

Engaging Rationalism and Empiricism in *Comus* and *Lamia*

Hiram R. Diaz III
Classicism and Romanticism

Introductory Remarks

“Supposing truth is a woman,” Nietzsche writes, “What then? Are there not grounds for the suspicion that all philosophers, insofar as they were dogmatists, have been very inexpert about women...[using] awkward and very improper methods for winning a woman's heart?”¹ The problem of Truth, for Nietzsche, resides more in the approach taken toward Truth than in propositional expressions of the Truth. Rationalism, against which Nietzsche is bitterly opposed, posits that Truth is deducible from axioms or postulates; Empiricism, toward which Nietzsche is much more affable, posits that all knowledge, ergo all Truth, is acquired via abstraction from raw sensory data. If the rationalists are correct, then Truth is not elusive but omnipresent, self-attesting, and perspicuous. However, if the empiricists are correct, then Nietzsche's view is correct - Truth is seductive to philosophers, and indeed all individuals, because it is elusive, always being approached but incapable of being dominated, controlled, restrained.

The importance of Nietzsche's anthropomorphism in the discussion of *Comus* and *Lamia*, then, becomes clearer as we seek to understand how their respective authors engaged these epistemologies. Is Truth acquired via sense data? Is Truth acquired via the deduction of moral principles from universally shared epistemological axioms and postulates? Milton and Keats, as we shall see, engage the question of correct method as Nietzsche did, via the use of fiction and its attendant devices, an irony that undergirds both their texts, and which we will briefly analyze at the end of this paper. Our conclusion is that it is the rationalism of Milton that supports a consistent use of fiction as a means of engaging the problem of Truth, whereas Keats' empiricism is not suited to this end.

¹ *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kauffman (New York: Random House, 1989), 1.

A Dually Noted Antithesis

Perhaps the best place to begin a critical review of each text's approach to the problem of Truth is at a basic contextual level. *Comus* very explicitly deals with the problem of Truth in the dialogue between the Lady's two brothers. The *Elder Brother's* Stoical disaffection is rooted in his knowledge of his ignorance concerning his sister's current plight. Without proof of the Lady's well-being or harm, the Elder Brother can only suspend judgment and express what he *hopes* may be the case. Logically, any other conclusion is an invalid inference drawn from unsound premises. He explains:

I do not, brother,
 Inferred, as if I thought my sisters state
 Secure without doubt, or controversie:
Yet where an equall poise of hope and fear
Does arbitrate th' event, my nature is
That I encline to hope, rather than fear..²

Moreover, this hope is not completely unsubstantiated by logical argument. He explains that the Lady's hidden strength, i.e chastity, is what he believes will help keep her pure, safe from external harm.³ That is to say, he deduces the safety of his sister from the axiomatic principle of Chastity. A deduction which inspires the Second Brother to exclaim:

How charming is divine Philosophy!
 Not harsh, and crabbed as dull fools suppose,
 But musical as is Apollo's lute,
 And a perpetual feast of nectar'd sweets,
 Where no crude surfeit reigns.⁴

This doxology to Philosophy identifies the study as a charming goddess, a musical instrument, and a perfectly balanced, perpetual feast of sweets. To put the matter more

² cf. Lines 408-412.

³ cf. Lines 418-459.

⁴ Lines 476-480.

clearly, the brothers attribute sensuous/empirical attributes to *reason*, effectively placing sensory experiences beneath the *divine* goddess Philosophy, or Ratiocination.

In stark contrast to the Second Brother's doxological outburst, the narrator of Lamia describes Philosophy as "cold" and oppressive. We read:

Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings,
Conquer all mysteries by rule and line.
Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine --
Unweave a rainbow, as it erewhile made
The tender-person'd Lamia melt into a shade.⁵

Here, it is important to note that the word *shade* is carefully chosen by Keats, as it echoes the narrator's earlier description of Lycius' loss of phantasy, "where *reason fades/ In the calm'd twilight of Platonic shades.*"⁶ It also echoes Lycius' lament at the thought of Lamia leaving him:

So sweetly to these ravish'd ears of mine
Came thy sweet greeting, that if thou shouldst fade
*Thy memory will waste me to a shade...*⁷

Keats subverts the commonplace philosophical assumption that what is real is not the *sensuous/empirical* but the *rational/ideal*. It seems that Keats is purposefully identifying *reminiscence/recollection* as a tool that is destructive of knowing about, as well as relating to, human existence.

Lycius, in contradistinction to the Lady's Brothers, privileges the sensuous/empirical. Keats does not differentiate between the real world of immaterial ideas and the false world of physical/shadowy things (as the Lady's Brothers do), but between the multiplicity of real physical worlds and the shadowy realm of memories and philosophical ideation that leads to the destruction of life.

⁵ Part II, Lines 234-238.

⁶ Part I, Lines 235-236.

⁷ Part I, Lines 268-270.

Morality: Dogmatic or Relative?

Significantly, the Lady's Brothers demonstrate that Philosophy, the tool by which the two calmly evaluate whether or not their sister is safe, is intimately connected to morality. More clearly, they demonstrate that the necessary consequence of their sister's chastity is her safety. According to the laws of deductive inference, the Lady's Chastity will keep her safe. The Elder Brother argues:

She that has [chastity] is clad in steel,
 And like a quiver'd Nymph with Arrows keen
 May trace huge Forests, and unharbour'd Heaths,
 Infamous Hills, and sandy perilous wildes,
 Where through the sacred rayes of Chastity,
 No savage fierce, Bandite, or mountaineer
 Will dare to soyl her Vigin purity

[...]

Hence had the huntress Dian her dred bow
 Fair silver-shafted Queen for ever chaster,
 Wherewith she tam'd the brindled lioness
 ...but set at nought
 The frivolous bolt of Cupid, gods and men
 Fear'd her stern frown, and she was queen oth' Woods.
 What was that snaky-headed Gorgon shield
 That wise Minerva wore, unconquer'd Virgin,
 Wherewith she freez'd her foes to congeal'd stone?

But rigid looks of Chast austerity,
 And noble grace that dash't brute violence
 With sudden adoration, and blank aw.⁸

The argument runs as follows:

If a woman is chaste, then she will be safe.
 The Lady is Chaste.
 Therefore, the Lady will be safe.

The examples of Diana and Minerva, let us note, are a concession to the Second Brother's uneasiness, as is evident from the Elder Brother's own words:

⁸ Lines 442-453.

Do you believe me yet, or shall I call
 Antiquity from the old Schools of Greece
 To testify the arms of Chastity?⁹

This rationalistic deduction of the Lady's safety from the axiom "All Chaste women are safe from forest dangers" stands in direct contrast to the relativistic morality that appears in *Lamia*. Nevertheless, Keats' presentation of morality as relative to individual experience over time is derived from his fundamental assumption that knowledge of the world is gained via abstraction from raw sensory data/experiences. "Had Lycius liv'd to hand his story down," the narrator explains, "he might have given the moral a *fresh* frown/Or clench'd it quite: but too short was their bliss..."¹⁰ Moral perspectives, accordingly, are presented as the products of individual experience, experiences which also differ from one species of beings (i.e. humans) to another (i.e. gods).¹¹

This is also manifestly the case in Lycius' identification of Apollonius in Part I, Lines 370-377:

"I'm wearied," said fair Lamia: "tell me who
 Is that old man? I cannot bring to mind
 His features: -- Lycius! Wherefore did you blind
 Yourself from his quick eyes?" Lycius replied,
 "'Tis Apollonius sage, my trusty guide
 And good instructor; *but to-night he seems*
The ghost of folly haunting my sweet dreams."

Lycius' context, *viz.* his present interaction with "fair Lamia," transforms Apollonius from a "trusty guide" into "the ghost of *folly*," a being toward which the narrator also later evinces some disdain when he transforms Apollonius the *sage*¹² into Apollonius the *sophist*.¹³

⁹ Lines 438-441.

¹⁰ Part II, Lines 6-8.

¹¹ cf. Part I, Lines 140-145.

¹² cf. Part II, Line 222.

¹³ cf. Part II, Lines 291 & 299.

Conclusion/s

Milton and Keats are very aware of the connection between ontology, epistemology, and ethics. Milton, following a Christian cosmology, believed in only two ontological domains (viz., that of the Creator and that of the creature), a universe that is completely known by God, known to man by revelation, and which, therefore, entails set ethical commitments revealed by God. Keats, whatever his personal philosophical beliefs may have been, valorized an ultimately inscrutable, densely layered universe of material beings, in which knowledge and ethical commitments supervene upon transitory individual experiences. For Milton, there are criteria for differentiating between what is *real* and what is *fictional*, which legitimizes his use of *fiction* as a means of engaging the problem of Truth. For Keats, however, the distinction between appearance and reality is not only tenuous, but dangerous. Thus, fiction cannot be used as a means of engaging the problem of Truth, for there may in fact be neither Truth nor fiction.

Milton's rationalism may or may not be in need of serious modification, but it at least provides criteria by which reality and fiction may be differentiated, which, in turn, grounds his ethical commitments. It preserves, moreover, literature's unique ability to concretize otherwise abstract philosophical discussions by lending them a fictional narrational texture. Unfortunately, Keats' assumption of empiricism, at least in the text of *Lamia*, renders literary fiction not only impotent as a means of engaging the problem of Truth, but, at worst, useless as means of engaging the problem of Truth. The reader may gain the capacity to imagine new worlds, places where ethical commitments vary from person to person, and from experience to experience. What they lose, however, is their capacity for empathizing with Keats when he condemns rationalism as destructive of life.