

On The Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci

Percy Bysshe Shelley

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ON THE MEDUSA OF LEONARDO DA VINCI,
IN THE FLORENTINE GALLERY.

IT lieth, gazing on the midnight sky,
Upon the cloudy mountain peak supine;
Below, far lands are seen tremblingly;
Its horror and its beauty are divine.
Upon its lips and eyelids seems to lie

Loveliness like a shadow, from which shrine,
Fiery and lurid, struggling underneath,
The agonies of anguish and of death.
Yet it is less the horror than the grace
Which turns the gazer's spirit into stone;

Whereon the lineaments of that dead face
Are graven, till the characters be grown
Into itself, and thought no more can trace;
'Tis the melodious hue of beauty thrown
Athwart the darkness and the glare of pain,

Which humanize and harmonize the strain.
And from its head as from one body grow,
As grass out of a watery rock,
Hairs which are vipers, and they curl and flow
And their long tangles in each other lock,

And with unending involutions shew
Their mailed radiance, as it were to mock
The torture and the death within, and saw
The solid air with many a ragged jaw.
And from a stone beside, a poisonous eft

Peeps idly into those Gorgonian eyes;
Whilst in the air a ghastly bat, bereft
Of sense, has flitted with a mad surprise
Out of the cave this hideous light had cleft,
And he comes hastening like a moth that hies

After a taper; and the midnight sky

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Flares, a light more dread than obscurity.
'Tis the tempestuous loveliness of terror;
For from the serpents gleams a brazen glare
Kindled by that inextricable error,

Which makes a thrilling vapour of the air
Become a and ever-shifting mirror
Of all the beauty and the terror there—
A woman's countenance, with serpent locks,
Gazing in death on heaven from those wet rocks.

Florence, 1819.