

THE EVOLUTION OF KEATSIAN ROMANCE

by

Eric Rivers

A thesis
presented to the University of Manitoba
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
in
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Eric Rivers

ABSTRACT

Many critics have sought to prove that Keats abandoned the romance, but they cannot agree on which poem represents the moment of decision. This study suggests that Keats's attitude to the romance was ambivalent from the beginning. In the process of writing Endymion, Keats veered away from his original intention of writing a relatively simple tale of adventure, and began to incorporate some of the tragic qualities of experience. Ultimately, Keats drew back into romance, with disunity the result. With Isabella, The Eve of St Agnes and La Belle Dame Sans Merci, Keats was able to integrate romance and the tragic qualities of experience with progressively greater fluency. He had thus created the Keatsian romance. Keats overcompensated in Isabella, and introduced gothic melodrama rather than tragic experience. The Eve of St Agnes is poised Keatsian romance, in which youthful passion and idealism are combined in the sexual and emotional union of two lovers. The last poem of the group, La Belle Dame Sans Merci, tips the balance of the scale toward tragedy. The knight's obsession with the unattainable young maiden brings on a near deathly state. With Lamia, Keats created the reverse of Endymion. Instead of uniting the real with the ideal, the mortal with the immortal, Keats banishes the ideal and the immortal thus

causing the death of Lycius. The emphasis is equally on the beauty of the ideal-immortal and on the dangers of an obsessive love of the exotic and unreal.

Keats's poetic ambition was matched only by a keen awareness of his poetic limitations. His awareness of his limitations and inexperience prevented him from completing an epic or a serious poetic drama. His poetic ambition drove him to compose works that were more substantial than occasional lyrics. The result of this internal quarrel was a compromise in form: the romance. Keats could thus stay within the limits of his talent and experience, and still indulge his ambitions through enlarging the scope of romance to include some of the tragic qualities associated with the world of experience. He made the tension between romance and experience the thematic focus of his poetry, including the great odes. Keats discovered this theme in the composition of the Keatsian romances.

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

How did Keats compose works as divergent in sensibility as Lamia and Endymion? Both poems are examples of exotic stories of love and adventure and thus can be described as romances. They differ in virtually every other area. Endymion is written in an overly-enthusiastic style, which, despite flashes of brilliance, is inappropriate for the material. One unfortunate consequence of this style is that the poem's tone is far too feverish for a work of such length. The poem's characters are relatively simple and one-sided, either wholly good like Endymion, or evil like Circe. A major problem in Endymion is the conflict of Keats's conclusion--that harmony exists between the ideal and the real--with the theme of human suffering developed in the Alpheus and Arethusa, Glaucus, and Indian Maid episodes. In contrast, Lamia is written in a firmly controlled style, with a half-ironic half-serious tone that is in keeping with the subject. The characterizations are ambiguous, and mirror the often paradoxical nature of real people. This ambiguity is carried over into the theme, which both calls into question the visionary imagination (symbolized by Lamia) and the critical faculty that destroys Lamia's illusions (symbolized by Apollonius). There is some truth

to the notion that Lamia is the reverse of Endymion (Bate 162).

The following chapters attempt to explain this reversal through an examination of five of Keats's romances. There appears to be an underlying pattern in them, even in works as diverse as Endymion and Lamia. I shall refer to this basic pattern as Keatsian Romance. A typical Keatsian romance is a narrative poem that begins in a relatively idyllic setting, most often a vaguely medieval one, in which two lovers meet. The first part of the tale is usually governed by the rules of courtly love, and is relatively placid. Some event or experience breaks this dreamy atmosphere and permanently alters the lovers' situation, most often dividing them. Thus, the second part of the poem is generally more tragic in character than the first. One explanation for this dialectic of romance and tragedy may be that Keats's mind is dialectical. Any thought brings its opposite to mind. When one adds to this dialectical tendency a pronounced poetic ambition (Keats began an epic at age twenty-three), it seems all but inevitable that he should attempt to expand the boundaries of romance to include more of the tragic aspects of life. Endymion represents the romantic side of this dialectic, and Lamia the tragic side.

Evidence of Keats's early understanding of the romance as an essentially idyllic world, and thus lacking in conflict,

is to be found in "Sleep and Poetry." Keats divides his poetic progress into two basic realms. The first is that of "Flora and old Pan" (102). From the description which follows (102-121), this pastoral landscape has many distinguishing features. It is a lazy place, where there is little to do except play, and then rest, and then return to play once again. The play is rather obviously of an erotic nature, as Keats's narrator would tease the nymphs: "touch their shoulders white/Into a pretty shrinking with a bite/As hard as lips can make it" (107-109). This world of cinnamon and almond blossoms seems a fit enough setting for a lyric poem, but is devoid of the conflicts necessary for a narrative poem.

The second realm of poetry Keats calls "a nobler life" (123). In this place "the agonies, the strife/Of human hearts" (124-125) will form the subject. Keats describes a charioteer, possible Apollo, whose words conjure various figures who "murmur, laugh, and smile, and weep"(142). Clearly, this realm has greater emotional variety than the first. An element of danger is noted in that the word "fear" is used as part of the description of the charioteer (128) and the people he creates (138). The "nobler life" Keats outlines seems to belong more to tragedy or epic than to romance. For the purposes of this study, I will call this second realm "tragedy."

The Keatsian romance is the product of his attempt to fuse these two realms in one poem. Endymion represents a failure in this respect, but a useful experience since it showed Keats that having strayed into this second poetic realm, he could not satisfactorily conclude with a retreat into the first realm. Isabella, The Eve of St Agnes, and La Belle Dame Sans Merci represent a trio of variations on the basic pattern, and conclude firmly in the second, more tragic realm. Lamia is the most exotic, the most "romantic" in the conventional sense, and the least compromising poem of the group. In it, this dialectical pattern of romance and tragedy is forced to its greatest extreme. Throughout this group of poems, Keats wrestles with the visionary imagination and romance, and tries to relate them to experience. The conflict between romance and tragedy is at first divisive in Endymion, but is ultimately channelled creatively as an undercurrent of tension that enriches The Eve of St Agnes, La Belle Dame Sans Merci, and Lamia. In these poems, Keats was able to unite the two realms, and create Keatsian romance.

Chapter II

A FEVERISH ATTEMPT

There are a great many different interpretations of Endymion. Even so, in the one hundred and sixty years since the poem's original publication, criticism has tended to gravitate to one or the other of two extreme schools of thought. The first, which may be represented by Sir Sidney Colvin, sees the poem as a Neoplatonic allegory of the soul's search for ideal beauty (Hill 75). The opposite of this rather intellectual reading was most strongly advanced by Newell Ford: Endymion as a poem in adolescent praise of sexuality (Hill 80). A host of alternatives resides between these poles of idealism and sensuality: Endymion as a sort of Aristotlean romance, in which the ideal is discovered as an aspect of the real (Little 44), as a would-be allegory that fails (Bate 174), as an embodiment of Joseph Campbell's "myth of the hero" (Patterson, "The Monomyth in Endymion" 66), as a "personal allegory" (Wigod 784), as an affirmation of the necessity for humanitarianism (Miller 47), and as an exploration of daemonic experience (Patterson, The Daemonic in the Poetry of John Keats 23). A common thread linking most of these readings is that they seek to locate the poem within a larger conceptual framework, whose origin lies outside the poem.

One area of agreement among the critics is that the poem fails to achieve whatever aesthetic goals Keats had for it. In the words of Allen, "No one has ever seriously held it to be a very good poem"(37). When a poem supports, or seems to support, a great number of differing interpretations, but is held to be an artistic failure, the readiest explanation is that the poet's intention was unclear. It is known that Keats had a better idea of how long he wanted the poem to be than he had of how he was to achieve this (Ward 116). He seems to have felt that his imagination, or just the imagination, would be strong enough to suggest incidents for his poem. Part of his intention in Endymion may have been to test this feeling. As well, the poem represented his attempt to write a romance set in the first poetic realm. The disunity of Endymion is the result of the eruption into this idyllic setting of themes which deal with the agonies of the human heart. At this stage, Keats was unable to integrate the two, with failure the result. Keats's point of departure may have been the pastoral romance, but his destination--the Keatsian romance--was unknown to him.

Keats begins Endymion firmly in the world of the conventional romance. The poem is set in the appropriately distant and exotic world of Greek mythology. To Keats Greek mythology may have been a perfectly natural poetic subject, as it was for the poets of the Renaissance. He does try to establish some feeling for the everyday life in Latmos

during the early passages of Book I. There are descriptions of people dancing (I 313-325), archers practising (I 332-337), and people simply losing themselves in thought (I 347-337). It is a common characteristic of romances to combine the exotic with the mundane (Beer 10), as Keats seems to be doing here. No sooner does Keats finish his catalogue of everyday life in Latmos than he introduces Endymion (I 358). The context of lines such as "they discours'd upon the fragile bar/That keeps us from our homes ethereal" (I 360-361), seems calculated to foster an allegorical reading of the poem. Allegory, or at least a tendency to drift towards allegory, is another characteristic of conventional romance (Beer 10). Book I of Endymion is highly reminiscent of Shelley's romance Alastor (Bloom 371). Both poems are critical of the visionary imagination, with Shelley's poem the harsher of the two. Both Shelley and Keats were influenced by Wordsworth's The Excursion. Shelley's influence predominates in Book I of Endymion, but the tragic sense of life that Wordsworth depicts comes to dominate the latter part of Keats's poem. Keats also drew on Spenser for the pastoral setting (Bloom 369), and on Drayton, whose poem "The Man in the Moone" may have suggested the myth of Endymion to Keats.

There is some evidence that Keats sought to strengthen the allegorical, and thus conventional, aspects of the poem in his revisions (Gradman 16). The famous phrase "A

fellowship with essence" (I 799) was a relatively late addition to the poem, replacing the less Platonic expression "blending pleasure" (Miller 38). Possibly Keats was trying to impose some kind of order on a poem that he knew was deeply divided. If this is the case, he was still thinking in terms of the first realm of poetry--the pure romance. The "pleasure thermometer" speech (Rollins, I 218) offers further encouragement for reading Endymion as a conventional romance (I 760-842).

Even within the framework of the traditional romance, Keats begins to show signs of discontent. Like Wordsworth's Solitary and Shelley's Poet, Endymion repudiates the natural world because it fails to live up to the splendour of his visions (I 680-709). Keats's character seems to suffer this dreary change rather more than Shelley's, since Endymion's response is a curious compound of near-paranoic fear and suicidal disgust:

If an innocent bird
Before my heedless footsteps stirr'd, and stirr'd
In little journeys, I beheld in it
A disguis'd demon, missioned to knit
My soul with under darkness; to entice
My stumblings down some monstrous precipice:
Therefore I eager followed, and did curse
The disappointment. (I 698-705)

This strain of visionary dreariness is one Keats rarely attempted, and never with more success than here. The presentation of the ideal (the dream-visions) and the real (the forest) in conflict represents a new development in the

traditional romance. Keats seems to have derived this from Alastor.

Also borrowed from Shelley's poem is the device of the erotic dream-vision as the impetus for the hero's subsequent actions. Tales of mortals being bewitched by female spirits, as Endymion and the Poet are, are common in the lore of romance. The tales of Thomas the Rhymer and Sir Launfal are two other examples. Endymion is given three dream-visions, the first being the most substantial (I 578-678). "I ev'n dar'd to press/Her very cheek against my crowned lip" (I 661-662) he says of his dream mistress. The succeeding visions represent mere glimpses (I 895-896, 942-971) that serve only to remind Endymion of the sensual bliss that was temporarily his in the first vision.

Book I conforms to the general outline of a conventional romance. It has an exotic setting, a combination of the everyday and the unusual, overtones of allegory, and a predilection for the erotic. The characterizations are fairly simple and straightforward, which is also typical of romances (Beer 10). The emergence of a conflict of sorts between the natural world and the ideal dream-visions is not a general characteristic of romances, but it is nonetheless derived in part from Shelley's romance Alastor.

If Keats could maintain the allegory throughout the remainder of the poem, Endymion would be a fully traditional

romance. A successful allegory requires a strong conceptual framework, like the twelve moral virtues in The Faerie Queene. Allegorists have a choice of two possibilities for the structural principle in Endymion: the "pleasure thermometer" or the dream-visions.

Since the narrative course of Books II-IV takes Endymion on an emotional sine wave, with high peaks and very low valleys, the "pleasure thermometer" with its implied rising movement to the peak of ideal love, seems an inappropriate guide to the poem's structure. Friendship comes before love on the "pleasure thermometer's" scale, and thus Endymion's amorous interlude in Book II should follow, not precede, the Glaucus episode, which is usually interpreted as Endymion's initiation into deep friendship. The poem's plot does not fall into the "pleasure thermometer" pattern without some Procrustean surgery.

Little valiantly makes a case for the dream-visions as Keats's organizing principle (43). She claims that the visions deal with three basic elements: air, in the first vision; water, in the vision in the well; and earth, in the cavern episode that closes Endymion's catalogue of dreams. Book II would then deal with the last vision, earth, with the succeeding books dealing with the other visions in a similar reverse order. Plausible as this interpretation may seem at first, the theme of Book III does not appear to be the relation between Endymion's vision in the well and

Glaucus's dilemma. The two episodes do not appear to "reflect and reinforce each other" (Little 43). That the relation between dreams and reality is somehow part of the overall theme of Endymion is inescapable, but the relationship does not seem as simple as Little proposes.

It appears Keats was unable to sustain his allegory over the whole of the work. His refusal to force his narrative into a preset pattern seems the result of his method of composition, which was to follow his imagination wherever it might take him. If his imagination led him beyond the bounds of traditional romance, Keats was more willing to follow than to correct its course.

Book II initiates this drift away from the conventional romance. There are four basic episodes in Book II: the encounter with the nymph (II 98-130), the bower of Adonis (II 387-587), Endymion's dalliance with his paramour (II 707-827), and the Alpheus and Arethusa story (II 912-1017).

In the first episode, the nymph informs Endymion that his quest for happiness will succeed, but will involve an extensive journey and much suffering (II 125-127). Venus repeats this message in the following episode (II 573). The basic situation in the bower of Adonis is an analogue of Keats's main plot: a beautiful youth's hibernations are periodically interrupted by an amorous goddess. The transparency of the analogue may be a sign that Keats's

invention was flagging. The profuse detail of the bower, modelled perhaps on Spenser's Bower of Bliss, is in keeping with the traditions of romance (Beer 10). Spenser invites censure on the excesses of his bower, since his allegory requires it. Keats lingers over his sensuous descriptions with no apparent moral intent. There is, however, an unpleasantly stagnant quality to the setting, which may reflect a veiled criticism of sensual overindulgence (Sperry 105).

The next episode in Book II is among the least successful in the poem. Endymion's sexual encounter with his unknown lover was beyond Keats's immature powers of description, and the results are often ludicrous. Again, as in the two previous episodes, Endymion's eventual happiness is foretold (II 807-808). Notwithstanding its occasional lapses in taste, this episode and the two previous to it, are generally in keeping with the romance tradition.

The Alpheus and Arethusa episode introduces a new theme into the work. Where the earlier portion of the poem deals with dreams of sensuous fulfillment, Alpheus and Arethusa introduce Endymion to the tragic character of life. Since Endymion has just lost contact with his immortal love, his own unhappiness helps him sympathize with Alpheus and Arethusa. His quest for personal happiness has led him to recognize the unhappiness of others. He is slowly awakening to an aspect of experience that is not usually treated in

romances. Endymion as a romance is beginning to falter. The tragic character of experience is explored further in the Glaucus and Indian Maid episodes.

Glaucus and the bizarre events that take place around him have long bedevilled critics. To the Neoplatonists he represents friendship in some way, or at least the necessity for sympathy (Miller 47). The difficulty with this interpretation is that the source for the Neoplatonic wisdom through which the episode is seen is the protagonist himself--Endymion. He already knows what he is supposed to learn, having grasped it from the dream-vision in Book I (Evert 116). Keats may be suggesting that Endymion must learn the concrete truth of his earlier abstract assertion, or pointing out the culpability of Endymion's dream-wisdom. If Endymion is so wise, and has already recognized the importance of sympathy, why is he initially unable to sympathize with Glaucus? Perhaps experience is a more profound tutor than dreams or visions, an heretical view for a would-be Neoplatonist.

For the youth who confidently told his sister that love and friendship were among the highest spiritual accomplishments of humanity, Endymion's initial reaction to Glaucus is unsettling. "I care not for this old mysterious man!" he says to himself (III 280). Glaucus weeps in response to Endymion's look of "high defiance" (III, 282). The sympathy that Endymion had earlier extended to Alpheus and Arethusa is then once again spontaneously given.

At this point it would be worthwhile to enquire why Endymion withheld his sympathy from Glaucus at all, even if it was only for a short time. In Book I two passages suggest that the only reliable remedy for melancholy is to negate the self by fixing one's attention on some external subject. This subject could be nature (I 95-100), art (I 783-797), friendship (I 800-802), or love (805-815). If Endymion is in some way a representative of the imagination, his reluctance to engage his sympathy is extremely troubling. Perhaps his behaviour is only human. He first shrinks away from a stranger. If this is the case, he is far from the ideal king of Book I. Keats seems unable to integrate the contending themes of the unhappiness of human life and the place of the imagination. The first theme leads him to Glaucus's monstrously unfortunate situation. The second seems left behind in the bower of Adonis.

The resolution to Glaucus's dilemma is as forced as the sudden vanishing of Endymion's unknown paramour in Book II. But while the sexual interlude of the earlier book summons forth some of Keats's least distinguished verse, the first part of Glaucus's story is told in the simplest, most relaxed lines in the entire poem. Although the events described--human life under water, men being turned into a variety of animals--are if anything more fantastic than any yet encountered in the story, the episode contains some moving passages, like the elephant man's request for death

(III 539-554). It is precisely this sort of material that Keats had excluded from the realm of romance in his earlier poem "Sleep and Poetry."

The theme of the essentially tragic nature of life provides a link between Books III and IV. Where Glaucus had abandoned Scylla for Circe, Endymion is faced with the choice of the Indian Maid or his unknown goddess. Keats's source for the Indian Maid appears to have been Alastor, but her appropriateness in a Greco-Roman mythological romance seems dubious at best (Sperry 109). This may be taken as a further sign that Keats's invention was faltering. She does serve to bring the theme of human tragedy to its apogee, which intensifies Endymion's grasp of the nature of life. The inevitable result of the conflict within Endymion is the complete demolition of the notion that dreams provide an adequate guide to life, as he makes plain: "I have clung/To nothing" (IV 636-637). The conflict between the actual and the ideal, the Maid and the goddess is insoluble. That the Maid turns into the goddess is perhaps the least satisfactory single event in the poem (Bloom 378). This unbelievable conclusion, along with the meandering structure of the poem, is perhaps chiefly to blame for the poem's generally poor reputation.

And yet the poem has been used by students of Keats as the most extensive statement of Keats's poetic creed (Bloom 369). In view of the preceeding analysis, it seems that

Keats began Endymion with one theme in mind, the exploration of dreams as a guide to life, and then discovered in the actual writing of the poem that dreams could be a tragically divisive force in the psychic life of an individual. The poem outgrew the pastoral romance genre, and developed in a more tragic direction, with the introduction of Alpheus and Arethusa, Glaucus, and the Indian Maid. That Keats was able to compose the best poetry in Endymion largely about these characters cannot have escaped him, but may only have further confused him.

What, then, does one make of Endymion? Keats shows a strong sympathy for the languid sensuousness he associates with romance in "Sleep and Poetry" (101-109), but the indulgence of this sympathy seems immediately to raise the matter of dealing in some way with human suffering. He seems unable to take a slow stroll through the kingdoms of romance without its bringing to mind the insufficiency of this form to encompass the whole, or even the most significant part, of experience. Thus, the random course of Endymion's plot cannot help but deviate from the sensuous Latmian forest and the promise of "an immortality of passion" (II 808).

Keats was undoubtedly correct in realizing that he need not attempt the great theme of humanity's tragic condition in his first effort. Such was his ambition, however, that he could not bring himself to stop short of treating this

noble theme, even if his poetic powers were not yet up to the task.

Perhaps a more useful question to ask at this time is what did Keats learn from Endymion? Given the poem's abandonment of its Neoplatonic opening, it can be assumed that allegory was not the mode closest to Keats's talent. The dialectic between bliss and pain, symbolized by Glaucus's imprisonment by Circe, is likely the most profitable discovery for Keats in Endymion. On a narrative level, the factor which distinguishes the Glaucus episode from the others is the presence of an antagonist--Circe. Endymion has no antagonist (Bloom 371), and hence no basis for conflict. In the absence of any conflict, Endymion is left to wander about the peculiar universe Keats created for him, a hero more acted upon than acting. Certainly this is partly the fault of the relatively simple and idyllic myth Keats chose to narrate. In his later narrative poems, he chose more promising stories, as a rule. The later romances are also a great deal shorter than Endymion, which almost suggests that Keats was honing his skills before attempting a more ambitious project. Plainly, Keats was aware that his ability to tell a story required development. The sensible thing would have been to choose a story with a well articulated beginning, middle and end, as Keats did in Isabella.

Chief among Keats's poetic discoveries must have been the insufficiency of the romance, as he understood it in "Sleep and Poetry," to address the themes that most interested him as a poet--particularly the theme of the dialectic of bliss and pain. As well, it must have confirmed the inescapable appeal of the genre for him, since he chose to continue it even after an admitted failure. There was a way for the poet to incorporate this theme into the romance through a structure which is first articulated, however hesitantly, in Endymion. As we have seen, the poem begins in the world of the traditional romance, and then slowly moves towards a more tragic approach with the character of Glaucus. This is the basic structure of Keatsian romance, and was Keats's most important discovery in Endymion. It was an inauspicious beginning, but one that Keats was able to make use of in his later romances.

During the composition of Endymion, Keats had unconsciously discovered the pattern of Keatsian romance: a tale that begins by indulging the reader's (and author's) delight in the heightened drama of the exotic world of romance, and then gradually incorporates some of the tragic character of the world of experience. Experiments like Endymion almost always yield uncertain results. As a pioneering attempt, though, Endymion had served him well.

Chapter III

A PAINFUL CHANGE

With Isabella, The Eve of St Agnes, and La Belle Dame Sans Merci, one can see Keats's growth as a poet, from the apprentice who composed the fervent but diffuse Endymion to the artist who created the remarkably concise La Belle Dame Sans Merci. He was manipulating his basic narrative pattern with increasing assurance. Each poem marks new gains in narrative vitality, and in Keats's ability to seek out situations that allow him to explore the dialectic of bliss and pain. These three poems have neither the uncertainty of Endymion nor the controversiality of Lamia, and seem to form a category of their own. In them, Keats seems to be coming to terms with the poetic lessons of Endymion, rather than boldly experimenting as he does in Lamia. As variations on the dialectic of romance and tragedy, and on the related theme of the inextricability of joy and sorrow, the poems hold considerable interest.

Dewy Rhyme--Isabella

Isabella is chronologically the first of this group, and the most problematic from a critical point of view. Unlike Endymion, about which there is general agreement that the poem is a noble failure, there is great disagreement as to

the actual merit of Isabella. Pathos, perhaps more than any other general tone, seems to be a matter of personal taste (Bate 314). What one person finds moving, another may find sentimental. There should be, however, somewhat more substantial reasons for the poem's difficulties. It is possible that part of the problem may rest in Keats's management of the transition from the romance setting of the poem's opening stanzas to the curious latter half of the poem, where more tragic details begin to dominate (Stillinger, "Keats and Romance" 599).

There can be little doubt that the poem begins in the world of courtly romance. The lover's cheeks grow appropriately pale, due to their failure to express their love for one another (26). As in keeping with the code of courtly love, the onset of love brings misery, disturbs the sleep cycle, and is a frequent source of intense embarrassment (44-45). To maintain the atmosphere of romance, Keats summons some of his finest early examples of what Matthew Arnold called Keats's "happy single expressions" (Hill 54). Thus the love between Lorenzo and Isabella is described as their sharing "The inward fragrance of each other's hearts" (76), and as growing "like a lusty flower in June's caress" (73).

This nervous happiness is interrupted by a curious stanza, which by an odd coincidence, considering its ominous implications, is number thirteen. Here Keats announces that

in matters of love, "The little sweet doth kill much bitterness" (98), goes on to mention Lorenzo's eventual fate (101-102), and reminds the reader that Isabella's tale ends in "great distress" (100). The stanza concludes with an allusion to the theme of bliss and pain being inevitably twinned, in that bees "Know there is richest juice in poison flowers" (104). As in Endymion, the recounting of an episode of happiness leads Keats to reflect on the ineluctable entrance of unhappiness, which cannot be far ahead. The turn from idyllic romance to a more inclusive view of the situation has begun, relatively early in the poem.

Where Endymion was handicapped by its lack of an antagonist, the present poem possesses two abundantly villainous characters in Isabella's nameless brothers. Keats's choice of two mercantilists for his antagonists has had the unfortunate effect of earning him the admiration of those who see capitalism as a social evil, and the disapprobation of those like John Scott, an early reviewer, who took offense at Keats's "school-boy vituperation" of commerce (Hill 53). Politics aside, the presence of active agents of evil does much to quicken the pace of the tale. That Keats should dwell on the political aspects of the brothers' lives may have weakened the poem, but it does represent an attempt to put the evil that men do in some sort of context, rather than ignoring the matter altogether, as in Endymion.

Isabella contains a number of digressions, much like Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde, which serve several purposes. At the simplest level, they allow Keats to divide his poem into sections, and thus smooth over the transitions in mood or plot. Thus, the stanzas in which the dialectic of bliss and pain is introduced serve to bridge the opening idyllic passages with the description of the evil brothers. Following the stanzas on the brothers, Keats introduces another digression, in the form of an apostrophe to Boccaccio (145-160). The purpose here seems to be to mimic Chaucer, who in Troilus and Criseyde is constantly deferring to his nominal source Lollius. Keats makes the odd claim in this digression that he is making Boccaccio "more sweet" (156). What Keats likely means is that verse is more "sweet" than prose, and thus more pleasurable to read. As both Stillinger (in "Keats and Romance") and the original reviewer Scott note, Keats has actually made the tale less "sweet," both by compressing the brothers' part of the story and by adding the somewhat ghastly details of the latter part of the poem. The Boccaccio digression has the additional value of reminding the reader that the story is not of Keats's invention, and thus he is not wholly to blame if the poem fails to please (Bate 310).

Although there are several fine images clustered around the brothers' plot to kill Lorenzo, such as "these men of cruel clay/Cut Mercy with a sharp knife to the bone"

(173-174), the actual murder itself does not even merit a summary. The scene is left largely to the reader's imagination, even if the slightly grisly image of the brothers washing their swords in the river is evoked (222). Here Keats fulfills his promise to make the tale sweet.

Isabella's movement from courtly love to a deeper empathy for Lorenzo, in stanzas 30 and 31, is a fine example of the poetry of the human heart Keats spoke of in "Sleep and Poetry." Keats here reached beyond convention, and heightened the dignity and nobility of his tale. Had he maintained this lofty tone, his poem would have been a good deal more successful.

The appearance of Lorenzo's ghost is largely in keeping with Boccaccio (273-321). From this point onward, Isabella begins to act in the manner of a gothic heroine. A sign of this gothic behaviour is Isabella's showing the Nurse a knife (348). A knife seems a singularly poor instrument with which to exhume her lover, and the Nurse's reply makes plain her anxiety about Isabella's sanity: "What feverous hectic flame/Burns in thee, child?" (348-349). The Nurse follows this question, which Isabella evidently ignores, with a more ambiguous request: "What good can thee betide,/That thou should'st smile again?" (349-350). Either the Nurse is asking Isabella what could make her smile again, or she is asking her why she is smiling now. The latter interpretation suggests Isabella has lost her hold on

sanity. Since the knife seems to have been part of Isabella's plan from the beginning, the beheading of the corpse, a ghastly enough incident, appears to have been premeditated. Interestingly, at this stage in the tale Keats includes an apostrophe to romance, here called "the simple plaining of a minstrel's song" (388), in which he seems to long for the simpler, more idyllic stories associated with romance in "Sleep and Poetry." In this same stanza, Keats makes use of a device Chaucer pioneered in Troilus and Criseyde, when he refers the reader to his source at a crucial and rather painful moment, in this case the beheading of Lorenzo's corpse.

Although the poem concludes with a rather moving refrain in its last two stanzas, the weird behaviour of Isabella in the preceeding stanzas, and the rather gruesome details of the exhumation, serve to complicate the tone, and render an unequivocal response impossible. The poem is a strange blend of courtly romance, tragedy, gothic horror, and pathos. It is possible that Keats has taken the move away from romance too far in this case, with unfortunately mixed results. Keats's own reaction was deeply ambivalent, veering from losing himself in the story, to questioning its effects afterwards (Bate 314). While clearly an advance on Endymion, Isabella lacks the unity of tone which would enable Keats to exploit his dialectic of romance and tragedy.

The Rose and the Bud--The Eve of St Agnes

A little less than a year after Isabella, Keats composed The Eve of St Agnes. Like Endymion, The Eve of St Agnes has inspired widely divergent readings. The most famous critical controversy associated with the poem is the Wasserman-Stillinger disagreement. For Wasserman, The Eve of St Agnes is an inspired Neoplatonic allegory, in which the sensuous fulfillment of the lovers is a prefiguration of that greater pleasure promised by the hereafter (Wasserman 103). Stillinger's curt rebuttal sees no allegory, much less romance, but rather a satanic seduction carried out by Porphyro, who represents "the ordinary cruelties of life" (Abrams 459). Both readings admit to being wilful exaggerations of a poem that presents itself as the perfumed essence of romance. Wasserman, author of an authoritative tome on Shelley, seems to see Keats through Shelleyan spectacles. In part, Wasserman's reading is an attempt to overcome Keats's early reputation for sensually luxuriant verse, freed from the slightest taint of thought. Stillinger would like to save Keats, at almost any cost, from the poetic crime of composing a mere romance "unhappily short on meaning" (Abrams 448).

If The Eve of St Agnes is examined from the point of view of Keatsian romance, with its pattern of a romance-setting

which takes on more tragic characteristics as the poem proceeds, a new interpretation is possible. One important qualification of this statement must be made at the start, however. Where Endymion and Isabella begins in the realm of romance and then moves towards tragedy, The Eve of St Agnes combines romance and a tragic realism virtually throughout the poem, in a most original and highly successful way. The chief obstacle to the recognition of this pattern is the lush style of the poem, which momentarily overwhelms the reader.

Once the dreamy opulence of the verse palls, one is left pondering the meaning. What the basic plot of The Eve of St Agnes most closely represents is neither Satan's temptation of Eve (Abrams 455) nor the soul's ascension into eternal bliss (Wasserman 101), but the essential subject of the courtly romance: the rescue of the imprisoned princess by the stalwart hero. The poem's complexity derives from the ambiguous presentation of the lovers. Porphyro does take advantage of Madeline's belief in the superstition of St Agnes's Eve. His moral stature would scarcely improve, however, had he left her to remain in the "enchantments cold" (135). For her part, Madeline is in some respects the agent of her own repression. She clearly wants the "soft adorings" (48) that accompany love. Given the tactile context of the phrase, and that these adorings be "Upon the honey'd middle of the night" (49), there can be little doubt

as to the nature of her desires. At the same time, St Agnes's Eve has power over her because it would allow her to indulge these desires in dreams, but avoid the unhappiness that actual experience can bring. The "enchantments cold" Porphyro saves her from are not totally the product of her environment, but are partially of her own making. As the narrator says, gently mocking her, Madeline is "Blissfully haven'd both from joy and pain" (240).

Although Porphyro does rescue Madeline, it is not purely the result of some deep empathy he feels for her sad situation. Clearly the "purple riot" (138) in his heart is the sign of his intense physical desire for her. He tries to distinguish between "ruffian passion" (149), presumably lust, and his own feelings, in order to convince Angela of his honourable intentions. Just exactly what his own feelings really are, he does not say, although there were signs earlier that he wanted not merely to look, but also to "speak, kneel, touch, kiss" (81). It is possible that Porphyro is lying to Angela, and that he is merely a bold and clever Don Juan. To be fair, his passion has likely eclipsed his integrity. In any case, it is not Porphyro's ardour that compels Angela to assist him. It is his "gentler speech...So woful, and of such deep sorrowing" (159-160) that convinces the old woman that he can be trusted.

Stillinger claims that "Porphyro's actions [are] wrong within the context of the poem" (Abrams 459). The difficulty with this interpretation is that the tone of the poem is so overwhelmingly in favour of the sensual, which Stillinger claims Porphyro represents (Abrams 459). If one is prepared to see the poem as fiendishly ironic, a story of a bold rape cleverly smothered beneath florid rhetoric, then this approach has some merit. Seen in the context of the earlier poems, a less ingenious scheme is revealed. Rather than standing for evil, and thus being Madeline's antagonist, Porphyro stands for the warmth of life itself. His name suggests the redness of life's blood. He is not so base a character as not to see the purity of Madeline, which he clearly recognizes and cherishes (225). In short, Porphyro is no more cruel than the process of life itself. Madeline is not merely the idealist that Stillinger paints (Abrams 459), but is also representative of that tendency among people to cling to stasis, rather than face the eventual decays that accompany any natural process. Both these "types" are really nothing more, nor less, than two simple but vivid characters.

There can be no doubt but that some of Porphyro's behaviour does give one cause for worry. That he comes to the castle at all is perhaps a sign of a somewhat rash temperament. He does attempt to mislead Angela as to his intentions. Something of a voyeur, Porphyro watches

Madeline undress (226-234), although it is not clear, given that he later "gazed upon her empty dress,/And listen'd to her breathing" (245-246), whether he actually sees her disrobe. All of these incidents give one pause, and cause one to wonder at Porphyro's character. What must be admitted, however, is that Porphyro's desire for Madeline is clearly sexual. Indeed the poem can be seen as something of a hymn to the erotic emotions (Bloom 378). Part of the complexity of sexuality, and thus of its fascination, is how easily these feelings of love and joy are transmuted to feelings of guilt. It seems likely that Keats intended the reader to feel somewhat wary of Porphyro's thoughts, as Stillinger admits Keats was of his own (Abrams 459). Far from being a blight on the poem, this unease adds to its complexity and honesty.

With the blending of reality and dream as the lover's consummate their desire, the icy moon of St Agnes's Eve sets (320-324). Madeline experiences a moment of grief when she realizes that she has lost her dream of enjoying sexual love and retaining her virginity (328-333). The rose cannot become a bud again. Despite Porphyro's assurances that he has a home for her, Madeline leaves the castle "beset with fears" (352). The lovers flee, not into some humid bower on a placid afternoon, but "into the storm" (371), and the poem returns to the chill of its opening. Nightmares, infirmity, Angela's death and apparently the Beadsman's as well, are the images with which the poem concludes.

Clearly the view that The Eve of St Agnes is merely a romance, a "necessary respite" (Bate 451) from the more searchingly honest Hyperion, is something of a disservice to this graceful and only deceptively simple poem. Its almost disturbingly frank eroticism, submerged conflict not of good and evil but of two views of life, and simple but animated characterizations are all among the finest achievements in Keats's verse romances. For the first time, Keats creates an harmonious whole out of the two realms of poetry. Traditional romance elements, like the superstitions and the imprisoned princess, are presented in a delicately realistic context, burnished with sensuous, euphonic diction in the best romance manner. The Eve of St Agnes is the first successful Keatsian romance.

The Latest Dream--La Belle Dame Sans Merci

Where the richly imaginative The Eve of St Agnes welds superstition, dreams, and psychological observation into an inclusive whole, La Belle Dame Sans Merci marks a return to the earlier pattern which holds that dreams of unearthly happiness are tragically incompatible with experience. As with Isabella and The Eve of St Agnes, the poem is set in some vaguely medieval landscape. Criticism of the poem has generally sought to interpret the work in view of one or more of its multitudinous sources. Thus Wasserman reads F.M. Dovaston's poem "Elfin Bride, A Fairy Ballad" as a gloss on La Belle Dame (71). Studies of the poem as part of

Keats's development, such as Bate's, tend to see the poem as yet another pause in the growth of Keats's talent (478). La Belle Dame Sans Merci is really no more of a pause than The Eve of St Agnes, and marks a definite turning point in the development of Keatsian romance. The sad fate of the knight prepares the way for the tumultuous tragedy of Lamia.

Using some of the same signs as the early stanzas of Isabella, the poem begins in the world of the courtly romance. The knight-at-arms announces his ailment, courtly love, with the "fading rose" withering on his cheeks (11). Judging from the descriptions of the knight's questioner, in stanzas one to three, we see the time of year is clearly Autumn. That the knight is wasting away for love in Autumn is a somewhat curious matter, since Spring is the season normally reserved for love in romances, as it is in Isabella (25). The implication, clearly, is that something unusual has happened, and this may be the cause of the questioner's interest.

The knight's enigmatic reply takes full advantage of the laconic tradition of the ballad. His tale is riddled with ambiguity, and is troubling insofar as it is difficult to judge how the impact of the events he narrates has coloured his narration of them. Unlike its three predecessors, this poem makes no pretence of objectivity. Since the knight tells his own story, one may question his reliability as a narrator. An immediate consequence of his unreliability is

the problem of the knight's curious diction. His use of "fairy" (14,24) and "elfin" (29) in his descriptions may be an attempt to heighten the wonder of the events.

The central focus of his tale is clearly the unnamed female figure, introduced in the poem's third stanza. Whoever, and whatever, she is, she seems to understand the courtly seduction procedures: the look of love (19), the hints of some inexplicable melancholy (20, 30), the use of music (24), the feast (25), and the hidden rendez-vous location, "her elfin grot" (29). Her actions are very reminiscent of Porphyro's stratagem in The Eve of St Agnes. At the insistence of his publishers, Keats removed a stanza from that poem which would have made the sexual consummation of the lovers tastefully explicit (Gittings 531). The ballad tradition of taciturn narrative allows Keats to plant the possibility of a similar sexual union between the knight and the lady. Stanza eight concludes with the knight kissing the lady's eyes, and stanza nine begins with her lulling him asleep. The knight would likely not have told a stranger if there had been a sexual encounter, but he leaves the implication that one might very well have happened.

After this likely, or at least possible, event, the knight has his dream, which is more properly described as a nightmare. At this point the turn from the romance-idyll to a more ambiguous tone occurs. The knight introduces his dream with a curious phrase. It was, he says, "the latest

dream I ever dream'd/On the cold hill's side" (35-36). There is some evidence that the knight misunderstands the nature of his dream. He claims the kings, princes, and warriors have opened "their starv'd lips...With horrid warning" (41-42). If one looks at what the dream figures actually say, however, it seems to be the furthest thing from a warning. They tell the poor fellow that "La belle dame sans merci/Hath thee in thrall!" (39-40). A warning, one would think, would take the form of some admonition to avoid the embraces of this apparently devious creature. But what the voices do is tell him what his situation already is, not what it might be. That he is still enthralled can be seen from the "lily on his brow" (9) which corresponds to the "death pale" faces (38) of the men of power in the dream. In draft form, Keats had apparently written "I see death's lily on thy brow" for line nine, and "And on thy cheeks death's fading rose" for line eleven, which would strengthen the identification (Wasserman 77).

Keats has now come full circle with his dream motif. Endymion's dreams had led him out into a world more complex and tormented than his visions had forecast. Madeline's dream had, in a sense, come true, although the rose could not shut and become a bud again. In both these cases, the dreams had been somewhat idealistic, and experience had proven more deeply problematic. The knight's dream, or rather nightmare, seems to invert the previous formula.

His dream is horrifying, and in a way he does not seem to understand, horrifyingly true. He has been hoodwinked by faery fancy, but unlike Madeline or Endymion, he does not recover from this; he apparently waits for the woman to appear again.

It might be useful to recall, in an objective fashion, the events of the poem, lest the rich colouring and drapery of it prove too mesmerizing. A knight meets a lady, whom he sets on his horse. They ride together all day long, despite there being a language barrier. She sings, finds food for him in the wild, and leads him to a cave. He falls asleep, has a nightmare, and awakens alone on a cold hillside. Shorn of its rich stylistic ornamentation, the action of the poem is almost unrecognizable. It is barely possible that the events depicted in the poem amount to no more than this unmiraculous succession of events. The knight's dilemma may be wholly of his own making, a sort of courtly love run riot. In any case, the knight's imagination, and through it his entire being, are in the thrall of the mysterious woman he met in the meads.

The knight's failure to make a renewed connection with either the woman or the more mundane world of experience is clearly unfortunate in the extreme, and possibly deadly. Keats seems to be reiterating his belief, discovered in the course of writing his earlier romances, that no true "repose amid intensity," as Perkins puts it, is possible (Hill 185).

The knight's tragedy is his vain attempt to recover an experience too intense to last. Whether the mysterious woman truly lacks mercy or not is indeterminate. She moans and weeps, but whether this is from the depth of her feelings for the knight, as he apparently thinks, or simply part of a masterly charade is left a mystery.

What is certain is that with its "perfect economy," La Belle Dame Sans Merci represents Keats's strongest statement yet of the dangers of the imagination (Wasserman 65). The tension between romance and tragedy has begun to slacken in tragedy's favour. In The Eve of St Agnes, the tension is taut almost to the breaking point, and the result is a dynamic masterpiece. Isabella suffers from a wild inconsistency of tone, but has the virtue of narrative vigour so sadly lacking in Endymion. La Belle Dame Sans Merci has an economy new to Keats's verse romances, and stands as a brilliant encapsulation of Keatsian romance. The death-pale knight waiting alone in the wilderness is the strongest single image Keats created for the dangers of the imagination, and for the unhappiness of dreamers in a less than ideal world.

Chapter IV

FANCY'S CASKET

Lamia is the last verse romance Keats composed. It was also the only poem he was ever able to finish that had been put aside, in this case for six weeks, and then taken up again (Gittings 490). In addition to the various other advances it represents, in terms of narrative movement, style, and intensity, it reflects Keats's growing dedication to craftsmanship. There was also the need to compose something popular, since Keats's finances were in some disarray during the summer of 1819.

The poem marks a return to both the world of Greek mythology, and the couplet, which Keats had first used in Endymion. But where Keats had taken one bare circumstance and tried to inflate it into four thousand lines of poetry with Endymion, Lamia deals with a brief story in a relatively concise fashion. A great deal of this gain in narrative speed is due to Keats's manipulation of the couplet. Apparently swayed by Leigh Hunt's anti-Augustan style of open couplets, Keats had deliberately avoided enclosing complete thoughts within the couplet's scanty plot of ground in Endymion. The resultant breathless quality imparted a somewhat over-enthusiastic tone to verse that was

already too intense to be justified by the action of the poem. Although not keeping to the strictly closed couplet, the verse of Lamia conforms, for the most part, with the basic neo-classic conventions. One cause for this new style was surely Keats's study of Dryden, particularly Dryden's translations of Boccaccio and Chaucer in his Fables (Gittings 463). From Dryden, Keats may have found precedent for occasionally breaking out of the couplet's miniature territory, even though it is likely that Keats is guiltier of this violation of neo-classic decorum in Lamia than is Dryden in any ten of his works. The reprinting of the source after the poem in the 1820 volume is likely intended to suggest that Keats has "imitated" the tale in verse, after the fashion of Dryden.

In some respects Lamia is the reverse of the earlier Endymion (Bate 162). The latter begins, at least, in the tradition of a Neoplatonic allegory. Lamia, with its many-sided characterizations, resists a rigorous allegorical interpretation. Ambiguity, which is alien to the spirit of allegory, is one of the chief distinguishing characteristics of Lamia. Endymion is suffused with what one might charitably call idealism, or less charitably, sentimentality. The rather overdone speeches, such as Endymion's to Echo (I 942-959), contribute to the general effect Keats labelled "mawkish" in his penitent preface. There can be no similar criticism of Lamia, which has been

called cynical (Sperry 219). And where Endymion concludes with a clumsily managed fusion of the opposites of the mortal and immortal love interests, Lamia's conclusion insists on an absolute disjunction of mortal and immortal.

Keats had a higher opinion of Lamia than of any other poem published in his lifetime, and likely of any poem he ever composed (Bate 561). There are a number of possible reasons for this preference. Chief among them is probably the poem's anti-sentimental tone. The somewhat awkward Isabella, and the apparent insubstantiality of The Eve of St Agnes seem to have given Keats some discomfort (Bate 561). Lamia does not suffer from either of these weaknesses, but it does present special problems of its own. Strangely enough for a poem that ends with the disappearance of its title character and the death of her paramour, the most frequent source of contention is the poem's "irresolution" (Hill 187). This irresolution chiefly arises out of the divided sympathies of the reader. None of the characters are presented in a consistently desirable way, which renders a coherent accounting of the thematic significance of the action extremely difficult (Hill 188). It is entirely possible that Keats intended just this effect, as he may have intended the reader to wonder over Porphyro's motivation in The Eve of St Agnes. Ambivalence may be the only possible response to certain situations and themes. This ambiguity may be the result of Keats's pushing his

dialectic of romance and tragedy to a greater extreme than in any previous narrative poem. The outcome is a poem that forces the reader to look searchingly into the appeal of exotic narratives and into the value of the imaginative faculty that constructs them.

Like all the previous narrative poems, Lamia begins firmly rooted in the world of romance. The prodigious growth in Keats's poetic powers has led to something of a distillation, which marks a newer and deeper vision of the nature of poetic romance. Hermes's pursuit of the nameless nymph is the supreme example of the realm of "Flora and Old Pan" as Keats had imagined romance in "Sleep and Poetry." The overt eroticism of Hermes's quest, the subtle urbanity of tone, the never-intrusive mythological learning displayed (Hermes the thief is bent on "amorous theft" [8]), all seem the purest fulfillment of the first stage of Keats's proposed scheme for poetic development. What purpose this masterpiece in miniature serves in the poem as a whole has been the cause of some confusion. On a purely narrative level, the episode clearly arouses expectations of a story in which almost anything, provided it is sufficiently weird, can happen. It thus demands that willing suspension of disbelief necessary for a subject so exotic. The sorts of tensions implicit in the earlier poems are conspicuously absent from the episode (Bate 553). Quite unlike the wayward Endymion, who is tortured near the completion of his

quest with an impossible choice, Hermes simply feels the desire for a new sexual diversion, and proceeds to satisfy that need. Some confusion may arise from the curious distribution of powers in this mini-romance. Why is it that Hermes needs Lamia's assistance to see the nymph, and she his to become a woman? The "reason" for the first may be that it was Lamia's advice to the nymph (I 107), and thus possibly her magic, that allowed the nymph to become invisible. To see through this spell would presumably require a further spell from Lamia. Why she should need his assistance is not so easily explained. It is possible that Lamia has been punished for some offense; she claims she was a woman before (I 117), although she may only be referring to an earlier transformation.

Whatever the rationale, if there is one, for the division of powers in the poem's opening episode, the narrator makes plain its thematic content. "Real are the dreams of Gods, and smoothly pass/Their pleasures in a long immortal dream" (I 127-128) is the narrator's verdict on the Hermes-nymph prologue. Clearly the immortality of passion promised again and again to Endymion is the sole property of the gods. The earthly lot of mortals, presumably, is more akin to that of Porphyro and Madeline, or perhaps even Lorenzo and Isabella.

Hermes's departure does not signal the end of the romance-elements of the poem. The transformation of Lamia is Keats's finest piece of grotesque description, in which

the sensual drapery of The Eve of St Agnes is equalled, but with the addition of an undertone of humour not found in the earlier poem. Her saliva, which foams all over the surrounding grass during this process, is "both sweet and virulent" (I 149) and capable of making the grass wither. With these exotic details added to the poem's already large catalogue of the bizarre, Lamia appears before Corinth. She is described in terms that paint her as an arch courtly lover: "a maid/More beautiful than ever twisted braid,/Or sigh'd, or blush'd" (I 185-187). At the appropriate moment, she becomes coy (I 256), and even goes so far as to pretend that she is of an essence too fine for life on the earth (I 271-286). Her behaviour is part of the essential courtly code--the lady's initial disdain for the lover. Like the mysterious woman in La Belle Dame Sans Merci, Lamia uses song as part of her stratagem, a song "too sweet for earthly lyres" (I 299). She vows her love to Lycius (I 309-310), as the woman to the knight. The narrator refers to her as "The cruel lady" (I 290), a succinct translation of La Belle Dame Sans Merci. Through another spell, Lamia is able to shorten the distance into Corinth (I 343-346). Her final touch of sorcery in Part I is her miraculous palace, hidden deep within Corinth (I 388-393).

In both The Eve of St Agnes and La Belle Dame Sans Merci, there is a feast laid out prior to the consummation of the passion. Lamia conforms to this pattern, and the majority

of miraculous events in Part II are preparations for the wedding feast of Lycius and Lamia. The roof of the palace is now apparently supported by the wedding music (II 122-123). An artificial glade is created out of carved cedar, and lit with hanging lamps (II 125-131). Incense, rich furnishings, copious heaps of exotic food, and "minist'ring slaves" are similarly conjured up (II 173-193). The final, and most dramatic of the magical events of Part II is the vanishing of Lamia, who cannot endure Apollonius's stare (II 306).

The purpose of this lengthy catalogue is simply to highlight the great number of events in the poem that depend for their effect on the willing suspension of disbelief. There are more such events in this poem than in any other of Keats's romances save the much lengthier Endymion. Keats had by no means forsaken the exotic or unusual in Lamia.

Despite the great degree to which the narrative depends upon the elements of romance, there is a new, and almost brutal tragic realism which eventually overcomes romance. The first sign of a more tragic approach is the exaggerated character of Lamia's courtly disdain for Lycius during their initial meeting. It is apparent that she rather enjoys his suffering: "without any show/Of sorrow for her tender favourite's woe,/ But rather, if her eyes could brighter be,/With brighter eyes" (I 290-294) she awakens her swooning lover with a kiss. Lamia, of all the characters in the

tale, recognizes that men are far more delighted by a "real woman" (I 332) than by the "sweets of Fairies, Peris, Goddesses" (I 329). Accordingly, Lamia plays the part of a woman in order to gain Lycius's affections.

Life among the mortals is a good deal more complicated than that presented in the Hermes episode. It is not long, therefore, before Lamia becomes acquainted with the earthly reality of sexual politics. Lycius's domination of Lamia in the matter of their wedding (II 72-83), distasteful as it may be, is the counterpart of Lamia's cruel manipulation of Lycius in Part I. That she is unable to dissuade him may be a sign of how far she has fallen from her earlier state, or perhaps that her love for Lycius has temporarily overcome her better judgement. Keats's remark that "Women love to be forced to do a thing, by a fine fellow" (Rollins, II 164), which fosters an image of the poet as a sexist, must be qualified in the light of Lycius's implicit submission to Lamia. He seems, until this scene at least, quite content to live in a sumptuous palace which he had never noticed in Corinth before, with a woman he had only just met. He has not even bothered to ask for her name, a somewhat fantastic oversight on his part, but reflective of the hold she has over him. Lamia's seeming delight in submitting herself to Lycius's will must be understood against the background of her feelings for him. She had fallen in love with him when she saw him win a chariot race "Like a young Jove with calm

uneager face" (I 218). His ability to control himself in a potentially dangerous situation, his Greco-Roman "right stuff" or machismo, seems to be the cause of Lamia's attraction to him. Nonetheless, the emotional sado-masochism of the two lovers in this episode is significantly less than ideal behaviour.

Another sign of the gradual domination of a more tragic sensibility is the figure of Apollonius. Whether he can be correctly described as the nemesis of the piece is an extremely difficult matter, but he is clearly the catalyst that causes the poem's final unravelling. Although the narrator describes Apollonius in rather prejudicial terms in the poem's second part, Lycius refers to him as "my trusty guide/And good instructor" (I 375-376) in the poem's first part. Given his behaviour just prior to his entrance to the wedding feast, where he laughs as if he has solved "some knotty problem" (II 160), it is not too great an exaggeration to see him as a single-minded research scientist, oblivious to the wider implications of his discovery (Sperry 304).

This curious blend of wild romance and almost cynical tragedy may be responsible for the poem's controversial conclusion. The action, as previously noted, is reasonably clear, but the thematic significance is more difficult to grasp. If Lamia represents the imagination, Apollonius the faculty of reason, and Lycius the soul, then the poem would

be nothing more than a simple allegory of the eclipse of the imagination by reason or science. Bate sees this as the Victorian perspective on the poem (547). This reading is rather too reductive to do justice to a poem so complex, and really amounts to no more than, in Leigh Hunt's verdict, an unfortunate "condescension to a learned vulgarism" (Hill 67). If one applies Coleridge's distinction of fancy and imagination, then perhaps Lamia represents the lower faculty of fancy (Pearce 220). Since Lamia is a character of ambiguous nature, both beautiful and ugly, immortal and mortal, equal parts woman and snake (Wasserman 166), it seems insufficient to regard her as an allegorical figure standing for fancy. She may more properly be deemed symbolic of fancy, or of that faculty of imagination most given to the exotic elements of romance.

One aspect of her nature is beautifully symbolized in her snake-like ability to encircle Lycius. The poem is full of diction that plays upon the related notions of entrapment, envelopment and imprisonment, like a snake coiling around its prey (Bernstein 179). Thus Lamia tangles Lycius "in her mesh" (I 295). Her lair is of course the palace, which is magically concealed from the population of Corinth (I 391-393). So pervasive is this diction of capture and imprisonment, that even Lycius and Apollonius use it. When Lycius wants to assure Lamia of his love, he reminds her of his desire to "entangle, trammel up and snare/Your soul in

mine, and labyrinth you there" (II 52-53). Apollonius's concern for Lycius is likened to the Gordian cliché of a "knotty problem" (II 160). Indeed, Lamia is described in Part I as a "gordian shape" (I 47), referring to the contorted coils of her snake body.

Allied with this diction of entrapment is a set of imagery and diction drawn from weaving. Lamia's ability to "unperplex bliss from its neighbour pain" (I 192) pictures bliss and pain as the warp and woof of experience. This use of "perplex" is continued in her speech to Lycius, which entices him "To unperplex'd delight and pleasure" (I 327), where the implication is identical to that of the first use. Later, when Lamia asks Lycius to shield her from Apollonius, the word is used in its more common sense as indicative of Lycius's confusion (II 102). It might also be interpreted as a sign that Lycius is further entangled in Lamia's problematic nature. Apollonius is given the power to "Unweave a rainbow" (II 237), which marks him off still further as Lamia's opposite number. Both activities are to a certain extent destructive: Apollonius robs the rainbow of its wonder; Lamia robs the world of experience of its complexity.

Lamia and Apollonius are the centre of a third body of imagery, drawn from the sphere of optics. She is able to render the nymph invisible and to help Hermes see her in the opening idyll, but significantly when she comes to deal with

her earthly lover, she blinds him (I 347). Lycius shares some of the responsibility for this, since he blinds himself from Apollonius's eyes near the close of Part I (373-374). In contrast, Apollonius's eyes are described as "sharp" (I 364), "quick" (I 374), "severe" (II 157), and as looking "without a twinkle or stir" (II 246) upon Lamia at the poem's climax. A sign of how deeply Lycius's vision is caught up in Lamia's power is his condemnation of Apollonius in terms the philosopher might use to describe Lamia (II 277-290). Lycius has completely lost the ability to distinguish illusion from reality at this moment.

The effect of these trains of imagery and diction is to encourage the reader to regard Lycius as enthralled by Lamia. His condition is similar to that of the knight in La Belle Dame Sans Merci. Again, it must be emphasized that Lamia is not solely responsible for this. In the moments of solitude Lycius has away from his friends, the night he meets Lamia, he falls into a reverie, in which he is lost in a dream-world of "Platonic shades" (I 236). Lycius is, in short, another in the line of Keatsian characters given to dreaming. As a dreamer, he welcomes the appearance of a figure like Lamia, with her power to unravel bliss from pain.

The dreamer may enjoy a brief respite from pain, as in the previous poems, but the world of process inevitably intervenes. One such intrusion is the sado-masochism

episode described in the opening lines of Part II. Another, and more important one, is the entrance of Apollonius. His claim that Lycius is the prey of Lamia merits some attention. If the previous analysis is correct, then Lycius is the willing victim of Lamia's guile. He accepts, seemingly without question, both her lie about having lived in Corinth (I 310-321), and the false story she tells about her parents being dead (II 94-97). Thus Lycius, the former student of the quick-eyed Apollonius, has turned away from reason altogether. The result of this is that, since Lamia is an immortal, they would live together inside the palace until he dies. In a sense, he would be her prey, or at least her prisoner.

The above may not sound particularly unpleasant, but given human nature, which the poem recognizes in the opening lines to Part II, it is tragic. The difference between the immortal Lamia and the mortal Lycius is too important for its consequences to be ignored. One cannot transcend the world of process by ignoring it, as Lycius tries to do. Lamia's power is too fragile to withstand the scrutiny of reason, which argues that it is very fragile indeed. The fate of Lamia is matched by the poem itself, whose action is rendered absurd (a woman who was a snake marrying a charioteer?) with the approach of cold logic. Since the poem's action is seemingly absurd, one is compelled to interpret the poem's action on the level of ideas.

Since we have seen a drift in Keats's narrative poems that moves from an idyllic world of romance to the conflict-torn world of process, Lamia may be seen as Keats's most extreme example of this pattern. The episode of Hermes that opens the poem is Keats's finest example of the erotic mythological idyll, and it has surprisingly little human interest. The only checks on the actions of the characters are magical, and magic thus provides the resolution to their problems. No real conflict, and hence no sustained narrative interest, is possible in such a world. Lamia, who symbolizes faery-fancy perhaps, forsakes this world for the realm of process. An interesting point to notice is that it is Lamia who intrudes on the lower realm, with the complicity of Lycius. Neither Lamia nor Lycius are wholly responsible for what follows. Lycius brings on the destruction of the illusion he so dearly loves, through his foolish attempt to merge romance and reality. Unconsciously or otherwise, this action inevitably arouses the scrutiny of reason, which exposes the beautiful illusions of romance to be dangerous snares. Lycius, and by implication any dreamer, who loses the ability to distinguish between romance and reality, has foolishly placed himself in a needlessly harsh situation. Keats added to his source Lycius's death, which alters the story from one of mere wonder to one embodying the tragic result of excessive devotion to romance.

Despite all of the above implied criticism of romance, Keats still felt a certain attraction to the genre. While the verse of Lamia is not loaded with the dense Pre-Raphaelite iconography of The Eve of St Agnes, it is still sensual, particularly in the imaginative description of Lamia's preparations for the wedding feast. This affection, if that is the appropriate term, carries over into the characterization. Although Lamia does claim she is a woman, which is not quite the truth and not necessarily a lie either, she does so out of a desire for Lycius to love her. There can be no doubt that her transformation is an extremely painful experience for her, which suggests that in her own way, she accepts the dialectic of bliss and pain. Her warmth, particularly when set off against Apollonius's spleen, is attractive, as is her desire to make Lycius happy.

When attraction passes into obsession, and one becomes cut off from the vital world of process, then an unfortunate resolution becomes inescapable. Cold, contemptuous, and gruff as he is, Apollonius is as much a part of human nature as is the imaginative faculty Lamia symbolizes. In a sense, Keats is still embracing what he seems to reject. The two realms of poetry, pastoral romance and the tragic narrative as outlined in "Sleep and Poetry," have become one. With Lamia, Keats has written a romance in which all the ambiguity, confusion, and complexity of experience are

recognized. It is an amazing performance, and a significant advance from the mawkish, over-fervent Endymion. Lamia is the most extreme, most Keatsian romance Keats was ever to compose.

Chapter V

CONCLUSION

Keats began Endymion with the intention of writing a traditional romance. His poem was to deal with the adventures of a simple character in a remote and exotic setting, and end with the hero's fulfillment. The poem he wrote veers away from the world of romance with the episode of Alpheus and Arethusa. Glaucus and the Indian Maid further complicate Endymion's quest, although both these situations are miraculously and unconvincingly resolved. The result was an awkward poem that partially dealt with the tragic qualities of experience, but ultimately drew back into romance.

With Isabella, The Eve of St Agnes, and La Belle Dame Sans Merci, Keats was able to integrate romance and tragedy with progressively greater fluency. In the process, he created the Keatsian romance. Initially, with Isabella, Keats overcompensated in his attempt to introduce tragic elements to the story, with results that border on the gothic. The Eve of St Agnes is poised Keatsian romance, in which youthful passion and idealism are combined in the sexual and emotional union of two lovers. The last poem of the group, La Belle Dame Sans Merci, tips the balance of the

scale toward tragedy. The knight's obsession with the unattainable young maiden brings on a near deathly state.

With Lamia, Keats created the reverse of Endymion. The characters are ambiguous, rather than simple. The tone varies from serious to jovial to ironic, in contrast to the uniformly earnest Endymion. Instead of uniting the real with the ideal, the mortal with the immortal, Keats banishes the ideal and the immortal thus causing the death of Lycius. The emphasis is equally on the beauty of the ideal-immortal and on the dangers of an obsessive love of the exotic and unreal.

Keats's poetic ambition was matched only by a keen awareness of his poetic limitations. His awareness of his limitations and inexperience prevented him from completing an epic or a serious poetic drama. Otho the Great, his only complete play, was an attempt at commercial writing. His poetic ambition drove him to compose works that were more substantial than occasional lyrics. The result of this internal quarrel was a compromise in form: the romance. Keats could thus stay within the limits of his talent and experience, and still indulge his ambitions through enlarging the scope of romance to include some of the tragic qualities associated with the world of experience. In the process, he created the Keatsian romance.

He was far too mercurial a poet to be content with merely repeating a successful formula. The Eve of St Agnes, La Belle Dame Sans Merci, and Lamia, the most successful of the Keatsian romances, are three very different poems. Keats becomes increasingly wary of the snares of romance, and depicts the romance's escape from the tragic world of experience in terms that suggest romance not only may contain elements of tragedy, but actually implies tragedy.

The evolution of Keatsian romance shows an original sensibility in the process of creating itself. None of the poems represents a position of anything other than momentary rest. It is likely that Keats saw romance more as a stage to be undergone than as the summit of his achievement. Nonetheless, he was able to expand romance to include more of the world of experience. Keats made the tension between romance and tragedy the thematic focus of his poetry (Kern 173), including the great odes. He discovered this theme in the composition of the Keatsian romances.

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