



Ambiguity in the works of John Keats:

A comparative study of the setting, the characters and the female in *La Belle Dame sans Merci* and *Lamia*.

Supervisor: prof. dr. Sandro
Jung
Co-supervisor: Sören
Hammerschmidt

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Taal- en Letterkunde: Engels-
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In the reception of John Keats, a connection between two of his poems has long been established but never discussed profoundly. The short ballad *La Belle Dame sans Merci* and the lofty verse narrative *Lamia*, written in the spring and summer of 1819 respectively, share common themes, psychological and mythological features. They both centre around the women who lend their name to the poems and the presence of sex and lust is patently obvious. Although its significance has been overstated innumerable times, the poet was also very much in love at the time of writing these poems. Like Jane Chambers says: “Whatever else it may be, *Lamia* is first of all a poem about love.”¹ Fanny Brawne was constantly in his thoughts and his subconscious. I do not aim to identify Keats or Fanny with the lady or the knight from *La Belle Dame*, nor with *Lamia* or Lycius, but the influence of the relationship on his poetry should not be neglected.

Central in the paper will be the female character, whom Keats was concerned with and engrossed by throughout his life and career. I will demonstrate how these two poems helped the poet pose questions about the role of the woman and how his lack of satisfactory answers have led to a lack of resolution in both. In a first introductory section, I observe the setting of both poems. The opposition of the classical myth and the medieval ballad is one of the more obvious differences, but in this part I will also consider the importance of the often underrated introductions; the Hermes scene in *Lamia* and the initial speaker in *La Belle Dame*. A second argument will consist of how a basic juxtaposition in Keats’s works is dealt with in these two works, that of sensuousness versus reason. More specifically, I demonstrate how the liaison between the supernatural woman and the mortal man ultimately fails because of the different realms they belong to. Thirdly, I will compare the conscious textual dualities and ambivalence in the poems,

¹ Jane Chambers, “‘For Love’s Sake’: *Lamia* and Burton’s Love Melancholy.” p. 585.

the most important of which is of course the archetypal image of the woman as femme fatale, “partly the enchanting monster who entices men away from the path of evolution, partly the *Magna Mater* to whom men long to return, and partly the unknown and beloved damsel.”² As I mentioned, I will also consider the sexual ambiguity here. To conclude, I recapitulate the parallels ascertained throughout the paper, but also what sets the dame and the lamia apart, hopefully further deepening our insight in the multilayered, ever inquiring mind of John Keats.

We only need to glance at the table of contents in a volume of Keats’s complete works to see how important a source of inspiration ancient Greece and Greek mythology were for the poet. *Lamia* is set in two different locations. In the initial episode between Hermes and Lamia, we find ourselves on the isle of Crete. Islands and all their inhabitants have always symbolized temptation, and for Keats in particular, but also in mythology more generally, temptation is feminine. Sorceresses, sirens and other nymphs all have an island of their own to reside on. It is therefore no coincidence that Crete is the roaming place of both Lamia and the invisible nymph, the newest object of passion for the “ever-smitten” Hermes. However, Crete is also an island directly associated with prestige and power. It was the island where the chief deity Zeus was hidden and raised. Keats immediately acknowledges that “sacredness” (I, 13).³ Other than that, Crete’s importance in the poem is limited. The entire episode is preoccupied with the exchange of promises between Hermes and Lamia, and the metamorphoses of the nymph and the serpent. This setting is in agreement with previous poems Keats set in ancient Greece to the extent that for Keats, who never learned Greek and never visited the area, “the ideal space of Greece can never

² Juan Eduardo Cirlot, *A dictionary of symbols*, p. 356.

³ All quotations from *La Belle Dame sans Merci* and *Lamia* are taken from *The Complete Poems of John Keats*, 3rd ed. Ed. J. Barnard. London: Penguin Books, 1988.

be inhabited in [an] easy intimate way.” It is a “supreme *fiction*” only partly accessible through “Spenser, Chapman, Milton and the like.”⁴

From line 171 onward, the poem’s location is shifted to Corinth. It is uncertain, but likely that Keats was aware of the reputation of Corinth. Contrary to Crete, which Keats opted for himself, Corinth as the setting for the main tale is given in Keats’s source for *Lamia*, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* by Richard Burton. Daniel P. Watkins has reason to believe Keats *did* know the implications of setting a story in Corinth, which was “very much a part of the romantic imagination, a fact that is illustrated [...] by the numerous histories of the period that feature Corinth prominently.”⁵ Those implications, which are certain to be influenced by the Epistles of Paul the Apostle, involve wealth, decadence, debauchery and moral corruption. Questionable mythological characters like Sisyphus, Medea and Oedipus were all residents of the city. The narrator labels it “the busy world of more incredulous” (I, 397) with “temples lewd” (I, 352). The fact that Keats portrays Lamia as an outsider⁶ and Lycius as a citizen – whereas Burton immediately identifies her as Corinthian as well – is highly significant for a sympathetic reading of the serpent. On the other hand, the two divinities most commonly worshipped in Corinth were Aphrodite and Apollo. Sensuousness versus reason is regarded as one of the central oppositions in both Keats’s poetics and *Lamia*, which makes the city all the more appropriate.

⁴ Martin Aske, *Keats and Hellenism: an essay*. p. 4.

⁵ Daniel P. Watkins, *Keats’s Poetry and the Politics of the Imagination*. p. 214, note 18.

⁶ Her location on Crete is, however, ambiguous as she later says “She dwelt but half retired” (I, 311-312) in Corinth before.

In his study on *Keats and Hellenism*, Martin Aske argues that nowhere else in Keats “the classical geography seem[s] so solid and palpable.” Among his examples are the “high marble doors” (I, 228) and a “pavement white” (I, 356).⁷

while many a light
 Flared, here and there, from wealthy festivals,
 And threw their moving shadows on the walls,
 Or found them clustered in the corniced shade
 Of some arched temple door, or dusky colonnade. (I, 357-361)

I agree with Aske that photographic descriptions of the city like the above help Keats render a more believable setting and that they argue in favour of *Lamia* as a work of maturity.

La Belle Dame sans Merci was written less than three months before the first part of *Lamia*, but however similar the characters and the narrative may be, Keats was much more familiar with the time and space of the ballad. Among its sources are the fifteenth century French courtly romance with the same title by Alain Chartier and Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, but also Wordsworth and Coleridge, who helped improve the abominable status of the ballad genre.⁸ These works were written in languages Keats understood, originated from a cultural history that was his as well, and were set in landscapes he had trodden too. The poet does not go into detail as much as he does in describing Corinth, but the overall conviction of the eerie mood, which writer and readers were

⁷ Aske, p. 138.

⁸ Theresa M. Kelley, “Poetics and the Politics of Reception: Keats’s ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’.” p. 341.

both familiar with, does not require that same verbosity. The lake, the meads and the “cold hill’s side” were enough to transfer the reader’s state of mind to that environment.

Because of this conciseness, supported by the rhythm and the shortened last lines of each stanza, the focus of this poem is on the natural much more than on the supernatural experience of the knight. Compared to *Lamia*, which is full of eloquence, brilliance and appearance, both narrators in *La Belle Dame* come across as sincere. The knight tells a story, however subjective, that has just happened to him, which leaves no room for a “loss of immediacy and vividness.”⁹ The knight’s experience is at least as supernatural as Lycius’s, but the extended anticipation and the unrecognizable setting heighten the extraordinary features of the serpent, whereas the lady of the ballad is never even heard. This is ultimately one reason why sympathies shift and are divided in *Lamia*, and the lady is generally considered purely evil.

The shift of setting I discussed is only one indication of the importance of the Hermes episode. A first subdivision can be made between critics who have addressed that importance and those who have dismissed or ignored it.¹⁰ My attention goes solely to the former. Within this group, the focus is still divided. Chambers stresses the similarities between Hermes and Lamia. She sees them both as frustrated lovers, unable to reach their love interest who lives in another realm. Another argument she gives is the ambiguity of both.¹¹ Hermes is the messenger among the gods and often plays the benevolent rogue. On the other hand he is the god of thieves and guides the

⁹ Aske, p. 130.

¹⁰ Among others Perkins, according to Chambers, p. 589, and Edward T. Norris, “Hermes and the Nymph in Lamia.” p. 322.

¹¹ Chambers, pp. 589-591.

human soul to the underworld. The versatility of mythology has rendered many gods dualistic, but context is what separates the acceptable from the malicious. In *Lamia* for example, he steals his father's light for amorous purposes (I, 9-10). This cannot be compared in gravity with the theft of Apollo's immortal cattle in one of the more famous myths about Hermes. By equating the amorous ambitions of the god with Lamia's in this prelude, Keats intricately transfers his mischievous but good-natured identity to her as well.

This sense of equality is visible throughout the episode. Lamia is involved in a transaction with the very god of trade, but her position in the negotiations is by no means inferior to his, which Hermes acknowledges in addressing her as follows:

‘Thou smooth-lipped serpent, surely high inspired!

Thou beauteous wreath, with melancholy eyes,

Possess whatever bliss thou canst devise,

Telling me only where my nymph is fled —

Where she doth breathe!’

(I, 83-87)

Their elevated state is also shown in their headgear. Lamia has a “starry crown” (I, 90) and Hermes is “crowned with feathers” (I, 68). Moreover, the two are connected by the god's staff, the *Caduceus*. This attribute is generally observed as a symbol of his virility, but by calling it his “serpent rod” (I, 89), a gender role reversal is suggested, accounting for Lamia's initial superiority over Lycius.

Charles I. Patterson in his analysis of the prelude defends a more prophetic reading. He opposes Hermes's successful quest for love to Lycius's tribulation and failure. Although their actions seem similar, the results they achieve are completely opposite.¹² Hermes's role ends when he and the nymph fly away, "not growing pale, as mortal lovers do" (I, 145). This is an obvious preview to the withering demise of both the human Lamia ("no longer fair, there sat a deadly white" (II, 276)) and Lycius, his arms "empty of delight, / As were his limbs of life" (II, 307-308). Patterson further emphasizes the sharp psychological contrast between both and their different ontological status.¹³

The impact of the first speaker in *La Belle Dame* has perhaps been slightly more overlooked. The ballad has two speakers. The knight, whose experience is being narrated, speaks from line thirteen until the end of the poem. But the first three stanzas are voiced by a particularly mysterious character. The lack of information given has often condemned him or her to play second fiddle in critical analysis. Nevertheless, I pay attention to Keats's choice here, on the one hand because it resembles *Lamia* in introducing the protagonist of the poem without letting him speak, but more importantly because I disagree with Patterson, one of the few critics who *has* paid attention to the introductory speaker.

In his quintessential study of *the Daemonic in Keats*, Patterson argues that the "full granary" and the "finished harvest" are signs that the questioner of the knight believes "all is well in the normal

¹² Charles I. Patterson, *The Daemonic in the Poetry of John Keats*. p. 203.

¹³ Ibid.

world of sentient life.”¹⁴ All that is relevant for him in this late autumn landscape, is that man and animal have enough food to survive the approaching winter. However, Patterson also points out that neither sex nor age of the initial speaker is made explicit, but suspects he is an inexperienced, adolescent male.¹⁵ According to the critic, the inquirer is there to contrast the satisfactory state of the outside world with that of confusion, longing and bleakness the knight is in. While this is a very tempting binary opposition, I am of the opinion we should read even more into his observations and at least nuance the positivity of that harvesting. The full granaries of the animal world imply that many of them are retreating for the winter months. “No birds sing” could be read in one of two ways. Either they do not sing where the knight is because the area is too depressing, which is Patterson’s interpretation, or there are indeed no birds around because they have travelled south for the winter. This second reading is more in agreement with the squirrel and many other animals going into hibernation, leaving nature without life in it. In addition to that, the human harvest can also be read as having deprived nature itself from its life altogether.

How then is the introduction valuable for the poem if the first speaker is *not* considered the exact opposite of the knight? The questions in the first and fifth line, and especially the third stanza, in which the view is narrowed from the landscape to the knight’s countenance, reveal much more than is often suggested. The questions enable the knight to give an account of the surreal adventure he just had. The detailed images are loaded with symbolism. The first thing that catches the observer’s eye is that the knight is “palely loitering”. And so it should be, because loitering is extremely uncommon for a medieval, courteous knight, who symbolizes almost

¹⁴ Patterson, p. 133.

¹⁵ Patterson, p. 131.

exclusively positive things. He is superior to all other humans and masters the world because of his long apprenticeship.

The one exception to this perfect picture is the wandering knight. He is caught up in the pursuit of his desires, while still striving to master them.¹⁶ Later in the poem it becomes apparent that he is indeed caught up in that pursuit. He is expectant, yet anxious, and even though he is not convinced he wants to leave, he ultimately has no choice. And a lack of choice is one of the most dehumanizing experiences one can have. But the third stanza in its turn reveals that whatever “ailed” him, it was inspiring enough to leave him with hope of life (represented by the lily), a willingness to overcome his misery (his feverish state), and a reminder of what awaits him should he recover what he has lost, which is the blissful encounter with the elfin lady. This last and most important element is symbolized in the rose, which I think Patterson has rightly interpreted as sexual desire.¹⁷ It is withering fast, but still distinguishable for the observer. In the context of the whole poem, the stanza is even more important because it at the least suggests the possible outcomes good and bad, whereas the ending of the knight’s story is purposely absented of any unequivocality.

As I have mentioned earlier in the analysis of Corinth as the setting for *Lamia*, sensuousness and reason formed a key dichotomy in Keats’s poetics. Critics old¹⁸ and more recent¹⁹ have written on the subject, although Theresa M. Kelley is one of the few to have considered the opposition in

¹⁶ Cirlot, pp. 161-162.

¹⁷ Patterson, p. 131.

¹⁸ John H. Roberts, “The Significance of *Lamia*.” (1935).

¹⁹ Kelley, (1987).

La Belle Dame sans Merci. A possible reason for this might be because it is one of Keats's major works in which one of the two forces is seemingly predominant throughout. Mainly due to the proximity of the experience, there is little room for reasoning. The knight seems completely absorbed by the lady's sensuousness. There is nevertheless more underlying discord than at first noticeable.

Firstly, there is the evident sexual imagery, but this will be addressed later. In stanza eight, Keats becomes almost proto-Freudian with the elfin grot, but too often the more obvious interpretation of Plato's cave has been dismissed prematurely. Read in this way, the knight realizes he is being led into her world of seeming. This is important for the interpretation of the lady's tears. Patterson again goes against the current in denying the lady has any evil qualities, "for she is never cunning, wicked, deceitful, consciously and intentionally cruel, insofar as we ever learn from the poem."²⁰ I agree that this is a possibility, but I disagree with this somewhat impetuous conclusion. His work is based on the argument that the daemonic experience is neither good nor evil, in agreement with the realization of the demon in classical mythology and folklore rather than the fully evil Christian demon, and he sometimes oversimplifies characters a little to tie his argument together. In its entirety, it is a convincing work, but the theory should always serve the poetry, and never vice versa.

There is only one report of the story and that is the knight's. He describes the lady only through physical qualities and without room for development, which sketches a negative, sorceress-like image and the reader should conceive her as such. This identification with the overwhelmed yet

²⁰ Patterson, p. 137.

experienced knight is not the only acceptable reading, but it does have the surplus value of narrowing the gap between observing and experiencing the sensation. An even more convincing argument for that rational counter-voice is given by Keats himself in a letter to George and Georgiana Keats²¹ (*italics mine*):

Why 4 kisses – you will say – why four because I wish to restrain the headlong impetuosity of my Muse – she would have fain said ‘score’ without hurting the rhyme – *but we must temper the Imagination as the Critics say with Judgment*. I was obliged to choose an even number that both eyes might have fair play: and to speak truly I think two a piece quite sufficient.

L, 2:97

Keats did not write his poetry with a dictionary of symbols by his side, but I am confident that he knew four is indeed symbolic, among other things, of rational organization.²² The knight therefore trusts in the power of reason and moderation to shut the wild, sensuous eyes of the lady. Ultimately, this resistance proves to be insufficient. He is able to put up a fight as long as he is conscious, but is helpless once he is “lulled asleep”. In dreams the subconscious takes over and rationality is suppressed by limitless fantasies, fears and desires. More so than the consummation of their love, it is the dream, filled with powerful men, that convinces him “she hath him in thrall” and sentences him to his loitering.

In *Lamia*, the opposition of the sensuous and the rational is much easier recognizable and as a consequence much more multilayered. John H. Roberts has suggested that the hostility between

²¹ Here cited from Kelley, p. 351.

²² Cirlot, p. 225.

Lamia and Apollonius is another version of the struggle that Keats had already portrayed in several other poems, the struggle between the ideal of humanitarian philosophy and the boundless poetry of sensuous delight.²³ Later academics have criticized this way of thinking because sifted through the skeleton of the narrative, Lamia and Lycius become oversimplified martyrs and Apollonius is nothing more than the merciless villain. In sum, all the characters are more than this mere allegorical representation of one of Keats's mental concepts.²⁴ I intend to reconsider Roberts's rigid approach and look how black and white Lamia and Apollonius actually are, but I will also demonstrate the importance of the grey, the fading of boundaries.

Roberts reacted to even earlier critics, who actually assumed that Lamia was purely evil and Apollonius was the saviour.²⁵ This interpretation was undoubtedly influenced by the common image of the lamia as the aquatic, child-devouring monster on the one hand, and the fact that Apollonius flourished for a time as the pagan rival of Christ in miracle-working on the other.²⁶ Instead of levelling out the extreme reading of both characters, Roberts reversed them. His arguments are mainly found in the confrontations of both adversaries, the first of which is when the couple is pacing the streets of Corinth:

Muffling his face, of greeting friends in fear,
Her fingers he pressed hard, as one came near
With curled gray beard, sharp eyes, and smooth bald crown,

²³ Roberts, p. 553.

²⁴ Patterson, p. 189.

²⁵ Roberts, p. 554.

²⁶ Coleman O. Parsons, "Primitive Sense in 'Lamia'." p. 207.

Slow-stepped, and robed in philosophic gown:

Lycius shrank closer, as they met and passed,

Into his mantle, adding wings to haste,

(I, 362-367)

.....

‘Lycius! wherefore did you blind

Yourself from his quick eyes?’ Lycius replied,

‘’Tis Apollonius sage, my trusty guide

And good instructor; but to-night he seems

The ghost of folly haunting my sweet dreams.’

(I, 373-377)

In this scene, Lycius is afraid to meet Apollonius. This is an illogical reaction to the sight of a “trusty guide” and “good instructor”. Because Lycius used to be considered the prize of the fight – a reading that has also been refuted since – readers mainly identified him with Keats and themselves with him. His fright is then an immediate indication of the threat Apollonius poses. The description is that of a regular philosopher, but his authority is heightened because, like Lamia and Hermes earlier, he too wears a crown. This peculiar way of saying someone is bald means Keats wanted to create a bond of superiority between Lamia and Apollonius over the helpless Lycius, as if they act on another level. Furthermore, the eyes of the philosopher, not coincidentally the most empirical of the senses, are twice lauded as “sharp” and “quick”. This is in stark contrast with the synesthetic description of Lamia, most clearly during her metamorphosis and in a description of her two stanzas later.

Apollonius is then again absent for some time until he appears at the wedding uninvited. He aggressively demands rather than asks Lycius to forgive him for interrupting (II, 169). The next

time he is mentioned, which is already near the climax of the poem, he has again “fixed his eye” (II, 246) on Lamia, “brow-beating her fair form” (II, 248). The enhanced excitement is then supported by an accelerated rhythm and Lycius’s hysterical reaction, until Apollonius’s silent stare ultimately “went through her utterly / Keen, cruel, perçant,²⁷ stinging.” The mood of the whole dénouement is terrifying. The sophist’s “demon eyes” (II, 289) and the comparison with a spear make Roberts eagerly jump to the conclusion that Apollonius is in fact the “destructive force, disclosing evil where only delight had been”,²⁸ rather than the hero of the poem.

It is interesting to briefly consider the opinion of one of Roberts’s contemporaries as well. In the same year Roberts published his reading, Edward T. Norris also suggested a radical opposition, but he contrasted Hermes’s nymph as Keats’s true ideal of poetry with Lamia as the inferior poetry of sensation.²⁹ That two similarly oversimplified binary reasonings place Lamia at opposite ends of Keats’s poetic spectrum is in itself proof enough that a more nuanced approach is advisable.

A myth is fundamentally a narration that creates moral boundaries only to test, challenge or overstep them the minute they are fixed. This brings about a constant questioning of those morals, which in its turn results in ambiguity and lack of resolution. Mythology suited Keats perfectly, and by choosing more obscure mythological creatures and tales, he created space to transform the ambiguities to his liking. He certainly does so in *Lamia*, for example with the

²⁷ Spenserian coinage for “piercing”.

²⁸ Roberts, p. 555.

²⁹ Norris, p. 324.

addition of Hermes, which I already discussed, and the death of Lycius, even though according to Burton mortal partners in an unequal relationship suffer no permanent damage.³⁰

Paul Endo argues that “the language of boundaries is recurrent in *Lamia*”, but that “the threshold between inside and outside is subject to dynamic, shifting pressures.”³¹ In other words: places, realms and characters are not static and external pressures dissolve the line that separates one side from the other. For example, when Lamia changes realms from the non-mortal serpent to the mortal woman, in her first hour – this is before she met Lycius – she is:

yet of sciential brain
 To unperplex bliss from its neighbour pain
 Define their pettish limits, and estrange
 Their points of contact, and swift counterchange;
 Intrigue with the specious chaos, and dispart
 Its most ambiguous atoms with sure art; (I, 191-196)

Like Hermes, she is concentrated on the object of her love and does not even consider that for all but the gods ideals and reality do differ, which makes her “subject to disillusionment”³² like everybody else. From the moment Lamia and Lycius meet, she shows awareness of the risks their liaison bears. The “finer spirits cannot breathe below / In human climes and live” (I, 280-281). When he then faints at the thought of losing her, Lamia reaches the peak of her abilities when she

³⁰ Chambers, p. 588.

³¹ Paul Endo, “Seeing Romantically in ‘Lamia’.” p. 113.

³² Donald H. Reiman, “Keats and the Humanistic Paradox: Mythological History in ‘Lamia’.” p. 664.

breathes life into him. This action changes her from “taker” to “giver” of life. This reversal is mirrored at the very end of the poem when Apollonius, who as a philosopher studies life and everything in it, causes Lycius’s death. However, her peak also initiates her loss of power, because in “throwing the goddess off” (I, 336), she sacrifices her superiority over Lycius, who soon seized upon this opportunity to de-victimize himself. Already in the early stages of part two, Lamia realizes he has deserted her (II, 42).

Aske described this failure of a relationship between a supernatural female and a mortal male as an “overexposure to the Muse, which threatens a distempering of the senses.”³³ This distemper is what leads Lycius to cause his own downfall. *He* wants to domesticate Lamia now, she has become *his* “prize”. But the secret prize is worthless if no one can know about it,³⁴ which is ironic insofar that an exposed secret loses its value as a secret altogether. Lycius, however, does exactly that by proposing a grand marriage feast, a complete turnaround from the youth who “hid from the collectivity and clung to his private delusion more tenaciously as the social world grew nearer. (I, 350-367)”³⁵ Lamia is ever conscious of the ill-fated ending, but she stubbornly opts for appearance, a world of seeming, to avoid it. “She set herself, high-thoughted, how to dress / The misery in fit magnificence” (II, 115-116). Moreover, the guests who pass the porch of the palace seem to be stepping “into the frame of a picture”. The reception room is then described so wealthy and impressive that there is a hint of fallacy in the frivolity,³⁶ which is in keeping with the image of Corinth as a city where artificiality prevails.

³³ Aske, p. 129.

³⁴ Endo, p. 123.

³⁵ Terence A. Hoagwood, “Keats and Social Context: ‘Lamia’.” p. 691.

³⁶ Aske, p. 140.

Apollonius is the only one who literally sees through all this deceit. In Roberts's condemnation of the philosopher I have already discussed the praise his eyes get. Whether one reads Apollonius as hero, villain or neither³⁷ – all of which are possibilities – it is more valuable to consider how Keats enabled all these options with the little appearance time and even fewer words the character has. As a character appears less in the reworking of a myth, more gaps have to be filled by his or her mythological background and the personal imagination of the reader. Keats reveals little or nothing about the man Apollonius. He merely endows him with clichés about the philosopher: bald, old, even dressed in a gown that is particularly “philosophic” (I, 365). The primary association is that with Apollo. Keats has often used the god of light, wisdom and poetry to personify the rational aspect of his poetic ideal. If we sustain that identification, it is ambiguous that – even though Apollonius survives and overcomes – his victory tastes bittersweet. The poem can then indeed be interpreted like Roberts did, as “an admission of the greater strength of Apollonius, but [...] at the same time a bitter lament that such should be the case.”³⁸

Whichever way one reads it, I think Lycius's position reveals more. Before Lamia came, he too was a philosopher. But his exaggerated infatuation with the sensuous Lamia makes him renounce rationality, thereby pushing and overstepping the boundary of the morally acceptable. Before Patterson goes on to answer it himself, he expresses the central question of this issue accurately when he says it is up to the reader to answer whether or not “all charms fly / At the mere touch of cold philosophy” (II, 229-230).³⁹ I think a personal answer leads to a more meaningful reading of

³⁷ Chambers, p. 597.

³⁸ Roberts, p. 555.

³⁹ Patterson, pp. 208-209.

the poem than to read the question rhetorical, and I also believe there are more than two possible answers to the question.

When *La Belle Dame* and *Lamia* are discussed together, it often concerns the image of the woman. But how similar are the two characters exactly? How do the possessive men influence the view of the women? And how are the relationships affected by the explicit sexual tension that runs through the narratives? It was Erasmus who first coined the phrase: “Women. You can’t live with them and you can’t live without them.” It is a theme that has been at the centre of western art and culture since Greek Antiquity. Every woman is endowed with a certain amount of characteristics of three different femme fatale figures. The female is always partly monster, partly mother and partly lover. The accuracy of this simplified representation is an entirely different issue, but it has left (mostly male) artists with the possibility to render each of their female characters original yet to a certain extent similar. Patterson in his introductory chapter refers to Carl Jung, whose *anima* archetype is a binary version of the threefold image. The *anima* is “an already existing pattern in the mind for apprehending the idea of the feminine in an all-embracing image.” This embrace consists of the enabling lover’s qualities and the disabling monster’s dangers. The wish to return to the mother is for Jung not a separate denominator, but falls under the second category.⁴⁰

La Belle Dame cannot be seen apart from its genre. The ballad was the primary poetical form in medieval France to sing the praises of the exclusively beautiful woman and lament the pain that was caused by her force of attraction on the one hand and her unreachability on the other. The

⁴⁰ Patterson, p. 20.

haughtiness of the genre is ridiculed by Keats in his many references to the sexuality of the lady. The platonic apostrophe of the medieval ballad is replaced by an accessible woman and the praise and grief consequently shift from the inability to have the experience to the inability to maintain it.

If we look at the knight's description, we are indeed able to identify aspects of all three parts that shape the ultimate femme fatale. The most straightforward attraction is always that of the beautiful beloved. All animals choose their partner based on how fit he or she is to reproduce as successfully as possible. But contrary to Lamia's, the lady's beauty is barely developed. The only reference is that she is "full beautiful". Immediately the knight elaborates upon what really lured him, which is her defiance. Long hair, like body hair and as opposed to hair near the head, "signifies the prevalence of the baser forces",⁴¹ and the "garland", "bracelets" and "fragrant zone" are the same chains Lamia sees and fears when Lycius wants to tame her indomitable spirit (I, 256). They are male means to keep limitless and therefore inevitably dangerous love, personified in the supernatural woman, in check. Thirdly, the proto-Freudian longing to return to the maternal womb is self-evident in *La Belle Dame*. I mentioned earlier that interpreting the grot as Plato's cave is a possibility which is frequently dismissed. But it does not exclude the more obvious reading in the least. The knight tries to recover the sensation he found and then lost in the lady's grot. Whether that grot represents the female sexual organ or the instinctive longing to a maternal warmth is of minor relevance. In the case of the knight, we could conclude that the beauteousness is what caught his attention, the destructiveness what lured him and the longing what holds him captive.

⁴¹ Cirlot, p. 129.

Many of the images from *La Belle Dame* resurface in *Lamia*. Easily recognizable are the tears and sighs. These are also what Lamia produces when her trust in Lycius dwindles. The question in both cases is in how far the women are sincere and not simply “lulling their prey asleep”. In *Lamia*, because of its considerable length and the continuous presence of the female, Keats has created space for shifts in sympathy.⁴² Lamia’s grief comes across as human, heartfelt (II, 37 & II, 66) and even inspirational (I, 321-327). In *La Belle Dame*, however, the tears and sighs are likely to be the weapons of a trickster. The “wild wild eyes”, which are a metonymy of uncultivated love and femininity, are not at all calmed by the knight’s kisses.

Another prolific set of symbols is to be found in Keats’s identification of the lady with food and of Lamia with drink. Francis L. Utley has convincingly associated the food from *La Belle Dame* with the pomegranate seeds Persephone ate, which tied her to the realm she consummated them in for at least part of every year.⁴³ Other than this notion of gender reversal, the lady is also identified with Hades, the greatest evil possible. Even though there are references to the devil regarding Lamia as well, they focus on pitiable characteristics like the clipped wings of the fallen angel (II, 234), and Lamia might even be the unfortunate Persephone herself (I, 56). The symbolism of the sort of food the lady finds the knight is even more significant. Roots are often associated with poisonous potions, but this homonym also refers to an organism’s foundations. Eating them often symbolizes a new and irreversible start, and the impossibility to return to a previous state. The honey and manna represent the succession and infinity of mythological systems and therefore the eternity of the knight’s entrapment. In themselves, wild honey, which was the drug of inspiration in ancient Greece and also had its merits as a healing substance, and

⁴² Hoagwood, p. 693, citing Wolfson.

⁴³ Francis L. Utley, “Infernos of Lucretius and of Keats’s *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*.” p. 112.

man, the food God sent the Israelites in time of despair, symbolize hope. This is the ultimate duality of the poem, that there is always hope, but that hope is a mental idea necessary to survive the otherwise unbearable ordeal of having experienced the beauty of Truth, whether it is true love, true nature or true poetic imagination.

Food is insignificant in *Lamia*. Its role is taken over by drink. Aske refers to it as “the image of an intoxicating draught.”⁴⁴ Especially in the darker second part, Lamia tries to mislead Apollonius with the help of Dionysus. The rivalry between the wine god and Apollo is what Nietzsche would later call the central dichotomy of Greek culture. Keats undoubtedly saw the resemblances that power struggle between order and chaos, and his own search for balance between truth and sensuousness bore. The ambiguity remains unresolved because even though Apollonius is the one who overcomes, the Dionysian frenzy⁴⁵ of Lamia’s feast is depicted the more enviable of the two, most notably in lines II, 202 to 214:

for scarcely was the wine at flow;
But when the happy vintage touched their brains,
Louder they talk, and louder come the strains
Of powerful instruments. The gorgeous dyes,
The space, the splendour of the draperies,
The roof of awful richness, nectarous cheer,
Beautiful slaves, and Lamia’s self, appear,
Now, when the wine has done its rosy deed,

⁴⁴ Aske, p. 130.

⁴⁵ Patterson, p. 210.

And every soul from human trammels freed,
 No more so strange; for merry wine, sweet wine,
 Will make Elysian shades not too fair, too divine.
 Soon was God Bacchus at meridian height;
 Flushed were their cheeks, and bright eyes double bright:

A second example of that “intoxicating draught” leads me to a last striking comparison, that of physical love in both poems. “And soon his eyes had drunk her beauty up / Leaving no drop in the bewildering cup / And still the cup was full” (I, 251-253). This representation of experiencing the supernatural as drinking from the horn of plenty suggests gluttony. Chambers has recognized Keats focused on the destructive role of idleness and luxury. This decadence is shown in the sadistic subjection of Lamia by Lycius:

he took delight

Luxurious in her sorrows, soft and new.
 His passion, cruel grown, took on a hue
 Fierce and sanguineous as ‘twas possible
 In one whose brow had no dark veins to swell. (II, 73-77)

The last line clarifies that Lycius is not intentionally cruel, but his overexposure to the experience has led him to corrupt that experience and with it himself. However, Lycius’s susceptibility is also hinted at in his presence near the temple of Venus on the eve of the Adonian Feast, which was a celebration of concubines, prostitutes and their clients (I, 315-320). Note also how his hue is “fierce and sanguineous”, a monochrome red that heavily contrasts Lamia’s “dazzling hue / Vermilion-spotted, golden, green and blue” (I, 47-48), which represents the ability to balance the

four elements and handle the supernatural. Denise Gigante says “she [Lamia] appears an explosion of color that can only occur in language”,⁴⁶ with which she stresses the importance of a sensuousness like Lamia’s in poetry. In *La Belle Dame*, the innuendoes are much more prominent. In the fifth stanza her eyes and moan suggest that she likes the accessories of restraint. The sixth stanza is the consummation of their love, and the food can in an alternative reading also be described as orgasmic. Ultimately, most of the comparisons drawn have a similar result. In the more misogynous ballad, the temptress embodies the dark half of the woman, to a certain extent exaggerated by the knight’s subjectivity. In the much more sympathetic *Lamia*, Keats “unite[s] the charm of the womanly and the mysterious glamour of the serpentine, divested of its evil, into his most irresistible heroine.”⁴⁷

There are at least as many differences between Keats’s lamia and his merciless lady as there are resemblances. They are first of all portrayed in different cultures. The lady’s bleak lakeside bleaches her character as much as Lamia’s brilliant palace brightens hers. But both the sinister identifiable and the marvelous unfamiliar can evoke similar feelings. Both poems show how otherworldly it can be to give in to temptation. However, neither propagates blind faith in sensuousness. The rational undertone in *La Belle Dame* is ultimately what might save the knight, and *Lamia*’s dénouement, for better or worse, proves that happiness has to be subdued and sometimes sacrificed in order to survive. Keats refreshes this old message by experimenting with the norms and expectations from the past concerning form and content, and of course also by explicitly breaking the taboos of his own time.

⁴⁶ Denise Gigante, “The Monster in the Rainbow: Keats and the Science of Life.” p. 439.

⁴⁷ Patterson, p. 198.

Neither poem has a clear resolution. We can only guess what the future holds for the knight, whether Apollonius, Lamia or Lycius himself was to blame for his death, where Lamia went or if the *Belle Dame* actually exists. What all those mysteries do have in common is that they invite the reader to a dialogue which seems to reinvent itself time and again. Even though both poems were written in the latter stage of Keats's career and it is widely established that he suffered from the negative criticism he received, he was never discouraged by it sufficiently to stop writing poetry that questions and oversteps the boundaries of the familiar and the acceptable. The human struggle between the Dionysian and the Apollonian continues to reinvent itself in modern culture. Now our culture has established a general understanding that every individual has to push his or her own boundaries to find a balance that is endurable for oneself and one's world, we turn to art like Keats's to help us explore and improve ourselves further. I think the value of poems like *Lamia* and *La Belle Dame sans Merci* will increase for as long as they are studied, because every well-developed insight enriches the poetic experience we get from reading them. In this paper, I hope to have delivered a balanced analysis of the origins of the narratives, the poems John Keats composed about them and the influence those poems and stories have had on twentieth century critics.

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