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"PASSION'S PASSING BELL": DYING INTO LIFE IN "THE EVE OF ST. AGNES," "LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI," AND "LAMIA"

Middle Tennessee State University

D.A. 1983

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THE EVE OF ST. AGNES, "LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI," AND LAMIA

Sylvia Pierce Little

A dissertation presented to the
Graduate Faculty of Middle Tennessee State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree Doctor of Arts

August, 1983

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ABSTRACT

"PASSION'S PASSING BELL": DYING INTO LIFE IN
THE EVE OF ST. AGNES, "LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI," AND LAMIA

by Sylvia Pierce Little

Between January and September 1819, John Keats wrote three remarkable, intricately related love poems: The Eve of St. Agnes, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," and Lamia. As a group the poems indicate ambivalent attitudes toward love, thematic transition, and tonal shift evident in his poetry during 1819. That they register Keats's dying into life as lover and poet is the thesis of this study.

Chapter One, "Three Love Poems," traces the physical and psychological conditions under which Keats wrote the poems and cites general critical interpretations. Comparisons and contrasts of the three poems reveal a developing ambivalence in Keats toward the entanglements of love and art.

Chapter Two, "The Poet as Lover," examines Keats's biography and letters and establishes the context for reading the poems autobiographically. The recurring images of entrapment, absorption, and dissolution in the letters suggest the ambivalence, the exquisite misery, Keats felt

Sylvia Pierce Little

toward loving Fanny Brawne. Each poem contains veiled references to their relationship.

Chapter Three, "The Lover as Poet," analyzes each poem as a statement of poetic process, the poet's union with poetic imagination. The fates of the poet-dreamers suggest an increasingly ambiguous view of the nature of the poet and his craft. The Eve of St. Agnes, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," and Lamia record a transformation of the poetic self.

Chapter Four, "The Lover as Lover," focuses upon the dreams and realities of the lovers--Porphyro and Madeline, the knight-at-arms and La Belle Dame, Lycius and Lamia, and Hermes and the nymph. The women are portrayed as angels and demons; the men, as impassioned lovers and self-deluded dreamers. The interrelationships of the lovers are analyzed and linked to Keats's emotional fluctuation in 1819.

Chapter Five, "Labyrinthine Love," examines the nature of love in the poems, the paradoxes of bliss and pain, enchantment and entrapment, and the attempts to unperplex bliss and pain. Physical consummation occurs but ultimately leads to darkness, chill, or death.

Chapter Six, "'Passion's Passing Bell,'" concludes that the pleasures and torments of loving Fanny Brawne created the tension for Keats's dying into life.

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Chapter I

THREE LOVE POEMS

The year 1819 is regarded as the "annus mirabilis" of John Keats's poetic life.¹ In the first eight months especially, Keats's genius flourished.² Among the accomplishments of that golden period are three remarkable, intricately related love poems: The Eve of St. Agnes, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," and Lamia. The Eve of St. Agnes marks the beginning of Keats's great year, Keats's triumphant entry as a "trained craftsman."³ "La Belle Dame sans Merci" marks the middle of the great year and signals for Alexander Crawford Keats's new mood, "the first utterance of the new Keats, the new poetry which is hereafter to prevail, and to become dominant."⁴ Lamia, the last

¹ John Middleton Murry, Keats and Shakespeare: A Study of Keats' Poetic Life from 1816 to 1820 (1925; rpt. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1958), p. 94.

² H. W. Garrod, Keats, 2nd ed. (1939; rpt. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1957), p. 61.

³ M. R. Ridley, Keats' Craftsmanship: A Study in Poetic Development (1933; rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, 1962), pp. 96-97.

⁴ Alexander W. Crawford, The Genius of Keats: An Interpretation (1932; rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, 1967), p. 63.

sustained poetic effort, marks the closing of the great year, the "full culmination of Keats's mind and art."⁵ As a group then these three love poems indicate both thematic transition and tonal shift occurring in Keats's poetry during 1819. Furthermore, they are closely related to Keats's changing relationship with Fanny Brawne, which Middleton Murry identifies as a passage from "the ecstasy of love to the ecstasy of despair."⁶ That The Eve of St. Agnes, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," and Lamia register the changing attitudes of Keats toward love and poetry during 1819, his own dying into life as lover and poet, is the thesis of this study.

Keats composed The Eve of St. Agnes the last week of January and the first week of February, a feat that Claude Finney considers "a spontaneous expression of genius, springing like Pallas Athena full grown from the forehead of the poet."⁷ Robin Mayhead similarly calls the poem a tour de force and claims that "it deserves to be reckoned among Keats's most assured performances."⁸ Keats wrote the ballad "La Belle Dame sans Merci" even more rapidly. According to

⁵ Crawford, p. 114.

⁶ Murry, p. 111.

⁷ Claude Lee Finney, The Evolution of Keats's Poetry (1936; rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), II, 540-41.

⁸ Robin Mayhead, John Keats (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1967), p. 47.

Walter Jackson Bate, Keats composed the poem on April 21 as "only a single afternoon's or an early evening's episode, though the stanzas have haunted readers and poets for a century and a half."⁹ "La Belle Dame sans Merci" was written as part of a journal letter to Keats's brother George.¹⁰ Stuart Sperry labels it the first of Keats's "undoubted masterpieces" of the spring.¹¹ Even more expansively, Ifor Evans calls it "the most memorable" of all Keats's short poems, "the most miraculous piece in all Keats's work."¹² The composition of Lamia, although interrupted by the completion of the verse-drama Otho the Great, was also relatively quick. Keats wrote the first half of Lamia in twelve or thirteen days in early July but did not finish it until the last week or so of August.¹³ Although a bewildering and disputed work, the "Mona Lisa of Keat's later poetry,"¹⁴ Lamia is, nevertheless, "a swift

⁹ Walter Jackson Bate, John Keats (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1963), p. 478.

¹⁰ John Keats, The Letters of John Keats, 1814-1821, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1958), II, 95-96. All further references to Keats's letters appear in the text.

¹¹ Stuart M. Sperry, Keats the Poet (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1973), p. 231.

¹² Ifor Evans, Keats (London, 1934; rpt. St. Clair Shores: Scholarly Press, 1971), pp. 108-09.

¹³ Bate, p. 543.

¹⁴ Donald Pearce, "Casting the Self: Keats and Lamia," Yale Review, 69 (1979-80), 212.

flashing, multi-colored romance."¹⁵ To Robert Gittings it is the "most consciously artistic" of all Keats's poems.¹⁶ Of Keats's narrative poems, Miriam Allott rates Lamia the most remarkable.¹⁷

The apparent spontaneity or relative ease of the compositions, however, does not lessen the psychological complexity out of which The Eve of St. Agnes, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," and Lamia evolved. During the late months of 1818, Keats was under significant strain. His brother Tom, whom he had nursed, died of tuberculosis at the beginning of December. Furthermore, Keats's work on Hyperion was breaking down. Thus, Keats was fatigued, grief-stricken, and acutely anxious about his inability to continue Hyperion.¹⁸ In a letter in early January, Keats complained to Benjamin Robert Haydon of a "plaguy" sore throat and a continual "agonie ennuyeuse": "I have been writing a little now and then lately: but nothing to speak off [sic]¹⁹ --being discontented and as it were moulting" (II, 32).

¹⁵ Finney, II, 668.

¹⁶ Robert Gittings, John Keats: The Living Year, 21 September 1818 to 21 September 1819 (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1954), p. 155.

¹⁷ Miriam Allott, "'Isabella,' 'The Eve of St. Agnes,' and 'Lamia,'" in John Keats: A Reassessment, ed. Kenneth Muie (Liverpool: Liverpool Univ. Press, 1958), p. 41.

¹⁸ Bate, p. 448.

¹⁹ Keats scholars have recognized that Keats made many errors in his letters. Hereafter only the most extreme

Part of his discontent resulted from a growing artistic uneasiness with the romance as a genre. Keats considered the romance Isabella written in March and April 1818 as "mawkish" and was determined to shake off the insipidities he associated with it.²⁰ During this same time Keats was becoming more deeply involved with Fanny Brawne.²¹ While experiencing personal and artistic anxieties, Keats turned from Hyperion and Isabella to write The Eve of St. Agnes.

The Eve of St. Agnes can then be seen as both a relief from the intensity and failure of Hyperion and a departure from the mawkishness of Isabella. Sperry believes that the poem "marks Keats's momentary abandonment of Milton for Spenser, of the spirit of heroic endeavor for imaginative escape, of epic for a return to romance" and allows Keats "a new sophistication, an extraordinary awareness of the devices of romance, and a fascination with both their possibilities and limitations."²² Bhabatosh Chatterjee sees The Eve of St. Agnes as a refining of the

errors will be cited. Apparent misspellings, slips of the pen, or grammatical oversights will be quoted as they appear without editorial citation.

²⁰ Bate, pp. 440-41.

²¹ Newell F. Ford, The Prefigurative Imagination of John Keats: A Study of the Beauty-Truth Identification and Its Implications (1951; rpt. Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1966), p. 125.

²² Sperry, p. 199.

romance genre.²³ Moreover, Bate believes that in turning from Hyperion to The Eve of St. Agnes Keats was adopting a mode and theme more congenial to his talent, but he adds that the richness of phrase and the sound patterns begun in Hyperion spread throughout The Eve of St. Agnes, allowing sustained and hypnotic effect and marking its great difference from Isabella. Keats, however, regarded The Eve of St. Agnes as mere exercise.²⁴

February to April 1819 was a period of uncertainty for Keats. The "plaguy" sore throat kept him inside for about ten days in early February. He was unable to start work again on Hyperion and was feeling more dissatisfied each day. Probably Keats was intensely feeling the aftermath of Tom's illness and death. Furthermore, there was constant financial anxiety. There was artistic anxiety as well, and, except for the fragment The Eve of St. Mark in mid-February, for two months Keats experienced a fallow period which he regarded as sterile and responsible for many painful, frustrating weeks of genuine apprehension.²⁵ Various references to this idleness or "uneasy indolence" appear in Keats's letters during March and early April. On March 8

²³ Bhabatosh Chatterjee, John Keats: His Mind and Work (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1971), p. 341.

²⁴ Bate, pp. 439, 452.

²⁵ Bate, pp. 452-460.

he wrote to Haydon, "I am mostly at Hampstead, and about nothing; being in a sort of *qui bono temper*, not exactly on the road to an epic poem" (II, 42). He complained to George Keats on Saturday, March 13, "I know not why Poetry and I have been so distant lately I must make some advances soon or she will cut me off entirely" (II, 74). On March 17 he protested to George of annihilating a day in "uneasy indolence" (II, 77). The condition persisted into April as Keats lamented to his sister Fanny that the idleness had grown upon him: "I have written nothing, and almost read nothing--but I must turn over a new leaf" (II, 51). On April 15 Keats again commented to George: "I am still at a stand in versifying--I cannot do it yet with any pleasure" (II, 84). Crawford contends that Keats was, in fact, in the throes of the crisis of his career and was unconsciously readying himself for "the great climax of his intellectual and poetic work."²⁶ Finally, on the evening of April 21, Keats shook himself free of the indolence, the "idle fever" that had plagued him for two months, and composed "La Belle Dame sans Merci" and the remarkable "vale of soul-making" passage. Thus began the five final extraordinary months of Keats's writing.²⁷ Keats had set into motion his own poetic dying into life.

²⁶ Crawford, p. 45.

²⁷ Bate, pp. 472-73.

By the middle of May, Keats had written four of his magnificent odes but, according to Bate, regarded them not as a new beginning but rather as "preparation for the next beginning." The confidence and the habit of writing began to return, but soon Keats was again beset by various worries: where to live since Charles Brown was letting Wentworth Place for the summer, how to provide the money that his brother George was needing, and whether to continue to write poetry or to sign on a ship as surgeon. After failing to collect money from those Keats had befriended or from Richard Abbey, the trustee and guardian of Keats's grandmother's estate, Keats decided to accompany James Rice, who was ill, to the Isle of Wight. After arriving in Shanklin on June 28, Keats planned three immediate projects. He intended first to compose a new narrative poem, Lamia, in a completely different style, then to collaborate with Charles Brown on the verse-drama Otho the Great, and finally to return to Hyperion.²⁸ Thus Keats was bent upon solid accomplishment and was determined, as he stated in his first letter to Fanny Brawne, never to return to London without it (II, 123).

The changing relationship with Fanny Brawne also contributed significantly to the psychological complexity that Keats experienced during the time he composed The Eve

²⁸ Bate, pp. 484, 525-26, 535-36.

of St. Agnes, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," and Lamia. The Eve of St. Agnes is often viewed as an expression or a sublimation of Keats's love for Fanny Brawne. Chatterjee considers that passion the immediate inspiration of the poem.²⁹ Finney stipulates that it is, in fact, the first poem inspired by Keats's love for Fanny.³⁰ Aileen Ward terms it Keats's "Epithalamion" that celebrates the joys of "first love."³¹ To Katharine Wilson it is a romance of "sheer happiness,"³² and to E. C. Pettet it is "a great affirmation of love--an intense, happy, achieved love."³³ Although most critics link The Eve of St. Agnes with the love Keats felt for Fanny Brawne, Gittings sensationally argues instead that Isabella Jones inspired the poem by not only suggesting the legend of St. Agnes' Eve but also by bringing it to life in a very particular sense--by spending the night with Keats on January 20--St. Agnes' Eve. To Gittings this successful love affair with Isabella Jones is more responsible for the poem's inception than the exciting

²⁹ Chatterjee, p. 340.

³⁰ Finney, II, 538.

³¹ Aileen Ward, John Keats: The Making of a Poet (New York: Viking, 1963), pp. 244-45.

³² Katharine M. Wilson, The Nightingale and the Hawk: A Psychological Study of Keats' Ode (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1964), p. 97.

³³ E. C. Pettet, On the Poetry of Keats (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1957), p. 212.

flirtations with Fanny Brawne.³⁴ Murry staunchly discounts Gittings' theory as "culpably irresponsible" as there is neither evidence nor probability that Keats spent the night with Isabella Jones and further suggests that it imputes a cynical behavior to Keats "for there is no doubt that by this time he was in love with Fanny Brawne and she with him."³⁵ Douglas Bush acknowledges that Isabella Jones may have suggested the legend to Keats but claims that its appeal rested upon "all the emotional warmth now awakened in the relatively happy lover of Fanny Brawne."³⁶

"La Belle Dame sans Merci" can be viewed as a more complicated outgrowth of Keats's love for Fanny Brawne. Takeshi Saito observes that in spite of, or rather because of, "his burning love for Fanny Brawne," Keats wrote "La Belle Dame sans Merci."³⁷ Finney also regards the poem as another emotional phase of Keats's love for Fanny--at once both intensely amorous and intensely jealous and distrustful: "In his rebellious moments he regarded love as a possessive, enslaving, destructive passion." Keats felt personally

³⁴ Gittings, pp. 61-62.

³⁵ John Middleton Murry, Keats, 4th ed. (1930; rpt. Oxford: Alden Press, 1955), p. 135.

³⁶ Douglas Bush, John Keats: His Life and Writings (New York: Macmillan, 1966), p. 111.

³⁷ Takeshi Saito, Keats' View of Poetry (London: Folcroft Press, 1970), p. 85.

restrained, separated from friends and distracted from his poetry.³⁸ Pettet further recognizes Keats's ambivalence toward love and believes that "La Belle Dame sans Merci" crystallizes a fear of loving but does not invalidate Keats's deep love for Fanny. The poem thus expresses "warring contradictions."³⁹ Werner Beyer notes that the dark backdrop of The Eve of St. Agnes, the earlier poem, is a reminder that love, despite its ecstasy, is perilous--"that it surmounts earthly pain imperfectly and leads to a joy that is not unalloyed."⁴⁰ Likewise, Finney sees in the setting of The Eve of St. Agnes the foreshadowing of the transient, though intense, happiness of love.⁴¹ Morris Dickstein theorizes that Keats both affirmed and denied the principle of pleasure and could therefore easily imagine in the setting of "La Belle Dame sans Merci" the devastating, perhaps even castrating, effect of erotic love.⁴² To Evans also "La Belle Dame sans Merci" symbolizes the painful pleasure of love and Keats's unappeased passion for Fanny.⁴³

³⁸ Finney, II, 590.

³⁹ Pettet, p. 215.

⁴⁰ Werner W. Beyer, Keats and the Daemon King (1947; rpt. New York: Octagon, 1969), p. 148.

⁴¹ Finney, II, 560.

⁴² Morris Dickstein, Keats and His Poetry: A Study of Development (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 109.

⁴³ Evans, p. 110.

Lamia is viewed in a very similar but more complex fashion. Because of unavoidable circumstances, Keats and Fanny Brawne were separated from the end of June until the second week in October. Murry suggests that this first separation from Fanny Brawne was the real beginning of Keats's torments.⁴⁴ In addition, Pettet argues that Lamia reflects "Keats's turmoil of feelings about love and Fanny during the period of separation from her."⁴⁵ Because of the promise of money to George, marriage to Fanny was for the time impossible, but Keats found that attempts to detach himself from Fanny both emotionally and imaginatively were also impossible.⁴⁶ Ridley identifies the paradoxical nature of the almost intolerable strain under which Keats wrote Lamia. His passionate love for Fanny Brawne distracted him from the very literary accomplishment that might provide financial security necessary for marriage.⁴⁷ Furthermore, Beyer cites as an essential human irony touched upon in Lamia Keats's simultaneous (and probably antagonistic) ripening of body and mind and calls Lamia a "confession piece," a "self-projection."⁴⁸ Moreover, Bate enumerates

⁴⁴ Murry, Keats, p. 22.

⁴⁵ Pettet, p. 229.

⁴⁶ Murry, Keats, pp. 44-45.

⁴⁷ Ridley, p. 262.

⁴⁸ Beyer, p. 238.

the attitudes of resentment, resistance, surrender, and jealousy that coexisted in Keats's relationship with Fanny during the summer and early fall.⁴⁹ Finney further identifies an irritability, a defiance, and perhaps even cynicism toward Fanny Brawne as part of the emotional context of the last half of Lamia.⁵⁰ Sperry confirms that Lamia is a strong reflection of Keats's love for Fanny but emphasizes particularly the mutual apprehensiveness and fascination Keats felt.⁵¹

Whatever the artistic and personal impulses were that motivated Keats to write The Eve of St. Agnes, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," and Lamia, it is clear that the poems share a mastery of source materials and metrical technique. According to Bush, Keats drew upon a wealth of reading in creating The Eve of St. Agnes: the folklore of the legend, Romeo and Juliet, Lochinvar, The Lay of the Last Minstrel, The Faerie Queene, Oberon, Christabel, and Mrs. Radcliffe's novels.⁵² Beyer adds The Arabian Nights and Boccaccio's Il Filocolo but argues that the main contours of The Eve of St. Agnes were guided by Wieland's Oberon, noting that like Romeo and Juliet, The Eve of St. Agnes is "a tale of electric

⁴⁹ Bate, pp. 538-40.

⁵⁰ Finney, II, 686.

⁵¹ Sperry, p. 300.

⁵² Bush, p. 113.

passion against a somber backdrop."⁵³ Obviously a masterful assimilation of sources, The Eve of St. Agnes also displays highly developed metrical skill. In two earlier metrical romances--Calidore: A Fragment and Endymion--Keats had used heroic couplets. He had written the third romance, Isabella, in ottava rima. In The Eve of St. Agnes he chose the Spenserian stanza.⁵⁴ To Bate the Spenserian stanza provided Keats a capacious yet disciplined framework for his poem by allowing the narrative to move "toward tableau, ample and yet self-contained," and the music and rhyme to expand and interlock, thus achieving richness and economy.⁵⁵

"La Belle Dame sans Merci" further demonstrates a rich composite of sources and metrical skill. Earl Wasserman links the poem to folk legend, particularly the medieval ballad "Thomas Rhymer."⁵⁶ Bush lists two contrasting episodes of The Faerie Queene, the witch Duessa's seduction of the Red Cross Knight and Arthur's dream of the Faerie Queene herself, as the main sources of Keats's ballad. Suggesting that when he composed "La Belle Dame sans Merci" Keats was preoccupied with Wieland's daemonology, Beyer

⁵³ Beyer, pp. 150, 155.

⁵⁴ Finney, II, 546-47.

⁵⁵ Bate, p. 441.

⁵⁶ Earl R. Wasserman, The Finer Tone: Keats' Major Poems (1953; rpt. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), p. 68.

asserts that Oberon is the chief source.⁵⁷ The metrical form Keats chose for "La Belle Dame sans Merci," that of the folk ballad, allowed compression of dramatic outline, dialogue, and imagery.⁵⁸ In fact, much of the poem's power depends upon the swiftness of the narrative, extraordinary clarity, and suggestive details.⁵⁹ Charles Patterson calls the daemonic ballad "a stark, powerful, brief little one-act drama."⁶⁰

When Lamia was published in 1820, Keats appended a passage from Robert Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy, in which is cited the lamia-Lycius story by Philostratus. Consequently, the Anatomy of Melancholy is unquestionably the primary source. However, many critics note the changes Keats made in the story as recorded by Burton and suggest additional works that Keats might have used. Among those Bernice Slote catalogs are the traditional folklore of lamias, the Undine legend, Ovid's Metamorphoses, Christabel, Paradise Lost, The Arabian Nights, John Potter's Archaeologia Graeca, and plays like Jane Shore. Slote recognizes that Lamia is a "mingling of classic-Gothic-folk

⁵⁷ Beyer, p. 243.

⁵⁸ Finney, II, 598.

⁵⁹ Sperry, p. 235.

⁶⁰ Charles I. Patterson, The Daemonic in the Poetry of John Keats (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1970), p. 129.

conceptions."⁶¹ Beyer argues that Oberon again influenced Keats: "Within the framework of Burton's tale, Keats was clearly guided by the pattern of Oberon, to whose moral and machinery he repeatedly alluded."⁶² The metre of Lamia was experimental. Keats had read Dryden for several months before he began Lamia and recognized within Dryden's crisp, worldly couplets a form quite different from the metrics of his earlier poetry. Keats's modification of the neoclassic couplet allowed him to narrate rapidly, to avoid and even work against sentimentality, and to work toward a deliberately condensed, but rich, expression.⁶³ In praise of Keats's metrical skill in Lamia, Sidney Colvin acknowledges "a fire and grace of movement, a lithe and serpentine energy, well suited to the theme, and as effective in its way as the victorious march of Dryden himself."⁶⁴

Critics over the years have recognized The Eve of St. Agnes, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," and Lamia as masterpieces. In 1844 Leigh Hunt rhapsodized about The Eve of St. Agnes:

⁶¹ Bernice Slote, Keats and the Dramatic Principle (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1958), pp. 175-81, 184-85.

⁶² Beyer, p. 224.

⁶³ Bate, pp. 545-46.

⁶⁴ Sidney Colvin, Keats (London, 1887; rpt. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1957), p. 167.

Let the students of poetry observe, that in all the luxury of the "Eve of Saint Agnes," there is nothing of the conventional craft of artificial writers; no heaping up of words or similes for their own sakes or the rhyme's sake; no gaudy commonplaces; no borrowed airs or earnestness; no tricks of inversion; no substitution of reading or of ingenious thoughts for feeling or spontaneity; no irrelevancy or unfitness of any sort. All flows out of sincerity and passion.⁶⁵

In 1851 D. M. Moir termed The Eve of St. Agnes a perfect composition "of the most florid Gothic, remarkable for its sensuous beauty."⁶⁶ Alexander Smith in 1857 praised the exquisiteness of The Eve of St. Agnes:

It is rich in colour as the stained windows of a Gothic cathedral, and every verse bursts into picturesque and graceful fancies; yet all this abundance is so subdued and harmonized in such wonderful keeping with the story and the mediaeval period, as to render it a perfect chrysolite--a precious gem of art.⁶⁷

Later critics, although less effusive, continue to praise The Eve of St. Agnes highly. Bush calls it a "gorgeous tapestry" of elaborately exploited medievalism: "The Eve of St. Agnes is by far the most beautiful short narrative

⁶⁵ Leigh Hunt, "A Commentary on Two Poems, 1835, 1844," in Keats: The Critical Heritage, ed. G. M. Matthews (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1971), p. 283.

⁶⁶ D. M. Moir, "The Language of Actual Life, 1851," in Keats: The Critical Heritage, ed. G. M. Matthews (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1971), p. 351.

⁶⁷ Alexander Smith, "Keats in the Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1857," in Keats: The Critical Heritage, ed. G. M. Matthews (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1971), p. 367.

of its age, or perhaps of any age of English poetry."⁶⁸ Ian Jack considers it one of the most delightful poems in the English language and certainly Keats's most successful narrative poem.⁶⁹ Finney regards it as the "only complete and perfect long poem" that Keats composed.⁷⁰ To Colvin The Eve of St. Agnes is the unsurpassed, unequalled example "of the pure charm of colored and romantic narrative in English verse."⁷¹

"La Belle Dame sans Merci" is also highly acclaimed. Sperry considers it a more profound assimilation of medievalism than The Eve of St. Agnes--the very essence of magic.⁷² To Bate it is "a lyrical distillation of diverse feelings," troubled but richly thoughtful.⁷³ Bush calls "La Belle Dame sans Merci" "a ballad of sinister magic."⁷⁴ Regarding it as one of Keats's most distinctive poems, Patterson rates "La Belle Dame sans Merci" Keats's "consummate achievement with the Daemonic."⁷⁵ Wasserman

⁶⁸ Bush, p. 111.

⁶⁹ Ian Jack, Keats and the Mirror of Art (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), pp. 191-92.

⁷⁰ Finney, II, 540.

⁷¹ Colvin, p. 160.

⁷² Sperry, pp. 233, 235.

⁷³ Bate, p. 478.

⁷⁴ Bush, p. 124.

⁷⁵ Patterson, p. 129.

notes the enthralling, haunting power and the perfect economy of the ballad.⁷⁶ Acknowledging the enchantment, the tenderness, the intensity, the magic, and the union of sound and sense of "La Belle Dame sans Merci," Colvin declares it "the master-piece, not only among the shorter poems of Keats, but even (if any single master-piece must be chosen) among them all."⁷⁷

Lamia, as Chatterjee observes, is probably Keats's most disputed work.⁷⁸ Gittings further asserts that, on the whole, Lamia has been "the critic's puzzle."⁷⁹ Criticism therefore reflects the perplexity and is decidedly mixed. After citing the sensuous richness, the psychologically intriguing characterization, and the dramatic quality to verify his belief in the high achievement in Lamia, Pettet qualifies, "However, for all this high achievement, Lamia is a puzzling poem, the more puzzling as our acquaintance with it grows."⁸⁰ To Dickstein it is an enigmatic, ambivalent poem--"something of a mutant."⁸¹ In

⁷⁶ Wasserman, p. 65.

⁷⁷ Colvin, pp. 166-67.

⁷⁸ Chatterjee, p. 417.

⁷⁹ Robert Gittings, John Keats (Boston: Little, Brown, 1968), p. 337.

⁸⁰ Pettet, p. 228.

⁸¹ Dickstein, p. 234.

Ward's view Lamia is a "riddling allegory of sexual passion."⁸² Sperry declares that Lamia is self-consciously and even bitterly ironic.⁸³ Amy Lowell offers other qualifications:

Lamia is by no means such a marvel of homogeneous treatment as the Eve of St. Agnes; it is no such perfection of evocative reticence as the fragment of the Eve of St. Mark. It stands midway in his stories, and it seems to tie his younger and older selves together by including within it bits of both.⁸⁴

After praising the "thrilling vividness of narration" and the "fine melodious vigour of much of the verse" in Lamia, Colvin maintains, "But surely for this it is in some parts too feverish, and in others too unequal."⁸⁵ Garrod believes Lamia has been overrated,⁸⁶ yet Walter Evert rates it as an example of "extraordinary growth in vividness of articulation and firmness of control."⁸⁷

Keats, however, regarded Lamia highly, preferred it to The Eve of St. Agnes and Isabella, and placed it first

⁸² Ward, p. 308.

⁸³ Sperry, p. 309.

⁸⁴ Amy Lowell, John Keats (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1925), II, 309.

⁸⁵ Colvin, pp. 168-69.

⁸⁶ Garrod, p. 59.

⁸⁷ Walter H. Evert, Aesthetic and Myth in the Poetry of Keats (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1965), p. 25.

in the volume of 1820.⁸⁸ In September 1819 in a letter to Richard Woodhouse, Keats criticized Isabella and The Eve of St. Agnes but not Lamia:

Isabella is what I should call were I a reviewer 'A weak-sided Poem' with an amusing sober-sadness about it. Not that I do not think Reynolds and you are quite right about it--it is enough for me. But this will not do to be public--If I may so say, in my dramatic capacity I enter fully into the feeling; but in Propria Persona I should be apt to quiz it myself--There is no objection of this kind to Lamia--A good deal to St Agnes Eve--only not so glaring--Would a [s] I say I could write you something sylvestran. (II, 174)

In July in a letter to J. H. Reynolds, Keats seemed satisfied with the first part of Lamia: "I have great hopes of success, because I make use of my Judgment more deliberately than I yet have done; but in Case of failure with the world, I shall find my content" (II, 128). In September in a letter to George Keats, Keats reiterated his satisfaction:

I have been reading over a part of a short poem I have composed lately call'd 'Lamia'--and I am certain there is that sort of fire in it which must take hold of people in some way--give them either pleasant or unpleasant sensation. What they want is a sensation of some sort. (II, 189)

Slote suggests that Keats's approval of Lamia rested

⁸⁸ Warren Stevenson, "Lamia: A Stab at the Gordian Knot," Studies in Romanticism, 2 (1972), 241.

largely on its dramatic development.⁸⁹ Keats's greatest ambition was to write plays, as Keats indicated in a letter to John Taylor in November 1819:

The little dramatic skill I may as yet have however badly it might show in a Drama would I think be sufficient for a Poem--I wish to diffuse the colouring of S^t Agnes eve throughout a Poem in which Character and Sentiment would be figures to such drapery--Two or three such Poems, if God should spare me, written in the course of the next six years, would be a famous gradus ad Parnassum altissimum--I mean they would nerve me up to the writing of a few fine Plays--my greatest ambition--when I do feel ambitious. (II, 234)

In a letter to George and Georgiana Keats in January 1819, written on some "thin paper" that William Haslam had given him for his letters to America, Keats suggested an almost incidental regard for The Eve of St. Agnes: "I took down some of the thin paper and wrote on it a little poem call'd 'St Agnes Eve'--which you shall have as it is when I have finished the blank part of the rest for you" (II, 58-59). Because of the casual, almost offhand, nature of his remarks or even his reticence about The Eve of St. Agnes, it is unlikely that Keats actually recognized the truly remarkable quality of the poem he had written with apparent ease and swiftness. It is even more curious that Keats's only comment about "La Belle Dame sans Merci" was

⁸⁹ Slote, p. 139.

a bit of whimsy in the letter to George and Georgiana that included the poem:

Why four kisses--you will say--why four because
 I wish to restrain the headlong impetuosity of my
 Muse--she would have fain said 'score' without
 hurting the rhyme--but we must temper the
 Imagination as the Critics say with Judgment.
 I was obliged to choose an even number that both
 eyes might have fair play: and to speak truly
 I think two a piece quite sufficient--Suppose I
 had said seven; there would have been three and
 a half a piece--a very awkward affair--and well
 got out of on my side. (II, 97)

Evidently Keats felt that the "colouring" or "drapery" of The Eve of St. Agnes was finely wrought. Critics, as well, recognize that quality in The Eve of St. Agnes. To Keats's contemporaries and the Victorians, the enchantment of the poem lay mainly in its rich tapestry, because, as Sperry notes, for them there was no mistaking the poem's meaning.⁹⁰ Leigh Hunt called it "rather a picture than a story."⁹¹ Modern readers are likewise enchanted. Many critics consider the rich imagery as the great seductive charm of The Eve of St. Agnes. Evans suggests that the power of the poem is predominately atmospheric.⁹² Mayhead also notes that most of the poem's effectiveness should be

⁹⁰ Sperry, p. 199.

⁹¹ Leigh Hunt, "Leigh Hunt Displays Keats's 'Calm Power,' 1820," in Keats: The Critical Heritage, ed. G. M. Matthews (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1971), p. 172.

⁹² Evans, p. 105.

attributed to the building of atmosphere and rich visual effects.⁹³ Bush offers support that The Eve of St. Agnes "lives rather in its richness of setting and detail than as a poem of human experience and feeling."⁹⁴ Sperry observes that the poem appears to sacrifice depth of character to creation of a rich, suggestive background, but he still maintains that it presents a skillful and "rich interplay of dramatic emotions."⁹⁵ Colvin argues, "Its personages appeal to us, not so much humanly and in themselves, as by the circumstances, scenery, and atmosphere amidst which we see them move."⁹⁶ Bate sees the technique of tapestry-weaving as dominant in The Eve of St. Agnes, Keats's welcomed "brief freedom from subjects he felt to be substantial and demanding."⁹⁷ Finney also views imagery as a controlling principle of composition in The Eve of St. Agnes, and further explains that the tuberculosis that Keats contracted in the fall of 1818 intensified Keats's "inherently sensuous temperament, making the year 1819 the supremely sensuous period of his poetry." To Finney, Keats's imagery is comprehensive because it contains images

⁹³ Mayhead, p. 47.

⁹⁴ Bush, p. 111.

⁹⁵ Sperry, p. 200.

⁹⁶ Colvin, p. 160.

⁹⁷ Bate, p. 451.

of all the sensations of the sensory system but also sensuous because of the attention Keats gives the intimately physical sensations of touch, temperature, pressure, taste, smell, and internal sensations.⁹⁸ Hugh Fausset regards the imagery in The Eve of St. Agnes as truly masterful:

But the concrete imagery of The Eve of St. Agnes is almost perfect. Each word is chosen with absolute discretion and a full recognition of relationship and values. Yet each contributes its iota of luxurious sensuousness. It was inevitable therefore that with such an abundance of material, movement should be lacking.⁹⁹

"Colouring" or "drapery" is important in "La Belle Dame sans Merci." However, because of the constraints of the ballad form, Keats in "La Belle Dame sans Merci" is much more limited in his use of imagery. The imagery seems sparse when one remembers the rich ornamentation of The Eve of St. Agnes. Keats is obviously using "a more limited palette" in "La Belle Dame sans Merci," choosing adjectives instead of metaphors but still modulating the imagery to reinforce narrative action and characterization.¹⁰⁰ The imagery serves, however, rather to undercut the romantic

⁹⁸ Finney, II, 548.

⁹⁹ Hugh I'Anson Fausset, Keats: A Study in Development (1922; rpt. London: Archon, 1966), p. 73.

¹⁰⁰ Judy Little, Keats as a Narrative Poet: A Test of Invention (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1975), pp. 99, 102, 106.

desire presented than to heighten it as in The Eve of St. Agnes. Colvin suggests that "La Belle Dame sans Merci" establishes an imagery of "enchantment and knight-errantry" and depicts a wasting away of love more than actually telling a story.¹⁰¹ Sperry notes the powerful contracted images of the poem:

The autumnal lake, the silent birds, the knight's pacing steed, the meal of strange forest fruits, and the sudden vision of the company of death-pale warriors and the dread name they utter: these and other details have the sharp distinctiveness and contraction of images remaining from a dream, as though they held the clue to a larger dream of partly hidden significance.¹⁰²

Finney relates the imagery of "La Belle Dame sans Merci" to the magical style of Celtic literature and further proposes that the poem's concrete images create an atmosphere that is "sad, sombre, chivalric, and weird."¹⁰³

There is less critical commentary on the "colouring" or "drapery" in Lamia than in The Eve of St. Agnes and "La Belle Dame sans Merci," probably because Keats accomplished in Lamia his intention of diffusing "the colouring of St. Agnes eve throughout a Poem in which Character and Sentiment would be figures to such drapery." In short, the imagery

¹⁰¹ Colvin, p. 160.

¹⁰² Sperry, p. 235.

¹⁰³ Finney, II, 597.

serves mainly as background "drapery" for Lamia's appearances, surrounding Lamia with mystery and ambiguity.¹⁰⁴ Lamia's transformation, the Corinthian street scene, and the creation of the magical palace are often-cited examples of brilliant tapestry-weaving. Nevertheless, Sperry calls attention to an underlying tone of subtle mockery in the imagery of Lamia's transformation,¹⁰⁵ and Georgia Dunbar more generally describes the shift from the banter and charming good humor of the beginning of Lamia to the "mitigating and chastising force of mockery" of the second part.¹⁰⁶

An intrinsic quality of the "drapery" or "colouring" in each of the three love poems is the juxtaposition of images. Keats considered "the knowledge of contrast, feeling for light and shade," essential to him in his development of the thought in a poem. In fact, the dialectical tendency of his mind and poetic style, his habitual use of contraries, was organic and genuine. By the time Keats composed The Eve of St. Agnes, the use of contrasts was a distinctive part of his imagery. Bate analyzes this pervasive characteristic:

This indeed has been one of the many fascinations of Keats to the twentieth-century reader and poet. It may be doubted whether there has been any

¹⁰⁴ Little, p. 113.

¹⁰⁵ Sperry, pp. 301-02.

¹⁰⁶ Georgia S. Dunbar, "The Significance of the Humor in 'Lamia,'" Keats-Shelley Journal, 8 (1959), 21, 26.

writer of the past century and a half who has employed contrasts in more essential and intrinsic ways and who at the same time has been by temperament, and in ultimate aim, so unsympathetic to the love of paradox or the juggling of disparities for their own sake.¹⁰⁷

Virtually all critics discuss Keats's use of contrasts in The Eve of St. Agnes, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," and Lamia as organic and powerful.

The Eve of St. Agnes illustrates many contraries. To Wilson it expresses "love and light and warmth as a core to hate and chill and death."¹⁰⁸ Bush defines the poem as basically an abstraction of young love viewed through contrasts of love/hate, youth/age, religion/passion, chill/warmth.¹⁰⁹ In addition to the contrast of chill/warmth, Sperry cites light/darkness, gratification/denial, and life/death as other contrasts the poem develops.¹¹⁰ Chatterjee mentions contrasts of noise/stillness, gross sensuality/sublime passion, ascetic aloofness/sensuous embrace as elements in a sharpening of the inner drama of the poem "that encompasses both the frost and the rose."¹¹¹ Because of these multiple contrasts, The Eve of St. Agnes

¹⁰⁷ Bate, p. 552.

¹⁰⁸ Wilson, p. 97.

¹⁰⁹ Bush, p. 111.

¹¹⁰ Sperry, p. 199.

¹¹¹ Chatterjee, p. 342.

becomes simultaneously a picture of the wretchedness of life as well as the happiness of love¹¹² or, as Finney observes, "a stark and grim interpretation of love as well as a glowing, sensuous romance."¹¹³ Richard Fogle recapitulates:

The poem is built upon a carefully arranged series of contrasts. The young lovers, Porphyro and Madeline, are precisely balanced by the Beadsman and Angela, who typify the inexorable demands of time, accident, and death. They are a pair of memento mori's, like the slave in the chariot of the victorious general at a Roman triumph. The poem begins and ends in images of cold and of physical suffering. The Beadsman, "meagre, barefoot, wan," walking slowly along the chapel aisle with his lamp casting pale beams toward the castle, is a strange symbolic curtainraiser to the romantic drama. As the curtain falls the wheel of life comes full circle.¹¹⁴

In "La Belle Dame sans Merci" contrasts are also strategically used. According to Patterson, the poem contrasts the mental and emotional states of both the knight and the speaker who questions the knight. "La Belle Dame sans Merci" also contrasts the daemonic and human worlds. Patterson further notes the antithetical relationship between the haggard knight and the full granary.¹¹⁵

¹¹² Saito, p. 84.

¹¹³ Finney, II, 550.

¹¹⁴ Richard Harter Fogle, The Imagery of Keats and Shelley: A Comparative Study (1949; rpt. Hamden, Conn: Archon, 1962), p. 204.

¹¹⁵ Patterson, pp. 129, 133.

Wasserman additionally cites the pairing of images of the knight's spiritual condition with those of the natural setting in the early stanzas.¹¹⁶ Chatterjee further suggests the juxtaposition of mortal/immortal, reality/imagination.¹¹⁷

Contrasts are integral in Lamia. Suggesting that the neoclassic couplets of Lamia allow much opportunity for antithesis, Bate claims that there are more different kinds of contrasts in Lamia than in Keats's other poems. He mentions particularly poetry/philosophy, the mortal/the immortal, permanence/change, pleasure/pain, dream/reality, love/ambition, pursuit/satiety, passion/thought, and withdrawal/participation. Moreover, Bate explores another level of contrast created by the kaleidoscopic pairs of contrasts opposing or supplementing each other:

Thus the happy (possibly clairvoyant) dream versus a reality that is both harsh and unknowable is matched by its counterpart--the delusive dream versus the healthful recognition of reality. More explicit by far than in the Eve of St. Agnes is the contrast on the one hand, of seclusion or retreat (and with it love) and, on the other, the hostile world. But equally emphatic, if not more, is the reverse opposition that was completely absent in The Eve of St. Agnes: seclusion or retreat, and to some extent love, in contrast to the salutary challenge and enterprise of the public world. If passion is opposed to the consecutive plod and restricted view of the "dull

¹¹⁶ Wasserman, p. 66.

¹¹⁷ Chatterjee, p. 357.

brain," it is also contrasted by implication with "disinterested" thought--by implication since the philosopher Apollonius is also remote from the ideal. Hovering in between is the opposition of passion and the mere act of reflection, whether the reflection be limited and partial, or disinterestedly comprehensive, or even the momentary straying of attention.¹¹⁸

Chatterjee stipulates that in Lamia Keats incorporates the various contrasts within two central motifs: "the contrast of the eternal order and the mutable human scene, and that of illusion and actuality."¹¹⁹ Slote labels the portrayal of oppositions in Lamia "the bright blackness."¹²⁰

There is also much contrast suggested by grouping The Eve of St. Agnes, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," and Lamia. Most criticism, however, pairs the poems in various combinations rather than grouping them. "La Belle Dame sans Merci" or Lamia is often regarded as the obverse of The Eve of St. Agnes in the depiction of tormenting, destructive love, and "La Belle Dame sans Merci" is identified as a preface to Lamia. A few critics align the three love poems. John Jones, for instance, regards Lamia as a triptych which places Lamia in the center panel, Lycius on the right, and Apollonius on the left and which embraces the other two poems. The Lycian panel assimilates The Eve of St. Agnes

¹¹⁸ Bate, pp. 552-53.

¹¹⁹ Chatterjee, p. 417.

¹²⁰ Slote, p. 187.

in the fulfillment of dream; the Apollonian, "La Belle Dame sans Merci" in the withering of dream.¹²¹ A psychoanalytic grouping is proposed by Arthur Wormhoudt:

The significance of Keats' attachment to Fanny Brawne is also found in the order of composition of the three poems discussed in the present chapter. The Eve of St. Agnes was begun a few months after the first meeting with Fanny. It must therefore be looked upon as a defense against the masochistic relationship which was already in existence with regard to her. It was a way of saying that normal happy love was possible after all. But Keats knew it was an unsuccessful defense and the composition of La Belle Dame Sans Merci a few months later gives a truer picture of his unconscious situation. Lamia, which followed these two poems, has the honesty to deal directly with the phallic mother on the pregenital level and with amazing intuition places the blame for the aggression, in itself a defense, where it belongs.¹²²

Wasserman chooses The Eve of St. Agnes, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," and Lamia as three of five poems to prove his thesis that a mystic union of the human and the ideal immortal resolves contraries and allows "fellowship with essence." He interprets The Eve of St. Agnes and "La Belle Dame sans Merci" as illustrations of the pleasure thermometer, "a series of increasing intensities that absorb the self into essence," and whose ascent carries the imagination toward

¹²¹ John Jones, John Keats's Dream of Truth (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1969), p. 248.

¹²² Arthur Wormhoudt, The Demon Lover: A Psychological Approach to Literature (New York: Exposition Press, 1949), p. 87.

truth.¹²³ He notes, however, that the vision dissipates in "La Belle Dame sans Merci" and that the ladder of intensities crumbles beneath the knight, rendering him enervated and forlorn as he returns to the cold physical world. By contrast, Madeline and Porphyro climb the ladder of intensities, creating their own heaven and becoming visionary phantom lovers by the end. Lamia contrasts the union with essence in the ideal world and in the mortal world and, to Wasserman, thereby mainly relates the destiny of mortal aspirations.¹²⁴ Stillinger regards Madeline, the knight, and Lycius as hoodwinked dreamers and sees the major concern of the three poems as a "facing-up" to the actual.¹²⁵ Finally, Allott traces an almost invariable emotional pattern in The Eve of St. Agnes, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," and Lamia: a lover's swoon or sleep, an awakening into enchantment, and finally an abrupt awakening into a repellent and hostile world.¹²⁶

There are still other reasons for grouping The Eve of St. Agnes, "La Belle Dame sans Merci" and Lamia. They are

¹²³ Wasserman, pp. 69-70.

¹²⁴ Wasserman, pp. 77, 123, 158, 163.

¹²⁵ Jack Stillinger, "The Hoodwinking of Madeline: Skepticism in 'The Eve of St. Agnes,'" Studies in Philology, 58 (1961), 533-55; rpt. in Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Eve of St. Agnes, ed. Allan Danzig (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971), pp. 67-68, 71.

¹²⁶ Allott, pp. 48-49.

highly erotic poems of seduction and enchantment in which dreams operate significantly. In each, lovers are caught between two worlds, enthralled by passionately consummated love in which feast and music are integral. In each, the love is opposed by others and consists of inextricable bliss and pain. The mutable world intrudes upon the momentary essence of ideal union, and the lovers find it impossible to remain in the chaste bedroom chamber, the elfin grot, or the magical palace. The price of enchantment is metamorphosis, disenchantment, or even death. Thus love, momentarily confident and happy in The Eve of St. Agnes, darkens as the winter storm and death intrude and becomes increasingly ambivalent in "La Belle Dame sans Merci" and Lamia. Moreover, physical love serves as a metaphor for poetic creation. Consequently, as a group the poems reveal a developing ambivalence in Keats toward the entanglements of both love and art, his own dying into life as lover and poet.

The demonstration of this thesis requires a close examination in Chapter Two of Keats's relationship with Fanny Brawne as a crucial part of the emotional context for each poem--the veiled autobiography; in Chapter Three of Keats's increasingly ambiguous view of the poet and his craft; in Chapter Four of the treatment of the poems' lovers, their interrelationships, and the linkage to Keats's own emotional fluctuation during 1819; and in Chapter Five

of the paradoxical nature of love itself in The Eve of St. Agnes, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," and Lamia. As Chapter Six will demonstrate, Keats in 1819 was passing through the shadows of experience--the "vale of Soul-making"--into the crucible that would refine both his "Hornbook Heart" (II, 102-03) and his poetic sensibilities. Before he could forge the poem of Keats, the "continual allegory" (II, 67) of his own life, he had to die into life as do Apollo in Hyperion and the poet in The Fall of Hyperion.

Chapter II

THE POET AS LOVER

Keats declared in February 1819, "A Man's life of any worth is a continual allegory--and very few eyes can see the Mystery of his life. . . . Shakespeare led a life of Allegory: his works are the comments on it" (II, 67). In that declaration Keats actually defined a rationale for autobiographical interpretation which many critics have followed in their own approaches to The Eve of St. Agnes, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," and Lamia. The opening statement of Lord Houghton's biography of Keats in 1848 approximates this rationale:

To the Poet, if to any man, it may justly be conceded to be estimated by what he has written rather than by what he has done, and to be judged by the productions of his genius rather than by the circumstances of his outward life. For although the choice and treatment of a subject may enable us to contemplate the mind of the Historian, the Novelist, or the Philosopher, yet our observation will be more or less limited and obscured by the sequence of events, the forms of manners, or the exigencies of theory, and the personality of the writer must be frequently lost; while the Poet, if his utterances be deep and true, can hardly hide himself even beneath the epic or dramatic veil, and often makes of the rough public ear a confessional into which to pour the richest treasures and holiest secrets of his soul. His Life is in his writings, and his Poems are his works, indeed.

The biography, therefore, of a poet can be little better than a comment on his Poems, even when itself of long duration, and chequered with strange and various adventures: but these pages concern one whose whole story may be summed up in the composition of three small volumes of verse, some earnest friendships, one passion, and a premature death. As men die, so they walk among posterity; and our impression of Keats can only be that of a noble nature perseveringly testing its own powers, of a manly heart bravely surmounting its first hard experience, and of an imagination ready to inundate the world, yet learning to flow within regulated channels and abating its violence without lessening its strength.¹

There are further justifications for autobiographical readings of Keats's poetry. Lionel Trilling specifies that the letters of John Keats grant him a prominence as poet but that they more interestingly reveal Keats as a heroic man; however, "his being a poet was his chosen way of being a man." Trilling adds, "And although it may seem heretical to say so, the letters give the poems an added virtue of potentiality and at many points they realize what the poems do not."² Keats's letters to Fanny Brawne and his references to her in other letters certainly portray the poet as lover and reflect the personal, incandescent passion that fires the romantic intensity and tension of The Eve of St.

¹ Lord Houghton, The Life and Letters of John Keats, introd. Robert Lynd (London, 1848; rpt. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1946), p. 9.

² Lionel Trilling, ed., The Selected Letters of John Keats (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1951), pp. 3-4.

Agnes, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," and Lamia. According to Robert Lynd, the letters to Fanny allow knowledge of Keats and human nature generally:

The letters of Keats to Fanny Brawne, "unpleasing" though Matthew Arnold thought them, admit us into the profoundest experiences of a soul as heroic as Hamlet's or Lear's--the hopes, the ecstasies, the vain-longing, the agonies of a young lover doomed to death.³

Maurice Buxton Forman recalls his father's justification for first publishing Keats's letters to Fanny Brawne in 1878 as an act of justice to Keats's memory, "essential to any picture of the true Keats." Harry Buxton Forman, as his son notes, thought "Keats's letters without those to Fanny Brawne very much like 'Hamlet' without the Prince of Denmark."⁴ It is fortunate indeed that the "mystery" of Keats's life is partly disclosed in the letters that are "fullest at this critical moment of 'dying into life.'"⁵

The beginning of the great year 1819 marked also for Keats the beginning of a love that would remain intense for

³ Robert Lynd, Introd., The Life and Letters of John Keats, by Lord Houghton (London, 1848; rpt. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1946), p. x.

⁴ As quoted in Maurice Buxton Forman, ed., The Letters of John Keats, 4th ed. (1952; rpt. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1960), p. viii.

⁵ John Middleton Murry, Keats and Shakespeare: A Study of Keats' Poetic Life from 1816 to 1820 (1925; rpt. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1958), p. 115.

the rest of his life and would exist as a strong under-current in his poetry. Nevertheless, some critics are reluctant to judge The Eve of St. Agnes, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," and Lamia as veiled autobiographical references to Keats's relationship with Fanny Brawne. Bernice Slote, for example, cautions against reading Lamia autobiographically-- "using the poem to interpret the poet." She argues that art should not become "diary" or a "literary peephole through which one observes the life of its maker."⁶ Charles Patterson suggests that Lamia is more professional than personal, "not so much a veiled rendering of his fascination with Fanny Brawne as . . . simply another version of the story he liked most to tell while exploring this question of the nature of beauty that is of most worth to man."⁷ Robert Gittings further claims that linking Keats's relationship with Fanny Brawne to Lamia, though tempting, is unjustified, and as mentioned in the previous chapter, he denies that The Eve of St. Agnes is a celebration of Keats's love for Fanny.⁸ Moreover, Gittings considers

⁶ Bernice Slote, Keats and the Dramatic Principle (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1958), pp. 165, 172.

⁷ Charles I. Patterson, The Daemoniac in the Poetry of John Keats (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1970), p. 215.

⁸ Robert Gittings, John Keats: The Living Year, 21 September 1818 to 21 September 1819 (London, 1954; rpt. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1978), p. 155.

"La Belle Dame sans Merci" archetypal, not autobiographical.⁹ Stuart Sperry, in fact, calls "La Belle Dame sans Merci" the most purely archetypal poem Keats wrote and one that resists reductive readings.¹⁰ In addition, Amy Lowell feels that "La Belle Dame sans Merci" is essentially an experimental poem, not an autobiographical one.¹¹ However, denials of autobiographical elements in The Eve of St. Agnes, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," and Lamia are more exceptions than the rule.

Critics and biographers are divided in their attitudes toward Keats's love for Fanny Brawne. Richard Monckton Milnes (Lord Houghton), Keats's biographer in 1848, does not mention the name of Fanny Brawne although he does assert, "True, a poet's love is, above all other things, his life."¹² A later biographer, Sidney Colvin, in 1887 states that Keats's love for Fanny Brawne was a misfortune:

A brisk and blooming, very young beauty, of the far from uncommon English hawk blonde type, with aquiline nose and retreating forehead, sharp-cut nostril and gray-blue eye, a slight, shapely figure rather short than tall,

⁹ Robert Gittings, John Keats (Boston: Little, Brown, 1968), p. 303.

¹⁰ Stuart M. Sperry, Keats the Poet (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1973), p. 232.

¹¹ Amy Lowell, John Keats (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1925), II, 225.

¹² Houghton, p. 145.

a taking smile, and good hair, carriage and complexion,--such was Fanny Brawne externally, but of her character we have little means of judging. She was certainly high-spirited, inexperienced, and self-confident: as certainly, though kind and constant to her lover in spite of prospects that before long grew dark, she did not fully realise what manner of man he was. Both his men and women friends, without thinking unkindly of her, were apparently of one opinion in holding her no mate for him either in heart or mind, and in regarding the attachment as unlucky.¹³

Colvin judges, "So it assuredly was: so probably under the circumstances must any passion for a woman have been."

After recounting various misfortunes that had befallen Keats in 1818 (George's departure for America, the unrecognized beginning of his own tuberculosis, Tom's illness, the jibes of reviewers), Colvin lists Keats's unlucky love:

Last were added the pangs of love--love requited indeed, but having no near or sure prospect of fruition: and even love disdained might have made him suffer less. The passion wrought fiercely in his already fevered blood; its alternations of doubt and torment and tantalising rapture sapped his powers, and redoubled every strain to which bereavement, shaken health, and anticipations of poverty, exposed them. Within a year the combined assault proved too much for his strength, and he broke down. But in the meantime he showed a brave face to the world, and while anxiety gnawed and passion wasted him, was able to throw himself into the labours of his art with a fruitful, if a fitful, energy. . . . Yet such work as Keats did at this time was done

¹³ Sidney Colvin, Keats (London, 1887; rpt. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1957), pp. 131-32.

at the very height of his powers, and included parts both of Hyperion and The Eve of St. Agnes.¹⁴

An almost diametrically opposed view is offered by Amy Lowell in her biography in 1925. Her sympathies are clearly with Fanny Brawne, whose determined and independent character Lowell admires and whose genuine passion for Keats she acknowledges:

At the time Keats met her, Fanny Brawne was just eighteen. That she had enough sweetness and depth of character to fall in love with the poet, I think there can be no doubt; and I believe she thoroughly satisfied the passionate part of Keats's love, satisfied it to a painful extent considering that they could not marry. She kept Keats in a burning agitation of desire which, under the circumstances, she was powerless to gratify. How much of this she may have understood, we have not as yet sufficient means of knowing. But the other side of love, the maternal side, she scarcely seems to have been mature enough to comprehend. She certainly developed, and grew more tender, as time went on; but the mothering which Keats so sorely needed, she had only begun to learn to give him when he died.¹⁵

Lowell pities Fanny Brawne for the unhappiness of her relationship with Keats and states that "he wronged her far more seriously than she ever wronged him. Her patience with him was unbounded; his with her was no bigger than a millet seed." Lowell praises "her sweetness, her loyalty, her

¹⁴ Colvin, pp. 132-33.

¹⁵ Lowell, II, 129-30.

charity and prodigious patience" and maintains that Keats felt not so much enslaved by Fanny Brawne in their irrevocable love as by love itself, which he felt menaced his freedom to write poetry.¹⁶ H. W. Garrod indicates, however, that the question of "whether Keats wrote better or worse when he was near Fanny Brawne" is not worth asking, "for upon whatever page of Keats's poetry there falls the shadow of a living woman, it falls calamitously like an eclipse."¹⁷

Evidently other critics do find the question worth asking. John Middleton Murry responds to the question in two very different ways in Keats and Shakespeare and Keats, works that are separated by twenty-five years of evidence and reflection. In the earlier work Murry presents Fanny Brawne as unequal to Keats in their love, as somewhat shallow, coquettish, and untrustworthy, and as responsible for Keats's ecstasy and anguish in his love. Murry argues that Fanny Brawne, in fact, was partly responsible for Keats's early death:

Had Fanny Brawne given herself to love as Keats gave himself, wholly and forever, Keats' history would have been different. Doubtless, he would have died young, but five or six, ten or a dozen years might have been added to his life--another poetic life-time at least. But now he burned out like a rush-light; he was utterly consumed.

¹⁶ Lowell, II, 130, 133, 135, 137.

¹⁷ H. W. Garrod, Keats, 2nd ed. (1939; rpt. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1957), pp. 56-57.

His agony of spirit made smooth the way for the devastation of his body.¹⁸

In Keats, the later work, Murry completely recants the charge against Fanny:

It is not even a partial truth, and it was a terrible thing to say, though I said it in good faith, ignorant of the very existence of the evidence that has made such a judgment impossible. I recant it entirely. In the sense in which something other than pthisis may be said to have killed Keats, in the same sense in which it was meaningful to say 'Fanny Brawne killed Keats,' the opposite is the truth. Separation from Fanny Brawne killed him.¹⁹

Murry also recants the position he had generally taken toward Fanny Brawne. He now believes that Fanny Brawne had great integrity which, he feels, captured Keats's heart and mind as much as her beauty did. Furthermore, Murry now stipulates that Keats experienced Fanny Brawne both as man and as poet. As a man, Keats lived to be with Fanny but died when they were parted. As a poet, he wrote his most splendid poetry while they were living in close physical proximity from April to June 1819. To Murry this was the time when Keats was happiest in his love and when his poetic genius flourished.²⁰

¹⁸ Murry, pp. 205-06.

¹⁹ John Middleton Murry, Keats, 4th ed. (1930; rpt. Oxford: Alden Press, 1955), p. 66.

²⁰ Murry, Keats, pp. 24, 81.

The evidence largely responsible for Murry's changed opinion of Fanny Brawne became public in 1934 when F. Holland Day, a Bostonian collector of Keatsiana, gave the Keats Museum at Hampstead the thirty-one letters that Fanny Brawne wrote to Fanny Keats between September 1820 and June 1824. Amy Lowell had quoted some passages from the letters in her biography in 1925, but since she would not disclose the identity of the owner of the letters, the passages were considered spurious.²¹ Not long after Lowell's biography was published, Garrod, for example, retorted, "If I had both his name and address, I do not think that I should call upon him and make a bid for the manuscript."²² Nevertheless, the letters are genuine and therefore become a silent and dignified refutation of the unkind remarks made about Fanny Brawne for nearly a century. In the foreword to the Letters of Fanny Brawne to Fanny Keats, M. Buxton Forman notes the exoneration of Fanny Brawne made possible by the publication of her letters. As Forman observes, except for Keats's letters and some comments made by Gerald Griffin to his family, Fanny Brawne's letters to Fanny Keats are the only contemporary, unbiased proof of the nature of Fanny Brawne,

²¹ Walter Jackson Bate, John Keats (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1963), p. 423.

²² Garrod, p. 14.

"an ordinary person of sound common sense and good and faithful heart."²³

Walter Jackson Bate also discusses the harsh and unjustified treatment of Fanny Brawne during the first century after Keats's death. To the Victorians Keats, the dying poet, was "consumed with unsatisfied love for a heartless flirt."²⁴ Bate attributes the growth of that legend to three circumstances: first, the vacuum created by the deliberate omission of Fanny Brawne's name in the first biography of Keats; second, after Keats's death the attitude of Keats's friends and acquaintances toward Fanny Brawne, who became a kind of scapegoat for their own guilty feelings or an object of their disapproval or hostility; third, the apparent indictment of her by Keats himself in some of his letters to her, although many of the bitter implications are now considered expressions of Keats's own conflicts.²⁵

A remark particularly damning to Fanny Brawne when lifted out of context appeared in a letter she wrote on December 26, 1829, to Charles Brown in Italy. Brown was planning a biographical memoir of Keats and sought her

²³ Maurice Buxton Forman, Foreword, Letters of Fanny Brawne to Fanny Keats, ed. and introd. Fred Edgecumbe (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1936), p. vi.

²⁴ Bate, p. 421.

²⁵ Bate, pp. 421-22.

permission to print anonymously one of her letters to Keats. She reluctantly gave her permission, suggested that she did not expect Brown's memoir to raise Keats's reputation, and stated a personal position that has often been used to condemn her:

I fear the kindest act would be to let him rest for ever in the obscurity to which unhappy circumstances have condemned him. Will the writings that remain of his rescue him from it? You can tell better than I, and are more impartial on the subject, for my wish has long been that his name, his very name could be forgotten by everyone but myself--that I have often wished most intensely.²⁶

Murry defends Fanny Brawne's remark as ringing true and loyal to the man she loved. He insists that Fanny Brawne could not have foreseen that Keats would become an immortal poet. In 1829 Keats's reputation to her appeared ephemeral.²⁷

Although efforts to correct the harsh view toward Fanny Brawne continue, there is still a mixed reaction. A general vindication of the position that Fanny Brawne had a positive influence upon Keats's poetry appears in Lynd's introduction to Houghton's biography of Keats:

I can see no ground for regarding Fanny either as a worthless creature or as an evil influence.

²⁶ As quoted in Murry, Keats, p. 73.

²⁷ Murry, Keats, p. 80.

Without her, I am convinced, Keats would never have written his greatest poems. I doubt if any poet who has never been in love can write the greatest poetry of which his genius is capable; and Keats had never been deeply in love till he met Fanny Brawne.²⁸

Lynd contends that Keats while thus "entrammelled" by Fanny wrote his greatest verse: The Eye of St. Agnes, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," "The Nightingale," "The Grecian Urn," "Bright Star," and Lamia.²⁹ Alexander Crawford argues with opposite conviction that "she had little or no influence for good upon his greater poems or upon his spiritual and intellectual life."³⁰

Not much really can be determined about the relationship of Keats and Fanny Brawne until the summer of 1819 when Keats's letters to her began. It is generally supposed that he met her in the fall of 1818, probably September or October. The Brawnes had let Charles Brown's house for the summer while Brown and Keats were on a walking tour of Scotland and had become good friends with the Dilkes who lived next door. When the lease expired the Brawnes moved to another house in Hampstead but continued to visit the Dilkes. Keats frequently visited Brown at Wentworth Place

²⁸ Lynd, p. xi.

²⁹ Lynd, p. xi.

³⁰ Alexander W. Crawford, The Genius of Keats: An Interpretation (1932; rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, 1967), p. 35.

and must have met Fanny Brawne there sometime after his return to Hampstead.³¹ After Tom Keats's death on December 1, 1818, Brown invited Keats to live with him at Wentworth Place. He accepted and within a short time had become close friends with the Brawnes. In fact, he spent Christmas Day with them.³² That day Fanny Brawne recalled three years later in a letter to Fanny Keats as "the happiest day I had ever then spent."³³ Consequently, many people have assumed that Keats and Fanny Brawne became engaged on that day. However, Murry argues that it was probably the time when Keats and Fanny declared their love for each other and that they were provisionally engaged in June but actually engaged in October 1819 after the four months of separation.³⁴ Bate further suggests that the day may have been no more than the first time Fanny really came to know Keats and certainly does not refer to an engagement.³⁵ Practically all biographers and critics, however, concede that Keats was by this time already deeply in love with Fanny Brawne.

³¹ Lowell, II, 126.

³² Murry, Keats, p. 33.

³³ Fanny Brawne, Letters of Fanny Brawne to Fanny Keats, ed. and introd. Fred Edgecumbe (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1936), p. 41.

³⁴ Murry, Keats, pp. 35-36.

³⁵ Bate, p. 430.

Keats first referred to Fanny Brawne in a journal letter to George and Georgiana Keats on December 16 and 18. Keats casually mentioned Fanny, but undoubtedly she had already impressed him:

M^{rs} Brawne who took Brown's house for the Summer, still resides in Hampstead--she is <her> a very nice woman--and her daughter senior is {I t}hink beautiful and elegant, graceful, silly, fashionable and strange we {h}ave a li{ttle} tiff now and then--and she behaves a little better, or I mus{t} have sheered off. (II, 8)

Several days later he described her more fully:

Shall I give you Miss Brawn? She is about my height--with a fine style of countenance of the lengthen'd sort--she wants sentiment in every feature--she manages to make her hair look well--her nostrills are fine--though a little painful--he[r] mouth is bad and good--he[r] Profil is better than her full-face which indeed is not full but pale and thin without showing any bone--Her shape is very graceful and so are her movements--her Arms are good her hands badish--her feet tolerable--she is not seventeen [Actually she was eighteen in August, 1818.] -- but she is ignorant--monstrous in her behaviour flying out in all directions, calling people such names--that I was forced lately to make use of the term Minx--this is I think no[t] from any innate vice but from a penchant she has for acting stylishly. (II, 13)

Again in February Keats wrote, "Miss Brawne and I have every now and then a chat and tiff" (II, 59). Even though Keats's reaction was apparently divided in these early descriptions to George, he wrote Fanny Brawne in July, "I have, believe me, not been an age in letting you take possession of me;

the very first week I knew you I wrote myself your vassal"
(II, 132).

The "possession" of John Keats by Fanny Brawne was aided by the Dilkes' moving from their side of Wentworth Place to Westminster on April 3, 1819, and the Brawnes' moving in. Murry discusses the import of the new arrangements:

Now Keats and Fanny were under one roof, about as close as two lovers could be without being in the same house. They knocked on the wall to each other, they shared the same garden in the spring of the year, talked and walked together to their hearts' content. There was a sombre undercurrent to Keats's felicity, the perplexity of vague doubt, fleeting premonitions of disaster to come; but we must believe that this was the happiest and richest period of his life.³⁶

That happiness was short-lived, though, since Brown once again let his house for the summer, thereby forcing Keats to find another place to live and setting into motion a set of circumstances that resulted in four months of separation from Fanny Brawne--a fatal separation in Murry's opinion.³⁷

As a result, the summer of 1819 was to be the summer of Keats's discontent. Douglas Bush describes Keats as the "partly happy, partly tormented victim" of conflicting

³⁶ Murry, Keats, p. 36.

³⁷ Murry, Keats, p. 37.

emotional drives during the summer. Keats's determination to write and become successful by writing bordered on desperation at times, and his passion for Fanny Brawne proved to be often tormenting and distracting. The letters Keats wrote Fanny Brawne during this summer acutely illustrate how torn Keats felt between loving Fanny and loving freedom and poetry. Keats knew only too well that marriage was impossible unless he made money, and making money required them to be apart.³⁸

Consequently, Keats left for the Isle of Wight in late June intent on working and stayed there until August 12 when he and Brown moved to Winchester in hopes of finding a library. He remained in Winchester until September 10 when he received an urgent financial request from George Keats. Keats left for London immediately to see Richard Abbey about the money George needed and returned to Winchester on September 15, without visiting Fanny Brawne at Hampstead. Brown's house would not be vacant for another month; therefore Keats resolved to live in town and find steady work there. On October 10 he visited Fanny Brawne at Hampstead but the next morning went to Westminster where the Dilkes had found him lodging. After several fruitless days of trying to find a position, Keats spent the weekend

³⁸ Douglas Bush, John Keats: His Life and Writings (New York: Macmillan, 1966), pp. 153, 159.

with the Brawnes. Within another four days he had given up his lodgings and was back at Wentworth Place, living with Brown and once again next door to Fanny Brawne.³⁹

In his letters to Fanny Brawne, Keats enacted the emotional drama of the summer and early fall of 1819. In them he registered his increasing ambivalence toward love, the exquisite misery of his soul's thralldom. From July until mid-October, Keats wrote ten letters to Fanny Brawne. Seven of these appeared during the summer months when Keats did not see Fanny Brawne at all. The remaining three followed his visits to Fanny on October 10 and October 15-17. John Hawley Roberts notes a curious, significant change of tone that occurs in the first seven letters. The first two, written before July 12, coincide with the composition of the first half of Lamia and show deep affection. The remaining five show confusion, fear, and enslavement.⁴⁰ Claude Finney states somewhat similarly that Keats was "ardent in his love for Miss Brawne, although somewhat rebellious and morbid" during the composition of the first part of Lamia, but that he was tortured by "thwarted desire, frustrating hopes, and corroding jealousy." By August 16 he had become "egotistic

³⁹ Bate, pp. 568, 574-77, 612-13.

⁴⁰ John Hawley Roberts, "The Significance of Lamia," PMLA, 50 (1935), 555-56.

as well as harsh and defiant."⁴¹ Furthermore, Bate proposes that three strands recur in the letters Keats wrote Fanny until his return to Hampstead in October--"protest or resistance," "passionate surrender," and "apprehensive jealousy."⁴² E. C. Pettet finds in the letters passionate love, "profound unease," rebellious moods, and recurring complaints of "lost freedom and independence."⁴³

The first two love letters, written on July 1 and July 8, only incidentally foreshadow the ambivalence that is clear in the later letters. For the most part they radiate the warmth and enchantment of first love. On July 1 Keats declared his devotion:

For myself I know not how to express my devotion to so fair a form: I want a brighter word than bright, a fairer word than fair. I almost wish we were butterflies and liv'd but three summer days--three such days with you I could fill with more delight than fifty common years could ever contain. But however selfish I may feel, I am sure I could never act selfishly. . . . Though I could centre my Happiness in you, I cannot expect to engross your heart so entirely--indeed if I thought you felt as much for me as I do for you at this moment I do not think I could restrain myself from seeing you again tomorrow for the delight of one embrace. (II, 123)

⁴¹ Claude Lee Finney, The Evolution of Keats's Poetry (1936; rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), II, 667-68, 680.

⁴² Bate, pp. 539-40.

⁴³ E. C. Pettet, On the Poetry of Keats (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1957), p. 225.

A week later Keats again proclaimed his love:

I never knew before, what such a love as you have made me feel, was; I did not believe in it; my Fancy was affraid of it, lest it should burn me up. But if you will fully love me, though there may be some fire, 't will not be more than we can bear when moistened and bedewed with Pleasures. . . . I cannot conceive any beginning of such love as I have for you but Beauty. There may be a sort of love for which, without the least sneer at it, I have the highest respect and can admire it in others: but it has not the richness, the bloom, the full form, the enchantment of love after my own heart. . . . I love you the more in that I believe you have liked me for my own sake and for nothing else. I have met <wht> with women whom I really think would like to be married to a Poem and to be given away by a Novel. (II, 126-27)

Wherever traces of ambivalence exist, they appear more playful than serious. Keats does refer to Fanny Brawne's remembrance as weighing upon him and does say that the pain of her love haunts him. He instructs, "Ask yourself my love whether you are not very cruel to have so entrammelled me, so destroyed my freedom" (II, 123). However, the tone is teasing, almost a baiting for Fanny to admit the power of their passion in an immediate, intoxicating reply, "rich as a draught of poppies" (II, 123). Although they are apart, she continues to have "luxurious power" over his senses, and her "tenderer nature" (II, 126) influences him. At the same moment that Keats speaks of being burned up by passion for Fanny, he erotically mentions the extinction of that fire by "moistened and

bedewed" pleasures. The only danger he cites is that she may place her affections elsewhere, and even that possibility seems remote, as the tone of the second letter indicates.

The tone of the third letter, written July 15, seems to be alternately melancholic and ardent. Admitting his misfortune of being "a little given to bode ill like the raven" (II, 129), he mentions that he had taken Fanny's letter to bed with him the previous evening but found her name obliterated from the sealing wax that morning--an event that seemed ominous until he believed it was just a dream. He also refers to an Oriental story he has been reading of a beautiful lady who enchants and deceives men and renders them melancholic. Then he adds an apprehension:

How I applied this to you, my dear; how I palpitated at it; how the certainty that you were in the same world with myself, and though as beautiful, not so talismanic as that Lady; how I could not bear you should be so you must believe because I swear it by yourself. (II, 130)

Keats seems depressed, lonely, ill, but Fanny Brawne is the "sweet Physician" who "could quite effect the cure" (II, 129). As he closes the letter, he admonishes, "Meantime you must write to me--as I will every week--for your letters keep me alive" (II, 131). Keats's earlier ardent remark that Fanny and pleasure "take possession" of him "at the same moment" (II, 129), a pleasant enthrallment, is consumed by ravening foreboding.

Keats wrote Fanny Brawne again on July 25. The tone is bittersweet, definitely ambivalent. The letter is filled with aching love, "swooning admiration" (II, 133), jealous fear, self-effacement. Keats admits that he is Fanny's vassal, that he is possessed by her, that he "would die for one hour" (II, 132) with her, that it is impossible that she could love him as deeply as he loves her. Nevertheless, Keats feels entangled by love:

You absorb me in spite of myself--you alone:
for I look not forward with any pleasure to
what is call'd being settled in the world; I
tremble at domestic cares--yet for you I would
meet them, though if it would leave you the
happier I would rather die than do so. I have
two luxuries to brood over in my walks, your
Loveliness and the hour of my death. O that
I could have possession of them both in the
same minute. I hate the world: it batters
too much the wings of my self-will, and would
I could take a sweet poison from your lips to
send me out of it. (II, 133)

Keats's "sweet Physician" is now sweet executioner; the "cure" is now "sweet poison." Resistance and surrender paradoxically coexist. Keats is chafing but at the same time luxuriating under love's vassalage.

Keats's next letter to Fanny on August 5 and 6 was, in part, an effort to change the tone of the previous letter: "You say you must not have any more such Letters as the last: I'll try that you shall not by running obstinate the other way" (II, 136). Clearly Keats is preoccupied with his work: "I am not idle enough for

proper downright love-letters" (II, 136-37). His diligence keeps his misery at bay:

I encourage it, and strive not to think of you
--but when I have succeeded in doing so all
day and as far as midnight, you return as soon
as this artificial excitement goes off more
severely from the fever I am left in. (II, 137)

Although Keats promises to see Fanny soon, a promise he admits keeping "with as much sorrow as gladness" (II, 137), he stipulates that the visit will be short: "I will stay very little while, for as I am in a train of writing now I fear to disturb it--let it have its course bad or good--in it I shall try my own strength and the public pulse" (II, 137). Then Keats closes the letter with a bantering description of the "settled" life that may wait for them, but the humor seems forced, and domestication--the "stagnant Lethe" (II, 138)--appears more a fear than a jest.

Ten days later Keats wrote the "flint-worded" letter that discloses intensely contradictory feelings, admittedly "unloverlike and ungallant" and "like so many strokes of a Hammer" (II, 141). The tone is strident: "Believe in the first Letters I wrote you: I assure you I felt as I wrote--I could not write so now" (II, 140). Keats admits the harshness: "My heart seems now made of iron" (II, 141). He feels separated even more than before from Fanny; he sees her "through a Mist" (II, 140). There is a "veil" between them. His fevered work has somewhat allayed the

"throng of Jealousies that used to haunt" (II, 140-41) him, yet his fear of absorption or dissolution by her remains:

Forgive me for this flint-worded Letter--and believe and see that I cannot think of you without some sort of energy--though mal a propos--Even as I leave off--it seems to me that a few more moments thought of you would uncrystallize and dissolve me--I must not give way to it--but turn to my writing again.
(II, 142)

The conflict between love and ambition appears as irreconcilable as surrender and resistance to love.

Keats did not write again until after the trip to London in September that George's financial crisis necessitated. Although Keats could have visited Fanny Brawne, he chose not to. His justification to Fanny is the reason for the letter on September 13:

Upon my soul it is not my fault, I cannot resolve to mix any pleasure with my days: They go one like another undistinguishable. If I were to see you to day it would destroy the half comfortable sullenness I enjoy at present into downright perplexities. I love you too much to venture to Hampstead, I feel it is not paying a visit, but venturing into a fire. . . . Knowing well that my life must be passed in fatigue and trouble, I have been endeavouring to wean myself from you: for to myself alone what can be much of a misery? As far as they regard myself I can despise all events: but I cannot cease to love you. . . . I am a Coward, I cannot bear the pain of being happy: t is out of the question: I must admit no thought of it. (II, 160)

His passion for Fanny is a consuming fire. Fanny is sustenance, but he must "wean" himself from her. The pain

of happiness is unbearable, but Keats implies that his misery, if not exquisite yet, is at least "half comfortable."

On October 11, almost a month later, Keats briefly visited Fanny. Though consuming, the fire of passion purified his heart. The letter is exultant: "I am living to day in yesterday: I was in a complete facination all day. I feel myself at your mercy. . . . You dazzled me-- There is nothing in the world so bright and delicate" (II, 222). The mood persists in another letter two days later. Keats's surrender is total:

I cannot exist without you--I am forgetful of every thing but seeing you again--my Life seems to stop there--I see no further. You have absorb'd me. I have a sensation at the present moment as though I was dissolving--I should be exquisitely miserable without the hope of seeing you. . . . I have been astonished that Men could die Martyrs for religion--I have shudder'd at it --I shudder no more--I could be martyr'd for my Religion--Love is my religion--I could die for that--I could die for you. My Creed is Love and you are its only tenet. (II, 223-24)

Keats was incarnating Porphyro's devotion: "'Say, may I be for aye thy vassal blest?'" After so many months "of toil and quest," Keats, "'A famish'd pilgrim,'" felt "'sav'd by miracle.'"⁴⁴

⁴⁴ John Keats, The Eve of St. Agnes, in Keats: Poetical Works, ed. H. W. Garrod (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1956), p. 205. All further references to Keats's poetry appear in the text. Short poems will not be cited parenthetically. Long poems will be cited by stanza or by part and line.

The last letter Keats wrote Fanny Brawne in 1819 records the despondency he felt on October 19, six days after the ecstatic surrender and several days after the weekend visit to the Brawnes. In the letter Keats appears tormented by his failure of ambition. He talks of the necessity of being busy and imposing "chains" upon himself, yet his resolve is wavering:

I shold like to cast the die for Love or death.
I have no Patience with any thing else--if you
ever intend to be cruel to me as you say in jest
now but perhaps may sometimes be in earnest be
so now--and I will--my mind is in a tremble, I
cannot tell what I am writing. (II, 224)

In the letter Keats indicates that he plans to return to Hampstead to live. That decision is proof that he had already "cast the die for Love." It would be some time yet before Keats would cast the die for death, but by then Keats as lover had experienced dying into life.

A little more than a year later, Keats was dying in Italy and irrevocably separated from Fanny Brawne. In anguish he wrote to Brown: "The persuasion that I shall see her no more will kill me. . . . I should have had her when I was in health, and I should have remained well. I can bear to die--I cannot bear to leave her" (II, 351). That a physically consummated love with Fanny Brawne could have saved Keats is doubtful. Still, the ravages of frustrated desire surely must have preyed heavily upon his

mind and body. Murry observes that perhaps Keats was "indeed burned up by his passion," but that the fire was also "a creative incandescence in the soul of one of the most richly gifted poetic natures the world has harboured."⁴⁵

Many critics agree that Keats's passion for Fanny Brawne is indeed a "creative incandescence" in The Eve of St. Agnes, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," and Lamia. Finney states that the creative and controlling emotion of The Eve of St. Agnes is Keats's "boyish, sensuous, and passionate" love for her.⁴⁶ Murry also claims that the poem imaginatively celebrates Keats's newly declared love for Fanny.⁴⁷ So does Aileen Ward: "The Eve of St. Agnes is Keats's commentary on the hidden drama of his life at this time."⁴⁸ In addition, Lowell maintains that the creative energy of The Eve of St. Agnes is the sublimation of Keats's love for Fanny Brawne.⁴⁹ To Michael Ragussis the complicated tone of The Eve of St. Agnes and its theme of "young love's necessary haste"

⁴⁵ Murry, Keats, p. 53.

⁴⁶ Finney, II, 545.

⁴⁷ Murry, Keats, p. 36.

⁴⁸ Aileen Ward, John Keats: The Making of a Poet (New York: Viking, 1963), p. 237.

⁴⁹ Lowell, II, 154.

are results of Tom's death and Keats's love for Fanny Brawne.⁵⁰ Thoughts of Fanny Brawne, Bate admits, are part of the psychological backdrop of The Eve of St. Agnes although he cautions that Keats's identification with Porphyro is only partial and that Madeline differs significantly from Fanny Brawne.⁵¹

In The Eve of St. Agnes, according to Miriam Allott, "Keats is celebrating romantic love and obviously indulging 'luxuries' to his heart's content." She notes that Keats is easily identified with Porphyro and seems himself transfixed by the magic of the poem.⁵² Richard Fogle specifies that the immortal, imaginatively projected values of young love in The Eve of St. Agnes are grounded in "everyday existence" even though the poem is "high romance."⁵³ Whether Keats is actually transcribing from his own experience of loving Fanny Brawne or, as Roger Sharrock claims, is "capturing by a supreme effort of the imagination love and the lover as he would wish them

⁵⁰ Michael Ragussis, "Narrative Structure and the Problem of the Divided Reader in The Eve of St. Agnes," Journal of English Literary History, 42 (1975), 384-85.

⁵¹ Bate, p. 439.

⁵² Miriam Allott, "'Isabella,' 'The Eve of St. Agnes,' and 'Lamia,'" in John Keats: A Reassessment, ed. Kenneth Muir (Liverpool: Liverpool Univ. Press, 1958), p. 55.

⁵³ R. H. Fogle, "A Reading of Keats's 'Eve of St. Agnes,'" College English, 6 (1944-45), 328.

to be,"⁵⁴ he still presents love in The Eve of St. Agnes as temporarily happy and fulfilled. The fulfillment of love is even briefer in "La Belle Dame sans Merci" and Lamia.

The tonal shift apparent in the three poems is a reflection of Keats's ambivalence toward love during the spring and summer of 1819. Dorothy Hewlett cites the "essential beauty created by love, his love for a woman," as symbolic in The Eve of St. Agnes and adds, "It seems impossible that it was written before 'Lamia.'"⁵⁵ Bush speculates that when Keats wrote "La Belle Dame sans Merci" he may have been torn by contradictory feelings toward Fanny Brawne. If The Eve of St. Agnes is Keats's Romeo and Juliet, Bush observes, "Lamia might be called his Troilus and Cressida."⁵⁶ Somewhat similarly Allott argues that "La Belle Dame sans Merci" and Lamia replace the optimism of The Eve of St. Agnes with "something much more uncompromising." The men are victims of "fatal enchantresses" who are themselves "somehow doomed." The tonal shift in the three poems, to Allott, "probably reflects a further phase in Keats's emotional development."⁵⁷ More

⁵⁴ Roger Sharrock, "Keats and the Young Lovers," Review of English Literature, 2 (1961), 80.

⁵⁵ Dorothy Hewlett, Adonais: A Life of John Keats (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1938), p. 322.

⁵⁶ Bush, pp. 124, 156.

⁵⁷ Allott, p. 57.

particularly, Ward interprets the transformation of the feast metaphor in The Eve of St. Agnes, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," and Lamia as symbolic of Keats's emotional fluctuation since in Keats's poetry feasting is a metaphorical equivalent of love.⁵⁸

That love can become a "bane" instead of a "blessing" because of "either adverse fate or deluded choice" becomes apparent in "La Belle Dame sans Merci." In fact, Colvin declares, "The plight which the poet thus shadows forth is partly that of his own soul in thralldom."⁵⁹ Moreover, Murry views the anguish of an impossible love as the basis for "La Belle Dame sans Merci":

La Belle Dame is Fanny Brawne; she is also the beauty of life itself which is claiming, through Fanny, Keats for its sacrifice and victim. Life, with its beauty and its pain, has taken hold of him; Love and Death have twined their arms about him.⁶⁰

As noted in the previous chapter, Finney, Saito, Pettet, and Evans see direct parallels between Keats's relationship with Fanny Brawne and the depiction of love in "La Belle Dame sans Merci." To Werner Beyer the poem is the quintessence of the theme of sensuality and

⁵⁸ Ward, pp. 308-09.

⁵⁹ Colvin, p. 166.

⁶⁰ Murry, Keats and Shakespeare, p. 124.

torment."⁶¹ To Bush it represents anguish after ecstasy, loneliness, and wasting futility.⁶²

Lamia extends the theme of the fatality of love expressed in "La Belle Dame sans Merci." Beyer contends that the lamia legend provided Keats a ready means for self-identification.⁶³ Murry additionally claims that the story was "singularly appropriate" to Keats's situation:

Lamia, as Keats wrote it, is imaginative autobiography, and of the most exact and faithful kind. Keats is Lycius, Fanny Brawne is the Lamia, and Apollonius is Charles Brown the realist, trying to break Fanny's spell over Keats by insisting upon her as the female animal. The identification seems transparent. Lamia is a poem of real and living experience; Keats wrote it from his heart.⁶⁴

Ward agrees that Lamia reflects Keats's own predicament, particularly in the changes that Keats made in Burton's account of the legend. However, she dismisses the equation of Lycius/Keats, Lamia/Fanny, and Apollonius/Brown as "too tidy" in a poem that is "much more of a riddle."⁶⁵ Pettet, Finney, and Sperry, as pointed out

⁶¹ Werner W. Beyer, Keats and the Daemon King (1947; rpt. New York: Octagon, 1969), p. 250.

⁶² Bush, p. 125.

⁶³ Beyer, p. 236.

⁶⁴ Murry, Keats and Shakespeare, pp. 157-58.

⁶⁵ Ward, p. 308.

in the previous chapter, likewise recognize autobiographical elements in Lamia. Furthermore, Bate acknowledges persistently held biographical interpretations of Lamia: Lamia as the innocent Fanny who threatens Keats's independence; Keats's humanization of Lamia because of Fanny's qualities; the general threat by the hostile world to Keats and Fanny's love; Keats's desire to retreat into the palace of love; and even perhaps Keats's wish to die.⁶⁶ Moreover, M. R. Ridley asserts that Keats's letters to Fanny Brawne in 1819 are indispensable to understanding Lamia and the gulf that separates it from The Eve of St. Agnes.⁶⁷

That gulf is also the record of Keats's dying into life as a lover, the schooling of his heart by "a World of Pains and troubles." In April 1819 Keats described the human heart: "Not merely is the Heart a Hornbook, It is the Minds Bible, it is the Minds experience, it is the teat from which the Mind or intelligence sucks its identity" (II, 103). By October 1819 it had become so for Keats, the lover of Fanny Brawne. Although his love for Fanny was tormentingly ambivalent, as the letters reveal and The Eve of St. Agnes, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," and Lamia demonstrate, it became "the teat" from which Keats's mind

⁶⁶ Bate, p. 548.

⁶⁷ M. R. Ridley, Keats' Craftsmanship: A Study in Poetic Development (1933; rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, 1962), p. 265.

drew identity. Assuredly Keats at times felt that his own identity as poet and man was being submerged, absorbed, uncrystallized, or even burned up by Fanny Brawne, but love became his "Creed" and Fanny Brawne "its only tenet." No wonder Keats found it impossible to "wean" himself from her.

Chapter III

THE LOVER AS POET

Not only did Keats as lover experience dying into life in 1819; as poet, he experienced a parallel transformation. The nature of the poet and poetry was for Keats a continual absorption, and evidence of the evolution of his aesthetic theory appears frequently in his correspondence and poetry. The letters provide the context and The Eve of St. Agnes, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," and Lamia the proof of Keats's poetic metamorphosis in 1819. A letter to Benjamin Bailey in November 1817 records an early aesthetic principle: "I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination--What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth . . ." (I, 184). Keats rejects "consequitive reasoning" (I, 185) as a means for perceiving truth though and adds, "However it may be, O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!" (I, 185). The emphasis upon sensation appears again in a letter to John Taylor in February 1818:

In Poetry I have a few Axioms, and you will see how far I am from their Centre. 1st I think Poetry should surprise by a fine excess and not by Singularity--it should strike the Reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts, and appear almost a Remembrance--2nd Its touches of Beauty

should never be halfway thereby making the reader breathless instead of content: the rise, the progress, the setting of imagery should like the Sun come natural natural too [sic] him--shine over him and set soberly although in magnificence leaving him in the Luxury of twilight--but it is easier to think what Poetry should be than to write it--and this leads me on to another axiom. That if Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all.

(I, 238-39)

To Clarence Dewitt Thorpe this "lovely excess, beauty never half-way but luxuriant and luxurious," is found in most of Keats's poetry but is at its fullest in The Eve of St. Agnes.¹ Hugh I. Fausset also recognizes the "near perfection" of Keats's expression of sensuous beauty in The Eve of St. Agnes and proclaims that had Keats's career ended with this poem, "there would have been every excuse for posterity's acceptance of him as a poet who sought beauty for beauty's sake rather than for truth's."² Indeed, Keats has often been regarded as primarily a poet of sensuous beauty and of the ethereal. To H. W. Garrod, for instance, the Keats of The Eve of St. Agnes is "the true Keats" whose "relapse into sense and luxury" suggests a "relapse of a temperament laboriously aspiring towards harder and sharper effects, the realities of

¹ Clarence Dewitt Thorpe, The Mind of John Keats (1926; rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, 1964), p. 184.

² Hugh I'Anson Fausset, Keats: A Study in Development (1922; rpt. London: Archon, 1966), p. 75.

thinking and suffering," but forever failing to sustain those heights.³

An opposite position is Thorpe's argument that "Keats was at core a thinker, and not merely a poet of the sensuous and lovely whose eye saw no deeper than the mere surface of things." Keats was a philosophic poet whose thought was often profound, whose aesthetic philosophy addressed most of the fundamentals of poetry, and whose ambition was to ascend the "gradus ad Parnassum altissimum." Thorpe concludes that though untimely death terminated the planned long ascent through preparation and experimentation to attain a lofty poetic ideal, Keats "advanced far up the steep slopes" and wrote poetry "of immortal accents."⁴ Throughout his career, however, Keats engaged in a continual inner intellectual struggle over the true nature and end of poetry--a dispute between the love of the sensuous, the fanciful, and the more thoughtful consecration to truth and to the heart of humanity.⁵ Thus the dream world and the real world became an essential antithesis for Keats. So did sensation and thought. In April 1818 Keats spoke of this duality: "I have been hovering for some time between

³ H. W. Garrod, Keats, 2nd ed. (1939; rpt. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1957), pp. 51-52.

⁴ Thorpe, pp. 24-25.

⁵ Thorpe, pp. 29, 32.

an exquisite sense of the luxurious and a love for Philosophy--were I calculated for the former I should be glad--but as I am not I shall turn all my soul to the latter" (I, 271).

By 1819 Keats had already formulated significant philosophy, as the theory of Negative Capability and his conception of human life as a Mansion of Many Apartments illustrate. Keats regarded Shakespeare as a negatively capable poet--"capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason" (I, 193). According to Thorpe, Keats craved as a personal poetic goal Shakespeare's "capacity to lose himself completely in detached, contemplative, but penetrative absorption in the world and men."⁶ In Lamia, it may be argued, Keats was approaching that ideal. Furthermore, in May 1818 in a letter to J. H. Reynolds, Keats set forth a sympathetic view of human life as a mansion of many apartments through which man travels. Keats distinguished the "infant or thoughtless Chamber" (I, 280) from the "Chamber of Maiden-Thought" where "one's vision into the heart and nature of Man" is sharpened by the knowledge that "the world is full of Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness and oppression" (I, 281). That chamber gradually darkens so that man cannot see the "ballance of good and evil" (I, 281). Consequently, he feels the "'burden of the Mystery'" (I, 281).

⁶ Thorpe, p. 96.

These two examples certainly demonstrate the philosophic bent of Keats's mind. Accordingly, Claude Finney states, "Keats was much more than a poet of sensuous beauty. He was a thinker, a critic, and an interpreter of life."⁷

In April 1819 Keats delved further into the mystery of life by depicting the world as "a vale of Soul-making."

Thorpe considers this concept the most profound philosophy

Keats wrote:

I know of nothing in all Keats's writings that carries the mind further in so many different directions, nothing that points more strongly to his mental struggles to understand the meanings and relationships of life's baffling phenomena, his persistent reaching out after truth in the light of his own experience and observation, nothing that shows how far he had gone toward a satisfactory reconciliation of the facts of existence.⁸

In the passage Keats conceived of the world as the place where one acquires identity, "is personally itself," and becomes a "Soul as distinguished from an Intelligence" (II, 102):

I will call the world a School instituted for the purpose of teaching little children to read--I will call the human heart the horn Book used in that School--and I will call the Child able to read, the Soul made from that School and its horn book. Do you not see how

⁷ Claude Lee Finney, The Evolution of Keats's Poetry (1936; rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), II, 549.

⁸ Thorpe, p. 81.

necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a Soul? A place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways. Not merely is the Heart a Hornbook, It is the Minds Bible, it is the Minds experience, it is the teat from which the Mind or intelligence sucks its identity. (II, 102-03)

John Middleton Murry contends that in the Vale of Soul-Making philosophy Keats gives an account of the oneness, the homogeneity, that he had reached as poet: "This was the process by which Keats himself believed he attained the condition of soul in which he wrote the first poetry which was undubitably and unmistakably Keats' and Keats' alone. . . ." Thus Murry believes that Keats not only achieved his own "complete individuality" in April 1819 but also "the knowledge which inevitably accompanies that achievement."⁹ Keats composed "La Belle Dame sans Merci" in the same letter in which he articulated the Vale of Soul-Making. In its larger attention to thought, the poem is clearly a thematic and tonal departure from The Eve of St. Agnes.

To Thorpe Keats increasingly emphasized the actual, the human heart. Thus Keats found his centrality "in wisdom through knowledge and 'continual burning of thought' upon the facts of poetry and existence as he

⁹ John Middleton Murry, Keats and Shakespeare: A Study of Keats' Poetic Life from 1816 to 1820 (1925; rpt. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1958), pp. 143, 148.

found them." Keats held other convictions as a result of this centrality, according to Thorpe:

And, with this remarkable clarity of judgment, he came to the conviction that all that can be known or imagined as to a world beyond visible reality must be deduced from that reality itself, that there is no more valid basis for an understanding of the infinite than a thorough knowledge of the human heart itself, which, to know in its fulness and profundity, is to know the burden of the mystery; and, since it is in the darkest, most tragic and miserable hours of life that the soul of man approaches nearest to infinite and god-like capacities, then that poet understands most of all-that-is-desirable-to-know who has probed to the depths the most profound misery, pain, and heartbreak of the great suffering heart of humanity.¹⁰

By the autumn of 1819 Keats had undergone a poetic dying into life.

A year earlier in a letter to Richard Woodhouse, Keats had identified his poetical character and had spoken his poetic ambition:

I am ambitious of doing the world some good: if I should be spared that may be the work of maturer years--in the interval I will assay to reach to as high a summit in Poetry as the nerve bestowed upon me will suffer. The faint conceptions I have of Poems to come brings [sic] the blood frequently into my forehead. (I, 387-88)

If by the autumn of 1819 Keats felt that he had not attained the highest summit, he, nevertheless, believed that he had

¹⁰ Thorpe, p. 190.

made use of his "Judgment more deliberately" (II, 128) than before in Lamia. Furthermore, he told Bailey in August 1819, "I am convinced more and more every day that (excepting the human friend Philosopher) a fine Writer is the most genuine Being in the World" (II, 139). Douglas Bush speculates that in Endymion, Hyperion, and Lamia Keats may have tried to objectify "his own version of the Wordsworthian theme of poetry and the poet, of aesthetic, emotional, and ethical experience and growth."¹¹ Whether or not this is actually the case, it is clear that as a group the three love poems The Eve of St. Agnes, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," and Lamia present the lover as poet and record a transformation of the poetic self.

A common critical tendency has been to view The Eve of St. Agnes as poetry of sensation and "La Belle Dame sans Merci" and Lamia more as poetry of ideas. Alexander Crawford, for example, regards The Eve of St. Agnes as a transitional poem, "La Belle Dame sans Merci" as the first of Keats's great poetry, and Lamia as a more complete expression of "Keats's thought and more profound philosophy." Crawford believes that the poems of 1819 are acclaimed as great poems because of the philosophy they contain--a philosophy that becomes the "informing spirit"

¹¹ Douglas Bush, John Keats: His Life and Writings (New York: Macmillan, 1966), p. 98.

which gives "richness and ripeness of thought" to their luxurious beauty.¹² Walter Jackson Bate also notes the "crucial if silent fact of hesitation or pause of judgment" in "La Belle Dame sans Merci"--judgment that is more fully expressed in Lamia.¹³ Earl Wasserman, nevertheless, maintains that "a high seriousness, an inner vision" is as inherent in The Eve of St. Agnes as in "La Belle Dame sans Merci."¹⁴ Furthermore, Takeshi Saito observes that beneath the "luxurious" beauties, The Eve of St. Agnes expresses an undercurrent of human sympathy and is to be identified with the other works of 1819 in the depth of tone and the sympathy for human misery.¹⁵ The movement toward a poetry of greater actuality is thus recorded in these three love poems of 1819.

The Eve of St. Agnes becomes then a standard for judging the extent of Keats's poetic transformation that is more fully registered in "La Belle Dame sans Merci" and Lamia. Cecil C. Seronsy regards The Eve of St. Agnes as

¹² Alexander W. Crawford, The Genius of Keats: An Interpretation (1932; rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, 1967), pp. 36, 49, 51-52.

¹³ Walter Jackson Bate, John Keats (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1963), pp. 478, 481.

¹⁴ Earl R. Wasserman, The Finer Tone: Keats' Major Poems (1953; rpt. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), p. 101.

¹⁵ Takeshi Saito, Keats' View of Poetry (London: Folcroft Press, 1970), pp. 83-84.

"a product of pure art, with no intrusion of reality." He cites the use of legend, the unreality of Porphyro's passage through the castle, Madeline's enchanted sleep, and the continuing escape of the lovers as evidence of the aesthetic impulse operating in the poem--the capacity of art "to carry life beyond life."¹⁶ In addition, Wasserman suggests the freeing of the imagination from its normal bounds in Porphyro's absorption into Madeline's dream and the lovers' subsequent metamorphosis (from human actors to visionary phantoms to "the selfless spirit of man forever captured in the dimensionless mystery").¹⁷

Several other critics identify the role that Keats himself is playing in The Eve of St. Agnes. Michael Ragussis specifies that Keats as narrator is actively creating the romance and is therefore caught between the world of imagination and reality. The narrator's experience becomes a microcosm of the central action of the poem. Thus the story of Madeline and Porphyro is an elaboration upon Keats's own involvement in a dream of romance. However, Keats is not completely absorbed in the dream and recognizes the intrusion of reality, "the inevitable passage out of innocence," as something he cannot wish

¹⁶ Cecil C. Seronsy, "The Concluding Stanzas of 'The Eve of St. Agnes,'" Keats-Shelley Journal, 6 (1955-57), 12-13.

¹⁷ Wasserman, pp. 112, 123.

away.¹⁸ Marian Cusac argues somewhat similarly that Keats assumes the role of "enchanter" in The Eve of St. Agnes, guiding readers through the events of the story and shaping their reactions: "His role as enchanter is thus an organizing principle corollary to the primary concentric structure."¹⁹ To Stuart Sperry, Keats as the poet-conjurer in The Eve of St. Agnes is fully aware of the "tenuousness and frailty" of the spell that he weaves in the poem and is at times even consciously ironic:

For although it is often taken as such, St. Agnes is not primarily a glorification of sensual passion or even, for all the condensed richness of its imagery, of the human senses. It is, rather, the imagination and its processes, an inspired testing, pursued more seriously in some of the poet's later verse, of the quality of poetic belief.²⁰

Sperry believes the real triumph of The Eve of St. Agnes therefore is its testing of the limits and dangers of its own devices as romance--what Ragussis calls "art wary of

¹⁸ Michael Ragussis, "Narrative Structure and the Problem of the Divided Reader in The Eve of St. Agnes," Journal of English Literary History, 42 (1975), 380-81, 383, 393.

¹⁹ Marian Hollingsworth Cusac, "Keats as Enchanter: An Organizing Principle of The Eve of St. Agnes," Keats-Shelley Journal, 17 (1968), 114, 119.

²⁰ Stuart M. Sperry, "Romance as Wish-Fulfillment: Keats's The Eve of St. Agnes," Studies in Romanticism, 10 (1971), 30.

art's own devices."²¹ As such The Eve of St. Agnes marks, for Sperry, "the beginning of that ironical perspective on imaginative experience Keats was steadily to develop in 'La Belle Dame sans Merci,' the great odes of the spring, and Lamia."²²

Aesthetically, The Eve of St. Agnes can be approached in another way. In Keats's poetry dreams are synonymous with imagination.²³ Therefore, the expedition Porphyro makes into the castle and the dreaming that takes place may represent the poet's imaginary flight, his union with his muse. C. F. Burgess establishes a direct parallel between Porphyro and Keats. The lover becomes poet:

Keats made this same journey into the imaginative world on a number of occasions only to find that return is inevitable. The world of the castle and especially Madeline's charmed bower is the world of the nightingale which the poet can reach for one transcendent moment only; it is the world of the Grecian urn, "forever warm" and "forever young," realized for an instant and then lost again. It is a world which is reached on "the viewless wings of Poesy" and which disintegrates at the touch of reality, of the "dull brain" which "perplexes and retards."²⁴

To Burgess The Eve of St. Agnes can therefore be read as

²¹ Ragussis, p. 391.

²² Sperry, p. 42.

²³ Wasserman, p. 101.

²⁴ C. F. Burgess, "'The Eve of St. Agnes': One Way to the Poem," English Journal, 54 (1965), 394.

"a triumph of the imagination" but also as a confirmation of Keats's inability to reconcile "the real and the fancied." It is, in fact, a metaphor for poetic process: Porphyro as poet journeys into the realm of the imagination (Madeline's castle) and actualizes not only Madeline's dream but also his own:

When, like Porphyro, the poet is compelled to enter the realm of the spirit, he does so with an understanding of the risks involved in thus isolating himself from reality and he does so with the knowledge that he must inevitably return. Yet the journey into the regions of the fancy is not without purpose if, like Porphyro, the poet can bring back a token, that is, the poem itself.²⁵

For Porphyro as for Keats, what the imagination seizes as beauty becomes truth. However, Keats significantly modifies this "favorite Speculation" (I, 185) in "La Belle Dame sans Merci" and Lamia.

"La Belle Dame sans Merci" also presents the lover as poet, but it gives a quite different view of the poetic process. Gittings believes, however, that the claim that the lady represents "false poetry" from which Keats "was now turning away towards philosophy" oversimplifies the theme. Rather, La Belle Dame symbolizes "the eternal fusion of Love and Death" that Keats instinctively acknowledged:

²⁵ Burgess, p. 394.

Keats from now onwards instinctively knew that these two for him were coupled together. In a month he had progressed from the halfway position held in the Darkness sonnet ["Why Did I Laugh Tonight?"], that death was "intenser" than verse, fame and beauty, all the things he loved. Death, he realized in the vision of La Belle Dame, was a part of those loves; they held their nature from the fact that all contained in them the seeds of the death they were all to experience.²⁶

Bush offers another disclaimer. "La Belle Dame sans Merci" is "pure poetry" devoid of serious moralizing. "And though the knight is not presented as a poet," Bush suggests, "he is akin to Endymion in his disillusioned return to actuality after a glimpse of the ideal."²⁷

That the knight and the lady do symbolize the poet and his muse is, nevertheless, a contention of a number of critics. Wasserman asserts that in "La Belle Dame sans Merci" dreaming functions as the imagination. The knight-at-arms aspires toward "visionary penetration into that final essence which is beauty-truth," but he finds that La Belle Dame as the ideal can never be possessed, though pursued, and that the vision inevitably shatters.²⁸ T. O. Mabbott alleges that Keats had Fanny Brawne personally in mind when he composed "La Belle Dame sans Merci" but that

²⁶ Robert Gittings, John Keats (Boston: Little, Brown, 1968), p. 303.

²⁷ Bush, p. 125.

²⁸ Wasserman, pp. 73, 75.

allegorically "surely his love was the Muse." This second meaning, Mabbott feels, Keats intended for public view and used to demonstrate the poet-knight's condition: "There is satisfaction in the ideas of partial success, frustration in the doubt that it will ever come again."²⁹ Judy Little adds that the lady serves as a stimulus to the knight's imagination or may, in fact, symbolize the imagination itself.³⁰ More emphatically, Katharine Wilson asserts that La Belle Dame personifies poetry or Keats's muse and that the poem represents, though perhaps unconsciously, Keats's reaction to her domination: "She has cheated him by her promise, exhausted him and left him in a barren land with dried up imagination since no birds sing and with no impulse to do anything but loiter in a desolate world."³¹ Moreover, Bhabatosh Chatterjee equates the elfin grot with the visionary realm of the imagination and notes the "heavy price" the visionary pays for intensity.³² Hence the protagonist experiences

²⁹ T. O. Mabbott, "Keats' La Belle Dame Sans Merci," Explicator, 5 (1947), no. 50.

³⁰ Judy Little, Keats as a Narrative Poet: A Test of Invention (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1975), p. 106.

³¹ Katharine M. Wilson, The Nightingale and the Hawk: A Psychological Study of Keats' Ode (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1964), pp. 141-42.

³² Bhabatosh Chatterjee, John Keats: His Mind and Work (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1971), pp. 357, 360.

both "the suprahuman beauty and the terrible destructiveness of the ultrafeminine."³³

As "the female presider of poetry," La Belle Dame represents the "elfin poetic imagination" and its untamed energy, according to Mario D'Avanzo. She provides both the pleasures and pains of poetic experience. The knight is the initiated poet whose interaction with his muse leads not only to imaginative ascent and fulfillment but also to inevitable waning of ecstasy, enervation, and eventual return to fevered, fretful existence.³⁴ Consequently, Keats presents in "La Belle Dame sans Merci" an ambiguous view of the nature of the poet and his craft, which Sperry cites as a mutual "infatuation with and enslavement by his own muse."³⁵

The emerging ambiguity toward poetic process in "La Belle Dame sans Merci" indicates the transformation that Keats as poet was experiencing in 1819. In fact, as Crawford explains, the poem reflects Keats's most insistent artistic problem at the time--"the conquest of the sensuous by the intellectual." Crawford rejects a frequent critical estimate that the poem is "but another of Keats's splendidly

³³ Charles I. Patterson, The Daemoniac in the Poetry of John Keats (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1970), p. 147.

³⁴ Mario L. D'Avanzo, Keats's Metaphors for the Poetic Imagination (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 192, 194-96, 198, 201-02.

³⁵ Stuart M. Sperry, Keats the Poet (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1973), p. 231.

imaginative and highly romantic efforts, and of a piece with his best earlier work." Instead, it is a criticism of Keats's earlier romanticism and a construction of a "new philosophy of beauty and truth," a depiction of the dangers of Keats's former allegiance to the sensuous ideals of poetry:

Here, then, is the substance of La Belle Dame sans Merci. Keats had now come to realize that mere sensuous beauty was a deceiver, even a wicked witch, who would betray any innocent poet who was captivated by her charms. Keats saw whither he had been going, and drew a picture of the fate that would have overtaken him had he continued to follow the goddess of his early dreams. This poem is the warning he gave himself, and shows the fate he was wise enough to foresee. By picturing his own destiny in that of the knight-at-arms he saved himself from the witch's thrall, and escaped to pursue truth and its larger ideals in the poems that were to follow.³⁶

Therefore evanescent beauty, though never abandoned as a poetic form and image, gave way to the greater permanence of truth as Keats sought "to anchor himself to an intellectual and philosophical centre."³⁷ The passage to greater humanism is an early vestige of Keats's poetic dying into life. Lamia some months later offers even more conclusive proof of Keats's transformation.

Lamia extends the ambiguous view toward poetic creation set forth in "La Belle Dame sans Merci," the irresolution

³⁶ Crawford, pp. 63, 70, 72-73.

³⁷ Crawford, p. 71.

Keats felt himself, as indicated by his shifting attitudes toward the lady and Lamia. David Perkins believes both poems are attempts to expose the visionary imagination that provides only temporary escape for the poet and can therefore deceive: "The lover of vision may be only the innocent victim of his own quest for happiness, or he may be a fool as well. In any case, he is certain to become a 'wretched wight.'" Lycius is a self-deceived dreamer whose dream cannot withstand the penetration of Apollonius. Perkins concludes that rather than contrasting the philosopher with the poet, Lamia "contrasts him only with the visionary poet or dreamer."³⁸ Jack Stillinger further agrees that Keats affirms the actual by condemning the hoodwinked dreamers in his poems of 1819.³⁹ Crawford, as well, suggests that "La Belle Dame sans Merci" and Lamia indicate Keats's dissatisfaction with the poetry of dreams and of the sensuous imagination. Thus Lycius represents the kind of poet-dreamer, the lover of enchantment, that Keats increasingly rejected:

³⁸ David Perkins, The Quest for Permanence: The Symbolism of Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1959), pp. 263-64, 270-72.

³⁹ Jack Stillinger, "The Hoodwinking of Madeline: Skepticism in 'The Eve of St. Agnes,'" Studies in Philology, 58 (1961), 533-55; rpt. in Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Eve of St. Agnes, ed. Allan Danzig (Englewood Cliffs N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971), p. 71.

Keats had come to believe that the catastrophe of devotion to the poetry of enchantment was not merely disillusion and bitter disappointment, but actual tragedy and poetic death,-- death of the real purpose of poetry, which was not to please with imaginative objects of beauty, but to console men in their spiritual endeavours and aspirations.⁴⁰

Newell F. Ford additionally maintains that in "La Belle Dame sans Merci" and Lamia Keats depicts the "cheating" imagination and in Lamia further recants "the dreamer tribe." Lamia becomes a symbol of "the dreaming, creative, but non-extensional illusory imagination," and Lycius represents "the dream-poet, prone to accept beauty as truth, illusion as reality." According to Ford, in Lamia Keats was symbolically "scourging the dream-poet within him, slaying a long-cherished, favorite self."⁴¹ Morris Dickstein contends that in Lamia Keats, indeed, bids farewell to his earlier poetry "of the love nest and the bower of sensation and dream and 'faery lands forlorn.'"⁴² Accordingly, Donald Pearce terms Lamia "a poem of complex valediction to his youthful muse."⁴³

⁴⁰ Crawford, pp. 133, 135-36.

⁴¹ Newell F. Ford, The Prefigurative Imagination of John Keats: A Study of the Beauty-Truth Identification and Its Implications (1951; rpt. Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1966), pp. 141, 144.

⁴² Morris Dickstein, Keats and His Poetry: A Study of Development (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 235.

⁴³ Donald Pearce, "Casting the Self: Keats and Lamia," Yale Review, 69 (1979-80), 227.

Whether Lamia does, in fact, demonstrate the superseding of Keats's old muse by a new one is not at all conclusive to some critics. Miriam Allott, for example, repudiates the view of Lamia as Keats's scourge of the dreamer. She sees the poem as a defense, a validation of the enchanted dream--of poetic imagination.⁴⁴ Chatterjee disagrees: Lamia is a rejection of the dream, but a very painful one for Keats.⁴⁵ John Hawley Roberts further interprets Lamia as "the principle of feeling as opposed to knowledge." She is therefore the poetic ideal from which Keats could never completely divorce himself. In the tragic ending of the poem, Keats bitterly admits that once that intellectual ideal (Apollonius) takes hold in his poetics, artistic destruction will follow. Consequently, Lamia is the "ultimate judgment on that intellectual and philosophical and humanitarian goal that at times he thought poetry should reach."⁴⁶

Instead of taking sides, many critics prefer interpreting Lamia as a statement of Keats's aesthetic dichotomy. Bate, for instance, refrains from fully identifying Lamia

⁴⁴ Miriam Allott, "'Isabella,' 'The Eve of St. Agnes,' and 'Lamia,'" in John Keats: A Reassessment, ed. Kenneth Muir (Liverpool: Liverpool Univ. Press, 1958), p. 61.

⁴⁵ Chatterjee, pp. 430-31.

⁴⁶ John Hawley Roberts, "The Significance of Lamia," PMLA, 50 (1935), 554, 560.

as art even though he admits that like art she aspires toward reality, creates illusion, and depends upon human response and recognition. He also acknowledges the divided commitment of Keats to poetry and philosophy but indicates that Keats is not to be identified with Lycius but with all the characters. Neither did Keats write Lamia as a treatise on "the future of poetry and the dangers it faced."⁴⁷

Sperry concedes that Lamia reveals Keats's (Lycius') divided allegiance to imagination (Lamia) and philosophy (Apollonius) but cautions against concentrating too narrowly upon poetic imagination as the theme.⁴⁸ Furthermore, Bush accepts the view that Lycius the lover is also poet but specifies that Lycius only partially projects one side of Keats. As cloistered artist Lycius lives in illusions and attains neither "devotion to the real" nor "comprehension of the world of suffering." Hence, Lycius is a flawed part of an ideal. Lamia and Apollonius are also flawed. Moreover, Bush recognizes other types of ambivalence in the poem: the opposition of the imagination and reason, of "poetic contemplation and humanitarian action," of "idealistic aspiration and realistic disenchantment," of "imaginative transcendence and rational acceptance of things as they are."⁴⁹ Thorpe

⁴⁷ Bate, pp. 556-57, 560.

⁴⁸ Sperry, Keats the Poet, pp. 298-99.

⁴⁹ Bush, pp. 159-61.

also identifies the conflict in Keats's poetic nature--
 imaginative flight into fancy and a grounding in reality--
 and believes Lamia records both:

The ephemeral pleasure palace with its lustrous, high-arched halls, its wreaths of light perfume, and faery-roof upborne by nothing more than strains of haunting music, is the pleasure house of unreflective dreams of the young poet, who has lately met the seemingly beautiful Lamia, not truly beautiful, but false, a serpent in disguise --mere sensuous passion, feeling without knowledge, empty dreams. The young poet-lover Keats espoused her on a day; then came along "cold philosophy"--Keats's own unsparing domestic criticism, his awakening intellect and reason--and fixed him with his eye; then, not only did the false Duessa fade away, and the palace of barren dreams crumble, but the youngster who loved so unwisely also died--though in his place was born a stronger, firmer soul,--but the Lamia story stops here.⁵⁰

The sensuous poet and the intellectual poet, to Edward T. Norris, are mirrored in the characters of Lycius and Hermes respectively. Lamia thus represents the poetry of sensation; the nymph, the truer ideal of knowledge. Thus, Lamia's transformation by Hermes represents the poet's power to create sensuous beauty.⁵¹

Some critics interpret Lamia as an explicit judgment Keats makes of his poetic development. Sperry emphasizes the importance of seeing Lamia as Keats's self-conscious

⁵⁰ Thorpe, pp. 32, 102-03.

⁵¹ Edward T. Norris, "Hermes and the Nymph in Lamia," Journal of English Literary History, 1-3 (1934-36), 323-24.

reaction to the recurrent problems of art.⁵² Priscilla Tate states that Lamia represents Keats's questioning the myth of the poet: "Lycius represents a negative value and misplacement of the imagination. He is committed to a delusion rather than a vision, and thus his path can lead only to unhappiness and destruction."⁵³ Warren Stevenson further contends that Lamia shows Keats's rejection of illusion and presents Lycius as an unworthy poet.⁵⁴ Pearce argues that Lamia centrally records the transformation of the poetic self:

Keats's need to "remake" himself, his constant preoccupation with questions about the nature of poetry, the kinds of experience he might embody in his poetry, his never-ending experimentation with the poetic medium, his poems about other art objects, about the poetic process itself, all make him strikingly modern. . . . Many of his finest poems are plainly hymns to the muses lightly disguised as poems on other subjects. The art of writing poetry possessed him utterly and the thought of poems he would one day write.⁵⁵

Therefore poetic metamorphosis appears in various symbols and images of death/rebirth, transformation/renewal, and

⁵² Sperry, Keats the Poet, p. 294.

⁵³ Priscilla Weston Tate, From Innocence through Experience: Keats's Myth of the Poet (Salzburg: Univ. of Salzburg, 1934), pp. 120, 130.

⁵⁴ Warren Stevenson, "Lamia: A Stab at the Gordian Knot," Studies in Romanticism, 2 (1972), 251-52.

⁵⁵ Pearce, pp. 214, 218.

supersession/replacement throughout Keats's poetry but, to Pearce, most spectacularly in Lamia. More specifically, Lamia represents not poetic imagination but the lower poetic faculty--"Fancy" or "Poesy"--and Apollonius represents not the anti-poet as he is often regarded but actually a side of Keats, "that aspect of his genius, for whom (as for Moneta [the priestess in The Fall of Hyperion]) Lamia's charm had now become anathema." Lycius therefore symbolizes Keats's earlier but now unacceptable poetic self:

Lycius, a no longer valid--because superseded--poetic self, enchanted by a Circean aesthetic--of continual surprises and "fine excess"--must be extricated, possibly, if necessary, sacrificed, in order that another self--Apollonian or Monetan, devoted to more deliberate beauty, clearer-eyed poems--may supervene. As for the banishment of Lamia herself, here is nothing new: the maturing poet must discard, or renounce an insufficient muse; die to her--or else die from her.⁵⁶

What Keats desired in 1819 was no longer a poetry of "fine excess" but "a poetry of human fact."⁵⁷

A more incisive judgment of Lamia is that it expresses Keats's demonic view of the poetic imagination. To Wilson Lamia is a demon muse who resembles Keats's "demon Poesy" in "Ode on Indolence" and La Belle Dame. She betrays, deceives, and falsely fascinates the poet Lycius. To fall

⁵⁶ Pearce, pp. 219-23.

⁵⁷ Pearce, p. 233.

under her spell is fatal. Therefore she must be superseded.⁵⁸ D'Avanzo also calls Lamia a demonic muse who enthralls and destroys the poet. Like Orpheus, Lycius looks back at his beloved and initiates his doom.⁵⁹ According to Walter Evert, Keats deliberately chose Lamia as the central figure for his poem because a lamia traditionally has alluring but false beauty and is pernicious. Thus she becomes a fitting symbol of Keats's revised view of the poetic imagination. To Evert Lamia is Lycius' demonic poetic imagination and a victim of imagination herself. As victim she enters fully into a life of illusions and with Lycius briefly enjoys a transient, ideal existence. She builds a faery palace that is solely supported by music and is magnificently adorned. However, when reality intrudes, Lamia vanishes. For Lycius, Lamia is at first a total substitute for reality. Hence, Evert interprets Lamia as an expression of Keats's awareness of the limits on imaginative escape that reality imposes:

This by no means implies rejection of poetry or of the antecedent imaginative activity necessary to its creation, but it does place limits on what is possible for poetry to be or do in the world for which it is intended. Lamia's palace is a perfect poem, and Lycius' lending of his spirit to it is without fault, in itself. It is when he attempts to remove himself from the "real"

⁵⁸ Wilson, pp. 142, 144.

⁵⁹ D'Avanzo, pp. 52-53.

world altogether, to live eternally, as a mortal,
 the life of a god, that he seals his own doom.
 For imagination has a "proper bound" beyond which
 lies madness or some other form of essential
 annihilation of the self.⁶⁰

To avoid the doom of Lycius, the poet must die into life
 if the ultimate concern of poetry is the human condition.

Several critics more elaborately interpret the poetic
 process in Lamia. Finney equates Lamia's palace supported
 magically by music with the poems Keats had imaginatively
 created and equates Lycius' desire to display Lamia and
 the palace with Keats's motivation to publish poetry and
 become famous. The nuptial feast symbolizes the actual
 publication of the poems. The "dreadful guests," the
 "herd," scorned in the poem become the unappreciative
 reading public, and Apollonius, the uninvited guest,
 symbolizes the reviewers whose judgment of reason and
 common sense destroyed whatever imaginative delights the
 public might have seen in Keats's poems. Unlike Lycius,
 however, Keats accepted the ridicule and censure in a
 virile, courageous manner.⁶¹ Georgia Dunbar notes the
 bitter sarcasm directed toward people generally and the
 "self-righteous critic" particularly in the second half

⁶⁰ Walter H. Evert, Aesthetic and Myth in the Poetry of Keats (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1965), pp. 275-76, 279, 284.

⁶¹ Finney, II, 700-01.

of Lamia.⁶² Moreover, the trumpet call symbolizes the return to reality--the disruption of Lycius' love-dream and the dispelling of Lamia's fairy music.⁶³ It is also a symbolic call to worldly fame.⁶⁴ D'Avanzo broadens the symbolic interpretation of Lamia. Sexual experience is the "large gathering metaphor for poetic experience." Therefore consummation is both physical and artistic union. Lycius' sleep and Lamia's weaving are other metaphors for poetic process. Lamia's pallor, however, prefigures blighted imagination, "the inevitable decline of the poetic fancy."⁶⁵

The decline of "Fancy" (I, 170), of "fine excess" (I, 238), Keats apparently wanted in 1819. In March Keats told Haydon, "It is true that in the height of enthusiasm I have been cheated into some fine passages, but that is not the thing" (II, 43). In June he further declared, this time to Sarah Jeffrey, "I hope I am a little more of a Philosopher than I was, consequently a little less of a versifying Pet-lamb" (II, 116). By mid-July Keats wrote Reynolds of his contentment with the first part of

⁶² Georgia S. Dunbar, "The Significance of the Humor in 'Lamia,'" Keats-Shelley Journal, 8 (1959), 24.

⁶³ D'Avanzo, p. 176.

⁶⁴ Werner W. Beyer, Keats and the Daemon King (1947; rpt. New York: Octagon, 1969), p. 219.

⁶⁵ D'Avanzo, pp. 55-56, 61, 161, 186.

Lamia and of his current poetic development:

I have great hopes of success, because I make use of my Judgment more deliberately than I yet have done; but in Case of failure with the world, I shall find my content. And here (as I know you have my good at heart as much as a Brother), I can only repeat to you what I have said to George-- that however I sho^d like to enjoy what the competences of life procure, I am in no wise dashed at a different prospect. I have spent too many thoughtful days & moralized thro' too many nights for that, and fruitless wo^d they be indeed, if they did not by degrees make me look upon the affairs of the world with a healthy deliberation. I have of late been moulting: not for fresh feathers & wings: they are gone, and in their stead I hope to have a pair of patient sublunary legs. I have altered, not from a Chrysalis into a butterfly, but the Contrary. having two loop-holes, whence I may look out into the stage of the world: and that world on <my> our coming here [Isle of Wight] I almost forgot. (II, 128)

Poetically and philosophically, Keats in 1819 was acquiring negative capability, "being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason" (I, 193), as his looking "upon the affairs of the world with a healthy deliberation" and his objectivity in Lamia attest. He was, furthermore, feeling the "burden of the Mystery" of life, aware of the soul-making disciplines of the world's school. If Keats had not yet become "a miserable and mighty Poet of the human Heart" (II, 115) as Shakespeare was, by the autumn of 1819, with "a pair of patient sublunary legs," and "the human friend Philosopher," Keats was better equipped to become one. As a butterfly self, fancy would continue to flit and dart, but for Keats the return to the

chrysalis with its vantage point of the world, was, in itself, poetic metamorphosis.

Chapter IV

THE LOVER AS LOVER

The lovers in The Eve of St. Agnes, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," and Lamia are players in the "continual allegory" of Keats as lover and poet during 1819. They are, however, equally fascinating players in their own dramas of love. Madeline and Porphyro, La Belle Dame and the knight-at-arms, Lamia and Lycius, and the nymph and Hermes enact their love in the dialectical settings of dream and reality. As a group they manifest increasingly ambivalent attitudes toward both the dream and reality of love. The women are ambiguously portrayed as angels and demons; the men, as impassioned lovers and self-deluded dreamers. Therefore what the lovers experience becomes a means for judging them first in their separate relationships and finally in their interrelationships.

Madeline and Porphyro, the lovers in The Eve of St. Agnes, embody the passion and desires of youthful love. Members of feuding families, they love at great risk and elope finally at considerable peril. When Porphyro reaches Madeline's castle he faces danger because "a hundred swords / Will storm his heart" if he is discovered by the "barbarian

hordes, / Hyena foemen, and hot-blooded lords" (st. x) who live there. Even the dogs "would execrations howl / Against his lineage" (st. x). His only friend, an old nurse, Angela, fears much more for his safety than he does as she warns him of the hatred of "'dwarfish Hildebrand'" and "'old Lord Maurice, not a whit / More tame for his gray hairs'" (st. xii). Because of the imminent danger, Angela hides Porphyro in a closet until they gain access to Madeline's chamber, where Madeline and Porphyro later enact the dream and reality of their love. Like Romeo and Juliet, they are star-crossed lovers, but they achieve momentary intensity and fulfillment before fleeing together into the storm, into uncertain, mutable existence.

Because their love is consummated and their escape is successful, Madeline and Porphyro are sometimes considered happy lovers. To James D. Boulger they epitomize "the ideal of earthly love."¹ Roger Sharrock regards their love happy and fulfilled but proposes that to some extent they represent "an ideal model of romantic love rather than a possible state."² Earl Wasserman also argues the idealization of their love, their passage into the post-mortal "finer tone"

¹ James D. Boulger, "Keats' Symbolism," Journal of English Literary History, 28-29 (1961-62), 250.

² Roger Sharrock, "Keats and the Young Lovers," Review of English Literature, 2 (1961), 81.

repetitions of earthly happiness.³ However, because their love is played against a backdrop of human and natural hostility--hatred, bloodthirstiness, old age, death, elemental cold, and storm--the youthfully warm and vibrant passion is inevitably modified.⁴ Therefore within The Eve of St. Agnes, reality constantly qualifies the dream of love.

For Madeline the dream of love is based upon the legend of St. Agnes' Eve that she has learned from older women:

They told her how, upon St. Agnes' Eve
 Young virgins might have visions of delight,
 And soft adorings from their loves receive
 Upon the honey'd middle of the night,
 If ceremonies due they did aright. (st. vi)

Most of the poem's action emerges from Madeline's anticipating, preparing for, experiencing the dream, and awakening from it. However, as Newell Ford notes, Porphyro fractures Madeline's "delicious prefigurative" dream by unexpectedly and incredulously substantiating it.⁵ Thus Madeline's prophetic dream is only partially fulfilled

³ Earl R. Wasserman, The Finer Tone: Keats' Major Poems (1953; rpt. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), p. 132.

⁴ Werner W. Beyer, Keats and the Daemon King (1947; rpt. New York: Octagon, 1969), p. 148.

⁵ Newell F. Ford, The Prefigurative Imagination of John Keats: A Study of the Beauty-Truth Identification and Its Implications (1951; rpt. Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1966), pp. 128, 141.

since the mortal lover Porphyro is but a shadow of the visionary Porphyro.⁶ Porphyro as real lover appears, to Madeline, "'pallid, chill, and drear'" (st. xxxv). Nevertheless, he creates himself within her dream by partly disguising, partly transforming his desire.⁷ Wasserman interprets their union as an etherealizing of their human passion.⁸ Their consummated love becomes for John Jones "the most erotic haven of intenseness in all Keats."⁹ Thus the truth of Madeline's dream, its actualization, can be compared to Adam's dream which Keats identified in 1817 in a letter to Benjamin Bailey: "The Imagination may be compared to Adam's dream--he awoke and found it truth" (I, 185).

As lover Madeline embodies a dream-like innocence from the moment she appears in the poem. Keats characterizes her as virginal, "lilly white" (st. vi). "Hoodwink'd with faery fancy," Madeline is totally preoccupied with "St. Agnes and her lambs unshorn / And all the bliss to be

⁶ M. A. Goldberg, The Poetics of Romanticism: Toward a Reading of John Keats (Yellow Springs: Antioch Press, 1969), pp. 123-24.

⁷ Stuart M. Sperry, Keats the Poet (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1973), p. 204.

⁸ Wasserman, p. 112.

⁹ John Jones, John Keats's Dream of Truth (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1969), p. 240.

before tomorrow morn" (st. viii). When she retires to her chamber "silken, hush'd, and chaste" (st. xxi), Keats makes her innocence more apparent. Although compared to a "mission'd spirit," to a "ring-dove fray'd and fled" (st. xxii), and to a "tongueless nightingale" (st. xxiii), Madeline becomes for Porphyro a "saint," "a splendid angel, newly drest, / Save wings, for heaven" (st. xxv). Keats emphasizes her purity as she kneels in prayer and prepares for bed. Her chamber is a paradise for Porphyro. Madeline is his "'seraph,'" his "'heaven,'" and Porphyro is her "'hermite'" (st. xxxi). Their love-making thus miraculously saves Porphyro, the "'famish'd pilgrim'" (st. xxxviii).

Many critics discuss Madeline's dream-like innocence and its loss. To Boulger Madeline is a sacrificial lamb:

In the love-mystery she is the Agnus Dei, the Lamb of God. Her movements and observances are a kind of Offertory service. What she is offering is herself, a pure and spotless victim, to love, and what is consecrated is her vision, the "miracle" which allows communion with the ideal and real Porphyro.¹⁰

Rosemarie Maier believes Madeline's simple innocence and her innocent trust are nearly identical but stipulates that in The Eve of St. Agnes Keats portrays the "mythic

¹⁰ Boulger, p. 256.

shattering of innocence" by sexual experience.¹¹ Priscilla Tate additionally sees the inevitable and necessary forfeiting of Madeline's innocence to experience.¹² To Bate Madeline is "serious and devout," but her innocence must be violated since "actual happiness is impossible without an awakening from dream to reality."¹³ Robin Mayhead believes Madeline's position is both Christian and pagan, at once devout and paganistically superstitious.¹⁴ Burgess also accords Madeline a dual characterization: "She is both angel and woman, of heaven and of earth, of the spirit and of the flesh."¹⁵ To Richard Fogle, the counterpointed and fused images of silver and rose convey Madeline's dualistic chastity and sensuousness.¹⁶ Claiming that Madeline's dream is an attempted escape into innocence,

¹¹ Rosemarie Maier, "The Bitch and the Bloodhound: Generic Similarity in 'Christabel' and 'The Eve of St. Agnes,'" Journal of English and Germanic Philology, 70 (1971), 69, 74.

¹² Priscilla Weston Tate, From Innocence through Experience: Keats's Myth of the Poet (Salzburg: Univ. of Salzburg, 1934), p. 72.

¹³ Walter Jackson Bate, John Keats (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1963), pp. 439, 446.

¹⁴ Robin Mayhead, John Keats (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1967), p. 52.

¹⁵ C. F. Burgess, "'The Eve of St. Agnes': One Way to the Poem," English Journal, 54 (1965), 392.

¹⁶ R. H. Fogle, "A Reading of Keats's 'Eve of St. Agnes,'" College English, 6 (1944-45), 327.

Michael Ragussis argues that Madeline experiences real passion when she embraces love. In her passage beyond maidenhood and dreams, Madeline discovers the wonder, the responsibility, and the danger of real love. Consequently, the storm that occurs at the end of the poem becomes "the perfect objective correlative for Madeline's entrance into experience."¹⁷ David Wiener calls Madeline's passage from innocence to experience a "fortunate fall." Madeline's dream world is a "self-enclosed, stagnant Eden," a world that is frozen and incapable of growth. Porphyro releases Madeline from the "limbo-like" innocent world into an experiential world where growth and fulfillment are possible.¹⁸ As St. Agnes' Eve closes, Madeline can no longer return to the chaste chamber, to bud-like innocence. The rose, once full-blown, cannot "shut, and be a bud again" (st. xxvii).

Instead of focusing upon her innocence, Jack Stillinger presents Madeline as a victim of deception, a "self-hoodwinked dreamer." Her "stuporous insensibility" leads to a "pitiful, yet at the same time reprehensible," condition: "Her conjuring (perhaps like Merlin's) has

¹⁷ Michael Ragussis, "Narrative Structure and the Problem of the Divided Reader in The Eve of St. Agnes," Journal of English Literary History, 42 (1975), 385, 388, 391.

¹⁸ David Wiener, "The Secularization of the Fortunate Fall in Keats's 'The Eve of St. Agnes,'" Keats-Shelley Journal, 29 (1980), 126.

backfired upon her, and as hoodwinked dreamer she now gets her reward in coming to face reality a little too late." Stillinger suggests that Madeline's "narcotic state" continues throughout The Eve of St. Agnes and that she possibly never wakens completely from her dream. She even believes Porphyro when he identifies the storm as elfin.¹⁹ Gail McMurray Gibson interprets Madeline's experience as an undercutting of the Annunciation by Gabriel to the Virgin Mary. Madeline, no innocent Virgin Mary, is Mary Magdalene, a sinner: "Unlike the Virgin Mary Annunciate, Madeline carries within herself mortal and not immortal fruit; she bears the gift--and the curse--of human love." What Madeline and Porphyro have enacted is a "secular Annunciation mystery."²⁰ These are extreme interpretations, however, since critics generally consider Madeline innocent, though gullible.

Nevertheless, critics are more divided in their views of Porphyro as lover. There is even disagreement about the meaning of his name. Robert Gittings suggests that Keats got Porphyro's name from Robert Burton's Anatomy of

¹⁹ Jack Stillinger, "The Hoodwinking of Madeline: Skepticism in 'The Eve of St. Agnes,'" Studies in Philology, 58 (1961), 533-55; rpt. in Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Eve of St. Agnes, ed. Allan Danzig (Englewood Cliffs N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971), pp. 63, 65, 67.

²⁰ Gail McMurray Gibson, "Ave Madeline: Ironic Annunciation in Keats's 'The Eve of St. Agnes,'" Keats-Shelley Journal, 26 (1977), 41, 49.

Melancholy, even though for a time he considered the name Lionel.²¹ Gibson states that "Porphyro" means "fire-bearing" or "fire-bearer."²² Wiener also associates the name with fire imagery.²³ Warren Stevenson says that "Porphyro" means "red."²⁴ However, William Heath suggests that it means "nobly born."²⁵ The possible meanings are appropriate to Porphyro's characterization. Porphyro is a young, ardent lover "with heart on fire / For Madeline" (st. ix). He is called "burning Porphyro" (st. xviii), and his heart is metaphorically "Love's fev'rous citadel" (st. x). Although Madeline's kinsmen would readily kill Porphyro because of the families' feud, there is no indication that he is not nobly born.

More importantly, critics equivocate about Porphyro's character. Fogle prefers to regard Porphyro as innocent, though certainly not bloodless or passionless.²⁶ More specifically, Ragussis cites the youthful recklessness,

²¹ Robert Gittings, John Keats: The Living year, 21 September 1818 to 21 September 1819 (London, 1954; rpt. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1978), p. 73.

²² Gibson, p. 45.

²³ Wiener, p. 123.

²⁴ Warren Stevenson, "Lamia: A Stab at the Gordian Knot," Studies in Romanticism, 2 (1972), 242.

²⁵ William Heath, ed. Major British Poets of the Romantic Period (New York: Macmillan, 1973), p. 1070.

²⁶ Fogle, p. 327.

impatience, and eagerness Porphyro exhibits as he invades the castle and carries out his stratagem.²⁷ Burgess also recognizes Porphyro's virility, venturesomeness, agility, and impetuosity and describes his coexisting ethereal and carnal loves for Madeline. However, his human passion for Madeline overpowers his nobler feelings.²⁸ Porphyro wants one moment to "gaze and worship all unseen; / Perchance to speak, kneel, touch, kiss" (st. ix). This progression of spiritual to physical intentions clearly indicates Porphyro's equivocal motives. Thoughts of Madeline flush his brow and make "purple riot" (st. xvi) in his heart. According to Bate, Porphyro has divided reactions himself, as he is touched to tears at Madeline's innocent trust in the legend but simultaneously plots to take advantage of it.²⁹ Moreover, to Mayhead Porphyro represents the human and unsanctified lover, not the "conventional romantic lover rescuing his lady fair from her wicked kindred." Thus, Mayhead suggests that their elopement is a very uncertain affair, an ominous beginning of their new life.³⁰

Some critics hold even dimmer views of Porphyro. Judy Little, for instance, sees Porphyro as hoodwinked by his

²⁷ Ragussis, p. 384.

²⁸ Burgess, pp. 389-91.

²⁹ Bate, p. 442.

³⁰ Mayhead, pp. 50, 52-53.

devotion to Madeline, but she denies that he is a "skeptical ravisher."³¹ Nevertheless, Jack Stillinger imputes distinctly wicked behavior to Porphyro. In The Eve of St. Agnes Angela momentarily accuses Porphyro of impiety, cruelty, and wickedness. However, to Stillinger the stratagem positively proves that Porphyro is a "peeping Tom and villainous seducer" whose pilgrimage is not at all spiritual but intentionally carnal: "The miracle on which Porphyro congratulates himself is in fact a stratagem that he has planned and carried out to perfection." Stillinger even proposes a partial, voyeuristic identification of Keats with Porphyro.³² Wiener calls Porphyro a "Satanic arch-seducer" but interprets Porphyro's actions as heroic, since he frees Madeline from "pristine innocence out into a fallen, but superior, world of experience."³³

The tendency to read The Eve of St. Agnes as an enactment of youthful ardor and rapturous fulfillment, however, allows both acceptance of the innocence of Madeline and Porphyro and its unconscious or deliberate loss. Although their love is qualified by Madeline's

³¹ Judy Little, Keats as a Narrative Poet: A Test of Invention (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1975), p. 90.

³² Stillinger, pp. 54, 62.

³³ Wiener, p. 122.

fears, the ensuing storm, and the death of Angela, it becomes legendary. So do the adolescent lovers who find erotic bliss but, unlike Romeo and Juliet, live to test it against the limits of experience.

The lovers in "La Belle Dame sans Merci," the lady and the knight-at-arms, also experience a momentary bliss, but they represent a fatality of love possibly foreshadowed but certainly not as evident in The Eve of St. Agnes. The middle stanzas of "La Belle Dame sans Merci" depict a magically erotic and probably consummated love, but the beginning and final stanzas indicate the knight's woe. Anguished, pallid, listless, the knight loiters on the "cold hill side," mercilessly enthralled by his memory of La Belle Dame.

The beautiful lady in "La Belle Dame sans Merci" is an ambiguously portrayed lover. She is sketchily drawn and remains enigmatic throughout the poem. Her mysterious nature contributes to the fateful relationship with the knight-at-arms, but he is unable to fathom that mystery or even to describe her concretely.³⁴ What is clear, however, is that she is not a mortal, and herein lies the source of the fatality of their love. Asserting that she represents "love in some form or other," E. C.

³⁴ Little, pp. 99, 101, 105.

Pettet feels that she is most likely a femme fatale.³⁵ David Perkins considers her nature ambiguous and maintains that even though La Belle Dame is often regarded as "a Circe who leads men to their destruction," her love is genuine. The food she offers, "roots of relish sweet," "honey wild," and "manna dew," may express her loving intentions but is as strange as her language of love. Both the food and love fail to nourish the knight. Since she is a "faery's child," her nature cannot be positively known, and any contact she makes with humans is, at best, uncertain.³⁶ Charles Patterson forcefully contends that La Belle Dame is neither innocent nor evil: "She is a nonmortal, daemonic creature of Celtic origins, and she is neutral as to good and evil because she is outside the human pale and all its restrictions." Therefore Patterson grants her characteristics of "mystery, glamour, delicacy, femininity, high sexuality, and haunting appeal," but he emphasizes that she is "never cunning, wicked, deceitful, consciously and intentionally cruel, or haughty." Furthermore, the knight is as responsible as she for initiating

³⁵ E. C. Pettet, On the Poetry of Keats (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1957), pp. 214-15.

³⁶ David Perkins, The Quest for Permanence: The Symbolism of Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1959), pp. 260, 262.

his enthrallment.³⁷ Wasserman claims that the banishment from the magical grot comes, not from La Belle Dame's withheld tenderness, but from the knight's failure to sustain his vision: "The vision of the mortal-immortal can only entice mortal man towards heaven's bourne; it cannot aid him in his aspirations or preserve his vision, which must inevitably be shattered."³⁸

Jane Ruth Cohen generally vindicates La Belle Dame:

There is no evil implicit in the possibility of the Lady's "faery" parentage nor in her appearance; if her eyes are "wild" so is the "honey" she brings her lover. Her "sweet moan" recalls Madeline's and her sorrow suggests regretful insight rather than malicious intent. The lady sings "sidelong," but her indirection is unavoidable if she rides sidesaddle in proper romance fashion. Her gifts meet passion's demands, if not those of nutrition, yet in her "grot" she maternally lulls her lover to sleep. The wraiths may warn "La belle dame sans merci / Thee hath in thrall"; however, the Lady has done nothing sinister, and the words of phantoms interpreted by a dreamer cannot be accepted as wholly valid. "La belle dame" has not granted religious grace nor, perhaps, sexual consummation; but neither has anyone granted her pity, forgiveness, or gratitude. "La belle dame sans merci" resembles Keats's more loved and blessed "demon Poesy" rather than the archetypes in myth and folklore.³⁹

³⁷ Charles I. Patterson, The Daemonic in the Poetry of John Keats (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1970), pp. 137-38.

³⁸ Wasserman, p. 75.

³⁹ Jane Rabb Cohen, "Keats's Humor in 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci,'" Keats-Shelley Journal, 17 (1968), 11.

That La Belle Dame is called "the Beautiful Lady without Kindness" is no indication, to Patterson, that she is therefore unkind: "She has neither kindness nor unkindness; for since she is outside the pale of human limitations, she is neutral as to good and evil and knows nothing of either." However, Patterson feels that she has emotional inclination, not obligation, and that her weeping suggests a sorrowful recognition of the inevitable failure of the mortal/immortal relationship rather than willful deceit.⁴⁰

La Belle Dame is often called a fatal enchantress. According to Werner Beyer, her destructive and sensual traits link her to the enchantress queen in Wieland's Oberon. Beyer labels La Belle Dame "a strange composite," a forerunner of the infinitely more complex Lamia.⁴¹ To define La Belle Dame as "pure witch, baleful enchantress" is an oversimplification to Bernice Slote. Attempting to modify somewhat the dark view of La Belle Dame's character, Slote argues that the lady is a type of naiad--a mingling of mermaid, siren, fairy, and undine--whose love for a mortal is fatal. Slote cites the classical naiad in Lemprière's Classical Dictionary, a work Keats knew, as a probable model for La Belle Dame's characterization:

⁴⁰ Patterson, pp. 141-42.

⁴¹ Beyer, p. 244.

Like the nymph of mythology, Keats's lady is in the meadow by a lake, light-footed, wreathed with offerings of flowers, knowing wild foods of honey and roots, loved by the knight in her elfin grot. Something of the ominous delirium, or nymph-stroke, is involved in the lover's punishment by nightmare and waking death.⁴²

As undine and mermaid, La Belle Dame represents tragic qualities. According to Slote, the undine injures her love by chance only. The mermaid, however, blindly and ruthlessly gratifies her passion. Although as naiad she possesses both life-giving and destructive tendencies, La Belle Dame as enchantress, lamia, and witch is even more sinister.⁴³ In fact, Francis Lee Utley calls her "a fairy mistress from hell."⁴⁴ Using the pallid knight and the "death-pale" kings, princes, and warriors as evidence, Edwin R. Clapp conjectures that La Belle Dame may be a composite of the fatal fay and vampire. He argues that Keats had probably seen "The Vampyre: A Tale by Lord Byron" in The New Monthly Magazine for April 1, 1819. Actually written by Byron's physician, Dr. John Polidori, the tale does not have much in common with "La Belle Dame sans Merci." However, a prefixed editorial remark cites

⁴² Bernice Slote, "La Belle Dame as Naiad," Journal of English and Germanic Philology, 60 (1961), 22-23.

⁴³ Slote, pp. 23, 29.

⁴⁴ Francis Lee Utley, "The Infernos of Lucretius and Keats's La Belle Dame Sans Merci," Journal of Literary History, 24-25 (1957-58), 121.

the emaciated, listless, and consumptive condition of the vampire's prey and could have suggested a prototype for the knight's wretched state.⁴⁵ James Twitchell advances Clapp's interpretation of the vampirism in "La Belle Dame sans Merci." The nightmare vision of the "starved lips" of pale kings, princes, and warriors, consequently, is both an admission and a "horrid warning" of victimization by the lady vampire.⁴⁶

The knight-at-arms in "La Belle Dame sans Merci" is indeed a victim. From the beginning of the poem, victimization is evident in the questions the knight is asked and in his response. The poem opens with a question: "O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms, / Alone and palely loitering?" The speaker probes further: "O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms, / So haggard and so woe-begone?" The knight is no longer at arms, or on horseback, but is palely loitering, completely absorbed in love.⁴⁷ His response, a description of his dream-like encounter with La Belle Dame and the nightmare that has banished her, indicates the depth of his enthrallment. It is a devastating enthrallment, however, for the knight yearns for an

⁴⁵ Edwin R. Clapp, "La Belle Dame as Vampire," Philological Quarterly, 27 (1948), 90-91.

⁴⁶ James Twitchell, "La Belle Dame as Vampire," College English Association, 37 (1975), 33.

⁴⁷ Bernice Slote, "The Climate of Keats's 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci,'" Modern Language Quarterly, 21 (1960), 198.

impossible mingling of antithetical worlds. To Slote his death is "both prophetically actual and presently symbolic" in the images of pallor, starvation, and sterility.⁴⁸ Neither can the knight transcend the bounds of his mortality nor accept them.⁴⁹ Thus he loiters in the mortal world, where "the sedge is wither'd from the lake, / And no birds sing," longing for another glimpse of the "elfin grot."

The knight is fully aware of his victimization. His "latest dream" is not a mere premonition of La Belle Dame's enthrallment. He already bears the mark of deadly love. Desolate and alone, he displays "all the ravaged and feverish torment of love."⁵⁰ Whether or not the knight is dying, T. O. Mabbott thinks, is immaterial. What ruins the knight is his love for La Belle Dame. Having once loved an immortal being, the knight finds that nothing else now matters.⁵¹ Patterson also sees in the knight's enthrallment a severance from humanity. Pitiably suspended between two worlds, the knight can neither return to the elfin lady nor find satisfaction and joy in the human world.⁵² To Evert the knight is suffering under "a cruelly

⁴⁸ Slote, "La Belle Dame as Naiad," pp. 27, 29.

⁴⁹ Tate, p. 82.

⁵⁰ Pettet, p. 215.

⁵¹ T. O. Mabbott, "Keats' La Belle Dame Sans Merci," Explicator, 5 (1947), no. 50.

⁵² Patterson, pp. 135-36.

delusive enchantment by a demon."⁵³ He has become a ghost, "a pale revenant," whose weakness results from exposure to "the blasted heath, the Hell of love."⁵⁴

Not only is the knight a victim of love. He is also a victim of dreams. Despite the knight's forlorn state, Bate believes the real question in "La Belle Dame sans Merci" is left open:

Was it indeed a Circelike figure that deliberately seduced the knight-at-arms into a moment of delusive happiness; or was it not that the knight fell in love with her at once, and then perished in trying to establish complete contact with something not wholly human?⁵⁵

A victim of his vision, the knight responds subjectively to both the dream of La Belle Dame and the dream of the "death-pale" warriors. Bate surmises that the "horrid warning" of starvation is not actually witnessed by the knight and may therefore be "an expression of his own uneasiness" or a self-fulfilling prophecy:

And if the dream is now proving to be prophetic, it is again through his own divided nature, his own act, his persistence in continuing to loiter on the cold hillside even though the autumn is about to become winter.⁵⁶

⁵³ Walter H. Evert, Aesthetic and Myth in the Poetry of Keats (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1965), p. 245.

⁵⁴ Utley, p. 121.

⁵⁵ Bate, p. 479.

⁵⁶ Bate, pp. 480-81.

According to Ford, the knight is a deluded dreamer whose dream is a "mirage of the imagination, a cruel betrayal."⁵⁷ Stillinger thinks the knight is hoodwinked by the "faery's child." Even when he awakens from the vision, he is still "the dupe of his dream" because he waits for another meeting with La Belle Dame and refuses to participate in the real world.⁵⁸ The knight has allowed himself to be taken in by some otherworldly creature. Having relinquished the control of his own destiny, he now falsely interprets experience.⁵⁹ He deceives himself about La Belle Dame by imagining her as he wishes her to be, and this false imagination causes him to suffer.⁶⁰ As Goldberg observes, the knight is the "victim of a dream within a dream," which if pursued upon waking will lead to inevitable self-annihilation: "And so, haggard and woe-begone, poised at the midnight point between light and darkness, the sign of death upon his fevered brow, he palely loiters on the cold hillside."⁶¹ The ennui of the knight-at-arms, like acid on the artist's metal plate, etches a stark, vivid image of betrayed love.

⁵⁷ Ford, p. 141.

⁵⁸ Stillinger, p. 68.

⁵⁹ Tate, pp. 81-82.

⁶⁰ Little, p. 106.

⁶¹ Goldberg, p. 124.

To some extent the lovers in "La Belle Dame sans Merci" prefigure Lamia and Lycius. Lamia is more complex and even more ambiguous than La Belle Dame, however, and Lycius is an even more tragic victim than the knight-at-arms. Keats further delineates the fatal lovers, Lamia and Lycius, by adding, as foils, the immortal lovers, Hermes and the nymph, who "smoothly pass / Their pleasure in a long immortal dream" (I.127-28) and, as consummate lovers, fly into the verdant woods, never to pale "as mortal lovers do" (I.145). In Lamia Keats thus contrasts the ideal happiness possible for nonmortal lovers with the transient, deceptive bliss inherent in a mortal-nonmortal love. Once more, reality qualifies the dream of love, and willful self-delusion destroys the dreamer.

As lover, the serpent-woman Lamia represents both beautiful and baneful aspects of the "brilliance feminine" (I.92). Her character is ambiguously complex--a coil or knot of contraries. In the passage from Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy that Keats appended to his poem, Lamia is called "a phantasm in the habit of a fair gentlewoman." As Bate observes, Keats makes her more mysterious: "From her first appearance, Lamia is deliberately conceived as an enigma: virtually every quality has its opposite, real or potential." It is uncertain whether she is essentially serpent or woman--mortal, immortal, or some amorphous form. However,

to Bate she is "not essentially sinister."⁶² Richard Benvenuto sees Lamia's identity as a "merger of contraries." A serpent in disguise, Lamia is "a flirt, a liar, and a hypnotist of sorts, as well as a loving and an innocent woman."⁶³ Pettet notes that Lamia is fundamentally ambiguous throughout the poem and is not simply a femme fatale:

We cannot forget that she is a cheat and that all her power and awakening of Lycius' love is based on illusion; ultimately she is the cause of his death and disenchantment. But she is never evil in the sense of deliberately willing Lycius' destruction.⁶⁴

To William Stephenson Lamia is paradoxically "beautiful and fearful, human and serpentine"--both good and bad enchantress.⁶⁵ Jones proposes that in Lamia Keats attempts "to address the schizophrenic object convincingly."⁶⁶

The poem illustrates Keats's apparently shifting sympathies for Lamia. An opening description establishes

⁶² Bate, pp. 554-55.

⁶³ Richard Benvenuto, "'The Ballance of Good and Evil' in Keats's Letters and 'Lamia,'" Journal of English and Germanic Philology, 71 (1972), 6, 11.

⁶⁴ Pettet, p. 232.

⁶⁵ William Curtis Stephenson, "The Fall from Innocence in Keats's 'Lamia,'" Papers on Language and Literature, 10 (1974), 43, 49.

⁶⁶ Jones, p. 248.

her serpentine demonic nature:

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 barr'd;
 And full of silver moons, that, as she breathed,
 Dissolv'd, or brighter shone, or interwreathed
 Their lustres with the gloomier tapestries--
 So rainbow-sided, touch'd with miseries,
 She seem'd at once, some penanced lady elf,
 Some demon's mistress, or the demon's self.
 Upon her crest she wore a wannish fire
 Sprinkled with stars, like Ariadne's tiar:
 Her head was serpent, but ah, bitter-sweet!
 She had a woman's mouth with all its pearls complete:
 And for her eyes: what could such eyes do there
 But weep, and weep, that they were born so fair?
(I.47-62)

In her exchange with Hermes she is at once beguiling and ingratiating--"brilliance feminine" (I.92) and "'smooth-lipp'd serpent'" (I.83). Although she has compassionately made the nymph invisible to protect her from "'the love-glances of unlovely eyes / Of Satyrs, Fauns, and blear'd Silenus' sighs'" (I.102-03), Lamia relinquishes that protection for the "boon" Hermes is capable of granting: Lamia's metamorphosis from snake to woman. With seductive guile, she lifts her "Circean head" (I.115), blushes demurely, and lisps her plea.

Once torturously metamorphosed, Lamia becomes "a lady bright" (I.171), seemingly a "virgin purest lipp'd, yet in the lore / Of love deep learned to the red heart's core" (I.189-90). When she meets Lycius, she ensnares him first by being beautiful and then by being coy. With artful

deceit she wins her lover:

Thus gentle Lamia judg'd, and judg'd aright,
 That Lycius could not love in half a fright,
 So threw the goddess off, and won his heart
 More pleasantly by playing a woman's part,
 With no more awe than what her beauty gave,
 That, while it smote, still guaranteed to save.
 (I.334-39)

Thus, in the first half of the poem, Lamia is a beautiful but artful deceiver.

In the last half of Lamia, Lamia is even more ambiguous. Content in the "purple-lined palace of sweet sin" (II.31), she is pained by Lycius' thoughts of the "noisy world" (II.33) and greatly fears his plan to wed her publicly. Her nature now seems totally submissive. Under Lycius' sadistic delight at bending her will, Lamia appears masochistic: "She burnt, she lov'd the tyranny" (II.81). However, Keats at this moment claims, "Ha, the serpent! Certes, she / Was none" (II.80-81). Then follow the marriage preparations that Lamia makes "to dress / The misery in fit magnificence" (II.115-16). She creates a magical banquet room, an exotic feast, and regal dress--all, it seems, to please only Lycius. Further, Lamia acquiesces to Lycius' wish to admit the guests, even though one is the uninvited sophist Apollonius, whose penetrative eye exposes and banishes Lamia:

Then Lamia breath'd death breath; the sophist's eye,
 Like a sharp spear, went through her utterly,

Keen, cruel, perçant, stinging: she, as well
 As her weak hand could any meaning tell,
 Motion'd him to be silent; vainly so,
 He look'd and look'd again a level--No!
 'A Serpent!' echoed he; no sooner said,
 Than with a frightful scream she vanished.
 (II.299-306)

The serpentine artful deceiver at the beginning of Lamia now seems a suffering, loving woman sympathetically presented, "almost as much a victim as Lycius himself, or at least . . . a helpless instrument of fate."⁶⁷

Mayhead argues that Keats intends for Lamia to be pitied, not condemned.⁶⁸ Theorizing that "Keats himself did not know whether she was a thing of beauty or a thing of bale," John Middleton Murry, nevertheless, feels that Lamia is a sympathetic character.⁶⁹ To Morris Dickstein the metamorphosis of Lamia is dying into life--explicit and sympathetic humanization.⁷⁰ Wasserman, however, claims that the metamorphosis is a miraculous "extrication of pure beauty from the beauty-horror of the earthly." Thus Lamia, no longer dualistic, becomes an ideal. As such she is not

⁶⁷ Pettet, p. 232.

⁶⁸ Mayhead, p. 56.

⁶⁹ John Middleton Murry, Keats and Shakespeare: A Study of Keats' Poetic Life from 1816 to 1820 (1925; rpt. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1958), p. 159.

⁷⁰ Morris Dickstein, Keats and His Poetry: A Study of Development (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 242.

a sinister lover.⁷¹ Maintaining that Lamia is a "crucially modified" figure of sinister legend, Beyer asserts that Lamia is a "gentle daemon" who has erred, not the traditional evil daemon. She is thus a "lovely elemental creature of passion."⁷² According to Patterson, Lamia is "a neutral daemonic female with lovable qualities and no malicious intent"--Keats's "most irresistible heroine."⁷³

Despite her sympathetic side, Lamia is regarded as a malevolent enchantress. As the "palpitating snake, / Bright, and cirque-couchant in a dusky brake" (I.45-46), Lamia represents, to Katharine Garvin, "the supreme snake in the grass"--demon and vampire.⁷⁴ Bush considers her an agent of corruption, "a type of belle dame sans merci who lives only for possessive love."⁷⁵ Noting her sorcery, her deliberate and unimpassioned entrapment of Lycius, her pretense of womanhood, Evert labels Lamia a pernicious cheat.⁷⁶ Perkins likewise argues that Lamia puts on "only the shape and appearance of a woman, but her nature remains

⁷¹ Wasserman, pp. 166-67.

⁷² Beyer, pp. 195, 226, 237.

⁷³ Patterson, pp. 191, 198.

⁷⁴ Katharine Garvin, "Snakes in the Grass," Review of English Literature, 2 (1961), 17, 24.

⁷⁵ Douglas Bush, John Keats: His Life and Writings (New York: Macmillan, 1966), p. 160.

⁷⁶ Evert, pp. 272-75.

untransmuted." She is serpent throughout and preys on Lycius: "Hers is a frightened, selfish love that would keep its object from growing up in order to continue to possess it."⁷⁷ Donald Pearce reiterates that, though beautiful, Lamia is an inherently sinister impostor.⁷⁸ In fact, Slote believes the chief fault of Lamia is her deliberate impersonation, which motivates her every act and identifies her whole existence as calculated deceit:

The audience for Lamia knows all the time that she is originally a serpent-immortal, not a real woman; that she works spells and illusions; that she goes to any lengths to ensnare Lycius. The audience can see that almost everything Lamia does is unreal and untrue, a tissue of lies.⁷⁹

Warren Stevenson considers Lamia's innocence cruel and affected: "Lamia is, in short, a virgin whore or demonic Eve, who hides beneath the appearance of new-born innocence a serpent-like disingenuousness."⁸⁰

As the context for Lamia's role as demon-enchantress, Slote cites both the traditional meaning of the lamia and the demonology associated with the serpent. A lamia,

⁷⁷ Perkins, pp. 269, 271.

⁷⁸ Donald Pearce, "Casting the Self: Keats and Lamia," Yale Review, 69 (1979-80), 220.

⁷⁹ Bernice Slote, Keats and the Dramatic Principle (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1958), pp. 152-53.

⁸⁰ Stevenson, p. 245.

traditionally defined, is "a serpent-vampire, an immortal (in some accounts the daughter of Neptune) loved by Jupiter and by the jealousy of Juno turned to serpent."⁸¹ Additionally, Slote theorizes that Keats probably knew the account of the Lamiae given in Lemprière's Classical Dictionary. Lemprière provides the following description of the Lamiae:

Certain monsters of Africa, who had the face and breast of a woman, and the rest of their body like that of a serpent. They allured strangers to come to them that they might devour them, and though they were not endowed with the faculty of speech, yet their hissings were pleasing and agreeable. Some believed them to be witches, or rather evil spirits, who, under the form of a beautiful woman enticed young children and devoured them.⁸²

Slote cites Burton's definition in Anatomy of Melancholy:

"gods above, Semidei or half gods beneath, Lares, Heroes, Genii, which climb higher if they lived well . . . but grovel on the ground as they were baser in their lives, nearer to the earth: and are Manes, Lemures, Lamiae, &c."⁸³

To these traditional meanings of the lamia, Slote adds the following primarily evil associations of the serpent: the serpent in the Garden of Eden; Ahriman, the Persian evil principle; Lilith, "the perilous seducer of young men";

⁸¹ Slote, Keats and the Dramatic Principle, p. 142.

⁸² As quoted in Slote, Keats and the Dramatic Principle, p. 142.

⁸³ As quoted in Slote, Keats and the Dramatic Principle, p. 142.

and the composite of Roman Lamia, Greek Hetaera, Turkish vampire, Empusae, "lying with young men and sucking their blood while they slept." Noting Burton's classification of the lamia as a devil and the archetypal image of the phallic serpent, Slote alleges that Lamia is "undeniably an evil principle to be reckoned with."⁸⁴

How Lycius, the young Corinthian scholar/philosopher, reckons with Lamia is central in the poem. According to Pearce, the problem in Lamia is not whether Lamia can be saved from the sophist Apollonius, but whether Lycius can be saved from Lamia.⁸⁵ Stevenson identifies the relationship of Lamia to Lycius as basically predatory. Lycius is a fundamentally passive dreamer victimized by his dream of Lamia.⁸⁶ The vassalage of Lycius is quick and sure. Easily taken in by her beauty, Lycius begins immediately to adore Lamia. To Lycius, she is a goddess whose vanishing will cause his death--"waste" him "to a shade" (I.270). Lycius swoons at the fear of losing Lamia and awakes only to be entranced further, since his life has been "so tangled in her mesh" (I.295). Lycius is bewitched, "so in her comprized," that he is called "blinded Lycius" (I.347). Until the noisy world intrudes, Lycius appears content to

⁸⁴ Slote, Keats and the Dramatic Principle, p. 143.

⁸⁵ Pearce, p. 220.

⁸⁶ Stevenson, pp. 243, 247.

perpetuate the dream by staying with Lamia in the "purple-lined palace of sweet sin" (II.31). However, once he decides to make his dream of love public because of pride or, as Bhabatosh Chatterjee observes, because of "the desire to give the dream a substantial basis by inviting the people of the actual world to witness its magnificence,"⁸⁷ Lycius becomes cruel and, "in self despite / Against his better self" (II.72-73), delights in Lamia's sorrows. Moreover, although he virtually admits that he has been willingly embracing a dream all along by believing Lamia to be "'but of heavenly progeny'" (II.87), Lycius still insists upon having a public wedding festival. For this insistence he is called "senseless Lycius" (II.147) and a madman by the persona of the poem. Furthermore, in Apollonius' invective Lycius is branded a fool--"'serpent's prey'" (II.298). Even in death Lycius is wound by the serpentine coiling of his marriage robe, transformed now into a winding sheet or shroud.⁸⁸

Lycius is a victim of Lamia's duplicity, but he is also a victim of self-delusion. Bate proposes that Lycius is completely absorbed in the side of Lamia that he wants to

⁸⁷ Bhabatosh Chatterjee, John Keats: His Mind and Work (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1971), p. 428.

⁸⁸ Gene M. Bernstein, "Keats' 'Lamia': The Sense of a Non-Ending," Papers on Language and Literature, 15 (1979), 179.

see. Therefore, he makes reality into a dream and attempts "to share passionately in the immortal."⁸⁹ Stephenson also feels that, by making Lamia be whatever he wishes, Lycius thus initiates his own downfall.⁹⁰ To Wasserman Lycius alone causes his destruction by undermining the "foundation of his own visionary existence."⁹¹ Perkins considers Lycius to be a self-deluded dreamer who completely and subjectively focuses upon Lamia until the mortal world fatally intervenes:

By confusing dream and reality, the dreamer, who is to have an unhappy end, brings them together. Confronted with actuality, the dream is inevitably dispelled. By contrast with the heart's illusion, reality appears meager and crabbed. Meanwhile, the dreamer, having lived so long with his illusion, has become incapable of dwelling in the actual human world. He cannot bear mortal life as it really is, and crumples at the impact.⁹²

To Stillinger Lycius is the hoodwinked dreamer whom Keats condemns.⁹³ If Lycius' dream proves ultimately unreal and vanishes, so, too, does Lamia's dream of happiness with Lycius.⁹⁴ Lamia becomes a "'foul dream'" (II.271) for Lycius, but from the first meeting, Lycius, a mortal lover,

⁸⁹ Bate, pp. 557-58.

⁹⁰ Stephenson, p. 49.

⁹¹ Wasserman, pp. 169-70.

⁹² Perkins, p. 275.

⁹³ Stillinger, pp. 68, 71.

⁹⁴ Little, p. 113.

has been for Lamia an Orpheus whose backward glance paradoxically and irrevocably confines her, as well, to perdition.

The failure of Lamia and Lycius to sustain their dream of love is counterpointed by the success of the god Hermes and the wood nymph to achieve bliss. Keats added the introductory episode of Hermes and the nymph to Burton's account of the Lamia story. The "ever-smitten Hermes" (I.7) is in pursuit of a wood nymph, the very thought of whom causes him to blush "from his winged heels to either ear" (I.23). Aided by Lamia, who makes the nymph visible, Hermes realizes his dream of "amorous theft" (I.8). After granting Lamia metamorphosis as compensation, Hermes begins the seduction:

So done, upon the nymph his eyes he bent
Full of adoring tears and blandishment,
And towards her stept: she, like a moon in wane,
Faded before him, cower'd, nor could restrain
Her fearful sobs, self-folding like a flower
That faints into itself at evening hour:
But the God fostering her chilled hand,
She felt the warmth, her eyelids open'd bland,
And like new flowers at morning song of bees,
Bloom'd and gave up her honey to the lees.
(I.134-43)

The love consummated, Hermes and the nymph fly away together into "the green-recessed woods" (I.144).

Since they are immortal, the nymph and Hermes are considered ideal lovers by some critics. Wasserman, for example, suggests that they represent ideal union or essence, "a perfectly attained heaven where love is forever

warm," and that Lamia and Lycius are their mutable, human counterparts.⁹⁵ Evert contends that Hermes achieves the "ideality of passion" because the basis of his existence "is essence itself": "There is nothing for Hermes to reach up for, so he reaches down, without loss of his own essential divinity, for the real achieves the ideal in his own proper being."⁹⁶ Perkins claims that the prefatory idyl of Hermes and the nymph may symbolize ideal union, the "authenticating of the visionary imagination," which happens only "in the realm of myth, where dream and actuality are interchangeable."⁹⁷

Although the episode of Hermes and the nymph implies divine, eternal pleasure, it is also sportive. Boulger argues that Hermes is a rake, a fertility figure, and that his lover is a "mere nymph." As such, they are hardly idealized figures but are rather "mythological projections" of human happiness.⁹⁸ According to Georgia Dunbar, Hermes' passion is frivolous and is to be taken no more seriously than the nymph's purity. The whole effect of the episode is one of mild mockery, light banter.⁹⁹ Bate regards the

⁹⁵ Wasserman, pp. 161-62.

⁹⁶ Evert, p. 283.

⁹⁷ Perkins, pp. 264-65.

⁹⁸ Boulger, p. 250.

⁹⁹ Georgia S. Dunbar, "The Significance of the Humor in 'Lamia,'" Keats-Shelley Journal, 8 (1959), 19.

miniature love idyl as "mere myth," which is treated with half-mocking flippancy:

Not only is the realm unreal, but myth mirrors the restless human hearts that invent it, and this is no transcendental love between Hermes and the nymph. What happens is that a virgin is taken by Hermes with dispatch, assurance, and complete freedom from self-question.¹⁰⁰

Dickstein labels the affair a beautiful and ambiguous rape in which Lamia "plays the madam and sells the nymph to the flighty Hermes to gratify her own sexual longing."¹⁰¹

The portraits of the lovers in The Eve of St. Agnes, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," and Lamia are imaginatively ambiguous. Once the eight lovers are grouped and their interrelationships examined, however, they become even more ambiguous. The women are not simply parallel; nor are the men. Neither is the pattern of the aggressive male lover and the acquiescing female maintained. Consequently, cross-references and role reversals occur throughout and greatly enrich the comparative portrayals. In fact, within almost every similarity, there exists qualifying contrast.

Of the women, Madeline and the nymph appear somewhat parallel, and La Belle Dame and Lamia are analogous supra-mortal lovers. According to Dickstein, Madeline and the

¹⁰⁰ Bate, p. 553.

¹⁰¹ Dickstein, p. 240.

nymph attempt returns to unspoiled innocence.¹⁰² The line "As though a rose should shut, and be a bud again" (st. xxvii) is an oblique reference to Madeline's desired innocence. The nymph is shown "self-folding like a flower" (I.138). However, both Madeline and the nymph, like flowers in bloom, give up their honey. Even so, to Chatterjee, they are "spared the poet's ironic gaze."¹⁰³ There is no duplicity in either's character--no hint of guile when Madeline ignores amorous cavaliers who wish to dance with her at the revelry, nor when the nymph desires to remain invisible to the "'love-glances of unlovely eyes'" (I.102). Though virginal, each is a passionate, though reluctant, lover, who differs from the more experienced and deliberately beguiling La Belle Dame and Lamia.

There are other intriguing interrelationships. Madeline plays the conjurer, as do La Belle Dame and Lamia. By participating in the ritual of St. Agnes' Eve, Madeline attempts to summon her visionary lover by innocent conjuring. Whether the conjuring of La Belle Dame is an inadvertent element of her faery nature or a deliberate ploy is left ambiguous. However, Lamia conjures deliberately, easily enthralling and entrapping Lycius. Although each woman summons her lover, she in some way fears the love she

¹⁰² Dickstein, p. 241.

¹⁰³ Chatterjee, p. 422.

embraces. Madeline sighs and weeps when Porphyro wakes her from her dream by playing an ancient tune, "'La belle dame sans mercy'" (st. xxxiii). La Belle Dame weeps and sighs "full sore" when she and the knight-at-arms are in the elfin grot. Neither can the nymph refrain from fearful sobbing as Hermes approaches. Faced with the public display that Lycius proposes, Lamia weeps "a rain / Of sorrows at his words" (II.66-67). Although it may be argued that only Madeline and the nymph weep genuine tears, it is not at all conclusive that the tears of La Belle Dame and Lamia are deceptive, for their recognition of the inherent fatality of loving a mortal may cause genuine misery. Consequently, it is possible to view La Belle Dame and Lamia as victims of love even though, unlike Madeline and the nymph, they do not suffer violation. Finally, Madeline fears that Porphyro will leave her "'to fade and pine'" (st. xxxvii)-- a fate like that of the knight-at-arms, according to Wasserman.¹⁰⁴ Also implied in Madeline's fear that Porphyro may die and leave her in "'this eternal woe'" (st. xxxv) is the apprehension of Lycius that he will die if Lamia vanishes.

Of the men, Porphyro, because of his passionate intensity and calculated stratagem, resembles Hermes. They are both aggressive lovers, whose intent may appear

¹⁰⁴ Wasserman, p. 106.

questionable but, nevertheless, leads to love's fruition. Both blush when they think libidinous thoughts about their lovers. Porphyro's blush is "like a full-blown rose / Flushing his brow" (st. xvi), and Hermes' blush makes "roses" of his "lilly clear" ears (I.24-25). Porphyro and Hermes burn with passion but approach Madeline and the nymph in tearful adulation. Porphyro weeps to think of Madeline "asleep in the lap of legends old" (st. xv), and Hermes looks upon the nymph with eyes filled with "adoring tears and blandishment" (I.135). Moreover, Porphyro wishes for a charm, "some drowsy Morphean amulet" (st. xxix), to help accomplish his stratagem, and Hermes, even though he possesses "lythe Caducean charm" (I.133), depends upon the magic of Lamia's breath upon his eyes to make the nymph visible and his seductive plan successful. Their desires gratified, both flee with their lovers. Porphyro and Madeline escape into the storm, while Hermes and the nymph fly into the verdant woods. In Wasserman's view, Porphyro and Madeline become phantom or visionary lovers, whose dreams are as real as those of Hermes.¹⁰⁵

The knight-at-arms and Lycius are somewhat analogous, primarily passive lovers. Whether the knight meets La Belle Dame by chance or by her design, he is enthralled by her alluring beauty. Deliberately sought by Lamia, Lycius is

¹⁰⁵ Wasserman, pp. 123, 160.

easily entrapped and remains essentially passive until he plans their public wedding. Both the knight and Lycius are so entangled by love that complete extrication is impossible. The knight-at-arms' condition is apparently fatal since his pallid brow and feverish cheeks betoken death. His deliberate sojourn on the "cold hill's side" is a foreshadowing of the ultimate severance from humanity and life itself. Lycius, too, is entrapped and, like the knight, blinded to the reality of his doom. Both hear but heed not the warnings given in their behalf. The knight remains on the cold hillside despite the cry of the pale warriors, princes, and kings. Lycius avoids Apollonius, who seems the "'ghost of folly'" that haunts Lycius' "'sweet dreams'" (I.377), and fails to see the deadly import of the vehement charge that Apollonius utters at the wedding feast:

'Fool! Fool!' repeated he, while his eyes still
 Relented not, nor mov'd; 'from every ill
 'Of life have I preserv'd thee to this day,
 "And shall I see thee made a serpent's prey?
 (II.295-98)

Lycius' fate is sudden death, however, not the gradual wasting away that the knight-at-arms experiences.

Of further interest, the role reversals of the knight-at-arms and Lycius take opposite directions. At first, the knight seems to dominate La Belle Dame. He meets her in the meadow, makes her a garland, places her on his horse. Then the lady begins to assume control. She finds him food,

takes him to her "elfin grot," lulls him to sleep. Lamia completely takes charge of Lycius from the moment they meet. In fact, she arranges their meeting, magically transports them through Corinth, and takes them to her secret palace that she causes to materialize on a familiar street. It is only after the trumpets' blare that Lycius rouses from amorous repose and begins to assert himself. He plans the marriage feast, invites the guests, and acts the host. He thereby relegates Lamia to a role of passive submission. The knight and Lycius thus differ from the aggressive lovers, Porphyro and Hermes, who never relinquish their control over their lovers.

As passive lovers, the knight and Lycius can be compared to Madeline and the nymph, although their fates prove more destructive than Madeline's and the nymph's. The four are victims to some extent. However, it can be argued that Porphyro, La Belle Dame, and Lamia are also victims since they are trapped within the willful dreaming of Madeline, the knight-at-arms, and Lycius. In each case, the mortal world threatens to or actually does destroy the dream and, consequently, the visionary lovers. It may also destroy the dreamer. Madeline's fate is uncertain; the knight's is more certain but still somewhat dubious; and Lycius' is conclusive.

The interrelationships of the lovers in The Eve of St. Agnes, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," and Lamia heighten the ambiguity already operative in the separate poems. Whether

the ambiguity is only artistic or whether it unconsciously exposes Keats's ambivalence toward love is uncertain. However, the contraries that function so fundamentally in the poetry of Keats evidently also operated in his personal life. His letters reveal a "gordian complication of feelings" (I, 342) for women generally and for Fanny Brawne particularly. A letter to Benjamin Bailey in July 1818 expresses a complicated sentiment toward women:

I am certain I have not a right feeling towards Women--at this moment I am striving to be just to them but I cannot--Is it because they fall so far beneath my boyish imagination? When I was a Schoolboy I though[t] a fair Woman a pure Goddess, my mind was a soft nest in which some one of them slept though she knew it not--I have no right to expect more than their reality. I thought them ethereal above men. . . . When I am among Women I have evil thoughts, malice spleen--I cannot speak or be silent--I am full of Suspicions and therefore listen to no thing--I am in a hurry to be gone. (I, 341)

In the same letter Keats, nevertheless, admits that "for after all I do think better of Womankind than to suppose they care whether Mister John Keats five feet high likes them or not" (I, 342). Appraisal of women "as children to whom I would rather give a Sugar Plum than my time" (I, 404) appears in a letter to George Keats in October 1818. In August 1819 a letter to John Taylor states stridently, "I equally dislike the favour of the public with the love of a woman--they are both a cloying treacle to the wings of independence" (II, 144).

Even though Keats considered the love of a woman "a cloying treacle," by 1819 he was already romantically involved with Fanny Brawne. The letters he wrote her during the summer and early autumn of 1819 are impassioned but ambivalent. The lovers he created in The Eve of St. Agnes, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," and Lamia are increasingly ambiguous. They manifest Keats's disparate feelings. In these poems Keats weaves personal ambivalence and artistic ambiguity to texture his tapestry of love.

Chapter V

LABYRINTHINE LOVE

The continual tapestry that Keats weaves in The Eve of St. Agnes, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," and Lamia pictures love as highly complex, richly ambiguous. Of the three poems, The Eve of St. Agnes is superficially the happiest illustration of love. Newell Ford calls The Eve of St. Agnes "an idealization of throbbing young love, passionate and corporeal."¹ To Roger Sharrock the poem is "the most confident statement of a happy and realized romantic love."² Richard Fogle considers it the immortalization of young love.³ Dorothy Hewlett regards The Eve of St. Agnes as "a rainbow symbol" of the beauty of love.⁴ However, to Amy Lowell, the ending of The Eve of St. Agnes with its "mutter

¹ Newell F. Ford, The Prefigurative Imagination of John Keats: A Study of the Beauty-Truth Identification and Its Implications (1951; rpt. Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1966), p. 126.

² Roger Sharrock, "Keats and the Young Lovers," Review of English Literature, 2 (1961), 85.

³ R. H. Fogle, "A Reading of Keats's 'Eve of St. Agnes,'" College English, 6 (1944-45), 328.

⁴ Dorothy Hewlett, Adonais: A Life of John Keats (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1938), p. 322.

of death beneath the surface makes the poem "no mere charming tale of love . . . but a profoundly dramatic study of an unplumbed mystery."⁵ Robin Mayhead additionally suggests that the storm and the escape into an uncertain world qualify the lovers' superficial happiness.⁶ Consequently, love in The Eve of St. Agnes is a commingling of joy and sorrow.⁷

"La Belle Dame sans Merci" and Lamia are clearer revelations of the paradoxical nature of love. Love is alluring but destructive, fatal. Miriam Allott states that Keats rejects the "moderate 'wishful' optimism" in The Eve of St. Agnes for the "more uncompromising" fatalism in "La Belle Dame sans Merci" and Lamia.⁸ To E. C. Pettet Lamia fully explains what Keats intuits in "La Belle Dame sans Merci"--the ultimate destruction of the illusive enchantment of love. Pettet argues that in Lamia Keats believes that the "dream-spell of love" is possible for the gods but that for mortals "the beguiling illusion of love is

⁵ Amy Lowell, John Keats (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1925), II, 171.

⁶ Robin Mayhead, John Keats (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1967), p. 58.

⁷ Werner W. Beyer, Keats and the Daemon King (1947; rpt. New York: Octagon, 1969), p. 149.

⁸ Miriam Allott, "'Isabella,' 'The Eve of St. Agnes,' and 'Lamia,'" in John Keats: A Reassessment, ed. Kenneth Muir (Liverpool: Liverpool Univ. Press, 1958), p. 57.

inevitably, and perilously, transient."⁹ Moreover, in the two poems Keats depicts love as an inextricable fusion of pleasure and pain.¹⁰ Lamia shows "love twisted into death."¹¹

Awareness of Keats's ambivalent love for Fanny Brawne accentuates the complexity of love apparent in the poems. In 1819 Keats was no longer able to sustain the adolescent view of a beautiful woman, "a pure Goddess," nesting softly in his mind (I, 341), although the sentiment is echoed in Madeline's trembling "in her soft and chilly nest" (st. xxvii), awaiting the dream, while Porphyro gazes rapturously upon her. Rather, Keats increasingly regarded his love for Fanny as a consuming fire--a force that would dissolve, absorb, or uncrystallize him. A woman of real passion, Fanny Brawne had so enchanted, entangled, "entrammelled" (II, 123) Keats that he could only protest his entrapment in the labyrinth of love while paradoxically seeking its center. In his first letter to Fanny Brawne, Keats declared that he could center his happiness in her (II, 123). In the subsequent love letters during the

⁹ E. C. Pettet, On the Poetry of Keats (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1957), pp. 229, 237-38.

¹⁰ Ifor Evans, Keats (London, 1934; rpt. St. Clair Shores: Scholarly Press, 1971), p. 110.

¹¹ Bernice Slote, Keats and the Dramatic Principle (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1958), p. 148.

summer and early autumn, Keats revealed a tortured desire to secure Fanny's love. Like Lycius, Keats was striving to fill his own heart with "'deeper crimson, and a double smart,'" "'to entangle, trammel up and snare'" Fanny's soul in his, to "'labyrinth'" her "'there / Like the hid scent in an unbudded rose'" (II.51-54).

Thus, labyrinthine love is evident in the personal experience of Keats and in the three love poems that register his progression into the innermost recesses of the labyrinth. Fundamental paradoxes of enchantment and entrapment, bliss and pain exist in the reality of Keats's love and in its poetic counterparts. Keats admitted to Fanny Brawne in early July 1819, "I have never known any unalloy'd Happiness for many days together" (II, 123). Neither do the lovers in the three poems experience sustained unalloyed happiness. The erotic bliss of Porphyro and Madeline is followed instantly by the "flaw-blown sleet" (st. xxxvii), the setting moon, and Madeline's fears as they flee into the storm. The happiness of the knight-at-arms disintegrates with his nightmare vision of the "starved lips in the gloam." For Lamia and Lycius the languid repose is interrupted by a "thrill / Of trumpets" that leaves "a thought a-buzzing" in Lycius' head (II.27-29), a thought that becomes "passion's passing bell" (II.39).

Attempts to "unperplex bliss from its neighbour pain" (I.192) are futile, however. When Madeline goes to bed on

St. Agnes' Eve, she lies in a perplexed "wakeful swoon" until sleep becomes a haven "both from joy and pain" in which she is "Blinded alike from sunshine and from rain" (st. xxvii). So long as her dream lasts, Madeline experiences unalloyed happiness. However, when Porphyro wakes her, the "painful change" (st. xxxiv) almost expels the bliss of dreaming and causes Madeline to sigh and weep. Even after they consummate their love, Madeline fears that she will be left to "'fade and pine'" as "'a dove forlorn and lost with sick unpruned wing'" (st. xxxvii). The knight-at-arms finds a bliss momentarily unperplexed from pain in the elfin grot, but his "latest dream" of the pale warriors, princes, and kings banishes the happiness and permanently perplexes bliss and pain. La Belle Dame weeps because she recognizes the transience of the unalloyed happiness, the inevitable fusion of bliss and pain in mortal life. During her metamorphosis from snake to woman, Lamia experiences one kind of unperplexing before she vanishes: "Nothing but pain and ugliness were left" (I.164). Then she instantly reappears as incomparable beauty. Newly changed, Lamia now possesses a "sciential brain" that can "unperplex bliss from its neighbour pain" (I.191-92). That is precisely her power over Lycius:

Lycius from death awoke into amaze,
 To see her still, and singing so sweet lays;
 Then from amaze into delight he fell
 To hear her whisper woman's lore so well;

And every word she spake enticed him on
 To unperplex'd delight and pleasure known.
 (I.322-27)

Although as a beautiful illusion, Lamia can blind Lycius for a while from "the sunshine and the rain" (st. xxvii), he eventually rouses, like Madeline, from the dream. However, for Lycius the forced recognition of the alloy of pain proves not only fearful but also fatal. Furthermore, Lamia's grief, like that of La Belle Dame, comes from knowing that unperplexing bliss and pain is impossible in the sublunary world.

What is possible for the sublunary lovers, however, is a melting into dream. The Eve of St. Agnes, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," and Lamia depict an allegorical, artistic consummation--the poet-dreamer's union with poetic imagination--but they explore in greater detail physical consummation. According to Claude Finney, in The Eve of St. Agnes Keats expends the full force of his sensuous temperament upon the central action of the romance, the scene enacted in Madeline's chamber.¹² Everything that occurs before Madeline retires is a preparation for the dreaming and the melting into dream: Madeline's preoccupation with the legendary dreaming on St. Agnes' Eve, which keeps her aloof while the baron and his guests revel and

¹² Claude Lee Finney, The Evolution of Keats's Poetry (1936; rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), II, 553.

dance; Porphyro's furtive entrance into the palace and the passage to Madeline's chamber; and the preparation that Porphyro makes for the feast and the music which will follow the dream. In primarily visual images that begin to radiate warmth, Keats describes Madeline's moonlit chamber which will frame this night of love:

A casement high and triple-arch'd there was,
 All garlanded with carven imag'ries
 Of fruits, and flowers, and bunches of knot grass,
 And diamonded with panes of quaint device,
 Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes,
 As are the tiger-moth's deep-damask'd wings:
 And in the midst, 'mong thousand heraldries,
 And twilight saints and dim emblazonings,
 A shielded scutcheon blush'd with blood of queens
 and kings. (st. xxiv)

Through this window the "wintry moon" shines, throwing "warm gules" (st. xxv) on Madeline as she kneels in prayer and then undresses for bed. Porphyro hides in a closet and watches:

Of all its wreathed pearls her hair she frees;
 Unclasps her warmed jewels one by one:
 Loosens her fragrant boddice; by degrees
 Her rich attire creeps rustling to her knees:
 Half-hidden, like a mermaid in seaweed,
 Pensive awhile she dreams awake, and sees,
 In fancy, fair St. Agnes in her bed,
 But dares not look behind, or all the charm is fled.
 (st. xxvi)

As Christopher Ricks observes, Keats keeps this potentially voyeuristic scene from being so by his magically delicate

and physically ambivalent handling of Madeline's disrobing and Porphyro's watching.¹³

Soon Madeline falls into the "poppied warmth of sleep" (st. xxvii), and Porphyro steals from the closet to gaze upon her briefly before setting the table feast "Of candied apple, quince, and plum, and gourd / With jellies soother than the creamy curd, / And lucent syrups, tinct with cinnamon" (st. xxx). These dainties "From silken Samarcand to cedar'd Lebanon" (st. xxx) thus arranged, Porphyro wakes Madeline from her dream by playing "an ancient ditty, long since mute / In Provence call'd, 'La belle dame sans mercy'" (st. xxxiii). The music causes Madeline to wake and moan. The mortal Porphyro now intrudes upon Madeline's visionary Porphyro and seems "'pallid, chill, and drear'" (st. xxxv). Madeline, fearing that the dream will leave her empty and hopeless, pleads, "'Oh leave me not in this eternal woe, / For if thou diest, my Love, I know not where to go'" (st. xxxv). Earl Wasserman argues that the fate that Madeline fears is similar to that of the knight-at-arms: "the elfin grot will turn out to be merely the cold hill side."¹⁴ This is only momentarily her fate though,

¹³ Christopher Ricks, Keats and Embarrassment (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), pp. 93, 95.

¹⁴ Earl R. Wasserman, The Finer Tone: Keats' Major Poems (1953; rpt. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), p. 106.

since Porphyro begins to create himself within her dream by physical union which resembles neither rape nor ordinary seduction.¹⁵ Madeline's dream of love is thus blissfully and physically enacted:

Beyond a mortal man impassion'd far
 At these voluptuous accents, he arose,
 Ethereal, flush'd, and like a throbbing star
 Seen mid the sapphire heaven's deep repose
 Into her dream he melted, as the rose
 Blendeth its odour with the violet,--
 Solution sweet: meantime the frost-wind blows
 Like Love's alarum pattering the sharp sleet
 Against the window-panes; St. Agnes' moon hath set.
(st. xxxvi)

That Keats intended this union to be explicitly sexual is clear from the proposed alteration of the lines, "'Oh leave me not in this eternal woe, / 'For if thou diest, my Love, I know not where to go'" (st. xxxv), to "So while she speaks his arms encroaching slow / Have zon'd her, heart to heart--loud the dark winds blow."¹⁶ The alteration prompted Richard Woodhouse to write John Taylor in September 1819:

You know if a thing has a decent side, I generally look no further--As the Poem was orig^y written, we innocent ones (ladies & myself) might very well have supposed that Porphyro, when acquainted with

¹⁵ Stuart M. Sperry, Keats the Poet (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1973), p. 204.

¹⁶ As quoted in William Heath, ed., Major British Poets of the Romantic Period (New York: Macmillan, 1973), p. 1073.

Madeline's love for him, & when "he arose, Etherial flush^d &c &c (turn to it) set himself at once to persuade her to go off with him, & succeeded & went over the "Dartmoor black" (now changed for some other place) to be married, in right honest chaste & sober wise. But, as it is now altered, as soon as M. has confessed her love, P. (instead) winds by degrees his arm round her, presses breast to breast, and acts all the acts of a bonâ fide husband, while she fancies she is only playing the part of a Wife in a dream. This alteration is of about 3 stanzas; and tho' there are no (t) improper expressions but all is left to inference, and tho' profanely speaking, the Interest on the reader's imagination is heightened, yet I do apprehend it will render the poem unfit for ladies, & indeed scarcely to be mentioned to them among the "things that are."--He says he does not want ladies to read his poetry: that he writes for men--& that if in the former poem there was an opening for doubt what took place, it was his fault for not writing clearly & comprehensibly --that he sh^d despise a man who would be such an eunuch in sentiment as to leave a (Girl) maid, with that Character about her, in such a situation: & sho^d despise himself to write about it &c &c &c--and all this sort of Keats-like rhodomontade. (II, 163)

John Taylor adamantly replied that unless the proposed alteration in The Eve of St. Agnes were censored, he would refuse to print the poem:

This Folly of Keats is the most stupid piece of Folly I can conceive.--He does not bear the ill opinion of the World calmly, & yet he will not allow it to form a good Opinion of him & his Writings. . . . This Vaporizing is as far from sound Fortitude, as the conduct itself in the Instances before us, is devoid of good Feeling & good Sense.--I don't know how the meaning of the new Stanzas is wrapped up, but I will not be accessory (I can answer also for H. [Hessey] I think) towards publishing any thing which can only be read by Men, since even on their Minds a bad effect must follow the Encouragement of those Thoughts which cannot be rased without

Impropriety--If it was so natural a process in Keats's Mind to carry on the Train of his Story in the way he has done, that he could not write decently, if he had that Disease of the Mind which renders the perception too dull to discover right from Wrong in Matters of moral Taste, I should object equally then as now to the sanctioning of the Infirmary by an act of cool Encouragement on my part, but then he would be personally perhaps excusable--As it is, the flying in the Face of all Decency & discretion is doubly offensive from its being accompanied with so preposterous a conceit on his part of being able to overcome the best founded Habits of our Nature. . . . Therefore my dear Rich^d if he will not so far concede to my wishes as to leave the passage as it originally stood, I must be content to admire his Poems with some other Imprint, & in so doing I can reap as much Delight from the Perusal of them as if they were our own property, without having the disquieting Consideration attached to them or our approving, by the "Imprimatur," those parts which are unfit for publication. (II, 182-83)

Therefore the controversial lines were altered, and the more explicitly sexual ones were relegated to footnote status in modern anthologies. It seems curious that Woodhouse and Taylor did not object to the more overtly sexual overtones of "Ethereal, flush'd, and like a throbbing star / Seen mid the sapphire heaven's deep repose; / Into her dream he melted" (st. xxxvi).

To Priscilla Tate the intended physical consummation in The Eve of St. Agnes identifies a genuinely human love and therefore marks Keats's mature vision of the reality of love within mutable existence.¹⁷ Peter Grudin interprets

¹⁷ Priscilla Weston Tate, From Innocence through

the melting into dream as both an actualization of Madeline's divine vision and its merging with physical reality: "It is the mingling and mergence of two contraries, concidental with but more subtle than the physical union of the lovers."¹⁸ According to Wasserman, Porphyro's melting into Madeline's spiritual vision is the attainment of "the conditions of heaven's bourne"--a fashioning of a personal heaven.¹⁹ Keats uses the commingling scents of the rose and the violet as a metaphor for consummated love--the blending of sensuous passion and purity. To Bhabatosh Chatterjee this commingling suggests "that in a meaningful union both the body and the soul have their apportioned place and are finally indistinguishable."²⁰ Morris Dickstein claims that the moon and the opened rose also signify consummation.²¹ Labeling the consummation as a drama of wish-fulfillment, Stuart Sperry declares:

Experience: Keats's Myth of the Poet (Salzburg: Univ of Salzburg, 1934), pp. 70-71.

¹⁸ Peter Grudin, "Keats' 'The Eve of Saint Agnes,'" College English Association, 37 (1975), 10.

¹⁹ Wasserman, p. 112.

²⁰ Bhabatosh Chatterjee, John Keats: His Mind and Work (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1971), p. 345.

²¹ Morris Dickstein, Keats and His Poetry: A Study of Development (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 240-41.

Only in the dream--by extension of the domain of romance, poetry, art--and the shelter it affords from waking consciousness is there any hope for the realization and appeasement that human longing, in all its turbulent impatience, insistently demands; for the dream is conditioned and informed by the same desire it embraces and fulfills.²²

Somewhat similarly, John Middleton Murry concludes that the melting into dream in The Eve of St. Agnes is essentially the "dream-consummation" of Keats's love for Fanny Brawne.²³

Melting into dream occurs again in "La Belle Dame sans Merci." In the central stanzas the "woe-begone" knight-at-arms describes a magically erotic, consummated love. After the knight meets the beautiful lady, he garlands her with flowers and rides away with her. She prepares a feast of "roots of relish sweet, / And honey wild, and manna dew" and then takes him to her "elfin grot" where they consummate their love. Afterwards the knight is lulled asleep by the lady and begins to dream. As Charles Patterson observes, Keats with charm and delicacy manages to present La Belle Dame's high sexuality and the increasing sexual involvement of the knight and lady. Patterson considers the garland, bracelet, and girdle of flowers a triple sex symbol and the

²² Stuart M. Sperry, "Romance as Wish-Fulfillment: Keats's The Eve of St. Agnes," Studies in Romanticism, 10 (1971), 33.

²³ John Middleton Murry, Keats and Shakespeare: A Study of Keats' Poetic Life from 1816 to 1820 (1925; rpt. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1958), p. 110.

"elfin grot" obviously sexual. Furthermore, he notes the replete sexual suggestion of the "pacing steed" the knight sets her on. All of these sexual overtones point finally to an "evidently consummated ecstatic sexual union."²⁴ If the faery-like meeting of the knight and lady is the outer dream of the ballad, then Keats has indeed shown the erotic melting into ideal dream. However, the knight's sleep that follows the physical union produces a discordant dream that banishes the earlier ideal dream. Ironically, upon waking, the knight finds himself melting now not into erotic dream but into ghastly nightmare. According to Bernice Slote, the "faery's child" is a nymph in human guise, "a nonmortal whose love crosses two states of being and is in itself the death-grasp on the mortal she takes with her."²⁵

There are several instances of melting into dream in Lamia. The nymph melts into Hermes' dream of love, and the dream Lamia has of Lycius prefigures their sexual union. As human lover, Lycius melts into Lamia's dream of human sexual intensity. Moreover, as a beautiful illusion, Lamia melts into Lycius' daydream and becomes a "prolonged, ideal

²⁴ Charles I. Patterson, The Daemonic in the Poetry of John Keats (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1970), pp. 142-43.

²⁵ Bernice Slote, "La Belle Dame as Naiad," Journal of English and Germanic Philology, 60 (1961), 22.

dream-vision."²⁶ The swiftly consummated love of Hermes and the nymph is a curtain raiser to the labyrinthine love-making of Lamia and Lycius, which at times even seems to parody the eroticism of The Eve of St. Agnes. For instance, Lamia's metamorphosis from serpent to woman is a kind of disrobing, too, but very different from Madeline's, and Lamia is at first a flippant, coy lover. Moreover, the swooning Lycius, "murmuring of love, and pale with pain" (I.289), appears far more ludicrous than Porphyro, who grows faint as he watches Madeline kneel to pray and aches to drowse beside her. The consummation itself is cynically introduced:

Love in a hut, with water and a crust,
Is--Love, forgive us!--cinders, ashes, dust;
Love in a palace is perhaps at last
More grievous torment than a hermit's fast:--
That is a doubtful tale from faery land,
Hard for the non-elect to understand. (II.1-6)

After consummation the lovers' languid repose upon a couch, "Where use had made it sweet" (II.23), is more satiate listlessness than erotic drowsiness. Unlike Madeline's chaste chamber, "That purple-lined palace of sweet sin" (II.31) is the setting for Lamia and Lycius' love-making.

However different in tone, the melting into dream is the central action in Lamia. When still in "the serpent

²⁶ Mario L. D'Avanzo, Keats's Metaphors for the Poetic Imagination (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1967), p. 62.

prison-house" (I.202), Lamia dreamed of Lycius:

And sometimes into cities she would send
 Her dream, with feast and rioting to blend;
 And once, while among mortals dreaming thus,
 She saw the young Corinthian Lycius
 Charioting foremost in the envious race,
 Like a young Jove with calm uneager face,
 And fell into a swooning love of him. (I.213-19)

Everything that follows Lamia's dream is a calculation to make it real. Lycius dissolves into her dream--is absorbed in spite of himself. In addition, Lamia becomes Lycius' sweet, but foul, dream, a beautiful illusion of happiness from which Lycius wakes to a grisly death.

The melting into dream is thus a passageway in the labyrinth of love in The Eve of St. Agnes, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," and Lamia. Typically labyrinthine, it leads either to uncertainty or to a dead end. For all the superficial happiness in The Eve of St. Agnes, the ending is strangely dark. The lovers' escape into the storm, the Baron's nightmare, Angela's "palsy-twitch'd death" (st. xlii), and the Beadsman sleeping among his cold ashes spread a pall of cold reality over the romance. In "La Belle Dame sans Merci" the knight-at-arms is left forlorn, forever to be haunted on the "cold hill's side." Lamia vanishes with a fearful scream, and Lycius dies, wound in his marriage robe. The lingering chill apparent in The Eve of St. Agnes and "La Belle Dame sans Merci" and the cold that runs through Lycius' veins presage disillusionment or death. Thus Keats

qualifies the happiness, or perhaps even ultimately questions the possibility, of melting into dream.

In Lamia Keats's metaphor for qualified happiness is an unweaving of rainbows:

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 gnomed mine--
Unweave a rainbow, as it erewhile made
The tender-person'd Lamia melt into a shade.
(II.229-38)

The passage has frequently been interpreted as an attack on philosophy and, by extension, a deriding of the philosopher Apollonius. Mayhead feels that Apollonius and the philosophy he represents should be condemned.²⁷ John Hawley Roberts sees Apollonius as a destructive force,²⁸ and Slote labels him an exorciser of evil, a magician, not a representation of ordinary philosophy.²⁹ To Ford the cold, skeptical philosophy makes Apollonius a slayer of young lovers.³⁰ Warren Stevenson argues that Apollonius is

²⁷ Mayhead, p. 56.

²⁸ John Hawley Roberts, "The Significance of Lamia," PMLA, 50 (1935), 555.

²⁹ Slote, p. 146.

³⁰ Ford, p. 144.

additionally a serpent-slayer who cuts the "Gordian knot of Lamia's double nature."³¹ To Katharine Wilson the philosophy is Newtonian physics, not the philosophy of a full awareness of reality which Keats respected.³² Walter Jackson Bate claims that Apollonius, possessing "the reductive spirit of denial of so many of the ancient sophists," consequently "can only see through" or analyze "the knotty problem" (II.160).³³ According to Chatterjee, as a "mere sophist," Apollonius typifies "the faculty of the mind that analyses and dissects experience, and in the process misses and destroys the reality of experience."³⁴ Thus he symbolizes penetrative reality³⁵ and perhaps, more narrowly, Lycius' rational side.³⁶

A prevalent view is that Apollonius unweaves the rainbow of Lamia and Lycius' happiness. The poem does display an antipathy to Apollonius. He appears austere, unrelenting.

³¹ Warren Stevenson, "Lamia: A Stab at the Gordian Knot," Studies in Romanticism, 2 (1972), 249.

³² Katharine M. Wilson, The Nightingale and the Hawk: A Psychological Study of Keats's Ode (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1964), p. 147.

³³ Walter Jackson Bate, John Keats (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1963), p. 560.

³⁴ Chatterjee, pp. 429-30.

³⁵ David Perkins, The Quest for Permanence: The Symbolism of Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1959), p. 272.

³⁶ Tate, p. 126.

Lycius brands him "'that gray-beard wretch'" whose "'lashless eyelids stretch / 'Around his demon eyes'" (II.287-89). According to the narrator, Apollonius' wreath should be "spear-grass" and "spiteful thistle" (II.228). However, Apollonius merely confirms what Lycius already knows inwardly--that Lamia represents an illusory love that is already being destroyed from within.³⁷ Moreover, Patterson claims that by willfully harboring the dream of Lamia, Lycius, in fact, forces Apollonius--his "'trusty guide / 'And good instructor'" (I.375-76)--to become an implacable opponent. Rather than a "sinister interferer and destroyer," Apollonius is a spokesman for sanity, balance. Hence, Patterson concludes that Lycius, more than Apollonius, unweaves the rainbow.³⁸ Furthermore, Wasserman maintains that Apollonius "completes the destruction only after Lycius has undermined the foundation of his own visionary existence."³⁹

The unweaving of rainbows is also evident in The Eve of St. Agnes and "La Belle Dame sans Merci." Warm love is constantly opposed by cold reality. Thus in The Eve of St. Agnes the rose and the frost coexist. Iridescent love, possible in the closed chamber and the elfin grot, is

³⁷ Dickstein, p. 239.

³⁸ Patterson, pp. 206, 209-11.

³⁹ Wasserman, p. 170.

certain to dissipate in the winter's storm or on the cold hillside. Throughout both poems mortality--in the guise of Angela, the Beadsman, the pale kings, princes, or warriors--intrudes and unweaves. Like the evanescent rainbow, illusive love disappears into the unrefracted light of common reality. When grouped with Lamia, The Eve of St. Agnes and "La Belle Dame sans Merci" suggest further unweaving. As the brilliant rainbow of sensuous romance in early 1819, The Eve of St. Agnes begins to fray under the unweaving impulses in "La Belle Dame sans Merci" and Lamia. The soft, prismatic glow of sensation fades into the starker brilliance of thought.

The lovers in The Eve of St. Agnes, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," and Lamia embrace the dream of happiness, attempt to unperplex bliss from pain, and melt into dream, but they find love to be labyrinthine. Happiness proves ephemeral; bliss and pain, inextricable; and melting into dream, ultimately an unweaving of rainbows. The impassioned lover of Fanny Brawne found love to be even more deeply labyrinthine. Having "never known any unalloy'd Happiness for many days together" (II, 123), Keats discovered a deeper, exquisite misery in loving Fanny. Unlike the lovers in The Eve of St. Agnes, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," and Lamia, he was denied a consummated love, a melting into dream, largely because of illness and early death. However, before disease forced him to lead "a posthumous existence" (II, 359) and

irrevocably separated him from Fanny Brawne, in 1819--the "annus mirabilis"--Keats experienced dying into life as lover and poet. The pleasures and torments of labyrinthine love created the tension, the cutting edge, for Keats's death into life.

Chapter VI

CONCLUSION: "PASSION'S PASSING BELL"

John Keats's dying into life was the culmination of a year of emotional and artistic turbulence. During 1819, the miraculous year, Keats experienced personal and poetic metamorphosis. The Eve of St. Agnes, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," and Lamia allegorically register that transformation and the ambivalence that Keats felt toward the entanglements of both love and art. The dialectical tendency of Keats's mind allowed a rich interplay of conflicting attitudes that are apparent in Keats's letters to Fanny Brawne and in the three love poems.

As lover, Keats experienced dying into life, the schooling of his heart by the exquisite misery of loving Fanny Brawne. He felt enchanted but also entrapped by her. In his love letters to Fanny Brawne during 1819, Keats revealed increasingly ambivalent attitudes toward love. His passion became a consuming fire that threatened his identity as man and poet, but his efforts to extricate himself from the trammels of love were frustrating and futile. However, Keats's incandescent passion for Fanny Brawne fired the

romantic intensity and tension of The Eve of St. Agnes, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," and Lamia. Thus each poem can be read as veiled autobiography. In the characterizations of Madeline, La Belle Dame, and Lamia, Keats conveys complex and ambiguous attitudes toward Fanny Brawne by presenting the women as angelic or demonic. In the characterizations of Porphyro, the knight-at-arms, and Lycius, Keats displays a conscious, partial self-identification with the impassioned lovers but also an unmitigated awareness of the dangers inherent in self-deluded dreaming.

As poet, Keats also experienced dying into life. The Eve of St. Agnes, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," and Lamia record a transformation of the poetic self, Keats's deliberate humanization as poet. Attention to thought began to supersede the emphasis upon sensation and fancy. During 1819 Keats described his poetic moulting as trading "feathers & wings" for "a pair of patient sublunary legs" (II, 128). Regarding philosophy as the poet's genuine friend, Keats wished to acquire penetrative insight, negative capability, and to become "a miserable and mighty Poet of the human Heart" (II, 115). In The Eve of St. Agnes, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," and Lamia, Keats depicts the poetic process, the poet-dreamer's union with imagination, and indicates the risks of following a false or demonic muse. In the world of human experience, the "vale of Soul-making" (II, 102), the poet's primary concern is the human

condition, and in 1819 Keats was philosophically moving toward a poetry of greater actuality.

Whether dying into life as poet was a result of dying into life as lover can only be speculated. Still, the inextricable pleasure and pain of loving Fanny Brawne and the increasing impossibility of consummating that love became for Keats a means of refining his "Hornbook Heart" (II, 103) and his poetic sensibilities. His awareness of the pains and miseries of life in general and of the torments of labyrinthine love in particular rendered his existence melancholic. More than a year before his untimely death, Keats was dying into life, already poignantly aware of the resonant tolling of "passion's passing bell" (II.39).

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