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Watching and Being Watched: The Confrontation between Subjectification and Objectification in Waterhouse's *Lamia*

I begin with an image of *Lamia* (1909) by J. W. Waterhouse (1849-1917), a painter most productive at the transitional period between the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Colourful and sensuous, this image is among many manifestations of Waterhouse's fascination with women as the focus of his artistic creation, showing the painter's passion for depicting distinctive female beauty through the figure of the *femme fatale*. Certain subjects captivated Waterhouse, and scenes from literature formed the subject matter of many of his paintings. As one of the most prolific artists of the Victorian period, like many of his contemporaries,[1] Waterhouse drew upon established stories and folklore, such as Greek myths and works by Keats, Shakespeare, and Tennyson. The art of Waterhouse was of the imagination, demonstrating his ongoing passion for legend, history, and literature.

Appearing in the image of serpentine woman, in ancient Greek mythology, Lamia is the name for a female demon who sucks children's blood. Though seemingly a classically inspired subject, the painting is only loosely based upon the famous female figure of the myth, as Waterhouse creates the image of Lamia on the pond raising her hair and staring at her reflection in the water, examining her new born body. Waterhouse represents the image of Lamia with half human and half bestial form, yet appearing less of a callous, monstrous and threatening presence than a lovely and desirable woman. The visual features that construct the image of Lamia denote an aura of narcissism, in which Lamia is portrayed as self-possessed, fully absorbed in her own image. Waterhouse reveals a fully auto-erotic woman who manifests grace and also inaccessibility. This picture gives us a sense of Lamia being intensely absorbed, withdrawn into an inner world of self. The painter creates a self-conscious world of female narcissism in which Lamia is detached from the outer world. Immersing herself in the world of self-reflection, Lamia contemplates her own image, enjoying her self-admiration. Lamia is on her own: she is not connecting with the outer world. She is for herself only.

[1] Helene E. Roberts has observed that Victorian painters 'relied heavily on the fact that the Victorian art public belonged to a literate society', and that '[the] middle- and upper-class audience at the annual exhibitions of the Royal Academy had read the same novels and poems'. See 'Marriage, Redundancy or Sin', in *Suffer and Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*, ed. by Martha Vicinus (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), pp. 45-76 (p. 46).

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J. W. Waterhouse, *Lamia* (1909) (private collection)

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To understand this painting fully, then, we must know the significance of its title, or its possible literary source. As its title indicates that a classical or literary source is intended, apart from the Lamia in Greek mythology, Waterhouse's Lamia brings to mind Keats's poetic description of Lamia. In 1819, the Romantic poet John Keats made Lamia the focus of his poetic narrative, relating the legend of the serpent woman whose passion to win Lycius's love impels her to transform into a beauty in true human form. Different from Waterhouse's Lamia who is detached from the realm of heterosexual exchange, Keats's Lamia is a woman hungry for heterosexual love. Realizing her inward passions but bound in a serpent form, Lamia's desire results in an act of exchange with Hermes, to transform from the serpent-girl to a real woman's shape. Begging for transformation at any cost, Keats's Lamia is determined to be turned into a human shape, crying out in anguish: 'When from this wreathed tomb shall I awake! / When move in a sweet body fit for life, / And love, and pleasure, and the ruddy strife / Of hearts and lips! Ah, miserable me!' (I. 38-41).[2]

If we turn momentarily from Waterhouse's painting to Keats's poem of Lamia, we enter a world of imagery that is fevered with transformative heat. Longing to be released from her miserable 'wreathed tomb', Lamia is willing to experience 'scarlet pain' (I. 54) to obtain a human form. The process of transformation gives her more than a twinge of uneasiness. The change which Lamia undergoes from a snake into a 'lady bright' (I. 171) is torturous and dreadful, filled with fierce transformative violence.

> Left to herself, the serpent now began
> To change; her elfin blood in madness ran,
> Her mouth foam'd, and the grass, therewith besprent,
> Wither'd at dew so sweet and virulent;
> Her eyes in torture fix'd and anguish drear,
> Hot, glaz'd, and wide, with lid-lashes all sear,
> Flash'd phosphor and sharp sparks, without one cooling tear.
> The colours all inflam'd throughout her train,
> She writh'd about, conculs'd with scarlet pain:
> A deep volcanian yellow took the place
> Of all her milder-mooned body's grace;
> And, as the lava ravishes the mead,
> Spoilt all her silver mail, and golden brede;
> Made gloom of all her frecklings, streaks and bars,

[2] Keats's poem 'Lamia' is quoted from Earl Reeves Wasserman, *The Finer Tone: Keats' Major Poems* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1953), pp. 138-157.

> Eclips'd her crescents, and lick'd up her stars:
> So that, in moments few, she was undrest
> Of all her sapphires, greens, and amethyst,
> And rubious argent: of all these bereft,
> Nothing but pain and ugliness were left.
>
> (I. 146-164)

Lamia's transformation takes place in tumult and madness, with the currents of excruciating contortions overwhelming her. Struck down by the violence of transformation, Lamia is galvanized by this torment, with her body writhing and squirming in agony. What Lamia suffers is like grisly torture, intense and sharp, acute and convulsive. With pain dominating her, her body is as on fire, wherein emanates a heat not felt before. In the process of transformation, there is nothing but a distorted and deformed body in pain. Lamia's violent response to pain in her writhing not only suggests that the price for submitting to passions is dearly paid, but signifies the great intensity of her desires. In a cruel fashion, the meanings behind Lamia's terribly painful transformation are her desperate need for individualism and her violent urge towards the liberation of desires. Lamia's transformation can be understood as her pursuit of passions, and her desperate endeavour to achieve union with Lycius.

As the central story of Lamia's metamorphosis is condensed in Waterhouse's painting called *Lamia*, how many removes are there in Waterhouse's departure from Keats's text of 'Lamia'? First, in developing a textual material visually through the figure of serpentine woman, Waterhouse dilutes the elements of suffering, pain and torture in Keatsian Lamia's transformation. The notion of pain concerns Keats, but not Waterhouse. If Keats's depiction of Lamia's transformation accompanying a sensual tremor of pain is understood as Lamia's response to her strong desire to unite with Lycius, Waterhouse's portrayal of the same serpentine woman seems more self-contained and auto-erotic in comparison. The painter portrays her as thoroughly harmless and self-complete. Viewers of Waterhouse are thus offered a more pleasant graphic portrayal of female erotic power which, compared to Keats's narrative of Lamia, defuses the sexually aggressive image of the serpentine woman in pursuit of passions. Second, although the image of Lamia is pictured as being autonomous and self-contained, what Waterhouse demonstrates in Lamia is a female body in a form of incomplete or unfinished metamorphosis. In this painting, we see Lamia raising her hair while burying herself in human clothes, with her shining serpentine skin falling about her legs in blue-black which looks like part of her garment. Lamia looks like a woman wearing inanimate serpentine drapery, but she and her drapery are one. To put it more appropriately, Lamia is not yet entirely 'undrest' from her serpentine form as

she is in Keats's text. As Lamia is bound by her serpentine shape in Keats's text, Waterhouse does not depict any of the sense of uneasiness the serpentine-shape imposes on the girl. In a sense this painting looks more like a girl only partly garbed in serpentine attire. Accordingly, there is no demonstrable unity between Keatsian Lamia and Waterhouse's representation of Lamia. Waterhouse's picture of Lamia thus signifies a very different pattern of representation, a far cry from Keats's narrative of Lamia. It is possible that Waterhouse consulted Keats's poem before setting his ideas to canvas, but it is clear that the presentation of passions imbued with meanings of pain in Keats's narrative becomes problematic in the painter's representation of Lamia. Therefore, the visible effect of Waterhouse's picture has transformed the full character of Keats's Lamia.

A known subject but, apparently, the representation of Lamia in Waterhouse's painting is loosely based on the tropes of legend. Understood as a mystical, seductive and disastrous temptress with erotic power in Greek mythology and Romantic texts of male imagination, the figure of the *femme fatale*, in the case of Lamia, is presented as warm-blooded and blameless. Waterhouse's *Lamia* seems to challenge the image of the serpentine woman, conjured up by literary images from disparate historical periods. As Elizabeth Prettejohn notes, '[i]n recent scholarship, when Waterhouse's work has been discussed at all, it has usually been to castigate him for his misogyny in representing the female figure as evil in her very beauty…Yet…Waterhouse's women are not so much *femme fatales* as wise sorceresses, with Circe as their archetype'.[3] Waterhouse's fascination with myth and his interest in poetry finds expression in his composition from references to the knowledge of the *femme fatale* in Greek mythology and Romantic poetry,[4] but the image of the *femme fatale* has been reincarnated through the painter's creative imagination. Indeed, in the case of Lamia, basing his portrayal of the fatal woman upon poetic moments in the texts of Keats, Waterhouse demonstrates his passion for depicting the *femme fatale* and creates alternative meanings beyond the original textual space. Waterhouse's work of Lamia thus offers the beholder a glimpse of the artist's creative power of imagination, as well as a distinct prism through which to view the image of the *femme fatale*, because it so significantly engenders the idea that the representation of Lamia requires more than the mimetic description of its source.

The discussion of the *femme fatale* through the image of Lamia in Waterhouse's pictorial world has led to many thoughts. The painting embodies two major subjects

[3] Elizabeth Prettejohn, 'Waterhouse's Imagination', in *J.W. Waterhouse: The Modern Pre-Raphaelite*, ed. by Elizabeth Prettejohn, Patty Wageman, and Robert Upstone (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2008), pp. 23- 35 (p. 31).

[4] Apart from Lamia, Waterhouse composed many famous figures of the *femme fatale* in his work, such as Cleopatra, Circe, the Sirens, and the Mermaid. See *J.W. Waterhouse: The Modern Pre-Raphaelite*.

for the cultural representation of women during the period. First, the subject of the *femme fatale* excited the imagination of numerous Victorian artists and writers, becoming a trope appearing in various guises in literary and visual art across the nineteenth century. In addition to Waterhouse's painting, the *femme fatale* emerged as an important figure in the texts of writers such as Algernon Charles Swinburne, Bram Stoker and Oscar Wilde, and artists such as Aubrey Beardsley. The presence of the *femme fatale* not only highlights the intimate connection between text and image in Victorian literary and visual worlds, but points to the wide range of contexts in which the image of woman was constructed as crippled in a bestial form, or trapped in a restricted setting, and yet was kept in subjectivity with erotic power. Second, the bewitching image of the *femme fatale* combined with narcissism creates a particular type of female beauty, pointing to a visual strategy which appeals to male sexuality and erotic fantasy.

Particularly, although the presence of Lamia absorbed in narcissism in her self-assured and self-sufficient postures suggests the auto-eroticism of the female subject, it nevertheless hints at the subject's unconsciousness of the gaze of the onlooker, displaying themes specific to the politics of spectatorship, provoking questions which indicate woman as a sexual object in art, an aesthetic object. This painting, therefore, is not restricted purely to an analysis of the notion of beauty and imagination found in the artwork alone. The picture establishes the conditions that invite the viewer's gaze, setting up the circumstances that implicate the viewer's eye to the woman's sensual body. Lamia is watching herself while she is being watched. It can thus be argued that what is inherent in this painting of Lamia is the notion of voyeurism. This painting elicits recognition as a picture conflating the aims of voyeurism, of looking, with those of exhibitionism. With her ample breasts exposed and her half-naked body emphasized, the visual field is occupied with a vision of public display which denotes the possibility of voyeurism. A potent yet generally unacknowledged aspect inherent in the medium of European oil painting, voyeurism is practiced and used by male artists as a visual strategy to enhance the allure of the depicted woman. In other words, the threatening presence of the *femme fatale* has been reduced to the beautiful form of her physical body, and a painting such as this forces us to see ourselves as voyeurs. That is, the configuration of such an image can very likely place the viewer in the position of a peeping Tom. Is the spectator made to believe that he or she is justified in looking that way?

In other words, the composition of the painting raises questions. Particularly, Waterhouse does not show Lamia's face. Her face is not shown or recognizable. Why did the painter choose not to represent the girl's face? It can be argued that the woman's face is not in full profile, as Lamia is depicted as a narcissistic girl taking

delight in her own reflection. Yet, although Lamia does not engage in any eye contact, her body, which looks like a body displayed in public, is not turning away from the viewer. In one sense, this picture seems to incorporate female narcissism in the image of the serpent-woman in a deliberate manner, as if Lamia is visible only to herself, enjoying her own image. However, in another sense, the fact that the viewer cannot really see the woman's face makes the point that by making Lamia's facial features unrevealed, the painter has explicitly enforced the viewer's eye upon the woman's body, which is turned toward the spectator. What really captures the viewer's eye at the first glance of *Lamia* is the woman's half-naked body. It seems that the beholder sees the half-naked body in display through the eyes of Lamia, namely by following Lamia's own gaze, as if Lamia invites her viewers to take part in examining her new born body. As Lamia is glimpsed at first out of reach because of the opacity of her facial expression, the painter plans to manipulate our ambivalent sense of distance and closeness to the depicted woman. We can observe her; she cannot return our gaze. As Waterhouse directs the gaze of the woman away from us, and ours toward the woman, eye contact is avoided. Waterhouse reveals the operation of desire at the level of the gaze. Clearly Lamia presents herself to us as the object of our gaze; we are, that is, to behold her. Lamia is, in effect, disempowered.

How the scene is composed influences how the viewer's gaze is directed. Lamia's face gazes fixed at the water before her, while placing us willy-nilly as voyeurs. Despite her looking towards her own image in the water which assumes a pose of narcissism, Waterhouse did not guarantee the privacy of the woman, turning her private moments into public display. The spectator is made to feel that in looking at this picture he or she is invasively entering the private space of the depicted woman. Furthermore, to incorporate a more modern perspective, every onlooker is integral to the scene of female nudity – we arrive before the picture innocently, but are transformed into peeping Toms by the time we leave. In this way, Waterhouse both teases and troubles the picture's beholders. The reading of *Lamia* becomes an inescapable reading of ourselves as spectators implicated in, rather than distanced from, Lamia's private situation. As Lamia is arranged as unconcerned with the onlooker, such a visual strategy allows untroubled access to the appreciation of female beauty. Accordingly, such an image of a narcissistic Lamia provokes not only questions of accuracy in terms of the painter's visual translation of literary text, but also of authenticity, posing questions such as, 'Who is doing the looking?', 'Who is authorizing the view?', 'For whom is this narcissistic pose intended?', or 'Whose passions are represented?'

Waterhouse presents us with the spectacle of a woman almost naked from the waist up, with her lower part merging into serpentine drapery, infatuated with her

self-image. What significance might lie in the portrayal of a woman almost shown as a nude, so preoccupied with her beautiful looks that she becomes totally oblivious of the other world? In effect, Waterhouse represents a long-standing convention of European painting in his work, as much as any male artist of his time. This visual strategy is not peculiar. Rather, it is an intensification of a cultural phenomenon endemic to art history. As Helene E. Roberts reminds us, 'Artists have long used woman's body as an object. They have reduced her image, nude or clothed, to volumes, textures and surface tones' (p. 45). Most significantly, as John Berger pointed out some twenty years ago in an insightful article entitled 'Past Seen from a Possible Future', the sensibility of gender located in a specific site – the female nude – is a common subject of European painting, which functions as a source of pleasure for beholders.:

> I am in front of a typical European nude. She is painted with extreme sensuous emphasis. Yet her sexuality is only superficially manifest in her actions or her own expression; in a comparable figure within other art traditions this would not be. Why? Because for Europe ownership is primary. The painting's sexuality is manifest not in what it shows but in the owner-spectator's (mine in this case) right to see her naked. Her nakedness is not a function of her sexuality but of the sexuality of those who have access to the picture.[5]

What kind of pleasure can we obtain from the painting of the nude? In the case of *Lamia*, while gazing at Lamia's carefully posed nudity, the beholder may be drawn to a certain kind of pleasure in the image, the pleasure of seeing the woman's body as an art object to be enjoyed. Berger's argument requires us to confront the framework within which the act of spectatorship is associated with 'ownership'. Moreover, Berger's statement articulates the fact that reading the image of naked women in painting marks more than the experience of taking possession, but the purpose of sexual arousal. In other words, when canvas offers the space for painters to realize their artistic passions through paints and brushes, it also offers a place of desire, or becomes a desirable place for 'those who have access to the picture'.

Apparently Waterhouse's treatment of female images with erotic aspects fulfills some of the conditions for the objectification of women in art history. Yet ambivalently, to some extent, the practice of depicting women as merely sexual objects for the interests of taking possession and sexual arousal is discontinued in Waterhouse's painting, as Waterhouse endorses these women's autonomy, presenting them as unique and unavailable by highlighting the image of female narcissism. It

[5] John Berger, *The Selected Essays of John Berger* (London: Pluto, 1986), p. 110.

seems that Waterhouse's painting serves to illuminate the power of female narcissism. Waterhouse's depiction of Lamia thus produces a sense of paradox since it can be viewed as a sexual object in art, as well as an empowered woman whose subjectivity is not denied. The woman shown in Waterhouse's painting is the *femme fatale* that cannot be owned, manifesting some power which resists objectification. It is true that the physical appearance of Lamia presents a vision that suggests sexual invitation; however, it can also be argued that Lamia displays her own sexuality for herself. Ambivalently, her self-absorbed pose both parallels a degree of objectification and reverses it, manifesting some elements of subjectivity. Accordingly, the division between subjectification and objectification has been undermined. Waterhouse's painting of Lamia demonstrates that there may be cases in which the boundaries between objectification and subjectification are blurred and hardly demarcated, in terms of the representation of women in art.

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