

Beauty, Power, and the Feminine in John Keats: A Feminist Reassessment

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Abstract- *This article offers a feminist reassessment of John Keats' portrayal of women in his poetry and personal letters, focusing on the complex interplay between beauty, power, and gender dynamics. Keats frequently depicts female figures as embodiments of beauty, often idealized as muses or cast as dangerous femme fatales. Through close readings of *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, *Endymion*, and *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, the study explores whether Keats' works celebrate or objectify women and how his aesthetic ideals contribute to traditional patriarchal narratives. Keats' personal letters to Fanny Brawne reveal similar tensions between admiration and possessiveness, further highlighting his struggle to reconcile idealized femininity with real female autonomy. While his poetry elevates beauty to a near-divine status, this elevation often reduces women to passive symbols of inspiration. This duality reflects broader Romantic anxieties about gender roles, with women portrayed as both desirable ideals and disruptive threats to male stability. By applying a feminist lens, this article argues that Keats' works, while deeply lyrical and emotionally rich, perpetuate limiting gender constructs. The study invites readers to reconsider Romantic literature's treatment of women and the implications for understanding literary portrayals of gender.*

Indexed Terms- *Feminism; John Keats; Femme Fatale; Romantic Poetry; Gender Dynamics*

I. INTRODUCTION

John Keats remains one of the most celebrated poets of the Romantic period, known for his intense exploration of themes like beauty, mortality, and artistic transcendence. His works are filled with vivid imagery and philosophical musings, often seeking to capture fleeting moments of beauty in an ever-changing world. Yet, beneath his lyrical celebrations of nature and art lies a significant, and often

controversial, theme: his portrayal of women and femininity. Keats' poetic world is populated by female figures who range from muses and goddesses to enigmatic, destructive forces. These depictions, though beautiful, have long invited questions about how he perceived women, both in life and in literature. At the core of Keats' poetry is an enduring fascination with feminine beauty. Women in his works are often portrayed as ethereal beings, embodying purity and artistic inspiration, but they are also presented as dangerous or elusive, reflecting an underlying tension between admiration and fear (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979). For instance, poems such as *La Belle Dame sans Merci* and *Endymion* illustrate women as both objects of desire and sources of suffering. This dual portrayal raises critical feminist questions: does Keats celebrate women's beauty, or does he reduce women to symbols of male longing? Is feminine beauty a source of empowerment, or is it confined within patriarchal ideals? This article aims to explore these questions through a feminist reading of Keats' poetry and personal letters. By examining his works such as *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, and *Endymion*, alongside his correspondence with Fanny Brawne, this study will reassess his portrayal of the feminine ideal. While Keats' poetic vision elevates beauty to a divine status, this elevation often comes at a cost: women are frequently depicted as passive objects rather than active participants in their own stories (Stolker, 2013). From a feminist standpoint, this tension invites a deeper reconsideration of Keats' legacy and the broader Romantic ideal of beauty, particularly in terms of gender dynamics in literature.

II. KEATS' CONCEPT OF BEAUTY: FEMININE OR FEMINIZED?

John Keats is perhaps most famous for his declaration that "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," from *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, reflecting his belief in beauty as a transcendent, immortal force. However, a closer look

at his works reveals that beauty in Keats' poetry is often gendered, frequently associated with feminine figures. This raises important questions about how aesthetic ideals and gender intersect in his vision of the world.

The Feminization of Beauty in Keats' Poetry

Keats often links beauty with female characters who represent purity and artistic inspiration. In poems like *Endymion* and *Ode to Psyche*, these women appear as muses guiding the male protagonist toward higher truths. Yet, their roles are often passive and idealized. For example, in *Endymion*, the moon goddess Cynthia symbolizes unattainable perfection, existing as a distant, ethereal ideal rather than a fully realized individual. This portrayal suggests that Keats' notion of feminine beauty is more about aspiration and longing than real women's experiences. From a feminist perspective, this idealization of women raises concerns about erasing female agency. The women in Keats' poetry are rarely given voices of their own. Instead, they function as symbols of male desire, reflecting the Romantic tendency to place women on pedestals rather than recognize their autonomy (Sultana et al., 2023).

2.1. Beauty as a Double-Edged Sword: Empowerment or Objectification?

Keats' concept of beauty is both empowering and problematic. On one hand, his celebration of beauty elevates it as a transformative, spiritual experience. On the other, his association of beauty with women as aesthetic objects risks reducing them to vessels of male pleasure. Consider *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, where the frozen female figures represent eternal beauty, yet lack humanity or voice (Sultana et al., 2023). Similarly, in *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, the mysterious woman embodies the femme fatale archetype—a figure whose beauty leads to male destruction. While she holds power, her portrayal suggests that female allure is a dangerous force.

This duality in Keats' portrayal reflects a broader Romantic tension between desire and danger, raising questions that still resonate today:

- Does beauty empower women, or does it imprison them?
- Does Keats celebrate feminine beauty, or does he reduce it to an object of male fascination?

From a feminist perspective, these questions highlight how literary portrayals of women have historically shaped gender norms, reinforcing both idealization and fear of the feminine (Altikriti, 2016).

III. THE FEMME FATALE AND POWER DYNAMICS IN KEATS' POETRY

One of the most intriguing features of John Keats' poetry is his repeated depiction of women as mysterious and dangerous figures, often identified with the femme fatale archetype. These female characters wield power through their beauty, yet they are frequently portrayed as threats to male autonomy and stability (Alwes, 1993). From a feminist perspective, this portrayal brings forward critical questions about gender power dynamics in Keats' work:

- Are Keats' women empowered by their ability to control men through their allure?
- Or are they simply projections of male anxieties surrounding desire and vulnerability?

To explore these questions, one must turn to one of Keats' most iconic poems: *La Belle Dame sans Merci*.

Analysis of *La Belle Dame sans Merci*: The Seductive Destroyer

Keats' poem *La Belle Dame sans Merci* is perhaps the clearest example of his fascination with the dangerous power of female beauty. The narrative follows a knight who encounters a mysterious, enchanting woman in the wilderness. She bewitches him with her song, takes him to her grotto, and feeds him exotic foods, causing him to fall into a dreamlike trance. However, when he awakens, he finds himself abandoned, haunted by visions of other men who have fallen victim to her spell (Alwes, 1993). The unnamed woman in the poem embodies the femme fatale archetype, using her beauty and charm to entrap men. She is both ethereal and dangerous, reinforcing a long-standing literary trope that casts women as objects of desire but also figures of fear. The knight, once a confident and autonomous figure, is left physically weakened and emotionally devastated by his encounter with her. This reversal of power dynamics, in which the woman dominates and the man becomes the victim, makes the poem particularly significant from a feminist perspective.

Power and Vulnerability: A Feminist Interpretation

From a feminist viewpoint, the woman in *La Belle Dame sans Merci* can be seen as a projection of male anxieties about female autonomy. Historically, patriarchal societies have perceived women's beauty and sexuality as destabilizing forces that must be controlled. The femme fatale figure reflects these fears, portraying women as dangerous simply because they possess the power to disrupt male authority. However, feminist critics argue that the femme fatale archetype also offers women a form of agency, even if it is often portrayed negatively. In Keats' poem, the woman is not a passive object but an active participant who controls the narrative. She seduces the knight, feeds him, and then leaves him in a state of despair. This suggests that, despite the misogynistic undertones of the trope, Keats' portrayal of the mysterious woman acknowledges the disruptive power of female autonomy. Yet, her power is ultimately framed as destructive. The knight's lament at the poem's end "And no birds sing" signals his loss of vitality and connection to the natural world following his encounter with the woman (Triaridou, 2021).

Contrasting Passive and Active Women in Keats' Poetry

A key pattern in Keats' work is the contrast between active and passive female figures. For instance, in *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, the woman wields significant power over the knight, actively shaping his fate. In contrast, in *Ode to Psyche*, the goddess Psyche represents a silent, passive form of femininity—an idealized figure meant to be admired and worshipped, but never feared.

From a feminist perspective, this contrast reflects the Romantic tension between desire and fear of the feminine. Keats seems torn between two opposing portrayals of women:

1. Women as passive muses, existing to inspire male creativity.
2. Women as powerful, dangerous beings, who must be resisted or controlled.

This duality mirrors the broader cultural anxieties of the Romantic period, during which women's roles in society were beginning to shift. The rise of early feminist movements and evolving social norms challenged traditional gender hierarchies. Keats'

poetry reflects these tensions, portraying women as both idealized objects of desire and disruptive threats to male stability.

The Femme Fatale as a Literary Tradition

To fully understand Keats' portrayal of the femme fatale, it's important to situate it within a broader literary tradition. The figure of the dangerous woman has appeared throughout literary history, from mythological characters like Circe and Medea to more modern figures like Carmen in Bizet's opera. These women challenge male authority, embodying the fear of unchecked female power. In Keats' case, his fascination with femme fatale figures suggests an ambivalence toward women's growing influence in his society. On one hand, he is captivated by their beauty and autonomy. On the other, he portrays their power as something that ultimately leads to destruction and despair—a reflection of his own anxieties about gender roles and male vulnerability (Triaridou, 2021).

IV. KEATS' PERSONAL LETTERS: INSIGHTS INTO HIS VIEW OF WOMEN

John Keats' poetry is known for its emotional intensity and deep introspection, but to fully grasp his portrayal of women, one must turn to his personal letters, which provide valuable insight into his views on love, beauty, and gender dynamics. His letters, especially those addressed to Fanny Brawne, reveal a complex and often contradictory perspective on women. He moves between adoration and frustration, reflecting the Romantic ideal of feminine beauty while simultaneously revealing his anxieties about women's autonomy. These letters allow readers to see how Keats' personal experiences shaped his poetic representations of women and shed light on the limitations of his feminist understanding (Johnson, 2019).

Keats and Fanny Brawne: Love, Obsession, and Patriarchal Control

One of the most famous aspects of Keats' life is his passionate but turbulent relationship with Fanny Brawne, to whom he wrote many letters between 1818 and 1820. These letters offer an intimate look at his emotional state, often oscillating between intense affection and jealous frustration. His letters reveal not

only his deep love for Fanny but also his insecurities and possessiveness. For instance, in a letter from July 1820, Keats writes:

“I cannot exist without you – I am forgetful of everything but seeing you again – my Life seems to stop there – I see no further. You have absorb’d me.”

Here, Keats expresses a consuming love for Fanny that aligns with the Romantic notion of all-encompassing passion. However, his words also suggest a desire for control, as he expects Fanny’s world to revolve around him. Keats’ frustration with Fanny’s social independence, particularly her interactions with other men, reveals a possessive streak. He viewed these interactions as a threat to their relationship, reflecting the patriarchal ideals of his time (Johnson, 2019).

In another letter, he writes:

“Do not tease yourself with the thought that I shall be hurt by anything you may say. I am full of your kindness. The more I know you, the more I love you.”

Although this statement appears affectionate, it also underscores his expectation that Fanny will prioritize his emotional needs. His intense love, while genuine, carries undertones of control, a dynamic that feminist critics would argue reflects traditional gender roles, where women are expected to safeguard men’s emotional well-being over their own.

Keats’ Insecurity and the Fear of Female Autonomy

Keats’ letters often reveal a deep anxiety about female independence, particularly regarding Fanny’s ability to move freely in society without him. His writings show conflicted feelings about women’s autonomy, with moments of admiration juxtaposed with fears of losing control over them (Sultana et al., 2023).

In one revealing letter from October 1819, Keats writes:

“You are always new. The last of your kisses was ever the sweetest; the last smile the brightest; the last movement the gracefulest. When you pass by my

window, you seem to have no proper motion of your own, but are as a wave of the sea.”

While this passage highlights Keats’ admiration for Fanny’s beauty, it also reflects his desire to freeze her in time—to keep her in an idealized, unchanging state. Comparing Fanny to a wave of the sea suggests that he views her as a natural force beyond his control, beautiful yet unpredictable. This tension between adoration and fear is also evident in Keats’ poetry, particularly in works like *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, where women are depicted as simultaneously alluring and dangerous. From a feminist perspective, Keats’ insecurities about women reflect broader cultural anxieties of the early 19th century. As women began to demand greater social freedom and autonomy, male writers like Keats struggled to reconcile their idealized visions of women with the reality of women’s growing independence (Johnson, 2019).

The Limits of Keats’ Feminist Understanding

Although Keats’ letters reveal emotional depth and sincerity, they also expose his limitations in understanding women as autonomous individuals. His frequent idealization of women leads him to reduce them to symbols of beauty and purity, rather than recognizing their complex inner lives.

In one of his more dramatic letters, Keats writes:

“I have two luxuries to brood over in my walks, your Loveliness and the hour of my death. O that I could have possession of them both in the same minute.”

This statement encapsulates the Romantic preoccupation with love and death, but it also highlights Keats’ tendency to conflate women with abstract ideals. In this case, Fanny becomes a symbol of desire and loveliness, rather than a real person with her own thoughts and emotions. From a feminist perspective, this kind of idealization can be dehumanizing, reducing women to objects of male desire rather than recognizing their agency and autonomy. Keats’ letters suggest that, while he admired women deeply, he often struggled to see beyond their physical beauty and appreciate their inner complexity.

Keats' Relationship with Other Women: Friends and Family

Beyond his correspondence with Fanny Brawne, Keats' letters to his sisters and female friends provide further insights into his attitudes toward women. His letters to his sister Fanny Keats are often affectionate and protective, reflecting a paternalistic attitude common during the era. In one letter to his sister, Keats advises her to "avoid men's flattery" and focus instead on cultivating her intellect. This advice highlights Keats' belief in women's intellectual potential, aligning with progressive ideas about education and self-improvement. However, his protective tone also reflects the era's view of women as vulnerable beings in need of male guidance and protection. This dual attitude encouraging female education while reinforcing traditional gender roles illustrates the tension in Keats' views on women's autonomy (Alwes, 1993).

CONCLUSION

John Keats occupies a prominent position in the canon of Romantic poetry, renowned for his lyrical explorations of beauty, mortality, and artistic transcendence. However, when his works are examined through a feminist lens, it becomes evident that his portrayal of women and the feminine ideal is deeply ambivalent. While his poetry elevates feminine beauty as a source of inspiration and transcendence, it also confines women within traditional patriarchal frameworks, often rendering them as passive muses or dangerous seductresses. This duality is essential to understanding the tension between idealization and objectification in Keats' vision of gender. Keats' fascination with beauty—as seen in poems like *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, and *Endymion* is inextricably tied to his depiction of women. On the surface, his poetry seems to celebrate the feminine as a powerful, almost divine force.

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