

FROM “A SERPENT, A LAMIA” TO A
RAINBOW-SIDED CREATURE: KEATS’S *LAMIA* AND
THE METAMORPHOSES OF THE MONSTER

*De “uma serpente, uma lâmia” a uma
criatura do arco-íris: Lamia de John Keats
e as metamorfoses do monstro*

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The abundance of female characters in Keats’ works has generated a long tradition of criticism, especially by feminist theorists, who have divided them into “mortal maidens” and “omnipotent goddesses”¹, ascribing them the diegetic functions of means of preservation and agents of destruction of the male heroes’ identities. Whereas the first type occurs mainly in the poems of 1817, the latter is more typical of poems written in and after 1819. Composed in the summer of that year, *Lamia* depicts a female character who is neither a mortal maiden nor an omnipotent god, but can be seen as a transitional stage between the two types. The title character is a monster who wishes to be human and “move in sweet body fit for life, / And love, and pleasure, and the ruddy strife / Of hearts and lips!”² (l.39-41). Her purpose is not evil in itself, as opposed to the mythological figure, who feasts on the blood of children. She is mortal to Lycius but only indirectly, when her own death causes him to die of grief. Neither is she omnipotent, since she needs the help of Hermes to escape the “wreathed tomb” of her serpentine body.

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¹ ALWES, Karla. *Introduction*, 1993, p. 1.

² KEATS, John. *Lamia*.

However, her complicated categorisation is not only due to her transitional stage between the types of female characters, but also because of what she represents in the poem.

In *Lamia*, the figure of the mythological snake-woman is problematised as a monster when she is opposed to the philosopher Apollonius, and this opposition comes to represent that between poetry and science. Her identification with poetry and imagination makes her a sympathetic, though ambiguous, character, and aligns her with other monsters whose status were reassessed by other Romantic poets. Lamia's monstrosity lies in her excesses, and as such she is both an ideal to be achieved and a danger to be feared.

The danger of the lamia, the mythological figure, comes first from her status as a monster. She is monstrous by being a conflation of woman and snake, an example of a fusion structure as described by Noel Carroll. She is a compound of human and animal, and the snake, in particular, is a beast that traditionally inspires fear. She has cannibalistic appetites and a taste for children's blood, and thus is used to terrify children into good behaviour. She is the mother of other monsters, such as the Scylla, the only child of hers that was not killed by Hera. This is one of the explanations in Greek mythology for why she became a monster. The gift of Zeus which allows her to take off her eyes, symbolising her gift for second sight, becomes a curse when she cannot close them and has to obsess over the image of her dead children. Some of these characteristics are reworked in Keats's poem.

Another important source for *Lamia* is Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621). The account of the story of the philosopher Apollonius, who puts a stop to the marriage between Menippus Lycius and a lamia, occurs in The Third Partition, Section 2, Member 1, Subsection I. The full account of their story takes no more than a few lines, and tells of

one Menippus Lycius, a young man twenty-five years of age, that going between Cenchreas and Corinth, met such a phantasm in the habit of a fair gentlewoman, which taking him by the hand, carried him home to her house in the suburbs of Corinth, and told him she was a Phoenician by birth, and if he would tarry with her, he should hear her sing and play, and drink such wine as never any drank, and no man should molest him; but she being fair and lovely would live and die with him, that was fair and lovely to behold. The young man a philosopher, otherwise staid and discreet, able to moderate his passions, though not this of love, tarried with her awhile to his great content, and at last married her, to whose wedding, amongst other guests, came Apollonius, who, by some probable conjectures, found her out to be a serpent, a lamia, and that all her furniture was like Tantalus's gold described by Homer, no substance, but mere illusions. When she saw herself descried,

she wept, and desired Apollonius to be silent, but he would not be moved, and thereupon she, plate, house, and all that was in it, vanished in an instant³.

The passage describes the lamia mainly in her effects on the male characters, and only hints at her inner life towards the end. The focus, and her allure for Lycius, is on the life of idleness and the pleasures she offers, rather than on her beauty; Lycius "tarries" with her. Her description as "staid and discreet" also heightens the idea that he is a victim rather than a willing agent of his fate. Apollonius's exposure of the lamia is described as the result of "conjectures" and he is not moved by her plea. The lamia, once exposed as a monster, gets no sympathy. In here, as well as in Keats's poems, the reader encounters the lamia already transformed into a monster. Although the main structural elements of the poem can be found in this passage, Keats foiled the main action in the introductory passage featuring Hermes and the nymph. The importance of Burton's *Anatomy* has been highlighted by Jane Chambers, who also discusses the parallels between Hermes's and Lamia's stories.

Chambers' main argument, in her article "'For Love's Sake': *Lamia* and Burton's Love Melancholy" is that the ambiguities of the title character can be explained when the passages before and after the lamia story in *The Anatomy* are read in the context of the whole section. According to her, Subsection I deals with "love's universal power and extent"⁴, which dominates humans and immortals alike. To this idea, Burton adds that Love (erotic love, in the figure of Cupid) has the ability of making beings from different planes fall in love with one another, as is the case of Lamia and Lycius. This kind of monstrous love, as with any other love, is a disease that cannot be cured. Thus, Burton describes "love melancholy", and the lamia story fits into the structure as an example of such melancholy. As a disease, love melancholy causes beings to act paradoxically, being akin to madness. According to Chambers, Lamia's and Hermes' acts of selfishness and even wickedness can be understood in the context of the disease.

Whereas Chambers seeks justification for the lovers' actions in *Anatomy*, she also acknowledges the prevalence of a view of Lamia as evil. This view is grounded on many passages from the poem. First, there is the already mentioned physicality of the monster. Lamia, even though trapped in a snake's body, has access to the outer world by means of her dreams, which are like psychic trips. Adapting from the myth, Keats makes this

³ BURTON, Robert. *The anatomy of melancholy*, p. 4675-76.

⁴ CHAMBERS, Jane. *For love's sake*, 1982, p. 586.

second vision less literal and more poetic. Nevertheless, it is a power that is never characterised as wholly good. Her greatest evil deed is, however, her ensnarement of the young Lycius, to whom she never discloses her true identity and who is thus fooled into her palace.

Textual evidence of her evil nature includes her early description and the confusion she causes on Hermes: "She seem'd, at once, some penanced lady elf, / Some demon's mistress, or the demon's self" (I.55-56). The god's inability to precise her nature can be seen as part of her ability to disguise herself, with the purpose of attracting the god and appealing to his pity. The idea of illusion is reinforced by the similes of the zebra, the leopard, and the peacock, animals whose fur or feathers create illusion of number, invisibility, and size. Mythical allusions include Circe, another *femme fatale*, but one who, like Lamia, is moved by love.

An absence marks another interpretation of the lamia monster. The poem, though referencing to her previous state as a charming woman, never mentions why she became a monster. In the myth, atoning circumstances are presented, but in the poem, these are never mentioned, and the generally sympathetic treatment of her miseries makes this absence all the more conspicuous.

The metamorphosis back into a woman's shape is described in gruesome details, and is rendered unnatural, as if the lamia was being punished for refusing to stay in her own monstrous shape:

Left to herself, the serpent now began
To change; her elfin blood in madness ran,
Her mouth foam'd, and the grass, therewith besprent,
Whither'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 colours all inflam'd throughout her train,
She writh'd about, convuls'd with scarlet pain. (I.146-54)

The transformation occurs when she is alone, left by Hermes, who, after getting what he wanted, couldn't care less for her fate. The ordeal begins when she loses the paradoxical beauties of her body, which implies that the metamorphosis might not be all for the best; her pain adds to this idea. At the same time the magnificence of her suffering, beyond human powers, expresses the "throes of excessive feeling and tormented consciousness"⁵

⁵ BOTTING, Fred. *Romantic Transformations*, 1996, p. 98.

of Romantic subjectivity. She bears all of this, "without one cooling tear," hoping that after the metamorphosis she will be reunited with her love, and the first words she speaks in her "new voice luting soft" is her beloved's name, who is to be found in Corinth.

Setting is also complicated in *Lamia*. Rather than settling for one identifiable realm, Keats mystifies them all. Here, Keats abandons the chivalric world of "Eve of St. Agnes" (1820), commonly used by Keats and other Romantics for "historical and poetic distance [which] provides the mysterious atmosphere for discussion of love and passion"⁶. The narrative starts with the fairy-tale formula "Upon a time," but this convention is soon upset by the recognition of the plurality of fairy lands. The narrator strives to establish that the setting is an Arcadian wood, and not the fairy land of Oberon's diadem, which would subsequently frighten away the dryads and the fauns in a way reminiscent of the flight of the pagan gods in Milton's "Nativity Ode." Additionally, this mythological world is the setting of only the first 170 lines, the Hermes prologue; the rest of Part I and the whole of Part II are set in Corinth, described much more soberly, with fewer mythological allusions, and where the only people who know of Lamia's castle are some Persian mutes. The historical and imaginative place of Corinth has to be reworked, as the poem attempts to account for the sudden appearance of a castle and Lycius acceptance of its existence. This concern with verisimilitude reflects worries that the inhabitants of Corinth wouldn't just accept a magical palace springing up from nowhere, making the setting less fairy-tale like and further highlighting Lamia's need to hide herself as a monster. The mythological world is left behind when the monster leaves it in the form of a beautiful woman, and the magical palace has more in common with a Gothic castle than with the woods where the dryads and nymphs play.

As much in control of the palace as of the illusions she creates therein, Lamia is progressively less in control of herself and her love for Lycius, finally submitting to what she feared would bring her demise – and indeed does – for a caprice of his. This second metamorphosis, a psychological rather than a physical one, is brought about by her excess of love. Lamia by this point has already won Lycius's love, and in order to achieve that love, has thrown "the goddess off, and won his heart / More pleasantly by playing woman's part" (l.336-37). This kind of excess is identified by Denise Gigante as the new concept of monster that arose in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century and found its expression in the literature of the Romantic period. This change was "from a concept of deformity to a notion of monstrosity as too much life"⁷. This excess of life can also be seen in its

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁷ GIGANTE, Denise. *The monster in the rainbow*, 2002, p. 433.

physical rendition, in the colours and shapes of Lamia's serpentine body. Although the physical excess produces the effect of strange beauty, found in nature, the psychological effects of the excesses of love are more profitably identifiable as sources of changes Keats brings into the poem.

Keats' use of this monster and his focus on her excess of love can be seen as part of a larger agenda other Romantics took in the revaluation of certain monsters, of which the heroic rendering of Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost* is one example. M. H. Abrams traces this change in attitude, which brought about what he calls "romantic Satanism," to Robert Burns, in 1787, and his request to have a spirit like his favourite hero, Satan. Abrams analyses: "Satan has come to be the hero not for technical reasons but because the reader rather inclines to take his side in the war between heaven and hell"⁸. Abrams presents Blake's, Shelley's, Coleridge's, Carlyle's, and other prominent romantics' views on *Paradise Lost* and its monster, and even those, like Shelley, who does not explicitly take side like Blake did, had a point in revaluating the figure of Satan and his role in the epic. God's rule, being equated to a tyranny, transforms the figure of Satan into the individual who resists tyranny.

Fred Botting sees in this suffering individual the prototypical hero in Romantic-Gothic writing. Even though he discusses the use of the figure in other works, and acknowledges the predominance of male heroes in these writings, some of his analyses are useful for the understanding of Lamia as a possible heroine in Keats' *Lamia*. He thus characterises the hero:

The individual in question stands at the edges of society and rarely finds a path back into the social fold. The critical distance taken with regard to social values derives from radical attacks on oppressive systems of monarchical government. Instead, the consciousness, freedom and imagination of the subject is valued. Usually male, the individual is outcast, part villain, part victim⁹.

He identifies Satan as well as Prometheus with this image. Lamia's situation in the poem reflects some of these concerns. Her exile, both as an exile in the island and in the "wreathed tomb" of her body, puts her in isolation from society, to which she only has access by means of her "dreams". Her values are also shown when she helps the nymph away from the lecherous satyrs. She wants to be freed from the power which imprisoned her in the snake. Her ambiguous nature is expressed in her unveiling the nymph for

⁸ ABRAMS, M. H. *The mirror and the lamp*, p. 251.

⁹ BOTTING, Fred. *Romantic transformations*, p. 91.

Hermes in exchange for a human body. She only protects the nymph as long as it does not affect her, and as soon as she realises the potential benefit from revealing herself, she does not hesitate. We are, however, inclined to forgive her, in a process similar to that described by Botting, since the reason behind her betrayal of the nymph is love and a desire to overcome her difficulties.

Botting mentions and further develops the centrality of the individual's imagination for Keats, as many other romantics. In *Lamia*, imagination is in conflict with reason, and both are personified in the figures of the monster Lamia and of the philosopher Apollonius. Their encounter in the end of Part I and their final confrontation in Part II can either be seen as lying "between responsibility and wanton hedonism on the one hand or between ethereal beauty and murderous rationality on the other"¹⁰.

Lamia can be understood as the representation of imagination and creativity, as many other females in Keats' works. First, as a snake, her "dreams" can be seen as an expression of her imagination. She is able to travel to Corinth; experience chariot races, and fall in love with Lycius without being physically present. Her power is such that there is a detachment between her physical and mental realities. She can also manipulate reality and create a whole palace out of her own imagination. The reality that she creates is dependent on her alone, and as soon as she vanishes everything around her vanishes too. She can also inflict the product of her imagination upon others, and the guests are all able to enjoy the comfort she can afford and the food she serves. As long as they are willing receptors of her creations, they are able to partake her feast. The ability to impress one's imagination upon others is an important concern for Keats and is a power given to his monster.

Lamia is also beautiful, and Keats focuses on her beauty, which is for Burton the mere disguise of the snake. Her world is a world of sensuousness, of sounds and textures. She represents the poetry of sensation, and Lycius, though previously a philosopher like Apollonius, finds delight in this world, as a poet might. Alwes recognises the poet as a metaphor of the lover in Keats:

For a poet who sees himself as "lover" to the imagination, a natural (and troublesome) correlative of the female as a metaphor of the imagination is the concept of sexuality [...] which conveys the magic and subversive power of the female and gives the impression of simultaneous attraction and repulsion on the part of the male¹¹.

¹⁰ BLAKE. *Lamia*, p. 2.

¹¹ ALWES. *Introduction*, p. 3.

Lycius's attraction is never doubted. The narrator, and definitely Apollonius, are more prone to feel this repulsion. The antagonism between Apollonius and Lamia has produced a tradition of criticism, but most critics seem to agree on the fact that the philosopher hates the lamia, and is more interested in solving the mystery and exposing her than truly saving his disciple, who, after all, dies. Therefore, even though Apollonius is "right" and brings the "truth" in exposing Lamia's illusions, his force is "destructive rather than constructive, disclosing evil where only sweet delight had been. [...] The poem is an admission of the greater strength of Apollonius, but it is at the same time a bitter lament that such should be the case"¹². The philosopher's and philosophy's destructive sides are expressed in his appearance at the wedding, even though he was not invited, and his malicious laugh at solving "some knotty problem" (II.160). He is also deceptive in that he can "[w]ith reconciling words and courteous mien / Turn [...] into sweet milk the sophist's spleen" (II.172).

The conflict finds its best expression in the lines
 Let spear-grass and the spiteful thistle wage
 War on his temples. Do not all charms fly
 At the mere touch of 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. (II.228-38)

The rainbow, in the first part of the poem used to describe Lamia's serpentine body, is taken here again as metaphor for the sublime. The beauty of the rainbow, the awe it creates on the beholder, is demystified and therefore lost when its constituent parts are analysed by the cold philosophy.

The ambiguities of Lamia as a character are better understood if she is seen as a monster in the Romantic tradition. Her evil deeds, her monstrous figure, her potential to idleness are flaws that pervade the whole poem, but these are not taken to be irredeemable traits. She is part of a tradition in Keats' writings to have female figures as metaphors for the imagination, but the misogynistic component of his writing makes it necessary that the approach to them should be always rather perilous. The power of the more

¹² ROBERTS. *The significance of Lamia*, 1953, p. 555.

masculine philosophy is patent, but does not present itself as a perfect alternative, since it leads to the death of the creative power.

Keats shares many preoccupations with other Romantic writers, and his use of the mythological monster lamia in the poem is a reassessment of her position as the beauty who attracts the young philosopher away from the cold philosophy, and is therefore closer to the figure of the poet as a creative entity than to the philosopher who, in the end, brings about destruction, despite holding the "truth".

RESUMO

A abundância de personagens femininas na obra de Keats levou a uma longa tradição de crítica, especialmente por parte de teóricos do feminismo, que as dividem em "donzelas mortais" e "deusas onipotentes", dando a elas funções diegéticas de meio de preservação ou de destruição das identidades dos heróis masculinos. Enquanto o primeiro tipo aparece principalmente nos poemas de 1817, o último é mais típico de poemas escritos em, e depois de, 1819. Composto no verão daquele ano, "Lamia" figura uma personagem feminina que não é nem uma donzela mortal nem uma deusa onipotente, mas uma que pode ser vista como pertencente a um estágio de transição entre os dois tipos. Em "Lamia", a figura mitológica da mulher-cobra é problematizada enquanto monstro ao ser colocada em oposição ao filósofo Apollonius, numa oposição que vem a representar aquela entre a poesia e a ciência. A identificação com a poesia e a imaginação faz com a personagem se torne simpática, embora de forma ambígua, e a alinha com outros monstros cujo status foram repensados por outros poetas românticos. A monstruosidade de Lamia se localiza em seus excessos, e como tal ela é ao mesmo tempo um ideal a ser alcançado e um perigo a ser evitado.

Palavras-chave: *John Keats; Lamia; monstros na literatura.*

ABSTRACT

The abundance of female characters in Keats' works has generated a long tradition of criticism, especially by feminist theorists, who have divided them into "mortal maidens" and "omnipotent goddesses", ascribing them the diegetic functions of means of preservation and agents of destruction of the male heroes' identities. Whereas the first type occurs mainly in the 1817 poems, the latter is more typical of poems written in and

after 1819. Composed in the summer of that year, *Lamia* depicts a female character who is neither a mortal maiden nor an omnipotent god, but can be seen as a transitional stage between the two types. In *Lamia*, the figure of the mythological snake-woman is problematized as a monster when she is opposed to the philosopher Apollonius, and this opposition comes to represent that between poetry and science. Her identification with poetry and the imagination makes her a sympathetic, though ambiguous, character, and aligns her with other monsters whose status were reassessed by other Romantic poets. Lamia's monstrosity lies in her excesses, and as such she is both an ideal to be achieved and a danger to be feared.

Keywords: *John Keats; Lamia; monsters in literature.*

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