

The "serpents' whine":
Derrida's *Pharmakon* and *Différance* in the works of John Keats

By

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of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree
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MASTER OF ARTS

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Abstract

This thesis demonstrates how Jacques Derrida's theory, particularly the notions of the *pharmakon* and *différance*, parallels and further explains John Keats's own theories of the importance of ambiguity in writing, writers, and readers. Derrida's concepts lend a vocabulary to Keats's treatment of the movement and play inherent in language, and the destabilization of common binary oppositions.

With an understanding of Keats's medical background, his employment of the ambiguity of common cures seems to signify a deliberate attempt to expose the lack of a fixed relationship between signifier and signified. Keats's play with the multiple effects of pharmaceutical substances in such poems as "Isabella" and "The Eve of St. Agnes" provides a clear example of his employment of the notion of Derrida's *pharmakon*. Such poems as "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," "Lamia," and "To Autumn" reveal Keats's more subtle and complex uses of the *pharmakon* and *différance*, as he examines the weaknesses of structures that depend on rigid binaries.

Keats's theory of poetics is most clearly defined in his letters, where he establishes a preference for uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts, and encourages a sense of ambiguity and indecision. This selflessness and movement that Keats promotes in writing, writers, and readers erases borders between the three, and they become connected in their common movement and play, illustrating Derrida's assertion that "il n'y a pas de hors-texte."

Introduction

Throughout Keats's poetry, there is an apparent tension between conflicting ideas that remains either largely unresolved or unsatisfactorily settled. Critics have recognized this tension and have characterized it in a variety of ways: some have insisted that it is an inherent weakness in Keats's style, while more recent criticism suggests that this tension yields a rich ambiguity and leaves room for multiple meaning. Keats's ambiguity and refusal to settle for common binaries seem to stem from something more deliberate and substantial than mere indecision. Instead, Keats's deliberate ambiguity functions as a rather systematic challenge to pervading philosophies characterized by a reliance on a binary system. In his questioning of this sort of conventional thought, Keats recognizes the omissions that arise from a binary system that ignores uncertainties and ambiguities. In this way, Keats's criticism aligns with Derrida's. Further resembling Derrida's theory of deconstruction is the way Keats's tension and consequent ambivalence are accompanied by a play with language and a blending of signifieds under one signifier that lead to a deferral of meaning. Keats's preference of ambiguity is evident throughout his poetry, but it is in his letters that he seems to clearly establish a theoretical and deliberate destabilization of common binary systems that aligns with Derrida's.

Derrida's notion of *pharmakon* provides a way of understanding Keats's treatment of language. Keats seems keenly aware of the sense of movement

and the multiple meanings of words that are invoked by the notion of *pharmakon*. His references to medicinal plants and herbs signify both cure and poison, and his employment of healing and poisoning plants, flowers, and roots functions literally as *pharmakon*. Keats's rather extensive knowledge of medicine suggests that his reference to plants with dubious healing properties is deliberate, and further, that he extended the ambiguity of medical treatments to larger themes in language and life.

For this discussion of the range and richness of Keats's ambiguity and play with signification, I have found Keats's treatment of plants and other such pharmaceutical substances particularly revealing in "Isabella," "The Eve of St. Agnes," "Ode on a Grecian Urn," and "To Autumn." These poems provide examples of Keats's more literal employment of *pharmakon*, and they are further examined along with "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," "Lamia," and "Ode to a Nightingale" as the argument progresses to address Keats's more far-reaching and less literal use of the notion of the *pharmakon*. This selection of poetry, along with selected letters, is representative of Keats's style and thematic concerns in general, and of his deliberate employment of the *pharmakon's* ambiguity in particular. As the argument progresses, these poems are discussed in terms of the manner in which Keats engages in a play with signification, until the conclusion, which addresses how Keats's deliberate ambiguity extends beyond his body of poetry.

The first chapter focuses on Keats's employment of the ambiguity literally associated with the *pharmakon*. From Keats's mention of medicinal cures, the argument advances to include a discussion of Keats's use of plants and food. The *pharmakon* is also discussed in its broader senses when dealing with ambiguities in such poems as "Isabella," "The Eve of St. Agnes," "Ode on a Grecian Urn," and "To Autumn." It is with an understanding of Keats's medical training that seemingly innocuous substances may be infused with rather harmful potential.

Keats's use of the Derridean *pharmakon* and *différance* is examined in their more subtle and complex capacities in the second chapter. It is here that Keats's philosophical proximity to Derrida emerges more clearly. Keats's indefinite treatment of settings, images such as the urn and the nightingale, and characters such as Porphyro, the Belle Dame, Lamia, and Apollonius reveals how a Derridean ambiguity and movement of meaning function in Keats's writing. Keats, like Derrida, quite clearly argues against a philosophy that requires, or, at least, encourages a structure that depends on clearly-defined and rigid binaries.

Keats's theory of poetics, discussed in the third chapter, moves beyond an argument against common and prevalent binary systems to establish a clear preference for uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts. Keats argues for a selflessness that permits the sort of movement and *différance* that Derrida describes and that pervade Keats's writing. It seems, then, that Keats and

Derrida, writing in different forms at different times, similarly argue against philosophies based on clear binary divisions that they found to permeate their worlds. The theory of language that underlies Keats's poetry and letters is applied also to poets. Keats's application of his poetic theory to poets and readers in effect erases the border between a text and its creator and reader. In this way, Keats's theory suggests that writers and readers are extensions of the text and are subject to the same theoretical treatment.

Keats's Pharmacy

As Keats was certainly aware from his studies at Guy's Hospital, the pharmaceutical substances prescribed to patients for various ailments were as ambiguous in their ability to cure as the Greek origin of the word "pharmacy" might suggest. Signifying both "healing drug" and "corrosive poison" (De Almeida 147), *pharmakon* reflects the dual nature inherent in many of the botanical and mineral treatments commonly used by physicians during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The meanings of many terms associated with the *pharmakon's* toxic potential are equally ambivalent. "Poison" originally meant simply "'a drink,' a potion that can be wholesome or unwholesome" (De Almeida 147). "Poison" came to be a general term for a "dangerous substance" because of its association with "toxicology" or "toxicon," whose Greek root "toxon" means "bow," and "*toxicon pharmakon* was the substance with which one smeared arrows to make them more dangerous" (De Almeida 147). Compounding the historical dubiety associated with these terms is the ambiguity of the roles of those who created these "poisons." People who prepared the harmful substances to be smeared on arrows were known as pharmacists, and some of the ambiguity that was inherent in their poison became associated with them. Though their poisons were intended to cause harm, these pharmacists could also serve a more benign purpose because "some poisons, when given initially in small but then in increasingly larger doses - or when given in attenuated form, controlled,

perhaps, by antidotes – may produce, like disease, a measure of immunity” (Stevenson 19). Similar to these “pharmacists” whose dubious role involved the creation and dissemination of both poison and cure, Keats, while studying at Guy’s Hospital, would have learned about the use and compounding of various antidotes and remedies.

As a student in William Salisbury’s botany course in the spring of 1816, Keats would have studied the pharmacological properties of a variety of plants, and this knowledge of the plants’ intricacies is evident in his poetry (Goellnicht 32). Salisbury would have taken advantage of the Chelsea Physic Garden to lecture his students on the various effects of the plants which were grown there and categorized by function. At this garden were “soothing and regenerative medicinal plants, highly poisonous homeopathic plants, dyeing plants known for their tincturing powers, perfumery plants, and culinary herbs [growing] in adjacent beds to form distinct yet related sections, and plants like the peony, poppy, and hemlock that bear more than one use [were] carefully duplicated in the beds” (De Almeida 148). Keats’s romantic pharmacy of botanical potions, with all of its ambiguity, extends into his writing where the subtle but significant implications of plants, perfumes, dyes, and drinks alter and complicate his language and meaning, similar to Derrida’s discussion of the *pharmakon*.

The *pharmakon*, Derrida writes, is ambivalent because “it constitutes the medium in which opposites are opposed, the movement and the play that

links them among themselves, reverses them or makes one side cross over into the other" (Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy" 127). An examination of Derrida's argument in its original language reveals that the *pharmakon* does not involve only the reversal of opposites: "Si le *pharmakon* est « ambivalent », c'est donc bien pour constituer le milieu dans lequel s'opposent les opposés, le mouvement et le jeu qui les rapportent l'un à l'autre, les renverse et les fait passer l'un dans l'autre" ("La pharmacie de Platon" 145). The French "renverse" includes in its definitions a meaning corresponding to the English "reverse," but "renverser" also signifies an overturning, overthrowing, upsetting, confusion, and disorder. The broader meaning of this word is relevant to Derrida's argument, since he advocates not merely the reversal of binary oppositions, but their destabilization and upset, making room for multiple alternatives of significance. Keats, too, in his employment of the *pharmakon*, does not settle for a reversal, but a destabilization. Derrida's use of *pharmakon* to signify "movement," "play," and "the medium in which opposites are opposed" is manifest in Keats's literal and figurative employment of signifiers for which there are multiple signifieds. Throughout Keats's writing there are traces of his medical training; from analogies of disease to allusions to ambiguous cures, Keats's poems are a palimpsest where medicine underlies art and meaning is layered and ambiguous.

The *pharmakon* functions most literally in Keats's poems as a characteristic of many of the plants or treatments whose effects on humans,

Keats would have known, were ambivalent. The central image of "Isabella" is the pot of basil, which embodies multiple meanings. Basil was an all-purpose remedy in English folklore, and its ointment was believed to be an antidote to the "crested basilisk's venom, and the Old French *basile* and modern French *basilic* are applied without differentiation to both the serpent and the plant" (De Almeida 214). This restorative plant whose name is blurred with that of the snake whose poison it can counteract is a particularly interesting example of Keats's employment of the movement inherent in the *pharmakon*. Basil's properties as an antidote are particularly fitting in this poem, considering Isabella's brothers are referred to as serpents (190) whose "venom" proves deadly to Lorenzo and is equally lethal to Isabella. To ancient Greeks and Romans, basil was associated with madness, and though it was commonly prescribed for a variety of ailments by the seventeenth century, an account published by French botanist Tournefort served to renew suspicion surrounding this herb. Tournefort reported that a man who was fond of the smell of basil would frequently sniff the powder from the ground plant. After some time, the man reportedly turned mad and died, and when surgeons opened his head, they found a nest of scorpions in his brain (Castleman 92-93). Though it occurred in France a century before Keats's time, this anecdote renewed and perhaps re-validated the suspicion of ancient Greeks and Romans, reinforcing the plant's ambiguous nature. Basil's connection with madness is certainly significant in "Isabella," as it becomes, ostensibly, the

object of her obsession. The Italian practice of placing a pot of basil outside a window to signify that a woman in that household was ready for marriage lends a degree of irony to this plant in "Isabella" (Castleman 93); this symbol of marriage flourishes with Isabella's tears at a time when the man she loves is dead and when the brothers' plan for her marriage will not come to fruition.

Just as the powers associated with basil contribute to the complexity of "Isabella," so does Keats's reference to other plants of dubious significance bring the *pharmakon's* ambiguity to bear on other poems. The lily, for example, recurs throughout many of Keats's poems and, in early drafts of "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" where it suggests a sickly pallor accompanying the knight's "anguish moist and fever-dew" (10)¹, it is associated with death (Wolfson 36). Keats's association of death with the lily surfaces also in "Isabella"; when she discovers the murdered Lorenzo, "upon the murderous spot she seemed to grow, / Like to a native lily of the dell" (65-66). It is after Isabella's reunion with Lorenzo and her comparison to the lily that she kisses "with a lip more chill than stone" (371), and seems to grow deathly cold even as she lingers at the "yawning tomb" (386), itself dangerous for the miasmatic vapours that were thought to emanate from deep within the earth (Stevenson 11). The lily in "The Eve of St. Agnes," though less obviously associated with death, is not free from suspicion. The St. Agnes' Eve ceremonies involve the young women's going supperless to bed to "couch supine their beauties, lily

white; / Nor look behind, nor sideways, but require / Of Heaven with upward eyes for all that they desire" (52-54). The "lily white," in this poem, could simply refer to the young women's beauty or purity, but it could just as easily describe the pallor of hungry, supine maidens instructed to maintain a deathly pose. Though perhaps innocent in appearance, the lily is not without dubious implications.

Keats's poetic pharmacy includes the potent potion of various ambiguous remedies and intoxicants presented in "Ode on Melancholy." Wolfsbane, nightshade, yew-berries, and globed peonies are mingled in this ode. These plants, De Almeida notes, "are nerve poisons, narcotico-acrids that act on the nervous system and brain and have the power at once to irritate to intensify and to stupify. They are . . . fatally sensitizing potions" (168). Wolfsbane has the distinction of preserving the intensity of intelligence until moments before death (De Almeida 168). In early drafts of "Ode on Melancholy," Keats invokes henbane, which produces senselessness and was a substitute for opium, but his choice of the more complex wolfsbane is relevant to the ode's message (De Almeida 169). Growing next to wolfsbane in the Chelsea Physic Garden was nightshade, which was known for its ability to derange the senses and the cerebro-nervous system. Nightshade, however, could also be a beneficial antidote for prussic acid, the poison in yew berries, which were similar in appearance to the ruby grapes of Proserpine (De

¹ Numbers in parentheses following Keats's poems refer to line numbers.

Almeida 170-171). Globed peonies, like wolfsbane, numbs the senses but preserves mental intensity. The peony serves as a representation of melancholy and "a prescription or sign of the way to poetic truth."

Compounding the peony's pharmaceutical ambiguity is its prescription for epilepsy, hysteria, and nightmares and melancholic dreams (De Almeida 172).

The array of plants included in this ode form a perilous melancholic potion.

Even such innocuous items as "relish sweet," "honey wild," and "manna-dew" (25-26) are potentially perilous when read with a knowledge of "Thomas Rymer," a medieval ballad that may have been a source for Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci." "Thomas Rymer" would have been available to Keats in Robert Jamieson's 1806 *Popular Ballads*. Wasserman provides a summary of this version of the tale:

Thomas encounters a beautiful lady whom he thinks to be the Queen of Heaven, but who identifies herself as "the queen of fair Elfland." She takes him upon her milk-white steed, for he must serve her for seven years; and for forty days and nights they ride through blood while Thomas sees neither sun nor moon.

Forbidden to touch the fruit of this strange country lest he suffer the plagues of hell, Thomas eats the loaf and drinks the claret that the elf-queen has brought. At length they rest before a hill, and the elf-queen, placing his head on her knee, shows him three wonders - the roads to wickedness, to righteousness, and to fair

Elfland. It is the last of these that they are to follow, and for seven years "True Thomas on earth was never seen." (68-69)

Though the food in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" is suspicious only because of its similarity to the medieval ballad, it does offer further possible sources for the knight's "anguish moist and fever-dew" (10). The medieval ballad also suggests that the setting of Keats's poem may be intended to be as equivocal as the elfland setting of "Thomas Rymer." Certainly a tale with a setting that produces fruit with a capacity to cause "plagues of hell" will yield only further ambiguity in ballads fashioned on its model.

The ambiguity of plants is reflected in the common suspicion surrounding honey and the bees who gather the potentially poisonous pollen. Honey and its effects were believed to be as varied as the flowers from which it derives; honey partakes of "the smell, the taste, and the general properties, of the flowers from which it is obtained" (De Almeida 178). Keats alludes to the potentially pernicious nature of honey that bears the trace of the various flowers from which it derives. As Keats writes in "Isabella," "Even bees, the little almsmen of spring-bowers, / Know there is richest juice in poison-flowers" ("Isabella" 104). "Poison-flour," as De Almeida recognizes, was a common term for chemists' flour of arsenic (178). This phonetic play on "poison-flower" reveals a more complex dimension of Keats's "honeyed dart" ("Isabella" 78) which is reminiscent of the *toxicon pharmakon* that later gave new meaning to the word "poison."

In "The Eve of St. Agnes," honey's ambiguity foreshadows the duplicitous nature of Madeline's nighttime experience. Madeline is told how "Young virgins might have visions of delight, / And soft adorings from their loves receive / Upon the honeyed middle of the night" (47-49). The "honeyed middle of the night" adequately reflects not only Porphyro's array of sweet fruit, jelly, and spiced dainties that are themselves suspect because of the accompanying tintured "syrops" and perfumed air, but also the duplicitous nature of Porphyro's seductive hallucinatory display. Perhaps reinforcing the suspicion surrounding Porphyro's spread of food are Keats's manuscripts that include an omitted stanza that was to appear between stanzas six and seven:

'Twas said her future lord would there appear
 Offering as sacrifice - all in the dream -
 Delicious food even to her lips brought near:
 Viands and wine and fruit and sugar'd cream,
 To touch her palate with the fine extreme
 Of relish: then soft music heard; and then
 More pleasures followed in a dizzy stream
 Palpable almost: then to wake again

Warm in the virgin morn, no weeping Magdalen. (Wasserman 112-113)

This omitted stanza suggests that the presentation of a feast is part of the St. Agnes' Eve tradition and would provide Porphyro with a more benign motive for presenting his display in Madeline's chamber. The feast and music are

Keats's addition and are not part of the St. Agnes legend. The folk tradition does, however, require that girls lie supine, look not behind, speak not a word, fast, and look to heaven (Wasserman 113). Keats's employment of actual rituals associated with this tradition, and his omission of the stanza that would have altered the tradition and made Porphyro's feast fitting, contribute to the dubiety of Porphyro's actions.

Keats's play with the significance of such items as honey, food, and even tradition is an example of the type of movement and play that is produced by the *pharmakon*: "the *pharmakon* is the movement, the locus, and the play: (the production of) difference. It is the differance of difference. It holds in reserve, in its undecided shadow and vigil, the opposites and the differends that the process of discrimination will come to carve out" (Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy" 127). Keats seems quite aware of the opposites that his words and substances hold in reserve, in "undecided shadow and vigil." It is precisely this knowledge of what these substances hold in reserve and shadow that makes Keats's reference to them meaningful.

Derrida's *pharmakon* refers also to color, perfumes, masks, make-up, and the trappings of festivity (Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy" 142). Dyes and tints were historically suspected of spreading infection. The Latin verb "inficere" includes "to stain" or "to color" among its definitions. Dyes, by association, became suspect: "the analogy with a tincture where a small drop of dye-stuff suffices to color a large amount of fluid played an important role

in medieval alchemy and medicine" (Stevenson 6-7). Tints and dyes, then, warrant a degree of wariness when examined more closely. Madeline's "garlanded" casement high and "triple-arched" is suspect with its "innumerable . . . stains and splendid dyes" depicting "fruits, and flowers, and bunches of knot-grass," similar to the items Porphyro employs in his hoodwinking of Madeline (212, 210). The colour from these dyes is cast upon Madeline, doubling her exposure to suspicious substances. It is not only the colours that add complexity to Madeline's exposure to such suspicious substances, but also the way in which she is characterized with the tints mingled on her body:

Rose-bloom fell on her hands, together pressed,

And on her silver cross soft amethyst,

And on her hair a glory, like a saint:

She seemed a splendid angel, newly dressed,

Save wings, for Heaven - Porphyro grew faint;

She knelt, so pure a thing, so free from mortal taint. (220-225)

Keats's blending of suspicious dyes and tints with Madeline's prayer reflects the blending of Porphyro's dubious actions with the religious holiday. The ostensible beauty and celestial connotations in these lines further establish the ambiguity of dyes. Though Madeline, dappled with colour, is surrounded by heavenly imagery, her comparison to an "angel, newly dressed . . . for Heaven" suggests impending or recent death. This stanza's concluding line is

similarly infused with ambiguity; the “mortal taint” from which Madeline seems to be free, is the very thing that prompts this extended heavenly imagery. Tints and dyes, as Derrida argues, are equivocal substances that mask. In these lines, Keats reveals his similar employment of tints; not only is Madeline’s mortality obscured by the reflected colours, but the potential danger of these dyes that give Madeline the appearance of a “newly dressed” angel is also concealed. Tints, dyes, perfume, and music share an ability to conceal melancholy, pain, or even dubious intent, and these elements mingled in potions may be used to soothe or vex an ailing soul (De Almeida 159, 161).

Similar to the belief of a fluid’s susceptibility to contamination by just a drop of dye is the belief of air’s noxious potential when tainted by a suspicious agent. Air, as a necessity, sustains life, but just as food’s nourishment can become noxious, so can air act as a tincture to the body. Keats often depicts air as breath and, perhaps following the Biblical example of the creator’s life-giving breath, as a sign of life. Lamia’s attempt to transform Hermes with her breath reflects the divine life-giving breath: “Stoop Hermes, let me breathe upon thy brow, / And thou shalt see thy sweet nymph even now” (121-122). With her breath, Lamia recreates Hermes into a form that can partake in the realm of the invisible nymph. Keats seems to equate breath with life in Hermes’ request: tell “me only where my nymph is fled- / Where she doth breathe!” (86-87). In this line, Keats quite clearly employs breath as a metaphor for life.

The association of breath with life is evident in "The Eve of St. Agnes" when the Beadsman's "frosted breath, / Like pious incense from a censer old, / Seemed taking flight for heaven, without a death" (6-8). Though the Beadsman's breath is compared to incense, whose perfume may be duplicitous, it is "without a death," and its visibility in the cold is due only to the breather's fleeting warmth of life. This attention to breath recurs in "Isabella" in Porphyro's interest in Madeline's breathing. As is the case with many of Porphyro's gestures, his attention to Madeline's breathing is rather ambiguous: Porphyro "listened to her breathing" and "breathed himself" (246-249). This simultaneous breathing is perhaps out of adoration, but the seemingly forced coordination of his breath with Madeline's, like his offering of fruit and music, could also indicate a more sinister motive. Porphyro's witnessing of Madeline's breathing seems as forbidden as his presence in her room; it is almost as if it is through the synthesis of breath that Porphyro can claim some aspect of her by inhaling her life's breath. Keats's studies at Guy's Hospital would have ensured his awareness of this intimate connection between life and air. Once synonymous with *anima*, the breath of life, air was considered a paradoxical crux of science, having the ability to be fertile or stagnant, supportive of life or noxious to life (De Almeida 77).

This "breath of life," as Keats learned, is not always as wholesome as it may appear. Though necessary for life, air could be pestilential, causing a variety of ailments. Isabella's brothers' crime that comes "on them, like a

smoke from Hinnom's vale" ("Isabella" 262) carries a threat more deadly than guilt when read with an understanding of the beliefs in the pernicious potential of air. Post-mortem decay was believed to be much more hazardous than the simple disintegration of the body might suggest; instead, post-mortem decay was believed to engender poisons of the most dangerous kind: "putrescence is the pattern of the process by which poisons are made" (Stevenson 10). This smoke from Hinnom's vale, often synonymous with hell, would be infused with the putrefaction of its sacrificed children. The brothers, then, are associated with the murderous acts associated with Hinnom's vale, and are subjected to its infectious, virulent smoke. Similarly, Isabella, when lingering at "the yawning tomb so long" (386), is exposed to air tainted by the decomposing Lorenzo, and the "venomous exhalations from the depths of the earth" which were suspected of producing disease (Stevenson 11). Air need not be contaminated by decomposition or the earth's exhalations to be dangerous, however; still air and ill-smelling effluvium of marshes were also thought to produce illness, multiplying the threat of such poisonous plants as hemlock, which grew in these miasmatic environments.

It is an image of this damp miasmatic air that Keats seems to conjure when he describes autumn as the "Season of mists" in "To Autumn" (1), but it is not just the damp and misty characteristics that make autumn air dubious. Just as "Summer has o'er-brimmed" the bees' "clammy cells" (11), so does the pervasive ripeness in this poem seem to overflow into decay and rot. The

“maturing sun” is said to “fill all fruit with ripeness to the core; / To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells / With a sweet kernel” (2, 6-8). This excessive and seemingly continuous ripening is suggestive of the decomposition that produces poisoned air. Air, then, in its susceptibility to contamination by a single intoxicating source, joins the pharmacopoeia of substances whose effects are ambiguous and indefinite.

The festive *pharmakon*, an ambiguous cocktail of food, perfume, music, colours, dyes, and even suspect air, is particularly potent in “Lamia,” where the wedding celebration seems transformative and able to transport the guests to a beguiling and fantastic realm. The banquet room is tainted by perfume from fifty censers “fed with myrrh and spiced wood” (176), and “an untasted feast / Teeming with odours” (133). Though commonly used for its aromatic properties, myrrh was also traditionally used at funerals (Castleman 389), making its use at Lamia’s wedding a fitting foreshadowing of Lycius’ death and Lamia’s disappearance. Like the spread of food in “The Eve of St. Agnes,” this feast is suspect when accompanied by perfume, duplicitous “mirrored walls” (182), vessels of wine (187), and “haunting music” (122). Keats, in his copy of *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, “underlined all the ‘Odoraments to smell’ that composed Burton’s cures for head-melancholy . . . Perfume embodies the masking, ductile and manipulative qualities of the *pharmakon*” (De Almeida 159). Similarly, music, in Burton’s book, is said to have the power to either ease or intensify disease, and the “association of

music (and chanted words or curses) with therapy or the induction of disease is an old one" of which Keats was likely aware (De Almeida 161). Like Lamia's wedding banquet, Porphyro transforms Madeline's bedroom into a realm of ambivalent design with "perfume light," and "an ancient ditty, long since mute" in "chords that tenderest be" played on a "hollow lute" (289-291). Just as mixtures of substances are combined in ambiguous potions, so are perfumes and musical strains suspect in their ability to manipulate and deceive.

Porphyro's playing a ditty on a hollow lute is clearly not overtly dangerous or indicative of ill intent, but, when mingled with the variety of substances that Porphyro displays whose effects are duplicitous, his music may be part of an intoxicating mixture designed to manipulate. The same can be said of Lorenzo's appearance to Isabella. Her vision of Lorenzo is compared to a "fierce potion" that "saves a sick man from the feathered pall / For some few gasping moments" (267-69). Like this "fierce potion," Isabella's vision provides no real relief, and, in fact, precipitates her decline. Lorenzo appears as a "pale shadow" (281) whose "lorn voice" (279) now lacks the "soft lute" (278) that characterized it in life. Though the narration reveals the loss of musical quality from Lorenzo's voice, his "striving" with "piteous tongue, / To speak as when on earth" (282-283) deceives Isabella, who hangs on the music of his voice (284). The "music" of Lorenzo's ghostly being is suspect; his voice serves less to comfort Isabella than to implore for her tear upon his

heather-bloom, initiating her obsession. Keats's writing is punctuated by such depictions of potions, tints, and music whose purposes prove to be elusive and mercurial.

Joining this litany of duplicitous substances are snakes, which serve as symbols of the *pharmakon's* characteristic ambiguity. While the snake's venomous bite was considered dangerous and potent enough to transform the physiological composition of its victim, Spence, Lemprière, and Tooke, Keats's sources for Greek medical myth, note the snake's association with positive attributes: a practical knowledge of medicinal herbs; wisdom, judgment, prudence, and foresight; the power of diagnosis and prophecy; and an ability to transform tangible elements and intangible thoughts (De Almeida 182). Moreover, snakes were thought to have hypnotic power due to their intense stare, the mesmeric noise of their rattles, and the vapours that were thought to emit from their bodies. Snakes were also believed to have the power to charm their prey through a high-pitched whine or rattle (De Almeida 186). Keats seems particularly aware of this belief in "Isabella" when he has Lorenzo bow "a fair greeting to these serpents' whine" (190). The multiple significance of this line is further complicated by the phonic play on "whine." Snakes' potent sounds were thought capable of causing birds to descend from trees to become serpents' prey (De Almeida 186). Keats seems to allude to this phenomenon when, in "Isabella," he builds upon the brothers' association

with serpents and compares Isabella to a “bird on wing” (470) who is consumed by the consequences of her brothers’ deed.

While Isabella’s brothers are associated with snakes, Keats’s Lamia is a snake endowed with self-mutating capabilities. *Lamiae*, according to Lemprière, “were monsters of Africa who had ‘ the face and breast of a woman, and the rest of the body like that of a serpent.’ Their hissings were ‘pleasing and agreeable,’ and they ‘allured strangers to come to them, that they might devour them’” (De Almeida 188). These feminine serpentine monster-like creatures are not restricted to ancient myth, however; associations between women and snakes were common, and, as Stevenson notes, during the time of Alexander the Great, a story emerged that associated women with the lethality of venom. When Alexander the Great was about to invade India, an Indian king offered him a beautiful damsel. Aristotle, who saw through the plot, prevented Alexander from approaching the damsel. The woman had been inoculated in infancy with snake venom, was raised amidst snakes, and nurtured on their poison since her childhood. This woman contained so much venom that her body and even her touch were deadly (Stevenson 18). The truth of stories such as this one is not as important as their presence in history and myth. The existence of such tales would have contributed to the plausibility of such equivocal or overtly dangerous women as Lamia. Lamia’s serpent qualities contribute to her ambiguity; through her association with serpents, Lamia adopts both wise and

curative, and deceptive and deadly characteristics. Within Keats's poetic treatment of cures and poisons seems to be a belief in their inseparability: substances with curative powers often have the capacity to poison, as the *pharmakon* suggests.

Where there is suspicion surrounding medicine in Keats's poetry, it is not surprising to find illness. Many characters in Keats's poems seem to be described in terms of symptoms. The knight in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," for example, is pale, haggard, moist, and fevered, symptoms that could suggest tuberculosis (Goellnicht 223). Such descriptions as these warrant attention because Keats, as a student of medicine, would have "read the hieroglyphics of the natural body with immediacy and comprehension" (De Almeida 51). It becomes evident that Keats's training in interpreting and decoding the signs of the body to detect health or illness surfaces as symptoms in his poetry. Similar to the knight, Isabella becomes pale and cold upon her vision of Lorenzo's ghost, and later at his burial spot (318, 371), and the poem is marked with references to fevers. "The Eve of St. Agnes" opens with the elderly beadsman and the palsied Angela, and closes with death and chill.

The depiction of these characters' illnesses, however, is not as unusual as the illness coded in the description of figures carved on the Grecian urn. De Almeida notes the unnatural and somewhat sickly state in which these figures are captured. Keats's erasure of the logical boundary that would separate artistic figures from life and disease only further exemplifies how the

pharmakon's elusiveness permeates Keats's works. The urn's Attic shape "with brede / Of marble men and maidens overwrought" (41-42) leaves much room for multiple meanings. "Overwrought," of course, means "fashioned upon the exterior of the urn, but it could also mean at this period 'exhausted by overwork,' 'worked up to too high a pitch; over-excited'" (De Almeida 118). This state of overwrought intensity could mask and foreshadow deathly exhaustion, and the figures on the urn could easily be diagnosed with this unhealthy state of excessive excitement. Just as Keats here bestows symptoms of diseases of the living upon immortalized figures of stone, he seems to illustrate the necessity of maturity and death in the fulfillment of life. Fair youth seem captured in stone, unable to mature, much like the carved trees that will never be bare, nor bear fruit (15-16). That the maiden cannot fade provides little comfort to the lover who can never kiss (17, 19). In Keats's poems, where medicines are ambiguous at best, it is, perhaps, no surprise to find such a measure of disease, particularly at a time when many physicians feared that disease was not multiple, but idiopathic, a cipher inseparable from the cipher of life and outside the realm of cause and cure (De Almeida 142).

It becomes obvious, in Keats's poetry, that distinctions between health and sickness are as elusive as distinctions between remedies and poisons. If, in "Ode on a Grecian Urn," the diseases of the living can afflict carved figures of stone, then it seems that the ever-changing state of mortals is to be preferred to the sustained, frenzied state of the urn's immutable townspeople.

The "overwrought" urn is contrasted sharply with the acceptance and wish for the change, maturity, and impending harvest and death in "To Autumn." Though the images of "To Autumn" lead to death and decomposition, this cycle is necessary and welcome compared to the overwrought state that is fixed and suspended on the urn. This necessary cycle of life and death is quite literally described in "Isabella" with the suggestion that Lorenzo's decomposing head helps to fertilize the thick green basil (426-430). "To Autumn," similarly, is a site of mingling of life and death that demonstrates their interdependence. Autumn's warmth sets the flowers budding "more, / And still more" until bees expect that "warm days will never cease" (8-10). Autumn is characterized as having the capacity to feign ceaseless, ever-ripening life, concealing its role as the harbinger of winter. As "to Autumn" illustrates, the ambiguity of the pharmakon is not limited to specific cures and poisons, but extends to the larger areas of life and death. Keats's elusive language becomes apparent in his treatment of ambiguous substances, but this proves to be only a literal representation of his deliberate ambiguity that challenges more rigid binary structures.

Rainbow-sided, Gordian Poetry

The blending of various meanings under one signifier that characterizes the ambiguity of the *pharmakon* functions literally in the substances and practices of romantic medicine that Keats incorporates into his poetry, and this mingling of opposites also reflects late eighteenth-century notions of health. It seems that during a time when it was feared that disease was inherent in life and outside the realm of cause and cure, health was considered to be a state of balance, a harmony between two polar opposites (Goellnicht 182). This attention to balance pervades much of Keats's poetry, and is evident in his use of language.

Interestingly, this idea of a balance of opposing forces is similar to the ambiguity that Derrida believes inhabits language. His use of the *pharmakon* illustrates this lack of definite and fixed signification: the *pharmakon* is "movement" and "play," and the producer of "difference" (Derrida "Plato's Pharmacy" 127). Derrida explains that the reason for this ambiguity in language is the lack of any natural attachment of signified to signifier, or "the arbitrariness of the sign" (*Of Grammatology* 51). Because of this absence of natural attachment to meaning, the process of signification itself becomes a series of absence and presence that Derrida calls the trace. This "unmotivated" trace ruptures the natural attachment, putting into question "the idea of naturalness rather than that of attachment" (Derrida *Of Grammatology* 46, 62, 71). The lack of "naturalness" in the attachment of

signifier to signified produces the "play" inherent in a system of signification that lacks the presence of a transcendental signified (Derrida *Of Grammatology* 50). It is this movement and play, inherent in the *pharmakon*, that contribute to *différance*. Signifying both "to differ" and "to defer," "*différance* (with an *a*) is to compensate – economically – this loss of meaning, for *différance* can refer simultaneously to the entire configuration of its meanings" (Derrida, "Différance" 8). In establishing his perceptions of language and signification, Derrida's text is performative, practicing the ambivalence he ascribes to the process of signification itself. In his discussion of the play inherent in language, his terms and meanings demonstrate the movement and multiplicity of signification that they attempt to characterize. This destabilized connection between signifier and signified, then, leaves writing open to a play that ensures that signification, or meaning, is continually deferred and that significance is always involved in a movement that perpetuates a differentiation of meaning. This sense of movement and *différance* is what permits the boundaries between opposites to be erased, as Derrida illustrates with the *pharmakon*, and as Keats demonstrates with his quite literal employment of the *pharmakon*, his figurative erasure of borders, and his destabilization of binary oppositions.

This movement and elusiveness come into play in the settings, themes, and characters of Keats's poems. The movement in his poetry is quite evident in Stillinger's *Reading The Eve of St. Agnes*, an examination of the multiple

interpretations of the poem that have been offered. Stillinger discusses his "Keats map" on which he attempts to plot the content of Keats's poems. This "Keats map," Stillinger writes, "starts with a horizontal line separating two realms in opposition: an actual world below the line and a contrasting ideal world above the line" (107). The pairs of opposites situated on either side of the dividing line can be any opposing realms established in Keats's poetry: "earth and heaven, . . . mortality and immortality, time and timelessness, materiality and spirituality" (107). Whatever oppositions are established on this map, Keats's poems reveal "frequent shuttling between the lower and upper regions" (109). Characters in Keats's poems, Stillinger claims, attempt to transcend their world, but find something is lacking in the idealized world, so they return to their originating realm (109). While this map may offer a cursory illustration of some of the movement in Keats's poems, Stillinger admits that he would no longer "seriously propose so simple a description to cover so complex a body of thinking, feeling, and writing as Keats and his poetry represent" (109). Stillinger re-evaluates the utility of a simple binary approach to works as complex as Keats's:

The map . . . is a frame for pairs of oppositions that, intentionally or not, Keats never in fact resolves in the poems . . . In every case, they are not so much ambiguities of an *either/or* division, where the meaning at first is uncertain but later is cleared up, as they are disparate elements in a continual *both/and* impingement

and a jostling of contraries . . . And Keats manages to keep these components steadily in conflict while at the same time creating a sense that somehow the tensions are resolved. (110)

While Stillinger's initial treatment of Keats's poems may have been too superficial, his amended commentary provides an explanation of how Keats's poems do not settle satisfactorily into patterns or solutions. Instead, his poetry is permeated with the sort of movement and play that Derrida describes. It is this play that permits differing significance of these works to emerge, resulting in a continual deferring of meaning.

"La Belle Dame Sans Merci," as Stillinger also recognizes (110), is structured to create the appearance of an inquiry and an appropriate response; the response, however, is not contained in the poem, but is continually deferred and left for readers to determine. In "La Belle Dame sans Merci," an unidentified speaker asks, "O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms, / Alone and palely loitering?" and then, "O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms, / So haggard and so woe-begone?" (1-2, 5-6). The knight responds by telling a story of his encounter with a "lady" whose identity remains almost as mysterious as that of the unknown questioner. The word "lady" alone is ambiguous in signifying both a woman and a woman of nobility; because the poem mentions knights, kings, and princes, it is possible that the woman he encounters is one of nobility. In the next line, this mysterious figure is referred to as "a faery's child" (14), and later we are told that she sings "a

faery's song" (24), speaks a "language strange" (27), and has an "elfin grot" (29), moving her into the realm of fantasy and folkloric creatures. Fairies and elves, as Keats would have known, could be helpful, indifferent, or menacing to humans. After telling of his experiences with this ambiguous woman, the knight seems to respond to the initial questions: "And this is why I sojourn here / Alone and palely loitering" (45-46). What could be missed by an inattentive reader, as Stillinger and others have recognized, is that the knight's response does not adequately answer the initial question, "what can ail thee." It is only through the implications of the knight's account that the reader and questioner are to infer that his encounter with the lady has led to his ailing state. By having the knight engage in the rhetoric suited to his role as the responder, Keats plays with the meaning of words, relying on the readers' assumption of the reliability of language to create the illusion of a meaningful exchange between two characters. In this poem, Keats seems to play with the meaning of words by stripping them of their assumed enduring attachment to meaning. Not only is the Belle Dame without specific form or meaning, but the questioner is without identity. The pale kings, princes, and warriors who claim that "'La Belle Dame sans Merci / Thee hath in thrall'" (39-40) have only questionable credibility, and there it is only by implication that we are to assume that the mysterious woman the knight describes is the Belle Dame. This poem, then, leaves the reader with gaps: one between the initial questions and the knight's partial answer, and another between the enigmatic lady and

her assumed title as "La Belle Dame sans Merci." It is this space, which becomes evident only upon close reading, that leaves room for multiple and evolving meanings to emerge.

"Ode on a Grecian Urn," too, includes a series of questions without answers, though the poem seems to convey a sense of completeness and containment. The first stanza concludes with a surge of questions:

What leaf-fringed legend haunts about thy shape
 Of deities or mortals, or of both,
 In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
 What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
 What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
 What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy? (5-10)

These questions are not answered with any certainty, as our knowledge of the significance of the urn is entirely speculative, and the encompassing, ostensibly conclusive answer in the last two lines of the poem is virtually incomprehensible. The questions themselves, however, are interesting in their establishment of binary oppositions. The speaker apparently cannot determine men from gods or pursuit from escape, and in the second stanza, Keats contrasts heard melodies with those that are unheard and sweeter. Phinney adds another binary in his examination of the ode; he identifies a tension between a desire to contemplate the urn in its historical setting, and a desire to appreciate the urn simply as an "objet d'art" (136). It certainly seems

that the litany of questions in the first and fourth stanzas suggests a desire to possess some knowledge of the urn's historical setting, but attempts to know the urn's history are complicated by the apparent collapse, or blending, of time: the ode's speaker is temporally separated from the setting from which the urn originates, and the figures on the urn itself depict not a direct account of the history of its own time, but an "ideal time of pastoral" (Phinney 140). The language describing the scene depicted on the urn also conspires in the collapse of time in this ode. Keats describes the scene as if it is unfolding in front of him as he writes: "Who are these coming to the sacrifice?" (31), "What little town . . . Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?" (35-37). The ode's speaker's interpretations of the images function as Derrida's trace, which is not restricted by time: "the concepts of *present*, *past*, and *future*, everything in the concepts of time and history which implies evidence of them - the metaphysical concept of time in general - cannot adequately describe the structure of the trace" (*Of Grammatology* 67). It is not only the apparent temporal blurring that invokes the trace, however; the urn, as art, functions on the level of symbol, or as a signifier requiring a reader to supply meaning, a signified. Art, suggests Phinney, must be supplemented to be understood (142).

Though Phinney does not overtly refer to Derridean terminology, Derrida's supplement complements this reading of the ode. The supplement, according to Derrida, refers to both the lack and the addition. It suggests that

language needs supplementation because of its lack of a stable signifier-signified relationship, and that language is this supplement ("Structure, Sign, and Play" 289). The silent and empty urn, like signifiers without fixed signifieds, requires a supplement to produce meaning. The absence inherent in the silent melodies indicates the urn's need of the supplement that the reader is to provide. It seems that with the speaker's appeal for the "soft pipes" to "play on" (12), play with the signification of the urn's depicted scenes begins (Phinney 142). It is from this point that the speaker characterizes such figures as the boughs, the melodist, and the love:

Ah, happy, happy boughs! That cannot shed
 Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;
 And, happy melodist, unwearied,
 For ever piping songs for ever new;
 More happy love! More happy, happy love! (21-25)

Wolfson compares the repetition of "happy" in this third stanza to Wordsworth's repetition in "The Thorn," and claims that the repeated words in Keats's ode "verge on becoming mere 'things' of passionate speech, rather than 'symbols'" (Wolfson 42). If Wolfson is correct, then Keats supplements the "text" of the urn not only with his meaning, but also with "things" of passionate speech, and meaningful signifiers and hollow utterances are mingled in the supplementation. "Happy," Wasserman claims, signifies something other than the gleeful state with which it is commonly associated.

Happiness is "the opposite of the weariness, the fever, and the fret that are the inherent attributes of the unhappy mortal world. It lies, we notice, *in* that which beckons us . . . Indeed, to describe the boughs, instead of the self as 'happy' is linguistically consistent with Keats's premise of empathy, for the happiness resides not in the self, but in the object into which the self is transported and in which it experiences" (23-24). According to Wasserman, Keats's supplemental characterization involves a movement of being that further heightens the tension between the immutable urn and the movement of language. It is this tension between the self and object and "intensity of stress" that contribute to the urn's immutability (Wasserman 33).

Wasserman's explanation of Keats's use of "happy" adds yet a further supplement to Keats's ode, which serves as a supplement to the urn.

The speaker even moves beyond the figures on the urn to imagine an emptied town, permitting a mingling of fiction with reality beyond that depicted on the urn. By attempting to "read" the urn and provide a supplement to the absence inherent in symbolic art, Keats seems to attach his ode to the urn and offer it as a piece of art to be read and to have its absences supplemented by future readers. By discussing the urn, Keats provides an example of this process of reading signifiers whose attachments to signifieds are multiple and tenuous and require the reader's effort of interpretation and supplementation. This series of readings, the ode demonstrates, results in a timeless trace of signification that leads to a continuous deferral of meaning.

By committing his work to the future, Phinney claims, Keats realized "he was also committing it to the medium of history, to the perpetual reading and reinterpretation that maintains our dialogue with the past" (149).

Following the questions in the first and fourth stanzas of "Ode on a Grecian Urn," there is only one statement that seems to bear any degree of certainty: "'Beauty is truth, truth beauty, - that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know'" (49-50). For all the debate over the meaning of these concluding two lines, only their ambiguity is certain. This statement provides a rather strong example of the blending of opposite forces that appears in Keats's poetry. These two poles of meaning, "beauty" and "truth," Wolfson suggests, "slide across their marker of equivalence, 'is,' reverse positions at the comma, and elude syntactic priority that, despite the elegant symmetry of statement, its logic can only be wondered at, like the urn itself" (48). Like the urn and like language itself, according to Derrida, these signifiers are without natural attachment to signifieds or to their syntactic positions: they quite literally slide, creating a movement and a difference in position that, undoubtedly, will lead to an endless deferral of meaning.

Language is not alone in its lack in this ode; the urn itself is an empty container, an empty signifier. The urn, with its empty space, could function as a symbol of Derrida's arbitrary sign. The urn, like signifiers, can be filled with anything, just as the figures on the urn can be linked to a variety of meanings. The urn can even function as a symbol of Keats's idea of art. The urn, as a

piece of art, does not communicate, but allows the poet or the self to enter the "presence of its mystery"; art, then, absorbs the reader into a "participation in its essence" (Wasserman 51). The hollow form of the urn clearly presents a space in which the reader and art mingle and leave their trace. The urn's empty space may also be seen as an absence around which the urn is able to define itself, even if its existence is related to the negation of mortal life (De Almeida 129). The urn's association with death offers another possibility for its multiple signification. Though the urn is a container for the dead, it becomes just as strongly associated with the immortality and eternal youth that seems to be represented on the urn's exterior.

The urn's hollowness, as a symbol of signifiers that are subject to play, seems to represent the space between an empty or unstable signifier and the signified that it may evoke but to which it is not attached. Similarly, many of Keats's poems elicit this sense of suspension in an ill-defined space replete with possibilities. "Isabella" is, in many ways, characterized by this sort of suspension between realms. Isabella and Lorenzo's relationship, in particular, is haunted by space that they attempt to fill and eliminate, but that also seems to fuel their relationship. The poem's first stanza introduces the couple in terms of recurring space between them: "They could not, sure, beneath the same roof sleep / But to each other dream, and nightly weep" (7-8). The pair attempt to fill the empty space between them by dreaming to each other, but dreams are ephemeral, leaving the dreamer with an absence of definite

meaning. Even if the couple were to dwell in the "self-same mansion," it would not be without "some malady," suggesting that, perhaps, this space of discontinuity is valuable for the possibilities that it affords. Even on the morning that Lorenzo leaves with the brothers, he almost misses his opportunity to bid Isabella "a good morrow," and when he does see her, he is in the courtyard and looks up to see "her features bright / Smile through an in-door lattice" (202, 199-200). Suiting the couple's characteristic suspended space, their meeting time is "before the dusk / Had taken from the stars its pleasant veil" (81-82).

Keats also seems concerned with the space between wishes and their fulfillment. In some instances, this space seems collapsed, while in others, this space is where much of the action transpires. Lorenzo, at the beginning of "Isabella," is caught between the desire to "ask my lady's boon" and the reality of the "Honeyless days and days" that he lets pass (28, 32). The problem, the narrator suggests, is passion that is "both meek and wild" (48). Stuart Sperry discusses this tension between wishing and willing in Keats: "a wish is double-natured: it lies somewhere between a desire and an act of will, an impulse and its realization, the unconscious and the conscious" (375). Wishes, in "Isabella," inhabit an ambivalent space, but "The Eve of St. Agnes," structured around wishes, is similarly fraught with uncertainties. It is not enough that Porphyro wishes for Madeline and wills his way into her bedroom, but he also interferes with her dreams and induces her return to

reality. After "filling the chilly room with perfume light" (275), Porphyro wishes her awake, but her dream is "a midnight charm / Impossible to melt as iced stream" (282-83). The dream, an equivocal charm, is even more suspicious for its lifeless iciness. It is when Madeline awakes, however, that the tension between wish and will is heightened. Though both Porphyro and Madeline experience the realization of their wishes, it seems that for Madeline, at least, the dubious wish, ever-evolving and filled with possibilities, is preferable to the "pallid, chill, and drear" nature of reality (311). Upon the fulfillment of her wish, Madeline asks for "that voice again, my Porphyro, / Those looks immortal" (312-13). If Madeline's response to reality is any indication, it seems that Keats appreciates the spaces between opposing elements. The dream, manipulated by Porphyro, is preferable to the reality of Porphyro, and the space between Isabella and Lorenzo similarly affords them an opportunity to supplement the lack in their relationship with dreams blended with reality.

Like characters who become suspended between the familiar and the unfamiliar, distinctions between death and life are subject to play, as their significance is also susceptible to movement. The brothers' murderous act seems to infect them with the death they mean to inflict on Lorenzo: "Sick and wan / The brothers' faces in the ford did seem, / Lorenzo's flush with love" (213-15). The deathly pallor, in this instance, quite literally moves from the brothers before the murder, to Lorenzo after. Even in Isabella's vision,

Lorenzo maintains characteristics of life and death: "the forest tomb/ Had marred his glossy hair," but he strives to "speak as when on earth," and "Isabella on its music hung" (75-76, 82-84). Lorenzo's severed head literally gives life to the basil plant and Isabella's incessant attention to the pot of basil is compared to a bird eager to "breast its eggs" (470), suggesting that life may yet emerge from the decomposing head. Isabella's consuming desire to find Lorenzo leads her to hover in death's domain, as is suggested by the narrator's question:

Who hath not loitered in a green church-yard,
 And let his spirit, like a demon-mole,
 Work through the clayey soil and gravel hard,
 To see skull, coffined bones, and funeral stole;
 Pitying each form that hungry Death hath marred
 And filling it once more with human soul? (353-58)

These lines depict an attempt to inhabit death's space. The working through "clayey soil" is made more ominous when accompanied by a desire to fill with human soul the forms that "Death hath marred." Keats's mingling of a living soul in a dead body is a clear and abrupt rupture of attachment of signifiers to conventional meaning. His play with signification here seems all the more profound considering his knowledge of the powers and limitations of eighteenth-century medicine. This ambiguous space between life and death is complicated further in this poem by the final two lines of this stanza: "Ah!

This is holiday to what was felt / When Isabella by Lorenzo knelt" (359-60).

Isabella's desperation, then, would have to bring her closer to death than the mingling of the soul of the living with the forms of the dead.

The reader, too, is kept suspended in many of Keats's poems. While Keats often seems to invite the reader into his poetry, he also engages in techniques that prevent the reader from becoming immersed in the story by keeping the reader aware of its artifice. The reader, then, often seems caught between involvement in the poetry and efforts to be kept distant. Twice in "Isabella," Keats reminds the reader not only that these events comprise a mere tale, but also that he is not the originator of this tale. At the end of the forty-ninth stanza, Keats suggests that the reader "turn to the very tale" (391).

Keats often engages his characters in settings that hover between recognizable realms. A sense of mystery and mystification pervades such poems as "The Eve of St. Agnes" and "Lamia," but this mystical element is tempered by a mingling with realism that makes the setting rather enigmatic. "The Eve of St. Agnes," Sperry recognizes, begins with the "somber, Christian devotions of the Beadsman, which lend at first a more serious color to the popular superstitions Madeline pursues, but it is not long before we are in a world of charms and dim enchantments" (374). The Beadsman's usual state of devotion is briefly mingled with the more enchanting world of "Music's golden tongue" and "prelude soft" (28). Similarly Angela moves out of her sphere when she, "weak in body and in soul" with "palsied hand," ventures

to be Porphyro's accomplice in his questionable deeds. Somewhat less definite than the "fierce potion" that is Isabella's vision of Lorenzo, is the potion of substances that Porphyro uses to sustain and infiltrate Madeline's dream. Porphyro swears "by all saints" (145) that he will not harm Madeline in his plan to charm her. Porphyro's swearing by saints on St. Agnes' Eve with his intentions to beguile Madeline with a mysterious mixture places his character in a dubious space between tradition and enchantment.

It is, at least in part, this rupture of constant meaning or signification, that has led to the multiple readings of Keats's poetry. The fifty-nine interpretations of "The Eve of St. Agnes" that Stillinger identifies are indicative of the shifts and movement that pervade Keats's writing. Stillinger explains that Keats's complex works, such as "The Eve of St. Agnes," require the reader to construct meaning that results in an "imposition of order on a chaos of information" (*Reading The Eve of St. Agnes* 82). This construction of meaning that Stillinger identifies is similar to the signifier-signified relationship that Derrida examines; both seem to be an imposition of order that struggles and fails to resist the movement inherent in such a structure.

Keats's most ambiguous characters are arguably the central characters of "Lamia." The poem begins with Hermes, who is almost a symbol of duplicity, and his character is just as ambiguous in Keats's poem as he is in mythology. Though he fulfills his promise to Lamia for which he swears by his "serpent rod" (l, 89), he is also described, when talking to Lamia, as "a

stooped falcon ere he takes his prey" (I, 67). Hermes' favour to Lamia remains of dubious benefit to her throughout the poem. Lamia, as a snake, embodies both benevolence and malignance. Keats moves beyond the ambiguity inherent in snakes and turns Lamia into a symbol that is particularly vulnerable to play:

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 deomon's mistress, or the demon's self. (I, 47-56)

Lamia's gordian shape, an allusion to the legendary knot, is an indication of her enduring ambivalence; she is, in this poem, a character whose nature is not easily discerned, and her physical appearance is correspondingly mottled. Lamia's body is stamped with a mix of animal markings that mingles with silver moons that evolve and dissolve. Keats's use of "dissolve" suggests that his language, here, is as inconstant and mutable as Lamia, herself. In addition to its common meanings, "dissolve" had a more scientific significance in the

nineteenth century: the chemical sense of "dissolve" involved the reduction "to a liquid condition so as to part into formative elements or destroy physical integrities" (De Almeida 83). Though this sense of dissolve includes a parting into formative elements, Lamia remains a gordian shape, tangled, mingled, and unresolved. It is not until she is penetrated by Apollonius' stare that she dissolves into nothingness.

More troubling than Lamia's variegated appearance is her identification as a "penanced lady elf," a "demon's mistress, or the demon's self" (I, 55-56). Though her comparison to a "penanced lady elf" is the most complimentary comment Keats offers Lamia at this point, elves, much like snakes, were duplicitous. Like the Belle Dame, Lamia's character is only made more indefinite by her association with elves. Further complicating Lamia's status is Hermes' comment that she must be "surely high inspired" (I, 83). That it is Hermes who makes this comment puts its reliability into question. The heavenly allusion in this comment, however, heightens the tension between Lamia's lowly condition as a snake and potentially the "demon's self," and heavenly beings.

Apollonius is no more clearly defined than Lamia. He is introduced by Lycius as a "sage, my trusty guide / And good instructor; but tonight he seems / The ghost of folly haunting my sweet dreams" (I, 375-77). This philosopher, on Lamia's wedding day, laughs as if "some knotty problem, that had daffed / His patient thought, had now begun to thaw, / And solve and

melt" (II, 160-62). Apollonius' solution to Lamia's "gordian shape" is foreshadowed in Keats's discussion of philosophy:

Do not all charms fly
 At the mere touch of cold philosophy?
 There was an awful rainbow once in heaven:
 We know her woof, her texture; she is given
 In the dull catalogue of common things.
 Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings,
 Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,
 Empty the haunted air, and gnomèd mine –
 Unweave a rainbow, as it erewhile made
 The tender-personed Lamia melt into a shade. (II, 229-38)

The dissolution of the "rainbow-sided" Lamia is foreshadowed here, and if Keats aligns Lamia with the mysterious things that "cold philosophy" seeks to measure, catalogue, and render common, then Lamia is on the side of the angels, complicating her previous description as the "demon's self." If Lamia is aligned with angels, Apollonius, the clipper of their wings, is almost demonized, complicating his earlier description as a "sage," "trusty guide," and "good instructor." Apollonius' cry, "Be gone foul dream" (II, 271), is made more complex and undefined by the earlier claim that the dreams of Gods are real (I, 127). Though Apollonius causes Lamia to vanish, Lycius' description of him suggests that Apollonius begins to assume the physical

characteristics of a snake: "Mark how, possessed, his lashless eyelids stretch / Around his demon eyes" (II, 288-89). In this mingling of characteristics, Keats effectively destabilizes binaries of reason and passion, mortal and immortal, and deception and truth. In "Lamia," Keats questions and dismantles the assumed significance of such symbols as the philosopher and snake, making his treatment of Lamia and Apollonius particularly representative of his disruption of traditionally prevalent binary structures.

Keats seems to permit, and perhaps encourage, a shift in the significance that we attach to Lamia and Apollonius. It seems as if he intended them to be without a sustained attachment to any defined set of characteristics, and reflecting this ambiguity is Lamia's lack of identity, which is quite telling; Lycius asks, "Hast any mortal name, / Fit appellation for this dazzling frame?" (II, 88-89). This inquiry into her name suggests a confusion between immortal and human beings. There seems to be a movement, in this case, toward an attachment of a limiting and defining signifier to an immortal and evolving creature. A name, functioning as a signifier and attempting a natural attachment, sets borders to define what it signifies, and Keats shows a tendency to avoid and erase borders that define, separate, and impose an order and structure onto the disordered. Keats's representation of the ambiguous Lamia and Apollonius, claims Rajan, "reflects Keats's continuing uncertainty about the value of illusion in life" (116). Lamia may represent illusion in this poem, but her character is too complex to associate with a

single characteristic. To align Lamia with illusion against Apollonius' reality is to diminish her own reality and all the ways in which she is a unification of such binary oppositions as good and evil, victim and perpetrator, and mortal and immortal. Rajan notes that the reader of "Lamia" is largely left in the space between these two characters: "to imagine a Lamia more beautiful and pure than she really is is to be guilty of self-deception. But to see through her and reduce her to nothingness is equally unsatisfactory" (120).

Similar to the ambiguity of Lamia's character, Keats's imagery in "Ode to a Nightingale" lacks a fixed significance, and attempts to reduce this imagery to stable signification result in an unsatisfactory and limited interpretation. Among this imagery is the nightingale's song, whose ambiguity permits multiple meaning. While keeping its significance ambiguous, Keats offers the bird's song a sense of permanence:

The voice I hear this passing night was heard
 In ancient days by emperor and clown:
 Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
 Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
 She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
 The same that oft-times hath
 Charmed magic casements, opening on the foam
 Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn. (63-70)

Keats here infuses the nightingale's song with a sense of ubiquity, its presence noticed by emperor and clown, in our world and in faery lands, and throughout many ages. The bird's song in this stanza has the characteristics of Derrida's trace: it exists through time and space, accumulating the significance of its movement. Certainly, Keats's use of the nightingale's song in this poem suggests its continual differing of signification and its deferred meaning.

The image of wine, too, in this ode is subject to a play with meaning that complicates and delays its meaning. The wine in "Ode to a Nightingale" is associated with the "cool vault of the deep-delvèd earth . . . the realm of song (related to that of the nightingale); of sunburnt mirth and Flora . . . of Hippocrene (the realm of art); of winking bubbles and purple-stained mouth (a synecdoche for Bacchus . . .); and of intoxication and loss of consciousness (allied with the drowsy numbness of the opening of the ode)" (Vendler 87). Within the wine, as in the nightingale's song, are allusions to various temporal and physical settings, as well as allusions to various parts of the poem itself. Keats's wine, then, is at once "a refreshing cool draught, a warmth, an incitement to thoughts of sunburnt mirth, an inspiration to song, a bacchic intoxicant, an opiate" (Vendler 88). Not only do these images suggest the movement that is allied with Derrida's theory, but also Keats's interaction with the nightingale's song and his thoughts of wine result in a desire to "fade away into the forest dim - / Fade far away, dissolve" (20-21). Keats's wine embodies multiple elements, but his choice for means of escape is not

"Bacchus and his pards, / But . . . the viewless wings of Poesy" (32-33). In these lines is a suggestion that poetry may help the speaker reach his goal of fading and dissolving. By the poem's conclusion, the music, a form of poetry, has fled and the speaker questions: "Was it a vision, or a waking dream? / . . . Do I wake or sleep?" (79-80). It is not only the speaker, but also the reader of Keats's poem who finds that the music has fled, and the poet has succeeded in a dissolution of sorts: the speaker is left in that ambiguous space between wake and sleep.

In "Ode to a Nightingale," wine, song, and poetry seem to converge in their ability to dissolve and transform. This power that Keats ascribes to poetry is made even more evident throughout his letters. The dissolution of a fixed and clearly-defined self and the ambiguity of poetry that Keats claims are favourable characteristics of poets and poetry are reflected also in Derrida's theory of language.

Poetry and Poets: "like the relict garment of a Saint"

The dissolution and ambivalent state between wake and sleep that concludes "Ode to a Nightingale" is a fitting example of Keats's theory of the poet. In his theory of poetics that aligns with Derrida's, Keats discusses the ambiguity and characterlessness of the poet. Keats's criticism of the logic of binary systems and his promotion of uncertainty and ambiguity surface in his discussion of the absence of fixed and defined character and the consequent movement inherent in the role of the poet. Keats's appreciation of change and movement seems to arise, at least in part, from his observation of peers who seem to adhere to philosophies advocating certainty and binary systems that prefer presence and absolute truth over ambiguity and uncertainty. Keats's letters reveal a criticism of this sort of vanity and egotism of such contemporaries as Wordsworth who, Keats writes, "left a bad impression where-ever he visited in Town - by his egotism, Vanity, and bigotry" (*The Letters of John Keats* I 237). This egotism, vanity, and bigotry demonstrate the rigid characteristics and excessive self-presence that Keats discourages in poets. In the negative capability letter, Keats contrasts his theory of characterlessness with the actions of his acquaintances: "I dined too . . . with Horace Smith & met his two Brothers with Hill & Kingston & one Du Bois . . . These men say things which make one start, without making one feel, they are alike; their manners are alike; they all know fashionables; they have a mannerism in their very eating & drinking, in their mere handling a Decanter"

(*The Letters of John Keats* I 192-93). It seems that the conduct of Keats's friends and fellow artists helped him to isolate the qualities of a great literary character (Fraustino 65). Similar to Derrida, Keats's preference for uncertainty and ambiguity arises, at least in part, from a criticism and deconstruction of the behaviours and beliefs of his influential peers.

Contrary to many of his contemporaries, Keats prefers writing that is infused with uncertainty, but for Keats it is not enough for writing to be ambiguous; the poet himself is to be as indefinite as his language. "Men of Genius," Keats wrote in a letter to Bailey in November 1817, "are as great as certain ethereal Chemicals operating on the Mass of neutral intellect - by they have not any individuality, any determined Character" (*The Letters of John Keats* I, 184). Keats associates genius with a rather overt sense of ambiguity and a lack of definition. This absence of individuality and character seems particularly important to Keats's idea of a poet, and he discusses two similar but distinct methods of achieving this characterlessness: negative capability and empathic projection. The "poetical Character," Keats later writes, "has no self - it is every thing and nothing - It has no character . . . A poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity - he is continually in for - and filling some other Body" (*The Letters of John Keats* I, 387). This sort of empathic projection, while resulting in the same lack of identity as negative capability, functions differently from negative capability. While this empathic projection involves the poet's inhabiting other bodies,

negative capability requires a poet to be “capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason” (*The Letters of John Keats I*, 193). Though both methods of achieving selflessness involve a movement and mingling of poet and object, negative capability suggests a sort of receptivity and hollowness similar to that symbolized by the urn. The poet empties himself so that he may be attached to and filled by signifieds.

Keats describes this receptivity associated with negative capability in terms of the flower and the bee:

it seems to me that we should rather be the flower than the Bee –
 for it is a false notion that more is gained by receiving than
 giving – no the receiver and the giver are equal in their benefits –
 The f[l]ower I doubt not receives a fair guerdon from the Bee –
 its leaves blush deeper in the next spring – and who shall say
 between Man and Woman which is the most delighted? . . . let us
 not therefore go hurrying about and collecting honey-bee like,
 buzzing here and there impatiently from a knowledge of what is
 to be arrived at: but let us open our leaves like a flower and be
 passive and receptive (*The Letters of John Keats I*, 232)

Keats’s image of the flower and the bee is reminiscent not only of Derrida’s trace in the mingling exchange between plant and bee and man and woman, but also of Derrida’s movement and *différance*. Instead of actively collecting

knowledge, Keats advocates a receptivity that suggests a continual evolution of knowledge and a continually deferred attainment of truth. Keats's methods of achieving characterlessness suggest a further mingling of absence and presence. The poet, Keats argues, should have the ability to empty himself and become much like the urn, a signifier or an absence to be filled by any variety of presence. Keats also suggests, however, that the poet must be able to move into other bodies, to be the presence that fills. The poet, then, is doubly ambiguous in his evolving identities and in his ability to be both the filler and the filled.

Similarly, Derrida discusses a tendency in poetics to be non self-referential. Clark, in his address of the ideas of poetics that Derrida discusses in "Che cos'è la poesia?," examines Derrida's "absolute nonabsolute": "this vertiginous phrase would express the poetic as that which is not unconditioned, that is to say it relates to otherness as well as to itself. Further, as *absolutely* nonabsolute, the poetic would be definable in terms of a desire to relate *never* to itself or to itself *only* as to otherness" (Clark 46). For Derrida, the "absolute nonabsolute," similar to Keats's negative capability, does not refer to the self unless the self is an other. Not only is Derrida's theory consistent with Keats's notions of the selfless, absent poet, but Derrida also suggests that selves are unfixed and can become "other."

In "Ode to a Nightingale," Keats presents this duality of the poet who participates in otherness by emptying himself and filling in other bodies. The

movement between and simultaneous engagement in these two states is demonstrated as the speaker wavers between the presence of his pained sense and aching heart and the flying away in the fourth stanza. In this ode, Tagore argues, Keats plays with the ambiguity of consumption, dealing with the body as both subject and object, as consuming and consumed (68-69).

Complementing this argument, of course, are Keats's notions of the receptivity and hollowness of negative capability, and the filling presence of empathic projection. Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" exhibits "the simultaneous filling up and emptying out of the body" (Tagore 73). The poem begins with a speaker who listens to the nightingale's song and drinks the experience, filling himself with the intoxication of the song. The "draught of vintage" (11) for which the speaker longs, is, in effect, a yearning to absorb, to be filled with the "Flora and the country green, / Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth! / . . . the warm South, / . . . the blushful Hippocrene" (13-16). The speaker's desire to be figuratively filled with his environment leads to the dissolution of identity in a fashion consistent with Keats's negative capability.

Though the speaker allows himself to be filled with his surroundings and the nightingale's song, he is also simultaneously incorporated and assumed by this intoxication. The speaker might "fade away into the forest dim - / Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget / . . . The weariness, the fever, and the fret" (20-21, 23). The speaker's incorporation of his

environment seems mutually consuming; he is dissolved, made weary, and incorporated into the environment he wants to consume. As the speaker is both filled and filling, inhabited and inhabiting, he "aches," has a "drowsy numbness" (1), sinks "Lethe-wards" (4), and dissolves (21). Both the filling and the being filled result in an erasure of the self, a movement and mingling of identities and beings. Like the trace, negative capability and empathic projection result in a continuous becoming and play that result in a differing and deferring of self-presence and identity. This ode, however, concludes with a bell that tolls the speaker back from the bird to his "sole self" (72). For all of the movement and attempt to shed identity in this ode, the speaker does not maintain characterlessness.

It is in "To Autumn," Macksey argues, that Keats is best able to dissolve his self and act as a receptive medium (296). Keats succeeds in this ode in effacing a sense of self and remaining a passive observer of the autumnal images. Unlike "Ode to a Nightingale," and "Ode on a Grecian Urn," this ode does not involve a struggle between authorial presence and selflessness. In addition to Keats's practice of negative capability in this ode, he employs the movement that he advocates in several of his letters. Macksey notices the "oscillating movement" that becomes apparent in this ode (301). Autumn conspires with the sun to "fill all fruit with ripeness to the core; / To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells / With a sweet kernel" (6-8). This excessive ripeness seems to hover between consummate ripeness and

disintegrating rot. The image of the gnats is infused with a similar hovering: "Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn / Among the river swallows, borne aloft / Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies" (27-29). The gnats rise and fall in response to the wind that wavers between presence and absence (Macksey 301). Keats, in this ode where he achieves characterlessness, employs the movement necessary to draw life and death, and absence and presence together: "Keats is not merely tracing here the passage from life to death; at this moment he has come to see death as functionally defining life, absence as giving graspable form to presence" (Macksey 302). Keats's treatment of life and death, in this poem, resembles the image of the urn, whose absence and presence are mutually defining. The binaries, in both these cases, are not simply reversed, but destabilized; not only are presence and life removed from their positions of preference, but there is revealed an interdependence between absence and presence, and life and death. In "To Autumn" Keats provides an ode in which he seems quite capable of remaining in uncertainties and maintaining characterlessness. In addition, Keats uses imagery to illustrate the ideal poetic ease of moving between absence and presence.

The flexibility and movement that Keats suggests are essential for the poet are reflected in his theories of poetry and of reading poetry. Keats's letters reveal a strong appreciation for uncertainty in life and art: "the only means of strengthening one's intellect is to make up ones mind about nothing

- to let the mind be a thoroughfare for all thoughts. Not a select party. The genus is not scarce population. All the stubborn arguers you meet with are of the same brood - They never begin upon a subject they have not prerresolved on" (*The Letters of John Keats II*, 213). The "thoroughfare" of the mind that Keats describes resists rigidity and encourages a play and movement in meaning that lead to something much like Derrida's *différance*. Keats's advocacy of indeterminacy and movement is evident in his poetry and is fitting advice for readers of his poetry.

Undefined minds as open as thoroughfares, Keats writes, have the benefit of enjoying multiple meanings of texts and continually deferring meaning: "I have an idea that a Man might pass a very pleasant life in this manner - let him on any certain day read a certain Page of full Poesy or distilled Prose and let him wander with it, and muse upon it, and reflect from it - until it becomes stale - but when will it do so? Never" (*The Letters of John Keats I*, 231). The implication here is that a reader who is open to the play and ambiguity of language will find endless enjoyment and, presumably, continually evolving meaning from a piece of writing. This letter reveals a tendency in Keats's theory toward a sort of movement and *différance* that closely aligns with Derrida's. These multiple meanings that Keats promotes are what lead to the various interpretations of his poems that continue to emerge.

Besides the play and *différance* that Derrida claims are inherent in language, he claims that poetry itself is continually evolving. Derrida suggests that poetry “sets in motion, resists, and hence calls for the interpretation it yet continues to exceed” (Clark 44). Poetry, then, is viewed as a decipherable system that can be interpreted, but that evolves out of any fixed explication. This mutability resists rigid definition and certainty, and instead encourages multiplicity. The evolution of both a language or piece of art and its interpretations creates a trace that, Derrida suggests, spans through time but is not restricted to it: “for the poetic there is always only ‘now’, yet this term . . . is of a complex and multiple temporality” (Clark 44). Art and language must be experienced *differentially* through a recognition of movement and change (Clark 45). Derrida’s theories of poetics and language resemble Keats’s poetics. Poetry, because it is composed of language, simultaneously perpetuates and recalls meaning and interpretation.

This inconsistency in significance results in Derrida’s *différance*, a differing and deferring of meaning. This movement and rupture of meaning is heightened in “Hyperion” in the “hieroglyphics old”,

Which sages and keen-eyed astrologers

Then living on the earth, with labouring thought

Won from the gaze of many centuries –

Now lost, save what we find on remnants huge

Of stone, or marble swart, their import gone,

Their wisdom long since fled. (277-83)

These undeciphered hieroglyphics provide an extreme example of the ambiguity and inconsistency of language. Not only is the meaning of these hieroglyphics unknown and entirely open to play, but language, in this example, is susceptible to ruptures in continuity and is shown to be vulnerable to extinction over time; writing, then, seems to be always in danger of "falling into the abyss of time, of becoming illegible *chiffres*, extant in form only, but void of any meaning" (Bode 34). In this poem, Keats examines the relationship between signifier and signified, which he has already suggested is tenuous, and he heightens the frailty of their attachment to each other. As Derrida explains in his discussion of the *pharmakon*, signifiers hold alternate meanings in reserve, in shadow. These hidden, concealed meanings that are always already present because of the movement and play of significance ensure that language is infused with an absence and, like the hieroglyphics, are not a complete presence. Language, in its evolution and inherent movement and absence, is similar to Keats's idea of the poet; both hold in reserve alternate significance and are open to a continual play of meaning.

The play and absence inherent in writing and poets are reflected also in the figures of "Hyperion." The gods' identities change and in this way, Keats seems to strip even the most potent figures and institutions of their claim to permanence and immutability. Keats establishes a parallel between

the gods who lose identity, signifiers with shifting signifieds, and poets whose identity shifts.

The central images of "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and "Ode to a Nightingale" similarly illustrate the uncertainty of signification and of the poet's identity. Though the ambiguity of the urn and the nightingale do not constitute as serious a challenge to institutional permanence, they also lack firm attachment to meaning, and the poet acts as both writer and reader of texts. It is the speaker in these poems "who keeps changing the interpretation, first seeing (for example) life on the urn, then seeing death, and finally seeing both life and death at the same time" (Stillinger 87). While acting as a reader of such "texts" as the urn, Keats models the role of the reader by providing an evolving interpretation and by anticipating such varied readings of the art that he creates. Much like "Ode on a Grecian Urn," "Ode to a Nightingale" involves the poet's interaction with a "text" or subject. The nightingale itself, like the urn, does not have a fixed meaning throughout the poem, but seems to be continually in the process of becoming (Wasserman 179). Meaning, Wasserman claims, "lies not only in a symbol or a situation, but often more significantly in the direction being taken by any of the materials. The poetry is . . . evolutionary, and we must read not only what is explicitly enacted but also what is implied by the abstract pattern . . . their becomingness" (179-80). Because of the "becomingness" of meaning, the reader, as Keats suggests in his letters and enacts in these odes, partakes in the

creation of meaning, reflecting the role of the writer. The roles of reader and writer, then, also become mingled and destabilized so that they, too, partake in the “becomingness” of language.

This undefined nature of Keats’s notion of the poet and of many of his symbols bears the characteristics of Derrida’s trace, which is to be “understood as an operation and not as a state, as an active movement, a demotivation, and not as a given structure” (*Of Grammatology* 51). The trace, as a factor in *différance*, is always in movement, in flux: “the immotivation of the trace has always *become*. In fact . . . the trace is indefinitely its own becoming-unmotivated” (*Of Grammatology* 47). In a letter to George and Georgiana Keats, John Keats provides a concrete example of the movement that constitutes the trace:

From the time you left me, our friends say I have altered completely . . . I dare say you have altered also – every man does - our bodies every seven years are completely fresh-materiald . . . We are like the relict garment of a Saint: the same and not the same: for the careful Monks patch it and patch it: till there’s not a thread of the original garment left, and still they show it for St. Anthony’s shirt. (*The Letters of John Keats* II 208)

Signification, like the human body and St. Anthony’s shirt, is always evolving, and changes in meaning occur under a single signifier. It is because of this continual movement that meaning is destabilized and deferred. Much like the

movement occurring in the shirt, the significance of the poet, Keats insists, must also be changing.

Similar to Keats's dislike of rigidity in language and thought, he shows an aversion to poetry that attempts to formalize readers' thoughts: "we hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us - and if we do not agree, seems to put its hand in its breeches pocket. Poetry should be great & unobtrusive" (*The Letters of John Keats* I, 224). Keats infuses poetry with the play and instability of meaning that Derrida recognizes in language. The poet's task, Keats claims, is to confront mystery, but not to attempt to explain it by imposing a structure of thought (Chatterjee 44).

Keats's letters contain theoretical observations, but unlike many of his contemporaries, he does not establish an overt theory as much as he simply encourages an interrogative perspective. Instead of outlining a definitive theory of practice, Keats challenges the idea of absolutes and certainties, encouraging instead continual questioning and suspension of judgment. Keats even challenges reasoning that is to lead to truth: "I have never yet been able to perceive how any thing can be known for truth by consequitive reasoning - and yet it must be - Can it be that even the greatest Philosopher ever <when> arrived at his goal without putting aside numerous objections" (*The Letters of John Keats* I 185). Keats suggests here that the arrival at the goal of truth involves the subordination of objections. The presence of repressed objections, of course, implies that the goal of truth is not reached. For all

Keats's questioning of pervasive thought, he holds himself to the same standards and seems certain only of uncertainty: "You know my ideas about Religion - I do not think myself more in the right than other people and that nothing in this world is proveable" (*The Letters of John Keats* I 242). Keats subjects even his form of writing to this scrutiny, reflecting his belief in the ubiquitous un-provability of the world: "I am sometimes so very sceptical as to think Poetry itself a mere Jack a lantern to amuse whoever may chance to be struck with its brilliance" (*The Letters of John Keats* I 242). Keats encourages active and evolving thought when reading poetry, and he recognizes that his form of writing may be subject to writers and readers as diverse and multiple as the meanings inherent in language.

Conclusion

It seems clear that the ambiguity in Keats's work is a rather deliberate manifestation of his theory and a challenge to rigid traditional and conventional beliefs. Keats's observations of these types of defined binary systems arise, seemingly, from a recognition of the ambivalence of natural remedies which, in part, likely prompted him to become critical of imposed notions of order and divisions. It is quite clear that Keats's medical training pervaded his writing; his poems show his sensitivity to and knowledge of various pharmacopoeia and diseases. The ambiguity of many medical treatments seems to provide a core tenet from which Keats proceeds to view not only his own writing, but also language, his theories, and the world. It is evident that in his poetry, Keats's recognition of the unification of opposing forces in medicine extends into language. The ambivalence that he recognizes in medicine affects his perception of larger issues and causes him, much like Derrida, to challenge dominant philosophies that were structured on a series of binary oppositions. Similar to Derrida, then, Keats broadens his view of ambiguity to challenge even the most established and pervasive philosophies.

Throughout his poetry and letters, Keats seems to struggle with these binaries and he consistently resists the options that the binary structure makes available. Instead, Keats, much like Derrida, destabilizes the binary by exposing the binary division as an inadequate one that excludes a range of possibilities. By revealing the ambiguity that is inherent not only in language,

but also in nature, as is the case with his reference to pharmacological substances, Keats shows how, in the face of multiple and ever-evolving meaning and signification, the binary structure is an oversimplified one that excludes multiple meanings and denies ambiguity. Instead, Keats argues that indecision, uncertainty, and suspension are the marks of great understanding.

Both Keats and Derrida, it seems, examine and criticize the beliefs of others in their respective fields. Similar to Derrida, Keats effectively discounts the notion of the transcendental signifier by engaging in a play with language and signification. During a time when the eminence and egotism of Wordsworth pervaded much romantic thought, Keats's insistence on absence in terms of negative capability and a destabilized signifier-signified relationship is a significant challenge.

Keats's ideas of language, meaning, poetry, and poets converge in such a way that the borders between reader and writer, and text and writer are erased. Keats seems to take pains, both in his poetry and his letters, to demonstrate the movement, play, and ambiguity that is inherent in language. Because of his recognition of this ambiguity, Keats favours an attitude of uncertainty, realizing that binary structures are too rigid for such continual movement. In his letters and poetry, Keats expresses ideas and criticism similar to those that Derrida establishes in his deconstruction of previous philosophical theories. Keats and Derrida merge even further, however, in their broad application of their criticisms and their erasure of borders. Keats

plays with erasures of borders in much of his poetry; the ambiguity he recognizes in romantic medicine is, like Derrida's *pharmakon*, an erasure of borders that separate remedy from poison, helpful from harmful. Figures such as Lamia, the Belle Dame, and Apollonius similarly embody this mingling of a spectrum of characteristics evoked by the notion of the *pharmakon*. Keats's letters reveal an erasure of borders between writing and writer that even more closely aligns with Derrida's theories.

By associating writing's ambiguity and absence of a fixed meaning with poets, Keats, in effect, erases the border between the text and its creator. Keats's negative capability demands an absence on the part of the writer; he is to empty himself of character so that he may be receptive and filled by other forms of presence. The writer and the writing both lack a natural attachment to a fixed meaning or identity. Instead, they become connected in their absence, and both are subject to the same movement, play, and *différance*. Because of the ambiguity that permeates writing, Keats suggests that the reader is complicit in creating meaning in a piece of writing; in this way, the borders between writer and reader are also erased.

It is the universality of Keats's criticism that brings his observations closest to Derrida's. By equally applying his theory to writing, nature, medicine, readers, and writers, Keats seems to recognize a sort of commonality and continuum between text, writer, and reader that Derrida addresses. Derrida's assertion that "il n'y a pas de hors-texte" expresses a

sentiment that Keats seems to present in his writing. Keats applies his ideas of the ambiguity, movement, and absence inherent in language to poets and readers of poetry, erasing the border between the written, the writer, and the reader. Whenever Keats speaks of the multiple meanings available in writing, he assigns the reader a partnership with the author in creating meaning. The ubiquitous uncertainty and *différance* that Keats recognizes may be explained by Derrida's suggestion that everything is as understandable, as knowable, and as uncertain as a text because there is no escaping the text; everything is a form of writing that can be understood only as a trace of movement and *différance*.

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