

The Eternal Artifact from the Still Cave of the Witch Poesy: The Role and Quality of Hermaphrodite in P. B. Shelley's *The Witch of Atlas*

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Abstract: In the classical legend, Hermaphroditus (Hermaphrodite) is the son of Hermes (Mercury) and Aphrodite (Venus). According to *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*, Hermaphroditus was originally a male Aphrodite, and represented as a Hermes with the phallus, the symbol of fertility, but afterwards as a divine being combining the two sexes, and usually with the head, breasts, and body of a female, but with the sexual parts of a man.

In 1819, Percy Bysshe Shelley saw the statue of the sleeping Hermaphroditus in palazzo Borghese in Rome, Italy, but unlike the statue he saw Shelley's Hermaphrodite in *The Witch of Atlas* has "two rapid wings" and "busy dreams...o'er its gentle countenance".

There has been a mass of critical discussions on the role and quality of Hermaphrodite in Shelley's *The Witch of Atlas*, and some of them are inconsistent or even contradictory. The objective of this study is to suggest a new interpretation of Shelley's Hermaphrodite through a close reading of *The Witch of Atlas* and reference and reexamination of different views by fourteen literary critics, including Carl Grabo, Carlos Baker, Harold Bloom, Desmond King-Hele, G. W. Knight, Richard Holmes, Richard Cronin, J. E. Hogle, Christine Gallant, Michael O'Neill, D. H. Reiman, D. L. Hoeveler, Jennifer Wallace, and Mark Sandy.

The present writer suggests that Shelley's Hermaphrodite was created from the Witch's desire for changes, the self-integration, and the dissatisfaction for her own infertility. She had a strong desire to create an ideal beauty, an eternal artifact, her familiar spirit, and the pilot to lead her boat. As a result, the "Image" inherited the essential qualities of the Witch herself; unparalleled beauty, immortality, sexlessness, and power to command dreams. It practices witchcraft like the Witch herself; it propels the boat as it goes against the stream or sails in the air. It simply disappears after the Witch goes down the Nile River in Egypt and Aethiopia to play pranks on mankind, not because it is lifeless, lacking in vitality or cold machine-like but because perfection once attained on all sides is useless in the world of mortals.

Key Words: P. B. Shelley, *The Witch of Atlas*, Hermaphrodite, poesy, Another Florimell

1. The Outline of *The Witch of Atlas*

The Witch of Atlas(1820) by Percy Bysshe Shelley(1792-1822) is a playful 672-line "visionary poem" written in the ottava rima stanzas. The present writer assumes that the poem consists of five

parts, which are loosely connected with each other.

(1) Prologue: Stanza I-VI(11.1-48)

In the first half of the Prologue, P. B. Shelley answers objection to Mary Shelley that the poem contains “no human interest” and that he should increase his popularity by adopting subjects that would more suit the popular taste. In the second half, he comically compares the Witch of Atlas with Wordsworth’s Peter Bell, who is remarkably contrastive with his Witch in every way. While Wordsworth puts away his boat in Prologue, it is indispensable for Shelley’s Witch, and her voyage therein is the substance of his poem.

(2) Part I: Stanza I-XIII(11.49-152)

Before the Fall, before the end of the Saturnian golden age, the Witch of Atlas was born. She was a daughter of the sun god Apollo and one of the Atlantides. At her birth, the animals and nature deities came to worship her. The Witch was so beautiful that her beauty seemed to eclipse the beauties of the natural world.

(3) Part II: Stanza XIV-XXX(11.153-288)

The Witch lived “on Atlas’ mountain within a cavern, by a secret fountain.” Her cavern was stored with “sounds of air”, “visions swift and sweet and quaint”, “odours”, “liquors clear and sweet”, and “scrolls of strange device”. All day she sat alone, spelling out scrolls of antiquity or weaving poetry “upon her growing woof” to forget her loneliness.

(4) Part III: Stanza XXXI-LVI(11.289-496)

When the Witch voyages, she uses a pinnace (or a boat), which has its origin in the sphere of the morning star. She creates Hermaphrodite, a perfect work of art, a familiar spirit (or a Xemime) of the Witch, and the pilot of her pinnace. It is made of “fire and snow” and synthesizes the opposing and contradictory aspects of creative mind. It sits face to face with the Witch and leads the pinnace in the most difficult part of their voyage. The Witch and Hermaphrodite travel all the way from Thamondocana through the Antarctic to the Niles.

(5) Part IV: Stanza LVII-LXXVIII(11.497-672)

The Witch gives a “strange panacea in a chrystal bowl”(Nepenthe) to those who are most beautiful so that they no longer fear death. She imparts “strange dreams” to those who are less beautiful to make their “harsh and crooked purposes more vain”. The priests throw away their deceits, the king demises the Crown in favor of an ape, and the soldiers stand around the anvils to beat their swords to ploughshares. Finally, the Witch helps “timid lovers” get married. The Witch does all the mischiefs with good intentions to better the world.

2. The Birth of Spenser’s Belphaebe and Amoretta and the Birth of Shelley’s Witch

Before discussing on the role and quality of Shelley’s Hermaphrodite, we will start with understanding its creator the Witch of Atlas.

The archetype of the Witch in Shelley's *The Witch of Atlas* is Belphaebe and Amoretta in *The Faerie Queene* by Edmund Spenser (1552-1599). Shelley borrowed his idea of the birth of his Witch from the tale of the birth of "faire Belphaebe and of Amoretta" in *The Faerie Queene* Book III. Both Shelley's Witch and Spenser's Belphaebe and Amoretta are the children of the sun god Apollo. In the world of myth, as we can see in *The Golden Bough*, Apollo is the creator of life and light and presides over reproduction. In that sense, the protagonist Witch in *The Witch of Atlas* is equivalent to Belphaebe and Amoretta in *The Faerie Queene*. We'll start with Spenser.

Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* Book III Canto VI Stanza 4-7 describes how fair Belpaebe and Amoretta were born in the "Garden of Adonis":¹

Her[Belphaebe's] mother was the faire Chrysogonee,
 The daughter of *Amphisa*, who by race
 A Faerie was, yborne of high degree,
 She bore *Belphaebe*, she bore in like cace
 Faire *Amoretta* in the second place:
 These two were twinnes, and twixt them two did share
 The heritage of all celestially grace.
 That all the rest it seem'd they robbed bare
 Of bountie, and of beautie, and all vertues rare. [Underline mine]

The name "*Chrysogonee*"(1.1) alludes to the myth of Danae who conceived when Jove(Zeus) came down upon her in a golden shower.²

It were a goodly storie, to declare,
 By what straunge accident faire *Chrysogone*
 Conceiu'd these infants, and how them she bare,
 In this wild forrest wandring all alone,
 After she had nine moneths fulfilled and gone:
 For not as other wemens commune brood,
 They were enwomb'd in the sacred throne
 Of her chaste bodie, nor with commune food,
 As other wemens babes, they sucked vitall blood.

But wondrously they were begot, and bred
 Through influence of th'heavens fruitfull ray,
 As it in antique bookes is mentioned.

It was vpon a Sommers shynie day,
 When *Titan* faire his beames did display,
 In a fresh fountaine, farre from all mens vew,
 She bath'd her brest, the boyling heat t'allay;
 She bath'd with roses red, and violets blew,
 And all the sweetest flowres, that in the forrest grew. [*Underline mine*]

“[R]oses red, and violets blew”(1.8) are singled out from all the flowers for their association with love and virginity, Venus and Diana, and so with Amoretta and Belphaebe.³

Till faint through irkesome wearinesse, adowne
 Vpon the grassie ground her selfe she layd
 To sleepe, the whiles a gentle slombring swowne
 Vpon her fell all naked bare displayd;
 The sunne-beames bright vpon her body playd,
 Being through former bathing mollifide,
 And pierst into her wombe, where they embayd
 With so sweet sence and secret power vnspide,
 That in her pregnant flesh they shortly fructifide.

The framework of Shelley's *The Witch of Atlas* is based on Spenser's *The Faerie Queen*. The first part of *The Witch of Atlas* (Stanza I-XI), which reminds us of the Garden of Eden, for example, is a descendant of “the Garden of Adonis” in *The Faerie Queene* Book III, Canto IV-XII.

Shelley begins his poem by introducing the Witch's mother, one of the Atlantides, whose beauty captivated Apollo. In Shelley's poem, he changes her first into a vapour, then a cloud, then a meteor, and finally into “one of those mysterious stars”.⁴

II

Her mother was *one of the Atlantides*—
The all-beholding Sun had ne'er beholden
 In his wide voyage o'er continents and seas
 So fair a creature, as she lay enfolden
 In the warm shadow of her loveliness...
 He kissed her with his beams, and made all golden
 The chamber of grey rock in which she lay—
 She, in that dream of joy, dissolved away. [*Italics mine*]

III

'Tis said, she first was changed into *a vapour*,
 And then into *a cloud*, such clouds as flit,
 Like splendour-winged moths about a taper,
 Round the red west when the sun dies in it:
 And then into *a meteor*, such as caper
 On hill-tops when the moon is in a fit:
 Then, into *one of those mysterious stars*
 Which hide themselves between the Earth and Mars. [*Italics mine*]

IV

Ten times the Mother of the Months had bent
 Her bow beside the folding-star, and bidden
 With that bright sign the billows to indent
 The sea-deserted sand—like children chidden,
 At her command they ever came and went—
 Since in that cave a dewy splendour hidden
 Took shape and motion: with the living form
 Of this embodied Power, the cave grew warm.

V

A lovely lady garmented in light
 From her own beauty—deep her eyes, as are
 Two openings of unfathomable night
 Seen through a Temple's cloven roof—her hair
 Dark—the dim brain whirls dizzy with delight
 Picturing her form—her soft smiles shone afar,
 And her low voice was heard like love, and drew
 All living things towards this wonder new.

But Shelley's Witch is not similar to Spenser's Belphaebe and Amoretta in every way. She is beautiful, has dark hair, her low voice sounds like love, and all living things come towards her.

The Witch is an exceptional protagonist among Shelley's poems. That is, she is an inquirer and an ideal beauty at the same time. Jean Hall says, "Like the Poet's visionary lover in *Alastor*, Emily in *Epipsychidion*, and the Shape all Light in *The Triumph of Life*, the Witch is one figure in a long

line of transcendental beauties celebrated by Shelley. But in this visionary company the Witch enjoys one distinction; she is the protagonist of her poem. The others are the visions of the poems' heroes, men who briefly glimpse the ideal and are drawn into a passionate, poetic search for it."⁵

Furthermore, the Witch is a personification of imagination and poesy. She is "a sort of imaginative sportswoman," whose "imagination is endlessly joyful, ebullient".⁶ That is, the Witch's most critical difference from Spenser's Belphæbe and Amoretta is that she is an artist, a poet, and a creator of artifacts. We'll focus on this in the next section.

3. The Witch of Atlas as a Poet, the Creator of Hermaphrodite

Unlike Spenser's Belphæbe and Amoretta, the Witch of Atlas is the symbol of a muse, poesy, and creative imagination. The Witch herself is a poet and creator of images, and she has a strong desire to create a beautiful immortal being, Hermaphrodite. To support this, the present writer quotes stanza XXVI, in which the word "poesy" appears twice.⁷

XXVI

All day the wizard lady sate aloof
 Spelling out scrolls of dread antiquity,
 Under the cavern's fountain-lighted roof;
 Or *broidering the pictured poesy*
Of some high tale upon her growing woof,
 Which the sweet splendour of her smiles could dye
 In hues outshining Heaven — *and ever she*
Added some grace to the wrought poesy.

XXVII

While on her hearth lay blazing many a piece
 Of sandal wood, rare gums, and cinnamon;
 Men scarcely know how beautiful fire is —
 Each flame of it is as a precious stone
 Dissolved in ever-moving light, and this
 Belongs to each and all who gaze upon.
 The Witch beheld it not, for *in her hand*
She held a woof that dimmed the burning brand. [*Italics mine*]

The Witch pictures and works "poesy" in her cavern all day. Since she is depicted as a poet, her witchcraft is her creative imagination. Shelley had also written of "the still cave of the witch Poesy"

(l. 44) in *Mont Blanc*(1816), from which the title of this article has derived. A cave or a cavern, which is frequently described in Shelley's major poems, is the symbol for poesy or imagination. We'll discuss on it in the next section.

Some critics even suggest that the Witch's real creator is the poet or the poetic imagination. M. H. Scrivener, for example, contends that "The Witch is created by the gods and the elements to remind the reader that her real creator is the poet—or rather, the poetic imagination. As a vapor, cloud, meteor, and star, she assumes the metamorphic shapes of the water cycle and fire, and symbolizes imagination, love, and utopia."⁸

As a creator, the Witch has a motivation to create. The present writer asserts that the Witch's motivation for creation consists of three elements; (1) The desire for changes, (2) The desire for the self-integration, and (3) The dissatisfaction for her own infertility.

(1) The desire for changes

Imagination seeks for changes. Scrivener further comments on Hermaphrodite: "The tendency of imagination is not static but prolific and always changing, so the Witch continues to metamorphose ..., creating a child, taking a voyage with Hermaphroditus in her boat, and finally intervening in the lives of imperfect humanity."⁹ One of the purposes of the Witch's voyage is to seek for changes.

(2) The desire for the self-integration

Imagination intends for the self-integration. D. L. Hoeveler suggests that the Witch "is similar to the poet described in the preface to *Alastor*, who unified the wonderful, wise, and beautiful, the functions of the imagination, the mind, and the heart. But, like the hero of *Alastor* and like Shelley himself, the Witch is not content with her own self-integration; she must have a double to reflect her own integration."¹⁰ The Witch, a perfect being as she is, needs a partner for her self-integration.

(3) The dissatisfaction for her own infertility

Desires for creation often come out of frustration or dissatisfaction. The present writer points out that the Witch's motivation for her creation, especially her creating Hermaphrodite came from her dissatisfaction with her own sexlessness and infertility. That is, Shelley's Androgyny, unlike that of Plato, is not self-sufficient.

4. A cavern as a symbol for poesy or imagination

The Witch of Atlas was living "on Atlas' mountain/ Within a cavern, by a secret fountain". (ll.55-56) A cavern is one of the most frequent images in Shelley's poetry. It is a dwelling place of the poet or where his/her voyage starts or ends, and the symbol for poesy or imagination. And the Witch of Atlas's cavern is the most minutely, elaborately described of Shelley's caverns.

In his essay "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry", W.B. Yeats wrote: "When Shelley went to the Continent with Godwin's daughter in 1814...[h]e may have seen some cave that was the bed of a

rivulet by some river-side, or have followed some mountain stream to its source in a cave, for from his return to England rivers and streams and wells, flowing through caves or rising in them, came into every poem of his that was of any length, and always with the precision of symbols.”¹¹

In many of Shelley’s major works, a cave, a river, and a boat are always in one set. In *Alastor*, the protagonist Poet passed in his boat along a river in a cave. At the end of *Prometheus Unbound*, Prometheus and Asia live amid a happy world in a cave where a fountain “leaps with an awakening sound.” In *The Triumph of Life*, when the Poet awoke to the vision that was Life, it was where a rivulet bubbled out of a cave.

In *The Witch of Atlas*, the Witch passed in her pinnace along a river in a cavern, and it was where it bubbled out of a cavern that she was born. She sits in her cavern all day, reading the works of some Saturnian Archimage and weaving poetry. Since the cavern, the river, and the pinnace are forming a trinity, we could say all the Witch’s creations are “from the still cave of the witch poesy.”

5. Shelley and Hermaphrodite

According to *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*(1849) edited by William Smith, the name Hermaphroditus (Hermaphroditos) “is compounded of Hermes and Aphrodite, and is synonymous with androgynes, gunandros, hemiandros, &s. He was originally a male Aphrodite (Aphroditus), and represented as a Hermes with the phallus, the symbol of fertility..., but afterwards as a divine being combining the two sexes, and usually with the head, breasts, and body of a female, but with the sexual parts of a man.”¹²

Shelley had first consciously met the idea of the Hermaphrodite, androgyny, in Aristophanes’ speech in his translation of Plato’s *Symposium* (ΣΥΜΠΟΣΙΟΝ) made at the Bagni di Lucca.¹³ In Shelley’s translation, Aristophanes’ account of the origin of humankind starts as follows(189d-e):

πρῶτον μὲν γὰρ τρία ἦν τὰ γένη τὰ τῶν ἀνθρώπων, οὐχ ὥσπερ νῦν δύο, ἄρρεν καὶ θήλυ, ἀλλὰ καὶ τρίτον προσῆν κοινὸν ὃν ἀμφοτέρων τούτων, οὗ νῦν ὄνομα λοιπόν, αὐτὸ δὲ ἠφάνισται· ἀνδρόγυνον γὰρ ἔν τότε μὲν ἦν καὶ εἶδος καὶ ὄνομα ἐξ ἀμφοτέρων κοινὸν τοῦ τε ἄρρενος καὶ θήλεος, νῦν δὲ οὐκ ἔστιν ἀλλ’ ἢ ἐν ὀνειδίει ὄνομα κείμενον.¹⁴

First, then, human beings were formerly not divided into two sexes, male and female; there was also a third, common to both the others, the name of which remains, though the sex itself has disappeared. The androgynous sex, both in appearance and in name, was common both to male and female; its name alone remains, which labours under a reproach.¹⁵

Shelley’s letter to Thomas Jefferson Hogg(1792-1862) of 3 December 1812 describes Elizabeth Hitchener as follows: “She is an artful, superficial, ugly, hermaphroditical beast of a woman, and

my astonishment at my fatuity, inconsistency, and bad taste was never so great, as after living four months with her as an inmate. What would Hell be, were such a woman in Heaven?"¹⁶ This is his most serious charge against her.¹⁷

In *Shelley: A Biography* (1968), J. O. Fuller notes that Shelley had seen the statue of a Hermaphrodite during a visit to the Palazzo Borghese, Rome, on 29 March 1819. Fuller asserts that 'It was plainly the sculpture which was there [i. e. in *The Witch of Atlas*] Shelley's model.' She further comments...that 'I saw this sculpture...and it is plainly asleep. That is why Shelley, even in his creative imagination, dared not in the poem wake it.'¹⁸

In *Shelley The Pursuit*, Richard Holmes describes the Hermaphrodite Shelley saw as follows: "The Hermaphrodite is asleep, lying on its belly, with the serene face cradled on its right arm and exposed to the viewer. The large eyes are closed, and the elegant curling hair is tied in with a simple band. The sculptor has cunningly arranged the disposition of the body so that the upper torso is slightly raised to reveal one breast, while the body below the waist is twisted on the right hip and the shapely legs drawn up, to concentrate the viewer's attention on a dramatic and lavishly executed pair of curving haunches."¹⁹

Shelley's *The Witch of Atlas* basically follows the classical genealogy of Hermaphroditus, the son of Hermes(Mercury) and Aphrodite(Venus). But unlike the statue in the Palazzo Borghese he saw, Shelley's Hermaphrodite is not always sleeping. It has "two rapid wings" (l.337) and "busy dreams o'er its gentle countenance."(ll.364-365). "Two rapid wings" reminds us of an angel or a bird. "Busy dreams" suggests that its dreams are very active.

Lastly, in one of the unused fragments of Shelley's *Epipsychidion*, the poet compares the ideal beauty Emily to a hermaphrodite²⁰:

Why, if you were a lady, it were fair
 The world should know...but as I am afraid
 The *Quarterly* might bait you if betrayed,
 And as it will be droll to see them stumble
 Over all sorts of scandal, hear them mumble
 Their litany of curses — some guess right
 And *others* swear you are a *Hermaphrodite*,
 Like that sweet marble monster of [both] sexes
 Who looks so soft and gentle, that it vexes
 This very soul, [?][?] that soul is gone
 Which lifted from its limbs the veil of stone
 Beyond this clear world...whither I and Thou
 All living and all lovely, hasten now

With steps, ah, too unequal! May we meet
 In one Elysium or one winding-sheet! [*Italics mine*]

6. Spenser's Another Florimell and Shelley's Hermaphrodite

Hermaphrodite in Shelley's *The Witch of Atlas* is equivalent to "Another Florimell" in Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*. The Witch in *The Faerie Queene* made a "repugnant mass" of purest snow into "Another Florimell" to save her son's reason and her own life (Book III Canto VIII 5-8).²¹

By their[her Sprights'] aduise, and her[the Witch's] owne wicked wit,
 She there deuiz'd a wondrous worke to frame,
 Whose like on earth was neuer framed yit,
 That euen Nature selfe enuide the same,
 And grudg'd to see the counterfet should shame
 The thing it selfe. In hand she boldly tooke
 To make another like the former Dame,
Another Florimell, in shape and looke
 So liuely and so like, that many it mistooke.

The substance, whereof she the bodie made,
 Was purest snow in massie mould congeald,
 Which she had gathered in a shadie glade
 Of the *Riphaean* hils, to her reueald
 By errant Sprights, but from all men conceald:
 The same she tempred with fine Mercury,
 And virgin wex, that neuer yet was sealed,
 And mingled them with perfect vermily,
 That like a liuely sanguine it seem'd to the eye. [*Underline mine*]

Spenser's "Another Florimell" was created to deceive people's eyes from the beginning. It was made from "purest snow", "fine Mercury," "virgin wex", mingled with "perfect vermily". "[W]ex" is "wax", and "vermily" is "vermillion". "Mercury" was one of the three basic substances of man in the era of Spenser.²² "The ingredients of Shelley's Hermaphrodite, however, are different except for snow. We'll see them later.

In stead of eyes two burning lampes she set
 In siluer sockets, shyning like the skyes,

And a quicke mouing Spirit did arret
 To stirre and roll them, like a womans eyes;
 In stead of yellow lockes she did deuse,
 With golden wyre to weaue her curled head;
 Yet golden wyre was not so yellow thrise
 As *Florimells* faire haire: and in the stead
 Of life, she put a Spright to rule the carkasse dead.

A wicked Spright yfraught with fawning guile,
And faire resemblance aboue all the rest,
Which with the Prince of Darknesse fell somewhile,
From heauens blisse and euerlasting rest;
 Him needed not instruct, which way were best
 Himselfe to fashion likest *Florimell*,
 Ne how to speake, ne how to vse his gest,
 For he in counterfeisance did excell,
 And all the wyles of wemens wits knew passing well. [*Underline mine*]

Talking about the Hermaphrodite, there is a note by A. C. Hamilton for the first 4 lines of Stanza 8 that the masculine spirit inhabiting the female body parodies the hermaphroditic Venus.²³

Him shaped thus, she deckt in garments gay,
 Which *Florimell* had left behind her late,
 That who so then her saw, would surely say,
 It was her selfe, whom it did imitate,
 Or fairer then her selfe, if ought algate
 Might fairer be. And then she forth her brought
 Vnto her sonne, that lay in feeble state;
 Who seeing her gan straight vpstart, and thought
 She was the Lady selfe, whom he so long had sought.

Shelley's Hermaphrodite certainly has its origin in Spenser's "Another Florimell". But it is drastically modified from that of Spenser, and in the present writer's opinion, it is not depicted as a false being. Here are the relevant stanzas (XXXV-XXXVII, XL) from *The Witch of Atlas*²⁴:

XXXV

Then by *strange art she*[the Witch] *kneaded fire and snow*
Together, tempering the repugnant mass
With liquid love —all things together grow
Through which the harmony of love can pass;
And a fair Shape out of her hands did flow —
 A living Image, which did far surpass
 In beauty that bright shape of vital stone
 Which drew the heart out of Pygmalion. [*Italics mine*]

While Spenser's "Another Florimell" was made from snow, mercury, wax, and vermillion, Shelley's Hermaphrodite is made from "fire and snow" tempered with "liquid love." According to Michael O'Neill, "liquid love" is a humour because love, an ideal that takes on rapturous majesty in *Prometheus Unbound* Act IV materializes here as a glue.²⁵

XXXVI

A sexless thing it was, and in its growth
 It seemed to have developed no defect
 Of either sex, yet all the grace of both —
 In gentleness and strength its limbs were decked;
 The bosom swelled lightly with its full youth —
 The countenance was such as might select
 Some artist that his skill should never die,
 Imaging forth such perfect purity.

XXXVII

From its smooth shoulders hung two rapid wings,
 Fit to have borne it to the seventh sphere,
 Tipt with the speed of liquid lightnings —
 Dyed in the ardours of the atmosphere —
 She led her creature to the boiling springs
 Where the light boat was moored, and said: "Sit here!"
 And pointed to the prow, and took her seat
 Beside the rudder, with opposing feet.

.....

XL

And ever as she[the Witch] went, the Image lay

With folded wings and unawakened eyes;
And o'er its gentle countenance did play
The busy dreams, as thick as summer flies,
Chasing the rapid smiles that would not stay,
 And drinking the warm tears, and the sweet sighs
 Inhaling, which, with busy murmur vain,
 They had aroused from that full heart and brain. [*Italics mine*]

Stanza XL is not much paid attention to, but it is important. Hermaphrodite keeps “The busy dreams, as thick as summer flies” on its face. This doesn’t simply mean it is always sleeping. It’s being asleep means it has the power over those dreams. “The busy dreams” means they are active dreams. Remember the Witch has “Visions swift and sweet and quaint” (l.161) in her cave. Hermaphrodite has the power to control visions and dreams, just like its creator, the Witch.

7. Hermaphrodite as One Who Leads the Voyage

Some readers of P. B. Shelley might say the poetic images in *The Witch of Atlas* are like a series of miniatures or pictures of still life, but it is not always true. The second half of Part III, Stanza XLIII-XVI(11.385-496) is conspicuous for its incessant changes, furiousness, swiftness, and striking contrasts.

In this part of the poem, the pilot Hermaphrodite leads the most adventurous part of the voyage. It exerts its full power to propel the “pinnacle”. Although these stanzas are seldom quoted or analyzed, they are truly Shelleyan and organize the most delightful part of the poem.²⁶

XLIII

And when the wizard lady would ascend
 The labyrinths of some many-winding vale
 Which to the inmost mountain upward tend —
She[the wizard lady] called "Hermaphroditus!" — and the pale
 And heavy hue which slumber could extend
 Over its lips and eyes, as on the gale
 A rapid shadow from a slope of grass,
 Into the darkness of the stream did pass. [*Italics mine*]

In stanza XLIII, to “ascend/ The labyrinths of some many-winding vale”, the Witch calls her partner “Hermaphroditus!” in Latin instead of “Hermaphrodite” in English, which sounds more like a magic spell. It might be one of the magic arts that she learned from “The works of some Saturnian

Archimage”(l.186). The line “as on the gale/ A rapid shadow from a slope of grass” can be rephrased as follows: “as if a rapid shadow would pass on the gale from a slope of grass.”

XLIV

And it[*Hermaphroditus*] unfurled its heaven-coloured pinions

With stars of fire spotting the stream below;

And from above into the Sun's dominions

Flinging a glory, like the golden glow

In which Spring clothes her emerald-winged minions,

All interwoven with fine feathery snow

And moonlight splendour of intensest rime

With which *Frost* paints the pines in winter time. [*Italics mine*]

In stanza XLIV, Hermaphrodite flings a “Glory”, i.e. “effulgence of light”(OED6), like its grandfather, the sun god Apollo. The chilliness of “fine feathery snow” and “Frost”, however, reminds us that the Witch “kneaded fire and snow/Together”(ll 321-322) to create Hermaphrodite. The second half of Part III abounds in images of striking contrast that reminds us of the theory of imagination by Samuel Taylor Coleridge(1772-1834). The language in this stanza, for example, emphasizes contrast. The Hermaphrodite’s wings are like day and spring and like winter and night concurrently. Also the mixture of “the golden glow” and iciness recalls the “sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice” in Coleridge’s *Kubla Khan: or, A Vision in a Dream. A Fragment*.

XLV

And then it winnowed the Elysian air

Which ever hung about that lady bright,

With its aetherial vans — and speeding there

Like a star up the torrent of the night

Or a swift eagle in the morning glare

Breasting the whirlwind with impetuous flight,

The pinnace, oared by those enchanted wings,

Clove the fierce streams towards their upper springs. [*Italics mine*]

In stanza XLV, we should note that the pinnace is “oared” by “those enchanted wings” of Hermaphrodite. It is Hermaphrodite who leads the most difficult and exciting part of the voyage.

XLVI

The water flashed, like sunlight by the prow
 Of a noon-wandering meteor flung to Heaven;
 The still air seemed as if its waves did flow
 In tempest down the mountains — loosely driven
 The lady's radiant hair streamed to and fro:
 Beneath, the billows having vainly striven
 Indignant and impetuous, roared to feel
The swift and steady motion of the keel. [Italics mine]

XLVII

Or, when the weary moon was in the wane
 Or in the noon of interlunar night
 The lady-witch in visions could not chain
 Her spirit; but sailed forth under the light
 Of shooting stars, and bade extend amain
Its storm-outspeeding wings, th' Hermaphrodite;
 She *to the Austral waters* took her way
Beyond the fabulous Thamondocana, — [Italics mine]

“Thamandocana” is now called Timbuktu in the Republic of Mali in West Africa. The swiftness and “steady motion” of the pinnacle owes much to the “storm-outspeeding wings” of Hermaphrodite, and they soon come into the Antarctic Zone in the next stanza.

XLVIII

Where, *like a meadow which no scythe has shaven,*
Which rain could never bend, or whirl-blast shake,
With the Antarctic constellations paven,
Canopus and his crew, lay the Austral lake —
 There she would build herself a windless haven
 Out of *the clouds whose moving turrets make*
The bastions of the storm, when through the sky
 The spirits of the tempest thundered by. *[Italics mine]*

Here is another example of contrastive images; “the Antarctic constellations paven”, i.e. a smooth stretch of water vs. “the clouds whose moving turrets make/ The bastions of the storm”, i.e. the stormy sky. This reminds us that Hermaphrodite was created by opposite elements; fire and snow.

XLIX

A haven beneath whose translucent floor
 The tremulous stars sparkled unfathomably,
 And around which the solid vapours hoar,
 Based on the level waters, to the sky
 Lifted their dreadful crags; and like a shore
 Of wintry mountains, inaccessibly
 Hemmed in with rifts and precipices grey
 And hanging crags, many a cove and bay.

L

And whilst *the outer lake beneath the lash*
Of the wind's scourge, foamed like a wounded thing,
 And the incessant hail with stony clash
 Ploughed up the waters, and the flagging wing
 Of the roused cormorant in the lightning flash
 Looked like the wreck of some wind-wandering
 Fragment of inky thundersmoke,—*this haven*
Was as a gem to copy Heaven engraven,— [*Italics mine*]

In stanza L, “the outer lake beneath the lash/ Of the wind's scourge” i.e. the storm vs. “this haven/ Was as a gem to copy Heaven engraven” i.e. the calm are making a striking contrast.

LI

On which that lady played her many pranks,
 Circling the image of a shooting star,
 Even as a tyger on Hydaspes' banks
Outspeeds the antelopes which speediest are,
 In her light boat; and many quips and cranks
 She played upon the water, till the car
 Of the late moon, like a sick matron wan,
 To journey from the misty east began. [*Italics mine*]

“Hydaspes” is a “river of northeast Pakistan, now called the Jhelum; it marked the eastern limit of Alexander’s conquest.”²⁷ *The Witch of Atlas* is a playful visionary poem and Part III is no

exception. As Richard Cronin points out, stanza LI-LIV parody John Milton's *Paradise Lost* Book I and II, the summoning of the fallen angels by Satan and the Parliament of Hell.²⁸

LII

And then she called out of the hollow turrets
 Of those high clouds, white, golden and vermilion,
The armies of her ministering Spirits—
 In mighty legions million after million
 They came, each troop emblazoning its merits
 On meteor flags, and many a proud pavilion
 Of the intertexture of the atmosphere
 They pitched upon the plain of the calm mere.

LIII

They framed *the imperial tent of their great Queen*
 Of woven exhalations, underlaid
 With lambent lightning-fire, as may be seen
 A dome of thin and open ivory inlaid
 With crimson silk..cressets from the Serene
 Hung there, and on the water for her tread
 A tapestry of fleecelike mist was strewn
 Dyed in the beams of the ascending moon. [*Italics mine*]

The framing of the Witch's "imperial tent" by "her ministering Spirits" in this stanza is comparable with the account of the devils' construction of Pandaemonium in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, I (ll.710-730).

LIV

And on a throne o'erlaid with starlight, caught
Upon those wandering isles of aëry dew
Which highest shoals of mountain shipwreck not
 She sate, and heard all that had happened new
 Between the earth and moon, since they had brought
 The last intelligence — and now she grew
 Pale as that moon lost in the watery night —
 And now she wept and now she laughed outright. [*Italics mine*]

In the first three lines in stanza LIV, the “starlight” is a metaphor for the pinnacle and the “highest shoals of mountain” is a metaphor for the shoals of the river. That is, the highest mountain would not cover the stars. The heaven and the earth are in correspondence in this stanza.

LV

These were tame pleasures — She[The Witch] would often climb
The steepest ladder of the crudded rack
 Up to some beaked cape of cloud sublime,
 And like Arion on the dolphin's back
 Ride singing through the shoreless air. Ofttime
 Following the serpent lightning's winding track
 She ran upon the platforms of the wind
 And laughed to hear the fireballs roar behind.

In stanza LV, the movement of the Witch in the pinnacle gives the impression of an aerobatics display. It is because Hermaphrodite's witchcraft is so powerful that it can take the Witch wherever she pleases. It takes her even to the “crudded rack”, a bank of clouds, which look like coagulated curds. The Witch's laughter reminds us of that of “I” in Shelley's *The Cloud*.

LVI

And sometimes to those streams of upper air
 Which whirl the earth in its diurnal round
 She would ascend, and win the spirits there
 To let her join their chorus. *Mortals* found
 That on those days the sky was calm and fair,
 And *mystic snatches of harmonious sound*
 Wandered upon the earth where'er she past,
 And happy thoughts of hope too sweet to last. [*Italics mine*]

The “mystic snatches of harmonious sound” refers to the music of the spheres. It is the music of heavenly bodies that is ordinarily audible only to the divine beings. You may recall the lines in Shelley's “With a Guitar. To Jane”: “That seldom heard mysterious sound, /Which, driven on its diurnal round/ As it floats through boundless day/ Our world enkindles on its way —”(ll.75-78).²⁹

The present writer assumes that this stanza, in which the Witch joins the chorus of the spirits, is the climax of the entire poem. The reference to “Mortals”, however, takes us down to the world of

mankind as they go down the Nile River.

8. Criticisms on Shelley's Hermaphrodite

There has been a mass of critical discussions on the role and quality of Hermaphrodite in *The Witch of Atlas*, and some of them are inconsistent or even contradictory. In this section, we'll take a bird's-eye view of the literary criticism on Shelley's Hermaphrodite in the last century.

(1) A natural personification of the two complementary forces of the world

In *Meaning of the Witch of Atlas*(1935), Carl Grabo concludes that the Witch represents 1. The goddess of love and electricity, 2. Isis, goddess of the Moon and fertility, and 3. The creative spirit of intellectual beauty. He argues, "The Hermaphrodite...is a natural personification of the two complementary forces of the world, of attraction and repulsion, of love and hate, for there are two fluid principles in electricity, the positive and negative, the resinous and vitreous, the masculine and the feminine, as they are variously designated. Yet there is, too, a mythological background to the Hermaphrodite which should be briefly sketched, for it is from myth that Shelley derives this symbol of a force which unifies contrarities, a force which in the physical world is a counterpart of the unifying principle of divine love...The poet's description of Hermaphroditus is consonant with the ideal of angelic perfection and of beauty, masculine and feminine, blent in one being. Its wings are "tipped" with the speed of "liquid lightnings," a phrase which recalls the "liquid love" of a previous line and other evidences of the poet's identification of love with electric energy."³⁰

His idea "the two complementary forces of the world" derives from the line "she[the Witch] kneaded fire and snow/Together, tempering the repugnant mass/With liquid love"(ll.321-323) to create Hermaphrodite. Grabo's reading is very symbolic. He identifies love in Shelley's poetry with electric energy. Mist, light, and starbeams are "symbols of the divine fire." Harold Bloom repeatedly cites Grabo and criticizes the arbitrariness of his reading.³¹ Although Grabo's work is very old, it still has the significance of the existence today for its originality and uniqueness.

(2) A companion to assuage her loneliness

In *Shelley's Major Poetry*(1961), Carlos Baker regards the Witch of Atlas' motivation for creating the Hermaphrodite as one of assuaging loneliness: "That the witch's trance-like immersion in the well of love has equipped her, as has also her reading, with the harmonizing power is proved by her manufacture of the Hermaphrodite. To assuage her loneliness, she creates a being more beautiful than Pygmalion's image. The allusion to Pygmalion suggests that Shelley was thinking of the Hermaphroditus whom Ovid displays under amorous attack in the fountain of Salmacis. But if this is the truth of the matter, he combined the idea with one from Spenser, where another witch creates False Florimell using snow as a principal ingredient. Shelley is not only imagining that love is capable of blending opposite sexes...he is also fancifully supposing that the witchery of love can effect a combination of fire and snow...So creative a being as the Witch of Atlas cannot, however,

reach “full satietie” by such expedients as the fashioning of Hermaphrodite. Love is not passive but active. Thus it is probably in Shelley’s view inevitable (since she has in her boat a means of transportation and in the Hermaphrodite a suitable companion) that she should descend from her lofty and lonely citadel into the world of men”.³²

Baker’s points are 1. The Witch’s purpose of creating Hermaphrodite was “to assuage her loneliness”, and 2. The witchery of love can combine fire, “liquid love” with snow, “the repugnant mass”. The former is an important point, because an androgyny as she was, she was dissatisfied with her state and needed a companion. The present writer agrees with this, but at the same time assumes that the Witch’s motivation to create Hermaphrodite was more positive one. She created it out of an irresistible appetite for creation.

(3) False Florimell

In *Shelley’s Mythmaking*(1969), Harold Bloom devotes as many as 40 pages on *The witch of Atlas*. He assumes that it is “Shelley’s best long poem, the most individual and original of his visions, and the supreme example of mythmaking poetry in English”.³³ He admires the Witch and the nymphs, but he is dubious about the Hermaphrodite in the poem.

Bloom argues: “This “living Image”[Hermaphrodite] is a “sexless thing”; its “growth” from fire and snow under the Witch’s hands not having been generative, it outwardly displays “no defect/ Of either sex, yet all the grace of both”; it is an image of “perfect purity,” its countenance displays the never-to-die skill of its maker. *But* when all that has been said for the Hermaphrodite, its “positive” case is at an end, for as the poem goes on to make clear, the Hermaphrodite is only an object for the Witch to experience, a useful toy at best, otherwise only a distraction; as much a toy, as much a deceitful image of real flesh as the False Florimell is...If poetry is what Wallace Stevens calls it, a supreme fiction, then in some sense the Hermaphrodite is poetry; but “The Witch of Atlas,” though urbane, is not that sophisticated. The Hermaphrodite is the best means available for the boat of the Witch’s mythopoetic desire to move against the course of nature; to oppose natural reality with a reality at once supra- and preternatural. The commentators on “The Witch of Atlas” have neglected that preternatural aspect of the Hermaphrodite, but it is in the poem as much as the supranatural is; the beautiful mouth of the Hermaphrodite is more beautiful than the mouths of the nymphs, but it is a mouth that has no moisture and no breath and only breathless mouths can summon it”.³⁴ He presumes that the scene of the nymphs and the Witch (Stanza XXII-XXV, ll. 217-248) is “the thematic center of the poem, and constitutes one of the heights of Shelley’s poetic achievement”.³⁵

In *The Visionary Company*(1979), Bloom comments on *The Witch of Atlas* again for 9 pages.³⁶ He compares the Hermaphrodite to “a golden cock” in W. B. Yeats’s *Byzantium*. The “Hermaphrodite, for all its “perfect purity,” is only an object, like Yeats’s golden bird, and as much a deceitful image of real flesh as Spenser’s False Florimell is. Like Yeats’s artifice, it is a robot; it needs to be led to the boat, ordered to sit in the prow, while the Witch takes the rudder, and then

falls asleep, to be awakened only for use when the Witch desires the boat to go against nature, against a stream, or through the air. The point of the Hermaphrodite is that it is the best permanent being the sexless Witch can create. The nymphs are capable of relationship, but they are mutable and must die. The Hermaphrodite is more beautiful than the nymphs, but its beauty is too perfect and unchanging. The nymphs must die, but they can love. The Hermaphrodite is sexually self-sufficient because it is a cold but unfulfillable perfection. A mere artifice remains the best product of the myth-making faculty, and so the Hermaphrodite is an involuntary criticism of *The Witch of Atlas*. Fictions intimate relationships to us, but cannot substitute for them”.³⁷

Bloom and Baker assume that Shelley’s Hermaphrodite is “False Florimell”. According Hiroshi Suzuki,³⁸ it is Douglas Bush³⁹ who advocated that Shelley’s Hermaphrodite reflected False Florimell. Although I’ve learned quite a lot from Bloom’s books, I disagree with his view on Hermaphrodite. It sounds like Bloom is trying to interpret *The Witch of Atlas* from outside of the poem. W. B. Yeats’s *Byzantium*(1930) was written a century after Shelley’s death. Many scholars would agree that Yeats was strongly influenced by Shelley, but not vice versa. Yeats’s “Miracle, bird or golden handiwork” being made of metal doesn’t mean Shelley’s Hermaphrodite is “a robot”. We’ll come back to Yeats’s golden bird in *Byzantium* later on in the next section, 9. Discussion.

(4) Symbols for completeness and a superhuman range of experience

In *Shelley: His Thought and Work*(1971), Desmond King-Hele goes back to pre-history sources to explain hermaphrodites: “The early god-makers often chose hermaphrodite because it made plain to the meanest mind that gods differed from men, and also because it symbolized a wholeness mortals were always striving for and could never attain. Many of the myths explaining the origin of the sexes depend on figures openly or latently androgynous, e.g. Aristophanes’s cartwheelers in Plato’s *Symposium* or Adam before he lost his rib. Shelley had the same basic motives as the mythmakers and an added incentive provided by his own Age. For at the end of the eighteenth century, scientists were greatly interested in hermaphrodites. They figure in Erasmus Darwin’s evolutionary theory and appear quite frequently in the *Philosophical Transactions* of the Royal Society...So hermaphrodites were there ready for Shelley to use as symbols for completeness and a superhuman range of experience.”⁴⁰

King-Hele’s description gives us some interesting historical background of Hermaphrodites. Since we know Shelley was certainly familiar with the idea of the Hermaphrodite, androgyny in Aristophanes’ speech through his translation of Plato’s *Symposium*, what King-Hele points out is persuasive enough. His indication that the scientists in the late eighteenth century were greatly interested in hermaphrodites is also very helpful to understand why Shelley chose the Hermaphrodite as one of his characters in his poems.

(5) The symbol of the purified, inclusive, poetic consciousness

In *The Starlit Dome*(1971), G. Wilson Knight asserts that Hermaphrodite is the symbol of the

purified, yet inclusive, poetic consciousness: “The Witch creates out of “fire and snow” mingled with “love” a new being resembling Goethe’s Homunculus, the mixture recalling the sunny=ice of Coleridge’s dome, symbol of the purified, yet inclusive, poetic consciousness. This seraph-form is, *sexless*, its bosom swelling “lightly” with “full youth,” yet incorporates the best of both sexes, strength and gentleness, and is excessively beautiful with an artistic “purity.” It is thus super-sexual rather than a-sexual, as is the creative consciousness, and, perhaps, the evolutionary explaining the origin or transcendental goal of mankind.”⁴¹

According to Knight, Hermaphrodite is a representative of something positive in every way. He particularly emphasizes on the artistic “purity” of Hermaphrodite. Bloom, however, objects to him taking the position that Hermaphrodite is a more paradoxical creature than he realizes.⁴² The present writer takes the side of Knight on this point.

(6) The Witch’s companion and servant, sorcerer’s apprentice

In *Shelley The Pursuit*(1976), Richard Holmes assumes that Shelley’s Hermaphrodite symbolizes all the potential energies of Nature, sexual and electric but it remains sleeping “for the most part”: “In his poem, the Witch herself creates a hermaphrodite. The beautiful bisexual creature is the Witch’s companion and servant, a sort of sorcerer’s apprentice, who symbolizes all the potential energies of Nature, sexual and electric. But for the most part the hermaphrodite remains, like its original marble image in Rome, sleeping; for its freedoms are potential only.”⁴³

The present writer disagrees with this in two points. First, Hermaphrodite couldn’t be a “companion”, a “servant”, and an “apprentice” at the same time. Holmes should choose just one of them. Second, Hermaphrodite is not sleeping “for the most part”. It plays a very important role when the pinnace travels all the way from Thamondocana through the Antarctic to the Niles.

(7) An alter ego of the Witch

In *Shelley’s Poetic Thoughts*(1981), Richard Cronin suggests that Hermaphrodite is an alter ego of the Witch: “The role of this creature in the poem is simply as an alter ego of the Witch. The Hermaphrodite is fashioned from fire and snow, and in stanza 30 when the Witch lay in the well of fire watching snow melt on the flames she was related to these two substances. The Hermaphrodite lying in the bottom of the boat ‘With folded wings and unawakened eyes’ recalls the description of the Witch in her contemplative hibernation. The Hermaphrodite is called a ‘sexless thing’ and the Witch is later compared to a ‘sexless bee’. The Witch created Hermaphrodite in her own image. Its Hermaphroditism is a symbol of her own existence, both in the world and out of it. It is used to express the radical ambivalence of the Witch’s own character. It is an image of ‘perfect purity’, but it can also be called ‘a sexless thing’, a description that makes it seem ridiculous, and insists that it is a ‘thing’, an object.”⁴⁴

As far as I know, Cronin is the only critic who asserts that Hermaphrodite is “an alter ego” of the Witch. The present writer admits that Hermaphrodite does inherit some traits of its creator the

Witch. But since not much inner relationship between the Witch and the Hermaphrodite is described in the poem, to regard the Hermaphrodite as “an alter ego” of the Witch is rather going too far.

(8) Lying in a well of crimson fire

In *Shelley's Process*(1988), Jerrold E. Hogle compares Shelley's *The Witch of Atlas* with Ovid's *Metamorphosis* and points out that Shelley completely omits the “well of crimson fire” from the making of Hermaphrodite: “The lady-wizard fashions Hermaphroditus, for example, shortly after lying repeatedly in a “well/ Of crimson fire” outside her cave, in a molten liquid (suggesting perception flaming up into interpretive distentions of it) that makes the “star” above it look “bearded,” the moon “mimic” itself, and the “snow” of winter melt into a blend of fire and water... There might have been a close causal connection between this pool and the hermaphrodite; even in Ovid, where there is a detailed episode revealing how the hermaphrodite of legend first became bisexual, this boy—for Ovid “the heir of Atlas” as the son of Mercury and Venus (two aspects of the Witch)—is joined to a girl passionately lusting for him, all in a “fountained pool,” which henceforth has the “magic” power to make all who swim there “Half men, half women”(Metam., IV., 231-60)...Yet Shelley's poem almost completely divorces the pool from the making of Hermaphroditus, save for the narrative proximity between the two and the way the latter is “kneaded” into shape out of “fire and snow,” a combination achieved in the well.”⁴⁵

As many critics have pointed out, the whole idea of Shelley's *The Witch of Atlas* is partly indebted to Ovid's *Metamorphose*. Hogle's point seems to be that Shelley should have included Ovid's “well of crimson fire” or the “pool” when he made the Witch create Hermaphrodite. We know Shelley had an extensive knowledge on classics, but we also know that when he used them he almost always greatly changed or remade them. As we have already seen, in many of Shelley's poetical works, a cave, a river, and a boat are always in one set, and *The Witch of Atlas* is not an exception. And the Witch's cavern was located “by a secret fountain”(1.56). The present writer assumes that in *The Witch of Atlas*, the “well”, the element of water, is substituted for the “secret fountain”, where the Witch was born.

(9) A golem

In *Shelley's Ambivalence*(1989), Christine Gallant suggests that Hermaphroditus “is rather like a golem, kneaded out of fire and snow, as the golem is out of earth, by its summoning magician. According to the Cabbalists, the golem was a monster created by the mystical combination of letters, who slavishly did the tasks willed by its master. So the Witch's creature is an ‘Image’, originally a ‘repugnant mass’ which the Witch shapes by ‘strange art’ and ‘liquid love’ into something beautiful; and it performs her menial chores as they sail down the Nile. But she makes it asexual and thus unable to experience intimacy with anyone but her. Full of grace, gentleness, smoothness and beauty, still this offspring is called ‘the creature’ and ‘it’—more than slightly disturbing...”⁴⁶

Cronin contends that Hermaphrodite is “an alter ego” of the Witch, Holmes suggests that it is a

“sorcerer’s apprentice” and Gallant suggests that it is “a golem”. The present writer assumes that it is more like the Witch’s familiar spirit or Xemime.

(10) The perpetual release of creative energy

In *The Human Mind’s Imaginings*(1989), Michael O’Neill points out that “Shelley asserts the superiority of his creation’s creation, the Witch’s Hermaphroditus, over the invention of Pygmalion” in Stanza XXXV, ll.325-328. He further argues that “The ‘fair Shape’[Hermaphrodite] which emerges from this ‘strange art’ bears a relation to ‘the harmony of love’ which is analogous to that of Shelley’s fictions to their imaginative source. ‘The harmony of love’ directs our attention not so much to the laudable nature of the Witch’s activity as to the perpetual release of creative energy that is central to her nature. For all the poem’s inventiveness, there is a constant if subliminal recognition that ‘fictions’ limit, even as they appease, the craving of the imagination.”⁴⁷

According to O’Neill, creative process is a perpetual release of energy, and the relationship of Hermaphrodite to the harmony of love is that of Shelley’s fictions to his imaginative source. That is, art comes out of imagination and love. The present writer assumes that his interpretation best fits Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*, for example, and *The Witch of Atlas* is a kind of unique variation, because in the latter, Hermaphrodite is created from “fire and snow” with “liquid love”.

(11) Perfected creation that lacks nothing

In *Percy Bysshe Shelley*(1990), D. H. Reiman applies Coleridge’s theory of art to Hermaphrodite: “...Into the boat she[the Witch] put a hermaphrodite that she had created by kneading “fire and snow”. This self-contained creature embodied a reconciliation of opposites such as Coleridge in *Biographia Literaria*...had said lay at the heart of poetry: it combined the ideals of male and female beauty (that of Hermes and Aphrodite) that appears in Aristophanes’ myth of the Androgyne (in Plato’s *Symposium*), in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, and frequently in sculptures of the Italian Renaissance. The hermaphrodite, in short, represents that perfected creation that lacks nothing and, therefore, has no need for love, no reason to seek the good or the beautiful outside itself.”⁴⁸

What Reiman calls “a reconciliation of opposites” is equivalent to what Grabo calls “a natural personification of the two complementary forces of the world.” Grabo and Knight referred to Coleridge’s *Kubla Khan* and Reiman referred to Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria*. How much Shelley was influenced by Coleridge’s poetical works and literary theory could be a very important issue. The present writer suggests that Hermaphrodite being made out of “fire and snow”, images of striking contrast in the second half of *The Witch of Atlas* Part III, and Coleridge’s artistic theory of two poles or extremities are basically the same thing.

(12) The false copy

In *Teaching Shelley’s Poetry*(1990), Diane Long Hoeveler assumes that “Hermaphroditism produces a physical monstrosity that merely accentuates the differences between the sexes. Androgyny, by contrast, is a merger of psychic characteristics within the imagination. The image of

the androgyne expresses the restoration of the psyche to its original, asexual wholeness, while the hermaphrodite represents an earthly and physical parody of that state.” Hoeveler further contends “that it is most plausible that Shelley intended the Witch to be an androgynous foil to the hermaphrodite she created. The Witch is Shelley’s True Florimell, the true love object who is androgynous and immortal, while hermaphrodite is the false copy, a purely physical love who lures the poet into the limiting realms of self.”⁴⁹

The present writer presumes that the hermaphrodite is not “an earthly and physical parody” of androgyny but an immortal and perfect being. Hoeveler’s negative view on Shelley’s Hermaphrodite seems to be descended from Harold Bloom. What Hoeveler calls “the false copy” seems to be equivalent to what Bloom calls “False Florimell”.

(13) Cold machine-like figure, inert and too disengaged

In *Shelley and Greece*(1997), Jennifer Wallace argues that Shelley’s “representation of a hermaphrodite in *The Witch of Atlas* is not so much doubly sexed as sexless. It is a cold machine-like figure, the creation of its Frankenstein-like mistress, the witch. And she, herself unattached and autonomously creating without love—’a sexless bee’—is a similarly peculiarly unsatisfied figure, longing...for love...The inertia of the hermaphrodite, its sexlessness, does not seem to have been a satisfactory way of representing the alterity of Greece to Shelley. The hermaphrodite was too disengaged, too lacking in vitality and motivation, too self-absorbed...”⁵⁰

Wallace’s view on Shelley’s Hermaphrodite is in the same line with those of Hoeveler and Bloom, or even worse than that. In Shelley’s text, including connotation, the present writer could hardly believe that Hermaphrodite is “a cold machine-like figure, the creation of its Frankenstein-like mistress,” and is “too disengaged, too lacking in vitality and motivation, too self-absorbed”.

(14) A closer representation of the poetic imagination than the witch

In *Poetics of Self and Form in Keats and Shelley*(2005), Mark Sandy argues that Shelley’s Hermaphrodite is a closer representation of the poetic imagination than the witch: “Shelley’s witch attempts to rectify her sterility by interweaving from ‘fire and snow’...a companion to share her immortal realms, only to create an androgynous companion which mirrors her own asexuality...This hermaphrodite might appear a passive and automated companion for the witch but, by virtue of her prodigious nature, is superior to her creator. The sexually amorphous assistant is a closer representation of the poetic imagination than the witch, because it can pilot her creator’s boat, which ‘in joyous expectation lay’..., through the world of nature. The hermaphrodite’s skill leads to a feeling of ill ease about the witch’s desire to participate in the dim mutable world of mortals. Such participation can only ever be mediated by her own creations, or dreams, and so the witch, like those rescued beautiful souls, is confined ‘beyond the rage/ Of death or life’”⁵¹

Sandy’s interpretation sounds agreeable except for the following two points. First, I don’t agree with him that Hermaphrodite “is superior to her creator,” the Witch. And I don’t understand what he

means by “by virtue of her prodigious nature.” Second, I can’t follow his saying that “the hermaphrodite’s skill leads to a feeling of ill ease about the witch’s desire to participate in the dim mutable world of mortals.” The Witch went into the world of mortals mainly because “her choice sport was.../To glide adown old Nilus”(ll.497-498) to play pranks on mankind.

9. Discussion

After reading fourteen scholars’ comments on Shelley’s Hermaphrodite, the present writer chooses the following four main points to be discussed here.

(1) Is Hermaphrodite False Florimell?

While the three critics, Harold Bloom, D. L. Hoeveler, and Jennifer Wallace have a negative view on Hermaphrodite, other critics don’t. Their point is Hermaphrodite is just an imitation, a fake, and a lifeless thing. According to Bloom, Hermaphrodite is an object for the Witch to experience, a useful toy, a distraction, like the False Florimell in *The Faerie Queene*. Hoeveler simply calls it “the false copy of the Witch.” Wallace’s comment is the harshest one; Hermaphrodite is “cold machine-like,” inert, “too disengaged,” “too lacking in vitality and motivation,” and “too self-absorbed.” The present writer disagrees with their ideas for the following four reasons:

1. When the Witch created Hermaphrodite, it “did far surpass/ In beauty that bright shape of vital stone/Which drew the heart out of Pygmalion”(XXXV ll.326-328), its countenance was such as might select/ Some artist that his skill should never die, /Imaging forth such perfect beauty”.
2. Hermaphrodite proves its tremendous power and efficiency all through the second half of Part III (Stanza XLIII-LVI, ll. 385-496). It is Hermaphrodite who enabled the Witch to travel all the way from Thamondocana through the Antarctic to the Niles. The present writer assumes this is one of the best parts of the poem, in which the poet’s imagination is in its height.
3. There is no phrase throughout the poem which implies Hermaphrodite is false, cold machine-like, too lacking in vitality and motivation, too self-absorbed, or too disengaged.
4. Hermaphrodite is not mentioned in Part IV (Stanza LVII-LXXVIII ll. 497-672) not because it is false but because perfection once attained on all sides is useless in the world of mortals.

Now we come back to the Harold Blooms’ comment on Yeats’s golden bird: “the Hermaphrodite, for all its “perfect purity,” is only an object, like Yeats’s golden bird, and as much a deceitful image of real flesh as Spenser’s False Florimell is. Like Yeats’s artifice, it is a robot...” To this, I’d like to make a brief comment on the second stanza of W. B. Yeats’s ‘Byzantium’:⁵²

Miracle, bird of golden handiwork,
More miracle than bird or handiwork,

Planted on the starlit golden bough,
 Can like the cocks of Hades crow,
 Or, by the moon embittered, scorn aloud
 In glory of changeless metal
 Common bird or petal
 And all complexities of mire or blood.

As in the poem, “Yeats’s golden bird” is “More miracle than bird or handiwork”. Since the color gold has something to do with the eternity in Western culture, the “golden bird” is a symbol of perfection, a perfect work of art. That is, “golden bird” vs. “Common bird” is immortal being vs. mortal being.

As for the line “In glory of changeless metal”, the present writer doesn’t see any “false” or “deceitful” connotation in the word “metal” in this context of the poem. In this stanza, things mortal — “Common bird or petal/ And all complexities of mire or blood”— are scorned aloud, but not the “metal”. It is “changeless” and in “glory”. And I don’t see anything “cold machine-like”, inert, “too disengaged”, “too lacking in vitality and motivation” in the Shelley’s poem itself, either.

(2) Hermaphrodite as a partner of the Witch

Richard Cronin suggests that Hermaphrodite is “an alter ego” of the Witch. According to Carlos Baker, Hermaphrodite is a companion of the Witch who created it “to assuage” her “loneliness”. Richard Holmes assumes that Hermaphrodite is the Witch’s companion and servant, sorcerer’s apprentice. Christine Gallant sees Hermaphrodite as something like “a golem,” who slavishly does the tasks willed by its master. Hermaphrodite gives such different impressions on different critics.

The present writer suggests that Hermaphrodite is the Witch’s Xemime or familiar spirit she created. According to *Merriam Webster*, a familiar spirit is “a spirit or demon that serves or prompts an individual.”⁵³ A familiar spirit might do what the witch or wizard tells it to do for the most part, but not always. It’s not a robot or a slave. When the Witch calls “Hermaphroditus!” in Latin instead of in English, it sounds more like a magic spell, because magic spells are usually in Latin. Hermaphrodite does prove its competency in the second half of Part III. Of course, the pinnacle might have been enchanted by its owner the Witch to some extent, but without Hermaphrodite, the Witch’s voyage would not have been possible. Hermaphrodite is the best partner, the familiar spirit and the eternal artifact created by the Witch.

(3) Hermaphrodite as a symbol of creative imagination

As the line “In the still cave of the witch Poesy”(l.44) in Shelley’s *Mont Blanc* signifies, the Witch or witchcraft is a symbol of poetic imagination for Shelley. As we read in the poem, the Witch “kneaded fire and snow/ Together” (ll.321-322) to create Hermaphrodite. According to Carl Grabo, Hermaphrodite is “a natural personification of the two complementary forces.” D. H.

Reiman suggests that Hermaphrodite is a “reconciliation of opposites at the heart of poetry.” G. W. Knight assumes that it is a “symbol of the purified, yet inclusive, poetic consciousness.” Michael O’Neill contends that the “harmony of love” directs our attention to the perpetual release of creative energy. Mark Sandy even asserts that it is “a closer representation of the poetic imagination than the witch”. In addition to this, the present writer argues that Hermaphrodite inherited the essential qualities from the Witch; imagination, poesy, or magic, and it is an eternal artifact itself.

An eternal artifact often consists of two opposite elements; hot and cold, hard and soft, masculine and feminine, etc. Knight points out the similarity between “Goethe’s Homunculus” or “Coleridge’s pleasure dome” and Shelley’s Hermaphrodite. Talking about “Coleridge’s pleasure dome”, Knight is referring to the striking contrast between “a sunny pleasure-dome” and “caves of ice”(l.36) in *Kubla Khan* by S. T. Coleridge. Coleridge’s “sunny pleasure-dome” and “caves of ice” are equivalent to Shelley’s “fire” and “snow”, respectively. The reconciliation or harmony of the opposites or extremities is the essential part of Coleridge’s theory of imagination, To support this, the present writer quotes a passage from his *Biographia Literaria* Chapter XIV:⁵⁴

He[The poet] diffuses a tone and spirit of unity, that blends, and...fuses, each into each, *by that synthetic and magical power, to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination.* This power, first put in action by the will and understanding, and retained under their irremissive, though gentle and unnoticed, control...reveals itself *in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image; the individual, with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects;...[Italics mine]*

Lastly, dreams and visions are essential qualities of poesy and imagination. Although none of the critics above paid any attention to, the present writer contends that Shelley’s Hermaphrodite presides over dreams. It keeps “The busy dreams, as thick as summer flies”(l.364) over its face. It means it has the power over those “dreams”. That is, Hermaphrodite has power to control visions, dreams, poesy or imagination just like the Witch, who has “Visions swift and sweet and quaint”(l.161) in her cave. This is one of the crucial points in what the poet himself called “a visionary rhyme.”(l.8)

(4) Prometheus’s Spirit with Pinions

The present writer suggests that the similarity between Shelley’s Hermaphrodite and “Prometheus’s Spirit with Pinions” in *Prometheus Unbound* sheds a light on the relationship between the Witch and Hermaphrodite. Cited below is a very famous scene from *Prometheus Unbound*, Act II Scene v, ll.72-97.⁵⁵

ASIA

My[Asia's] soul is *an enchanted Boat*
 Which, like a sleeping swan, doth float
 Upon the silver waves of thy sweet singing,
 And thine doth like an Angel *sit*
Beside the helm conducting it
 Whilst all the winds with melody are ringing.
 It seems to float ever — forever —
 Upon that many winding River
 Between mountains, woods, abysses,
 A Paradise of wildernesses,
 Till like one in slumber bound
 Borne to the ocean, I float down, around,
 Into a Sea profound, of ever-spreading sound.

Meanwhile *thy [Prometheus's] Spirit lifts its pinions*
 In Music's most serene dominions,
 Catching the winds that fan that happy Heaven.
 And we sail on, away, afar,
 Without a course — without a star —
 But by the instinct of sweet Music driven
 Till, through Elysian garden islets
 By thee, *most beautiful of pilots,*
Where never mortal pinnace glided,
The boat of my [Asia's] desire is guided —
 Realms where the air we breathe is *Love*
 Which in the winds and on the waves doth move,
 Harmonizing this Earth with what we feel above. [*Italics mine*]

Obviously, some of Shelley's poetical works are cut from the same cloth. Especially, as Carl Grabo points out, *The Witch of Atlas* "is hewn from the same block from which were fashioned the gigantic *Prometheus* and the lesser *Cloud*.⁵⁶ *Prometheus Unbound* was written some two years before *The Witch of Atlas*, and they share some images, symbols, and settings. In this scene, Prometheus's Spirit with Pinions, "most beautiful of pilots," guides Asia's "enchanted boat." In *The Witch of Atlas*, Hermaphrodite with "two rapid wings" plays the role of the pilot of the Witch's boat, taking her seat "besides the rudder". That is, the relation of the Witch and Hermaphrodite is that of

Asia and Prometheus's Spirit. Therefore, in the context of Shelley's poetical works, Shelley's Hermaphrodite is a good, fair, idealistic and perfect being just as Prometheus's Spirit is.

10. Conclusion

Although Shelley borrowed the idea of his Hermaphrodite from "Another Florimell" in Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, it is not equivalent to what Bloom and Baker call "False Florimell".

Shelley's Hermaphrodite was created from the Witch's desire for changes, the self-integration, and the dissatisfaction for her own infertility. She had a strong motivation for creating an ideal beauty, an eternal artifact, her familiar spirit, and the pilot to lead her boat. As a result, the "image" inherited the essential qualities of the Witch herself; unparalleled beauty, immortality, sexlessness, and power to command dreams. The roles of Hermaphrodite are as follows:

- (1) The relationship of the Witch and Hermaphrodite is that of the creative imagination and the eternal artifact.
- (2) Hermaphrodite cooperates with the Witch to control visions or dreams.
- (3) Hermaphrodite plays the role of the Witch's familiar spirit or Xemime.
- (4) Hermaphrodite cooperates with the Witch to exert witchcraft in the voyage.
- (5) Hermaphrodite accompanies the soul of the Witch. Its role is equivalent to that of Prometheus's Spirit, who leads Asia's Boat in *Prometheus Unbound* Act II scene v.

In the second half of Part III, Stanza XLIII-LVI, Hermaphrodite practices witchcraft like the Witch; it propels the boat as it goes against the stream or sails in the air. Without Hermaphrodite, the Witch's voyage would not have been successful. But it is unrecognizable in Part IV, Stanza LVII-LXXVIII not because it is "lifeless", inert and "too lacking in vitality" but because perfection once attained on all sides is useless in the world of mankind. Since the Witch is just playing pranks among mortal creatures, she doesn't need any help of her familiar spirit, Hermaphrodite.

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