transformed into bird-women by Demeter, as punishment for not having guarded her daughter properly.[25] Ovid introduced yet another variant: in the Metamorphoses (V, 531) he lets the Sirens ask for wings, so that they may search for their ravished companion; they are thus transformed into bird-Sirens at their own request.[26]

Virgil tried to circumvent the Sirens by relating the legend according to which they were turned into "rocks" after being defeated by Orpheus. He obviously did not want them to distract pious Aeneas with their magic song. On the other hand, he could not ignore them altogether and so he sacrificed the helmsman Palinurus in memoriam. Sleep overcomes Palinurus in the Aeneid as they sail past the "Siren's Rocks, which once were hard to pass and whitened by the bones of many men."[27] The helmsman drowns and Aeneas takes over just in time to steer the ship safely past the Siren-cliffs. Thus Virgil somewhat contrivedly eludes the Odyssean sorceresses while at the same time paying tribute to tradition.

The Sirens did not fare too well in the hands of explicators and commentators: in their exegetical

fervor, they would tend to forget the essentially poetic quality of the Homeric Siren-tale. Some of the questions raised by Aristarchus (c. 180-c. 145 B.C.) and the Alexandrian scholars were downright pedantic. They wanted to know, for example, why the Sirens could not foresee their failure, if they were indeed omniscient. Another question which occupied the mind of many a commentator was how exactly did the victims of the Sirens die.[28]

Naturalists, on the other hand, wondered about what kind of "bird" they were. No statement on the Homeric Sirens by Aristotle has come down to us; but in his Historia Animalium (9.40.2), he calls a kind of bee "SEIREN." (The Greeks appear to have given this name to a number of different things "that give forth sounds," including the nightingale, swans and "a sort of bell."[29] Pliny the Elder (A.D. 23-79), commenting on a number of fabulous animals (including the Pegasus bird, the griffin and the bearded eagle), expresses doubts as to the existence of Sirens:

> Nor yet do the sirens obtain any greater credit with me, although Dinon, the father of Clearchus, a celebrated writer, asserts that they exist in India, and that they charm men by their song, and, having first lulled them to sleep, tear them to pieces. The person, however, who may think fit to believe in these tales, may probably not refuse to believe also that dragons

> licked the ears of Melampodes, and bestowed upon him the power of understanding the language of birds . . .

Fairyland has been transferred to India; as we shall see, not without reason.

Of the many rationalistic explanations for the Sirens one in particular was destined to gain wide circulation and influence mythologists for centuries to come, namely that they were actually whores who robbed travelers of their belongings. The theory, it seems, was a result of the rationalistic explanations the Odyssey set forth by Alexandrian scholars. In the twelfth century A.D., Eustathius, archbishop of Thessalonica, reiterated this explanation in his commentary on the Odyssey, specifying that they were "flute-playing whores who robbed travellers of their money."[31] The Sirens which the "Guides Bleues" of antiquity included in their itineraries were not of the kind mentioned by Eustathius. In his guidebook to Greece, Pausanias (second century A.D.) mentions a temple in Koroneia, where Hera is shown holding Sirens in her hands because it was she who instigated them to challenge the Muses. (The Muses won, plucked the Sirens' feathers and adorned their hairdos with them.)[32]

These "plucked" Sirens are, as we can see, but pallid imitations of the spellbinding sorceresses of

the *Odyssey*. What they needed was a reviving blood infusion and new hunting grounds. These would be provided to them by Christianity, for the Church set them to lure souls away from the path of righteousness.

NOTES

Chapter II

[1] See Martin P. Nilsson, Greek Popular Religion (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1940).

[2] W. B. Stanford, ed., The Odyssey of Homer, 1947, rpt. London: St. Martin's Press, 1977), I, xxxvii.

[3] Stanford, II, 411.

[4] The Odyssey of Homer, trans. Richmond Lattimore (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), XI, 568-71.

[5] Odyssey, IV, 566-67.

[6] See Ernst Buschor, Die Musen des Jenseits (München: Bruckmann, 1944).

[7] See Georg Weicker, Der Seelenvogel in der alten Litteratur und Kunst (Leipzig: Teubner, 1902).

[8] See Jane E. Harrison, Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Univ. Press, 1908), pp. 197-207.

[9] Fragmenta Hesiodea, ed. R. Merkelbach and M. L. West (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), frr. 27 and 28 (Rzach numbers 68 and 69):

27. Schol. Ap. Rhod. Δ 892, καλὴν 'Ανθεμόεϲϲαν" ἠκολούθηϲεν 'Ηϲιόδωι οὕτωϲ ὀνομάζοντι τὴν νῆϲον τῶν Ϲειρήνων· νῆϲον ἐϲ 'Ανθεμόεϲϲαν, ἵνά ϲφιϲι δῶκε Κρονίων. ὀνόματα δὲ αὐτῶν Θελξιόπη (ἢ Θελξινόν), Μόλπη, 'Αγλαόφωνοϲ.

28. Schol. QV Hom. μ 168, "αυτίκ' ἔπειτ' ἄνεμοϲ μὲν ἐπαύϲατο, ἠδὲ γαλήνη | ἔπλετο νηνεμίη" ἐντεῦθεν 'Ηϲίοδοϲ καὶ τοὺϲ ἀνέμουϲ θέλγειν αὐτὰϲ ἔφη.

[10] Alcmane, I Frammenti, ed. Antonio Garzya (Milano: Silvio Viti, 1954), p. 85, no. 8: ἁ Μῶσα κέκλαγ', ἁ λίγηα Σηρήν.

[11] Buschor, p. 6.

[12] Pindar, Parth. 2, 13ff., fr. 94b.

[13] Sophocles, fr. 861, quoted by Weicker, p. 49.

[14] Euripides, Helen, ed. A. M. Dale (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), vv. 167-79, p. 9: "πτεροφόροι νεάνιδες, / παρθένοι Χθονὸς κόραι / Σειρῆνες, . . ."

[15] Jane E. Harrison, Myths of the Odyssey in Art and Literature (London: Rivingtons, 1882), p. 156.

[16] Plato, Great Dialogues, trans. W. H. D. Rouse (New York: Mentor Book, 1956), p. 417.

[17] Plutarch, Moralia (Quaestiones conviviales), trans. F. H. Sandbach (London: Heinemann; Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1961), IX, 14, 745, p. 279.

[18] Ibid., ll. 745-46.

[19] Proclus, Comment. in Plat. Crat., p. 157, quoted by Weicker, p. 59.

[20] Lykophron's Alexandra, trans. Carl von Holzinger (Leipzig: Teubner, 1895), vv. 670-73. "τίς οὐκ ἀηδὼν στεῖρα Κενταυροκτόνος, / Αἰτωλὶς ἢ Κουρῆτις αἰόλῳ μέλει / πείσει τακῆναι σάρκας ἀκμήνους βορᾶς;" "Die Nachtigallenmaid, Kentaurentödterin, / Kuretin oder auch Aitolerin, wird sie zum Hungertod nicht locken durch ihr buntes Lied?"

[21] See Giulio de Petra, "Le Sirene del Mar Tirreno," Atti della R. Accademia de Archeologia, XXV (1908), 3-14.

[22] Karl Kerényi, The Gods of the Greeks (London: Thames & Hudson, 1974), p. 58.

[23] Kerényi, p. 56.

[24] Apollonius Rhodius, Argonautica, trans. R. C. Seaton (London: Heinemann; Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1912).

[25] See Erich Kaiser, "Odyssee-Szenen als Topoi," Museum Helveticum, 21 (1964), pp. 109-213.

[26] Ovid, Metamorphoses, V, 531.

[27] Virgil, The Aeneid, trans. W. F. Jackson Knight (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1956), p. 146.

[28] See Weicker, p. 69.

[29] J. P. Postgate, "A Philological Examination of the Myth of the Sirens," The Journal of Philology, 9 (1880), p. 23.

[30] Pliny, Natural History, X, 70, trans. John Bostock and H. T. Riley (London: H: G. Bohn, 1885), II, 530.

[31] Eustathius, Commentarii in Homeri Iliadem et Odysseam, ed. G. Stallbaum (Hildesheim: Olms rpt., 1960), 1709, 42. Eustathius also relates the legend according to which the Sirens were turned into birds for having spurned the gifts of Aphrodite, i.e., love.

[32] Pausanias' Description of Greece, trans. J. G. Frazer (London: Macmillan, 1913), Bk. IX, ch. XXXIV, p. 486: "2. Coronea contains the following notable objects. In the market-place there is an altar of Hermes Epimelius ('guardian of flocks') and an altar of the Winds. A little lower down is a sanctuary of Hera with an ancient image, a work of Pythodorus the Theban. In her hand the goddess carries Sirens. For they say that the daughters of Achelous were induced by Hera to vie with the Muses in singing; and the Muses, being victorious, are said to have plucked off the Sirens' feathers, and to have made crowns for themselves out of them."

CHAPTER III

CHRISTIAN SIRENS

Old Testament "Sirens": A Question of Translation

The seventy-two Palestinian Jews who, as the story has it, were secluded on the island of Pharos by Ptolemy Philadelphus (284-247 B.C.) in order to translate the Old Testament into Greek, had a hard time finding corresponding equivalents for Hebrew demonology. Thus, when they were confronted with the arcane beasts, which in Isaiah's vision of the coming destruction of Babylon will haunt its ruins, they were quite obviously at a loss. The prophet's vision read as follows: "There (in Babylon), the haunters of waterless regions will certainly lie down, and their houses must be filled with eagle-owls. And there the ostriches must reside, and goat-shaped demons will go skipping about."[1] As we know, the prophets of the Old Testament had a penchant for such desolate visions; the fate awaiting Edom, according to Isaiah, wasn't much better than the one Babylon was heading for: "On her dwelling-towers thorns must come up, nettles and thorny weeds in her fortified places, and she must become an abiding place for jackals, the courtyard for the ostriches."[2]

What kind of beasts were these demonic haunters of deserted places which the Hebrews called tannîm or benôt ya' anâh (jackals and female ostriches)? Maybe some help came from a comparison of Isaiah's visions with the prediction which the prophet Micah makes for the future of Samaria, guilty of idolatry: "I shall make a wailing like the jackals, and a moaning like female ostriches. For the stroke upon her is unhealable."[3] The seventy-two scholars must have racked their brains trying to remember some Greek equivalent. But Micah gave them a helpful, probably crucial hint: jackals wail, female ostriches mourn. And someone must have remembered the mourning Sirens of late antiquity--indeed, someone may even have recalled the passage in Euripides' Helen, where she calls upon the Sirens to attend her mourning over the destruction of Ilium. Of course: Sirens mourn over the ruins of a destroyed city! And thus the Sirens made their entry into the Bible, tarnished as "wailing jackals and mourning female ostriches." Having found this solution, the Septuagint saw no reason to search for another. And so we read that at the coming of the Messiah the Sirens too will glorify Him: "The wild beasts of the field will glorify me, the Sirens (jackals) and the ostriches; because I shall have given water in the wilderness.[4]

As one might expect, the Greek Church Fathers had considerable difficulty explaining these Sirens in the Septuagint. Origen (A.D. 185-254) thought they were evil ghosts, Cyril of Alexandria (A.D. 380-444) suggested night-owls and his commentators, remembering the ancient Greek tale of Halcyone who was turned into a kingfisher to lament her husband, drowned at sea, thought they might be halcyon birds or else "owls with mournful voices."[5] Eusebius (A.D. 265-340) apparently had the Homeric Sirens in mind when, commenting on Isaiah, he wrote: "They are certain demons, cruel and wild ghosts . . . for the Greeks say that the Sirens have sweet voices, but are deceitful beings. . . . With their lust and their demonic song they seduce the souls of men, as the poets relate."[6] Cyril too has heard of the Homeric Sirens, when, in his commentary on Micah, he explains that "the Greeks and their disciples called 'Sirens' ghostly beings who sing sweetly and magically overcome their listeners"; this, he adds, is the power of Satan.[7] However, the task of reconciling the desert demons of the Old Testament with what they may have known of the Odyssean Siren episode was beyond the capacity of the Greek Church Fathers mentioned above, who looked upon the hidden myths of Greek antiquity with a wary and suspicious eye. Wild, wailing ghosts or birds are what the Sirens remained in the Septuagint, until the

great scholar and lover of the classics, Clement of Alexandria, revived the Homeric myths by giving them a Christian garb.

It would be interesting to try to establish whether the Alexandrian translators were in fact just following an established literary topos when they let the Sirens haunt the ruins of Babylon--but that lies outside the scope of this study. That the bewailing of destroyed cities by birds and/or demons may in fact have been a very old and familiar theme is suggested not only by the passage from Euripides we quoted above, but also by a "lament" of Antipater of Sidon (fl. c. 100 B.C.) on the destruction of Corinth: "Nothing remains of its former splendour, only the Nereids, the daughters of Okeanos, remain by the ruins, to lament the fate of the city like kingfishers."[8] A similar wailing, probably inspired by the Septuagint, can be found in a Syrian song about the capture of Jerusalem by Saladin: "The Siren wails among the people for the killing of the orphans, the peacock in the rushes laments the young dead."[9]

St. Jerome's Dragons

St. Jerome (c. A.D. 340-420), the Latin translator of the Bible, was no more at home in Hebrew demonology

than the Septuagint had been. Still, he did amend the "mistake" of the Alexandrian translators and put the ostriches (struthiones) in the right place. Only once, when translating the Hebrew tannîm (jackal) did he resort to the Sirens--and that, curiously enough, in a passage where the Septuagint had translated the word as "hedgehogs." Otherwise Jerome rendered the old jackals as "dracones."

Jerome's "oversight" occurs in Isaiah 13:21, in the continuation of the passage quoted above. This is how his translation reads:

> Sed requiescunt ibi bestiae, et replebuntur domus eorum draconibus, et habitabunt ibi struthiones, et pilosi saltabunt ibi, et respondebunt ibi ululae in aedibus ejus, et sirenes in delubris voluptatis.

Obviously Jerome, who knew the Homeric enchantresses well, could not resist the temptation of having them haunt the "hideouts of voluptuousness" of Babylon.

The problem now was how to reconcile his dracones with the Odyssean Sirens, and what Jerome apparently did was to consult one of the many bestiaries that must have been in circulation at the time. While explaining that the pagans had thought of the Sirens as animals or demons who "with their sweet and deadly song" would draw the souls into the depth of the sea, where they were devoured by wolves and dogs (i.e., Scylla's girdle),

he also gave a more updated explanation: the Sirens are "daemones aut monstra, aut certe dracones magni . . . qui cristati sunt et volantes."[10] What the venerable lion-tamer had done was simply to lift out of a bestiary the description of a basilisk, the deadly crested serpent, later known as cockatrice. Others were to follow and elaborate Jerome's example: in Hugh of St. Victor's De bestiis we read of two kinds of Sirens: the Homeric ones and "the winged serpents of Arabia, that can go faster than horses and are said to fly as well. Their venom is so fierce that one dies before one feels the pain of the bite."[11]

Clement of Alexandria and Pagan Wisdom

Few of the Greek Fathers could rival the erudition and the classical scholarship of Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 160 - c. 215). No other Church Father would ever match the daring with which Clement cast bridges between Greek myth and the teachings of the Church. In contrast to the grim Apologists who, led by Tertullian, fought the ancient mysteries "as a diabolical aping of Christian truth,"[12] Clement endeavoured to explain the Christian doctrine to his followers in images that were known to them, i.e., using Greek myth and literature.

Thus in the Protrepticus he addressed his disciples with these words: "Come, I shall show you the Logos, and the mysteries of the Logos, and I shall explain them to you in images that are known to you." Further on he praises Pythagoras and Plato "who followed their inner vision towards truth, with God's help."[13] Clement's allegorical interpretations of the Odyssean journey have a breadth of vision unparalleled in later Christian allegories, and which only Dante will surpass.

In his interpretation of the Circe-episode, Clement, according to Hugo Rahner, thought of "Christ as the one and only Hermes, the knowing leader. His saving gift is the plant Moly, the Evangelic message."[14] As one might well expect, some of his colleagues accused him of being too liberal towards pagan culture. In refuting these allegations, Clement resorts to a daring metaphor, in which the song of the Sirens is likened to the lure of Greek wisdom:

> It seems to me that most of those who call themselves Christians resemble the companions of Odysseus, for they approach the Logos without a feeling for a more refined culture: they sail not past the Sirens, but past the rhythm and the melody of Greek culture, they seal their ears with a refusal of learning (amathia), because they know very well that they would not find the way home, if once they listened to Greek wisdom."[15]

Thus for Clement, Odysseus is the prototype of the

courageous man who dares approach with open ears the wisdom of the pagan past, the song of the Sirens, but who of his own free will, binds himself to the "mast of faith."

In the following centuries and throughout the "dark ages," we shall sorely miss this ease and familiarity, unhampered by the suspicion and fear of getting ensnared in the coils of heresy, with which Clement approaches the myths of the pagan past. It is this superior ease which allows him to compare, with poetic boldness, the song of the Sirens to the voice of God:

> Their song is so powerful that those who hear it are drawn to them almost against their will. The voice of God in the Scriptures forces those who hear it to believe and to obey without proof, just as the voice of the Sirens compels men to follow it almost against their will.[16]

Almost as if to show how malleable the myths and the images of the past can be in the hands of an erudite and unbiased man, Clement then goes on to use the image of the Sirens in what was destined to become the canonical Christian interpretation:

> Let us fly away from old habits like from the Sirens, of which legend tells! She strangles man, distracts him from the truth, takes his life. She is a trap, an abyss, a pit, a devouring monster. She is an island of destruction, heaped with bones and corpses. On her sits an attractive wench, Lust, and delights with her worldly music: "Come hither, honored Odysseus, glory of the Achaians, steer your ship

> to the beach, so that you may hear our divine voice." She praises you, sailor, calls you honored, but let her feed upon the dead! A wind from heaven comes to your aid, sail past pleasure, sail past the song, it causes death.[17]

This is Clement on the pulpit, preaching hell and brimstone, while at the same time quoting lines from Homer--the only ones most of his disciples would probably ever hear.

Another time, Clement quotes a fragment in which Euripides speaks of "the golden sandals of the Sirens" which will carry him up to Zeus (i.e., the wings of poetry) and prays that the spirit of Christ may likewise give him wings to fly to his heavenly Jerusalem.[18] But what was destined to remain was the allegory of Odysseus sailing past the Sirens as the Christian soul sailing to its divine destination on the ship of the Church: "Mari iactato per impetum ventorum consimilia cernentes _haereticorum_ placita debebant auditores praeternavigare circumspicientes portum tranquillum," Hyppolitus admonishes in his _Refutationis Omnium Haeresium_, and goes on to illustrate further his metaphor with the classical example that inspired it:

> Tale enim mare est belvosum et innavigabilem . . . tamquam Siculum . . . quod pervagatum esse Ulixem narrant . . . Sirenes autem suaviter canantes et canorum pelliciebant praeternavigantes, suadentes suavi cantu appellere eos qui auscultarent . . .[19]

The moral of the story being, of course, if somewhat paradoxically, that the good Christian journeying through a sea of heresy--like, presumably, the Christian reader leafing through the Odyssey--should follow the example of Odysseus and tie himself to the "lignum Christi." For the sea is haunted with the honeysweet song of the Sirens which, as any good Christian knows by now, represents the lure, and the allure, of heresy. Unlike Clement, neither Hyppolitus nor Tertullian would ever dare compare the compelling song of the Sirens to the voice of God: for them, there is no doubt, the voice of God, as revealed by his Scriptures, has the undaunted rigidity of the mast of a ship, this emblem of uprightness pitted against the melodic undulations, and narcissistic sinuosities of pagan poetry, the Siren song par excellence. After his conversion to Christianity, Paulinus, Bishop of Nola (353-431), renounced the "classics" and, in a letter to a friend, he compared the writings of Xenophon, Plato, and Demosthenes, and the charms of literature in general, to the honey-sweet fruit of the lotus and the song of the Sirens which make men forget their true Ithacas: ". . . pernicioram istam inanium dulcedinem litterarum quasi . . . Lotophagos, ut Sirenarum carmina blandimentorum nocentium cantus errita."[20]

But what, in fact, does pagan literature, or any other form of heretic speech have in common with the Sirens' song? In the first place, albeit figuratively, both try to lure the dutiful traveler (be it a Christian soul or a pagan king) away from the "right path," the pursuit of a prefixed goal (be it the Kingdom of God or Ithaca) with their melodious words and false promises. For St. Augustine (A.D.354-430), the words of pagan literature (itself no more than an "enchanting dream")[21] are, like those of the Sirens, "mock realities," "veils concealing errors."[22] "I have nothing against the words themselves," he notes in his Confessions. "They are like choice and costly glasses, but they contain the wine of error [supposedly, as opposed to the "wine of truth," the "Word of God" and "blood of Christ"] which had already gone to the heads of the teachers who poured it for us to drink."[23] They are heresy, in short, because, as Clement has already put it, they distract the Christian soul from divine Truth, the words of God, as well as the world of God, that informs with its divinity the teachings and writings of the Christian Church. "If the literature of the stage delight you," Tertullian tells his hapless flock, "we have literature in abundance of our own . . . and not fabulous, but true; not tricks of art, but plain realities . . ."[24] The language of the Scriptures, and

of the Holy Fathers who interpret them, is plain language that, far from indulging in "tricks of art," cancels itself in the disclosure of the Truth that underlies it. What matters in the Scriptures, as, just before his conversion, St. Augustine realizes while listening to St. Ambrose, is their meaning--not the words that convey it, the vessels that contain it: ". . . his meaning, which I tried to ignore, found its way into my mind together with his words, which I admired so much."[25] The language of heresy, or pagan literature, like the enchanting song of the Sirens, is a "choice and costly glass" containing either the "wine of error" or other "mock realities." For what matters here is what pleases the ear (be these flatteries, or Clement's "rhythm and melody of Greek culture" or Augustine's "stately prose of Cicero") and entertains the mind (like "the wanderings of a hero named Aeneas . . . the death of Dido who killed herself for love"--"What can be more pitiful than an unhappy wretch unaware of his own sorry state, bewailing the fate of Dido, who died for love of Aeneas, yet shedding no tears for himself as he dies for want of loving you? O God . . ." wonders St. Augustine).[26] As one remembers, the song of the Odyssean Sirens modulates itself in self-reflecting contemplation, at once container and content, medium and object, signifier and signified:

"Come this way, honored Odysseus, great glory
  of the Achaians,
and stay your ship, so that you can listen here
  to our singing;
for no one else has ever sailed past this place
  in his black ship
until he has listened to the honey-sweet voice
  that issues
from our lips . . .

Its only truth is the mirror of falsity, of its emptiness; its only meaning a mere echo, or the delayed and deceptive promise of one:

then goes on, well pleased, knowing more than
  ever
he did; for we know everything that the Argives
  and Trojans
did and suffered in wide Troy through the gods'
  despite.
Over all the generous earth we know everything
  that happens.
(*Od*. XII, 184-90)[27]

(a promise, moreover, that would only yield a reflection, a repetition of what Odysseus already knows, "everything about the Fall of Troy"). For even in this case, between the luring words of the song (the signifier) and the "information" it promises to disclose (the delayed signified), lies a beach strewn with human bones--forgetfulness, perdition, death.

Saeculi Voluptas

From the examples quoted above one might come to the conclusion that for the Church Fathers the lure of

the Sirens was limited to their song. But this is not so. If the honey-sweet chant of the Sirens has come to represent heretic language (all the way from mere flattery to pagan literature), their hybrid form is a perfect metaphor for worldly pleasures in general and the lure of the flesh in particular. In his commentary on Isaiah, Eusebius warns his readers against ". . . the Sirens . . . [who] . . . with their lust and their daemonic song . . . seduce the souls of men . . ."[28] St. Ambrose (A.D. 340-397), commenting on Psalm 43:20 (rendered by Aquilas as "You have humbled us in the abode of the Sirens"),[29] explains that the Sirens are young girls who, according to myth, lure sailors with their sweet voices, so that they suffer shipwreck: they represent "pleasure of song and flattery. So worldly pleasures (saeculi voluptas) delight us with flattering flesh, to deceive us." In his De Fide (Lib. III) he warns against the "dulcem sed mortiferam cantilenam aut capiendos animos adolescentium,"[30] the sweet sing-song which leads youth astray. And it was partially to counter the lascivious songs sung not only in taverns but in monasteries as well, that Ambrose introduced hymn-singing into the service.

At about the same time, St. Jerome was advising one of his aristocratic female disciples to chase from her palace all singers, for they are "deadly Sirens."

"Mortiferos sirenarum cantus surda debeamus aure transire," he admonishes in his commentary to Joshua.[31] Similarly, St. Leander warns a nun to shun the "organum Satanae," i.e., secular music, which delights the prurient ears of worldly ladies: "Fuge Sirenum cantus, mi soror: ne dum prurientibus auribus oblectamenta delectaris audire terrena, averteris a recto itinere. . . ."[32]

The dangers and temptations of pagan literature and of secular music were, as we shall see, of great concern to the Church throughout the Middle Ages. Even in the darkest dungeon, Boethius (A.D. 480-524) would not cease to rail against the sweet lie of poetry, going so far as calling the Muses themselves "meretriculas" at the beginning of his Consolatio philosophiae. But in fact, what one can overhear in Philosophia's sharp words against the Sirens of elegiac poetry--who have somehow managed to wind their way into the prisoner's cell--is an inner battle between the austere philosopher and the poet in Boethius himself. "Quis, inquit, has scenicas meretriculas ad hunc aegrum permisit accedere . . .? Sed abite potius, Sirenes usque in exitum dulces . . ."[33] In Dante's Purgatory we shall find Virgil in Philosophia's role, chasing away the "dolce sirena."

By the time Isidore of Seville (c. A.D.570-636) set out to compile his encyclopedic work known as the Origines,

knowledge of "pagan" literature had reached such a low point that it was probably no longer perceived as a major threat by the Church, which was now starting to become more concerned with orthodoxy in its own files and with the "heresy of sex" in general. Isidore's interpretations of classical learning in a Christian key became so popular that not only did they supersede the study of the classical authors themselves, but became standard reference in all matters dealing with pagan literature and mythology. Though the interpretation of the Homeric Sirens as meretrices probably goes back to Alexandrian scholarship, it was Isidore of Seville who was chiefly responsible for canonizing and popularizing this notion for centuries to come. Horace had already called Circe a meretrix and had closely associated the Sirens with her.[34] Sidonius Apollinaris (c. A.D. 431-482) in one of his letters had written of a young man who had escaped erotic temptations by sealing his ears with Odyssean wax: "atque Ulysseus, ut ferunt, ceras auribus figens, fugit, adversum vitia surdus, meretricii blandimenta naufragii."[35] Sidonius gets the story a bit mixed up here, but the notion of the Sirens' lure as erotic blandishments comes through clearly enough. For Isidore the Sirens, like various other pagan demons and female deities (including the Gorgons) were meretrices

> quae transeuntes quoniam deducebant ad egestatem, his fictae sunt inferre naufragia. Alas autem habuisse et ungulas, quia amor volat et vulnerat. Quae inde in fluctibus commorasse dicuntur, quia fluctus Venerem credeverunt.[36]

How different a world, how different the worries, from those of the Odyssey and its Sirens! And yet, how pliantly do the old enchantresses adapt themselves to their new role. They still please the ear and the minds with their melliflous song, but they are also gradually acquiring a corporeality that appeals to the other senses. In the Christian Siren it is not the bird that "signifies" most but rather the woman. As we have seen, St. Ambrose describes them as "young girls . . . flattering flesh." The fear of heresy has spread through the realm of worldly pleasures in general, over which reigns, undisputed, the flesh--and what apter representation could this be given than that of that most undecorous hybrid, the Siren? Boethius calls the "Sirens" of elegiac poetry that have mysteriously stolen into his cell "scenicas meretriculas," "showy prostitutes." The equation is fairly eloquent. elegiac poetry = Siren = scenicas meretriculas, that is, pagan literature = Siren = alluring flesh. And the Siren becomes again the emblem of a false/corrupted system of value, in yet another deviation from the "path of truth."

Paradoxically, if in keeping with its role in the _Odyssey_, the Siren's increasing semiotic pliancy seems

to produce only other representations, other surfaces, other signifiers whose only meaning (signified) is either dispersed in an interplay of reflections, or simply the absence or negation of one (false/non-True, senses/non-sense, Satan/non-God). For the pleasures of the flesh, like the rhythm and melody of pagan poetry, are fundamentally self-reflective: their object is to please the senses, not to produce sense (neither to procreate nor to signify, both actions that would automatically extend them beyond, or above, themselves). What awaits the hapless traveler who, lured by the veil of appearances, dares pierce it in the pursuit of yet greater riches, is not Truth or transcendence but a desert shore heaped with blanched bones: oblivion, perdition and death.

On the other hand, if what signifies most, however negatively, in the Christian Siren is her femaleness (her song is, presumably, as feminine as her upper body), taxonomically speaking she is still seen as a beast, and as such she figures prominently among the fauna of the various bestiaries and other naturalist studies of the times.

Bestiaries and the Sirens of Heresy

In the second century A.D., somewhere within the cultural orbit of Alexandria, a Greek monk compiled a book of popular theology and morality which became known as The Physiologus (The Naturalist). It was based on the notion that every aspect of the world is a revelation of Christian truths, and it illustrated some of these by means of the real or supposed characteristics of actual or fabulous animals. Though little is known about its origin or its sources, it seems likely that it drew at least some of its material from earlier books of natural history.[37]

By the fifth century, the Physiologus had been translated into Arabic, Syriac, Armenian, and Ethiopian. The first news of a Latin version comes from a decree issued by Pope Gelasius in 496, condemning it as a heretical book. But the decree failed to curb its popularity, and in the following centuries new translations and adaptations continued to appear in almost every language spoken in the Christian world.

The Physiologus, and the bestiaries fashioned after it, are of particular interest for the study of the Christian Siren-symbolism, for, ironically, it was this "heretical" book which for centuries held up the Siren

as a warning example of both the dangers of heresy and the lures of the flesh, and contributed to make the Siren one of the most popular motifs in the Ecclesiastical art of the Middle Ages.

Although all the early Greek manuscripts have vanished, their very origins are enough to suggest that the Physiologus' identification of Sirens with heresy and prostitution might be a development of earlier comparisons between the Sirens and bad counselors or lewd, deceitful teachers. In Euripides' Andromache, Hermione laments having heeded the "Sirens' words of the crafty gossip-mongers, the strange women, teachers of iniquity,"[38] who advised her to act against Andromache. Pythagoras is said to have compared the pleasures of food and sex to the deadly songs of the Sirens,[39] and Seneca, for whom city life is full of temptations which threaten the philosopher like Sirens, calls the speeches of those who malign the Stoics and try to sway people to a life of pleasure "Siren-songs": ". . . hae voces non aliter fugiendae sunt quam illae, quas Ulixes nisi alligatus praetervehi noluit."[40] Similarly, in Apuleius' Golden Ass, Amor warns Psyche against her wily sisters: "nec illas scelestas feminas . . . vel videas vel audeas cum in morem Sirenum scopulo prominentes funestis vocibus saxa personabunt."[41]

Thus, it is this same image of the Siren as heretic and meretrice, which we have already encountered in more orthodox texts, that the <u>Physiologus</u> and most of the bestiaries uphold and popularize. According to the Aethiopian <u>Physiologus</u>, Sirens are meretricious heretics "who have the semblance of believers but who oppose the power of the sacraments and seduce the simple-minded with their sweet voices"[42]--Simon Magnus is considered as the perfect example of such a man by a <u>Smyrna manuscript</u> while a Greek one gives the privilege to Arius.[43] In his version of the <u>Physiologus</u>, Bishop Theobaldus lends the Sirens yet another "meaning" when he compares them to hypocrites, who appear "outwardly as gold, and as men using the powers of reason, but inwardly they are like beasts wanting in reasoning power":[44] but once again this is only a shell, a surface, a screen, the signifier of its own negation.

Beast and human but in fact neither the one nor the other, the Siren of the <u>Physiologus</u> and of the bestiaries maintains the physical characteristics of the Odyssean Siren and, because of the "sins" it has come to represent, is often associated with that other hybrid, the Centaur (Figure 12), whose symbolic value it shares. Accordingly, medieval art frequently represents them together, though, to judge from the number and variety of her representations,

she was by far the more popular of the two. For, despite its condemnation of the Physiologus as a heretical book, later the Church had the bestiaries sculpted in their cloisters and churches, where the simple-minded who could not read (or simply had no access to monastic libraries) would be confronted daily with this sculpted picture-book and its lessons. From the way these images from the bestiaries are arranged on capitals, columns, portals or within frescoes one can assume that preachers referred to them during their sermons to illustrate their words with "concrete" images. The Siren could thus be used, according to the necessities of the sermon, as a warning symbol against all kinds of worldly pleasures--the treacherous teachings of the "devious-deviants," the heretics, the lures of the flesh, the dangers of spectacle and music.

As the Siren's semantic field expands, so do her figurations. From one-quarter woman and three-quarters bird, perched on a rock overlooking the ocean, she becomes increasingly female and gets closer and closer to the sea till, her feathers turned into scales and her legs into fins, she becomes a mermaid.

As we watch the iconographic evolution of the Christian Siren, we witness the beginnings of that misogynist fear and resentment against the fickle "daughters

of Eve" of which we will hear the crescendo throughout the Middle Ages, and which will culminate in the "sulphurous pit" of witch-hunting and final burning of the wanton, Satanic flesh. For the scenario which the grim expounders of the Bible have been preparing has only two roles in store for women: that of the Angel of Salvation and that of the Siren of Perdition.

The Birth of the Mermaid: Some Notes on Medieval Siren-Iconography

The Church Fathers had, as we saw, no difficulty in interpreting the episode of Odysseus and the Sirens in a Christian key; from Clement of Alexandria onward, they included it in their sermons, identifying the Sirens with the dangers of voluptas and heresy, and Odysseus with the steadfast Christian soul that sails past the lures of this world, to reach his true Ithaca, his heavenly homeland. In accordance with this interpretation, one would expect to find this theme in early Christian funerary art, to indicate the successful completion of the voyage of life and the triumph over the temptations of this world. However, the only trace of such a theme is represented by a number of Roman sarcophagi found in Christian cemeteries and elsewhere, dating mostly from the third

century A.D. It seems that these sarcophagi do not properly belong in the sphere of Christian art, since they were originally used in a pagan context and only later adopted by Christians.[45] As a result, it is fairly safe to assert that the first known representation of a Siren in Christian art does not show a Odyssean bird-lady but a mermaid and is found in the Sacramentarium of Gellone, a Visigoth manuscript dated around A.D. 780.[46]

We should say offhand that a number of different theories have been set forth to answer the question of when and how the Odyssean Sirens became mermaids, that is, of when they were first conceived of as having fish-tails.[47] As is frequently the case when a question involves a number of different fields of inquiry--in this case iconography, literature, and folklore--the theories proposed have tended to reflect the primary concerns of the authors vis-à-vis their main discipline. Without wanting to belittle the importance of the search for the oldest iconographic prototypes of the fish-tailed Siren, or mermaid, I would like to suggest that in order to get at the heart of the question, one should concentrate less on the possible iconographic itineraries of the motif and rather address oneself to the question of when the Siren-as-mermaid became

"necessary" as a symbol of heresy and lust. I have already partially anticipated the answer to this question in the previous pages by pointing at the growing use of the Siren as symbol for worldly temptations and, specifically, for the lures of the flesh in early patristic literature.

The Fathers of the Church were not the first to identify the Sirens with harlots: in the fragments of the Greek comedy (Epicharmus, Theopompus) they tempt the famished Odysseus with descriptions of a Gargantuan feast and erotic pleasures. (The claim to fame of one Greek writer by the name of Anoxilas is that he compiled a list of prostitutes which he compared to mythological monsters, Chimera, Scylla, and so forth; a certain Theano is compared to a Siren because of her thin, bird-like legs.)[48] But the crucial difference between these early caricatures of the Odyssean Siren and its Christian counterpart is that in the latter we can discover the seed of a complex and contradictory love-hate attitude towards women in general that would spread through numerous facets of the Church-dominated culture of the Middle Ages and would then be partially carried on into the Renaissance.

As I shall endeavor to show, the iconographic motif of the "mermaid" (i.e., a lady part human, part fish) had also already existed for a very long time. As such it carried with it a number of latent "meanings," but in order to be used as a sign in a specific context, two premises had to be fulfilled: (1) the previous context (not necessarily the original one) had to be either forgotten or be consonant with the new one--so that there could be a continuity of meaning; and (2) there had to be need for such a sign. So, to answer our intial mermaid-question in a different way, one could say that the Siren became "fishy" when the notion of woman as either-harlot-or-angel started to take foot in the preachings of the Church.

Let us now examine how the passage from one type of iconographical motif, the bird-Siren, and the new motif, the mermaid-Siren, may have occurred and what modifications and/or accentuations this passage entailed.

The Homeric Siren-story, as mediated and modified by subsequent artistic representations, had retained unaltered these basic elements: monstrous beings, part human, part animal, dwell on an island, tempt and enchant passing sailors with their magic song; Odysseus eludes them by tying himself to the mast and stopping the ears

of his companions with wax. The association of the Sirens with the sea is therefore an intrinsic element of their story, which had been there from the beginning (i.e., the Odyssey) and which was never abandoned. In the Odyssean Siren-episode the island is only a prop or, better, a stage for the enchantresses; it could easily be "submerged" into the sea, drawing the Sirens down into the deep. There exists archaeological evidence to suggest that already in the late third or early second century B.C., the iconographic representation of the Sirens was occasionally "contaminated" by that of the sea-monster Scylla. A Megarian bowl (Figure 5) found the Athenian agora shows Odysseus tied to the mast of his ship while a "mermaid" with a long fish-tail swims toward him; the whole scene is enlivened by hippocampi, fish, and birds. H. A. Thompson calls the scene "a fantastic contamination of the story of Scylla and Charybdis with that of the Sirens."[49] A further example of a fish-Siren antedating the medieval mermaids can be seen on a Roman lamp of the first or second century A.D., now in the Royal Museum in Canterbury. Again, it shows Odysseus tied to the mast of his ship, the helmsman, and another companion raising his hands to his ears. In the water floats a Siren with long hair and a fish-tail, singing and raising one arm towards the ship (Figure 6).[50]

The Siren in the *Sacramentarium* of Gellone also has long hair and the tail of a fish, ending in a loop, but she does not sing, and her arms, if she has any, are tucked away as she lies, eyes wide with fear, under the extended cross (Figure 7) of Ecclesia. To underscore the aquatic nature of the mermaid, a letter *D* in the text below her is formed by a fish, while the letter *M*, over her tail, is composed of two serpentine monsters, the first of which bites the tail of the second with one of the heads it has at both ends. In medieval Christian art, contortions of any sort (loops, knots, coils, twisted limbs, contorted branches) often symbolize the discord within the human soul that has *strayed away from the right path*, be this the line of a text or the conduct of one's life. In the *Sacramentarium* of Gellone, which contains also a *Martyriologium*, the very nature of the text suggests that the Siren represents the danger of rift and dissention generated by heresy within the Christian community. The way the mermaid literally slips into the text to stare at us from between the lines illustrates how easily heretical errors can wind themselves into the "approved text" if it were not for Ecclesia sternly warning us, with her brandished cross, against the dangers of deviating from the *official* line. The letters that the copyist draws will themselves come to life and

turn against him if he takes too much pleasure in the elaboration of his craft, or, worse yet, if he lets himself be lured into inquiring too much about the text he is copying. For the Truth of the text lies beyond its lines and the page on which they rest, in parallel correspondence (allegory) to these but accessible only to those who know the Sacred Code. Those who don't will inevitably fall by the wayside, there to struggle "between the lines," in a space inhabited by twisted monsters and coiled Sirens. In this context, the margins of the page and the space between the lines are really not so different from the Odyssean "Lotus-land" or "Siren-isles." It is easy to let the mind wander inquisitively, but difficult to find the way back once one is caught in the loops and snares of heresy. This is what the medieval manuscripts tell us wherever the empty spaces, the desert shores of the page, are either filled and consacrated by the powerful sign of the Cross (or other Christian symbols) or are left over to the self-devouring monsters of heresy, in warning.

But if the oldest depiction, which has come down to us, of the Siren as mermaid in Christian art is in the Visigoth Sacramentarium, its oldest description occurs nearly a century earlier in the Liber Monstrorum, attributed to Adhelm, Bishop of Shelbourn (A.D. 639-707):

> Sirenae sunt marinae puellae, quae navigantes pulcherrima forma, cantus mulcedine decipiunt. Et a capite et usque umbilicum, corpore virginali et humano generi simillamae, squamosas tamen piscium caudas habent, quibus semper in gurgite latent.[51]

By the seventh or eighth century, then, we already have a well-developed notion of beautiful mermaids who enchant sailors with their sweet song, have scaly fish-tails, and lurk in the deep. The bestiaries, which had at first only described the bird-Sirens of antiquity, also begin to transform them gradually into mermaids or to speak of various kinds of Sirens. In fact, the two forms of the Siren, half bird or half fish, are both common in the Middle Ages, and indeed often appear fused together, but there is no question that the motif of the mermaid far surpassed that of the bird-lady in popularity.

On the other hand, the iconographic motif that was destined to become so popular on the capitals of medieval churches was not that of the Siren with one fish-tail first introduced to us by the Sacramentarium and the Liber Monstrorum. The "classic" Siren of the Middle Ages has two fish-tails which she usually holds up on either side of her body as she brazenly faces the viewer. The body, from the waist up, is that of an attractive naked woman with conspicuously long hair curling over her shoulders. She sometimes wears a cap or a crown on her head.

Eleanor B. Sachs has, we believe, convincingly argued that the inspiration for the medieval double-tailed mermaid was the representations of Scylla on Etruscan funerary monuments (Figure 9).[52] Scylla and other so far unidentified fish-tailed deities seem to have played an important role in Etruscan notions of death and afterlife, for they are found on a great number of cinerary urns and funerary monuments; they probably had the function of psychopomps, leading the souls across the waters to the Underworld. (Other models for the medieval mermaid may have been the Greco-Roman Tritons, commonly shown blowing a conch-shell to calm the waves (Figure 10).)[53] Considering the abundance of Etruscan funerary monuments showing either Scylla or similar marine beings, it seems more than likely that some of these monuments should have been known in twelfth-century Italy and that they provided a model for the double-tailed mermaid. However, as we have already suggested, it was only when the writings of the Church Fathers and the preachings of the Church had prepared the ground and made a bifurcated fish-Siren "necessary," that the motif which had been latently present all the time was officially adopted. But why did the Church Fathers choose <u>this particular</u> Siren motif (that of the

double-tailed Siren) to represent the dangers of worldly temptations, and specifically those of heresy and the flesh?

In order to answer that question, it will be helpful to pay attention to the elements that were either modified or accentuated in the "new" motif: the double-tailed mermaid, like the Etruscan Scyllas, is uniformly frontal, that is, she always faces the viewer. But while the various Scyllas (Figure 9) let their tails curl or rise almost independently (in her hands Scylla usually wields an oar), the medieval mermaid is very much intent in pulling up and spreading her fish-tails in a gesture of exposure which in other contexts is regarded as apotropaic (Figure 14). The brazen baring of a non-existing womb--what better image for the deceiving and "barren" lures of the flesh? The fact that the mermaid is one of the few creatures which is depicted in its frontal totality in medieval art can be viewed as an iconographic rendering of the notion of "blandishment": by enticingly facing the "spectator," she can let him gaze at the beauty of her upper body, with her "open arms" she almost invites him to an embrace; her long floating hair, loosely waving down her bare shoulders, stands in sharp contrast to the restrained and decorous hairdo of saints and pious ladies. In addition, the two

parted fish-tails lent themselves admirably as images of division and schism, i.e., the rift between the body and the soul produced by the lures of the flesh and, at the same time, the schism in the body of the Church produced by heresy, a division of which, of course, the very nature of the bi-corporal Siren is a constant reminder.

So, while the iconographic motif of the double-tailed Siren reaches back into antiquity, the conscious use of the motif as a sign for the dangers of worldly pleasures, lust, and heresy begins only in the Middle Ages and coincides with the building and adorning of the earliest Romanesque churches and cloisters.

The total frontality of the mermaid (as opposed to the partial frontality of other beasts and monsters, whose heads are frontal, but whose bodies are shown in profile) echoes the total "exteriority" of the Odyssean Sirens: she too remains mostly an alluring (and ultimately impenetrable) surface, behind which lie only the barren wastes of death and perdition. When Christian art will proceed to "rip away" and show the backside of its enticing surface, it will reveal a body eaten up by worms and maggots.

Romanesque art adopts both bird-Siren and mermaid and then a variety of hybrid forms born from the fusion of

the two. Interestingly enough, the bird-Siren appears frequently as a bearded bird-man. Apart from the desire of having a greater variety of motifs, the bird-men are clearly a counterpart of the long-haired mermaids or bird-Sirens. Three such bird-men are carved on a capital of the twelfth-century church of Cunault (Figure 12): they are engaged in a dispute, while looking on a Centaur battle with a monster with an oversized head, a symbol of Folly. The artist has effectively linked the notion of heretical dissent with that of madness, another form of distraction away from the path of "truth." It is probably not the first time, and certainly not the last time, that "unorthodoxy" is dealt with in terms of madness: for what is un-orthodox (from the Greek orthos = correct and doxa = opinion) is inevitably un-true and, as such, profoundly nonsensical and foreign, alien, mad. Here again, as with hypocrites and heretics, human semblance is seen only as a screen, a surface, to conceal the chaos and emptiness of un-reason. While the male bird-Sirens would seem to stress the intellectual hybris and the ensuing "madness" of the heretic, the female bird-Sirens tend to emphasize the seductive aspect of heresy. The beautiful faces of the two Sirens at St. Benoit-sur-Loire (Figure 11), their mesmerizing look

and parted lips, suggestive of an enchanting song, all point at the seductive lures of deviating doctrines, fittingly portrayed by the contorted tree beside which they sit, the tree of error and dissent, but also the tree of Knowledge, after the Fall.

Speaking of the tree of error and dissent, one should probably note, at this point, that the majority of bird-Sirens in Romanesque art have also a serpent's tail, which links them to the tempting snake in the garden of Eden. It is interesting to note that in some of the illuminated manuscripts and painted glass of the Middle Ages the snake tempting Eve is often depicted as having the face of a woman. By linking the Siren to the _serpens_ of Eden, the Church produced a powerful symbol for the danger of seduction in general but particularly of a verbal sort. For we are still dealing with an "aural society" in which the dangers of heresy were perceived primarily as "acustic," i.e., in the guise of false preachers to whom the unwary will "lend their ears." _Do not listen_, is what the numerous depictions of dragons devouring the ears of a man with twisted limbs say, while next to him a mermaid sings her sweet song.

But the connection of the Siren with the _serpens_ had other consequences as well. Since Eve was herself

identified with the tempting serpent--so much so that one finds statues of the Virgin treading not on a snake but on Eve herself as she bites into the apple--the Siren itself was increasingly linked to Eve, that is, to woman as seductress and temptress par excellence: indeed, so much so that later on she will occasionally take Eve's place under Mary's chastising feet.

One of the most extraordinary representations of the _tempting_ Siren in Romanesque art survives in the small church of St. Jakob in Kastellaz (Figure 19), in the South-Tyrol. A beautiful, long-haired bird-Siren with a serpent's tail ending in a grotesque bird-head daintily picking berries with its sharp beak hovers over the figure of a naked Adam, straining pitifully under the weight of his "flesh." To the left, an illustrated penitential sermon uses the familiar figures of medieval bestiaries to portray the dire consequences of the Fall. The degeneration of mind and body, heresy and corrupted dialectics, are represented in the battle of a monster, wearing a Phrygian cap and holding a snake in one hand, with a Centaur. In the same fresco, Envy and Lust are represented by a dog-headed monster biting and being bitten by a snake, while a mermaid and an ithyphallic youth, riding a dolphin, stand for the bondage to lust. Instead of spreading her fish-tails in the usual way,

the mermaid crosses them as if to emphasize her ultimate sterility. As a recognized and recognizable symbol of Satanic temptation, the Siren acquires a yet larger semantic capability and gradually comes to stand for all those worldly activities and attitudes that are recognized as sinful or heretical by the Church. Guillaume le Clerc, in his bestiary of 1211, lists some of the "sounds and glamours of this world" of which the Siren "affords example":

> The syren, who sings so sweetly
> And enchants folk by her song
> Affords example for instructing those
> Who through this world must voyage.
> We who through this world do pass
> Are deceived by such a sound,
> By the glamour, by the lusts
> Of this world, which kills us
> When we have tasted such pleasures.
> Wantonness and bodily ease,
> And gluttony and drunkenness,
> Slothfulness and riches,
> Palfreys, fat horses,
> The splendour of rich draperies.
> So great is our delight in them
> That perforce we fall asleep.
> Thereupon the syren kills us.[54]

"Fat horses, / The splendour of rich draperies . . .": to each his own "surface." It is not surprising that the Middle Ages would compare the diverting pleasures of the theater and of music to the lures of the Sirens. Gervaise, writing at the beginning of the thirteenth century, singled out as "Sirens" the <u>tragitaours,</u>

tumeresses et jouglaours,[55] i.e., the musicians, actors and jugglers who found no sympathy among the preachers of the Middle Ages: they were called Satan's allies, were banned from churches, were refused the sacraments and burial in sacred ground, and were vehemently attacked from the pulpit. Jugglers and actors were, to all practical effects, heretics. They made people believe things that were not there; they were polymorphous, polyphonic, a medley of jingling "surfaces," where rhyme replaced reason in a satanic parody of the established truths. John of Salisbury (1110-80), considered by some the most learned man of his time,[56] attacked the wandering minstrels, dancers, and acrobats, who enjoyed great popularity both at the courts of the nobles and among the common folk, saying that they proffered to the eye and to the ear all that could inflame luxuria.[57]

And thus jugglers and acrobats were banished, together with all the other grotesques and hominids, to the margin of the page (Figure 21): decorations, yes, but also a manner of textual exorcism, or excision, whereby all alien matter, no matter how phantomatic, is removed from the body of the text and "buried in unconsecrated ground," a lume spento.

The official Church of the early Middle Ages appears to be constantly torn between incorporating yet more "mirabilia," to be interpreted as a revelation of Christian truths (cf. the bestiaries, the lapidaries, Isidore's Origines, the commentaries, etc.) and between banishing what must have appeared as a never-ending avalanche of things, which were threatening to bury the words of the sacred texts. The interest in real and phantastic animals, in the wonders of pagan mythology and those brought back by travelers from all over the world, was a double-edged sword. While the Church might try to teach Christian morality with them, they might also titillate the listener or viewer and instill in him an illicit cupiditas sciendi. Thus it comes as no surprise that the first bestiary was condemned as a heretical book or that jugglers were called Satan's allies: the notion of the devil as the great "illusionist," who would tempt even Christ and the saints with false visions, made the whole world appear as swarming with "marginalia" and seductive illusions, devised to distract and capture the unwary.

This battle against deceiving glamour and surface was at its most complex when it came to music, towards which the Church had for centuries a very ambivalent attitude. While St. Paul exhorted the Ephesians to

praise God with spiritual songs,[58] St. Jerome warned that the words, not the voice, should be pleasing.[59] Clement of Alexandria thought fit to warn against chromatic modulations and melodic movements, "which are so popular in places where one dances and sings with courtisans."[60] Too much movement, too much modulation, whether of the body (actors, acrobats, jugglers, et al.) or of the voice, were seen as deviations from the norm, from the unwavering uprightness of the Christian soul, which could only encourage further deviations. We find at the beginning of the history of Church music a musical asceticism, which not only excluded instruments from the service but kept Church singing as austere as possible. When St. Ambrose began to compose easy melodies inspired by popular tunes in order to attract more people to his services, his enemies accused him of composing magic songs to charm the masses. Even his disciple, St. Augustine, could not hide his ambivalent feelings:

> Sometimes, too, from over-anxiety to avoid this particular trap I make the mistake of being too strict. When this happens, I have no wish but to exclude from my ears, and from the ears of the Church as well, all the melody of those lovely chants to which the Psalms of David are habitually sung; and it seems safer to me to follow the precepts which I remember often having heard ascribed to Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, who used to oblige the lectors to recite the psalms with such slight modulation of the voice that they seemed to

> be speaking rather than chanting. But when I remember the tears that I shed on hearing the songs of the Church in the early days, soon after I had recovered my faith, and when I realize that nowadays it is not the singing that moves me but the meaning of the words when they are sung in a clear voice to the most appropriate tune, I again acknowledge the great value of this practice.
>
> (Book X, 33)[6]

The strictly monastic discipline was finally counteracted by the mystic trend of the Franciscans, given to miracles and visions. But even then, when the turn towards Gothic poetry and Mariology brought music into the Church and polyphony evolved in France and Italy, the Church kept stressing the fundamental difference between secular and sacred music. Christian iconography exemplified this opposition by pitting the "secular" Sirens with their profane instruments, against the biblical psalmist, King David.[62]

On a page of the Arundel Psalter, illustrating Psalm LXXX, King David is shown on the left playing his harp, while on the right a bird-Siren with a portative organ looks at him askance (Figure 23). Since the organ and the bells were the instruments most suited to church music, putting them in the hands of the Siren is probably yet another way of exposing the hypocrisy of the heretic, who will pretend to play canonical tunes while in fact infiltrating the Church with his

apocryphal modulations. On the right-hand portal of the Lyon Cathedral (Figure 24) one can see an organist being swallowed by a fish; on a relief on the cathedral of Rouen (Figure 25), a man with the lower body of a cock conducts a half-human monster playing a portative organ; on the stalls of Saint-Chamont, a woman plays such an organ while next to her another woman undresses.[63]

The opposition of secular and sacred music continued to be a popular motif in the Renaissance. On a miniature from the Sforza Book of Hours (Figure 27), a winged, double-tailed mermaid plays a fiddle in the lower margin of the page, while on the top, three angels intone a heavenly song: the chastity of the angels--they are dressed and have no instruments--is pitted against the sensuality of the long-haired, naked mermaid. We see also how the page became a miniature battlefield between the heavenly choirs above and the satanic orchestra below.

The motif of the devil who stealthily joins a company of merrymakers disguised as a fiddler is a popular one in European folktales. It is therefore not surprising to find a great number of fiddling mermaids in Christian art, since both share the central motif of the seduction of the unwary. A fiddling merman can be seen on the main entrance of the Lyon Cathedral, while

next to him a crowned mermaid with a young mer-babe in her arms recalls the theme of Eve and the Fall. A three-faced fiddling merman appears on a fifteenth-century fresco in the cloister of Brixen: the three faces may be a further sign of the heretical nature of the fiddler, since a great number of heretical disputes centered around the nature of the Holy Trinity. This theory finds support in the representation of another three-faced merman in the cathedral of Basel (Figure 28), carved on a frieze at the foot of a pillar: two male bird-Sirens face each other while on the right a bearded, three-faced merman holds up his two fish-tails and a third one is looped around his belly, representing the self-strangulating forces of heresy.

The Mermaid and Tertullian's Pisciculi

But not all the attributes of the Christian Sirens are as eloquent and clear as those related to her musical skills: one of the most frequent and elusive ones is a fish she holds in her hands. At Cunault-sur-Loire, a carved mermaid (Figure 29) is apparently handing a fish to a man in a boat while another man stands by. A similar scene is sculpted on a capital at Civeaux, where one of the two men is plunging from the boat into the

sea. It has been suggested that the mermaid here is a symbol of Divine Grace delivering the soul, i.e., the fish, from the sea of the world.[64] The Abbé Crosnier, observing that mermaids are frequently sculpted on baptismal fonts, suggested that they might be a symbol of the Christian soul regenerated by the waters of baptism. Accordingly, he interprets a mermaid suckling her young at St. Etienne d'Auxerre as "the soul regenerated by baptism."[65]

These theories do not hold under closer scrutiny, since there is really not enough evidence to support the notion of the Siren as soul. What is correct is the identification of the fish as the Christian soul. Tertullian calls the Christians who have been cleared of sin by baptism *pisciculi*.[66] Jesus had urged Peter and Andrew to follow him with the promise of making them "fishers of men."[67] The two scenes described above are thus to be interpreted simply as two "moments" of the same action. The mermaid holding (not handing) the fish prefigures the effect her song will have on the sailors on the boat; they will fall asleep and plunge into the sea, and Satan will have caught another soul. The mermaid brandishing a knife while holding a fish in the church of St. Aubin (Figure 31) clearly indicates

the danger in which the captive soul finds itself. An interesting variation on the motif can be seen on the Romanesque portal in Remagen, where the merman is carrying his booty of souls in a kind of knapsack, a combination, it would seem, with the German folktale motif of the devil carrying his captive souls to hell in a sack. A positive "counter-scene" to that of the soul which has become a prisoner to the mermaid of heresy and lust, is the representation of St. Peter (Figure 33) who, sailing on the ship of the Church, holds the key of heaven in one hand and a fish in the other--this time it is indeed a soul saved from the sea of the world.

The Crown and the Comb

Two frequent attributes of medieval and later mermaids are the crown and the comb. It is not entirely clear how the mermaid got her crown: there is the possibility that it might have been taken over from depictions of crowned bird-Sirens, as we can see them on the medieval reliefs of Etchmiadzin. As we shall see later on, the bird-Siren became associated in Armenia and other eastern countries with the Phoenix and related firebirds, who have as attribute either a

nimbus or a crown. Thus the mermaid may have received her crown from her eastern counterpart, the firebird-Siren. It appears quite likely, however, that this attribute was at some point associated with the negative symbolism of the crown of <u>superbia</u>. Allegorical representations of the Seven Deadly Sins (Figure 38) use the crown as symbol of pride; worn by the mermaid, this crown probably stands for the overweaning pride of the heretic.

The comb which the mermaid frequently holds in her hand (Figure 35) must of course be seen in conjunction with her hair, which is usually conspicuously long, abundant, and loose. This is true already of the oldest mermaid-depictions we know (<u>Sacramentarium</u> of Gellone) and is also partially true of the Etruscan Scyllas and Tritonesses which we assumed served as "models" for the medieval, bifurcated mermaid. Without embarking on a survey of hair-folklore, I should like to point out its symbolic significance in connection with the medieval mermaid.

Hair is universally regarded as a carrier of potentially dangerous magical powers. (Medusa's petrifying hair is but one example.) In folktales, abundant and loose hair is usually a characteristic of "wild" supernatural beings, and corresponds in

part to the feather-dress of the Swan-maiden, in that it represents a crucial link to the "wilderness"/otherworld. A Tyrolean folktale tells of the condition on which a Salige (a white lady) will consent to marry a mortal: he must allow her to sleep with her hair touching the ground; the moment he lifts it onto the pillow, she must leave him and return to the wilds.[68]

In a social context, a woman's loose hair is associated with moral looseness in general: folksongs abound with variations on the theme, ranging from the fairly innocent to the frankly erotic. The mermaid's loose hair floating in the water underlines her aquatic and "wavy" nature (Undine), alluring and treacherous like water itself. At the same time, it characterizes her as a "loose" and wanton female, in contrast with the strict coiffure of saints and respectable ladies (nuns must cut off their hair).

Combing one's hair in public is the height of immodesty: on fourteenth-century tapestries, the Whore of Babylon was represented as a woman sitting on a rock, "combing her long hair and gazing into a mirror."[69] Mirror and comb are of course well-known symbols of vanity, and indeed one finds mermaids gazing into mirrors quite often. But their meaning is not exhaustively

explained in terms of symbols of vanitas. Combs are found in women's graves as funerary gifts from prehistory up to the Middle Ages; in folktale, they are magical objects par excellence. Already in antiquity, the comb was used as a symbol of sexuality: the Greek word for the scallop-shell, kteis, meaning comb and consequently used for various objects with projecting teeth, including the weaving comb, was also used for pubes and pudenda muliebra.[70] The combing the mermaid is engaged in is an essentially "gratuitous" act: it will not make the mermaid's hair less entangled, but it will lure and bind her victims. Fair-tressed Circe and Kalypso of the beautiful hair[71] are, one might say, both using an over-sized "comb" as they sit at the loom, weaving and singing. The mermaid's combing is, in fact, the equivalent of Circe's or Kalypso's weaving, which is, in its turn, the tangible correlative of their singing. The mermaid's hair is, therefore, not only a parallel to the cloths and webs the two "witches" weave, but also the physical correlative of her ensnaring song.

Sirens with combs abound in bestiaries, psalters, and ecclesiastical decorative art. The Peterborough Psalter (fourteenth century) shows us a rather unique combination of three Sirens with bird-wings, fish-tails, and duck-feet (Figure 36): in the center stands a

male-Siren holding a fish in his right hand, as does the Siren to his left, while the one on the right is combing her hair with the typical medieval comb, which has two rows of teeth.

NOTES

Chapter III

[1] Isaiah 13:21. New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures. Revised 1970. All further citations from the Holy Scriptures in English are from this edition.

[2] Isaiah 34:13.

[3] Micah 1:8.

[4] Isaiah 43:80. According to Erich Kaiser, "Odyssee-Szenen als Topoi," Museum Helveticum, 21 (1964), p. 112, the Septuagint may have been induced into this erroneous translation by the assonance of the Hebrew word SE'ÎRÎM (literally "the hairy ones," i.e., pilosi) in Isaiah 13:21, with the Greek word for Siren.

[5] Cyrillus, Comment. in Isaiam, in Jaque Paul Migne, Patrologia cursus completus. Series graeca (Paris: Garnier, 1857-1866), 70, 908D. Migne's Patrologia graeca is hereafter cited as PG, his Patrologia latina as PL. In Migne's Latin version of Cyrillus, the Sirens are called "passeres stridulos": "ejus modi erant Graecorum superstitionis doctores, et poetae, et oratores. Inest enim illis suavitas, et ornatus, quantum ad orationem attinet, nihil vero docent necessarium." This is only a short step from saying that pagan authors and poets are in fact heretical. For all Patristic source materials I am deeply indebted to Hugo Rahner's Griechische Mythen in Christlicher Deutung, which guided me in the early stages of my inquiry into the Siren of Christianity. To my knowledge, Rahner's discussion of the Patristic interpretations of Greek myth is the most insightful study available, though it may not be the most exhaustive one. Wherever possible, I have consulted the Patristic materials in Migne's Patrologia; unless otherwise noted, all translation from Latin are my own; the Greek materials I have translated from Rahner's German versions.

[6] Eusebius, Comment. in Isaiam 13:21 (PG24, 189D). In Migne's Latin we read: "Nam apud Graecos Sirenes dulcisonae et fallaces fuisse narrentur."

[7] Cyrillus, Comment. in Michaeam 1:10 (PG71, 653D; 656A). Quoted by Rahner, p. 453. The Latin text reads thus: "Sirenas autem Graeci veteres ac recentes tradunt volucres quasdam modulatrices esse, et posse cantuum concinnitate oblectare audientes."

[8] Anthologia graeca, trans. W. R. Paton (London: Heinemann, 1918-27), X, 151.

[9] The German translation of this poem is quoted by Georg Weicker, Der Seelenvogel in der alten Litteratur und Kunst (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1902), p. 78.

[10] Hieronymus, Comment. in Isaiam (PL24, 222B). The actual commentary to Isaiah deals with the dangers of heresy: "Quidquid enim haeretici loquuntur in synagogis Satanae, non est doctrina Domini, sed ululatus daemonum et pilosorum, quos imitabatur Esau. Et sirenae requiescent in delubris voluptatis, quae dulci et mortifero carmine animas pertrahunt in profundum . . . Prope est ergo et instat quotidie tempus ruinae haereticorum, et non differtur eorum subversio."

[11] In Hugh of St. Victor, De bestiis et aliis rebus, II, 47, "De sirenis serpentibus": "In Arabia autem sunt serpentes que Sirenae vocantur cum alis, quae plus currunt equis, sed etiam volare dicuntur, quorum virus tantum est, ut morsum ante mors insequatur quam dolor" (PL177, 101C).

[12] Quoted by Rahner in the 1957, revised edition of his Griechische Mythen, p. 162.

[13] Clement of Alexandria, Proteptikos, XII, 119, 1, quoted by Rahner, p. 21.

[14] This is Rahner's interpretation of Clement's Stromata, VII, 16, 95, 1/3: "und die Rettung durch das Moly wird nicht einmal erwähnt, denn sie ist allen bekannt: nur im Gegenbild der christlichen Erfüllung erblicken wir, was Clemens unausgesprochen dachte. Christus ist der wahre, der einzige Hermes . . ." (Rahner, pp. 263-64).

[15] Clement of Alexandria, Stromata, VI, 11, 89, 1. This is the translation from Rahner's German version on p. 426.

[16] Rahner (revised edition, 1957), p. 299.

[17] Clement of Alexandria, Proteptikos, XII, 12, 118, 1-4. Translated from Rahner's German version, p. 442.

[18] Clement of Alexandria, Stromata, IV, 26, 172, 2. He is referring to Euripides' fragment inc. 911: "χρύσεαι δή μοι πτέρυγες περὶ νώτῳ καὶ τὰ Σειρήνων πτερόεντα πέδιλ' / ἁρμόζεται· βάσομαι δ' εἰς αἰθέρα πουλὺν ἀερθεὶς Ζηνὶ συμμείξων . . ." See Kaiser, p. 116.

[19] S. Hippolyti, Refutationis Omnium Haeresium, 7, 13, ed. L. Duncker and F. G. Schneidewein (Göttingen: Dieterich, 1859), pp. 347-49.

[20] Paulinus of Nola, Epistola 16, 7. Quoted by Rahner, p. 463. See also a commentary by John Edwin Sandys in A History of Classical Scholarship (Cambridge: The Univ. Press, 1921), I, 226.

[21] St. Augustine, Confessions, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin Books, 1961), p. 35.

[22] St. Augustine, p. 34.

[23] St. Augustine, p. 37.

[24] Tertullian, De spectaculis, trans. Peter Holmes (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1870), I, 43.

[25] St. Augustine, p. 108.

[26] St. Augustine, pp. 33-34.

[27] The Odyssey of Homer, trans. Richmond Lattimore (New York: Harper & Row, 1965).

[28] Eusebius, Comment. in Isaiam 43:20 (PG24, 400D), quoted by Rahner, p. 453. Migne's Latin reads as follows: "Quod si etiam Sirenae fuerint, voluptate et diabolicis canticis hominum animas demulcentes, poeticis carminibus eleganti sermone concinnatus . . ."

[29] The Vulgate translation reads: "quoniam humiliasti nos in loco afflictionis."

[30] Ambrosius, De fide ad Gratianorum, III, 1, 4 (PL16, 614C) and Explanatio Psalmorum 43:75, quoted by Rahner, pp. 461-62: "Et Hieremias de Babylonia memoravit quod habitabunt in ea filiae Sirenum . . . ;

ut ostenderet Babyloniis hoc est, secularis confusionis illecebras, vetustae lasciviae fabulis comparandas· quae velut scopuloso in istius vitae littore, dulcem resonare quamdam, sed mortiferam cantilenam ad capiendos animos adolescentium viderentur . . ."

[31] Hieronymus, Epistola 54:13 (PL22, 556): "Cantor pellatur, ut noxius. Fidicinas et psaltris, et istiusmodi chorum diaboli, quasi mortifere sirenarum carmina proturba ex aedibus tuis."

[32] Leandrus, Regula, I (PL72, 881D), where he continues: "Fuge Sirenum cantus, et a lingua malesuadentis sepi aures tuas."

[33] Boethius, The Consolation of Philosophy, trans. "I.T.," rev. H. F. Steward (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press; London: Heinemann, 1968), I, 26-41, p. 133. Boethius concludes: "Rather get you gone, you Sirens pleasant even to destruction, and leave him to my Muses to be cured and healed."

[34] Horace, The Satires and Epistles, ed. J. B. Greenough (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1888), Epist. Lib. I, 23-26, p. 172: "Sirenum voces et Circae pocula nosti; / quae si cum sociis stultus cupidusque bibisset, / sub domina meretrice fuisset turpis et excors / vixisset canis immundus vel amica luto sus."

[35] Sidonius Apollinaris, Epistola, 9, 6 (PL58, 620C). Quoted by Rahner, p. 463.

[36] Isidor of Seville, Origines, L.XI, ch. III. Isidor has derived this almost entirely from Servius, ad Aen. 5.864: "meretrices fuerunt, quae transeuntes quoniam deducebant ad egestatem . . ."

[37] P. T. Eden, in his introduction to Theobaldi Physiologus, ed. P. T. Eden (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1972), p. 2.

[38] Euripides, Andromache, 936-54, in Four Tragedies, ed. David Green and Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1956).

[39] Porphyrius, Pythagorae vita, 39, appended to Diogenes Laertius, De clarorum philosophorum vitis, ed. Westermann (Paris: A. F. Didot, 1850).

40 L. Annaei Senecae, *Ad Lucilium Epistolae Morales*, ed. L. D. Reynolds (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965), Epist. 123.12, Vol. I, p. 531; in Epist. 31, 2, Seneca resorts to the same Odyssean image: "Ad summam sapiens eris, si cluseris aures, quibus ceram parum est obdere: firmiore spissamento opus est quam in sociis usum Ulixem ferunt. Illa vox quae timebatur erat blanda, non tamen publica: at haec quae timenda est non ex uno scopulo sed ex omni terrarum parte circumsonat. Praetervehere itaque non unum locum insidiosa voluptate suspectum, sed omnes urbes."

41 *The Metamorphosis or Golden Ass of Apuleius of Madaura*, trans. H. E. Butler (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), I, Bk. V, ch. 12, p. 144: "Neither see nor hear those wicked women--sisters I may not call them--for they have conceived unnatural hate for thee and have trodden underfoot the bonds of blood. Oh! take no heed when, like the Sirens, they stand forth upon the crag and make the cliffs echo with their fatal voices."

42 *Die Aethiopische Übersetzung des Physiologus*, ed. Fritz Hommel (Leipzig: Hinrich, 1877), p. 59. The description of the Sirens, however, indicates that the Ethiopian translator had probably never heard of the Odyssean Sirens: "Sie aber, die Sirenen, sind mörder und besitzen nichts, was so wie ihre stimme entzückt. Von ihrem nabel bis zu ihrem fuss gleichen sie vögeln, und von ihrem gesicht bis zu ihrem nabel dem pferde."

43 See Josef Strzygowski, *Der Bilderkreis des griechischen Physiologus* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1899).

44 Theobaldus Episcopus, *Physiologus*, ed. P. T. Eden (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1972).

45 For a thorough discussion of these sarcophagi see Theodor Klauser, "Studien zur Entstehungsgeschichte der Christlichen Kunst VI," *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum*, 6 (1963), pp. 71-100.

46 Reproduced in Ernst H. Zimmermann, *Vorkarolingische Miniaturen* (Berlin: Deutscher Verein für Kunstwissenshcaft, 1916), fig. 153.

47 This, too, is a *vexata quaestio*: see Edmond Faral, "La Queue de Poisson des Sirènes," *Romania* 74 (1953), pp. 433-506. V. H. Debidour, *Le Bestiaire*

Sculpté en France (Strasbourg: Arthaud, 1961) on p. 237 suggests that the mermaid resulted from a misunderstanding of the motif of the "fish swallowing a man"(!). Ph. Stern, on the other hand, in "Les Ivoires de Begram et l'art de l'Inde," in J. Hackin's Nouvelles Recherches archéologiques à Begram (Paris: Presses Universitaires, 1954), p. 31, thinks of a possible derivation from the Hellenistic representations of Tritons gripping their fishtails. A. Kingsley Porter in "Spain or Toulouse? And Other Questions," The Art Bulletin, 7, 1 (1924), pp. 3-25, would make us believe that "the fish type was a misunderstanding of Eastern sculptures representing the Earth"--as found in the Coptic sculptures of Ahnas--"The meaning of these Coptic sculptures is certain--the woman holds a garland of fruit . . . But a misunderstanding of some such work of art has transformed the Earth holding a garland of fruits (Figure 00) into a naked woman with two fishtails, which she holds in her hand. Hence the entrance upon the iconographic scene of the sirène poisson" (p. 21). Eleanor B. Sachs in "Some Notes on a Twelfth-Century Bishop's Mitre in the Metropolitan Museum of Art," The Bulletin of the Needle and Bobbin Club, 61, 1-2 (1978), pp. 3-52, provides us with what I consider to be the most convincing and well-documented argument for the descendence of the bifurcated mermaid from the representations of Scylla found on Etruscan cinerary urns.

[48] Anaxilas, fr. 22K, quoted by Kaiser, p. 122.

[49] Homer A. Thompson, "Excavations of Athenian Agora, 1947," Hesperia, XVII, 3 (1948), 160-61, fig. 5. Also discussed by O. Touchefeu-Meynier, Thèmes odysséens dans l'art antique (Paris: Boccard, 1968), p. 155, who considers it the earliest representation of the mermaid which will be adopted by the Middle Ages.

[50] Touchefeu-Meynier, p. 158, fig. 278.

[51] Jules Berger di Xivrey, Traditions Tératologiques (Paris: Imprimerie Royale, 1836), p. 25. Berger also refers to Bochart's exegesis of the Sirens, which is interesting because it relates of an Arab "Siren": "Bochart regarde la tradition qui donne aux Sirènes des extrémités de poisson, comme celle du vulgaire. "Superiora sunt virginum, inferiora τῶν στρουθῶν, passerum vel struthionum, non piscium ut vulgus putat." Hierozoïc., part. II, l. VI, c. viii. p. 830. Il retrouve en Orient le mythe des Sirènes dans la croyance

arabe rapportée par Alkazuin d'un animal qui habite certaines îles de la mer, qui a la forme d'un homme, est toujours à cheval sur une autruche, et se nourrit des corps humains que la mer pousse sur le rivage."

52 Sachs, p. 10.

53 Stern, p. 31.

54 George C. Druce, trans. The Bestiary of Guillaume le Clerc (Kent: Invidio Press, 1936), pp. 36-37. Quoted by Sachs, pp. 6-7.

55 Gervaise, Bestiaire, quoted by Faral, p. 487.

56 Sandys, I, 539.

57 E. Reuter, Les Représentations de la musique dans la sculpture romane en France (Paris: n.p., 1938), p. 64.

58 Ephesians 5, 19.

59 Hieronymus, Comment. in S. Pauli Epist. ad Ephes. (PL29, 822C): "Et nolite inebriari vino, in quo est luxuria: sed implemini Spiritu sancto, loquentes vobismetipsis in psalmis et hymnis, et canticis spiritualibus, cantantes et psallentes in cordibus vestris Domino, gratias agentes semper pro omnibus, in nomine Domini nostri Jesu Chirsti, Deo et Patri.

60 Clement of Alexandria, Pedagogue, II, 4. Quoted by E. Winternitz, "Secular Musical Practice in Sacred Art," The Secular Spirit (New York: n.p., 1975), p. 228.

61 St. Augustine, pp. 238-39.

62 An early literary example of this motif can be found in a letter of Cassiodorus (c. A.D. 510). In answering King Theodoric's request for helping in finding a citharoedus, he extols the power of music, warns against the dangers of secular "Siren-songs," and contrasts them to the sacred beauty of David's Psalms (Var. 2.40.10). See Kaiser, p. 115.

63 I.e., secular music and "heretical melodies" are one and the same thing.

[64] F. Piper, Mythologie und Symbolik der christlichen Kunst (Weimar: n.p., 1847-51), I, 390.

[65] M. Crosnier, "Iconographie Chrétienne," Bulletin Monumental, 14 (1848), p. 295.

[66] Tertullian, On Baptism, trans. Peter Holmes (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1870), I, 231.

[67] Matthew, 4:19.

[68] This folktale was recorded by the author from Johanna Marcher Gais (Bruneck, South Tryol) in April 1969.

[69] A. A. Barb, "Antaura, the Mermaid and the Devil's Grandmother," Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, 29 (1966), p. 29.

[70] A. A. Barb, "Diva Matrix," Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, 16 (1953), p. 205.

CHAPTER IV

DANTE'S SIRENS: DE CONTEMPTU MUNDI

The property of the early Church had been Holy Scripture, and any attempt to pirate or mutilate this property was hunted down as heresy. Tertullian waved the title-deeds of this property at his enemies when he accused them of trespassing the sacred precincts of the Scriptures: "Indeed Marcion, by what right do you hew my wood? By whose permission, Valentinus, are you diverting the streams of my fountain? By what power, Apeles, are you removing my landmarks? This is my property!"[1] Dante was confronted by a radically different Church from the one Tertullian was trying to establish in the hostile environment of Roman paganism, a Church which in his eyes and in those of many others had become too much of an Establishment, a keeper not only of Truth, but of a great share of worldly power and riches. As in the times of the early Fathers, the conflicts between the Church and the heretical sects of the twelfth century also centered around the problem of rightful ownership--but what was at stake now were worldly possessions, and the way the Church was neglecting its original inheritance for the sake of the latter:

che la vostra avarizia il mondo attrista,
calcando i buoni e sollevando i pravi.
Di voi pastor s'accorse il Vangelista,
quando colei che siede sopra l'acque
puttaneggiar coi regi a lui fu vista:
(Inf. XIX, 106-108)[2]

What did the itinerant preachers and tormented clerics who took to the road in the two centuries preceding Dante preach, if not that self-same poverty which the early Church Fathers had held up as the only way to salvation? At a time when monasteries and cathedrals had become depositories of worldly riches, "the mainstream of heresy was a striving for reform of the Church. The clergy of the cathedrals were unworthy, because they lived impurely and amid riches. Distributed by such sin-stained hands, how could the sacraments be of any value?"[3] The Establishment had tried to react: the Church's answer to the poverty-sects (the Humiliati, the Waldensians, the Beguines and Cathars) had been the Franciscans and the Dominicans. But, as we hear in Cantos XI and XII of Dante's Paradiso, these too had strayed from the path of poverty and had become polluted by the lure of worldly riches, "sì ch'è la muffa dov'era la gromma" (Par. XII, 114). This is the scenario that we must keep in mind as we look at Dante's femmina balba, the Siren of greed and avarice.

In Canto XVIII of Purgatory, having reasoned with

Virgil as to the nature of love until near midnight, Dante feels like dropping into a contented slumber; he is roused by the onrush of souls that once were slothful. After these have hurriedly answered Virgil's question, Dante, still pondering over what he has seen, closes his eyes and gives in to his drowsiness: "e 'l pensamento in sogno trasmutai" (Purg. XVIII, 145). It is in the realm of sloth that Dante falls asleep and has the dream in which the Siren appears to him. Departing from the commonplace of the bestiaries, which have sailors fall asleep after they hear the Sirens' song, he has sleep precede her apparition and her song, as if to indicate that while reason is dormant, one is more vulnerable to temptation:

> Ne l'ora che non può il calor diurno
> intepidar più il freddo de la luna,
> vinto da terra e talor da Saturno;
> quando i geomanti lor Maggior Fortuna
> veggion in oriente, innanzi a l'alba
> surger per via che poco le sta bruna;
> mi venne in sogno una femmina balba,
> ne gli occhi guercia, e sovra i piè distorta,
> con le mani monche e di colore scialba.
> Io la mirava; e come 'l sol conforta
> le fredde membra che la notte aggrava,
> così lo sguardo mio le facea scorta
> la lingua, e poscia tutta la drizzava
> in poco d'ora, e lo smarrito volto
> com'amor vuol così le colorava.
> Poi ch'ella avea 'l parlar così disciolto,
> cominciava a cantar sì che con pena
> da lei avrei mio intento rivolto.
> "Io son" cantava, "io son dolce sirena,
> che' marinari in mezzo mar dismago,
> tanto son di piacere a sentir piena!

> Io volsi Ulisse del suo cammin vago
>   al canto mio; e qual meco s'aùsa
>   rado sen parte, sì tutto l'appago!"
> Ancor non era sua bocca richiusa,
>   quand'una donna apparve santa e presta
>   lunghesso me, per far colei confusa.
> "O Virgilio, o Virgilio, chi è questa?
>   fieramente dicea; ed el venia
>   congli occhi fitti pur in quella onesta.
> L'altra prendea, e dinanzi l'apria
>   fendendo i drappi, e mostravami il ventre:
>   quel mi svegliò col puzzo che n'uscia.
>
> (XIX, 1-33)

The figure that appears to Dante in the prophetic hour preceding dawn is a stammering, cross-eyed, handless, club-footed, cadaverous _femmina_--a word which Dante uses at other times to refer to women of questionable morals (cf. Inf. XVIII, 66: _femmine da conio_). In describing this deformed hag, Dante may have had in mind one of these composite monsters with which the Middle Ages represented the Vices, each symbolized by a single, "monstrous" limb (Figure 38). But as he gazes upon her, her pallid face begins to color, her tongue is loosened, and she begins to sing so sweetly that he cannot turn his attention from her.

It would be tempting here to draw a parallel between the Homeric Sirens and Dante's _dolce sirena_, inasmuch as both can be said to be activated by the narcissistic desires of the two wanderers, i.e., Odysseus' desire to hear the Sirens sing of his deeds at Troy, and Dante's desire to have the creature he feels attracted to mirror

the love of his own loving gaze. But just as I do not believe that one can look at the Odyssean Sirens in terms of a conscious allegory--be it of excessive self-love, or of the temptations of forbidden knowledge--I also do not think that Dante's Siren has much to do with poetic narcissism as such. However, one can say that both the Odyssean and Dantesque Siren have no power unless they have an audience, i.e., an unwary listener or "dreamer" on whom to exercise their charm.

In Dante's dream, the self-proclaimed Siren boasts of having turned Odysseus away from his journey with her song. (Dante, it would seem, learned of the Homeric Siren episode through his reading of Cicero.)[4] It is possible that he is here confusing the Siren with Circe by attributing Odysseus' detainment on Circe's island to the Siren. But in fact the line "Io volsi Ulisse del suo cammin vago al canto mio" has puzzled numerous translators, and could simply mean that she turned Odysseus, intent on his journey, to her song--without implying that he changed his route or that she detained him. The evil spell to which Dante has fallen prey in his dream is broken by the appearance of a lady "holy and alert," who spurs Virgil into action: he rends the clothes of the Siren, shows Dante her belly, and the stench it emanates wakes him up.

This "foul smell" takes us back to the Inferno, and to one foul creature in particular, Geryon:

> Ecco la fiera con la coda aguzza,
> che passa i monti e rompe i muri e l'armi;
> ecco colei che tutto il mondo appuzza!
> (Inf. XVII, 1-3)

Dante had probably borrowed the figure of Geryon from Virgil who, in the Aeneid, had placed him in the "very jaws of Hades" along with "shapes terrible of aspect" (such as Grief, Disease, Old Age, Fear, Hunger, Poverty, Death, Pain, Joy of Sinning, and False Dreams), and other multicorporeal beings (Centaurs, Harpies, Gorgons, Chimaerae, and, significantly, "Scyllas half-human"). But, whereas for Virgil the "shadowy shape of the three-bodied Geryon" served mostly as an emblem of its liminality, its intermediary situation between two different realms (the human and the animal, earth and Hades), with no specific meaning other than that of "bodiless, airy life flitting behind an empty figment of a form,"[5] for Dante it becomes a "sozza imagine di froda" (Inf. XVII, 6). Still the "figment of a form," therefore, but a form that is no longer a mere cover for "airy life" but rather, a malodorous deceiver. Its description reminds one of the various figurations of heresy in the bestiaries:

> La faccia sua era faccia d'uom giusto,
> tanto benigna avea di fuor la pelle,
> e d'un serpente tutto l'altro fusto;
> (*Inf*. XVII, 10-13)

Both Geryon and the Siren share a deceitful appearance, not unlike Theobaldus' "hypocrites . . . appearing outwardly as gold, and as men . . . but inwardly . . . like beasts . . . ," or Dante's "traditore . . . che nella faccia dinanzi si mostra amico, si che fa di sé fede avere, e sotto pretesto d'amistade chiude lo difetto de la inimistade."[6]

But, unlike Geryon, Dante's Siren is not immediately associated with any particular form of deceit or fraud. Indeed, the pilgrim himself is fairly puzzled, and haunted, by this oneiric apparition, till Virgil reveals her true identity to him. She is, he says, "l'antica strega, che sola sopra noi omai si piagne," a rather cryptic definition which Benvenuto, in his commentary, explains as "idest inveteratam meretricem, quae ab initio mundi seduxit hominem . . ."[7] A familiar epithet, an old role: here again, the Siren would seem to be the representative of worldly pleasures, which distract man from the pursuit of Divine Love and Truth. And indeed, if the reference to what lies above ("sopra noi") indicates, as it would seem, the last three *gironi* of *Purgatorio*, Dante's "dolce Sirena" would more specifically

be associated with those worldly riches that lead men to the sins of avarice, gluttony, and lust, "li beni vaghi" whose pursuit is forever punished in Canto VII of the Inferno. The very description of the "femmina balba" indicates as much, as Benvenuto's classic interpretation bears out:

> BALBA: hoc respicit avaritiam quae non loquitur clare et aperte, sed implicite et dolose: gulam, quia ebrietas facit linguam grossam, ita ut non possit articulate loqui: luxuriam, quae facit hominem adulari, lingere et multa fingere falso; NEGLI OCCHI GUERCIA: hoc facit avaritia, quia avarus non videt recte, nimia cupiditate cecus tam habendi, quam retinendi; hoc facit gula, quae reddit oculos lippientes et visum destruit; luxuria multo fortius, quia offuscat oculos corporales et intellectuales, et quid deceat non videt ullus amans; E SOVRA I PIÈ DISTORTA: talis est avaritia quae numquam recte incedit, nec iudicat recta lance; gula peius, quia ebrius praestat risum videntibus ipsum ambulare tortuose; luxuria pessime vadit per viam rectam; CON LE MAN MONCHE: istud patet in avaro, qui nihil dat, nil recte facit nisi cum moritur; unde paulo infra audies quod avari stant manibus et pedibus ligati, gulosus nihil vult operari, luxuriosus minus, imo luxuria fovetur inertia et accidia; E DI COLORE SCIALBA: hoc verificatur in avaro, guloso et luxurioso qui habent bona tantum simulata. Omnes isti communiter habent faciem pallidam et sine colore.[8]

Thus, if Dante's Siren is still endowed with the attributes that made her an apt symbol for worldly temptations (be these verbal or carnal, heresy or fornication), she has also acquired new traits which have allowed her to extend her semantic resonance on to the realm of

economy--a level in which she embodies the lure of worldly riches in their most literal form, that of gold, or money. And, indeed, this is the aspect of the "dolce Sirena" that, despite its more subversive sex appeal, is emphasized by both Benvenuto's commentary and, more crucially, the text itself. For, if the Siren's initial speech impediment and its various other deformations can be easily interpreted as symptoms of all three disorders ("avarizia, gola e lussuria"), they are not to be found among the "lussuriosi" and the "golosi" punished in hell or cleansing in Purgatorio (*Inf*. V and VI, *Pur*. XXVI and XIV, respectively), but they are most prominent among the more avaricious dwellers of both places. The misers and prodigals condemned to an eternity of useless toil and insults are described as "guerci" ("Tutti quanti fur guerci / Sí della mente in la vita primaia, / Che con misura nullo spendio ferci") (*Inf*. VII, 40-42), while the ones who are expiating their sins in purgatory are forced to stare at the ground to which they are bound with both their hands and their feet--both groups clearly echoing the stammering female, "ne gli occhi guercia, e sovra i piè distorta, con le man monche," of Dante's dream. Nor is it unlikely that the stench that exudes from the Siren's belly once Virgil has uncovered it be more than tangentially related to the filth of the

misers' life ("la sconoscente vita che i fè sozzi," "immondi di cotesti mali") (Inf. VII, 51 and 53).

In his study of Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe, Lester K. Little has pointed at the ambivalent responses elicited by money "during the early generations of the profit seeking monetary economy" of the eleventh century.[9] Then, money was conceived as both extremely attractive and outright repulsive at once, as evidenced by the numerous *exempla* and folktales about the trickery of the devil who lured the unwary with shiny coins which, once touched, would turn to excrement, or by the pictorial theme of men and apes defecating coins in the margins of gothic manuscripts.[10] This ambivalent attitude towards monetary (as opposed to divine) economy can be easily retraced throughout Dante's *Inferno*, where the effects of the luring and corrupting powers of money are portrayed in various forms: in the misers and the prodigals (*sozzi* and *guerci de la mente*) bullied by Pluto, "il gran nemico," in the usurers with their moneybags tied around their necks, in the panderers and their "femmine da conio," in the simoniacs and their "mal tolta moneta," in the counterfeiters and maestro Adamo who coined "fiorini ch'avean tre carati di mondiglia." The Siren evoked by Dante's longing in his dream tells us that it

is not money as such, however vile, that is at the roots of evil, but the love of it, whether it manifests itself in prodigality or, worse yet, in avarice.

As L. K. Little has pointed out, "until the end of the tenth century, pride was unreservedly dominant as the most important vice . . . But in the eleventh century Peter Damian heralded a significant change when stating unequivocally: Avarice is the root of all evil."[11] There is no doubt that Dante shared this view. In the Convivio, he explains that worldly riches lead the human will to the vice of avarice--"conducono l'umana volontade in vizio d'avarizia."[12] In the same text, worldly riches are at once defined as "false traditrici," or "false meretrici, piene di tutti defetti." Here again, one can detect a prefiguration of the treacherous creature of Dante's dream. And indeed, the love of riches has the same deceiving power as Dante's loving gaze on the Siren: it endows vile matter with a beauty not its own that, in turn, fuels the desire for more:

> E che altro cotidianamente pericola e uccide
> le cittadi, le contrade, le singulari persone,
> tanto quanto lo nuovo raunamento
> d'avere appo alcuno? Lo quale raunamento nuovi
> desideri discuopre, a lo fine de li quali
> senza ingiuria d'alcuno venire non si puō.[13]

And he adds, in a passage that sheds some light on the meaning of the "lady holy and alert" who rouses Virgil

into action: "E che altro intende di meditare l'una e l'altra Ragione, Canonica dico e Civile, tanto quanto a riparare a la cupiditate che, raunando ricchezze, cresce?"[14]

On the other hand, if the Siren's association with avarice can be seen as a new semiotic development, one should not forget that the excessive love of riches that it denotes is a form of idolatry and as such close kin to heresy. Dante himself stresses this parallelism in his Pilgrim's invective against the Popes at the end of Canto XIX of the *Inferno*: "Fatto v'avete Dio d'oro e d'argento: e che altro è da voi a l'idolatre, se non ch'elli uno e voi ne avete cento?" (Inf. XIX, 112-114). And, indeed, both heresy and avarice have this in common that they both endorse, and indulge in, the *wrong* system of "currency," that is, a system whose aim is not the propagation of true value, the Word of God, but rather the diffusion, or adoration, of counterfeit.

The lures of worldly blandishments are so powerful that it takes only a few minutes for Dante's intent gaze to color the wan face of a stammering hag "as love wishes," and then he is at the mercy of a *mundus* disguised as a beautiful woman: in the *Divina Commedia*, it is not woman who is the cause of perdition, but the world. On the other hand, in the art of his time, the

world is portrayed as a woman whose beautiful front conceals a putrefying back, as one can see, for example, in sculptures in the Cathedral of Worms and in the Church of Sebaldus in Nürnberg. Dante's *antica strega* is a fusion of two ready-made *topoi*, that of the Siren and that of *Frau Welt*, a theme that by his time had become very popular in the books of *exempla*, wherein we are told:

> . . . de puella que apparuit militi cogitanti quomodo gloriosus possitesse in mundo, que *a parte anteriore erat mirabiliter pulcra*. Quam cum respiceret miles et delectaretur multum in eius pulcritudine, ait quella: "Si videres me a parte posteriori, numquam placeret tibi anterior mea pulcritudo." Et vertens se a parte posteriori, videns miles quod plena erat vermibus, corrupcione, putritudine et foetore, ait puella: "Talis est mundus" et disparuit.[15]

Walter von der Vogelweide conjures up this same image in a memorable poem in which the devil is pictured as the keeper of an inn in which *Fro Werlt* (Lady World) works as a waitress:

> Do ich dich gesach reht under ougen,
> do was din schouwen wünnen rich, des muoz ich
> jehen al sunder lougen:
> doch was der schanden alse vil,
> do ich din hinden wart gewar,
> daz ich dich iemer schelten wil.[16]

The theme of the world as a specious, deceiving beauty who, once unveiled, or seen from behind, reveals itself as a putrid, rotting body, was also well known in

religious literature and in ecclesiastical art. Ch. Grandgent has added to this repertoire the tale of Caesarius of Heisterbach (Dialogus Miracolorum, XII, ch. iv), in which a sweet-voiced cleric, who has bewitched his audience with his song, collapses, when exorcised, into a putrid corpse.[17]

Dante's Siren is also "exorcised" when Reason summons Virgil to the rescue and he tears her clothes and reveals the rottenness below. For, unlike the Sirens of the Odyssey, who left the bones of their victims in full view on the shore of their island--a clear token of the essential immanence of the Homeric world--Dante's Siren conceals the horror she harbors--in a manner that well bespeaks the world-denying religion that Dante had inherited, for which "mundane splendors" were more often than not a trickery of the devil to entice hapless souls into his trap. (On the other hand, it might be wrong to assume that Dante accepted this tradition in toto: indeed, the famous episode of Odysseus, who leaves Ithaca behind once more to "divenir del mondo esperto," already heralds, in spite of Odysseus' fate in the Inferno, the Renaissance view of the world as a grand, God-given book of splendors, which man must unfold in order to fulfill his destiny on earth.)

Much like the Odyssean Sirens, Dante's dream-Siren also promises total fulfillment: "e qual meco s'aùsa / rado sen parte, sì tutto l'appago." This is the lie of worldly riches, which promise satisfaction but in fact cause only more desires, and desire for more. To the counterfeit appagamento of the Siren, Dante will oppose a true fulfillment in Paradise, in an episode which was, I believe, intended as a precise counterpart to the dream in the realm of sloth. In fact, the rhyme scheme of this terzina is the same as that of the Siren's song in Purgatory, though in reverse order. In Canto III of the Paradiso, which begins with the beautiful description of Beatrice as "Quel sol che pria d'amor mi scaldò il petto," she encourages Dante to speak to those substances which he beholds with childlike wonder:

> "Però parla con esse, e odi, e credi;
>   ché la verace luce che le appaga
>   da sé non lascia lor torcer li piedi."
> Ed io a l'ombra che parea più vaga
>   di ragionar drizza'mi, e cominciai
>   quasi com'uom cui troppa voglia smaga:
> (Par. III, 31-36)

I would venture to say that, with these three rhymes, Dante is answering the Siren-rhymes of Purgatorio XIX, "dismago--vago--t'appago." Worldly riches cannot give satisfaction, but the "verace luce," i.e., the light of God, does appease the soul; furthermore the love of truth exerts a Siren-like grip on the blessed souls,

holding them captive so that they cannot turn their feet from it: the Siren in Dante's dream was "sovra i piè distorta," the blessed cannot "torcer li piedi" away from "la verace luce." One is reminded of Clement of Alexandria's daring comparison of the voice of God to the voice of the Sirens.

In Paradise, the soul is "vaga di ragionar"; Odysseus (and Dante) on their _cammin vago_ let themselves be distracted and detained by the lure of the Siren. In his dream Dante had straightened the crooked hag with his loving gaze; in Paradise, it is Dante who straightens up and turns to speak to Piccarda. His longing to learn about the fate of the Blessed is such that he is almost beside himself: "e cominciai quasi com'uom cui troppa voglia smaga." We are intended to contrast this striving after a divine relevation--and the temporary confusion brought about by Dante's eagerness to know--with the total loss of bearings that afflicts sailors upon hearing the song of the "dolce sirena" ("che i marinari in mezzo mar dismago"). The sweetness of the Siren's song has its divine counterpart in the sweetness of eternal life:

> "O ben creato spirito, che a' rai
> di vita eterna la dolcezza senti"
> (_Par_. III, 38-39)

Piccarda, who has become _more beautiful_ than she was

in life because of her heavenly bliss, tells Dante what he wants to know, for, as she says, "la nostra carità non serra porte a giusta voglia"--the just longing for divine enlightenment is the answer to unlawful _cupiditas_ for the world and its deceiving luster.

Thus the two "episodes," with their corresponding rhymes, pit the counterfeit beauty of the worldly Siren against the "verace luce" of God's truth; but the contrast can be narrowed down to a more specific opposition between two female figures, the temptress and the redeemer, the Siren and the Virgin Mary. The pivotal word which alerts us right away to the presence of a heavenly counterpart to the worldly Siren is the word _ventre_. The Siren's _ventre_ is like that of the Harpies, vile and defiling. But to all Christians who prayed in Latin or in Italian, another _ventre_ would have come to mind immediately, the "womb" of Luke 1:42: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb" (i.e., "il frutto del tuo ventre"). In _Paradiso_ XXIII, Dante, hearing the song of the angel Gabriel, compares it to earthly music:

> Qualunque melodia più dolce sona
>   qua giù e più a sè l'anima tira,
>   parrebbe nube che squarciata tuona,
> comparata al sonar di quella lira
>   onde si coronava il bel zaffiro
>   del quale il ciel più chiaro s'inzaffira.
> "Io sono amore angelico, che giro

> l'alta letizia che spira del ventre
> che fu albergo del nostro disiro;"
> (Par. XXIII, 97-105)[18]

In the apotheosis of Mary, the song of the angel Gabriel is declared infinitely sweeter than any earthly melody. The deceiving song of the Siren has its heavenly counterpart in the song of Gabriel and of the choirs of the blessed; while her foul ventre is countered by the ventre from which lofty gladness ("alta letizia") breathes--the blessed womb of Mary.

Scholars have repeatedly tried to identify the "other woman" to whom Dante had presumably devoted his attentions after Beatrice's death. Referring back to the "gentilissima donna" of Vita Nuova, they have in turn suggested Lady Philosophy, the Muse of Poetry, etc. This search after a precise referent might strike one as somewhat ironic given that, in the text itself, Beatrice seems to want to keep this paradigm of otherness fairly open. As she proceeds in her reproaches, she further identifies the initial "altrui" with "imagini di ben . . . false che nulla promission rendono intera" (Purg. XXX, 131-132), that is, "false images of riches that never fully keep their promises." In the following Canto (XXXI), moved by his contrition, Beatrice decides to instruct Dante against a possible relapse, and refers

back to the said images, this time in aural terms, as she relates them to the song of the Sirens:

> Tuttavia, perché me' vergogna porte
> del tuo errore, e perché altra volta
> udendo le sirene sie più forte,
> pon giù il seme del piangere, ed ascolta:
> (*Purg*. XXXI, 43-46)

Beatrice then gradually unveils the "false images" in a way that is fairly reminiscent of the one we have witnessed in Canto XIX. And indeed, the way in which she refers to the seduction of the Sirens seems to parallel Dante's earlier dream, where, after coloring the wan features of the "femmina balba" with the hues of love, he starts giving in to her physical attractions (Beatrice chides Dante for having given too much importance to her "belle membra" and too little to the greater beauty of her soul when this was finally released from her "carne sepolta.") Whereas the Siren in Dante's dream is a singular embodiment of the world-as-temptation, the Sirens of Canto XXXI remain fairly abstract in their plurality, as if to underline, at this point in Dante's journey, the superfluity of any specification. Even a few lines later, when Beatrice turns Dante's error into one of recidivism, she does not resort to greater precision:

> Ben ti dovevi, per lo primo strale
> de le cose fallaci, levar suso
> di retro a me, che non era più tale.

non ti dovea gravar le penne in giuso,
Ad aspettar più colpi, o pargoletta
o altra vanità con sì breve uso.
(Purg. XXXI, 55-60)

She speaks of "erroneous things," of "a little girl or any other vanity." But even the "little girl" ("pargoletta"), probably the most concrete definition of these false pleasures, loses her contours the moment in which she is identified with other more or less generic vanities.

So, there is really no reason to suspect that the Sirens Beatrice refers to in this Canto are any different from their oneiric predecessor, nor that they mean anything more precise than, as Dante himself puts it, "le presenti cose / col falso lor piacere," that is, "worldly matters with the pleasures they falsely promise." What is particularly interesting in this protracted exchange between Dante and Beatrice, at the close of Purgatorio, is Beatrice's moral attitude towards the Sirens and their songs. Unlike most Church Fathers, and later Christian preachers, Beatrice does not seem to believe in the sanctity of ignorance, the wax in the ears. Quite the contrary, she seems to think that not only "errare humanum est," but that it is also the only way towards experience and, through this, towards God. What she reproaches Dante for is not for having listened to

the Sirens but for having listened to them again and again, that is, for his inability to learn from the pain of the "first arrow" ("lo primo strale") and his hapless waiting for more ("più colpi"). On the other hand, she also seems to imply, albeit with some impatience, that it is never too late to repent.

So, with Dante's Sirens we have already come a long way from the medieval bestiaries and the sculpted sermons of Romanesque churches. For Dante, the Siren is no longer a symbol of heresy or of lust but, rather, the dissembling embodiment of an inordinate and unredeemed craving after merely mundane splendors and "worldly" enlightenment. Against this spurious luster, Dante pits "l'alta luce che da sé è vera" (Paradiso, XXXIII, 54) and the "luce intellettual piena d'amore" (Paradiso, XXX, 40) of Paradise.

NOTES

Chapter IV

[1] Tertullian, De Praescriptione Haereticorum, trans. Peter Holmes (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1870), p. 37.

[2] Dante Alighieri, La Divina Commedia, ed. Siro A. Chimenez (Torino: U.T.E.T., 1963). All quotations from the Divine Comedy are taken from this edition. In this passage Dante is railing against the simoniacal Popes and referring to the Apocalypse of St. John.

[3] Georges Duby, The Age of Cathedrals: Art and Society, 980-1420, trans. Eleanor Levieux and Barbara Thompson (Chicago. The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 131.

[4] See M. Tullii Ciceronis, De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum, ed. Nicolaus Madvigus (Hauniae: F. Hegel, 1869), Lib. V, cap. 18, pp. 694-695. "49. Mihi quidem Homerus huiusmodi quiddam vidisse videtur in iis, quae de Sirenum cantibus finxerit. Neque enim vocum svavitate videntur aut novitate quadam et varietate cantandi revocare eos solitae, qui praetervehebantur, sed quia multa se scire profitebantur, ut homines ad earum saxa discendi cupiditate adhaerescerent. Ita enim invitant Ulixem (nam verti, ut quaedam Homeri, sic istum ipsum locum):

> O decus Argolicum, quin puppim flectis, Ulixes,
> Auribus ut nostros possis agnoscere cantus?
> Nam nemo haec umquam est transvectus caerula cursu,
> Quin prius astiterit vocum dulcedine captus,
> Post, variis avido satiatus pectore musis,
> Doctior ad patrias lapsus pervenerit oras.
> Nos grave certamen belli clademque tenemus,
> Graecia quam Troiae divino numine vexit,
> Omniaque e latis rerum vestigia terris.

It is to this passage (and its beautiful translation of the Sirens' song) that most commentators refer to when they speak of the Homeric Sirens in terms of the temptations of knowledge, akin to the Biblical temptation of the Tree of Knowledge.

[5] Virgil, The Aeneid, trans. W. F. Jackson Knight (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1958), VI, 255-287, p. 155.

[6] Dante Alighieri, Il Convivio, ed. Maria Simonelli (Bologna: Riccardo Pàtron, 1966), IV, ch. XII, 3, p. 163: "E per questo modo le ricchezze pericolosamente nel loro accrescimento sono imperfette, ché, sommettendo ciò che promettono, apportano lo contrario. Promettono le false traditrici sempre, in certo numero adunate, rendere lo raunatore pieno d'ogni appagamento; e con questa promissione conducono l'umana volontade in vizio d'avarizia."

[7] Benvenuti de Rambaldis de Imola, Comentum super Dante Aldigherij Comoediam, as quoted by Natalino Sapegno, ed., La Divina Commedia (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1956), p. 213.

[8] Benvenuto, as quoted by G. A. Scartazzini, ed., La Divina Commedia, 4th ed. (Milano: Ulrico Hoepli, 1903), p. 534.

[9] Lester K. Little, Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1978), p. 34.

[10] Little, p. 34.

[11] Little, p. 36.

[12] Dante, Convivio, IV, ch. XII, 4, p. 164.

[13] Ibid., p. 165.

[14] Ibid.

[15] La Tabula exemplorum secundum ordinem alphabeti, ed. J. Th. Welter (Paris: E. H. Guitard, 1926).

[16] Walther von der Vogelweide, Auswahl aus den Gedichten (Leipzig: Teubner, 1880), p. 33. Further examples of poetry and prose on the theme of Lady World can be found in Konrad von Würzburg, Heinrich von Kempten, Der Welt Lohn, Das Herzmaere, ed. Edward Schröder, trans. Heinz Rölleke (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 1968), pp. 103-111.

[17] C. H. Grandgent, ed., La Divina Commedia, rev. by Charles S. Singleton (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1972), p. 474. Here we have a fusion of the tale of "The Monk and the Bird" (AT 471A: years

seem moments while man listens to song of bird) with the motif of Lady World.

[18] See also the beginning of <u>Paradiso</u> XXXIII, 7-9: "Nel ventre tuo si raccese l'amore / per lo cui caldo ne l'eterna pace / così è germinato questo fiore."

CHAPTER V

THE SIREN AS MUSE: RENAISSANCE PLATONIST TRADITIONS

As we have seen in our chapter on post-Homeric Sirens, Plato's myth of Er (Republic, Book X) presents a vision of the Sirens which was to have a profound impact on the neo-Platonic elaboration of their significance during the Renaissance. Plato's Sirens, one might remember, are situated in the empyrean, on the seven circles which orbit through the heavens within the immense whorl or spindle turned by Necessity or Fate:

> And the spindle turned on the knees of Necessity, and up above on each of the rims of the cirlces a Siren stood, borne around in its revolution and uttering one sound, one note, and from all the eight there was the concord of a single harmony. And there were three others who sat round about at equal intervals, each one on her throne, the Fates, daughters of Necessity, clad in white vestments with filleted heads, Lachesis, and Clotho, and Atropos, who sang in unison with the music of the Sirens, Lachesis singing the things that were, Clotho the things that are, and Atropos the things that are to be.[1]

Some scholars have ascribed this association of the Sirens and the music of the spheres to Pythagorean tradition.[2] Plutarch, in an influential commentary, tried to square the transcendental harmony of Plato's Sirens with their more destructive Homeric counterparts:

> Now Homer's Sirens, it is true, frighten us, inconsistently with the Platonic myth; but the

> poet too conveyed a truth symbolically, namely that the power of their music is not inhuman or destructive; as souls depart from this world to the next, so it seems, and drift uncertainly after death, it creates in them a passionate love for the heavenly and divine, and forgetfulness of mortality; it possesses them and enchants them with its spell, so that in joyfulness they follow the Sirens and join them in their circuits. Here on earth a kind of faint echo of that music reaches us, and appealing to our souls through the medium of words, reminds them of what they experienced in an earlier existence. The ears of most souls, however, are plastered over and blocked up, not with wax, but with carnal obstructions and affections. But any soul that through innate gifts is aware of this echo, and remembers that other world, suffers what falls in no way short of the very maddest passions of love, longing and yearning to break the tie with the body, but unable to do so.[3]

In Plutarch's commentary, then, the Sirens come to resemble something akin to a pure Platonic Idea of Form: their Ur-music, a melody of Eternity, is only heard as a dim echo here on earth, merely as a distant memory of earlier perfection. And, perhaps most significantly, the lure of the Siren's song is here construed not as the lure of the flesh, but rather as the lure of the spiritual perfection beyond life. In a paradox that seems to prefigure Petrarchan conceits, the Sirens are said by Plutarch to inspire a passionate desire to move beyond worldly passion, for they frenzy the body with

the longing to transcend the body, to soar beyond the fallen flesh, and to recover the primal purity of the spirit, aspiring (as Pater would later put it) to the condition of music.

Though there seems to be little in the text of Plato's Republic to warrant this interpretation, Plutarch goes on to associate the Sirens with the Muses, and justifies this reading with what he believes to have been a Platonic etymological pun on τὰ θεῖα and σεῖα εἴρειν:[4]

> My view is that just as Plato speaks of "shafts" and "spindles" instead of "axes" and of "whorls" for "stars," so here, too, contrary to usage, he gives the name of "sirens" to the Muses, because they "seyen" (eirousias), that is, "speak," the divine truths in the realm of Death.[5]

The neo-Platonist Proclus, more cautious than Plutarch, accepts the identification of the Sirens with the Muses, but insists that more careful distinction must be drawn. As we have seen, he accordingly divides the Sirens into three categories: those that occupy the heavenly sphere of Zeus (Plato's Sirens), those that inhabit the worldly realm of Poseidon (Homer's Sirens), and finally, those that linger in the Underworld of Hades, the chthonic Plutonic Sirens.[6] Proclus's tripartite division, however, tends to reduce itself to a more fundamental dichotomy

between two antithetical harmonies, that is, between the material or cosmic harmony of the Sirens on the one hand, and the more elevated or "noetic" harmony of the Muses on the other.[7] This notion will be picked up in the many subsequent treatments of the competition between the Muses and the Sirens. Pausanias, for example, tells of a cult image in a Boetian temple to Hera which shows the latter holding the Sirens in her hands. The Sirens had been encouraged to engage in a singing contest with the Muses and the Muses had emerged as victors, plucking the Sirens' feathers out and wearing them as the crowns of their own triumph.[8] The battle between the Sirens and Muses will continue throughout the Renaissance.

We have briefly sketched these Platonic and neo-Platonic traditions of the Sirens merely to provide a background for the (re)emergence of the Siren as Muse in the Renaissance, most notably in the work of Petrarch. For unlike the infernal Sirens of Dante, unlike the heretical mermaids of Christian iconography and homiletics, unlike the harlots of Boccaccio, the Siren in Petrarch reacquires some of the grandeur that had been attributed to her by Plato. Petrarch's repurification of the Sirens, his restoration of the Siren as Muse, is an aspect of that far larger endeavor which his pupil Boccaccio so eloquently described:

> For Petrarca cleansed the fount of Helicon, swampy with mud and rushes, restoring its waters to their former purity and reopened the Castalian cave which was overgrown with the entwining of wild vines. Clearing the laurel grove of briars, he restored Apollo to his ancient temple and brought back the Muses, soiled by rusticity, to their pristine beauty.[9]

Though this is obviously not the place to rehearse the full extent of Petrarch's classical and neo-Platonic inheritance, nor his place within a tradition of Courtly Love which reaches back to the troubadours, Dante and the dolcestilnovisti, the traditions converge to create--for the first time, it would seem--a new, and subsequentially very influential, avatar of the Siren in the poetry of Petrarch.[10]

The particular poem in which these traditions most saliently converge into the Siren as celestial muse is the sonnet entitled "Quando Amor i belli occhi a terra inchina." Clearly echoing Plato's myth of Er and its neo-Platonic interpretations, the poet tells how his soul wants to die of pleasure when Amor (or Laura) casts her eyes downward, and when she gathers all of her emotions into the sigh that then melts into the sound of her voice, "chiara soave angelica divina":

> Quand Amor i belli occhi a terra inchina
> e i vaghi spirti in un sospiro accoglie
> co le sue mani, e poi in voce gli scioglie
> chiara soave angelica divina,

sento far del mio cor dolce rapina
e sì dentro cangiar penseri e voglie
ch' i' dico: "Or fien di me l'ultime spoglie,
se 'l ciel sì onesta morte mi destina."

Ma 'l suon che di dolcezza i sensi lega,
col gran desir d'udendo esser beata,
l'anima, al dipartir presta, raffrena.

Così me vivo, e così avolge e spiega
lo stame de la vita che m'è data,
questa sola fra noi del ciel sirena.[11]

Like the traditional Siren of antiquity, Laura's voice has the power to transform its victim into a willing prey ("sento far del mio cor dolce rapina"). But though the sweet spell of her song is associated with the themes of binding, tying and weaving which are already present in the Homeric Siren ("Ma 'l suon che di dolcezza i sensi lega"), the final tercet of the sonnet seems evidently to allude to the spindles wound and unwound by Fate in Plato's myth of Er: "e così avolge e spiega / lo stame de la vita che m'è data, / questa sola fra noi del ciel sirena."

Laura-Amor is, in other words, simultaneously cast as Siren and as Fate in this sonnet. But curiously enough, Petrarch has reversed the neo-Platonic myth of the Siren, for rather than luring the soul heavenward, here she restrains its celestial _élan_ ("la raffrena") and draws it back to earth ("fra noi"). Though the poet is so moved by the sound of her voice that he is willing to

die right there and then, Laura the Siren is paradoxically not an agent of death, nor even of the transcendence of the flesh ("l'anima, al dipartir presta"), but rather embodies that divine power (or Fate) which holds him captive in earthly existence. It is well known to what extent Petrarch was torn between a heavenly Laura and her earthly incarnation; here, it is as if he momentarily entertains the illusion that the two could completely coincide, that heaven might exist on earth, that the Siren might be the divine song momentarily made flesh. But Petrarch is equally aware that the things of this world are transient and can only detain him from those heavenly concerns which he should be pursuing. It is therefore no wonder that another face of the Siren should subsequently emerge in his work, for after the death of the only heavenly Siren, Laura, the world for him only seems to harbor tempting and deceitful enchantresses whose seductions he will steadfastfully abjure (indeed, in his famous letter to posterity, he states that when he approached his forties he renounced all carnal contact with women).

The Sirens we find in this stage of Petrarch's work therefore are no longer the Muses of neo-Platonic tradition, but rather the more familiar temptresses associated with the _Odyssey_. In one of the _Rime Disperse_ written after

1350, for example, Petrarch tells how after Laura's death he never felt love again ("ne mai luce senti che fesse adore")--except in memory. And though Love had tried to ensnare him in its nets through the lure of other beautiful eyes, he could never again be captured since "nova rete vecchio augel non prende." But the most explicitly Odyssean reference occurs in the following passage of the Rime Disperse:

> E pur fui 'n dubbio fra Caribdi e Scilla
> e passai le Sirene in sordo legno
> over com uom ch'ascolta e nulla intende.[12]

These last lines almost seem to echo the famous poem (Rime, CLXXXIX) in which he despairs about ever reaching port, for at the helm of his ship sits Love, diverting him from his course, "colma d'oblio per aspro mare, a mezza notte il verno, entro Scilla e Caribdi." While Laura was still alive, he had asked forgiveness for not being able to turn his eyes away from the overwhelming light of Love, for not being strong enough to close his ears to the sound of the Sirens--"e di Sirene al suono chiuder gli orecchi."[13] But he ends the poem by confessing that he will nevertheless not flee from Love.

An interesting indication of Petrarch's attitude to the lure of the Sirens is contained in a letter he wrote to his Carthusian brother in 1348, that is, at the time of the plague in which Laura and many of his friends also

died. Petrarch calls his brother fortunate for having shut himself off from the world at an age when he would have been most vulnerable to the Sirens: "felix animi fortunatusque propositi, qui mundum tum maxime blandientem medio etatis flore sic spernere potuisti interque Sirenum voces obstructa tutus aure transire."[14] As this letter and the other examples quoted above show, Petrarch eventually chose a Christianized version of the Sirens as allegories of the blandishments of the world over the neo-Platonic interpretation of the Sirens as Muses. In the _Trionfo della Morte_, Laura is apotheosized as a Beatrice who descends from heaven to console the poet with the assurance that death is but a merciful release from the dark prison of life, for the poet had previously asked whether death, which comes "al fin di quest'altra serena / ch'a nome vita," is indeed painful. Oddly enough, Leopardi in the nineteenth century will interpret this "altra serena" as "life, the fourth Siren, to be added to the three of the fable"[15]--even though Petrarch is clearly echoing Dante's "vita serena" (_Inferno_ VI, 51), meaning "life on earth." Yet by a fortunate phonetic confusion that many Italian poets were to consciously or unconsciously exploit ("sirena"/"serena"), Leopardi may have intuited a deeper significance in Petrarch's phrase, for, as we have seen, after the death of Laura

"la vita serena" indeed became a place of Sirens for him, a region which he sailed through "in sordo legno" (according to his lovely synecdoche), as he retreated ever more into solitude, there to pursue his grandiose dream of reconciling his love for the Classics with his Christian faith.

Many poets of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, both in Italy and abroad, tried to imitate Petrarch's use of the Platonic Sirens, but few were able to bring the same level of complexity to the theme as he did. Pietro Bembo (1470-1547) composed a rather bloodless poem, comparing his angioletta to the ancient Sirens. It is worth quoting because it demonstrates how quickly the topos had turned into a facile concetto:

> La mia leggiardra e candida angioletta,
> cantando a par de le Sirene antiche,
> con altre d'onestade e pregio amiche
> sedersi a l'ombra in grembo de l'erbetta
> vid'io pien di spavento:
> perch'esser me parea pur su nel cielo,
> tal di dolcezza velo
> avolto avea quel punto agli occhi miei.
> E già dicev'io meco: o stelle, o dei,
> o soave concento!
> Quand'i m'accorsi ch'ell'eran donzelle,
> liete, secure e belle.
> Amore, io non mi pento
> d'esser ferito de la tua saetta,
> s'un tuo si picciol ben tanto diletta.[16]

Bembo fared a little better in a Petrarchan invocation to the Virgin Mary, beseeching her to save his soul, "la qual se dal camin dritto impedita / le Sirene gran tempo e schernit'hanno, / non tardar tu, ch'omai de la mia

vita / si volge il terzo e cinquantesim'anno."[17] The Sirens who detained and mocked Bembo may be both worldly ambitions--of which he had many--and the ladies he admired, equally numerous. The direct prototype for the invocation of the Virgin Mary against the Sirens is to be found in Dante, though it seems more likely that Bembo here conflated Petrarch's invocation of the Virgin and his reference to the detaining Sirens in another poem.

Pietro Aretino (1492-1556) spent most of his life in the dissolute company of those Sirens whom Boccaccio had railed against in his Genealogia. It is thus somewhat ironic that his only "Platonic" love should have been directed toward a lady named Angela Serena, wife of a certain Antonio Serena.[18] Aretino, who, above and beyond his vituperative or pornographic verse, was occasionally capable of finely crafted poems, composed some sixty Stanze in praise of "la Sirena," all of them based on the concetto of the heavenly Siren. Aretino was very eager for these Stanze to receive proper recognition, and before they were published, contrived to get sonnets in praise of them from Molza, Gambara, Camillo, and Bembo himself.[19] The Stanze, as mentioned, revolve around the image of the angelic Siren: the poet invites the entire animal kingdom to "quiet down" and listen to the praises of "la fatal Sirena"--and the same invitation is addressed

to the "squamosi Dei," the gods of the Adriatic sea (#4). He compares her to the "gloriose, soprane, amiche stelle" (#6), echoes Petrarch when he speaks "del viso suo, terreno ciel a noi" (#12), and seems to be aware of Platonic myth when he writes that in her face "vede ciascun pianeta i pregi suoi" (#12). Indeed, stanza 15 is devoted exclusively to the stellar harmony of the music of the spheres, ruled over by the beauty of the Siren:

> Stelle, vostra mercé, l'eccelse sfere,
> dette del ciel Sirene, hanno concesso
> a lei non solo in belle note altere,
> come titol gradito, il nome istesso,
> ma le loro perfette armonie e vere
> con suprema dolcezza ha il suo impresso
> ne le sue chiare e nette voci; ond'ella
> quasi in lingua de gli Angioli favella.[20]

Perhaps the most celebrated by-product of Aretino's stellar Siren was a woodcut (attributed to Titian) showing a shaggy shepherd staring longingly at a twin-tailed mermaid seated on a cloud and surrounded by seven stars. (See Figure 46.) The woodcut illustrates Aretino's stanza 5, where he describes himself as:

> il toscano pastor che il vero tene
> sculto nel fronte, sopra un tronco assiso
> gli occhi al ciel volti, a la sua Dea il pensiero
> così a dir move in suon piano, ed altero

Aretino's lines recapture the Platonic (and subsequently Christianized) theme of the gross, fallen body longing for that transcendental love or perfection (represented

by the sidereal Siren) which will redeem it from the flesh--a rustic moth, as it were, yearning for a star.

If Aretino's Petrarchan imitations can get rather tiresome ("Stelle, dette del ciel Sirene," etc.), he occasionally does manage moments of real poetic power, as when he speaks of the treasures which the sea will bring in tribute to his Siren:

> il mar, che nel gran letto ogni onda acqueta
> tanto assotigli sua grossezza occulta,
> che i tesori da lui rubati al mondo
> discopre a lei nel periglioso fondo.
> (stanza 43)

And in stanza 58, he captures something of the elemental powers of nature when he describes the impact his praise of the Siren will have on the creatures of the deep, the inhabitants of the air, and the wild beasts. Like Orpheus, he will tame all of nature with his Siren songs:

> Parve che mostruosi pesci erranti
> i profondi silenzi avesser desti:
> tal non so che per l'acque tremolanti
> mosser rotando i lor cenni, i lor gesti,
> nuovi gli augelli formar voli et canti
> allor, che tu, fido pastor, tacesti;
> e le fere volubili inquiete
> ne fecer segno immote et mansuete.
> (stanza 58)

Aretino's Siren is a Siren _sui generis_, and came into existence through a fortuitous (and fortunate) coincidence--certainly these _Stanze_ would never had been written had Angela Serena married a man with a different name.

Though Aretino may have known something about the Platonic Sirens, his knowledge of the Odyssean Siren episode would seem to be rather spotty, as one can deduce from a satirical "Sonetto" directed against "il marchese del Vasto," an effeminate nobleman who was apparently trying to gain the support of the Venetian senators for an expedition against the Turks, and who seemed to be especially given to the excessive use of perfumes. As a result, the senators were forced to "seal" their noses as Odysseus "had sealed his ears" against the Sirens:

> Alfin poi s'è rimaso
> in conclusion, come 'l marchese viene,
> ch'ognun si turi il naso molto bene:
> come delle sirene
> al canto si stoppò gli orecchi Ulisse,
> acciò che suo malgrado non dormisse.

As even the most cursory reader of the Odyssey could have told Aretino, Odysseus of course did not stop his ears against the Sirens, nor in Homer is their song described as sleep-inducing--this is a tradition that gains currency with the bestiaries. But while Aretino's satirical use of the Sirens points back to some of their medieval associations, it also announces the more playful (and frequently, more trivialized) deployment of the Siren as a decorative motif in much of subsequent Renaissance and Baroque verse.

NOTES

Chapter V

[1] Plato, Republic, X, 617b-c, in Plato, The Collected Dialogues, including the Letters, ed. Edith Hamilton, Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978), p. 841.

[2] Erich Kaiser, "Odyssee-Szenen als Topoi," Museum Helveticum, 21 (1964), p. 114.

[3] Plutarch's Moralia, trans. F. H. Sandback (London, Cambridge, Mass.: Loeb, 1961) IX, 14, 745-746, pp. 279-281.

[4] Kaiser, p. 115.

[5] Kaiser, p. 115.

[6] Kaiser, p. 115.

[7] Kaiser, p. 118.

[8] Pausanias, Description of Greece, trans. J. G. Frazer (London: MacMillan, 1913), Bk. IX, ch. 34, p. 86.

[9] From "Lettere edite ed inedite di Giovanni Boccaccio," ed. Corazini (Florence, 1877), trans. Mary Martin McLaughlin in The Portable Renaissance Reader, ed. J. B. Ross and M. M. McLaughlin (New York: Viking Press, 1958), pp. 124-125.

[10] See S. H. Whitfield, Petrarch and the Renaissance (New York: Russell & Russell, 1965).

[11] Petrarca, Canzoniere, ed. Piero Autini (Milano: Garzanti, 1974), Sonnett CLXVII, p. 232.

[12] Petrarca, Rime trionfi e poesie latine, ed. F. Neri (Milano: Ricciardi, 1951), p. 596.

[13] Petrarca, Il Canzoniere, ed. G. A. Scartazzini (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1883), XV, 33, 7.

[14] Petrarca, Prose (Milano: Ricciardi, 1955), Fam. 16, X, 3.

[15] G. Scartazzini, ed., p. 348.

[16] Pietro Bembo, Le Rime XVI, in _Prose e Rime_, ed. Carlo Dionisotto (Torino, 1960), p. 519.

[17] Bembo, Rime, XCVII.

[18] Thomas Chubb, _Aretino, Scourge of Princes_ (New York: Reynel & Hitchcock, 1940), p. 265.

[19] Gianmaria Mazzuchelli, _Vita di Pietro Aretino_ (Milano: Sonzogno, 1830), p. 235.

[20] Mazzuchelli, p. 15.

[21] Estratto dal codice 269 magliabechiano, in Mazzuchelli, p. 178.

CHAPTER VI

BOCCACCIO'S SIREN AND HER LEGACY

Toward the middle of the fourteenth century, Hughes IV, king of Cyprus and of Jerusalem, commissioned Giovanni Boccaccio to write "a genealogy of the pagan gods and of the heroes born from these according to the fables of the ancients, and, at the same time, an account of what the learned men of old had thought was hidden under the veil of these fables."[1] In other words, Boccaccio was commissioned not only to write a "mythology of the pagans" but also to furnish a compendium of the scholarship that had been devoted to pagan myths up to his time.

The first draft of the _Genealogy_ was written between 1350 and 1355, but Boccaccio spent the last twenty-five years of his life revising and expanding what was destined to become the "chief link between the mythology of the Renaissance and that of the Middle Ages."[2] Like all his scholarly works, the _Genealogy_ was written in Latin prose; it is divided into a general proem and fifteen books. Within the introductory chapter and the first thirteen books, Boccaccio presents and classifies all the mythological lore in any way accessible to him. His arrangement is strictly genealogical. The introductory chapter establishes Demogorgon as the original pagan god.

Book I treats Demogorgon and all his progeny, except for his grandson Aether and his descendants, the account of whom fills the remaining twelve books.[3] Book XIV contains the famous defense of poetry, and the last book is a defense of the *Genealogy* itself, with some further segments in favor of poetry and bits of autobiographical information.

How does Boccaccio's mythological encyclopedia differ from the encyclopedic *trêsors*, *miroirs*, *speculi*, etc. of the Middle Ages? In its attempt to reduce the whole of classical mythology to a system, the *Genealogy* may be said to be following medieval tradition; the same may be said of its allegorical interpretations of myths, which follow quite closely those set forth by Isidor and the other compilers of scholastic knowledge. What is new and points towards the humanist evaluation of learning as the means of elevating man is Boccaccio's unabashed admiration for the erudition of the scholars of the past and his obvious attempts at emulating and, if possible, outdoing his predecessors.

Tertullian and other early Fathers had been essentially hostile to any kind of "knowledge" that was not directly derived from the Scriptures ("those fables and endless genealogies," those "words which spread like a cancer";[4] when they realized that the Church would not be able to

protect its flock from "pagan fables" altogether, the Fathers resorted to allegory, by which everything could be reinterpreted in a Christian key. But even then the main purpose remained that of defusing potentially dangerous knowledge by subordinating it to the function of "illustrating" Christian truth. The danger of falling prey to an unlawful "cupiditas sciendi," however, remained present, as evidenced by the case of Dante who, for all the admiration he may have harbored towards Ulysses, nonetheless has him sail straight to hell on his search for "virtue and knowledge"; nor does "scholarship" save Brunetto Latini and all the other clerks and scholars of great fame from eternal damnation because of their sin of sodomy.

It is only later that scholarship begins to be perceived as a means of salvation: for Boccaccio--who towards the end of his life became very concerned with saving his soul--the "seriousness" of scholarship is an "antidote" to the "frivolity" of his vernacular writings; however, this does not entail a renunciation of poetry, such as we find it in Boethius' refusal of the "scenicas meretriculas"--on the contrary, scholarship is put to the service of "mythology" because it is the poetry of the ancients and, as poetry, it contains "historical truth,

truth concerning the physical universe, astrological truth, moral truth, religious and theological truth. It is his [Boccaccio's] office, as poet-scholar-critic, to discern and reveal this truth."[5]

The moral framework of Christianity is not abandoned, but it radically expanded to include what Michel Foucault has called "the prose of the world,"[6] i.e., the unlimited possibilities of unveiling truth through analogy as opposed to the more rigid and contained structure of medieval allegory. When Boccaccio suggests that "the fabled descent of Aurora from Titanus and Terra reflects the relation of the dawn to the sun and the earth, or, that the transformation of Adonis into a flower symbolizes the fragility of beauty,"[7] or that Sirens are half-fish because prostitutes have a habit of flipping about like fish and of babbling about all manner of things while they make love, he is abandoning the realm of allegory and indulging, instead, in what Foucault describes as a kind of vertigo of analogism.[8] But let us take a closer look at Boccaccio's treatment of the Sirens, for he deals with them in a way which is paradigmatic of a new understanding of the function of mythology within the humanities--but also of the difficulties of discerning

between "reliable" and "unreliable" sources, i.e., of the difficulty of scholarship in general.

Boccaccio begins Chapter XX of Book 7, dedicated to the Sirens, daughters of Acheloos, with a survey of what scholars and poets of antiquity have written about them.[9] The first two sources he mentions are Servius and Fulgentius. Servius (fourth century A.D.), a celebrated Latin grammarian and commentator on Virgil, had resurrected the rationalistic explanation dating back to Alexandrian times according to which the Sirens were meretrices (i.e., not just symbols of the lures of the flesh, but literally prostitutes). Fulgentius, also a Latin grammarian and mythographer (fifth century A.D.), author of Mythologiarum Libri tres ad Catum Presbyterum, had more or less followed Servius, stressing, however, the allegorical significance of the Sirens. Boccaccio refers to these two sources when speaking of the genealogy and the triad of Sirens. However, he then immediately corrects the two Latin grammarians by quoting Leontius, according to whom there were four Sirens: Aglaosi, Telciepi, Pisinoi and Iligi.[10] Now this Leontius probably was none other than the Calabrian "scholar" Leonzio Pilato ("aspectu horridus homo . . . turpi facie, barba prolixa et capillitio nigro . . . moribus incultus, nec satis urbanus homo . . ." who,

however, was "literarum grecarcum doctissimus et quodem modo grecarum hystoriarum atque fabulorum arciuum inexaustum . . .")[11] whom Boccaccio had taken into his house to translate the Odyssey and to serve as a living archive of Greek mythology and--one might add--of a certain kind of mythological folklore. This is in fact a fairly revolutionary aspect of Boccaccio's mythography--that he makes no distinction between ancient sources and what he can gather "orally" from this exotic wandering scholar-translator-cook named Leonzio. Further on, Boccaccio cites a certain Albericus as a source for the tradition that the Sirens had chicken-feet. The rest of the references are drawn from more established sources: Ovidius, Plinius, Aristotles, Omerus.

Boccaccio's account of the genealogy and of the various dwelling places assigned to the Sirens is quite accurate, considering the numerous inconsistencies in the various Siren stories told throughout antiquity. What is of interest to us, however, is Boccaccio's interpretation of the Sirens, for here he ventures much farther than anyone before him, relying, as I have said, on the "folklore" passed on to him by Leonzio. He credits Palefatus for having been the first to explain that the Sirens were in fact prostitutes, who deceived sailors.

This he then substantiates with what Leonzio had told him about the way the Aetolians were able to conquer all of Greece: they were the first to practice prostitution in Greece, becoming such expert ruffians that they succeeded in subjugating all of Greece ("et tantum lenocinio facundie valuisse, ut fere omnem Achayam in suam vertissent predam").[12] This presumably is why an Aetolian river is said to have been the father of the Sirens, for it was on the banks of this river they began offering their wicked services ("scelesta servitia"), while the river itself stands for the flowing and lascivious lust of prostitutes ("lascivam et effluentem concupiscentiam meretricum"). The reason Calliope, Muse of epic poetry, is said to be their mother is explained by their notorious "eloquence."

Boccaccio then proceeds to etymologize some of their names. Parthenopia means virgin, for prostitutes imitate the modest habits of virgins, i.e., they cast down their eyes, speak little, blush, playfully eluding those that would touch them. Leucosia comes from leucos, meaning white, which signifies the beauty of their faces, the rich ornaments on their bodies, their luxurious clothes. Boccaccio explains that if dishonest women did not adorn themselves thus, they would not succeed so easily in

attracting men, for ignorant men judge the interior by the exterior ("cum ab ignaris per exteriora iudicentur intrinseca"), and the ugly and the poor are generally despised.[13] The third etymology is quite extravagant. It deals with the third of the Tyrrhenian Sirens whose name was Ligeia, i.e., "she of the bright voice."[14] Leonzio, who had been source for Iligi-Ligia, must also have supplied the etymology for her name: it is derived, Boccaccio writes, from "iligi quod est circulus seu girum" (indeed, ἴλιγγος means "a spinning round," "a swoon"),[15] which stands for the encirclement of the unwary. With flattery, lascivious laughter and caresses these women charm the sailors so that even if they knew how evil their seducers were, they would not want to free themselves (trahuntur in somnum a talibus, id est in sui oblivionem se ipsos") and fool themselves with stolid hope, until they have given all their possessions to these greedy women and are drowned not in the sea but in the sewer of shameful lust ("in sterquilinio obscene libidinis").

What we have given here is but a summary of Boccaccio's vertiginous peroration against these wicked females. However, it would probably be a mistake to adduce this as a proof of Boccaccio's misogyny or of a personal

resentment against prostitutes. Rather, one feels that he is caught in a delirium of analogy which gives him the illusion of discovering new connections and webs of relations with every word he puts down. True, in the pulpits of his time preachers were themselves stringing together endless chains of analogy--comparing the Virgin Mary with everything from newly baked bread to the frame of a door, but the difference is that for Boccaccio this analogical technique was scholarship and not merely a rhetorical device to be employed in sermons.

But let us conclude with Boccaccio's interpretation of the Sirens: they are fish from the navel down, for women are beautiful and honest to the girdle, but all their lust resides in the navel. They are likened to fish because fish are "slippery" ("animalia sunt lubrica"); they are said to have chicken-feet because they spread about and squander the riches of others; they were companions to Proserpina because she represents "Sicilian wealth" ("Sycula habundantia rerum"), and wealth leads to lust, gluttony and slothfulness. But when wealth is gone, the prurient appetites remain and thus men are driven to brothels ("in lupanar"). They are said to live on islands and along the coast, because such women cannot practice their trade where they are known, and therefore they prefer

places frequented by foreigners. And finally, god-inspired Isaiah says that Sirens and demons will dance in Babylon--which, Boccaccio moralizingly concludes, is probably what has been happening in the new Babylon of our own time.

Boccaccio's treatment of the Sirens is typical of the work as a whole (i.e., citation of authorities, etymology, interpretation). Whether, however, it affords "a perfect example of the ambivalent attitude of the Renaissance toward women," as John Mulyran has stated,[16] is difficult to say. It certainly echoes some of the more virulent passages of Boccaccio's Corbaccio, for example, when it speaks of love for a woman as a "passione accecatrice dell'animo, disviatrice dello ingegno, ingrossatrice, anzi privatrice della memoria"[17] or when he rails against the "ventraia" of the women who have ensnared him (echoing Dante's "foul Siren"). However, to attribute a marked increase in misogyny to the Renaissance as a whole, on the basis of this evidence, would seem to be off the mark. Certain ambivalent attitudes were indeed carried over from the Middle Ages, but they reach their apex in precisely that period of transition represented by Boccaccio. We should dwell on these anti-feminist attitudes briefly because some of the arguments used against women appear not only in Boccaccio's

interpretation of the Siren, but in some later mythographers as well. It was actually a contemporary and rival of Dante, Cecco d'Ascoli (1269-1327) who lashed out against women most vigorously in his L'Acerba, a didactic poem dealing with astronomy, astrology, meteorology, physiognomics, ethics--and women. (L'Acerba became very popular in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; Leonardo da Vinci's Codex Atlanticus is studded with quotations from it.) Picking up the old Aristotelian notion of women as a deformity of nature, a view that had been restated by Galen (A.D. 131-201), echoed in some patristic antifeminist writings, and accepted by St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) in his Summa Theologica ("the production of women comes from defect in the active power . . . or even from some external influence, such as that of a south wind, which is moist"),[18] Cecco d'Ascoli expatiated at length on the fickleness and infidelity of women, attributing these to an "excess in moisture":

> Naturalmente umida è ciascuna
> E l'umido la forma non conserva,
> Nè per gran tempo li dura nessuna.
> È per natura in lei la falsa fede.
> Con dolce inganno fa la tua vita serva,
> Mostrando gli occhi pieni di mercede.
> (L'Acerba, IV, 4367)

Boccaccio expresses a similar view, in his Corbaccio, when he writes that women are "mobili tutte e senza alcuna

stabilità: in una ora vogliono e disvogliono una medesima cosa ben mille volte, . . . salvo quelle che a lussuria appartengono . . . perciochè quelle sempre le vogliono."[20] As we can see, Boccaccio, while chastising women in general for their fickleness, does distinguish between the merely capricious and those that belong to "lussuria"; it is against the latter that he lashes out in his interpretation of the Sirens.

It is not until the end of the Renaissance that a Spanish humanist by the name of Juan Pérez de Moya (d. 1595) resuscitates Boccaccio's interpretation of the Siren story in an overtly antifeminist key, in a mythological encyclopedia entitled Philosophia Secreta (Madrid, 1585). There he states that certain women "son bestiales y non sujetas a razon," and that the Sirens are said to be the daughters of Achelous "porque así como el río es cosa humida, así todos los deleites de las tales es flujo del humor."[21] One might, however, argue that even Pérez de Moya is not so much an antifeminist as simply a crusader against the pleasures of the flesh, and that it is therefore quite unwarranted to speak of a Renaissance antifeminism. As we shall see, most of the mythographers that followed in Boccaccio's footsteps tended to tone down the more strident strains in his interpretation of the Sirens, while at the

same time stressing the scholarly aspect of mythography and the notion of erudition as an achievement per se, unfettered by the fear of "dangerous knowledge" or heresy. That scholarship could represent a lure as dangerous as that of the Sirens is illustrated by the fact that Cecco d'Ascoli himself was burned at the stake as a heretic in 1327.

The Sirens in Renaissance Mythography

Boccaccio's Genealogia immediately became a favorite text of the early humanists, as the thirty or forty extant apographs made in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries prove. It first appeared in print in Venice in 1472, published by Wendelin of Speier, and was followed by seven other editions in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. In 1517, there finally appeared an Italian version, translated by Giuseppe Betussi, and published in Venice "Al Segno del Pozzo." Within ten years, three other Italian humanists published mythological encyclopedias which were all, in one way or the other, indebted to Boccaccio's Genealogia.

The first of these was Lilio Gregorio Giraldi's De Deis Gentium, varia et multiplex historia, which appeared in Basel in 1548. Giraldi (1479-1552), a poet and

archaeologist from Ferrara, friend of Pontano and Sannazzaro, pays tribute to Boccaccio's pioneering work ("Joannem Buccatium hominem fuisse studiosissimum, et elegantis ingenii, . . . ingeniosum et eruditum"), while at the same time criticizing his faulty Greek and Latin, and his reliance on untrustworthy sources.

Boccaccio's virulent tirade against the Siren-prostitutes must have offended Giraldi's humanist sensibility, for he ignores it completely and gives instead a "sketch of the Sirens which is almost completely etymological,"[22] while criticizing Boccaccio for relying on faulty information: "Buccatius ex Albrico ignobile scriptore . . ."[23] However, he does include some traits of Boccaccio's Sirens in his description of the fabulous _Lamia_, who "Faciest est mulieris et formosa quidem, ubera et pectora longe pulcherrima, quae neque melius pictor possit effigere"--but her lower body is that of a snake. According to Giraldi, Sirens are also the fastest creatures on earth--which calls to mind Isidor's Arabian _serenae_ (XII, IV, 29)--but their resemblance to the Sirens lies chiefly in the way they capture their victims: "pectora aperiunt et ubera ostendunt," and having thus caught the attention of their prey, "intrepidae manent, deorsum in

humum saepe respicientes, ornatum ac pudorem mulieris imitantes."

Giraldi's inclusion of the Lamia in his mythological manual is interesting also because it seems to reflect--at least indirectly--an interest in Italian popular folk-beliefs, long before the birth of folklore studies. The lamia, a vestige of Roman demonology, has in fact survived up to this day as a bogey of folk-belief; her confusion with the Siren, like that of the Greek Gorgo, dates back at least to the late Middle Ages, as one can see from a mosaic in Pesaro depicting human-headed bird-Sirens bearing the inscription Lamie.[24] Cavalcanti must have also thought of "lammie" as mermaids, or nymphs, when in a poem to lady Pinella he speaks of "un grande fiume pieno di lammie, servite de schiave / bell' e àdorn' e di gentil costume."[25] Boccaccio himself had used the expression "piu bella che una lamia"; but it is unclear what exactly he was referring to since in Italian folk belief Lamiae were considered vampirical "streghe," as Giraldi confirms when he mentions that "sunt qui Striges putent, quae infantium in cunis sanguinem sugunt."[26] Finally, the humanist scholar does not forget to mention that Lamiae are also a kind of fish--"cuius Nicander in Glossis meminit."

In his description of the beauty of the Lamia, Giraldi had stated that no painter could ever paint something more beautiful. Some, however, tried: Vincenzo Cartari's Imagini colla sposizione degli dei antichi, published in Venice in 1556, was clearly intended as an iconographical manual for artists. In his foreword, the publisher Marcolini stresses that the book "is of a nature to be gladly welcomed by painters and sculptors, providing them with themes for a thousand inventions."[27] In his text, Cartari tempers Boccaccio's somewhat unilateral interpretation of the Sirens by citing Xenophon, according to whom Sirens were

> cosa piacevole e virtuosa . . . che elle cantavano solo le vere lodi di coloro che ne erano degni, esaltando in quelle le virtù: e che perciò appresso di Homero cantarono di Ulisse, che egli era degno di essere lodato sommamente: perchè era ornamento grande a tutti e Greci. . . .[28]

By quoting both Boccaccio's interpretation of the Sirens as symbols of "la roina e la morte che viè dietro a i lascivi pensieri" and Xenophon's more enlightened exegesis, Cartari offers the artists he is writing for the choice of using them either as negative or as positive symbols. That they are only symbols he makes quite clear when he writes: "ma pesci, come dissi, o uccelli che fossero le Sirene, basta, che sono cosa in tutto finta."[29] What

matters really is not whether they existed as Sirens or whether they were famous prostitutes, but instead whether they can provide artists with themes for their "inventions." Thus the Sirens are freed from the painted and sculpted sermons of medieval ecclesiastical art to swim or wing themselves through the manifold "inventions" of Renaissance art.

With Natale Conti's Mythologiae, first published in Venice in 1551, we return to the realm of humanist scholarship, erudition--and politics. Conti's mythology became an extremely popular work, appearing in over twenty editions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The French translation of Jacques de Montlyard was printed five times.[30] Conti adds a number of new sources to those previously cited by Boccaccio and Giraldi, including Archippus' explanation of the Sirens as rocks around which the surf makes music-like sounds, and the story of the contest between Sirens and Muses, which he interprets as being an allegory of "true and false music."

It is unclear what Conti exactly means by "true" and "false" music; presumably, his distinction derives from the earlier, medieval one between religious and secular music, though his association of "true" music with the Muses already bespeaks a "Rinascimental" stance. And

indeed, Conti's elaborate interpretation of the Siren motif is, for the most, an apology for humanist wisdom and its "counsels." In this context, of course, the true music of the Muses refers mostly to veridic, wise speech, as opposed to the vacuity and frivolity of the language of mere entertainment. This is, for instance, the lesson Conti draws after due examination of both Odysseus' and Orpheus' encounters with the Sirens:

> Therefore if a man wishes to avoid a tremendous amount of accidents and hardships, as well as the lawless pleasures and ugly temptations of human life, he ought to follow the example of Ulysses and stop up his ears. Or perhaps he should follow Orpheus by listening to the advice of wise men and turning deaf ears to others. But if a man really wants to keep his ears open to their song and govern his life according to his own way of thinking, he should tie himself to the mast of the ship. Such a man will need an almost incredible amount of prudence . . . or like Orpheus he should subdue the voices of the Sirens with very wise and very reliable counsels.[31]

Of course, Ulysses never did stop up his ears, preferring, as we know, to keep his mind open to the song of the Sirens. For Conti--as he concludes with a political moral reminiscent of the writings of Niccolò Macchiavelli--the song of the Sirens stands for the seductive eloquence of the flatterers who surround the Italian princes: for where, indeed, can one find a prince who will cast away adulators? "Haec una causa est cur tam frequenter mutati sint principes regionum Italiae, . . . cum nihil neque

firmius sit neque stabilius es regno, quod a sapiente principe gubernetur."[32]

Though the association of Sirens with flattery is by no means new--one can already detect it in the words they address to Odysseus as they are trying to lure him to their island, and in the sweet tones of the heretics and the hypocrites as portrayed by numerous Church Fathers from Tertullian to Theobaldus--it does seem to find a particularly congenial soil in the political and cultural life of the Renaissance. For, as the symbol of flattery, the Siren not only becomes one of the prime concerns of the righteous ruler, but also one of the greatest obstacles for the dutiful scholar who must fend his way through the treacherous terrain of courtly life. In his own bestiary, Leonardo da Vinci, who was directly acquainted with the dangers of courtly intrigues, identifies the Siren with the treacherous power of "lusinghe o soie" (adulation and flattery).[33]

What all these examples reveal is one of the most basic humanist attitudes towards the acquisition of wisdom and knowledge in both the private and the public spheres. In other words, should a man seek wisdom by turning away from the world, like Petrarch in his old age, or, following Orpheus' example, should he rather learn to distinguish

between true and false teachers, just as a prince should surround himself with wise counselors and cast away deceitful flatterers? For the humanist Conti, and for Leonardo da Vinci this is, of course, only a rhetorical question.

What we have witnessed in the passage from Boccaccio's defense of pagan mythology as poetry containing seeds of truth, to Conti's ethical and philosophical interpretations of myth, is the birth of the Renaissance view of mythology as a secret philosophy or hidden language which only the initiated (i.e., the erudite man) will be able to decipher fully. The very title of Juan Pérez de Moya's handbook of mythology, Philosophia Secreta (published in 1585), is indicative of the atmosphere that also fostered the thoughts of Paracelsus and the rise of alchemy as a "hidden science." In his book, Juan Pérez de Moya gives a moral interpretation of the Sirens, which he identifies with the lures of the flesh, and ends up by giving a numerological explanation of why there were three Sirens. The reason is simple: music is based on the three harmonic principles "diapason y diapente y diatesaron."[34]

With the emergence of Renaissance humanism and, with it, of greater confidence in man's perfectability and his "better judgment," the medieval Siren, symbol of a world

whose beautiful face is only a screen for corruption and decay, gradually fades away. And, just as gradually, another Siren surfaces from the deep to remind man of the vanity of this world, and warn him against its false appearances--be these the beauty of the courtesan or the words of the flatterer--but also to lure him on, past the fear of treacherous surfaces, into an abyss where, amid worms and maggots, lie also gems of wisdom and the personal knowledge of good and evil. The habitat of this new Siren is no longer the margins, or space between the lines, of a sermon but rather the canvas of painters, the pages of mythological encyclopedias, . . . or among the floatsam and jetsam of some remote shore.

<u>Fish, Fowl, or Forgery?</u>

Natale Conti, as we saw, had written only of mythological Sirens, but his French translator, Jacques de Montlyard, included also some information on Sirens that had been cited in his own times:

> Elles se montrent avec leur petits qu'elles tiennent entre leurs bras. Car elles les allaictent de leurs mammelles, qu'elles ont fort grosses a la poictrine. Quand les mariniers les voyent, ils en ont grand' peur et leur iettent une bouteille vuide, de la quelle elles se ioüent cependent que la vaissau tire chemin.[35]

The Sirens are slowly joining the ranks of those innocent savages and semi-humans from whom Montesquieu and others will try to derive new notions as to the nature of religion. Now they inhabit a world which, though removed, is no longer unreachable, and the testimonies of sailors and travelers who have seen them increase with a vertiginous crescendo throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In Baltasar de Victoria's Teatro de los Dioses, yet another handbook of pagan mythology published in 1620, after having been told that the Sirens symbolize sensual delights, the readers are informed that

> en el año de mil quatrocientos y tres, en el mar de Pumaran (en Olanda), se levanto una gran tempestad, y quedo en tierra una Sirena desnuda, y muda: la qual traida à Edan . . . vivio alli algunos años, y aprendiò a comer pan, y leche, y a hilar como las otras mugeres, y diò muestras de algun culto Divino, mas siempre permaneciò muda.[36]

One wonders whether the venerable prior of the convent of San Francisco in Salamanca was struck by the heartbreaking paradox of a "dumb Siren"! But, clearly, his main concern appears to have been with the fact that the Siren, while learning how to spin like other women, never displayed any religious feeling.[37]

The same observation was made years later, in the time of King Henry II, when a naked merman was caught in England: "He would not utter any speech . . . even when

hung up by his feet [?] and cruelly tortured. When he was taken into the church, he showed no sign of reverence or even of belief. . . ."[38] Poor mermaids and mermen: unable to speak, let alone sing, they were tortured, taken into churches,--and of course, dissected. The chronicler of the Histoire de la Compagnie de Jesus records that "seven mermen and mermaids were captured in Menear in 1560 and taken to Goa, where their bodies were dissected by Demas Bosquez, physician to the Viceroy, and found to have an internal structure exactly similar to that of the human body."[39] From mythology to anatomy, the step seemed only natural, since both myth and body were being discovered to be hidden microcosms, awaiting to be dissected and/or deciphered. And thus mermaids entered the aetherized realm of curiosity-cabinets. Guillame Rondelet, one of the most eminent scientists of the French Renaissance, described both a "sea monk" and a "sea bishop" in his Libri de Piscibus Marinis, published in 1554. Already in Vincentius Bellovacensis' Speculum Naturale (thirteenth century), a monachus marinus is described. This sea-monk appears to be inherited from the medieval notion that there exists a diabolical "counterpart" to all of God's creation; later it is taken as a sign of God's presence even in the

depth of the seas. But what did Philip, Archduke of Austria, think of, when, according to Jacques de Montlyard, he brought to Genoa in 1548 "une serene morte pour en faire montre; et deux Satyres en vie, l'un en eage d'un ieune garçon, l'autre en eage viril."[40] What happened was that during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there began a flourishing trade of counterfeits known to English antiquarians as Jenny Hanivers: animal bodies doctored to look like imaginary or mythical monsters.[41] Ulisse Aldrovandi (1522-1605) described some of these forgeries in his posthumous book on serpents and dragons (1640). Mermaids were of course among the hottest items and remained so for centuries, until even P. T. Barnum's forged mermaid was put to rest in the storage rooms of the Peabody Museum--only to be exposed, in 1969, as a forgery of a forgery: it is not Barnum's mermaid, just an anonymous mermaid, "purchased for the collection from an American sea captain who procured it in China."[42]

Is it not a supreme irony that the Siren, a symbol of deceit for over two thousand years, should finish her career as a prized piece of forgery? But we know that the Siren continued to live on in the realm of Renaissance art and poetry, at a safe distance from the sharp knives of dissecters and forgers.

NOTES

Chapter VI

[1] Giovanni Boccaccio, *Genealogiae deorum gentilium libri*, ed. Vincenzo Romano (Bari: Laterza & Figli, 1951). This two-volume edition, far from being perfect, is however, the only one readily accessible to students of Boccaccio.

[2] Jean Seznec, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods*, trans. B. F. Sessions (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1953), p. 220.

[3] Ernest E. Wilkins, *The University of Chicago Manuscript of the Genealogia Deorum Gentilium of Boccaccio* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1927) p. 5.

[4] Tertullian, *De Praescriptione Haereticorum*, trans. Peter Holmes (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1870), p. 9.

[5] Charles G. Osgood, *Boccaccio on Poetry*, being the preface and the fourteenth and fifteenth books of Boccaccio's *Genealogia Deorum Gentilium* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1930), Introduction, p. xxii.

[6] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences, 1966* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. 17.

[7] Wilkins, p. 3.

[8] Foucault, p. 21.

[9] Boccaccio, ed. Romano, pp. 354-57.

[10] Boccaccio, p. 354.

[11] Wilkins, p. 8.

[12] Boccaccio, p. 355.

[13] Boccaccio, p. 356.

[14] Karl Kerényi, *The Gods of the Greeks* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1974), p. 58.

[15] H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), p. 828.

[16] John Mulryan, "Boccaccio's Treatment of the Siren Myth in the De Genealogia and Its Influence on Renaissance Mythography." Unpublished essay. St. Bonaventure Univ. (1976), p. 8. Cited with permission of the author.

[17] Boccaccio, Opere Minori: Il Corbaccio (Firenze: Salani, 1964), p. 641.

[18] St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica in Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas, ed. C. Pegis (New York: Random House, 1945) I, 880.

[19] Francesco Stabili (Cecco d'Ascoli), L'Acerba, ed. Achille Crespi (Ascoli Piceno: G. Cesari, 1927), p. 381.

[20] Boccaccio, Corbaccio, p. 649.

[21] Juan Pérez de Moya, Philosophia secreta, 1585, ed. Eduardo G. de Baquero (Madrid: n.p., 1928), p. 158.

[22] Mulryan, p. 3.

[23] Lilio Gregorio Giraldi, De Deis gentium varia et multiplex historia (Basel: Oporinus, 1548), p. 25.

[24] Published in Georg Weicker, Der Seelenvogel (Leipzig: Teubner, 1902), p. 33, fig. 14.

[25] Guido Cavalcanti, in La Poesia Lirica del Duecento, ed. C. Salinari (Torino: U.T.E.T., 1968), p.437, n. 50b.

[26] See Leopardi's long disquisition on lamie in his Zibaldone and Tommaseo's entry in his Dizionario: "Ed il rozzo parlar del villan vuole queste Ninfe sien chiamate Lamie dando al cognome loro indegne infamie."

[27] Seznec, p. 251.

[28] Vincenzo Cartari, Le Imagini con la Sposizione de i Dei de gli Antichi (Venice: Marcolini, 1556), p. 206.

[29] Cartari, p. 204.

[30] Seznec, p. 279.

[31] Natale Conti (Comes), *Mythologiae sive explicationum fabularum libri decem* Venice 1551 (Francoforti: apud haeredes A. Wecheli, 1584), VII, 13; this passage was translated by John Mulryan, p. 8.

[32] Conti, VII, 13.

[33] Leonardo da Vinci, *Prose scelte d'arte e di scienza*, ed. G. E. Mottini (Milano: A. Vallardi, 1933). We find a similar equation of Sirens and flattery in Vintler's *Blumen der Tugend*, vv.2417ff.: "die smaichungred die ist nicht frisch / die selb gleicht man der syreen Fisch."

[34] de Moya, p. 160.

[35] *Mythologie ou Explication des Fables* 1599, par Jacques de Montlyard (Paris: Chevalier, 1627), ch. XIV.

[36] Baltazar de Victoria, *Teatro de los Dioses de la Gentilidad* 1620 (Barcelona: J. P. Marti, 1702) III, 4, p. 254.

[37] de Victoria, p. 254.

[38] Ralph of Coggeshall, Rolls Series 66, pp. 117-118. Quoted by Katherine M. Briggs in *The Anatomy of Puck*; an examination of fairy beliefs among Shakespeare's contemporaries and successors (London: Routledge, 1959), pp. 148-149.

[39] Colin Clair, *Unnatural History: An Illustrated Bestiary* (London: Abelard Schuman, 1967), p. 220.

[40] Montlyard, p. 14.

[41] W. M. S. Russell, "The Origin of the Sea Bishop," *Folklore*, 86 (1975), p. 96.

[42] "Barnum's Mermaid" in *Buried Treasures of the Peabody Museum*, 2 (1969), Harvard University, p. 3.

CHAPTER VII

THE SIREN'S MIRROR

While the dauntless travelers of the Renaissance were plundering the four corners of the earth in search of booty, the wonders of creation with which to fill their cabinets and collections, poets and painters were instead sifting through the artistic inventory contained in the various _trésors_, _miroirs_, bestiaries and mythological manuals in order to add ever new material and motifs to a canvas which seemed to have no outer limits save those of the human imagination. In all this exuberant rummaging and exploration, however, one can sense an underlying anxiety: how, given the sheer plenitude of the world, could one ever reach the end of what Porta called "the rope stretched from the first cause as far as the lowest and smallest of things, by a continuous and reciprocal connection"[1]--that is, how could one master the entire span of that Great Chain of Being (and of Analogy) which constituted the visible and cognitive world of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries? Although occasionally dizzied by the ambitiousness of their own enterprise, the great scholar-travelers and cataloguers of the Renaissance nevertheless often bemoaned the complacency of mankind and its failure to share in their enthusiasm

for the newly (re)discovered <u>mirabilia</u> of the world. In an endless letter describing the exotic cornucopia of merchandise aboard Portuguese ships and the myriads of "mostri stupendi d'animali bruti" which their sailors had sighted in Africa or India (including what probably was one of the earliest of the forged monsters--"un mostro scorticato e pieno di paglia . . . che é quasi la Scilla . . . ha testa e collo di cane, spalle, braccia e mani di figura umana, petto e ventre di pesce, e piedi d'oca. . . ."), Filippo Sassetti concludes somewhat dishearteddly: "E altre cose infinite vi sono, delle quali non si pigliano cura costoro di dare notizia al mondo."[2]

But in the courts and piazzas of Italian cities, there were those who never tired of giving "notizia"--whether they be scholars, artists, poets, or "cantastorie." In palaces and in public squares, people joined together in this carnival of taxonomy and description, and story-tellers outdid themselves in unfurling tapestries of marvels, in reciting the roll-call of creation as one might inventory the precious cargo of a merchant ship, or leaf through the table of contents of Cartari's <u>Imagini</u>, or lose oneself amid the classificatory profusion of contemporary lapidaries, bestiaries, or almanacs. And the emphasis, as in every cabinet of curiosities or public market or fair, fell on the <u>visible</u>, on the element

of *display*, on the fabulous surfaces of the particular spectacle at hand.

One such surface--and it is a very remarkable one at that--is the highly ornamented pavillion which Luciana offers to Rinaldo in the fourteenth Canto of Luigi Pulci's (1432-1484) *Morgante*. Embroidered on its four walls of fabric are the four elements and the creatures that inhabit them, be they mythological, fabulous, or real. This web of correspondence does not only include animals and monsters, however; pagan gods and heroes, as well as human crafts and inventions, are also situated in their respective elements. The unfolding of this encyclopedic pavillion take up some 54 stanzas of the poem:

> La terza parte è figurata al mare;
> quivi si vede scoprir la balena
> e far talvolta navili affondare,
> e dolcemente cantar la serena
> e' navicanti ha fatti addormentare;
> il dalfin v'è che mostrava la schiema
> e par ch'a' marinai con questo insegni,
> che si proveggin di salvar lor legni.
> (XIV, 64)[3]

Since stories about whales were particularly popular in the Renaissance (see the "Extracts (Supplied by a Sub-Sub Librarian)" at the beginning of Melville's *Moby Dick*), it is interesting to observe that whale and Siren are similarly associated as fabulous creatures of the deep in Boiardo's and Ariosto's poems. Here, in Pulci's

Morgante, the Siren is but one of many fabulous inhabitants of the water: as such we find also Odysseus (having sailed past the columns of Hercules), and "converse in ninfe, le navi troiane." Classical mythology, the Bible, popular folk beliefs, all must contribute some corresponding inhabitant to the four elements. Thus, we find cherubim, seraphim and the salamander lumped together in the fire, and, spread throughout, all the beasts of the *Physiologus*, including the pelican feeding its young with the blood from its breast. The crow is obviously biblical as he is shown "come già dell'arca uscia"; the crocodile is shedding tears over the man he has just killed; and, wondrous sight, "poi si vedeva col fero sguardo e fischio, uccider chi el guardava il bavalischio . . ." When all the fabulous flora and fauna of Luciana's pavillion has been duly listed and described, Rinaldo can finally take this cosmic canopy and hang it up over his bed, a "universo da camera," or the bedroom as *locus amoenus*: "Fu commendato da tutta la gente / il padiglione e' n camera si mette . . ."

Luciana's wondrous pavillion is only a condensed form of that great fabric of words and images that spreads throughout Renaissance Romances and Epic Poems--the elaborate intertextual mesh through which Arthurian heroes cavalcade in their single-minded quest for Holy Grails,

and noble paladins and Saracene villains joust, pursuing each other, and occasional vagrant maids, from one enchanted garden to the next, from text to text. The models are old--the great classic epics: the Iliad, the Odyssey, the Aeneid; early medieval Romans. The characters are new, or, rather, drawn from more recent historical legends--King Arthur and his Knights, Charlemagne and his Paladins, the Crusaders. The concerns are, for the most, secular and formal. The texts that result are, as might be expected, both resonant and polyphonic in their integration of old themes and new tones, pagan lore and Christian allegories, the supernatural and the pedestrian, magic and science. It is, hence, hardly surprising that, midst the clash of symbols, mixed metphors, and various other modes of formal and thematic hybridization that compose and generate these narratives, one should also find, strategically located and more ubiquitous than ever now that she has been freed from the fetters that linked her to heresy, the Siren.

In Boiardo's Orlando Innamorato, and then again in Ariosto's Orlando Furioso, the Siren appears both as a mermaid and in the more flexible garb of a witch, not unlike Circe and Kalypso. Not unlike them, but not identical either; for neither Morgana nor Alcina (nor, later, Armida and Acrasia), though undoubtedly inspired

by them, seem to have retained the "pedagogic" role and the crucial narratorial responsibilities of their Greek predecessors. Their main task, in fact, is not to test the hero's mettle and, when this has proved worthy of both their wiles and their love, to set him free with instructions as to how to overcome further obstacles on his way home, but, rather, much like the Sirens', to lure him away from his path and to keep him away from it in a state of more or less drastic immobility.

In the fourth Canto of Boiardo's Orlando Innamorato, Orlando penetrates into the magic garden of Orgagna--one of the many loci amoeni of Renaissance literature, a fusion of Alkinoös' gardens, Eden, Dante's paradiso terrestre, and a contemporary menagerie of curiosities.[4] Orlando's adventures in Orgagna are a translation of Homeric and medieval motifs into the chivalric realm of Renaissance epic poetry. Before entering the garden, our hero is given a few pieces of sound advice--among which that of being absolutely chaste for three days--and a book containing a detailed map of palace and garden, and instructions on how to fend one's way through both:

> Un libro ti darõ, dove ẽ depinto
> Tutto 'l giardino e ciõ ch'ẽ dentro al cinto.--
> Il dragone che gli omini divora,
> E l'altre cose tutte quante dice,
> E descrive il palagio ove dimora
> Quella regina, brutta incantatrice.
> (II, IV, 5-6)[5]

Clearly, the book replaces, in a manner better befitting the bibliophilic tendencies of its times, both the hermetic Moly plant of the Odyssey, and Circe's oral warnings. Nor is this the only written, or printed, text on which Orlando will have to rely in the course of this particular adventure. In Orlando Innamorato, the Odyssean wanderings are turned into a treasure hunt through an allegorical labyrinth, just as the exemplary carvings on the mountain of Purgatory are replaced by chiseled phrases of humanist wisdom. Having clubbed to death the dragon that guards the walls of the enchanted garden, Orlando finds further directions as to how to reach the palace on the forehead of a statue that decorates a fountain.

His next encounter is with Falerina, a minor sorceress who has decreed Orlando's death and who, to that purpose, has forged a magic sword that will be able to cut through his alleged invulnerability, and which, on occasion, she uses as a mirror. Falerina does not have the aura of a Siren nor the stature of a Circe: she has magic powers, but she is not an experienced temptress, nor does she sing or weave. All she has in common with them, and with other Renaissance enchantresses, is her garden and her long wavy hair. The main function of Falerina's hair might also be, as suggested by the

sword-mirror in which she is contemplating herself, to lure and ensnare hapless knights; in this particular instance, however, it turns out to be the instrument of her own perdition. After a brief chase through the garden, Orlando manages to grab her flying tresses and, with these, ties her to a beech.

Odyssean motifs are again imbued with medieval connotations in Orlando's next encounter. It is the book, his faithful Circe, that instructs him to prepare for it by stuffing his ears with the petals of roses. He can now proceed to a "riviera" whose treacherous surface already prefigures the ambivalent nature of the creature who inhabits it. For its bed strewn with corpses immediately belies the tranquil stillness of its clear waters, "acque tranquille e chiare insino al fond," which would give it the appearance of a Petrarchan pond. This is where and when, in the midst of gurgling water and the faint ripples of a melody, a Siren surges into sight:

> Non gionse il conte in su la riva apena,
> Che cominciò quell'acqua a gorgogliare;
> Cantando venne a sommo la Sirena.
> Una donzella è quel che sopra appare,
> Ma quel che sotto l'acqua se dimena
> Tutto è di pesce e non si può mirare,
> Ché sta nel lago da la furca in gioso;
> E mostra il vago, e il brutto tiene ascoso.
>
> Lei comincia a cantar sì dolcemente,
> Che uccelli e fiere vennero a odire:

> Ma, come erano gionti, incontinente
> Per la dolcezza convenian dormire.
> (II, IV, 36-37)

Though Boiardo's Siren is, very obviously, a mermaid, her description reminds one of Dante's doubly deceitful "dolce Sirena" who also "mostra il vago, e il brutto tiene ascoso." Her soporific powers, instead (as will be recalled, Dante's Siren appears to him in dream but does not produce sleep with her voice) connect her directly with the Sirens of the bestiaries and, through these, to the trance-like slumbers of the Lotus-Eaters and to Circe's magic potions. But, like Falerina, this Siren also lacks the sophistication of her Hellenic ancestors and is easily ensnared by her own snares. Orlando, protected by his rose petals, pretends to sleep and, as the Siren prepares to kill him, he seizes her by the hair, as he had previously done with Falerina, and drags her onto the meadow:

> Per le chiome la prese il conte Orlando,
> Fuor di quel lago la trasse nel prato,
> E via la testa le tagliò col brando,
> Come gli aveva il libro dimostrato, . . .
> (II, IV, 39)

What follows is a rather bloody ritual, reminiscent of Siegfried's bath in the pool of dragon blood, and other similar pagan "baptisms": Orlando cuts off the Siren's head and smears his body and his armor with her blood, thus making himself completely invulnerable. For

Orlando, the Siren, deprived of her voice, is only a malevolent beast, a "mala bestia"; she is a Medusa-like monster, turned into a protective shield for our Perseus-Orlando.

Thus, armed with the mirror-sword and smeared with Siren-blood, Orlando proceeds to kill a fire-breathing bull, a harpy (che avea la testa e faccia di regina / coi capei biondi e il capo incoronato"), a gold-plated donkey, a Fauna (a she-faun, modeled, it would seem, after Giraldi's Lamia: "viso di donna e petto e braccia avia / Ma tutto il resto di una serpe ria"). Finally, he cuts down the immense magic tree in the center of the park (it bears pumpkin-sized Hesperidean apples), and the chimerical garden vanishes in an apocalypse of smoke and fire, to be replaced by the tranquil, open landscape of "everyday."

Orlando has killed the mermaid but has yet to measure himself against another, more treacherous Siren: Morgana. As our narrator informs us, she has already caused the downfall of many a valiant Paladin, including Brandimarte:

> E sappiati che il franco Brandimarte
> Non fu per forza, come gli altri, preso;
> Ma Morgana la fata con mala arte
> L'avea d'amor con falsa vista acceso;
> E seguendola lui per molte parte,
> Non fu da alcun giamai con arme offeso,

> Ma con carezze e con viso iocondo
> Fu trabuccato a quel dolente fondo.
> (II, VIII, 36)

"L'avea d'amor con falsa vista acceso": once again we are reminded of Dante's worldly Siren, modeled after the medieval _mundus_ (beautifully concealing her rotten back), here metamorphosed into another ambivalent figure: Morgana, otherwise known as _la Fortuna_, whose lush mane on the front of her head conceals a bald nape: ". . . quella bona fata, / Qual sempre fugge intorno e mai non resta, / E dietro ha il calvo alla crinuta testa" (II, VII, 39).

Significantly, the entrance to her lair bears an inscription that immediately recalls the words over the door of Dante's _Inferno_ and, in a way, the parched bones on the shores of the Sirens' island:

> 'Tu che sei gionto, o dama, o cavalliero,
> Sappi che quivi facile è l'entrata,
> Ma il risalir da poi non è legiero . . .'
> (II, VIII, 39)

Written instructions thus continue to accompany Orlando in his "wanderings" past the garden of Orgagna, but this time, heeding the voice of his courage, he disregards them and steps in. The second enchanted garden of the poem far surpasses the first in splendor, indeed, as the narrator himself notes: ". . . mai non se intese per odita, / Nè per veduta in tutto quanto il mondo / Più

vago loco, mobile e iocondo." There, by a fountain of precious stones, lies Morgana, feigning sleep, and Orlando is so taken with her deceitful beauty that he barely hears the words of warning spoken at his shoulders. The earlier situation with the Siren is here again reversed as the predator turns herself prey in order to prey upon: Orlando, who has obviously forgotten his earlier aventure, is soon engaged in a long and painful purgatorial pursuit (in the course of which he is whipped by a gaunt hag, lady Penitenzia), for one of the traits of lady Fortuna is her fickleness: "perchè fermezza in Lei non è, né fede" (IX, 19)--a trait which, as will be recalled, Tertullian identified with female nature and Boccaccio personified in his wanton Siren. Predictably, Morgana's demise is accomplished when Orlando succeeds in grabbing her by the hair:

> Come Dio volse e la ventura buona,
> Volgendo il viso quella fata al conte,
> Lui ben la prese al zuffo nella fronte.
> (II, IX, 17)

But the series of Sirens and enchantresses in the _Orlando Innamorato_ does not end with Morgana. She has a sister, Alcina, who sits in her flowery garden by the sea, spellbinding her marine menagerie and whoever else may wander by. One of her victims is Astolfo, whom she

lures onto a whale (which he believes to be an island) by baiting him with the sight of a mermaid:

> Oltre a quella isoletta è una sirena:
> Passi là sopra chi la vol mirare.
> Molto è bel pesce, né credo che apena
> Dece sian visti in tutto quanto il mare. --
> (II, XIII, 62)

The mermaid as ichthyic rarity: thus we found her, together with her mythic kin, in the later editions of Renaissance myth manuals.

Boiardo did not live to tell what happened to Astolfo on his thousand-and-one-night island whale, but Ariosto picked up the tale in Canto VI of his _Orlando Furioso_, where Astolfo himself retells how he was lured "volendo vedere una sirena / Che col suo dolce canto acheta il mare" (VI, 40), and taken to a magic isle where Alcina, grown tired of him, transformed him into a myrtle-tree. In a scene reminiscent of Dante's suicide saplings, Ruggiero ties the hippogryph to this very tree and is thereupon scolded by the "metamorphosee." Ruggiero himself succumbs to the lures of Alcina and turns into a slothful, effeminate, perfumed parody of himself, and, in the process, forgets his true-love Bradamante, until he is saved by the long-maned enchantress Melissa, who gives him a magic ring that will reveal Alcina's true identity.

> Che ha costei che t'hai fatto regina,
> che non abbian mill'altre meretrici?
> costei che di tant'altri è concubina,

> ch'al fin sai ben s'ella suol far felici.
> Ma perchè tu conosca chi sia Alcina,
> levatone le fraudi e gli artifici,
> tien questo anello in dito, e torna ad ella;
> ch'aveder ti potrai come sia bella. --
> (VII, 64)[6]

Like the medieval Siren, Alcina is nothing more than a meretrice, a lush form of deceit. Ariosto resorts again to metamorphosis to turn the Siren Alcina into a paradigm of the vanity of the world: the ring of Reason reveals that Alcina is but counterfeit surface and that her beauty is mere artifice:

> Fece l'annel palese ancor, che quanto
> di beltà Alcina avea, tutto era estraneo:
> estraneo avea, e non suo, dal piè alla treccia;
> il bel ne sparve, e ne restò la feccia.
> (VII, 70)

The opposition "bel"/"feccia," in the lines quoted above, might well mislead one to drawing, here too, a parallel between this enchantress and Dante's Siren, or the medieval <u>mundus</u>; the way in which "feccia," however, is later defined as "donna sì laida, che la terra tutta / nè la più vecchia avea nè la più brutta," and followed by a whole stanza in which Alcina's decrepitude is described in detail, seems to suggest that Ariosto had something else in mind. The obvious satire on the wonders of cosmetics notwithstanding, if one compares the stanzas that describe Alcina's extraordinary beauty with the one that exposes her as a Hecuba-like hag, one cannot but overhear the echo of the

danse macabre, haunting reminders of the frailty and fleetingness of beauty and youth.

In this literature of reflection and repetition, where not only themes and plots recur, but also characters, names, situations, settings and objects, all texts are, in a sense, Siren songs--fantastic, and potentially endless, elaborations of pre-existing material into a new whole whose main narrative concern is both the pleasure of its own telling and the amusement (intellectual or other) of the audience. For, whatever ulterior aims and obligations the poet might have, the main one is that of producing art, that is, beauty, with as much passionate virtuosity as language may allow. In other words, for Boiardo and Ariosto "poetic creation" is a matter of form rather than of content, and as such it ceases to be transitive to become essentially self-reflective--that is, in the strictest sense of the term, parodic. For the basis of parody is not, as is commonly believed, humor (the province of its lower kins: pastiche, caricature, burlesque, travesty) but self-conscious contemplation of previous literature.

This is not entirely the case, however, with Tasso. His Gerusalemme Liberata, like Boiardo's Orlando Innamorato and Ariosto's Orlando Furioso, is a combination of the heroic epic and the chivalric romance, but the goal of

Tasso's poem, unlike that of both Ariosto's and Boiardo's, is not just formal but also moral. This is particularly obvious in Tasso's use of the "supernatural," that is, of all the material drawn from both folklore and mythology. Whereas, as we have seen, in both Boiardo and Ariosto the supernatural is mostly a pretext for poetic license (once Orgagna has provided its thrills it disappears into smoke, and Alcina comes to an uglier, but nevertheless similar, end), in Tasso it has a marked didactic purpose both at a literary as well as at a spiritual level. Indeed, he might well be referring to his own (literary) beliefs when he has his Sage instruct Rinaldo about the true riches of Virtue:

> Signor, non sotto l'ombra in piaggia molle
> Tra fonti e fior, tra Ninfe e tra Sirene,
> Ma in cima a l'erto e faticoso colle
> De la virtú riposto è il nostro bene.
> Chi non gela, e non suda, e non s'estolle
> Da le vie del piacer là non perviene.
> Or vorrai tu lunge da l'alte cime
> Giacer quasi tra valli augel sublime?
> (XVII, 61)[7]

"Shade," "soft sand," "springs," "flowers," "nymphs" and "Sirens"--these are not just emblems of ease and contentment, but also, and the presence of the Sirens suggests, the expressions of poetic leisure and stylistic self-absorption--a narcissistic urge which, according to the Sage, must be overcome with hard labor in order to achieve virtù.

This, in a nutshell, is the lesson that Rinaldo will have to learn from his encounter with Armida, the main Siren of the Gerusalemme Liberata. Significantly, after a few failures, Armida manages to lure Rinaldo to her lair with the help of a Siren--whose sudden appearance through the waters of a placid brook echoes Orlando's encounter with his Siren in the garden of Orgagna:

> Il fiume gorgogliar fra tanto udìo
> Con novo suono, e là con gli occhi corse,
> E mover vide un'onda in mezzo al rio,
> Che in se stessa si volse e si ritorse,
> E quinci alquanto d'un crin biondo uscìo,
> E quinci di donzella un vòlto sorse,
> E quinci il petto e le mammelle, e de la
> Sua forma in fin dove vergogna cela.
> (XIV, 60)

The Siren in question is not a real Siren, "non . . . vera Sirena / Ma . . . magica larva," but rather an emanation of Armida's magic, a simulacrum of her own allure; still she sings a beautiful song whose sibilant alliterations point at a clear message, "Solo chi segue ciò che piace è saggio," and have the immediate effect of plunging Rinaldo into a sound slumber. Thereupon, Armida comes onto the scene with the firm intention of turning her new victim into a fish, as she has already done with other crusaders, but the moment she sees his handsome sleeping face she loses herself in what turns out to be a form of self-reflective contemplation: ". . . e placar sente ogni ira, / Mentre il riguarda, e 'n

su la vaga fronte / Pende omai sì, che par Narciso al fonte" (XIV, 66). Once she recovers her bearings, Armida brings Rinaldo to her enchanted garden where, with her charms, she makes him forget all his duties, and turns him into an all too willing slave of love.

Significantly, the spell is broken by a mirror (in the shape of an "adamantino scudo"), conveyed to Rinaldo by two virtuous knights (Carlo and Ubaldo); but yet more significantly, the object of exorcism this time is not the sorceress but Rinaldo himself. It is to him that the mirror reveals the ugliness of his own slothful state:

> Qual uom, da cupo e grave sonno oppresso,
> Dopo vaneggiar lungo in sé riviene,
> Tale ei tornò nel rimirar se stesso:
> Ma se stesso mirar già non sostiene:
> Giù cade il guardo, e timido, e dimesso,
> Guardando a terra, la vergogna il tiene.
> Si chiuderebbe e sotto il mare e dentro
> Il foco, per celarsi, e giù nel centro.
> (XVI, 26)

Rinaldo has followed the Siren's call to pleasure and forgotten his knightly obligations; what the mirror now shows him is not the ephemerality, or the ugliness, of sensuous joy (unlike Orgagna, Armida's garden does not disappear, and, unlike Alcina, Armida herself is as beautiful as ever when she begs Rinaldo not to abandon her), but rather that his virtue is destined to other, higher things: "Qual sonno o qual letargo ha sì sopita / La tua virtude? o qual viltà l'alletta? / Su su; te il

campo e te Goffredo invita; / Te la fortuna e la vittoria aspetta" (XVI, 28).

When Rinaldo is again confronted with the promise of sensuous delight--another lure of Armida's in the shape of one hundred nymphs, "dee boscarecce, / Nude le braccia e d'abito succinte, / Con bei coturni e con disciolte trecce"; who dance and sing and call him to their groves--he is so tempted by it that his senses and his sense of duty must engage in a strenuous strife before the latter finally prevails and, with one fell swoop, hushes the rebellious spirits.

Tasso's lesson is clear enough. A literature of reflection needn't be narcissistically self-indulgent in order to achieve originality. For him, parody, like Falerina's mirror, is also a double-edged sword: just as it can jab at previous literature with self-indulgent virtuosity, it can also humor it with a more instructive intent. In other words, there is nothing wrong with indulging in the contemplation of beautiful forms and figures, that is, provided one knows how to cut through them and, stronger for the deed (like Orlando covered with Siren-blood), move beyond.

In the first three books of Spenser's Faerie Queene (1590), the tradition of classical epic, medieval romance, and the more recent humanist epics of the Italian

Renaissance all converge into a text of extraordinary poetic luxuriousness and at the same time of notable moral sobriety. Indeed, it has been said that Spenser's aim in the Faerie Queene was to combine something of Ariosto's exuberance with the sterner poetic temper of Tasso, just as he sought to synthesize the tradition of classical allegoresis (as renewed by Renaissance humanism) with the tradition of Christian allegory associated with biblical exegesis.[8] To speak of the motif of the Sirens in the Faerie Queene would inevitably involve a global reading of the poem that would go well beyond the bounds of the present study, since, as we have seen in our examination of Boiardo, Ariosto, and Tasso, the Siren in Renaissance epic tends to lose her specificity and is increasingly associated on the one hand with an ever-proliferating number of enchanting (water-)nymphs, and on the other seems more and more conflated with the image of Circe--as in the case of Ariosto's Alcina and Tasso's Armida.

Indeed, the magic garden in which Armida spellbinds Rinaldo with the power of Lust is the direct ancestor of Acrasia's Bowre of Blisse in Canto 12 of the Second Book of The Faerie Queene, a deceptive locus amoenus associated with the seductive powers of music and female beauty:

> Eftsoones they heard a most melodious sound,
> Of all that mote delight a daintie eare,
> Such as attonce might not on liuing ground,
> Saue in this Paradise, be heard elsewhere:
> Right hard it was, for wight, which did it heare,
> To read, what manner musicke that mote bee:
> For all that pleasing is to liuing eare,
> Was there consorted in one harmonee,
> Birdes, voyces, instruments, windes, water, all
> agree.
>
> The ioyous birdes shrouded in chearefull shade,
> Their note vnto the voyce attempred sweet;
> Th'Angelicall soft trembling voyces made
> To th'instruments diuine respondence meet:
> The siluer sounding instruments did meet
> With the base murmure of the waters fall:
> The waters fall with difference discreet,
> Now soft, now loud, vnto the wind did call:
> The gentle warbling wind low answered to all.
>
> There, whence that Musick seemed heard to bee,
> Was the faire Witch her selfe now solacing,
> With a new Louer, whome through sorceree
> And witchcraft, she from farre did thither
> bring . . .
>
> (XII, 70-72)

Though Acrasia (whose name means Incontinence) exercises her alluring spell over most of the events of Book Two of the Faerie Queene, she is of course not the only enchantress whose wiles Spenser's questing knights must overcome in the course of the initiatory Bildung which is to fashion them into "a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline."[9] In Book One, the Red Cross Knight must, like Adam, fall into the deceitful snares of the (Eve-like) temptress Duessa (who represents the Whore of Babylon, or false Church; i.e., Roman Catholicism) before he can rise from his degraded state

and, with the help of St. George, redeem himself. Book Two--whose major theme is Temperance, and whose action revolves around Sir Guyon's quest to destroy the forces which tempt men into excessive concupiscence--is punctuated by a series of female temptresses who threaten to imperil the Knight of Temperance with their worldly blandishments. They include the sensual Perissa in the Castle of Medina (Canto 2), the amorous Phaedria who lures Guyon to the Lake of Idleness (Canto 4), and, of course, the witch Acrasia whose Bowre of Blisse Guyon has set out to destroy.

It is in the course of Guyon's sea voyage from the Castle of Alma toward Acrasia's Bowre of Blisse that we encounter Spenser's most explicit adaptation of the Homeric Siren episode (indeed, Book Two of The Faerie Queene, composed after Spenser had read Tasso, contains far many more classical motifs than the more Christianized landscape and allegory of the Red Cross Knight in Book One). Guyon is voyaging toward Acrasia's garden with two companions--the Palmer (i.e., the counsel of right reason) and Alma's boatman. Their journey (Canto 12) recapitulates many of the episodes of the Odyssey (filtered through the Aeneid). They pass by the Gulf of Greediness (Charybdis), the Rock of Vile Reproach (Scylla), and the Wandering Islands (Aeolia) which are

inhabited by Phaedria, a Siren-like figure who lures sailors to shipwreck in the Quicksand of Unthriftyhed:

> That was the wanton Phaedria which late
> Did ferry him ouer the Idle lake:
> Whom nought regarding, they kept on their gate
> And all her vaine allurements did forsake,
> When them the wary Boateman thus bespake;
> Here now behoueth vs well to auyse,
> And of our safetie good heede to take;
> For here before a perlous passage lyes,
> Where many Mermayds haunt, making false melodies.
>
> But by the way, there is a great Quicksand,
> And a wirlepoole of hidden ieopardy,
> Therefore, Sir Palmer, keepe an euen hand;
> For twixt them both the narrow way doth ly.
> Scarse had he said, when hard at hand they spy
> That quicksand nigh with water couered;
> But by the checked waue they did descry
> It plaine, and by the sea discoloured:
> It was the quicksand of Vnthriftyhed.
> (XII, 17-18)

Just beyond lies the Whirlepoole of Decay, filled with "Most vgly shapes, and horrible aspects, / Such as Dame Nature selfe mote feare to see, / Or shame." Spenser parades before the reader's eye an inventory of sea monsters (mostly mermen and walruses) that belong to the same medieval bestiary as the Siren:

> The dreadfull Fish, that hath deseru'd the name
> Of Death, and like him lookes in dreadfull hew,
> The griesly Wasserman, that makes his game
> The flying ships with swiftnesse to pursew,
> The horrible Sea-satyre, that doth shew
> His fearfull face in time of greatest storme,
> Huge Ziffius, whom Mariners eschew
> No lesse, then rockes (as trauellers informe,)
> And greedy Rosmarines with visages deforme.
> (XII, 24)

Before Guyon and his companions make their encounter with the Sirens proper, however, they sail by an island with

> A seemely Maiden, sitting by the shore,
> That with great sorrow and sad agony,
> Seemed some great misfortune to deplore,
> And lowd to them for succour called euermore.
> (XII, 27)

Though she is not identified, this doleful maid who counts on Guyon's pity and gullibility recapitulates his inability to see through the deceit of Duessa (who had also ensnared his affections by posing as a damsel in distress). The palmer, more perceptive than Guyon, quickly identifies her as "onely womanish fine forgery, / Your stubborne hart t'affect with fraile infirmity." The notion of female infirmity as "guileful bait," the counterfeit tears and cries, power masking as weakness--all these will become variants of the figure of the fatal mermaid-siren in Renaissance and post-Renaissance literature.

Having overcome the temptation of pity, Guyon now approaches the stead of the Sirens. The landscape more resembles Circe's isle or the port of the Laistrygones than the Homeric site of the Sirens. Though the Sirens are, as in Homer, associated with a stilling of the winds, Spenser places them in a shaded enclosure (or "halfe theatre"), no doubt to underscore that the place

of coolness and rest which they offer to Guyon is merely a "deceiptfull shade" or an alluring appearance:

> And now they nigh approached to the sted,
> Whereas those Mermayds dwelt. It was a still
> And calmy bay, on th'one side sheltered
> With the brode shadow of an hoarie hill,
> On th'other side an high rocke toured still,
> That twixt them both a pleasaunt port they made,
> And did like an halfe Theatre fulfill:
> There those fiue sisters had continuall trade,
> And vsd to bath themselues in that deceiptfull
> shade.
>
> (XII, 30)

In classical tradition, the Sirens of course numbered three. Spenser's "fiue sisters" (an allegory, according to most commentators, of the five senses) would seem analogous to Fulgentius' explanation of the five daughters of Apollo as representing each of the five senses.[10] In a more general fashion, however, Spenser seems to follow Natalis Comes' identification (in Mythologiae, VII, 13) of the Sirens with voluptuous desire.[11]

> They were faire Ladies, till they fondly striu'd
> With th'Heliconian maides for maistery;
> Of whom they ouer-comen, were depriu'd
> Of their proud beautie, and th'one moyity
> Transform'd to fish, for their bold surquedry,
> But th'vpper halfe their hew retained still,
> And their sweet skill in wonted melody;
> Which euer after they abusd to ill,
> T'allure weake trauellers, whom gotten they did
> kill.
>
> (XII, 31)

The competition between the Siren and the Muses (a story which derives not from Homer but from late Hellenistic

legends) was, as we have seen, a motif which became very popular in the Renaissance, largely through its neo-Platonic context. Similarly modern and non-Homeric is of course Spenser's representation of the Sirens as half-fish rather than half-bird.

In the following stanza, however, Spenser cleaves more closely to his Homeric original, for as in the *Odyssey*, these Mermayds seek to ensnare Guyon in the fleshly power through the sweet melody of flattery:

> So now to Guyon as he passed by,
> Their pleasaunt tune they sweetly thus applide;
> O thou faire sonne of gentl Faery,
> That art in mighty armes most magnifide
> Aboue all knights, that euer battell tride,
> O turne thy rudder hither-ward a while:
> Here may thy storme-bet vessell safely ride;
> This is the Port of rest from troublous toyle,
> The words sweet In, from paine and wearisome
> turmoyle.
> (XII, 32)

Whereas the Homeric Sirens offer Odysseus (false) knowledge, playing on both his vanity and his curiosity, Spenser's five sisters offer Guyon a deceptive form of repose and a "sweet In," that is, a place resembling Acrasia's Bowre of Blisse, a false Eden which offers mere complacency to the striving Christian soul. That the Sirens in Spenser are also linked to lures of Dame Nature, that is, to natural or corporeal life as opposed to spiritual existence, is borne out by the following stanza in which

the elements, stirred by the Siren's (Orphic) song, respond in kind:

> With that, the rolling sea resounding soft,
> In his big bass them fitly answered,
> And on the rocke the waues breaking aloft,
> A solemne Meane vnto them measured,
> The whiles sweet Zephirus lowd whisteled
> His treble, a straunge kinde of harmony;
> Which Guyons senses softly tickeled,
> That he the boateman bad row easily,
> And let him heare some part of their rare
>   melody.
>
> (XII, 33)

As these lines indicate, the "rare melody" which entices Guyon by softly tickling his senses is <u>not</u> specifically the song of the Sirens, but rather the "straunge kinde of harmony" made by the wind and waves. The Mermayds merely serve to incite with their "pleasaunt tunes" a far vaster (and more perilous) music--not the music of the spheres, but the elemental music of the world of Nature or Generation, the music of "the rolling sea resounding soft," matrix of all life, and the music of Zephirus, stimulant of the growth of all living things and tickler of the sexual instinct (cf. Chaucer). Spenser's Mermayds, then, are merely proxies for a far greater enchantress--Dame Nature. The fact that her allurements are described in terms of (musical) art (e.g., "big bass," "solemne Meane," "treble," "harmony") merely underscores the essential paradox of Acrasia's Bowre of

Blisse, an enchanted garden whose natural beauty is of such splendor that it can only be seized as art.

It is perhaps appropriate to close this brief survey of the motif of the Siren in Renaissance epic and romance with a mention of what C. M. Bowra has called "the epic of Humanism"[12]--Os Lusiades of Luis de Camões (1524-80). From the Odyssey on, the Siren has often had her place in epic voyages of discovery, whether she embodies one of the many perils which the voyager must overcome in the course of the journey, or whether she simply takes her place among the many exotic monsters and marvels encountered at the far corners of the earth. Christopher Columbus, for example, is reported (by Las Casas) to have sighted several Sirens off Haiti on his voyage to the New World: "he saw three serenas (mermaids) who rose very high from the sea, but they were not as beautiful as they are painted, although to some extent they have a human appearance in the face. He said that he had seen some in Guinea on the coast of Malagueta." Comments Samuel E. Morison, "These last were the West African dugong; the Haitian 'mermaids' were the Caribbean manatee or sea cow whose articulated head and armlike fore limbs have an uncanny human appearance. They are certainly not beautiful, but stuffed manatee used to be a staple of our country fairs as 'gen-u-wine mermaids.' Columbus' habit of accurate and

honest observation is proved by resisting the temptation to engraft these sea cows onto the classical myth. What a good story it would have made for the Sovereigns, to have the Spaniards conducted to their first River of Gold by lovely and seductive mermaids!"[13]

Luis de Camões, another great sailor of the sixteenth century, who was also a scholar, a humanist and a poet, was unlike Columbus, willing to take far more liberty with the Siren in his epic of Portuguese voyages of discovery, Os Lusiades. In the tenth and concluding Canto of his epic, he has a Siren sing (for some sixty stanzas!) of the noble, adventurous deeds of Portuguese heroes present, past, and future--her song fulfills the promise of epic narration which Homer's Sirens had so deceitfully offered to Odysseus. Like many of the figures from ancient mythology which appear in the Lusiades, the Siren who intones the prophetic song of Portuguese national destiny retains, as Bowra observes, "a peculiar brightness which neither allegory nor the grand style had yet dulled."[14] Camões, Bowra continues, is "tenderly conscious" of the beauty of his pagan goddesses and remains "free from the theological inhibitions of the Middle Ages. . . . What even Ariosto does not do, Camões does gaily and confidently."[15] In other words, he manages to accommodate the sensuality of the pagan gods and goddesses

to a comprehensive Christian system of values, as the alluring Siren who hymns the deed of Christian heroes so graciously shows.

Though Camões' "angelica Sirena" is endowed, like her Homeric ancestors, with the power of sweet (and, in this case, prophetic) song, the fact that she should also be called "a bella Musa," "a bella deosa," or "a Nympha" is a measure of just how eclectically and vaguely the Renaissance had come to construe the figure of the Siren: in Camões she is virtually indistinguishable from Tethys or the various (sea-)nymphs that attend Venus on her Isle of Love. As we have seen in Boiardo, Ariosto, Tasso, and Spenser, the Siren has come almost inevitably to be associated with a *locus amoenus*, and Camões' evocation of the Isle of Love on which the triumphantly returning Portuguese symbolically copulate with Tethys-Venus and her nymphs is strongly reminiscent of Tasso's or Spenser's Bower of Blisse. We give a few stanzas from Richard Fanshaw's 1655 English translation to indicate the lush, almost Rubensesque quality of the scene:

> There, in rich Chaires of substance crystalline
> They sit by Two's and Two's, Gallant and dame.
> At th'upper end, in other of gold fine,
> Sits the fair Goddesse with renown'd De Game.
> With Viands delicate in sawce divine
> (Such as to Cleopatra's Board ne're came)

Are heapt the dishes of red burnisht gold,
Part of the Tresure which their Seas infold.

The fragrant Wine not onely are above
Falernian Liquor of Italian growth,
But that choice-Nectar sent about by JOVE
When Rebel Gyants felt Immortals wroth.
In Di'mon-Cups (tempting to mirth, and love)
The Ruby sparckles, bubbles the curl'd froth
With the powr'd spring. Thus, of their Lovers true
The greatest Foe the watry Nymphs subdue.

A thousand pleasant Arguments they touch;
Still laughters pass, quick witty Repartees,
'Twixt dish and dish, whereby, without too much
Of Those, to whet the appetite to These,
Musical Instruments not wanting (such,
As to the damned Spirits once gave ease
In the dark Vaults of the Infernal Hall),
Joyn'd with a Siren's Voice Angelical.
(Canto X, Stanzas 3-5)[16]

As the Siren (or "fair Muse") begins her song,

A suddain Silence curbs the Winds, indents
With the horse waves to whisper under ground;
And the bruit Creatures in their Houses (made
By Nature's hand) asleep are sung and playd.
(Stanza 6)

Although the sleep- or trance-inducing power of the Siren's song was, as we have seen, a frequent theme of the bestiaries, here (by a conflation we have already seen in Spenser) her music also seems to possess Orphic powers. She is, at any rate, not only a muse but a prophetess endowed with the power of reading into the book of Nature, and of seeing into the full scope of Portuguese national destiny:

With a sweet Voyce she raises to the skies
Rare men to come into the world, whose cleare

Ideas were beheld by Protheus wife
In a Diaphane and Phantastick Sphere,
Which in a Dream Jove shew'd to his shut Eyes;
And after, He by Prophecy appeare
  Made it in humid Realms, where this Nymph (took)
  Therewith) got the brave story without book.
(Stanza 7)

In the sixty stanzas that follow, the Siren (clearly a "double" of the epic poet) will sing of the power and glory that awaits the Portuguese nation--and the way eroticism and heroism, sensuality and valor are blended into her great pageant-like narrative is highly characteristic of the tonality of Os Lusiades as a whole. Even the postscript (Stanzas 74ff.), which explains these pagan nymphs allegorically as the honor and glory which follow great deeds, does not detract in any way from the lush sensuality which permeates the universal love-making on the Isle of Love. It seems rather that Camões added this unlikely allegory to appease the censors of the Inquisition. Just as the Venus-Tethys of Os Lusiades manages to embody some of the qualities of Divine Love without sacrificing one whit of her splendid pagan eroticism, so the Siren singing on her isle can provide a prophetic and angelic voice without having to disguise herself in allegorical accoutrement--the reason being, according to Bowra, that Camões' gods and goddesses "come not from philosophy but from poetry."[17]

NOTES

Chapter VII

[1] G. Porta, Magie naturelle (Fr. trans., Rouen, 1650, p. 22), quoted by Michel Foucault, The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. 19.

[2] Filippo Sassetti, "A Braccio Valori, in Firenze," in Lettere del Cinquecento, ed. Giuseppe G. Ferrero (Torino: UTET, 1967), p. 621.

[3] Luigi Pulci, Il Morgante, ed. George B. Weston (Bari: Laterza, 1930), I, 328. All quotations from Pulci's Morgante are from this edition.

[4] For a discussion of "Paradises, Heavenly and Earthly" see Harry Levin, The Myth of the Golden Age in the Renaissance (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1969), pp. 168-169.

[5] Matteo Maria Boiardo, Orlando Innamorato, Libro Secondo, ed. Aldo Scaglione (Torino: UTET, 1951). All quotations from Boiardo's Orlando are from this edition.

[6] Ludovico Ariosto, Orlando Furioso, ed. Remo Cesarini (Torino: UTET, 1962). All further quotations from Ariosto are from this edition.

[7] Torquato Tasso, La Gerusalemme Liberata (Milano: Antonio Vallardi, 1928).

[8] See E. de Seloncourt's introduction to Spenser's Poetical Works, ed. J. C. Smith and E. de Seloncourt (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), p. xliii. All subsequent quotations from Spenser are drawn from this edition. I have also relied on the introduction and critical notes contained in Book I and II of the Faerie Queene, ed. Robert Kellog and Oliver Steele (New York: Odyssey Press, 1965).

[9] Book I and II of the Faerie Queene, ed. Kellog and Steele, p. 1.

[10] See Charles W. Lemmi, "Symbolism in Faerie Queene, II, 12," Modern Language Notes, L (March, 1935), pp. 161-162.

[11] Henry G. Lotspeich, Classical Mythology in the Poetry of Edmund Spenser (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1932), p. 81.

[12] C. M. Bowra, From Virgil to Milton (London: Macmillan, 1945).

[13] Samuel E. Morison, Admiral of the Ocean Sea (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1942), pp. 397-398.

[14] Bowra, p. 104.

[15] Bowra, p. 117.

[16] Luis de Camōens, The Lusiad, trans. Richard Fanshawe, ed. Jeremiah D. M. Ford (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1940).

[17] Bowra, p. 110.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SIREN AS EMBLEM, THE EMBLEM AS SIREN

If Boiardo, Ariosto, Tasso, Spenser, and Camões were primarily writing for an aristocratic, or at least highly cultivated public who took delight in the rich texture of classical allusion and the intricate interpretative play of different levels of allegory, Hans Sachs, the cobbler-poet from Nürnberg, shows another dimension of the treatment of the Siren motif in the Renaissance. In 1537, the first German translation of the *Odyssey* by Simon Schaidenreisser had appeared in Augsburg. Twenty years later, Hans Sachs composed a *Schwank* entitled "Ulisses mit den meerwundern der Syrenen, den leibswollust andeutent,"[1] in which the Homeric episode is (more or less) faithfully retold in simple, down-to-earth verse. Sachs' audience was presumably a very different one from that of, say, Ariosto, and his earthy lack of inhibition or intimidation vis-à-vis the classical material enables him to transpose the Homeric episode into his German idiom and milieu in such a way that none of its immediacy is lost. Indeed, in Sachs' hands, the Siren episode is characterized by that same "creaturely realism" and stolid domesticity which one so often associates with the Northern Renaissance. For example, when "fraw Circe" addresses

Odysseus as "mein thewrer Ulisse" and warns him to avoid the Sirens ("die schnöden meerwunder"), Sachs conjures up the image of a portly German <u>Hausfrau</u> bidding her husband farewell, handkerchief in hand.

Although Sachs for the most remains faithful to Schaidenreisser's translation of the <u>Odyssey</u>, in his colloquial retelling of the Siren story he interpolates into the Homeric text several notions handed down through the Church Fathers and the bestiaries. Circe admonishes Ulysses that the man who hears their song will forget friends, wife and child ("All irer freund, weib unde kind"),

> Weil sie so übersüssig singen,
> Darmit die leut zu schlaffen zwingen.
> Als denn umbkeren sie die schieff
> Und stürtzen sie zu grunde tieff.
> Als denn erwürgen sie die lewt,
> Fressens, ziehen in ab ir hewt,
> Die irem singen hören zu.[2]

That the Sirens charm their victims asleep is, as we have often seen, a tradition of the bestiaries; and Sachs' emphasis on the grisly details of the scene (a few lines later he will speak of "Ein grossen hauffen todtenpain, / Auch menschenhewt ein grosse summ") seems particularly suited to his popular audience, eager for marvels and shock effects. But Sachs retains all the elements of the Homeric episode--the quieting of the winds ("Der himel war heyter und still, / Hetten der starcken wind nicht vil"), the stopping of the sailors' ears ("Mit wachs

verkleibt er in die ohrn, / Das sie das gsang nicht konten hörn"), the tying to the mast ("er aber liess sich mit eim zaum / Starck pinden an den segelbaum"), and, set off by the separate title, "Der Syrenen gsang," the song of the Sirens is translated in its entirety into alluringly homely German.

But the most interesting aspect of Sachs' poem is the "Beschluss" or moral conclusion with which his retelling of the Siren episode closes. The tale told by Homer ("Homerus der hoch poet"), as Sachs instructs his audience, contains an important secret meaning and lesson ("Ein schöne geheimnus und lehr") which should be elucidated as follows: as we sail through the sea of life's misery ("in diesem jammer-mehr"), we should be on our guard against the lures of the treacherous Sirens, who represent the lure of wordly pleasures. For although we might believe that we can "possess" such pleasures, it is in fact the pleasures which insidiously possess us:

> Vermein, den wollust haben bsessen,
> So hat der wollust uns gefressen,
> Uns abzogen in unser jugent
> Alle gut sitten, zucht und tugent,
> Gesundheit, sterck, krefft, ehr und gut,
> Bringt uns schand, schaden und armut,
> Kranckheit und dergleich böse stück,
> In summa alles ungelück.[3]

(As to the physical ills caused by the Sirens, one might recall that the astronomer and physician Girolamo

Fracastoro published a poem entitled Syphilis, sive Morbus Gallicus in 1530 in response to the syphilis epidemic raging in southern Europe, a gift perhaps of the Sirens of the New World.) Sachs goes on to cite Aristotle, who says we must tie ourselves to the mast of temperance ("An segelpaum der messigkeit"); then Marcus Tullius (i.e., Cicero) is quoted to the effect that worldly pleasure is a harlot, and finally Seneca is adduced for his opinion that passion is "Freundtlich und kützelt uns voron, / Heckt darnach wie ein scorpion." But the final moral exhortation comes from the German poet's own mouth: "Das messigkeyt wider auffwachs / Sampt allen tugenden, wünscht Hans Sachs."[4]

Hans Sachs' "Ulisses mit den meerwundern" shows the persistence of a certain medieval tradition of moralization within the Renaissance--his poem could be compared to the many "Homère moralisé" or "Ovide moralisé" that were published in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance. His approach, moreover, is a secular form of Christian homiletics: an exemplary text is chosen (in this case, a classical rather than Biblical text), and then subjected to an interpretative reading which extracts its "hidden" or allegorical reading. What distinguishes Sachs from medieval allegoresis, however, is the relative "realism" of his poetry, that is, its

literal level (in this case, the Siren episode) is not merely in the service of some higher, moral meaning (i.e., the dangers of "wollust"), but can function aesthetically in its own right as well.

Hans Sachs' treatment of the Siren episode as *exemplum* can be compared to the many emblem books that were published during the Renaissance. Like Hans Sachs' "Ulisses," these emblem books, among the most popular printed texts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries if one is to judge from the quantity that was published,[5] reflect the Renaissance fascination with translation and interpretation: as a rule, the books are compilations of woodcuts or engraving which are, as it were, visual "translations" (or citations) of figures, scenes, or motifs drawn from (classical) literary texts, and these images are in turn accompanied by written legends or commentaries which provide an additional translation or interpretation of the material at hand.[6] Although it may be an exaggeration to claim, as Compagnon recently has in *La Seconde Main*, that these emblems constitute "une espèce inédite du signe," they clearly differ from medieval allegory in that the relation between the *signifiant* and *signifié* (or between the *sermo* and *ratio*) is far less fixed, far less theologically codified than in medieval allegory.[7] The emblem is, in Compagnon's words, "un signe sans histoire,"

that is, its meaning is not fixed in some sacred origin, or tradition, and hence is available to a multiplicity of interpretative and iconographical possibilities.[8] If the medieval bestiaries and Tesauri were written by Churchmen whose chief aim was to convey simple moral interpretations of the world of creation (including, occasionally, figures from classical mythology), the emblem books on the other hand were compiled by men who had at least been exposed to the outer fringes of Renaissance humanism, and were composed for an audience which enjoyed the display of erudition. As Seznec observes, the science of emblems may have aimed at establishing an esoteric means of expression while at the same time wishing to offer lessons within the reach of everyone: "its ambition was to be at one and the same time an occult and a popular language."[9] The attraction of the emblem, in other words, lay in the fact that it was at once hermetic and accessible, at once open and closed.

The very first emblem book to be brought out was Andrea Alciati's Emblematum liber, published in Augsburg in 1531, and subsequently much translated and reprinted. Significantly enough for our topic, one of its 100 images (each accompanied by an epigram) depicted the Sirens with the following verses:

Absque alis volucres, crucibus absque puellas
Rostro absque pisces, qui tamen ora canant,
Quis putet esse ullos? iungi haec natura negavit
Sirenes fieri sed potuisse docent.
Illicitum est mulier, quae is piscem desinit
  atrum,
Plurima quod secum monstra libido vehit.
Aspectu, verbis, animi candore, trahuntur,
Parthenope, Ligia, Leucosia viri.
Has musae explumant,
has atque illudit Ulysses.
Scilicet est doctis cum meretrice nihil.[10]

As one can see, Alciati has turned the Sirens into a riddle "containing" a moral lesson: a wise man, as we know by now, will have nothing to do with Sirens. Geoffrey Whitney's A Choice of Emblemes and Other Devises / For the most parte gathered out of sundrie writers, Englished and Moralized (1586) is a typical example of the Renaissance vogue of emblem books, and shows some both the attractiveness and the limitations of the genre. Beneath a woodcut (borrowed from Alciati) depicting three (fish-tailed) Sirens singing and playing instruments to a mast-bound Odysseus, we read the following verses:

Withe the pleasaunte tunes, the SYRENES did
  allure
Ulisses wise, to listen theire songe:
But nothinge could his manlie harte procure,
Hee sailde awaie, and scap'd their charming
  strong,
  The face, he lik'de: the nether parte, did
    loathe:
  For womans shape, and fishes had they bothe.

Which shewes to us, when Bewtie seekes to snare
The carelesse man, whoe dothe no daunger dreede,
That he shoulde flie, and shoulde in time beware,
And not on lookes, his fickle fancie feede:

> Suche Mairemaides live that promise onelie
> ioyes:
> But hee that yeldes, at lengthe him selffe
> distroies.[11]

Whitney's moralization of the emblem really adds nothing new or different to the traditional interpretation of the Sirens in medieval bestiaries or Christian iconography. The novelty, rather, resides entirely in the interplay of image and text, and in the witty deployment of antithetical points (e.g., "The face, he lik'de: the nether parte, did loathe").

Cesare Ripa's Iconologia (1593) is probably the most monumental and most influential of the emblem books. Emile Mâle considered it "the key to the printed and sculptured allegories of the seventeenth century," and numerous editions, repeatedly enriched with new illustrations, were reprinted through the end of the eighteenth century.[12] Ripa (who seems to have been a famous chef by profession before he turned emblematist) includes in the 1603 edition of his Iconologia an emblem of "Eternity" which, though he does not specifically say so, bears a remarkable resemblance to the traditional twin-tailed Sirens of medieval and Renaissance iconography. Ripa borrowed the image from the Florentine Francesco Barberini; it represents a long-haired "Siren" whose star-studded tails are completely joined so as to encircle her entirely, and in her two hands she holds

two golden balls aloft. (See Figure 48.) Here is Ripa's allegorical "translation" of the image:

> Egli la figura: donna di forma venerabile, con capelli d'oro alquanto lunghi, & ricadenti sopra alle spalle, à cui dal sinistro, e destro lato, dove si dovrebbero stendere le coscie, in cambio di esse si vanno prolungando due mezi circoli, che piegando quello alla destra, e questo alla sinistra parte, vanno circondando detta donna fino sopra alla testa, dove si uniscono insieme, hà due palle d'oro una per mano alzate in su, & è vestita tutta die azurro celeste stellato, ciascuna delle quali cose è molto à proposito conveniente per denotare l'Eternità, poiche la forma circolare non ha principio, nè fine. L'oro è incorrutibile, & fra tutti li metalli il più perfetto, e l'azurro stellato ci rappresenta il Cielo, del quale cosa non appare più lontana dalla corruttione.[13]

Ripa's female emblem of Eternity, her two tails encircling her like an _ourobouros_, holding two golden balls symbolizing incorruptibility, dressed in starry celestial blue, would seem to be an obvious _avatar_ of the neo-Platonic heavenly Siren, and Barberini may well have taken his inspiration from the woodblock attributed to Titian which we have already mentioned in connection with Aretino's Sirena poems. A further variant of this emblem occurs in the Hertel edition of Ripa's _Iconologia_ (1758-60). The celestial "Siren" of Eternity is depicted on a stone slab in the lower righthand corner of the engraving. She appears to be guarding the entrance to a cave which Phoebus Apollo is approaching and in which Demogorgon (the progenitor of all the gods, according to Boccaccio's

Genealogia) is seated, writing down the laws of the Universe on a tablet. (See Figure 48.)

The Renaissance invention of the emblem and the invention of mobile type occurred more or less contemporaneously, as Compagnon points out.[14] And if printing made possible the wide popularity of the emblem books, disseminating an ever-increasing repertoire of signs and interpretations, so emblems in turn played an important role in the early art of the book, particularly as printer's marks which elaborately graced the title pages of many incunabula. It is therefore highly significant for our topic that the emblem of the Siren was often associated with the art of typography during the Renaissance, and in many cases became the emblem of the printed book. Nicolaus de Balaguer, a Venetian printer who worked circa 1486-88, was perhaps the first to choose a double-tailed Siren as his distinctive printer's mark. (See Figure 49.) One of the earliest and most famous of printed books, the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, published by Aldus in Venice in 1499, also contains a woodcut of a Siren. (See Figure 50.) Other Venetian printers who adopted the Siren as their printer's mark in the second half of the sixteenth century were Joannes Varisius and the heirs of Petrus Varanus. The Siren was also popular as a printer's mark outside of Italy: in the first half

of the sixteenth century, Juan Joffre of Valencia issued his books under the sign of a beautiful twin-tailed Siren flanked by two vines and two rodents and bearing a small dolphin (another frequent printer's mark) on her head. (See Figure 51.) A similar woodcut is found in Lucio Marineo Siculo, Cronica Daragon, published in 1524. Indeed, the Siren had found such favor as a printer's emblem that in 1674 Basile's Pentamerone is published in Naples "Ad istanza di Antonio Bulifòn Libraro all'Insegna della Sirena." The Siren which composes Bulifon's printer's mark bears the ambiguous inscription: "Non Sempre Nuoce."[15]

(A parenthetical digression on the transmission of Sirens. Art historians were long puzzled by the Sirens which figured in South American art of the seventeenth century, for they seemed to have no precedent in indigenous iconographic traditions. Their enigmatic presence in the folk art of the New World is perhaps explained by F. Muthmann's convincing hypothesis that these Sirens were actually copied from the printer's marks that figured on the title pages of European books introduced into South America. This hypothesis seems doubly plausible, given the fact that, as M. von Luschan has argued, the twin-tailed Siren that occurs in Benin art seems to have reached Africa in much the same way, i.e., through the

commercial relations that existed between Nürnberg, Lisbon, and the Benin.[16] A Yoruba ivory amulet illustrated in Willet's Ite and the History of West African Sculpture (which uncannily resembles a Siren holding her twin tails) would seem to confirm this argument. (See Figure 53.))

Why is it so appropriate--indeed, so inevitable--that the Siren should emerge as an emblem of the printed book? As we have seen, the Siren has over the course of her long history often been associated with various forms of problematic textuality. Already in Homer's Odyssey, the Sirens appear to suggest a danger not only to Odysseus, but to Homer's poem itself--whether they represent the lure of lyric, or of an alternate, more Iliadic form of epic, or simply the danger that the narrative will be diverted from its course by its own self-indulgent tendency to mirror or echo itself along the way. Medieval Christian commentators, one may recall, similarly drew on a Patristic tradition which interpreted the Sirens as symbols of the guiles of mendacious (secular) rhetoric, and Boethius opposed Philosophy to the Sirens of poetry, while other Church Fathers construed the temptation of the Sirens as including secular music, theater, and, perhaps most significantly, the heterodox or heretical reading of Christian texts.[17] Given this tradition of interpretation, it is not surprising that the Sirens should

be associated with the art of printing, a diabolical invention par excellence, as the German folk tradition which casts Doctor Faustus as the inventor of printing clearly attests. Even the great Venetian printer Aldo Manunzio was suspected (like Gutenberg) of having entered into league with the Devil by having employed one of his imps as an assistant. In 1490, he found it necessary to issue a public statement declaring that "I, Aldo Manunzio, printer to the Doge, have this day made public exposure of the printer's devil [the common term during the period for a printer's boy]. All who think he is not flesh and blood may come and pinch him."[18]

The art of printing was diabolic (or, if one will, Sirenic) for a variety of reasons. As the vehicle for the dissemination of profane books (such as Aretino's erotic poetry), it obviously aided the spread of an increasingly secularized Renaissance humanism, while simultaneously weakening the authority of the Church. In addition, by making the Bible available to a greater number of readers, the new technology of print further undermined the power of the clergy by creating the possibility of a direct, unmediated contact with the Holy Scripture--the interpretative freedom this enabled would lead directly to the Reformation, an outgrowth of that heterodox or heretical reading of the Bible which the Middle Ages had

associated with the lure of the Sirens. But it is perhaps above all as an art of mechanical reproduction (to use Walter Benjamin's phrase), as a technology which involves the multiplication of copies at the expense of the original, that printing most resembles the "counterfeit" or "forged" lure of the Sirens (who, as we have seen time and time again, are frequently seen as mere copies, mere "doubles," mere deceptions, and never authentic originals). It is therefore appropriate that so many early printers should have adopted the Siren as an emblem to grace their title page: she is there to entice the reader, to lure him into the text, and to advertise the craft of the typographer. Her splayed tails, moreover, are perfectly suited to the printer's display of his own talent and name on the title page. And if the Siren sings "Non Sempre Nuoce" to the prospective reader, it is to invite or provoke him to taste the forbidden _plaisir du texte_.

It is very much in this sense that François Rabelais speaks of the fantastic animals which decorate the Silenus boxes found in apothecary shops:

> Silenes estoient jadis petites boites, telles que voyons de present es bouticques des apothecaires, pinctes au dessus de figures joyeuses et frivoles, comme de harpies, satyres, oysons bridez, lievres cornuz, canes bastées, boucqs volans, cerfz limonniers et aultres telles pinctures contrefaictes à plaisir pour exciter le monde à rire . . . mais au dedans l'on reservoit les fines drogues comme baulme,

> ambre gris, amomon, musc, zivette, perreries et aultres choses precieuses.[19]

Gargantua, as Rabelais writes in his "Prologe de l'auteur," resembles one of these Silenus boxes. Though its title, though its exterior presentation might suggest nothing but "mocqueries, folateries et menteries joyeuses," at its interior is to be found the precious medicament of wisdom:

> C'est pourquoy fault ouvrir le livre et soigneusement peser ce que y est deduict. Lors congnoistrez que la drogue dedans contenue est bien d'aultre valeur que ne promettoit la boite, c'est-à-dire que les materieres icy traictees ne sont tant folastres comme le titre au-dessus pretendoit.[20]

In the very next paragraph, Rabelais goes on, significantly enough, to mention the Sirens as figures of this interplay between exterior and interior, container and contained, "folasterie" and wisdom:

> Et, posé le cas qu'au sens literal vous trouvez matieres assez joyeuses et bien correspondentes au nom, toutesfois pas demourer là ne fault, comme au chant de Sirenes, ains à plus hault sens interpreter ce que par adventure cuidiez dict en gayeté de cueur.[21]

The song of the Sirens is here associated with the lure of the literal level of the text, with the casual or accidental ("par aventure") texture of the signifiant (puns, wordplay, double entendres, in short, everything "dict en gayeté de cueur"). Here again, we see the Sirens associated with the seductive pleasure of the (literal)

surface, and if Rabelais warns his reader "toutesfois pas demourer la ne fault," he seems to be alluding to a danger already alluded to in Homer--the danger that the reader's journey will be impeded, the danger that his interpretative course will be waylaid in the "sens literal" instead of rising to that "plus hault sens" which contains (in another famous metaphor) the book's "sustantificque mouelle." The Siren's song is here placed in the same category as the jingles on the fool's cap, with which Erasmus attracts his audience so that he may hold up a mirror to the folly of his age. But it is also a resounding humanist affirmation of the reader's capacity to listen, like Odysseus, to their charming melody, without falling prey to the lure of literalism.

NOTES

Chapter VIII

[1] Hans Sachs, ed. Adelbert von Keller (Stuttgart: H. Laupp, 1873), VII, pp. 410-414.

[2] Sachs, pp. 410-411.

[3] Sachs, p. 413.

[4] The poem ends with the date "Anno salutis 1557 jar, am 27 tag Novembris."

[5] See E. P. Goldschmidt, The Printed Book of the Renaissance (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1950).

[6] See Mario Praz, Studies in Seventeenth-Century Imagery (London: The Warburg Institute, 1939) for a fuller discussion.

[7] Antoine Compagnon, La Seconde Main, ou le travail de la citation (Paris: Seuil, 1979), p. 258.

[8] Compagnon, p. 259.

[9] Jean Seznec, The Survival of the Pagan Gods, trans. B. F. Sessions (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1953), p. 103.

[10] Andrea Alciati, Emblemata (Lugd: apud Mathiam Bonhomme, 1550), p. 126. For a further discussion of Sirens in emblems, see Th. A. G. Wilberg Vignau-Schuurman, Die Emblematischen Elemente im Werke Joris Hoefnagels (Leiden: Universitaire, 1969), pp. 163-166. Hoefnagel's (1542-1600) motto over his emblem of the Sirens reads: "Homo fugiens non moratur lyrae strepitum." This motto, as Vignau-Schuurman points out on p. 166, was probably taken from the Adagia Erasmiana, where we find it as "Vir fugiens haud moratur lyrae strepitum," and where it is thus explained: "Senarius proverbialis in eos, qui in rebus periculosis ac seriis, properan*d*i studio negligunt leviora. Nam qui fugit in bello, non putat sibi liberu*m* ac vacuum, ut cantore*m* aliquem auscultet. Idq*ue* ad co*m*plures res acco*m*modari potest." In his Wapen-und Stammbuch of 1589, Jost Amman inscribed the word "VANITAS" over the Siren.

[11] Geoffrey Whiting, A Choice of Emblems (Leyden: Christopher Plantyn, 1586), p. 10.

[12] Seznec, p. 278.

[13] Cesare Ripa, Iconologia overo descrittione di diverse imagini cavate dall'antichità, e di propria inventione (Rome, 1603), rpt. with an introduction by Erna Mandowsky (Hildesheim: Olms, 1970), pp. 140-141.

[14] Compagnon, p. 262.

[15] The Siren as printer's mark is discussed by Friedrich Muthmann in Abhandlungen der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften, Phil.-Hist. Kl. 1 (1956), pp. 1-85.

[16] Muthmann, p. 80.

[17] Erich Kaiser, "Odyssee-Szenen als Topoi," Museum Helveticum, 21 (1964), pp. 126-127.

[18] William Rose Benét, The Reader's Encyclopedia, 2nd ed. (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1965), p. 816.

[19] François Rabelais, Oeuvres Complètes, ed. P. Souda (Paris: Garnier, 1962), I, pp. 5-7.

[20] Rabelais, p. 7.

[21] Rabelais, p. 7.

CHAPTER IX

SHAKESPEARE'S SIREN TEARS

The verse romances and epics of Boiardo, Ariosto, Tasso, Spenser and Camões, as well as the emblem books we have examined in previous chapters do of course not exhaust the possible literary and iconographic habitats of the Renaissance Siren--although they do constitute her most privileged domain. Any fuller investigation of the motif of the Siren during the Renaissance would have to venture further into the vast and virtually impenetrable body of Renaissance mythography which issues out of Boccaccio--in England, the names of Stephen Batman and Richard Linche come to mind--as well as into the great mass of intellectual prose (Bacon, Burton, et al.) and the rich lode of minor mythological poetry, often Ovidian in inspiration, dealing with classical themes. All of this lies well beyond the limits of the present investigation, as does the broader tracing of the evolution of Odyssean themes in Renaissance and post-Renaissance literature. We will therefore restrict ourselves in these final pages to casting a brief glance at a few, fleeting apparitions of the Siren in the work of William Shakespeare.

In an appendix to his useful _The Ulysses Theme_, W. B. Stanford quotes Samuel Daniel's _Ulisses and the Syren_ (1605), one of the few English Renaissance poems to focus on Odysseus's encounter with the enchantress (and which compares interestingly with the Hans Sachs _Schwank_ we analyzed in the previous chapter). The Siren offers Ulysses rest, mirth, and pleasure, while trying to convince him that the heroic pursuit of worldly glory is but a delusion compared to the peace she can offer him:

> Vlisses, O be not deceiu'd
> With that vnreall name,
> This honour is a thing conceiu'd,
> And rests on others fame,
> Begotten onely to molest
> Our peace and to beguile
> (The best thing of our life) our rest,
> And giue vs vp to toyle.

Ulysses replies that he prefers honor, toil and danger:

> Delicious Nymph, suppose there were
> Nor honour, nor report,
> Yet manlines would scorne to weare
> The time in idle sport,
> For toyle doth giue a better touch,
> To make vs feel our joy,
> And ease finds tediousnesse as much
> as labour yeelds annoy.[1]

Stanford notes that this reply seems to echo Ulysses's great speech on Time in _Troilus and Cressida_ (III, iii) in which he pleads to Achilles for glorious deeds.[2] Daniel's Syren is similar in function to Spenser's five

mermaids of the senses, but whereas in Spenser a Christian allegory overlays the knightly exploits, here the context is more specifically secular, as it will also tend to be in Shakespeare.

But perhaps the most celebrated Siren song of the English Renaissance is the one Sir Thomas Browne composed for his masque of the Inner Temple:

> Steer hither, steer, your winged pines,
> All beaten mariners,
> Here lie Love's undiscover'd mines,
> A prey to passengers;
> Perfumes far sweeter than the best
> Which make the Phoenix urn and nest.
> Fear not your ships,
> Nor any to oppose you save our lips.
> But come on shore,
> Where no joy dies till love hath gotten more.[3]

As K. M. Briggs observes in The Anatomy of Puck, this Browne Siren is carefully classical in inspiration, half-bird, half-fish, with Hyginus and Servius quoted as authorities.[4] Many of the English Renaissance Sirens, however, also contain elements that are more medieval or folkloristic in origin--this is particularly true of the comb and the looking glass that were the mermaid's most frequent heraldic attributes. Browne's poetry provides several examples of this. Here is the comb (and the deceptive weeping):

> But (of great Thetis' train)
> Ye mermaids fair,
> That on the shores do plain

Your sea-green hair,
As ye in trammels knit your locks,
Weep ye; and so enforce the rocks
In heavy murmurs through the broad shores tell
How Willy bade his friend joy and farewell.[5]

Here is the looking glass, emblem at once of narcissism and amorous fascination:

See, the salmons leap and bound
To please us as we pass;
Each mermaid on the rocks around,
Lets fall her brittle glass,
As they their beauties did despise,
And lov'd no mirror but your eyes.[6]

We have quoted these poems of Samuel Daniel and Sir Thomas Browne simply to give something of the tone of the context within which Shakespeare was working--a confluence (to simplify drastically) of the "high" classical tradition (filtered through Golding's Metamorphoses) and the more "popular" tradition of folk belief, emblem books, heraldry, etc. It is significant in this respect that throughout Shakespeare the terms "sirens" and "mermaids" are more or less interchangeable, for the distinction between the Odyssean creatures and the enchantresses of northern mythology is no longer pertinent. Already Chaucer had noted the tendency of the two terms to blend:

Swich swete song was hem among,
That me thoughte it no briddes song,
But it was wonder lyk to be
Song of mermaydens of the see;
That, for her singing is so clere,

Though we mermaydens clepe hem here
In English, as in our usaunce,
Men clepn hem sereyns in Fraunce.
(Romaunt of the Rose,
677-684)[7]

A Midsummer Night's Dream is perhaps Shakespeare's happiest fusion of his classical inheritance (via Golding's Metamorphoses and Plutarch), with a more local legacy of British fairylore; and Oberon's famous lines about "a mermaid on a dolphin's back" are indicative of the intricate resonances Shakespeare is able to elicit from whatever literary or popular material he happens to be dealing with:

OBERON
My gentle Puck, come hither. Thou remember'st
Since once I sat upon a promontory,
And heard a mermaid on a dolphin's back
Uttering such dulcet and harmonious breath,
That the rude sea grew civil at her song,
And certain stars shot madly from their spheres
To hear the sea-maid's music.

PUCK I remember,
OBERON
That very time I saw (but thou couldst not)
Flying between the cold moon and the earth,
Cupid, all armed. A certain aim he took
At a fair vestal, throned by the west,
And loosed his love-shaft smartly from his bow,
As if should pierce a hundred thousand hearts.
(lines 146-160)[8]

Since the "vestal" of line 158 appears to be an allusion to Elizabeth, the Virgin Queen and voteress of the moon-goddess Diana, commentators have tried to decipher the "mermaid on a dolphin's back" as an allusion to a

contemporary historical figure, say, Mary Queen of Scots. It would make more sense, however, to recognize in these lines a more conventional icon of the Siren. "The sea-maid's music" echoes with a reminiscence of the music of the spheres so frequently associated in the Renaissance with the Platonic Siren ("And certain stars shot madly from their sphere"). The power of her "dulcet and harmonious breath" to effect (and in this case civilize) the untrammeled forces of nature allies her with Orpheus--and contrasts nicely with the Spenserian Sirens (who, as we have seen, aroused the sensual elements through their singing). More specifically, this mermaid who reigns over the wat'ry kingdom ("That the rude sea grew civil at her song") recalls Ariosto's Alcina, mistress of all the creatures of the sea: "E volendo vedere una sirena / che col suo dolce canto acheta il mare" (Orlando Furioso, VI, xl).

It is not on a dolphin, however, but on a whale that Alcina rides off with Astolfo, but the detail is insignificant, for Shakespeare is here drawing on a very common icon of Renaissance pageantry described at some length by Noel Purdon in The Words of Mercury: Shakespeare and English Mythography of the Renaissance:

> The pattern would always be similar--a personnage from marine mythology--Neptune,

> Arion, or Proteus perhaps, or a triton or mermaid--would ride on a dolphin, either on a rocking cart in a procession, or as part of a water-pageant on an estate-lake. He would sing, and make a short speech commanding the sea to cease its turbulence, perhaps as a mark of subservience to a princely spectator. In more lavish pageants, such as Gascoigne's _Princely Pleasures_ of 1575, a fireworks display could follow, to represent the heavenly conflagration as a result of the music.[9]

Purdon reproduces a number of woodcuts and engravings representing these mythological water pageants in honor of Queen Elizabeth, and a number feature mermaids (or tritons) on dolphins' backs, the power of their music clearly symbolizing the power of the sovereign in achieving harmony and concord within her realm. The classical and Christian tradition of the Siren as agent of disorder or corporeal misrule seems here to have been completely reversed--though one should point out that in the following portions of Oberon's speech, Shakespeare has linked the mermaid's song to the unleashing of Cupid's "fiery shaft" which flies (in vain) against the "wat'ry moon" of Elizabeth-Diana.

A similar tableau of marine pageantry, a virtual _carro trionfale_ of gorgeous verbal orchestration, is set in motion by Shakespeare in praise of another (and far less vestal) queen. We refer of course to the celebrated lines spoken by Enobarbus in _Antony and Cleopatra_ (II, ii):

> The barge she sat in, like a burnish'd throne,
> Burn'd on the water: the poop was beaten gold;
> Purple the sails, and so perfumed that
> The winds were love-sick with them . . .

It is altogether appropriate that this "Rare Egyptian," this great vampire-goddess, should be escorted in her triumphal procession by "smiling Cupids" and . . . mermaids:

> Her gentlewomen, like the Nereides
> So many mermaids, tended her i' th' eyes,
> And made their bends adornings. At the helm
> A seeming mermaid steers: the silken tackle
> Swell with the touches of those flower-soft
>   hands,
> That yarely frame the office. From the barge
> A strange invisible perfume hits the sense
> Of the adjacent wharfs.
> (lines 210-16)

Cleopatra is not only associated with mermaids through contiguity, but, as already becomes clear in this same scene, she is metaphorized into a figure closely resembling the Siren in her endless fueling of desire ("Other women cloy / The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry / Where most she satisfies . . ."), and will ensnare Antony with her wiles, until his fortunes shipwreck in her bed ("Royal wench! / She made great Cesar lay his sword to bed; / He plouged her, and she cropped."). A similar metaphor occurs in the description of Tamora in Titus Andronicus (I, i): " . . . this queen, / This goddess, this Semiramis, this nymph, / This siren that

will charm Rome's Saturnine / And see his shipwreck and his commonweal's."

Though Shakespeare here rather conventionally associates the mermaid with the lures of concupiscence (Cleopatra and Tamora are sisters of Alcina, Armida, and Acrasia), he also draws on the tradition which associates the Siren with the power of words as instruments of deceit. In _Venus and Adonis_, for example, Venus cries out upon hearing from Adonis that he does not and cannot love her:

> "What! canst thou talk?" quoth she. "Hast thou a tongue?
> O, would thou hadst not, or I had no hearing!
> Thy mermaid's voice hath done me double wrong;
> I had my load before, now pressed with bearing:
> Melodious discord, heavenly tune harsh sounding,
> Ear's deep-sweet music, and heart's deep-sore wounding."
>
> (lines 427-32)

Later in the poem, Adonis picks up the same metaphor to protest against the elaborate rhetoric of seduction which Venus has woven to ensnare his affections. Like a virginal Odysseus, he will stop his ears against her blandishments:

> "If love have lent you twenty thousand tongues,
> And every tongue more moving than your own,
> Bewitching like the wanton mermaid's songs,
> Yet from mine ear the tempting tune is blown;
> For know, my heart stands armed in mine ear
> And will not let a false sound enter there,
>
> "Lest the deceiving harmony should run
> Into the quiet closure of my breast;

> And then my little heart were quite undone,
> In his bedchamber to be barred of rest.
> No, lady, no; my heart longs not to groan,
> But soundly sleeps while now it sleeps alone."
> (lines 775-786)

Public or political rhetoric is also seen as a potential form of linguistic deception, as in the Virgilian painting of the Fall of Troy in _The Rape of Lucrece_, where Nestor (with "conceit deceitful, so compact, so kind") is seen seducing the Greeks into battle:

> There pleading might you see grave Nestor stand,
> As 'twere encouraging the Greeks to fight,
> Making such sober action with his hand
> That it beguiled attention, charmed the sight.
> In speech it seemed his beard, all silver white,
> Wagged up and down, and from his lips did fly
> Thin winding breath, which purled up to the sky.
>
> About him were a press of gaping faces
> Which seemed to swallow up his sound advice,
> All jointly list'ning, but with several graces,
> As if some mermaid did their ears entice . . .
> (lines 1401-1411)

Nestor's mermaid-like gift for deceptive political oratory is again alluded to in _Henry the Sixth, Part III_, in a speech in which the monstrous Richard, crazed by his lust for the crown, gives a veritable inventory of the arts of political dishonesty and opportunism. The mermaid, appropriately enough, takes her place here beside Machiavel:

> Why, I can smile, and murder whiles I smile,
> And cry "Content!" to that which grieves my heart,
> And wet my cheeks with artificial tears,
> And frame my face to all occasions.

> I'll drown more sailors than the mermaid shall;
> I'll slay more gazers than the basilisk;
> I'll play the orator as well as Nestor,
> Deceive more slily than Ulysses could
> And, like a Sinon, take another Troy.
> I can add colors to the chameleon,
> Change shapes with Proteus for advantages,
> And set the murderous Machiavel to school.
> (III, ii, lines 182-193)

Richard's "artificial tears" are, as we have seen, a common attribute of the Renaissance mermaid--Sir Thomas Browne's poem quoted above makes mention of them, as does Spenser. They commonly represent deception, allurement through pity, while at the same time emphasizing the perilous and yet attractive liquidity of the female. All these associations converge in Antipholus' declaration of love to Luciana in The Comedy of Errors (III, ii), a scene shot through with themes of deceit. Luciana is asking Antipholus to lie, to pretend he truly loves his sister ("Apparel vice like virtue's harbinger; / Bear a fair presence, though your heart be tainted; / Teach sin the carriage of a holy saint; / Be secret-false; what need she be acquainted?"). She is asking him, in other words, to behave like a Siren; he in turn accuses her of being a Siren, of luring him to death with talk of her sister when it is in fact she, Luciana, whom he loves:

> O train me not, sweet mermaid, with thy note,
> To drown me in thy sister's flood of tears!
> Sing, siren, for thyself, and I will dote.

> Spread o'er the silver waves thy golden hairs,
> And as a bed I'll take them and there lie;
> And in that glorious supposition think
> He gains by death that hath such means to die.
> Let Love, being light, be drowned if she sink!
> (lines 45-52)

The wavy golden hair, the seductive singing ("thy note"), the sexual double entendre on "die" and on "light" (i.e., wanton)--all these combine into a seme we are now most familiar with.

Another scene of "death" associated with the mermaid-Siren shows the extraordinary economy and density of Shakespearean metaphor. The passage in question occurs in <u>Hamlet</u> (IV, vii) and deals with the suicide of Shakespeare's most tragic songstress. Queen Gertrude is describing the circumstances of Ophelia's death:

> There on the pendent boughs her coronet weeds
> Clamb'ring to hang, an envious sliver broke;
> When down her weedy trophies and herself
> Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,
> And, mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up;
> Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds,
> As one incapable of her own distress,
> Or like a creature native and indued
> Unto that element; but long it could not be
> Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
> Pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay
> To muddy death.
> (lines 171-82)

Ophelia's "mermaid-like" clothes may refer to the billowing waves or the undulating hair or simply the two fishtails which are standard features of the iconography of the Siren. But these clothes are "mermaid-like" in another

sense as well, for as life-preservers their function is entirely deceptive: though they seem to bear her up at first, it is in fact her garments which cause her demise, for "heavy with their drink," they "pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay / To muddy death." And what is Ophelia's "melodious lay" or "old laud" but the immemorial song of the Siren, transformed now into a "mad song" chanted by a hapless Orphic prophetess, "incapable of her own distress"? All of which resonates through one of Shakespeare's finest sonnets. I quote it without the Siren-lure of commentary:

> What potions have I drunk of Siren tears
> Distilled from limbecks foul as hell within,
> Applying fears to hopes and hopes to fears,
> Still losing when I saw myself to win!
> What wretched errors hath my heart committed
> Whilst it hath thought itself so blessèd never!
> How have mine eyes out of their spheres been
>   fitted
> In the distraction of this madding fever!
> O benefit of ill: now I find true
> That better is by evil still made better;
> And ruined love, when it is built anew,
> Grows fairer than at first, more strong, far
>   greater.
> So I return rebuked to my content,
> And gain by ills thrice more than I have spent.
> (Sonnet 119)

NOTES

Chapter IX

[1] Samuel David, Ulisses and the Syren (1605), quoted by W. B. Stanford in The Ulysses Theme: A Study in the Adaptability of a Traditional Hero, 2nd ed. (Ann Arbor: The Univ. of Michigan Press, 1982), p. 313.

[2] Stanford, p. 313.

[3] Thomas Brown, as cited by Katherine M. Briggs in The Anatomy of Puck (London: Routledge, 1959), p. 150.

[4] Briggs, p. 151.

[5] Briggs, p. 151.

[6] Briggs, p. 152.

[7] Quoted in Robert Kilburn Root, Classical Mythology in Shakespeare (New York: H. Holt, 1903), p. 107.

[8] All Shakespeare quotations are taken from William Shakespeare, The Complete Works, ed. Alfred Harbage (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969).

[9] Noel Purdon, "The Words of Mercury: Shakespeare and English Mythography of the Renaissance," in Elizabethan and Renaissance Studies, 39, ed. James Hogg (Salzburg: Universität Salzburg, 1974), p. 190. Purdon notes the ongoing use of this conventional image: "Ben Jonson, for instance, uses the same 'riding on a dolphin' device three times, in Neptune's Triumph, in the Staple of News, and in the Twelfth Night entertainments of 1605. At the same time the mermaid-on-dolphin icon had a continued non-dramatic existence as a convention in poetry for a Locus amoenus description or a lively delineation of place." Ibid.

APPENDIX A

A BRIEF SURVEY OF SIREN SCHOLARSHIP

The seventeenth century saw a proliferation of myth manuals and lexica modeled after their great Renaissance predecessors, the mythographies of Boccaccio, Giraldi, Cartari and Conti. As Noel Purdon has pointed out, "these manuals leave much to be desired as reference compendia and one must be careful not to over-estimate their importance."[1] Indeed, they are characterized by an increasing brevity of the single entries, reflecting both the reading habits of its perusers and the publishers' desire to make a handsome profit with them. Rarely does one find any new information and/or interpretation of the ancient myths: what survives in a number of them, e.g., in François Pomey's Pantheum Mythicum seu Fabulosa Deorum Historia (1675), is the medieval habit of moralizing mythology. The Sirens remain a symbol of "voluptatum illecebis," which must be countered with the songs of Orpheus, i.e., the wise and reliable counsels already prescribed by Comes (Natale Conti) in his Mythologiae. Boccaccio is mentioned, but in an almost perfunctory way, in Herbert of Cherbury's De Religione Gentilium (1648): he has now taken his place among the revered host of authorities, and the result

is that almost anything can be attributed to him. Thus he is credited for having "related" the story of the Siren's meadow, which, in fact, is a very marginal detail in the Genealogia. On the other hand, the notion of Sirens as meretrices survives well into the eighteenth century, and we still find it in the 1770 edition of Benjamin Hederich's Mythologisches Lexicon (1741). A rare instance of new "information" is provided in Samuel Boyse's (1708-1749) Pantheon or Fabulous History of the Heathen Gods, Heroes and Goddesses, etc. In the 1753 edition of this manual we are told that the Sirens are connected to the floodings of the Nile: "The Egyptians . . . represented the three Months of Inundation by Irises, or Figures half Female and half Fish. . . . to these symbols they gave the name of Syrenes. . . ." Did Boyse have Shakespeare's description of Cleopatra's barge in mind?

The first "scholarly" treatise entirely devoted to the Sirens was Claude Nicaise's Les Sirens, ou Discours sur leur forme et figure, published in 1691, a very curious work which combines the standard Siren-lore with an enlightened hymn to the city of Naples as a cradle of culture and scholarship:

> Nous reconnaissons par toutes ces choses que la ville de Naples était le vrai séjour des Sirènes. . . . C'est de là que je me persuade que les Napolitains ont toujours pris Parthénope pour leur symbole, tant à cause, s'il m'est permis de le dire, que par ses ailes elle marque qu'elle a toujours volé jousqu'au ciel et s'est élevée au-dessus des autres villes d'Italie,tant par sa noblesse et les beaux esprits qu'elle a produits. . . .

This was the time of Muratori, Fontanari, the abate Conti and Giambattista Vico--who, though he was only twenty-three, was already deeply immersed in the studies that would lead to the Scienza Nuova (1725) and its revolutionary approach to mythology. However, it was Herder, and not Vico, who functioned as the great mediator between the mythology of the Enlightenment and that of Romanticism. His observation, written down in his Travel Diary of 1769 that "Greek mythology must be read at sea" and that "the nymphs, sirens, tritons, etc. are both easily explicable in terms of the sea"[2] probably spawned the myriad of marine, meteorological and other nature-oriented explanations of the Sirens one finds in nineteeth-century scholarship.

Vico's example, on the other hand, which had been to regard all the incidents in the Odyssey as "symbolical representations of historical forces and movements," where Circe and the Sirens "portray the politics of the

heroic cities," since "the sailors, travellers and wanderers of these fables are the plebeians who, contending with the heroes for a share in the auspices, are vanquished in the attempt and cruelly punished,"[3] did not appeal to the more romantically inclined followers of Hamann and Herder.

It would be a Sisyphean task to list each and every opinion that has been risked on the Sirens since Herder undertook his epiphanic sea-journey in 1769. Scholars have tried to provide an overview of the numerous theories that have been proposed regarding the Sirens of Greek antiquity, by grouping them into a number of distinct categories. E. Kaiser, for example, distinguishes five main theories, which consider the Sirens respectively as (1) midday-demons, (2) soul-birds, (3) Muses of the Otherworld, (4) Muses of Magic Song, and (5) a nymphlike group of Muses devoted to citharoedic dance (the latter notion was set forth, rather unconvincingly, by H. Koller in his Musik und Dichtung im Alten Griechenland, pp. 45-48).[4] Kaiser has not included in his list what one might call the marine and meteorological schools of thought, which dominated Siren-scholarship during the latter part of the nineteenth century. It should not go unmentioned that H. Schrader devoted an entire book to the theory that Sirens were--originally--an embodiment

of sultry winds originating from the earth, associated with the scorching effects of the sun (H. Schrader, Die Sirenen nach ihrer Bedeutung und künstlerischen Darstellung im Altertum, 1868): "Wir bezeicnen die Sirenen als die Brennenden, Ausdörrenden"[5]--just as W. Roscher devoted an opus to proving that the Gorgons were originally embodiments of "thunder and lightning."[6] Following similar notions, J. Schwartz had discovered an affinity between the Sirens and the Hraesvelgar, the stormbird of Eddic mythology.[7] Klausen, like Schrader, had also linked them to the scorching glow of the sun and had termed them "demons of putrefaction" (Dämonen der Verwesung).[8] Schrader had at one point mentioned the scirocco as an example of an "evil wind": A. Conze countered by proposing Malaria: "an die Malaria über lachenden Künstenstrichen könnte man denken. . . ."[9] Others again, taking Herder's suggestion to "understand" the Sirens in terms of the sea a bit too much à la lettre, focused on a number of marine phenomena. L. Preller "allegorized" them into "Perils of Seafaring,"[10] G. Patroni, betraying a more Mediterranean temperament, considered them "divinità del bel tempo";[11] J. F. Cerquand, on the other hand, stressed "l'enervement par la fatigue et la chaleur," before setting sail for

the Milky Way and interpreting the Odyssey as a voyage through the skies, where Odysseus' ship is the sun and the Sirens are the stars which commit suicide as it approaches, their twinkling being in fact their song.[12]

Speaking of intrepid navigators, one should not forget to mention the many scholars who actually took to the sea in order to map the geography of Odysseus' wanderings in Wonderland. The dean of these Homeric cartographers was probably V. Berard, who wrote five volumes on Le Navigation d'Ulysse and mobilized every possible geographical institute in the process. One thinks of Reinhold Messner reaching the summit of Mount Everest without the aid of oxygen when, in the entry made by Berard in his journal on August 26, 1912, we read: "Nous mettons enfin le pied sur le roc des Sirenes."--which, following a well-known popular tradition, he considers to be the three little Galli islands near Capri.[13] Some of these navigators actually got to hear the "song" of the Sirens: for S. Baring-Gould, it was "the wailing of the rising storm in the cordage . . . ; she derives the name of the Sirens from συρίζω, to pipe or whistle.[14] J. P. Postgate, on the other hand, was more inclined towards the piping of nightingales: "Like birds in a wood, they

were to the passing mariner 'vox et praeterea nihil'."[15] F. G. Welcker, while providing a useful overview of Sirens in literature and art, muses in an aside: "Es wäre nicht zu verwundern, wenn das ursprüngliche Märchen . . . nur einen Singvogel verstanden hätte. . . ."[16]

Much attention was of course devoted to the magic calm which ensues as Odysseus approaches the island of the Sirens: it prompted--just to cite one out of many--E. Buchholz to explain the Sirens as "eine Allegorisirung der blanken Spiegelfläche des Meeres," i.e., of the treacherous calms which trap ships on the sea.[17]

O. Crusius' controversial notion of the Sirens as midday-demons was essentially an outgrowth of the kind of romantic reveries mentioned so far.[18] Basing himself on Hellenistic folklore and literature, he discussed the by now notorious Symplegma on a decorative marble relief, showing a "winged female with bird-like claws 'visiting' an old farmer or traveller (or Silen) in a rustic landscape" (Figure 4). For Crusius there could be no doubt: this was a Siren sexually vampirizing a farmer who had fallen asleep in some evil place in the evil hour of noon.

Though the winged female--Cornelius Vermeule calls her "Lasa-like"[19]--bears no resemblance to any other known Siren-representation, Crusius found many

followers for his theory, among them K. Latte, Ch. Picard, E. Rhode, R. Caillois, et al. The theory, as far as it applies to Sirens, has now been laid to rest, the symplegma, however, still awaits its decipherer. Jane Harrison mentioned it to substantiate her notion of the Siren as Ker,[20] M. P. Nilsson also thought of a sultry midday dream,[21] and Emily Vermeule has recently included the picture in her noteworthy book on Death in Early Greek Art, entitling it "a traveler's dream, the noonday nightmare."[22] J. Hackin, having found a copy of it in his excavations in Begram (Afghanistan), takes it to be a forgotten "scene d'amour mythologique."[23] I would tend to agree with this notion, for except for the claws, the lady is most attractive and the "sleeping traveller" seems most cooperative. (Of course, Crusius' bowdlerized rendition of this relief in his article hid this fact from his readers.)

The relief is a treasure of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, which harbors another cause celèbre of "Sirenology": the famous Corinthian vase from about 570 B.C., known as the Boston Siren Aryballos (Figure 1), probably the earliest representation of the Odyssean Siren episode to have come down to us. A number of mysterious elements on the aryballos have yet to be explained satisfactorily. Briefly, the are (a) the black

oblong which obscures the ship's stern, (b) the third figure behind the two Sirens, (c) various phallic protuberances, (d) the birds hovering over the ship, and (e) the crossed square behind the "island" of the Sirens.

The black oblong has been compared to the fringed drapery on the aphlaston of Odysseus' ship on yet another famous piece of pottery, to which we will turn anon. J. R. T. Pollard has identified it as a steering platform.[24] The "female figure" has been identified with Chthon--one of the various mothers imputed to the Sirens--and with Circe, whose palace is shown by the crossed square behind the island. Personally, I take the third figure to be just another Siren, who has her wings folded over her back rather than stretching them out like the other two. The artist who painted this vase probably had as vague a notion of the Homeric Sirens as we do: he knew that there were erotic overtones in Odysseus' encounter with Circe and, by proxy, in the lure of the Sirens: these he indicated with the two phalloi, one on the ship, the other on the island. He was also aware of the dangerous aspect of the Sirens and conveyed some of this danger through the depiction of the two vulture-like birds hovering over Odysseus' ship. (I cannot go along with Pollard's

interpretation of them as harmless seagulls.) What is perhaps the most remarkable aspect of this depiction is the way the total "absence" of Odysseus' companions in this episode is rendered: the Sirens are perched on a "rock" where only Odysseus can see and hear them: it is clearly to him that they direct their magic song.

We turn now to the most famous representation of the Siren-episode in Greek art, the red-figure Attic stamnos, dated from about 475 B.C., found in Vulci (Figure 2). The unanswered question in this depiction concerns the Siren in the center: is she swooping down to pray upon the sailors, or is she falling down because she is dead or dying? As part-time ornithologist, I cannot go along with the attack-theory: no self-respecting Siren would ever "swoop to kill," except with her song; no bird plunges down so awkwardly if it wants to attack a victim. Since her eye is closed, I believe that the Siren is actually dead and that the artist is representing the legend according to which the Sirens died or committed suicide after failing to detain Odysseus (or after being out-sung by Orpheus in the voyage of the Argonauts).

The second puzzling feature in this depiction is the embroidered, fringed drapery hanging from the poop of the ship. E. de Laglandière considers it to be a "credemnon de l'initiation," hung on the ship to calm

the winds and the sea; he refers to the tradition according to which Odysseus was initiated into the mysteries of Samothrace (Scholiast on Apoll. Rhod. 1.907);[25] Jane Harrison also believed that the kredemnon "may have had some sacred significance."[26]

Leaving the realm of art and returning to our survey of theories, we now face the work which was the single most influential contribution to Siren-scholarship in this century: Weicker's Der Seelenvogel in der alten Litteratur und Kunst, published in 1902, an elaboration of his dissertation, "De Sirenibus Quaestiones Selectae" presented in Leipzig in 1895. Weicker, tired of the myriad of meteorological conjectures of his predecessors, ammassed what even today remains the most extensive collection of testimonia from art and--to a lesser degree--from literature, and then proceeded to cut the Gordian knot of the Siren-problem by claiming that the Sirens were soul-birds (i.e., souls of the dead), patterned after the well-known Egyptian ba-bird, and that the great majority of Sirens in art could be explained as such: their main feature is their bloodthirstiness and their sexual vampirism. Homer's Sirens are only an embellishment of demons which are in fact much more related to the Harpies, the Furies and the Stymphalian birds than to enchantresses. Weicker's theory held sway for many

years; because of its uncompromising one-sidedness, it also represented a serious setback for further inquiry. Weicker's article in Roscher's Lexicon became a standard reference. Its influence can be deduced from the following example: in the 1867 edition of Lübker's _Reallexicon des klassischen Altertums_, the Sirens were still "maidens dwelling on an island, later symbols of the dirge"; in the 1914 edition, they suddenly became "demons of the dead, lusting after blood and sex." Even Zwicker, who wrote the article on Sirens in Pauly's _Real-Encyclopödie_, though reaffirming the priority of the Homeric Sirens, accepted Weicker's notion of the _Seelenvogel_.

Thus, for many years, soul-birds proliferated in Siren-scholarship (see R. Hackl, O. Lagercrantz, de Petra, and countless others), until, in 1944, Ernst Buschor attempted a solitary coup d'état: in a work that was much criticized for its lack of critical apparatus, he tried to turn the Sirens into Muses of the Otherworld, _Musen des Jenseits_, who solace the dead with their song and act as an infernal counterpart to the Heliconian Muses. Buschor's book is beautifully written and makes for fascinating reading, but unfortunately, as J. R. T. Pollard has pointed out, "the view of the Sirens as Muses of the Dead, attractive

though it might appear, can scarcely be maintained on the evidence."[27]

But Buschor's masterpiece had undoubtedly set Siren-scholarship onto new tracks: from now on we will hear the Sirens referred to as some sort of Muses with increasing frequency; already Jane Harrison, in her Myths of the Odyssey (1882), had spoken of them as "a kind of evil Muse, not wholly evil, but very far from entirely good; sprung from a lower world of mystery and evil and death. . . . Muses rather of the barren sea than of the clear spring water . . ."[28] Even Károly Marót, while laboriously refuting all previous theories, including of course Buschor's, ends up by speaking of the Sirens as Muses of Magic (of course, for Márot, the Muses themselves were originally Siren-like sorceresses, dedicated to prophecy and magic dance).[29]

At this point, I shall limit myself to indicating a few works which the prospective "Sirenologist" might find useful in order to familiarize himself with the subject and then list a few significant articles or essays dealing with specific aspects of the Sirens. Jane Harrison's Myths of the Odyssey still remains a very useful and readable source of information; students with a mastery of Dutch will find a very witty and insightful "history of Sirens" in G. J. de Vries'

De Zang der Sirenen (1969); K. Márot's book (1960) is at times morose, at times brilliant, and should not fail to provoke further speculation. For a criticism of Maröt, and for some interesting new insights, G. K. Gresseth's article on "The Homeric Sirens" (1970) can be highly recommended. Gresseth makes a strong argument for the notion that the Homeric Sirens were in fact winged.[30] John Pollard, in Seers, Shrines and Sirens (1965), offers a concise survey of some of the theories we have mentioned previously. By far the most insightful contribution on Homeric Sirens is Pietro Pucci's recent article on "The Song of the Sirens" (1979): taking a thorough philological approach, he shows that the song of the Sirens--as text--is essentially Iliadic in nature (see note 31 of chapter I of this dissertation). Finally, one cannot but recommend Emily Vermeule's book on Aspects of Death in Early Greek Art and Poetry, where the Sirens are discussed together with "magicians, enchanters, druggists and poets," and some little-known representations of Sirens are reproduced.

The following is a list of articles and essays dealing with specific aspects of the Sirens and which were not mentioned in the preceding discussion.

Brommer, Frank. "Kopf über Kopf." Antike und Abendland 4 (1977), 42-44. Proves that what Kurt Latte had taken for Sirens perched on a man's head and consequently had interpreted as midday-demons are in fact just "heads"--though what their meaning might be remains unexplained.

Chapouthier, Fernand. "L'Homme-Oiseau et l'Origine de la Sirène," in F. Bisson de la Roque, Le Tresor de Tod, Cairo, Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1953, pp. 37-42. Describes a lapis-lazuli pendant which proves that the motif of the human-headed bird existed in Anatolian art of ca. 2000 B.C.

Curtius, Ernst. "Terracotten aus Kamiros," Archaeologische Zeitung, 28, 1871, pp. 10-11. Discusses a terracotta fragment which he interpets as Aphrodite Epitymbia in the shape of a Siren: Sirens were associated with Aphrodite--indeed, were originally an aspect of the goddess, who reigns over graves and cemeteries.

Germain, Gabriel. Essai sur les origines de certains thèmes odysséens et sur la genèse de l'Odyssée (Paris: P.U.F., 1954). "Les Sirènes promettent le savoir; qui les a entendues repart 'sachant plus'. A Ulysse, dont, sans l'avoir interrogé, elles n'ignorent pas le nom,

elles parleraient volontiers des héros de Troie, mais elles connaissent aussi bien 'tout ce qui se produit sur la terre nourricière'. L'appât qu'elles présentent à un esprit avisé, c'est donc ce terrible fruit de la connaissance pour lequel nos premiers parents perdirent l'Eden. Quels que soient les charmes auxquels les Sirènes puissent recourir pour des navigateurs plus vulgaires, elles n'en essaient pas d'autres sur Ulysse. En restituant son importance à cette tentation par le savoir, on tire ce court récit d'entre les apologues simplets pour l'apparenter à des mythes dont nous venons de citer le plus connu et le plus net" (p. 384).

Kanowski, M. G. "The Siren's Name on a Corinthian Aryballos," AJA, 77, 1 (1973), pp. 73-74. Discusses the word "foûs" on the "Schaubert Vase."

Kunze, Emil. "Sirenen," Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Athenische Abteilung, 57, 1932, pp. 124-141. Accepts Weicker's soul-bird: there is no doubt that the prototype for the Greek Sirens was the Egyptian soul-bird--but it came to them via the Orient, as did the griffin and the sphinx. Early representations of Sirens show no Egyptian influence. Greeks, inspired by Assyrian scorpion-men and scorpion-birds, consciously

discarded the scorpio-feature, and created a new type which was able to adapt itself to all developments of Greek art. The "tendril" often seen on heads of Sirens links them to Mistress of Beasts, πότνια θηρῶν, of oriental origin, who later had to yield to Olympian gods. Discusses a bird-siren on a shard from Praisos and claims it is the only example of a Mycenaean or sub-Mycenean Siren (dates it in the end of the eleventh century). For a vigorous refutation cf. D. Levi, AJA, 49 (1945) 280f.; cf. also J. P. Droop, BSA, 12 (1905-1906) 41ff. Discussing an ivory plaque from Ephesus, he supports derivation of the motif from Anatolian repertory of fantastic creatures.

Levi, Dorio. Gleanings from Crete: The Siren from Praisos, AJA, XLIX, 1945, pp. 280-293. Refutation of Kunze's theory that the Siren of the shard from Praisos (Crete) is Mycenaean. "The siren from Praisos finds its obvious place in the renewed stream of Oriental art among the many monstrous creatures suggested for the second time to the art of Crete by the fantasy of the Orient" (i.e., Hellenic art of Geometric style). The Praisos-siren is thus Geometric Greek. Suggests route of entry of Siren motif: "The motif of the siren is one of those which show how this oriental current followed the shores

of Syria and the bridge of the large islands of Cyprus and Rhodes to reach Crete directly from there, thence expanding to the Aegean islands, to the Peloponnese and the Greek mainland."

Mühlenstein, Hugo. "Sirenen in Pylos," Glotta, 36, 1-2, 1957, pp. 152-156. Attempts to prove that Sirens are mentioned on the tablets of Pylos as decorative elements: from the word seremokaraoi he derives hypothetical Mycenaean name of Sirens, i.e., σειρημ-. This theory has not found a great echo. See E. Kaiser, pp. 111-112.

Thompson, Homer A. "The Excavation of the Athenian Agora," Hesperia, 17, 3 (1948), pp. 160-161. Describes a Megarian bowl and what is presumably the first apparition of Sirens as mermaids in Greek art, described as "a fantastic contamination of the story of Scylla and Charybdis with that of the Siren." See O. Touchefeu-Meynier, Thèmes odysséens.

Touchefeu-Meynier, O. Thèmes odysséens dans l'art antique, Paris, Boccard, 1968, ch. IV, "Ulysse et les Sirènes." A very valuable catalogue of monuments depicting Odysseus and the Sirens. Considers Megarian bowl of third century B.C., discussed by Thompson, the

first apparition of the "mermaid": "Ce document nous parait donc d'un intérêt capital; c'est la première apparition, à notre connaisance, du type de la Sirène qu'adoptera le Moyen-Age, mais qui n'est signalé dans la littérature qu'au VIe siècle après J.-C., et qui n'était pas connu jusqu'à présent, dans l'art, avant le XIIe siècle après J.-C., date à laquelle il fait son apparition dans la sculpture romaine.

Note: I was not able to consult R. D. Barnett's article in S. Weinberg, ed., Studies Presented to Hetty Goldman (1956), p. 231, cited by E. Vermeule, p. 252.

NOTES

Appendix A

[1] Noel Purdon, The Words of Mercury: Shakespeare and English Mythography of the Renaissance (Salzburg: Universität Salzburg, 1974), p. 113.

[2] Johann Gottfried Herder, From Travel Journey, Book IV, cited by Burton Feldman and Robert D. Richardson in The Rise of Modern Mythology, 1680-1860 (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1972), p. 236.

[3] Giambattista Vico, The New Science, as quoted by W. B. Stanford in The Ulysses Theme: A Study in the Adaptability of a Traditional Hero, 2nd ed. (Ann Arbor: The Univ. of Michigan Press, 1968, Ann Arbor Paperbacks, 1982), pp. 185-186.

[4] E. Kaiser, Odysee-Szenen als Topoi, Museum Helveticum, 21 (1964), p. 111.

[5] Hermann Schrader, Die Sirenen nach ihrer Bedeutung und künstlerischen Darstellung im Altertum (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1868), p. 14.

[6] Wilhelm H. Roscher, Die Gorgonen (Leipzig: Teubner, 1879). See ch. VI: "Der Blitz spaltet oder durchbricht die schwangere Wolke und springt aus der dadurch entstandenen Öffnung heraus"--for the general tenor of the work.

[7] J. Schwartz, Zeitschrift für Gymnasialwesen 1863, p. 465. Quoted by Weicker, p. 217.

[8] R. H. Klausen, Abenteuer des Odysseus. Quoted by Weicker, p. 217.

[9] A. Conze, Heroen und Göttergestalten der Griechischen Kunst (Wien: n.p., 1874-75), p. 44.

[10] Ludwig Preller, Griechische Mythologie I (Berlin: n.p., 1860), p. 481.

[11] Giovanni Patroni, "Intorno al mito delle Sirene," Rivista di Filologia e d'Istruzione Classica, 19 (1891), p. 337.

[12] J. F. Arquand, Etudes de Mythologie Grèque (Paris: n.p., 1873), pp. 119-153.

[13] Victor Berard, Le Navigations d'Ulysse, IV (Paris: A. Colin, 1927-29), p. 383.

[14] Sabine Baring-Gould, Curious Myths of the Middle Ages (First and Second Series, London: Rivingtons, 1869), p. 429. See also W. W. Hyde, Ancient Greek Mariners (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1947), p. 82, where he writes that "the Sirens needed no island, since they merely symbolized the wailing of the storm through the ships' rigging."

[15] J. P. Postgate, "A Philological Examination of the Myth of the Sirens," The Journal of Philology IX (1880), p. 110.

[16] Friedrich G. Welcker, Griechische Götterlehre II (Göttingen: n.p., 1863), p. 171.

[17] Eduard Buchholz, Die Homerische Götterlehre III (Leipzig: Engelmann, 1884), p. 266.

[18] O. Crusius, "Die Epiphanie der Sirene," Philologus, 50 (1891), pp. 93-107.

[19] Cornelius Vermeule, "Greek, Etruscan and Roman Sculptures in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston," AJA, 68 (1964), p. 334.

[20] Jane E. Harrison, Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Univ. Press, 1908), p. 203.

[21] Martin P. Nilsson, Geschichte der Griechischen Religion (München: C. H. Beck, 1941-1950), p. 229.

[22] Emily Vermeule, Aspects of Death in Early Greek Art and Poetry (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1979), p. 155, fig. 8.

[23] Joseph Hackin, Nouvelles recherches archéologiques à Bergram (Paris: Presses Universitaires, 1954), p. 120.

[24] John R. T. Pollard, "The Boston Siren Aryballos," AJA, 53, 4 (1949), pp. 357-359.

[25] E. de Laglandière, "Ulysse et les Sirenes," *Annali dell'Istituto di Corrispondenza Archeologica per l'anno 1829*, I, Roma, p. 285.

[26] Jane Harrison, *Myths of the Odyssey in Art and Literature* (London: Rivingtons, 1882), p. 152.

[27] John R. T. Pollard, "Muses and Sirens," *The Classical Review*, N.S. 11, 12 (1952), p. 60.

[28] Harrison, *Myths*, p. 182.

[29] Károly Marót, Die Anfänge der Griechischen *Literatur. Vorfragen* (Budapest: Ungarische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1960).

[30] Gerald K. Gresseth, "The Homeric Sirens," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, 101 (1970), pp. 203-218.

APPENDIX B

SIRENS IN FOLKLORE

Any study of the folkloric "sources" of the *Odyssey* will have to find a way of coming to terms with the possibility that much of the folklore material under scrutiny may depend ultimately on--or in any case be influenced by--the *Odyssey* itself. The uncertainty caused by this possibility may well be the reason why most of the work done in this direction up to this day has limited itself to pointing out parallels to folk-tales and folk-beliefs without any further attempt to inquire into the significance of certain *nuclei* of motifs and their meaning vis-à-vis the *Odyssey*. This cautious approach may well be warranted in the face of the impossibility of making any conclusive statements regarding the dynamic interrelationship of oral epic and folk-tale. It might nevertheless be interesting to review what kind of folkloric sources have been suggested for the Sirens; then we could take a closer look at the motif of magic song and the different contexts in which it appears in folk-literature.

In an article published in 1908, W. Crooke identifies the Homeric "witch-maidens" with the "bird-maidens or

Gandhārvis of Buddhist tales, who charm travellers with their singing." He also relates them to "the Rākshasīs or ogresses of India, who live on human flesh, and change themselves into lovely maidens who seduce voyagers." Analogies are also seen with "water witches" such as the Pragagnan of Java, who "live on the banks of streams and madden men with their singing."[1] Following in Crooke's footsteps, L. Radermacher in 1915 mentions an Irish folktale in which Druids warn travelers to stop their ears with wax in order to elude the magic song of mermaids; he also sees an analogy to the Sirens in the _Watermömen_ of Mecklenburg and in "mermaid-gardens" of Breton folklore.[2] Denys Page devotes part of a chapter to the Sirens in his _Folktales in Homer's Odyssey_, where he reiterates the analogy with the Javanese _Pragagnan_, the German _Watermömen_, the cannibal ogresses of the Pāli Jātaka (Birth-Stories of Buddha), as well as the mermaids of Brittany and Malta.[3] Without specifying any particular folk-tale, Page suggests that the Siren-episode in the _Odyssey_ "is based on familiar folktale, not free invention," a folk-tale which he believes was known and immediately recognized by the Homeric audience.

It would be impossible to cite all the instances in which scholars have, more or less _en passant_, recognized the Odyssean Sirens in a varied array of mermaids,

water-spirits, and what usually turn out to be swan-maidens or Lamias. One suggestion which is often made--most recently by Karoly Marót and Gerald K. Gresseth--is to follow the "Celtic lead." Marót cites an episode of magically induced sleep in the "Distruction des Dind Rig."[4] Gresseth suggests that a further study of the "remarkable similarities between some Irish hero-adventures and the Odyssey" and the "whole correspondence of motifs between Irish and Greek myth" might yield interesting results.[5] (Robert Graves, in his White Goddess, "reconstructs" the Siren-song "on the model of similar songs in ancient Irish literature. He then identifies the Sirens with the "Birds of Rhiannon who sang at Harlech in the myth of Bran.")[6] In the following pages we shall be taking a closer look at some of the purported parallels in order to establish whether it is in fact possible to find a significant kinship between the motif of the Sirens--as it appears in the Odyssey--and analogous motifs in other folkloric sources.

1. Ogresses

In a Buddhist legend, the Valāhassa Jātaka "we read of a city in Ceylon, entirely inhabited by Rākshasīs. It was their custom to entice shipwrecked mariners into

their city, where, after a period of love and dalliance, their real nature would assert itself. On one occasion five hundred merchants were wrecked, and subsequently taken to Sirīsavatthu. They all paired off, and in the middle of the night the chief Rākshasī left her man in order to eat the flesh of a previous lover who now lay in magic chains in the house of torment. After her meal she returned, but it had had the effect of making her body cold. When about to embrace her, the merchant noticed the change and guessed the truth. In the morning he warned his companions, but only half the number were willing to try to effect an escape. The Bodhisattva suddenly appeared in the form of a flying white horse and took the two hundred and fifty merchants to a place of safety. The others were devoured by the Rākshasīs."

This Jātaka tale led to a learned discussion of whether the Rākshasīs could be identified with the Homeric Sirens, and whether the Buddhist tale might be derived directly from the Homeric myth.[8] A number of objections can be raised against an identification of the Buddhist ogresses with the Homeric Sirens. If one examines this and other stories about Rākshasīs, one finds that song and music play a very minor role in their luring of victims: their blandishments are primarily erotic and their distinguishing trait is the ability to transform

themselves from hideous monsters into ravishing beauties. Thus they might be related to the serpent-lamia, but not to the Sirens.

2. Of Highwaymen and Women

We have seen how by the fourth century A.D., the rationalistic interpretation of the Homeric Sirens as musical whores who preyed on travelers had become somewhat of a commonplace in exegetical and patristic writings. Is there any evidence to suggest that such an interpretation might in turn have been influenced by popular beliefs about the use of incantatory music in the context of robbery? The use of incantations and spells in order to "bind" or cast a magic sleep on possible victims is as old as witchcraft itself, and it would be difficult to draw a clear line between (magic) song and spell. Circe's knowledge of knots (VIII, 448) cannot be separated from her incantatory skills and her many devices; most frequently we find these knots and spells used in the context of love-magic (it is probably with a binding-spell similar to those recorded by J. C. Lawson in his book on modern Greek folklore that Circe would have unmanned Odysseus--X, 301), either for the purpose of winning a man's love or fettering his virility.[9] Whether the

use of "slumberstrains" in winning a lover--a motif which one finds both in Indian and Celtic tradition--is merely a romantic elaboration of the more primitive love-charms is difficult to ascertain. In a Kathakoca tale we are told of a musician who wins the hand of a princess by outplaying her and her other suitors at the lyre: while the others succeed in quieting a mad elephant, at making a barren tree blossom, at attracting a distant deer, etc., Dîpaçikha's playing casts a magic sleep on all those who are present; he takes off and piles up all the jewelry of the enchanted sleepers, and when they wake up again, the marriage is celebrated.[10]

The Celtic counterpart to Dîpaçikha is the musician Craiphtine, who in The Destruction of Dind Rig plays the slumberstrain on his lyre so that Moriath's mother, who has the bad habit of sleeping with only one eye at a time, should fall asleep and her lover Labraid be able to reach her;[11] the motif recurs somewhat camouflaged in a Rumanian folk-tale in which a lovesick princess will only recover if the "golden stag which sings like the birds" is brought to her. Out of the stag creeps her lover who lulls her to sleep with his sweet song and then "steals" a kiss.[12]

While these musical lovers seem to belong to a category of their own--a category whose ancestor is

probably Orpheus--the two wizards who with their harps cast magic sleep on travelers in a thirteenth-century French roman of Merlin are clearly descendants of the Odyssean Sirens. Merlin's encounter with the evil magicians is elaborately allegorical and we can only give a brief summary of it here.

On their journey to Logres, Merlin and his company reach a plain where two "enchanteors" sit on throne-like seats beneath a cross flanked by two great elm trees; by playing the harp they cast a death-like sleep on all those who pass by; it is suggested that they dishonor the beautiful damoisieles and then kill them and their companions; in fact, the plain is covered with graves. While the rest of his company are overcome by the music of the two highway-wizards, Merlin stops up his ears "au mieus qu'il puet"

> et fait aussi comme uns serpens qui repaire en Egypte que on apiele aspis, qui estoupe de sa keue l'une de ses oreilles et l'autre en terre boute,
> pour chou qu'elle n'oie le conjurement de l'enchanteor.[13]

That is, he stops up his ears like the aspis who--as the bestiaries relate--sticks his tail into one ear and presses the other to the ground in order not to hear the spells of the snake-charmer. He then kills the two "malvaise escommuniie" by having them dig their own

graves and burning them with sulfur. This cryptic Christian allegory may contain some indigenous elements but for the most part it seems to be a fusion of the "King David" motif (the Psalmist sitting on his throne with his harp) with that of the medieval Sirens, i.e., the temptations of Satan.

If one could extend this inquiry into the realms of medieval magic and witchcraft, one would find oneself at no loss as far as the use of incantatory spells and songs for the purpose of robbery is concerned. One could point at the well-known "Hand of Glory" (main de gloire =mandragore) over which thieves would recite incantations in order to make themselves invisible and to cast a magic sleep on everyone in the house they wanted to rob; or mention the customs of Ruthenian burglars, who "would make a flute from a human legbone and play upon it, whereupon all persons within hearing are overcome with drowsiness."[14] However, as all the evidence on the theme of "musical robbers" appears to be clearly post-Homeric--and indeed, for the most part, does not go further back than the Middle Ages--it cannot be used to substantiate the notion that the Homeric Sirens may have derived, at least in part, from popular beliefs about the use of incantatory songs by robbers and thieves.

3. Nightingale the Robber

Turning to Russian folk-tradition, one encounters a very fine specimen of a "musical robber," but he appears to belong to another class from those mentioned so far, a descendant perhaps of the monsters Heracles has to dispatch when he is hired by Eurystheus. The hero of the *byliny* we are about to examine is *Ilya of Murom*, who on Eastern morn vows "to sing at high mass that same Easter day in Kief town, and to go thither by the straight way."[15] He will do this without staining his hand with blood or using his sword or his fiery darts. He saddles his "magic" horse and with it leaps from mountain to mountain towards Kief. On the way he hews down a forest (cf. the forest journey of Gilgamesh); at Chernigof Ilya wipes out a host of Tartars with a "damp oak" (i.e., without using his weapons). He is offered to be a Tzar but he refuses; he is also informed that on the *straight way* to Kief he will have to overcome three formidable "barriers": the lofty mountains, the Smorodine-river and the Black Morass, and, finally, Nightingale the Robber. Here we hear more about this musical highway-monster: "He hath built his nest on seven oaks, that magic bird. When he whistleth like a nightingale, the dark forest bowest to the earth, the

green leaves wither, horse and rider fall as dead. For that cause the road is lost, and no man hath travelled it these thirty years."

From this we gather that one of the main purposes of Ilya's quest is to open up a blocked road, i.e., to reestablish the normal flux of communication, without using his usual weapons. The supernatural horse takes care of the first two barriers by leaping over them (in Greek myth, we could have expected a "battle with the river," such as Heracles' battle with Acheloös); after crossing the Black Morass, they reach the Magic Bird: "he thrust his turbulent head out from his nest upon the seven oaks; sparks and flame poured from his mouth and nostrils. Then he began to pipe like a nightingale, to roar like an aurochs, and to hiss like a dragon." Ilya is not "petrified," but his horse Cloudfall is scared and falls on his knees; Ilya restores its courage by means of a few mighty insults; then he breaks a twig from a willow, fits it to his bow, and conjures it to fly into Nightingale's left eye. The robber falls like a "rick of grain," and Ilya ties him to his stirrup by his yellow curls. Soon they reach the Nightingale's dwelling "built over seven pillars over seven versts of ground." It is surrounded by an iron paling; on each spike there is the head of a hero. The

fortress has three towers with golden crests; it is set in a *locus amoenus*, surrounded by gardens, blossoming and blooming with azure flowers "and a fair orchard encircled all."

Ilya takes the monster along to Kief and attends Easter mass, leaving Nightingale in Cloudfall's custody. After mass, Prince Vladimir invites the hero to a feast, but since nobody believes he has come the straight way, he leads his host to take a look at the monster tied to his horse. Prince Vladimir unwisely wishes to hear the Nightingale whistle: Ilya commands him to do so "under his breath," but the malicious monster "did all with his full strength. And at that cry, all the ancient palaces in Kief fell to ruins, damp mother earth quivered, the young damsels hid themselves and the good youths dispersed, and as many as remained to listen *died*." In his wrath, Ilya shoots a burning arrow into Nightingale's breast, cuts off his head, and scatters his bones.

The reader will undoubtedly have recognized many of the Heraclean parallels in this *byliny*: the way Ilya ties the Nightingale to his stirrup and brings him to Prince Vladimir parallels the episode in which Heracles ties Kerberos to a chain and brings him to Eurystheus. The bog reminds one of the swamp where Kerberos guards

the entrance to Hades; Heracles, too, must capture Kerberos without weapons.

Nightingale the Robber appears to be a kind of guardian of an otherworldly forest and, as such, related to Humbaba, the guardian of the great cedar forest ("when he roars it is like the torrent of the storm, his breath is like fire and his jaws are death itself").[16] In this context it seems fitting to point out the magic sleep which seizes Gilgamesh when he first hears Humbaba's voice: "But now Gilgamesh was overcome by weakness, for sleep had seized him suddenly, a profound sleep held him; he lay on the ground, stretched out speechless, as though in a dream."[17] In the _byliny_, it is the horse Cloudfall that is seized by weakness--but later we hear of the deadly effects of Nightingale's whistling and roaring on mere mortals. (Prince Vladimir has a three-hour fainting spell.)

While the "roar of the aurochs" and the "hiss of the dragon" belong to the standard repertoire of monstrous, otherworldly guardians, the sweet deadly piping of the nightingale appears to be a foreign element; indeed it might have been taken over directly from the Siren or, more likely, from another monster of the underworld which was, at some point, strongly contaminated by the Siren-myth, i.e., the Gorgo. Did the Gorgons sing?

Apparently yes, since according to Pindar "it was in imitation of their dirge that Athena invented the 'tune of many heads'" (Pind. Pyth. 12.23). However, we hear nothing more of "musical" Gorgons until the Physiologus, where the Gorgonia is said to imitate the sounds of other animals, including lions, serpents, and birds. When the Gorgonia desires a mate, she first calls a lion, who does not approach because he is afraid, then a dragon, and, finally, she "pipes sweetly and sings with charm beyond all." The Gorgonia of the Physiologus is obviously a fusion of many classical figures, including Medusa, Circe, and the Sirens.[18] Nightingale the Robber may thus have gotten his sweet piping (and his blond locks) from the Sirens via the Gorgon.

4. The Celtic Connection

There is no question that magic song and otherworldly music play a significant role in Celtic tradition: what is difficult--especially for someone not specialized in Celtic studies--is distinguishing between the superimposed layers of Christian imagery and the core of pre-Christian beliefs about the otherworld. Since the Christian heavens are filled with the songs of the blessed choirs and with

angelic music. They are easily fused with the pagan musical otherworld of the Irish imramas (voyages). This, for example, is clearly the case of the ancient tree on which birds call the canonical Hours on an island described in The Voyage of Bran.[19] The same holds true of the island surrounded by a revolving fiery rampart in the Voyage of Maeldúin--a favorite motif in medieval allegory, going back to the vision of St. John in the Apocalypse.

In the Voyage of the Huí Corra, Lochan dreams of heaven and hell: "I beheld the Lord Himself on His throne, and a birdflock of angels making music to Him. Then I saw a bright bird, and sweeter was his singing than every melody. Now this was Michael in the form of a bird in the presence of the Creator."[20] The magic birds of Celtic mythology have been changed into angels and have taken their place in heaven. Thus, when one reads that the song of the birds of Rhiannon causes oblivion and loss of all sense of time for eighty years,[21] one wonders whether this feature was not simply taken over from the popular medieval tale of The Monk and the Bird (AT 471A), which tells of a monk who forgets time while listening to a bird singing outside the convent; when he returns, three hundred years have passed and

nobody recognizes him. The central motif ("years seem moments") of the medieval story has been traced back to the Bible, i.e., to Psalm 90:4: "Quoniam mille anni ante oculos tuos tamquam dies hesterna quae praeteriit, et custodia in nocte." The motif as such, as Lutz Röhrich points out, exists outside Christian tradition as well and appears, for example, in the old Indian Vishnu-Purana, in which Prince Raiwata goes to Brahma to inquire about suitors for his daughter; as he arrives, the heavenly musicians are singing; he waits till the song is over--only to be told that the men he is inquiring about have died "20 generations ago."[22]

Thus one must also consider the possibility that the "timeless" song of Rhiannon's birds and of similar birds in Celtic tradition may be a very ancient trait, going back perhaps to an Indo-European matrix. Whether one could link the Siren's magic song to this same matrix is a matter of pure speculation.

In the Irish _imramas_, magic music usually causes sleep, which in turn is often described as a magically healing sleep. Thus Bran, while walking alone, hears a sweet music behind him: "at last he fell asleep at the music, such was its sweetness."[23] In the _Voyage of the Huí Corra_, we hear of an island where "birds warble music and minstrelsy that was melodious and superlative, to

which patients of every kind and the repeatedly wounded would have fallen asleep . . ."[24] Similarly, in Cormac's Adventures in the Land of Promise, Cormac meets a warrior carrying a silver branch with three golden apples: "Delight and amusement enough it was to listen to the music made by the branch, for men sore-wounded, or women in child-bed, or folk in sickness would fall asleep at the melody which was made when that branch was shaken."[25] A Christian allegory fused with the memory of a shaman-druid healing the sick with some magic rattle?

The birds of the "great queen" Rhiannon not only produce forgetfulness of time, but, as we are told in the story of Culhwch and Olwen, they "wake the dead and lull the living to sleep."[26] As we have seen, the power of sleep-inducing music is not the prerogative only of birds: in the Voyage of Bran, there is talk of a singing stone "from which arise a hundred strains."[27] In the imram of the Huí Corra, the pilgrims arrive at an island surrounded by a brazen palisade and a brazen net spread on its spikes: the wind, blowing through the net, produces a sweet music which causes the men to fall asleep for three days and three nights.[28] The brazen palisade and this curious "Aeolian harp" take us back to the Odyssey and to Aiolos' isle, surrounded by a wall of bronze, where the winds--according to

W. B. Stanford's translation, "moan all around with the sound of pipes."[29] Such notions could perhaps have been introduced into the Irish stories by learned monks.

Similarly, when one hears of mermaids producing magic sleep with their singing, as in the legend of Ruad, who "hoists her sail of bronze and goes to the rivermouth" where she hears a "burden of seamaids which no one else had ever heard,"[30] falls asleep, and drowns, one is probably dealing with an intricate fusion of local traditions and Homeric lore mediated by Christian sermons, legends, and bestiaries. Such a fusion of motifs appears also in the aforementioned Destruction of Dind Rig, where Craiphtine the Harper plays the slumber-strain on the ramparts of the fortress, so that the host within should fall asleep. The Munstermen who are besieging Dind Rig "put their faces to the ground and their fingers in their ears that they might not hear the playing."[31] We have already heard of how Merlin used this ruse; the Physiologus, which popularized the motif of the asp plugging one ear with its tail while pressing the other to the ground, explains this as illustrating the following Christian truth: "In such a manner do the rich men of this world; one ear they have on the ground to obtain riches, the other is stopped up by sin . . . they shall be punished in the day of judgement and shall

go to hell."[32] The ultimate source, once again, is the Bible, as illustrated by Psalm LVIII, 4, 5: "Alienati sunt peccatores a vulva, erraverunt ab utero, locuti sunt falsa. Furor illis secundum similitudinem serpentis, sicut aspidis surdae et obturantis aures suas, quae non exaudiet vocem incantantium et venefici incantantis sapienter."

From the material we have examined so far, one may safely deduct that the motif of magic, sleep-inducing song or music--associated most frequently with supernatural birds--is indigenous to Celtic mythology (one might also recall the two birds who in the Sick-bed of Cu Chullainn, fly over a lake, linked together by a chain of gold and sing a song which casts sleep on all except Cu Chullainn);[33] this motif was later fused with the medieval Christian allegorization of the sleep-inducing song of the Sirens, symbols of worldly temptations. Finally, one finds the Odyssean Siren-episode transferred almost in toto to the Book of the Taking of Ireland, where, on their way from Egypt, the original Irish settlers meet a single Siren and are told by the druid Caicher to stop their ears with wax, for "sleep was overcoming them at the music."[34] (In Geoffrey of Monmouth's History of the Kings of Britain (ca. A.D. 1100), Brute and his Tojans, having sailed to the Columns of Hercules "saw

many of the monsters of the deep called Sirens, which surrounded the ships and well-nigh overwhelmed them.")[35] By this time, every significant sea-voyage had to include some mention of the Sirens: a literary commonplace, now fused with mariner's reports of whales and other monsters of the deep.

5. The Sweet Bird of Youth

It is interesting to note how in a number of folk-tales, the quest for the source of youth is essentially the quest for what one might term "the source of sound." Thus the hero must bring back a magic bird, a singing tree or singing water. When a triad of magic objects is sought, the first is usually expressed in terms of sound, the second in terms of light, and the third in terms of liquidity. But in fact this triad of attributes is simply the threefold expression of one basic notion: that of the regeneration of life, usually embodied in its final and fullest realization by a supernatural bride whose marriage to the hero coincides with his investiture as the new ruler. This investiture is often preceded by a recognition of the hero whose rights have been usurped. A variant of this investiture may entail the theft of the power brought back from the quest by the hero: since

the old king wants to regain his youth and marry the bride rightfully belonging to the hero, the latter steps into the "rejuvenating" bath before the king does and (like the serpent in the Gilgamesh-epos) steals his "youth" and then takes over his role.

The motif of what I have called the "source of sound"--usually described as the motif of the magic bird (or some other source of supernatural song)--is essentially found in conjunction with three types of folk-tales classified by Aarne-Thompson as 550 (Search for the Golden Bird), 551 (The Sons' Quest for a Wonderful Remedy for Their Father), and 707 (The Three Golden Sons). But in fact one encounters this motif in a great variety of different tales--often hybrids of the ones mentioned and usually involving the hero's initiation, investiture, and acquisition of a bride. There is, of course, no way of linking these tales and the motif of magic sound directly to the Odyssey--even though the various baths followed by "recognitions" of Odysseus (Od. VI, 224-237; XXIII, 154-165) might tempt one to do so. One could, however, mention Karl Meuli's attempt at reconstructing the hypothetical "Argonautica" which, as many scholars believe, served as a model for the part of the Odyssey known as the Wanderings.

According to Meuli, this Argonautica was patterned after the well-known _Tale of the (Animal) Helpers_ (_Helfermärchen_, AT513, 513A, and 514); the original Argonauts went on a quest for the solar bride (_Sonnenjungfrau_), and the dominating theme of this Ur-version, according to Meuli, was the wrath of Helios following the theft of his daughter. Such speculations, attractive as they may sound, are probably destined to remain mere suppositions. Combining Meuli's theory with our observations on the place of magic song in a specific group of tales dealing with the acquisition of a supernatural bride, one could be led to speculate about possible echoes of these motifs in the _Odyssey_. Circe--the daughter of Helios--and/or Nausikaa would then correspond to the solar bride, and the Sirens' song would be the "counterfeit" echo of the "source of magic sound"--i.e., the magic bird, which is invariably associated with the supernatural bride in our folk-tales and which we have interpreted as a symbol of the regenerative powers acquired in the Otherworld. Following this line of speculation one could then focus on what appears to be a fundamental notion in the hypothetical Indo-European matrix of our myths and tales, namely, the identification of sound and light. The number of instances in which brilliance of sound corresponds to and is basically

interchangeable with luminosity in the corpus of folk-tales classified by Aarne and Thompson is such that one can hardly entertain any doubts as to its significance. Marius Schneider has pointed out the image of the "singing sun" in Vedic cosmogony and has cited a beautiful Vedic hymn in which the creation of the world is described in terms of "weaving threads of sound." It is not necessary to trace the etymology of the Sirens back to either the Indo-European root svar, meaning "to burn and shine," or to svar, "to sound." The very fact that there appear to be two roots identical in form with these two meanings supports the notion that brilliance of sound is identified with luminosity: the Sirens need not be turned into demons of the scorching midday-sun to explain the presence of solar luminosity in the Siren episode. Like the magic bird, tree, or water of our folk-tales, described one time as singing and the next time as shining, they too seem to have been associated ab ovo (to use K. Marót's favorite expression) both with the brilliance of light and the luminosity of song.

6. The Siren and Other Human-Headed Birds

Whatever the roots may be that lead back from the Sirens to a hypothetical Indo-European seminal matrix, the

fact remains that to all practical effects the Sirens *qua* Sirens were born with and within the *Odyssey*. These Homeric *voices* were probably endowed with the body of the ancient oriental human-headed bird only in post-Homeric times, but it was with this body that they soared in the realm of fabulous ornithology, there to pair and fuse themselves with a variety of other super-natural birds of disparate folk-beliefs. Anyone who has tried to track down any single inhabitant of the fantastic aviary of folk-belief and myth is aware of the near impossibility of distinguishing between parents and their offspring, between a *struthiocamelus*, an *ushtrmurg*, between a dog-bird, a woman-bird, a bird-fish, etc., between the Greek and the Chinese phoenix, or, for that matter, between the host of human-headed birds--from Alexander's guardians of the land of the blessed to the various human-headed *'anqās*, *zaghsars*, or *bahrīs* of Islamic lore. We shall therefore have to limit ourselves here at pointing out certain "birds of a feather"--without claiming to know the "ifs" and "hows" of their kinship to the Sirens.

The variegated corpus of legendary deeds and voyages ascribed to Alexander the Great after his death fused to become what is known as the Alexander romance, the oldest version of which to come down to us is the so-called

Pseudocallisthenes. A number of marvels described therein appear interesting in relation to the nucleus of motifs discussed in the previous pages. First of all, when Alexander reaches what turns out to be the spring of the "water of life," the water is described as "shining like lightening,"[36] thus linking this fount to the various shining or singing waters of our folk-tales. Alexander is robbed of immortality by his cook--who, having discovered the true nature of the water by observing a dead fish come to life in it again--drinks of it himself and uses some to seduce Alexander's daughter Kale--while withholding this precious knowledge from his king. Later Alexander "punishes" his daughter by banishing her into the sea, there to live as Nereïs. This is obviously the link to the various legends which have Nereids or Gorgons rise out of the sea to ask if King Alexander is still living. In the folklore of the Black Sea, the sailor must answer that "he lives and reigns," "for then the awful and monstrous Gorgon in gladness of the tidings transforms herself into a beautiful maiden and calms the waves and sings melodiously to her lyre." This Gorgon is a fusion of Nereid, Alexander's daughter, and Siren.[37]

In another episode, Alexander reaches a place "where there is a brightness without sun, moon or stars." Two

human-headed birds bar the road and command him to turn back, for he may not enter the land of the blessed. In other versions of the romance, Alexander is given prophetic instructions relating to his future battles: "The East calls you and you must triumph over king Poros."[38] After Alexander's attempt at emulating Etana's ascent of the heavens with the help of two wondrous birds has failed, he and his army reach a lake with honey-sweet water; in the belly of an enormous fish a shining stone is found, which Alexander has made into a ring which he uses as a beam in the dark. During the night "women rise out of the lake and sing melodiously."[39] Here again we have, quite literally, a "fusion" of the ancient Sirens with the water which becomes itself sweet like the honey-sweet song of its inhabitants. In the palace of Xerxes and Cyrus, Alexander is shown a speaking bird which is kept in a golden cage and which is the oracle the king turns to in time of need. Georg Weicker has pointed at a parallel story in Philostratus' fictional biography of Apollonius of Tyana,[40] where we are told of human-headed ἴυγγες, i.e, Iynxes, which are kept in a golden cage as oracular birds. According to Greek myth, Iynx was the daughter of Peitho and Pan, who having tried to charm Zeus was transformed by Hera into the bird called Iynx (i.e.,

the wryneck or Iynx torquilla). What is interesting is that this bird played an important role in ancient love-magic, as is attested a.o. by Pindar, who says that Aphrodite herself brought the "love-crazed" bird down from heaven so that Jason might conquer Medea's heart with it: "she tied the colourful bird to a four-spoked wheel, and taught wise Asonidas pleading songs of magic."[41] (The bird, we are told, was tied to a "wheel" or rhombus with four spokes and whirled around while magic love-charms were sung.) These oracular and magic birds were also related to the so-called Keledones; the two may infact be just two different names for the same "birds." (Philostratus compares both to the Sirens as enchanting singers.)

Returning now to Alexander and his marvels, one might finally point out also those curious birds which spew fire when touched[42] and which could either be an echo of the phoenix or, more likely, a memory of the "external soul" which, in an Armenian folk-tale, is said to have brought about the invention of iron. The hero, having killed the soul-bird of the black giant--and thus the giant himself--tries to touch the bird but burns his fingers in the process; he then covers the bird with black stones, which melt and which he forges into tools and weapons, thus inventing the art of forging.[43]

Alexander's incandescent birds like the Armenian soul-bird are authentic fire-birds; whether the human-headed birds who guard the entrance to the land of the blessed are, as Weicker claims, "eine Weiterbildung der Sirenensage"[44] (a development of the Siren-story), is difficult to say. Eva Baer, in discussing the Sphinxes and Harpies in medieval Islamic art, concludes that "there is no evidence for an immediate or direct connection between the creatures of classical antiquity [i.e., the Sirens], and the human-headed bird in the Muslim world."[45] She also points out that the Siren is called al-sīrānis by al-Qazwini and that "it is described as living in Kabul and Zabulistan; one of its features is the musical tones produced by its breathing through twelve holes in its nose," and concludes that "the siren, as understood in the Muslim world, was quite unconnected with the human-headed bird."[46]

The two human-headed birds guarding the land of the blessed in the Alexander romance, with their dazzling splendor outshining the sun, are strongly reminiscent of the two scorpion-people who keep watch at the gate of the sun in the Gilgamesh-epic, "whose radiance is terrifying and whose look is death, whose frightful splendor overwhelms mountains" (Gilg. Tablet IX, Column II).[47] In neither case is anything said about

magic song, but if the notion of brilliance has indeed been associated equally to light as to sound from times immemorial, then perhaps one can say that there is a link connecting Gilgamesh's scorpion-people to Homer's Sirens and Alexander's human-headed birds.

7. Birds of Paradise

I should like to conclude this brief incursion into the realm of fabulous ornithology with the Russian *Sirin*, a bird which lent its name not only to the finest pre-revolutionary publishing house in Russia but--from 1920 to 1940--to the great lepidopterist Vladimir Nabokov himself. In order to do justice to this human-headed "bird of paradise," one would probably have to retrace the wanderings and mutations of the human-headed bird from its Iranian cradle to its Thracian, Sarmatian, Indo-Scythian, Parthian, and Sasanian *avatars*, a task which manifestly lies outside the scope of this inquiry. I shall therefore just mention--for the record--the appearance of a "rudimentary" bird-Siren playing a cithara on a Thracian plaque, together with Heracles mastering a boar and two griffins, dating from the third century B.C.; the human-headed birds on an ivory plaque excavated at Begram (Kapiçi), the ancient metropolis of

Hellenistic Afghanistan (attributed to the first or second century A.D.); and the enigmatic clay "Sirens" found in a niche of a small sanctuary in the ruins of the ancient city of Pendzhikent, forty miles east of Samarkand in Tedjikistan, apparently dating from the fifth or early sixth century A.D. (Figures 56, 57).

Whether there exists a thread connecting these disparate Siren-birds to the medieval "Sirins" on a gold pendant found in Kiev (eleventh or twelfth century) (Figure 58) or to the crowned bird-Siren with a peacock's tail and powerful claws on the medieval façade of the Cathedral of St. George at Yuriev-Polski (Figure 59), I will not venture to say. However, crowned, human-headed birds appear frequently on Armenian illuminated manuscripts; since they are often pitted against an angelic choir (Figure 60) or are ensnared by intricate vegetation patterns, one can safely assume that *these* bird-Sirens are standard representations of the dangers of heresy, as is the ugly-faced male monster mirroring himself in a "flower" on the margins of the Jurjew-Gospel (Figure 61).

The bird we are chasing, however, is of a different feather: it is a true "bird of paradise," as we read in seventeenth-century texts describing the *Sirin*: that its song is so melodious that men die in the vain attempt to pursue it. One has the impression that, like the

sacred birds of the Celtic Rhiannon, the Sirin, together with a number of other fabulous birds which were either indigenous or had been "adopted" in pre-Christian times into the realm of Russian folk-beliefs, were later transformed into emissaries or guardians of the Christian paradise. When this happened is a matter of speculation: Vladimir Peretz has suggested that the notion of paradisal birds spellbinding humans with their heavenly song was introduced into Russian folklore through the *Speculum magnum exemplorum*, a collection of exempla partially translated into Russian in 1677.[48] V. Kiparsky, while agreeing with Peretz on the Christian source of the motif of the magic passing of time (i.e., the story of "the monk and the bird" which we discussed in the context of Celtic beliefs), suggests that a reminiscence of the Odyssean Siren-song also went into the making of the Russian birds of paradise.[49] I would venture to say that the notion of the magic "lapse of time" was probably known long before the so-called "Heisterbachlegend" was translated into Russian (in a Bashkir tale, for example, we hear of a man who, having searched for his escaped Swan-maiden in the otherworld, returns to find his village gone and his mother and brother aged beyond recognition),[50] but will readily concede that it became

especially popular in Christian allegorical lore dealing with the effects of angelic or paradisal song.[51]

The Russian Sirin was one of four canonical birds of paradise, the other three being the Finix, the Alkonóst, and the Gamajun. Sirin and Alkonóst are often pictured together in Luboks--popular prints--of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Both are shown as crowned, variegated birds with a human face, long hair, and luscious plumage (Figure 62). Usually there is a description and brief narration that accompanies these depictions: these brief texts are quite revealing as far as the power of the Sirins' song is concerned. Thus we read in one text that two sweet-singing Sirins once appeared on the banks of the Nile: a red-haired Sirin-man and a black-haired Sirin-woman. All those who heard their song fell into the river--including the Eparch.[52]

Another text is more allusive and allegorical: it says that "it is not given to all to know her . . . those, whose eyes do not see and whose ears do not hear, shall never behold her. God created her for those who love her." Then again we are told that the "bird of paradise called Sirin lives in the East of Edemskij Paradise, where it is forever singing beautifully, prophesizing happiness to men who are holy." Interestingly, it is also a kind of angel of death, for when it

flies down to earth those mortals who hear her song "must remove themselves from life" (Figure 63).[53] A particularly charming Lubok shows a magnificent crowned Siren with long, curly hair alighting on a flowery bush, while a man enchanted by her song falls down a cliff and other men are shown firing a cannon to frighten her off. The text at the bottom of the print tells us that "the bird Sirin of the holy blessed Lord (lives) in the countries of India which lie near the sacred place of paradise; (there) this bird appears and sings songs which enchant the hearing of men. People who see her and who do not want to be deprived of life by her voice drown out the sound by firing cannons, thereby frightening her so that she flies off to her abode" (Figure 63). It is interesting to note how even these utterly Christianized "Sirens" retain some of their primeval dangerousness: their song is otherworldly, only the dead (blessed) can listen to it with impunity. On the other hand, wherever the Sirin-bird appears in Russian folk-art it does so as an omen of life and fertility and is thus found often in scenes connected to marriage and domestic bliss. I therefore think it only appropriate to conclude our visit to "Edemskij Paradise" with a Rumanian Christmas carol entitled "The Swan Maiden, the Bird of Heaven, and

the Crown of Paradise" in which the Swan Maiden will marry "the brave" if he will bring her

> The bird which sings in heaven
>   with sweet and beautiful
>   speech,
> To which God Almighty and
>   the angels listen constantly,
> Singing among the trees in
>   bloom . . .

The brave goes to Paradise, where St. Basile has mercy on him and gives him the bird. The swan thereupon turns into a beautiful maiden and

> The bird began to sing,
> With sweet and beautiful song,
> The song of heaven.
> They went to church,
> And the priest married them.
> Who was his sponsor?
> Who but St. John,
> Who stood sponsor to Jesus.
> He blessed them,
> And gave them,
> To each one gifts,
> To her a small cross,
> As well as a small Ikon;
> To him a staff of silver,
> To rule over the whole world,
> To have power upon earth
> And this young bride
> With golden tresses
> That shone like the sun's
>   rays . . .[54]

NOTES

Appendix B

[1] W. Crooke, "Some Notes on Homeric Folk-Lore," Folk-Lore, 19 (1908), pp. 169-72. Crooke also relates the curious notion that the Sirens in Hera's hands described by Pausanias (Description of Greece, IX, 34, 3) may "simply denote the fascinations of married life."

[2] L. Radermacher, "Die Erzählungen der Odyssee," Sitzungsberichte der K. Akad. d. Wissenschaften Wien, 178/1 (1915), pp. 21-23. See also Joseph Frison, Revue des Traditions Populaires, 25 (1910), p. 273, where the submarine garden of the Breton Sirens is mentioned: "LE JARDIN DE LA SIRÈNE: Un capitaine de mer avait ancré son navire sur une roche. Une sirène lui dit: 'Enlevez l'ancre de votre navire; là où vous l'avez jetée, vous endommagez les fruits de mon jardin.' L'équipage pria le capitaine de faire ce que disait la sirène, et il le fit."

[3] Denys Page, Folktales in Homer's Odyssey (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1973), pp. 83-91. See also K. Ilg, "Maltesische Legenden," Zeitschr. d. Vereins für Volkskunde, 19 (1909), p. 310. The Maltese mermaid appears to have been shaped by Jewish legends, according to which "the women who seduced the angels were transformed into sirens" (cf. Louis Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publ. Soc. of America, 1913, IV, 152). Ilg writes on the mermaid(s) of Malta: "Sie stammen von einem Mädchen, das das schönste war, aber mit einem Geschöpfe sündigte, das vordem an Gottes Seite gesessen, später aber verdammt ward. Diese Sirene ist wunderbar schön, sie altert auch nicht und ist voller List. . . . Mit den Haifischen ist sie gut Freund und überlässt ihnen die Bezauberten."

[4] Károly Marót, Die Anfänge der Griechischen Literatur (Budapest: Ak. d. Wiss., 1960), p. 210.

[5] Gerald K. Gresseth, "The Homeric Sirens," TAPA, 101 (1970), p. 215.

[6] Robert Graves, The White Goddess (New York, 1948), p. 467.

[7] N. M. Penzer in C. H. Tawney, The Ocean of Story (London: Sawyer, 1924), vol. III, p. 284.

[8] _Ibid._, p. 281.

[9] J. C. Lawson, _Modern Greek Folklore_ (New York: University Books, 1964), p. 19. The name for the "binding" is ἀμπόδεμα, which according to Lawson means "entanglement." One might mention in this context Jean-Paul Clébert's original interpretation of the Sirens in his _Bestiaire Fabuleux_ (Paris: Albin Michel, 1970), p. 382: "La sirène, monstre créé par l'homme seul, isolé comme l'est le marin en mer, obsédé par l'image de la femme, est celui de la sexualité exigeante et de la tristesse post-coïtale, cet autre vieux mythe dont on se débarrasse à peine de notre temps. Dans l'amour exclusivement sensuel, l'homme, a-t-on prétendu, s'est senti charmé d'abord, enlacé, caressé, puis noyé." For a psychoanalytic "analysis" of the Sirens, see H. A. Bunker, "The Voice as (Female) Phallus," _The Psychoanalytic Quarterly_, III (1934), pp. 391-429. According to Bunker (p. 428), "The song of the Sirens . . . symbolizes the love of the mother in its allurement, holding forth the promise of the Land of Heart's Desire, which symbolizes the possession of the beloved mother; but the end of that song is death (castration)."

[10] C. H. Tawney, _The Kathakoca_ (London, 1895), pp. 64-66.

[11] Whitley Stokes, "The Destruction of Dind Rig," _Zeitschr. f. Celt. Philol._, 3 (1901), p. 11.

[12] I. Studzda, _Fairy Tales and Legends from Romania_ (New York, 1972), p. 87.

[13] G. Paris, ed., _Merlin_ (Paris, 1884), pp. 154-57.

[14] N. M. Penzer, _The Ocean of Story_, pp. 151-53.

[15] I. F. Hapgood, _The Epic Songs of Russia_ (New York: Scribner, 1916), p. 49.

[16] _The Epic of Gilgamesh_, trans. N. K. Sandars (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1964), p. 72.

[17] _Ibid._, p. 78.

[18] _Physiologus_, ed. E. Legrand (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1873), p. 39:

"La Gorgone. Elle ressemble à une belle femme; ses cheveux blonds se terminent en tête de serpents. Toute sa personne est pleine de charmes, mais la vue de sa figure donne la mort. Au temps de sa fureur, d'une voix harmonieuse, elle appelle à elle le lion, le dragon, les autres animaux; pas un ne se rend à son appel. Enfin, elle invite l'homme. Celui-ci s'engage à s'approcher d'elle, si elle veut bien cacher sa tête; elle le fait, on en profite pour la prendre. Avec elle on tue les lions et les dragons. Alexandre avait avec lui la Gorgone Scylla . . . --Moralisation. Redoutez, mortels, la Gorgone. Fuyez le péché; nul ne peut dire, quand il est tenté: C'est Dieu que me tente; non, c'est du coeur que vient la tentation."

[19] T. P. Cross, Ancient Irish Tales (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1969), p. 588.

[20] H. R. Patch, The Other World (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1950), p. 35.

[21] J. A. Macculloch, Celtic Mythology (Boston: M. Jones, 1918), p. 121.

[22] L. Röhrich, Erzählungen des späten Mittelalters (Bern: Francke, 1962), p. 275.

[23] Cross, p. 588.

[24] Patch, p. 37.

[25] Cross, p. 503.

[26] A. Ross, Pagan Celtic Britain (London: Routledge, 1967), p. 339.

[27] Cross p. 589.

[28] Patch, p. 37.

[29] W. B. Stanford, ed., The Odyssey of Homer (London: Macmillan, 1965), I, p. 366.

[30] Whitley Stokes, "The Bodleian Dinnshenchas," Folklore, 3 (1892), p. 505.

[31] Stokes, Dind Rig, p. 12.

[32] Beryl Rowland, *Animals with Human Faces* (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee, 1973), p. 16.

[33] Cross, p. 185.

[34] S. Macalister, ed. "The Book of the Taking of Ireland," *Irish Texts Society*, 35 (Dublin, 1939), p. 21.

[35] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain* (New York: Dutton, 1958), p. 19.

[36] I. Friedländer, "Alexanders Zug nach dem Lebensquell," *Arch. f. Religionswissenschaft*, 13 (1910), p. 169.

[37] Lawson, p. 185.

[38] A. Ausfeld, *Der Griechische Alexanderroman* (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1907), p. 84.

[39] Friedländer, p. 176.

[40] G. Weicker, *Der Seelenvogel* (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1902), p. 81. (See *Vita Apoll. Thyani*, I, 25.)

[41] Pindar, *Pythia*, IV, 213.

[42] Ausfeld, p. 32.

[43] H. von Wlislocki, *Märchen und Sagen der Bukowinaer und Siebenbürger Armenier* (Hamburg: A.G., 1891), p. 8.

[44] Weicker, p. 81.

[45] Eva Baer, "Sphinxes and Harpies in Medieval Islamic Art," *Oriental Notes and Studies*, IX (1965), p. 47.

[46] Baer, p. 48.

[47] Alexander Heidel, trans., *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1946), p. 65.

[48] V. Kiparsky, "Paradiesvögel im russischen Schrifttum," *Societas Scientiarum Fennica*, 39, 2 (1960), p. 1.

[49] Kiparsky, p. 4.

[50] Ch. Coxwell, _Siberian and Other Folk-Tales_ (London: Daniel, 1925), p. 469.

[51] In this context one might mention the German folktale of the "Island of Storks." When a ship discovers an island surrounded by a high wall, the captain sends a sailor to the top of the mast to see what is within--but the sailor leaps from the mast and over the wall. Only the third sailor can be held back by his feet, and after three days of unconsciousness, he tells of having seen the garden of Paradise, where the angels made such heavenly music that he was compelled to follow it. (Cited by E. Buschor in _Die Musen des Jenseits_ (München: Bruckmann, 1944), p. 8.)

[52] Kiparsky, p. 5.

[53] I am grateful to Lena Lenček for the translations of the Russian texts on the "Luboks."

[54] Moses Gaster, ed. and trans., _Rumanian Bird and Beast Stories_ (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1915), pp. 256-58.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1

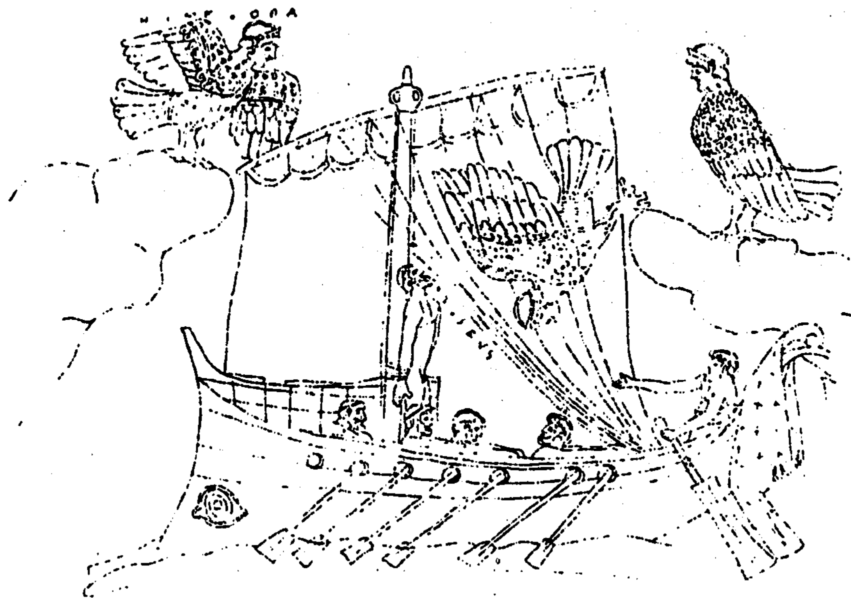


Figure 2

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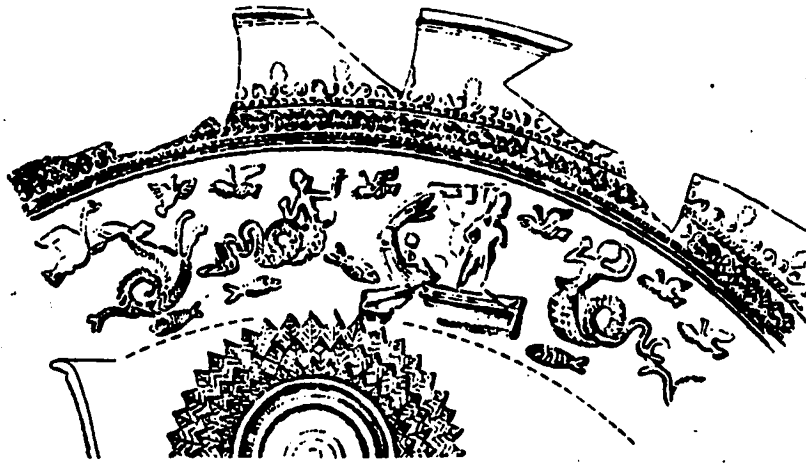

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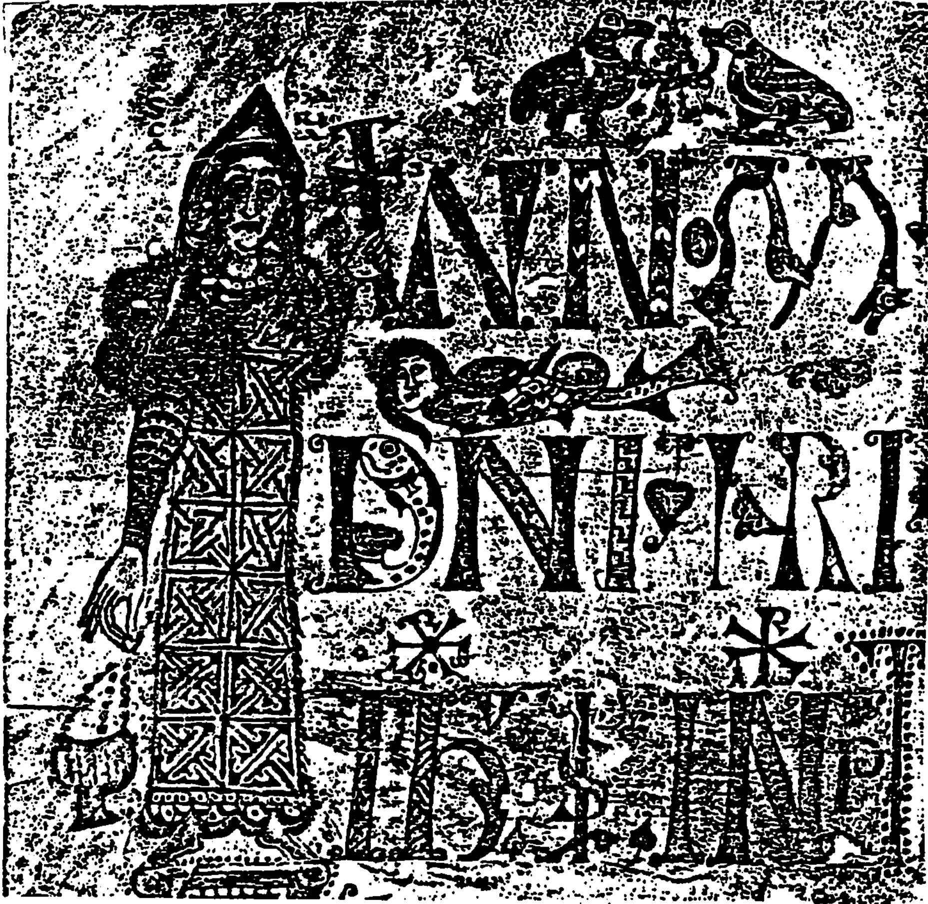

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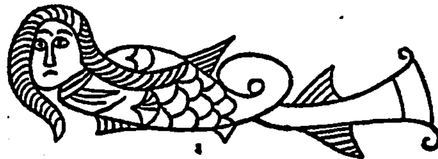

Figure 8

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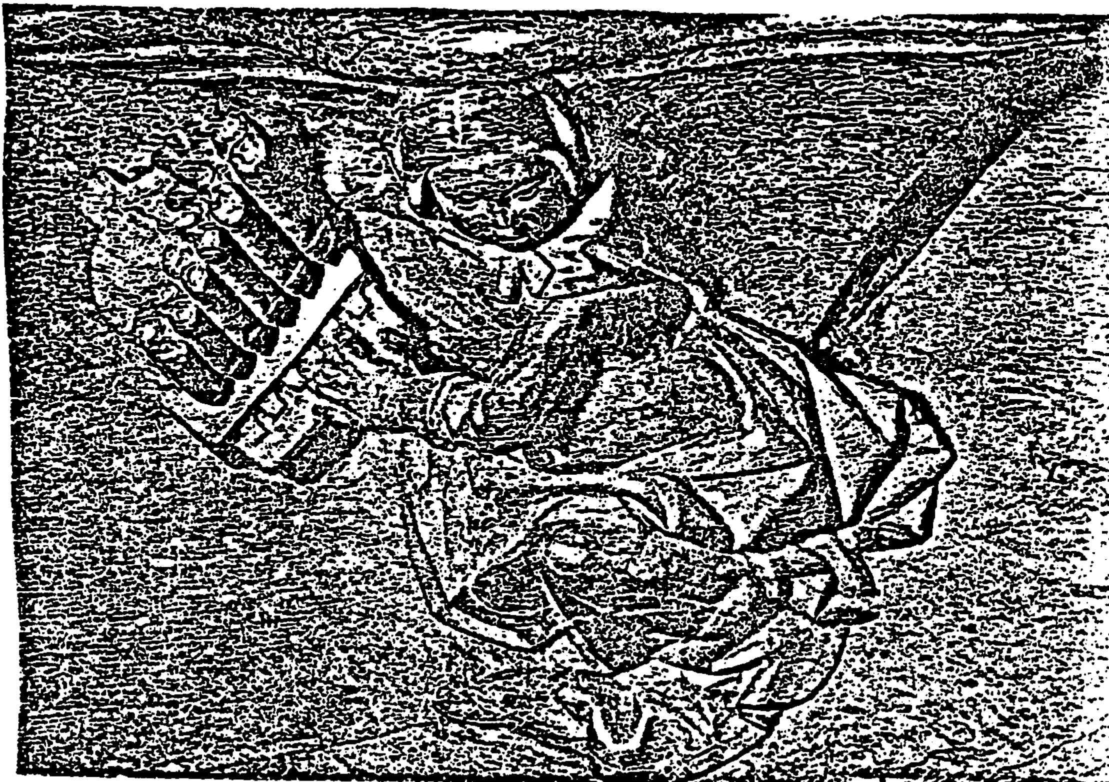

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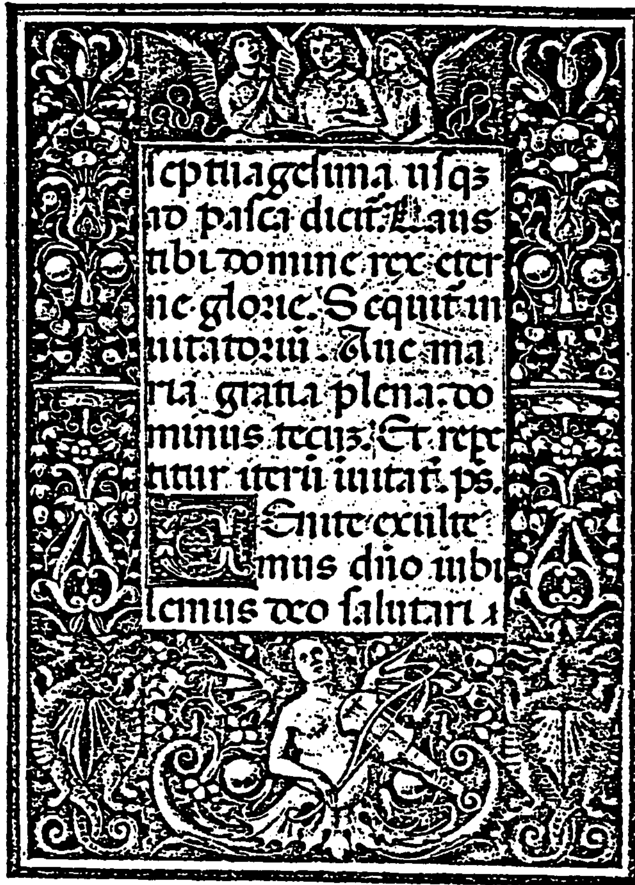


septuagesima usq;
ad pasca dicit. Laus
tibi domine rex eter
ne glorie. Sequit in
uitatoriu. Aue ma
ria gratia plena do
minus tecu. Et repe
titur iteru inuitat. ps.
Venite exulte
mus dño iubi
lemus deo salutari

Figure 27

Figure 28

Figure 29

Figure 30

Figure 31

Figure 32

Figure 33

Figure 34

Figure 35

Figure 36

Figure 37

Figure 38

Figure 39

Figure 40

Seraine ou esbatement mondain XVIII

Figure 41

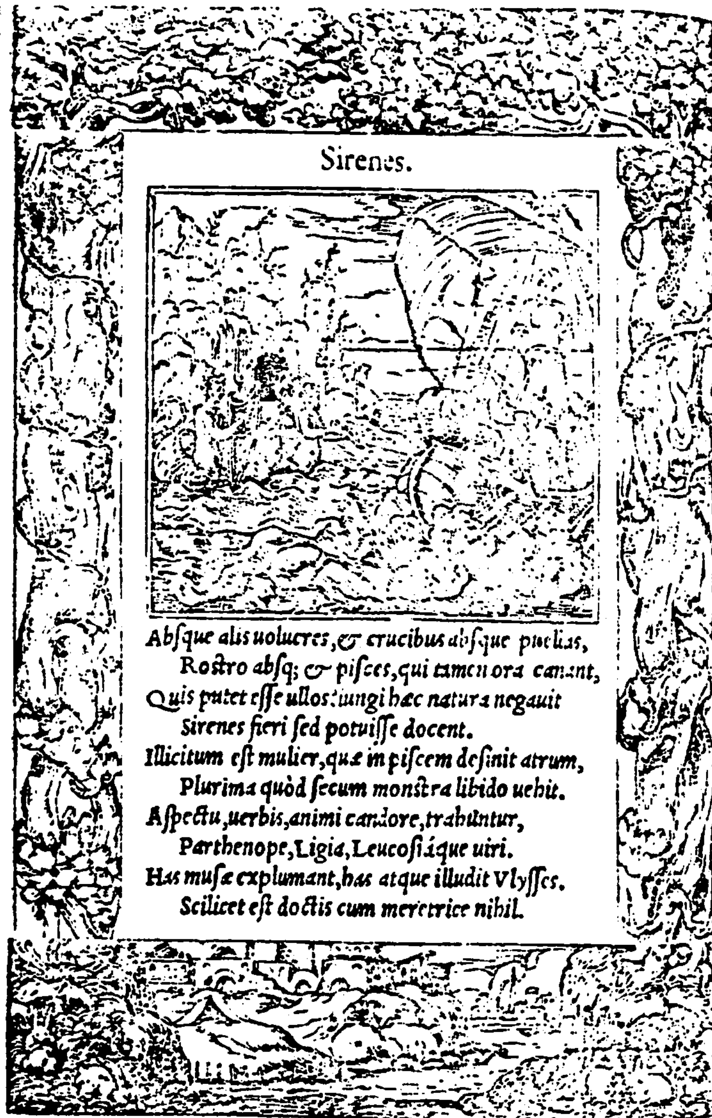
Figure 42

Figure 43

Figure 44

Figure 45

Figure 46



Sirenes.

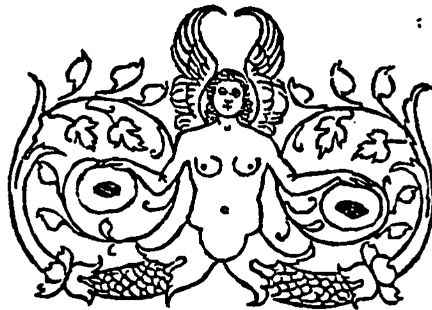
Abſque alis uolucres, & crucibus abſque puellas,
Roſtro abſq; & piſces, qui tamen ora canant,
Quis putet eſſe ullos? iungi hæc natura negauit
Sirenes fieri ſed potuiſſe docent.
Illicitum eſt mulier, quæ in piſcem deſinit atrum,
Plurima quòd ſecum monſtra libido uehit.
Aſpectu, uerbis, animi candore, trahuntur,
Parthenope, Ligia, Leucoſiáque uiri.
Has muſæ explumant, has atque illudit Vlyſſes.
Scilicet eſt doctis cum meretrice nihil.

Figure 47

Eternity

Figure 48

Figure 49



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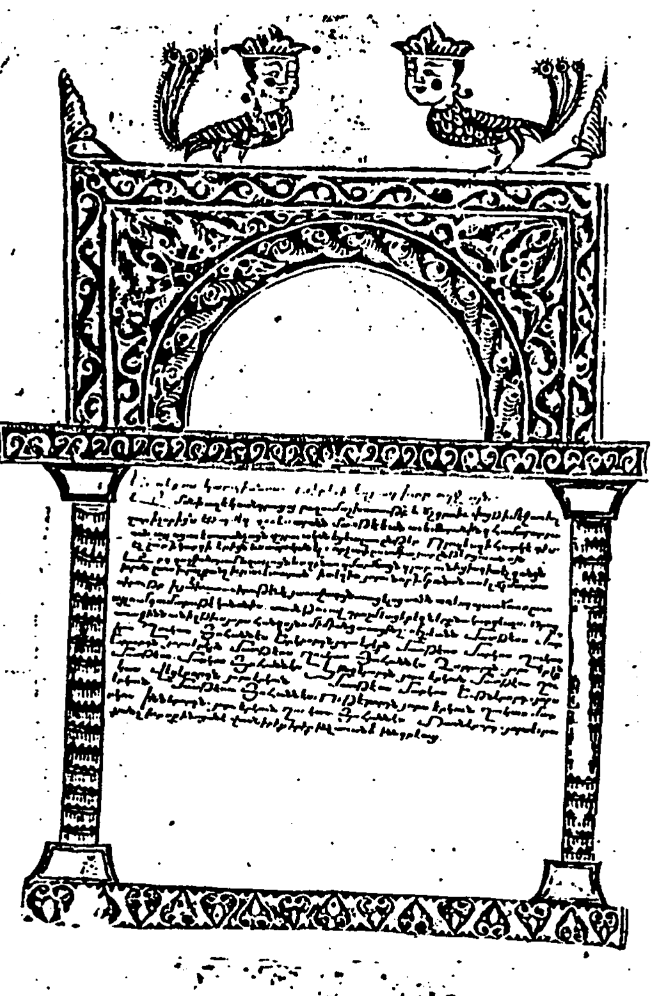

Figure 60

Figure 61

Figure 62

Figure 63

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