Literary Sophias: The Esoteric Female in Romanticism

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by

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Abstract

This thesis explores the Romantic representation of femininity in relation to elements of the Western esoteric tradition. In particular, it discusses the presence of Gnostic themes and gender imagery and the ways in which Romantic writers incorporated these concepts into their works as a means of articulating discourses that could challenge mainstream trends. I propose that Romantic writers engaged with an image of the feminine that elevated the female within the epistemological hierarchies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and whose precedents lie in the traditions of Gnosticism and other esoteric schools of thought. This feminine image resurfaced within dissenting movements like the Moravians, Behmenists and Swedenborgians, who emphasised the feminine aspects of God and creation.

During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, these movements, and the ideas they espoused, became intertwined with apocalyptic concepts which entailed the spiritual renewal and the betterment of humanity, and in which the feminine was a central component and catalyst. These concepts acquired greater socio-political significance during and post-Revolution and, within this socio-political climate, Romantic writers challenged the binary constructions of gender and epistemological hierarchies. This thesis demonstrates the ways in which Romantic writers—S.T. Coleridge, William Blake, Mary Shelley, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and the transitional figure, Elizabeth Barrett Browning—incorporated alternative religious representations of gender into their writings in ways that subverted established discourse, depicting the feminine as a source of spiritual wisdom and creative transcendence, a mode of representation that mirrors such figures as the Gnostic Sophia.
# Table of Contents

*Acknowledgments*  
iv

**Introduction: Gender and Gnosticism in Romantic Literature**  
1

I. Concepts of the Feminine in Gnostic Thought  
8

II. Scholarly Approaches to Gender and Esoteric Thought in Romanticism  
17

**Chapter One: Coleridge’s Redemptive Unity**  
37

I. Coleridge, Femininity and Women’s Rights  
40

II. Boehme and the Sophianic Feminine in Coleridge’s Language of Unity  
43

III. The Abyssinian Maid and the Paradisial Self in “Kubla Khan”  
47

IV. The Unifying Feminine in “An Allegoric Vision” and “The Ancient Mariner”  
58

V. The Transnatural Female in *Christabel*  
66

**Chapter Two: ‘Fleshly Spirituality’: Blake, Sacred Sexuality and the Alternative Religious Contexts of the Eighteenth Century**  
78

I. Blakean Women: A Critical Overview  
79

II. Blake’s Poetic Philosophy  
85

III. ‘Mystical Unions’: Blake and the Moravians  
88

IV. The Theosophy of Desire: Blake and Swedenborg  
99

V. Conclusion: Blake’s Alternative Circles  
104

**Chapter Three: Sacred Sexuality and the Elevation of the Female in Blake’s *Vala* and *Jerusalem***  
105

I. Sexuality and Esoteric Themes in Blake’s Early Works  
105

II. The Sophianic Female in *Vala* and *Jerusalem*  
108

III. *Vala*: An Overview  
110

IV. *Vala* and the Division of the Sexes  
121

V. *Vala* and the Subjugation of the Female  
125

VI. *Vala* and the Redemptive Female  
128

VII. *Jerusalem*: An Overview  
134

VIII. *Jerusalem* and the Universal Female  
139

IX. Conclusion: Blake’s Sexual Apocalypse  
143
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Introduction:
Gender and Gnosticism in Romantic Literature

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1972), Mary Wollstonecraft presented herself as one lifting the veil of ignorance, for she was using the reason God had given her to communicate “good” (2004, 34). She sought to revise traditional cultural and religious conceptions of the feminine, drawing on an image of feminine wisdom and knowledge and speaking on behalf of what she termed “exquisite sensibility,” which could exercise “understanding” and “amend the heart” (5), thereby acting as an agent of reform within society. Her *Vindication* is a “revision of established religious, historical and cultural models,” in which gender configurations and sexuality are presented as being socio-politically significant (Nicholson 1990, 402). The text is “a wide-ranging study in the relations subsisting between God, nature, and society,” presenting an argument that aligns with a wider movement in the eighteenth century to redefine God and societal norms (403). On the one hand, the growth of capitalism “implied a god more like an engineer” (ibid), conceptualised by Isaac Newton as a deity “very well skilled in mechanics” (Koyre 1957, 186), and by Thomas Paine as an impersonal stabiliser of natural laws (Nicholson 1990, 405). On the other hand, some, like Blake, advanced a concept of ‘God’ that was beyond the mechanistic limits of human perception, revealed through experiential and revelatory insight rather than through a set of reductive laws. Nicholson observes that, in the wake of the Enlightenment, “the radical mind of the eighteenth century extracted from the Scientific Revolution a reverence for and understanding of nature that rendered the God of traditional Christianity superfluous” (403). The failure of the French Revolution to deliver on equal rights and democratic freedoms underscored the Romantic attempt to
rethink and rework traditional ideas about God and humanity—for “an absolute monarch in heaven” was as undesirable as “an absolute monarch on Earth” (404).

For many eighteenth-century radicals, the goal of such a re-visualisation was to redefine social hierarchies by moving beyond an autocratic or oligarchic view of God and divinity, so that humanity’s full potential could be realised. However, this movement also entailed the questioning of gender rights, roles and hierarchies, spearheaded by writers like Wollstonecraft and William Godwin. Both Wollstonecraft’s individual position as a woman associated with dissenters, and her familiarity with their beliefs and non-conformist ‘group’ position were important in the development of her ideas (Morgan 2007). Although rational scepticism led her to move away from “all brands of Christianity,” she retained what Anne Stott describes as a kind of “eroticized pantheism” (2005, 104). According to her son-in-law, Percy Shelley, she believed that The Deity was a personal power that could be experienced as ecstatic or expanded consciousness, and that the aim of this power was to bring about the renovation of society (Goldberg 1984, 205). Wollstonecraft argues, in terms akin to Blake, that both evil and good originated in the “scheme of Providence, when this world was contemplated in the Divine mind” (52), but that they became polarised due to unequal and unbalanced male/female dynamics that could only be restored to equilibrium through acknowledging the importance of the female capacities and by equalising male/female relations in this life (Nicholson 1990, 416). She discourages sexuality as it was then practiced—as both a reproductive and economic transaction within the social marketplace wherein the subjugation of women, as forms of ‘property’, was an inherent factor, female powerlessness being the “inevitable concomitant of political tyranny” (414).

The redefinition of God meant a complete shift in the way that sex and gender relations were perceived. The “ideology of progress” that spurred Enlightenment thought
and was intended to bring about “the growth of a humane, rational, and civilised society” became instead “a struggle between the sexes, with men imposing their value systems on women in order to facilitate social progress” (Jordanova 1980, 42–69). The blending of a ‘scientific’ approach to sexuality with persisting conceptions of Eve and sin meant the objectification and censure of women. In a model of the cosmos where “nature is a constructed object—not generated but engineered by a male god,” sex becomes “inherently problematical” because it is regarded as “part of fallen life,” displaying the “irrational impulse” that can overtake human reason as a consequence of sin (409). The belief in sex for reproduction not pleasure rendered it a necessary ‘evil’ (Dombrowski 1988, 151–56) and entailed the subordination of women, “traditionally portrayed as the daughters of Eve and, accordingly, as lacking in rational control” (Nicholson 1990, 409). The place of sexuality in a mechanistically-based universe renders it a bodily function devoid of spiritual love or fulfilment, and a woman’s desire for sex was denigrated as irrationally “giving in to self-destructive urges” (McLaren 1983, 15). In this sense, Eve’s ‘disobedience’ “is a revolt of appetite against reason, inferior against superior, a kind of insane attempt to reconstruct the cosmos” (Nicholson 1990, 409), a stance which those like Wollstonecraft, Godwin and Blake continually fought against.

As part of the move to redefine established religious, social and gender concepts, writers in the latter half of the eighteenth century also encouraged the development of an alternative masculine ‘ideal’, one that advocated the male acquisition of what were considered the ‘gentle’, feminine attributes, such as intuitive sympathy and emotionality (Markley 2004, 1). However, the post-Revolutionary period marked the decline of the

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1 The eighteenth-century English jurist, William Blackstone, stated that scripture, the law and other authorities jointly confirmed male superiority and the subjugation of women: “By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law … that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of her husband” (1869, 430). Blackstone also argued that men were given a greater portion of “reason” and that this enabled them to occupy the public sphere—this gendering being “ordained by God and Nature” (28).
‘man of feeling’ as a subversive figure, when Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) upset the gender politics of sensibility by inaugurating a “new style of conservative masculine subjectivity” that linked sensibility with “hierarchical and patriarchal forms of political authority” (Friedman 2009, 427).

In *Vindication*, Wollstonecraft critiques Burke’s reactionary change of emphasis and its resultant “reconfiguration of the traditionally ‘feminine’ qualities of sensibility as essentially masculine and conservative in orientation” (ibid). This usurpation unmoored women from any distinctive gender values, causing “an evacuation of meaning” which Wollstonecraft viewed as detrimental to her attempted re-conceptualisation of society based on gender equality and female emancipation (ibid). Such a re-conceptualisation incorporated the need to address many of the core beliefs and attitudes that shaped society, including those of religion. Thus, women writers shared a “common desire to reconceive Christianity as a more ‘earthly’ faith, whereby the spiritual is thoroughly integrated with social, material and emotional realities” in ways that were significant to the Romantic discourse and to an emerging proto-feminist perspective (Styler 2010, 1). While pious and conventional religious sentiment underpinned much of women’s education in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, heterodox religious concepts helped form this emerging emancipatory vision.

In the course of this thesis, I aim to show that Romantic writers drew on an image of femininity which had evolved and resurfaced within the alternative theological environment of the eighteenth century, an image that has antecedents in esoteric tradition. This image and other heterodox concepts allowed writers a lens through which to posit

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2 Lucy Aikin’s four-part *Epistles on Women* (1810) attributes the positive advances in civilisation to female love and the social practices of women (Mellor 2000, 80). The first epistle presents her rewritten version of the Biblical creation and declares the “primary equality of Eve with Adam” (1.150–51). Like Wollstonecraft, she refutes the orthodox denigration of Eve and, like the ancient Gnostics, advances the Sophianic qualities of Eve as a source of Enlightenment. Likewise, Wollstonecraft’s God “anticipates liberation theology,” a God who champions the oppressed and is the impetus for the self-realisation and liberty that manifests as the will to struggle against injustice and discrimination (Nicholson 1990, 421).
their own ideals and alternative discourses. By engaging with these concepts, writers like Wollstonecraft, Blake, Coleridge, and Mary and Percy Shelley were able to embody and communicate an image of femininity that challenged notions of irrational and spiritually degraded womankind. Though not directly esoteric, this emerging perspective contains certain concepts that mirror ideas of God and gender found in such esoteric traditions as Gnosticism, and reflects a wider tendency of writers during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to incorporate heterodox religious perspectives in order to subvert dominant discourses. The Romanticisms of Coleridge, Blake, the Shelleys and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, particularly as related to femininity and spirituality, are indicative of wider themes that were circulating in the heterodox environment. I argue that Romantic writers sought to formulate a model of the divine that incorporated elements and values not present in orthodox concepts of God, elements, for example, that reinstated the feminine principle to the Godhead and elevated the role of the female in the creative and transcendent processes. This re-envisioning was based on esoteric principles that went back to antiquity and addressed the issue of humanity’s relationship to both the finite and the infinite. Such principles informed the Romantic worldview which called for the return of the feminine principle to its rightful place in the restorative scheme.

When viewed through the lens of esotericism and occult thought, images of femininity in Romantic writing acquire another layer of complexity. The importance of the esoteric in relation to Romanticism has been well established by scholars such as Kathleen Raine, M.H. Abrams, John Beer, Harold Bloom, Paul A. Cantor, Laura Quinney and Linda M. Lewis, but its importance in relation to the Romantic view of the female has not been similarly elaborated upon. This thesis will show how an understanding of the esoteric elements of Romantic literature, specifically in relation to gender, can elucidate the ways in which women are presented. By exploring the similarities between Romantic tropes and
esoteric themes and motifs, it elucidates the complexities of the feminine in Romanticism and demonstrates how viewing representations of women through an esoteric, particularly Gnostic, lens can alter our perception of Romantic gender configurations.

Romantic ideology went further in its engagement with both conventional notions of femininity and traditional models of masculinity. A Romantic visionary perspective as being primarily male-centric is belied by the recourse of Romantic writers, both male and female, to the incorporation of esoteric components into a literary infrastructure. This infrastructure may appear orthodox but nonetheless displays underlying unorthodox components with which writers attempted to reformulate gender constructs and relationships that served to counter the Burkean ‘deference’ of sensibility to hierarchical and patriarchal forms of masculinity (Friedman 2009, 427). Romantic writers elevated the status of feminine sensibility within the eighteenth-century epistemological framework, taking it beyond a position of deference. Rather than merely assimilating female qualities into the male identity for the purpose of creating a more comprehensive masculinity, Romantic writers emphasised the need for active feminine mediation that surpasses the function of a muse. I contend that Romantic writers helped mitigate the Enlightenment understanding of ‘feminine’ sensibility as irrational and inferior by ascribing the mainspring of creative and cultural transcendence to the female in their inclusion of esoteric motifs and themes.

Throughout this thesis, I will discuss the influence of esoteric and alternative theosophical elements from various sources and dissenting movements, including Gnosticism, Hermeticism, Behmenism, Swedenborgianism and the Moravian Church. I will examine the extent to which Romantic conceptions of femininity were influenced by the representations of masculine and feminine found in these alternative philosophies and theologies whose ideas rearticulate images of the female found in esoteric systems,
particularly Gnostic thought. I will evaluate how those ideas and images challenged conventional eighteenth-century notions of gender and sexuality, how they were articulated by male and female writers, and what place such ideas had within the wider ideological and literary context of the Romantic era.

My focus will be on the writings of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Blake, Percy Shelley, Mary Shelley, and later author, Barrett Browning, whose works illustrate how the esoteric image of the female continued into the more conservative gender milieu of the Victorian era. Where relevant, I will also show how elements of Gnosticism, either directly or indirectly, are present within many of the esoteric strands that influenced these writers. The goal of this thesis is, firstly, to show the degree to which Romantic writers attempted to elevate the feminine principle to a position of eminence within the processes of creativity and personal/collective transformation. Secondly, I will ascertain how esoteric elements filtered into their representations of the feminine in ways that question gender constructs in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

To clarify the philosophical and cultural context of my research, this introduction presents an overview of certain aspects of Gnostic thought that relate to the functions and status of the feminine (and, by extension, to gender configurations), aspects of which underscored many of the sources accessible to the Romantics. I will also discuss the Romantic re-conception of gender-based social, political and religious perspectives in the period following the French Revolution, comparing Romantic conceptualisations of femininity with Enlightenment ideas of gender structures, and I will examine the utilisation of the epic poetry genre as a means of conveying the themes and motives of Romantic thought.
I. Concepts of the Feminine in Gnostic Thought

The term ‘Gnosticism’ is derived from the Greek gnósis, meaning ‘knowledge’, and was first coined by Cambridge scholar Henry More (1614–1687). It has been used to designate the beliefs and practices known in antiquity as ‘Gnosis’ (Van Den Broek, 2006, 403), as well as the various Gnostic movements of the first, second and third centuries, which were denounced as ‘heretical’ by early Christian writers. The terms ‘Gnosis’ and ‘Gnosticism’ have therefore been employed interchangeably to denote both the Gnostic systems of belief and the various modes of spiritual thought, such as Neoplatonism, Hermeticism, and Kabbalism, to which they are related (Van Den Broek 2006, 403). Scholarly opinion is divided as to the genesis and development of Gnosticism. Some argue that Gnosticism “provides an important and useful way to categorize a variety of religious movements” (Brakke 2010, 1); others that it was a persecuted variant of Christianity or Judaism, or a religion in its own right that became intertwined with Christianity and posed a serious threat to ‘the Church’ which was influenced by but later denounced it (ibid). Scholars like David Brakke argue that there was a specific “Gnostic school of thought, the literary remnants of which can be identified and therefore can be described and studied” (2010, x). In line with this, I will affirm that many aspects of Romantic gender constructs have their antecedents in Gnostic thought, especially the role of the female in the attainment of transcendence.

Despite its suppression, the ‘heresy’ of Gnosticism persisted throughout the Middle Ages under the guise of alchemy, in which the transmutation of lead into gold is presented as an analogy for personal transformation (Segal 1986, 101–102). Thus, alchemy may be viewed as constituting a link between Gnosticism on the one hand, and Hermeticism and

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3 More was a member of the ‘Cambridge Platonists’, a group of theologians and philosophers working at Cambridge in the seventeenth century. The group included Ralph Cudsworth, Thomas Burnet and John Norris among its members. The term ‘Cambridge Platonists’ is something of a misnomer, as the group’s ideas and beliefs also covered Christian Kabbalah, Hermeticism and Renaissance concepts among others.
later mystical or ‘Pseudo-Gnostic’ movements (such as Behmenism) on the other (ibid). The texts of the *Hermes Trismegistus*, dating back to the first century CE, are also significant. They represent part of a collection of occult teachings dating back to antiquity, portions of which have distinct Gnostic overtones, such as the androgynous Godhead, the Divine Sophia (Wisdom) and the Sacred Christos (Will). The writings which comprise the *Trismegistus* are attributed to the inspiration of Thoth/Hermes, whose counterpart was known to the Gnostics as Sophia (Mead 1992, 3.104–17). Texts such as the *Trismegistus* would have been available to the Romantics. For instance, John Everard’s translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* (1650) comprises Egyptian-Greek texts from the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE that discuss the divine, the cosmos, mind and nature, and refer to related philosophies, such as Gnosticism and alchemy (Van Meurs 1998, 217), and in 1772 Blake’s printing mentor, James Basire, was commissioned to make an engraving for the frontispiece for James Harris’s *Hermes, or a Philosophical Inquiry Concerning Universal Grammar* (1771), a text that related the analysis of language to the hieroglyphics and correspondences of Hermes Trismegistus and praised the role of the imagination in preserving the “immutable Archetypes” that are contained therein (Harris 1771, 384).

The Romantics would have learned about Gnosticism largely from secondary sources, such as Irenaeus (died c. 202 CE), Origen (c.185–254), and Augustine (354–430), who attacked Gnosticism (Van Meurs 1998, 217). Irenaeus’s *Adversus Haereses* was available in several editions, published in 1526, 1702, 1710 and 1857. Origen’s works were reprinted in various collections, such as *The Phenix*, published between 1707 and 1708, and Augustine’s writings had been printed under the title *Augustinus* in 1640, which sparked a revival of this thought in the second half of the seventeenth century that

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4 In 1945, the Nag Hammadi Library was discovered in Upper Egypt (Nuttall 1998, 8). It is a collection of Coptic texts comprising forty treatises, including *The Apocryphon of John*, also called *The Secret Book According to John*, which had previously been known only in a summary by Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons (ibid).
continued into the eighteenth century (Harris 2013, 643). In 1800, the *Ante Nicene Christian Library: translation of the writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325* was published in several volumes and reprinted throughout the nineteenth century. The volumes include Books from Clement of Alexandra’s *Stomata* (hitherto available in Latin) which described and denounced Gnostic practices and rites. In terms of more contemporaneous sources, J. L. Mosheim’s *Ecclesiastical History* was translated into English in 1758–1768 and published in at least five editions between 1765 and 1790. It provides a description of the Gnostic demiurge, as well as an account of some of the beliefs of the Ophites (Van Meurs 1998, 217, 273), a Gnostic sect described by Irenaeus in *Against Heresies*. J. Bryant’s *Analysis of Ancient Mythology* (1774–76) includes plates devoted to the Ophite Gnostics (Nuttall 1998, 218), and Edward Gibbon gives a summary of Gnostic beliefs in his hugely successful *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, first published in 1776. Nathaniel Lardner’s *The History of Heretics of the First Two Centuries after Christ* was published in 1780, and Constantin Volney’s *The Ruins: or, A Survey of the Ruins of Empire*, one of the “most popular and influential of free-thinking texts” in late eighteenth/nineteenth century Britain (McCalman 1999, 745) describes a quasi-Gnostic Creator worshipped by the ancient Egyptians, and was translated into English in 1792 and regularly published up to 1854.

The Gnostic-based philosophy of Jacob Boehme (1575–1624) informed the works of many Romantics, as did the mysticism of Emmanuel Swedenborg, who influenced both Blake and Barrett Browning, and whose ideas were developed from the Gnostic-Hermetic and Kabbalistic mystical traditions. Swedenborg was also influenced by Boehme and, as Desiree Hirst notes, he likely derived his theory of the “Divine Man” from Boehme’s

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5 Clement of Alexandria (c.150–c.215) in his *Siromata* (7:17) and Origen in his *Contra Celsum* (6:28) also mention the Ophites as heretical. The term ‘Ophite’ comes from the Greek ‘ophis’, meaning ‘snake’ and may have been a generic term used to denote a set of heretical beliefs that honoured the Serpent of Eden (Rasimus 2007, 432).
“Heavenly Adam” (1964, 95, 205). The ideas and applications inherent in these philosophical traditions and ideologies find purchase throughout Romantic literature. They depict the transformational process as being both ‘inward’ (mental, emotional and spiritual) and ‘outward’ (physical and metaphysical), often using gendered metaphors to convey the workings of these inner and outer characteristics (Segal 1986, 102).

In Gnostic cosmology, ‘God’, the Invisible Spirit, is defined as being beyond gender, but manifesting in successive male-female pairings that operate in harmony as part of the process of creation (King 2000, 173). For the Gnostics, complementarity of the genders gives stability to the entirety of creation, the uniting of gendered polarities precipitating restorative oneness (Brakke 2010, 57). Thus, in Gnostic thought, “humankind’s essential nature” is formulated in terms of gender, linked to and represented by the feminine Sophia, or Wisdom (King 2000, xi). In The Apocryphon of John (c. 180 CE), one of the most important Gnostic texts, Sophia is an aspect of the ‘feminine’ element of God, the Epinoia of Light, who, in Christ-like fashion, acts as the saviour of humankind. The Epinoia represents the ‘unfallen’ divine, whereas Sophia is the earthbound equivalent, the divine incarnated in flesh, who, as a manifestation of the anointed ‘Christos’, works toward humankind’s spiritual enlightenment and, by extension, her own restoration to the divine whole (Turner 2000, 181). The female saviour figures, the Epinoia and Sophia, are key characters of the Apocryphon, which also presents the subordination of women to men as “a product of the wicked mechanizations of Ialdabaoth,” the Gnostics’ ‘false god’, or demiurge (King 2000, 174). These female figures are central to the ultimate goal of Gnosticism, which is to achieve the unification of the individual’s earthly self, represented by Adam, with the spiritual ‘Sophianic’ self, thereby restoring the integrated self to divinity through experiential knowledge and revelatory insight, or ‘gnosis’ (ibid).

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6 For a comprehensive study of perspectives and debates concerning gender in Gnostic thought, see Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism (2000), edited by Karen L. King.
In Gnosticism, the Fall of Adam equates to the loss of androgyny and the differentiation of the sexes, not to sin and disobedience as propounded by official Christianity (Hirst 1964, 204). Reunification with the divine is achieved through the ‘marriage’ of the earthly ‘Adam’ and the heavenly ‘Sophia’, a reintegration that manifests the Sophianic light of God through the uniting of male and female energies (Beer 1970, 51). The Gnostics emphasised the importance of individual experience and intuitive knowledge, rather than prescribed scriptures as the path toward salvation, by recognising the inner Sophia, or Divine Wisdom, the body’s own light-giving soul (Bock 1989, 20).

When read within the context of Western esoteric tradition, Romantic constructions of gender become more radical and the female becomes important in her own right. Like the Gnostic Sophia, she functions in an illuminative and mediatory capacity. This mediation encompasses a broader redemptive role that is assigned to and facilitated by the feminine principle, a key Gnostic-Hermetic concept that infused Romantic renditions of male-female dynamics in ways that heightened rather than diminished the role and status of the female in the creative and transcendent processes.

Scholars like Paul Cantor have drawn attention to the fact that the “distinctive orientation” of Romantic myths and symbology reveals similarities with beliefs that are “known in the history of religion as gnosticism” (1985, x–xii). Cantor points out that, from the standpoint of Romanticism, elements that can now be identified as Gnostic provided a means to mythically depict and respond to the reality in which Romantic writers found themselves, at a time when other sources of inspiration, such as established religion and the ideals of the Age of Reason, were being called into question (ibid). Although Romantic writers engaged with many gendered concepts that originated in Gnosticism, these had, over time, become intertwined with heterodox tradition and could therefore appear in different forms and configurations, thereby obscuring their provenance. Yet, despite their
appearance in other guises, they retained their essential Gnostic character (Van Den Broek 2005, 405) and so have important epistemological implications regarding the role of the feminine in Western culture.

It is not possible to delineate and bring into focus all the Gnostic elements in Romantic literature. Nevertheless, it is possible to highlight, over other esoteric source material, certain Gnostic beliefs and concepts that share similarities with those of the Romantics, especially in relation to female roles and qualities. By examining the links between these beliefs and concepts, I aim to reveal the importance placed on the feminine principle in both Gnostic and Romantic ideology, as exemplified in the Gnostic worship of the Divine Sophia and in the Romantic view of the female as a channel of redemptive grace and vision. In the following chapters, where applicable, Gnostic components will therefore be emphasised because they are key to understanding Romantic representations of gender. They also underscore many of the other esoteric traditions upon which the Romantics drew, thereby forming, in many instances, a background ‘thread’ or impetus to those traditions and, in turn, to the subject matter of Romantic writings and imagery. Such is the case, for instance, with the works of Jacob Boehme (called the “first modern Gnostic”), whose writings influenced the development of Romantic ideas (van Meurs 1998, 237–38, 273) and were translated into English and reprinted in London between 1764 and 1781 (ibid).

Boehme’s Christian Gnosticism, polemically termed ‘Behmenism’ (van Meurs 1998, 237), incorporates the conceptualisation of God as simultaneously including and transcending male and female, while the original Adam is presented as a corresponding androgyne (Gibbons 1996, 62). The Virgin Sophia, or Wisdom, represents what Boehme called the “Heavenly Adam,” the divine element in humankind that is integral to the ‘whole’ image of ‘man’ (Hirst 1964, 204). The ‘fall’ of Adam equates to the separation of
this whole into sexual differentiation. Redemption is thus viewed as the (re)union of opposing, yet related, forces and is driven by the Sophianic light principle, which facilitates the reintegration of fragmented energies within human beings and, consequently, the realisation of the divine within humanity (ibid).

Boehme’s notion of the “Noble Virgin Sophia” as the female spirit, or counterpart, of Christ displays similarities with the Gnostic immortal androgynous man, or the ‘Heavenly Man’, whose feminine side is the All-wise Begettress Sophia (Van Den Broek 2005, 423). This concept is obfuscated in Judaism and non-Gnostic Christianity. Unlike the Gnostic espousal of a female divinity, Sophia’s importance as a manifestation of God is bypassed by the Book of Ezekiel, which depicts the glory of God in “likeness as the appearance of a man” (1.26), and the feminine face of God became hidden and unacknowledged in established Christianity (Van Den Broek 2005, 407). Blake lists Boehme among his formative influences in a verse-letter to his friend, the sculptor John Flaxman: “Shakespeare / in riper years gave me his hand; / Paracelsus and Behmen appear’d to me” (E.707). Coleridge refers to him as “an extraordinary man” who “rendered many intuitions in his own mind, perhaps of very profound Truths” (Collected Letters 3.279). Boehme informed certain key concepts in Coleridge’s works, such as the creative potential and vital relations arising from the interactions of the opposites (Hessayon 2013, 17) and the ways in which various manifestations of the feminine are akin to the forms and patterns of the Gnostic Sophia (ibid).

Boehme’s Gnosticism emphasises the coming together of the polarities of the self, and by extension the universe, using gender as a metaphoric system, wherein the feminine acts as a channel for the reunification of divided energies. As I shall show, this concept parallels what Coleridge terms “unity-in-multeity … that in which the many … becomes one” (Biographia Literaria 2.227), the multeity being comprised of disparate and opposing
elements, while the unity represents the reconciliation of these elements into a stable whole (Welleck 1981, 170). Moreover, Boehme’s depiction of Adam and his feminine aspect, Sophia, prefigures the “Romantic notion of woman as a spiritualising influence on man” (Gibbons 1996, 101).

The uniting of gendered polarities is also present in some of the core beliefs of the Moravians, beliefs which display certain similarities with concepts found in esoteric thought, as I will show in chapter three of this thesis. For example, they believed that the divine essence manifests in a series of male and female pairings similar to those described by the ancient Gnostics, who linked these paired configurations to the Anthropos, the ‘perfect’ androgynous reflection of God’s image (Gibbons 1996, 61). In Jewish Kabbalism, these pairings are called the Sephiroth and represent a primordial state of equilibrium which ‘the Fall’ disrupted and which can be restored through the reintegration of male and female energies (Scholem 1941, 293–94). Likewise, Boehme describes the “Noble Virgin Sophia” as the “Bride” of Christ who ‘begets’ that ‘wholeness’ which is the unified image of the Divine ‘Man’, or “Heavenly Adam” (Hirst 1964, 204). She represents the spirit of Christ that dwells within the soul and is the facilitator of intuitive insight and transcendent knowledge within each individual that opens the way to the divine (The Way to Christ 24.259).

In a similar vein, Swedenborgians focused on the equity of male and female potencies within the ‘Grand Body’, or ‘Grand Man’ (similar to Boehme’s Heavenly Adam), and the importance of the feminine principle in the philosophies of the various esoteric traditions upon which they drew. They believed that the harmonious unity of their ‘church’, founded on Swedenborg’s doctrines, provided a “new Jerusalem,” an open and equal community of men and women, regenerated “through divine grace and love” (Bergquist 2005, 170). In Conjugal Love (1768), Swedenborg challenges hierarchical
notions of gender by depicting the ‘oneness’ of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ principles, neither of which is superior to the other:

the truth of good, or truth grounded on good, is male (or masculine), and the
good of truth, or good grounded in that truth, is female (or feminine): but this
may be comprehended more distinctly, if instead of good we speak of love,
and instead of truth we speak of wisdom; which are one and the same. (1794, 33)

Swedenborg believed that love flowed from the Creator into the female and was transmitted by her to the male (Rix 2007, 22). In this sense, the female acts as a mediator and is seen as closer and more receptive to divine energy. Thus, the Moravians, the Behmenists and the Swedenborgians viewed the female as a source of illumination akin to the Sophianic principle of Gnostic-Hermetic tradition. These representation and constructs found purchase in the works of Romantic writers. For instance, Wollstonecraft’s conception of ‘The Deity’ displays similarities with the Swedenborgian concept androgyny of the ‘Divine Man’ (Hirst 1964, 95, 205), with Jacob Boehme’s ‘Heavenly Adam’ existing as a unity of male and female (ibid), and with the sexual dimension of spirituality found not only in Swedenborg but also in sects like the Moravians (discussed later). As I will show in the coming chapters, Coleridge, Blake, the Shelleys and Barrett Browning all engaged with a body of ideas wherein the female plays a vital role in the spiritual development of humanity. In the section that follows, I will provide an overview of

7 In 1789, Wollstonecraft reviewed Emmanuel Swedenborg’s On Marriages in Heaven; and on the Nature of heavenly conjugal Love for the Analytical Review, and remarks good-humouredly upon the notion of sexual union in heaven “without weariness or disgust” as “ingenious reveries” (Works 1.94–95). Although her tone is circumspect, her involvement with the more radical side of ‘rational dissent’ meant that she inhabited a relatively liberal atmosphere of intellectual enquiry and analysis. Her writings for the Analytical Review address diverse subjects and her publisher and employer, the Unitarian Joseph Johnson, also published and sold the works of Unitarian leader Joseph Priestly, who conversed with Swedenborgians (including the printer, Robert Hindmarsh, one of the original founders of Swedenborgianism) and wrote letters to the New Jerusalem Church (Viscomi 1998, 206). Wollstonecraft would have therefore been immersed in, or at least aware of, the different theological undercurrents of the time.
criticism regarding the esoteric in Romanticism, as well as an outline of debates surrounding gender in Romantic literature, so as to clarify my argument within the wider field of Romantic scholarship.

II. Scholarly Approaches to Gender and Esoteric Thought in Romanticism

From the 1970s to the 1990s, feminist approaches to Romanticism largely critiqued the ideals and configurations, expressed in the works of canonical male writers, works that have been viewed as favouring the male poet. Alan Richardson, for example, states that male Romantic writers reiterated “memories and fantasies of identification with the mother in order to colonize the conventionally feminine domain of sensibility” (1988, 13). Marlon B. Ross supports the view of Romanticism as an “historically masculine phenomenon” that enabled men to “reconfirm their capacity to influence the world in ways socio-historically determined as masculine” (1989, 3). Anne K. Mellor divides the Romantic movement into the binary opposition of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ Romanticism, asserting that female writers “foresawed the concern of their male peers with the capacities of the creative imagination” and the “possibility of transcendence” (1993, 2, 19). Rather, they celebrated “the workings of the rational mind” in both female and male bodies (ibid). She states that male writers espoused an ethos “grounded on polarity,” wherein the subject is male, and the female is identified with nature and omitted from discourse (ibid). As well as making a distinction between male and female aesthetics in the Romantic era, Mellor also distinguishes between the female poet and “the poetess,” the former being more politically explicit than the latter, who challenges convention more indirectly and subtly from within the domestic milieu (2000, 70). Mellor’s distinction reflects what has been termed ‘the doctrine of the separate spheres’ (which divides gender roles into the male/public sphere and the female/private sphere) but differs from it by placing the female (as ‘political’ poet
and ‘domestic’ poetess) within both spheres of influence (2000, 1, 2). Mellor states that, from 1780–1830, Romantic women writers became increasingly able to air their views in “the same discursive public sphere” as their male peers (Mellor 2000, 3). Nonetheless, such participation was decried by other kinds of public discourse, such as conduct books, sermons, articles and media columns which declared that women should “remain silent, stay at home” and “devote themselves exclusively to the activities of raising children and pleasing their husbands” (6). Irrespective of these discriminatory pronouncements, women writers believed that they spoke on behalf of mothers and the family, as well as the public conscience and the advancement of social reform. They were therefore active in putting their words into practice and played a significant part in philanthropic societies, civil rights campaigning, and the anti-slavery and Charity Schools movements (ibid).

However, the rediscovery and reintegration of Romantic women writers resulted in an increased awareness of how women, and issues pertaining to women, are represented in Romantic literature. Stephen C. Behrendt, Harriet Kramer Linkin and Kari Lokke present the view that Romanticism takes on a deeper colouration if we consider the works of female writers. According to Linkin and Behrendt, the historical and scholarly reception of women Romantics has “complicated our understanding of their achievement” (1999, 2). Lokke emphatically does not view Romantic philosophy and art as being “inherently inimical to women’s values and interests” (2004, 2). However, she defines male and female Romantics by stating that “feminine and (proto-) feminist visions of spiritual and artistic transcendence” created a “critique of Romanticism from within” (ibid). Behrendt writes that the Romantic community was “more diverse and more dynamic” than many had supposed and that women writers of the Romantic era represent “a variety of ‘shadings’ of Romanticism” but are nevertheless still “in conversation” with the “familiar tradition” associated with male Romantic poets (2010, 2, 4). Unlike male authors,
women’s writing took place “in a less stable and generally less hospitable environment,” in that their works were often unacknowledged or were received with less acceptance by the prevailing mores. Women Romantic writers have thus been the recipients of contradictory and discriminatory criticism, “especially when they opted for subjects and forms traditionally associated with the male poetic tradition” (ibid), making it difficult for scholars in our own time to reach a definitive general consensus (ibid).

Scholars like Betty T. Bennett, Claire Colebrook, Adriana Craciun, Susan J. Wolfson and Beth Lau advocate a more nuanced approach to male-female relations in Romantic literature, arguing against over-simplified oppositions and binaries. In Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley: An Introduction (1998), Bennett acknowledges the compatible influence of William Godwin, Percy Shelley, Byron and others upon Mary Shelley’s outlook and writing. Colebrook, in her 2007 essay, “Blake, Literary History and Sexual Difference,” posits that, in Romanticism, for the feminine “to emerge as a subject,” on the same footing as the male, “there must be some subject/object differentiation, and this difference is represented as the difference between male identity and female object” (5). When interpreted male-centrically, such difference can entail negative implications for women, but when interpreted positively, with male and female interacting on equal terms, it “allows for a critical re-reading of romanticism and for an autonomous feminine aesthetic” (ibid). However, Craciun states that the “engagement of women writers with their male counterparts, and vice versa,” is “so overwhelming” that it is impossible to delineate a ‘female’ Romanticism (2002, 5). She cites Jean-Jacques Rousseau as an “important touchstone for women’s writings on the French Revolution” and a “crucial figure informing nineteenth-century discourses of domesticity” (ibid). Furthermore, her Fatal Women of Romanticism explores the engagement of female Romantic writers with
the violent or ‘fatal’ woman, a figure previously considered the realm of male authorship (1).

Similarly, in Borderlines: The Shiftings of Gender in British Romanticism (2006), Wolfson examines the borders between male and female spheres, stating that “men and women face each other and continually negotiate, and across which occur more than a few strange shifts and transactions” (3). She highlights the complexities, ambiguities and similarities in the constructions of gender depicted by female and male Romantic writers, Felicia Hemans, Maria Jane Jewsbury, Lord Byron and John Keats. Likewise, Fellow Romantics: Male and Female British Writers, 1790–1835 (2009), edited by Beth Lau, brings together male and female writers, focusing on the dialogues and commonalities between them. Lau writes that “men and women of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries participated in many of the same literary traditions and experiments … they influenced and interacted with one another in dynamic and fruitful ways” (1). She goes on to say that “much can be gained from exploring common ground and interrelations among literary men and women of the Romantic period” instead of fixing upon their “ideological differences and separate cultural spheres” (7). Of particular interest is Ashley Cross’s chapter, “Coleridge and Robinson: Harping on Lyrical Exchange,” which examines the poetic conversations between Coleridge and Mary Robinson and the shared use of imagery in texts such as “The Eolian Harp” (1796) and Sappho and Phaon (1796). Cross writes of this exchange that “reading Robinson’s and Coleridge’s relationship as a mutually enhancing exploration of gender categories and poetic reputation depends on recognizing an important shift in the critical understanding of Coleridge’s relationship to women generally, and to women writers” (43). Such a shift, Cross argues, “corresponds to a movement in Romantic studies away from the idea of separate, gendered Romanticisms” (ibid).
Reinforcing the movement away from separate spheres, *Romantic Women Writers, Revolution, and Prophecy: Rebellious Daughters, 1786–1826* (2013) by Orianne Smith investigates the links between revolution and prophecy in the works of Romantic women writers in Britain. These women writers placed their “visionary claims within the context of a rich tradition of female prophecy and the ongoing debate regarding the merits and perils of enthusiasm in the long eighteenth century” (1). Smith examines the ways in which the tradition of female prophecy gave women a historical and Biblical precedent for their prophecies and input to public discourse, proffering a “reassessment” of some “critical assumptions about Romantic women writers and their contributions to public life” (2). Her chapter, “‘I, being the representative of liberty’: Helen Maria Williams and the Utopian Performative,” explores Williams’s engagement with female prophecy as a genre for her political writing and her “progressive millennialism” (99). According to Smith, Williams, like Blake, Percy Shelley and Anna Barbauld, “confidently invoked” a figure of the “poet-prophet speaking out in a time of revolution” (ibid). Smith’s research elucidates the ways in which Romantic women writers found a liberating agency in the prophet image for political and revisionist purposes. However, by examining this image in an exclusively Christian context, she overlooks the esoteric connotations and precedents of the ‘female saviour’ figure and its full subversive potential.

Recently, *Women’s Literary Networks and Romanticism: “A Tribe of Authoresses”* (2017), edited by Andrew O. Winckles and Angela Rehbein, brings together essays examining the nuances and scope of women’s networking in the eighteenth century. Such networks were local, familial and international, and were structured around a “variety of beliefs, ideas and interests,” including rational dissent and other heterodox views (2). According to Winckles and Rehbein, “not only did Romantic-era writing not happen in a vacuum,” but there were “many different modes and means of literary expression open to
women writers during this period” (3). Literary networks not only influenced the ways in which women “thought about their own identities but also their identities in relation to others” (ibid). The volume also reveals how male Romantic-era writers engaged with, and were invested in, these networks and the degree to which they were “part of a collaborative model of textual production” (9). In particular, Winckles chapter, “Sisters of the Quill: Sally Wesley, the Evangelical Bluestockings, and the Regulation of Enthusiasm,” explores the works of Sally Wesley (wife of Charles Wesley, founder of the Methodist church) and the Bluestocking network which was part of the evangelical revolution taking place in the mid to late eighteenth century, providing a platform for women’s political and literary voices, “enthusiasm and prophetic expression” (41). The collection offers an in depth exploration of different kinds of networks in the eighteenth century—not only “networks of association or mutual interest” but also networks of “influence, knowledge, and meaning” which provided various opportunities for self-determination and expression for women writers.

Concerning gender and the esoteric, even in light of the links between Romanticism and esotericism explored by those like Bloom, Cantor and Quinney, the applications of esoteric concepts to the Romantic treatment of femininity are still under represented. Abrams’s *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971) paved the way for discussions concerning the Romantic ethos and Western esoterica, but female personifications, such as Sophia, feature little in the text. Likewise, Bloom, despite his interest in the reverence for the divine ‘spark,’ closely associated with Wisdom, makes no reference to this feminised figure in his discussion of heterodoxy, personal religion, self-knowledge, and intuition, themes common to both Gnostic and Romantic thinking (1983, 7). Brian Gibbons’ contention that English Behmenism exhibited “patriarchal” tendencies (despite the fact that it had a number of prominent women preachers and venerated Sophia/Wisdom as a
central figure in its belief system) disregards the nuances of gender in Western esoteric thought (1996, 207). A.D. Nutall writes that the “transgressive ‘life-affirming’ theology” of Blake and other writers and thinkers of the Romantic era derives “traceably” from Gnosticism, a philosophy that denounced the false demiurge, Ialdaboath (1998, 3).

However, although Nutall discusses this transgressive theology in relation to sexuality, the image of the Gnostic female is not addressed at any length. Likewise, Thomas Pfau’s assertion—that the commonalities present in Romanticism and Gnosticism highlight the tensions that have historically existed in Western civilisation between Christian orthodoxy and heretical heterodoxies—has interesting implications for the place of the feminine within the Romantic ethos, but these are not explored (2007, 961). Laura Quinney discusses the esoteric in Romanticism from an individual and philosophical perspective rather than a gendered one, focusing on the “supra-mundane” (meaning ‘transcendent’) to define the Romantic connection with Gnosticism, and stating that the Romantics pursued transcendence as a “psychological representation” (2011, 415). In her 2009 book, *William Blake on Self and Soul*, she discusses the actions and events pertaining to female characters in Blake’s works but does not explore gender concerns in relation to Gnosticism, as such is not her main focus.

More recently, *An Introduction to Jacob Boehme: Four Centuries of Thought and Reception* (2013), edited by Ariel Hessayon and Sarah Apetrei, brings together perspectives from leading scholars of Boehme, examining the different periods and social and cultural avenues that contributed to Boehme’s impact upon Western culture, such as the English civil war, the London Philadelphian Society, the works of mystic, William Law, the philosophy of Hegel, Masonic circles and Russian religious philosophy. The book illustrates the developmental interpretation of Boehme over the centuries, his “liminality” between epochs and lay and elite cultures, and his anomalous nature as a
“simple shoemaker” capable of “incommensurate complexities” in his writing (9). The volume refutes the notion of Boehme as a “voice crying in the wilderness,” reconstructing the wide ranging heterodox networks and trains of thought through which Boehme’s writings and ideas have been transmitted (10). In particular, Elizabeth Engell Jessen’s article explores the historical association between Boehme’s philosophy and the poets Blake and Coleridge who, she states, displayed an “affinity with his theosophy” (180). She analyses the intellectual, emotional and aesthetic influence of Boehme’s writings on Blake and Coleridge. However, despite showing Boehme’s importance to the esoteric deliberations of Romanticism, she does not discuss the representation of the feminine in Blake, Coleridge and Boehme. Indeed, such a discussion is noticeably absent from the collection.

Per Faxneld’s *Satanic Feminists: Lucifer as the Liberator of Women in Nineteenth-Century Culture* (2017) does provides an illuminating study of counter-readings of the misogynist tradition of woman as the Devil’s accomplice which contained within them an incipient feminism. In these counter-readings, Lucifer was recast as a giver of knowledge, a liberator of women and an ally against a patriarchal structure headed by a male God and his male priests. Faxneld demonstrates how such readings emerged in various literary texts (including the works of Shelley and Byron), paintings and objects (such as jewellery) of the nineteenth century, stating that “the Romantic poets who praised Satan tended to be strongly progressive … and the fully fledged socialists who later used the theme were often influenced by Romanticism” (82). Faxneld refers to George Sand’s *Consuelo* (1842–43) wherein a strong young women desiring independence is metaphorically linked to Satan for whom she develops warm feelings (ibid). Faxneld presents a unique study that reveals new facets of feminism, Romanticism and occult thought. However, while Faxneld does discuss some Gnostic themes and characteristics, his focus on the subject solely from
the point of view of the Satanic bypasses other aspects of the esoteric and its treatment of femininity, such as the empowering potential of Sophia and other feminine knowledge figures. The book also reveals how male and female Romantic writers both incorporated revisionist readings of Satan which entailed a feminist message.

In response to and building on these approaches, I wish to demonstrate the ways in which both male and female Romantic writers found mobility and agency within certain tropes that resonate with esoteric features and renditions of gender, as well as the extent to which Romantic ideology integrated feminine sensibility into new forms of individual, social and spiritual action in ways that reimagine and question cultural binaries. Thus, I argue that another nuance or ‘shading’ of Romanticism may be found in the gender-based esoteric concepts that writers of the Romantic era incorporated into their works, and in the possibilities of transcendence that they evoked in their writings. The experiences of self-determination and transformation (inherent in the workings of transcendence) constitute a link between the inner world of the individual and the outer world of the collective, thereby exploding traditional binaries of public and domestic spheres, and of ‘male’ and ‘female’ Romanticisms. As I will show in chapter six, the emancipatory discursive forum of women writers was a manifestation of the Romantic redefining of feminine roles and influence, an attempt, despite ongoing criticism and denigration, to counter existing systems and attitudes. Later writers such as Barrett Browning challenged the reactionary prescriptivist outlook of the 1830s by reverting to Romantic and heterodox representations of the female. According to Daniel E. White, “the ideal ‘Romantic’ woman,” conceived from the proto-feminism of the 1790s, was “self-sufficient” and able to “both think and feel,” her intuitions and cogitations leading her “to an ideology of social renovation through universal love and gradual political reform through organic change” (2000, 82).
I contend in this thesis that the Romantic movement was actually instrumental in elevating the feminine affective principle within the epistemological gender hierarchies of the eighteenth century by presenting the feminine as a channel of creative and spiritual transcendence in a reiteration of esoteric ideas. The concept of the Sophia, or inner Wisdom, is reflected in the development of the ‘poetising self’ that characterises Romantic aesthetics, marking the general turn in poetics and philosophy away from mechanistic and “pragmatic models of rationality” towards an intuitive and subjective outlook (Pfau 2007, 961).

Mark Lussier views the “subject and object” of Romanticism as “a zone of contact between the cosmos and consciousness,” where identity and self-knowledge is formed (2011, xii). This thesis shows that the female in Romantic literature is instrumental in both representing and creating this ‘zone’ of contact. The feminine principle functions not only as an inspirational catalyst but also as the facilitator of the writer’s inner journey toward self-knowledge, creative expression and spiritual revivification. This pattern is visible in Blake’s *Vala* and *Jerusalem*, Coleridge’s Abyssinian maid in “Kubla Khan” (1816), the figure of Asia in Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) and in the eponymous heroine of Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*, and is indicative of a transformative feminine energy akin to the Gnostic belief in illuminative wisdom embodied in the Divine Sophia. The feminine principle was thus emblematic of a set of values and attributes which could enunciate the processes of self-realisation and transformation not only in relation to the wider collective but also within each individual. In *Prometheus Unbound*, the possibility of transcendence, inherent in the human condition, is dependent upon the unification of male and female, and Romantic writers of both sexes viewed the harmonising and equalising of gender relationships as being essential for humanity’s progress. Likewise, Blake’s mythology depicts humanity’s separation from an ideal androgynous state into a
state of harmful abstractions—harmful in that the male and female principles no longer exist as one but have become opposed—echoing Boehme’s depiction of the Fall as a “loss of androgyny,” able to be repaired only by reuniting masculine and feminine polarities within oneself (Gibbons 1996, 61).

In Romanticism, I argue that the transcendent possibilities of the human condition manifest in the process of male/female reintegration. Romantic transcendence, therefore, depicts a reciprocal process of interacting with a visionary impulse that, as Quinney notes, was the reverse of established orthodoxies and hierarchies (2009, 54). Romantic literature encompasses multiple factors, concepts and meanings, viewed through many metaphorical and symbolic lenses, including the lens of esotericism. Blake, Coleridge and Shelley all present multifarious perspectives and narratives, which follow several modes of development and meaning but, in the end, come to resolution. In this way, the protagonists and the reader are initiated into ‘the Mysteries’ of the divine light of vision that reveals the unity behind all things, the ‘secret’ that lies both beyond and within how things appear to be (Wittreich 1973, 57). Blake’s epics, as noted by Jerome McGann, direct one from the divisiveness of ‘single vision’ to the generative ‘double vision’ that leads to the regenerative ‘fourfold vision’, represented, in Vala, by the four Zoas reunited with their female Emanations. Such an initiatory ‘journey’ reveals that within the ‘prison’ of nature lies the ‘threelfold vision’ of the ‘garden of delights’ where opposites (contraries) are in unity (1973, 15), as represented by the sweet garments linked to the “female Form” and worn by Jerusalem (18.35, 37; E.112). Jerusalem is Vala’s daughter but, in her shadowy manifestation, she is also Vala herself. Thus, the personifications in the Romantic epics (especially those of Blake) are also multifarious, in that they can be viewed as different aspects of the same character or of the same overriding thematic dynamic. Examples of this multi-faceted structure are Blake’s Sons of Albion, who are aspects of the figure of
Albion, and the Daughters of Beulah, who are facets of the state of unified being which is ‘Beulah’.

When characterisations are interpreted in this multi-layered way, seeming discrepancies—even contradictions—are smoothed out to reveal the unifying dynamic that moves towards recovery and resolution. In Coleridge’s *Christabel* (discussed in chapter one), the figure of Geraldine is not only a manifestation of Christabel’s essential self but, upon taking the form of a serpent, symbolises self-realisation and intuitive wisdom. Together Christabel and Geraldine represent both their “dual identity” and their “complementary relationship” (Brinks 2011, 96). This multiplicity reflects the different yet related contexts that are a feature of the Romantic ethos. In turn, these contexts reflect the different forms of Gnosticism, which are many-sided, in that there were ascetic Gnostic groups just as there were communities of Gnostics practicing sacred sexuality as a means of acquiring spiritual enlightenment (Goehring 2000, 330).

The main goal of the Gnostics was to achieve the balancing of opposites via the reunification of masculine and feminine energies—and this could be done ascetically, meditatively, or through physical acts of sexual union, but it was a sexuality that aimed to transform somatic experience (Williams 1999, 137). Romantics writers, too, as I will show in the following chapters, advanced different aspects of the transformative process which, in a similar vein to the Gnostics, could operate within various contexts that ranged from the mental to the physical. The main goal was to synchronise these different aspects and divided energies into an integrated whole. Like the Gnostic Sophia, the Romantic female, on both the internal and external levels, was central to this synchronisation.

The structure and narrative of epic poetry reveal the Romantic opposition to what Geoffrey Hartman calls the “condescension of accommodation” (1991, 130). Through their multiple contexts, perspectives and characterisations, the epics embrace the idea of
“leading men through darkness into light,” which is the Romantic obverse to ‘accommodation’ and its depiction of God darkening the light so that human eyes cannot see it. In this sense, Milton’s is a poetry of ‘condescension’, the Romantics’, of initiation (ibid). The Romantic epics represent the ‘refurbishment’ of epic poetry, an example being Blake’s enlisting of Milton’s aid in order to “confute or convert him” (Wilkie cited in Wittreich 1973, 55). Indeed, the epic poems of Milton and Blake are extended examples of the epic genre. The Romantic poets appropriated the revolutionary aspects of Milton’s poetic structure but ignored or overturned his traditionalism. Thus, the Romantic epics can be placed within the great arena of British poetry, whilst exuding their own lines of creative freedom, historical sense, dissenting views, and innovative imagination (Wittreich 1973, 58).

Furthermore, I argue that Romantic writers, especially Blake, Percy Shelley and Mary Shelley, subverted Milton’s rendition of the Fall in Paradise Lost through their engagement with esoteric, particularly Ophite Gnostic, concepts. The Ophites esteemed the Edenic Serpent as a bringer of knowledge, and Eve as a receiver and transmitter of knowledge (Rasimus 2007, 432). Their cosmogony included the feminine Holy Spirit (a concept which resurfaced in the beliefs of the Moravians), the Sophia of Light and Wisdom, the Incorruptible Christos, and the Demiurge of Chaos, called Ialdabaoth (Turner 2000, 193). I will show that, in various works, writers such as Coleridge, Blake and the Shelleys display an ‘Ophitic’ use of the serpent/Satan and Eve images, presenting them in association with illuminative knowledge, transformation and personal awakening.

According to Gregory Leadbetter, Coleridge equated the serpent with self-realisation (2016, 202). In Christabel, as I will show, he portrays transformation as being mediated to Christabel by Geraldine, her true nature, who mirrors the function of the serpent in bestowing ‘Sophianic’ wisdom and ‘redemptive’ self-awareness which, in Gnostic
parlance, reunites earth with heaven in a ‘sacred union’ that repairs the divided self and restores the soul to the ‘pleroma’ (the source of all being, or ‘God’).

For Shelley too, the serpent was a positive symbol—as seen in *The Assassins* (1814), where it is linked to the transformative love of Albedir’s daughter who cherishes it in her bosom (2002, 2690). Again, in Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), the pairing of the Lucifer-like Prometheus (a Gnostic ‘rebel’ Christ figure who exposes falsehood and tyranny) and the ‘Sophianic’ Asia (who aids Prometheus in his rebellion) results in a Gnostic-style ‘inversion’ of orthodox values in which the ‘satanic’ Prometheus is associated with Christ, the redemptive impulse with the feminine figure of Asia, and the tyrannical Jupiter with the god of the Old Testament (Cantor 1985, 77). Shelley’s inversion contains echoes of Blake’s reversal of the ‘sin’ and ‘shame’ ascribed to sexuality by the official Church and also, like Blake, provides a ‘correction’ of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (Cantor 1985, 77). In *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley also evokes a Gnostic inversion of Paradise Lost in her portrayals of Victor and the Creature, the former of whom acts as a kind of demiurge or false creator, while the latter is a rebellious Satanic figure who, in his quest for knowledge and self-determination, challenges Victor’s authority. Yet, without the mediating influence of the feminine principle, their actions do not come to a satisfactory conclusion.

For Romantic writers, self-determination and the gaining of knowledge were associated with the imagination, which they regarded as being synonymous with the potentialities of the true self (Bloom 2008, 894). According to Mary Lynn Johnson and Brian Wilkie, many Romantic-era writers believed that the petrifying of human imagination resulted in the world being “seen as recalcitrant matter that threatens us” (1978, 211). In “The Eolian Harp,” Coleridge speculates that animated nature ‘trembles’ into life and thought when stirred by the creative breeze of the imagination. Shelley, too,
understood that imagination is creatively active, not possessive or restrictive, and that the Romantic ideal was not to create so as to entrap but to create so as to unfold the visionary life (McGann 1973, 21). In line with the unfolding of this vision, Romantic writers believed, as Wittreich notes, that poetry affected cultural forces “and that the poet is a legislator” (1973, 57). Similarly, Wollstonecraft and Barrett Browning, viewed their works as being a means of awakening the public conscience and giving a necessary voice to issues that needed to be expressed so as to move the individual and society towards change (as I will show in chapter six). Wollstonecraft defined the ‘natural writer’ as one who realistically responds to the world and speaks “the language of truth and nature with resistless energy” (1974, 4.164–65). Women writers made it their aim to ‘speak’ for women in the areas of women’s rights and education, but they were just as concerned with the subjective workings of transformation as their male peers. Indeed, the aim of the Romantic-era writers discussed in this thesis was the restoration of humanity (individually and collectively), and they shared the same ultimate vision of a ‘new heaven and earth’ of gender complementarity and universal unity. This vision was often symbolised in their works by the climactic ‘apocalyptic event’, which ushers in the “new Jerusalem,” a restored universe of peace and equilibrium (McGann 1973, 12, 54–55).

There are parallels between aspects of the Romantic representation of women and the praxes of dissenting female preachers and prophets who defined themselves as “mouthpieces or vessels of the ‘Divine Word’” (Mellor 2000, 70–71). They believed in a “divine inner light that authorized them to speak” (70), resonating with the illuminative wisdom that emanates from the Gnostic Sophianic principle. The Philadelphians, for instance, acknowledged the “validity of female prophesy” and believed that the role of women was to realise their “special relationship” to the feminine heavenly ‘Light’, associated in Gnostic thinking with the Divine Sophia, who bestows understanding and
redeems human beings through revelatory knowledge (Gibbons 1996, 151, 156). Joanna Southcott (1750–1814) believed herself to be a divinely authorised and divinely inspired prophetess, infused with holy love and divine grace. These qualities of feminine self-possession and transcendence are also seen in the writings of Barrett Browning, who put forward a spiritualising feminine ideal in her vision of herself as a female poet and an incarnation of Wisdom, likening herself to Mary Magdalene, the companion of Jesus and a figure often equated to Sophia in esoteric thought (Lewis 1998, 9, 13).

Such ideas were part of the reformulating of existing orthodoxies that followed in the wake of the French Revolution’s failure to deliver on its promises of equal rights and democratic freedoms, a reformulation that marked a general shift amongst radical thinkers in their perceptions of divinity and gender relations. Many in England began to challenge the conservative ideal of a divinely appointed monarchy and the structuring of society along hierarchical and patriarchal lines. The rise of capitalism, with its support of wealth and privilege, and its exploitation of women (and children) as cheap labour, also contributed to criticism of the status quo (Mellor 1989, 160), a criticism that sought to redefine traditional conceptualisations of god, society and gender. Although Romantic works display their own signature or ‘voice’, they show the influence of this movement, and its attempt to re-envision conventional notions viewed as inhibitive and subjugating. The omnipotent God of the Bible, looking down on humanity from his heavenly ‘throne’, was likened to an autocratic overlord ordering his earthly kingdom according to a pattern of feudalistic subordination (Nicholson 1990, 403). An “absolute monarch in heaven” was as undesirable as an “absolute monarch on Earth” (404). In contrast, radicals of the eighteenth century sought to advance a ‘model’ of the divine that incorporated elements and values not present in orthodox concepts of God and creation—elements that reinstated
the feminine principle to the godhead and raised the role of the female in the processes of social change, creative expression and spiritual transformation.

Each chapter of this thesis will show the different ways in which Romantic writers elevated the female at the individual and cultural levels and worked towards restoring the feminine principle in human relationships, social arrangements, and spiritual attainment. The esoteric elements that are integral to the Romantic spiritual ‘ideal’ can be understood on several levels which, as I shall show, include the psychological, especially in the case of Coleridge, the emotional and the carnal/physical in Blake, the social and mythical in the Shelleys, and the cultural and theological in Barrett Browning. I argue that an examination of the esoteric aspects of Romanticism reveals meeting points not only of spiritual oppositions but also of gendered ones. In the Romantic works discussed, the desire for a resolution of these oppositions is recurrent and is articulated in various ways that indicate an ultimate aspiration towards unity and the dissolution of binaries. The feminine is key in this search for resolution, acting as a mediator between the internal and the external, a conduit for intuitive insight and transcendent knowledge. As such, Romantic writers incorporated gendered concepts through which both individual and collective perceptions of the self, in relation to the transcendent function, could be articulated, and which played a part in shaping and challenging epistemological gender constructs.

Chapter one focuses on Coleridge’s psychological applications of esoteric femininity in “Kubla Khan,” “An Allegoric Vision,” “Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” and Christabel, exploring the ways in which Gnostic-Hermetic and Behmenist images contributed to his search for a language of unity, in which the feminine is depicted as a uniting nexus of dark and light opposites, a mediator between the conscious and the unconscious. Throughout these works, the feminine takes on illuminative, Sophianic qualities by acting as the catalyst of personal change and insight.
Chapters two and three discuss female representations and esoteric concepts in Blake’s mythology from a sexual and spiritual perspective. Chapter two comprises an overview of the theological, philosophical, and dissenting climate of the eighteenth century and acts as a preliminary examination of Blake’s sources and influences, laying the groundwork for textual analysis in chapter three. I will examine the beliefs and ideas of the Moravians, Swedenborgians and other non-conformist movements and religions, in relation to the image of the illuminating feminine which has precedents in many elements of esoteric tradition, elements which, as I will show, find purchase in the female characterisations of Blake’s *Vala, or the Four Zoas* (1797–1809) and *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion* (1804), works that will be analysed in detail in chapter three.

Chapter four examines the gender imagery of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). It discusses the ways in which Mary Shelley utilised esoteric notions of the feminine in a socio-political examination of unfulfilled familial bonds and unresolved male/female disparities which are associated with her depictions of female characters as knowledge givers who are continually side-lined by a patriarchal society. The chapter discusses the novel as a Gnostic inversion of Milton’s ‘Fall’. The Creature acts as a rebellious Satan, whereas Victor takes on the role of an autocratic, demiurge-like creator, demonstrating what happens when the feminine principle is not given due regard and is relegated to a secondary position within culturally proscribed boundaries.

Chapter five focuses on Percy Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) as a response to *Frankenstein*, exploring Shelley’s mythic incorporation of Gnostic gender configurations in his portrayal of Prometheus and Asia. I argue that, by facing Demogorgon, the ‘people’s monster’ (the constraining barrier to release from oppression and limitation), Asia functions as an active feminine principle who, rather than being side-
lined within patriarchal confines, as in Frankenstein, unites with Prometheus and facilitates both personal and collective transformation in a utopian vision of society.

In chapter six, I will explore Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* and other works in order to show the ways in which she inflects Romantic tropes of artistic self-determination and theological concepts to redefine established prevailing notions of femininity. The chapter discusses the continuing influence of Romanticism and esoteric representations of the female on Barrett Browning as a later Romantic in the more prescribed cultural climate of the nineteenth century. The chapter will also show how Barrett Browning’s representation of Aurora Leigh’s character links with the writings of Swedenborg and the feminine visionary and spiritualising perspective of the female prophet tradition, a perspective which drew on esoteric concepts and revisionist imagery as a means of validation and empowerment.

The thesis concludes with an evaluation of the ways in which the thematic content and symbology of Romantic literature challenged prevailing attitudes, and how Romantic representations of women subverted orthodox binary frameworks and were assisted in doing so by the incorporation of esoteric sources, particularly those derived from Gnostic antecedents. I will offer a summary of how these alternative ideas and representations change our understanding of the role of the female in Romantic literature.

These chapters explore how Romantic and esoteric conceptions of femininity, especially those that are Gnostic-based, share common aspects and display interconnected elements. These elements assist in revealing the ways in which the role of the feminine is read and comprehended in Romantic literary works. Each chapter reveals how Romantic representations of femininity challenged and subverted the prevailing ideas regarding feminine attributes and roles and sought to raise the female above her prescribed secondary
position. In chapter one, I will examine the psychological application of Gnostic elements in Coleridge’s poetry, wherein the female acts as the catalyst of inward transformation by bringing together disparate aspects of the self as part of Coleridge’s quest for unity.
Chapter One
Coleridge’s Redemptive Unity

According to Brian Gibbons, Coleridge’s spiritual and artistic vision is “deeply indebted to esotericism” (2001, 5). His works display a ‘plurality’ of forms and themes that mirror the plurality of philosophies and heterodoxies with which he engaged. His poetry exhibits similarities and interconnections with Gnostic-Hermetic concepts, notably in the desire for unity through self-realisation recurrent in the texts, a desire consistently linked with feminine figures. The writings of Jacob Boehme were influential during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, “not only in his native Germany, but also in England, the Netherlands and France” (Gibbons 2001, 5), and Coleridge was particularly influenced by Boehme’s works. A significant element within esotericism is the concept of salvific knowledge—the belief that one can connect with “the underlying structure of reality,” which can be termed ‘God’, and understood as the sum of one’s essential self, experienced through an “intuitive apprehension of the true ground of being” (ibid). In Gnosticism, salvation is achieved by way of knowledge (gnosis), wherein the soul is ultimately identified as a manifestation of Sophia, or Divine Wisdom, a transformative process reflected in the philosophical and aesthetic underpinnings of Romanticism, and operative in many of Coleridge’s constructions of female figures. These constructions also encompass Coleridge’s search for unity in the coming together of oppositions.

In this chapter, I argue that Coleridge sought a figure through which to articulate both consciousness and what lies outside the purview of consciousness (the unconscious), what he in his notebooks terms the *Ego diurnus* and *Ego nocturnos* (3.4409), the light and the dark aspects of the psyche. These aspects, seemingly at odds but also interrelated, are presented in Coleridge’s feminine representations, figures who embody the potential for
change and the opening of perception in his works. These representations are counterintuitive, as they do not follow a standard pattern of good over evil. Rather, they question conventional moral constructs by blurring the boundaries of signification in an attempted unity of opposites. In the texts discussed, transformational processes are depicted as the search for, or acquisition of, knowledge through strife, through desire, fear and experience. Change in perception occurs when moral and spiritual boundaries are blurred or brought into question. Coleridge’s feminine figures represent a conflux of primal fears and transcendent capabilities. They personify the desire for wholeness, the integration of primal drives into the ‘light’ of consciousness in a process of individuation. As such, they appear uncanny and disturbing, as well as beautiful and otherworldly.

Indeed, Coleridge wrote that poetry is a product of the imagination, and that the imagination is a “Vision and Faculty Divine,” a “fusing power” which “reveals itself” not only in the subjective “balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities” but also in their outer occurrences and correspondences (Coleridge Notebooks 1.4406; Biographia Literaria 1–2.16, 135). This notion of reconciliatory balance reflects the concept of synthesis in nature and the concordance of elements that characterise Gnostic-Hermetic philosophies. Coleridge’s conception of the imagination as a binding element, bringing together oppositional forces, replicates the ideas of Boehme, who viewed both good and evil as originating in divine providence. John Beer notes that Boehme’s “alchemical sense of correspondences” between the external and the internal significantly informed Coleridge’s thinking and poetic imagery (1959, 24). According to Kiran Toor, “the modifying nature of Coleridge’s imagination and its power to blend and assimilate disparate elements into one glorious product” can be described in “alchemical language,” for “a new substance emerges” from the “conjunction, combination and regeneration” of
opposites (2004, 83). The alchemical dictum, ‘Solve et Coagula’ (dissolve and coagulate), could be applied to the art of poetic distillation that characterises Coleridge’s opus (ibid).

In his *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge states that the imagination “dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create,” for it organically “struggles to idealise and to unify” (1.304). Beer notes that Boehme’s philosophy was integral to Coleridge’s progression as a poet, as it encouraged the linking of mind and imagination by advancing the notion of the eternal ‘eye’, which imaginatively pierces through the veil spread over the phenomenal world of the senses (1959, 29). Coleridge wrote that the goal of poetry was to “convert a series into a Whole, so as to assume “a circular motion” of oneness (*Collected Letters* 4.545). Through his ‘poetic alchemy’ (Adair 1967, 3), Coleridge sought to fuse the “conscious and unconscious elements” of the mind so as to engender a ‘totality’ of imaginative comprehension, psychological unity and spiritual creativity (Toor 2004, 85). Many of Coleridge’s conceptualisations anticipate the theoretical formulations of what we would now term ‘psychoanalysis’.¹ Like Blake, Coleridge has been called an ‘avatar’ of “the early Romantic movement in English poetry” (Engell Jessen 2013, 180), and his works contributed to the evolution of a Romantic worldview which took into account the inner workings of the soul and their outward expression, a legacy inherited from ancient philosophies—as evidenced by the well-known Delphic aphorism, “Know Thyself.”² For the Gnostics, and then later for the Romantics, the feminine principle was a means by which the divine could be realised within the self through the reunification of fragmented energies (Gibbons 1996, 90).

¹ Elements of Romanticism influenced psychoanalytic theory. Although Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung were prominent figures after the Romantic era, they drew on ideas that had been developing throughout the eighteenth century, such as the composite nature of the psyche and the experiential phases of consciousness (Faflak 2008, 8).

² Coleridge references this maxim in the poem “Self Knowledge” (1832), In which he contemplates the workings of the ego and the disciplining of intellectual powers (Beer 1974, 200).
This chapter explores parallels between Boehme’s ideas, esoteric tradition and the representations of femininity in Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan,” “An Allegoric Vision,” “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and Christabel. Composed in the period of 1795–1817, these works show the development of Coleridge’s thinking in relation to femininity and esoteric thought. They demonstrate the evolution of Coleridge’s female figures, whose facets range from the bestowing of insight and inspiration (as in “An Allegoric Vision”) to the blurring of light and dark, of conscious and unconscious boundaries, in the pursuit of transcendence and psychic wholeness (as in “Kubla Khan,” “The Ancient Mariner” and Christabel). I argue that, in his quest to comprehend himself and the world, Coleridge attempted to create a model for poetic unity that questions established discourse and modes of signification. In his focus on the workings of the psyche, Coleridge drew upon a key element of esoteric tradition: the unity of opposites—light and dark, above and below—facilitated by the transpersonal self in the form of a transcendental feminine figure.

I. Coleridge, Femininity and Women’s Rights

In a letter to Thomas Poole, Coleridge wrote, “My spirit is more feminine than yours” (*Collected Letters* 1.258):

> I have known strong minds with imposing, undoubting, Cobbett-like manners, but I have never met a great mind of this sort. And of the former, they are at least as often wrong as right. The truth is, a great mind must be androgynous (*Table Talk* 1 September 1832, *Collected Works* vol. 6).

An important part of his longing for fulfilment was the harmony of the masculine and feminine, an expression of the equanimity that he sought to achieve in his works. At the same time, Coleridge’s awareness of sexual injustice spurred him to lament the absence of
a pronoun that would include women equally (Coleridge Notebooks 3.3238, 3399). He expressed public outrage in the Morning Post (16 April 1800) at a proposed divorce bill and its double standard in respect to the question of adultery, stating that it was unequal justice “to make the whole weight of punishment fall upon the female,” for every woman considered to be guilty was “punished throughout her life in reception by society”; but, he asked, “what punishment is inflicted upon the man beyond which the courts of common law, or his own conscience may inflict?” (Collected Works vol. 1). In Table Talk of August 1833, Coleridge notes the complete lack of women’s political representation, wryly observing that “an unmarried woman of age, possessing one thousand pounds a year has surely as good a moral right to vote, if taxation without representation is tyranny, as any ten-pounder in the kingdom” (Collected Works vol. 1).

Feminist criticism of Coleridge seems to have followed two lines of interpretation. Some view his conceptions of gender as inherently sexist. H.J. Jackson in her 1993 essay, “Coleridge’s Women, or Girls, Girls, Girls are Made to Love,” asserts that Coleridge’s view of great minds as androgynous is endemically inegalitarian, as it locates the androgynous mind within the male body (597). Jackson concludes that Coleridge believed men could appropriate beneficial ‘female’ traits, but women were “constitutionally incapable of [masculine] ‘philosophic consciousness’” (ibid). Julie Ellison views Coleridge’s representations as trivialising the feminine by casting it in the “conversational realm of pity and sympathy” (1990, 105). In “Coleridge and the Question of Female Talents” (2002), Anne K. Mellor divides Coleridge’s feminine representations into five categories: the absent mother, the constraining wife, the “all-controlling and malignant power in the universe,” the passive virgin and the object of desire (120). She attributes these negative portrayals to Coleridge’s anxiety regarding an emerging female literati. Diane Long Hoeveler speculates that Coleridge was drawn to women he could idealise
and ‘self-create’, so that they became his own flawless projections, “magical beings who would somehow be able to produce for him the psychic harmony” that he sought (2010, 146). However, these interpretations and categorisations do not take into account the ways Coleridge’s feminine representations challenge or destabilise conventional moral binaries and modes of signification.

Other scholars have pointed out Coleridge’s positive engagement with females. Julie Carson states that his writings on women were often unsympathetic but he also “rose to their occasion and, more than any other male Romantic writer, made ‘femininity’ his subject position” (2002, 203). In her 2005 book, Erotic Coleridge: Women, Love, and the Law Against Divorce, Anya Taylor points out that aspects of Wollstonecraft’s thinking concerning women’s rights and suffrage, and the humanity of both men and women, were supported by Coleridge (2005, 48). Coleridge’s reference to Wollstonecraft in relation to Godwin as “one instance of the ascendancy which people of imagination exercised over those of mere intellect” supports this claim (Hazlitt 1987, 50). Critics like Taylor, Tim Fulford and Ashley Cross have highlighted Coleridge’s close attendance to the lives of women in his intellectually engaging relationships with figures like Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson and Matilda Betham. Fulford argues in “Mary Robinson and the Abyssinian Maid: Coleridge’s Muses and Feminist Criticism” that Coleridge is unable to sustain traditional chivalric discourses and “opens gender roles and gendered poetics into question” (1999). Similarly, Cross writes that Robinson and Coleridge’s “complex dynamic reveals a lyrical exchange that is enhanced by gender difference, rather than inhibited by it, as close perhaps as it was possible to come to intellectual equality across gender at that time” (2009, 42).

While aspects of Coleridge’s feminine constructions may seem to repeat conventional gendered codes, they are also ambiguous, combining dark and light imagery
and breaking down conventional moral and gendered categorisations. Clearly Coleridge shows some concern with the issue of women’s rights or lack thereof, but he was also a product of the prescriptivist discourses of the time. I argue that Coleridge incorporated Gnostic-Hermetic into a literary model of spiritual and creative unity, perhaps as a means of exploring and integrating his own self-proclaimed ‘femininity’. The female figures analysed in this chapter are not idealisations but combinations of different aspects of aspiration and experience. His feminine creations reflect of the totality of the psyche, acting as catalysts for development and embodying the potential for spiritual unification and insight.

II. Boehme and the Sophianic Feminine in Coleridge’s Language of Unity

Writing of Coleridge’s conception of unity, John Beer observes that Coleridge frequently connected the mind and the natural world within the ‘One Life’, a creative impulse that can consolidate disparate elements of reality into a comprehensible ‘whole’ (1977, 166). However, Beer points out that Coleridge also considers “the paradox of the relationship between unity and diversity, including the strange power of the mind to see things disparately yet at the same time hold them in unity” (227). Such a paradox could be more easily explained if “two levels of consciousness could be shown to co-exist in all waking experience” (ibid), thereby reconciling apparently dissimilar perceptions. Elaborating this point, Seamus Perry pinpoints a “persistent opposition between intellectual and imaginative commitments, between the appeals of unity and the discernment of differences” (1999, 23). Despite such oppositions, Coleridge’s dedication was definitely not to “anti-systematic diversity” but rather to the ultimate end of human thought and feeling, unity (20).
Building on the studies of Beer and Perry, this chapter sets Coleridge’s search for unity against the backdrop of esoteric tradition, in particular the Gnostic-Hermetic ideas present in Boehme’s theosophy. In Boehme, the interaction of opposites is a key notion, and the feminine, associated with the wisdom of Sophia, is an illuminating and potentially reconciling force. In his 1959 book, *Coleridge the Visionary*, Beer explores Coleridge’s inclusion of Behmenist imagery in many of his philosophical and visionary speculations (63). He identifies a certain ambivalence towards the Teutonic philosopher when, in a letter to Lady Beaumont, Coleridge writes of Boehme: “for myself, I must confess I never brought away from his works anything I did not bring to them” (*Collected Letters* 4.751). In the same letter, he also refers to Boehme as an “extraordinary man” and recalls “conjuring” over his *Aurora* while at school (ibid). He expresses his appreciation for Boehme’s vision in these terms:

> if in some places the Mist condenses into a thick smoke with a few wandering rays across it … The true wonder is, that in so many places, it thins away almost into a transparent Medium, and Jacob Behmen, the philosopher, surprizes us in proportion as Behmen, the visionary, had astounded or perplexed us. (1.558)

In *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge praises Boehme’s ability to address the “head” as well as the “heart” of the reader (1.152). In one of his notebooks, Coleridge lists Boehme’s Sophia among the key concepts of esoteric tradition, and states that “Man before the Fall” was “possessed of the Heavenly Bacchus (as Jac. Boehmen’s Sophia or Celestial Bride)” (1.441). This passage demonstrates Coleridge’s engagement with three strands of esotericism—Christian Gnosticism, Kabbalism, and the esoteric symbolism of Greek and Roman myths. The sentiments reflect those held by various counter-enlightenment movements that viewed rationalism and empiricism as contributing factors in the
separation of humanity from its own divine essence. The subversive figure of Bacchus/Dionysus suggests joy, revelry, and sexual and spiritual power that Coleridge equates with the feminine Sophia of Boehme’s writings. ³

Coleridge, like Blake, interlinked Boehme’s ideas with concepts of the lost Sophia/Shechinah/Dionysus, a theme common to the mystic philosophers (Beer 1959, 63). ⁴ The ancient mysteries of Bacchus depict a fallen humanity. The ideal Bacchus, or Dionysus, is broken condemning ‘man’ to “live in a world shorn of the fulfilment which he had possessed, unless he could by some means be reintegrated into the heavenly Bacchus” (50). In Gnosticism, reintegration with the divine is achieved through the coming together of the earthly Adam and the heavenly Sophia. In Kabbalism, the joyful dialectic of male and female elements brings forth the feminine Shechinah, the divine light of God (51). Such associations between Gnosticism, Neoplatonism, Kabbalism and other ancient belief systems was noted by many scholars of the time who attempted to explain the “common origin of all myths” (63), an academic legacy referenced in George Eliot’s Middlemarch (1874) in the character of Mr. Casaubon and his proposed “Key to all Mythologies.”

Coleridge’s notebooks show that he recognised links between esoteric systems and the works of mystics like Boehme. In The Friend (1818), Coleridge states that “the heresies of the Gnostics” and other spiritual philosophies “shadow out some important truth” (1.427, n.430). According to Fulford, Coleridge’s “self-avowed participation in mystical tradition was an attempt to find support in his continued struggle for a language of unity” (1991, 51), expressed in his desire for “unity-in-multeity” (Biographia Literaria 1.222). A significant part of Coleridge’s attempt at such a vocabulary involved the

³ Dionysus, the Greek god of wine and fertility, was also called Bacchus (the name adopted by the Romans). In esoteric circles, he is associated (especially under his Greek name) with resurrection and rebirth, redemptive freedom, and the renewal of life (Burkert 1985, 132).

⁴ In Jewish theology, the Shechinah represents the glory of the divinity, also referred to as the ‘Divine Presence’, depicted as light, or interpreted in Kabbalism as the feminine aspect of God (Brandon 1970, 573).
reworking of esoteric concepts and gender binaries into a vision of individual as well as collective wholeness. Although Coleridge engaged extensively with Unitarianism in the 1790s, his consistent recourse to Boehme’s works betrays his interest in Gnostic themes and ideas (Leadbetter 2016, 28). Coleridge drew up a list of authors showing the various influences on his writings—“Jacob Behmen” features highly (Marginalia 1.174). In the Gutch Notebook, Coleridge employs the cognate image, “well-spring—total God” (1.272). This image reflects Boehme’s emphasis on the divine pleroma, or “total God.” The hyphen in ‘well-spring’ figures the “divine source in a logical paradox of unseen depth and perpetual vitality” (Leadbetter 2016, 29).

In Boehme’s cosmology, the universe exists as an opposition of light and dark, spirit and body, love and wrath, joy and pain, eternity and time. These oppositions are interrelated, as all visible things are emanations of the invisible—the hidden divinity that manifests creation. Coleridge’s feminine figures also evoke an indefinable ‘truth’ that spurs the desire for understanding and creative unity. In Boehme, God’s self-knowledge finds expression in nature, which is ordered according to heavenly wisdom, the eternal Sophia. By a repeated amalgam of natural desire, self-reflection and creative purpose, humanity is able to reconnect with the divine by realising the truth within nature, the Sophia, on both an inner and outer level. In The Way to Christ (1764), Boehme describes the “Noble Virgin Sophia” as a representation of spiritual purity which is the whole, heavenly image of ‘man’. She personifies the “Pearl” or spirit of Christ that resides in the soul and is humanity’s spiritual love, the facilitator of intuitive knowledge that opens the way to the divine (24.259).

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5 The Unitarians (from the Latin unitas, meaning ‘unity’) believed in God as the Divine Unity of creation. They were influenced by Enlightenment ideals emphasising the physical sciences, experimentation and political reform. They represented the uniting of religion with science, and belief with reason. They owned newspapers, journals and publishing houses, and supported causes like the abolition of the slave trade and freedom of the press. Coleridge’s first publisher, in 1796, was the Unitarian, Joseph Cottle. The Unitarian ethos appealed to Coleridge, but he gradually moved into more esoteric and mystical modes of thought (Holmes 1998, 69, 96).
III. The Abyssinian Maid and the Paradisial Self in “Kubla Khan”

The pattern of a feminine catalyst for psychic awakening occurs in “Kubla Khan” (1816), wherein the Abyssinian maid with a dulcimer functions as an embodiment of natural expression, the interplay of conscious and unconscious. The poet’s quest for creative fulfilment in “Kubla Khan” is subject to much on-going debate. Patricia Adair’s 1967 account casts the text as the poet’s waking dream where the river of consciousness meanders through the ‘caverns’ of the mind and meets with the ‘sunless sea’ of the unconscious. Adair focuses on the textual links with the Greek Orphics. However, the Abyssinian maid does not feature in her discussion (108–144). The same year, Geoffrey Yarlott explored the poem in relation to Coleridge’s reading of Purchas, his Pilgrimes (1625), stating that the Abyssinian maid represents the aloof but ‘vital air’ of inspiration, the harmony of “inner and outer” needed to achieve creative genius (147–148). Eugene Sloane presents a Freudian reading of “Kubla Khan” as an elaborate “birth dream” in which esoteric symbols depict and catalogue unconscious drives (1972, 97) and John Beer views “Kubla Khan” as the movement from the world of nature, “with all her ambiguities,” to that of the “‘absolute’ genius” which resolves them (1977, 117).

According to Beer, resolution depends upon mediation from the Abyssinian maid, whose “mythological significance” seems to mark her as “a votary of Isis and perhaps one of the cave-dwellers in Abyssinia who were thought to preserve the reliques of ancient wisdom” (ibid). For Seamus Perry, the maid is a muse who “promises to inspire a paradisal kind of creation” (1999, 200). Eric G. Wilson describes the poem as a “somnambulistic vision … attuned to the undulations of the abyss” (2004, 342), and Jack Stillinger claims that Coleridge took “a very casual attitude” to “Kubla Khan,” presenting it as a psychological oddity (2010, 157).
There is no well-defined body of feminist criticism on “Kubla Khan.” In their 1982 article, “The Mirror and the Vamp: Reflections on Feminist Criticism,” Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar propose that the poem is a “romantic touchstone,” both as a “founding myth of culture” and because its “explicit sexualization of the dreaming poet’s concerns about creativity” questions the place of women in the “aesthetic revolution of the early nineteenth century” (160–165). Julie Ellison configures the poem in relation to the ‘family romance’ of the French Revolution. Coleridge’s text, writes Ellison, is “built up out of the accumulating anxieties of threatening fathers (‘Ancestral voices prophesying war’), demonic mothers,” (the wailing woman), and “mediating sisters (‘damsel with a dulcimer’)” (1990, 121). The “holy dread” of revolution undermines “safe familial sanctuaries” and negates “self-congratulatory overviews” (122). As such, the poem alters the private and public structures of revolutionary politics. Tim Fulford reads the poem along Burkean lines of the masculine sublime (the Khan and the poet) and feminine pathos (the wailing woman and the Abyssinian maid) (1999, 5) and Anne Mellor interprets the woman wailing in “Kubla Khan” as an example of the “constraining wife” figure in Coleridge, whose lover has “deserted her for more sinful or pleasurable pursuits” (2002, 120). Anya Taylor views “Kubla Khan” as questioning the power structures of gender. The decree to build the pleasure dome is “unheard and patriarchal, but the song that the poet yearns to imitate is the woman’s song, ‘Singing of Mount Abora’” (2005, 104). Lastly, Anne DeLong examines “Kubla Khan” in relation to the image of Medusa and essentialist gender poetics and politics (2012, 1). In “Kubla Khan,” Coleridge utilises Medusan imagery to “signify both the mesmerist and the mesmerized subject, a conflation of subject/object positions that complicates issues of agency, subjectivity, and gender” (2).

I argue that “Kubla Khan” exhibits a Gnostic-Hermetic interaction of contrary images seeking to be brought together. The poem juxtaposes both light and dark imagery
in a series of oppositional ideas that require creative synthesis. I propose that the esoteric symbols Coleridge employs are part of his search for creative synthesis, transcendence and self-knowledge. The Abyssinian maid is central in this search, acting as a nexus of oppositional forces and aspects of the psyche. She contains the potential for restorative creativity in the “deep delight” of her “music loud and long” (44–45). An enigmatic figure, the maid gains form, substance and clarity when set against the poetic structures, themes and symbolism of “Kubla Khan,” which make her, and the poem, more clearly defined.

According to E. S. Shaffer, Coleridge believed poetry had the power to express the inexpressible in ways that made “visible” the “esoteric gnosis,” the original “priestly and philosophical secret” (Shaffer 1975, 148). The word ‘priestly’ implies a mediated gnosis that has a male orientation, but Coleridge ascribes a priestly function to the feminine, who functions as a custodian and arbiter of creative gnosis. According to Adair, Coleridge attests to his ‘presence’ in the poem when he uses the first person in relation to the Abyssinian maid (1967, 135): “A damsel with a dulcimer / In a vision once I saw” (3.37–38). Adair states that Coleridge longed “for the absolute, for the Love which could transcend the limitations of mortal life” (1967, 179). In “Kubla Khan,” the Abyssinian maid reflects this longing (ibid). Boehme’s emphasis on the workings of the heart thus become an important element in the text (Beer 1977, 30). In Boehme’s philosophy, the human heart corresponds to the sun: “First, behold the Sun. It is the Heart … of all stars … it enlighteneth and warmeth all” (Aurora 1764, 68). In “Kubla Khan,” the dome with its surrounding “gardens bright” and “spots of greenery” is described as “sunny” (1.6–11; 3.47) in contrast to the dark caverns below (3.47) which, nevertheless, represent the place of descent, gestation, and eventual ascent to the light (Sloane 1972, 101, 107). In Behmenist thought, ‘the Heart’ symbolises the revivification and enlightenment which lies at the core of energies that would otherwise be destructive or constricting (Beer 1977, 30).
In his notebooks, he writes that poetry deals with those “manifold forms” that are not “attached by us consciously to our Personal Selves” (2.2086). For Coleridge, the fundamental impulse of life was to achieve wholeness, and the aim of poetry was to bring “the whole soul of man into activity” (3.3827). Such wholeness requires a ‘turning’ to the feminine ‘other’ on the journey to reunification and self-realisation. This journey has an individual and universal appliance, but is rendered in terms of a connection between what he called the upper diurnus consciousness and its lower nocturnos counterpart (Toor 2004, 86, 87). In “Kubla Khan,” the correspondences between the potentially redemptive ‘lower nature’ and the ‘higher nature’ of conscious cognizance are depicted through interacting opposing images (Beer 1977, 127). There is a complementary movement between the gardens of the conscious ‘world’ above and the measureless caverns of the unconscious ‘world’ beneath.

In Boehme, the holy ‘work’ of synthesis is mirrored in the element of water (Beer 1977, 30), represented in “Kubla Khan” by the central fountain (the ‘heart of hearts’) bursting forth from below (2.17, 19). The serpentine river, Alph (from Alpha, meaning ‘the beginning’), denotes the imaginative process that links the two ‘worlds’ (1.3–5). The source of life is figured as feminine in the Abyssinian maid with a dulcimer. In Aurora (1612), Boehme links music with the process of creation. He gives an account of angels communicating in harmony with each other to form a “Divine Tune” that appeals to the senses of the physical world:

The Sixth qualifying, or fountain Spirit in the Divine Power is the Sound, Tone, Tune or Noise … and the Distinction of every Thing, as also the ringing Melody and Singing of the holy Angels, and therein consists the Forming or Framing of all Colours, Beauty and Ornament, as also the heavenly Joyfulness. (1764, 123)
Throughout his cosmology, Boehme interlinks light and sound as manifestations of God’s divinity. This Divine Sound manifests the soul and the powers of life, including those of the visible and invisible realms.

Similarly, the Abyssinian maid appears from the deeper ‘invisible’ realms, as if ‘distilled’ from the mind of the poet like a forgotten, or unrealised, dream (Toor 2004, 87). The words “A damsel with a dulcimer / In a vision once I saw” (3.37–38) suggest a vision half-remembered, and needing to be fully recognised and assimilated. Sloane points out that the Abyssinian maid betokens an unintegrated aspect of the poet’s psyche. She personifies delusory enchantment, the holy/unholy feminine presence, similar to Blake’s Shadowy Female and the figure of Life-in-Death in Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” (Sloane 1972, 120). However, the poem suggests that if imaginative and creative steps are taken to reach her—“Could I revive within me / Her symphony and song” (3.42–43)—, then the nature of the ‘visible’ sunlit heights and the ‘invisible’ sunless depths can be fully comprehended in an reintegrative conciliation (Toor 2004, 89). That which lies beyond or beneath consciousness can be brought into consciousness through the uniting of disparate forces. The focal-point of this unity is the dome of Xanadu, the word ‘dome’ derived from the Latin domus, meaning ‘home’ (Sloane 1972, 106). It symbolises the desire to return to one’s true self (ibid), a blessed state of ‘repose’ (peace), where the veil of limited perception is lifted (Bodkin 1934, 110).

Coleridge believed in the connection between nature and the divine. Beer notes that in Thomas Maurice’s *The History of Hindostan* (1795)—a work that Coleridge was familiar with—domes relate to nature worship, reflecting both the shape of the universe and the curve of heaven (Beer 1959, 233–36, 266). Xanadu, with its blossoming gardens

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6 Coleridge claimed that “Kubla Khan” was the result of an opium dream and that he was interrupted by an unwanted visitor from Porlock while writing it. The poem was never completed. Thus, the “person from Porlock,” or “Porlock,” may be a literary metaphor for intrusions or distractions that break creative inspiration.
and “many an incense-bearing tree” (1.8–9), represents the reveal of “an ancient unconscious wisdom” (Adair 1967, 133). When neglected or unacknowledged, this wisdom sinks into the chasms of regret and unfulfillment, causing a waning of the moon and the sound of a woman “wailing for her demon-lover” (2.15–16). Such imagery conjures up irrational imaginings of hauntings and demons. However, in the Crewe Manuscript, the original unpublished version of “Kubla Khan,” Coleridge uses the word ‘daemon’. He therefore describes the place of her wailing as both “savage” and “holy” (2.14), the term daemon possibly meaning ‘teacher’ or tutelary deity (Liddell 2017).

Xanadu, with its pleasure-dome, blends the exotic with the erotic, and the earthly with the heavenly. It is an imaginative projection of sensuous desire in which the ‘art of love’ signifies unity, insight and wholeness (Sloane 1972, 105). The feminine symbolism of Xanadu supports this theme of love and consummatory ascendancy begotten from the ‘womb’ of renewed and redemptive nature. The grounds are “fertile,” and “girdled” with “walls and towers” (girdles being female attire), while the “gardens” which enclose the rounded, breast-like dome (1.1–2, 6–7, 8) connote a sacred feminine enclosure, or ‘bower’ (Sloane 1972, 105, 107, 108). In the Crewe Manuscript, the name ‘Kubla Khan’ is written ‘Cubla Khan’. According to R. Gerber, in “Keys to ‘Kubla’,” Cubla, or Cublai, is associated with Cybele, the goddess of nature. Cybele also wails for her ‘demon-lover’, Attis, whose self-emasculcation symbolises the merging of himself with his feminine ‘other’ (1963, 321–41). This merging signifies falling, or ‘letting-go’, into the female where a resurrection or ‘rebirth’ can occur within the feminine depths of transformative love, as demonstrated in “Kubla Khan” by these words (Sloane 1972, 101, 102, 109):

And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,
A mighty fountain momently was forced. (2.17–19)
The “fast thick pants” are redolent of a kind of ‘coitus’, the image of union precipitating a “mighty fountain” of conjoined creative and spiritual energies (Sloane 1972, 101). Similarly, Boehme employs images of nature as restorative: “This Heavenly Salitter, or powers one in another, generate Heavenly joyful fruits and colours” (Aurora 1764, 81). “Kubla Khan,” with its “upboiling anguish,” presents the disordered self which, when acknowledged and accepted, opens up the realisation that ‘anguish’ burns from the same fire as ‘love’. Anguish can therefore reach out to love and love to anguish in a fusion that opens the mind and heart to the “ultimate power which is … a well-spring, displaying in its depths the true form of infinity, and thus demonstrating the nature of ‘total God’” (Beer 1977, 154). This ‘nature’ transcends separateness in a ‘totality’ of perception that Coleridge believed was vital for the positive progress of humanity, an outlook he sought to enunciate in his poetic discourse.

Both Gnostic and Behmenist cosmologies incorporate the concept that Paradise can be re-attained, and that humanity can be awakened and restored to its original Edenic condition (Beer 1977, 26). The wailing woman and the Abyssinian maid are two sides of the same coin—the ‘anguish’ of ‘Paradise lost’ and the ‘love’ of ‘Paradise regained’. The Abyssinian maid stands between the opposite upper and lower realms and points, through her presence and music, to the unity that is the return to Eden. She dwells “in the innermost” and represents the ‘doorway’ to Paradise in her song of Mount Abora (Bodkin, 1934, 95). Mount Abora is named ‘Amara’ in the Crewe Manuscript. In 1540, the Portuguese priest and explorer, Fransisco Alvarez (1465–1541), published a description of Mount Amara in Abyssinia, and the paradisial legends associated with it (Cooper 1906, 20). These legends linked to tales of Kublai Can, a descendent of the Biblical Cain, who built gardens in remembrance of the lost Eden (Beer, 1962, 227–231). The accounts written by the English clergyman and geographer, Samuel Purchas, in Purchas, his
Pilgrimes tell of the “stately Palace” and pleasure-gardens built by Cublai Can (415). Purchas also mentions the Ethiopian “Hill Amara,” set in a place “graced with Natures store” and said to have been “our Fore-fathers Paradise” (843). Both Coleridge and Milton were familiar with these accounts (Bodkin 1934, 92). Milton writes in Paradise Lost (1667): “Mount Amara, though this by some suppos’d / True Paradise under the Ethiop line” (4.2.280–286).

Purchas’s descriptions suggest a sexual undercurrent to the myth in the image of the “sumptuous house of pleasure” in Xandu (1905, 415), and the reference to “goodly Damosels skilful in Songs and Instruments of Musicke” (ibid) who bestowed the delights of Paradise upon those who entered therein. The serpent and apple symbols in Paradise Lost also have sensual overtones (Bodkin 1934, 168), but whereas Milton presents Eve as a kind of temptress, the source of Adam’s undoing, Coleridge’s Abyssinian maid embodies creative power that could link him, in love, to the manifold facets of nature, and to his paradisial self (169–170). Sloane argues that if “Kubla Khan” “was a love lyric in the long tradition that stretches back to ‘The Song of Songs’ extolling the beauty of the beloved, no set of images could be more appropriate” (1972, 107).

“Kubla Khan” shares obvious similarities with Purchas’s account. In its evocative ambience and imagery:

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan

A stately pleasure-dome decree:

Where Alph, the sacred river, ran

Through caverns measureless to man

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7 A possible present-day equivalent of Mount Amara is the peak, Amba Geshen, located near Lake Tana, the source of the Blue Nile, said to be the River Gihon of the Bible, one of the four rivers flowing out of Eden through Kish, the Biblical name for Ethiopia/Abyssinia (Ullendorff, 1968, 2).

8 Coleridge may also have read James Bruce’s Travels to Discover the Sources of the Nile (1790). Robert Southey had a copy of the Dublin (1790) edition in his library. Bruce mentions an area named Atbara, and a region called Amhara (Cooper 1906, 1). This is the same James Bruce who brought to England the manuscripts of the Ethiopian Book of Enoch which influenced Blake’s Ethiopian illustrations (1821).
Down to a sunless sea. (1.1–5)

The “caverns measureless” are contiguous with the “sunless sea,” for both symbolise the upper- and under-worlds of the self (Bodkin 1951, 103–104). The second stanza presents a scene of apocalyptic-style undercurrents which surge and throb from the clefts and fissures, in the sense of bringing life from death:

Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail …
And ’mid these dancing rocks at once and ever
It flung up momently the sacred river …

Five miles meandering with a mazy motion …
And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean …

The shadow of the dome of pleasure
Floated midway on the waves;
Where was heard the mingled measure
From the fountain and the caves. (2.20–21, 23–25, 28, 31–34)

Without the life-giving waters which cleanse and renew, the underground ocean would remain lifeless but, as they surge onto the dancing rocks, they excite the waves and act as a precursor to restoration. Through the “mingled measure” of opposites, these energies find their point of focus and resolution in the Abyssinian maid who appears in the third stanza, the culmination of the poem. The final stanza, Kiran Toor notes, connects the end with the beginning and brings everything full circle, like the alchemical serpent biting its own tail (2004, 84). This circle of motion is an on-going unity, symbolised by the snake-like “mazy
motion” of the sacred river. The structure of the third and final stanza is arranged around the poet’s revived vision of the Abyssinian maid:

And on her dulcimer she played,
Singing of Mount Abora …

That with music loud and long,
I would build that dome in air …

And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread. (3.39–41, 45–46, 49–52)

The imperative to the audience to weave “a circle round him thrice” signifies cyclic completion. The word ‘thrice’ suggests both sacred geometry, which marks out a sacred space (Shaffer 1975, 165), and the “triple rhythm” which, according to E. Wind, enabled earth to communicate with heaven (1958, 46, 142). It also denotes the mystical number three of ancient religious and mythological traditions—the number of the goddess, the ‘three-in-one’ (maiden-mother-crone), representative of the phases of life and instinct (Sloane 1972, 118–119). The Abyssinian maid embodies all three aspects of the Goddess. Although she appears in her youthful semblance, she manifests the ‘holy dread’ of mystery and wisdom like the ‘crone’, and bestows spiritual sustenance like the ‘mother’. The second stanza alludes to the phases of the goddess when Kubla hears the ancestral voices “prophesying war” (2.29–30), the phases of one’s natural instincts, life and history, which become warring and tumultuous aspects of the psyche if not integrated into the totality of the self.
The unintegrated polarities of the second stanza and the apocalyptic events that are portents of change. They elicit, in the third and concluding stanza, a sense of fear and cries of “Beware! Beware” (3.49). However, the Abyssinian maid’s singing draws the opposed factions towards harmonisation within the dome of pleasure and the garden of love, the sacred temenos of a restored paradise. The “flashing eyes” and the “holy dread” (3.50, 52) indicate that the poet has reached a place of ‘sublime’ meeting, a cataclysmic transformation containing the possibility of unity, where fear can be transmuted into love, and alienation into reconciliation (Beer 1977, 89–90). What at first seems destructive possesses the potential for a “a merciful work of circulation” (31) resounding in the ‘notes’ of human experience in the singing of the Abyssinian maid. Through her “music loud and long,” the poet aspires to build “that dome in air” (3.45–46). The Abyssinian maid singing of Mount Abora represents the hope of Paradise re-attained.

According to Sloane, Kubla Khan is “the powerful creative figure” that the poet “would emulate” to becalm the ancestral voices of war (1972, 118). Thus, Kubla Khan and Coleridge “are one and the same,” wishing to dwell in Xanadu by assimilating the feminine ‘other’ (ibid). The music of the Abyssinian maid sends forth a renewed vision of Paradise, the return to what Boehme calls the ‘love-fires’ at the heart of the universe (28). These fires are fanned by air and, for Boehme, ‘Ayr’ displays a living quality and a divine essence in which all creatures rejoice (Aurora 1764, 57), reflecting the Gnostic concept of the divine ‘breath’. Coleridge, too, believed in the ‘vital air’ of love and creative infusion (Yarlott 1967, 48). The “dome in air” (3.46) signifies the paradisial spirit suffused with the ‘breath of God’, representing the fulcrum of potentiality glimpsed in the maid’s “symphony and song” (3.43). The last lines of the poem suggest the poet’s ‘taste’ the Edenic condition: “And he on honey-dew hath fed, / And drunk the milk of Paradise” (3.53–54).
Throughout the poem, Coleridge uses imagery symbolic of the interaction between the consciousness of ‘day’ and that of the ‘night’. He juxtaposes the “green hill” above with the “deep chasm” below (2.12–13), the “sunny pleasure-dome” with the dark “caves of ice” (2.36), and the gentle “sinuous rills” with the up-surging “mighty fountain” (1.8; 2.19). The Abyssinian maid uses the ‘heart’ of her music to harmonise these elements, turning death (symbolised by the ice) into life (symbolised by the sacred river and the fountain). Like the sacred river, the poem’s images flow from the unconscious mind to the conscious. Their course can be traced to the wisdom and imaginative fulfilment of the Abyssinian maid. By playing her dulcimer and singing of Mount Abora, the maid opens the way to self-realisation and redemptive unity. Through her music and song, she resurrects the image of the dome of Xanadu, and bestows the paradisal milk and honey of creative energy.

IV. The Unifying Feminine in “An Allegoric Vision” and “The Ancient Mariner”

In “An Allegoric Vision,” (completed two years before “Kubla Khan,” in 1795), two figures convey the concept of a transformative feminine illuminator: the Goddess, associated with darkness, and the woman in white, associated with light. In “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” (1798), these polarities are consolidated into the personage of Life-in-Death, who is both horrifying and illuminating.

Scholars like Jerome McGann have interpreted “An Allegoric Vision” as affirmation of Coleridge’s supposed view of religion as a “golden mean between superstition and Atheism,” the moral of the tale being to illustrate the “Falsehood of extremes” (1985, 97). Nicholas Halmi views the text simply as a “satirical narrative involving personified abstractions” (2009, 346), and Joel Hartner states that Coleridge’s allegorical vision is not only a “metaphysics of analogy,” but a “faith in unity amidst
diversity” (2011, 16). Fulford writes that Coleridge presents a parable about the necessity of avoiding extremism” in which “All extremes meet” (2012, 19).

However, such interpretations acquire another and broader dimension when set against Coleridge’s engagement with the esoteric. The text acts as a parable of self-liberation through intuitive knowledge and subjective experience. “Vision” was included in the introduction to A Lay Sermon Addressed to the Higher and Middle Classes on the Existing Distresses and Discontents (1817), and is both a critique of institutions and a critical exploration of “the world of illusions, divisions, and false consciousness” (McGann 1985, 96). At the centre of this exploration are the Goddess and the woman in white, named Religion. The vision begins with the protagonist/poet entering the Temple of Religion, which he describes as “crowded with tawdry ornament and fantastic deformity” (55–60; 200). The institutional artifice is reinforced by people “dancing about in strange ceremonies and antic merriment,” while others are “convulsed with horror” at the scene of superficial sanctity and manufactured reverence (Poetical Works 60–65; 200). Hidden behind this façade, of religion is the Goddess, who resides in the “holier recesses” of the temple (70–75; 200). Her features are “blended with darkness” (90–95; 201) suggesting both mystery and the denigration and concealment of the feminine within established religion. The inscriptions on the walls are “incomprehensible” and contradictory, reflecting the polarity exhibited by the crowds in the temple (90–95; 200).

As in “Kubla Khan,” Coleridge projects himself into the text as the poet who prostrates himself before the Goddess. He comes away “wond’ring and dissatisfied,” because the mysteries inscribed on the walls, like the Goddess’s features, are blurred with institutional dogma and their meanings obfuscated (90–95; 201). The poet realises that the

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9 Coleridge originally included “An Allegoric Vision” as part of a lecture delivered at Bristol in 1795. He later printed a revised version in The Courier in 1811. It then became part of the introduction to two of three planned lay sermons concerning the political situation at the time, two addressed to the upper (1816) and middle (1817) classes, with the third unwritten sermon to be addressed to the working classes (Roberts 2016, xxxvi).
Temple of Religion is being used as a “Temple of Superstition,” and that true religion takes the semblance of the woman in white named Religion: “we were addressed by a woman, tall beyond the stature of mortals, and with something more than human in her countenance and mien” (105–110; 201). Her countenance displays “deep reflection animated by ardent Feelings” (110–115; 201). She symbolises a religion which is associated with revelatory knowledge, acquired through individual perception. Like Boehme’s Sophia, this feminine Religion personifies God’s truth in nature. She possesses an optic glass, with which she “assisted without contradicting our natural vision and enabled us to see far beyond the valley” (120–125; 201).

In contrast, the old man with a microscope, a personification of rationalism, delights in empirical analysis and denies the existence of things beyond immediate sensory experience (Poetical Works 150–155; 202). He is accompanied by the female figure of Sensuality, who embodies the epistemological alignment of the feminine with ‘inferior’ baser instincts, as opposed to ‘superior’ masculine reason. By making the woman in white the converse of the Goddess who is obscured by such dogmas and attitudes, Coleridge subverts established Christian doctrines, as well as social hierarchies. He creates a ‘middle ground’ in which transformative equilibrium is attained through a balance of natural and intellectual impulses.

However, the protagonist’s epiphanies are facilitated by both the Goddess and the woman in white. The two figures are thus interfused, reflecting Coleridge’s burgeoning drive, as a “syncretic mythologist,” to turn imaginatively the “roots of superstition into a means of intellectual awakening” (Leadbetter 2016, 30). The Goddess and the woman in white can be read as two sides of the same coin. In the darkness of the former lies the light of the latter, for out of the dark unconscious depths comes the light of conscious understanding that unites the whole being. From the standpoint of history and culture, the
Goddess represents negative constructions of femininity within “ecclesiastical obscurantism or the imposition of priesthood in league with an oppressive political order” (Leadbetter 2016, 30). Alternatively the woman in white, with her eyeglass, mirrors esoteric constructions of the feminine as an agent of inner perception and revelation, a construction reconfigured within movements like the Behmenists, Philadelphians and Moravians (ibid). Coleridge’s woman named Religion presents “a kind of literary heresy” by replacing both the Enlightenment’s “self-certifying claims and the culturally sanctioned orthodox Christian faith” with a subjective poetic outlook (Bock 1989, 14). His longest major poem, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” provides a “controversial but paradigmatic example of such an heretical journey” (18). Again, an ambiguous but transcendent femininity, the figure of Life-in-Death, acts as the catalyst for the mariner’s spiritual revelation.

Criticism of “The Ancient Mariner” has leaned towards four main areas of discussion: Romanticism, existential concerns, religious allegory and autobiographical aspects. M.H. Abrams defines the poem as a religious allegory which follows the Mariner’s fall from grace, the division of the self, and the Mariner’s change of heart (1971, 272). Beer states that the cumulative effect of Life-in-Death’s description is “one of beauty” combined with the fear of death (1977, 144). For Jerome McGann, the poem demonstrates that truth is not one set narrative of events, but a series affected by the lens of history (1981, 48). Anthony Harding suggests that Coleridge creates a poem reminiscent of Biblical narratives which questions “eighteenth-century models” of “religious belief” (1995, 57). Such models discourage individual perspicacity and originate in sensory phenomena that are ascribed ‘benevolent’ and ‘malevolent’ forms of expression. Peter Kitson views the Mariner as being led to “integrate himself with the One Life” (1997, 46).
Perry states that Coleridge’s poem is about “the redemption of other things—their transformation, indeed, from ‘slimy things’ to ‘happy living things’” (1999, 282).

From a feminist perspective, Mellor sees the feminine figure of “The Ancient Mariner” as a “malignant” and “vampyric” female, and reiterates Alethea Hayter’s suggestion that Life-in-Death is drawn from the nightmarish Ebon Ebon Thalud of Arabian Nights (2002, 120). Taylor views “The Ancient Mariner” as a meditation on the vulnerabilities of will and agency (2005, 60), and Beth Lau continues the argument that “The Ancient Mariner” reflects Coleridge’s ambivalence toward his mother (2009, 82).10 Diane Hoeveler asserts that “Life-in-Death” reiterates the “consuming, and ultimately castrating” negative feminine, symptomatic of the virgin/whore binary (2010, 145).

In response, I argue that Life-in-Death, like the Abyssinian maid, functions as a locus where oppositions meet, traditional moral and spiritual signifiers are destabilised, and the unconscious is made conscious. Her embodiment of death and self-renewing life suggests resurrection and rebirth into new ways of thinking and perceiving. Her visage, at once beautiful and deathly, confronts the Mariner on his path to individuation, breaking down the barriers of his perception. This break down in polarisations reveals their arbitrariness. Coleridge employs seemingly irreconcilable imagery—rotting water and dancing fires, slimy things and shining snakes. Images of decomposition and tactile sliminess contrast with the immutability and intangibility of light, paralleling the polarities between the physical and the spiritual present in “An Allegoric Vision.” Like the Abyssinian maid, the female Life-in-Death acts as the middle ground, uniting nature and the divine, light and dark, within the individual. She is an amalgam of opposites, reflected in her appearance:

Her lips were red, her looks were free,
Her locks were yellow as gold:
Her skin was as white as leprosy,
The Night-mare LIFE-IN-DEATH was she,
Who thickens man’s blood with cold. (3.190–94)

She embodies both beauty and terror, juxtaposing radiant gold and red vitality with decay, pure white with corruption.

The mariner begins by viewing the world as static, exhibiting the empiricist subject’s “fear of blind matter” and finite corporeality (Bloom 1993, 235). He travels a circular path, returning to his ‘native country’ and “experiences an archetypal death and rebirth” within a seemingly Christian context (Bock 1989, 20). But Coleridge introduces many salient features that resonate with Hermeticism and the Gnostic tradition of Christian heresy. Indeed, as Gregory Leadbetter notes, orthodox Christian culture, symbolised by the albatross, becomes the “uncomprehending witness to a nascent imaginative energy bursting through its husk” (2016, 197). By triggering the Mariner’s process of individuation, Life-in-Death functions as a catalyst for personal realisation and spiritual unity, reminiscent of the Sophia.

The mariner’s spiritual transformation is not only instigated by a feminine force, but also entails the reversal of traditional sexual power structures. The poem opens with the mariner addressing the wedding guest, who acts as a surrogate for the reader: “The Wedding-Guest sat on a stone: / He cannot choose but hear; / And thus spake on that ancient man, / The bright-eyed Mariner” (1.20–24). 11 The wedding feast, a symbol of

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11 This thesis quotes the 1817 version of “The Ancient Mariner.” Coleridge replaced the Argument of the 1798 text with an epigraph from *Archaeologiae Philosophaeae* (1736) by Thomas Burnet, another member of the Cambridge Platonists, which, translated, reads: “I can easily believe, that there are more Invisible than Visible Beings in the Universe; but who will declare to us the Family of all these, and acquaint us with the Agreements, Differences, and peculiar Talents which are to be found among them? What do they
social convention, is juxtaposed against the mariner’s own spiritual ‘wedding’ in which he is “won” by Life-in-Death. This theme of marital unity reflects Boehme’s concept of the inner marriage of the Sophia and the earthly personality. “The Ancient Mariner” transgresses established religious boundaries, symbolised by the albatross. Like “An Allegoric Vision,” the poem also mocks superstitious beliefs, for the sailors speculate that, instead of the breezes, the bird had actually brought the fog: “Then all averred, I had killed the bird / That brought the fog and mist. / ‘Twas right, said they, such birds to slay, / That bring the fog and mist” (2.15–20). The corpse of the animal is hung around the mariner’s neck like a cross, weighing him down.

The fog clears after the albatross’s death, and this momentary clarity erodes the mariner’s conditioned beliefs. The blurring of natural and supernatural is symbolised by the sea as it thickens and burns: “About, about, in reel and rout / The death-fires danced at night; / The water, like a witch’s oils, / Burnt green, and blue and white” (2.129). The mariner falls into a slumber that presages cathartic renewal. He dreams of life-giving water: “Sure I had drunken in my dreams, / And still my body drank” (5.304–05). His unity with Life-in-Death suggests a rebirth not only into the afterlife but also into his present life: “I was so light—almost / I thought that I had died in sleep, / And was a blessed ghost” (5.307–09). The dark figure of Life-in-Death become, in a Kabbalistic sense, the feminine Shechinah of light and in a Gnostic sense the Sophia of illuminative wisdom, a conveyor of unity-in-multitude and an instrument of resolution. The mariner becomes aware of the divine in nature and the interconnectedness of reality.

This realisation leads to another provocative transgression of established religious boundaries seen in the serpent forms of the sea snakes. They are described as luminous and
“richly attired” in different colours: “I watched the water-snakes: / They moved in tracks of shining white, / And when they reared, the elfish light / Fell off in hoary flakes” (4.274–77). For Coleridge, the snake signified unity and completion. In a letter to Joseph Cottle, dated March 7 1815, Coleridge writes that poetic narrative should assume a circular or cyclical format, like “the snake with its Tail in its Mouth,” with the goal of comprehending “Past and all Future in one Eternal Present, what to our short sight appears strait but is part of the great Cycle” (Collected Letters 4.956). Despite cursing the serpents as “slimy things” earlier in the poem, the mariner suddenly sees their true beauty and blesses them:

O happy living things! no tongue
Their beauty might declare:
A spring of love gushed from my heart,
And I blessed them unaware:
Sure my kind saint took pity on me,
And I blessed them unaware. (4.283–88)

Their association with light brings to mind the serpent of Genesis but rather than sin and shame, the knowledge these serpents bring equates to the mariner’s realisation of the divine within the seemingly base and earthbound. That which might be shunned or despised becomes a source of illumination. The mariner’s shift into a higher perspective is reflected in the switch from sea to sky. The “upper air” bursts into life, becoming a source of renewed energy and creative power as the mariner’s dead crew are reanimated or reborn (5.332). The Mariner sheds the last vestiges of his internalised dogma. The albatross falls away: “The self-same moment I could pray; / And from my neck so free / The Albatross fell off, and sank / Like lead into the sea” (4.291–92). The references to fire and light in the sky reflect Boehme’s imagery of oppositional but interrelated forces that spur creation.
Thus, both the Mariner and the reader undertake what Bock describes as a “heretical leap of faith” passing “beyond the culture’s assumptions about the nature of reality,” a leap that is horrifying to the wedding guest, an affiliate of conventional society (Bock 1989, 15). Bock states that Coleridge’s works contain important elements that are Gnostic in essence despite being rendered in ways that are characteristically Romantic, especially in the idea of transformation wrought through experiential insight unconstrained by established dogmas and doctrines (20). The Mariner moves from a self-centred outlook to a recognition of synthesis in nature. He realises the interconnectedness of things as opposed to their division into a dualistic set of values or absolutes. Such a realisation is traumatic. As Fulford succinctly words it, the mind is “cut loose from customary criteria of understanding” and “discovers a world of astonishing newness and strangeness” (Fulford 1991, 69). When read in conjunction with Gnostic and Hermetic philosophies, the spiritualising function of Life-in-Death becomes clear. Coleridge’s female characters act as representatives of the protagonists’ search for inner knowledge and unity but they are agents of transformation, shown in a more literal sense in Christabel.

V. The Transnatural Female in Christabel

Christabel was fundamental to Coleridge’s exploration of transfigurative gnosis through the “shadows of imagination” (Leadbetter 2016, 201). Critics have regarded Christabel as a study of evil, finding a binary opposition between good and evil in the characters of Christabel and Geraldine. Anthony Harding reads these two characters as embodying the orthodox tension between purity and carnality, stating “that-which-is-Christabel is severely compromised by that-which-is-Geraldine” (1985, 215). Camille Paglia interprets the poem within the context of Gothic vampire tropes. She refers to vampirism as “a kind of drain on male energy by female fullness” and reads Geraldine as an Oedipal negative mother figure.
who preys on the childlike Christabel (1990, 336). Hoeveler sees the poem as revealing “a fear and hatred of women” in Coleridge’s “conscious and unconscious opinion of them as perverse, sexually voracious, predatory, and duplicitous” (1990, 176). Jackson states that in his attempt to articulate the fundamentals of gender using “polar logic,” Coleridge “unavoidably incorporates the hierarchical values of his own society” (1993, 593). Mellor reads Geraldine as a “treacherous female,” a “bad mother or wicked stepmother” (2002, 119–120), and William A. Ulmer views Christabel as naïve and sheltered, her “guiltless fallibility” being the result of “original sin” (2007, 383).

Scholars have also commented on the complexities of the female characters within a distinctly feminine-oriented text. Katherine Swann examines the ways in which Christabel “capitalizes on and exposes culture’s tactical gendering” of genres, namely the feminisation of the Gothic genre (1984, 535). Swann reads the text as a dramatisation of a hysteria which passes from Christabel to the narrator, to the reader in a “playful suggestion that hysteria cannot be restricted to feminine bodies,” revealing genre and gender as “cultural fantasy” (538, 541). May continues these formal concerns, reading Christabel as a disruption of a paternal order. Citing Kristeva’s theory of abjection, May states that “the symbolic modality of signification … assumes a patriarchal hierarchy, fixed laws of grammar and syntax, univalent signification, the law” (1997, 705). Christabel disrupts this law with its uncertain narrative and ambiguous signification (700). Focusing on the explicitly political, Andrea Henderson examines Christabel in relation to events of the French Revolution, stating that Geraldine “is possessed of a kind of revolutionary energy, one all the more threatening because it inspires confidence and sympathy” (1990, 883). Carson commends the “breadth and depth” of the poem’s female characters and its depiction of a “radically non-phallic and anti-patriarchal” female union (2002, 22). Lastly, Taylor highlights the text’s psychological aspects which demonstrate Coleridge’s
“continued work on the human person, on how selves are made and lost,” in its focus on the emotional development of a young woman (2002, 708).

However, these interpretations overlook the revelatory, spiritual aspects of Geraldine’s character, which come into focus when Coleridge’s engagement with the esoteric is taken into account. The text is characterised by the indefinite. Like “The Ancient Mariner,” Christabel disputes traditional moral categories of what is ‘good’ and ‘evil’. The theme of spiritual ‘becoming’ takes the form of opposing ideas and forces, of light and dark, masculine and feminine, united in the character of Geraldine. Rather than being passive and myopic, Christabel willingly exposes herself to the conventionally transgressive powers of gnosis by leaving her “appointed station” at the castle:

The lovely lady, Christabel,
Whom her father loves so well,
What makes her in the wood so late,
A furlong from the castle gate?
She had dreams all yesternight
Of her own betrothèd knight;
And she in the midnight wood will pray
For the weal of her lover that’s far away. (1.23–30)

She prays for her ‘betrothed knight’ and instead finds Geraldine in the woods. The reference to the chivalric tradition of spiritualising love predicts events of the poem, suggesting that Christabel’s union with Geraldine is also spiritual one. The interplay of conscious and unconscious manifests itself in the relationship between Christabel and Geraldine, whose story reflects and anticipates Christabel’s. The characters’ identities frequently cross boundaries of signification, as described in their first meeting:
The lady leaps up suddenly,
The lovely lady Christabel!
It moaned as near, as near can be,
But what it is she cannot tell.—
On the other side it seems to be,
Of the huge, broad-breasted, old oak tree. (1.39–42)

Swann notes the uncertainty over whether “the lady” is Christabel or Geraldine (or both), and whether the ‘leaping up’ the cause or effect of fright (1984, 538). Ellen Brinks notes that Christabel is startled by the sight of Geraldine, “a lady so richly clad as she” (1.67), thereby registering the “shock of the double” in the referent of ‘she’, which slips between the two, indicating their “transitive identity” (2003, 96). Like the Goddess in “An Allegoric Vision,” Geraldine is present in the text but still obscure due to Christabel’s clouded perception. The equivocation of the subsequent line suggests that Christabel possesses a “latent self-knowledge in silence” (Leadbetter 2016, 205): “But what it is she cannot tell” (1.40). This line is echoed in her ensuing vision of Geraldine: “A sight to dream of, not to tell!” (1.253). The language here creates secrecy, in that Christabel has some innate understanding of what she sees but is unable to articulate this knowledge.

As Jean Watson points out, the esoteric symbol of the oak “unifies the earth below and the heaven above. The root, ordinarily a phallic image, assumes also the womb image of the feminine, thus symbolizing the androgynous mystery of God” (1983, 40). As in “The Ancient Mariner,” imaginative vision in Christabel transgresses internalised religious and social boundaries. The images of the “broad-breasted” oak tree and the “forest bare,” foreshadow the descriptions of Geraldine’s bare neck and arms. Christabel glimpses Geraldine “on the other side” of the oak tree, creating an “initiatory boundary, which Christabel must cross” (Leadbetter 2016, 209). The density of the oak contrasted with
Geraldine’s brightness and her connection with the pale moon connotes the binarism and potential unity of earth and sky, tangible and intangible, matter and spirit—associations reflected in Geraldine’s romantic advance toward Christabel:

And thus the lofty lady spake—
‘All they who live in the upper sky,
Do love you, holy Christabel!
And you love them, and for their sake
And for the good which me befell,
Even I in my degree will try,
Fair maiden, to requite you well.
But now unrobe yourself; for I
Must pray, ere yet in bed I lie.’ (1.226–234)

An intertextual reference to “Kubla Khan” and “The Ancient Mariner” is present in the phrase “upper sky,” suggesting a connection between Geraldine, the Abyssinian maid and Life-in-Death, as each of these characters acts as a catalyst of self-realisation. The love of the creatures of the upper sky indicates that Christabel’s union with Geraldine equates to a shift in perception as she, like the mariner and the poet in “Kubla Khan,” realises the interconnectedness of above and below, the material and the immaterial, and is thus able to overcome matter as a barrier to perception. It is through a physical communion with Geraldine that Christabel achieves self-knowledge. The white robe of Geraldine is a semantic parallel with the white robe worn by the woman named Religion in “An Allegoric Vision.” Both she and Geraldine represent the light of revelation and desire for unity, white being an amalgam of all colours. Like Life-in-Death, Geraldine exhibits
sublime and disturbing beauty, indicating her transcendent nature as a meeting point of binary oppositions and concepts:

There she sees a damsel bright,
Drest in a silken robe of white,
That shadowy in the moonlight shone: …
Her stately neck, and arms were bare;
Her blue-veined feet unsandl’d were,
And wildly glittered here and there
The gems entangled in her hair.
I guess, ‘twas frightful there to see
A lady so richly clad as she—
Beautiful exceedingly! (1.58–68)

Far from falling prey to ‘sinful’ carnality and forfeiting her “spiritual wholeness” (Harding 1985, 215), Christabel transforms herself into a snake, signifying the attainment of her own self-knowledge and change in perception. As with the mariner, this change can be construed as horrifying when viewed from the standpoint of established religious and social conventions, but when viewed through a Gnostic-Hermetic lens Christabel becomes an implicit critique of “the authority of Christian discourse” (Leadbetter 2016, 203). Esoteric traditions regarded the serpent as a symbol of revelatory knowledge associated with feminine wisdom. Coleridge’s familiarity with esotericism and the Greek pantheon in which, according to Jane Ellen Harrison, nearly every God was aligned with a ‘snake-goddess’ of the earth (1991, 306), inspired his usage of the “coiling movement of the snake” to symbolise “ultimate harmony” (Beer 1977, 56). Christabel’s transformation connects her to her own wisdom and true nature. Her transcendence resonates with Boehme’s image of Sophia riding and transcending the serpent-like beast of materiality
In *Christabel*, the serpent mirrors the function of Geraldine as a bringer of insight and self-awareness. Christabel’s rising half-way (like a snake) to watch Geraldine undress and the revelation of “half her side” (1.252) demonstrate their “complementary relationship or dual identity” (Brinks 2003, 96). A possible reference to Goethe’s green snake\(^{12}\) is present in Bard Bracy’s dream of an embracing snake and a dove:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{I stooped, methought, the dove to take,} \\
\text{When lo! I saw a bright green snake} \\
\text{Coiled around its wings and neck.} \\
\text{Green as the herbs on which it couched,} \\
\text{Close by the dove’s its head it crouched;} \\
\text{And with the dove it heaves and stirs,} \\
\text{Swelling its neck as she swelled hers! (2.548–554)}
\end{align*}
\]

Bracy, Leoline’s henchman and representative of the established order, interprets the serpent as unholy, casting it as a deceiver and corrupter. However, May notes the dream’s association of the green serpent with the healing power of herbs (1997, 713). The snake and the dove share a symbiotic relationship breathing in unison and subverting good and evil dualism. The interconnected nature of Christabel and Geraldine’s identity is mirrored in Bracy and Sir Leoline’s differing interpretations—the former believes the dove is Christabel, while the latter believes it is Geraldine. When taking into account the esoteric significance of the serpent as a positive symbol, Geraldine can be read as a potentially

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\(^{12}\) The notion of the snake as a symbol of the free personality also has a precedent in Goethe’s *Das Marchen* or *The Green Snake and the Beautiful Lily* (1795), published a year before Coleridge began writing *Christabel*. In Goethe’s work, the snake represents a bridge between the real world and the inner worlds of characters, reflecting the Hermetical correspondences of ‘inner’ and ‘outer’. The snake sacrifices itself to create a bridge between the spirit world and the land of the senses, thus associating it with Christ-like attributes, transformation and the freeing of perception (Mahoney 2004, 102). W.H. Bruford attributes *Das Marchen* to Goethe’s reading of *The Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz*, a work that incorporates various esoteric and alchemical symbolism (1975, 186).
liberating force. She represents Christabel’s own essential self which Christabel manifests, drawing in her breath “with a hissing sound” (2.459). The name ‘Geraldine’ combines the suffix ‘dine’ with the masculine name ‘Gerald’, meaning ‘spear-ruler’ (Sloane 1972, 109), bringing together the gendered divisions of masculine and feminine.

May notes the religious connotations of the name ‘Christabel’ and the image of Geraldine’s exposed side, reminiscent of “the wounds in Jesu’s side” (1.433). These connotations blur the line between “damned and martyred, diabolical and divine” (1997, 709) reinforcing the interpretation of the serpent as potentially positive. They also suggest a ‘female Messiah’ (Bruder 1997, 114), a notion prevalent in eighteenth-century dissenting movements like the Moravians (discussed later). These spiritual and philosophical connotations are also implicitly political. Fulford argues that, in their relationship, Leonine and Christabel play out the “Burkean family model,” which was “implicitly political” in that it idealised the “traditional family as the model of a monarchical nation” (1999, 98). Sir Leoline’s castle represents a patriarchal domain of absolute power and arbitrary constructs, the domination of the strong over the weak. He commands the village bell be tolled in exactly the same way every time: “five and forty beads must tell / Between each stroke—a warning knell” (2.341–42).

As such, Geraldine’s socially disrupting presence acquires a positive dimension when considering Christabel’s ambiguous sexuality and the values that Sir Leonine represents. His social order is shown as decaying even before Geraldine’s arrival. He is “weak in health” (1.118) and the mastiff bitch is aging and toothless (1.145), suggesting institutional corruption. The spell that has Christabel “fearfully dreaming” (1.294) is gendered as the “lord of her utterance” (1.268) implying, as Swann notes, that Christabel’s passive silence is due to the “brooding, dreaming ‘lord’ of the castle” (1984, 540). Swann identifies paternal and feminine orders in the poem. Leoline’s order is “legislative” and
“structured according to a divisive logic” (547) which opposes “potential ‘sames’ or potentially intermingling parts of the ‘same’” (548), as he endeavours to distance himself from others by constructing a “space between” (1.349).

In contrast, the feminine order mingles identities and differences: “Christabel awoke and spied / The same [lady] who lay down by her side— / Oh rather say, the same” (2.370–371). Moreover, Leonine views fatherhood as entitling him to ownership—“his own sweet maid” (2.655)—and he is authoritarian, readily casting off his only daughter for her ‘transgressions’. Thus, the narrative of Christabel presents the breaking down of an oppressive order by destabilising conventional moral, sexual and structural categories in a revolutionary, Hermetic synthesis of opposites. Within the restrictive scope of her stern father, Christabel is unable, as the ‘innocent daughter’, to embrace her innermost desires in the face of prevailing prejudices. However, her Sophianic will takes the form of a serpent, evil from an orthodox perspective, and spiritually awakening from a Gnostic perspective. At the sight of his daughter’s transformation (2.623), Sir Leoline’s male dominance is rendered self-isolating and destructive, not only to himself but also to his own child and the very fabric of the traditional family model that he upholds (Fulford 1999, 108): “And wouldst thou wrong thy only child” (2.625). A combination of the sublime and beautiful, Geraldine subverts Burke’s gendered binarism. Her implied seduction of Sir Leonine can be read as a calculated ‘dethroning’, thereby recasting Christabel’s “treacherous hate” (2.606) as contempt for an oppressive order.

According to Fulford, the harmony of masculine and feminine was, for Coleridge, an ideal that he sought in both language and nature as “a blessed state” that transcended division and “the language of mastery” (1999, 105). Brinks states that Coleridge’s implicit textual references to “what Geraldine and Christabel share” suggests a reluctance to “assume power over the narrative” (2003, 100–01). Instead, he imaginatively immerses
himself in what takes place in an impulse to join the activities, a ‘transgression’ for which he received much censure (ibid). In The Champion (May 1816), a reviewer speculated whether Geraldine was a sorcerer, a vampire or a man (166). In the Examiner (June 1816), William Hazlitt wrote that there “is something disgusting at the bottom of [Coleridge’s] subject” (Whalley 1971, 1.207). In a copy of Christabel belonging to his son, Derwent, Coleridge comments on the bad blood between himself and Hazlitt:

Geraldine is not a Witch, in any proper sense of that word—That she is a man in disguise, is a wicked rumour sent abroad with malice prepense, and against his own belief and knowledge, by poor Hazlitt. Unhappy man! I understand that when one of his Faction had declared in a pamphlet (“Hypocrisy unveiled”) [that] Christabel [was] “the most obscene poem in the English Language” he shrugged himself up with a sort of sensual orgasm of enjoyment, and exclaimed How he’ll stare! (i.e. meaning me) Curse him! I hate him. (cited in Beer 1986, 40)

Brinks observes that early critics of Christabel, upset by the ‘tone’ of the poem, turned “Christabel’s ‘deviant’ behaviour … into a question of the ‘deviance’ of Coleridge’s authorial voice, tainting him with Geraldine’s femininity and degraded desires” (2003, 109). Coleridge’s defence of Geraldine suggests that he did not regard her as a one-dimensional, stereotypically negative figure. Like Life-in-Death, Geraldine functions as a locus of binary opposites, who instigates Christabel’s own awakening, rebellion against oppressive constraints, and self-acceptance in defiance of prejudice. Like the protagonists of “An Allegoric Vision,” “Kubla Khan,” and “The Ancient Mariner,” Christabel’s spirituality is experiential and leads to a change in perception that cuts through delusion and limitation. The transformative power of imaginative vision “rewrites Christabel’s knowledge as it realizes its occult form” in the personage of Geraldine, who “embodies
both the gnosis and the power of its language” (Leadbetter 2016, 202). She is the “transnatural form” (ibid), whose ‘allure’—as she appears before Christabel and unclothes herself (1.252)—facilitates the awakening of Christabel’s spirituality and imaginative insight (Leadbetter 2016, 202). Such an awakening represents the conjoining of the natural with the transnatural, the discovery of one’s own ‘lost glory’. Christabel, rather than being a passive victim of hostile and devious forces, is an active participant in her own self-realisation, she is her own serpent of gnosis.

V. Conclusion: Coleridge’s Literary Unity

In synthesising esoteric symbols and concepts with social, religious and philosophical discourses, Coleridge creates a syncretic language in which polarities are brought into confluence. This syncretic form counters hegemonic frameworks, as traditional signifiers of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ are conflated and destabilised, and the lines between identities, *diurnus* ego and *nocturnos* ego, are blurred in the quest for self-knowledge. In aspiring to create a literary model of unity, Coleridge sought to define “for his own and his nation’s benefit a liberating rather than oppressive language of power” (Fulford 1999, 25). The Abyssinian maid, the woman named Religion, Life-in-Death and Geraldine are figures who reveal the “affinity of apparent opposites” (Swann 1985, 406). The works discussed bring together the terrifying and the beautiful, transcending notions of duality and absolutes, a unity epitomised in Christabel’s serpent form. “Kubla Khan,” “The Ancient Mariner” and *Christabel* all utilise the serpent (or, as in “Kubla Khan,” a serpentine river) to symbolise provocatively spiritual rebirth, opening up the possibility of creative wholeness and fulfilment. By bringing together the *diurnus* conscious and the *nocturnos* unconscious, the doors of mind and spirit can be opened to a more integrated understanding of reality, a totality that fuses and confuses binary oppositions in the image
of the feminine ‘other’, who assists in bringing into perception different aspects of the soul.

Whereas Coleridge incorporated esoteric and mythological configurations of the feminine into his search for a language of unity, Blake devised his own mythology, which rearticulated esoteric and dissenting gender constructions based upon a similar desire for unity, but a unity achieved through sexual means. In the next two chapters I will illustrate how Blake’s models of the female again show many Gnostic influences and promote the importance of the feminine principle in the development and expression of his ideas and sexual imagery.
Chapter Two
‘Fleshly Spirituality’: Blake, Sacred Sexuality, and the Alternative Religious Contexts of the Eighteenth Century

Gnostic theosophy covered the range of human experience from the psychological to the physical, from the personal to the collective, and from the material to the spiritual. Writers like Coleridge and Blake when addressing the human condition were assisted in this endeavour by the incorporation of esoteric principles and non-conformist views. In this and the following chapter I present the ways in which Blake expresses his beliefs and ideas from the perspectives of sexuality and gender reunification. Drawing on scholars like Harold Bloom, Nelson Hilton, Marsha Keith Schuchard and Suzanne Sklar, and by exploring the sources and influences that underpinned Blake’s ideology, I will show how this sexual perspective contributed to Blake’s feminine conceptualisations. Blake’s multi-layered depictions of female characters are often better understood when viewed through the lenses of esotericism (particularly Gnostic-derived concepts) and alternative movements. I therefore examine Blake’s poetic and sexual representations of the female within an esoteric and dissenting paradigm that raised the feminine principle to a position of eminence within his works, a position Blake associated with the spiritual progress of both the individual and the collective.

This argument sets up chapter three by presenting an overview of Blakean feminist theory and an exploration of Blake’s poetic philosophy, his religious background and ideas. I demonstrate how his gendered mythology relates to sacred sexuality and the heterodox concepts of unified contraries and the role of the feminine principle in achieving divine vision. Although I use a selection of examples taken from a cross-section of Blake’s opus, the discussion will be centred on *Vala* and *Jerusalem*, and analyses of both these
works will be given in the following chapter. I view Blake’s renditions of femininity as complex, and the positive potential of his female characters as often empowering. As ‘Emanations’ of males (enacting the creation of Eve out of Adam’s rib) they seem reminiscent of Old Testament gender typologies even as they replicate stereotypical eighteenth-century gender distinctions. However, scholars have also pointed out the complexity and positive potential of Blake’s feminine constructions.

I. Blakean Women: A Critical Overview

Since the 1970s, developments in Blakean feminist theory have revealed two dialectical trends in scholarship: the perception of underlying misogyny in Blake’s works, and the recognition of a more nuanced approach to gender and sexuality. Irene Taylor’s classic piece, “The Woman Scaly,” (1973) examined both Blake’s delineation of negative femininity (what he terms the ‘Female Will’) and his representations of characters who deviate from such delineation. Taylor investigates socio-economic factors, stating that Blake’s women behave cruelly and manipulatively as a consequence of their own oppressions. This article presents an objective sociological analysis of Blake who, she argues, “had consistently great understanding and sympathy” with respect to the “social and economic position of the individual female” (78).

This approach to Blake’s women was further developed in 1977 in Susan Fox’s “The Female as Metaphor in William Blake’s Poetry” and David Aers’s “William Blake and the Dialectics of Sex.” Both articles radically considered Blake’s depictions of women as a fundamental issue central to the reading of his poetry. Fox points out that Blake’s complex use of females as metaphors has “clouded full understanding of his work” (507). She analyses the apparent contradiction in his portrayal of both genders as coexisting in complete mutuality
and interdependence whilst the female is presented as being in either an inferior and
dependent position or in one that is dangerously dominant (ibid). Similarly, Aers
explores the rhetorical significance of Blake’s female characters. He interprets the
Female Will as a symbol of internalised hegemonic systems and argues that Blake
“develops a method capable of grasping the most complex movements of
consciousness while simultaneously revealing how intimately connected these are to
social relations within which individuals gain consciousness” (500). I have applied
this sound hypothesis to Blake’s women, who simultaneously perpetuate and
undermine gender stereotypes.

In her influential “Blake’s Portrayal of Women” (1982–83) Anne Mellor presents a
more uncompromising account. She reads Blake’s depictions of women as an extension of
Edmund Burke’s gendered configurations of the sublime and beautiful in which “the
masculine is sublime, the feminine is pathos” (153). Her examination of Blake’s
relationship with his wife, Catherine, is perhaps one-sided, as she condemns Blake for
marrying an illiterate woman “on account of her pathos” (ibid). That Blake taught
Catherine not only to read and write but also to paint is relegated to a parenthesis as further
evidence of an unequal relationship: “As far as I can tell, Catherine Blake played the
traditional role of the subservient wife in a patriarchal marriage. She was the student
(Blake taught her to read and write and paint)” (ibid). Mellor exaggerates the positive
criticism for Blake at the time when she asserts that “critics have hailed Blake as an
advocate of androgyny, of a society in which there is total sexual equality” (148), and she
tends to skip over the inherent complexities and ambiguities of Blake’s female characters
and feminine constructs in her reading of Blake as an unconscious misogynist.

Similarly, in her Freudian analysis of Blake, *Sons and Adversaries: Women in
William Blake and D. H. Lawrence* (1990), Margaret Storch reads Blake’s female

characters as inherently misogynistic, stating that in Blake’s universe, “a woman as a self-
sufficient entity carries a threat of castration … A woman who refuses to be subservient
threatens the ideal human state, namely, that in which man is actor and agent” (66).
According to Storch, Oothoon’s role reflects the eighteenth-century view that “The perfect
female exists for man’s gratification” (ibid), as she brings other women to her lover for his
pleasure without expecting reciprocal attentions. However, when taking into consideration
the sexual culture of the eighteenth century, in which women had very little freedom of
expression, Oothoon’s radicalism becomes more profound. Her goal is to liberate
Theotormon from his “hypocrite modesty;” but in so doing she commits what he sees as
the ultimate apostasy, offering to act as an ensnaring bawd. She is thus bound up in the
virgin/whore binary.

In the 2000s, scholars working in queer theory highlighted the ambiguous gender
constructions and representations of androgyny in Blake’s corpus. According to Tom
Hayes’s seminal “William Blake’s Androgynous Ego-Ideal” (2004), Blake’s prophetic
works predict that, following the apocalypse, men will “regain their polymorphous
perverse sexuality and live in a state of eternal bliss” (141). Drawing on Freudian
analysis, Hayes views the portrait of the Visionary Head (c. 1819-20), as a representation
of Blake’s “ego-ideal. That is … a representation of how Blake would like to have looked
if he had been able to avoid conforming to the code of heterosexual masculinity” (143), a
code which exaggerates the difference between men and women and imprisons them in
“mutual destructive misery” (155). Hayes’s view opposes feminist writers of the 1970s
who argued that Blake’s androgynous utopian ideal was inherently anti-female. Hayes
notes Blake’s discomfort with binary oppositions—mind and body, women/nature and

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1Polymorphous Perversity: a psychoanalytic term coined by Freud to describe a state of somatic
bliss or pleasure in the womb, every part of the body being subject to senation. This state may continue to
approximately age five, in which a person derives undifferentiated or multifarious forms of pleasure from
men/culture—, stating that “sexual equality cannot be achieved by simply acknowledging the difference between masculine and feminine traits and allocating to each a mutual identity,” because in binary oppositions “men have secured the first [positive] quality, thus leaving women to be aligned with the second [negative] quality” (150, 147). In Blake’s mythological universe, “there is no such thing as an essential biologic manliness or womanliness” (147). Hayes supports his claims with convincing quotes and contemporary accounts. However, he adheres to the prevailing belief in Blake’s ambivalence towards women’s liberation without fully considering the ways in which Blake’s outspoken female characters question and challenge oppressive systems.

Despite such debates, the judgments of women scholars have been underrepresented within Blake scholarship. Women Reading William Blake, edited by Helen Bruder (2007), sought to redress gender imbalances in Blake criticism and celebrate what has long been an “important but neglected critical heritage” (Bruder, xvi). The volume brings together generations of female writers on Blake, including Germaine Greer and Tracy Chevalier, with the aim of debunking “the common caricature which suggests that female scholars’ regard for and gravitation toward gender issues necessarily involves a narrowing of intellectual focus and a reduction of academic merit” (ibid). Blake’s sexual politics is addressed from historical, biographical and theological angles. The collection explores spiritual traditions such as Hindu, Moravian and Kabbalistic as well as Christian iconography, though Gnosticism does not feature. In particular, Nancy Moore Goslee’s “Aesthetic Agency? Enitharmon in Blake’s Europe” builds upon more sympathetic readings of Blake’s character, Enitharmon. Goslee draws on Helen Bruder’s analysis of Enitharmon’s role in relation to the visual and verbal satire of the revolutionary era, stating that Blake “tests the resources of his own visual and verbal arts to propose a gendered analysis of revolutionary desire—both political and erotic—and its restraints” (70). From
this standpoint, Enitharmon acts as “one of those transgressive women prophets” that conservative journals “so disarmingly refused to discuss” (71). Goslee states that, in Enitharmon, Blake’s revised his earlier political radicalism as her character simultaneously embodies the dangers of revolutionary excesses, and the dangers of an over-reactionary attempt to quash those impulses, for both women’s agency and that of society at large (ibid). Nonetheless, Goslee displays the tendency among critics to disregard the ambiguity and creative potential of Blake’s female characters, thereby reinforcing Enitharmon’s status as a negative feminine stereotype.

Similarly, *Blake, Gender and Culture* (2012), co-edited by Bruder and Tristanne J. Connolly, “brings to light sexual realms in Blake’s world which had been obscured” by showing “the richness that combinations of Blake, gender and culture are bringing forth in the early twenty-first century” (2). The book includes a range of perspectives from masculinity and imperialism to plant biology and sexuality. The interest throughout the essays in religion, spirituality and the relationship between the body and the soul are relevant to a Gnostic reading of Blake. Mark Crosby’s “Merely a Superior Being: Blake and the Creations of Eve” examines Blake’s textual and visual renditions of Eve’s creation. Crosby states that Blake challenges ‘Pauline’ tradition (which took from Genesis 2:21 to support the superiority of men) by drawing on the first account of Eve’s creation in Genesis 1:27 in which she is brought into being at the same time as Adam and can thus be regarded as his spiritual equal. According to Crosby, Blake “appropriated Gnostic interpretations” which sought to “resolve Eve’s two creations by interpreting Genesis 1:27 as the creation of an androgynous human who is divided into a gendered binary at Genesis 2:21-2” (12). Crosby charts the evolution of this concept in Blake’s illuminated manuscript

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2 For further reading, see *Sexy Blake* (2013), edited by Helen Bruder and Tristanne Connolly, which examines the dynamics of sexuality in Blake, his representations of the body, the “prevalence and ambivalence of violence and dominance in Blake’s work,” and the constructions of hyper-femininity and hyper-masculinity in his characters (12–13).
of Genesis (produced for his patron John Linnell) and The Book of Urizen, The Book of Ahania, and The Book of Los. These works rework the “contending biblical versions of this event according to his [Blake’s] own mythopoetic system” and present different, and subversive, interpretations of divine agency (ibid). Crosby does not detail Blake’s engagement with Gnosticism, but the essay casts in a new light Blake’s Miltonic treatment of women, traditionally seen as perpetuating orthodox hierarchies.

Female characters have been loosely discussed in relation to an esoteric paradigm in Blake, but I have not yet discovered an analysis that specifically explores Blake’s constructions of femininity—the function, actions and roles of female characters—in relation to a Gnostic framework. I believe that such a discussion casts Blake’s female representations in a different light and assists in untangling the complex threads of his mythology and the workings of gender within it. The concept of gender, and that of gender complementarity, forms the basis of much of Gnostic and Blakean mythology. While critics like Quinney and Mellor have read the feminine in Blake as a “limited state” (Quinney 2009, 509), being identified with weakness. Thel “lacks the will to confront the fallen world of Experience and try to redeem it,” Oothoon “lacks the power to break her lover’s mind-forged manacles” (Mellor 1982–83, 83, 148, 154. Given Blake’s intentional ambiguity when it comes to other binaries such as heaven/hell, innocence/experience, it is reasonable to interpret a similar treatment in his depictions of gender. Blake’s female characters do not strictly adhere to traditional notions of female submission. They display distinct personalities and voices, subjected to and/or resisting the inequalities of a male-dominated system. For instance, Jerusalem actively resists orthodox oppression and the hegemonic reduction of all things into “one knowable law” (Colebrook 2007, 17). In Visions of the Daughters of Albion (1793), the protagonist, Oothoon, having been raped by Bromion and rejected by her lover, Theotormon, boldly speaks out against patriarchal
double standards: “Once were thy fires lighted by the eyes of honest morn / And does my Theotormon seek this hypocrite modesty!” (6.15-16; E.49). What is more, the negative feminine in Blake is often shown in connection with a patriarchal figure exercising his power. For example, Andrew Lincoln observes that in Europe, Enitharmon ‘complements’ the “gloomy patriarchal God Urizen,” and in so doing affirms that “women’s dominion emerges from within a patriarchal framework and helps to strengthen it” (1999, 621).

In Blake, the conflicts between male and female characters are depicted as unhealthy consequences of a spiritually divided creation. Such conflicts, I argue, reflect the internalisation of hegemonies and oppressive constructs by men and women. However, this dualistic separation is counterpointed by a desire for reunification in an androgynous ideal form, reflecting the androgynous image of ideal ‘man’ in Boehme and other esoteric sources. In works like Vala and Jerusalem, the suggestion of such reunification as an alternative to dualistic strife is connected with the actions of female characters, who function as integral forces in Blake’s cosmology. Understanding the feminine in Blake depends upon an awareness of his wider opus, his use and development of sexual imagery and symbolism (discussed in detail in the next chapter), and the connections between his mythological concepts and different heterodox sources.

II. Blake’s Poetic Philosophy

According to Stuart Curran and Joseph Antony Wittreich, Blake’s “poetic career” presents the “building of a canon” that drives purposefully forwards to the “supreme and summary works” of Milton (1804), and finds expression in Vala, or The Four Zoas (1797) and Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion (1804) (1973, xv–xvi). These are Blake’s “largest visionary and poetic structures” in which his beliefs and concerns are most fully expressed (Curran 1973, xiii). They are his epic poetry and encompass the mature
flowering of his mythology, theosophy and creativity (ibid). Its end is in accordance (or balance) with the beginning, and the middle, with the beginning and the end (Wittreich 1973, 52). This concordance can be seen in the shift in emphasis from an early poem like “The GARDEN of LOVE” (from Songs of Experience, 1789), where the gates are shut to love’s joys and sweetness (44.8, 12; E.26), to Vala, where the way is opened to the “garden of delights” (93.42; E.366).

Blake’s sexual imagery also undergoes a progression. In earlier works, like the Poetical Sketches (1783), the pouring of “soft kisses on her bosom” and the opening of the “narrow bud” (14–15; E.408, 413) are more exuberantly overt and direct than in his later works where sexual symbols, such as “the wings joined in the Zenith over head” and the “beautiful gates” of Beulah (E.372, 20.7; E.313), are more ‘encoded’ and complex. In Europe and the Urizen-Ahania-Los series of poems (1794–1795), Blake introduces characters that reappear in Vala and Jerusalem. The culmination of the whole is Jerusalem, which contains and brings to fulfilment all that has gone before (Wittreich 1973, 52). According to Harold Bloom, Milton is “a foreshortened or ‘brief’ epic, intended to move the figure of Milton in the poem towards “emancipatory vision” (2008, 909). Vala and Jerusalem are longer and more intricate, especially in their treatment of gender/sexual relations and the role of the female in the attainment of visionary transcendence.

Blake’s epics draw one into his mythic world, which, in many instances, can be linked to Gnostic beliefs and symbolism. The main purpose of Gnostic theosophy was to ‘raise’ the human being from the ‘sleep of death’ and to ‘resurrect’ the true self into a realisation of unity with the divine, a process in which the female played a significant part. I argue that, in Blake, the achieving of ‘resurrection’ by sexual means, and the advancement of feminine values that challenged the prevailing religious and institutional censure of female independence and sexuality is a central theme. It is interesting that
Alexander Gilchrist, in his *Life of William Blake* (1863), reports Blake as declaring that if he discovered his wife to be unfaithful he would not “take it ill” (1907, 349). This statement is indicative of an attitude unencumbered by the values of the day and the double standards that applied to men and women in regard to sexuality. Scholars have proven that a number of Gnostic groups and communities practiced sexual rites and followed a way of life that espoused sexual equality and non-conformity (King 1988, 322).

As my Introduction noted, early Christian writers like Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria denounced Gnosticism, including Gnostic sexual practices.³ Their works were in print during the eighteenth century and would have been available to those radical thinkers like Blake who were interested in comparative religion, a field of study that had gained ground in the Enlightenment. That Blake was familiar with Gnostic beliefs is evident in a verbal exchange recounted by Henry Crabb Robinson that occurred between himself and Blake concerning natural religion: “referred to the commencement of Genesis … But I gained nothing by this for I was triumphantly told that this God was not Jehovah, but the Elohim, and the doctrine of the Gnostics repeated with sufficient consistency to silence one so unlearned as myself” (1922, 23). Blake’s links (through his mother) with the Moravians—whose inner circles viewed sacramental sexuality as a channel for ‘divine grace’—as well as the influence of Swedenborg (especially during the first part of his creative life) also may have led Blake to incorporate a sexual dynamic into the development of his ideas and symbolism. For the Moravians, as well as for Swedenborg, physicality and spirituality were interconnected which meant that sexuality could be perceived as a way to the divine.

³ Book Three of Clement’s *Stromata* deals with the subject of Gnostic sexual rites. The text was available in the Latin edition of *Ante-Nicene Fathers* but judged to be too obscene in its depictions to be translated into English by nineteenth-century translators. It critiques the Gnostic practice of sexuality as endorsing lust rather than procreation (Churton 2014, 104).
The unification of the physical and the spiritual is reflected in Blake’s view of the imagination, a concept associated in the Romantic ethos with the potentialities of the true self (Bloom 2008, 894). For Blake, the imagination was an emanative force that proceeded from the divine but was intimately connected with the natural world and the sensations and capacities of the earthly body: “Nature is Imagination itself” (E.702). As such, the body was not to be denigrated, nor split off from the soul and spirit, for without ‘generation’ there can be no ‘regeneration’. Sexuality, as a manifestation of the generated body, was therefore a means by which regenerative ‘ascendancy’ could be gained. These ideas exhibit Blake’s individualistic stamp and were developed into his own visionary philosophy, whilst reflecting the Romantic quest for imaginative freedom and self-determination. At the same time, they reveal the influence of the various strands of esotericism which informed his works. Furthermore, these ideas illustrate not only Blake’s recourse to the esoteric and the influence of the Moravians on his early life and education but also the general shift amongst radical thinkers to redefine God, society and gender relations (Nicholson 1994, 403). Such influences assisted Blake in the formation of his own unique Romantic protest against conformist attitudes and censorious creeds. In the next section, therefore, I will discuss the significance of Blake’s Moravian connection for the evolution of his creativity and mythology.

III. ‘Mystical Unions’: Blake and the Moravians

Schuchard’s research extends what is known of Blake’s Moravian background. Thomas Wright, in his Life of William Blake (1929), mentions that Blake’s parents had attended the Moravian Chapel in Fetter Lane, London, and that Blake’s father had subscribed to the doctrines of Swedenborg (1969, 1–2). Schuchard supports this by revealing that Blake’s mother was a widow when she married Blake’s father, James Blake, and that she and her
first husband, Thomas Armitage, were listed in the Moravian Archives for 1750–1751 as members of the Fetter Lane Chapel. They had been taking part in the public services for some time, but in 1750 applied for entrance into the inner Congregation during a period when intense religious zeal and commitment characterised those who comprised the Unitas Fratum (‘Unity of Brethren’) at the Chapel (2008, 12–13, 28). Several Blakes listed in the Chapel Registers may well have been related to James Blake (13). If so, it is possible that when James became Catherine’s second husband in October 1752, he was influenced not only by his wife’s beliefs but also by those of his relatives.

Catherine encouraged and even inspired her son’s artistic and literary talents, stimulating his creativity within a dissenting environment that challenged orthodox attitudes, beliefs and modes of representation. Schuchard emphasises the likelihood that through his mother’s connection to the Moravian Church (and also possibly his father’s)—as well as through his family’s wide circle of Moravian friends and associates—Blake would have had access to an influential culture of religious art, music and poetry which not only provided support for political protest but also enabled Blake to come into contact with various esoteric traditions (2008, 13). The leader of the Moravians, Count Nicolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700–1760), was well-versed in Hermeticism, Jewish/Christian Kabbalism, Oriental Mysticism and Behmenism (ibid), all of which influenced Moravian theology. Born in Dresden, Saxony, he made his first visit to London in 1739 and thereafter was active in encouraging and overseeing the growth of the Moravian Church in England. Blake was well-read, and as he grew up he became familiar with several languages and philosophies, as evidenced by Frederick Tatham, who recalls the “books well-thumbed and dirtied by his [Blake’s] graving hands in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, French and Italian, besides a large collection of the mystical writers,” including Boehme (Bentley 2004, 57). The various contemporaneous works were available that made reference to the
Gnostics, and could well have been read by Blake, include Mosheim’s *Ecclesiastical History* and Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Van Meurs 1998, 217, 273).

The studies of A. D. Nuttall and Laura Quinney have demonstrated that many of the unorthodox movements of the eighteenth century eclectically drew on radical philosophical sources, which in turn derived their ideas and beliefs from “a long tradition of heterodoxy” going “back to the ancient heresies, including Gnosticism” (Quinney 2009, 55). E.P. Thompson, in his *Witness Against the Beast* (1993), has shown that much of Blake’s spiritual thinking incorporated ideas circulating amongst the radical religious movements that contributed to the alternative culture of the eighteenth century, and the studies of Kathleen Raine (1968) and Desiree Hirst (1964) have affirmed that numerous concepts, images and symbols in Blake’s works have their beginnings in Gnostic-Hermetic writings. Many of these philosophical and occult traditions depict transformation as being associated inwardly with the mind, the emotions and the spirit, and outwardly with the physical and metaphysical, and often utilised gendered symbols and metaphors as a means of displaying and expressing these inner and outer correspondences (Segal 1986, 102).

Some of the core beliefs of the Moravians display a similar *modus operandi*, beginning with an important tenet of their faith—and one particularly connected with the writings of Boehme (and with the mythic theosophy of Blake)—that is, the concept of ‘Ein Soph’, whose ‘love’ manifests the essence of God in a series of emanations, or male/female pairings (Schuchard 2008, 17). These emanations are similar to those of the ancient Gnostics, who viewed each pair as a male and female syzygy representing opposites that are in perfect equipoise (Welleck 1981, 70). In Jewish Kabbalism, these paired emanations, or Sephiroth, are part of the Sephirotic Tree and represent the balanced potencies of the godhead, a balance disrupted by the loss of androgyny and the separation of the sexes (Scholem 1941, 293–94). In Gnosticism, this ‘fall’ into disequilibrium is
remedied by the reintegration of male and female energies (ibid) that transmits the
Sophianic ‘divine light’ of God (the ‘Shekinah’ of Kabbalism) through the uniting of male
and female elements (Beer 1970, 51). These ideas are a defining characteristic of Blake’s
Vala and Jerusalem and will be discussed in the next chapter. For Zinzendorf, the
Kabbalistic idea that the ‘mystical union’, or ‘marriage’, of masculine and feminine
principles could be replicated on Earth led to the formulation of his sacramental ‘Marriage
Theology’ which became “central to Moravian sermons, hymns and ceremonial”
(Schuchard 2008, 22, 26). Likewise, Boehme’s ‘unity of the one’ (a basic Gnostic
concept—symbolized by his androgynous “Heavenly Adam” (Swedenborg’s Grand Man)
and embodied in his “Noble Virgin Sophia” (1622, 77)—unites contrary forces in contrast
to the mind/body, God/Devil, intellect/feeling dualities of orthodox Christianity and
Enlightenment thinking. The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (1793) is Blake’s clearest
example of unified dualities (Van Meurs 1998, 284–88; see also Raine 1968 and Hirst
1964).

According to Brian J. Gibbons, the lack of a female principle in established
Christianity was redressed in non-conformist movements, especially those with esoteric
leanings, by the introduction of the divine feminine, or ‘Sophia’ (1996, 205), a concept (as
discussed in the previous chapter) that resonates with the Divine Virgin Sophia of
Boehme’s philosophy and with the Divine Sophia of Gnostic ideology. It is not surprising,
then, that Zinzendorf’s ‘Herzensreligion’ emphasised the heart (the Herz, or the Hebrew
‘Lev’), as being the seat of emotion, intellect, intuition and feeling, thereby suggesting an
experiential, felt religion which urged the utilisation of one’s Herz/Lev to ‘sensate’ the
love of Jesus as a way of connecting the body with the humanised divine nature, and the
mind and intellect with heavenly wisdom (Schuchard 2008, 19, 20). As Craig Atwood has
pointed out, ‘Lev’ implies something “more visceral and effective than the Greek word for
the personality, Psyche” (2004, 44). Blake’s words to Crabb Robinson are suggestive of the concept of Herz/Lev: “I know what is true by internal conviction. A doctrine is told me—My heart tells me It must be true” (Crabb Robinson 1872, 2.28). Similarly, the Gnostics emphasised that Gnosis (knowledge) is achieved through experience and individual revelation, rather than through prescribed scriptures (Bock 1989, 20)—and certainly not through the edicts of a counterfeit god. Indeed, the Gnostic demiurge, a false creator, who forbids Adam and Eve to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, is comparable to Blake’s figure of Urizen (Nutall 1998, 8), who “form’d laws of prudence, and called them / The eternal laws of God” (28.6–7; E.83). In contrast, liberation from imposed dogmas and creeds is brought about by becoming aware of the body’s own “dynamic and Light-oriented soul,” the inner Christ, or Sophia (Doody 2000, 107).

Throughout Blake’s works, nature, matter and spirit are all intertwined. The light of God is realized within and through the body. Blake uses the term ‘body’ in both a material and spiritual sense, emphasising its function as a ‘vessel’ (or avatar) for the immortal essence, a relationship that is vital for the experience of oneself as an eternal spirit (Brakke 2010, 62). As such, a distinction cannot be made between the soul and the body, an idea that echoes the Gnostic belief that Sophia, as the ‘Epinoia of Light’, represents not only the ‘unfallen’ divine but also the divine self, ‘fallen’, or incarnated in the flesh and, as such, works towards humanity’s restoration to the divine whole (Turner 2000, 181). In Blake’s poem, “A Divine Image” (from Songs of Experience), the body is likened to a “fiery forge,” dressed in “forged iron,” connoting the energy (fire) that arises from that opposition of contraries which is the cause and mobility of mortal life, each working upon the other (55.5–6; E.32).

Such concepts lay behind the Moravian desire to realise the inward light of the soul by contemplating the fully humanised body of Jesus, in order to identify the bodies of
worshippers with the Saviour’s physical form. In extolling the efficacy of the ‘mystical marriage’, the Moravians viewed the feelings of the body, particularly love and passion, as the highest expression of spirituality and worship (Peucker 2015, 6). For Zinzendorf, the Kabbalistic idea that the ‘mystical union’ of masculine and feminine principles could be replicated on earth led to the formulation of his sacramental ‘Marriage Theology’, a motif taken up and infused by Blake into his concept of the emanative ‘imagination’. Indeed, Zinzendorf was criticised for promoting a Fleischliche Spiritualität, or ‘fleshly spirituality’ (Deghaye 1969, 167). For Swedenborg, the organs and sensations of the body have their spiritual counterpart in the ‘body’ of the Grand Man, and so the soul and body are eternally conjoined (Schuchard 2008, 137). This correspondence between the body and the spirit is illustrated in plate 29 of Milton, where Blake presents himself in a naked pose, with a flaming star (the spirit) descending to the sole of his foot (the body). Blake describes this union of the spirit and body as “a bright sandal formed immortal” which can be put on “to walk thro’ Eternity” (E.115). The sandal is a symbol of the Holy Shekinah, and both foot and sandal denoting the mundane realities and their supra-mundane correlates (Wolfson 1992, 166–67). Sandals enable one to ‘walk’, grounded in the ‘Female Presence’, and so in Vala, or the Four Zoas, Orc defies the repressive Urizen by “Walking in joy” and delighting in “visions of sweet bliss” (78.35, 37; E.354).

Such non-conformist themes and attitudes were reinforced by a conceptualisation that was crucial to the beliefs and practices of the Moravians and which went further than established Christianity’s concept of ‘Mother Church’. They believed in the essentially feminine nature not only of the Church but also of each individual Christian (Podmore 1998, 130). The Holy Spirit, too, was defined as feminine, whose copulation with the masculine Logos breeds all of Creation (Vogt 1985, 74). The feminine, both sexually and spiritually, was given an elevated position in Moravian theology, an elevation that Blake,
given his Moravian background, would have understood. It is not surprising, then, that within his own theosophy, the feminine is presented as a vital and pronounced force for creation and potential transcendence. Zinzendorf connected “the Womb of Woman” with the side wound of Christ, thus making the female the primary creator in both a physical and spiritual sense (Fogleman 2014, 77). The Lev was associated with the feminine Shekinah, whose Divine Presence could “vivify the Heart” (Schuchard 2008, 32).

In the *Te Matrem*, Moravian congregations sang the praises of the Shekinah as the source of inspired vision, as the feminine aspect of the Divine, as the begettress of the incarnate spirit, and as the fount of wisdom (Schuchard 2008, 307). The *Te Matrem* refers to “the four Zoa,” or ‘living beings’ who sing the Shekinah’s praises by night and day. In *Vala, or the Four Zoas*, Blake, according to Erdman, “sought to understand the ‘Four Mighty ones’ in the psychic alchemy of every man” (1954, 293). In *Jerusalem*, the sexually symbolic words, “They every one in their bright loins / Have a beautiful golden gate” (14.19–20; E.158), are affirmed by the accompanying illustration of a young woman enclosed in star-like petals above a semi-nude male (with androgynous characteristics) reclining under an arching rainbow (plate 14). Such images evoke the sexual union of the male with the female which reflects the redemptive union of earth and heaven, and a return to androgyny (Gibbons 1996, 90), paralleling the Gnostic belief that gender complementarity stabilises the whole of creation and precipitates transformation (Brakke 2010, 57). In this sense, the female hovering over the male figure represents the illumination bestowed by the indwelling Sophia, or Divine Wisdom (Van Den Broek 2006, 403).

However, the most controversial tenet of the Moravians, the one most at odds with the prevailing orthodoxies (but the one that is symbolically present in many of Blake’s feminine personifications) was their belief in a female Jesus, expressed in their adoration
of Christ’s body, which became an object of ritual and meditation. According to Aaron Spencer Fogleman, the concept of a female Jesus has a precedent in Gnostic theosophy as ‘Sophia’, the embodiment of saving grace, divine revelation and holy wisdom (2014, 83). Behmenism, too, with its emphasis on the feminine mediation of the Noble Virgin Sophia, as well as the prominence of the feminine principle in the esoteric traditions with which it was associated, greatly influenced not only radical dissenting religions, like the Moravians, the Shakers and certain Pietist ‘orders’, but also the Romantic movement in general. This influence resulted in an emphasis on the feminine emotional, or ‘affective’ powers in engendering both spiritual and creative advancement. For the Moravians, Christ took on the form of a male, but all his “attributes, qualities, and functions” were female (Fogleman 2014, 77), a belief that extended to portraying the side wound as female genitalia (ibid). Thus, the pierced side of Jesus was feminised, as was the Holy of Holies in the Temple of God (Schuchard 2008, 35). According to Bloom, the Holy of Holies was the ‘sacred centre’ of the Female Mysteries (2008, 941). Such images and concepts, with their focus on the feminine sexuality of Christ, revive a late Medieval literary and artistic tradition (suppressed after the Renaissance) of describing and portraying the side wound as a bedchamber, or as a honeycomb, as “sweet luscious fruit,” or as “the juice of the grape” (Steinberg 1983, 57, 374–75).

This idea of the sexually redemptive female is portrayed in an illustration Blake sketched for Vala in the 1790s (see Appendix, Fig. 3) depicting an angelic-looking woman standing naked in a star-like headpiece, displaying her vulva within which is a phallic-shaped form, and below her is a reclining man (also naked) with a baser, earthly appearance, who looks longingly out of the picture and is reaching towards the woman. The image reflects the idea of the uniting of the earthly with the heavenly, encapsulated in the Behmenist/Gnostic concept of achieving gender equity and balance in this life through
the return to androgynous unity, pictorially and sexually symbolised by the phallus within the vulva. In Blakean terminology, this state of unity, in which the male/female dynamics have reached blissful equilibrium, is called ‘Beulah’. In Milton, Blake states: “There is a place where Contrarieties are equally True / This Place is called Beulah. It is a pleasant lovely Shadow / Where no dispute can come” (E.129). A ‘Vision of Beulah’ is conveyed which, according to Bloom, presents Beulah as ‘organised Innocence’, or nature at its best and most imaginative (2008, 922). There is no progression through contraries because contraries have become united (ibid). In “Inscriptions in the Manuscript of The Four Zoas,” Blake states that “unorganised Innocence” is “an impossibility” in Beulah, for “Innocence dwells with Wisdom but never with ignorance” (93.1–2; E.697). The “veils of ignorance” in Vala are a limiting “cold web” which cover from “head to feet” (113.21; E.377), contrasting with the unifying ‘warmth’ of enlightened Innocence (symbolised by the character, Jerusalem), secure in the folds of liberating experience.

In Gnostic thought, Sophia embodies the unification of male and female energies and exemplifies the wisdom that can pierce the delusional veil and release life’s essential potentialities which, though woven from within, form the designs and progressions of actual existence (Chetwynd 1986, 36, 423). For Boehme, such “inward and outward worlds” reflect the “mortal and immortal essence” and are “set forth” in humanity as a “resemblance and similitude of the living heavenly essentiality” (The Signature of All Things, 1981, 35). In Jerusalem, Blake equates the female to “a golden Loom” (5.34; E.148) weaving together ( uniting) the inner and outer strands of experience that form the fabric of life (E.145–146, 153). The Hermetic ‘marriage’ clearly articulates this unity, for the alchemical elements of ‘mystical union’ require the balancing of masculine and feminine forces and manifest the illuminative importance of the feminine principle in achieving transcendence. Thus, in Blake’s Jerusalem, Los declares: “In Beulah the Female
lets down her beautiful Tabernacle / Which the Male enters magnificent through her Cherubim / And becomes One with her, mingling” (E.193). The esoteric traditions on which Blake drew emphasised that mystical knowledge could not be attained without the feminine, the hub of the transcendent process, the ‘Tabernacle’ for sexual and spiritual union, and the focal-point for the imparting of experiential knowledge.

The importance of the feminine principle was also a significant component of Enochian theosophy, a tradition portrayed in Blake’s Enochian illustrations. In 1774, the Ethiopian manuscripts of Enoch were brought to England by James Bruce, explorer and Ancient Mason. Blake’s Lambeth neighbour, the Swedenborgian J.A. Tulk, sent information about Bruce’s discovery to the New Magazine of Knowledge (October 1791, 421–24), describing the Book of Enoch as “Gnostic” and drawing attention to its main theme of angelic union with the “daughters of men” (cited in Schuchard 2008, 271–76). Blake’s Enochian illustrations show the centrality of the feminine principle to the mystical marriage. The adoration shown to her by angels and spirit-beings signifies not only their ‘oneness’ with her but also their acknowledgement of her divine equality with them (Bentley 1977, plates 140–41). It also signifies their sharing of secret wisdom with her—the ‘secret’, for Blake, being the divine unity that lies hidden behind all things, and the means of attaining it, which is through the doorway of sexual desire and fulfilment. The obtaining of secret knowledge resonates with the Garden of Eden story but, unlike the Biblical Eve, the feminine is held up as an object of reverential worship, not censure (Schuchard 2008, 272), resonating with Swedenborg’s affirmation that the ‘womb’ of woman has communication with heaven (1885–91, 460).

In both pictures, the woman’s similarity to Sophia is marked. Like her Gnostic counterpart, she is given esteem and veneration, she provides a link between the earthly and heavenly realms, she is central to the union of masculine and feminine energies, and
she encapsulates within herself natural and spiritual forces of illuminative knowledge. Sophianic characteristics are also indicated in the Ethiopian novella written by Blake’s friend George Cumberland, entitled *The Captive of the Castle of Sennaar: An African Tale* (1798). Blake was sent a copy of this novella, which he read (Schuchard 2008, 272). It tells of the island of the Sophis, who live according to nature, and who manifest the energy “whose office” it is “to create,” which they call the ‘Holy Energy’ of ‘Love’—reminiscent of Sophia’s divine loving energy, or potency (Cumberland 1991, 30).

Such ideas and sexual themes underscored many of the beliefs and practices of the Moravians. In 1749, Parliament recognised the Moravian Church as an episcopal ally of the Church of England (which may explain why William Blake was baptised at St. James’s Anglican Church, Piccadilly, in 1757). After 1760, when Zinzendorf died, the church underwent a retrenchment along more conservative and orthodox lines, even censoring many of its hymns and sermons. Nevertheless, in the privacy of their own homes and small gatherings, many Moravians continued to cherish and uphold their ‘uncensored’ faith. Such may have been the case in the Blake household where Catherine undertook the schooling of her children along Moravian lines, as had been advocated by Zinzendorf, who had upheld the efficacy of women as teachers and instructors (Schuchard 2008, 118). Indeed, the theosophical works of the French mystic, Madame de la Mothe-Guyon—adored by Blake in his later life—had often been discussed at Fetter Lane meetings (131).

Moravians also continued to help and assist one another in the areas of work, culture and education, and valued their friendships and contacts with non-Moravians who shared similar interests and beliefs. Blake’s parents enrolled him at Henry Pars’ Drawing School (1767–1772), so that he could develop his artistic talents in a free-minded atmosphere. As an engraving student at the Royal Academy (1779–1780), Blake befriended the sculptor John Flaxman, the painter Thomas Stothard, and the engraver
William Sharpe, all of whom were like-minded in their radical views and interest in theosophy.

IV. The Theosophy of Desire: Blake and Swedenborg

At the same time as the Moravian Church was instigating a change of emphasis, Swedenborg introduced his ‘reformist’ theology of ‘Conjugal Love’ which, exoterically, could be interpreted as supporting sexual intimacy within the ambit of conventional marital ties. However, esoterically, it could be indicating the ‘mystical marriage’ engendered by the joining of a man and a woman (not necessarily within the bonds of wedlock) in the rites and techniques of sacred sexuality. Swedenborg had read Nicholas Venette’s *Mysteries of Conjugal love, or, the Pleasure of the Marriage Bed Considered* (1754) in which, through the divine expression of ‘conjugal’ sexuality, Eros is presented as nature’s ‘occult Wisdom’ (Porter 1995, 72). Swedenborg extended the delights of conjugal love into the heavenly realms, where he believed it reached its most sublime form. He viewed chastity, not as abstinence from sexual activity, but as a state of oneness resulting from the equal and reciprocal interchange of love between sexual partners, an inner quality of being that both flows from and is created by this love (Lines 2002, 31–32). He believed that erotic love contained within it the flowers of spiritual love, the ‘true’ marriage of masculine and feminine elements. Thus, those joined legally in a contract of marriage are not necessarily joined in the delights of conjugal love (ibid). Blake, like Swedenborg, held that there can be no true conjugal love unless the sexual consorts are in a state of ‘spiritual marriage’ merged with the “Enjoyment” that is the “life of love” (Swedenborg 1978, 523–51). Blake viewed ‘Self Love’ (a Swedenborgian term) as an obstacle to true conjugal happiness: “Go see … the ties of marriage love. thou Scarce Shall find but Self love Stands Between” (95–97; E.448). Swedenborg wrote of the hell that is wrought by “the love of
self” and the hell of those who “are in the pride of their own intelligence” (Apocalypse Revealed 1.113). For Blake, self-love blocked the attainment of true vision and he likened it to “A Creeping Skeleton / With lamplike eyes watching around the frozen marriage bed” (7.21–22; E.50).

Like Zinzendorf, Emmanuel Swedenborg was familiar with Hermetic, Kabbalistic and Behmenist traditions and his writings incorporated Gnostic-derived concepts like the androgyny of God, and the original ‘man’ existing as a unity of male and female (Hirst 1964, 95, 205). Swedenborg associated with the Moravian Brethren in London and had affiliations with the congregation at Fetter Lane, and his writings were printed and distributed by Moravian publishers and booksellers (Schuchard 2008, 8, 20, 55). Born in Stockholm in 1688, Swedenborg made his first visit to England in 1710, where he read English publications of esoteric works, such as John Norris’s The Theory and Regulation of Love (1688), in which Norris refers to a letter he sent to his friend, Henry More, at Cambridge (who, as mentioned in the introduction, first coined the term ‘Gnosticism’), questioning the orthodox Christian view that sexuality was sinful. In reply, More directed Norris to read the mystical writings where he would find that sensual pleasures are not forbidden in the ‘Paradise of God’ (171, 100). Norris followed More’s advice and concluded that sexuality was a ‘Tree’ planted by God and therefore could not be evil (100). Thus, if Eve took the fruit of such a tree and gave it to Adam, then she could not be ‘sinful’ either, a view embraced by Gnosticism and other esoteric traditions that honoured the feminine principle (Rasimus 2007, 432).

Swedenborg’s travels and his wide-ranging esoteric studies (as well as his interest in Moravian theosophy) enabled him to work out and spread his beliefs. His voluminous works were, over time, translated into English and became available to a wider readership. In 1789, his followers (now named Swedenborgians), some of whom had founded the New
Jerusalem Church, held their first General Conference, which Blake attended, in London (Erdman 1954, 121, 127). The five-day Conference read aloud passages from Swedenborg’s works and discussed his teachings (ibid). Blake, at about this time, had been reading the 1788 translation of Swedenborg’s *The Wisdom of Angels Concerning Divine Love and Divine Wisdom* (1763) and his marginal comments reveal that it affirmed certain ideas that he himself had been formulating, but in different terms (ibid). For instance, Swedenborg’s “Spiritual idea” is Blake’s “Poetic idea,” and Swedenborg’s “Negation” that “constitutes Hell” is for Blake, not the negation of divinity per se, but the negation of “Poetic Genius” which he viewed as a divine manifestation (Marg. to *Divine Love* 12–13.737–38). However, he is in accord with Swedenborg’s equating of love with life and he also shared Swedenborg’s emphasis on the unity of the divine in ‘One Divine Humanity’ (Erdman 1954, 128), for Blake believed that the unity of heaven unites humanity (*Albion*) into the ‘Divine Body’ (Symons 1904, 255).

Aspects of Swedenborg’s philosophy influenced Blake’s thinking during the creativity of his younger days, especially from 1784 to 1788, and then from 1789 (his thirty-first year) to 1791 or 1793 (Erdman 1954, 247–48). However, elements of Swedenborg continued to appear in subsequent works, such as the sense of touch, which, in *Vala, or the Four Zoas*, is symbolised by the figure of Tharmas (Magno 1987, 158) who represents the restoring of the sensual body to its spiritual dignity. Swedenborg believed that sexual joy was mirrored in heaven as well as on earth, that conjugal love was the gateway to eternity, and that the feminine principle of love was the ‘fire’ that kindled light in the male: “Love then is the heat of man’s life, or his vital heat. The heat of the blood, and its redness also, is from no other source. The fire” (1794, 522). This notion is reflected in the non-canonical saying of Jesus (who, in later non-Biblical gospels, takes on many
attributes of the Sophia) in the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas: “He who is near unto me is near unto the fire” (Thomas 82).

In The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (1790–1793), Blake alludes to the climactic moment of vision by showing a woman giving birth to an embracing couple who soar into flaming clouds. In the midst of the clouds is a hovering celestial female, declaring: “As a new heaven is begun, … Now is the dominion of Edom, & the return of Adam into Paradise” (3.3–4; E.34), Edom being the place where rules, including sexual norms, are reversed and the “unbridled flow of life liberates … because it is not subject to any law” (Scholem 1971, 138). The writings of Swedenborg, described in the text as “linen clothes folded up” (3.3; E.34) show that Blake was starting to move beyond Swedenborg into his own visionary opus of liberated sexuality and revolutionary freedom, represented by “the dominion of Edom” which, along with Adam’s return to paradise, symbolised, for Blake, the transformation of hell into heaven (Scholem 1971, 138).

The Marriage of Heaven and Hell addresses the nature and resolution of contraries (Bloom 2008, 896), particularly the opposition between true and false prophecy (Wittreich 1973, 30). Blake sought to transmit by artistic means a ‘new age’ of visionary revelation and his works progressively manifest this aim (McGann 1973, 8). In The Apocalypse Revealed (1766), Swedenborg wrote that the arcana concealed within the revelatory “Word” could only be disclosed by “the spiritual sense” (1.113). According to Wittreich, Swedenborg “tried to reduce the spiritual sense” to “corporeal understanding” (which, for Blake, ran the risk of turning true religion into orthodoxy), whereas Blake “preserves the visionary dimension of prophecy” (1973, 30). Nevertheless, Wittreich states that Swedenborg “articulated conceptions of prophecy compatible with Blake’s own,” and that Blake “took his prophetic stance … incidentally” from Swedenborg and “centrally” from Milton (30–31). This stance can be seen (but reworked and re-expressed) in Marriage and
later, to a much greater degree, in Vala and Jerusalem, elements of which are an “imaginative re-casting of Revelation” (31).

The theosophy of ‘desire’ contained within Swedenborgian ideas and beliefs is observable in many of Blake’s themes and concepts but infused with his own voice and meanings. It was a theosophy that re-envisioned the masculine Trinity as a ‘Quaternity’, thereby restoring the feminine principle to the Godhead, a restoration expressed metaphorically in Blake’s “arrows of desire” which are associated with the rebuilding of Jerusalem, a feminine concept that I will elaborate in the next chapter. The theosophy of desire included the practice of erotic meditations on the Sephiroth and their corresponding ‘angels’ and emanations (Schuchard 2008, 204). Blake would later draw on the Kabbalistic series of angelic names found in the works of Cornelius Agrippa (1486–1535) with which he was familiar (Erdman 1954, 137–38), and in his annotations to Swedenborg’s The Wisdom of Angels Concerning Heaven and Hell (1788) he revealed his desire for the ‘angelised’ effects of spiritual vision and revelatory exaltation (E.602–609). In 1788, Blake wrote: “The desire of Man being Infinite, the possession is Infinite and himself Infinite” (7.1; E.3). In All Religions are One (1788), he amalgamated Swedenborg’s ‘Divine Influx’ with his concept of ‘the Poetic Genius’ and also with the human form, making a link between the divine, the visionary imagination and the body. He also read and annotated Johann Caspar Lavater’s Aphorisms on Man (1788)—and in response to Lavater’s maxim that the most religious are those “who in the smallest given time can enjoy most of what [they] will never repent” wrote: “True Christian Philosophy” (366; E.591). For Blake, ‘hell’ was the wearied possession of unfulfilled desire (ibid). Conversely, the theosophy of desire was one of liberation and emancipation and became an essential part of his artistic philosophy.
V. Conclusion: Blake’s Alternative Circles

This exposition of Blake’s background and religio-philosophical views reveals how Blake reshaped the various sources that influenced him into his own mythology and symbolism. Clarke Garrett states that the commonly thought of Enlightenment as “a coherent body of secular ideas and attitudes” was complemented by “the profound religious concerns of many men and movements that together give the century its tremendous vitality” (1984, 67). He also observes that eighteenth-century thinkers pursued enlightenment in “varied and unlikely places (ibid). While Blake may seem like an atypical case, the range of sources that influenced his works demonstrate the diverse presence of ideas and beliefs during the eighteenth century that were available to interested readers and thinkers. The belief in a “spiritual millennium” for those like Blake meant that theological traditions became part of the “widely held concerns for social improvement through human effort,” and movements like the Moravians and Swedenborgians exemplified this concern (67–68).

Operating with what Peter Vogt calls a “global vision,” the Moravians established themselves across Europe, North and South America and Africa, and were key players in the evangelical awakenings of the 1740s (2006, 7). Swedenborg, after his death in 1772, garnered considerable interest in his ideas and writings, especially in England (Garrett 1984, 68). The concepts and imagery disseminated by these movements reflect a tradition of esotericism with which Romantic writers like Coleridge and Blake engaged in their reworkings of certain concepts. The following chapter examines Blake’s reformulation, particularly in relation to the feminine, as articulated in two of his most difficult works, *Vala* and *Jerusalem*. Blake’s esoteric views shed light on these complex poems, revealing them as highly intimate and yet universal statements on human desire for spiritual unity.
Chapter Three
Sacred Sexuality and the Elevation of the Female
In Blake’s *Vala* and *Jerusalem*

Blake sought to create a personal mythology wherein his views about life, spirituality and the human condition could be expressed and enacted. The themes of male/female reintegretion, gender equality, the unifying of contraries (both inwardly and outwardly), and the feminine as an illuminator, essential to the whole image of ‘man’, recur throughout his corpus. However, it is in his epic poems, *Vala, or The Four Zoas* and *Jerusalem*, that Blake’s mythological constructs and characterisations come to fruition. *Jerusalem* is his final and longest work and completes many of the ideas and themes present in *Vala*. Blake’s utilisation of both esoteric concepts and dissenting beliefs enable his often complicated representations of gender to be better understood. This chapter examines Blake’s elevation of the feminine within the contexts of sacred sexuality and spiritual liberation. I will include overviews of critical perspectives on both *Vala* and *Jerusalem* before moving into in-depth analyses of the texts. I will also trace the progression of Blake’s sexual ideas and imagery in examples, taken from some of his earlier works, which inform his later prophesies.

I. Sexuality and Esoteric Themes in Blake’s Early Works

The presence of both esoteric and non-conformist modes of thought, particularly regarding sexuality, can be seen as early as Blake’s *Poetical Sketches* (1783), which display strong Moravian and Swedenborgian undertones in their depictions of the theosophy of desire. Both the Moravians and the Swedenborgians linked desire with the attainment of unity, believing that the passions were not to be scorned or repudiated. Likewise, in Blake’s
Poetical Sketches, poems like “To Spring” and “To Summer” evoke the passionate sensuality of the theosophy of desire and extol the centrality of the female in the process of consummatory union. Nelson Hilton notes that Blake uses phrases containing sexual symbolism and correspondences historically associated with the female, such as “O thou with dewy locks … scatter thy pearls / Upon our love-sick land” (“To Spring”). In “To Summer,” Hilton suggests that the luscious valleys evoke the etymology, “Vulva, as it were vallis, a valley,” and that they express the symbolism of consummatory fulfilment: “Throw thy / Silk draperies off, and rush into the stream: / Our vallies love the Summer in his pride” (E.408–10). In “To Autumn,” feminine sexual imagery is once more interwoven with Blake’s pictorial language: “Sing now the lusty song of fruits and flowers. / The narrow bud opens her beauties to / The sun, and love runs in her thrilling veins” (E.413).

In “To the Evening Star,” further sexual allusions to the female are indicated in the fair angel who is called upon to “Smile upon our evening bed” and to “Smile upon our loves”—and in the visionary song, “To Morning,” the dreamer reaches the peak of all that has gone before and beholds the beautiful maiden “beaming with heavn’ly light” and speaking with “the voice of Heaven” (E.416).

According to Bloom, the sketches display an “inwardness … which shadow[s] forth the most original aspects of his later symbology” (2008, 967). The bliss and freedom of sexual fulfilment is intimately expressed in the Poetical Sketches, but Blake also equated sexual freedom with political and religious freedom, declaring that “The Roman pride is a sword of steel / Glory and Victory a Phallic Whip” (E.811). In The French Revolution (1791), political, religious and sexual tyranny are interrelated: “In the den nam’d religion, a loathsome sick woman bound down … / She refused to be whore to the Minister, and with a knife smote him” (35, 37; E.287). Blake considered the laws of orthodox hegemony to be “as destructive to true spiritual life as the legalistic tyranny of
the Old Testament Commandments” (Mee 1992, 21). In his depiction of Urizen, Blake related the “ten commands” to the “stony law” of Urizen’s “net” which perverts “the fiery joy” of freedom (8.3; E.54). For Blake, such freedom pertained to both men and women. Blake believed that earthly harmony engenders heavenly harmony (Erdman 1969, 10), a belief that Blake affirmed to Crabb Robinson (and which he shared with the Moravians and Swedenborgians, as well as with the esoteric traditions that influenced them): “We are all coexistent with God—members of the Divine Body” (Crabb Robinson 1872, 2.25).

Thus, Blake’s writings simultaneously depict the negative effects of external conditioning and repressive systems upon the individual and society, and the positive effects that are the result of liberation from such conditioning and systems. For instance, Blake’s *The Book of Thel* (1789) has been interpreted by critics like Anne Mellor and Brian Wilkie as an allegorical and symbolic rendition of denied sexuality and experience on the part of its main protagonist, Thel.¹ I argue that rather than denying the world of experience Thel fully embraces her experience of the physical world by not conforming to orthodox gendered behaviours and roles. Thel, like the Gnostic Sophia, acts as a spiritual intermediary, and in so doing subverts traditional conceptions of the feminine and exposes the follies perpetrated by patriarchal powers and prescribed conventional values. Her flight back to the ‘Vales of Har’ is not a cowardly running away from the ‘voice’ of the grave—a symbol of bodily death, violation and experience—but a rejection of sexual exploitation and subjugation. It is a return to her essential being—her Sophianic ‘wholeness’ and completeness. The fear Thel experiences instigates her awakening as it drives her toward her own inner ‘Sophia,’ spurring her desire to find the self-liberating knowledge concealed within her circumstances and experiences. The final plate of *Thel* seems to support this interpretation. The illustration shows two boys and a girl riding a serpent, said by Morris

¹ See Mellor, “Blake’s Portrayal of Women” (1982–83), and Wilkie, *Blake’s Thel and Oothoon* (1990), Victoria, Canada: University of Victoria.
Eaves, Robert N. Essick and Joseph Viscomi to represent experience, which may turn on the children at any moment (1993, 85); (see Appendix, Fig. 4). But the contentedness and security of the children belies such an interpretation. This image resonates with Boehme’s depiction of Sophia as one who rides and transcends the beast of materiality: “The Bride of the Beast saith: I am your God set me upon you, ride on how you will” (Threefold Life, 1764, 3.77). Thus, Thel’s likeness to Sophia in this image suggests that it is she who is not only carried by the serpent but also confidently commands the reigns. The serpent in Blake’s image may also denote the serpent of the Tree of Knowledge from Genesis, which, in Gnostic thinking, brought Gnosis to humanity. By portraying the serpent as being part of the transcendent process, Blake reverses the negative connotations ascribed to the Serpent of Eden by the established church, and, as Cantor notes, also ‘corrects’ Milton’s Paradise Lost (Cantor 1984, 77).

Blake’s image illustrates the unity that results from the triumphant ‘ascendancy’ of the Sophianic spirit. This ascendancy, which comes to its fullest expression in his later works, signifies the movement from death (separation) to life (integration), a resurrective awakening that Blake consistently associates with the feminine principle. In Vala, or the Four Zoas, the need for reunification with the feminine powers is a central and persistent theme; in Jerusalem, the divided Albion can attain wholeness only by reuniting with his female counterpart.

II. The Sophianic Female in Vala and Jerusalem

Ambitious in their message and scope, and prophetic in their tone and vision, Vala and Jerusalem are cogent representatives of Blake’s epic poetry. According to Curran and Wittreich, Blake’s epics concern “the split between the self and its emanation, between one’s actuality and potentiality” (1973, xiv–xv). They also engage with the “inter-acting
contraries” of phenomenal existence and the need to redress the “self-defeating dialectic” that causes “a materialistic culture to disintegrate” (ibid). The epics strive towards the restoration of the ‘Divine Vision’, which is the recovery of humanity’s Emanation, Jerusalem (the image of ‘infinite desire’), and the attainment of the original state of blessedness (or unity of vision)—for “to find the world is to find oneself” (McGann 1973, 6). Thus, when it is said in Vala that no visions are seen “in the darksom air,” this is countered by the exhortation to turn the eyes inward “and there behold the Lamb of God” (28.17; E.318, 87.43; E.369). Blake’s Lamb of God is intimately related to attributes of the rising female figure of Jerusalem (who appears at the end of both Vala and Jerusalem). She is conceptualised not only as a woman but also as a city for, in the words of Bloom, Jerusalem is “where one lives and what one loves” (Bloom 2008, 934). The insistence upon the possession of the Divine Vision is a core feature of Blake’s philosophy (McGann 1973, 7).

Jerusalem is a “consolidation or continuation” of Vala (Wittreich 1973, 37). The same characters appear in each work. In Vala, the main players are Vala, Enitharmon, Los, Enion, Tharmas and Luvah. In Jerusalem, the figures of Albion and his Emanation, Jerusalem (who represent the male and female aspects of humanity), the nature goddess, Vala, the visionary, Los, and Jesus, the counterpart of Jerusalem, play major roles. Portions of Vala are present in Jerusalem. The former depicts the effects of a disunited human consciousness in which the feminine and masculine principles are unintegrated and at odds with each other, whilst the latter presents a vision of human consciousness in a post-apocalyptic universe in which the different aspects of humanity are brought together through the unifying and illuminating efforts of the eponymous female protagonists.

In both Vala and Jerusalem, darkness is transmuted (or ‘woven’) into light via the mediatory feminine principle (Wittreich 1973, 39). The female figures weave the “fibres of
love” and “soft affections” (86.40; E.245, 6.28; E.100) in “bright Cathedron’s golden Dome” (26.32, 35–36; E.123), ‘Cathedron’ possibly being derived from Blake’s wife’s name (Erdman 1982, 962) and linking the transcendent with everyday life. The esoteric aim of sexuality practiced as a sacred rite is to transmute carnal sexuality into mystical-erotic union. In sacred sexuality, the female freely gives of her body just as Christ’s body was freely given. She is the doorway to eternity. In Gnostic terms, Sophia, as the feminine personification of the divine in the earth, is embodied in the female form—so to communicate with the female in sacred sexual rites is to communicate with Sophia. This communication takes place within the hieros gamos, or ‘sacred marriage’, called ‘Beulah’ by Blake which, in Hebrew, means ‘married’ or ‘married land’ (Damon 1973, 42), and is Blake’s code for sacred sexual union. An example of the hieros gamos in Vala is the reuniting of Los with Enitharmon: “Their wings joined in the Zenith over head / Such a Vision of All Beulah hovering over the Sleeper … / … Then Los said I behold the Divine Vision thro the broken Gates … / And Enitharmon said I see the Lamb of God upon Mount Zion / Wondring with love & Awe they felt the divine hand upon them” (100.9–10, 15, 17–18; E.372). The “broken Gates” and their association with Enitharmon, who sees “the Lamb of God,” here associated with feminine love, are suggestive of the redemptive grace of the ‘female Jesus’, and the sacramental rending of the veil of the Holy of Holies which opens the way to the Divine Presence.

III. *Vala*: An Overview

Critical reception of *Vala* has been mixed if not entirely negative, with the poem being attributed to Blake’s volatile imagination, or inability to find a printed form suited to the text. In *Fearful Symmetry* (1947), Northrop Frye judges the work “the greatest abortive masterpiece in English literature” (2004, 269). In *A Prophet Against Empire*, David
Erdman dismisses the poem, calling it “as mad as the effort to play croquet in Wonderland with living mallets and balls” (1954, 294). G.E. Bentley states that “it is possible but unlikely” that as a first draft the *Vala* was a “great poem, but the present manuscript is a tantalising and tragic failure” (1963, 165). Despite its difficulties, the text’s interest and strengths lie in its relationship to heterodox traditions and the maturation of Blake’s mythological concepts and structure. Kathleen Raine’s two volume work, *Blake and Tradition* (1964) provided a detailed exploration of Blake’s major works in relation to religious and occult beliefs. Raine examines *Vala* as evidence of Blake’s familiarity with Hermetic tradition, stating that the characters, Tharmas, Enion and Vala, reflect the gendered configuration of elements in Hermeticism wherein the “superior is masculine and eternal, the inferior is feminine and mortal” (276). Raine reads Tharmas as the ‘Eternal Man’ and Enion and Vala as representation of matter and the body, but her interpretation does not take into account the creative role of the feminine in Hermetic tradition. The Hermetic philosophies of Agrippa and Paracelsus depict the feminine as a fundamental force in the creative process, a force that is even prior to the masculine in the order of creation, being the ‘tree’ that bears the fruit of ‘man’ (in contrast to Genesis where Eve is secondary, coming out of Adam’s rib). Moreover, Agrippa states that the feminine brings light and rationality to creation in a “beam,” or “ray” of Divinity (13). In Boehme’s Gnostic-Hermetic Christianity, the feminine is also connected with light, the Noble Virgin Sophia representing the knowledge of God. In Blake, these associations come into play in characters like Jerusalem, Thel and Ahania, and in images such as Enitharmon’s crystal house connoting the refracting of light to achieve new perception. Raine’s study is one of the first extensive explorations of Blake’s esoteric sources. However, her analysis of *Vala* tends to follow the man/culture, woman/nature binary without acknowledging the nuances and the different roles and guises of the feminine in esoteric tradition.
Since the 1970s, there have been relatively few book-length studies dedicated to Blake’s epic poem. In contrast to Raine’s ‘history of ideas’ focus, Brian Wilkie and Mary Lynn Johnson presented the first in-depth exploration of the poem’s text in *Blake’s Four Zoas: The Design of a Dream* (1978), stating that *Vala* creates problems for the reader in that it “seems to exist without a context” (2). This view of *Vala* is followed through in a chapter by chapter commentary of each Night of the poem. Wilkie and Johnson’s reading focuses on the poem itself with passing references to myth, contemporary history, Romanticism at large and Blake’s wider body of work, where applicable. The aim of the book is to provide, in the authors’ words, “what readers of the *Zoas* need most” which is “not the guidance of authority but the communal reinforcement of their insights and help in clarifying them” (3). This approach provides much needed attention to plot points and detail which facilitates the reader’s understanding. However, the authors’ reading of the poem with minimal reference to external sources can have the opposite effect of exacerbating difficult parts of the poem that may rely on, or be informed by, various traditions and contexts. The complex nature of Blake’s beliefs are not explored and the function of transcendence and divine agency in the poem is not elucidated but summarised only in a cursory comment: “Blake . . . allowed a hope to survive that somehow, perhaps through some loophole of events in the world, the human community would eventually be renovated. That would be a bonus, however—a something added after the true kingdom of God which is within has been sought and found” (241). The study aimed to “fundamentally reinforce the consensus of Blakeans” that a direct response to the text was of primary importance (viii).

But such a view disregards the considerable significance of heterodox ideas and historical contexts on Blake’s corpus explored by critics like Raine and E.P. Thompson. Blake did not engrave *Vala* and the work exists in a single manuscript revised by him.
during the period 1797 to 1807, wherein significant changes occurred in his symbolism, mythology and beliefs. Scholars like Steve Clark, David Worrall, Jackie DiSalvo, G.A. Rosso and Christopher Z. Hobson have termed this “the thesis of fracture.”\textsuperscript{2} As such, \textit{Vala} has been treated as a stepping stone between the more politically overt Lambeth prophecies and the ‘Christianised’, more obscure and cryptic \textit{Milton} and \textit{Jerusalem}. The above approaches have spawned tendencies among scholars to focus either on the poem’s textual content and minute particulars of the \textit{Vala} manuscript, or on the wider contemporary history of Blake’s time and its manifestation within the themes and imagery of the poem. The former tendency is exemplified by Paul Mann and Robert N. Essick who speculate that \textit{Vala} was Blake’s attempt to create a “more accessible” and “reproducible” format than illuminated printing (Mann 1986, 204). Based on the manuscript’s multiple revisions, Mann and Essick theorise that Blake may have planned to publish the text in intaglio format (as in the late Lambeth books, \textit{The Book of Ahania} and \textit{The Book of Los}), and later in relief printing or letterpress complimented by intaglio work or etchings (as in Blake’s \textit{Night Thoughts} or Hayley’s \textit{Ballads}). Mann and Essick’s approach suggests that Blake held the unilluminated text of \textit{Vala} a failure and that he strove for some ideal state of production for the poem.

The latter critical tendency is evident in Andrew Lincoln’s \textit{Spiritual History: A Reading of William Blake’s Vala, or The Four Zoas} (1995) which focuses on the poem’s relationship to history. Lincoln surmises that a previous emphasis on the text’s ‘disorder’ (possibly stemming from Blake’s revisions) and its psychological aspects has obscured our understanding of the work. Lincoln views the evolution of the text as organic, with some incompatibility entering in the last stage of revision. He reads the poem as aligning itself with “a Christian tradition that places all human experience within a providential

\textsuperscript{2} For further reading into the term “the thesis of fracture,” and the multitude of contexts that have given rise to this term, see Clark and Worrall’s \textit{Historicizing Blake} (1994) and \textit{Blake, Politics, and History} (1998), edited by DiSalvo, Rosso and Hobson.
framework, but it is also influenced by an Enlightenment tradition that seeks to liberate history from this framework” (1). He argues that instead of promoting one of these traditions, Blake ironically employs them to destabilise each other through a narrative that develops from “an ‘ideal’ cosmic harmony … to a materialistic and scientific order” (190). The poem thus represents the tension between sceptical and visionary impulses, with a clearer focus on the former impulse. Lincoln’s study explodes the view of Blake’s work on the Vala manuscript as desultory, but his focus on mainstream Christianity and Enlightenment thought leaves little leeway for the heterodox views and esoteric sources that inform the poem’s narrative.

In Blake’s Critique of Transcendence: Love, Jealousy, and the Subline in The Four Zoas (2000), Peter Otto brings together critical approaches to the text, by concerning himself with the manuscript in its present state in relation to ontological and eschatological arguments. Otto argues against the notion of Vala as a failure, stating that “when Blake finally stopped working on the manuscript he believed that the form taken by the work was the only one the subject matter could assume,” a form that “embodies the poem’s insights about the nature of the fallen world and of fallen perception” (144). Otto suggests that the poem “directs us to a human rather than transcendent reality,” a reality that is “a dismembered communal form (Albion), rather than a single faculty” (33), for instance, God or the Romantic imagination. Therefore, the poem’s readers are led to “embrace the conflicting voices and narratives of The Four Zoas” as the difficulty in reading the poem “details the shape of the fallen world” (33). By doing so, one can celebrate “the human divine,” in which “the self embraces the body, which for the religious sublime is an object of disgust” (34).

I agree by and large with Otto’s opinion that the material aspects of the text relate to the theological themes and concerns of the poem. Building on this idea, I wish to add
that Blake’s revision of the work indicates the growth of his ideas into the mature flowering of a mythological structure which becomes clear when viewed through the lens of Gnosticism and esoteric tradition. Blake was aware of Gnostic personifications and cosmology from various sources, including Bishop Irenaeus’s account of *The Secret Book*, and his mythological structure resembles Irenaeus’s arrangement of aeonic emanations, composed of four ‘luminaries’, or key aeons. In *The Secret Book*, the four luminaries, Harmozel, Oroiael, Daneithai and Eleleth, spawn from the angelic ‘Self-Originate’, so-called because it is the ‘begotten’ of the Invisible Spirit, and is thus the direct offspring of the original deity, rather than an indirect emanation (Brakke 2010, 55). This entity is established as a ‘custodian’ of the entirety and is referred to in *The Secret Book* as a kind of Christ figure, who challenges the authority of Ialdaboath (ibid). The Self-Originate functions as a pivot, or anchor, extending from the Invisible Spirit to the four luminaries who, in turn, act as key aeons, providing a focal structure for the subsequent emanations, ending in Sophia (ibid). Like Blake’s four Zoas, these luminaries also provide “dwelling places” for the divine archetypes of “ideal humanity, which are transcendent versions of human beings” (Brakke 2010, 56). The pairing of male/female aeons and the celebration of androgyny in the form of the Anthropos demonstrates a gender complementarity which brings about stability (57), an idea fundamental to Gnostic thinking, and reiterated in Blake’s mythology. As perfect, unmaterialised emanations of the Invisible Spirit, the paired aeons possess a femininity united with a masculinity that is purportedly beyond gender, a notion which equalises the principles of male and female and subverts the orthodox Christian conception of God as male.

The concept of gender (and gender complementarity) is central to Blakean, as well as Gnostic, mythology. However, there is a dearth of feminist criticism dealing specifically with *Vala* and its representations of the feminine. Susan Fox states that Blake depicts the
feminine “as inferior and dependent (or, in the case of Jerusalem, superior and dependent),
or as unnaturally and disastrously dominant” (1977, 507). Fox asserts that, in Blake,
women “come to represent weakness (that frailty best seen in the precariously limited
‘emanative’ state Beulah) and power-hunger (‘Female Will’, the corrupting lust for
dominance identified with women)” (ibid). Likewise, Mellor writes of Vala that “attempts
to read Blake’s Eden and the fourfold Man as genuinely androgynous are belied by
Blake’s consistently sexist portrayal of women” (1982–83, 148). For Mellor, the imagery
Blake employs throughout his corpus depicts women as “either passively dependent on
men, or as aggressive and evil” (ibid). As such, Mellor argues that Blake’s “theoretical
commitment to androgyny” in the prophetic works of Vala and Jerusalem is “undermined
by his habitual equation of the female with the subordinate or the perversely dominant”
(ibid).

These interpretations do not consider the ways in which male characters in Vala are
rendered incomplete or ineffectual without their female counterparts. For example, Los is
unable to enter Beulah or to perceive eternity while separated from Enitharmon, and
Urizen’s power is diminished without Ahania. Indeed, feminist critics have also
highlighted the critique of patriarchy and potential for agency in Blake’s prophetic works.
In her 1983 article, “Ways of Their Own: The Emanations of Blake’s Vala, or The Four
Zoas,” Judith Lee examines Blake’s female Emanations in Vala in relation to
Wollstonecraft’s Vindication, stating that both Blake and Wollstonecraft “recognized
sexual relationships to be, at a psychological level, ever symbiotic: the perceptions of one
partner prompt behaviour that elicits complementary behaviour—and, inevitably, new
perceptions—on the part of the other” (133). According to Lee, the notion of social change
as a mutual evolution forms the basis for Blake’s regenerative myth in Vala. Both the
Emanations and the Zoas function as “symbols that represent the dynamics of
psychological change and as characters who reflect contemporary social attitudes” (ibid). Lee points out Blake’s revision of Night VII, which “changes the poem from a drama of the fall of ‘Man’ through the seduction of ‘Woman’ to a drama of the fall of the ‘Androgyne’ through the disintegration of both the male and female powers” (133). In the interactions between Los and Enitharmon in Night VIII, Blake illustrates the need for both men and women to individually reform themselves. Thus, Blake’s androgynous ideal connotes a “being—and a relationship—in which contraries exist productively in dynamic tension” (ibid).

For Mary-Kelly Persyn, Blake’s gender representation in Vala is less about mutual reform and more about revealing the workings of patriarchy. Persyn states that “the key question is not whether Blake’s portrayal of women plays on negative images of the female gender, for it unquestionably does” (1999, 54). Instead, for Persyn, Blake’s use of negative depictions of femininity “consciously exposes the consequences of patriarchal constriction of women’s life possibilities and choices” (ibid). In this regard, Blake echoes Mary Wollstonecraft. However, Persyn also writes that Blake’s poetry “rarely provides positive images of female characters. Thus, as Blake’s critics have long recognized, his treatment of the female is ambiguous, tortured, and sometimes even seemingly self-contradictory” (ibid).

Continuing in this vein, Claire Colebrook discusses Blake’s representation of sexual difference. Her article, “Blake and Feminism: Romanticism and the Question of the Other” (2000), focuses on the possibilities of redemption in Blake’s gender constructs. Colebrook writes that Blake “clearly rejects the Miltonic conception of gender whereby the feminine is the same as the masculine in kind and differs only in degree” (6). In contrast to many earlier feminist analyses of Blake, “Blake stresses the significance of gender alterity” in Vala (ibid). While the apotheosis of gender unity can be thought of as
an “annihilation of the feminine” it can also be seen, according to Colebrook, as “a celebration of sexual difference. Determining whether the feminine is either complementary or subsidiary at the conclusion of Blake’s epics would therefore be central to the feminist critique of romantic narcissism as it relates to Blake” (ibid). The key point of Colebrook’s argument is the notion that Blake depicts the feminine as more than just a component of a completed masculine subject. Rather, redemption in Blake is achieved “through the recognition of two terms that are essentially related, yet never fully unified or integrated” (6). Colebrook identifies what she calls a “double movement in Blake” in which sexual difference is simultaneously a symbol and symptom of an alienated state, a division that is both consequence of the fall from eternal unity, as well as the means for redemption (7).

Building on these readings, I believe that Blake’s prophecies depict humanity’s ‘fall’, not as an act of disobedience, designated thereafter as ‘the fall into sin’, but as a state of physical, emotional, intellectual and sexual division wherein the male and female principles no longer exist as one but have become opposed. *Vala, or The Four Zoas* charts the process of humanity’s creation and descent into dualism. The depictions of dualism are the very means by which Blake’s works challenge the binarism of gender, established religion and eighteenth-century thinking. However, I also argue that the subversive elements of the text are brought into sharper relief when taking into account Blake’s engagement with Gnosticism, a theosophy in which dualism, and the resolution of dualism, are core themes. In his mythology, Blake devised a fourfold system of divine elements, the Four Zoas. These elements are Tharmas, Urizen, Luvah, and Urthona (also called Los). The Zoas and their female counterparts represent the different cognitive faculties that make up the consciousness of Albion (a manifestation of the union between humanity and the divine). Having separated from the divine whole, they divide into the
four base elements that constitute the human being—Urizen (reason), Los (imagination), Luvah (the passions), and Tharmas (sensory perception), with paired Emanations being Ahania (wisdom, coupled with reason), Vala—otherwise known as the Shadowy Female—(nature and sensuality, coupled with emotion), Enitharmon (music and creativity, coupled with imagination), and Enion (earth mother, sexual desire, coupled with the sensory body). As a fragmented representation of ideal humanity, Albion not only equates to Adam, but also represents the collective consciousness of men and women in England, which must be awoken and freed from the limitations of divisive institutional, relational and philosophical constructs.

Thus, in Vala, Blake portrays both sexual oppression and sexual liberation. Sexual oppression is seen in the symbolism of Vala exerting domination over Albion, in the female binding of male sexuality, and in Urizen’s dream of impotent power wielded without his female counterpart (Magno 1987, 47–49, 83–84). Blake portrays a riven universe unredeemed by the restorative and visionary experience of uninhibited and freely-given sexuality, a world where love is unable to operate, a place of Enion’s “panting in sobs” (Magno 1987, 158). It is not surprising, then, that Tharmas (the sense of touch) mournfully cries out: “O fool to lose my sweetest bliss / Where art thou Enion” (ibid). Sexual liberation eventually manifests in the generative dynamic of the Zoas united with their female Emanations, who are presented as bestowing heavenly visions and opening the way to Eden (Magno 1987, 304, 824). Enion’s weeping is replaced by the peaceful fulfilment of sacred sensuality, and the anguish of Tharmas is changed into bliss (ibid).

However, before such a happy state of harmonious fusion comes into being, the division of the sexes in Vala is described in these words: “Why art thou terrible and yet I love thee” (4.21; E.301). In The Four Zoas: A Photographic Facsimile of the Manuscript with Commentary on the Illuminations (1987), Cettina Tramontano Magno observes that
this interplay of opposites suggests the eventual emergence of something that has been concealed but which may yet be revealed (28), an idea encapsulated in the figure of Orc, the ‘secret child of promise’, the ‘secret’ being the hidden desire for visionary attainment through spiritualised sexuality, and the role of the feminine in its application. In Vala, Orc is initially bound in Urizen’s chains, but his “deep pulsation” shakes “with strong shudders” the stronghold of Urizen’s reason (57.16, 65.9–10; E.339, 344). His eventual ‘rising’ as “the Glorious King” (91.30; E.364) represents the rise against tyrannical systems, and the reclaiming of nature and desire from the bonds of repression (Bloom 2008, 957, 961). Orc, the concealed child, has gestated in the caves (womb) of the female sexual mysteries, as represented by the daughters of Urizen who are indicative of the sexual dynamic that lies within the confines and limits of Urizen’s jurisdiction (Bloom 2008, 257). The symbols of female sexuality ascribed to them include “sweet lilies to their breasts and roses to their hair,” adornments of “precious ornaments,” and “songs of sweet delight” (68.8, 10–11; E.353). Orc’s “tygers” of energy burning in the dark forests of the deep (77.9–10; E.353) remind one of the poem in Songs of Experience: “Tyger, burning bright / In the forests of the night” (42.1–2; E.24). Orc shares similarities with Boehme’s ‘child of liberty’ (wrought of its mother’s ‘seed’) who, in the newness of ‘light-life’ and ‘fire-spirit’, arises from ‘death’ and “bruises the head of the old serpent” of God’s anger by passing through and beyond that anger without harm (The Signature of All Things, 1981, 37, 47).

Orc’s rising is associated with the call to Vala to “shake off the waters from thy wings and the dust from thy white garments” (98.5; E.365). In Jerusalem, this call is repeated when Vala’s daughter, Jerusalem, is urged to arise and “overspread all Nations as in Ancient Times / For lo! the Night of Death is passed and the Eternal Day / Appears upon our Hills” (97.2–3; E.256). These calls are interrelated for, in Blake’s words: “Vala
produc’d the Bodies, Jerusalem gave the Souls” (18.7; E.163). The name, ‘Vala’, may be derived from the word, ‘veil’, and the female figure of Vala, as the matrix of nature’s forms and elements represents not only the “soft deceits” and “cloudy tears” (93.18; E.365) of the veil of illusion interposed between the phenomenal world and its underlying reality (Boehme’s ‘signature’ of all things) but also the rending of the veil (93.21; E.365) that opens the way to salvific unity.

IV. Vala and the Division of the Sexes

According to Bloom, Vala, or the Four Zoas aspires to integrated ‘oneness’ (Bloom 2008, 948), an example being the pairing of Tharmas and Enion. Tharmas symbolises the capacity to convert desire into actuality, and the female, Enion, is the totality (or embodiment) of that capacity (ibid). Tharmas, as the sense of touch, represents the sexuality of Beulah in all its fullness, but his division from Enion (sexual desire) dislocates his touch into flooded diffusion, resulting in a chaotic state of consciousness, which begets chaos in the external world (948–49). This chaotic condition pertains not only to the division of Tharmas and Enion but also to the other Zoas and their emanations. It is elaborated in the Nine Nights which are the ‘chapters’ of the poem. The isolation of the “empiricist self” in the material world (Quinney 2009, 33–34) is summed up by Tharmas, the Zoa of the bodily senses, who laments his unfulfilled and conflicted sense of self:

Despair will bring self-murder on my soul.

O Enion, thou art thyself a root growing in hell …

In dreadful dolour and pain … I am like an atom,

A nothing, left in darkness; yet I am an identity:

I wish & feel & weep & groan. Ah, terrible! terrible! (4.41–45: E.302)
Quinney writes that Tharmas “feels like an atom” because he is “experiencing his consciousness/life” in terms of empirical science with its implication that “the ‘I’ is a little node of consciousness adrift in a dark and alien world of matter” (2009, 34). Tharmas’s internal conflict therefore reflects the ontological loneliness that accompanies the experience of consciousness in Western history (31). Yet Blake goes further and places this loneliness within the context of disunited and disrupted gender relations at both the personal and collective levels:

Lost! Lost! Lost! are my Emanations! Enion O Enion,

We are become a Victim to the Living. We hide in secret …

I will build thee a Labyrinth also: O pity me. O Enion,

Why hast thou taken sweet Jerusalem from my inmost soul? (4.7–11; E.301)

Enion and Tharmas represent the sexual urges and the sensations of the body, as well as the original unity of the Divine Whole. After the separation of the sexes, and the equating of the body with sin, Enion is unable to join with Tharmas, and vice versa. In their frustration and isolation, Enion is reduced to incessant wailing, and Tharmas to unassuaged remorse. Enion’s only form of union is with the Spectre of Tharmas, a fearful and narcissistic reflection of the real Tharmas, created as a result of their lack of true union:

Enion said—Thy fear has made me tremble thy terrors have surrounded me

All Love is lost Terror succeeds & Hatred instead of Love …

Once thou wast to Me the loveliest son of heaven—But now

Why art thou Terrible …

I am almost Extinct & soon shall be a Shadow in Oblivion (4.17–22; E.301)
According to Mary Lynn Johnson and Brian Wilkie, Tharmas is the force that binds the personality and the body together (1978, 206). He has an affinity through his Emanation, Enion, with Beulah (207). Blake therefore puts the condemnation of spectral love into the mouths of the Daughters of Beulah, who are embodiments of female protectiveness (208): “The Spectre is in every man insane and most / Deformed” (1.299; E.179). The Daughters protect those who are falling, “Creating Spaces lest they fall into Eternal Death” (ibid). They also create a space for the Spectre, thereby presenting the expectation that regeneration will come, and dislocation will be healed (Wilkie 1978, 208). So, it is that Tharmas and Enion give birth to Los and Enitharmon who become the “agents of redemption in the poem” (ibid). Night I of *Vala* reveals Los and Enitharmon as Enion’s children, whose mother has placed within their generated forms ‘the seed’ of regeneration, which over time will come to fruition (8.1–2; E.304). However, to begin with, Los and Enitharmon experience the same alienation from one another as besets the other characters in the poem. Los’s separation from Enitharmon means that he cannot “enter into Beulah through her beautiful gates” (20.7; E313), and without her presence he cannot behold eternity (E.79). Night VII is the turning-point, when Los stands before Enitharmon and she motivates him to mark out a circle of imagination around the warring ranks of Urizen, which she fills with her “blushing love” (90.29, 34, 36; E.370). In so doing, she moves Los to feel love, not hate, towards Urizen. Los no longer beholds Urizen as an enemy but as like “an infant lovely breathed from Enitharmon” (90.64–67; E.371).

Just as Blake presents both the ontological loneliness of the alienated self and the remedy for that loneliness, so the Gnostics presented the loneliness of the divided self as intrinsic to human existence whilst also proffering a means of salvation through loving unity and self-knowledge. Unlike established religion and the empirical sciences of Blake’s time, which defined the ontological subject in terms of diminution and self-
deprecation in relation to an external, all-powerful deity and the awesome sublimity of nature, salvation is reached through connecting with one’s own divinity, represented by the divine Sophia, or Wisdom. In his recourse to the esoteric, Blake attempted to present the female, in her many moods and colours, as the facilitator of creativity and spiritual growth. Thus, even in their negative manifestations, Blake’s female characters display positive, as well as subversive spiritual potential, the one encompassing the other, for, as elucidated in chapter two of *Jerusalem*, even the stars are bound “In merciful order” and the “Laws of Cruelty” bend “to Peace” (49.54–55; E.199).

This mercy and peace characterises the unity of male and female that is presented in *Vala* as a “significant feature at the time of the apocalypse in the final night” (Ankarsjo 2005, 128), a feature exemplified in Enitharmon’s weaving of “the Web of Life / Out from the ashes of the Dead” (6.28–29; E.100). Her relationship with Los is a vital ingredient in the overall development of Blake’s ‘gender utopia’ which culminates in the apocalyptic vision of restoration. As Sibylle Erle has argued, Blake’s female characters are a crucial underlying force in Blake’s mythology (2010, 51), the means by which true selfhood can be attained and understood. They actively assist in reconnecting the self to the divine source from which humanity has become disconnected. However, in Blakean conceptualisation, this disconnection is primarily attributed to male actions—as in Urizen’s claim to godhead which causes the division of Los (the imagination) and Enitharmon (creativity). In *The Book of Urizen* (1794), Urizen’s hubris is repudiated by the other Eternals. He is banished and begins to build his own empire. Furthermore, by presenting the division of Los from Enitharmon in terms of the female coming forth from the ‘left side’ of the male, Blake repudiates the Miltonic vision of the separated female form as “Sin”—a view he further challenges in the reaction of the unintegrated Eternal Men who “shudder’d at the horrible thing / Not born for the sport and amusement of Man,
Such a reaction is indicative of the historical denigration of women by orthodox Christianity, and the demeaning effects of sexual alienation in a society where “radically asymmetrical gender roles” are prescribed (Quinney 2009, 40). Blake’s portrayal of gender disunity also resembles that of the Gnostics, who regarded the dividing and pathologising of male and female as a reflection of the disintegration and fragmentation of a flawed earthly existence (Van Meurs 1998, 277). In Vala, the negative effects of this sexual division are played out in the relationships between the male and female pairings as, for example, between Vala and Luvah. They can no longer see each other properly or move beyond sorrow: “The weak remaining shadow of Vala” laments “day & night, compell’d to labour & sorrow / Luvah in vain her lamentations heard,” but he can only come before her “in various forms” so that “she knew him not;” and so “she despised him” and “knowing him not,” hated him, a hatred that labours “in the smoke”—and “Urizen saw thy sin & hid his beams in darkning Clouds” (32.1–2; E.321–23). In Blake, it is more often than not his male characters who devise and uphold the notion of sexuality as “Sin,” as displayed in the reaction of the Eternal Men to the separated female form, and the response of Urizen who, upon seeing ‘sin’, manifests his anger in “darkning Clouds.”

V. Vala and the Subjugation of the Female

Blake consistently depicts the female as a menacing presence in connection with a patriarchal figure, a prime example being the figure of Urizen. Margaret Storch observes that the character of Urizen denotes a condition in which the imagination and senses are paralysed by “moralistic rationalisation,” symbolised, in one of its most developed forms,

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3 In The Book of Ahania (1795), ‘Sin’ is the name given to the erotic songstress, Ahania, by the horrified Urizen (2.34; E.84).
by his Web of Religion (1990, 80). In this context, as David Aers points out, Enitharmon, too, when divided from Los (before they return to one another and start the poem’s redemptive process), becomes so acculturated to oppression that she rejoices with Urizen to see “every man bound” in fear (1977, 508). Urizen represents limitation and reduction. His name, which, as Shelia Spector observes, combines the Hebrew for “curse/light” of the “counsellor” with the Greek for “horizon,” narrows the ‘horizons’ of perception within fixed, ‘curse-like’ parameters of reason (2001, 116). However, in ‘Eternity’, he is the united intellect of humanity. The contrast is, therefore, made between what Urizen once was, what he has become, and what he can be again when reunited with his counterpart, Ahania (Wisdom) who is the source of his renewal (Bloom 2008, 954). For Enitharmon, the forces of oppression have created fragmentation and sexual frustration. As a result, she tries to impose on Los the ideology of repression. Women’s subordination and subjection instils “a fear,” which can play out in “the neurotic desire to own, to possess, to control the male” (Aers 1977, 139). Enitharmon is, therefore, convinced that her very survival depends on binding the male to her ‘female will’ (ibid). She can thus be read, in relation to the wider historical context of the 1790s, as a symbol of repressed feminine sexuality, creativity and spirituality conditioned by patriarchy. In Europe – A Prophecy (1794), Enitharmon reveals that her “allegorical abode” is all a delusion “where existence hath never come” (5.7; E.62). This line encapsulates perfectly the vacuity of female identity and the tenuous position of women in the eighteenth century. By subversively reworking the myth of female domination as a dream, Blake reveals its arbitrariness as a cultural construction perpetuated by a patriarchal system as a means of controlling women: “Enitharmon slept, … / Eighteen hundred years, a female dream!” (9.1, 5; E.63).

In this sense, the characters of Enitharmon and Vala are not so much perpetuations of a stereotype, operating from a position of power, as a reflection of patriarchal
oppression and the unhealthy relationships and sexual behaviours it fosters in both sexes (Bruder 1997, 170). This state of being echoes Mary Wollstonecraft who, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), was concerned with the way in which patriarchy enforced manipulative exploitation of female roles and sexuality, and it suggests Blake’s familiarity with the proto-feminist writers and discourses of his time. In 1791, Blake provided engravings for Wollstonecraft’s *Original Stories and Elements of Morality* and was aware of the tenor of her writings (Erdman 1954, 142). Like himself, she was part of the movement that sought to change conventional notions of God, society and gender into models that would be life-enhancing, rather than life-denying.

The life-denying effects of Enitharmon’s oppression and suppressed creativity are presented in her manifestation as an “actively destructive fragment of a tragically divided humanity” (Freed 1994, 59). However, I would like to point to the ways in which Enitharmon, as the representative of free and life-enhancing ‘creativity’ and the counterpart to innovative and unconstrained ‘imagination’, plays a positive and constructive role. Similarly, in her association with nature, Vala represents traditional conceptions of the female within epistemological hierarchies that contributed to divisive gender constructs and relationships. In *Europe*, she is shown as the Shadowy Female, seductive and cruel, the image of “unfulfilled love and unrealised desire” (Hagstrum 1973, 114), who rolls her clouds “into the secret place” (2.18; E.61). She takes on Urizenic qualities, and as the dominant Female Will, “extends her sway” over all nature (Hagstrum 1973, 112–13). Yet Blake is concerned with cutting through these constructs and hierarchies by bringing the female out of the ‘shadows’ and into a place of ‘elevation’. He therefore promotes the absolute necessity of the feminine principle for the attainment of gender rights and spiritual growth, contrasting the woes of alienation with the joys of integration, in which feminine redemptive ‘grace’ is a vital component. And so,
Enitharmon eventually takes her rightful place at the side of Los, and Vala reunites with Luvah and redeems her realm.

VI. Vala and the Redemptive Female

In Night VII, Los collaborates with Enitharmon, and the poem moves into its redemptive phase (Paley 1973, 121–22). Disunity is described in words which portray the spectral condition of the estranged self: “Each male formed without a counterpart” is without “a concentering vision,” and so begins “the dreadful state of Separation” which is like a “curse” that “Must fall unless a way be found to Ransom & Redeem” (87.34; E.369). Enitharmon observes that “Without the food of life … the Spectre is Eternal Death” (ibid) and urges that counterparts be created for them so that the process of sacred union might be set in motion. In reply, Los tells Enitharmon to turn her eyes inward, for there she will see “the Lamb of God” (87.43; E.369) and will behold the sacrificial “robes of blood” by which she will fabricate bodies for the Spectres (32.14; E.321), an act of ransom and redemption tinctured with the light of Enitharmon’s love: “With sighs of love Sweet Enitharmon … breathd forth upon the wind” (90.39–40; E.371). Her sighs enable immortal “forms Embodied and Lovely” to be assimilated to the “spectrous dead” (90.42–43; E.371). It is interesting to note the semantic parallel between ‘Sweet Enitharmon’ and Blake’s later description of the blood-stained garments as “sweet clothing,” a connection linking the robes, and the weaving of creation, to the feminine redemptive principle (113.14; E.376). In Blake, weaving and women are interconnected as an image of regeneration and the resurrecting of forms, as demonstrated in this passage from Night VIII, which gives further elaboration regarding Enitharmon’s creative and redeeming role in bringing life from death:

Then Enitharmon erected Looms …
And calld the Looms Cathedron in these Looms She wove the Spectres
Bodies … Singing lulling Cadences to drive away
Despair from the poor wandering Spectres …
Looking down the Daughters of Beulah saw
With joy the bright Light and in it a Human form …
And they worshipped (100.2–5, 8–10; E.372)

Enion, too, gives form to fallen sensation by weaving, on “her shining loom,” a garment of gold for Tharmas (6.1; E.303), gold indicating the importance placed by Blake in the coupling of the senses of the body with sexual desire. Furthermore, the robes marked in blood, that are associated with the Lamb of God, inwardly perceived by Enitharmon as it is within her own body, are put on by Luvah when he reunites with Vala, for Luvah is feminine in certain of his characteristics. He has attributes which link him with Enitharmon, for he also is a Lamb of God, a bringer of gentle love, and a weaver of fabrics and threads which others can use (Hagstrum 1973, 103) and, like the Sophia of light and the Kabbalistic Shekinah, he is also a figure of light (ibid).

Vala, Luvah’s female counterpart is, when separated from him, the Shadowy Female, representing both unfulfilled sexuality and sexual tyranny. She embodies the oppressive effects of proscribed constructs upon the human psyche, effects that Blake depicts as being detrimental to both the individual and the collective psyche, as well as to the existential progress of humanity. Peter J. Sorensen identifies parallels between Vala and the Gnostic Sophia, both of whom represent two aspects of the feminine principle, one heavenly, the other earthly, yet sharing the same condition of immortality ‘made flesh’ in the mortal world (1995, 52). Building on Sorenson’s reading, I would add that Blake uses this Sophianic image to elevate the female in the figure of Vala, who is so often interpreted as an archetype of negative femininity. It is apparent that Vala, though caught up in the
 coil of materiality and division, also yearns for redemption and restoration. She expresses her desire for the reunion of ‘earth’ with ‘heaven’ in this passage from *The Four Zoas*:

Alas am I but as a flower then will I sit me down

Then will I weep then Ill complain & sigh for immortality

And chide my maker thee O Sun that raisedst me to fall

So saying she sat down & wept beneath the apple trees. (9.15–19; E.396)

The female sexual symbolism of the apple trees is a Blakean (and esoteric) pointer signifying mystical union and the transition from ‘death’ to ‘life’. It is in and through the body of the female that the divine light is realised and so the female becomes the ‘sacrificial Lamb’, not in a negative sense but in the sense of moving from the soul’s ‘entombment’ to the soul’s ‘resurrection’.

Vala was once a daughter of Eternity but her separation from Luvah generates a division that causes displacement and alienation (Hagstrum 1973, 102–104). This schism is a metaphor not only for the soul’s descent into matter but also for the rupture of nature and sensuality from the passions, including tender feeling and emotion. Luvah and Vala create a kind of ‘Babylon’, an energy that drives towards what Jean Hagstrum terms “death or non-entity,” where Spectres prey on life (105). Beulah is eternal bliss; Babylon is the place where love is prostituted, and aggression replaces tenderness (105–11). Yet fallen sexuality hides the life-giving ‘bread and wine’ (113). Vala, like each of the Zoas and their Emanations, was once part of the united Albion, the Eternal Man. Just as Sophia begets that ‘oneness’ which characterises the unified image of divine humanity (Hirst 1964, 204), so a state of harmony is required to bring Babylon and Beulah into balance (Hagstrum 1973, 115) or, more precisely, to create a place of harmonious ‘rest’ for the conflicts of Babylon within the ‘arms’ of Beulah, where opposites are united.
The moment of harmonious reconnection occurs when Luvah clothes himself in the garments of blood—for the garments signify the physical passions riding the chariot of threefold sexuality which is the redeemed realm of Vala and Luvah, the body sanctified in the “rivers of bliss,” the return to “peaceful love” (116). Thus, the Visions of Beulah are of transcendence and the burning away (purification) of the “sexual torments” of Babylon (ibid). The fallen Vala is the “melancholy Magdalen” (93.2: E.365), but after she has descended “into the sepulchre” and scattered “the blood” from her “golden brow” (93.3–4; E.365), the red garments of the Magdalen (put on by Luvah) become “sweet clothing” (113.14; E.376), symbolising “erotic fulfilment in our river of space” (Paley 1973, 268), as well as life and forgiveness (Hagstrum 1973, 118). The motif of the ‘Lamb of God’ is, therefore, symbolically associated with Vala, as the scatterer of the ‘blood’ and Luvah, as the wearer of the ‘blood’. Luvah becomes Christ-like when he assumes the red robes which are the purified incarnated passions, the “Created body” as a product of art—as a resurrected form “Embodied and Lovely” (97.42; E.371). In the characterisation of Vala, Blake shows that prostituted love can become a “new manifestation” (Paley 1973, 269), a sexual redemption engendered, according to Hagstrum, through the threefold conjoining of the head, the bosom and the loins (1973, 118).

Blake’s elevation of the feminine is a central theme running throughout all the Nine Nights of Vala, moving with increasing momentum and intensity from the strife of division and rejection to the rising of the Divine Vision of the “Universal female,” Jerusalem (103.38; E.376), who enshrines within her veil the holy “Lamb of God” (104.2; E.376). The veil of Vala, once hard and impenetrable (Hagstrum 1973, 112), has become “the inmost deep recess” of “wondrous beauty and love” (103.32; E.376), a “gently beaming fire” (or ‘sacred heart’) within “fair Jerusalem’s bosom” (104.4; E.376). Thus, the Sons of Eden sing: “Now we behold redemption” (104.8; E.376), and the call goes up:
“May we live forever more in Jerusalem / Which now descendeth out of heaven a City, yet
a Woman” (122.37–38; E.391). This climactic event is the prelude to the apocalyptic ninth
Night of restoration, when the old becomes new. It also interconnects with the restorative
awakening of “All Human Forms” united as one with their collective Emanation,
Jerusalem, as described in the final part of Jerusalem (99.1–5; E.258–59), where Los
sings: “Come forth O lovely-one / I see thy Form O lovely mild Jerusalem, Winged with
six Wings” (85.32, 86.1; E.244).

In Night IX of Vala, and following on from the redemptive vision in Night VIII,
the Zoas and their female emanations are described as “Four Starry Universes” and as the
“Four Wonders” united (123.36, 39; E.392). The reunification of Los and Enitharmon is
here portrayed as the entering of Los “into Enitharmon’s bosom” (99.26; E.372). Ahania
issues forth “in majesty Divine” and Urizen, in response, rises up to meet her “on wings of
ten-fold joy” (125.30; E.394) whilst his daughters “stand with cups and measures of
foaming wine (125.15; E.394). Orc transmutes into the Eternal Forms of Luvah and Vala
(Bloom 2008, 966), who return to their “place of seed” (126.8; E.395), which symbolises
the regenerative consummation of generative nature and sexuality (Bloom 2008, 966).
Together they walk in “Valas Garden” (126.19; E.395), and Vala (like Christ, the Good
Shepherd) tends her flocks and calls to them “follow me O my flocks” (129.3, 11; E.397–98). The joys of sexual bliss are symbolised by “dreams of Beulah” and the eating of the
grapes and apples which abound in Vala’s “garden of delight” (129.9, 93.42; E.397, 366).
Enion’s return to Tharmas has calmed his flooded seas and they are “brought into the
gardens of Vala” (129.27, 130.8; E.398). The apocalyptic restoration is also a cosmic one,
for Enion, Ahania and Vala ascend like Queens of Heaven “to their Golden looms” and
“Thro all the golden rooms / Heaven rang with winged Exultation,” and in all their
“delightful expanses / … the heavens rolled on with vocal harmony” (127.11, 12, 14–15, 32-33; E.405).

The reuniting of male and female within a renewed cosmos, as portrayed in Vala’s ninth Night, reflects the pairing of male/female aeons which, as David Brakke states in his study of Gnosticism, engenders the stability of all creation (2010, 57). I argue that, in Blake, this notion of gender complementarity as the means to individual and collective equilibrium forms the basis of his mythology and is interwoven with the role of the feminine principle in the transformative process. Thus, the female characters in Vala are similar to the Gnostic Sophia, and also to Boehme’s Noble Virgin Sophia who, as Desiree Hirst notes, begets spiritual oneness and likewise has attributes in common with the Divine Sophia of Gnosticism (1964, 204). Vala’s female protagonists, like Sophia, have Christ-like mediatory and redemptive qualities and facilitate the attainment of unity and wisdom. They therefore act in the capacity of a ‘female Jesus’ (Fogleman 2003, 305, 312–13), as seen, for instance, in Vala’s descent into the sepulchre to scatter the blood of resurrection, and in her call to her flocks to follow her. This Christ-like quality is also seen in Enitharmon’s connection with the Lamb of God as a symbol of feminine love and grace. Vala’s female characters, in reuniting with their male counterparts, are also central to the concept of ‘mystical marriage’ and its transcendent function. As channels of enlightenment, they can also be likened to the Kabbalistic Shekinah of light. The Ascension of Enion, Ahania and Vala, and the rising and honouring of the Universal Female, Jerusalem, are reminiscent of Sophia’s elevation and worship as Queen of Heaven. As I will show in the last section of this chapter, many of the themes and concepts in Vala are further developed or reiterated in Jerusalem in relation to the liberating agency of the salvific female.
VII. Jerusalem: An Overview

In the figure of Jerusalem, Vala’s daughter, we see again the need for unity in a fragmented world. She exemplifies Blake’s opposition to orthodox oppression and the hegemonic reduction of all things into “one knowable law” (Colebrook 2007, 17): “Why wilt thou number every little fibre of my soul / Spreading them out before the Sun like stalks of flax to dry?” (22.19–21; E.167). However, there is no clear critical consensus as to what the character or the poem represent. In Fearful Symmetry, Frye interprets Jerusalem as a cycle of resurrection, anchoring Blake firmly within canonical Christian tradition, although his focus on minor characters in the poem bypasses the significance of Jerusalem as the eponymous figure. Erdman reads Jerusalem in relation to the political context of Blake’s time. He views the poem as an allegory of the Napoleonic wars and associates Albion with military policy in Britain, the violence “from Albion to Great Tartary” with “the extension of the war in 1812 to Russia” and Jerusalem with the ideal of peace without vengeance (1954, 460). Erdman refers in passing to Blake’s apocalyptic imagery and millennialism, but the different facets of Jerusalem and its characters are overridden by historical allegory.

Kathleen Raine connects some aspects of the poem’s imagery with that of Boehme. However, she paints Blake as a Platonist and overlooks not only the Sophianic qualities of Jerusalem’s character but also the Christian-Gnostic aspects of the work. In contrast, Joseph Anthony Wittreich interprets Jerusalem as a reworking of Revelation and Milton’s Paradise Regained (1671) in an “epic tradition that by Spenser and Milton was tied to the tradition of prophecy” (1973, 23). According to Wittreich, Blake’s Jerusalem is “not only a consolidation and continuation of Blake’s previous poems . . . it is also a consolidation of the visions contained in Milton’s epics and in Revelation prophecy” (37). Jerusalem thus “subsumes” the structure and themes of previous prophecies and attempts to go beyond
them or to “complete” them (ibid). Wittreich makes useful points and comparisons. However, his reading is somewhat reductive in that he asserts that only two main characters are present in the texts: “John, or Blake, who are actors throughout; and, Jesus, who in both cases is the author of the Revelation, the true maker of the poem” (38). This reading disregards the wide cast of characters in the poem, including the six main characters, Jerusalem, Los, Albion, Vala, the Spectre, and Jesus, which distorts the reading.

Morton D. Paley states that, considering Blake’s circumstances, “what is remarkable is not that he encountered difficulties completing Jerusalem but that he completed it at all” (1990, 12). As such, when speaking of its problems and progress, “we must be mindful of its status as an evolving work of composite art, written, designed, etched, and printed by the same man” (ibid). According to Bloom, each of the four chapters of Jerusalem “depends for its progression on a dialectical struggle of contraries that are eventually resolved in the awakening of Albion” (2008, 928, 545) and the “rejoicing in Unity among the Flowers of Beulah” (98.21; E.257). I agree with both Paley and Bloom. I believe that Blake intended the poem to be the capstone of his corpus in which the uniting of contraries—Emanations and Zoas, men and women—in an apocalypse of sexual unity and liberation would complete his mythology, a sense of closure that he struggled to implement.

Despite Jerusalem’s significant role as a saviour in Blake’s epic poem, her significance has been underestimated by critics. As a character, Jerusalem has been viewed as “passive” (Paley 1983, 182–83) and “static” (Dortort 1998, 291–96). Brenda Webster disregards the transcendent and healing potential of Jerusalem’s eroticism, stating that it was Blake’s view that female sexuality should be “dispensed with altogether” (1983, 222–23). Mellor reads Jerusalem as “passively dependent” (1982–83, 148) and dismisses her
empowering potential even though the city “bears a female name, Jerusalem, and serves as the female’s ultimate self-realization” (149–150). Mellor instead focuses on the representation of the human form divine as a ‘Man’ (J 96:6; E.253) and states that Blake “apparently valued the male human form as a more powerful image of physical beauty and grandeur than the female form … in Jerusalem, the masculine is sublime, the feminine is pathos” (153). Similarly, Marc Kaplan (1996) views Jerusalem as a “powerless victim” (1996, 63) and Raine and Brian Aubrey, in their esoteric readings of Blake, associate the character of Jerusalem with Boehme’s Mirror of Divine Wisdom, a means of perceiving all the possibilities of creation, which they deem ‘passive’ without considering the potential for agency inherent in this concept. 5

Persyn examines the metaphorical links between female chastity and Druid sacrifice in Jerusalem stating that, for Blake, “the law of chastity is dehumanizing and destructive. Within the poem, ‘Druid’ demands for female chastity deprive women of identity and eventually of sanity by restricting them to an existence defined by the patriarchally imposed limitations of the gendered body” (1999, 53). Persyn reads the character of Jerusalem as sacrificing herself and thereby losing her imaginative, independent identity (ibid). Following in the vein of Mellor and Fox, Persyn writes that Blake “consistently portrays male characters as the shapers and controllers of female embodiment, identity, and destiny” (56). Concurringly, in William Blake and the Body (2002), Tristanne Connolly focuses on the motif of birth from the male bosom, for instance, Albion’s sons emerging from his breast. The male bosom is thus a seat for divinity, a reading which denies the divine elements connected with women in the poem,

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5 Brian Aubrey analyses Jerusalem in relation to divine numbers in Boehme. However, a discussion of gender and how it pertains to this context is lacking. 1996. Watchmen of Eternity: Blake’s Debt to Jacob Boehme. New York: University Press of America.
as Connolly states that “Freud and Blake both consider women ‘little capable’ of civilization’s difficult tasks” (218).

However, in Blake’s Jerusalem as Visionary Theatre: Entering the Divine Body (2011), Suzanne M. Sklar highlights the potentially empowering aspects of Jerusalem’s character. Sklar considers Jerusalem’s theological significance in relation to the Bible, her connections with Jesus, and the ways in which Blake’s characterisation of Jerusalem challenges notions of harlotry and virginity. Not only does Jerusalem’s sexuality inspire “forgiveness and peace” (44) but, Sklar notes, her presence can also be viewed as “the matrix” in which “the poem’s other stories can constellate … Her story of forgiveness and dynamic restoration is like ‘a golden string’ leading us into the heart of the labyrinth of Blake’s illuminated epic” (44, 67). Jerusalem takes on Christ-like attributes, suffering as people suffer and being consumed by a dragon and rising again, as Jesus is crucified and resurrected. Sklar observes that when Jerusalem and Jesus embrace, their “‘holy raptures’ can inspire all to participate in the Divine Body … Jerusalem is the Divine Name through which all enter that body” (68).

Building on Sklar’s research from a Gnostic standpoint, wherein gender complementarity is a metaphor for creative wholeness, I read Jerusalem and Albion as representations of a divided humanity. Jerusalem is both the female Emanation of Albion and a city. Albion represents universal humanity, resonating with the concept of the Divine Man in Boehme and the Grand Man in Swedenborg. Albion also represents a land (Britain), which indicates national humanity, Blake’s own countrymen, for whom he wished to build ‘Jerusalem’. In Vala, each Zoa, as a constituent element of Albion’s being, embodies a life principle whose Emanation is a feminine figure through which Albion (humanity) can be restored to divine wholeness. Thus, the image is presented of the Emanation, Enitharmon, singing over the Zoa, Los, and reviving him to life (E.368-69). In
Jerusalem, such a role is given to the eponymous heroine, Albion’s own female counterpart, who represents and embodies each of the Emanations of Vala and is also the Emanation of humanity individually and collectively.

Jerusalem progresses from war and strife to the healing of divisions, a healing brought about by the figure of Jerusalem, its main protagonist. As a City, Jerusalem is contrasted with the world of the divided Albion, where the way to Eden is ‘barred’ and the Beulah of “love and fulfilment is stonified,” and where the Sons of Albion can no longer expand the circumference of themselves outwards but know only contraction and reduction (Bloom 2008, 932–33). Bloom observes that, as a Woman, Jerusalem is not only Albion’s Emanation but also represents the creative and spiritual potential of humanity, imaginative freedom, and fulfilled desire which need to be realised as part of the process of social development (934). Thus, Albion’s predicament is also a sexual one, as Jerusalem represents the liberty of both the body and spirit (942). The ‘awakening’ of Albion is associated with the ‘appearing’ of Jerusalem in all her manifold beauty: “O lovely Jerusalem! O Shiloh of Mount Ephraim! / I see thy Gates of precious stones: thy walls of Gold and Silver” (85.22–23; E.244). Her redemptive sexuality is expressed as the “lovely Threefold” path of head, heart and loins (Hagstrum 1973, 118), “three Universes of love and beauty” (86.2–3; E.244). This path is the opposite of the divisive ‘single vision’. It instigates the ‘fourfold vision’, represented in Vala by the four Zoas united with their Emanations (98.24–27; E.257). In the final lines of Jerusalem, the generative cycle of “going forth and returning” becomes the regenerative “Life of Immortality” (99.2, 4; E.258) which, according to Bloom, is creatively experienced within the recurring rhythms that are Eden (Eternal Life) and Beulah (sexual union) perpetually interconnecting with one another (2008, 945). This unified state contrasts with the initial state of disunity that is presented at the beginning of the poem.
VIII. *Jerusalem* and the Universal Female

The first chapter of *Jerusalem* depicts Albion’s descent from an “individuality of existence to spectrous existence through a multiplicity of roles,” which cuts him off from Jesus who represents a state which is “totally spontaneous, individualised, uncircumscribed by any role” (Kroeber 1973, 359). Separation engenders alienation, symbolised by Albion’s banishment of Jerusalem/Jesus, thereby undermining not only Albion’s internal life but also the external world of nature. Jerusalem is synonymous with Jesus, and vice versa. Each is present in the other, and so they share similarities with the Sophia of the Gnostics who is present in Christ (and vice versa), for she is not only Christ’s counterpart but is also synonymous with Christ, as well as representing the indwelling Christ in each person. Jerusalem personifies the movement from division to reintegration, and that is why she is both Woman and City, “an individuality and a collectivity” (ibid). Jesus is the energy which, in each person, is the unique embodiment of the divine original. Jerusalem attests to a person being what they essentially should be; Jesus is the “continuing reality of eternal life” (ibid). So true life is not ‘non-entity’ but a ‘passage’ into realised living (Kroeber 1973, 359), and true energy is a ‘flowing forth’ from inside, from one’s real self. Jerusalem and Jesus, then, play redemptive roles in a manner reminiscent of the Sophia/Christ pairing in Gnostic and Behmenist christology. However, initially, Jerusalem’s salvatory pairing with Jesus is affected by divisive reduction and limitation which Los (the imagination) attempts to fight, but the shadowy Spectre of his conditioned self fills him with hatred, and he empowers Albion’s sons who are complicit in Jerusalem’s banishment. Albion curses Jerusalem and becomes entrapped in deluded negativity. Geographically, the figure of Albion indicates Blake’s native country and, culturally, Blake’s desire to see renewal and change, not only within the individual but also collectively, by building Jerusalem on
English soil and transforming the “dark Satanic Mills” into a “green and pleasant land” (1.8, 16; E.95–96).

However, the first chapters of the poem reveal a state of conflict that is the result of Albion’s rejection of Jerusalem which precipitates humanity’s division, causing society to become enmeshed “in a woven mantle of pestilence & war” (7.20; E.149) and “the delights of cruelty” (5.15; E.147). Albion cuts himself off from both Jerusalem and her daughters, rejecting “the Divine Bosom” (4.14–15; E.146). Yet such a situation does not prevent Jerusalem from ultimately fulfilling her role as the facilitator of renewal and transcendence. Suzanne Sklar notes that, in Jerusalem, sexuality, particularly feminine sexuality, can “lead to Eden; erotic and holy,” and to the regeneration (Blake’s Great Eternity) that comes from generation (2011, 45). In other words, generation is a necessity of regeneration, for none can “consummate bliss without being Generated” (86.42; E.245). Salvation, therefore, does not come from elsewhere but from within each person (Kroeber 1973, 365). Sklar observes that Los refers to the corporeal “birthplace of the Lamb” (the vagina) as “the point from which forgiveness emanates” (2011, 45)—but Albion’s fallen sons wish to turn this source of erotic spirituality into “the Abomination of Desolation” (7:65–70; E.150), thereby “filling humanity with absurd and deadly shame” (2011, 45).

This theme of the unifying and transformative power of sexuality is graphically illustrated in Plate 28 (see Appendix, Fig. 1), which depicts a transcendent world where material bodies and spiritual forces commingle. The union is not just a sexual one; it is also an emotional and spiritual one. The two embracing figures appear androgynous within a profoundly feminised setting, as they are sitting in, or are seemingly part of, a giant lily—a female sexual symbol. Both their forms are defined, yet they merge into each other, suggesting that they are two aspects of a whole being, fused together sexually, emotionally and spiritually, their hair forming a single arching line around them and their lips merging
to form one mouth. Furthermore, their shared form seems to blend into the shapes of the lily’s petals, suggesting that they are not only part of the lily but are emerging or being reborn from it as part of a transformative and transcendent process.

Moreover, Jerusalem’s persecution and subsequent resurrection is a Christ-like process, in that she suffers for the actions of others and rises again. In chapter four she confronts the great dragon, which is, in essence, her own shadow (or, to be more precise, the shadowy aspect of her mother, Vala) and, by so doing, signals the reconnection of the material world with the divine. Having had her sexuality condemned on account of dogmatic pronouncements which represent orthodoxies and narrow perceptions of the world, she now finds that in the Great Eternity, free from constraints, her “embraces are cominglings from the head even to the feet” with no “pompous High Priest entering by a Secret Place” (69.43–4; E.233). Unlike the cold “veils of ignorance,” described in Vala, which also cover from “head to feet” (113.21; E.377), Jerusalem’s “cominglings” enact a truly ‘pure’ form of sexuality free from the inhibitions of the Female Will (oppressed, negative femininity) and the castigations of patriarchy. Sklar notes that Jerusalem’s sexual dynamic both includes and transcends “mundane erotica” (2011, 45) because the ‘place of generation’ is “the point” of consummated bliss and “mutual forgiveness” (ibid).

Therefore, the “forgiving embrace” in Blake unites and transforms “not only the lover and beloved, but also the minute particulars of the surrounding world;” within this embrace, a “closed circumference can open and the centre (the centre of being) can emanate outward” (ibid). Blake’s Jerusalem appears in naked beauty (86.14–19; E.244), and notions of sin and judgment are finally eliminated. As Hagstrum observes, in Jerusalem’s climactic moment the ‘bow of salvation’ is the masculine joined with the feminine (1973, 116), the ‘arrows’ are the “arrows of love” (ibid), and the ‘chariot’ of “new fourfold” humanity is the sexual threefold way (ibid).
Plate 9 shows one of Jerusalem’s daughters feeding and petting a serpent (Appendix, Fig. 2). As in Thel and Coleridge’s Christabel, the female is again depicted interacting with a serpent in a manner suggestive of transformation and awakening to knowledge. The serpent imagery coincides with Albion’s awakening to a vision of the ‘forgiving embrace’, set against the backdrop of “the all wondrous serpent” regeneratively shedding its skin in order to “Humanize / In the Forgiveness of Sins” (98.44–45; E.258). Like the serpent of the ancient Gnostics, Blake’s serpent is associated with enlightenment and regenerative sexuality. Like Thel, Jerusalem subverts traditional conceptions of the feminine, sex and sin. Thus, Albion calls to Jerusalem to “open the hidden Heart in Wars of mutual Benevolence, Wars of Love” (97.14; E.256). His awakening releases the stored energy within him, which is Jesus (Kroeber 1973, 364). Eternal life is therefore life that is vital, exuberant, uninhibited and emanative. It is the life that flows from true being:

In Great Eternity, every particular Form gives forth or Emanates
Its own peculiar Light, & the Form is the Divine Vision
And the Light is his Garment. This is Jerusalem in every Man …

(54.1–3; E.203)

These lines depict Jerusalem, “called Liberty among the Children of Albion” (54.5; E.203), as the Emanation of humanity individually, but they take us forward to Blake’s ultimate elevation of the female. In apocalyptic-style language that denotes the birth of the new from the old, Albion is described as standing “before Jesus in the Clouds of Heaven,” and Jerusalem, as “the Eternal Day” that follows “the Night of death” and “Appears upon our Hills” to “overspread all nations” (96.42–43, 97.2–4; E.256). Here, Jerusalem is presented as the collective Emanation of all humanity, the Universal Female, the object and fulfilment of all desire. And so, in the Song of Los, she is extolled as “the New Jerusalem descending out of Heaven,” her “Gates of Pearl” reflecting “Eternity … beneath
azure wings” (86.4–5, 19; E.244). The poem concludes with regenerated “Humanity Divine … going forward irresistible from Eternity to Eternity” (98.24, 27; E.257), able to partake of “the Life of Immortality,” for, as the final line declares: “I heard the name of their Emanations they are named Jerusalem” (99.4–5; E.258–59).

IX. Conclusion: Blake’s Sexual Apocalypse

Just as the New Testament ends with the apocalyptic Book of Revelation, so Blake concludes Vala and Jerusalem with imagery that has a prophetic dimension. However, it is a dimension that presents apocalyptic elements in ways that are revisionist in their import and meanings. Like the Book of Revelation, Blake presents a new Heaven and a new Earth, but in terms of a cosmos restored and renewed through the return of the female Emanations of humanity to their rightful position in the divine order. This return facilitates the uniting of contraries through male/female reintegration. It is a restoration culminating in the Divine Vision of the ‘new Jerusalem’ which, for Blake, is feminine and represented as a both a City and a Woman, the Universal Female Form, or Emanation, of all creation. By drawing on esoteric symbols and concepts like the Sophianic feminine, female sexual imagery, sacred sexual union and male/female spiritual and sexual reintegration, Blake sought not only to elevate the feminine within epistemological hierarchies, but also to dispel the stigma and double-standards surrounding female sexuality. Within the contexts of sacred sexuality and the theosophy of desire, the feminine operates as a vital redemptive and liberating force. For Blake, this image of the feminine is not a permanent solution or ‘cure’ to sexual and social inequality. Rather, it is part of an ongoing process, a step towards a gradual spiritual evolution for the individual and society. Jerusalem denounces “passive acceptance of anything,” for each person creates their own belief (Kroeber 1973, 367). This kind of creativity is the core of Blake’s “imaginative activity” (ibid).
Throughout Blake’s works, sexuality and sexual imagery are equated with lifting restrictive barriers that impede imaginative and personal growth, and the widening of perception. For Blake, the notion of virginity neither inhibits nor disinhibits human–divine communion. Instead, in Jerusalem, the Eternals proclaim: “Establishment of Truth depends on destruction of Falsehood continually / On Circumcision, not on Virginity!” (55.65–66; E.205). They understand that erotic and intellectual barriers have been put in place by patriarchal systems that oppress both women and men, blocking the fulfilment of desire and the freeing of potential. As such, the yoke of ‘phallic superiority’ must be lifted (circumcised) in order for society to progress. This progression starts as an internal one and, for Blake and Coleridge, the imagination, as an active receiver and transmitter of unity mediated by the feminine principle, was the means to facilitate individual growth which, in turn, promotes the growth of society. This outlook continues in the works of Mary and Percy Shelley, who stress in different ways the need for an active feminine force within the creative and political ambits of society.
Chapter Four
The Unseen Feminine:  
Gnosticism and Gender Politics in *Frankenstein*

In Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* the need for an active feminine presence, symbolised by the Creature’s unfulfilled longing for a female companion, encapsulates the novel’s gender politics. In making the female absent as a spiritualising and civilising influence, Shelley insists upon the importance of a feminine input in relation to an unchecked masculine principle. In this regard, it is a work that presents the dangers for the individual, the family and society when the female is relegated to the side-lines. One of *Frankenstein*’s core themes is the unbridled pursuit of knowledge, and Victor is a character in a long line of unfortunate knowledge seekers (other notable figures being Faust, Prospero and, of course, the Biblical Eve). The novel, on the one hand, seems to present a conservative attitude towards science. On the other, it displays the aspiration and spirit of enquiry that characterised both the Enlightenment and Romantic eras. The fundamental problem with Victor’s search for knowledge is that it takes place without a stabilising influence, this associated in the novel with the need for a tempering feminine agency.

In his book, *Creature and Creator: Myth-Making and English Romanticism* (1984), Paul A. Cantor examines Romantic mytho-poetics in relation to Gnostic themes and motifs, stating that “the distinctive orientation of Romantic creation myths, particularly the tendency to invert gods and devils, is known in the history of religion as gnosticism” (x). *Frankenstein* involves a Gnostic inversion of the Fall, wherein the transgressor is depicted as the male Victor, who also takes on the role of corrupt creator or demiurge, and the Creature is portrayed as a Satanic figure, in the Gnostic sense of a rebellious ‘Lucifer’,
who challenges the authority of the godlike Victor through his own desire for the light of knowledge. Extending Cantor’s argument, I propose in this chapter that the notion of the feminine as a guiding principle is central to this Gnostic inversion, and its absence inevitably leads Victor and the Creature towards destruction. Unlike Percy Shelley, Mary Shelley achieved literary fame in her own lifetime, though reviewers often overlooked the political and philosophical underpinnings of her writings. Following her death, she was remembered primarily for *Frankenstein* and for her efforts to publish her husband’s works.

In 1976, Ellen Moers’s influential *Literary Women* presented *Frankenstein* as a prime example of the “female gothic,” a genre she defined as being written by women and focusing on a “young woman who is simultaneously persecuted victim and courageous heroine” (91). Examining the biographical implications of the novel, Moers interprets *Frankenstein* as a sublimated afterbirth, an attempt by Mary Shelley to resolve her guilt over her mother’s death and her sense of inadequacy for failing to provide a healthy son and heir.¹ For Moers, *Frankenstein*’s merits lie in its presentation of the “abnormal, or monstrous, manifestations of the child-parent tie” and in so doing, “to transform the standard Romantic matter of incest, infanticide, and patricide into a phantasmagoria of the nursery” (99).

Three years later, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar published their seminal study of nineteenth-century women writers, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), presenting *Frankenstein* as a “Romantic ‘reading’ of Paradise Lost,” in which Victor alternates between the roles of Adam, Satan and Eve (222). The anxieties of authorship faced by a woman writer form the basis of Gilbert and Gubar’s interpretation. *Frankenstein*, they state, is “a waking dream . . . a Romantic novel about—among other things—Romanticism, as well as a book about books and perhaps, too, about the writers of books”

¹ In 1797, Mary Wollstonecraft died of puerperal fever after Mary Shelley’s birth, having been unable to expel the placenta.
Gilbert and Gubar examine the influence of Wollstonecraft which established “highly charged connections between femaleness and literariness,” specifically in connection with the figure of Mary Shelley’s dead mother (223). They argue that, for Mary Shelley, books came to function as “surrogate parents,” who gave her birth not through a human mother but through reading (ibid).

These ground-breaking analyses spurred an increased focus on bodily themes and issues in *Frankenstein* during the 1980s and 90s. Building on the theme of parenting in the novel, Mary Jacobus’s 1982 article, “Is There a Woman in This Text,” provided an influential examination of a “curious thread in the plot,” centred not on a negative father figure (Frankenstein/God) but on the image of the dead mother who represents the Creature’s loveless state. Alone and motherless, the Creature “fantasizes acceptance by a series of women but founders in imagined rebuffs,” resulting in violence and destruction (132–133). Jacobus’s deconstructive, psychoanalytic approach drew attention to Shelley’s representation of women through absence in a feminist reading that has been frequently referenced.

Focusing on gender politics in the novel, Mary Poovey’s *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer* (1984) examines the tension between the proper femininity of conduct-books and improper female Romantic self-expression and originality. According to Poovey, the “narrative strategy of *Frankenstein*, like the symbolic presentation of the monster, enables Shelley to express and efface herself at the same time” thereby assuaging her “conflicting desires for self-assertion and social acceptance” (131). Poovey’s reading centres of the novel as a manifestation of Shelley’s condemnation of ‘masculine’ Romantic egotism and ambivalence toward ideologies of motherhood.

The themes of proper feminine conduct and authorship in Mary Shelley’s works have been widely covered. Audrey A. Fisch, Anne K. Mellor and Esther H. Schor state
that *Frankenstein* “advances its critique in terms of an incipient feminist politics” that resonates with the pioneer feminism of Mary Wollstonecraft a generation earlier (1993, 4). According to Michael Eberle-Sinatra, Mary Shelley writes against the imposition of female passivity within the confines of the private sphere and critiques a society where the sexes are allocated to separate spheres and where men are viewed as “masters of knowledge” (2000, 96–97, 100). For Anne-Lise Francois and Daniel Mozes, Mary Shelley’s female characterisations can be understood in terms of the complexity of prevailing constructions of femininity which stranded women “between the ideal of feminine pliancy and the image of feminine virtue as a gem” that must keep itself pure (2000, 72).

Since the early 2000s, scholars have moved away from binary distinctions such as the separate spheres doctrine. Critical focus seems less psychological and more historically inclined. However, the themes of motherhood, death and the anxieties of authorship are still current in *Frankenstein* criticism. Nancy Yousef in her article, “The Monster in the Dark Room: *Frankenstein*, Feminism, and Philosophy” (2002), examines the novel in relation to contemporary philosophical narratives of development. Absent from these narratives (and also from Shelley’s text) are accounts of “infancy, childhood, the network of relationships in which the individual is embedded from the first moments of life, and the role of dependence and relation generally in the individual’s formation” (201). Yousef observes that Shelley’s creature “follows in this tradition by acquiring the full array of human faculties without parents” (ibid). The novel engages with Enlightenment theories of education, human nature, and socialisation in a critique of “masculine constructions of knowledge and personhood” that prefigures modern feminist analysis of the “philosophical canon” (200–201).
Colene Bentley discusses *Frankenstein* in relation to eighteenth-century theories of political community which “modelled political relations on a network of rights, duties and common conceptions of time” (2005, 326). The novel engages with these concepts by “depicting characters who endeavour, like the monster, to attach themselves to others” (ibid). Shelley uses the ‘bounded’ communities of families in the novel to critique society’s primary model of genetics to examine “exclusionary practices of closed communities that are affiliated by blood and sentiment” (332). Victor’s statement on Montanvert that “there can be no community” among “enemies” calls attention to what Bentley views as “the novel’s preoccupation with building new communities” based on “impartial standards of justice rather than by sentiment or genealogy” (ibid). For Bentley, Shelley’s underlying suggestion in *Frankenstein* is that societies “need to consider themselves from perspectives outside of their closed purviews in order to reflect on matters of identity and justice” (347).

Adriana Craciun examines the politics of *Frankenstein* in relation to the ‘language of monstrosity’ that was widely employed by both counter-revolutionaries and pro-revolutionaries in the 1790s. Craciun cites Godwin’s description of the feudal system as a devouring ‘ferocious monster’ and Thomas Paine’s ‘monster’ of aristocracy in *Rights of Man* (1791). Craciun refers to Rousseau, infamous in counter-revolutionary groups for abandoning his five children to a foundling hospital, and seen as a failure of revolutionary philosophy (2016, 87). Craciun states that by “ingeniously overlaying this series of flawed father figures who neglected their children (Victor, Godwin, Rousseau, God),” Shelley elicits their political assertions while “holding them subject to the critique of the ‘domestic affections’ and of gender, which their consistently masculinist political liberties denied” (87–88).
Andrew Smith asserts that the novel “as a whole represents an ambivalence towards the Romantic project and the type of artistic and political idealism with which Romanticism was associated” (2016, 4). Victor Frankenstein, Smith states, should be viewed as a “thwarted idealist” who searches for a means to defeat death and in so doing gives life to a creature that kills (ibid). Idealism thus produces or becomes the very thing that it is fighting against, a failure Smith ascribes to the novel’s post-Napoleonic setting. In response to the arguments presented, I wish to show that a consideration of the esoteric elements in *Frankenstein* may reveal another angle to Mary Shelley’s ambivalent and complex approach to politics and gender in the early nineteenth century. Her ‘language of monstrosity’ is not just a protest against prescribed conduct and male-oriented hegemony, it also challenges gender binaries by demonstrating what can happen when ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ qualities, roles and values are categorised and segregated. To this end, her works elevate the status of the feminine within epistemological hierarches, conveying the implicit message that active female influence on creative, emotional and intellectual processes is essential not only for individual development but also for the development and stability of society at large.

By referring to the mystical works of Agrippa and Paracelsus, whose philosophies incorporate femininity as a central force in the creative process, Mary Shelley creates a subtext critiquing cerebral Enlightenment philosophies of personal development. Like the women in the novel, these sources are side-lined early on. Victor disregards them in favour of a scientific approach that is driven by hubris and devoid of emotional intelligence, a reflection of the desensitising effects of male-dominated attitudes and norms which impede society’s progress toward reform and gender equity. A defining feature of the Romantic ethos was the concept of the imagination as a means by which the soul transcended the confines of the body through the attainment of love. Yet it was a love that both male and
female writers associated with feminine figures, such as Asia in Percy Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* and Safie in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, figures conversant with the workings of the soul in relation to the liberation of the human spirit and the achieving of union with God.

**I. The Modern Prometheus: Frankenstein and the Feminine Principle**

In the context of Romantic thinking, the term ‘God’ refers to the sum of all potentialities and also to that which is above and beyond the ordinary, everyday self but which is a fusion of the mundane with the supra-mundane, the earthly with the heavenly (Abrams 1971, 102). Such a fusion, I contend, is not only contingent upon but is also a manifestation of the combining of masculine and feminine elements and, for Romantic writers of both sexes, the feminine principle was central to this unifying process. The concepts and themes pertaining to the Romantic elevation of the female resonate with the characteristics and functions of the Sophia, revered in Gnostic thinking as a mediatrix and an illuminatrix. In *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley associates the feminine with transcendent capabilities. The influence of Safie is instrumental in teaching the creature speech and reading. These abilities allow him, at least for a time, to transcend his base condition and reflect upon himself and the world he inhabits.

Mary Shelley’s novel promotes her belief in the importance of a feminine agency for the development of the individual and society and illustrates what occurs when this agency is not given due credence. As the themes of her novel unfold, they reveal the lack of a female influence due to the fact that the role of the feminine principle is either commandeered or unacknowledged by male characters and social constructs. Thus, Victor’s earlier noble ambition to exercise the “astonishing … power placed within” his “hands” for the progress of humanity does not come to fruition (1.4.7). In the absence of a
tempering and co-creating feminine influence, his aspirations become tainted with the corrupting desire for adulation and power that disrupts the ‘Promethean’ ideal:

No one can conceive the variety of feelings which bore me onwards, like a hurricane, in the first enthusiasm of success. Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world. A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs. Pursuing the reflections, I thought, that if I could bestow animation upon lifeless matter, I might in process of time … renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption. (1.4.8)

Victor Frankenstein’s notion of power initially expresses the laudable aim of pouring “a torrent of light into our dark world.” Yet it is coloured by the patriarchal imperative to be the sole “creator and source” of this “torrent of light,” a ‘father’ who will be continually blessed and acknowledged by ever grateful children, thereby overriding any need for a ‘mother’ and usurping the feminine agency in the act of creation.

In the characterisations of Victor and the Creature, Mary Shelley creates connections with aspects of the mythical Prometheus, as indicated by her subtitle, “The Modern Prometheus,” though the term ‘Modern’ implies an alternative rendition of the myth’s fundamental elements, one applicable not only to the times in which she lived but also to the universal question of humanity’s advancement that she was attempting to address. The similarities between the mythic Prometheus and Frankenstein’s character have been highlighted by critics such as Harold Bloom (1965, 611). On the one hand, Victor pits himself against the limits of science as Prometheus pitted himself against the Gods and steals the ‘spark’ of life, creating a living being. On the other hand,
Frankenstein’s creation also bears a resemblance to Prometheus, for it is the creature who discovers fire and, in a sense, steals it: “One day, when I was oppressed by cold, I found a fire which had been left by some wandering beggars, and was overcome with delight at the warmth I experienced from it” (2.11.6). Both Frankenstein and the creature become tortured beings and thus symbols of human suffering at the hands of the gods, a suffering exacerbated by the fact that they do not have a saving feminine principle that can help them alleviate their torture.

In the novel, creation becomes identified with the Fall, but not in the Biblical sense of the ‘fall’ of mankind. Rather, it is the fall of the creator that is being revealed. Victor Frankenstein does the work of a ‘god’ by creating a ‘man’, but he has the satanic motives of pride and the desire for power. By aspiring, like Satan, “to become a god himself,” he not only fulfils the role of a demiurge or false creator but also represents “the being who fell from heaven and the being who created the world of man” as one and the same (Cantor 1985, 105). Frankenstein plays the role of God and, like Prometheus in Percy Shelley’s version of the myth, is identified with Satan, but not in the Gnostic Lucifer-esque sense of a Satan who desires to shed light on falsity and experience transformation. Rather, he is a ‘fallen’ Satan: “All my speculations and hopes are as nothing, and like the archangel who aspired to omnipotence, I am chained in an eternal hell” (3.25.7). In addition to the obvious parallels with the Prometheus myth, Mary Shelley’s inserted epigraph from *Paradise Lost* (1667) suggests that the story has similarities with Milton’s creation account. Indeed, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar state that the novel attempts “to take the male culture myth of *Paradise Lost* … and rewrite it,” depicting Victor in the role of Eve as a doomed seeker of knowledge (1984, 220). Lucy Newlyn points out that *Frankenstein* is “a revisionary reading of *Paradise Lost*” (1993, 134). However, the characters in *Frankenstein* are neither entirely mythical in the traditional sense, nor fully
Miltonic, nor wholly Biblical, so it seems that the epigraph is intended to draw the reader’s attention to the possible parallels rather than direct allusions.

According to Paul Cantor, the ambiguity of the characters of _Frankenstein_ arises from the fact that the two main characters “must be correlated with three figures from _Paradise Lost_: God, Satan, and Adam,” thereby reducing “three characters to two” (1985, 103). In this way, Mary Shelley eliminates the “middle term,” removing some aspects of Satan’s role and “giving them to her god-figure, Frankenstein, and taking other elements from Satan and giving them to her Adam-figure, the monster. The result is to make both characters in her story, both creator and creature, in some sense Satanic” (105). A similar mingling of elements occurs in Percy Shelley’s _Prometheus_. However, as I discuss in the following chapter, the Satanic aspect of Percy Shelley’s Prometheus undergoes a purposeful evolution whereas the Satanic elements associated with Mary Shelley’s two main protagonists do not, due to a consistent lack of transformative feminine influence upon both Frankenstein and his creature. Throughout the novel, the female is linked with the transformative attributes of love, compassion, intuitive knowledge, and learning (in the sense of positive socialisation and education). However, these attributes are unable to be exercised by the women in the novel because the feminine functions are appropriated or side-lined by male characters and male-dominated systems. The concept of a required input of female energy into an all-pervasive male dynamic, through the alternation of one with the other, has strong esoteric, particularly Gnostic, undertones. Thus, Mary Shelley puts a Gnostic slant on her depictions of creation in _Frankenstein_ and shows the need for a balancing female impetus which, by its conspicuous absence in the novel, draws attention to the lack of an active female influence on society.

The novel’s description of Frankenstein’s fall echoes the fallen Satan of _Paradise Lost_, as Walton, the novel’s narrator, who encounters Frankenstein on his journey to the
North Pole, declares: “What a glorious creature must he have been in the days of his prosperity, when he is thus … godlike in ruin! He seems to feel his own worth and the greatness of his fall” (3.25.6). The creature, too, likens himself to Satan, telling his creator: “Remember that I am thy creature; I ought to be thy Adam, but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed” (2.10.10). It is therefore not the creature’s own misdeeds that have driven him from joy but the misdeeds of his creator; he is ‘fallen’, not through any fault of his own but through a fate imposed on him from above. The creator’s fall has become the creature’s fall and, by extension, the fall of creation itself. It is the creature’s own ‘Paradise Lost’ that is being reflected upon when he states:

Like Adam, I was apparently united by no link to any other being in existence; but his state was far different from mine in every other respect. He had come forth from the hands of God a perfect creature, happy and prosperous … but I was wretched, helpless, and alone. (2.15.7)

In the traditional story, all the blame for the evil in the world is deflected away from God and placed firstly upon Satan and then on mankind. That is why the creature goes on to lament that he views Satan as a fit emblem for the condition in which he finds himself—but then shifts the blame ascribed to Satan by stating that when he looks up at the privileged position of those who should be protecting him, he feels, like Satan, “the bitter gall of envy” (ibid). In Milton’s account, God created the world to be perfectly good but Satan’s wilfulness and man’s collusion with Satan corrupted God’s creation, so although man is to a degree the victim of the Devil’s scheme, he is also responsible for his own fallen state. Milton’s account tallies with the Biblical ‘Fall’—but Mary Shelley subverts the point of focus by making the creator responsible for the creature’s degradation.

Thus, the creator’s motives in Frankenstein are made suspect, thereby justifying the rebellion of the creature, a fact that, according to Cantor, is indicative of the Gnostic
underpinnings that characterise this work (1984, 105). In Gnostic thinking, Satan or Lucifer challenges falsehood and the edicts of the demiurge. In her novel, Mary Shelley’s representation of creation implies that the original creation of ‘man’ was defective. As such, “man owes nothing to his creator; his wisest course is then to rebel against what he has always been told is the divine order” (Rasmus 2006, 804). For the Gnostics, the God of the Old Testament was a false creator who forbade access to the Tree of Knowledge (and, by extension, to the Tree of Life), a prohibition countered by their composite concept of the ‘rebel’ Christ (or Satan) and the ‘Sophianic’ serpent of wisdom (ibid). However, the rebellion of the creature in *Frankenstein* does not lead to liberation. Rather, as Mary Shelley clearly shows, it leads to a struggle between creator and creature that eventually destroys them both, the tragic end result of male forces running amok without the tempering influence of feminine mediation. By rebelling against Frankenstein’s tyranny, the creature also becomes a tyrant toward his master, resulting in what Victor describes as “the whole period during which I was the slave of my creature” (3.18.13). If viewed from this perspective, Mary Shelley’s rendition of the Prometheus myth turns the Creature into the “fallen image of his creator” and, as a result, “Frankenstein and the monster” become “mirror images of each other” (Cantor 1985, 105) with no prospect of restoration for the fallen.

Critics like Bloom and George Levine have posited that Victor and the creature represent two sides of the same coin and that, despite Victor’s moments of triumph and the creature’s moments of despair, the roles of the two characters are reversed as the plot progresses. Thus, Victor Frankenstein states:

I abhorred the face of man. Oh, not abhorred! They were my brethren, my fellow beings, and I felt attracted … as to creatures of an angelic nature and celestial mechanism. But I felt I had no right to share their intercourse …
How they would, each and all, abhor me and hunt me from the world did they know my unhallowed acts and the crimes which had their source in me!

(3.22.1)

This passage depicts the turmoil Victor feels as the story unfolds. Yet, the roles are not fully reversed because the Creature, lacking synthesis with a female companion, also cannot transcend his feelings of alienation. Victor, too, with no feminine counterpart to counterbalance his ambitions, becomes increasingly cut off from humanity and from human sympathies: “I walked about the isle like a restless spectre, separated from all it loved and miserable in its separation” (3.20.20). It is interesting to note that in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, as in Blake’s *Vala*, the term ‘spectre’ is used to denote the wandering soul disconnected from love and unity. Nevertheless, despite feelings of spectral alienation, the creature does have moments of triumph in which he feels more powerful than his creator: “Slave, I before reasoned with you, but you have proved yourself unworthy of my condescension. Remember that I have power; you believe yourself miserable, but I can make you so wretched that the light of day will be hateful to you. You are my creator, but I am your master; obey!” (3.20.11). Devoid of any gentle or civilising influence, the creature knows only how to imitate his creator in generating suffering and misery, as shown in his proclamation: “I too can create desolation” (2.16.32).

*Frankenstein*, then, reveals the “tension between humanity’s visionary powers as a creator and its spiritual limits as a creature” (Cantor 1985, 107). In *A Defence of Poetry* (1821; published 1840), Percy Shelley claims that “poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World” (Shelley 2004). According to Robert Kiely, the scientist in *Frankenstein* metaphorically represents the poet, as Victor Frankenstein’s attempt to remake the human form equates to the goal of Romantic artists—the spiritual regeneration of man (1971, 161). However, this regeneration, though held up as the desired ideal by
Mary Shelley, is shown as failing, the creature being portrayed as repulsive and the creator as being overtaken by hubris. Cantor states that “the creation myth served Romantic artists as a vehicle for criticizing the established order, for exposing the corrupt foundations of religious and political authority” (1985, 107). However, the revolutionary forces displayed in the theme of creation presented in *Frankenstein* do not denote the true ‘revolution’ of like hearts and minds that is the product of united polarities and creative ‘oneness’. Rather, these forces are shown to be unpredictable and dangerous because they lack that depth of empathy and feeling that comes from a feminine principle able to soften with rational gentleness and reconciliatory emotion the hard edges of masculine reformist zeal and bigotry.

II. Cornelius Agrippa, Paracelsus and Esoteric Gender

Victor’s unilateral act of creation sidesteps the feminine principle. Like the act of creation in Genesis, it is male-oriented. The consequent absence of a female presence that can soften and stabilise both the hard edge of Victor’s ambition and the isolation of his Creature is also redolent of the expulsion of the feminine element from nature. This marginalisation is represented in the novel by Victor’s initial engagement with and then rejection of Cornelius Agrippa and Paracelsus. In regard to Agrippa and Paracelsus, Mary Shelley does not specifically detail their ideas, but their presence in the text suggests that she knew of their writings. Percy Shelley, in his letters, attests to the influences of both Agrippa and Paracelsus on some of his works, influences he may have shared with his wife.

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2 A similar hubris characterises the ‘imposter-prophet’ in Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man*, who claims to have the power to “authorise culture” (1996, 301), thus subsuming “the social realm” to his “own authorship” (Webb 2000, 130–31). His is a self-acknowledged ‘legislatorship’ of the world which wields absolute power and manipulation (131). He creates what is and what will be—but not in a positive sense. Like Victor Frankenstein, and in contrast to Percy Shelley’s ideal of the poetic ‘legislator’, he represents the misuse of the creative/visionary impulse and its adverse effects on both creator and created.
(Letters of Shelley 1.227; Wilson 2003, 94).³ William Godwin (Mary Shelley’s father), based his novel, *St. Leon: A Tale of the Sixteenth Century* (1799), on the philosophical and alchemical ideas of Agrippa and Paracelsus, and it is reasonable to surmise that such familiarity had been transmitted to his daughter.⁴

Cornelius Agrippa espoused the belief that the female sex was noble and to be honoured, and his “Declamation on the Nobility and Preeminence of the Female Sex,” part of his *Collected Treatises* (1529) which were translated into English in 1670, declares the moral and spiritual worthiness of women. He states that women can be compared to the “dignity … of silver,” being composed not of “vile dirt” but of a more “refined and purified substance,” and that in the “order and place” of creation, the name of Eve (the representative of all women) means ‘life’ and Adam’s means ‘earth’ (1670, 13, 3). Thus Eve, as the final link in the chain of creation, is the ‘crown’ of all being (Thompson 1992, 35). Similarly, the Gnostic Sophia, as the final emanation of the Invisible Spirit (Brakke 2010, 55), is the exemplar of the divine in the earth. Agrippa declares that women are “possess’d of no less excellent Faculties of Mind, Reason, and Speech” than men and that in the “Regions of Bliss and Glory” there is “no exception of Sex” (1670, 2). He critically exposes the Biblical Fall by offering a reversed interpretation in which Eve is extolled, not denigrated. He argues that the orthodox version of the Fall lays the blame on Eve, even though it declares that it was Adam who first ate of the forbidden fruit—thus, Agrippa argues that it is “In Adam we all dyed,” not in Eve, for it was Adam who transgressed first

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³ The figure of Agrippa appears in Mary Shelley’s short story, “The Mortal Immortal” (1833) where he creates an elixir of immortality to be administered to the main protagonist, Winzy. Charles Robinson’s research has revealed the extent of Percy’s role as editor to the 1818 Frankenstein manuscript. See: Mary Shelley and Percy Shelley, *Frankenstein, or, The modern Prometheus*: the original two-volume novel of 1816-1817 from the Bodleian Library manuscripts, ed. Charles E. Robinson (New York: Vintage Books, 2009).

⁴ Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim was a Germanic polymath, physician, legal scholar, theologian and occult writer who was born near Cologne in 1486 and died in Grenoble in 1535. He studied with the Humanist Johannes Trithemius at Wurzburg (Valente 2006, 4–8), and during his time in Italy studied the Kabbalah (ibid) and lectured on the Pimander of *Hermes Trismegistus* at the University of Pavia (Tyson 1993, xx–xxi).
In *Frankenstein*, Victor’s transgression takes the form of hubris and out-of-control ambition which disregards and oversteps the contribution of feminine energies. Agrippa believed that the female brought to the act of creation “a Rational Soul,” operating as “a beam, or bright ray of Divinity” (13). Likewise, the Gnostic Sophia, incarnate in creation, is extolled as the light of wisdom and restorative unity (Turner 2000, 181).

Mary Shelley’s reworking of aspects of the Genesis myth reflect Agrippa’s ideas. He is mentioned early in the novel when Victor recounts his discovery of Agrippa’s works:

> When I was thirteen years of age, we all went on a party of pleasure to the baths near Thonon: the inclemency of the weather obliged us to remain a day confined to the inn. In this house I chanced to find a volume of the works of Cornelius Agrippa. I opened it with apathy; the theory which he attempts to demonstrate, and the wonderful facts he relates, soon changed this feeling into enthusiasm. A new light seemed to dawn upon my mind … (1.2.7)

However, Victor’s father’s dismissal of Agrippa without explanation as “sad trash” (ibid), as well as his own experimentation with electricity, causes him to reject his previous enthusiasm for Agrippa (and Paracelsus), just as he rejects all other considerations and restraints in his single-minded aim to become a god-like creator (1.2.9). In his “Third Book of Occult Philosophy” (1533), Agrippa warns of those who practise “magical vanities” and “brag that they can do miracles” (Tyson 1992, 706). He promoted magic as a synthesis of the natural with the divine, of nature sourced from the fount of being (ibid). Therefore, natural magic is drawing down to Earth its corresponding celestial elements in an alchemical amalgam that creates oneness. This notion has similarities with the Gnostic-Hermetic stabilisation of creative processes through the emanative pairing of united energies. Victor’s hubris and unbridled pursuit to animate matter makes him believe that he has performed a miracle. However, he is deluded in his vanity, with tragic
consequences, for he does not bring together the correspondences of nature which include
the correspondences of masculine and feminine. By unilaterally binding nature to his own
will in the drive to create a living being, Victor rends nature from its source and disrupts
the balance required in the act of creation.

Stuart Peterfreund observes that the criticism of Agrippa by Victor’s mentor at the
University of Ingolstadt is another factor in Victor’s overthrow not only of Agrippa but
also of Paracelsus, whose philosophy likewise promoted the need for synthesis in nature
(2004, 79–80). Yet, as Mellor notes, it is his lectures at the university that introduce him to
the prospect of delving into the secrets of nature (1989, 91–92). They inspire him to
penetrate her “recesses … and shew how she works in her hiding places” (1.3.16). In
giving these words of Professor Waldman a feminine connotation, Mary Shelley’s text
implies that any abuse of nature is an abuse of the feminine. Victor’s inspiration soon
becomes an obsession, for he even bypasses the careful experimentation and considered
observation advocated by the scientific method. His lack of balance and restraint leads to
disaster rather than the benefits for humanity promised by Waldman. From a Gnostic
viewpoint, such divorcing of nature from its essential elements engenders disequilibrium
and the breakdown of cohesion, a division symbolically reflected in Victor’s rejection of
Agrippa and Paracelsus.

In 1812, Percy Shelley wrote to Godwin that he had been poring over the reveries
of Paracelsus (Letters of Shelley 1.303), and it is likely that Mary Shelley was introduced
to Paracelsus via her husband’s (or her father’s) reading. Peterfreund points to the
influence of Paracelsus in various sections of Mary Shelley’s novel, particularly in relation
to those feminine values and functions that provide a backdrop for Mary Shelley’s
“cultural critique” (2004, 83). By incorporating esoteric elements of this nature into the

5 Paracelsus (1493/94–1541) was a physician and alchemist of the German Renaissance (Debus
narrative of *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley reinforces her underlying message of the importance of the female in personal relationships and in the interactions of society. Victor Frankenstein’s failure to understand nature as being interwoven with an understanding of oneself is a prominent theme, for the animation or ‘ensouling’ of the Creature is fundamentally connected with his own ensoulment. His loss of ‘soul’ is mirrored in the soulless state of the ‘monster’ created in his image (Peterfreund 2004, 85–86). Ultimately, both experience the same feelings of self-loathing and alienation in the failure to unite the ‘outside’ with the ‘inside’ (ibid).

Paracelsus believed in the Hermetical correspondence between the microcosm (humans) and the macrocosm (the universe), and that one’s state of being is dependent upon the harmoniousness of that connection (Wear 1995, 314). He states that “the outer and the inner are one thing … one concordance … one fruit” (*Selected Writings* 1951, 67). For Mary Shelley, as for Paracelsus, such a ‘concordance’ is dependent upon the ‘fruitful’ acknowledgement of the feminine principle, which is rejected by Victor, and made unattainable for the Creature, a rejection reinforced by Victor’s distancing of himself from his previous studies of Paracelsus (Vasbinder 1984, 61). Victor’s statement that he seemed to “have lost all soul or sensation” (1.4.8) presents the “soulless self-absorption” and self-glorification which, in the view of radical Romantic writers, doomed the scientific enterprise (Peterfreund 2004, 86). It was their belief that science should be marked by “individual and cultural self-understanding” (ibid).

As the gulf between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ widens, Victor laments that all is ‘blasted’—a word that links with an earlier textual reference to a beautiful oak tree having 1993). A lecturer at the University of Basel and an itinerant physician, he was a pioneer in the use of medicinal chemicals and minerals (Webster 2008). His medical and philosophical works were published under the names Theophrastus von Hohenheim, and Theophrastus Paracelsus (a Latinisation of Hohenheim). It has been suggested that the name, ‘Paracelsus’, was given to him by his friends in 1528 as an expression of his unconventional character and pioneering spirit, the prefix ‘para’ meaning ‘beyond’ (Pagel 1982, 5, 6). He believed that the macrocosm of the universe was present as a microcosm in each person (Wear 1995, 314).
been blasted to a stump by a bolt of lightning (1.2.13; 2.9.1). For Paracelsus, trees symbolised feminine love and nurturance. In the *Opus Paramirum* (1530–1531), Paracelsus wrote that the female is “like a tree bearing fruit. And man is like fruit that the tree bears” (2008, 94–95). Without that tree, all is blasted and fruitless. Thus, in the absence of a feminine creative counterpart, Victor himself, as creator, is “a blasted tree” (3.19.8), while the Creature is the corrupted fruit. The Creature’s loathsome and appalling appearance can therefore be viewed as a representation of the hideousness of a situation that lacks a strong and sustaining female tree (or presence). Mary Shelley’s reference to Agrippa and her utilisation of Paracelsian imagery reinforce the notion, implicit in the novel, that the marginalisation of female knowledge and influence is detrimental to human progress and sound creative vision. Embedded in the text is the message that gender imbalance has repercussions not just at the personal level but for society at large, and can only be remedied by the adjustment of the dynamic between male and female energies, a concept that has its antecedents in esoteric, particularly Gnostic, thought where the ‘marriage’ of the heavenly Sophia and the earthly Adam brings equipoise and sustainability (Brakke 2010, 57).

**III. The Feminine Presence in *Frankenstein***

According to Betty T. Bennett, the death of Mary Shelley’s mother and her father’s second marriage, her husband’s inability to show his grief in the wake of their first child’s death, and her own unassuaged depression were factors that are represented in Victor’s ultimate forsaking of his ‘child’ (2003, 6). I believe that such factors also consolidated Mary Shelley’s desire for embodied, ‘hands-on’ feminine qualities that could be sources of sustenance, edification and renewal, and for the bonds of mutual love, help and comfort
between males and females to be strengthened and equalised. What is more, Frankenstein’s disastrous experiment suggests the fallibility of male-oriented sciences and education. Thus, Victor Frankenstein represents a flawed masculinity as a microcosm of a society in which women are second-class citizens. The absence of femininity in the creature’s birth and subsequent development is its integral flaw.

*Frankenstein* can be read as a commentary on rampant idealism and scientific hubris, and as a representation of Mary Shelley’s own path traversed through a man’s world, as well as her attempt to navigate the masculinised province of published authorship. Yet, her novel also implicitly acknowledges the efficacy of the female voice in sounding the bell of change. As such, her characterisations of Frankenstein and the creature display, on the one hand, a desire to reach out sympathetically to other human beings and, on the other, a “merciless and brutal turning in upon the self, a wilful sundering of all bonds that tie a man to the rest of humanity” (Cantor 1985, 107). The former tendency is connected to the novel’s female characters and to ‘feminine’ qualities, the latter, to the absence of an operative female presence and values. In *Frankenstein*, though Mary Shelley’s female characterisations appear to display stereotypical feminine features, they are actually crucial in defining the male characters’ behaviour and development. They serve to render Victor’s irresponsibility towards the creature more contemptible. Without a positive female figure, the creature’s life is blighted not only by physical imperfections but also by a lack of affection and the emotional and mental synergy that is so vital to self-esteem and self-attainment. The female characters, at a

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6 Even at the professional level, Mary Shelley experienced anxiety over her position as an author on account of social biases against female published writers, her awareness of this bias being further heightened during her involvement in the *Cyclopaedia* project in 1835. As the only female author in a list of several dozen contributors, tensions resulted from this “gendered intervention” into “masculine writing domains” (Kucich 2000, 207), evident in her complaints about the “omnipresent Mr. Montgomery” (*Letters of Mary Shelley* 2.222) cornering the market for eminent male Italian authors in the first two volumes, and in her refusal, at one point, to carry out research in the British Library due to its “patriarchal atmosphere” (Kucich 2000, 208).
deeper level, represent that civilising and enlightening influence which, when absent or unacknowledged, cannot facilitate individual growth and the formation of social ties.\(^7\)

Such a lack of acknowledgement also applies to the double standards of the time, as exemplified in the character of Justine, who lives with the Frankenstein family and is hanged for the murder of William, the youngest member of the Frankenstein family. Falsely accused of William’s murder, she is nevertheless described during her trial as having a countenance which, “always engaging, was rendered, by the solemnity of her feelings, exquisitely beautiful” (1.8.2). Yet, despite her outward, idealised appearance, she is a feminine figure who furthers the development of male characters by revealing both the destructiveness of the vengeful Creature, who is the real murderer, and Frankenstein, who cowardly refuses to exonerate her. However, it is her name and treatment at the trial which specifically reflect the double standards of the contemporary judiciary system, of which Mary Shelley was deeply critical. The fact that she and Elizabeth, as women, do not have the standing and credibility to convince the jury of her innocence serves to indict both the judicial system and the position of women within society (Bennett 2000, 6). As such, Victor Frankenstein takes on the role of an agent for a society in which relations between men and women, when unbalanced and divided, are ultimately destructive (ibid).

Elizabeth and Safie are perhaps most integral to the development of Frankenstein and the creature. Safie directly represents Mary Shelley’s proto-feminism. The daughter of a Turkish merchant, she defies her father in escaping to join De Lacey’s son, Felix (an act reminiscent of the Shelleys’ own elopement). Furthermore, she is encouraged by her

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\(^7\) Mary Shelley’s concern with gender compatibility and masculine self-awareness is also evident in her novel, *The Last Man*, wherein the protagonist, Lionel Verney, is only able to discern his gender by looking in a mirror, but without this empirical perception he possesses no such identity. According to Elizabeth Fay, the only way Lionel Verney is able to gain a subjective and personalised perception of himself is to take on a “feminised ideal” that will open up his cognitive, intuitive and relational senses by combining “masculine and feminine traits in such a way as to confute traditional notions of gender” (1998, 95). The instability of gender both represents the need for a realignment of “conventionally assigned” gender qualities, and warns against the repression and erasure of female attributes and values within society (Eberle-Sinatra 2000, 95, 104).
mother to “aspire to the higher powers of intellect, and an independence of spirit” (2.14.8). She is separated from the De Laceys by a language barrier but is made part of their family, unlike the Creature who conceals himself because of his repulsiveness. According to Anne Mellor, the De Laceys represent the united and mutually affectionate family that is the model for a society based on gender equality and egalitarian principles. Their leaving symbolises the removal of an “alternative to a rigidly patriarchal construction of gender and family” (Mellor 1989, 18). Safie is a civilising influence in that, when learning to speak the De Laceys’ language, she indirectly educates the Creature who watches her from his hideout. She is a stranger to him, but he is attracted to her because of her beauty and bearing: “Presently I found, by the frequent recurrence of one sound which the stranger repeated … that she was endeavouring to learn their language; and the idea instantly occurred to me, that I should make use of the same instructions to the same end” (2.13.6).

While the name Safie may relate to “Safi,” a name in Arabic meaning “pure,” it is possible that Shelley was drawing on its similarity to the Greek name Sophia, or “Wisdom” (Lowe-Evans 1993, 49). Safie’s transcendent potential is indicated by her effect upon the De Lacey household, something the Creature also notices: “Several changes, in the meantime, took place in the cottage. The presence of Safie diffused happiness among its inhabitants; and I also found that a greater degree of plenty reigned there” (2.15.10). It is through the Creature’s observation of Safie that the importance of the feminine is made fully apparent, in that he becomes more aware of his own alienation resulting from the absence of a female counterpart: “no Eve soothed my sorrows, nor shared my thoughts; I was alone. I remembered Adam’s supplication to his Creator. But where was mine? He had abandoned me: and, in the bitterness of my heart, I cursed him” (2.15.11). The curse here anticipates Prometheus’s curse of Jupiter in Prometheus Unbound but, unlike Percy
Shelley’s Prometheus, the Creature is unable to revoke his curse because he has no feminine influence to move him towards forgiveness.

Elizabeth, however, is the most idealised of all the female characters. Frankenstein’s betrothed, she is described in the following terms: “The saintly soul of Elizabeth shone like a shrine-dedicated lamp … her smile, her soft voice, the sweet glance of her celestial eyes, were ever there to bless and animate us. She was the living spirit of love to soften and attract” (1.2.5). Critics like George Levine have argued that Frankenstein and the creature are connected by their destructive behaviours (1996, 209). Adding to this observation, I also suggest that Elizabeth and the creature are connected because together they constitute the psychology, spirit and personality of Victor. Whereas the creature is his base ‘earthly’ side, Elizabeth is his sympathetic ‘heavenly’ side, associations reinforced by her correlation with the “celestial” and her ability to “bless and animate.” This function is reflected in Elizabeth’s ability to “subdue [Victor] to a semblance of her own gentleness,” whereas the creature enrages him, causing him to lose self-control and become violent (1.2.5). This correlation distinguishes her as the Sophianic component of Victor’s character, the spiritual element of his Adamic physicality personified by the creature. Victor is unable to reconcile and unite these two aspects of himself because he is the product of a male-dominated society and does not realise the full importance of the feminine in shaping individual and collective progress. He therefore turns his back on the creature’s request for a companion “with whom I can live in the Interchange of those sympathies necessary for my being” (2.17.2). Despite his initial intention to create a female counterpart for the creature, Victor does not provide a soulmate for his ‘Adam’. The feminine aspect of Adam is Sophia, symbolising the Wisdom that is integral to the ‘whole’ image of ‘man’ (Hirst 1964, 204). Thus, the creating of a companion for the creature has Gnostic overtones in that it promises the possibility of
the attainment of wholeness, whereas the withholding of such a gift indicates the
continuation of the creature’s ‘divided image’ (Gibbons 1996, 90). The lack of an
operative female agency means that the dispersed elements of nature cannot be reunited,
feminine functions having been appropriated for male ends. The fact that Victor constructs
the female body and then, having considered the horrors of sexuality and reproduction,
destroes the body before it was ever given life suggests that Victor’s fear of the Creature is
surpassed only by his fear of the female, whose body is far more grotesque and threatening
than the creature’s male body.

Mellor suggests that, “At every level, Victor Frankenstein is engaged upon a rape
of nature,” a violent penetration and usurpation of the female’s ‘hiding places’, of the
womb (1988, 118). Terrified of female sexuality and the power of human reproduction,
creativity and spirituality that it generates, both he and the patriarchal society he represents
use the technologies of science and the laws of the polis to manipulate, control, and repress
women” (ibid). In Gnostic thinking, the subordination of women is a product of
Ialdabaoth’s mechanisations (King 2000, 174). Ialdabaoth symbolises the falsehood and
delusion that results in alienation and the division of the sexes. Victor is deluded into
believing he can take on and wield the creative forces of nature without any recourse to a
feminine agency, a false view that has disastrous consequences. Like the Gnostic Sophia,
the female in Frankenstein embodies illuminative and mediatory qualities which could be
a means of individual transformation. However, this Sophianic agency is unable to operate
due to its marginalisation. Sophia represents the divine element in humanity and the
feminine aspect of nature, without which there can be no wholeness or creative integrity.

The themes played out in Mary Shelley’s novel give credence to this assessment in
that they point to the usurpation of natural power by authoritarian and unilateral methods.
Horrified by his own creation, Victor refuses to provide the Creature with the love and
companionship of a female counterpart, thereby denying any possibility of emotional sustenance and development and keeping his offspring a ‘monster’. Thus, in this sense, the social, intellectual and creative limitations imposed on women are presented by Mary Shelley as the side lining of feminine values as well as the commandeering of the womb and the role of mother by the male in an act of creation that is doomed to failure. The role of ‘soulmate’ is not usurped as such, but in denying his creature the right of a female counterpart, Victor Frankenstein symbolises the patriarchal denial of the feminine principle as an equal and vital player in the development of both the individual and society.

IV. Conclusion: Mary and Percy Shelley’s Prometheus Myth

The infusion of feminine qualities required for the forsaken Creature in Frankenstein reflect the notion of the ‘Man of Feeling’ propounded by Godwin, but Mary Shelley goes much further than this. The creature is too repulsive to be socially accepted, causing him to become destructive to both himself and society. Without a female counterpart to love and assist him into a fuller experience of being, his alienation is unalleviated, and he cannot evolve to his true potential. But, even more importantly, without the redemptive and illuminative values of the feminine principle, both inwardly and outwardly, he cannot gain the insight needed to open up his faculties or receive the knowledge that can guarantee his progress towards greater relatedness, sentience and spiritual understanding. Without his Sophianic principle, he is without his manhood, his creative vision, his place in society and his freedom of spirit. Like Victor, he is trapped on one side of a binary, he cannot merge the mind with the heart or ‘male’ ambition with ‘feminine’ feeling. He can only walk the earth forever, like a spectre, unable to find rest and peace for his soul. This image metaphorically describes the fate that is the result of opposite but complementary energies
unable to come together. Thus, in her novel, Mary Shelley positions the female as the vehicle of a salvation that is denied the creature by the creator but for which the creature will always long.

Where Mary Shelley depicts the negative effects resulting from the suppression of the feminine, Percy Shelley, as I will show in the next chapter, presents in *Prometheus Unbound* a resolution of gender imbalances through the coming together of male and female agencies, a resolution that becomes more apparent when read in comparison with Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Both Victor Frankenstein and the creature are characterised by their need for the feminine, but it is a need that is not fulfilled and so there is no resolution of the tensions that this omission creates. The conflicts presented in both *Frankenstein* and *Prometheus Unbound* engage with the politics of institutional and hierarchical structures in the nineteenth century, but Frankenstein places this engagement within the orbit of familial relationships and socialisation.

It is clear from his preface to the 1818 edition of *Frankenstein* that Percy Shelley regarded the underlying themes of the text as being of social and spiritual significance, stating that the novel was a directive to “the imagination for the delineating of human passions” that are “more comprehensive and commanding than any which the ordinary relations of existing events can yield” (vi). These words reflect the disruption that can occur when meaningful ties between the sexes are not established, a neglect that he attempts to rectify through the character of Asia in *Prometheus Unbound*, in response to the ideas and issues raised in *Frankenstein*. In his capacity as editor and collaborator, it is likely that he and Mary discussed the esoteric sources and concepts contained therein. As his wife, Mary Shelley would have known of his interest in alchemy (Mellor 1989, 73) and his familiarity with the gnosis of Agrippa and Paracelsus. In contrast to Victor Frankenstein and the Creature, Percy Shelley’s Prometheus is able, with the assistance of
the feminine principle, to achieve freedom from hell and transform his Satanic aspects into Christ-like attributes. Such a transformation echoes the alchemical concept of the transmutation of base metal into gold, a transformative process that does not eventuate in *Frankenstein*, for it is dependent on an active Sophianic agency, able to beget the oneness that unites contrary forces, and assists in restoring the unified image of nature and humanity.

In the following chapter, I contend that in Percy Shelley’s rendition of the Prometheus myth, Asia acts as Prometheus’s Sophianic counterpart, who not only works through Prometheus but also acts as the catalyst for revolution in her confrontation with Demogorgon. In this way, he suggests a solution to the problems presented in *Frankenstein*. However, where Mary Shelley’s depictions of the Sophianic female are presented through familial and social relationships enacted within a contemporaneous setting, Percy Shelley creates a more traditionally mythic narrative of human spiritual evolution and revolution, presenting an ideal and mystical union of male and female energies, facilitated by an active feminine principle.
Chapter Five  
The Revolutionary Feminine in *Prometheus Unbound*

Radical in their subject matter and socio-political views, the writings of Percy and Mary Shelley share many basic themes and symbols with their contemporaries and predecessors, including the visionary pursuit of ideal love, the rebellion against authoritarian rule, and the quest for freedom from restrictive dogmas and self-negating social constraints. In *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley depicts the negative effects resulting from the suppression of the feminine, with a clear focus on familial and social ties. In *Prometheus Unbound*, Percy Shelley presents a resolution of gender disparities through the collaboration of male and female. The message in both works is the same—the need for an active feminine intermediary—but the emphasis is different. William Keach states that in his political vision Shelley attempted to “transfigure Wollstonecraft’s powerful but conflicted exemplarity” concerning women’s rights into a more “self-authorizing female agency” (2004, 111, 103). I believe that Shelley also sought to transform the unilateral male authority of Victor Frankenstein in Mary Shelley’s “Modern Prometheus” into the bilateral male and female agencies of Prometheus and Asia operating equitably in *Prometheus Unbound*. Both *Frankenstein* and *Prometheus* show how the lack of unity between the sexes undermines society and inhibits humanity’s progress. Both works connect the feminine with that cognitive awakening which results in creative accomplishments and transcendence and leads to the attainment of self-realisation and self-determination. However, in *Frankenstein*, the creature is unable to attain full mental, emotional and spiritual stature because he lacks a civilising and spiritualising feminine influence; and Frankenstein is unable to achieve the personal and collective aims usually associated with the Promethean myth in the Romantic era due to the marginalisation of female functions.
Conversely, in *Prometheus Unbound*, Asia acts as both the acknowledged counterpart of Prometheus and the catalyst who shifts the balance in favour of transcendental revolution.

Percy Shelley’s *Prometheus* depicts a revolution of the human spirit, a redemptive process that, in Behmenist terms, both ‘rides’ and transcends the beast—Shelley’s Demogorgon—of divided materiality (*Threefold Life* 1620, 3.77), bringing the natural ‘will’ into unity with the divine will. For the Gnostics, Sophianic Wisdom has an association with their concept of the ‘rebel Christ’—for it is a wisdom that opposes restrictive dogmas and regimes (Rasimus 2006, 804). Thus, rather than operating behind the scenes as simply a muse or an extension of Prometheus, Asia functions as the core piece of the puzzle, a piece missed or bypassed by revolutions (like the French Revolution) which relinquish their original democratic aims in the drive to secure power and political domination at the expense of egalitarian ideals and equitable gender relations. The ultimate failure of the French Revolution, culminating in the Reign of Terror, convinced many Romantics that revolutionary goals could be accomplished only by a revolution (transformation) of the human spirit, and they consistently aligned this process with the feminine and articulated it within an esoteric paradigm. This chapter shows how Percy Shelley’s representation of the feminine in *Prometheus Unbound* resonates with both western occult tradition and with Mary Shelley’s portrayals of gender in *Frankenstein*. I argue that both writers engage with a Gnostic-based ethos wherein the union of male and female energies is a central symbol of completion and perfection. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* illustrates the catastrophic effects of a one-sided ‘revolution’, symbolised by the creature deprived of a feminine counterpart or influence. Percy Shelley’s *Prometheus* depicts a mainly internal, transformative ‘revolution’, successfully achieved through the united actions of Asia and Prometheus.
I. Shelley’s Philosophical Ideas and Esoteric Language

Michael O’Neill observes that Percy Shelley’s esoteric poems, such as Prometheus Unbound, often present a coded language intended for the more educated or ‘initiated’ audience—the “sunetoi” or “discerning few,” as Shelley referred to this type of readership (2014, 32). According to Stephen Behrendt, such a use of language engages with the “potential” for a “universal army of visionaries among the poem’s readers,” representing the need for integration and synthesis that “activates the images of apocalypse produced at moments of cultural crisis” (1989, 24). Prometheus Unbound demonstrates Shelley’s desire for a “spiritual kingdom” in “these early years when reform seemed genuinely attainable” (55–56). Shelley, like Blake and Coleridge, employed coded texts and imagery to present both the existential alienation that beleaguer humanity and the means of addressing it. Such means resonate with the Gnostic belief that personal liberation is achieved through the acquisition of experiential knowledge and self-awakening, which Shelley associated with the possibilities of the imagination and the transformative power of love. Cian Duffey states that Prometheus Unbound stresses that a “systematic revolution in opinion, a moral and intellectual revolution, must precede any successful or lasting change in political institutions,” and that Shelley “saw his own work” as “participating in this vital, long term intellectual revolution” (2005, 10). Accordingly I argue that he expressed his socio-political beliefs using the alternative language of esoteric tradition to emphasise the primary importance of the individual psyche in altering the collective psyche to achieve political transformation. Love is integral to this process and is identified with the feminine principle, which in Prometheus is represented by the character of Asia.

Though Shelley’s idealism is often regarded as naïve or overly simplistic, I believe that he viewed non-violent forms of resistance as the most practicable and efficacious. In
“The Masque of Anarchy” (1819), and in a letter to Leigh Hunt of November 14, 1819, Shelley highlights violence as a major but irrational aspect of political control. He writes:

I fear that in England things will be carried violently by the rulers, and that they will not have learned to yield in time to the spirit of the age. The great thing to do is to hold the balance between popular impatience and tyrannical obstinacy; to inculcate with fervour both the right of resistance and the duty of forbearance. You know my principles incite me to take all the good I can get in politics, for ever aspiring to something more. I am one of those whom nothing will fully satisfy, but who am ready to be partially satisfied by all that is practicable. We shall see. ([Letters of Shelley](2.458–59))

Shelley’s awareness of both the violent actions of “rulers” and the repercussions of “popular impatience,” as well as his readiness “to be partially satisfied by all that is practicable,” indicate a political outlook that appears complex but reflects his attitude towards violence. His advocacy of “both the right of resistance and the duty of forbearance” can be viewed as a form of apathy that works in favour of the oppressor (Leask 2004, 123).

However, Shelley’s avowed commitment to non-violence as his preferred method of political change suggests that he, like his Prometheus, viewed violent resistance as a perpetuation of oppressive regimes which could only spawn new power struggles and social unrest. The closing “We shall see” implies both an acknowledgement of the intractable nature of oppression and the possible ways of overcoming it. Written a year before the publication of *Prometheus Unbound*, this letter suggests that, in his writing of the poem, Shelley was searching for a way to articulate and resolve his concerns about revolution. His focus on the importance of the feminine in the poem suggests that by incorporating the gender configurations of Gnostic-based thought Shelley recognised and
was attempting, like Mary Shelley in her “Modern Prometheus,” to address the issue of women’s rights and influence that neither the French Revolution nor previous versions of the Prometheus myth had adequately acknowledged.

II. Critical Perspectives on Shelley and *Prometheus Unbound*

Two discernible trends in Shelley criticism, solidified by New Criticism and Historicism, are to examine his poetry within a depoliticised framework, or to extend his political influence. In 1971, Earl R. Wasserman’s important book, *Shelley’s “Prometheus Unbound”: A Critical Reading*, explored the lyrical and psychological aspects of the poem’s imagery and themes, asserting that, although Shelley never renounced his atheistic views, he nevertheless assimilated various ideas and theories that have non-orthodox religious underpinnings (24). Despite discussing Prometheus’s character as a representation of the “One Mind,” or the collective psyche, Wasserman does not examine the text’s esoteric undercurrents nor its Gnostic implications. Also in 1971, M.H. Abrams compared Shelley’s *Prometheus* to “the popular eighteenth-century genre of universal history,” wherein the protagonist is “Man” or “Mankind” (300), with Prometheus representing the symbolic “Man” who is humanity’s “intellectual and moral vanguard,” developing “through history” toward a “perfected human condition” (ibid). Similarly, Stuart Curran in 1975 approached Shelley’s thematic content from both a Zoroastrian and a psychological perspective, stating that Shelley “transformed the Zoroastrian duality into an exact model of the Freudian,” wherein Jupiter is Thanatos (the ego’s fear of destruction) and the reunited Prometheus and Asia are Eros (117). Yet Freud, writes Curran, “conceived of this duality as … irresolvable” (ibid). I argue that Shelley sought to resolve this duality by bringing together opposing forces through the joining of Prometheus and Asia.
Since the research of Wasserman, Abrams and Curran, a focus on the politicised aspects of Shelley’s works has highlighted the revisionist and subversive elements of *Prometheus Unbound*. Linda M. Lewis explores the iconographic relationship between Prometheus and Christ as a revision of Christian themes integral to Shelley’s presentation of Prometheus as saviour of humankind. In *The Promethean Politics of Milton, Blake, and Shelley* (1992) Lewis draws analogies between these three writers through their representations of tyranny and rebellion, and discusses *Prometheus Unbound* in terms of the dual Prometheus—a Messianic figure associated with Christ, and a disruptive and destructive figure associated with Satan. *Prometheus Unbound* was written at a time when institutional Christianity was being scrutinised for its involvement in the power structures and hegemony that Shelley was challenging. Bryan Shelley interprets *Prometheus Unbound* as a direct revisionist engagement with the Bible, attempting to delineate a ‘pure’ form of Christianity unconstrained by the “dogmas with which it came to be encumbered” (1994, 1). While he draws attention to the esotericism that underlies many of the revisionist aspects of *Prometheus*, Shelley examines these aspects in order to better define the poem’s treatment of the Bible rather than to explore its esoteric themes and patterns. In *Romantic Satanism* (2003), Peter A. Schock views Shelley’s body of work as resplendent with satanic imagery, which gradually evolves and transforms from a demonic figure of Satan into an illuminating, humanitarian, light-bearing Lucifer. Schock singles out *Prometheus Unbound* as the work in which this transformation and the struggle between these two satanic images are most sharply brought into focus. Yet these interpretations overlook the importance of Asia as Prometheus’s counterpart, whose influence is instrumental in bringing about his Christ-like transformation and who is crucial to understanding the poem as a whole.
Christopher R. Miller discusses Shelley’s use of a favourite word, ‘Heaven’, employed with a range of meanings, political, spiritual and metaphorical. Miller states that in the eighteenth century, “the language of religious enthusiasm was frequently translated into the aesthetic realm of poetry” and that “there was a strongly political cast to Shelley’s concern with heaven” (2005, 577). According to Miller, Shelley conceptualised Heaven as “a kingdom” which merely reproduced “earthly notions of monarchy, empire, and class privilege; conceived as a divine reward, it enabled a cynical deferral of earthly justice, an illusory coda to life’s struggles” (578). Prometheus Unbound reflects Shelley’s distrust of orthodoxy and institutions, being “invested in a process of redefining and reimagining heaven” by modulating from “a signifier of theistic awe to a term of celestial beauty and boundless” (586).

In his 2006 study, “The Political Poet,” Keach offers a cogent explanation of the difficulties surrounding Shelley’s political didacticism in Prometheus Unbound. He examines the philosophical underpinnings of Shelley’s politics, stating that Shelley’s view of reform was driven by his “inflected idealism,” by a belief that “human beings make their own political history, and in this sense determine their own political existence, through acts of perceiving the world and themselves. But political existence is also a function of ‘material’ conditions and institutions” (2006). Prometheus, Keach asserts, is “neither a mythical Greek deity nor a fictional human being: he is a figure of future human potential projected to the utmost degree of idealization” (ibid). According to Keach, the ‘ideal’ was, for Shelley, a “mode of perception beyond the confines of dualistic alienation. ‘[I]dea’ designates all existential reality as constituted through acts of perception” (ibid). Within the mental processes that make reality, Asia is the “liberating projection of Prometheus’ capacity for love” while Jupiter is the “enslaving projection of Prometheus’ own capacity for hatred” (ibid).
Cynthia Cavanaugh draws attention to the influence of Dante Alighieri’s *Divine Comedy* (1472) on *Prometheus Unbound*. She discusses similarities between Shelley’s text and the third canticle of *Divine Comedy*, “Paradise,” in the imagery of Shelley’s sun temple and the Phidian forms of the characters therein which parallel Dante’s saints in the sun. Both authors, Cavanaugh states, “use images of light and radiance to indicate the presence of wisdom” (2010, 84). Though Cavanaugh does not explicitly discuss Shelley’s political intentions, her study again demonstrates Shelley’s revisionist engagement with a Christian paradigm. By representing the sun temple as a state of mind, Shelley depicts an “internal paradise where love and wisdom coexist” without “endorsing the Christianity represented in Dante’s *Paradise*” (ibid).

In contrast, Michael O’Neill views the notion that Shelley utilised poetry as the “vehicle for the endorsement of a system of ideas” as “fundamentally erroneous” (2011, 20). Instead, O’Neill writes, the strength of Shelley’s poetry lies in the ways that he “tests, dramatizes, anatomizes and enacts the processes involved in belief or, indeed, doubt” (ibid). Rather than simply being a poet “hurrying always to exalt principles of liberty, love, and equality,” Shelley can be viewed “one of the major exemplars of Keats’s ideal ‘Negative Capability’ in that he is “often prepared to open his poetry to differing interpretations, to allow the reader’s mind to be the final courtroom of the poetry’s appeal” (ibid). In O’Neill’s view, such imaginative multiplicity forms the “spring of Shelley’s poetic practice in *Prometheus Unbound*” (21), as seen in the dynamics between Jupiter and Prometheus, which illustrate the two-way mechanisms of hatred and tyranny.

In her article, “Stoned Shelley: Revolutionary Tactics and Women Under the Influence” (2009), Katherine Singer reads Asia’s inhalation of vapours during the eruption of Demogorgon’s volcano as an “allusion to the French Revolution as a kind of failed drug experiment” that unleashes “catastrophic violence” in Demogorgon’s power to overthrow
Jupiter (689). Singer also discusses the implications of the gas being nitrous oxide, which had been used in experiments at the turn of the nineteenth century by Humphrey Davey, with whose works Shelley was familiar (ibid). Singer presents an interesting argument about a little explored aspect of the Prometheus Unbound text, but her reading of Prometheus and Asia’s revolution as failed seems dismissive of its ultimate success and the factors integral to its success, that is, Asia’s questioning of Demogorgon that results in Prometheus’s positive transformation and recognition of his capacity to love.

Madeleine Callaghan writes that Shelley’s idealism “was always veined with an awareness that heaven remained, and perhaps would always stay, ‘unascended’” and states that “Shelley’s skepticism is constant throughout his work, as is his preoccupation with embodying visionary thought in language” (2015, 92–93). Callaghan discusses this ambiguity and its embodiment in the female characters of Alastor (1816) and The Triumph of Life (1822) in terms of a tension between life-affirming ideology and nihilism, the latter of which Shelley rejects in favour of experience and the visionary insight promised by these female characters. Similarly, Elham Nilchian examines the notion of “self-loss” in Shelley from the perspective of Sufism, asserting that the “Romantics pursue a sense of mystical oneness with the divine—God, Nature, or an ideal beloved (2016, 222). Nilchian links the male poet’s search for “an ideal female other,” and his desire for self-loss as a means to “become one with her,” with the loss of self in Sufism, referred to as “fanaa” (ibid). Nilchian also cites Alastor, wherein the poet is “provoked by that vision for “intercourse with an intelligence similar to itself. It is a poet who ‘images to himself the Being whom he loves’ and seeks self-perfection through losing his egotistic self for that idealised Being” in the pursuit of divine knowledge (223).

In regard to Shelley’s treatment of women, In the 1970s, scholars like Kenneth Neill Cameron and Nathaniel Brown portrayed Shelley as a proto-feminist who espoused
both an ideal that explicitly challenged “the period's sexist norms” and an “erotic psychology” that required “equality between the sexes” (Brown 1979, 3, 71, 198). Contrastingly, Barbara Gelpi, refuted the view of Shelley as a feminist. In *Shelley's Goddess: Maternity, Language, Subjectivity* (1992), Gelpi argues that he recapitulates gender norms and traditional roles. Teddi Chichester Bonca calls Shelley a “detractor of men” rather than a “champion of women” who longed to escape masculinity through creating idealised feminine ‘mirrors’ of himself (1999, 227).

More recently, Shelley’s treatment of women has been re-evaluated. Nora Crook discusses Shelley’s relationships with women who, she writes, “feature prominently in many of his works” (2013, 66). According to Crook, the “category ‘Women’ has been as inseparable from ‘Shelley’ as ‘Politics’ or ‘Irreligion’ or ‘Nature’ in a way that is not similarly true of Shelley and ‘Men’ … His works testify to the influence of remarkable women” (ibid). Her essay explores the damaging accounts of Shelley as a ‘lady’s man’ by biographers Thomas Jefferson Hogg and John Cordy Jeaffreson in relation to his status as a women’s liberator and a “disciple of Wollstonecraft” (70). Crook also lists Shelley’s reading of women authors such as Sappho, Wollstonecraft, Charlotte Smith and Germaine de Stael. Her study gives a balanced account of Shelley’s interactions with women both literary and personally. “Whether Shelley was one of the most pro-feminist of male writers or the subtlest of self-deceiving male dominators” Crook writes, is a debate that will be “perpetually reconfigured” (66). However, she also points out that Shelley “casts women as agents in his works to a greater degree than any of his male contemporaries” (ibid). spawning a legacy of ‘Shelleyan’ feminists like Frances Wright, Margaret Fuller, and Harriet Taylor.
Likewise, Anne Schwan’s study, “‘Bless the Gods for my pencils and paper’: Katie Gliddon’s prison diary, Percy Bysshe Shelley and the suffragettes at Holloway” (2013) reveals the influence of Shelley on Katie Gliddon, a prominent figure in the Suffragettes, who kept a diary of her time in prison within the margins of a smuggled copy of The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley, which she read almost constantly. Schwan notes that Shelley “offered a valve for ‘violent emotion’ to young female readers and maintained ‘a subversive appeal’ for adult women”, like Gliddon, who transposed Shelley’s “revolutionary politics to the struggle for women’s suffrage,” taking lines from “Fragment: to a friend released from prison, 1817” which she dedicated to her leader Mrs Pankhurst (154).

Adding to and replying to the above viewpoints, I propose in this chapter that an analysis of the esoteric components of Shelley’s themes and imagery can help elucidate aspects of his political didacticism, as well as the simultaneously simplistic and complex nature of his feminine idealisations—Shelley drew on a set of ideas that are at once simple in their archetypal nature and complex as part of a long, varied and well developed heterodox tradition. I argue that much of Shelley’s revisionism and political expression lies in his incorporation of Gnostic motifs, a connection that becomes more obvious when taking into account his representation of feminine agencies. The narrative of Prometheus Unbound strongly resembles cosmological Gnostic myth. Prometheus presents the idea that the truth of reality is a concealed source of creative energy, which appears unknowable. Nevertheless, this source, or truth, is potentially knowable, but first Demogorgon must be faced. In Shelley’s Prometheus, Demogorgon is a chthonic rendition of a disrupted material reality, unable to connect with its core nature, a rupture that not only hides the ‘deep truth’ but also contains the seeds of reconnection and renewal, the
promise of ascendancy from the ashes of destruction (Brigham 1996, 259). Prometheus acts as an avatar of the human psyche, constrained by Jupiter’s power, which represents the religious, institutional and political oppression that moulds the collective consciousness. Prometheus is freed from bondage when he recognises the salvific power of love, but it is a recognition and freedom instigated by the character of Asia, who assists him in deposing Jupiter and triggering, through the eruption of fire, an apocalyptic event that renews both himself and the world. Humanity’s imagination is thus made free to transcend the confines of mortal reality and realise its full potential. The Gnostic paradigm is seen in the character of Jupiter who, like the Gnostic demiurge, is a false god created, in this case, by the human imagination. Prometheus’s bondage equates not only to the soul’s entrapment in the physical body but also to the entrapment of the mind within the limitations of orthodoxy, which Prometheus, as a personification of the imaginative faculties, transcends by realising the importance of the feminine Asia. Prometheus and Asia can be read as both Adam and Eve, and Christ and Sophia. Prometheus’s revelation is contingent upon Asia’s discovery of the deep, seemingly unknowable source that was there before Jupiter, a discovery that engenders the reunification of male and female principles and humanity’s resulting liberation from the illusory reality of the demiurge.

III. Shelley and Gnosticism: The Ophitic Serpent in The Assassins

It is clear Percy Shelley was aware of the historical presence of Gnosticism, as shown in his 1814 fragment, The Assassins, which consists of four chapters of an intended Romance, designed on the same scale as his two Gothic works, Zastrozzi (1810) and St.

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8 In Renaissance literature, Demogorgon is a mysterious creative figure associated with eternity and fate (Everest 2014, 2.467–68). Many scholars trace the name back to the Greek term ‘Demiurge’ (Sweeney 1997, 4.516; Solomon 2012, 50). The Gnostics attributed falsehood to the Demiurge. However, other strains of Gnostic thought, such as the writings of Valentinus, depict the Demiurge as fallen or disconnected from reality and the truth of its own nature (Irenaeus 1885, 1.6).
Irvyne (1811). This fragment follows a group of Christian Gnostics he had read about in Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and the Abbé Augustin Barruel’s *Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire du jacobinisme* (1797–98), as they try to flee Jerusalem and Rome in order to settle in a utopian valley called “Bethzatanai” (Shelley 2002, 256). The text marks a transition between Shelley’s early Gothic novels and his more political prose-like poetry (Hoeveler 2013, 203). It reveals, as Diane Hoeveler notes, that in his sympathetic portrayal of these Gnostics, Shelley’s stance and judgments regarding official Christianity and what he considered to be “the institutionalized corruptions of … religion” are more “complex than has generally been recognized” (2013, 203). Shelley describes the assassins as possessing a superior singleness and sincerity of character that prevented them from being taken in by the “gross delusions of antiquated superstition” (2002, 254). He also makes it clear that “many of their opinions significantly resembled those of the sect afterwards known by the name of Gnostics” (ibid). Shelley depicts the assassins, in accordance with a Gnostic paradigm, as people who value “human understanding” and “the energies of the mind” (ibid), and who emphasise subjective enquiry over blind belief in either a single ‘divine code’ that purports to be the sole arbiter of revelation, or in a prescribed rule that promotes one course of action over any other (ibid). As Schock points out, *The Assassins*, though less refined in its execution, displays the same anti-institutional sentiments as *Prometheus*, especially in its treatment of the so-called ‘satanic’ (2003, 119).

In the fourth chapter, the narrative deviates towards an event that reinforces the esoteric character of the assassins’ faith by making a connection between the satanic and the female, when the daughter of Albedir befriends a snake by singing to it: “It leaped into her bosom, and she crossed her fair hands over it, as if to cherish it there” (Shelley 2002, 269). In their veneration of the serpent, the assassins are here revealed to be Ophite Gnostics, who worshipped the Edenic serpent as an ally of humanity, a reading further
supported by the name of the valley—Bethzatanai, or “house of Satan” (Schock 2003, 119). In this sense, Satan is not the devil of orthodox Christianity but a light-bringer, the bestower of ‘gnosis’, or knowledge. Here, the ‘house of Satan’ is linked to the power of the serpent but in the sense of a concept that is contained within itself—an amalgamation of all the colours of the spectrum into one eternal light of insight which then acts upon and enables the inner ‘satanic’ to evolve and transform into a vehicle of liberation. Yet, this serpent of knowledge is intimately connected to the feminine illuminative agency of the daughter of Albedir and is so closely interwoven with her that she carries it close to her heart.

According to Tertullian, the Ophite Gnostics magnified the serpent as an agent of good, “For it was the serpent,” they say, “who gave us the origin of the knowledge of good and evil” (cited in Nuttall 1997, 11). Likewise, in *Ecclesiastical History*, Mosheim describes the Ophites as believing that “the serpent by which our first parents were deceived, was either CHRIST himself or sophia, concealed under the form of that animal” (1832, 1.190). The serpent is thus synonymous with Sophianic wisdom, and also with Christ—the ‘rebel Christ’ of the Gnostics, who challenges the edicts of Jehovah. In Gnostic thinking, Christ is the masculine counterpart of Sophia, and is sometimes identified with Sophia (Hanegraaff 2006, 829). The Gnostics believed that humanity’s ‘first parents’ (personified mythologically by Adam and Eve) were not deceived. Rather, when Eve ‘tempted’ Adam in the garden, she did not bring about his ‘fall’ but his enlightenment (Brakke 2010, 66). Similarly, Sophia is a kind of Eve, the bestower of the knowledge of good and evil—‘good and evil’ in this context representing the pairing and balancing of opposites that engenders self-understanding and reconnection to the realm of spirit, as well as the empowerment that leads to freedom from oppression and tyranny. It is a knowledge that not only reintegrates oppositional forces but also reverses them, so that
they appear to change to their opposite poles when, in fact, what takes place is an ‘enantiodromia’—a term coined by the psychoanalyst, Carl Jung (1991, 229)—in that they undergo a transformation from one to the other, say from darkness into light. This conversion is also a sort of ‘transposition’, as in music when notes move from one octave to another, remaining the same but altering their pitch and resonance. So, Shelley, in *The Assassins*, presents the daughter of Albedir as singing to the serpent before enfolding it to herself (2002, 269). Like the Gnostics, Shelley links the serpent to the female, who cherishes it in her bosom (ibid).

In similar vein to Coleridge and Blake, as well as the ancient Ophites, Shelley regarded the snake as a positive symbol, subversively drawing upon its associations not only with rebelliousness against repressive regimes and dogmas, but also with the Garden of Eden, specifically in the Ophite sense as a symbol of illumination. For the Gnostics, the serpent was positive for the very reasons that it was negative in orthodox Christianity. According to the Biblical account, Jehovah forbids Adam and Eve to eat of the Fruit of Knowledge and anathematises the serpent for being instrumental in their disobedience. However, in Gnostic beliefs, there is no ‘sin’ of disobedience, the serpent being the means by which forbidden knowledge can be gained, a knowledge that is needed in order to become free. Thus, the knowledge of the serpent is a ‘rebel’ knowledge that sees through and turns around those things that may appear benevolent but which, in actuality, have been put in place as forms of control—so what has been pronounced bad or evil is actually good, and vice versa. The denigration of Eve by the Church is also reversed and she is acclaimed for bringing wisdom to Adam, not shame and disobedience. It is significant, then, that Shelley links the image of the snake with the feminine figure of Albedir’s daughter. As with Asia in Prometheus, she is identified with transformative and unconditional love: “She leaned over the precipice, and her dark hair hanging beside her
face, gave relief to its fine lineaments, animated by such love as exceeds utterance” (2002, 269). Such a connection is echoed in *Prometheus Unbound* in the pairing of Prometheus and Asia, the former a rebel Satan or Christ, the latter, a representation of Sophianic energy, the feminine counterpart or spirit of Christ, that assists Prometheus.

**IV. Shelley’s Version of the Prometheus Myth**

According to Paul Cantor, *Prometheus Unbound* attempts to “correct *Paradise Lost*** through a Blakean-style inversion of Milton’s values, portraying the ruling god as a demiurge-like tyrant and treating the Lucifer-esque rebel sympathetically (1984, 77). In his Preface, Shelley states that “The only imaginary being resembling in any degree Prometheus is Satan” (Zillman 1965, 14). In Ophitic Gnostic fashion, Shelley associates the ‘satanic’ Prometheus with Christ, basing the Titan’s torture on aspects of the Crucifixion, thereby turning the ‘demonic’ rebel of orthodoxy into a hero and liberator, whilst Jupiter is made to resemble the Old Testament god. The resemblance between Jupiter and Jehovah is reflected in Prometheus’s curse of Jupiter, which parallels the opening lines of Genesis, but with wording that casts Jehovah’s motives in a sinister light (Cantor 1984, 78): “Let thy malignant spirit move / In darkness over those I love” (1.1.276–77).

The oldest written record of the Prometheus myth is found in Hesiod’s *Theogony* and *Works and Days* (c. 750–650 BC). However, Hesiod’s version functions mainly as a backdrop to the story of Pandora and the introduction of evil into the world, presenting Prometheus as a kind of trickster who fools Zeus into accepting the bones and fat of sacrifice instead of the meat, to which Zeus responds by hiding fire from mortals. Depending on the socio-political climate, as well as the particular purposes of those writing their different versions of the myth, classical poets present two conflicting
renditions. The first is that of Prometheus as a trickster and thief whose defiance of divine authority condemns humanity. The second is of Prometheus as a selfless benefactor of humanity. The latter representation of Prometheus as a self-sacrificing hero gained new popularity during the Romantic era (McCalman 1999, 776). Shelley’s own version of the events leading up to Prometheus’s fire stealing contains some similarities to Hesiod’s. However, there are important variations. Jupiter does not conceal “the means of life” from mankind because of Prometheus’ trickery. Rather, it is Saturn, Jupiter’s rival for power, who “refused / The birthright of their being” (2.4.38–39). Acting in humanity’s best interests, Prometheus decides to aid Jupiter in his conquest of Saturn on the condition that Jupiter “Let man be free” (2.4.45)—but such action from Prometheus is only possible because of Asia. Unlike Pandora, Asia does not introduce evil but acts as an agency for deliverance from evil, through the turning of evil into good.

Another version of the Promethean myth which presents Prometheus as humanity’s benefactor is Aeschylus’ Prometheus Bound (c. 430). While critics have noted parallels with Shelley’s Prometheus, there are some significant differences. Shelley’s version presents Prometheus’s gifts as extensions of the symbolic fire representing both the negative and positive manifestations of knowledge and power. However, in Asia’s retelling of the myth in Act Two of Prometheus Unbound, Prometheus does not steal the fire of knowledge because the attributes symbolised by the fire belong solely to the gods but because they are already part of his character and being. Far from stealing or usurping the power of the gods, Shelley’s Prometheus instead “waked the legioned hopes / Which sleep within folded Elysian flowers, … and Love he sent to bind / The disunited tendrils of that vine / Which bears the wine of life, the human heart” (2.4.59–65). This love is mediated to Prometheus by Asia as she retells the myth. Asia’s act of love invokes Prometheus’s empathy and moves him to grant the forgiveness that ‘tames’ the fires of
conflict and resolves his rebellion against Jupiter. The taming of fire results in beneficial technology, such as agriculture, metalworking and navigation, all profitable to humanity as a whole but secondary to the awakening of “the human heart,” made possible by the feminine influence of Asia.

Another important difference in Aeschylus’s account is that it includes the two opposing forces of Divine Law, determined by the might of Zeus/Jupiter and Prometheus’s concern for humanity. In Shelley, there is no divine law because Jupiter does not have the divine right to law and power. Instead, his power is derived from that of Prometheus, a detail confirmed by Asia in Act Two: “Then Prometheus / Gave wisdom, which is strength, to Jupiter / And … Clothed him with the dominion of wide Heaven” (2.4.43–46). Prometheus’s gift of wisdom is connected with forgiveness, a redemptive forgiveness alluded to by Asia, for it is the strength of Prometheus’s own wisdom, brought forth by Asia’s Sophianic wisdom, that enables the creation of a composite resolution to the conflict with Jupiter. This resolution is the means by which Prometheus overcomes the constraints Jupiter represents by releasing them as part of the process of attaining self-awareness, thus regaining his power in an enantiodromial transformation. Prometheus and Jupiter represent two sides of the same coin, and the return of power to the former through the giving of wisdom to the latter is synonymous with the regenerative and unifying wielding of power, metaphorically described as being “clothed … with the dominion of wide heaven” (2.4.46). In Aeschylus’ Prometheus Bound, the other gods regard Zeus’s tyranny as part of the natural order of things. However, in Shelley’s Prometheus Unbound, they accept Jupiter’s rule out of fear, but the implication is that they will become free from fear when, through the actions of Asia and Prometheus, Jupiter’s tyranny is subverted, and the perceived natural order of things is revealed to be insubstantial, a phantasm of the mind caused by their own conditioned perceptions. From this standpoint, the fact that Jupiter
acquired his power from Prometheus, a power that is transmuted and returned to Prometheus, suggests that Jupiter is a symbol of the evil created by humanity that can be redeemed and transformed through the power of love and the granting of wisdom.

V. Politics and Prometheus

*Prometheus Unbound* is among Shelley’s most overtly political works. Abrams reads the work as a cosmic allegory or an illustration of humanity’s changing condition and evolution towards a new golden age (1971, 300). Schock posits that the text contains within itself Shelley’s attempt to clarify his own stance on whether political change should occur via a gradual evolution of ideas and attitudes or by immediate revolution (2003, 24). Linda M. Lewis claims that, in writing *Prometheus*, Shelley was trying to inspire subversive feelings and motivations in his readers (1992, 178). Certainly, such interpretations and opinions support the view that *Prometheus Unbound* is “a political statement” (ibid). Yet, Shelley’s rendition of the Prometheus myth reveals a more specific intention concerning gender, religion and revolutionary change. Just as William Blake re-sculpted Christian myth as part of a subversive discourse, so Shelley, despite being an outspoken atheist, incorporated Christian elements into his mythology, such as his comparisons between Prometheus and Satan. However, as noted by Cantor, Romantic authors commonly took a Gnostic approach in their adaptations of Christian sources, articulating the Fall, for example, not as a symbol of a loss of innocence associated with falling into sin and shame but as a symbol of mankind’s liberation and enlightenment (1984, x). Thus, Prometheus and Asia’s transformation mirrors both the Gnostic pairing of Christ and Sophia, and the reunion of Adam with the divine Sophia. As a second-generation Romantic, Shelley did not witness the bloodshed of the Revolution as an adult—as had Blake—but he did grow up during the rise of Napoleon in France, the
injustices of land enclosure and the 1819 Peterloo Massacre in Britain. Like Blake, he countered the falsity of Enlightenment principles, such as ‘Liberty’ and ‘Equality’, by creating his own apocalyptic vision in a recourse to heterodox esoteric traditions, a vision that is expressed in *Prometheus Unbound*. As Mary Shelley explains in her notes to that poem:

More popular poets clothe the ideal with familiar and sensible imagery.

Shelley loved to idealize the real—to gift the mechanism of the material universe with a soul and a voice, and to bestow such also on the most delicate and abstract emotions and thoughts of the mind. (Shelley 1841, 127)

Scholars often read Shelley’s figure of Prometheus as a representation of “Humanity, the Mind of Man, the Good in Man or something similar” (Butter 1970, 171). In light of both Mary Shelley’s observation and Percy Shelley’s handling of his revisionist themes and ideas, I view *Prometheus Unbound* as the re-envisioning and enactment of a revolution which must first take place in the mind and spirit before any outward progress can be achieved. Shelley’s revolution was not a simple ‘idealising’ of the real, but the gifting of “a soul and a voice” both to the “mechanism of the material universe” and the “emotions and thoughts of the mind.” As such, Shelley gave impetus to the inward and outward manifestations of revolutionary dynamics, including a controversial and often overlooked aspect of revolution—the position of women. In lieu of his support of egalitarian ideals, Shelley places male-female relations within the context of basic human rights inspired by the French Revolution, as well as within the context of an inner ‘revolution’ instigated by the transforming interplay of masculine and feminine forces.

Thus, in Act Two of *Prometheus Unbound*, Prometheus (whose name means forethought, denoting the ‘male’ intellect) awaits the “current of feeling” and empathy necessary to induce both personal and collective change, metaphorically depicted in the
descent of Asia (the ‘female’ passions) into Demogorgon’s cave. Asia descends with Panthea, her sister who, during the separation of Prometheus from Asia, watched his pain and anguish and waited for the moment of deliverance to be revealed (Bodkin 1951, 253). As this moment draws near, Panthea says of herself that she mediates the love of Prometheus and Asia by bearing “the music” of the lovers’ “wordless converse” (50–52), but it is Asia’s questioning of Demogorgon that leads directly to the liberation of Prometheus (1951, 284). According to Cantor, the dialogue between Asia and Demogorgon expresses the “gnostic contrast between the benighted god of this world, who attempts to imprison the human spirit” (1984, 86) and the desire of the soul to reconnect to the true source of being. Demogorgon remarks:

Abandoned hope, and love that turns to hate;
And self-contempt, bitterer to drink than blood;
Pain, whose unheeded and familiar speech
Is howling, and keen shrieks, day after day;
And Hell, or the sharp fear of Hell? (2.4.25–9)

By “Harmonizing this earth with what we feel above” (2.5.90–97), Asia’s collaboration in liberating the human spirit remedies this imprisoned state and parallels the Gnostic emphasis on transformation through the synthesis of forces otherwise at odds in a fallen world. Linda Brigham states that in Asia’s interchange with Demogorgon, the feminine imagination brings reality more into being, so that it is “no longer separate from the mind” (1996, 257). Thus, ‘outer’ and ‘inner’ are reconnected in a Hermetical synergy that echoes Paracelsus and Agrippa. Where Demogorgon is a macrocosmic entity, Asia represents the microcosm of the individual, whose insight changes her reality and, by extension, the

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9 The words “Abandoned hope” may also reference the famous phrase inscribed at the entrance to Hell in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, indicating Demogorgon’s negative role as a demonic entity who is transformed through Asia’s questioning.
material world of Demogorgon which had previously been a barrier to achieving new perceptions, but which nonetheless contains the “deep truth” (2.4.114). This change resonates through interwoven fibres of the universe and awakens Prometheus. When Asia asks for the name of the “master of the slave” (2.4.114) she is referring to the formlessness of that ‘deep truth’ in which “imagination and physical reality no longer have a barrier between them” (ibid). Demogorgon answers: “Fate, Time, Occasion, Chance and Change? To these / All things are subject but eternal Love” (2.4.114–20). Asia responds by endowing the new revolution wrought by love with the symbol of the sun: “Prometheus shall arise / Henceforth the sun of this rejoicing world” (2.4.126–27).

Thus, the emphasis on transformation through the synthesis of opposing forces ascribes the source of creative transcendence to the female. Moreover, in these words spoken by Demogorgon, Shelley upholds the importance of ‘feminine’ qualities in achieving gained knowledge and ultimate liberation and gender unity. Again, he alludes to the serpent as a symbol of knowledge and liberation connected with a feminine illuminating influence:

\[
\text{Gentleness, Virtue, Wisdom and Endurance,—}
\]
\[
\text{These are the seals of that most firm assurance}
\]
\[
\text{Which bars the pit over Destruction’s strength;}
\]
\[
\text{And if, with infirm hand, Eternity,}
\]
\[
\text{Mother of many acts and hours, should free}
\]
\[
\text{The serpent that would clasp her with his length—}
\]
\[
\text{These are the spells by which to reassume}
\]
\[
\text{An empire o’er the disentangled Doom. (4.562–569)}
\]

*Prometheus* demonstrates that true revolution cannot be achieved until the disharmonious effects of a material world, cut off from its primary source—as symbolised by
Demogorgon—are confronted and resolved, effects demonstrated in the divisive beliefs and discourses that underpin hegemony. At both the personal and collective levels, resolution is dependent upon linking back to the fundamental ‘essence’ or foundation, that core state of liberated surety. Such a resolution is metaphorically shown as being linked with the feminine influences of “gentleness, virtue” and “wisdom” which can create an enduring “seal” of “firm assurance” over “the pit” of destruction by weaving those eternal “spells” of freedom that can “disentangle Doom.” When this happens, and the so-called unknowable source (kept fathomless and formless within Demogorgon) becomes accessible and knowable, then the unredeemed serpent of oppression and limitation is loosed to become the redeemed serpent of freedom and restoration. In the fourth act of *Prometheus* we see this revolutionised global order extended to the cosmos in a celebration of song and dance.

**VI. Revolution as Internal Transformation**

Shelley’s portrayal of the process of revolutionary transformation starts with an unrepentant Prometheus who is, nevertheless, full of sorrow for allowing the world to descend into “torture and solitude, / Scorn and despair” (1.13–14). His repentance is revealed in his desire to revoke his curse upon Jupiter, but he is unable to remember it. When he calls on spirits, which represent his own mental powers, to help him remember, it is Earth, his mother, who appears, but she is unrecognised because the world is “fallen” and has become hateful due to Jupiter’s reign (1.159–179). The Earth is here linked with the Mother archetype, for both represent Prometheus’s own ‘earth’, his ground of being, the ‘womb’ of his soul from which he has become disconnected due to his separation from Asia, his feminine ‘other’. The Mother is not recognised by Prometheus because the feminine principle, as matrix of all forms and potentialities becomes unrecognisable in a
fallen world. Yet, according to Bodkin, in mythological tradition the Mother appears during the hero’s darkest hour, for she is “one with the lament of ‘universal Nature’” and therefore stands before the assailed mind (1951, 157). Thus, despite the fact that Prometheus cannot remember the curse, the appearance of Earth, his mother, is a portent of coming change. It is the phantasm of Jupiter that eventually recites the curse. By appearing in the form of a phantasm, Jupiter is revealed as a product of Prometheus’s own mind. In reciting the curse, the phantasm discloses the need for deliverance, and in wishing “no living thing to suffer pain” (1.305), Prometheus revokes the curse. In so doing, he realises that he perpetuates Jupiter’s power by continuing to hate him, but by revoking his hatred, he no longer participates in Jupiter’s tyranny, and no longer enables Jupiter to continue wielding tyranny. Through the exercise of Prometheus’s feminine intuitive and sympathetic faculties, Jupiter’s negative power is converted into its opposite and returned to Prometheus in a positive form. Shelley thus depicts love as the underlying principle of things and the foundation of humanity’s ideal future, a love associated with the Sophianic agency of the feminine principle.

When Prometheus is told by the spirits that he will end the reign of Jupiter, he is overcome by despair at his own limitations but is pulled out of it by thoughts of Asia: “I said all hope was vain but love” (824). The ‘earth-born’ Prometheus recognises the spirit of love by acknowledging the feminine within himself, thus becoming a Christ-like figure who wishes “no living thing to suffer pain” and will not curse even his persecutor. By revoking the curse, he forgives his adversary in an acknowledgement of mutuality that is ‘heaven-born’ in its effects. As with Coleridge’s “The Ancient Mariner,” who overcomes his abhorrence of nature and blesses the sea snakes, Prometheus feels great pity for the sufferings of men locked in the vice of out-worn customs and destructive hypocrisies that they cannot cast off:
Hypocrisy and Custom make their minds
The fanes of many a worship now outworn.
They dare not devise good for man’s estate,
And yet they know not that they do not dare. (1.618–31)

Established religion and revolutionary violence are shown as limitations (symbolised by the furies) within Prometheus’s own mind. It is only through his own intuitive self—his counterpart, Asia, “Lamp of the earth,” “whose footsteps pave the world with light” (2.68–69)—that Prometheus finds salvation and clarity. Like the Gnostic Sophia, who resides in the soul of humanity, Asia signifies the love that “wove through all the web of being,” unifying microcosmic and macrocosmic, a love that needs to be recognised and felt in an inward sense in order to achieve “one harmonious soul of many a soul” (4.1.400) in an outward, collective sense. It is the ‘feminine’ light of empathy and knowledge that faces Demogorgon, who spawned, but can also end, the tyrannous reign of Jupiter (Foot 1995, 196). Demogorgon not only represents the dark depths of doom but also dispels that doom by virtue of the descent of feminine love “into the depths” which then shake and change accustomed attitudes with all their “established attentions and oppressions” (Bodkin 1951, 256).

*Prometheus’s* revolution is achieved not only outwardly in a political (and cosmic) sense, but also inwardly in a spiritual sense. First and foremost, it is a revolution of the individual spirit. Shelley’s prototype for a successful revolution is presented in the ‘androgyne’ that is Prometheus and Asia’s reunion. This joining of male and female, a prototype that is decidedly Gnostic, engenders the unity through which spiritual wholeness is achieved. Asia declares:
Like the wide heaven, the all-sustaining air,
It makes the reptile equal to the God;
They who inspire it most are fortunate,
As I am now; but those who feel it most
Are happier still, after long sufferings,
As I shall soon become. (2.5.40–46)

Shelley’s revolution is also a gender revolution—as seen in his use of symbols like the vine, the wine, and the opening up of “Elysian flowers,” symbols that indicate the love that heals “the disunited tendrils” and stirs “the human heart” (2.4.59–65). Rather than consigning the female to ignominy or inferiority, as is the case in many orthodox creeds and dogmas, the Romantics, like the Gnostics before them, elevated the feminine principle to a central position. Consequently, their literary language manifests a range of feminine metaphors and symbols aimed at showing that love is stronger than tyranny and possesses a power that can move impediments and alter destinies. Thus, despite the torments to which he has been subjected, Prometheus forgives Jupiter and becomes free. This forgiveness is achieved through the restorative actions of Asia (the feminine principle, represented in Gnostic symbology by the divine Sophia). It is through the grace and wisdom of forgiveness, brought forth by Asia, that Shelley’s Prometheus disentangles the fate imposed on him by Jupiter and changes his destiny. However, unlike the reconciliation between Prometheus and his oppressor in Aeschylus’ version of the myth, a resolution that Shelley rejected as being too “feeble” and simplistic, his protagonist’s act of reconciliation is a necessary step towards Prometheus’s personal advancement (1965, vii–viii). It is active, not passive, a kind of enantiodromial transposition that, unlike Milton’s Satan, moves Prometheus forward from “taints of ambition, envy, revenge, and a desire for personal aggrandizement” (vii–ix), a process metaphorically described by alchemists as
‘the transmutation of base metal into gold’. In other words, there is an inner evolution from the ‘Satanic’ to the ‘Luciferic’ to the ‘Christ-like’ (Cantor 1984, 77).

The Prometheus myth gained widespread appeal in the Romantic era. In his storm and stress phase, Goethe looked upon Prometheus as humanity’s true creator, imprinting men with his likeness in defiance of false gods (Murray 2004, 776). Byron viewed Prometheus as heroically defying Jupiter and working for the betterment of humanity (Mellor 1989, 71). Shelley shared the Romantic view of Prometheus as a hero bravely enduring the vagaries of human existence and treading the precarious path of destiny in search of the flower of freedom (Bloom 1959, 9). But in *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley incorporates a re-articulation of feminine values, showing the importance that the Romantics placed in the feminine principle as a liberating agency. In aiding Prometheus, Asia confronts Demogorgon, the volcanic force of the underworld, who cuts through Jupiter’s power in a violent eruption. That which was generated by Demogorgon is now consumed and made anew by fire in an apocalyptic event which, because of the active mediation of the feminine, is able to revive materiality and emancipate the imagination from the limitations of conditioned attitudes, bound vision and circumscribed perceptions:

This is the day, which down the void abysm
At the Earth-born’s spell yawns for Heaven’s despotism,
And Conquest is dragged captive through the deep:
Love, from its awful throne of patient power
In the wise heart, from the last giddy hour
Of dead endurance, from the slippery, steep,
And narrow verge of crag-like agony, springs
And folds over the world its healing wings. (4.152–53)
Shelley therefore places humanity’s spiritual and social progress explicitly within the context of gender relations. In a counterpoint to epistemological hierarchies, Prometheus acknowledges his own limited maleness and allows the female to assume control. In so doing, he acquires new perception and the trappings of Jupiter’s power are simply “unregarded” to become “the ghosts of a no more remembered fame” (4.169–79). From this perspective, Shelley presents a radical transformation, or metamorphosis of male divinity (Jupiter) into female (Asia) in a challenge to orthodox discourses. Again, for Shelley, this is an inner process, in which the transformation of male divinity into female signifies the release of the eternal feminine in every man as a result of the dissolution of his alienating consciousness. To Shelley, such a release signified man’s recognition of his own divine self. In a letter to Maria Gisborne in October 1819, Shelley wrote: “Let us believe in a kind of optimism in which we are our own gods” (1964, 218). Such optimism is evident in *Prometheus Unbound*. Shelley creates a vision of love in which men and women unite to become their own divinity, moving beyond negation, censure and guilt, like dreams passing “Through the cold mass / Of marble” (4.412–13), moving towards a celebration of “the human will itself,” which Mary Shelley regarded as Shelley’s chief focus (Woodman 1981, 229).

For Shelley, the human will displayed limitations linked to the patriarchal vision of God and society with its “emphasis upon empire and kingship,” and so he sought to address these limitations in his representation of gender (ibid). In their collaboration, Prometheus and Asia accomplish the release from tyranny and conditioned perceptions. Prometheus, having recognised and accepted the presence of Asia, unites with her in a moment that transcends consciousness and social conditioning:

But in the other his pale wound-worn limbs

Fell from Prometheus, and the azure night
Prometheus and Asia’s union thus forms the “mythical constellation of Shelley’s revolutionary ideal” (ibid). For Shelley, the real failure of Aeschylus’s version of the myth was not his reconciliation of Jupiter and Prometheus, but his failure to render this reconciliation as an active transcendence achieved through the uniting of the male protagonist with his own feminine divinity. By not doing so, the feminine is relegated to “a subordinate role” (Woodman 1981, 230). However, in Shelley’s version, the centrality of the feminine is seen throughout the poem in the figures of, Earth, Asia and Panthea. Furthermore, the name, ‘Panthea’ could be derived from the Greek ‘pan’ meaning ‘all’ and ‘Theia,’ or ‘Thea’, the Greek goddess of light (Theogyny 1995, 135, 371). Stuart Curran notes the links between the Triple Goddess of antiquity and Asia, Panthea and Ione who comfort Prometheus in his suffering (1975, 47–51). As I have shown, they also assist in bringing together the disparate elements of the universe, as Panthea accompanies Asia into Demogorgon’s lair, and mediates the love between Prometheus and Asia. The act of reconciliation flows from the act of union. Thus, Asia is the catalyst of Prometheus’s will to act and bring about change.

VII. Conclusion: Shelley’s Gnostic Promethean Ideal

Shelley asks in his Defence, where would we be “if Poetry did not ascend to bring light and fire from those eternal regions where the owl-winged faculty of calculation dare not ever soar?” (Symonds 2011, 114). Asia is the force that enables Prometheus to soar, thereby ascribing a “feminine nature” to power, creativity and divinity (Woodman 1981,
231). *Prometheus* depicts a revolution of the human spirit, a redemptive process that, through Asia’s actions, overcomes Jupiter’s tyranny and frees the imagination from the intellectual confines of Demogorgon. Thus, rather than operating behind the scenes as simply a muse or a representation of male creativity, Asia functions as the core piece of the puzzle, a piece missed or bypassed by revolutions (like the French Revolution) which relinquish their democratic aims in the drive to secure power and political domination. In Shelley’s version of the myth, Prometheus is driven on and sustained by the impetus of Asia’s love, while it is Asia herself who confronts Demogorgon in a mental and spiritual battle, becoming what Shelley in his essay “On Love” calls “a soul within our soul” (1980, 72). From this perspective, Prometheus can be read as a stand-in for an earthly, ‘Adamic’ humanity raised above its baser instincts by a divine, ‘Sophianic’ feminine in a subversion of Pauline hierarchy. This view is affirmed by Shelley in his “Essay on Christianity” (1811) in which he takes established institutions to task for corrupting Christianity and the teachings of Christ for political purposes, and where he defines God as ‘it’ rather than ‘he’, using the pronoun “itself” to define the nature of God in relation to men and women (1977, 55).

Thus, Shelley presents a revolutionary concept of the divine, free from the imposition of human constructions of God and gender, a concept not based on institutional strictures. Rather, it is a concept based on the “fruitful possibility that man can attain heights of spiritual excellence or transcendence undreamed of in the usual gross trappings of mortality” (Abana 2006, 41). These spiritual heights are attained through experience and self-realisation in which the individual reaches his/her full potential, becoming an expression of God by fulfilling “most accurately the tendencies of his nature” (*Poetical Works* 1.259). By incorporating a Gnostic worldview into the Prometheus myth, Shelley utilises the alternative beliefs and motifs of esoteric tradition as a trope of freedom in
which the figure of a rebel Christ (Prometheus) is presented in connection with a Sophianic feminine force (Asia), the pairing of the two functioning as a symbolic prototype of ideal revolution.

Prometheus Unbound and Frankenstein affirm the usefulness of Gnostic thought in offering a vocabulary that highlights their similarities and differences, specifically in relation to the importance of the feminine principle for humanity’s individual and collective progress. In Prometheus Unbound, this importance culminates in change and renewal; in Frankenstein, it is side-lined and, therefore, alienation and destruction are the outcomes. Both Percy and Mary Shelley articulated a similar message concerning women’s rights and roles, but incorporated the same concepts in different ways. Where Mary Shelley illustrates the importance of women by depicting the feminine principle as unacknowledged or absent, Percy Shelley portrays the feminine as a central, active component of an ideal revolution. However, they both tapped into an image of the female that can be traced back to esoteric tradition in order to create a discourse with which to elevate the status of the feminine within epistemological frameworks. An alternative feminine discourse also became part of the beliefs and ideas of various radical movements, especially those which espoused the concept of a feminised spirituality in the tradition of the female prophet (Kelly 2001, xviii). The next chapter examines the manifestation of esoteric images of the female within some of these movements and the ways in which Elizabeth Barrett Browning, as a female writer, utilised this image as a source of agency and social reform.
Chapter Six
The Poet and the Prophetess:
Barrett Browning’s Feminist Discourse in *Aurora Leigh*

In her writings, Elizabeth Barrett Browning took on a prophetic role, referring to herself as a prophet in a letter to Anna Brownell Jameson in 1860, who vehemently criticised the content of her *Poems Before Congress*:

As to England, I shall be forgiven in time. The first part of a campaign and the first part of a discussion are the least favourable to English successes …

After a while …, you will arrive at the happy second thought … not of *invasion*, prophesies a headless prophet. ‘Time was when heads were off a man would die.’ A man—yes. But a woman! *We* die hard, you know. (*Letters of Barrett Browning* 2.367).

In *Aurora Leigh* (1856), a female poet-prophet figure is presented in connection with artistic growth, gender relations and social development. However, as I have shown, the prophetess tradition links back to long-standing heterodox theosophies of the illuminating feminine principle, theosophies reiterated within the ethos of Romanticism. In her works, Barrett Browning incorporated Romantic tropes of creative self-realisation, drawing on the tradition of the female prophet and the heterodox ideas of Swedenborg in order to locate the processes of creative transformation and freedom within the struggle for gender equality. To this end, *Aurora Leigh*, one of the first full-length portraits of a woman writer in English literature, promotes the importance of the feminine principle in the life of both the individual and the nation.
I. Romantic Women Writers and Literary Theology

Critical attention over the past two decades has revealed how gender informed literary production and reception in the Romantic era. Stephen Behrendt refutes conceptions of ‘male’ and ‘female’ Romantic tropes, stating that “writers of both genders, and from across the economic, political, and ideological spectrum, understood themselves to be participants in an active—even an interactive—community of writers and readers” (2009, 4).

According to Behrendt, Romantic writers shared a common enterprise, and not the “solitary, introverted activity caricatured in the images of the flower-sniffing Wordsworthian wanderer, on the one hand, and the rebellious Byronic misanthrope, on the other” (4).

Claire Knowles writes of the history of Romantic scholarship that “traditional accounts of romanticism, its ideologies, preoccupations and poetics, have arisen out of an understanding of the era predicated largely on works by men” (2010, 11). Knowles notes that “critics have typically displayed far more interest” in assessing the “male-centred phenomena” of Romantic ideals and irony, the sublime in nature, and the subjective contemplations of the poet, “than in any attempt to come to an understanding of the female poet and her relation to a specifically female tradition” (ibid).

In Women’s Life Writing, 1700–1850 (2012), Daniel Cook and Amy Culley discuss the obstacles to women writers’ self-representation in print, stating that the works of female writers were “judged against a male auto/biographical tradition in reviews often circumscribed by gender and expressing contemporary hostilities to women’s life writing” (4). Cook and Culley note that “attempts to establish a distinct female tradition characterized by relational and contingent models of selfhood and discontinuous and fragmented narrative forms have largely been resisted, particularly in historicist studies” (2). Their study explores the strategies employed by women for undercutting criticism and
cultural circumscription, such as “prefaces, claims to modesty, humility and an exemplary character, insistence on the work’s artless spontaneity and simplicity of style, invocation of a familial or domestic context” (ibid). The volume reveals the ways in which women writers utilised various genres and forms of representation, such as poetry, fiction and allegory, to delineate a distinct sense of self.

The scope and volume of women’s Romantic writing demonstrates what Devoney Looser, in the introduction to The Cambridge Companion to Women’s Writing in the Romantic Period (2015), calls “a watershed moment for British women’s writing” (xiii). Looser asserts that an exploration of women writers collectively and separately from male writers is important, as “patterns of self-presentation and critical reception based on sex … shaped how women writers wrote and how all readers read” (xvii). Such patterns, according to Looser, are still influential. For instance, Elizabeth Fay observes that for their works to be positively received, women writers sometimes tactically assumed a conservative position to ameliorate the critical censure that accompanied “stepping outside allotted feminine spheres” (2015, 76).¹ The various manifestations of resistance to female participation included conduct books, sermons and media articles declaring that women should remain within their allocated, ‘natural’ domestic milieus. An example is Anglican clergyman Richard Polwhele’s satirical poem, The Unsex’d Females (1798), which divides women writers into two categories: proper (feminine) and improper (unsex’d). ‘Proper’ women wrote within genres identified as ‘domestic’, such as autobiographical fiction, diaries, letters and the poetry of feeling, intended for a primarily female audience and designed to instruct readers in so-called proper, ‘feminine’ conduct.²

1 For further reading into gender and genre in the Romantic era, see Crystal Lake’s chapter, “History Writing and Antiquarianism,” and Fiona Price’s “National Identities and Regional Affiliations.” The authors argue that contemporary proscriptions of gender in relation to genre molded women’s literary production.

In *Women’s Literary Networks* (2017), Winckles and Rehbein argue that, far from the notion of (male) “individual literary genius,” the “authorial self” only manifests in the Romantic period “in conversation with and reaction to other authors and other texts” (8). They suggest that the nature of authorship was innately collaborative and networked. Of particular interests is Winckles’s exploration of the literary network of Methodist, Sally Wesley. Winckles posits that writing religiously, or employing religious themes, entailed something more for women, who were prohibited from the traditional genre of the sermon. According to Winckles, for women in Wesley’s network, religion “was not simply a matter of doctrine, but a way of experiencing and of being in the world” (21).

These studies reveal the extent to which women writers found agency within the literary forum of Romanticism. However, from 1830 onwards, critical censure increased in its acuity. Many women adopted male pseudonyms in order to position their work “outside a narrowly defined feminine literary tradition” (Easley 2015). In “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists” (1856), George Eliot comments on the critical bias against women writers who sit outside of this tradition: “By a peculiar thermometric adjustment, when a woman’s talent is at zero, journalistic approbation is at the boiling pitch; when she attains mediocrity, it is already at no more than a summer heat; and if ever she reaches excellence, critical enthusiasm drops to the freezing point” (1856, 460). Nevertheless, this gendered demarcation of writing does not alter the fact that the literary developments of Romanticism enabled the manifestation of a feminine presence within the discursive sphere which had not heretofore been seen and which, for future female authors, opened a door that would never be fully closed. A precedent had been set that could not be eradicated, and female authorship continued to increase. Many women writers became active in philanthropic endeavours like the anti-slavery and Charity Schools movements, drawing on an esoteric feminine image which had resurfaced in both Romanticism and
dissenting movements throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Mellor 2000, 6). I contend that Barrett Browning’s representation of the feminine cuts across notions of a sublime, internally focused ‘masculine’ Romantic tradition and a socially-oriented ‘feminine’ Romanticism. *Aurora Leigh* places the Romantic concern with artistic and spiritual self-creation within the dissenting paradigm of the female prophet, a role which encompassed the heterodox image of a transcendent feminine wisdom that can instigate personal and, for Barrett Browning, authorial self-determination.

Linda M. Lewis writes on the topics of theology and philosophy that women writers had no “‘shoulders of giants’ upon which to stand, their male peers having refused to include them in the ongoing dialogues across the centuries” (1998, 4). Thus, Romantic writers such as Wollstonecraft, Lucy Aikin and Barrett Browning “sought out the giants and engaged them in philosophical and religious debate” (ibid). They challenged the theological issues of their own time and revised them in the eighteen and nineteenth-century phenomenon of female spirituality (ibid).

In *Mothers of the Nation*, Anne Mellor examines links between the literary tradition of the female poet in the Romantic era and the writings of dissenting female prophets who defined themselves as “mouthpieces or vessels of the ‘Divine Word’,” not in an established religious sense but grounded in revisionist interpretations of the scriptures (2000, 70–71). They believed in “a divine inner light which authorised them to speak” (70). For example, Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* (1826) presents an apocalyptic narrative, organised around the figure of a prophetess, Sybil of Cumae, who, according to Samantha Webb, “represents a specific type of cultural authority that links authorship to the public, political realm” (2000, 132). The “divinely inspired” word of the Sybil was integral to the nation’s public life, her oracles having “a direct influence on her culture” (133). In *Literary Theology by Women Writers of the Nineteenth Century* (2010), Rebecca Styler
writes that “throughout the nineteenth century, women used literature as a means to engage with theological discourse, through which they reinterpreted Christianity to meet deeply felt personal and political needs” (1). They not only expressed their discontents with their received forms of faith, but they also found new ways in which to address issues such as cultural constructions of gender and social justice (ibid).

According to Styler, it was necessary for women writers to fashion a “literary theology” because they were prohibited from taking up any formal role within the established Church and academy (2010, 1). Moreover, they also faced cultural constraints and even censure in regard to the “assumption of spiritual authority” (ibid). However, Styler overstates her case, because there were circles where female preaching and teaching was supported and encouraged. Women writers, therefore, often drew cultural and spiritual empowerment from these heterodox sources. However, because the concepts upon which they drew were outside the fold of the established Church, and because they wished to reach as wide a readership as possible, female Romantic authors employed secular forms of literature as a means of articulating “notions of the divine nature and divine-human relations” (ibid).

Orianne Smith states that the tradition of female prophecy persisted into the eighteenth century, mainly through sectarian doctrine (2013, 46). Research by scholars like Paula McDowell and Hillel Schwartz has shown that the delineation of gender roles did in fact create a subculture of female mysticism in late seventeenth and early eighteenth-century dissenting sects, such as the Philadelphian Society, the Shakers, and the French Prophets, a persecuted Huguenot sect that sought refuge in London in 1706. Schwartz points out that women often outnumbered men in the audiences that watched the “trance-preaching” of the French Prophets. Consequently, many women joined the sect and came to play an important role as visionaries within it (1980, 127). The Philadelphians and the
Shakers went even further in advocating women leaders and a theology “grounded in a celebration of female mysticism” (Smith 2013, 46). These two sects not only accepted the leadership of the female prophets, Jane Lead and Ann Lee, but also based their doctrines on the belief in the “regeneration of society through the agency of a new spiritual woman” (ibid).

Adopting the ideas of Boehme, the Philadelphians believed evil and sin were the products of an imbalance between male and female energies, a disparity that could be rectified with the spiritual aid of the Divine Sophia, or Wisdom, the “female complement to male divinity” (Smith 2013, 47). In 1725, The Great Crisis, published by a member of the Philadelphian sect, advocated the need for a “Female Embassy” to “draw the Male Upwards in order to achieve the Recovery of Paradise again, even on earth” (Gibbons 1996, 156). The leader of the Shakers, Ann Lee, appropriated this idea, appointing herself “Ann the Word,” the spiritual bride of Christ who would bring her people salvation (Francis 2000, 36). The Philadelphians acknowledged the “validity of female prophesy” and believed that the role of women was to realise their “special relationship” to the “essential divine attribute” of “love,” represented by the feminine ‘Light’ principle—the Divine Sophia esteemed in Gnostic and Behmenist thought (Gibbons 1996, 151, 156). Similarly, the Moravian belief in a “female Messiah”—a notion also propounded by the prophetess Joanna Southcott (Bruder 1997, 114)—echoes the concept of the Gnostic redemptive Sophia. Many Romantic writers held non-conformist beliefs that reflected their own views and radical thinking. However, in their elevation of the feminine, they moved religious conceptualisations into the wider field of literary language and modes of expression which applied to all areas of human life and experience, not just the religious. Indeed, the Romantic movement in general enabled the flourishing of the female ‘prophet’ in both a religious and literary sense.
Moreover, scholars and cultural historians, such as Elaine Pagels, Susan Haskins and Elizabeth A. Johnson, have examined the empowering concepts of the esoteric feminine, encoded (but suppressed) in exoteric Christianity and Judaism (each of which contains elements that have their origins in ancient schools of religious thought, including Gnosticism), and the ways in which these concepts influenced women’s religious experience and confronted the gender disparities present in Western religious thought. Such concepts provided a way to reinterpret doctrine and recover empowering myths of the feminine buried within orthodox religious frameworks. For instance, Johnson suggests that the christology of the Sophia-creator disrupts the male-dominated language of Jesus as Logos, for such a creator enables women, previously prohibited from participating in the “imago dei,” to gain transcendence by becoming the “imago christi” (1992, 73). Styler has shown that the tendency of women writers to utilise the idea of a female spirituality as a means of reinterpreting official doctrine persisted into the nineteenth century. For instance, Wollstonecraft forms her argument for female education along theological lines—religion should play a part in expanding women’s education by combining heart and mind, thereby uniting the experiential with the intellectual. If women are the spiritual equals of men, then they should not be given a frivolous education in conventional and limiting female accomplishments.

Northrop Frye has described the “cultural prejudice” resulting from Enlightenment empiricism as a form of bias, or discrimination, wherein “descriptive verbal structures” were equated with truth while literary devices, such as “myth,” “fiction” and “fable,” carried connotations of being “not really true” (1963, 29). From this perspective, John Locke proclaimed that figurative language was the product of pleasure and delights, not of truth and knowledge, and was therefore diversionary rather than intellectual (2004, 366). However, within the paradigm of literary theology, metaphor not only depicts pre-existing
ideas in the form of symbols but also acts as a “cognitive vehicle enabling us to say things that can be said in no other way” (Soskice 1985, 79). Literature was effective not only as a medium for communicating religious ideas but also for re-envisioning, re-constructing, and even creating those very ideas. Recent decades have seen the development of a “literary” or “metaphorical” theology in which figurative language is seen as a “unique way of creating understandings of religious phenomena” (Styler 2010, 5).

Literary theology, therefore, became part of the reaction to Enlightenment thinking, a reaction that also permitted expressions of disillusionment with the failed values of the French Revolution. What started as a revolt against tyranny, with the aim of putting into place a government created according to the highest principles of enlightened thought, turned into a blood-bath demonstrating the lowest aspects of human nature. The Enlightenment represented the universe as mechanical and run by fixed laws. Romantics came to understand the universe as organic and growing in accordance with acts of self-determination and imaginative freedom. Consequently, human aspirations and subjectivity acquired new value and importance. When set against the disillusionment that followed in the wake of the French Revolution, such aspirations and subjectivity led to an interest in women’s rights that challenged official disinterest in female status and liberties.

While the Romantic movement did not ultimately succeed in changing the plight of women at the time, it did elevate the epistemological position of women in its evocation of esoteric feminine imagery in connection with the processes of self-knowledge and intuitive understanding. Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* presents an example of the ways in which women writers harnessed and projected the concept of a transformative, Messianic feminine force. The poem delineates a discourse of female empowerment and equitable male/female relations, drawing on the ideas of Swedenborg and the image of the illuminating feminine.
II. Barrett Browning and Swedenborg: The Development of the Female Poet as Prophet

Scholars have frequently explored the position of *Aurora Leigh* in relation to genres and the gendering of genres. Deidre David writes that Barrett Browning “models her poetic and intellectual career upon traditionally male lines,” yet *Aurora Leigh* is the work that most deeply expresses “aesthetic and political beliefs” in boldly rendered imagery “associated with female experience” (1987, 143). According to Glennis Stevenson, *Aurora Leigh* brings together public and private, exploring not only the “inner spaces of the heart, but also the school rooms … slums and brothels of contemporary life” (1989, 91). Dorothy Mermin states that the text fuses two “apparently incompatible genres,” the novel and the epic poem, giving the work its “scope and flexibility” and instilling Barrett Browning with the confidence of writing “in a strong female tradition” (1989, 185). Margaret Reynolds and Marjorie Stone locate Barrett Browning’s epic poem within the field of Victorian sage discourse, a form which expressed ideas about the world, a man’s place within it and how he should behave and live. This genre identified the poet as male and privileged men as the bearers of visionary authority. Reynolds and Stone interpret Barrett Browning’s epic poem as revisionist, female-oriented sage discourse that subverts the form even as it utilises it.3 Likewise, Lewis identifies Barrett Browning’s subversive cultural manoeuvres, stating that *Aurora Leigh* demonstrates Barrett Browning’s limits as a feminist as well as her radical revisionist approach within the confines of “the patriarchy of God, the Incarnation and Resurrection of Christ, and the divine inspiration of Scripture” (1998, 3).

Critics have also discussed the prophetic aspect of the female poet in *Aurora Leigh* in relation to Germaine de Stael’s *Corinne* (1807), which deals with the notion of female

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genius as prophetic/sibylline. Alison Chapman states that *Aurora Leigh* “acknowledges the legacy of *Corinne,*” but Barrett Browning also “rejects Corinne’s affective improvised lyricism” as a model for female poetics and instead “transforms poetry into public discourse” (2003, 68). The text of *Aurora Leigh* displays a generic “mixedness,” as Karen Dieleman notes, combining the traits of the “epic narrative, lyric, social novel, poem, spiritual autobiography and manifesto” in a fusion that challenges gendering of ‘masculine’ genres and the prophetic voice (2007, 149). As Amy Billone observes, Barrett Browning sought to establish women as ‘true’ authorial voices, aspiring to the intellectual vigour of George Sand (2010, 587).

I wish to suggest an alternative source of *Aurora Leigh*’s prophetic elements, that of esoteric tradition, namely the writings of Swedenborg. I argue that Barrett Browning found a means of making women’s private ‘affective’ sphere public by engaging with constructions of the feminine found in esoteric tradition as a source of agency. Drawing on Swedenborg’s writings, her work exhibits the same sentiments of male and female unity espoused by earlier Romantic writers and millenarian sects of the eighteenth century.

According to Linda M. Lewis, Barrett Browning “appropriates myth and dogma to her own ends” in a revisionism of both classical and Biblical myth (1998, 5). An avid social commentator, Barrett Browning declared herself a “great admirer” of Wollstonecraft, who influenced her views on the position of women in society (cited in Stone 2009, 49). Her long poem, *An Essay on Mind* (1826), emphasised the importance of the poet in bringing about political change. Her later volumes, *Prometheus Bound, Miscellaneous Poems* (1833), and *The Seraphim, and Other Poems* (1838), engage with a range of socio-political issues, such as the nature of tyranny and freedom, contemporary

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4 Linda M. Lewis states that de Stael’s model of female genius is based upon the goddess image of Greek and Roman mythology. However, Lewis also writes that female wisdom figures such as Sophia informed the Goddess image and provided an underlying basis for both Romantic and Victorian women writers (2003, 20).
theological debates, and power relations within sexual relationships and the family (Avery 2014). Her condemnation of both established religion and society at large for their collusion in oppressive systems, such as slavery and child labour, is demonstrated in poems like “The Cry of the Children” (1844) and “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point” (1850). The latter work simultaneously emphasises the brutality of slavery and the sexual exploitation of women (ibid).

Born in 1806, Barrett Browning embodied the Romantic ideal of the poet tackling social and political injustices, arguing for tolerance and liberty (Avery 2011, 20), and presenting the feminine as a “wisdom figure, and teacher for God” (Lewis 1998, 5). When Wordsworth died in 1850, she was considered for the position of Poet Laureate, demonstrating the literary acclaim she had achieved as a woman, but was not awarded the title (Avery 2014). As Stone notes, Barrett Browning’s first published works, The Battle of Marathon (1820) and An Essay on Mind, with Other Poems (1826) “pre-date the appearance of Tennyson’s juvenilia in Poems by Two Brothers (1827)” (2014). Her formative years “therefore belong to the Romantic, not the Victorian period” (ibid). Behrendt writes of Aurora Leigh that, as a poem of ‘social commitment’, the text “represents an important stage in a variety of poetry whose roots lay in the eighteenth century and that flourished during the Romantic era” (2009, 153). On a similar note, Andrew O. Winckles and Angela Rehbein assert that, due to the Romantic characteristics of Barrett Browning’s work, the publication date of Aurora Leigh “should cause us to productively question where, precisely, the boundaries of Romanticism are drawn” (2017, 13).

In line with the above views, I approach Barrett Browning as a transitional figure. Her work carries Romantic elements and tropes through into the Victorian era. Aurora Leigh is widely regarded as her ‘magnum opus’, and I perceive the poem as the
culmination of her social and spiritual ideas and a statement of her beliefs concerning gender relations. The Swedenborgian aspects of the work are more fully expressed and signify her participation in, and continuation of, a feminised spirituality that re-emerged in the eighteenth century and was rearticulated in Romanticism. Comparing *Aurora Leigh* to Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* (1850), Margaret Homans asserts that the ‘masculinised’ Romanticism typified by Wordsworth was a difficult model for a woman poet to follow (1980, 160). However, as I have shown, the feminised elements and imagery of Romanticism and esotericism provided scope for women writers to create agency and revise established ideas. According to Lewis, Barrett Browning dramatised through her works not only women as personifications but also herself as “Lady Wisdom” in the tradition of the ‘poet-prophetess’ (1998, 173). Such a tradition links back to the classical goddesses of wisdom, like Athena, as well as to the Kabbalistic Shekinah and the Gnostic Sophia (ibid). As scholars like Styler and Barbara Taylor have shown, the notion of an enlightening feminine wisdom recurred in the millenarian sects of eighteenth and nineteenth-century England that prophesied a female Messiah, of which Southcott was the most prominent example (Taylor 2016, 161–82). By taking on the role of “Lady Wisdom,” Barrett Browning used this source of authority to speak out on social issues, including prostitution, illegitimacy, injustice, oppression and poverty.

Another important source for the spiritual aspects of her works were the doctrines of Emmanuel Swedenborg. Barrett Browning and Robert Browning read Swedenborg’s *Conjugial Love* together early in their marriage during their time in Florence. Barrett Browning’s letters of the 1850s refer frequently to her reading of Swedenborg and acknowledge the influence of his teachings. For her, Swedenborg filled in the gaps in her

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5 Additionally, American feminist Margaret Fuller, with whom the Brownings were acquainted during the latter portion of their life in Italy, comments in *Women of the Nineteenth Century* (1843), that the image of the female has been associated since ancient times with knowledge, insight and wisdom—as in the figure of the Egyptian Isis “who was divine wisdom,” and in pre-Judeo-Christian traditions of female prophets and the illuminating feminine (51, 47, 55, 115).
faith by proffering the concept of a “living body in resurrection” (the body in this life) and the notion of a conjugal love that does not leave behind its beloved at death but continues into the afterlife (*Letters of Barrett Browning* 2.426). Influences from Swedenborg’s religious teachings can be seen in Robert Browning’s poetic volumes, *Men and Women* (1855), *Dramatis Personae* (1864) and *The Ring and the Book* (1868–69) (Lines 2004, 29, 32). Furthermore, the Brownings were friends with the leading English Swedenborgian, Charles Augustus Tulk, and Robert Browning was an early friend of James John Garth Wilkinson, editor and translator of Swedenborg’s works as well as a proponent of Swedenborgian ideas, who praised his works for their “legitimate” engendering of “philosophical ideas” (Wilkinson 1846, 6).

Barrett Browning would have encountered certain Gnostic concepts in Swedenborg, such as the androgyny of God and the feminine aspect of Christ, as well as the notion of the Divine Man being a unity of male and female. In *Conjugal Love*, Swedenborg contradicts the orthodox conflation of sexuality with sin, describing male/female relations as “the first elementary, powerful, and universal Union, or Bond of Society,” of which the “constant exercise” is “the very basis to the accession of all other kinds of permanent Powers” (Swedenborg cited in Rix 2007, 102). He also challenges hierarchical notions of gender by depicting ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ principles as of equal standing, neither of which is superior to the other:

> the truth of good, or truth grounded on good, is male (or masculine), and the good of truth, or good grounded in that truth, is female (or feminine): but this may be comprehended more distinctly, if instead of good we speak of love, and instead of truth we speak of wisdom; which are one and the same….

(1794, 263)
Within this configuration, both principles are essential in achieving spiritual love and fulfilment and are shown as complementary yet integrated with one another to form a ‘whole’. In 1807, Robert Southey, who had studied Swedenborg’s beliefs, wrote of him that he described love as being that which “flows from the Creator into all things; from the Creator it is received by the female, and transferred through her to the male” (Rix 2007, 22). In this sense, the female acts as a mediator between the divine and men and is seen as closer and more receptive to divine energy. She is thus a conduit of illuminative love, akin to the Sophianic principle of Boehme and Gnostic-Hermetic tradition.

Barrett Browning’s concerns for equitable male/female relations within society, and the importance of feminine agency, are evident in an early work, An Essay on Mind, in which she explores the notion of gender as an influence on the manifestation and development of genius. In her consideration of the “various forms of Mind,” Barrett observes that since the Creation, when “dust” first “weigh’d Genius down,” “The ambitious soul her essence hath defin’d, / And Mind hath eulogiz’d the pow’rs of Mind” (11.3–6). The text presents the question of what happens when the feminine “ambitious soul” is weighed down by the “dust” of a female body in a male-centred literary culture, thus making the quest for self-realisation conflicted. At the age of fourteen, Barrett Browning had confidently stated in the ‘Preface’ to The Battle of Marathon that “Now, even the female may drive her Pegasus through the realms of Parnassus, without being saluted with the most equivocal of all appellations, a learned lady” (Poetical Works 1:2).

For Barrett Browning, women were just as able to be as ‘learned’ as men, without having to suffer being continually referred to as such, as if it were something to be marvelled at or criticised. However, in An Essay on Mind, published when she was twenty, her uncertainty regarding the status of the female author is more apparent, as her assessment of the nature of genius within a male-oriented society shows. In “The Vision of Fame” that concluded
Barrett’s 1826 volume, the ambitious soul is personified at first as a “bright and lofty” regal woman, with a “brow of peerless majesty;” but the fame that should be worthy of praise is not directed towards her, causing the visionary woman to fade, yet still gleam “With supernatural fires” (*Poetical Works* 1:119–21).

The tension between gender and the female ambitious soul is expressed more boldly in Barrett Browning’s “The Development of Genius” in 1826–27, which was roundly condemned by her father (after he had read less than half of it) as “insufferable” and “most wretched” in its “egotism,” and “beyond grasp” (*Letters of Barrett Browning* 1:359). Part of this poem was posthumously published as “The Poet’s Enchiridion,” while part of it appeared as “Earth” in her 1833 volume, and a third part in the 1838 poem “The Student” (Mermin 1989, 42). In “The Student,” Barrett Browning adopts a kind of dramatic monologue in order to express, in a more veiled way, the profound inner conflict of female genius caught within inhibiting social and intellectual codes that continually restrict its sphere of expression and influence: “My midnight lamp is weary as my soul, / And, being unimmortal, has gone out. / And now alone yon moony lamp of heaven, / Which God lit and not man, illuminates / These volumes, others wrote in weariness” (1.5).

Marjorie Stone observes that, as a text “struggling to be born,” “The Development of Genius” is a work more “intensely Romantic than anything Barrett had yet written” (2014). Her male protagonist attempts to open his heart and trace the development of his mind. He acts as a stand-in for the young female poet of Barrett Browning’s early years, who was unable to reconcile her gender with the intellectual climate in which she grew up, and who, unlike the eponymous heroine of her later work, *Aurora Leigh*, struggled to achieve a full sense of artistic self-possession. Barrett Browning’s poet seeks truth and fame in the charnel house of history until the bones of the dead stand up “with a shout, in living crowds” (1.109); and, like Blake’s poetic sensibility in “Auguries of Innocence”—
which is acute enough to tear the “fibre of the brain” (E.490) at the sound of a wounded hare—Barrett envisions a female sensitive consciousness that can hear all the sounds of existence with “a separate curious torture … gathered in the chambers” of the ear to “agonize its sense” (11.121–22). Such a consciousness ranges over a wide span of experience, feelings and thought, and needs to be able to communicate all that it is thinking and observing or suffer the agonies of frustration. This passage anticipates “The Soul’s Expression,” which was published as the lead sonnet in both the 1844 *Poems* and subsequent editions of Barrett Browning’s poetry (Stone 2014). As in “The Development of Genius,” she refers to “the dread apocalypse of soul,” the term ‘dreadful’ alluding to the infinite depths of her own consciousness which, if able to be fully and ultimately expressed, would engender renewing apocalyptic effects within the finite realms of existence (*Poetical Works* 2:227). Stone points out that the sonnet’s “principal subject” is its “articulation of the Romantic philosophy of infinite aspiration” which Barrett Browning retained throughout her career and shared with both Robert Browning and John Ruskin (Stone 2014).

### III. The Feminine Principle and the Female Poet as Prophet in *Aurora Leigh*

Barrett Browning’s engagement with ideas concerning the spiritual image of the feminine illustrates her Romantic quest for spiritual and artistic fulfilment, as well as her desire for social reform. Knowles observes that Barrett Browning’s works demonstrate a desire to “transform” suffering by “focusing on its transcendental potential” (2010, 189), a potential Barrett Browning equates in *Aurora Leigh* with both a strong female force and the bringing about of positive gender relations. Scholars have viewed the poem as conservative in its narrative and message (in that Aurora ends up marrying Romney), and read the work either along religious or feminist lines. For example, Abrams states that
although Barrett Browning embraced the Romantic concept of the “apocalypse of consciousness,” she did not wholly abandon the Christian understanding of apocalypse (1971, 360). The feminist implications of *Aurora Leigh* in relation to esoteric and alternative religious movements are not discussed. More recently, Simon Avery and Rebecca Stott have discussed Swedenborg’s influence on both Barrett Browning’s religious views and *Aurora Leigh*. However, like Lewis, they view *Aurora Leigh* as an example of the tensions between traditional and dissenting values that Barrett Browning allegedly struggled with (2014, 45). I wish to argue that Barrett Browning incorporated a revisionist image of the female in her engagement with Romantic and heterodox representations of the feminine. By doing so, she was able to combine and reconcile traditional and dissenting values and find agency within both sets of values, a reconciliation that comes to fruition in *Aurora Leigh*. She thus presents a seemingly conservative outlook that is revised and subverted through the incorporation of a heterodox discourse.

Not long after *Aurora Leigh* was published, Barrett Browning writes of her main source of heterodox thinking in a letter, dated December 10–18, 1856, to her sister, Arabella. She reveals that what people regarded as her ‘gospel’ was in fact based upon the teachings of Swedenborg:

I was helped to it—did not originate it—& was tempted much (by a natural feeling of honesty) to say so in the poem, & was withheld by nothing except a conviction that the naming of the name Swedenborg, that greater seer into the two worlds, would have utterly destroyed any hope of general acceptance & consequent utility … most humbly I have used [Swedenborg’s ‘sublime truths’] as I could. (*Letters to Arabella* 2.275)
Swedenborg laid down the foundation of his theology in *Arcana Cœlestia* (Heavenly Mysteries), published in eight Latin volumes from 1749 to 1756, in which he interprets passages of Genesis and Exodus, drawing attention to what he views as the inner spiritual sense of these two works. He later gave a similar appraisal of the inward-looking elements of the book of Revelation in *Apocalypse Revealed* (1766). A key aspect of Swedenborg’s theology was the belief that, behind its ‘outer’ themes and stories (as usually accepted and believed), the Bible documents the transformation, rebirth or regeneration of a human being from a materialistic to a spiritual being. In *Arcana Celestia*, Swedenborg reads the creation myth, not as an account of the creation of Earth, but rather as an account of humanity’s rebirth in six steps represented by the six days of creation. From this perspective, events related to humanity in the Bible could also be related to Jesus Christ. In particular, Swedenborg focuses on how Christ becomes free from materialistic boundaries by realising the divine in the human presence.

Swedenborg’s glorification of humanity acquires a particularly Gnostic tone in his interpretation of the Virgin Birth, which asserts the feminine origin of ‘god’, the divine infusing humanity through the female (1781, 139), an idea that mirrors the Gnostic view of Sophia. As the true essence of humanity, Sophia undertakes the descent into material reality and represents the divine spirit ‘made flesh’, and it is through realising one’s true ‘divine humanity’ that one can achieve spiritual awakening. Like the Gnostics, Swedenborg places this divine humanity within the context of gender relations, wherein the union of male and female re-enacts the spiritual androgyny of Christ, a union primarily facilitated by the female as the receiver of divine energy, or grace. This inner Christ, or Sophia, is thus able to re-establish the connection between the spiritual and material worlds, thereby restoring humanity to the eternal (Stott 2014, 42).
Drawing on Swedenborgian ideas, *Aurora Leigh*, uses male/female relations as a metaphor for spiritual awakening. The major poem of Barrett Browning’s career, *Aurora Leigh* presents a powerful defence of women’s liberty, advocating proper education, meaningful employment and creative freedom in which “feminism is represented … by theological models of judgment” (Omer 1997, 98). It tells the story of a young female poet who rejects an offer of marriage from her cousin, Romney Leigh, in order to pursue her literary career. Book II presents a scene of female self-determination as Aurora goes out in the early morning to celebrate both her twentieth birthday and herself as “woman and artist”—both incomplete but awaiting completion (2.4–5). Excited to make her mark upon the world, she symbolizes her sense of becoming one with God’s creation by brushing “a green trail across the lawn with her gown in the dew” (2.21). She celebrates her burgeoning femininity and intellectual ability by dancing and twirling an ivy wreath in her hair. She chooses to follow her inspiration and creative vision over the socially approved avenues of sentimental love, daintiness, and modesty symbolised by such plants as the bay, myrtle, and verbena.

In the theological debate with her cousin Romney that follows this moment of self-realisation, Aurora regards the writing of poetry as essential to herself and its influence as essential to the progress of civilisation. Alicia E. Holmes reads Romney Leigh as a representation of the prevailing views of society. Romney, therefore, resists Aurora’s reading of the Biblical story of Miriam and, in so doing, resists her authority (1992, 596). The fact that Aurora shows herself be as well-versed as Romney in the story of Moses and Miriam suggests that Barrett Browning was aware of historical studies of the Bible and their potential effect to validate scripture as an implement of male oppression (600). Such an effect is illustrated in Romney’s attempt to dissuade her from measuring to herself a “prophet’s place” by imitating Miriam (who, in the Biblical text, is allocated only two
verses of song compared to Moses’ nineteen). Romney instead encourages her to join his quest for a Moses to lead God’s people out of the bonds of class hierarchy and poverty. Romney cannot go beyond the literal facts to a “sudden sense of vision” (2.84) and, in a reiteration of social norms, contends that it is a woman’s purpose to supply the man with ‘heart’ so that he can work with his ‘head’, for if women use their heads too much, it hurts and soils them (2.40–41). Romney is a “cold dead weight” (2.39) without imagination, all clay and no spirit in contrast to the intuition and imagination of Aurora, who surmises that though the Bible contains truth, it holds not all of it (Holmes 1992, 601). She thus moves beyond the limited words accorded to Miriam in a rediscovery of her feminine self, refusing Romney’s first proposal of marriage, and offering a critique of women who are socially conditioned to accept any kind of love unthinkingly:

Women of a softer mood,

Surprised by men when scarcely awake to life,

Will sometimes hear the first word, love,

And catch up with it any kind of work,

Indifferent, so that dear love go with it.

I do not blame such women, though, for

They pick much oakum…. (2.443–49)

Stott and Avery observe that the term ‘oakum’ refers to the process of untwining and unpicking old rope which was then mixed with tar and used for ship’s caulking (2014, 45). A tedious and labour-intensive task, it made the fingers bleed and was primarily given to slaves, convicts and the inmates of workhouses (ibid). Barrett Browning hereby equates the position of women who accept love and marriage unthinkingly, on account of societal expectations, constraints and conditioning, with that of inmates put to work on a mindless and back-breaking task. In this context, Romney’s first proposal (rejected by Aurora)
equates to work, and a thankless form of work at that, as women who enter into such contracts can expect little in return. As such, Aurora refuses “Romney’s proposal of marriage as work” (ibid) but accepts his later proposal of marriage as a loving, transformative and spiritual relationship. In this sense, the contrapositioning of unthinking love as the entrance into servitude and heavenly love as the entrance into freedom represents the opposition between being a conventional woman or being a liberated, self-realised woman.

As the poem progresses, Swedenborgian principles become more evident in these words spoken by Aurora in Book II: “But innermost / Of the inmost, most interior of the interne, / God claims His own, Divine humanity, / Renewing nature” (2.558–61). Barrett Browning employs a specific Swedenborgian term, ‘Divine Humanity’, and echoes his belief, demonstrated in Arcana Celestia, that the ‘internal’ is the inmost part of humanity and is what distinguishes human beings from animals, as it provides the means for connecting with God (McNeilly 2004, 33). Throughout the text of Aurora Leigh, the crossing and bridging of the material and spiritual worlds is presented as the underlying focus and objective of the poem, an objective which is linked not only with Aurora’s self-determination but also with the reconciliation of and equitable relations between the sexes, which Aurora describes in a Swedenborgian-style manner: “to keep up open roads / Betwixt the seen and the unseen,—bursting through / The best of your conventions with his best” (2.468–70). The poem illustrates a “full revelation of Swedenborgian principles,” in that Aurora and Romney are eventually able to resolve their differences in a declaration of love that reflects the three central Swedenborgian ideas of love, wisdom, and use (which results from love and wisdom), “couched in the vision of New Jerusalem and in a language that borrows heavily from Swedenborg’s writings” (Stott 2014, 42). Like Prometheus and Asia in Shelley’s Prometheus Unbound, Aurora and Romney are agents who will
“transform society by opening the roads between the material and spiritual worlds” (ibid). Like Asia, it is Aurora who is instrumental in instigating this revolution, for she is aligned with creative and transcendent powers in her role as the artistic poet: “Art symbolises Heaven” (9.658). Aurora’s self-realisation as a poet entails a spiritual realisation, as it is through her own inner journey that she is able to comprehend the eternal which she expresses in these terms: “Art symbolises Heaven, but Love is God” (9.658–59).

In Aurora and Romney’s drive for social reform, Barrett Browning echoes Swedenborg’s concept of ‘use’ as the end-product of love and wisdom: “Use is the doing of good from love by means of wisdom” (Swedenborg 1995, 183). Yet, it is only through imaginative vision, again associated with and instigated by Aurora, that such ‘use’ can be achieved. Near the end of the poem, Romney has been unable to implement his plans for reform adequately because he lacks the appropriate affective and creative faculties, as well as the required intuitive insight, symbolically represented by his blindness: “In thought or vision, if attainable / (Which certainly for me it never was), / And wished to use it for a dog to-day / To help the blind man stumbling” (9.515–18). Aurora, having realised the functions of art and love, declares her love for Romney and becomes, for him, the ‘vision’ that was previously unattainable, thereby fulfilling the role of the salvific, revelatory feminine. In turn, Romney is awakened spiritually and, in response, describes the union of male and female energies in these terms:

Which still presents that mystery’s counterpart.

Sweet shadow-rose, upon the water of life,

Of such a mystic substance Sharon gave

A name to! Human, vital, fructuous rose,

Whose calyx holds the multitude of leaves,

Loves filial, loves fraternal, neighbour-loves
And civic- all fair petals, all good scents,
All reddened, sweetened from one central Heart! (9.883–90)

Aurora and Romney’s embrace in Book IX is shown to be both spiritual and erotic, wherein physical and gendered barriers are transcended:

I wept so? Did I drop against his breast,
Or did his arms constrain me? were my cheeks
Hot, overflooded with my tears, or his?
And which of our two large explosive hearts
So shook me? That I know not. There were words
That broke in utterance … melted in the fire,—
Embrace, that was convulsion … then a kiss
As long and silent as the ecstatic night,
And deep, deep, shuddering breaths, which meant beyond
Whatever could be told by word or kiss. (9.714.24)

This transcending of physical barriers echoes the androgyny of Swedenborg’s ‘Divine Man’, these two main characters having achieved a realisation of the eternal in a union of the material and spiritual worlds which have become fused in their bodies and souls. As in Shelley’s Prometheus, it is a union that is explicitly linked with revolution, but it is a revolution based on healthy relations and equalised understanding between the sexes. Romney acquires a more inclusive faith, apologising for the “male ferocious impudence” that let him “push aside … the world’s Aurora” (2.291) in the way that Jehovah pushes aside any reference to the feminine principle, proclaiming himself the one and only God in the authorised version of the Bible, as noted by Holmes (1992, 599). This repeal of masculine hegemony thus allows for an apocalyptic re-envisioning of earth
where “a new Eve and Adam meet within the context of a transformed spiritual and political horizon, a proclamation of gender equality and liberated poetics” that will usher in a new age of prosperity (ibid):

It is the hour for souls,
That bodies, leavened by the will and love,
Be lightened to redemption. The world’s old,
But the old world waits the time to be renewed,
Toward which, new hearts in individual growth
Must quicken, and increase to multitude
In new dynasties of the race of men;
Developed whence, shall grow spontaneously
New churches, new economies, new laws
Admitting freedom, new societies
Excluding falsehood…. (9.941–48)

Aurora and Romney’s marriage is successful because it is a spiritual marriage, brought about through Romney’s internal illumination and transformation which Aurora facilitates. As such, the pair invoke the New Jerusalem in which blind Romney finally “sees” “laid in jasper-stone as clear as glass / The first foundations of that new, near Day / Which should be builded out of heaven to God” (2.955–57). From this perspective, Aurora is the one who brings about this New Jerusalem, for she determines its order of design and embellishment: “Jasper first … / And second, sapphire; third, chalcedony; / The rest in order—last, an amethyst” (2.962–64). In the Bible, these four stones are used to construct “the foundations of the city walls” of the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:19–21). In their union, Aurora and Romney, like Shelley’s Prometheus and Asia, symbolically achieve a spiritual revolution and a rebuilding of heaven and earth wherein Aurora fulfils her calling
as a poet and prophetess. The emphasis on redemption and renewal, particularly of the male via the female, mirrors the process of conjugal love in Swedenborg.6

As Abrams has pointed out, the image of a spiritual apocalypse flourished in English and German Romanticism (1971, 358). Romantics employed apocalyptic imagery in relation to “personal and internal experience” (which transforms the collective) rather than a literal end of the world (355). Similarly, at the end of *Aurora Leigh*, Aurora and Romney envision a New Jerusalem, but rather than an outward apocalypse resulting in destruction, the poem depicts what Abrams describes as an “apocalypse within” and the ‘second coming’ of Christ within (1984, 353). As Romney’s redeemer, and the bringer of this apocalypse, Aurora equates to a Sophianic, female Messiah, ushering in a new heaven and new earth, paved by “the philosophic, social, or poetic seer who demonstrates the way to a secular redemption” (358). Aurora describes her poetic calling in prophetic terms, in which she herself is the seer and redeemer, acting as a channel through which humanity (Romney) is able to reconnect with its divine nature in a Swedenborgian (and also Gnostic) style union, thereby awakening into spiritual wholeness: “First, God’s love. / And next … the love of wedded souls” (9.881–82).

While Aurora’s declaration of love to Romney could be interpreted as a recapitulation of conventional views concerning women’s roles within the realm of marital domesticity, it is clear that Barrett Browning regarded marriage for the sake of marriage (that is, marriage arising from social and financial expectations, wherein women were often conditioned to accept matrimony unquestioningly) with some scorn, as Aurora’s rejection of Romney’s first marriage proposal shows. However, the conflicting interchange

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6 This sentiment of spiritual revolution is echoed in Barrett Browning’s political poems, *Casa Guidi Windows* (1851) and *Poems Before Congress* (1860), which use apocalyptic imagery to convey the image of a new world. In *Windows*, Barrett Browning describes a revolutionary apocalypse which seeks to “plant the great Hereafter in this now” (1.299), but in order to achieve this ‘Hereafter’, the people “must be revived from within,” which, as Lewis notes, is what Aurora and Romney aspire to at the end of *Aurora Leigh* (1998, 110).
between traditional and dissenting values is better understood when Barrett Browning’s incorporation of eighteenth-century heterodox discourses, such as Swedenborg, are taken into account. Barbara Taylor states that “the language of prophecy and apocalypse” came to be expressed as commitment to the metaphorical “construction of a new heaven on earth” not as “literal faith in millenarian change” (2016, 160–61). Rather than struggling to resolve the tension between traditional and dissenting values, Barrett Browning saw the writings of Swedenborg, along with esoteric ideas and the paradigms of Romanticism, as ways to articulate and advocate healthy gender relations that would help improve society, relations which not only entailed but also required female independent-mindedness.

Marjorie Stone points out that *Aurora Leigh* utilises Romantic tropes both in its representation of poets as prophets—“the only truth-tellers now left to God” (1:859)—but also in its defence of the individual’s right to self-attainment and cohesion (Stone 2014). The Romantic transformation of “the priestly interpreter into the independent prophet” assists Barrett Browning in her portrayal of a female illuminator and agent of reform whose prophetic aspirations are not only “undisguised” but also “challenged on the grounds of her sex” (ibid). Aurora is a visionary who dreams not of judgment day (associated with the wrathful male god of orthodox religion) but of a renewed world and humanity’s spiritual revivification: “he marked judgment, I, redemption-day” (4:428).

However, as Stone observes, the role of feminine wisdom is given not only to Aurora but also to Marian, who acquires wisdom through suffering (Stone 2014), for she is abused and persecuted as a fallen woman, or harlot. In both these female characters, the narrative is carried along a redemptive trajectory that culminates in a revisionist interpretation of Revelation, as Romney and Aurora fuse in a mystical Swedenborgian vision of “the love of wedded souls” (9:882). By presenting a raped, fallen woman as a bringer of wisdom, Barrett Browning radically challenges sexual double standards and prejudices, for Marian
acts as “the priest who brings Aurora and Romney together” (Stone 2014). Her priestly role permits, “not through law, but from a feminine and specifically outcast position, Aurora’s desire and marriage” (Reynolds 1992, 46), and ushers in a vision of a new and better world. The fallen Marian develops into an illuminating and mediatory force who redeems Aurora by reminding her of her own humanity and leading her towards a spiritual revelation based on love (not superficial purity) and “focused not on the afterworld but on this world,” in a Sophianic awakening of the divine within the earthly (Stone 2014). In the character of Marian, Barrett Browning presents a discourse that elevates women from shame and sexual degradation. Moreover, Aurora and Romney’s revelation at the end of the poem gains further political significance when taking into account another important image—Barrett Browning’s allusion to the Woman Clothed with the Sun in Revelation. Mary Wilson Carpenter interprets the “prophet poet,” Aurora, as this kind of apocalyptic figure (2003, 116). In her embrace with Romney, the golden-haired Aurora metaphorically stands with the moon beneath her feet (9:842), akin to the Woman in Revelation (12:1), and both she and Romney gaze “with inscient vision toward the sun” (9:913). The Woman Clothed with the Sun is contrasted with the “dropped star” of the woman-artist trapped in the confines of domestic life (5.917–18).

Clarification of the Sun Woman’s political relevance requires a chronological leap back to the 1790s. This figure also appears in dissenting tradition, notably in the beliefs of the prophetess, Joanna Southcott, who utilised the image in a proto-feminist revision of scripture. In 1792, Southcott attracted thousands of followers after claiming to have heard voices telling her that she was ‘the Woman Clothed with the Sun’ (Rev. 12:1). She believed that the voices were of divine origin, issuing from the Holy Spirit (Niblett 2015, 22). Her ministry gained ground from 1802 to 1814, drawing people from all sections of society and reaching over a hundred thousand in London, with many thousands more in the
industrial north (Taylor 2016, 102). According to J.F.C. Harrison’s sample study of Southcott’s followers, sixty-three percent of the sample were women (2013, 107). These women were drawn to her by the radical nature of her prophecies which were “directed at a female audience in explicit defence of woman’s equal spiritual status” (Taylor 2016, 103). In 1813, when she was sixty-three years old, she announced that she had been visited by the Holy Spirit and was pregnant with Shiloh, a second Messiah. To her close followers, Southcott was an illuminator and a mediator between the human and the divine.

As the ‘Woman Clothed with the Sun’, Southcott, like Blake’s Jerusalem, was a personification of the redemptive archetypal female (Sklar 2011, 72). In *The Threefold Life of Man*, Boehme likens the Sun Woman of Revelation not only to his Virgin Sophia (1619–20, 5) but also to Christ (13). In his *The Three Principles*, she is aligned with cosmic creation (1618–19, 8); in his *Signatura Rerum*, with Holy Wisdom (1621–22, 11); and with Eve, in *Mysterium Magnum* (1622–23, 23). Southcott likewise embodied a similar set of spiritual archetypes and concepts—not only the Woman Clothed with the Sun but also the Bride of the Lamb, Sophia, Eve, and Mary (Sklar 2011, 76). In her corpus of sixty-five prophetic works, Southcott preached a doctrine of female spiritual equality that shocked many middle-class, main-stream Christians (Carpenter 2003, 132). Like Wollstonecraft, Southcott sought to refute the notion of a spiritually and sexually degraded female. She declared that, with her arrival, the female had been freed from the “curse of the Fall” and elevated “to a full and rightful position within the priesthood of believers” (Taylor 2016, 221). The answer to those who disputed the ‘divine justice’ of this proclamation was a message, delivered through her, from Christ:

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7 Interestingly, she was a notable personality within the social and cultural milieu frequented by Blake while he was writing Jerusalem (Sklar 2011, 76). Two of Blake’s associates, William Sharp and William Owen Pughe, were among her most devoted followers (ibid). Sharp was one of Britain’s most celebrated engravers (Bentley 2001, 66) and became a convert of Southcott after reading her books and questioning her openly about her beliefs and mission (Sklar 2011, 77). Pughe, a Welsh lexicographer and Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, also joined Southcott’s flock, and became friends with both Sharp and Blake (Bentley 1988, 252).
Now I answer thee of women: they followed Me to My Cross, and stood weeping to see Me crucified; they were the first at my sepulchre to see My resurrection: now I will not refuse women…. Let it be known unto all men, the work at first was carried on by women. The first presents that were made were from women. So they showed their love and faith before men showed any. So now suffer women to be present and forbid them not. (1813, 105)

In her writings, Southcott preached the centrality of the feminine redemptive, Sophianic ‘light’ within the divine workings of the cosmos:

Then ye see plain, ye sons of men,
The way I’ve led all on.
It was to Woman, not to Man,
I in this power come … (1804, 159–60)

Woman, therefore, was to be the deliverer of man (Harrison 2013, 105).

With the ‘spiritual revelations’ of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries came the possibilities of future alternative discourses and environments through which women could reimagine and revise their faith to achieve personal empowerment and social reform. Southcott presented an ‘apocalypse’ in which the means for the growth and transformation of society takes place within the female body. In the renewed world (in the sense of the old giving way to the new), the female is no longer the bearer of guilt but the bringer of salvation and the way to the divine. Joanna Southcott founded an actual religious movement, but women writers more commonly wove theology into their literary discourses of empowerment and equality, including the image of the light-giving, salvific feminine. In 1838, George Eliot, in a letter to a friend, stated her interest in unfulfilled prophecy. Although she is circumspect in her attitude towards “Joanna Southcote” (1.11–
12), she nonetheless also incorporates the image of the Woman Clothed with the Sun into her characterisation of the titular heroine in *Romola* (1862–63), who is clothed with the sun of righteousness, displays a ‘feminine’ social conscience and “enacts a feminist protest against masculine egotism and error” (Carpenter 2017, 132). Likewise, this revisionist employment of the Woman in Revelation, and the elevation of the feminine into a redeeming, illuminating force is present in Barrett Browning’s portrayal of the female characters throughout *Aurora Leigh*. Both Southcott and Barrett Browning evoke an apocalyptic vision of renewal, but Barrett Browning does so to affirm human, especially women’s, creative advancement within a paradigm of societal reform, a reform contingent upon female artistic expression, social influence and self-determination.

**IV. Conclusion: Barrett Browning’s Literary Sophia, Continuing a Legacy**

Romantic writers like Wollstonecraft, Mary Hayes and Anna Barbauld, worked to redefine the terms in which society saw, valued, and educated women, terms which tie into aspects of dissenting culture that upheld the value of the female prophetess and preacher. These women actively participated in the open forum of discursive literary debate and their writings sought to redefine notions of God, gender and society. Unitarian publisher, Joseph Johnson brought many of these women’s works into public circulation, including Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. Indeed, Wollstonecraft’s work exerted a profound influence on Unitarian discussions of female education (Taylor 2016, 103). This legacy continued into the later nineteenth century in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s corpus and those of other feminist writers who engaged with theology and the esoteric as part of a personal transformation. They applied Sophianic constructions of the feminine to the world around them. In the case of Barrett Browning, this Sophianic image is intellectually and emotionally implemented in her literary endeavours and desire for
social reform. Barrett Browning’s sentiments about love and sexuality reflect those of Swedenborg and, like Southcott, she incorporates her “vision of a woman-engendered new Jerusalem” in *Aurora Leigh* (Stone 2014) in her revisionist allusions to the Woman Clothed with the Sun. Spiritual and cultural evolution is integral to Aurora’s development as a poet and her defiance of social norms, thus identifying her with the tradition of dissent which figures like Wollstonecraft and Southcott had established. Swedenborg’s emphasis on the androgynous deity, and the fulfilment of love in useful works are present in *Aurora Leigh*. Moreover, by engaging with Romantic tradition and the heterodox beliefs, Barrett Browning was able to translate dissenting concepts of female spirituality into a literary vehicle for elevating her own status as both a poet and a social reformer. In taking on these roles, and identifying herself with the principle of feminine wisdom, Barrett Browning enabled her readers to become followers, thereby instigating personal transformations in her audiences and fostering more accessible alternative dialogues and discourses within established social and cultural frameworks.
Conclusion

Unity in Polarity:

Romanticism and the Sophianic Female

An esoteric understanding of Romanticism changes how the feminine is read and comprehended, revealing another complex thread in the rich tapestry of gender representation in Romantic literary works. Coleridge, Blake, the Shelleys and Barrett Browning elevated the feminine within the processes of creative expression and transformative vision. In doing so, they countered the prescribed gender attributes and roles of Enlightenment and orthodox frameworks. As in the writings of Boehme, Romanticism incorporates gender as a metaphoric system for depicting the polarities of the self and the universe, a system in which the feminine acts as the binding agent of divided energies, paralleled in concepts such as Coleridge’s “unity-in-multeity.”

The connection between the feminine principle in Gnostic and Romantic ideology is exemplified in the concept of the Divine Sophia and in the Romantic view of the female as a facilitator of transcendental vision and redemptive grace.

The image of the feminine found in esoteric tradition provided a backdrop not only for Romanticism but also for the non-conformist movements. For instance, Moravian belief that Divine Love manifests in a series of male/female pairings, or ‘emanations’, similar to the equipoised gendered syzygies of Gnostic cosmology and the Sephiroth of the Kabbalistic Sephirotic Tree (Scholem 1941, 293-94), is reflected in the emanative couplings of Blake’s *Vala* and *Jerusalem*, and in Coleridge’s Abyssinian maid who is instrumental in restoring the Paradisal state of balanced wholeness. Similarly, Swedenborg’s theosophy focused on the conjoined male/female potencies of the Grand Body (Divine Humanity) and on the mediatory receptiveness of the female to divine
energy, is mirrored in Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*. Transcendence was not an inherent part of Romantic humanism. Rather, it is presented as inherent in male/female reintegration, a unity that might potentially transform epistemological constructs. Although much of Romanticism appears to promote the male writer as the active artistic agency, it is also the case that esoteric renditions of the female infused Romantic representations of male/female dynamics in ways that centre the female affective principle as a creative force. The feminine principle operates not only as a counterpart to the masculine personality but expedites the male’s inner journey toward self-realisation, creative freedom and spiritual renewal.

Such a configuration was part of the radicalism of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that provided a springboard for Romantic writers to promote spiritual, social and political change. In his search for a language of unity, Coleridge’s constructions of female characters as nexus points of dark and light opposites, conscious and unconscious, that instigate the widening of perception suggests an alternative to dualistic or binary ways of thinking about gender in a society. His efforts to unite oppositional forces reflect Boehme’s view of light and dark as originating in divine providence, both of which must be brought into balance and reconciled through the joining of the earthly ego with the Sophianic self. The development of his female characters and their centrality across the five works discussed (which Coleridge continued to revise) suggests that representations of the feminine and their esoteric antecedents were an ongoing concern. His portrayal of female characters in the above works also suggest his androgynous aspirations through psychic integration with the feminine ‘other’, thus achieving the ‘great mind’ spoken of in Table Talk (*Collected Works* v.6). The psychological nature of Coleridge’s works, along with their metaphysical concerns, indicates an attempt to formulate a worldview that would help mitigate the existential and social alienation felt by
many following the French Revolution’s failure to deliver on promises of democratic freedoms and equal rights. I also affirm that, through his language of unity, Coleridge sought a sense of inner cohesion in a society in which he frequently felt like an outsider, a cohesion achieved via integration with the feminine in an inward resolution that he found difficult to achieve in the outer world.

For Blake, the search for a unifying principle acquired a sexual focus in his incorporation of Moravian and Swedenborgian beliefs and other and non-conformist and esoteric movements. Blake’s maternal links to the Moravians, as well as the early influence of Swedenborg on the development of his thinking, contributed to the sexual dynamic in his ideas and symbolism, as seen in the imagery of the Poetical Sketches, and later in the themes and motifs of Vala and Jerusalem. The Gnostic character of these epic works is evident in the male and female pairings that make up the four Zoas, each of which must unite in order to restore the divine, androgynous image of humanity. The underlying premise of Blake’s mythology was the achieving of ‘resurrection’ by sexual means, in which the female played a pivotal role. The sexual content in Blake’s poetry equates to the lifting of the barriers and constraints which impede imaginative perception and transformative growth. Both Vala and Jerusalem portray sexual oppression and sexual freedom. Like the paired aeons of Gnostic cosmology, the reunion of the Zoas with their female Emanations engenders personal, collective and cosmic stability. Blake’s female characterisations are crucial for the attainment of wholeness and reconnection to the divine source, thereby challenging epistemological hierarchies and contravening prevailing religious and institutional censure of female independence and sexuality. For Blake, the potentialities of human perception and imagination are infinite because divinity is infinite. However, to a closed or limited sensory apparatus, the divine seems to be outside the range of human consciousness, and the imagination confined to a set of parameters. Blake’s
works interconnect nature, matter and spirit; and divinity is realised within the body and its senses. The female figure of Jerusalem as the Divine Vision epitomises fulfilled desire and the liberation of body, mind and spirit.

The works discussed in this thesis each attempt to redress the split between the “actuality and potentiality” of the self and the imagination (Curran 1973, xiv–xv), as well as the effects of fragmented human consciousness and unhealthy gender relations. Both Percy and Mary Shelley depict the necessity of gender equity from the perspectives of social interchange and mythic ideals. Like Blake, they utilise alternative ideas in order to subvert mainstream modes of thought and representation but take a more socio-political than theosophical approach. Frankenstein presents a tragic outcome resulting from the lack of a tempering/balancing feminine influence, revealing what can happen when feminine roles and values are either absent or relegated to a secondary position within culturally proscribed boundaries. Frankenstein’s Gnostic inversion of the Fall subverts Miltonic representations by portraying the male Victor as a transgressive demiurge-like creator, and the Creature as a rebellious ‘Lucifer’, who challenges Victor’s authority. Victor’s rejection of Agrippa and Paracelsus symbolises his rejection of the feminine principle, and his unilateral creation of the Creature without a feminine contribution echoes the male-oriented act of creation in Genesis, a creation myth which Mary Shelley presents as inherently self-destructive and socially damaging.

Prometheus Unbound depicts a cosmos renewed by the intervention of an active feminine agency that enables the masculine principle to evolve and bring about change. Asia functions as Prometheus’s Sophianic counterpart and the catalyst for liberating revolution by confronting Demogorgon. Percy Shelley’s illustration of human spiritual evolution and revolution attempts to remedy the alienation arising from the lack of a feminine agency and the breakdown of social ties in Frankenstein. He does so by
portraying the feminine principle as the facilitator of a spiritual revolution. Asia unites with Prometheus in a personal and collective transformation, bringing about a utopian vision of society. Her dialogue with Demogorgon parallels the Sophianic transcendence of materiality and it is through this interchange that the veil of perceptive illusion is lifted, and the unknowable made knowable. The Satanic elements of Percy Shelley’s poem take on an Ophitic serpentine quality, in contrast to Mary Shelley’s treatment of the Satanic which, without a beneficial feminine agency, cannot transform. By viewing the Prometheus myth through a Gnostic lens, Shelley incorporates an esoteric paradigm into an emancipatory trope in which a feminine force is the key instigator of personal awakening and social restitution.

The Romantic era opened up more opportunities for women writers who began transgressing gendered codes by writing within the discursive male-oriented disciplines of philosophy, science and theology. In the case of Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh* carries forward Romantic tropes of artistic self-determination and engages with theological modes of representation to redefine established notions of feminine roles and status. In so doing, she articulates an esoteric image of the female that had re-emerged within certain eighteenth-century dissenting religions, an image that enabled discourses that would help reimagine cultural constructions of gender and social relations in the later nineteenth century. The link between the literary tradition of the female poet in the Romantic era and the tradition of dissenting female preachers and prophets did not occur in an established religious sense but was a manifestation of revisionist interpretations of established creeds. Thus, Barrett Browning incorporates this prophetic tradition into a secular mode of literary representation which emphasises the socio-political significance of gender configurations and sexuality. *Aurora Leigh* presents an apocalyptic vision of a new world that
inextricably connects female advancement with social advancement in a Messianic representation of the feminine.

Barrett Browning’s engagement with themes relating to the spiritual image of the female voices not only her desire for artistic fulfilment and spiritual development but also her pursuit of social reform and a more equitable model of male/female and marital relations. Like the Sophia principle of esoteric tradition, that opens the eyes of perception, Aurora redeems the blinded Romney—and, like Shelley’s Prometheus and Asia, both characters unite in a spiritual revolution and a symbolic renewal of the world. The redemption of the male via the female restores equilibrium and reflects Swedenborg’s concept of conjugal love as a sacred ‘marriage of spiritualised affinity, wherein the female transmits divine energy to the male and the male joins with the female in oneness of purpose and heightened perception. Moreover, masculine hegemony is renounced in Romney’s recognition of Aurora’s abilities, allowing for a new vision of society. By alluding to the Woman Clothed with the Sun in her description of Aurora, Barrett Browning reworks established theological concepts (such as those of Joanna Southcott) to present a new image of feminised salvation, a legacy that continued into the nineteenth century, as evidenced in the works of George Eliot.

Harold Bloom states that all the great Romantics, in one form or another, sought to move beyond human perceptions and “transcend nature’s illusions” (1993, 407). I have shown that the Romantic yearning for visionary transcendence can be identified according to a set of ideals that assimilate esoteric elements as a way of challenging and subverting established orthodoxies. Such a visionary impulse was a response to Enlightenment empiricism and the notion of a purely mechanistic universe which many saw as reductive in its laws and definitions. For writers like Blake, Wollstonecraft, the Shelleys and Barrett Browning, a central part of this re-envisioning concerned the position of women within
established mores. In a society that pathologised gender by projecting a ‘scientific’ basis of biological difference on to pre-existing notions of sin and sexuality, views of ‘sex-as-reproduction’ and traditional conceptions of women as ‘daughters of Eve’ placed the female in a subordinate position within a transactional system of marriage for the purposes of economic expediency and child-rearing. The Romantic desire to explore infinity came as a rebuttal against Enlightenment assumptions of a static universe and reductive categorisations.

In their elevation of the female, Coleridge, Blake, Mary and Percy Shelley, and Barrett Browning produced a literary language that incorporated an array of feminised metaphors, tropes and symbols aimed at revealing that love can triumph over tyranny and can transform both body and mind through the altering of perceptions. This thesis has shown how a reading of the esoteric feminine imagery employed by these writers reveals a complex set of ideas underpinning gender representation in Romantic literature, ideas that disrupt binary notions of a masculine Romantic tradition and a feminine subjectivity. While female authors were inhibited by patriarchal culture, an examination of the esoteric feminine in Romanticism pushes the discussion of male and female authors away from gendered categorisations and the perception of divisive male representations. The writers discussed demonstrate, in different ways, a fundamental inclination towards resisting binaries. Coleridge’s blurring of signification and identities destabilises traditional moral and gender distinctions, Blake’s spiritual theosophy of sexual union challenges orthodox notions of sin and female degradation, revealing the erroneousness of sexual categories by their very exaggeration and desire for resolution. In *Frankenstein*, Victor and the Creature are constrained within their intensely proscribed ‘male’ half of the gender binary, being unable to acknowledge or merge with their ‘feminine’ aspects. *Prometheus Unbound* refutes the violence and political one-sidedness of a male-centred revolution, and Barrett
Browning crosses the boundaries of genre and gender in her portrayal of a Sophianic authorial voice within the frameworks of epic poetry and the female prophet tradition.

In all the works explored, the perception of polarities is a core principle—light and dark, masculine and feminine, mortality and infinity, all seemingly contrary but nonetheless interrelated, drawing one another together in a fluid dynamic of Hermetic complimentary configurations. For many Romantics writers, experimentation in literature was a way of exploring and coming to terms with the world by perceiving and depicting possible polarities within an overall unity. In this sense, polarity in Romantic literature entails unity, and the feminine is the Sophianic binding agent.

By advocating subjective knowledge rather than external institutional tenets, a knowledge associated with feminine wisdom and agency, these writers encouraged individual reflection and self-development and, in so doing, sowed the seeds of discourses that challenged patriarchal dominance and hierarchies. By elevating the female at the individual and collective levels of human experience, Romantic writers reinstated the feminine principle as an important and vital player in the attainment of transcendence, self-determination and self-realisation. The feminine is a key factor in the balancing of disparate forces which both Romantic and esoteric writers saw as comprising the human condition. Moreover, Romantic writers placed the quest for transcendence and unity within the realms of politics, religion and social change. Within the context of this refurbishment, the feminine principle is pivotal in subverting hegemony, for it is inherently linked with the divine self and the attainment of knowledge. It therefore surpasses the function of a muse and is a vehicle of spiritual awakening that entails the breaking down of the status quo in regards to gender roles and hierarchies.

Thus, the feminine in the Romantic ethos is interlinked with personal transformation, transcendental vision, sexual liberation, social change and human rights.
These connections all require the male to relinquish dominance in order to attain higher vision and reveal the feminine as a source of unity that leads to creative and spiritual fulfilment. Romanticism helped mitigate the denigration of feminine sensibility as irrational and inferior, by depicting the source of creative transcendence as female. In the disillusioning aftermath of the French Revolution, and in the presence of culturally engrained attitudes to gender, Romantic writers aspired to a revolution of the human spirit which they consistently connected with a feminine catalyst in an esoteric context. In so doing, they attempted to weave a coherent discourse out of a variety of metaphors, symbols and ideas that encompassed strong esoteric and dissenting elements, reconfiguring the image of the feminine into new forms of individual and social action.
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Appendix

Figure 1. *Jerusalem* Plate 28 (Bentley 28), Copy E, Yale Center for British Art.
Figure 2. *Jerusalem* Plate 9 (Bentley 9), Copy E, Yale Center for British Art.
IV.

The eternal gates terrific porter lifted the northern bar: Thel entered in & saw the secrets of the land unknown: She saw the couches of the dead, & where the fibrous roots Of every heart on earth fades deep its restless twists: A land of sorrows & of tears where never smile was seen.

She wandered in the land of clouds thru' valleys dark, listening Delours & lamentations: waiting oft beside a dewy grave She stood in silence, listening to the voices of the ground, Till to her own grave plot she came, & there she sat down, And heard this voice of sorrow breathed from the hollow pit.

Why cannot the Ear be closed to its own destruction? Or the glimpsing Eye to the poison of a smile? Why are Eyelids shut with arrows ready drawn, Where a thousand fighting men in ambush lie? Or an Eye of gods & graces, showing fruits & counsel gold?

Why a Tongue impregnated with honor from every wind? Why an Ear, a whirlpool hence to draw creations in? Why a nostril wide inhaling terror trembling & afflict. Why a tender rush upon the youthful burning boy? Why a little curtain of flesh on the bed of our desire?

The Virgin started from her seat, & with a shriek, Ried back unhindered till she came into the rules of Har.