The chameleon poet's delight: Keats' treatment of the serpent tradition in "Lamia"

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THE CHAMELEON POET'S DELIGHT:
KEATS'S TREATMENT OF THE SERPENT TRADITION IN LAMIA

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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Many of the critical problems surrounding Lamia stem from over-allegorization. The serpent-woman figure of myth and tradition possessed overwhelmingly evil characteristics, and this background has influenced readings of Lamia, resulting in comments that Keats was repudiating imaginative poetry and acknowledging the superiority of reason. Keats's treatment of the subject, however, is too subtle for such painless categorization. Keats does not reverse traditional concepts of good and evil in his sympathetic portrayal of Lamia; instead, he illustrates the uncertainty and relativity of reality.

Lamia, the most sympathetically treated character in the poem, is overcome by helplessness despite her temporary dominance of Lycius. Keats portrays her as a misunderstood creature who uses her impressive alluresments to gratify herself, not to destroy Lycius, as is the case in earlier versions of the story. Apollonius, Lamia's antagonist, perceives that she is an illusion and singlemindedly destroys her in spite of Lycius' pleas. Lycius is caught somewhat haplessly between the two powerful forces, yet his action (inviting his friends to the wedding) precipitates the final disaster and his own death.

A major theme of the poem, reality vs. illusion, reflects a shifting philosophical position in the late eighteenth century. Reason alone was becoming mistrusted as a guide for decisions, and an emphasis on feeling marked the Romantic rebellion against the calculation of the intellect-oriented eighteenth century. Keats's letters indicating the inadequacy of reason and the superiority of the imagination reveal the influence of this contemporary attitude.

Even though the more desirable feelings succumb to the superior power of reason in Lamia, Keats is not repudiating them. Instead, he is providing a qualifying warning that all creatures and qualities have mixed characteristics, and that fallible humans must exercise caution in a world without absolutes.
What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the camelion Poet. It does no harm from its relish of the dark side of things any more than from its taste for the bright one; because they both end in speculation.¹

_Lamia_ has puzzled generations of critics because the poem does not offer a coherent, clearly definable explanation of the conflicts within it. W. J. Bate was not exaggerating when he said the meaning of Keats's poem "has perhaps elicited more controversy than any other single problem raised by his verse."² In this poem Keats has distributed his sympathies so evenly that it is difficult to discover where they lie. This situation raises the tempting speculation that he did not know where to place them himself, that the conflicting impulses of his personal life mirrored his ambivalence toward the value of imaginative poetry. But Keats's own high regard for the poem and his close attention to craftsmanship and versification indicate that _Lamia_ involves artistic concerns more substantial than the muddled uncertainty of a divided lover, thinker, and poet. The blurred treatment of the characters in the poem indicates, not the poet's momentary confusion, but his firm opinion, carefully arrived at and uniquely expressed, that no creature or quality is purely good or purely evil.

_Lamia's_ surprises go further than the revelation that appearances can be deceiving. Lamia herself, although accompanied by several thousand years of malignant serpent associations, elicits more sympathy than any other character in the poem. In order to understand Lamia we must separate her from the accumulated influence of her ancestors and observe the ways
in which Keats takes a familiar concept and rearranges it until it is
distinctively his own.

Keats is perhaps the only major writer to endow a serpent-woman with
genuine love for a human and to pass over her malevolent, willfully de­
structive characteristics. The serpent-woman figure was popular with
nineteenth-century English Romantic and post-Romantic writers because
she fit in with a frequent description of the female as a baleful enchant­
ress, and Keats did not neglect this convention entirely. Lamia does
enthrall Lycius and lies to him shamelessly, but her deceit helps her
gain an unexceptionable end: the attentions of the man she loves. Lycius'
death does ultimately result from the fact that she is a serpent, but it
does not occur until an unfeeling magician (who finds the pair because
of Lycius' indiscretion) assumes she is like the rest of her kind and
drives her away.

Keats's unusually benevolent treatment of the serpent-woman dis­
tinguishes Lamia not only from her nineteenth-century peers but from
the entire serpent tradition as well. Although the serpent's symbolic
functions have been legion (cunning, beauty, demonism, fecundity,
seduction, healing, immortality), it induces fear more frequently than
any other response, and is the most common representation of evil in
all countries and all times. Milton's prelapsarian Edenic serpent
receives the most charitable ophidian description in literature, but
even this particular reptile has uncanny intellectual ability: "His
head . . . well stor'd with subtle wiles." Keats was certainly aware
of most of these connotations when he wrote Lamia in the summer of 1819.

Suggested sources for the poem are as plentiful as they are con­
jectural. Keats probably knew Coleridge's Christabel, published in 1816,
and its serpent-woman may have influenced Lamia, although its tone is very different. Other descriptions of serpent-women may have come to Keats through folklore, since Keats was well acquainted with it, and since lamias had been adopted into British tradition. Keats's Lamia shares the quasi-human qualities of the mermaids and nymphs whose popularity had revived during the Romantic period.

Only a few sources for Keats's poem may be definitely established. First there is Burton's account in his Anatomy of Melancholy, adapted from the second century account of Philostratus. This version gives few details of the character of lamias, but Lempriere's Classical Dictionary made additional information available to Keats. Besides a reference to the creatures' classical origins, it provides an interesting description of the sounds lamias make:

They allured strangers to come to them, and though they were not endowed with the faculty of speech, yet their hissings were agreeable.

Keats allowed his lamia to speak while still in her serpent form, a departure from convention prompted by the influence of Milton's Satan-as-serpent in Paradise Lost.

Lamia figures characteristically appear in literature in their human disguises, with only a few traces remaining of their reptilian origins, such as glittering eyes or a scaly part of the body they try to keep hidden. Keats, however, makes Lamia beautiful even while she is a snake, echoing Milton's description of the prelapsarian serpent. Milton's snake, living in a sinless world, has all of its original beauty and has not yet acquired sinister connotations:

Circular base of rising folds, that tow'r'd
Fold above fold a surging Maze, his Head
Crested aloft, and Carbuncle his Eyes;
With burnisht Neck of verdant Gold, erect
Amidst his circling Spires, that on the grass
Floated redundant . . . (ix, 498-503)

Keats's serpent-woman also exists in an earlier age, not necessarily more
innocent but certainly more glorious than recent times, before the "fairy
broods / Drove Nymph and Satyr from the prosperous woods."10 Like the
serpent in Eden, Lamia is beautiful, but inconsistency and paradox mark
her appearance:

She was a gordian shape of dazzling hue,
Vermilion-spotted, golden, green and blue;
Striped like a zebra, freckled like a pard,
eyed like a peacock, and all crimson barred;
And full of silver moons, that, as she breathed,
Dissolved, or brighter shone, or interwreathed
Their lustres with the gloomier tapestries--
So rainbow-sided, touched with miseries,
She seemed, at once, some penanced lady elf,
Some demon's mistress, or the demon's self. (i 47-56)

Is Lamia striped, then freckled, then eyed, then barred, or is she all
four at once? If her character harmonizes with her physical description
she is both a penanced elf and a demon.

The reptile shape offers Keats a perfect vehicle for his illustration of mixed characteristics. Lamia's "cirque-couchant . . . gordian shape" echoes Milton's description of the serpent before Satan entered it: "the serpent sly / Insinuating, wove with Gordian twine / His braided train" (iv 347-349), and reposed "In labyrinth of many a round self-rolled" (ix 183). While Milton's depiction emphasizes the snake's innate craftiness, its head "well stored with subtle wiles," Keats's associations with the Gordian knot imply a complication in Lamia's character. Lamia, unlike the Edenic snake, comes equipped with a knowledge of good and evil, and even though she can "unperplex bliss from its neighbor pain," she cannot separate the good and evil within herself; they are tangled inextricably.
This combination of good and evil provides the most striking distinction between Lamia and Milton's serpent. The snake in Eden, itself innocent, becomes the tool of a purely diabolical force, motivated by revenge:

Nor hope to be myself less miserable
By what I seek, but other to make such
As I, though thereby worse to me redound:
For only in destroying I find ease
To my relentless thoughts . . . (ix 126-130)

Lamia (according to her own account), is a woman with genuine human emotions trapped within a serpent body, and this time the snake is not a perfect part of a perfect idyll; it is associated with evil. Like Satan, Lamia is fallen, but while he tries to induce others to fall she tries to regain her innocent state. Keats delighted in the reversal of the expected, the attribution of acceptable intentions to an apparently sinister figure. This characterization of Lamia enables the development of a corresponding idea: the work of a conventionally accepted "good" force may result in destruction.

Disparities between the two serpent figures, not to mention the fact that Milton's snake is male and Lamia is female, would seem to indicate a lack of common origins for the two poems. But Milton was very much aware of the serpent-woman tradition. Many of his non-Biblical sources depict the Edenic serpent as a woman's body from the waist up attached to a snake; Andreini's "L'Adamo" uses a female serpent to entice Eve, and this female figure appears frequently in medieval and Renaissance paintings of the Fall, including works by Raphael and Michelangelo. Artists used the female serpent figure because of the tradition that Lilith, Adam's first wife, wanted revenge on her
replacement, Eve, and she and Satan decided together that a female could catch Eve off guard and make temptation easier.

In order to understand fully the nature of the serpent-woman it is necessary to go to the earliest records of her, earlier than the Judeo-Christian version of Lilith. At each stage of her development she acquires additional evil characteristics until she becomes the thoroughly malevolent creature in the original tale of Lamia and Lycius. The serpent-woman Lilith developed from the Babylonian demoness Lilitu, derived from Sumerian lil, or "wind." This wind-demoness, or night-demoness, enticed men in their sleep. The Jews, during their Babylonian captivity beginning in the seventh century, B.C., became acquainted with this myth and adopted it into their own religion. According to Talmudic tradition, Lilith was Adam's first wife, but quarreled with Adam until she was dismissed from Eden. Later she gave birth to demons, conspired with Satan regarding the temptation of Eve, and vented her jealousy against mothers by devouring their children in the night. But with these added characteristics from Jewish mythology, Lilith retained her original reputation as a seductress and destroyer of men.

Lamia is an evil spirit of similar character and vintage. Originally appearing in the texts of the First Babylonian dynasty, Lamashtu or Lam-me-a was associated with the goddess Ishtar and had a reputation for killing children and devouring men. She may have acquired serpent characteristics due to confusion with Lilith, but received her own ophidian identification from classical mythology. According to the Greeks, who named her Lamia, she was a beautiful immortal woman who caught Zeus's eye. The ever-jealous Hera gained her revenge by turning Lamia into a serpent and causing all her children to be stillborn. Lamia, driven to desperation,
expressed her misery by eating other people's children and eventually turned to fattening up and devouring young men. Since then she has always been bound in the dual nature of woman and serpent.  

The similarities between Lamia and Lilith led to confusion between the two, until they become interchangeable. The Jews incorporated Lamia characteristics in their Lilith figure, and Christianity displayed a corresponding lack of distinction between the two. Lamia's entry into British folklore provided her with some less baleful associations, but her earlier and overwhelming characteristics were primarily evil.

Philostratus was not the first to write down the lamia story that Keats eventually used. Similar stories of a serpent-woman in love with a man and opposed by a scholar-antagonist have appeared in India, Armenia, Afghanistan, and Persia. Nai-tung Ting hypothesizes that they all came from a didactic religious tale in Central Asia around the time of Christ. His proposed archetype reads:

A man meets a beautiful girl in the country. She claims to be from a good family, and he takes her home. They live together very happily; but she is in fact a snake-woman, and he becomes somewhat ill. Then one of the holy men he has met tells him that he is living with a lamia and, in order to convince the incredulous husband, suggests that the latter use a trick to cause her to reveal her original form. The trick works and the husband is taught by the divine to destroy her with fire. When she cannot escape, she pleads for mercy and accuses the holy man of harboring sinister design. . . . Her husband henceforth lives like a recluse.

In this version, the lamia's professions of love are false, and she fattens up her lover so she can eat him. Her vampire-like actions make him sick-looking. After his narrow escape the man admits his error and turns away from further temptation.

Apollonius' version of the story, and Philostratus' later retelling of it, reflect a similar didactic purpose. Philostratus was a neo-
Pythagorean, intent on promoting the philosophy personified by Apollonius. He makes it clear that Lamia is an undesirable creature; she feeds on young men habitually. Apparently able to assume human shape of her own accord, she was beautiful to look at, in a particularly voluptuous style, and gave herself out for wealthy. But this was all show, and in reality she was no such thing: as presently appeared.

Apollonius, the undisputed hero, finally exposes the lamia and saves his disciple, Menippius the Lycian, but the story did not become popular. Neo-Pythagoreanism disappeared and Apollonius drew criticism from certain thinkers in the medieval Christian world, which was wary of his magical powers, and which had relegated reason and philosophy to the devil.

It is not surprising, then, that Robert Burton retold Philostratus' story with a different emphasis. Burton, unlike Philostratus, did not sympathize with Apollonius. His anti-philosophical bias shows throughout The Anatomy of Melancholy. Burton gives no indication that Lamia intended to eat Lycius; she is an illusion that succeeds in getting Lycius to give himself up to pure passion. When Apollonius makes his accusation, she weeps and pleads for him to be silent, whereas in the Philostratus account she mocks the philosopher in a manner suitable to a murderess without a conscience. Since Burton did not accept Apollonius as the deserving victor, he neglected to mention that Lycius repented and returned to his teacher. Instead, Burton leaves him with his shattered illusion of love and presumably an unwillingness to return to the man who had forced him to recognize unpleasant reality.

Keats departs from the original version even more by elaborating on the feelings of Lycius. He makes Lycius culpable for the final disaster by admitting the outside world against Lamia's will, and he includes Lycius'
death at the end. Thus, by the time the Philostratus account filters down to the nineteenth century, its message has changed completely. No clear-cut victory is possible because no one deserves a victory. Lamia is an illusion; Lycius is a victim of pride and passion; Apollonius is unfeeling. Each has developed from the original allegorical representations of lust, passion and reason to more complex, realistic characters. Each seems fated to carry out a certain course of action and powerless to alter the outcome.

Lamia's helplessness shows from the beginning. Traditional lamia figures were able to assume human shape at will, but Keats's Lamia cannot free herself from her serpent prison-house. This raises the possibility that she is telling the truth when she says she was a woman once. Perhaps a being more powerful than she sentenced her to a snake's body for punishment or for revenge, as Hera does in the classical story. Whatever the cause, Lamia did not become a snake of her own accord, because she has to have divine help—the stroke of Hermes' caduceus—to escape from her reptilian jail.

The question of whether Lamia is essentially a snake or essentially a woman is never fully answered, but she retains elements of both creatures. Even while a serpent at the beginning of the poem, she has human characteristics. In addition to her husky, seductive voice, she has a woman's mouth. Her eyes are much too beautiful to be relegated to a snake: "what could such eyes do there / But weep, and weep, that they were born so fair, / As Proserpine still weeps for her Sicilian air?" Just as Proserpine is unable to leave Hades and return to her home, Lamia is unable to get free from the sinister connotations of her serpent self. Her reptilian form is beautiful—more beautiful than any snake
ever known to man—but its metallic Byzantine gaudiness implies seduction, not the beauty of innocence. Her "Circean" head suggests similarity to the beautiful, dangerous witch of the Odyssey. This is not the only reference to the demonic; Lamia's metamorphosis, aided by her madly running elvin blood, resembles descriptions of the final stages of demonic possession. The destruction of her showy finery and the pain that accompanies it seem to consume her serpent nature entirely, but a snakelike characteristic appears at least once in the remainder of the poem, in the expression of her eyes when she seduces Lycius: "if her eyes could brighter be, / With brighter eyes . . . " (i 292-293). And Lamia is a "cruel lady," with no regard for Lycius' love-sickness. This characteristic may indicate the continued presence of a baleful part of her, or it may merely demonstrate the results of love-melancholy explained by Burton: the tendency of human beings to act like animals when they become victims of love.26

Whether or not Lamia retains the actively evil part of her snakehood, she keeps the knowledge of good and evil that she had acquired. Her "sciental brain" and her knowledge of "love deep learned to the red heart's core" after becoming a woman indicate a depth of awareness perhaps centuries, certainly more than hours, in the making. The fact that some part of Lamia's demonic nature hovers about her is inescapable, but Stevenson goes too far when he says she retains her essentially demonic nature because "she was a maid / More beautiful than ever twisted braid."27 Lamia's qualities are too mixed to be termed essentially demonic.

One of Lamia's unattractive traits is her dishonesty. Confident that she has Lycius under control from the moment he first looks at her, she tells him she is a goddess, then that she is a mere mortal, shifting
from one role to another with ease (made easier by Lycius' failure to perceive the change). Keats indicates the degree of seriousness which he applies to Lamia's dishonesty here by making this section the most comic part of the poem. First Lamia pouts:

... 'If I should stay,'
Said Lamia, 'here, upon this floor of clay,
And pain my steps upon these flowers too rough,
What canst thou say or do of charm enough
To dull the nice remembrance of my home? (i 271-275)

Then she stimulates both Lycius' ego and her own by implying that she is a goddess. She refers to her "many senses" and "hundred thirsts," hinting that along with her more-than-human demands she will deliver more-than-human satisfaction. Lycius, sure that this purveyor of other-worldly bliss can never be his (and perhaps afraid that if she were, he wouldn't know what to do) swoons away. Lamia realizes that her wiles have worked too well. Aware that his fear of inadequacy would ruin their relationship, she hurriedly assures him that she is just a woman: "Lycius could not love in half a fright, / So threw the goddess off, and won his heart / More pleasantly by playing woman's part" (i 335-337). Now that their station is nearly equal, Lycius can overcome his passion-deadening awe.

Later in the poem Lamia engages in deception that brings more serious consequences; it hastens the demise of her relationship with Lycius. Lycius inquires about her parentage, hoping to make her seem as human as possible by proclaiming her name to his friends and inviting her family to the wedding celebration. When Lamia replies that she has no friends, and that all her parents' "luckless race are dead, save me," she could be telling the truth. She could be the last of her race, but she neglects to mention that hers is not a race of mortals but one that
is generally immortal. Realizing her true nature is in danger of becoming apparent, she pretends to fall asleep. This ploy gets her out of trouble for a time, but assures the end of their love affair.

Although Lamia takes unfair advantage of Lycius, the narrator does not rebuke her actions. Her first speech destroys "all pain but pity" in the gentle heart:

'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)

Lamia knows what she is missing, because although she is imprisoned within her serpent body, her spirit is free to travel, and it was during one of these journeys that the invisible wallflower had fallen in love with Lycius. (This bit of information comes from the narrator, not Lamia herself, which adds to her credibility when she tells Hermes she loves Lycius.)

Lamia's suffering forms another part of the author's sympathetic treatment. She experiences intense pain when she metamorphoses into a woman. Much later, she feels a different kind of pain, the pain Lycius inflicts when he decides to show Lamia to his friends. Lamia realizes she cannot make Lycius change his mind, and she is aware that no good will come from the celebration:

And knowing surely she could never win His foolish heart from its mad pompousness, She set herself, high-thoughted, how to dress The misery in fit magnificence. (ii 113-116)

She seems to be trying to keep her thoughts from impending disaster.

The frailty of Lamia's existence ties in with her helplessness:

A haunting music, sole perhaps and lone Supportress of the fairy-room made moan Throughout, as fearful the whole charm might fade. (ii 122-124)
With all the preparations made, Lamia has nothing to do and her nervousness increases: "Lamia, regal dressed, Silently paced about . . . In pale contented sort of discontent" (ii 133-135). Any outside intrusion threatens her existence: "ready for the revels rude, / When dreadful guests would come to spoil her solitude." When the party begins, the narrator prescribes a wreath of willow and adder's tongue, emblems of grief and sorrow, for Lamia's "aching forehead." Unable to say even one word in self-defense, Lamia manages only a feeble, protesting wave of her hand before Apollonius' statement, "A serpent!" induces her scream and her disappearance.

During the course of the action in the poem, Lamia makes a remarkable regression from knowledge to innocence, from control (of Lycius) to helplessness, and from cunning speech to resigned silence. Immediately after her metamorphosis, she seems to be enjoying the best of two worlds: innocence guided by experience. She controls the situation completely. But once an outside threatens her absolute dominion, her self-possession begins to unravel, and her last words are: "do not bid Old Apollonius--from him keep me hid" (ii 100-101). Her extraordinary powers diminish as the threat from outside increases. By making her so pathetically fallible, Keats transforms her from an object of fear to an object of pity. The revengeful, blood-sucking, devouring monster of lamia legend could not be more remote. In fact, Lamia functions in one place to give life, rather than to take it away. Her kiss revives Lycius. It gives "afresh / The life she had so tangled in her mesh," unlike the kisses of lamias in earlier tales, who made their victims noticeably weak and sick-looking before they devoured them. Such unusual treatment of a stock folklore character indicates the degree of Keats's
sympathy toward Lamia. It is true that Keats picked up a great deal of information about baleful women on his walking tour of Scotland and in his reading of English folklore, and he explored some of these baleful qualities in "La Belle Dame sans Merci." But Lamia's baleful aspects are potential, not actual. Her relationship with Lycius is doomed because of those potential qualities as understood by Apollonius, not because of any active attempt at destruction on her part.

The description near the end of the poem—"poor Lamia," "no longer fair"—evokes pity and avoids condemnation. The narrator scolds Lycius, not Lamia, for providing Apollonius with the opportunity to destroy them both. Like Lamia, Lycius is characterized by helplessness. His helplessness results from the spell Lamia's beauty casts on him when they first meet. This powerful spell overcomes him immediately and the suggestion of Lamia's absence topples him into semi-consciousness. Even after Lamia promises to stay, Lycius never fully regains consciousness: "And as he from one trance was wakening into another . . . " (i 296-297), "Lycius from death awoke into amaze . . . Then from amaze into delight he fell" (i 322-324). Lycius recognizes from the beginning that Lamia's beauty transcends the realm of humanity, and when he gives himself up to the illusion that she is human, reality becomes unreal and realism becomes sinister: "'Tis Apollonius sage, my trusty guide / And good instructor; but tonight he seems / The ghost of folly haunting my sweet dreams'." (i 375-377).

Because Lycius possesses no superhuman powers, he can share neither Apollonius' unwavering allegiance to reality and the future nor Lamia's total surrender to illusion and the present. He obviously prefers Lamia's alternative, but cannot make his exclusive devotion permanent; the
Corinthian trumpets leave a thought behind in his head, and "His spirit passed beyond its golden bourne / Into the noisy world almost forsworn" (ii 32-33). At this point a reversal begins in the roles of Lamia and Lycius, as Lamia sees him slipping from her grasp: "... she began to moan and sigh / Because he mused beyond her, knowing well / That but a moment's thought is passion's passing-bell" (ii 37-39). When they first met, Lamia trapped Lycius in her gordian complexity—"The life she had so tangled in her mesh"—and now Lycius claims a similar role: "I am striving ... How to entangle, trammel up and snare / Your soul in mine, and labyrinth you there" (ii 50-53). Lamia's superiority in the beginning made her cruelty possible; Lycius becomes similarly cruel when he assumes the superior role. Cruelty, a quality not unexpected in a serpent-woman, comes to Lycius as part of a second self, an unadmirable self:

Besides, for all his love, in self-despite,  
Against his better self, he took delight  
Luxurious in her sorrows, soft and new.  
His passion, cruel grown, took on a hue  
Fierce and sanguineous as 'twas possible  
In one whose brow had no dark veins to swell.  
(ii 72-77)

Lycius accompanies the "mad pompousness" of his "foolish heart" with a serpent-like characteristic; he is "stung, Perverse" by Lamia's sorrow.

The tone of the narrator indicates that he takes Lycius' faults more seriously than Lamia's. The comic results of Lamia's dishonesty and cruelty find no counterpart in the results of Lycius' cruelty and pride. The narrator both scolds and warns Lycius: "O senseless Lycius! Madman! Wherefore flout / The silent-blessing fate, warm cloistered hours, / And show to common eyes these secret bowers?" (ii 147-149). The narrator never blames Lycius for giving himself up to illusion, but
does condemn him for exposing Lamia to the public. The Corinthians' uncouthness and inability to appreciate beauty (particularly evident in canceled passages from early drafts) desecrates the "secret bowers" of the palace, and their presence gives Apollonius the opportunity to get inside. Lycius' illusion harms no one as long as he keeps it to himself, but he precipitates disaster when he chooses to have a public wedding.

In earlier versions of this tale, Lycius admits the error of his ways and returns to Apollonius' philosophic fold. But for Keats's Lycius, no desirable alternative exists. His human nature makes it impossible to maintain the conditions necessary for the permanent impermanence that life with Lamia demands, and he can never again be satisfied as a disciple of Apollonius. Lycius' attempt to live in both his world and Lamia's inevitably leads to his death. His impulsive prediction when he first meets Lamia—"Even as thou vanishest so shall I die"—comes true.

The actions of Apollonius contribute to the inevitability of the tragedy as do those of Lamia and Lycius, but the magician's actions result from singlemindedness, not helplessness. He can react to situations only from his standpoint as a logician. According to tradition, Apollonius possessed superhuman powers of magic and exorcism. These traits seem odd when associated with a philosopher who personifies mechanical precision of thought, but scientific reasoning did not always have its present connotations of objectivity. In early Christian tradition, reason was the realm of the devil, whose reliance on wisdom opposed Christ's reliance on faith. Thus it would be appropriate to attach demonic traits to a philosopher, whose endeavors were regarded by the medieval church as the forbidden fruit of human reason. This
attitude is not apparent in the account of Philostratus, who was of the philosophers' party (and knew it), but it surfaces in Burton's version. The dark origins of Apollonius' power give Burton and Keats the opportunity to point out the power and destructiveness of pure reason.

Apollonius' first appearance in the poem is the best indication of his real function, before he acquires all the traits Lycius hysterically ascribes to him at the end. When Lycius enters Corinth with Lamia he trembles at the sight of Apollonius, not because Apollonius looks sinister, but because he represents calm, clear-eyed deliberation: "Slow-stepped, and robed in philosophic gown." His judicial bearing indicates the relentlessness with which he will face Lycius if he sees him. Apollonius' immutability chills rather than reassures. As he approaches the wedding-feast, uninvited, he remains unimpressed by the splendor of the palace. He continues in his customary contemplative gait and laughs, reveling in his accuracy, even before he sees Lamia. The ostentatious trappings have given him enough of a clue to figure out what Lycius has been doing. Now Apollonius is the one with the "scientific brain." He has untangled the "knotty problem." He has sorted out the complications of the situation and through the power of his own reason he will begin "to thaw, / And solve and melt" the problem, just as he will eventually dispatch Lamia.

The laughter of Apollonius contains no joy, and he apparently derives no comfort from his cynicism. The wreath that the narrator wants to give him ("Let spear-grass and the spiteful thistle wage / War on his temples," ) seems appropriate to a mind never at rest. Apollonius does not join in the revelry, but sets about his task with cold precision and fixes his eyes on Lamia. When Lycius realizes what is
happening, he screams out wildly, calling Apollonius a "foul dream," a "ruthless man," a "gray-beard wretch," and tells the Corinthians to notice his "lashless eyelids" and "demon eyes." Here the reversal of Lycius' earlier values is apparent. Nothing in the narrator's description indicates that Apollonius' appearance has changed; he is just as deliberate as he has always been. His calm, unblinking stare destroys Lycius' only reason for living, and Lycius sees Apollonius as a sinister, even snake-like creature.

At this point the singlemindedness of Apollonius reveals his failure to comprehend that for Lycius, illusion is reality. Apollonius sees his carefully tutored disciple turning away from philosophy and claims to have saved him from destruction:

... 'From every ill
Of life have I preserved thee to this day,
And shall I see thee made a serpent's prey?' (ii 296-298)

Apollonius behaves just as blindly as the others have. Lamia, in her blindness, lies to get what she wants, but Apollonius, in his blindness, murders Lycius. Reason is more powerful (eventually) than passion, and reality is more powerful than illusion. It is capable of doing more harm, therefore, much in the same way that some traditional accounts of the Fall place more blame upon Adam than Eve. Adam, representing reason, consciously chose to sin, but Eve, representing passion, was seduced by the serpent and was tricked into her mistake. If reason is the most powerful human force, it can become the most powerful destructive force. The agent of destruction in this poem administers the death-gaze in a manner appropriate only to a serpent: "Like a sharp spear, went through her utterly, / Keen, cruel, perceant, stinging." In yet another departure from the expected, the "serpent" receives the blow instead of dealing it.
Not one of the characters in Lamia may be labeled with a "good" or "evil" allegorical tag. Each exhibits too many contrary characteristics to be termed villainous or heroic. But each is rendered incapable of balanced judgment by a kind of blindness; Lamia's passion, Lycius' pride and self-love, and Apollonius' heartless logic all contribute to the insolubility of the tangle in the poem. Romantics believed that feeling was superior to reason, but feeling, however desirable it may be in this poem, cannot exist under the withering influence of philosophy. The mixtures of qualities here are not simple reversals; they are complications, hazy indistinctions, and they indicate "a universe in which all absolutes have been relativized."33

A definite boundary between reality and illusion does not exist. Apollonius proves Lamia is an illusion, but illusion has become reality for Lycius. This conception of reality marked the transition in philosophy that took place in Europe in the late eighteenth century. Flux and change characterized empiricism, precluding absolutes, and Kant sought to prove that reality is forever unknowable to the intellect.34 Thus Apollonius cannot provide an adequate standard of reference. Lamia, whether she represents love or poetry or some other art, remains inadequate for the demands of life.

By contrast, Hermes and the nymph live in an immutable world and possess the potential to experience love completely. Their world makes no distinction between reality and illusion:

\begin{quote}
It was no dream; or say a dream it was,  
Real are the dreams of Gods, and smoothly pass  
Their pleasures in a long immortal dream. (i 126-128)
\end{quote}

Wasserman contends that the Hermes-nymph and Lamia-Lycius episodes illustrate the failure of the poem as a thematic narrative, since they do not seem
to be connected, but Keats apparently felt it necessary to present an example of the ideal to contrast with the earthly. Lycius exceeds himself when he tries to achieve the ideal, something past the bounds of what he can obtain legitimately. He cannot desert his human heritage and lift himself into a long immortal dream. Any disjunction between the two parts of the poem reinforces the disjunction between mortals and immortals.

The difficulties caused by the conflicts within the poem represent the difficulties Keats observed in his own world. Keats developed his personal method of dealing with the problem of good and evil, unlike the orthodox view that would have condemned Lamia's passion. But Keats's system also differed from the Romantic vision of Blake in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Blake says Christianity has presented good and evil in the reverse of the way they are:

> Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from Energy. ... Energy is the only life and is from the Body and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy. Energy is Eternal Delight.

This clearly stated definition did not exist for Keats. If it had, *Lamia* would be a much easier poem. Lamia would have been exalted as the personification of Energy, of Eternal Delight, of everything Blake would have called good. But Keats saw weaknesses in both sides. He would have qualified either the unstinted criticism of passion by the religions or the unstinted praise of passion by Blake. For Keats, good and evil could not be distilled into exclusive samples of one or the other, and passion could not triumph over reason. Every creature contains a mixture of both traits. Bernice Slote states that this principle explains the meaning of *Lamia*:
To be absorbed into the dichotomies, the tragic involvements of opposing life-elements that are shown in Lamia, is to erect a new body of the imagination, and the difficulties that many have found in the "meaning" of the poem and in Keats's personal position in the conflict can be resolved if one remembers his total conception of the poetic character, his own acceptance of life on its dual terms, and his growing tendency toward the actual use of drama as the fulfillment of the imagination. Lamia is a quarrel in which every element has both light and shade; in which somebody and yet, eventually, nobody wins. 38

Elaborating on the ambivalence of the figures in the poem, Patterson detects a resemblance between Keatsian characters like Lamia and the Greek daemons in Plato's dialogues:

These daemons were conceived to be suprasensible and supra-human creatures intermediate between gods and men, at times messengers between them, at times agents of the gods in their relationships with men. . . . Belonging neither to the world of mortals nor to the world of the gods these daemons were outside the pale of human limitations of any kind--moral, physical, social, or legal--and therefore were neutral creatures, neither good nor bad, neither moral or immoral. 39

In this climate of relativity, final judgments of the moral worth of the characters are impossible.

This world of light and shade was not the product of Keats's temporarily unsettled state in the summer of 1819. In early 1818 he noted that even the most admirable people display mixed characteristics:

The best of Men have but a portion of good in them--a kind of spiritual yeast in their frames which creates the ferment of existence--by which a Man is propell'd to act and strive and buffet with Circumstance. The sure way Bailey, is first to know a Man's faults, and then be passive, if after that he insensibly draws you towards him then you have no Power to break the link. (Letters, I, 210)

Human fallibility wipes away assurance and leaves doubt remaining. Speculation does not ripen into certainty because the Romantic age lies in the darkening Chamber of Maiden-Thought. Keats speaks for his peers as well as himself ("We are now in that state"): 
This Chamber of Maiden Thought becomes gradually darken'd and at the same time on all sides of it many doors are set open—but all dark—all leading to dark passages—We see not the ballance of good and evil. We are in a Mist—... We feel the "burden of the Mystery." (Letters, I, 281)

In the darkening chamber, where good and evil cannot be distinguished, moral absolutes cannot be safely applied and personal judgments become necessary. Equally subjective attention must be given to the question of reality vs. illusion, because the intellect may not be depended upon as an accurate guide to reality: "Nothing ever becomes real till it is experienced" (Letters, II, 81). The inconsistent standard of experience means that one man's reality may be another man's illusion.

With the subjectivity of reality established, the imagination becomes the guiding force:

I am the more zealous in this affair [the imagination] because I have never yet been able to perceive how any thing can be known for truth by consequitive reasoning... (Letters, I, 185)

The poet with Negative Capability will understand the inadequacy of reason and accept the continual presence of uncertainty:

I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason—Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge. (Letters, I, 192-194)

Many of the problems in the interpretation of Lamia result from the impositions of readers not content with half knowledge. The deeply embedded didactic elements of the original story of Lamia and Apollonius coupled with the traditional concept of the malevolent, parasitic serpent woman too often encourage a kindred interpretation of Keats's poem. Conventional artistic considerations demand a resolution of the tensions, but Keats offers none because for him there is no resolution. Some studies of
Keats's life during the period he wrote Lamia have yielded declarations that Keats was writing chiefly on poetry, even that he uses this poem to repudiate his earlier preference for imaginative poetry. Undoubtedly Lamia owes a great deal to both Fanny Brawne and Keats's concept of the relation between poet and poetry, but each serves as a means of illustration rather than an end in itself. Moreover, the poem is not a repudiation or acknowledgement of cheap deception on Lamia's part; if it were, Apollonius would retain his neo-Pythagorean role as the high-minded savior who knows what is best for everyone.

Rather than a repudiation, Keats's attitude in Lamia may be more accurately termed a rational qualification, a leash on the euphoria of immaturity, and an acknowledgement that the mortal's quest for permanence cannot find complete satisfaction. As David Perkins points out, Keats used concrete terms and an oblique approach rather than a personally fashioned dogma of the ideal: "Consequently, one does not find in him a clear-cut or obvious moral interpretation which can be pinned down in the language of abstraction." Caution by the reader must accompany these qualifications by the poet:

In a poem like "Lamia," which challenges the notion of self-evident moralities, we must be prepared to experience purgatory from a point of view at which hell and heaven are at best problematical abstracts. . . . "Lamia" stresses the objectivity of the natural world and explores the causes of man's failure to see the world as it is—multiplex and unfathomable. . . . Both Apollonius and Lyclus—the teacher and the student of philosophy—commit the fallacy of over-restriction by identifying Lamia according to what they presume she is not. Both judge her according to a priori standards of good and evil. Whatever Lamia is, however, her identity is a merger of contraries, making it impossible to classify her under the headings of conventional morality.
Beneath the trappings of *Lamia*, the sophisticated versification, the irony, the cynicism of Burton, the man-about-the-world tone of Byron, the taste for the dramatic carried over from *Otho the Great*, the aim to give the public "a sensation of some sort," lie indications of the maturing quality of Keats's later poetry: imagination tempered by reality.
NOTES

1 John Keats, The Letters of John Keats, ed. Hyder Rollins (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), I, 387. All subsequent quotations from this edition will be referred to as Letters.


3 Lydia Sandlund, in "The Femme Fatale" (Thesis, William and Mary, 1977) says Lamia is part of a progressive development that culminated in the femme fatale figure at the end of the nineteenth century.

4 Maximilian Rudwin, The Devil in Legend and Literature (Chicago, 1931), p. 43.


6 Critics hypothesize that Christabel influenced Lamia because each poem presents the serpent-woman with a degree of sympathy. The differences between the poems are striking, however: Geraldine's parasitic relationship with Christabel, the ugliness and horror of her serpent characteristics, and her symbolic function as the personification of evil. The distinction between good and evil is much clearer in Christabel than in Lamia.


12 Lilith eventually became a part of Christian tradition in the Middle Ages. The Venerable Bede said Satan decided to use a female form in Eden because "like is attracted to like." Pierre Comestor concluded that the prelapsarian serpent had a virgin's head, befitting its innocence (Rudwin, p. 96).
[Notes to pages 6-18]


14 Langdon, p. 366.


16 Slote, Dramatic Principle, p. 142.

17 Rudwin, p. 94.

18 Both the Vulgate and the Wycliffe Bible use "lamia" in place of the original Hebrew "lilith" in Isaiah 34:14.

19 Ting, p. 151.

20 Ting, p. 150.

21 Ting, p. 153.

22 Philostratus, Life of Apollonius of Tyana, tr. J. S. Phillimore (Oxford, 1912), II, 223.


24 Ting, p. 160.

25 "the words she spake / Came, as through bubbling honey, for Love's sake" (i 64-65).

26 Ting, p. 163.


28 It is important, when reading Lamia, to appreciate its humor and keep the serious parts of the poem in perspective. See Georgia Dunbar, "The Significance of Humor in 'Lamia'," Keats-Shelley Journal, 8 (1959), 17-27.

29 Rudwin, p. 246.

30 Rudwin, p. 249.


34 Bate, *Classic to Romantic*, p. 163.


38 Slote, *Dramatic Principle*, p. 140.


41 Benvenuto, p. 6.
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