



Journal of Arts & Humanities

Ambiguity in Keats's *Lamia*

Chunhong Yang¹

ABSTRACT

Keats's *Lamia* is usually read as an ambiguous poem. The paper will focus on the causes of *Lamia*'s ambiguity. Her ambiguity presents Keats's vacillation between two poetic realms—the beautiful and the sublime. And the poem tries to offer his solution to his dilemma. While Wordsworth prefers the sublime in *Tintern Abbey* and *Intimations on Immortality*, Keats offers a different choice in *Lamia*.

Key words: Ambiguity, Keats, *Lamia*, Wordsworth.

Available Online: 30th October 2014

MIR Centre for Socio-Economic Research, USA.

1.0 Introduction

During his poem writing career, Keats seems to be trapped in a dilemma. He vacillates between two poetic realms—lyrics and epics, in aesthetic terms, whether to write the beautiful or to write the sublime, or in the style of his contemporaries, whether to write like Leigh Hunt or to write like William Wordsworth. Even early in *Sleep and Poetry*, Keats talks about his poetic realms and decides to move from Hunt to Wordsworth. His first realm is “of Flora, and old Pan” to tell “a lovely tale of human life” (l. 102, 110). This realm is usually considered as Hunt's favorite, and in *To Leigh Hunt. Esq.* He again states clearly his dedication of “shrine of Flora” and “Pan” to his mentor (l. 8, 12). After the realm of Flora, he

¹ College of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Changping District, Beijing, China 102206. E-mail: 362352218@qq.com

will “pass them for a nobler life, / Where I may find the agonies, the strife / of human hearts” (l. 126-128). These two lines acknowledge the superiority of epics or the sublime.

Critics fail to find its echoes with Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey*. In *Tintern Abbey*, Wordsworth expresses his understandings of nature in two stages. He finds “dizzy raptures” in nature “in the hour of thoughtless youth” (l. 85, 89-90); but gradually he begins to have “elevated thoughts, a sense sublime” to hear “the still, sad music of humanity” (l. 95, 90). Here, Keats's two realms in *Sleep and Poetry* echo Wordsworth's two stages.

Later, we see Keats's attempt to write epics, but he gives up not only in *Hyperion* but also in *The Fall of Hyperion*. In his letters, he explains that he leaves them as fragments because there are too much “Miltonic intonation” (ll, 167). When *Hyperion* still needs revision, Keats turns to create *Lamia*. In *Lamia*, although it is a narrative poem, we may find his possible solution to the dilemma and causes of two epic fragments.

Critics have universally considered Keats's *Lamia* as an enigmatic and ambivalent poem. We are often told that *Lamia* portrays the conflict between poetry and philosophy, or between sensation and reflection, or, in modern terms, between the pleasure principle and the reality principle. For instance, [Karla Alwes in *Imagination Transformed* \(1993\)](#) views *Lamia* as “the essence of contradictions” since she is both “a goddess, elusive and impenetrable” and a “serpent, the incarnation of evil itself” (144, 145). [Martin Aske in “Keats, the Critics, and the Politics of Envy” \(1995\)](#) says, “*Lamia*, as the reincarnation of the female muse, is finally caught—trapped between the importunate poet-lover... and the potency of the sophist's eye, the malevolent shaft of criticism which goes through her” (61). [Anne K. Mellor in “Keats and the Complexities of Gender” \(2001\)](#) says, “A serpent-woman cannot sustain the delusions of love in the face of cold reason and everyday reality: Apollonius has only to see *Lamia* once to unmask the serpent” (224). Until 2005, John Whale in *Critical Issues: John Keats* (2005) still argues that “*Lamia* represents his [Keats's] most daring representation of his conflicted configuration of woman”, and she combines “many of the diverse figures of woman who feature in his writing” (19).

The poem is rich with implications, but critics have not been able to discover an interpretation that accords with the various elements of story, character, and tone. Following the critical tradition, the paper also admits *Lamia*'s ambiguous beauty, but it will focus on the causes of her ambiguity. *Lamia*'s ambiguity presents Keats's hesitation between two poetic realms. And it tries to offer his solution. As an embodiment of a “rainbow-sided” beauty, *Lamia* tries to tell us that, with the intrusion of “Cold Philosophy”, beauty will vanish.

2.0 “Rainbow-sided” beauty

Our first acquaintance with *Lamia* presents her as consisting of a bewildering variety of textures. She is so many things that it is hard to comprehend her beauty.

She was a Gordian shape of dazzling hue,
Vermilion-spotted, golden, green, and blue;
Striped like a zebra, freckled like a pard,
Eyed like a peacock, and all crimson barred;
And full of silver moons, that, as she breathed,
Dissolved, or brighter shone, or interwreathed
Their lustres with the gloomier tapestries—
So rainbow-sided, touched with miseries,
She seemed, at once, some penanced lady elf,
Some demon's mistresses, or the demon's self. (l.ll.47-56)

“A Gordian shape” foreshadows her perplexity. She is rich in colors and shapes. There are not only cool colors and warm colors but also stripes, freckles, spots and moons on her skin. Both bright and gloomy, she is a mixture of both beauty and sublimity. It is hard to define her beauty but the first impression is more a bizarre feeling. Most critics agree with Keats’s sympathy towards Lamia, while Warren Stevenson observes the poet’s ironic attitude when reading this part. Thus, Keats holds an ambiguous feeling to the serpent woman. Also, during her transformation, she is said to be

Left to herself, the serpent now began
 To change; her elfin blood in madness ran,
 Her mouth foam’d, and the grass, therewith besprent,
 Wither’d at dew so sweet and virulent;
 Her eyes in torture fix’d, and anguish drear,
 Hot, glaz’d, and wide, with lid-lashes all sear,
 Flash’d phosphor and sharp sparks, without one cooling tear.
 The colors all inflam’d throughout her train,
 She writh’d about, convuls’d with scarlet pain:
 A deep volcanian yellow took the place
 Of all her midler-mooned body’s grace;
 And, as the lava ravishes the mead,
 Spoilt all her silver mail, and golden brede;
 Made gloom of all her frecklings, streaks, and bars,
 Eclips’d her crescents, and lick’d up her stars:
 So that, in moments few, she was undrest
 Of all her sapphires, greens, and amethyst,
 And rubious-argent: of all these bereft,
 Nothing but pain and ugliness were left. (l.ll.146-64)

The terms of her transformation suggest a very particular paradoxical mixture of pain and pleasure. As Andrew Motion in *Keats and Whale in Critical Issues* both observe, the passage could be indicative of sex (431, 80). In this respect, Lamia’s foaming mouth produces a fluid both “sweet and virulent” and she “writhes about convulsed with scarlet pain”, where the adjective serves to clinch the transformation of apparent pain into a signal of sexual pleasure. This, in turn, is reinforced with “ravishes”, “licked up” and “undressed”.

Lamia’s transformation gives her new condition of womanhood. Having adopted a woman’s form, she is now “a maid / More beautiful” than any human maiden.

A virgin purest lipp’d, yet in the lore
 Of love deep learned to the red heart’s core:
 Not one hour old, yet of scintillating brain
 To unperplex bliss from its neighbour pain.
 Define their pettish limits, and estrange
 Their points of contact, and swift counterchange;
 Intrigue with specious chaos, and disport
 Its most ambiguous atoms with sure art;
 As though in Cupid’s college she had spent
 Sweet days a lovely graduate, still unshent,
 And kept his rosy terms in idle languishment. (l.ll.189-99)

Assuming her woman’s form, she is “A virgin purest lipp’d, yet in the lore / of love deep learned to the red heart’s core”: A virgin with deep knowledge of sexuality since she is “a lovely graduate” from “Cupid’s college”. Thus, even in her new condition, Lamia is paradoxically described.

The ambiguous or even contradictory creation of *Lamia* shows a wavering poet. He is trying to handle “most ambiguous atoms with sure art” (l. 96), but he is composing a poem of mixed beauty, both lyrical and epic. As *Lamia* can “unperplex bliss from its neighbour pain”, Keats also suggests that the function of poems should be soothing to offer comfort and to heal despondency. In this way, we can understand *Lamia* as an incarnation of his poetry. However, at least in the beginning of the poem, Keats is hesitating between two styles, giving us an ambivalent beauty.

When *Lamia* bargains with Hermes, her voice is “swift-lisping” (l.116). The word “lisp” is the very one used by Lockhart to mock the young poet. In his fourth attack on the Cockney School, after ridiculing several passages of the “amorous scenes” in *Endymion* (Matthews 107), Lockhart says:

We had almost forgot to mention, that Keats belongs to the Cockney School of Politics, as well as the Cockney School of Poetry.
It is fit that he [Keats] who holds *Rimini* to be the first poem, should believe the *Examiner* to be the first politician of the day. We admire consistency, even in folly. Hear how *their bantling [Keats] has already learned to lisp sedition* (emphasis added). (Matthews 109)

In the attack, Keats is mocked as a disciple of the Cockney Hunt, trying to “lisp sedition”. In the poem, *Lamia* is also “lisp(ing) sedition” not only to Hermes but also to Lycius. Thus, *Lamia* can be read as a response to the attack. With its “specious chaos” and “most ambiguous atoms” (l.95, 96), the poem offers his tentative argument on poetic creation.

3.0 “Cold philosophy”

Lamia is such an ambiguous beauty with a mixture of loveliness and “disagreeables”. It shows Keats’s uncertainty in composing poems or in creating beauty. However, in the final disaster, Apollonius’ cold gaze not only dissolves *Lamia*, but also leads to the death of Lycius. With the vanishing of the mysterious beauty, the poem tries to say that cold philosophy could be destructive to the beautiful.

Do not all charms fly
At the mere touch of cold philosophy?
There was an awful rainbow once in heaven:
We know her woof, her texture; she is given
In the dull catalogue of common things.
Philosophy will clip an Angel’s wings,
Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,
Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine—
Unweave a rainbow, as it erewhile made
The tender-person’d *Lamia* melt into a shade. (ll.11.229-38)

“Cold philosophy” can destroy “all charms”: With its mere touch, a “rainbow” dies away. So for “rainbow-sided” *Lamia* (l.1.52), this will be disastrous. “Cold philosophy” is embodied by Apollonius, the philosopher “with curl’d gray beard, sharp eyes, and smooth bald crown, / Slow-stepp’d, and robed in philosophic gown” (l.11.364-65). And the intrusion is symbolized in the act of seeing or gazing throughout the poem, for instance, the gaze between Hermes and *Lamia*, the gaze between *Lamia* and Lycius, and the gaze of Apollonius on *Lamia*.

Lamia strikes a bargain with Hermes through the power of her vision. The oath Hermes swears “by [her] eyes” transpires only when “she breathe[s] upon his eyes” (l.11.90, 124). This exchange gives *Lamia* volcanic vision—her eyes “in torture fixed, and anguish drear, / Hot, glazed, and wide, with lid-lashes all sear, / Flashed phosphor and sharp sparks, without one cooling tear” (l.11.150-52). *Lamia*’s eyes

are “ever watchful, penetrant” when she lands at the border of Corinth (II.I.33), but within that border Lycius’ eyes turn her into a mirror of his desire and Apollonius’ gaze harpoons her. When Lycius first observes Lamia, he bends to her “open eye / where he was mirrored small paradise” (II.II.46-7). He falls desperately in love with her, literally consuming her with his eyes, “his eyes had drunk her beauty up, / Leaving no drop in the bewildering cup, / and still the cup was full” (I.II.251-52). Intoxicated, Lycius is instantly addicted, as he declares “Ah Goddess, see / whether my eyes can ever turn from thee!” (I.I.225). He is “chain[ed]” to her so firmly that he predicts what his fate will be when she ceases to mirror him: “Even as thou vanished so I shall die”, he moans (I.I.256). Indeed, he feels horror at Lamia’s unsightly death precisely because she no longer reflects him. Calling her “My silver planet”, as if she were a planet in orbit around him as a sun, calls attention to his brilliance (I.II.167-68). Like Narcissus, who becomes so enamored of the illusion of himself that he sees himself reflected in the water, Lycius too falls in love with the reflection of himself rather than the reality of Lamia. After Apollonius had impaled Lamia with his “juggling eyes”, the panicked Lycius

Gazed into her eyes, and not a jot
Owned they the lovelorn piteous appeal
More, more he gazed; his human senses reel;
Some hungry spell that loveliness absorbs;
There was no recognition in those orbs. (II.II.256-60)

As there is no “recognition” of Lycius in Lamia’s eyes, neither is there a reflection in which he can find comfort.

Thus, by condemning Apollonius and admonishing Lycius, the poem suggests when perceiving beauty, one would better be satisfied by “half-knowledge” and be capable of remaining in “uncertainties”. And the rigid philosophy cannot help us to get truth; instead, it could be disastrous to beauty.

4.0 Conclusion

As discussed above, *Lamia* talks about the deadly effect of cold philosophy on rainbow-sided beauty. Critics fail to find the same thematic discussion of *Lamia* with *Intimations of Immortality* by Wordsworth. It says,

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.
It is not now as it hath been of yore ;
Turn wheresoe’er I may,
By night or day,
The things which I have seen I now can see no more. (l. 1-9)

The ode presents a similar predicament of the personae. He loses his “visionary gleam” and he cannot “see” the “celestial light” of “rainbows” (l. 57, 9, 4, 10). At first he is sad about his loss of visionary capability, especially the capability in seeing splendor in nature. But he is not lamenting; instead, he eulogizes “the philosophic mind” as compensation of the loss (l. 191).

Though *Lamia* deals with the same problem of seeing, Keats has a different attitude. He not only laments on the loss of beauty but also indicts cold reasoning for destruction of beauty. In the story, Keats finally offers his choice between the beautiful and the sublime. Thus, it is understandable that the two Hyperions are left as fragments.

Acknowledgement

This paper is supported by “the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities (JB2013085)”

References

- Alwes, Karia. (1993). *Imagination transformed: the evolution of the female character in Keats's poetry*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Aske, Martin. (1995). Keats, the critics, and the politics of envy. *Keats and History*. Ed. Nicholas Roe. 46-64.
- Matthews, Geoffrey, ed. (1971). *Keats the critical heritage*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Mellor, Anne K. (2001). Keats and the complexities of gender. *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*. Ed. Susan Wolfson. 214-229
- Motion, Andrew.(1998). *Keats*. New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux.
- Stevenson, Warren. (1972). *Lamia: A stab at Gordian knot*. *Studies in Romanticism*. Vol. 11, No.3. Boston University. 241-252
- Whale, John. (2005). *Critical Issues :John Keats*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.