

Keats, Women, and the Demon Poesy

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When Keats abruptly claimed, in one of his letters, that 'What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth—whether it existed before or not', he expanded upon his somewhat gnomic text by adding: 'The Imagination may be compared to Adam's dream—he awoke and found it truth'.¹ The allusion is to the nativity of Eve, as described by Milton in Book VIII of *Paradise Lost*. In this scene, Adam is laid asleep by God but in such a way that he is still able to see, by means of his 'fancy', the creation of Eve from his left rib. Miraculously, the gap between fiction (dream) and actuality closes, so that Eve appears, in the flesh, exactly according to the image of Adam's desire. Here is how Milton imagines the scene, in Adam's words:

Mine eyes he closed, but open left the cell
 Of fancy my internal sight, by which
 Abstract as in a trance methought I saw,
 Though sleeping, where I lay, and saw the shape
 Still glorious before whom awake I stood,
 Who stooping opened my left side, and took
 From thence a rib, with cordial spirits warm,
 And life-blood streaming fresh; wide was the wound,
 But suddenly with flesh filled up and healed:
 The rib he formed and fashioned with his hands;
 Under his forming hands a creature grew,
 Manlike, but different sex, so lovely fair,
 That what seemed fair in all the world, seemed now
 Mean, or in her summed up, in her contained
 And in her looks, which from that time infused
 Sweetness into my heart, unfelt before,
 And into all things from her air inspired
 The spirit of love and amorous delight.

1 To Benjamin Bailey, 22 November 1817. All page-references are to *Letters of John Keats: A Selection* ed. R. Gittings (Oxford University Press, 1982).

She disappeared, and left me dark, I waked
 To find her, or for ever to deplore
 Her loss, and other pleasures all abjure:
 When out of hope, behold her, not far off,
 Such as I saw her in my dream, adorned
 With what all earth or heaven could bestow
 To make her amiable: on she came,
 Led by her heavenly maker, though unseen,
 And guided by his voice, nor uninformed
 Of nuptial sanctity and marriage rites:
 Grace was in all her steps, heaven in her eye,
 In every gesture dignity and love.²

Readers of this passage who are also familiar with the whole of Milton's epic will be aware that Adam does not simply awake and find his dream truth. Keats's confident formulation of the authority of poetic idealization, in so far as it cites this passage in support of its claims, raises more questions than it answers. For instance, it will immediately be obvious that Adam's awakening is not a moment of triumph but one of great anxiety and uncertainty: like the Belle Dame figure, Eve disappears, leaving her creator-dreamer (momentarily) desolate, 'out of hope'. There are other disjunctions, too, between Keats's simple formula and the Milton passage, some of which stem from the existence in Book IV of an earlier account of this nativity scene, told from the quite different perspective of Eve. In Eve's narrative we learn that she has to be 'led' to Adam because her first instinct is to flee from him, so unlovely is he in comparison to the beautiful image with which she has fallen in love—the reflection of her own image in the lake. The point of Eve's narrative in Book IV is to reveal her as essentially narcissistic and vain, weaknesses which are there from the start and which lead inevitably to her sexual temptation by Satan and subsequent fall. Milton's misogynist representation of the inferiority of Eve, so obnoxious to women readers,³ is, however, far from a simple matter, as a number of

2 *Paradise Lost* VIII.460-89. Quotations from *Paradise Lost* are from Alastair Fowler's edition in Longman Annotated English Poets (Longman, 1971).

3 For an eighteenth-century response, see Mary Wollstonecraft's incisive critique of Milton's salacious imagination in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1792 (Penguin Classics, 1972, pp.100-02).

recent feminist critics have demonstrated.

In the birthing scene which is Eve's nativity, God is paradoxically both the creator of new life and a midwife to Adam. However we resolve that particular paradox, one thing is certain: both male figures, God and Adam, usurp the female prerogative of maternity. Indeed, as Margaret Homans has argued in a recent article, when Keats talks about creativity in the context of this scene from *Paradise Lost*, he equates his imaginative project 'not only with male sexual potency but also with the masculine appropriation of the feminine'.⁴

There was nothing unusual about Keats's conception of the poetic project as a potently masculine one; the idea had a long established and respectable genealogy. Influential eighteenth-century aestheticians, such as William Duff in his popular *Essay on Original Genius* (1767), described the imagination as an intrepid explorer travelling beyond 'the visible diurnal sphere' and making 'the most stupendous discoveries in its aerial tour'. The imagination of an original genius will, he claims,

indulge its adventurous flight without restraint: it will dart a beam upon the dark scenes of futurity, draw the veil from the invisible world, and expose to our astonished view 'that undiscovered country, from whose bourne no traveller returns'.⁵

The quotation from Shakespeare is apt for Duff because it was this poet more than any other writer who 'with amazing boldness' had 'ventured to burst the barriers of a separate state and disclose the land of Apparitions, Shadows, and Dreams'.⁶ While Duff does not deny imagination in women, he is careful to distinguish it from the virile, vigorous and far-reaching imagination of men. Addressing his 'fair readers' in *Letters on the Intellectual and Moral Character of Women* (1807) he writes:

Of that creative power and energy of imagination, which is

4 'Keats Reading Women, Women Reading Keats' in *Studies in Romanticism* 29 (Fall, 1990), 344.

5 William Duff, *An Essay on Original Genius* (Garland Publishers, New York, 1970), p.140.

6 *Ibid.* p.141.

exerted in calling into existence things that are not, and, in bestowing on shadowy forms all the colours of life and reality, a power rarely exhibited by any mind; I do not remember to have met with any remarkable examples in your sex.⁷

Duff's masculine metaphors of adventure and exploration, of conquering and colonizing new worlds, reappear in Keats's sonnet 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer', the poem which for Leigh Hunt 'completely announced the new poet taking possession':

Much have I travelled in the realms of gold,
 And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
 Round many western islands have I been
 Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.
 Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
 That deep-browed Homer ruled as his demesne;
 Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
 Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
 Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
 When a new planet swims into his ken;
 Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
 He stared at the Pacific—and all his men
 Looked at each other with a wild surmise -
 Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

(*Poems*, p.72) ⁸

As a reader of Chapman's Homer, and as the author of this sonnet, the young Keats is 'taking possession' or inheriting the demesne of poetry, figuring himself as Cortez, the Spanish conquistador who overthrew the Aztec empire and won Mexico for the crown of Spain. Even in Keats's most passive and indolent moods, dozing on a sofa or napping upon clover, the poetic 'voyage of conception' involves 'delicious *diligent* Indolence' (*Letters*, p.65; my emphasis).

7 *Letters on the Intellectual and Moral Character of Women* (reprinted Garland Publishers, New York. 1974, p.29).

8 Page-references are to *John Keats: The Complete Poems*, ed. J. Barnard, 2nd edn, Penguin, 1977. For the text of *Lamia*, I have also consulted *The Poems of John Keats* ed. J. Stillinger (Harvard University Press, 1978).

But while the imaginative project was gendered masculine, poetry tended to be personified as a woman, with the poet's seigniorial rights extending over woman's estate. Although the conquered 'demesne' of Keats's sonnet on Chapman's Homer is not conspicuously gendered, the land of poetry is often figured as a 'fair demesne', such as that of Lamia's enchanted palace (*Poems*, p.429). Similarly, Keats (like many of his contemporaries) would presumptuously incorporate whatever feminine attributes seemed appropriate for his purposes, such as his figuring of the poet's heart as a 'teat from which the Mind or intelligence sucks its identity' (*Letters*, p.250). Or think of the way he addresses his Muse; in the 'Ode on Indolence' she is the 'maiden most unmeek', his 'demon Poesy'; and in the sonnet, 'If by dull rhymes our English must be chained', the poet describes the female Muse as fettered in the body of a 'Sonnet sweet' (*Poems*, pp.350, 340).

Fettering the Muse might, however, suggest some underlying anxiety about the equation of poetry and woman, or that Keats felt his manhood and poetic prowess were not what they should be:

Is there so small a range
In the present strength of manhood, that the high
Imagination cannot freely fly
As she was wont of old?

(*Poems*, p.87)

The massive elisions entailed in his confident assertion of the identity of imagination and Adam's dream might also point to complexities and uncertainties surrounding his sexual identity and poetic authority.⁹ Of course, Keats knew that his formulation did not bear much close scrutiny, and he ironized his poetic credo in *The Eve of St Agnes* when Madeline, dreaming of her lover Porphyro, wakes to a truth which involves a terrible deception (*Poems*, p.322). Perhaps Madeline is punished for

9 Margaret Homans is particularly interested in the way in which the equation of poetic identity with sexual potency leads inexorably to related anxieties, such as the need to woo a female readership and to attract women sexually; see 'Keats Reading Women, Women Reading Keats', *loc.cit.*, 348-9.

usurping the masculine, God-like role of dreamer-poet-creator? Whatever meaning we might want to give to that particular scene, and its ironic re-writing of Milton's nativity scene, the number of times Keats poetically re-worked the *Paradise Lost* passage warrants some attention.

In particular, Keats's re-workings concern themselves with two points of perplexity and ambiguity: first, Adam's imagination of Eve does not give him instant and direct access to her, and second, when he does overcome her hesitation and win her to himself, she lives up to the proverbial reading of woman as 'woe to man', a curse rather than an ideal. The first can be described as a kind of failed birth; the second problem, which we can loosely call 'the problem of woman', gets articulated in a number of different ways, one of which is described by Christine Froula in an important article entitled 'When Eve Reads Milton: Undoing the Canonical Economy'.¹⁰ Froula is interested in Adam's sense of himself as incomplete, and his corresponding awe at what appears to be Eve's total self-sufficiency. In other words, Froula explores the underside of that confident masculine appropriation of the feminine, as figured in the nativity of Eve.

We have already seen how, at first sight, all the fairness in the world seemed to Adam to be 'summed up' or 'contained' in Eve; shortly after this he worriedly questions whether

... nature failed in me, and left some part
Not proof enough such object to sustain,
Or from my side subducting, took perhaps
More than enough ...
 [for] when I approach
Her loveliness, so absolute she seems
And in herself complete, so well to know
Her own, that what she wills to do or say,
Seems wisest, virtouesest, discreetest, best;
All higher knowledge in her presence falls
Degraded ...

(VIII. 534-52)

That Adam should associate this sense of inadequacy with his

10 *Critical Inquiry* 10 (December 1983), 321-47.

life-giving rib is interpreted by Froula as 'archetypal womb envy': 'the "completeness" he fears in Eve and lacks in himself attaches to the function Adam associates with his rib: the power to create a human being'.¹¹ Furthermore, in order to compensate for this sense of his own incompleteness, Adam projects an all-powerful creator whose patriarchal power serves to counterbalance the maternal power of Eve. Not surprisingly, given the compensatory deals which must be struck between the male figures of Milton's poem, Adam's moments of doubt about his superiority to Eve receive strong rebukes. Think of how Raphael, with sternly 'contracted brow', reminds Adam of his first lessons about Eve's lesser nature, warning him at the same time to wean himself from his excessive and infatuated love of her person. Later, when Adam chooses to fall with Eve rather than obey God's edict about the forbidden fruit, he stands convicted of unmanliness, of 'effeminate slackness' (XI. 634). In the jealous words of Christ:

Was she thy God, that her thou didst obey
 Before his voice, or was she made thy guide,
 Superior, or but equal, that to her
 Thou didst't resign thy manhood, and the place
 Wherein God set thee above her made of thee
 And for thee, whose perfection far excelled
 Hers in all real dignity ...

(X. 145-51)

Adam's captivation by Eve conforms to a familiar romance plot whereby magnetism to an ideal, desired woman proves, in the end, to be a fatal attraction. This is also the story of Keats's 'La Belle Dame sans Merci. A Ballad', a romantic tale of enchantment, seduction and disillusion, in which a knight-at-arms is disarmed by a bewitching female figure who is at one and the same time a mature woman ('Full beautiful'), 'a faery's child', and also a type of untamed animal—'her foot was light/ And her eyes were wild' (*Poems*, p.335). Note, however, that these metamorphoses form part of the disillusioned knight's retrospective account of the Belle Dame. As readers we are positioned as the interlocutor who questions and then listens to

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.332.

the knight's story, a point about the poem's narrative framing which is important to remember if we are not also to become victims of the Belle Dame. While many critics have been lured to unravel her mystery, asking 'who, or what is she?', we should resist that trap and focus instead on *how* she is represented to us.

When Eve tempts Adam, the 'fair enticing fruit' which she holds out to him is clearly a metonym for her body; after eating, Adam casts 'lascivious eyes' on Eve and the two of them, burning with lust, fall to love-making (IX. 996-1016). Some parallels can be drawn between this temptation scene and the Belle Dame's preparation of a love potion for the knight—a prelude to lulling him asleep:

She found me roots of relish sweet,
And honey wild, and manna-dew,
And sure in language strange she said -
'I love thee true'.

(*Poems*, p.335)

Just as woman disguises the evil within her by projecting a sweet, alluring exterior, honey disguises the bitter poison. But this is a masculinist projection, a way of externalizing and fending off the vulnerability men feel when attracted to women. Rather than admit complicity, it is easier for the knight to suggest that he was drugged by a venomous woman, that he was the innocent and passive victim of feminine duplicity: 'And sure in language strange she said - / "I love thee true"'. But how sure can we be of the strange tale the knight is telling us?

As in so many medieval romances and Renaissance epics, the struggle between this knight and the Belle Dame is figured as a struggle between love and war, between a world of feminine enchantment in enclosed, womb-like spaces, such as the elfin grot, and the so-called 'outside' world of manly warfare. Towards the end of the ballad the 'Pale warriors', the knight's companions-in-arms, recall him to their company, warning him against emasculation by the Belle Dame, just as Raphael, with 'contracted brow', cautions Adam against an unmanly infatuation with Eve.

If the Belle Dame's 'elfin grot' exposes her as an elf, then she

is also linked to fancy, the poet's 'deceiving elf' addressed at the end of 'Ode to a Nightingale', a poem written about the same time as 'La Belle Dame sans Merci'. The poet reproaches fancy, or the poetic imagination, for failing to transport him wholly to a world of enchantment; despite her formidable reputation for deception, 'the fancy cannot cheat so well/ As she is famed to do, deceiving elf'. The faery lands themselves are 'forlorn', a word which bridges that longed for other world of the ode's penultimate stanza and the final stanza of the poet's far from ideal present (*Poems*, p.48). Fancy fails to live up to her promise.

Lamia, the serpent woman, is another such 'deceiving elf', an enchantress who, like one of those 'faery damsels met in forest wide' of medieval romance, waylays a young warrior, Lycius, en route to Corinth. Like fancy itself, which must 'dart forth, and cloudward soar' from the mind's opened 'cage-door' ('Fancy', *Poems*, p.307), Lamia must escape the 'wreathed tomb' of her serpentine body. Eros and fancy then coalesce, leaving Lycius captivated as much by Lamia's voice as by her physical beauty:

For so delicious were the words she sung,
It seemed he had loved them a whole summer long
(*Poems*, p.421)

Here Lamia's musical voice satisfies one of the axioms Keats laid down for poetry: that 'it should strike the Reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts, and appear almost a Remembrance' (*Letters*, pp.69-70). But like poetic language, Lamia fails, in the end, to posit a world of substance; her palace, like the nightingale's enclosure and the Belle Dame's elfin grot, is illusory, a fictional place which cannot survive the lover's awakening. In the puns of Keats's 'Ode to Psyche', the poet's 'fond believing lyre' is a foolish and self-deceiving liar, the 'fane' a 'feign' (*Poems*, pp.341-2).

Unlike the Belle Dame, Lamia does not need to give her victim a potion; she is herself a magical draught:

And soon his eyes had drunk her beauty up,
Leaving no drop in the bewildering cup,
And still the cup was full.
(*Poems*, p.421)

At first, Lycius correctly identifies Lamia as a beautiful illusion, likely to vanish as quickly as she has appeared; and, Adam-like, his pleasure at beholding her is held in check by a fear of loss:

‘For pity do not this sad heart belie—
Even as thou vanishest so I shall die.
.....
So sweetly to these ravished ears of mine
Came thy sweet greeting, that if thou shouldst fade
Thy memory will waste me to a shade—
For pity do not melt!’

(*Poems*, p.421)

Playing up to these fears until Lycius swoons with fear and woe, Lamia then spins her chief fiction, which is to appear before Lycius as ‘a real woman’ without (she claims) ‘Any more subtle fluid in her veins/ Than throbbing blood’. At this point the narrator jocularly breaks into his own fiction:

Let the mad poets say whate’er they please
Of the sweets of Faeries, Peris, Goddesses,
There is not such a treat among them all,
Haunters of cavern, lake, and waterfall,
As a real woman, lineal indeed
From Pyrrha’s pebbles or old Adam’s seed.
Thus gentle Lamia judged, and judged aright,
That Lycius could not love in half a fright,
So threw the goddess off, and won his heart
More pleasantly by playing woman’s part.

(*Poems*, p.423)

If Lamia is at some level the ‘demon Poesy’ of Keats’s ‘Ode on Indolence’, then she most certainly satisfies that poem’s address to the Muse as ‘maiden most unneek’. Like Eve, new formed from Adam’s rib yet, paradoxically, not ‘uninformed/ Of nuptial sanctity and marriage rites’, Lamia is

A virgin purest lipped, yet in the lore
Of love deep learnèd to the red heart’s core;
.....
As though in Cupid’s college she had spent
Sweet days a lovely graduate, still unshent.

(*Poems*, p.419)

Just as Milton’s imagination betrays him into gross

inconsistency, describing the unfallen, innocent Eve as a temptress who wears her golden tresses 'Dishevelled ... in wanton ringlets waved' (IV. 306), so Keats projects a bifurcated image of Lamia as innocent and artful, the virgin whose coyness masks the eagerness of a whore. Although not 'one hour old', Lamia is 'yet of sciential brain/ To unperplex bliss from its neighbour pain', an allusion to the fallen Eve who has imbibed from the tree of knowledge 'sciential sap, derived/ From nectar, drink of gods' (IX. 837-38). But the nectar which Eve greedily and pleasurably engorges 'without restraint' is death, just as the nectar of the flower, sipped in at the mouth, gets metamorphosed into the sting of the bee's tail: 'aching Pleasure nigh/Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips' ('Ode on Melancholy', *Poems*, p.349). The inextricable nexus of pleasure and pain can also be seen in the derivation of 'Joy's grape' from the earlier 'ruby g(rape) of Proserpine' (*Poems*, pp.348-9).¹²

Critics have linked Keats's contradictory presentation of Lamia to his abiding ambivalence about the genre, Romance.¹³ But Lamia's 'gordian shape of dazzling hue' also arises from the 'gordian complication of feelings' which Keats feels whenever he thinks about women.¹⁴ In a letter to his close friend Benjamin Bailey, he confesses that he lacks 'a right feeling towards Women', that they make him feel resentful. His rationalization of this 'gordian complication' is interesting: while conceding that he has 'no right to expect more than their reality', he nevertheless bears woman a grudge for how far she now falls below his school boy imagination of her as 'a pure Goddess'. As he unwittingly reveals a few lines later, however, his resentment against womankind more probably resides in his doubt as to whether 'they care ... Mister John Keats five feet high likes

12 I owe this last point to Nelson Hilton, 'Keats, Teats, and the Fane of Poesy' in *Imagining Romanticism: Essays in English and Australian Romanticisms*, ed. D. Coleman and P. Otto (Locust Hill Press, 1991), p.66.

13 See Susan Wolfson, *The Questioning Presence: Wordsworth, Keats, and the Interrogative Mode in Romantic Poetry* (Cornell University Press, 1986).

14 For another 'gordian snake' enchantress, see *Endymion* III. 494 (*Poems*, p.174).

them or not' (*Letters*, pp.136-7).¹⁵

Keats's ambivalence about woman, whether real, idealized, fictional or otherwise, gets played out, as we have already seen in 'La Belle Dame sans Merci', as a struggle between love and war, between a feminine and fictive enclosure of sybaritic romance and an outside world of manly action and mateship. The same pattern can be observed in *Lamia*; the serpent woman's spell over Lycius receives its first shock

When from the slope side of a suburb hill,
Deafening the swallow's twitter, came a thrill
Of trumpets—Lycius started—the sounds fled,
But left a thought a-buzzing in his head.
For the first time, since first he harboured in
That purple-lined palace of sweet sin,
His spirit passed beyond its golden bourne
Into the noisy world almost forsworn.
(*Poems*, pp.425-6)

From this moment onwards *Lamia*'s spell begins to lose its potency until finally, at the wedding feast, the philosopher Apollonius solves the 'knotty problem' of *Lamia*'s womanhood by dissolving her with his splenetic gaze (*Poems*, p.429), leaving the reader with a solution as dubiously 'sweet' as Porphyro's 'real' intrusion into Madeline's dream (*Poems*, p.322).

Although captivated by the women they love, Lycius and the knight-at-arms are also concerned to capture their elusive female companions. The knight encircles different parts of the Belle Dame's body with a 'garland', 'bracelets', and 'fragrant zone',¹⁶ an adornment which is worship but also possession, eliciting a contradictory 'sweet moan', and just a hint of pretence: the Belle Dame looks at the knight 'as [if] she did love' (*Poems*, p.335)—responses which have prompted one critic to argue that the

15 For Keats's insecurity about his height see the sonnet, 'Had I a man's fair form', and Woodhouse's comment on it (*Poems*, pp.54, 540n).

16 A flowery belt or girdle worn around the waist.

romance of this ballad is as fatal to the Belle Dame as to the knight.¹⁷

Certainly Lycius' desire to possess Lamia as his own proves fatal to them both. Hoping to bridge the gap between inner and outer worlds—to reconcile the conflicting claims of love and war—Lycius determines to lead Lamia in 'triumph' through the 'thronged streets' of Corinth, like a trophy of war (*Poems*, pp.426-7). After initially pleading with Lycius not to expose her in this way, Lamia consents with something like the mixed emotion of the Belle Dame's 'sweet moan': 'She burnt, she loved the tyranny', the narrator confidently tells us, like a man who would persuade us of the secret pleasure women derive from sexual harassment.

In *The Eve of St Agnes* Porphyro wants Madeline to wake and find her dream truth, but the 'truth' she encounters in her bed-chamber is, at worst, a dupe; at best, the truth of the waking world falls far short of the beauty of her trance, because Porphyro contaminates her dream by appropriating it physically through stealth and deception. The same emotional indeterminacy can be seen in the concluding scene of *Lamia*, where (masculine) truth exposes the mystery of (feminine) beauty. For Lycius, though, the truth Apollonius reveals is death. Only in the riddle of the 'still unravished' Urn, where consummation with the poet is perpetually deferred, do we find reasserted in a poetic text the confident and yet hollow conflation with which we started:

'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.'
(*Poems*, p.346).

17 Karen Swann, 'Harassing the Muse' in *Romanticism and Feminism*, ed. A. Mellor (Indiana University Press, 1988), pp.81-92.