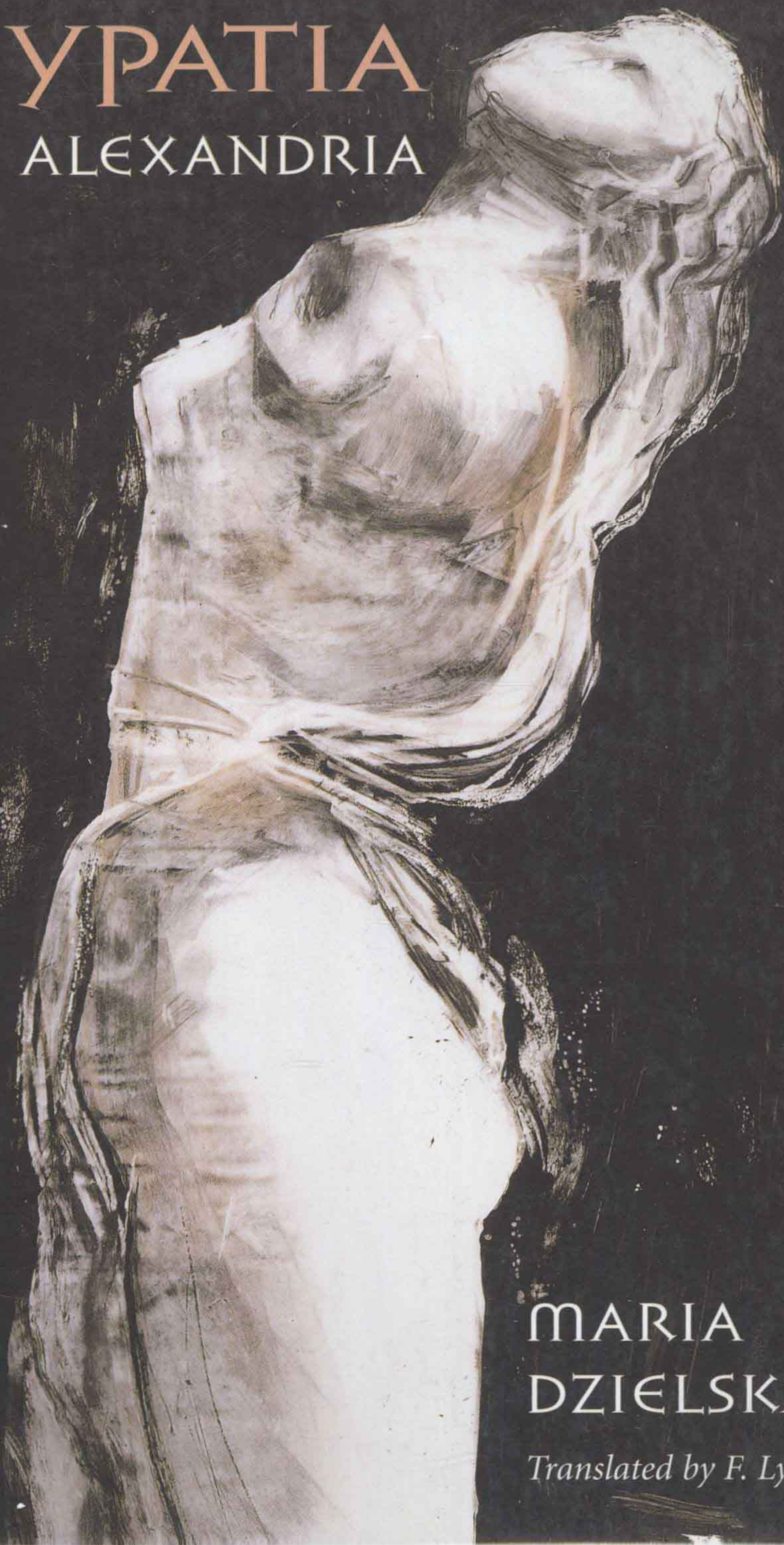


HYPATIA OF ALEXANDRIA



MARIA
DZIELSKA

Translated by F. Lyra

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The idea of a book on Hypatia occurred to me as I was doing research on the life and work of Synesius of Cyrene. When reading his letters filled with admiration for Hypatia's soul and mind, I felt a need to learn more about this extraordinary Alexandrian woman, scholar, and philosopher whose life and spiritual individuality have sustained interest in her for many centuries.

While working on the book I received help and encouragement from various people and institutions. I began research on Hypatia in 1988 at the Ashmolean Library during a short scholarly visit at Oxford. A fellowship from the Trustees of Harvard University in 1990 gave me the opportunity to resume research at the Center for Byzantine Studies at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, D.C. The book would have never materialized without the scholarly support of the Center, with its magnificent library, the courtesy of its staff, and especially the advice and guidance of Professor Angeliki E. Laiou, Director of the Center.

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THE LITERARY LEGEND OF HYPATIA

The Modern Tradition

Long before the first scholarly attempts to reconstruct an accurate image of Hypatia, her life—marked by the dramatic circumstances of her death—had been imbued with legend. Artistically embellished, distorted by emotions and ideological biases, the legend has enjoyed wide popularity for centuries, obstructing scholarly endeavors to present Hypatia's life impartially, and it persists to this day. Ask who Hypatia was, and you will probably be told: "She was that beautiful young pagan philosopher who was torn to pieces by monks (or, more generally, by Christians) in Alexandria in 415." This pat answer would be based not on ancient sources, but on a mass of belletristic and historical literature, a representative sample of which is surveyed in this chapter. Most of these works present Hypatia as an innocent victim of the fanaticism of nascent Christianity, and her murder as marking the banishment of freedom of inquiry along with the Greek gods.

Hypatia first appeared in European literature in the eighteenth century. In the era of skepticism known historically as the Enlightenment, several writers used her as an instrument in religious and philosophical polemic.

In 1720 John Toland, in youth a zealous Protestant, published a long historical essay titled *Hypatia or, the History of a Most Beautiful, Most Virtuous, Most Learned and in Every Way Accomplished Lady; Who Was Torn to Pieces by the Clergy of Alexandria, to Gratify the Pride, Emulation, and Cruelty of the Archbishop, Commonly but Undeservedly Titled St. Cyril*. Though basing his account of Hypatia on sources such as the tenth-century encyclopedia *Suda*, Toland begins by asserting that the male part of humanity has been forever disgraced by the murder of “the incarnation of beauty and wisdom”; men must always “be ashamed, that any could be found among them of so brutal and savage a disposition, as, far from being struck with admiration at so much beauty, innocence, and knowledge, to stain their barbarous hands with her blood, and their impious souls with the indelible character of sacrilegious murderers.” In unfolding the story of Hypatia’s life and death, Toland focuses on the Alexandrian clergy, headed by the patriarch Cyril: “A Bishop, a Patriarch, nay a Saint, was the contriver of so horrid a deed, and his clergy the executioners of his implacable fury.”¹

The essay produced a stir in ecclesiastical circles and was speedily answered by Thomas Lewis in a pamphlet, *The History of Hypatia, a Most Impudent School-Mistress of Alexandria. In Defense of Saint Cyril and the Alexandrian Clergy from the Aspersions of Mr. Toland*.² But for the most part Toland’s work enjoyed a favorable reception among the Enlightenment elite. Voltaire exploited the figure of Hypatia to express his repugnance for the church and revealed religion. In a style not unlike Toland’s, he writes about Saint Cyril and the Alexandrian clergy in *Examen important de Milord Bolingbroke ou le tombeau du fanatisme* (1736). Hypatia’s death was “a bestial murder perpetrated by Cyril’s tonsured hounds, with a fanatical gang at their heels.”³ She was murdered, Voltaire asserts, because she believed in the Hellenic gods, the laws of rational Nature, and the capacities of the human mind free of imposed dogmas. Thus did religious fanaticism lead to the martyrdom of geniuses and to the enslavement of the spirit.

2 ∞ The Literary Legend of Hypatia

Voltaire returns to Hypatia in his *Dictionnaire philosophique*. There he asserts that she “taught Homer and Plato in Alexandria during the reign of Theodosius II” and that the events leading to her death were instigated by Saint Cyril, who “loosed the Christian rabble on her.” Though not neglecting to divulge his sources—Damascius, *Suda*, and “the most learned men of the age”—Voltaire makes quite cavalier use of them; and in the midst of serious accusations against Cyril and the Christians, he offers a coarse, asinine salon witticism about his favorite heroine: “When one strips beautiful women naked, it is not to massacre them.” In truth, we are left in the dark as to whether the “sage of Ferney” is deriding his readers, the ideas that he is promulgating with such enthusiasm, or Hypatia. Voltaire expresses hope that the patriarch Cyril asked God for forgiveness and that God indeed had mercy on him; Voltaire himself prays for the patriarch: “I beseech the merciful father to have pity on his soul.”⁴

Toland’s and Voltaire’s reductive accounts of Hypatia mark the genesis of a legend that mixes truth and falsehood. Had they consulted their ancient sources with greater perception, they would have detected in them a far more complex personality. This “victim of superstition and ignorance” not only believed in the redemptive powers of reason but also sought god through religious revelation. Above all, she was stubborn and intensely moral, no less a proponent of asceticism than the dogmatic Christians whom Voltaire and others depicted as ruthless enemies of “truth and progress.”

Influenced by Enlightenment ideas, neo-Hellenism, and Voltaire’s literary and philosophical style, Edward Gibbon elaborated the legend of Hypatia. In *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* he identifies Cyril as the perpetrator of all conflicts in Alexandria at the beginning of the fifth century, including the murder of Hypatia.⁵ According to Gibbon, Hypatia “professed the religion of the Greeks” and taught publicly in both Athens and Alexandria. I do not know the source of Gibbon’s first claim; the latter reflects an erroneous interpretation of Damascius’ account in *Suda*. Like Toland and Voltaire,

Gibbon retails Damascius' story about Cyril's burning envy of Hypatia, who was "in the bloom of beauty, and in the maturity of wisdom," surrounded by disciples and persons "most illustrious for their rank or merit" and always "impatient to visit the female philosopher." Hypatia was murdered by "a troop of savage and merciless fanatics" instigated by Cyril, and the crime was never punished, apparently because "superstition [Christianity] perhaps would more gently expiate the blood of a virgin, than the banishment of a saint." This representation of "the Alexandrian crime" perfectly fitted Gibbon's theory that the rise of Christianity was the crucial cause of the fall of the ancient civilization. He used the circumstances of Hypatia's life to document this thesis and to show the difference between the old world and the new: reason and spiritual culture (Hypatia) versus dogmatism and barbaric absence of restraint (Cyril and Christianity).⁶

The figure of Hypatia appears briefly and allusively in many other eighteenth-century works, including Henry Fielding's droll satiric novel *A Journey from This World to the Next* (1743). Describing Hypatia as "a young lady of greatest beauty and merit," Fielding states that "those dogs, the Christians, murdered her."⁷

But it was in the mid-nineteenth century that the literary legend of Hypatia reached its apex. Charles Leconte de Lisle published two versions of a poem titled *Hypatie*, one in 1847 and another in 1874.⁸ In the first version Hypatia is a victim of the laws of history and not of a Christian "plot," as Voltaire contended.⁹ Leconte de Lisle views the circumstances of Hypatia's death with historical detachment, from the perspective that history cannot be identified with a single culture or system of belief. The era of Hypatia simply faded away, replaced by a new one with its own rules and forms. As a believer in the old deities and a lover of reason and sensual beauty, she became a symbolic victim of the changing circumstances of history. "Mankind, in its headlong course, struck you and cursed you."¹⁰

In the second version of the poem Leconte de Lisle reverts to

an anti-Christian interpretation of Hypatia's death. It is Christians who are guilty of the crime, not "historical necessity":

The vile Galilean struck you and cursed you;
But in falling, you became even greater! And now, alas!
The spirit of Plato and the body of Aphrodite
Have withdrawn forever to the fair skies of Hellas!

This version echoes Toland's anticlerical, and specifically anti-Catholic, motif.¹¹ As the legend develops, that motif is reinforced.

Both of Leconte de Lisle's Hypatia poems manifest confidence in the permanence of the essential values of antiquity. As one of the founders of the Parnassian school of poetry, which drew inspiration from classical antiquity, Leconte de Lisle loved classical literature. He not only translated Greek poets and dramatists; he regarded Hellenism as the fulfillment of the ideals of humanity, beauty combined with wisdom. Thus for Leconte de Lisle, despite her death Hypatia lives on in the Western imagination as the embodiment of physical beauty and the immortality of the spirit, just as the pagan ideals of Greece have molded Europe's spirituality.

She alone survives, immutable, eternal;
Death can scatter the trembling universes
But Beauty still dazzles with her fire,
 and all is reborn in her,
And the worlds are still prostrate beneath her white feet!

Leconte de Lisle's admiration for the Greeks' excellence and Hellenic ideas about the supernatural world is also expressed in a short dramatic work, "Hypatie et Cyrille" (1857).¹² In it we find the same Romantic longing for ancient Greece, where people lived in harmony with the beauty of divine nature and in conformity with the teachings of their philosophers—the same longing that resonates in Hölderlin's poems, the classics of "Weimar humanism," and the works of the English neo-

Hellenists. Here Leconte de Lisle attempts to reconcile pagan philosophy with Christianity.

Plato's beautiful and wise disciple tries to convince the stern patriarch Cyril that there is only a small difference between Neoplatonism and Christianity: "The words are slightly different, the sense is very much the same." Hypatia admits that the person of Christ is holy to her, but she also feels affinity with the gods enrobed in the eternal fabrics of the cosmos. The deities reveal themselves in the beauty of nature, in the intelligence of the astral bodies, in the wonder of art, in the spirituality of sages searching for truth. Cyril's pronouncement, "Your gods are reduced to dust, at the feet of the victorious Christ," elicits Hypatia's passionate credo:

You're mistaken, Cyril. They live in my heart.
Not as you see them—clad in transient forms,
Subject to human passions even in heaven,
Worshiped by the rabble and worthy of scorn—
But as sublime minds have seen them
In the starry expanse that has no dwellings:
Forces of the universe, interior virtues,
Harmonious union of earth and heaven
That delights the mind and the ear and the eye,
That offers an attainable ideal to all wise men
And a visible splendor to the beauty of the soul.
Such are my Gods!

"Hypatie et Cyrille," full of exaltation and Romantic rapture over the Greeks' "heaven," ends with a description of the bishop's anger. He has no understanding of Hypatia's belief in the world of divine intelligences and the natural beauty of the universe. Cyril threatens her and her world with the curse of oblivion, extinction of the ancient culture.

Leconte de Lisle's poems were known and widely read in the nineteenth century; and the image of Hypatia in love with the ideal forms of the visible world—in contrast to the closed spheres of Cyril's rigidly dogmatic Christianity—has survived

to our time. Even today we tend to associate the figure of Hypatia with de Lisle's line, "Le souffle de Platon et le corps d'Aphrodite," the spirit of Plato and the body of Aphrodite.

Leconte de Lisle's younger contemporary Gérard de Nerval referred to Hypatia in an 1854 work,¹³ and in 1888 Maurice Barrès published a short story about Hypatia, "La vierge assassinée," in a collection titled *Sous l'oeil des barbares*. Barrès states in his preface that he wrote the story at the request of Leconte de Lisle, his "Parnassian master."¹⁴ "La vierge assassinée" combines bucolic elements with a cool and austere presentation of philosophy and moral virtues.

The story opens as young Lucius meets the charming and beautiful Alexandrian courtesan Amaryllis on the banks of the Nile canal overgrown with water lilies. The marble of a temple and Greek sculptures glimmers beyond the trees, and we also see town buildings and ships anchored in the port. However, rich and beautiful Alexandria is in decline: "The town extends its arms over the ocean and seems to call the entire universe to its perfumed and feverish bed, to lend assistance during the death throes of a world and the formation of the ages to come."¹⁵

Walking to the Serapeum, where Hypatia (who is called Athénée in this story) is usually to be found, Lucius and Amaryllis encounter a crowd of Christians who are chasing Jews out of the city. The audience awaiting Athénée/Hypatia in the library of the Serapeum talk with alarm about "the Christian sect, which says it owes its convictions to the fact that the lenient temples have fallen into disrepute and age-old traditions have been abandoned." They recall that the Emperor Julian perished at the hands of a Christian while fighting to defend holy monuments of the past. One member of the audience attempts to induce the "Hellenes" to defend themselves against the "barbarians" using their methods, that is, cruelty and violence; otherwise "those barbarians will destroy you."

In the meantime a crowd of Christians begins to assail the Serapeum, calling for the death of Athénée, the symbol of paganism in the city. The mob forces its way into the interior of

the shrine, where Athénée delivers a speech in praise of the Hellenic past and takes an oath of fidelity to the monuments of the past now being destroyed. Impressed by her speech, the mob desists, but its most zealous members continue to incite action. Athénée calmly awaits death. Lucius, Amaryllis, and their friends attempt to lead her out of the temple, but she refuses to abandon “the library and the statues of our forebears.” Covering her face with a long veil, she gives herself up to the mob, which tears her to pieces. The Roman legions, which have just entered the city, are unable to rescue her. In the evening Amaryllis and Lucius find the divine remains “of the virgin of Serapis.” Barrès assures us that the martyrdom of “the last of the Hellenes” will become the source of her apotheosis and enduring legend.

While Leconte de Lisle, Barrès, and others were writing about Hypatia in France, the English clergyman, novelist, and historian Charles Kingsley elaborated her legend in a long book titled *Hypatia or the New Foes with an Old Face* (1853).¹⁶ Though originally intended as a historical study based on the author’s research on Greek culture of the late empire and the history of Alexandria, it in fact took the form of a mid-Victorian romance with a strong anti-Catholic flavor. Kingsley detested priests and monks, with their vows of celibacy and their seclusion from the affairs of this world. In the book Cyril and the clergy around him exemplify the Catholic hierarchy and the segment of the Anglican clergy that opposed Kingsley; good Christians could find their virtues represented in the young monk, the converted Jew, the courtesan Pelagia, and Hypatia herself.

The action of the novel occurs chiefly in Alexandria. This large port city of the East, wealthy and poor, enlightened and primitive, with a heterogeneous population of Greeks, Egyptians, Jews, and—as Kingsley would have it—Goths, provides an appropriate medley of nationalities, trades, beliefs, and social classes, out of which emerge the central characters of the novel: the pagan philosopher Hypatia, the dogmatic and despotic patriarch Cyril, the ambitious and power-hungry prefect of Egypt Orestes, and the monk Philammon.