



The Symbolology of Serpents in Greco-Roman and Biblical Mythology

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In this panoramic study of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and biblical passages ranging from Genesis to Revelation, Wendell Hixson examines the role of serpents as ancient symbols of power, virility, and the bilateral forces of good and evil, chronicling snakes' connotatively rich roles as foils of the gods and barometers of human morality—roles that outstrip the rote symbolism of devilish cunning. This essay was written for World Literature I with Dr. Ben Wetherbee.

AS SERPENTS SLITHER through the history of the Near East and the developing psyche of Europe, they seem to ubiquitously coil around the collective consciousness of many cultures and literary eras in the ancient age. The significance of snakes and their inspiration for divine beasts, such as leviathans of the ocean, basilisks of the earth, and dragons of the sky, reveal the pervasive beliefs that serpents not only occupied but fearfully controlled every realm of their natural and divine world. Through the biblical accounts of flying, fiery adders to the horrendous, venomous serpent in Ovid's account of Cadmus in the *Metamorphoses*, its monstrous qualities distinguish this beast as something to be awed and feared. However, a Brazen Serpent recognizably was killed and erected on a cross to bring the Israelites salvation from those very fire-breathing

snakes, and Cadmus sowed the slain serpent's teeth to birth vivacious soldiers from the soil. These creatures bring salvation and life just as they breed fear and death. In another vein altogether, the serpent represents a very forceful and sexual symbol—one that represents both male and female sexuality—usually indicating either the beginning of creation or the creation of knowledge through the concept of *Chaoskampf*, a battle between a god and a serpent for control of chaos. The complex symbology of the serpent permeates mythology across the Mediterranean and becomes central to this collective identity as eternal beings which inspiringly depict the most beautiful and most horrifying aspects of divine and worldly existence. Additionally, the serpent bridges these two dichotomous domains and encapsulates the dynamic of the intermingling mortal and immortal realms. In full, the diverse symbology of the serpent richly presents itself throughout biblical tales and Ovid's Greco-Roman myths, establishes these creatures as emblems of the dualistic nature of thought and religious belief, and demonstrates the importance of their enigmatic and transformative abilities.

From their legless, slithering movement to their shedding of skin, serpents' features have captivated the attention of ancient cultures across the world and, as symbols, have been given an enormous range of interpretations, and central to this convergence of definitions is their symbolism as a bridge between the earth and the heavens. The bridging quality of serpents originates mainly from their perceived immortality, due to the sloughing of skin being seen as a way for snakes to live forever; their underworldly origins, as they lived within burrows and crags leading ancient Greeks and Romans to believe they journeyed to and lived in the underworld; and their lives being focused on earth rather than on Mount Olympus or in Hades. They were consequently believed to be an enigmatic creature that, though immortal and capable of travel between realms, largely lived and interacted with mankind. This travel between worlds can also be implied in their use as a symbol of Hermes, the

caduceus. These ideas create multiple influential implications. Serpents are earthly beings beyond simple mortality, giving them a status as demideities, which places them in the theomachical world where good and evil are constantly in battle. They hail from the land of the dead and rely on stealth and darkness, which establishes their nature as naturally cunning and venomous, and thus can be easily construed as evil. However, serpents also possess another important attribute of that same deadly venom: “Venom of snakes was panacea” (Antoniou, et al. 3-4). This explains the Rod of Asclepius, the symbol of the medical field often confused in North America with the caduceus, and its association with the medical institution. They protect life and can thus be seen as naturally good. They connect the duality of good and evil perceived in many cultures, making them inherently and perpetually fascinating. Their venom, however, only scratches the surface. Though it clearly demonstrates why serpents have become so innately contradictory, the ensuing duality that erupts from serpent symbology quickly becomes unwieldy; there is no way to demonstrate their symbolic entirety without creating an encyclopedic listing of every appearance and meaning, but there are many crucial narratives in Ovid’s anthological *Metamorphoses* and in the Bible that aptly present these scaled wonders.

Authors throughout the Mediterranean understood this ambiguity and incorporated multiple meanings in their works; they sometimes presented many meanings within the same stories. Greek culture was enamored with snakes themselves and had already reflected their converging and diverging meanings—depending on their context—through the medium of language. The Greeks had approximately forty-one words for snakes, distinguishing different species as well as distinguishing monsters and dragons; an expert on serpent symbology posits, “Words are symbols and the words for serpent present a world of symbology, especially for biblical scholars” (Charlesworth 499, 515). Firstly, Ovid presents the great story of Cadmus to markedly illustrate the serpent’s Greco-Roman diversity. Cadmus in his journey to found the city of Thebes

encounters a basilisk of Greek proportion, a horrendously giant serpent capable of felling trees by simply moving about the forest, ripping spears deeply lodged into its near indestructible scales, and emitting a scorching breath like the “black blast that stinks from holes of Hell” (3.63-97). Cadmus luckily hurls a spear that impales the beast into a tree, but this creature is respected and feared by the gods themselves, and immediately they grow indignant of Cadmus’ treatment of such a holy being. It is seen in their response that serpents command respect from the divine, and it is later seen that they rival gods in strength, as is seen in Apollo’s battle with Python (1.57-60). After the battle, Pallas even descends upon Cadmus and commands him to sow the serpent’s teeth, which births a virile race of armed warriors (3.98-130). Pallas’ instructions and the birth of the soldiers, juxtaposed with the grotesque creature’s description, begins to develop the complexity of the narrative of Cadmus. Despite his obedience to Pallas, as is customary in many Greco-Roman tales, many gods begin to torture Cadmus and destroy his life. A Fury slaughters his children and grandchildren with vipers, Cadmus exiles himself from the city he founded himself, and eventually sorrow envelops him and he accepts his fate: the curse of becoming the very thing he slew (4.482-616). His legs join together, scales wrap around his body, his tongue splits in two, his arms wither away, he falls to his stomach, and he swears to peacefully live alongside humankind. His wife joins him in this fate. And so, Cadmus becomes a tragic hero solely because he slew the serpent, but he ennobles the creature in the process. The gods, still indebted to him and wishing to still bestow a reward upon the founder of Thebes, punish him by transforming him into the very thing they respect. He becomes a being that is immortal just as the gods are, and one that peacefully lives alongside humanity, as opposed to the hellish beast he killed.

Ovid’s portrayal of the multifaceted nature of the serpent doesn’t end with Cadmus. For example, the tale of Tiresias depicts an interestingly divergent image of the serpent. “Tiresias” chronicles the short account of the argument between Juno and Jupiter

that drives them to question the wiseman Tiresias. Their argument humorously surrounds the gendered question of pleasure during sex (3.324-42). Who enjoys sex more? Is it the man or the woman? And the reason they consult Tiresias does not rest on his wisdom, but rather a punishment he received years prior. While walking through a forest, Tiresias had stumbled upon two snakes in the throes of entangled coitus. Either in a panic or out of disgust, Tiresias struck the fornicating little reptiles. Juno, out of anger, transformed him into a woman for seven years. The accounts differ—and Ovid doesn't include it—but seven years later, the womanly Tiresias had stumbled upon two snakes once again in passionate entanglement and left them be. Juno, as a reward, had transformed him back into a man. Now having experienced sexuality as both a man and woman, Tiresias receives the of the god and goddess: which state was more pleasurable? Tiresias easily answers that women enjoy sex much more than men. After disagreeing with her, Juno punishes Tiresias once again by blinding him, but Jupiter, as a reward for taking his side, consoles Tiresias with the gift of prophecy. Importantly, the serpent again commands respect from the gods, as Hera leaps to their aid, and the influence of even regular snakes simply fornicating in the forest holds up to the draconic beasts in Cadmus' story. Additionally, the serpent represents another central dichotomy. The sexual duality of the phallus and the yoni, the man and the woman. Greco-Roman culture used the ouroboros—the serpent biting its own tail—commonly and not simply to represent eternal life, but to also represent the sexual elements of eternity and existence. The tail of the snake represents the phallus, while the mouth of the snake symbolizes the yoni. Accordingly, it does not seem random that Hera essentially castrated Tiresias by transforming him into a woman after he struck the snakes. Also, as brought up earlier, Apollo's battle with Python lends itself freely to diverse interpretation, and an important element is the sexual nature of the battle between a god and a serpent. Delphi, the Greek center of the world, was the home of Python and where, after Apollo's victory, a great

temple was built to house the Oracle at Delphi. The phallic and chthonic snake was slain and cast underground and out of Delphi, and in its absence creation began in an intense sexual encounter where the phallus resides in a fertile or chaotic space, and once removed something begins to develop, much like the womb. The fumes of Python's rotting corpse also connect the Oracle directly to Apollo giving her intense visions. Furthermore, Delphi originates etymologically from the Greek word *delphys*, literally meaning "womb."

Moreover, "snakes had long been associated with the cult at Delphi. It was here that Apollo had defeated the primordial serpent . . . Python in an encounter that was seen as a struggle of order against chaos" (Strootman 436). While the sexual aspect of the theomachy between a god and a serpent is important, the theomachy itself is nearly ubiquitous in cultural explanations of creation. It usually involves a chaotic or uncontrolled space that a divine entity could exert influence over, and the concept of *Chaoskampf*, literally German for the "struggle against chaos" and denoting the battle between good and evil, usually involves a heavenly thunder god battling a chthonic or undersea serpent (Kitts 89). This widespread story of creation displays the dual idea of good challenging evil across the many regions of the Mediterranean, and Margo Kitts also states, "Now, indisputable cross-Mediterranean patterns of material exchange have been established for the late Bronze through Classical ages, and there is no question that Hesiod was influenced by Near Eastern myths" (87). The Near East and Greece were known to be linked mythologically and culturally, and developed simultaneously through many ages. Both the Near East and Greco-Roman myths remain similar in their reliance on narratives of transformation that depict an evil or chaotic place morphing into a realm of potential and creation.

Thus, transformation becomes a means for creation and transformation is creation in its own right, where something else is destroyed to become something new. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* frames

the story of Greece and the rising of Rome around the transformations throughout mythical history, and serpents are aptly characterized as transformative creatures. The belief that they are a tether between dual ideals also emphasizes the dual worlds of Greece, which was sloughed off as an old skin, and the new, complex Rome, which is strong and, like the serpent, a center for all human experiences and a bridge between the earthly and the divine. This epic anthology defines Rome and how its people view the noble history of their Greek spiritual ancestor. As one author discussing Chaoskampf, puts it, “The idea of a struggle between good and evil is common to all peoples who have attained to any moral consciousness. For a non-philosophical people the abstract is too difficult to apprehend, and all things are personified. Evil has thus always taken a definite form, preferably that of a serpent” (Murison 127). Through serpents, Ovid especially highlights the way the Romans would have viewed the world around them as clearly divided into death and life, man and woman, good and evil, Rome and Greece.

Crossing the Mediterranean Sea into the Near East, serpents later in time had a fundamental impact. For example, the Bible parallels Greco-Roman myth continuously. As the connection between God and the serpent is enhanced, the concept of Chaoskampf is clearly demonstrated throughout all of Revelation, and the prevalence of serpent sexuality remains. In Numbers 21.4-9, the biblical God unleashes a swarm of “fiery, flying serpents” upon the disobedient Israelites (*New American Bible [Rev. Ed.]*). The bites are extremely deadly, and the swarm destroys all in its path; this tale seems to reaffirm the usual negative connotation of serpents in Judeo-Christian mythos. However, God commands Moses in the only possible way to curb the swarm and cure the adders’ bites. Through an act of obedience and Godly mercy, Moses is given the task to raise a Brazen Serpent upon a wooden pole, usually depicted as a cross. The “Nehushtan” was the derogatory name given to the Brazen Serpent that Moses erected over the land (2 Kings 18.4). By foreshadowing the crucifixion with a serpent, the Bible ennoble the

serpent by having it suffer hatred and disrespect while on Earth but affording it a divine respect as a redeemer of humanity. And the rarely quoted lines of John 3:14-16 undeniably bestow such an honor upon this symbolic being:

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.

Christ even invoked the serpent to His Apostles and sent them out into the world saying, “Behold, I am sending you like sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and simple as doves” (Matthew 10:16). “Shrewd” was used to refer to wisdom and cunning, while “simple” referred to gentleness and kindness. Yet these depictions of the Brazen Serpent and the serpent’s exemplary shrewdness aren’t the most influential or infamous accounts of serpents in the biblical narrative. The temptation by the serpent in the Garden of Eden remains a notoriously defining moment for the perception of snakes in Christian lore, as later in time the concept of the devil was projected onto the serpent in the Garden, mainly coming from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, making it seem malevolent (Antoniou et al. 3). Their association with cunning suddenly came to be seen as evil, and the identifying nature of the serpent was that of a devilish tempter that brought about the Fall of Man. Though there is considerable disagreement between biblical scholars about the actual implications of the serpent in the Garden,

Some critics find in the story of the fall two strata. In one the serpent is not evil but wise, and the initiator of mankind into knowledge, while in the other and later he becomes a tempter. As has been seen, the serpent was regarded by the Semites, as well as by other peoples as being the wisest of animals. (Murison 128)

In Genesis, the wickedness of the serpent is not expressly declared, while its superior wisdom is emphasized. It does not even lie to Eve. Rather, the serpent tells her the truth—though, granted, not the whole truth—and fulfills the creation story by leading people to the fruit that wouldn't kill them, but would bring knowledge that would give them freedom and a prophecy which would one day bring God to redeem humanity and give it eternal life in Heaven. It brings humanity knowledge and creates the reason God Himself must later come into the world. Perhaps the projection of Satan onto the serpent was a near-negligent case of giving the serpent an absolute meaning as evil, while it was also playing a crucial part in the development of humankind. If anything has been discovered, ancient writers in the Mediterranean rarely confined the serpent to a single definition in their stories, which make the allegories much more interesting than they might have been without such a complex creature.

In addition, the sexuality associated with the serpent importantly intermingles with biblical analysis just as it had with Greco-Roman mythos, and this analysis continues into the concept of Chaoskampf, once again demonstrating the collective culture of viewing the world in a dualistic manner: good and evil, man and woman, birth and death, etc. Just as Apollo and Tiresias experienced the sexually subconscious nature of serpents, the serpent in the Garden of Eden interacts with the Judeo-Christian God in such a manner. A phallic being penetrates a confined, comforting, fertile space, and after manipulating the woman to eat fruit—fruit being a sexual symbol throughout cultures—the woman is cast out of the Garden. The naïve first humans are then birthed out from the Garden and forced into the outside world, experiencing a kind of birth trauma from such a fall from grace. Ross G. Murison acknowledges that some scholars even believe the first sin to not have been disobedience but believe it might have been carnal: “Because the curse pronounced upon the woman is to be realized in child-bearing, it has frequently been held that the serpent represents the lusts of the

flesh, and the first sin was of this class” (129). The allegorical nature of the narrative seems to conflict with this analysis. Regardless, there is interestingly proto-Freudian evidence that sexuality was used to explain cosmic creation in an allegorical manner. This passage from the final book of the Bible explicitly reveals the importance of a woman’s sexuality and her grotesque relationship to a blasphemous dragon:

A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was with child and wailed aloud in pain as she labored to give birth. Then another sign appeared in the sky; it was a huge red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on its heads were seven diadems. Its tail swept away a third of the stars in the sky and hurled them down to the earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman about to give birth, to devour her child when she gave birth. She gave birth to a son, a male child, destined to rule all the nations with an iron rod. Her child was caught up to God and his throne. The woman herself fled into the desert where she had a place prepared by God, that there she might be taken care of for twelve hundred and sixty days. Then war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels battled against the dragon. The dragon and its angels fought back, but they did not prevail and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. The huge dragon, the ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, who deceived the whole world, was thrown down to earth, and its angels were thrown down with it. (Revelation 12:1-9)

But this sexual conflict is simply an element of the framing narrative of theomachy. Though it is “subtle,” as Kitts describes it, in Genesis, the Chaoskampf and the theomachy demonstrate themselves clearly through Revelation. As described earlier, Chaoskampf involves a thunder god and a sea serpent battling for control of the impressionable chaos, and Kitts enumerates two essential elements in this cosmic clash:

Its most striking feature is violence. However subtle in Genesis, the Near Eastern Chaoskampf extols a violent force which suppresses a cosmic threat. . . . A second feature is complex, aqueous foes, personified sometimes as rebellious waters, but often as sea monsters. Monsters range from the Akkadian... to the West Semitic Lotan, Litany, or Leviathan. (89)

The bizarre and celestial grandeur that Kitts describes can be seen in the chimeric beasts seen in Revelation, like the crowned hydra that waits to eat the child and then battles with Heaven, and “the Beast of the Sea” accomplishes her second crucial detail of Chaoskampf: “Then I saw a beast come out of the sea with ten horns and seven heads; on its horns were ten diadems, and on its heads blasphemous name[s]” (Revelation 13.1). These beasts are usually directly associated with the devil and even explicitly stated to be Satan in certain cases, but these creatures are directly battling with Heaven itself. Their destiny is to be defeated and for Heaven to conquer the entirety of everything. Conversely, the serpent in the Garden acts on a much smaller scale. There is not an explicit theomachy occurring in the Garden. The stakes of good and evil are not as neatly defined in Eden as they are in Revelation. The serpent that tempted Eve can’t be definitively defined as purely evil, and, I think, leans more into the usual serpentine ambiguity of the Mediterranean.

Overall, the diverse symbology of the serpent reveals the philosophy of the ancient world, especially the Mediterranean Greco-Roman and Near Eastern cultures, and how duality informed most people’s understanding of the world. The idea of everything being complex or relative is a fairly modern notion, as most ancient cultures viewed the world in terms of black and white. They saw man and woman. They saw life and death. They saw good and evil. And the reason the serpent captivated them so magnificently revolves around its naturally enigmatic properties and behaviors. It subverted and fulfilled their dualistic ideals and bridged them, which presented something that diverged from their hierarchical way of

thinking. It allowed for humanity to believe that their mortal world was linked to the divine, and presented the world and history as a transformative experience where empires rise and fall, beliefs merge and diverge, and good and evil cannot always be easily separated. The serpent was an avenue for evolving complex thought and symbolic experimentation, and through the serpent's perpetual importance throughout the world into the modern era, the slithering anomaly has very well proven the immortality it has always been known to have. ►►

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