A study of John Keats’ Lamia as a ‘heterotopology’ entwining Wiccan magic and empowerment of women
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Abstract

This is a study of John Keats’ poem Lamia as an alternative space or heterotopia as coined by Foucault where Keats elevates women and shows how they can construct a world of knowledge of their own. This paper also alludes to the Bible and Jewish folklore and is purely based on a mythic study of the poem and not merely on a pure historicist approach.

Full version of the paper

Why should we modern women connect ourselves with Keats’ depiction of a woman in Lamia (1819)? The legend of Lamia is such that each and every woman can closely connect with her. According to the legend Lamia was the daughter of Poseidon and Lybie, a personification of the country of Libya and a queen of Libya herself whom Zeus loved. Hera discovered the love affair of Zeus with Lamia and to take revenge, stole away her children. Consequently, it is said that Lamia in her grief became a monster and a murderer of children. It can be said in Shakespeare’s words that Lamia is more sinned against than sinning. From then onwards Lamia is depicted as a seductive, malevolent serpent destructive towards mankind and it is to her former glory that Keats adopts the task of reinstating her.

Thus, women who either follow their own instinct or go against conventions and patriarchy are either branded as ‘fallen women’, ‘witch’, ‘baby-killer’ or ‘femme-fatale’. I want you to notice the motherly instinct and want of love in the legend itself. Keats’ Lamia too went by her instinct of love for Lycius and wanted to have married and bear children like anyone else and be absorbed into the society, but the traditional norms of society condemned and victimised her for doing so. In a traditional society a woman is not allowed to make her own choice. Lamia is a ‘heterotopology’ where there is co-existence of several incompatible spaces in a real place. The magical world of Lamia or the space of the dream is juxtaposed with the real human world of Lycius or the ideological space or rule of the father or patriarchy symbolized by Apollonius. Both the spaces inhere in themselves their own politics which clash with each other and gets inverted in each other.

How is Keats different from a patriarchal society and how he depicts women? A hardcore conventionalist would brand Lamia as a victimizer as she is accused of inflicting pain and seducing Lycius while sentimentalists would sympathise with her plight. But we miss here that Keats actually wants her woman to be independent and empowered. There is a subversion of gender politics in Keats’ poems. The woman is always more powerfull than her counterpart and is shown full of magical power in poems such as Endymion and Lamia. It is often targeted against Keats that Keats inspite of having a love relationship with women like Fanny Brawne was jealous and insecure of...

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her. It is only that Keats was strongly conscious of the potentiality of women and is honest enough to portray it through his poems and does not take them for granted.

But how Lamia got associated with the Wiccan cult? The association of Lamia with the Wiccan cult starts from Jerome’s translation of Lilith as Lamia in the Vulgate. Lamia’s Wiccan world is a heterotopia or counter-site. It is a cult of a primitive world older than Christianity. It might have been that Lycius was ignorant of Lamia being a Wiccan and Lamia also did not intend to divulge her identity before the completion of the waiting period of an year and a day. Wiccans keep a private journal or core religious text known as Book of Shadows whose contents are known only to themselves. It can be said in Edward W. Soja’s words from his book Third Space: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real and Imagined Places(1989) that, ‘They are not just ‘other spaces’ to be added on to the geographical imagination, they are also ‘other than’ the established ways of thinking spatially’(p.163). Lilith is the spirit in Isaiah34:14, who gave birth to a breed of monsters by Adam and from this ensues Lamia’s projection as a seductress in the Christian imagination. Gerald Gardner, who has introduced the Wiccan cult to the whole world says that there is an uninterrupted historical worship of Lilith till now and her name often given to the goddess or priestess. This idea is further confirmed by Dorean Valiante who cites her as a presiding goddess of the craft, as the personification of erotic dreams, the suppressed desire for delights. One view is that Lilith was originally a Sumerian, Babylonian or Hebrew mother goddess of childbirth, children, women and sexuality who later became demonized due to the rise of patriarchy. She can be equated to the Hindu goddess Kali who is at one breath called as mother and on the other hand she is ‘Chinnamasta’ or destroyer of mankind.

I want to show that the magic Lamia uses is not of malevolent intention and mainly connected with the Wiccan cult. There are various evidences from the poem which tells that Lamia is a Wiccan and she uses Wiccan magic to get love and reinstate herself in the society as Lycius’ wife. Burton in his Anatomy of Melancholy, which is the chief source of Keats’ Lamia, says that Lycius often visited the temple of Venus where a thousand whores were engaged in prostitution. Lamia is a fallen woman and indeed claims to have no family of respectable name. Keats makes this clear in the following lines where Lamia herself proposed to lycius who failed to locate her among the various girls at the temple of Venus-

``And next she wondered how his eyes could miss
Her face so long in Corinth, where, she said,
She dwelt but half retired, and they had led
Boys happy as the golden coin could invent
Without the aid of love; yet in content
Till she saw him, as once she passed him by,
Where ‘gainst a column he leant thoughtfully
At Venus’ temple porch”

The problem starts when a fallen woman like Lamia claims to be a wife of an outwardly respectable man.

Lamia as Lilith is a Wiccan and practices Wicca which is a pagan, nature-based religion popularized in 1954 by Gerald Gardner who was initiated into the cult. He was a retired British civil servant, who at the time called it Witchcraft and its followers ‘Wicca’. Wicca is a modern survival of an old matriarchal mystery religion which has
existed for hundred of years which has existed for hundred of years and has its origin in
the pre-Christian paganism of Europe. Wicca is distinguished by its beliefs, practice of
magic, ethical philosophy, organizational structure and secrecy which Keats’ Lamia
adheres to in the poem.

Let us first examine Lamia’s representation in the poem as a powerful woman. If
we remember Spenser’s influence on Keats who even paid tribute to his predecessor in
Imitation of Spenser (1814), then we can confidently say that Keats has far outgrown
the former poet’s conception of romantic love and depiction of women as sexual
commodities up for display for the men to choose from. Lamia can be said to be a
subversion of Spenser’s Epithalamion (1595) in every way. While Spenser’s
Epithalamion is a marriage song, Lamia’s music ceases when Apollonius, the teacher of
Lycius reveals her identity. Again while in Spenser women are given no voice and their
sexuality is displayed as closest to pornography. Spenser depicts her future wife with the
following comparisons-eyes like sapphire, forehead like white ivory, cheeks like ripened
apples, lips like cherries, breast like bowl of cream, paps like budded lilies. Keats on the
contrary uses very powerful and beautiful animals to depict Lamia like zebra, leopard,
peacock, falcon and serpent. Lamia is not only powerful but also intelligent and a tactful
negotiator in love and forces Hermes to give her mortal shape in exchange for his nymph.

How is Keats so fascinated with magic? Keats was strongly influenced by the
dramas of Shakespeare which he read in 1817 during his vacation at Isle of Wight. Keats
read Tempest most and appreciated Macbeth which he said is full of poetry of
Shakespeare and exudes soul-full of love and divine romance.

Music and magic plays a dominant role in Tempest where there is also a masque
celebrating and invoking fruitfull marriage between Miranda and Ferdinand. Prospero
used magic to empower himself just like Lamia. But the result of Lamia is more aligned
to Macbeth’s fate who uses the black magic of the three witches but gets barren kingship.
Also Lycius’ first words of address to Lamia- ‘‘Ah, Goddess, see/Whether my eyes can
ever turn from thee!” (LL.268-269,p.628) is similar to Ferdinand’s addressing Miranda as
the goddess of the island. Keats again surpasses Shakespeare’s poetry full of love and
divine romance into a love of reality full of difficulties and there is no innocent Miranda
but a fallen woman who though from her heart is ‘‘A virgin purest lipp’d’’ but society has
made her experienced ‘‘yet in the lore/ Of love deep learned to the red heart’s core:’’
(LL.189-190,p.625)

But Lamia’s magic is not evil intentioned like the three witches but has a morality
of its own and based on the Wiccan Rede: ‘‘An it harm none, do what ye will’’; which
allows her to exercise full freedom of herself yet taking the full responsibility of her
actions and keeping in mind that it will not harm herself and others. Another common
element of Wiccan morality is the Law of Threefold Return which says that whatever
good or bad task a person commits, it will return to that person with triple force.

Handfasting is another celebration held by the Wiccans, and is the commonly
used term for their weddings. Some Wiccans observe the practice of a trial marriage for a
year and a day. Lamia also lived with Lycius before having any formal marriage
ceremony. Again, initiation into the cult or group is preceded by a waiting period of same
duration.

Lamia’s destruction comes when Lycius an instrument of patriarchy tries to force
his rules upon her. The disrupted marriage banquet feast in Lamia has its echoes from the
vanished Banquet scene in Actiii,sciii of Tempest which was a figment of Prospero’s magic and the failed banquet scene of Macbeth, Actiii,sciv. Just as the banquet in Macbeth determines the acceptance of the new king by the society, the vanished banquet scene in Lamia shows that her marriage has not been accepted by the patriarchal society represented by Apollonius.

A question arises in our mind that why does not Lamia justify herself when Apollonius accuses her? She prefers to be silent about her real identity rather than divulge it and beg mercy from a biased and pretentious society which can never tolerate powerful women. She vanishes into air of which element she is actually made of. A woman’s heart is a treasure house of secrets which poets like Keats tries to venture into.

This reminds us of a utopian feminist, Charlotte Perkin Gilman whose notable work Women and Economics(1898) states that economic disempowerment of women contributed to their subordination in society and family. Gilman accused Darwin of privileging the male mind while describing the evolution process. Gilman ironically says that there is no female mind and that the brain is not an organ of sex. Survival for women depends on her domestic labour which is the sexual satisfaction she delivers her husband who earns for the family.

The paintings of the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood adopted the Keatsian sensuality which can be effectively seen in D.G. Rossetti’s painting of Lady Lilith. Here we have a strong woman in contemplation of her beauty. She is not bound by the Victorian conventions of dressing and does not even try to hide her sexuality. She celebrates her beauty and is indifferent to the male gaze, will not be submissive and rejects the role of a wife.

Notes:


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