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*Ovidius Pictus: Afterlives  
of the Metamorphoses  
in Europe, from Books  
to the Arts*

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IL CAPITALE CULTURALE  
*Studies on the Value of Cultural Heritage*

**eum**

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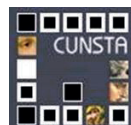
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# *Ovidius Pictus: Afterlives of the *Metamorphoses* in Europe, from Books to the Arts*

edited by  
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# Polysemic Hercules: Gustave Moreau and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

Erin Daly\*

## *Abstract*

The nineteenth-century French painter Gustave Moreau owned a French edition of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* translated by Pierre du Ryer in 1660. This text was a significant source for Moreau's painting, *Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra* (1875-1876). I offer a close reading of Ovid's Hercules cycle focusing on the artistic choices and meaning of Moreau's painting. When Ovidian themes are understood in relation to Moreau's *Hercules*, connections can be made between this painting and its companions, *Salome Dancing before Herod* and *The Apparition*, both of which Moreau debuted with *Hercules* in the Salon of 1876 and the Exposition Universelle of 1878. Conceived together, these three images juxtapose masculine virtue and feminine vice. Although Moreau explored dichotomous and essentializing typologies in these works, his more personal drawings and studies are ambiguous. This imagery hints at the artist's attempts to find meaning by exploring the spaces in between the very binarily defined typologies that his own official art sought to define.

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Gustave Moreau (1826-1898) painted an Apollonian Hercules in the act of confronting the seven-headed Hydra in *Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra* (1875-76) (fig. 1). This vicious water-snake was believed to guard the region of Lerna in Argos at the Alcyonian Lake, one of the purported entrances to the Underworld<sup>1</sup>. Hero and Hydra are locked in a moment of static contemplation before the fight. Around the terrible creature are strewn the bodies of her many vanquished foes: men, some just boys. Their petrifying bodies appear to meld into the rocky outcrop as they writhe in agony after encountering the poisonous blood of the Hydra. Geneviève Lacambre has shown that Pierre du Ryer's 1660 French edition of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* was the source for this work, but a close reading of the Hercules cycle in relation to the meaning of Moreau's *Hercules* has not yet been considered<sup>2</sup>. Building upon established political and aesthetic arguments<sup>3</sup>, I offer a new interpretation of the painting based on Ryer's translation and moralizing commentaries, as well as Moreau's writings and drawings. Moreau zealously pursued popular studies of his time, and he was knowledgeable in history, classics, poetry, and music, in addition to art and aesthetics. He would become a central and prolific figure of the Symbolist movement, and an analysis of this critical literary source is a fitting approach for contextualizing his work and the imagery and symbols that he chose to include in it.

Ovid's tale is steeped in the woes of dangerous love, betrayed honor, and destined death: although Hercules slays the Hydra, years later the blood of the monster causes his demise. Further meaning can be derived from Ryer's poetical translation and his moralizing commentary that was included in Moreau's edition. After a summary of the text, I present a visual analysis based on Ryer's Ovid and Moreau's writings and drawings. When these Ovidian themes are understood in Moreau's *Hercules*, critical connections can be made between this work and its companions, *Salome Dancing before Herod* (fig. 2) and *The Apparition* (fig. 3), both of which Moreau debuted with *Hercules* in the Salon of 1876 and the Exposition Universelle in 1878. Conceived together, these three works juxtapose binary typologies of masculine virtue versus feminine vice. Although dichotomous relationships are explored in the very public *Hercules* and *Salome*, there is ambiguity within Moreau's private sketches and studies of Hercules. I conclude with a brief look at Moreau's drawings and watercolors of Hercules reveling amongst the vices. These preliminary works are investigations that demonstrate Moreau's dissatisfaction with his own pursuit of essentialized gender characteristics.

<sup>1</sup> Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, II, 37, 4-5.

<sup>2</sup> Lacambre 2008, pp. 343-344; Allan 2021 describes the importance of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in Moreau's collection, and he utilizes the Hercules cycle to contextualize Moreau's painting, *Dejanira (Autumn)* (1872-1873), and he focuses on the figures of Dejanira and Nessus.

<sup>3</sup> Mathieu 1976, pp. 120-121; Kaplan 1974, p. 42; L. Feinberg, in Lacambre 1999, pp. 140-141; Cooke 2014, pp. 76-81.

Ovid picks up the story of Hercules after the labors have been completed<sup>4</sup>. Hercules fights the river god, Achelous, to win the hand of Deianira. During their battle, Achelous transforms himself into a great serpent in an act that causes Hercules to laugh. The hero recounts that he killed Juno's murderous snakes when he was only an infant and that he defeated the many heads of the Hydra. Hercules easily defeats the minor river deity. Deianira and Hercules embark on their journey home to Tiryns, and they come to a wide river. The centaur Nessus offers to carry Deianira across the river while Hercules swims. Nessus, however, becomes so enamored with Deianira that he attempts to abduct her. Acting fast, Hercules grabs his bow and arrow and shoots Nessus, piercing him through the back, but these are no ordinary arrows. The hero dipped these arrows in the poisonous blood of the Hydra after her defeat. As Nessus begins to die, he removes his tunic which is stained by his blood – blood now transformed into poison – and he gives it to Deianira. In his final act of revenge, Nessus tricks the unknowing heroine into believing that the lethal tunic is a love charm<sup>5</sup>.

Years pass. In Ovidian fashion, a rumor describing Hercules' love for another woman reaches the ears of Deianira. At first, Deianira contemplates killing her rival but realizes that this might further incite Hercules' misplaced passion. Desperate to keep her beloved, Deianira decides instead to use the magical tunic. An unwitting servant delivers the tunic to Hercules as a gift from his wife, and he finds Hercules in the middle of making his final atonements to Juno. Happily receiving the gift, Hercules dons the tunic atop his bare skin. Activated by the heat of the fires and incense lit on the marble altar, the poisoned shirt starts to do its evil work. The poison burns his skin; he tries to remove the cloak, but instead, he begins to rip off his own skin<sup>6</sup>. He runs through the forest: bones exposed and melting, his body burning, and blood and sweat oozing from him like boiling water<sup>7</sup>. Ripping down trees, he builds a funeral pyre. After carefully leaving his bow and poisoned arrows for Philoctetes, Hercules burns himself upon the fire. In his apotheosis, he sheds his mortal skin like a snake, and Jupiter carries his immortal form up to Olympus. In Ryer's edition, he describes «Like a snake that has stripped itself of its old age by stripping itself of its skin, and which has donned new and more brilliant scales, appears more radiant, and more beautiful when it rolls along through the grass, in the light of the Sun»<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, IX, 1-272; Ryer 1660, pp. 373-392 for the stories of Hercules summarized here.

<sup>5</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, IX, 129-133; Ryer 1660, p. 379.

<sup>6</sup> First, he punishes the servant, Lichas, by throwing him into the sea. In Lichas' overwhelming terror, he transforms into stone, Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, IX, 223-225.

<sup>7</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, IX, 165-170; Ryer 1660, pp. 384-385.

<sup>8</sup> Ryer 1660, p. 388. Author's translation unless otherwise noted: «Comme un serpent qui s'est dépoüillé de sa vieillesse, en se dépoüillant de sa peau, & qui s'est reuestu d'une écaille plus reluisante, paroist plus éclattant, & plus beau quand il se roule sur l'herbe, à la lumiere du Soleil». Ovid, *Metamorphoses* IX, 266-270: «Utque novus serpens posita cum pelle senecta;

In his painting of Hercules and the Hydra, Moreau wanted viewers to consider different elements of Hercules' timeline as described by Ovid: the hero's past, present, and future. The artist did this by condensing the visual imagery in the painting and emphasizing the contemplative nature of the moment shared between hero and monster. Moreau chose to place these figures in the moment before the fight begins, and he was explicit about this intention in a note saying «There is nothing more beautiful than this man and this beast contemplating themselves before the fight. It is especially dreadful»<sup>9</sup>. Hercules stares stoically at the creature, while the Hydra returns the intensity of his gaze. The central head pauses, while the additional six heads coil and prepare to strike. They foam red at the mouth, and as Moreau articulates, they portray the interior wrath of the beast<sup>10</sup>.

Moreau combined iconographical features of Apollo and Hercules in his painting<sup>11</sup>, and the Apollo Belvedere was his inspiration for this lithe and elongated Hercules<sup>12</sup>. His bold body shimmers in the dark and rocky outcrop of the Hydra's lair. He wears the skin of the Nemean lion upon his back, and he is armed with a bow, arrows, and a club. In one hand, Hercules clutches a laurel branch, and his head is crowned by the same leaves. The laurel tree is sacred to Apollo, and the placement of Hercules near the sun also emphasizes Moreau's reference to the sun god<sup>13</sup>. Julius Kaplan has commented on the lighting and atmospheric techniques utilized in this image to heighten the tension and suggests that the cloud in front of the sun is a metaphor for the confrontation between Hercules and the Hydra<sup>14</sup>. These qualities are enhanced by specific references to nineteenth-century Romantic paintings like Delacroix's *Barque of Dante* (1822) and Gros's *Napoleon Bonaparte Visiting the Plague Victims of Jaffa* (1804)<sup>15</sup>. Peter Cooke argues that these quotations, in addition to the tumultuous colors, painterly style, and subject matter, evoke the Romantic sublime, while the allusion to the Apollo Belvedere is a nod to the pursuit

luxuriare solet squamaque nitere recenti». My sincere thanks to Drs. Dorothy and Jack Johnson for their assistance with the translation of this passage.

<sup>9</sup> G. Moreau, in Cooke 2002, p. 100: «Rien n'est plus beau que cet homme et cette bête se contemplant avant le combat. C'est bien autrement terrible».

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*: «J'ai choisi pour la tête maîtresse de l'animal le serpent hadj adoré par les Égyptiens, ce qui me permet de lui donner cet aspect immobile et inquiétant dans la fixité, tandis que les autres reptiles greffés sur son corps, et qui ne sont que les instruments ou membres de sa colère, se tordent de fureur, exprimant la passion intérieure de la bête».

<sup>11</sup> Mathieu 1976, p. 120.

<sup>12</sup> Kaplan 1974, p. 41; Cooke 2014, p. 79.

<sup>13</sup> Kaplan 1982, pp. 67-68; Bagenal 1988, p. 10; L. Feinberg, in Lacambre 1999, pp. 139-140.

<sup>14</sup> Kaplan 1974, p. 41.

<sup>15</sup> Kaplan 1982, p. 69: Kaplan lists these nineteenth-century references alongside other art historical references that Moreau made in *Hercules*. He suggests that Moreau drew from Pousin's *Echo and Narcissus* (1631), Delacroix's *Massacre at Chios* (1824), Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* (1817-1819), and Doyen's *Miracle des Ardentes* (1767).

of Neoclassicism's ideal beauty. Through this careful fusion of the opposing styles and competing legacies of Romanticism and Neoclassicism, Moreau presents the struggle «between spiritual light and the darkness of materialism» to reflect and enhance the «moral duel» between hero and monster<sup>16</sup>.

In his own words, Moreau wrote that he dismissed the Hellenistic Hercules, and that his hero was:

...a fleet-footed Hercules, the Hercules who outran the brazen-footed hind, a personification of youth in all its strength and grace, devoting himself to the right, an athlete by virtue of the spirit rather than the muscles. A giant if you like, but one of harmonious and noble proportions. Nothing of that over-fleshy wrestler with redundant forms<sup>17</sup>.

By rejecting Hellenistic sculpture, Moreau sought to evoke a Winckelmann-inspired Classical ideal through his visual quotation of the Apollo Belvedere. Contemporaries noted and appreciated Moreau's adaptation. Critical reactions to the painting reflect a disdain for the baroque qualities of the Hellenistic period as they were described by Winckelmann. In his review of the 1876 Salon, Georges Lafenestre mirrored Moreau's notes on the subject in his reaction to the painting when he wrote:

This is not that enormous, big-bellied athlete with thickset, brutish forms which the Macedonian decadence handed down to the banal Pantheon of the Romans. This is the true Hellenic Hercules, the son-in-law of Maia, the solar Hercules, the symbol, like Apollo with whom he was long confused, of light, beauty, youth, and poetry<sup>18</sup>.

Likewise, these ideas fit well with the interpretations of Apollo and Hercules given by mythological dictionaries held in Moreau's library. For example, in Louis Ménard's *Du Polythéisme hellénique* of 1863, the author describes the similarities shared between Apollo, Dionysus, and Hercules. In one passage, he states:

...the three myths share a common feature, for they all represent the power of the sun; but this physical aspect is conjoined in Apollo with the metaphysical idea of universal harmony, in Dionysus with the mystical idea of death and resurrection, in Hercules with

<sup>16</sup> Cooke 2014, p. 80.

<sup>17</sup> Mathieu 1976, p. 120 cites undated note from Musée Gustave Moreau (or MGM) (trans. James Emmons): «L'Hercule au pied léger, l'Hercule de la biche au pied d'airain. Cette personification de la jeunesse dans sa force, dans sa grâce se vouant au droit, cet athlète par l'âme plus que par les muscles. Géant si l'on veut, mais aux formes cadencées et nobles. Rien du lutteur engraisé et redondant de formes».

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem* cites Lafenestre 1876 (trans. James Emmons): «L'Hercule de M. Moreau n'est past, en effet, cet athlète énorme, ventripotent, aux forme épaisses, à tournure bestiale, que la décadence macédonienne légua au banal Panthéon des Romains, c'est le véritable Hercule hellénique, le beau-fils de Maïa, l'Hercule solaire, symbole, comme Apollon, avec lequel il fut longtemps confondu, de la lumière, de la beauté, de la jeunesse, de la poésie».

the political idea of civilizing labor. The labors of Hercules represent both the struggle of light against the malevolent powers of darkness and the struggles of nascent civilization against the terrible obstacles born of the earth beneath the feet of humanity<sup>19</sup>.

Hercules as a representative force of «civilizing labor» and his labors as the «struggles of nascent civilization» had been associated with the hero's iconography in France since the Revolution as has been detailed by Lynn Hunt<sup>20</sup>. Kaplan and Larry Feinberg have argued convincingly that Moreau's *Hercules* should be understood in light of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71. Given Moreau's political interests in the early 1870s, the war played a role both in the selection of the subject matter and his approach to its gruesome imagery<sup>21</sup>. This Hercules, veiled appropriately in the imagery of the Apollo Belvedere, represents France while the many-headed Hydra alludes to Bismarck and the German princes he controlled<sup>22</sup>. Moreover, Cooke suggests that the Hydra might also be a representative of anarchy as it relates to the artist's hostile position toward the Paris Commune of 1871<sup>23</sup>.

The moralizing commentary found in Moreau's edition of the *Metamorpho-*

<sup>19</sup> L. Feinberg, in Lacambre 1999, p. 139 cites Ménard 1863 pp. 188-189 (trans. Feinberg): «...les trois mythes ont un trait commun, ils représentent les énergies du soleil; mais cet aspect physique s'allie dans Apollon à l'idée métaphysique de l'harmonie universelle, dans Dionysos à l'idée mystique de la mort et de la résurrection, dans Héraklès à l'idée politique du travail civilisateur. Les travaux d'Héraklès représentent à la fois les luttes de la lumière contre les puissances malfaisantes des ténèbres et les luttes de la civilisation naissante contre les terribles obstacles que la terre fait naître sous les pas de l'humanité». Feinberg also notes similar themes expressed in mythological dictionaries held in Moreau's library, like Eduard Adolf Jacobi's *Dictionnaire mythologique universel* (Paris, 1863) and Francois Noël's *Dictionnaire de la fable ou Mythologie grecque, latine, égyptienne...* (Paris, 1801). Mathieu 1976, note 460 for an additional passage (Ménard 1863, p. 73) in which the battle between Hercules and the Hydra is compared with Apollo and the Python; see Mathieu 1978 for an overview of Moreau's library.

<sup>20</sup> Hunt 1983, pp. 99-101. At the 1793 consecration of the new constitution, Jacques-Louis David planned four stations that would represent four major turning points in the history of the Revolution. One of these was to be a colossus of the French people represented as Hercules smashing the Hydra of federalism. The image of this station survives through engravings. Hercules is shown bearing a club in one raised arm, and he stands on top of the Hydra. According to observers, this Hydra was half-woman, half-serpent. This creature shares much in common with the figure of Medusa in Benvenuto Cellini's *Perseus with the Head of Medusa*, perhaps representing an early and significant contraction of Medusa and Hydra iconography. See also Mainz 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Kaplan 1974, pp. 41-42; L. Feinberg, in Lacambre 1999, p. 140-141. In the early 1870s, Moreau was creating plans for a memorial for a friend who died during the Franco-Prussian War, he also made a direct reference to the conflict in his 1871 painting *Crusader Dying in the Desert*, and he made a scathing caricature of the German Imperial Chancellor Bismarck recorded in MGM.

<sup>22</sup> L. Feinberg, in Lacambre 1999, p. 140.

<sup>23</sup> Cooke 2014, p. 79. The murals of Moreau's mentor, Théodore Chassériau were destroyed during the night of May 23-24, 1871, and the artist expressed his outrage at the Commune in a letter to Alexandre Destouches (May 27, 1871, MGM).

ses might also have encouraged the artist to reflect on socio-political themes of warfare, government, and anarchy through the theme of Hercules. Ryer posits that the defeat of the Hydra was an allegory for warfare and describes the Hydra herself as a metaphor for a stronghold upon which Hercules laid siege and overtook. Therefore, the magical head of the Hydra was not really a regenerative head but a monstrous metonymy for soldiers pouring forth from a fortification, replacing anew those who were just cut down<sup>24</sup>. Themes of civic discord and war were certainly at the forefront of Moreau's thoughts, and he explored them through mythology and gender relations. Questions of gender also interested Ryer, and he wrote that the Hydra might also be interpreted as Vice with each of her heads representing a different vice<sup>25</sup>.

Broader feminine connotations of vice informed Moreau's depiction of the Hydra, and they were likely drawn directly from other Hercules narratives. In *Memorabilia*, Xenophon describes the story of an adolescent Hercules. He is approached by two women: one modest and demure, the other beautiful and entrancing. They represent the paths of Virtue and Vice<sup>26</sup>. While Vice tempts Hercules to take the easy route of pleasure and happiness, he is not swayed. Virtue presents a difficult but noble path that will result in long-lasting recognition, and those successful will be beloved by the gods, their friends, family, and fatherland. Hercules chooses the path of Virtue. This story, also known as the allegory of Vice and Virtue, long captivated artists ranging from Albrecht Dürer and Paolo Veronese to Pieter Paul Rubens and Nicolas Poussin<sup>27</sup>. There was one version, however, that Moreau must have seen during his travels to Italy: Annibale Carracci's *The Choice of Hercules* (1596).

In an undated, preliminary sketch Moreau quotes the pose of Carracci's Hercules (fig. 4). Like the original painting, Moreau shows the right knee of Hercules bent at a right angle, while the left twists toward the ground. Moreau's Hercules arranges his arms in a similar manner, but this Hercules clings to Virtue's arm and hair, rather than the club itself as depicted in Carracci's version. Moreau slenderizes Hercules not unlike the final figure he paints in *Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra*. In an oil sketch dating to the second half of the nineteenth century, Moreau imports Carracci's pose again along with a similarly muted color palette (fig. 5). The abstracted, zigzagging path of Virtue shown in this sketch shares much in common with the path painted by Carracci. Moreau's Virtue is dressed in blue, while Vice, standing in the distance like a mirage, wears only a fleshy pink veil that snakes behind her. Serpentine Vice shown in this parable enhances the moralistic tones of Moreau's approach to the figure of Hercules and heightens our sensitivity to-

<sup>24</sup> Ryer 1660, p. 391.

<sup>25</sup> Ivi, p. 390.

<sup>26</sup> Xenophon, *Memorabilia* II, 1.21-34.

<sup>27</sup> Wuttke, Virey-Wallon 2007 for an overview of Hercules at the crossroads.



ward the essentializing gender characteristics that the artist and translator associated with the virtuous masculine and the treacherous feminine.

In *Hercules*, the Hydra, imbued with connotations of feminine, serpentine vice, is a symbol that evokes anarchy and chaos. The emotional spectacle is heightened by the corpses of the Hydra's many victims. The bodies range in their liquidity and opacity. Their twisted and contorted masses become a rocky crag in a hellish citation of Leonardo da Vinci's *Madonna of the Rocks*<sup>28</sup>. The sinister depiction of the Hydra's lair likewise recalls Ovid's description of Perseus advancing toward Medusa's cave: fields of men and beasts turned into stone created a mortiferous landscape of approach<sup>29</sup>. Unlike Medusa's collection of frozen sculptural curiosities, Moreau presents the lively dwelling of the Hydra, where only some victims have begun their wretched transformation into stone. Torsos, limbs, and decapitated heads are juxtaposed with those humans still clinging to life. The gruesome nature of Moreau's *Hercules* must have been informed by Ovid's vivid description of Hercules tearing off his own skin, stripping himself clean to the bone, to release himself from the deadly power of the Hydra's blood<sup>30</sup>. Hercules was triumphant on the day of his battle, but the beast causes his woeful death in the future. His victory, therefore, is fleeting, and soon enough, he will be among the many shown suffering and dying around the Hydra. It is this compressed timeline that informs the meaning of the predominant and mysterious corpse in the foreground.

Underneath the Hydra lies the corpse that I argue could be understood as a sickly premonition of the now triumphant Hercules. While the wide-eyed Hercules is caught in the mesmeric force of the Hydra's gaze, the viewer of the painting may be confronted by a vision of the hero's own death. Separated by a small chasm, the vision is not yet seen by Hercules. The ashen body of the prone nude is rendered in sharp clarity, especially compared with the nearby ghostly corpses, but his face and hair are shown as hazy and hallucinatory. Dreamy, loose brushstrokes suggest a prophetic mirage: is this Hercules? Or is it simply another young hero, who, not unlike the regenerative heads of the Hydra, has replaced himself time and time again in the never-ending battle against chaos?<sup>31</sup> As a metaphor for the terrors of war, the Hydra and her vic-

<sup>28</sup> Kaplan 1974, p. 42.

<sup>29</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, IV, 776-804.

<sup>30</sup> Ryer 1660, pp. 384-385.

<sup>31</sup> Mathieu 1976, p. 120; L. Feinberg, in Lacambre 1999, p. 138. As Feinberg describes, this prone nude appears in at least nine studies Moreau made for *Hercules*, including a large unfinished oil painting that hangs in the Musée Moreau today. My suggestion for interpreting this highlighted corpse as a future Hercules is strengthened by Mathieu's identification of Poussin's *Echo and Narcissus* as the precedent for the body. Feinberg agrees with Mathieu, suggesting that despite alterations, the torso is derived from Narcissus. Similarities between the corpse and Narcissus can be observed in the aforementioned unfinished oil painting of Hercules in Paris where the youthful nude corpse is shown clearly at the water's edge. If we are to accept Mathieu's sug-

tims remind viewers of the knowledge that Hercules' venomous arrows (the quiver colored in the same bright red as the bloody fangs of the Hydra) are the only objects that survive the encounter and will be utilized by Philoctetes during the Trojan War – implying that mankind's ceaseless desire for war rages on.

The torso of the Hydra rises from a pile of bodies (fig. 1). The white scales of her belly shine in an eerie light as they emerge from the slaughter. The texture of the long, vertical body is rendered silky and tactile, and it leads the eye up to the immortal head of the creature. Moreau prepared his Hydra by making sketches after books, magazines, and live snakes<sup>32</sup>. He based the Hydra's head on the stylized cobra of an Egyptian headdress<sup>33</sup>, writing that he chose the «serpent hadj» as the «tête maîtresse» for this work because it allowed him to capture the contradictory aspects of immobility and restlessness that he sought in his vision of the monster<sup>34</sup>. The mouth of the cobra is closed, and a forked, black tongue slithers out, and a yellow eye looks forward, gazing straight ahead. The density of all seven heads together seems almost to overwhelm the size of the torso, and the improbable weight adds to the precarious, potential energy of the serpent's movement. Emerging from the fantastical dark matter comprising the Hydra's mid-torso, these smaller serpents hiss, some with their mouths open wide. The bottom-left serpent oozes poisonous blood and bares its venomous fangs – reminding viewers that not only is the bite fatal but even contact with this poison will boil blood. For a moment, the Hydra is engaged in the dangerous dance of the snake charmer, but who has been charmed? The Hydra or Hercules?

Based upon preparatory drawings, it is apparent that *Hercules* and *Salome Dancing Before Herod* were conceived together. One sketch shows cobras around the head of Salome, and Moreau must have been contemplating the visual and metaphorical similarities between the Hydra and what he considered to be her human, female counterpart (fig. 6). One drawing shows Salome with

gestion, then metaphorical meanings abound. Narcissus as a representation of self was destined to be an arbiter of his own death (incurred by vanity). Contemplating the death of Hercules and Narcissus in the same measure, Moreau perhaps uses the corpse as a representation of Hercules himself and ponders his agency in a world of chance determined by the gods.

<sup>32</sup> L. Feinberg, in Lacambre 1999, pp. 139-141, note 18. Moreau obtained an entrance card to the Muséum d'Histoire naturelle to work in the galleries of anatomy, zoology, botany, geology, and minerology. Moreau used Johann Wagler's *Descriptiones et icones amphibiorum* (1833) to make watercolor snake studies, and from these he derived the central head of the Hydra. *Ibidem*, note 142: Moreau also consulted the *Magasin pittoresque* (January 1853). Another source in Moreau's library, Georges Cuvier's *Le règne animal: Les reptiles* (1836) noted that the *haje* was the snake that the ancient Egyptians called "asp". The same snake is associated with Cleopatra, another iconic femme fatale.

<sup>33</sup> L. Feinberg, in Lacambre 1999, p. 139.

<sup>34</sup> G. Moreau, in Cooke 2002, p. 100 (see note 10 above).

a profile flattened to align her with her serpent companions. Sinuous tendrils of cloth wrap around Salome's head. Additional sketches demonstrate that Moreau was directly comparing body typology: the heroic body of Hercules next to the slender, serpentine curves of Salome (fig. 7).

Ryer's commentary may have helped Moreau see connections between the stories of Hercules and Salome. Ryer sought to blame someone for the unjust death of Hercules, and he turned to Deianira, who is little more than a characterless plot device in Ovid's text. He sees, nevertheless, both Deianira herself and Hercules' failed love for her as the root cause of Hercules' downfall. He is quick to point out that in Deianira's emotional and feminine response to rumor, she plots not only to kill her rival, but also manages to poison Hercules in a manner all too similar to Circe, master of *φαρμακεία*. Ryer included lines from *Remedia Amoris* in which the poet notes that while Circe exerts her shape-shifting power over others, she is unable to control her own heart<sup>35</sup>. These duplicitous, feminine themes in Hercules' death find a climactic parallel in the ultimate femme fatale: Moreau's Salome.

Salome is shown in a monumental and eclectic throne hall in *Salome* (fig. 2). Herod's substantial throne flanks a partitioned wall and constricts the space of Salome's stage. On the left is a sitar player and Herodias, the calculating mother of Salome. In the lower right half of the painting stands the ominous executioner. Salome's eyes are closed, and her head is angled toward the ground. She is almost hovering. In one arm she holds a lotus as her other stretches straight forward as if she is in the act of summoning. While her body is in hieratic stasis, elements of her garment move about. Like the secondary heads of the Hydra, they offer a glimpse into the interiority of Salome's character and the turmoil of her dance.

A comparison of the final paintings of *Salome* and *Hercules* reveals key correlations. Hercules and Salome share the same space on the left side of the canvas. Around Hercules are fallen brethren, around Salome are thrown flowers. Carnage, nonetheless, is implied in *Salome* as she dances on this bloody floor, painted in the same color as Hercules' quiver and the venom dripping from the Hydra's mouths. Like the Hydra, Salome rises. Portrayed wavering in a «somnambulist» trance<sup>36</sup>, the weight of her body is inexplicably carried upon her toes much like the oversized head of the Hydra balances upon its slender torso. Hercules stands against the Hydra, but who is Salome confronting? The viewer must supply John the Baptist, who is the victim of Salome's deadly dance<sup>37</sup>. Indeed, *The Apparition*, also displayed at the Salon of 1876, offers a more immediate interpretation of femme fatale and victim (fig. 3).

<sup>35</sup> Ryer 1660, p. 381; Ovid, *Remedia Amoris*, 269-270, «Vertere tu poteris homines in mille figuras, Non poteris animi vertere iura tui».

<sup>36</sup> Cooke 2011, pp. 214-232: for an analysis of Salome's "dance".

<sup>37</sup> Bible, New Testament, Mark, 6:21-28; Matthew, 14:6-11: for the story of Salome summa-

Sarah Lippert argues that Moreau conflated the typologies of Salome and Medusa in *Apparition*<sup>38</sup>. Inspired by Benvenuto Cellini's *Perseus with the Head of Medusa*<sup>39</sup>, Moreau purposely merged this imagery<sup>40</sup>. Cellini's Perseus raises the head of Medusa who was conquered by his masculine virtue. It is Salome, in *Apparition*, who re-enacts the action of «holding up», but it is a «supernatural force» that holds forth the head of John the Baptist while sculptural blood drips from his neck in a nod to Cellini's original material. Although this Salome is anything but a virtuous Perseus, there has been a role reversal: «the head is from a heroic martyr, while the evil heroine calls it into being»<sup>41</sup>. Moreau's visualization of the ties between Salome and Medusa are strengthened through the artist's creative conceptualization of Salome alongside the Hydra in preparatory drawings.

Essentializing ideas of masculine virtue and feminine vice in *Apparition* were codified in Moreau's cultural milieu through Joris-Karl Huysmans' novel, *À rebours* (1884). *À rebours* follows the intrigues, musings, and dreams of Huysmans' protagonist, Des Esseintes, and Gustave Moreau was Des Esseintes' favorite artist. In this fantastical Paris, Des Esseintes owned *Salome* and *Apparition*. While Des Esseintes worshipped before both images, he suggests that *Apparition* was «even more disturbing» than its counterpart, *Salome*<sup>42</sup>. In elaborate detail, Huysmans sets the scene:

Des Esseintes, like the old king [Herod], was overwhelmed, stunned, and unhinged by this dancer... In this picture she was truly a whore, obedient to her temperament of a cruel and passionate woman; she lived again, more polished and more barbaric, more hateful and more exquisite; arousing the languorous senses of man more vigorously, she

rized here. King Herod was giving a feast on his birthday. The daughter of Herodias [Salome] arrived and danced before Herod. She was so pleasing to him that he offered her anything she desired and swore by oath to fulfill her wishes. Her mother tells Salome to demand the head of John the Baptist. Fulfilling her duties, she requests that the head of the Baptist be delivered to her on a platter. Although this upsets the king, he was bound by his oath. A guard completed the command and brought out the head on a platter. Salome presented the gift to her mother while the disciples buried the body of the Baptist.

<sup>38</sup> Lippert 2014, pp. 247-252, esp. 249: Moreau would have been well aware of the story of Medusa. Before she was turned into a gorgon, Medusa was once beautiful and her hand in marriage was pursued by many. Neptune, however, raped Medusa inside a shrine of Minerva. In response, Minerva punished Medusa by transforming her beautiful hair into snakes (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, VI, 793-802). As Lippert describes, Medusa was beauty wrapped in sin, unveiled, and then punished by the gods. Moreau alludes to Medusa's hair by exploring the snake-like qualities of Salome's headdress.

<sup>39</sup> Moreau was familiar with this sculpture. He saw *Perseus with the Head of Medusa* in Florence and made a drawing of it preserved at the MGM (Des. 4533).

<sup>40</sup> Lippert 2014, p. 249.

<sup>41</sup> Ivi, p. 251.

<sup>42</sup> J.K. Huysmans 1977, p. 146: «...mais l'aquarelle intitulée *l'Apparition* était peut-être plus inquiétante encore».

bewitched and subjugated his will more surely, with her charms as of some great venereal flower that had burgeoned in a sacrilegious seedbed and grown to maturity in a hothouse of impiety<sup>43</sup>.

Des Esseintes, like Herod, is overcome by the sight of Salome. Like those men petrified by the gaze of Medusa, the protagonist is «unhinged» by Salome.

In *Apparition*, Moreau shows the decapitated head of John the Baptist, held aloft like conquered Medusa, but it is Salome who plays the role of Perseus in Moreau's topsy-turvy world: this is the ultimate nightmare for virtuous men<sup>44</sup>. Not unlike Hercules, the Baptist sought a life of righteousness when he met his end through Salome's enchantment of Herod. Likewise, Hercules, by overcoming the Hydra, is later killed by her blood – given to him by the inadvertent femme fatale, Deianira<sup>45</sup>. Hercules' phantasmic vision of himself as the prone nude before the Hydra therefore shares much in common with the apparition of the Baptist before Salome.

Huysmans' over-the-top act of codifying Salome's role as a paradigmatic femme fatale loomed large in the public's imagination regarding not only the art of Moreau, but the very perception of the painter himself. It is tempting to end the analysis here, but when it comes to Moreau's views on gender and morality, his private works are not so obvious. In the very public *Hercules* and *Salome*, stark and binary constructions of gender are clear, but Moreau's private works are surprisingly ambiguous. Moreau's personal drawings suggest a more complex and continually revised exploration of gender typologies. For example, Moreau returned to the allegory of the choice of Hercules in drawings and watercolors. In one image, Moreau shows a curvaceous Hercules who has chosen not Virtue, but Vice, and he writhes in ecstasy with serpents in an erotic nod to the Laocoön (fig. 8). Snakes wind around the supple form

<sup>43</sup> J.K. Huysmans 1998, pp. 48-49 (trans. Mauldon); J.K. Huysmans 1977, p. 148: «Tel que le vieux roi, des Esseintes demeurait écrasé, anéanti, pris de vertige, devant cette danseuse... Ici, elle était vraiment fille ; elle obéissait à son tempérament de femme ardente et cruelle ; elle vivait, plus raffinée et plus sauvage, plus exécration et plus exquise ; elle réveillait plus énergiquement les sens en léthargie de l'homme, ensorcelait, domptait plus sûrement ses volontés, avec son charme de grande fleur vénérienne, poussée dans des couches sacrilèges, élevée dans serres impies.»

<sup>44</sup> Moreau elaborated on Salome as femme fatale in writing. Lippert 2014, p. 251; G. Moreau, in Cooke 2002, p. 97: «Cette femme qui représente la femme éternelle, oiseau léger, souvent funeste, traversant la vie une fleur à la main, à la recherche de son idéal vague, souvent terrible, et marchant toujours, foulant tous aux pieds, même des génies et des saints. Cette danse s'exécute, cette promenade mystérieuse s'accomplit devant la mort qui la regarde incessamment, béante et attentive, et devant le bourreau à l'épée qui frappe. C'est l'emblème de cet avenir terrible réservé aux chercheurs d'idéal sans nom de sensualité et de curiosité malsaine.»

<sup>45</sup> Allan 2021: Allan describes a similar merging of typologies in Moreau's *Autumn (Dejanira)* evident in the artist's approach to the character of Dejanira, saying «Given such a conflation of figures, Dejanira anticipates the late-nineteenth century femme fatale. Like Moreau's Salome or Helen of Troy, she becomes the beautiful instigator, at once passive and aggressive, of a sequence of tragic events».

of Hercules who does not look that different from Salome. In another watercolor, Moreau uses swaths of color to set the stage for Hercules' Saturnalian spree, and the hero appears in a delicate *figura serpentinata* as if he is one of Moreau's often portrayed female characters like Sappho or Helen (fig. 9). Jean Selz has noted that Moreau's attitude toward male beauty has been «difficult to define precisely». Within Moreau's images, Selz sees «considerable ambiguity» verging on attempts to shroud masculine forms with an «almost feminine beauty»<sup>46</sup>. Selz speculates that Moreau was interested in original and Platonic androgyny – «an image of primitive perfection that a pure spirit nostalgically tries to aspire and recapture»<sup>47</sup>. Whether it was a quest for Platonic ideals or a more complex sense of sexuality, sensuousness, and attraction than Moreau was allowed to voice during his time, only his artistic oeuvre is left to speak on these questions today<sup>48</sup>. His Hercules images allow modern audiences to reflect on the vast ambiguities embodied by the ancient hero himself, who served as a foil through which Moreau searched for possibilities in the interstices between traditional and culturally constructed gender binaries.

In one extraordinary drawing, Moreau juxtaposes the muscular torso of Hercules with the undulating scales of the belly of the Hydra (fig. 10). Both figures writhe in a horizontal arrangement, and Moreau explores the shared characteristics of man and monster, male and female. This work recalls Ovid and Ryer's description of the apotheosis of Hercules: «Like a snake that has stripped itself of its old age by stripping itself of its skin, and which has donned new and more brilliant scales, appears more radiant, and more beautiful when it rolls along through the grass, in the light of the Sun»<sup>49</sup>. Even though Hercules is the slayer of snakes and serpentine foes, in death, Moreau compares his radiant

<sup>46</sup> Selz 1979, p. 91.

<sup>47</sup> Ivi, p. 93.

<sup>48</sup> See esp. G. Lacambre, in Capodiecchi 2002, pp. 8-11. Lacambre describes that Moreau requested many of his personal letters and papers be burned, except those relating to his «travaux, lettres de félicitations, de sympathie – toutes sans exception». He did not want his personal correspondence to influence the legacy of his paintings. As Lacambre details, many letters nevertheless have remained, including the letters from his time abroad in Italy, as well as writings regarding his artistic practice. In fact, the artist organized and filed several of his own letters as he prepared his house museum. It is difficult, therefore, to determine how many personal letters were destroyed as he arranged documents for public presentation. At least one letter between Moreau and his «meilleure et unique amie, Alexandrine Dureux» escaped destruction and was discovered in a boudoir drawer. In any case, we are missing critical information exchanged between Moreau and his female partner, and we are certainly lacking the full scope of exchange between Moreau and his closest friends. My goal, therefore, is to allow the paintings to speak louder, and rather than attempt to label or decipher Moreau's sexuality, I seek to broaden conversations by thinking expansively about the vast material corpus left to us today, and this is an important aspect of my forthcoming dissertation.

<sup>49</sup> Ryer 1660, p. 388: «Comme un serpent qui s'est dépouillé de sa vieillesse, en se dépouillant de sa peau, & qui s'est reuestu d'une écaille plus reluisante, paroist plus éclatant, & plus beau quand il se roule sur l'herbe, à la lumière du Soleil».



body to the scales of the Hydra. In his immortality, Hercules has become one with the very opposition that dictated the terms of his heroism in his mortal life.

Keeping these complications in mind, it is possible to draw certain conclusions. For audiences of his time, Moreau offered a misogynistic rumination on vice, gender, and death in the companion works *Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra*, *Salome Dancing Before Herod*, and *The Apparition*, and it is his conflation of the gendered character typologies – Hydra/Salome/Medusa versus Hercules/John the Baptist/Perseus – that have become the long-enduring legacy left to viewers of these paintings. Moreau's edition of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* allows viewers to see these ideas clearly, but there is more. The process of preparation for these public paintings reveals new insights regarding the many ideas to which Moreau was responding and contemplating. In private, Moreau's unofficial efforts hint at his attempts to find meaning by exploring the spaces in between the very binarily defined typologies that his own official art sought to define.

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*Appendix*

Fig. 1. Gustave Moreau, *Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra*, 1875-76, 179.3×154 cm. Oil on canvas, Art Institute of Chicago





Fig. 2. Gustave Moreau, *Salome Dancing Before Herod*, 1874-76, 143.5×104.3 cm. Oil on canvas, The Armand Hammer Collection, Gift of the Armand Hammer Foundation, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles



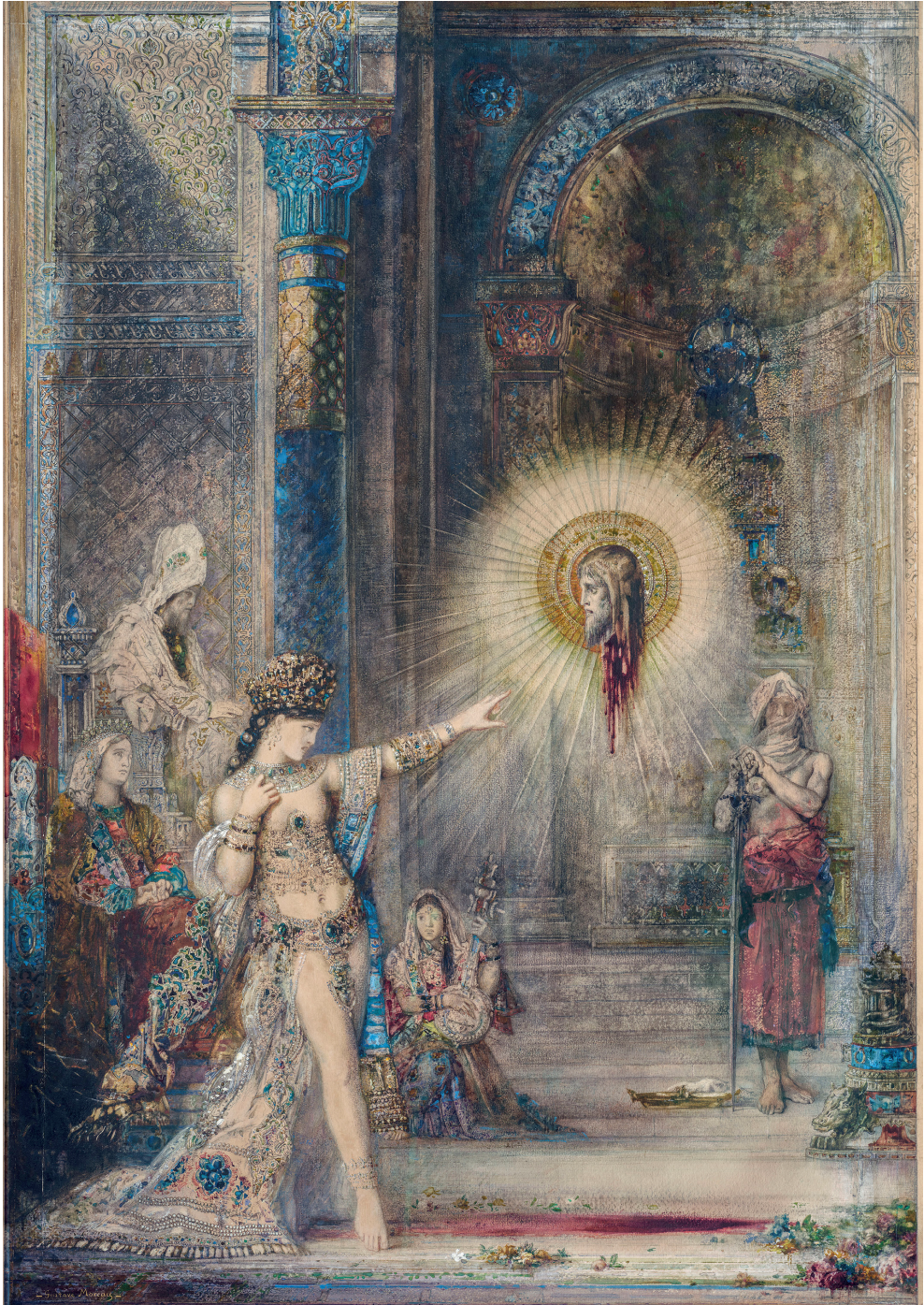


Fig. 3. Gustave Moreau, *The Apparition*, 1876, 106×72.2 cm. Watercolor on paper, Musée d'Orsay, Paris. © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY





Fig. 4. Gustave Moreau, Des. 1641, Study for *Hercules between Vice and Virtue*, 19th Century, 34.3×18.3 cm. Drawing, Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris. © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY



Fig. 5. Gustave Moreau, Cat. 110, Study for *Hercules between Vice and Virtue*, 19th century, 45×38 cm. Oil on canvas, Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris. © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY



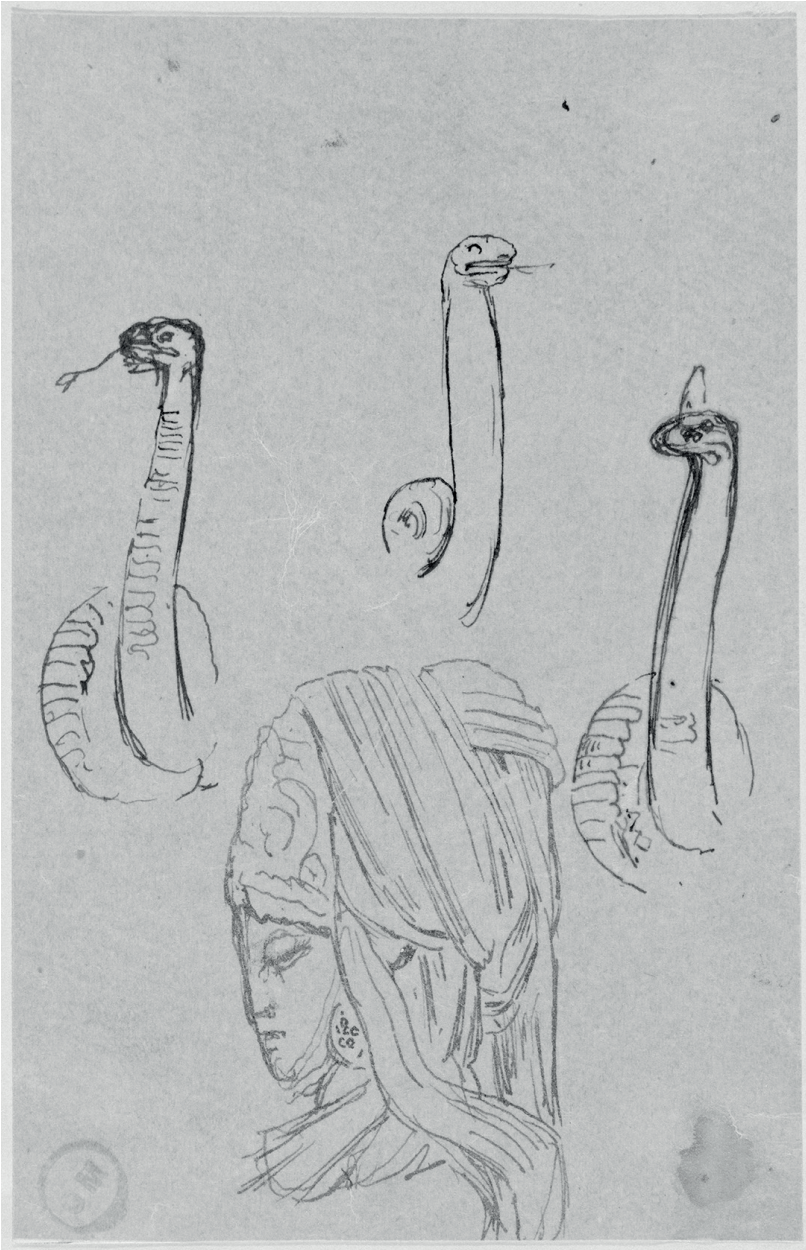


Fig. 6. Gustave Moreau, Des. 6021, Study of Heads for Salome and of Serpents for *Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra*, 19th Century. Drawing, Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris. © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY



Fig. 7. Gustave Moreau, Des. 8287 recto, Study for *Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra* and *Salome Dancing Before Herod*, 19th Century. Drawing, Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris. © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY





Fig. 8. Gustave Moreau, Cat. 130, *Hercules and the Vices*, 19th century, 93×35 cm. Drawing, Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris. © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY

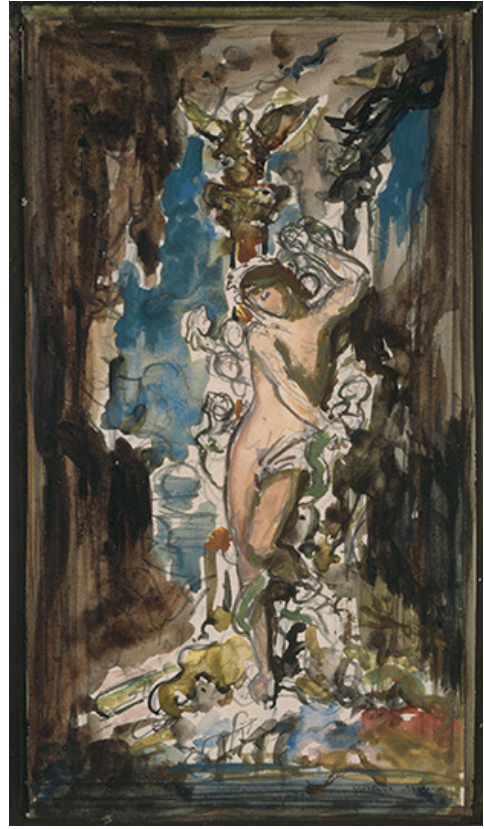


Fig. 9. Gustave Moreau, Cat. 365, *Hercules and the Vices*, 19th century, 24.5×14.5 cm. Watercolor, Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris. © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY



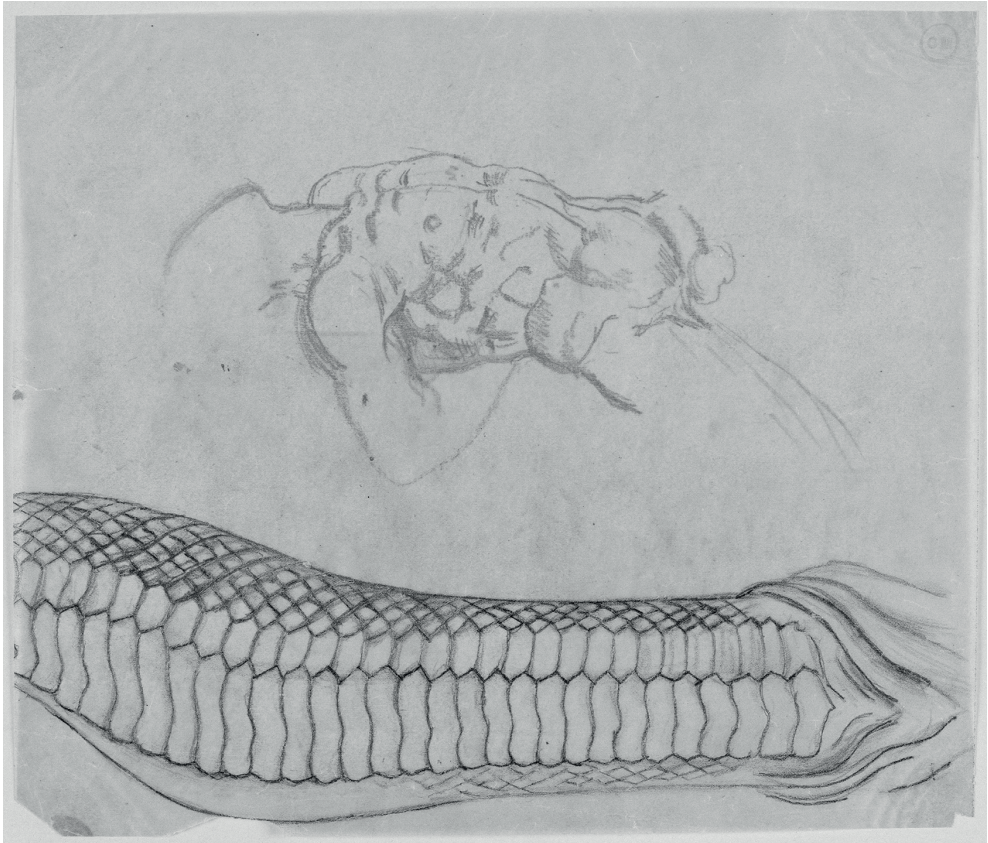


Fig. 10. Gustave Moreau, Des. 8438, Two Studies for *Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra*, 19th Century. Drawing, Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris. © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY

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