

## Dread of Lamia

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**Abstract:** Critics agree with an ambiguous image of Lamia, but they mainly discuss Keats's sympathy and fail to explain his hostility. A psychological reading of the poem illustrates dread of woman in Lamia. Hostility to Lamia is caused by dread of woman or specifically dread of vagina. Lamia herself is an embodiment of vagina as she is an archetype of Medusa. Dread of woman imprisons Lamia and finally causes her death.

**Keywords:** dread of woman, dread of vagina, Medusa, Lamia, imprisonment.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Critics have universally recognized *Lamia* to be an enigmatic and ambivalent poem since the image of Lamia is hard to define. They believe that the poem 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, Jeffrey Baker in *John Keats and Symbolism* (1986) thinks *Lamia*'s "principal concern" is "appearance and reality" and regards Lamia as a "mixture" of "true and false beauty" (p.34, p.37, p.34). 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" (p.144, p.144, p.145). 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" (p.224). Until 2005, John Whale in *Critical Issues: John Keats* (2005) still thinks "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" (p.19).

Critics agree with an ambiguous image of Lamia, but they mainly try to discuss Keats's sympathy and fail to trace back his hostility to Lamia. This paper tries to present a psychological reading of the poem to explore hostility and fear of woman in *Lamia*. Keats's letters illustrate his anxiety, frustration when facing woman and his ambivalent attitudes to woman. And the similar attitude is expressed in his portrayal of Lamia. The split image of Lamia is caused by dread of woman.

### 2. DREAD OF WOMAN<sup>1</sup> IN LIFE

In *Feminine Psychology*, Karen Horney (1967) with the analysis of male homosexuality and other perversions concludes that man's "dread of woman" comes from the "dread of the vagina" and it is "anxiety" working behind the "dread" (133, 137,137).

Male homosexuality has for its basis, in common indeed with all the other perversions, the desire to

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase is borrowed from Karen Horney's, in *Feminine Psychology* (133)

escape from the female genital or to deny its very existence. Freud has shown that this is a fundamental trait in fetishism, in particular; he believes it to be based, however, not on anxiety, but on a feeling of abhorrence due to the absence of the penis in women. I think, however, that even from his account we are absolutely forced to the conclusion that there is anxiety at work as well. What we actually see is dread of the vagina, thinly disguised under the abhorrence. Only *anxiety* is a strong enough motive to hold back from his goal a man whose libido is assuredly urging him on to union with the woman. A boy's castration anxiety in relation to his father is not an adequate reason for his dread of a being to whom this punishment has already happened. Besides the dread of the father, there must be a further dread, the object of which is the woman or the female genital. Now this dread of the vagina itself appears unmistakably not only in homosexuals and perverts, but also in the dreams of male analysts. (p.137)

Man's dread of woman comes from the "the dread of vagina" or "the female genital", and "anxiety" is an essential cause to this fear. It applies not only to "homosexuals and perverts" but ordinary males. Keats's letters reveal his anxiety caused by woman, as John Whale naming him "anxious Keats" when analyzing his attitudes to women (2005, p.22). Moreover, even Keats himself in his letters self-diagnoses his attitudes as "perversity" (1935, p. 341).

Karen Horney goes on to explain the origin of "anxiety" can be traced back to the boy's "early development" (p.137). It is the mother who initiates anxiety because mother "first forbids instinctual activities", and prohibitions produce anger, and then "this anger has left behind a residue of anxiety" (p.141). On the other hand,

The boy... feels or instinctively judges that his penis is much too small for his mother's genital and reacts with the dread of his own inadequacy, of being rejected and derided. Thus his anxiety is located in quite a different quarter from the girl's; his original dread of women is not castration anxiety at all, but a reaction to the menace to his self-respect. (p.142)

Anxiety is also the result of "the dread of his own inadequacy" to meet mother's requirements, and dread of woman in fact is related to question of self-respect. Here, Keats's early life has to be referred to.

As the favorite child to his mother, Frances, John was also fiercely devoted to her. Once, it is told, when she fell ill and absolute quiet was ordered, John found an old sword and took up his post outside her door with the blade bared, forbidding anyone to enter or his mother to leave her room. This happened when he was almost five. The story could reveal his intense love of his mother. So the effect of the later events could hardly be exaggerated. The later events include Frances's hasty remarriage and her subsequent disappearance. When John was still eight, on April 15, 1804, his father Thomas Keats died in the accident of falling off the horse. More unfortunately, his mother hastily remarried in two short months. It is worth recalling another tragedy very similar to his. "But two months dead!" The parallel with Hamlet's situation is startling, and it helps to illuminate the incommunicable emotion which young John Keats felt against his faithless mother. But still harder for Keats to accept must have been his mother's subsequent disappearance and mysterious disgrace. Aileen Ward observes Keats's mother in such events produces negative effects on Keats: "The idealized woman of his crucial early experience, beautiful and recklessly affectionate, had betrayed and abandoned him in a manner beyond his understanding, and forever afterward he was haunted by the fear that any woman he loved would play him false and then leave him" (1963, p.11).

It is not hard to imagine the impact on Keats caused by Frances' remarriage and her later disappearance. Keats loves his mother so intensely in childhood that his mother's hasty remarriage

means a severe betrayal to him. And her latter disappearance gives him much more hurt for he would think it is due to his “inadequacy” that he could not stop his mother to do so and desert him for another man. That is to say, he is not good enough to make his mother stay with him and he is “rejected” by mother. It deeply hurts his “self-respect” as well. So after these happenings, as Aileen Ward describes, Keats “Almost overnight...changed from an affectionate child into a rebellious schoolboy, protesting against the world by the only means he had—his fists” (p.11). And “Such pugnacity must have had a driving force deeper than mere ambition to win a place in the schoolboy world. Some of it must have sprung from half-conscious rage against his stepfather and his errant mother”(p.12). Keats’s sudden change is to protect his self-pride because his mother’s acts really damage his pride; on the other hand, with his scrapping and fighting behavior he tries to show his manliness and masculinity in order to resist the anxiety caused by his assumption that his “inadequacy” leads to his mother’s betrayal. Aileen Ward analyzes it is “rage...against his errant mother” partly responsible for his behavior, while this rage also creates anxiety to work behind (p.12). Therefore, Keats’s early development reveals his problem—his mother’s hasty remarriage and disappearance account for his anxiety for woman since he would feel it is his “inadequacy” that results into his mother’s departure, and the anxiety also causes his dread of woman.

### 3. DREAD OF WOMAN IN LAMIA

Anne Mellor observes, “Keats’s growing anxiety, even hostility, to the feminine subject of romance is most clearly articulated in *Lamia*” (2001, p.223). In fact, *Lamia* also reveals “growing anxiety, even hostility” to woman represented by Lamia herself. As Mellor goes on to illustrate that “Keats insistently, if reluctantly, turns his reader’s sympathies away from the female lover [Lamia]” (p.224), or as Debbie Lee (1998) argues that Lamia is presented from the start as both a nonhuman figure and a racial other, Keats in *Lamia* expresses his hostility to woman. The hostility comes from his dread of woman. He is trying to conceal his dread by showing his hostility instead.

Keats’s Letters reveals his ambivalent ideas to woman since his “pure goddess” in his “Boyish imagination” cannot meet the woman in “their reality” (I, 341). What is “their reality”? It is the “reality” of woman’s body that is so repulsive and repugnant. In the letter of 18 September, 1818, Keats lists a variety of woman body’s deformities to his brother George,

pendulis mammis her dugs like two double jugs, or else no dugs in the other extream, bloody-falln fingers, she have filthy, long, unpaired, nails, scabbed hands or wrists, a tan’d skin, a rotten carcass, crooked back, she stoops, is lame, splea footed, as slender in the middle as a cow in the wast, gowty legs, her ankles hang over her shooes, her feet stink, she breed lice, a meer changeling, a very monster, an aufe imperfect, her whole complexion savors, an harsh voice, incondite gesture, vile gate, a vast virago, or an ugly tit, a slug, a fat fustilugs, a trusse, a long lean raw bone, a Skeleton, a Sneaker... (Letters, II, 191)

And in the same letter, Keats says that he is composing a poem named *Lamia*. Thus, it is clear that his split attitudes to woman affect his creation. As analyzed by Horney, dread of woman is deep-rooted in dread of vagina, while *Lamia* also shows such tendency. Richard Marggraf Turley in *The Boyish Imagination* (2004) illustrates *Lamia* “is probably best understood as a psychological exploration of the predominantly male apprehensions associated with growing up, getting married, and having children” (p.71). And he also observes the poem’s associations with female genitals.

#### 3.1. Medusa Archetype

Turley looks for evidences in Keats’s student books of his apothecary study to support the reading of *Lamia* as Keats’s own astonished discovery of the vagina—the “reality” of the woman’s body. His key

point is to interpret Lamia's dwelling—her “purple-lined palace of sweet sin” (II, 31) as “an architectural embodiment of the female genitalia” (p.118).

With the help of Keats's surgical manuals, he discovers the resemblance between “lamia” and “labia”, and thinks Keats's portrayal of Lamia as a “virgin purest lipped” (I, 189) could be understood as a “medical pun” (p.118). However, he only makes effort to interpret Lamia's dwelling as the embodiment of female genital instead of analyzing Lamia herself. Lamia herself is the incarnation of vagina. According to the archetype study, we can understand Lamia as the embodiment of the female genital.

Keats's Lamia is a typical archetype of Medusa. First, her appearance is similar to Medusa. It is obvious that she is a serpent woman. Second, her identity is similar to Medusa. Lamia's primal identity is a woman instead of a serpent and she was victimized into the serpent form before the story begins. This resonates with the Medusa archetype. Lamia in the classical legends started out as a beautiful queen in Libya but who had a relationship with Zeus which led to Hera's jealous slaying of her children and turning Lamia into a monster. Like Lamia, Medusa in some narratives had not always been a Gorgon but had been turned into that horrific creature through the jealousy of an Olympian goddess. In these myths Medusa was an especially beautiful priestess in the temple of Athena, until she made love to or (in some accounts) was raped by the sea god Poseidon. Then Athena, in her fury or jealousy, turned her into an ugly Gorgon who could never attract the god again. Keats's Lamia was originally a woman and was changed into a serpent when the story begins. So Keats's Lamia is a figure combining both the classical myths and Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*. She is a woman victimized into a reptilian.

Third, her capability resembles Medusa, that is, her eyes. Medusa is known for her lurid eyes which could petrify the beholders. Similarly, Keats endows his Lamia with lurid eyes. Before her transformation, “And for her eyes: what could such eyes do there / But weep, and weep, that they were born so fair?” (I, 61-2) At this moment, Lamia can see comings and goings of gods, she can make a nymph visible or invisible, she can “unperplex bliss from its neighbour pain” (I, 192). Her visual power is associated with creative imagination: she has the power to transform the invisible into the visible, and to satisfy the desires of gods. Annis Pratt argues that “Medusa is frightening to males precisely because she is a source of capabilities they want to usurp” (1994, p.30). So Lamia finally loses her vision after her transformation, or that is, her vision is gradually usurped by the males.

The first usurper is Hermes. It is after Lamia “breath'd upon his eyes” that Hermes could see the nymph (I, 124). Before Lamia's breath on Hermes, only she could see the nymph. As the exchange, Hermes reassumes her woman's form. But it is the prize that she should pay for. She should pay her transformation with her vision. So in her transformation, “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” (II, 345). Though Karla Alwes detects the passage's importance and observes “the most significant aspect of Lamia's transformation is that the tears she shed” (1993, p.149), she does not realize by this act Lamia also loses her vision as well. Morris Dickstein names the transformation as “humanization” (1971, p.242). It is during this humanization that Lamia loses her vision. And in her subsequent encounters with males, her loss of vision is revealed.

The second usurper is Lycius. During their first encounter, Lamia seduces Lycius with her sweet voices instead of her lurid eyes because at this time she has lost her visual capabilities. And it is Lycius who is visually aggressive:

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And soon his eyes had drunk her beauty up.

Leaving no drop in the bewildering cup.

And still the cup was full-while he afraid

Lest she should vanish... (I, 251-254)

So Tilottama Rajan discovers “cruelty” in their encounter (1980, p.120). And later when Lycius is retorted for his interest in the trumpet outside, Lycius

.....answer'd, bending to her open eyes,

Where he was mirror'd small in paradise,

“My silver planet, both of eve and morn! (II, 45-57)

Lycius's culpability lies in the fact that his love is a form of self-love: when he looks into her eyes, he sees himself “mirror'd small in paradise”, and he calls her “My silver planet” as if she were a planet in orbit around him as a sun. Here Lamia has already lost her visual capability. And the most severe usurp played by Lycius is his insistence of marriage since he tries to completely possess Lamia by the patriarchal ceremony. His intention to hold a marriage is to “entangle, trammel up and snare / Your soul in mine, and labyrinth you there” (52-3). Turley is wrong that he thinks it is Lamia who really wants marriage and Lycius is tricked into the proposal. Actually it is Lycius's wish since he can possess Lamia totally by the marriage. Thus, it is not only Apollonius who should be blamed for the catastrophe of Lamia, Lycius but also should be partly accused of.

Apollonius, the third and the most obvious usurper, and is the usurper of Lamia's life as well. Garrett Stewart in “Keats and Language” parenthesizes Apollonius as “a parody of Apollo” both in his name and his character (2001, p.140). In the mythical account, Apollo kills the snake goddess in Delphi, and Annis Pratt regards it as usurp since Apollo seizes the political oracles after killing the goddess. In *Lamia*, Karla Alwes says between Lamia and Apollonius there is “a battle over not only the control of the female but over the control of Lycius as well” (p.154). This battle starts from their first encounter and Apollonius kills Lamia with his visual aggressiveness. In their first encounter, Apollonius's “sharp eyes” and “quick eyes” injure Lamia so severely that make Lamia unable to see him clearly (I, 364, II, 374). For Lamia, trembling, asks Lycius “tell me who / Is that old man? I cannot bring to mind / His features” (II, 371-3). In the wedding ceremony, Apollonius “Had fix'd his eye, without a twinkle or stir / Full on the alarmed beauty of the bride, / Brow-beating her fair form, and troubling her sweet pride” (II, 246-8). Finally, the eye of Apollonius “like a sharp spear, went through (Lamia) utterly, / Keen, cruel, perçant, stinging” (II, 300-301). There can be no doubt about the destruction here. It is both phallic and all-encompassing. The masculine rites of Apollonius have destroyed the woman with a weapon of phallogocentric proportions.

To sum up, Lamia exactly follows the archetype of Medusa since it resembles Medusa in the above analyzed three aspects—in appearance, in identity and in the visual capability. According to interpretations of psychologists, the head of Medusa is a symbol of female genital. Sandor Ferenczi identifies the Gorgon head as “the terrible symbol of the female genital region” (360). Or Phillip Slater argues “it seems more likely that the snakes of the Medusa head are not compensatory phallic, but are a source of fear, and represent an aspect of the vagina itself”. Keats's Lamia, as an archetype of Medusa, embodies the female genital itself. Thus, Keats's hostile treatment of Lamia comes from the dread of vagina.

### 3.2. Imprisonment and Invisibility

In *Lamia*, Keats reveals his hostility and fear of woman. First, he tries to imprison his female characters. He imprisons both Lamia and the nymph. Most of the critics question the purpose of

beginning story of Hermes and the nymph since it is not in Burton's. They all agree that the story of Hermes and the nymph is to warn against the romantic relationship between the mortal and goddess as this is a motif of Keats's poetry. For example, *Endymion* deals with the same motif that is the love affair between goddess Cynthia and mortal man Endymion. It is due to the difference between mortals and gods that the story ends differently from the story of Lamia and Lycius. Morris Dickstein says "this is a story of gods. Here domination and aggression, though explicit enough, have no consequences. The story ends happily (p.241)". Or Karla Alwes argues, "Hermes's role here is to introduce the poem by concentrating on it through the fairy-tale dimensions of illusion. The poem will progressively become more concerned with the antithesis of these dimensions-mortality-until, at the end, death rather than transcendence occurs" (p.147). There are several references to the differences between gods and mortals: we are told that the dreams of gods are "Real" (I, 127), with the implication that the dreams of mortals are, by contrast, false or unreliable; mortal lovers grow pale, while gods who are in love with goddesses do not.

The story of Lamia and Lycius ends differently from the one of the nymph and Hermes. On one hand, it is because they are gods that their story has a happy ending. On the other hand, it is due to the invisibility of the nymph that it has a different ending from Lamia's. At first, the nymph is invisible to all, to "the love glances of unlovely eyes, / Of Satyres, Fauns, and blear'd Silenus' sighs" (I, 102-3). After she is revealed (by Lamia) to Hermes, she is still invisible to others except Hermes since

Into the green-recessed woods they flew;  
Nor grew they pale as mortal lovers do.

The story of Lamia is quite different. Before her metamorphosis Lamia too enjoys some of the benefits of invisibility. Keats describes how

She could muse  
And dream, when in the serpent prison-house,  
Of all she list, strange or magnificent:  
How, ever, where she willed, her spirit went;  
And sometimes into cities she would send  
Her dream, with feast and rioting to blend. (I, 202-205, 213-214)

Her invisibility is the equivalent to a purely imaginary existence, in which she is able to play with the semblances of things, enjoying them without being involved, unbound by the responsibilities of being visible and human. Lamia violates invisibility in revealing herself to all of Corinth. After she reveals herself to (or "is revealed" because she is helped by Hermes to be in a woman's shape) Lycius, if they could keep themselves invisible to the public, Lamia also can have a happy life with him. But since her first encounter with Apollonius, her invisibility is violated and thus her doom is forecast. Therefore, in the wedding when she is exposed to the whole city, she is finally dissolved. Jeffery N. Cox in "*Lamia, Isabella, and The Eve of St. Agnes: Eros and 'romance'*" also says "The 'pleasures' of the 'long immortal dream' that Keats's narrator tells us Hermes eventually finds with his nymph (I. 27-28) depend upon their escape from the economy of triangulated desire and its travails of competitive love" (2001, p.58). In other words, Hermes and the nymph could find their happiness because of their invisibility.

Second, the above mentioned principle of invisibility will bring about the woman's imprisonment of one's own. Since the display of oneself in the public will incur disastrous consequence—Lamia is

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dissolved due to her violation of invisibility, woman will try to imprison herself. This imprisonment is similar to agoraphobia. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar observes that the disease results from the patriarchal “education” of “self-lessness”, and this “sickening” education will make woman even have “anxiety about—perhaps loathing of—her own flesh” (1984, p.53-4)

Such diseases (anorexia and agoraphobia) are caused by patriarchal socialization in several ways. Most obviously, of course, any young girl, but especially a lively or imaginative one, is likely to experience her education in docility, submissiveness, self-lessness as in some sense sickening. To be trained in renunciation is almost necessarily to be trained to ill health, since the human animal’s first and strongest urge is to his / her own survival, pleasure, assertion. In addition, each of the “subjects” in which a young girl is educated may be sickening in a specific way. Learning to become a beautiful object, the girl learns anxiety about—perhaps even loathing of—her own flesh. Peering obsessively into the real as well as metaphoric looking glasses that surround her, she desires literally to “reduce” her own body. (53-4)

Therefore, “anxiety” or even “loathing of” her own body will lead woman to “reduce” her own body. Or as Gilbert and Gubar earlier summarizes “woman’s own tendency to ‘kill’ *herself* into art in order ‘to appeal to man’” (p.15). Lamia is infested with disease similar to agoraphobia. After her encounter with Lycius, she manages to imprison herself in their “purple-lined palace” and desires not publicity. And that’s why she is shuddered at Lycius’s proposal of wedding ceremony. It is because she knows if she is displayed to the public there is no happy ending at all.

Furthermore, Lamia tries to figuratively “kill” herself to appeal Lycius. This refers to her metamorphosis. As above argued, her transformation is bought with her visual power. With the loss of her visual power, she loses vision and creative imagination which leads to her final death. So this is a killing of herself. On the other hand, her transformation also could be understood as her “loathing” of her own body, and then she tries to “reduce” her body. In her transformation, “She writh’d about, convuls’d with scarlet pain” when her serpent body “melted and disappeared” (I, 54, 166). It is suffering and “sickening”, but she endures it and is willing to suffer. The sloughing off of her body is an activity to “reduce” her body. This is done for Lycius, so she is willing to “kill” herself to appeal to Lycius.

Finally, Lamia even perceives the disastrous consequence of marriage ceremony she still agrees to hold the wedding. It is to please Lycius. For Lycius, Lamia could do everything even she knows the wedding would kill her. Gilbert and Gubar argues

Whether she becomes an object d’art or a saint, however, it is the surrender of her self—of her personal desires or both—that is the beautiful angel-woman’s key act, while it is precisely this sacrifice which dooms her both to death and to heaven. For to be selfless is not only to be noble, it is to be dead. (p.25)

So it is Lamia’s “surrender of herself” that kills her. Of course, the surrender begins from her transformation. And the agreement to wedding ceremony is her biggest surrender as it costs her life.

To conclude, Lamia’s ambiguity comes from Keats’s dread of woman, while this dread could be psychologically understood as dread of vagina since Lamia is the embodiment of female genital. So the dread leads to Keats’s hostility and fear of woman. Both imprisonment of Lamia and Lamia’s killing of herself to please man betray hostile attitudes to woman.

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