“And By My Power Is Her Beauty Veil’d”

Deconstructing Binary Oppositions Within the Changing Reception of the Representation of Gender in the Poetry of John Keats

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Bachelor Thesis Literary Studies

Utrecht University, June 2013

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She is all that man desires and all that he does not attain

- Simone de Beauvoir[1]

[1] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (trans. H.M. Parshley). New York: Penguin, 1972 (1949) 229. Qtd. in Alwes 1.

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Introduction

In this thesis the reception of the poetry of Romantic poet John Keats will be discussed. I will do so in light of nineteenth-century constructions of masculinity and femininity, usually along binary oppositions, and in light of the feminist readings of Keats and critiques of such binary oppositions. The notions of gender concerning the persona Keats as well as his poetry will thus be discussed from different viewpoints: the nineteenth-century view on Keats as a person and poet; the nineteenth-century reception of his poetry; Keats's own thoughts on the poetic occupation; the poet's vision of his poetry; the reception of his poetry among feminist critics; and feminist comments on the nineteenth-century reception of Keats's poetry. The aim of disentangling this Gordian knot of reception and criticism is to emphasize the social constructedness of gender-roles and highlight the main distinctions between nineteenth-century criticism and feminist- and gender readings of Keats's poetry.

In the first chapter of this thesis, a general conception of gender-roles, and specifically its representation in literature, in the Romantic Era will be discussed. Looking at the masculine poetic tradition and using contemporary gender criticism, the social constructedness of these binaries will be addressed. Subsequently, the second chapter will focus on Romantic poet John Keats and nineteenth-century reception of his poetry as well as on Keats's own ideas on the pursuance of poetry and his own poetical works. In chapter three Keats's poetry as well as the nineteenth-century reception of his poetry will be interpreted from a feminist perspective, leading to a case-study of Keats's narrative poem *Lamia.* Before explaining more about this last chapter I will briefly reflect on some of the key feminist- and gender theories which form the basis for the feminist reading of Keats's poetry and comments on nineteenth-century criticism on his poetry within this thesis.

In respect to the main themes covered in this thesis, especially Julia Kristeva's and Judith Butler's theories on gender are of interest, as they have addressed the linguistic construction of bodily effects and the performativity of the masculine and feminine. The division of gender roles in Keats's poetry and its nineteenth-century reception, as well as the social constructedness of these binaries will, in this respect, be studied as a more complex elaboration of Kristeva's and Butler's arguments. The first important idea when studying binary oppositions is that of subjectivity, which we find in Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Herein she distinguishes the *symbolic* from the *semiotic* expression of language. Kristeva states that the *symbolic* – which is similar to Lacan's symbolic order[2] – is the aspect of language that is systematic, capable of existing independently of its referent, tied to the social order, and dependent on a functional separation between the subject and object. (cf. Leitch 2076; cf. Leitch 2068) The *semiotic* dimension of language is language determined by the instinctual pre-verbal unsignifyability of the – pre-oedipal – body of the language user, connected to the maternal body (cf. Kristeva 2072-4). A separation of the *semiotic* and *symbolic* occurs when meaning is attributed to the semiotic, therewith distinguishing the subject from the object (cf. Kristeva 2077). Kristeva argues that this rupture of the *symbolic* and *semiotic* she sees in poetry calls for a reconfiguration of the notion of subjectivity, stating that the subject brings the text into being, but is not what the text signifies (cf. Leitch 2068). She thus argues that poetry can be seen as being somewhere *in between* the *symbolic* and *semiotic*, as poetry attempts to capture the *semiotic* – that is, the pre-linguistic bodily characteristics – *within* the *symbolic* – that is, language which refers. Emphasizing the way in which language refers, Kristeva argues that a text rather signifies linguistic and social

[2] The symbolic order is "the dimension of symbolization into which the human being's body, to the extent that he or she begins to *speak*, must translate itself. The Symbolic is the dimension of articulation, not equivalent to pointing or naming. Like algebra, the "Symbolic" is a structure of *relations* rather than *things*" (Leitch 1159). The symbolic order can be distinguished from the "Imaginary" and the "Real."

structures of the symbolic order (cf. Leitch 2068).

Subsequently, in her essay "Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection," Kristeva further investigates the differences between object and subject. She regards the *abject* as opposed to the object, existing outside the "ego." The *abject* is explained as being outside as a mere "thing," "radically excluded" and "draw[n] toward[s] the place where meaning collapses" (2). The *abject* is neither subject nor object, rather it is placed somewhere *in between*, before entering the symbolic stage and becoming, the Lacanian object (cf. 9). Simultaneously, as the *abject* only exist by the *deject*[3] who places himself outside, the very existence of the *deject* lies in the exclusion of the *abject* (cf. 8). These theories of the object, subject and abject are interesting when looking to Keats's representation of the female in his poetry. Seeing Keats as the *deject* and the writing of poetry *abject*:

> He [the deject] is on a journey, during the night, the end of which keeps receding. He has a sense of the danger, of the loss that the pseudo-object attracting him represents for him, but he cannot help taking the risk at the very moment he sets himself apart. And the more he strays, the more he is saved (Kristeva 8).

The "pseudo-object" can be considered as Keats's female other – and, therewith, as a metaphor for poetry – who evokes fear and a desire to subordinate as well. In chapter three the representation of this female "other" will be addressed more extensively.

A similar approach to the (mis)representation of women can be found in Judith Butler's theory of performativity. Where William Hazlitt, one of Keats's critics, already drew an analogy between acting and poetry in his writings, it is interesting to look at gender roles in Keats's poetry from the perspective Butler's theory of performativity, which she explains in

[3] He who places the abject in the abject position.

her article "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." In this theory, Butler addresses the social constructedness of gender-roles, stating that the performative body "acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives." Therewith, "gender reality is performative as it is real only to the extent that it is performed" (526-7).

Before starting the discussion on femininity and masculinity in the Romantic Era, it is important to explain why *Lamia* is used in this thesis to emphasize the changing interpretation of gender-roles in Keats's poetry over time. Keats published *Lamia* after his much criticized poem *Endymion*. Reviews mainly judged *Endymion* as being "too feminine," accusing Keats of having a weak character and even of being "effeminate."[4] Keats, affected by this criticism, hereafter reflected even more than he did before on his own role as a poet and on the pursuance of poetry in general, promising, in one of his letters, to write with "more Judgment" in the future ("The Complete Poetical Works and Letters of John Keats"[5] 328). Subsequently, *Lamia* captures a wide variety of different themes Keats already addressed in earlier poems; e.g. ambiguity towards pursuing poetry (e.g. in *Sleep and Poetry*); the search for and questioning of the self-identity (e.g. in *Hyperion*); the effects of Beauty (e.g. in *Ode to a Grecian Urn)*; losing identity to (the power of) a woman (e.g. in *Ode to a Nightingale)*; and the "battle" between reason and imagination and longing for merging the male and female – mortal and goddess (e.g. in *Ode to Psyche* and *Endymion*). In addition, where *Endymion* received much criticism, nineteenth-century reviews of *Lamia* where generally quite positive, recognizing his poetic genius and arguing that with *Lamia* Keats (finally) wrote in a more

[4] In his article "On the Effeminacy of Character," published in 1822 in *Table Talk, Essays on Men and Manners*, William Hazlitt writes: "Effeminacy of character arises from a prevalence of the sensibility over the will; or it consists in a want of fortitude to bear pain or to undergo fatigue, however urgent the occasion."
[5] Hereafter referred to as "Poetical Works and Letters."

masculine manner, following the poetic tradition of poets such as Milton and Spenser. However, feminist critics have read and interpreted this change in the poetic attitude of Keats and the reactions of nineteenth-century critics on *Lamia* quite differently. Emphasizing that Keats "others" the female in *Lamia* in yet a different way than in his earlier poems, they state that the poem can be read as an allegory of Keats's own life and his ambiguous feelings towards women. With this comment, they not only deconstruct positive nineteenth-century criticism on *Lamia*, but subsequently question the prevailing social constructions of binary oppositions between men and women within the Romantic Era and its influence on Keats's poetry and reception of his poetry in general.

With this last statement in mind, the conclusion will aim at using the analysis of the changing reception of Keats's poetry to show the fluidity of meaning within changing discourses and the role of interpretation in this process.

Chapter 1. Masculinity and Femininity in Romantic Literature

When exploring the conception of gender in Romantic poetical works, the relation between the masculine and feminine can be regarded as constructed along traditional binary oppositions of female passivity and male activity; feminine self-renunciation and masculine self-assertion; and female emotion versus male reason, along with a wide range of metaphors for the female.[6] Though, still partly in line with the poetic tradition of the English Augustan period, in the Romantic Era there is a movement away from reason and a shift towards the revaluation of the feminine, emotions and relationality (cf. Richardson 14). This revaluation of the feminine comprises a different approach towards emotion and feeling – both conventionally associated with women –, in a way which can be designated as the "colonization" of characteristics traditionally ascribed to women (cf. Richardson 13). By using contemporary feminist and gender criticism, this chapter intends to show that the conventional binary oppositions between male and female within the Romantic discourse are rather socially constructed than biologically determined, and explores how this constructedness can be related to the masculine poetic tradition, herein focusing on Romantic poet John Keats. Subsequently, the concept of masculine self-possession of Romantic male poets in light of the emergence of female readers and writers during the Romantic Era will be touched upon.

While the existence of gender oppositions can be traced back as far as the Classical Age and its tradition of masculine heroism, we will jump ahead towards eighteenth century Europe, in which the rising industrial capitalism changed traditional class-hierarchy within society. The Industrial Revolution marked a period in which the organization of labour changed from traditional hand production to machinery production, characterized by an

[6] Some common metaphors for the feminine in Romantic poetry are nature, love, poetry, earth, and the goddess/fairy.

approach of *laissez-faire* by the government. This shift changed the social structure of society as well, dividing owners from non-owners. Production expanded, eventually leading to more consumerism and, therewith, a commercialization of society (Encyclopaedia Britannica). Historian Barker-Benfield argues that the male writers of the time were afraid these social changes would fundamentally affect the role of men in society, as the free pursuance of worldly pleasure would, in their opinion, would lead to general decay (cf. "Gender, Genre and the Romantic Poets" 13). Subsequently, the rise of female readers and writers, and the "feminization discourse"[7] within various novels, for instance those of Henry Fielding, were regarded as devaluating the social embedded nature of traditional gender ideas and male superiority even further (cf. Mellor 5). Romantic poetry seemed to be a reaction to this changing discourse, as male poets in this Era tried to regain their influence by reconfirming gender oppositions and subjecting the feminine in their own pursuit for masculine self-possession (cf. Ross 29). Contrary to the oppression of women in the sixteenth to eighteenth century by excluding them from activities traditionally performed by men (e.g. politics, science and literature) and assigning stereotypical roles of domesticity and maternity to them, Romantic poets merely subjected women by incorporating "feminine" characteristics. In this light, Philip Cox argues that "socially constructed categories of masculinity and femininity are neither fixed binary oppositions, nor tied to biological sexual difference" (12). Herewith, Cox substantiates the argument that binary oppositions are rather socially constructed within a particular discourse.

When applying a feminist and gender reading to the Romantic subjection of women, it is interesting that the "subject," when read as being "feminine," can be seen as a way of the male author creating his female other. By creating this "other," he simultaneously subjects

[7] The "feminization discourse" is the "cultural construction of the novel as an ideological arena in which the social contract is translated into a sexual exchange and the desirable characteristics of the good women are both defined and appropriated by the hegemonic masculine culture" (Mellor 5).

and incorporates the female by depriving her of her voice,[8] eventually gaining masculine authority. This male authority can not *only* be regarded as a product of traditional binary oppositions between male and female, as Cox explains when referring to feminist and literary critic Hélène Cixous.[9] Performing a deconstructive reading of her argument that "all discourse is structured in terms of [Derridian] binary oppositions which ultimately relate to the opposition between social constructs of masculinity and femininity," Cox emphasizes that the conception of gender and gender-roles is not fixed but ever changing within different discourses (cf. 12).

Focusing on the social-historical masculine tradition of poetry, e.g. the epic's of Milton and the Shakespeare tragedy, we can examine the preoccupation of Romantic poets with self-possession, or – as we would call it today – , their "image," in a broader light of traditional role-patterns within the (pre-)Victorian and Romantic Era. With poetical forms deriving from classical poetry and drama, it could be argued that poetry became a masculine occupation, as classical models of poetry presupposed knowledge of both Greek and Latin, languages well-educated Romantic poets would naturally be acquainted with[10] (cf. Mellor 6). Within this tradition, poetry is often identified as love (e.g. in Shakespeare) and the woman as the one giving poetic inspiration. The elements "love" and "poetic inspiration" occur frequently in Romantic poetry. Stereotypically, love is designated as being essential for the poet in coming into his poetical state – thereby empowering him. The female, the visible form of earthly beauty, is the one "whose presence arouses man's sensibility to supernatural beauty" (D'Avanzo 26-27). Feminist critics have argued that this role of the female being the

[8] Concerning the male deprivation of the female's voice, Margaret Homans argues that, by representing the female as passive, even frequently using the metaphor of the female as nature – and thus non-human – , women are denied to enter the Lacanian "symbolic order" (cf. Mellor 19).

[9] Cox refers to Cixous' 'Sorties', trans. Anne Liddle, in *New French Feminisms,* ed. Marks

[10] Interesting to note her is that Keats, although he did know Latin, did not know Greek. Some of his contemporaries – especially Byron – were particularly annoyed with Keats's writing about Greek mythological themes without understanding the Greek language.

mere object of desire and complementary of the male poet, engenders her as a passive being, incapable of competing with men, therewith bringing the male poet closer to his own capacity of self-possession making men subjects and women muses at the most (cf. Ross 30). Women are thus needed by the poet to arouse in him a sense of the Self.

The general focus on masculinity and poetic self-possession within Romanticism consequently leads to strong condemnation of poets – e.g. John Keats – regarded as being "too feminine," or even "effeminate," leading to the division of poets in two distinct classes in 1820:

> In the first class, which contains all the greatest poets, with Shakespeare at their head, intellect predominates . . . Such poets are truly spoken of as masculine. In the other class – in which Keats stands . . . beauty and sweetness is the essential, the truth and power of intellect and passion the accident. These poets are, without any figure of speech, justly described as feminine (Patmore qtd. in Wolfson 331).

Clearly, feminine abilities were not tolerated among Romantic poets, rather, this "romantic emotionalism," as Richard Altick describes, was only allowed within a larger "ideal of 'manliness' according to which pain was to be concealed and grief suppressed" (qtd. Wolfson 332). That the quarrel over what aspects within poetry could be considered masculine and what aspects feminine concerned poets themselves as well, can be seen in the opposing views of Keats's contemporaries Lord Byron and William Wordsworth. Whereas they both argue for poetry as a form of masculine empowerment rather than a sign of feminine vulnerability, Byron aligns emotional feelings with weakness and his opinion is that "emotional effusion must therefore be framed with a feminine cause or undercut with masculine derision" (cf. Ross 40; Ross 36-37). Wordsworth, on the other hand, attempts to "bring the 'feminine'

vulnerability of emotion into the realm of 'masculine' power," in order to attain the 'naked feeling'" (Ross 38). Though the distinction between Byron's subjection of the female to masculine power and Wordsworth's incorporation (through imagination) of feminine emotionalism towards reaching masculine self-possession seems minor, the two views did evoke heavy debates among nineteenth century Romantics and critics on the aspects of "femininity" and "effeminacy" within Romantic poetry. Reviews on the presumed "effeminacy" of Keats can therefore, as Wolfson argues in her article "Feminizing Keats," be evaluated as a "cultural preoccupation to secure distinctions between the genders and stabilize codes of conduct" (323). In this respect, where Keats's – more Wordsworthian – "Negative Capability"[11] caused even more discussion about the opposition between masculine poetry and the "effeminate" in the nineteenth century, for contemporary feminist critics it provided evidence of the socio-historical constructedness and prevailing (masculine) conceptions of gender distinctions during Romanticism.

In his attempt to find his own voice and poetic identity – ultimately, the Self –, the male Romantic poet investigates central ideas of Imagination, Beauty, Love and Ambition, a search literary scholars have aligned with the male quest. In this quest, the poet strives to engender self-possession, a form of masculine power predetermined by his literary forefathers.[12] This quest, in the tradition of the mythological quest for the Golden Fleece and the medieval quest for the Holy Grail, can ultimately be seen as the journey towards manhood. In his article "Romantic Quest and Conquest," Ross highlights that the traditional search for manhood is complicated in Romanticism, first by referring to Wordsworth's vision

[11] In a letter to George and Thomas Keats, Keats describes "Negative Capability" as the capacity of a man for "being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" ("Poetical Works and Letters" 277).

[12] Some scholars who observe analogies between the male-quest and Romantic poetry are Harold Bloom and Lionel Trillings in the *Oxford Anthology of English Literature* (1973) and Marlon B. Ross in 'Romantic Quest and Conquest' in *Romanticism and Feminism* (1988), ed. A. Mellor.

that the "persistent effort of the Romantic poet to find in his own voice an aboriginal self that recreates the world and that emblematizes the capacity for seizing the world." (Ross 26) echoes through Romantic poetry. Additionally, Ross points at Harold Bloom, who understands this quest as one in which the poet searches for "an originating self within the self," and emphasizes that "the 'self' can transform any external object into an aspect of itself while pretending to deny the externality of that object" (Ross 26-7). This inner search for the Self can be seen as the pursuit of total self-possession and control of one's feelings and thoughts, in order to completely rely on the imagination. Following Bloom's argument, it could be argued that the analogy of Romantic poetry with the male quest can also be interpreted as a quest for the internalization of the female voice. This ultimately makes the poetical quest for self-possession a socio-historical occupation of men, rather than the intrinsic desire of the poet, as this longing of self-possession and subjection of the female is culturally determined by the masculine tradition of his poetical forefathers (cf. Ross 48).

A different aspect which is of importance for the debate on gender-roles during Romanticism is the rise of women readers and writers of poetry in the nineteenth century. These women were considered to be intruding a genre of male dominance. In his book *Gender, Genre and the Romantic Poets,* Cox wonders whether the own masculinity of the male poet writing within this feminizing genre was questioned more during Romanticism (cf. 9). The hostilities of poets towards women, for instance Keats's supposed remark that he "does not want ladies to read his poetry: that he writes for men." (Richard Woodhouse qtd. in Homans 347) and other comments by both Byron and Keats on the so called "bluestockings"[13] imply that some poets did question their own masculinity, especially since

[13] "Bluestockings" refers to "the learned or literary ladies of the late eighteenth century originally derived from the bluestockings worn by Benjamin Stillingfleet when he attended Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's Wednesday literary evening with the leading female intellectuals of her day" (Mellor 215).

women writers challenged the traditional masculine construction of femininity (cf. Mellor 9-10). Whether the rise of female readers and writers directly led to an even larger focus on masculinity and obliteration of the female (voice) within Romantic male poetry is questionable. Though, it did certainly not withhold male poets from appropriating, re-gendering and internalizing both the subject (the self) and the object (the external world) within their poetry under the guise of attempting to merge the male and female – as we will also see in Keats's poetry. However, whether the consequence of this pursuit of self-possession is the silencing the female other, as is argued by feminist critics, we will see in the following chapters of this thesis (cf. Mellor 19).

Chapter 2. The Nineteenth-century Reception of Keats and His Poetry

While today poet John Keats is aligned among the canonical Romantic poets Wordsworth, Coleridge, Blake, Byron, Shelley – together the "Big Six" –, during his age Keats was much debated among his contemporaries. His poetry as well as his appearance and descent evoked different emotions, ranging from mocking his "adolescent affectation" and accusing him of "mawkishness,"[14] to celebrating his promising talent and stylistic beauty. This chapter will study the different critiques on Keats and reviews of his poetry in the nineteenth century, subsequently addressing Keats's vision on his own pursuance of poetry.

When publishing his narrative poem *Endymion* in 1817 at the age of 22, Keats was still quite unknown. Though he had already published his *Poems* in 1817, with *Endymion* Keats was immediately noticed for his promising talent and taken under the wing of Cockney[15] poet Leigh Hunt. However, there was also much criticism; hostile reviews ridiculed his sensible youthfulness, calling his poetry "inept, puerile and pretentious," and "lack[ing] masculinity"[16] (Wolfson 88). His readers seemed to feel Keats tarnished the traditional and canonical authorative occupation of writing poetry, claiming that he excessively tried to imitate these canonical models while simultaneously writing in a highly sensible manner (cf. Levinson 4). According to his contemporaries, it was apparent that

[14] The Oxford Dictionary definition of "mawkishness" is "Feeble or sickly sentimental character; excessive sentimentality." Different reviewers accused Keats of mawkishness, e.g. Josiah Conder in *Eclectic Review* (1829) and Richard Woodhouse in a letter to John Taylor (19 September 1819).

[15] Poet Leigh Hunt was considered the key member of the Cockney School of Poetry. "The Cockney school was a dismissive name for London-based Romantic poets such as John Keats, Leigh Hunt, and Percy Bysshe Shelley. The term was first used in a scathing review in *Blackwood's Magazine* in October 1817, in which the anonymous reviewer mocked the poets' lack of pedigree and sophistication" (Poetry Foundation). Their manners were regarded "effeminate" and "squeamish."

[16] Other words Keats's contemporaries used to describe his poetry are: "profligate", "puerile", "unclean", "disgusting", "vulgar", "recklessly luxuriant and wasteful", "unhealthy", "abstracted", "insane", and even as "species of masturbatory exhibitionism" (Levinson 3).

Keats's "effeminate" writings were not in line with this tradition of masculine poetry. In addition, his supposedly fine-boned physical appearance was considered "girlish," which gave critics even more reason to emasculate him.

Two of the strongest reviews of the Cockney School – and, therewith, of Keats and his poetry – which emphasized and condemned "effeminacy" were those of John Lockhart and William Hazlitt.[17] In his article "On the Effeminacy of Character," Hazlitt distinguishes the man who shows firmness and decision of character and has a masculine energy of style, e.g. Byron, from the unmanly man whose effeminate style corresponds with his effeminacy of character, e.g. Keats. Hazlitt uses *Endymion* as the subject for criticism on Keats's effeminacy, stating:

> He [Keats] painted his own thoughts and character, and did not transport himself into the fabulous and heroic ages. There is a want of action, of character, and so far of imagination, but there is exquisite fancy. All is soft and fleshy, without bone or muscle. We see in him the youth without the manhood of poetry.

Hazlitt aligns effeminate style with those with "effeminacy of character," which he indicates are those "wrapped up in themselves," devoted to passion of the moment, and being unable to distinguish reality and imagination, ultimately resulting in meaningless poetry, as "the very motives that imperiously urge them to self-reflection and amendment, combine with their natural disposition to prevent it." (Hazlitt) Subsequently, Lockhart, in his article "The Cockney School of Poetry" finds the reason for the Cockney's "moral depravity" and their "effeminacy" in their low-birth and lack of intellect, therewith equating high-birth with the

[17] John Gibson Lockhart."The Cockney School of Poetry."*Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, vol. II. (October 1817): 38-40, and William Hazlitt. "On Effeminacy of Character" (1822). *Table Talk Essays on Men and Manners*, vol. II (1824).

male and low-birth the female.

Elaborating on accusations of effeminacy depriving from low-birth, Keats's fellow poet Byron specifically defined Keats's work as "a sort of mental masturbation," which he considered to be something of the lower classes (qtd. in Mellor 173). Essentially, he renounces Keats's poetry as *non*Literature, "signifying nothing" (qtd. in Levinson 16). In their turn, feminist critics have commented on Byron's criticism on Keats. In *Romanticism and Gender*, Mellor argues that the reason for Byron to attack Keats so strongly had to do with the fact that he saw this masturbation as gender-crossing, and thus "effeminate" and unmanly[18] (cf. 174). Even more taunting is Byron's insinuation – after the death of Keats – that the young poet died because of the bad reviews he received, stating:

> Is it [Keats's dying of the consequences of breaking a blood-vessel] actually true? I did not think criticism had been so killing….in this world of bustle and broil, and especially in the career of writing, a man should calculate upon his powers of resistance before he goes into the arena (qtd. in Wolfson 322).

With this comment, Wolfson argues, Byron sets Keats apart as a weak, delicate, sensible and, above all, unmanly boy, an image which was not only echoed in nineteenth-century reviews, but continued to resonate through twentieth-century criticisms of Keats and his poetry (cf. 324-5).

[18] In light of Byron's comments on Keats it is interesting that in her article "Feminizing Keats," Susan Wolfson notes that, in his time, Byron was "seen as 'unmanly' in that he was 'ungentlemanly,'" and that he furthermore was considered a womanizer (321). My question is: does being womanizer entitle Byron to do write about more feminine subjects without being called "effeminate"?

Not only preoccupations of Keats's critics with his supposed weakness, but also with his low-birth recur in almost all reviews of his poetry in the nineteenth century. Keats's attempt to write poetry within the masculine tradition was basically considered mimicry of style, as he did not *transcend* class through his poetry – as Wordsworth thought himself of doing – but, in his desire to align himself among the more privileged and intellectual poets, fetishized class (cf. Levinson 17). The fact that his poems had a particular appeal to women fortified the critics to see Keats as a "threat to prevailing codes of manliness" all the more (Roe 52). Even after his death the allegations of "effeminacy" echoed through criticism, Swinburne for instance called Keats in 1886: "a vapid and effeminate rhymester in the sickly stage of whelphood. . . [who] lived long enough only to give promise of being a man" (qtd. in Roe 52).

Though those who sympathized with Keats, i.e. Leigh Hunt and Benjamin Bailey, generally praised Keats's poetry, they seemed evenly interested in his physical characteristics and feminine style. Bailey's statement that Keats's face has "the proper shape for a poet's head," (qtd.Wolfson 319) is fairly subjective, but does show the preoccupation with the general appearance of Keats – and, for that matter, of any other man of Genius. Leigh Hunt, himself fiercely accused of being "effeminate," sees "effeminacy" and something which the "more 'manly' energy of the poet's true nature was constantly fighting against and attempting to master" ("Keats and the Performance of Gender" 42). Yet, about Keats's *Hyperion*, he did regret "something too effeminate and human in the way Apollo receives the exaltation which his wisdom is giving him. He weeps and wonders somewhat too fondly" (qtd. in Wolfson 319). Judgments of lack of masculinity in Keats's poetry, thus, keep returning. Even Shelley's *Adonais*, which celebrated Keats's genius and sensibility, was eventually perceived as confirming yet again Keats's "effeminacy" and deviation from the masculinist tradition (cf. Wolfson 322).

Whereas his contemporaries devaluated him as an unknowing feminine boy, Keats himself felt ambivalent towards the role of poetry, the representation of masculinity and femininity within poetry and his own poetical works as well. Mellor describes Keats's vision of the self as a self which is "unbounded, fluid, decentrered, inconsistent – not 'a' self at all," (Mellor 175) as Keats himself also states in a letter to Richard Woodhouse in 1818:

> As to the poetical Character itself (I mean that sort, of which, if I am anything, I am a member that sort distinguished from the Wordsworthian, or egostical Sublime; which is a thing per se, and stands alone,) it is not itself – it has no self – It is everything and noting – it has no character – . . . What shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the camelion poet ("Poetical Works and Letters" 336).

Looking at this statement from a feminist perspective, Mellor sees similarities between Keats's vision of the self and psychoanalytic ideas of the self and the other within poststructuralist theories of Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva. Concerning the female within his poetry, Keats considers the self as melting into the (female) other and becoming the other, which he captures in his understanding of "Negative Capability."[19] Though nineteenth-century reviews depicted him as a boy lacking manly virtue, Keats's Preface to *Endymion* shows that he certainly *did* show awareness about his own position within the poetical tradition:

> […] the reader, who must soon perceive great inexperience, immaturity, and every error denoting a feverish attempt, rather than a deed accomplished. . . The imagination

[19] "Negative Capability" and becoming the other can also be interpreted in light of Judith Butler's theories on performativity.

> of a boy is healthy, and the mature imagination of a man is healthy; but there is a space of life between, in which the soul is in a ferment, the character undecided, . . . thence proceeds mawkishness, and all the thousand bitters which those men I speak of must necessarily taste in going over the following pages ("Poetical Works and Letters" 48).

Subsequently, he reacted to those judging him of being "too smokeable" by stating, in a letter to George and Georgiana Keats: "[…] that the man who ridicules romance is the most romantic of Men – that he who abuses women and slights them – loves them most," ("Poetical Works and Letters" 357) therewith mocking the reviewers who take everything within his work too literally.

More serious were his contemplations about his own feelings towards Imagination, Beauty, Truth and Love, not only regarding the pursuance of his poetry, but also concerning his relationship with Fanny Brawne. The matters occupying him almost seem to be matters of life and death for Keats, as one moment Fanny and his love for her are his greatest inspiration, the next moment this love distracts him from pursuing poetry. This ambivalence and inner struggle is clear in his letter to Fanny in 1819:

> […] a few more moments' thought of you would uncrystallize and dissolve me. I must not give way to it – but turn to my writing again – if I fail I shall die hard. O my love, your lips are growing sweet again to my fancy – I must forget them ("Poetical Works and Letters" 389).

Besides this ambivalence, he was critical of his own poetry as well. In a letter to James Hessey 1818 on *Endymion* he writes:

> I have written independently *without Judgment* —I may write independently & *with judgment* hereafter. The Genius of Poetry must work out its own salvation in a man: It cannot be matured by law & precept, but by sensation & watchfulness in itself ("Poetical Works and Letters" 328).

This indicates that, in his future poetry, as he states later in the same letter, "that which is creative must create itself." Additionally, after *Endymion*, he was aggrieved with the fact that his poetry appealed to women so much, showing his ambivalence towards fame, women and poetic autonomy in a letter to John Taylor in 1819:

> I feel every confidence that if I choose I may be a popular writer; that I will never be; but for all that I will get a livelihood – I equally dislike the favour of the public with the love of a women – they are both a cloying treacle tot the wings of independence ("Poetical Works and Letters" 389).

The extensive criticism on Keats's poetry and Keats's own ambivalence towards the pursuance of poetry show to have given a lot of thought to questions of gender and gender-roles, which has been studied elaborately by contemporary feminist critics. This constructedness of the differences between masculinity and femininity in the nineteenth-century not only shows in reviews on Keats's poetry, but in his letters and poetical works as well. The feminist interpretation of the constructedness of these gender-roles within the criticism on Keats's work and his poetry and letters will be studied in the next chapter.

Chapter 3. A Feminist and Gender Reading of Keats and His Poetry

As already seen in the first two chapters, the issue of gender and gender-roles – and the representation of masculinity and femininity within poetical writings – was fiercely debated during the Romantic period. Feminist critics have studied Romantic writings since, focusing on the way in which poetry foregrounds issues of gender, the self and society (cf. "Gender, Genre and the Romantic Poets" 155). In her article "Feminizing Keats," Wolfson states that, within nineteenth century criticism on Keats, two reactions can be distinguished. First, those who "regender Keats, alienating what he evoked to the sphere of the feminine, and using his example to degrade the feminine in men," and second, those who "embrace Keats as a way of challenging and enlarging socially restricted definitions of manhood" (333). This chapter will look at both views in light of feminist criticism, reviewing how feminist critique deconstructed gender-roles within Keats's poetry and nineteenth century reception of his poetry.

In the 1970s, feminist, criticism embraced Keats for the similarities between his low-class and limited education and marginalized women, subsequently seeing his poetry as an alternative to the 'macho' masculine poetry of other Romantic poets. In the 1980s Keats was placed back within the patriarchal canon by those same critics, though still sharpening him against his masculine contemporaries (cf. Wolfson 89). Wolfson argues that feminist critics who have regendered Keats and his poetry as being "feminist," have, by treating Keats as diverging from his masculine contemporaries, placed him outside a particular discourse in the same manner his nineteenth-century critics "othered" Keats by calling him "effeminate" (cf. 348). Rather, she argues, feminist criticism should study Keats "as an opportunity to investigate the multiple and often conflicting interests that animate men's writing within patriarchal culture" (349).

Subsequently, in the 1990s, feminist critics focused more on the aspects that propagated nineteenth-century masculinity in Keats's poetry. Ross, for instance, does not assess the earlier mentioned Preface to *Endymion* as self-critical, but rather as "an audition for patriarchal culture" (qtd. in Wolfson 95). This desire to align himself among poets writing within the classical tradition is the cause, as Homans argues in "Keats Reading Women, Women Reading Keats," for Keats's dismissive attitude towards female readers and women in general (cf. 369). This dismissive attitude is what feminist critics see as a recurring theme within Keats's poetry, often in the form of a mortal male who is seduced by the godly beauty of a woman – habitually described by a metaphor[20] – who simultaneously fuels him in and restrains him from pursuing his male search of the Self. Feminist critics argue that the poet, invoking male authority over the alien female in his poetry, ultimately suppresses the longing for the female by either attempting to merge the male with the female or by suppressing her. Herewith, he seems to denounce women in general – in his poetry as well as in his own life –, as those "—who appear to me as children to whom I would rather give a sugar Plum than my time, form a barrier against Matrimony which I rejoice in." ("Poetical Works and Letters" 335).

Levinson argues that exactly this "othering" of the female signifies Keats's alienation from his poetical forefathers, (cf. 15) as "Keats's discourse 'mans' itself by a self-consciously autotelic receptivity, at once 'unmanning' the Tradition and, paradoxically, feminizing himself as well" (40). This indicates that the male figure who needs creativity/Imagination (the female) in his search of the Self (the poetic tradition), simultaneously disdains and glorifies the muse. This ambivalence – or, as Keats would say, "Negative Capability"– can be

[20] In his poetry, Keats often uses metaphors such as music, the archetypal beauty, and poetry when describing the female.

interpreted as showing what feminist critics have been calling Keats's androgyny.[21] Simultaneously, this ambivalence can be seen as the burden of prevailing nineteenth-century gender roles, as the women in Keats's poetry are, according to Alwes, constantly portrayed in opposite manners: as both salvation and destruction; joy of creativity and fear over its possible loss; and the representation of the poets alienation from masculine identity (cf. 2). In emphasizing this ambiguousness and androgyny of the poet, feminist readings of Keats's poetry have foregrounded his struggles of having the ambition to write in a certain tradition and therewith belong to a certain class and how he failed to achieve this goal.

In light of general nineteenth century ideas of class, gender-roles and Keats's ambivalence towards both, it is interesting to study the vast amount of metaphors Keats used in his poetry and the way in which they are, according to feminist critics, used to depict the woman as "other." The main metaphor in the work of Keats is Poetry as a woman who should be courted by a man (cf. D'Avanzo 25; cf. Homans 343). In this respect, Keats's love stories in his poems can be seen as an allegory for his own relation towards poetry; the woman is poetry who seduces and controls the man, but whose transcendent power he needs, as he identifies her with his own imagination. She is, thus, the ideal, the object of desire, but at the same time obstacle towards achieving the ideal (cf. Alwes 1). In the same manner, his object of affection Fanny Brawne is the inspiration for Keats to write his poetry, but also that what distracts him from pursuing his writing (cf. Hofkosh 107). Additionally, Keats's women are often portrayed as demonic figures – like the serpent-lady in *Lamia* – which are alien to the

[21] Androgyny, as used by the Romantics, can be viewed in light of Pope's vision of the "perfect" or "ideal" woman; the promise of "a utopian image of wholeness" and "male incorporation of the feminine" (Richardson 19). Yet, Richardson refers to Catherine Macaulay who, in her *Letters on Education*, reverses the Romantic thought as following: "Pope has elegantly said *a perfect woman's but a softer man*. And if we take in the consideration, that there can be but one rule of moral excellence for beings made of the same materials, organized after the same manner, and subjected to similar laws of Nature, we must either agree with Mr. Pope, or we must reverse the proposition, and say that *a perfect man is a woman formed after a coarser mold*" (qtd. in Richardson 19).

male. In these poems, the man shows his masculinity through subjecting the female, therewith humanizing her. Alwes states that this, again, shows that "male authority" – and, additionally, ideal poetic power – "derives its power from his gendered identity and inherent difference from the female" (4). In this subjection lies the key to Keats's fascination of the female as the focus of male desire; "The Imagination may be compared to Adam's dream – he awoke and found it truth," as he wrote to Benjamin Bailey. ("Poetical Works and Letters" 274) Herewith, his imaginative project – or quest – is equated with masculine appropriation of the feminine (cf. Homans 344). This same attitude Keats's shows, though not as literally, in his letters to Fanny:

> Ask yourself my love whether you are not very cruel to have so entrammelled me, so destroyed my freedom. Will you confess this in the Letter you must write immediately, and do all you can to console me in it—make it rich as a draught of poppies to intoxicate me ("Complete Works and Letters" 380)

He not only says she "destroys [his] freedom," but additionally tries to control her by telling her what to say ("you *must* write immediately"), therewith merely making her the object of his vision (cf. Homans 351). This voiceless object becomes the female other; the opposite of the male subject. Essentially, Keats's behavior as a masculine poet is mirrored in his poetry and vice versa; at one moment making the female the muse and object of his affection, at another moment despising her for being a seductress who keeps him from pursuing his masculine mission.

Keats's struggles with the issue of gender in his poetry as well as in his own life, as seen in the examples above, can be regarded as one of the causes of his ambiguousness

towards the female and the role she ought to play. While, in order to reach poetic perfection, Keats adopts a female role in his poetry, patriarchal tradition expects him to take the position of the masculine poet through the acts of the man, while simultaneously looking for signs of masculinity through the performed femininity (cf. "Gender, Genre and the Romantic Poets" 13). However, taking the position of the female "other" is – in respect of Kristeva's theory of the *abject* – impossible, as the male body (either Keats himself or the male character in his poetry) according to Homans, "prefers to keep women distinct as objects of vision. Woman should remain 'abstract'" (345). Looking at Keats's poetry as embodying this balancing act of gender-roles, it is never possible for the male poet to represent the female, as he cannot not perform this gender role due to socio-historical constructions of masculinity (and his own role as a male) within the tradition he writes in. At the same time, it is almost impossible for him to perform femininity in his poetry without being accused of "effeminacy of character" by his masculine contemporaries. Therefore, the performance of the "wrong" identity – that what is called "effeminacy" – can, according to Cox, be read as a deconstruction of traditional masculine ideas of gender-roles (cf. "Gender, Genre and the Romantic Poets" 15). In this light, Keats is thus not fully male and his poetry not fully masculine, neither is he fully female and his poetry fully "effeminate." Rather, he is "floating" somewhere in between, being called androgynous, but not in the Romantic sense of the word. In essence, ambiguousness towards issues of gender can be aligned with this androgyny, as this is the way in which the male-poet is not able to merge the male and female; subject and object; Self and other, as even the subject who *performs* the role of the female is a constructed outsider, the poet's female other.

Chapter 4. A Case-study of *Lamia* in Light of Nineteenth-century Reviews and Feminist Criticism

Keeping the criticism on Keats's poetry of both nineteenth-century critics and feminist critics in mind, this chapter will study one of Keats's narrative poems, *Lamia.* Focusing on masculine and feminine aspects in *Lamia*, the most striking and interesting changes in interpretation of gender-roles over time will be addressed.

Lamia was written in 1819, and published in 1820. Keats had great expectations of this narrative poem, as he wrote in a letter to John Hamilton Reynolds: "I have great hope of success, because I make use of my judgment more deliberately than I have yet done" ("Poetical Works and Letters" 383). *Lamia* is based on a Greek myth and begins with telling the story of the god Hermes. He has fallen in love with a nymph who hides herself from him. Hermes meets Lamia, a woman trapped in the body of a serpent, who says she will make the nymph visible if Hermes returns her into her woman shape again. Hermes agrees and after this Lamia (turned into a woman) goes in search for a young man, Lycius, whom she saw on one of her spirit journeys. Lycius immediately falls in love with Lamia when seeing her. They decide to live together in a house of Lamia's choice, which is hidden from the rest of the world. Lycius wants to marry Lamia and have a large feast. Lamia agrees, only under the condition that Lycius will not invite his former teacher, the philosopher Apollonius. At the wedding, Apollonius shows up uninvited and reveals Lamia's true —serpent—identity, after which Lamia vanishes and Lycius dies.

Lamia can, in many respects, be seen as a changing point in Keats's writings. Levinson, for instance, states that *Lamia* contradicts the practical and scientific norms of Keats's career (cf. 269). Subsequently, Haogwood quotes Stillinger in his article "Keats and

Social Context: Lamia," who argues that:

> […] the poem [Lamia] serves well to introduce the basic Keatsian conflict between mundane reality and some extra-worldly ideal state. The opposition is clearer in this poem than in any other, and it is not resolved. ... As a deadlock in the conflict between reality and an ideal [the ending of Lamia] represents in the 1820 volume a starting point of massive irresolution (685).

Here, Stillinger aptly describes how Keats is tossed back and forth between writing within the masculine tradition – the "reality" – with its appropriation of the female voice, and adopting a more feminine, emotive and mythical position – the "extra-worldly" – in his poetry.

The different attitude towards questions of reality and the ideal/Imagination were also noticed by Keats's contemporaries. Although he is still accused of writing "sickly affectation" and "unintelligible quaintness,"[22] overall, the reviews on *Lamia* were far more positive than those of *Endymion*, and indicate that Keats was, finally, pursuing his poetical career in the correct manner. The British Critic[23] even wrote:

> Mr. Keats is a person of no ordinary genius and prophesying that if he will take Spenser, and Milton for models instead of Leigh Hunt he need not despair of attaining to a very high and enviable place in public esteem (Spenserians).

Perhaps also his "Byronic satire," which seemed to have invaded his poetry, was why his contemporaries thought of *Lamia* as fitting better within the masculine – or Byronic –

[22] Literary Chronicle 2 (29 July 1820) 484.
[23] British Critic NS 4 (September 1820) 257-64.

tradition than his earlier poems (cf. Lau 217).

This more masculine character of *Lamia* is also noticed by feminist critic Wolfson. She sees the narrative poem as an extreme reaction of Keats on earlier criticism calling him "too smokeable," though also arguing that the plot of *Lamia* is "driven by tension between desire and self-sufficiency" (Wolfson 93). Elaborating on her own argument, in her article "Feminizing Keats" Wolfson describes how the seductress Lamia is introduced in the shape of a test, tempting Lycius to retreat from the social demands of adult life. Lycius must show his manly resistance in order to become a true man and restore masculine control (cf. Wolfson 327). Subsequently, in "Keats and Gender Criticism" Wolfson sees Lycius change from "a romantic Keatsian swooner in Part I into a 'cruel' and 'perverse' figure of 'tyranny' in Part II . . . and finally into a fatally disillusioned bridegroom" (91). According to nineteenth-century critics this masculine control is a positive thing, whereas, according to feminist critics, this control only emphasizes socially constructed gender roles, something which will be studied in this chapter.

First, it is interesting to look – from a feminist perspective – at Lamia as the serpent character in the poem and its relation to masculine control. Traditionally, a Lamia was monster who had the face and breasts of a woman, and the rest of the body like that of a serpent, alluring strangers to come to her. Some believed that Lamias were witches in the form of beautiful women (cf. D'Avanzo 52). Keats's Lamia, turned into a mortal woman by Hermes, seduces Lycius. Enthralled by her beauty "his eyes had drunk her beauty up," (I.251) signifying that Lamia gives him the ultimate inspiration while capturing him with her appearance. Lycius, in his dream-like state, totally submits himself to Lamia, even agreeing to live together away from worldly Corinth. At first, Lycius finds satisfaction in living in this dream, but upon hearing the sounds of trumpets, he begins to long for Corinth again. Lamia

immediately notices Lycius longing and tries to bring him back into her realm of control:

> The lady, ever watchful, penetrant,
> Saw this with pain, so arguing a want
> Of something more, more than her empery
> Of joys; and she began to moan and sigh (II. 37)

D'Avanzo describes this controlling role of Lamia as "Lycius' 'demon Poesy' offer[ing] him imaginative fulfillment and poetic vision while wounding and destroying" (52). Upon seeing the sighing Lamia weakened, Lycius sees his chance to come into power again. Surprisingly, Lamia actually seems to *like* Lycius's new found masculine power:

> […] She burnt, she lov'd the tyranny,
> And, all subdued, consented to the hour
> When to the bridal he should lead his paramour (II. 83)

While Keats's male contemporaries must have loved this new found control of the male, feminist critics have questioned this sudden submission of Lamia. Lamia's abrupt switch is indeed not explained further by Keats. It could be argued that Keats hereby shows his vision of the female as being unstable and emotive by nature, but that is merely a guess. Fact is that the poem continues with Lycius who plans to marry Lamia in Corinth, therewith making her his property. This new role of Lycius as the "owner" of beauty puts him in a place where he can show off Lamia in Corinth, therewith commercializing her, as argued by Levinson (cf. 227). Lamia, the new-found "trophy-wife," thus becomes Lycius's ideal woman. Various critics have addressed this "commodification" of Lamia by Lycius. Wolfson even argues that

Keats himself sees "Poetry itself" as a market commodity with no use value, by referring to Keats's letter to Bailey in which he writes: "As Tradesmen say everything is worth what it will fetch, so probably every mental pursuit takes its reality and worth from the ardour of the pursuer - being in itself a Nothing" (99).

Returning to the Lamia's control over Lycius, it can be argued that Lycius is already warned for the seductive serpent-woman upon hearing Lamia calling him:

> […] "Ah, Lycius bright,
> And will you leave me on the hills alone?
> Lycius, look back! And be some pity shown."
> He did; not with cold wonder fearingly,
> But Orpheus-like at an Eurydice;

The allusion to the Orpheus myth suggests that Lycius very well knows that with looking back he will initiate his own ruin, just like Orpheus did when he looked back to Eurydice against the advice of Hades (cf. D'Avanzo 53). Lycius's teacher Apollonius has warned him about enthrallment and the senses, but against the rationalist advice he looks back, letting himself be seduced by Lamia's overwhelming beauty and becoming "tangled in her mesh" (I.295). Alwes has argued that herewith, the misogyny inherent to Keats can be aligned with Apollo's – or, in case of *Lamia* with Apollonius' – reason, as he produces the female known as "femme fatale"; the "physical and feminine embodiment of an imagination that attempts dissertation of the earth, of replacing the Dionysian principle of beauty with the Apollonian of knowledge" (Alwes 185). In short, Keats is considered as depicting the female "other" as the eye of evil who seduces the man, taking him away from rationality into an extra-worldly sphere of imagined perfection.

By representing simultaneously perfection and destruction, Lamia very well embodies Lycius vision of inspiration from the moment she looks at him:

> […] bending to her open eyes,
> Where he was mirror'd small in paradise (II. 47)

Upon looking into her eyes Lycius is enchanted. Only seeing the dreamlike-paradise Lamia takes him to, he can leave the real world behind:

> His phantasy was lost, where reason fades,
> In the calm'd twilight of Platonic shades (I.236)

Lamia is the ultimate inspiration for Lycius, in the same manner Keats emphasizes: "I have the same Idea of all our Passions as of Love they are all in their sublime creative of essential Beauty" ("Poetical Works and Letters" 273-274). With earlier mentioned feminist criticism in mind, Lamia can be seen as representing the imaginative force of the poet who needs Passion and Love in order to fulfill the writing of his poetry. Lamia thus becomes – for both Lycius and the poet Keats – the outside and alien force which is the ideal that should be achieved but simultaneously is the obstacle to that achievement. She cannot be domesticated, nor can she be of use outside the inspirational realm of the poet. Anyhow, Lycius tries to subject the goddess he falls in love with:

> That Lycius could not love in half a fright,
> So threw the goddess off, and won his heart
> More pleasantly by playing the woman's part, (I.337)

However, the "woman's part," can ultimately not be played by Lamia because of her serpent nature, which is in line with the traditional masculine representation of the woman as an evil seductress. Levinson argues that, herewith, Keats makes his method of representation his representational object. He says that "by fetishizing this purpose, he makes it of an 'object' in the material sense and a 'subject' in the philosophical sense," which ultimately has the effect of "double alienation" (21). In short, Lamia becomes the "other" not only as a woman who should be subordinated, but also because she stands for an idea that should be internalized by the male.

With this last statement in mind, the poem can also be read as an allegory of Keats's vision of his pursuance of poetry: the inability of the man (Lycius) to "tame" the woman is projected on the female (Lamia), as this elusiveness of the woman is, for Keats, equal to the elusiveness and ambiguousness he himself feels towards imagination – the woman. He himself is not able to "tame" his imagination, thus by placing it outside himself, as a seductress and woman who tempts, lures and confuses him, he presents himself as the controlling male, perfectly fitting within the masculinist tradition. Eventually, as Swann suggests by referring to Lacan: "the Woman does not exist," except as a fantasy in which man would find his own completion (cf. Swann 84). Essentially, this interpretation of *Lamia* places Keats firmly within the masculine tradition he longed to be part of, therewith deconstructing criticism by his contemporaries of writing in an "effeminate" manner.

Conclusion

Having discussed the social constructedness of gender-roles during Romanticism, the specific role of Keats's poetry within the patriarchal tradition, nineteenth-century criticism on his poetry, and feminist criticism on both Keats's poetry and reviews of his poetry by his contemporaries, the former chapters have shown the difficulties of interpretation. Subsequently, these difficulties are closely related to the fluidity of changing discourse, resulting in the impossibility to distil "one" or "the" true meaning or interpretation from both Keats's poems and criticism on his poems, as well as from feminist readings of both the poems and reviews. In this respect, it is not surprising that Keats's contemporaries criticized him and called him "effeminate," as they traditionally were accustomed to taking feminine aspects in poetry literally, therewith making the subject of the text what the text signifies. Within their patriarchal discourse, their only conclusion could be that Keats's poetry did not fit within their notion of traditional masculine poetry.

Relating these notions concerning interpretation to the end of *Lamia*, in which Lamia's serpent nature is revealed by Apollonius' gaze, it seems that philosophy and reason have prevailed over the senses. However, when Lycius dies of despair of his loss of Lamia, it can be questioned whether reason *did* actually win. This end can be read as signifying Keats's ever existing ambivalence towards beauty and truth; Imagination; reason; male dominance; the role of the feminine; and the real and divine, as feminist critics have argued. However, a different interpretation of this ending as well as of the discussion on the representation of gender in Keats's poetry can be that poetry might be the single thing that *exceeds* socially constructed binaries.

Does this last argument, then, essentially make this thesis – and, therefore all interpretation of binaries within Keats's poetry – superfluous? No, would be my answer to that question. In the end, every interpretation, or interpretation of an interpretation, or even

interpretation of an interpretation of an interpretation, tells us more about the discourse in which we write and interpret ourselves, therewith making each single interpretation useful.

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