

**Exploring the boundary between image and reality: *trompe l'oeil*
illusion in Keats and Shakespeare**

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A cathedral ceiling painted to look like the sky, a painting of a man seemingly climbing out of the frame, a faux sculpture on the facade of a building that appears to protrude from the wall—these are what can be considered typical examples of *trompe l'oeil*, an artifice traditionally used by painters to trick the eye into thinking that a realistically painted object is the thing itself. The mode of representation known as *trompe l'oeil* first emerged in the realm of figurative painting, but it has not been used exclusively within the world of the visual arts. Just as a painter can use the visual device of *trompe l'oeil* to blur the distinction between real and unreal, a poet can use a kind of literary *trompe l'oeil* to play with the borders between reality and fiction. Keats and Shakespeare use what might be called a form of *trompe l'oeil* to create images that blur the distinction between real and unreal and lure us into an imaginary world having the appearance of reality. These images not only give the reader a visual experience comparable to traditional *trompe l'oeil* illusionism, but provide an opportunity for Shakespeare and Keats to negotiate the tension between reality and fiction and thus express their aesthetic concerns. *Antony and Cleopatra* (1607-8) and *Lamia* (1820), for instance, conjure up visually sharp images of reality that serve as a point of departure for a reflection on the relationship between the realistic and the figurative.¹ This reflection is further developed in *The Tempest* (1610) and *Ode on a Grecian Urn* (1820), where Shakespeare and Keats call into question the nature of representation itself.

The peculiar effect of *trompe l'oeil* illusionism is explored in Jacques Lacan's series of lectures, "Of the Gaze as *Objet Petit A*". "What is it", Lacan asks in a lecture delivered on 11th March 1964, "that attracts and satisfies us in *trompe-l'oeil*? What is it that captures our attention and delights us?"² Lacan answers that it is the peculiar effect that *trompe l'oeil* has on our mind. On one hand, a painting in *trompe l'oeil* invites us to take pleasure in a perfect imitation of nature, appealing to our sense of sight with its representation of an object so true to life that it tricks one into the illusion that it is real. On the other hand, the painting also awakens in us a certain sense of uneasiness, because when we discover that the object it portrays is nothing but an illusion, we are forced to acknowledge that any representation of nature based on imitation is inadequate compared to the thing itself. Keats and Shakespeare use what might be considered a form of *trompe-l'oeil* to express similar concerns about the nature of representation. The question of representation is broached in *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Lamia*, where Shakespeare and Keats conjure up visually sharp images of reality that conflate the realistic and the figurative. When Cleopatra contemplates the humiliation and disgrace she will have to endure if Octavian takes her back to Rome as his trophy, she gives the audience an extremely realistic account of the imaginary play that will be played at their return:

¹ All quotations from Shakespeare's works are from *The Arden Shakespeare Third Series Complete Works* (2021) ed. William, Ann Thompson

All quotations from Keats's works are from John Keats, *Complete Poems* (2019)

² Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, (1978), p. 112

The quick comedians
Extemporally will stage us and present
Our Alexandrian revels. Antony
Shall be brought drunken forth, and I shall see
Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness
I' th' posture of a whore. (5.2.210-7)

Cleopatra's playhouse metaphor draws attention to itself as a daring moment of self-reflexive theatricality. First, because the actor playing Cleopatra would have been himself a boy with a squeaky voice like one of the "quick comedians" that Cleopatra fears will "stage" her "in th' posture of a whore". Second, because what Cleopatra fears is exactly what Shakespeare's audience has witnessed in the course of the play—the "Alexandrian revels" played at Antony and Cleopatra's exotic feast in Act 1, and "drunken Antony" making a fool of himself at Pompey's dinner party in Act 2. These two factors complicate the whole scene imagined in Cleopatra's mind and help Shakespeare call attention to the contrast between theatrical illusion and stage reality, reminding his audience that behind Cleopatra's imaginary Roman puppet-play is his own play. This allows Shakespeare to turn Cleopatra's theatrical vignette into what might be considered an example of literary *trompe l'oeil*: just as an object painted in *trompe l'oeil* appears to come forward, standing out from the material surface of the painting, so too Cleopatra's speech appears to protrude from the verbal surface of the play, blurring the distinction between the real and the unreal. To phrase this idea differently, Shakespeare's use of the artifice of the play within the play in this scene is reminiscent of the use of overstepped frames in a work of *trompe l'oeil*. Like a painter can use a series of overstepped frames in a *trompe l'oeil* painting to draw the viewer into a fictive pictorial space that creates the optical illusion that it is real, Shakespeare uses the play within the play to lure us into a secondary world that can be taken, at least during the reading, for real. Shakespeare's use of *trompe l'oeil* imagery in Act 5 Scene 2 of *Antony and Cleopatra* can be likened to Keats's use of imaginative frames in the middle of *Lamia*. A serpent disguised as a beautiful woman, Lamia seduces a mortal youth, Lycius, weaving around him a magic spell that allows her to take on a human shape to deceive him:

Let the mad poets say whate'er they please
Of the sweets of Faeries, Peris, Goddesses,
There is not such a treat among them all,
Haunters of cavern, lake, and waterfall,
As a real woman, lineal indeed
From Pyrrha's pebbles or old Adam's seed. (I.328-33)

Keats's narrator here takes a step back from Lamia's temptation of Lucius to weave into the narrative a little aside about poetry. "Whatever fanciful poets might say", Keats declares in this aside, "there's no poem like a real live woman". When taken on its own, this seems like a fairly straightforward claim about the relationship between real women and imaginary ones. However, there are at least two troublesome implications that complicate such claim when the passage is taken against the background of the poem as a whole. First, the narrator dismisses

what “the mad poets” have to say about imaginary female figures such as fairies, Peris, and goddesses in favour of “a real woman” because he wants to distinguish himself from more fanciful poets who seem to be irrationally infatuated with mythological creatures—yet much of what is contained in the poem undermines this attitude since Keats often indulges in precisely the kind of aesthetic idealisation he dislikes about fanciful poets. Second, he puts great emphasis on the idea that poets ought to praise real women over mythological creatures, but the more he insists that real women are preferable to poetic fictions, the more he calls attention to the fact that Lamia herself is not “real woman”, but a poetic fiction. Indeed, the most disturbing aspect about this passage is perhaps what John Blades describes as “Keats’s conjuring of the ‘real’ in a context where the whole force of the narrative is dominated by the insecurity of the ‘woman’s form’ inhabited by Lamia”.³ The insecurity surrounding Lamia’s supernatural identity—who is described alternately as a “snake” (I.88), a “serpent” (I.113), a “lady” (I.171), and a “maid” (I.185)—allows Keats to situate his poem within an imagery fictional world that creates an illusion of depth similar to the space of a *trompe l’oeil* painting. Just as a *trompe l’oeil* painting tricks the audience into thinking that what one sees is reality when in fact it is a representation within a representation, so does Keats cast his poem into a series of imaginative frames that almost lead him to reverse the usual relationship between the imagined and the real. The relationship between the imagined and the real is subject for reflection in Prospero’s speech on the revels in *The Tempest*, where Shakespeare gives us an even more provocative example of literary *trompe l’oeil*:

We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep. (4.1.156-8)

Coming out of the curtain and appearing on stage, Prospero concludes the masque in celebration of Ferdinand and Miranda’s engagement with a meditation upon the illusory character of theatrical representation, revealing to the couple that the “revels” played out before their eyes were but an illusion just about to melt into “thin air”. Not unlike Cleopatra’s playhouse metaphor, Prospero’s image is used in reference to more than just the masque played out before Ferdinand and Miranda, it is a comment on the life of Shakespeare’s play, *The Tempest*, and its performance at the Globe—the “great globe itself”, and on human life in the “real” word outside the play. Here, dramatic illusion becomes a metaphor for the fleeting nature of human existence—life is but a dream, and human beings are but the “stuff” dreams are “made on”, or “built of”—just like the characters of Shakespeare’s play are the “stuff” the play is “built on”—“our little life” is not reality but an illusion, a brief dream “rounded with a sleep”. Prospero’s vision of life as the stuff dreams are made on is expression of an attitude toward the illusory character of theatrical representation that we find in *trompe l’oeil* illusionism. As Dabney Townsend argues, one mark of *trompe l’oeil* illusionism is that it is a form of artistry closely associated with paradox: “the paradox of *trompe l’oeil* effects aesthetically is that their aesthetic effect depends on their being recognized as imitations”.⁴ Just as *trompe l’oeil* asks the audience to reevaluate the extent to which it can rely on representation, Prospero’s breaking

³ John Whale, *John Keats* (2004), p. 85

⁴ Dabney Townsend, *The A to Z of Aesthetics* (2010), p. 318

off of the wedding masque, revealing as it does the fictional nature of the dramatic world within which the play itself is framed, brings us up against the equivocal nature of representation. The equivocal nature of representation is central to Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. Contemplating its monumental shape from a distance, Keats's speaker in Stanza I apostrophizes the urn as "Sylvan historian" and thus situates it at a certain remove from us. Then, in Stanza II, we suddenly find ourselves close enough to notice that the sides of the urn are wrapped in layers of descriptive detail that form a kind of *literary trompe l'oeil*:

She cannot fade though thou hast not thy bliss. (19)

The urn is addressed as "Sylvan historian" because it has many carvings along its sides which tell a "flowery tale", a "leaf-fring'd legend" about "marble men and maidens" that will continue to be recited to other generations so long as the urn survives intact. These figures—men and maidens—are caught in a delicate suspense of present and past, their love affair being forever on the point of being enjoyed:

For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,
For ever panting and for ever young. (26-7)

Just as the young lovers are immobilised in the "mad pursuit" of a love that will remain "for ever warm and still to be enjoy'd", the nature depicted on the urn is not transient: the "boughs", for instance, "cannot shed" their leaves "nor ever bid the spring adieu", the "soft pipes", although "unheard", can "play on" forever, and so can the "melodist", who will never grow tired of "piping songs for ever new". So beautiful is this merely imagined sound, that it suggests to Keats's speaker that the unheard music coming from the pipes is far more pleasing than any audible music, because unheard melodies are not affected by time. Here, the verisimilitude of Keats's evocation of "unheard melodies" creates an almost *trompe l'oeil*—or better, *oreille*—effect, confirming Caroline Cass's claim that one characteristic of an example of *trompe l'oeil* is that "it feeds an almost universal desire to escape into a world where fantasy invades the senses".⁵ The paradox involved in this silent urn, this "cold pastoral" being so full of noise—of *piping, panting, breathing*—is made explicit in the final stanza of the poem. In this stanza, Keats's narrator distances himself from the urn again to address it as a "silent form" that teases him out of thought "as doth eternity". "Teasing", here, seems to stand for an outright deception, referring to the ability of the urn—the ability of any work of art—to draw us into a realm of imaginative experience that seems true but cannot be true. For Keats, this paradox is resolved in eternity, as he implies in the enigmatic conclusion of his Ode: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty". Truth is not to be spelled out, according to Keats, it is to be "teased out" of art itself.

Both Keats and Shakespeare incorporate into the pattern of their poetry little pictorial vignettes that illustrate the tension between the world of art and the world of "everyday" life. This tension is negotiated using visual imagery that blurs the distinction between the realistic and the figurative and creates a deceptive, almost *trompe-l'oeil* effect. In doing so, Shakespeare and

⁵ Caroline Cass, *Grand Illusions* (1988), p. 53

Keats point to poetry's ability, just as much as paintings, to deceive. However, *trompe-l'oeil* does more than just deceive. *Anthony and Cleopatra*, *Lamia*, *The Tempest*, and *Ode on a Grecian Urn* are all examples of literary works in which Shakespeare and Keats use the visual device of *trompe l'oeil* to pursue their literary ends and thus call into question the nature of representation.

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