

KEATS' "LAMIA:"  
THE SERPENTINE DIALECTIC

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Thesis Abstract

Kürşat K. Pekgöz, **Keats' "Lamia:"**

**The Serpentine Dialectic**

This thesis is an attempt to disentangle the serpentine dialectic of Keats' "Lamia." I am positing three transformations in the development of the mixoparthenos figure: monstrous mother, a cannibalistic and vampiric phantom, and a tragic character. All three layers of myth are fully present in Keats' poem, but Lamia is ultimately more tragic than monstrous. I also posit that Keats' version of the story is more sympathetic to the she-serpent at least partly because Keats, unlike Plato, values imagination over reason.

## Tez Özeti

Kürşat K. Pekgöz, **Keats, “Lamia:”**

### **Yıllankavi Diyalektik**

Bu tez Keats’in “Lamia”ındaki yıllankavi diyalektiği çözümlenmeyi hedeflemektedir. (Şahmeran benzeri) mixoparthenos figürünün gelişiminde üç dönüşüm evresi varsaymaktayım: canavar ana, yamyam ve vampirik bir hayalet ve son olarak trajik bir karakter. Keats’in şiirinde her üç mit katmanı tam olarak mevcut olsa da, Lamia nihayetinde trajik özelliklerin ağır bastığı bir karakterdir. Buna ek olarak Keats’in versiyonunda dişi yılanı daha sempatik bakıldığını ve bunun bir nedeninin de Plato’dan farklı olarak Keats’in hayal gücünü mantığa tercih etmesi olduğunu varsaymaktayım.

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Dedicated to – *E.*, “*the better angel,*” and *B.*, “*the worser spirit.*”

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INTRODUCTION:  
OPHIDIAN MATTERS

What to make of the serpent, that slimy and scaly beast? Of all animals that have become symbols, the serpent is perhaps the most flexible of form and meaning: the most slippery, the most subtle, the most sinister. The serpent is the most monstrous of monsters, monster *qua* monster, indeed perhaps an avatar of monstrosity itself. Such a chain of claims will, naturally, require a definition: what is a monster? But let the formula (*logos*) come after the foreword (*prologos*). Our aim, at any rate, is to explore how Keats challenges and subverts his sources in his “Lamia” (admittedly a very *particular* text, serpent, and monster).

The snake itself, a creature in the realm of natural science, hails from the clade Ophidia (or perhaps the suborder Serpentes). Snake, not *serpent*: no semiotic demon bursting out of a mediaeval bestiary, symbol-laden, but an innocent beast dangling from an innocent tree.<sup>1</sup> Why do we fear it so? There are adult humans who cannot withstand even a mimetic representation of the snake, let alone the sight of a living specimen.<sup>2</sup> “The most common fear is ophidiophobia” asserts Lynne A. Isbell: 36% of all adults surveyed in a poll in 1999 reported an irrational fear of snakes (p. 3). Attempts to explain ophidiophobia via evolutionary psychology are not new, but Isbell offers a fascinating (if tentative) aetiological theory which might explain not

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<sup>1</sup>Throughout this study I am employing the adjective *ophidian* to refer to snake *qua* animal. *Serpentine* is for serpent *qua* monster.

<sup>2</sup> Conventional wisdom has it that spiders and snakes are the most popular phobia-inducing animals. Spiders, however, pale against snakes in terms of the sheer mythological terror they have inspired. The sole arachnid narrative of Classical myth is a predominantly tragic one: a brilliant but hubristic maiden vying against a jealous goddess. Arachne elicits *pathos*, not *deimos*.

only the genesis of this ancestral phobia but also its impact on the evolution of sophisticated primate traits. According to Isbell's aptly-named Snake Detection Theory, "snakes were responsible for the evolution of our excellent vision: ... the lateral geniculate nucleus (LGN) visual system" (p. 145) and "visual systems are more developed in those primates that have shared the longest evolutionary time with venomous snakes and least developed in those primates that have had no exposure at all to venomous snakes" (p. 146). Snakes were certainly the first predators to pester the earliest primates, predating raptors and carnivorans by 15-20 million years (p. 74). Predation pressure from snakes may thus be (at least partially) responsible for our enlarged brains and improved vision.

What follows is an even more fascinating (yet tentative) hypothesis. In addition to language capacity and complex tool creation and use, we are told that "ours is the only species that points declaratively" (148). That is to say, we humans are capable of *deixis* pure and simple. *Declarative pointing* is defined as "directing someone else's attention to an object for the purpose of sharing interest in that object," which stands in stark contrast to *imperative pointing*, which connotes a desire to obtain the object thus pointed. (Liskowski et al. qtd. in Isbell, p. 148). Isbell's study asserts that the former is unique to humans, whereas the latter is not. While the Western philosophical tradition has rigorously (and jealously) maintained a radical, essential rupture between the human and the animal (catalogued and analysed in Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am*), this categorical difference has been defined variably from philosopher to philosopher. What makes our species *special*? The traditional answer is *Logos*: speech and reason. Aristotle held that animals have nutritive and perceptual souls only: the rational portion is beyond their reach. Descartes held the (now notorious) view that they are little more than pseudo-sentient automata. Kant maintained that they lack (free) will (though not desire), and Bentham

was of the opinion that they live in the present, with no perception of past and future. Modern science has also posited crucial anatomical and phenomenological elements in distinguishing the animal from the human, but the fact that the human brain remains a dark continent (understood only imperfectly) keeps frustrating the quest for the perfect categorical divide. That *declarative pointing* is what makes us human may seem radically novel, but we are soon told that *deixis* is a prerequisite of *lexis* (and thus, *Logos*). Not only are the connections between declarative pointing and language manifold, we are told, but also that “declarative pointing is a developmental precursor to language” (p. 152). Isbell concludes her work with an eccentric reference to Huynh Sanh Thong, a Vietnamese-American scholar, who has “developed a linguistic argument that snakes were ultimately responsible for the origin of language because mothers needed to warn their children about them” (p. 153).<sup>3</sup> This oddly fanciful (and obscure) argument has an Edenic aroma wafting all about it. One can almost imagine Adam raising his majestic index finger and aiming it at the Edenic beasts even as he gave them their primeval names (in that long-lost language which is neither Hebrew nor Greek).

We may circumvent this question and comment upon the hermeneutical repercussions of Isbell’s theory without validating or rejecting its scientific content. To repeat: there is no *lexis* without *deixis*, and ophidiophobia might have contributed

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<sup>3</sup> Who spoke first in Eden: Adam or Eve? Dante claims in his *De Vulgari Eloquentia* that “a woman spoke before anyone else, when the most presumptuous Eve responded thus to the blandishments of the Devil [...] it may be thought unseemly that so distinguished an action of the human race should first have been performed by a woman rather than a man.” But the naming of beasts by Adam (Gen. 2:20) comes before Eve addressing the serpent (Gen. 3:2). It is surprising that a man as steeped in Biblical lore as Dante should have been so careless, unless we care to find a Freudian confession in his slippage.

to the evolutionary history of *Homo sapiens*. To put this formula in mythopoeic language: the snake has opened our eyes and made us wise, made us “Men” through *Logos*. Was it thus the serpent (and not God) who taught Adam how to point at Edenic animals and invent names for them?<sup>4</sup> Again, let us circumvent the question—while pausing to marvel at how the serpent was devious enough to usurp the quintessential gift of God to mankind. For the serpent upon the tree has the power of reason and speech and the written *Logos* is all too silent about this great mystery. Nor does Milton, throughout his “no middle flight,” provide an answer to the question raised by his own Eve:

What may this mean? Language of Man pronounc't

By Tongue of Brute, and human sense exprest?

(Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book IX, 553-554)

The Bible does not answer the question and neither shall we. The question I would rather tackle is this: what is the relationship (if any) between *snake*, a creature of natural science, and *serpent*, a mythologem and fictional construct? The semiotic relationship between the two certainly seems *tautegorical* (to quote Coleridge). That is to say, when the serpent becomes a sign of itself, it passes through the lens of

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<sup>4</sup>And if *Logos* is a gift from the serpent and not from God -- were the Gnostics justified in their blasphemous reversal of the Edenic fable? It must be remembered that various Gnostic narratives (cf. *Hypostasis of the Archons*) cast the serpent in the role of a saviour, while the god of the Old Testament is relegated to the role of an archontic dungeon keeper: either a flawed demigod or evil incarnate. The Gnostic serpent is thus no temptress but an agent of enlightenment – liberating our species from a Kafkaesque dungeon.

epiphanic translucence (as opposed to revelatory transparency). It becomes a creature that is both identical and alien to itself, the same animal *but with a difference*. But just how darkly is that glass? Let us rephrase our question in Peircean terms. When the snake becomes a sign of itself as *serpent*—does it rise on the brazen cross as an Icon, an Index, or a Symbol?

To remind ourselves of the Peircean trichotomy:

“I had observed that the most frequently useful division of signs is by trichotomy into firstly Likenesses, or, as I prefer to say, *Icons*, which serve to represent their objects only in so far as they resemble them in themselves; secondly, *Indices*, which represent their objects independently of any resemblance to them, only by virtue of real connections with them, and thirdly *Symbols*, which represent their objects, independently alike of any resemblance or any real connection, because dispositions or factitious habits of their interpreters insure their being so understood.”

(Peirce qtd. in Bergman and Paavola, “Symbol”).

There is much of the *Iconic* in the connection between snake and serpent. Indeed most serpents appear to be little more than *hypericonic* snakes: they resemble exaggerated versions of the natural creature. What is more, the qualities that are prone to exaggeration during this mythopoeic translation are often the qualities that are thought of as being “essentially” ophidian: the gaze, the venom, the menace. We may therefore complete the syllogism and conclude that serpents are *hyperophidian* beasts.

The most immediate Iconic link between the ophidian and the serpentine is the anatomical resemblance. Serpents borrow the limbless grace of snakes (though some

come equipped with claws) and often sport a mail of scales like their naturalistic cousins. In the throes of death, they writhe and convulse in a fashion that is truly ophidian. Forked tongues and lashing tails are all too common. The serpent slain by Cadmus certainly has an animalistic feel, a natural (if *unnaturally* huge) snake possessed of by no demonic or divine agency:

“The dragon wreathed his scales in rolling knots,  
and with a spring, entwisted in great folds,  
reared up his bulk beyond the middle rings,  
high in the air from whence was given his gaze  
the extreme confines of the grove below.”

(Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 3.1).

Ovid needs no more than five lines to paint a vivid picture of this hypericonic (and hyperophidian) serpent. We are presented with the image of a colossal beast weltering pythonesque upon the earth: “cirque-couchant,” as Keats would have it in his *Lamia*. The upper half of the beast rises like a cobra ready to pounce at its prey. The serpentine stare, depicted here by Ovid as all-penetrating, is another essentially Iconic and ophidian trait. Myth and literature abound with other examples: the ever-awake dragons of the Colchian grove and the Hesperidean garden have an immediately recognisable mimetic relationship with the cold, lidless gaze of snake *qua* animal. Medusa is a *hyperophidian* maiden. Not only does her hair teem with living vipers but her gaze, petrific as it is, embodies and amplifies the chilling, transfixing stare of the

snake.<sup>5</sup> The same principles apply to the basilisk, the little king of serpentkind: a creature so venomous that “it will even kill a man just by looking at him”<sup>6</sup> (The Aberdeen Bestiary, Folio 66r).

The snake never averts its eyes, even when it recoils in terror. Nor does Helios Panoptes, the sun-god who discovers every shame and sin—father to Medea, the quintessential φαρμακίς of Greek literature, a slayer and tamer of dragons). Nor does “LORD God, walking in the garden in the cool of the day” —father to Jesus, the messiah-serpent. For we are told by the written Logos that “as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up.” (*King James Version*, Gen. 3:8. & John, 3:14). This is the serpent lurking half-concealed among the branches of the Tree, as omniscient and unfathomable as her nemesis: God. The monstrous vigilance of the serpent, having passed through hermeneutic translucence, (d)evolves into an analogy of solar and/or theophanic omniscience.

Moving from the Iconic to the Indexical presents a unique hermeneutic twist. We are told by Peirce that the Index must represent its object “independently of any

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<sup>5</sup> Isbell merges anecdotal evidence with a complex argument about biochemical pathways to explain that freezing is a natural response to the sinister menace of the snake: “freezing is a natural response of mammals to animals that appear on the periphery” (pp. 93-96). I cannot help but think of Perseus and his *peripheral* method of slaying Medusa: employing a polished shield to avoid the stare which is intolerable in its unwarped intensity.

<sup>6</sup> The snakes/serpents listed and catalogued in the Aberdeen Bestiary offer curious mixtures of myth, allegorical hermeneutics, and pseudoscience. That the basilisk is hyperophidian in its venomosity is unambiguous enough: “indeed, no bird can fly past unharmed by its gaze but, however far away, will be burnt up and devoured in its mouth.” We are even told that “it kills [all crawling things] with its scent.” (The Aberdeen Bestiary, Folio 66r). Two hypericonic elements (the gaze and the venom) merge into one.

resemblance... only by virtue of real connections.” Perhaps the first Indexical link to come to mind is the perennial association between serpents and fire—ranging in variety from the divine ardour of Biblical seraphim<sup>7</sup> to the volcanic inferno of Typhon, the Hesiodic archdemon. A common naturalistic explanation for this trope is the intuitive link between venom and heat: the stinging sensation of ophidian venom is all too suggestive of draconian fire. One might imagine an even more specific analogy between venom-spitting snakes (such as *Naja pallida*) and fire-breathing dragons. (Though the exaggerated venomosity of the serpent is Iconic in itself, not Indexical.)

Another prominent and pervasive Indexical connection is regeneration. Snakes slough off their old skin annually or biannually in a process called moulting. That this behaviour has inspired tales about serpentine regeneration and immortality is an easy conclusion to draw. Asclepius, the demigod of medicine punished for the hubristic feat of resurrecting his patients, has a serpent entwined around his rod (whereas Hermes the psychopomp has two, around his caduceus). The plant of immortality Gilgamesh uproots from the bottom of the ocean is devoured by a serpent, and the temptress of Eve lurks perilously close to the Tree of Life. Sometimes the connection is more visceral and exaggerated: the Lernean Hydra sprouts two heads after every decapitation. Once again, there is a semiotic excess involved in the translation of the snake into the serpent: serpents are revealed to be *hyperindexical*. Mythic traits such as polycephaly and immortality stand in a hyperindexical relation to the humble snake sloughing off his skin. The most extreme examples elevate the serpent to an Index of

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<sup>7</sup> The etymological ambiguity underlying the word reveals precisely the Indexical connection in question. Seraph is thought to derive either from the Hebrew verb *saraph* (“to consume with fire”) or the Hebrew noun *saraph*, “a fiery and flying serpent” mentioned in Numbers 21:6 (“Seraphim,” Gigot).

eternity and cosmic grandeur. One is reminded of Ananta-Shesha, the primeval dragon that serves as a bed to the supreme god Vishnu, or Jormungandr, the aquatic dragon that encircles the world in Norse mythology. (And yet the connection between the object and the Index, Peirce insists, must be “by virtue of real connections.” The Indexical transformation [of the ophidian into the serpentine] is further complicated by *unreal connections*—unrealistic and/or fictional cultural narratives about snakes and serpents.)

And what of the Symbolic? In what ways does the serpent stand in an arbitrary and/or conventional relation to snake *qua* animal? Falling back to Eden—what to make of that perennial connection between wisdom and serpents? “Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field,” runs the Biblical line, “which the LORD God had made.” (*King James Version*, Gen. 3. 1.) Why does Jesus, himself likened to a snake upon a cross, counsel his disciples to be “as wise as serpents, as harmless as doves?” (*King James Version*, Matt. 10. 16). Milton also draws a line between the animalistic, primeval wisdom of the serpent and the infernal cunning of Lucifer:

“...for in the wilie Snake,  
Whatever sleights none would suspicious mark,  
As from his wit and native suttletie  
Proceeding, which in other Beasts observ'd  
Doubt might beget of Diabolic pow'r  
Active within beyond the sense of brute.”

(*Paradise Lost*, Book IX, l. 91-96)

Serpentine wit is *native*: even before Satanic possession, it is already “beyond the sense of brute.” What is more, there is no theological explanation for it: it simply

is. The written Logos cannot explain why this particular creature should be able to reason and speak. Why is the serpent “wise” and not innocent, like the dove? No *persuasive* commentary is to be found in any source which might suggest an Iconic (or even Indexical) relationship between Sophia and serpentkind. In the wisdom of the serpent, then, we have something akin to Saussurian arbitrariness. Until proven innocent, the serpent is guilty of cunning and mischievous *phronesis*.

As for *unpersuasive* hermeneutics, we might turn to archetypal criticism, perhaps the least scientific (in being unfalsifiable) and the most metaphysical (in both the “vulgar” and philosophical meanings of the word) of all critical schools. Karl Jung, in his *Aion*, has the following to offer: “the snake does in fact symbolize “cold-blooded,” inhuman contents and tendencies of an abstractly intellectual as well as concretely animal nature: in a word, the extra-human quality of man” (*Aion*, 186.) It is impossible to extract a communicable explanation out of such intuitive comments. If the human creature is a mixture of Cartesian spirit and Hobbesian beast, the serpent represents both halves before their syzygy (thus we are told by Jung). There is nothing in this argument to explain the Biblical connection between wisdom and the serpent: Jung simply elevates the serpent into a symbol (and Symbol) of duality itself. Based on this argument, there is nothing hindering us from associating the serpent with the disparity and imbalance inherent in every binary opposition. And indeed perhaps we should do so. But Jung radically changes his argument later on:

“Since the shadow, in itself, is unconscious for most people, the snake would correspond to what is totally unconscious and incapable of becoming conscious, but which, as the collective unconscious and as instinct, seems to possess a peculiar wisdom of its own and a knowledge that is often felt to be supernatural.” (*Aion*, p. 234.)

Jung's second postulation runs along these lines: the serpent corresponds to pure potentiality (as opposed to actualisation), pure collectivity (as opposed to individuation), and pure fluidity (as opposed to completion). We are told by Jung that the serpent represents not only duality in sheer abstraction but also that ineffable, untranslatable "element" (an inadequate word: *χώρα* is older than *τὸ γέννη*) which predates all dichotomies and trichotomies. The serpent is both absolute duality and its absolute negation. That the father of archetypal criticism can assign such categorically opposite formulae (*Logoi*) to the serpent in the same work, *Aion*, is certainly very revelatory: a moment of epiphanic translucence which reveals absolutely *nothing*. More follows in the same vein: "The dragon... is the slippery, evasive, poisonous, dangerous forerunner of the hermaphrodite." (*Aion*, 234). Slippery and evasive: *χώρα*. Poisonous and dangerous: *φάρμακον*.

Speaking of hermaphrodites, what is the gender of the serpent? Male? "Where is the snake *not* a phallic symbol?" asks La Barre (p. 74). The Icono-Indexical relationship between the snake and the masculine serpent is viscerally clear: what is the serpent but a living, writhing phallus dissevered from limbs and heads? We are told by Campbell and Jung that the serpent, whenever it rises from the murky depths of the collective unconscious, acts as a hypermasculine agent liberating the young male psyche from maternal influence. Campbell writes about the "Great Father Snake," a demonic character in Australian aboriginal culture—a bugbear to frighten boys who are about to undergo the circumcision ceremony. He is "one of the principal features of the ordeal of initiation" (p. 10). In a similar vein, Jung reports that one of his patients "dreamt that a snake shot out of a cave and bit him in the genital region. This dream occurred at the moment when the patient was convinced of the truth of the analysis and was beginning to free himself from the bonds of his mother-complex."

(qtd. in Campbell, p. 11). Freud likewise reads the serpent as a phallic animal throughout his oeuvre (perhaps most notably in *Das Medusenhaupt*: “the hair upon Medusa’s head, represented in works of art in the form of snakes ... replace the penis.”)

Or is it female, as with our Lamia? The Icono-Indexical relationship is perhaps less transparent here. A well-fed snake resembles a pregnant one: we might perhaps speculate that the macabre image of a snake devouring her food is the uncanny antithesis of a woman giving birth. There is a modern feminist view (Jean Markale, Marija Gimbutas, Merlin Stone, Robert Graves) which reads the serpent as a symbol of repressed femininity waiting to return and, in its most utopian form, treats the snake/serpent as the melancholic relic of a distant golden age—an aeon of peace and harmony under the gentle tyranny of a universal, omnipotent Goddess. Merlin Stone’s *When God Was a Woman* is a notable example:

In many of these myths the female deity is symbolized as a serpent or dragon, most often associated with darkness and evil. At times the gender of the dragon seems to be neuter, or even a male (closely associated with his mother or wife who is the Goddess). But the plot of the underlying symbolic theme of the story is so similar in each myth that, judging from the stories that do use the name of the female deity, we may surmise that the allegorical identity of the dragon or serpent is that of the Goddess religion (p. 67).

Gillian M. E. Alban’s Ph.D. thesis, *Melusine, Snake in the Garden of Byatt’s Possession: The Great Goddess Dispossessed* relies heavily on this tradition. Though she prefers the term “gylanic” instead of “matriarchal,” her conception of Mélusine as

a universal mother goddess is in continuance with the tradition hereby discussed. Alban is perhaps alone in her quest to reject the androgyny of the serpent goddess and assign a purely feminine role to it: “but her snake-tail is the symbol of the creative force of the goddess and hence represented the female,” we are told, “long before the phallus was connected with parturition” (p. 69). Yet even authors who assign a definite gender to the serpent cannot avoid its gender-queer quality completely. The masculine serpent of Jung darts out of a cave, one of the most time-hallowed symbols of motherhood, and the feminine dragon of Stone cannot avoid becoming “neuter, or even a male.”

Thus we are unable to assign binary gender to the serpent. Nowhere does this become as apparent as in one of the versions of the myth of Tiresias (as reported by Hyginus):

On Mount Cyllene Tiresias, son of Everes, a shepherd, is said to have struck with his staff, or trampled on, snakes which were coupling. Because of this he was changed to a woman. Later, advised by an oracle, he trampled on the snakes in the same place, and returned to his former sex.

(*Fabulae*, 75)

What better image of bisexuality than two serpents intertwined? But if s/he is androgynous, just what kind of androgyny is it? Helene Cixous distinguishes between two kinds of bisexuality in her seminal essay, *The Laugh of the Medusa*. The first is the “classical conception of bisexuality” which, through “the fantasy of “total” being (though composed of two halves), would do away with the difference experienced” (pp. 883-884). The liberatory alternative to this phallographic ideal is “the other bisexuality on which every subject not enclosed in the false theatre of phallographic

representationalism has founded his/her erotic universe” (p. 884). Is the serpent masculine, feminine, bisexual (in the classical or postmodern sense), sexless – or transcendent of all gender? Is it parthenogenetic, androgenetic, asexual, heterosexual, or eternal—and thus in no need of procreation? We shall circumvent these questions, too, only to pass from the *prologos* to our *Logos*.<sup>8</sup>

What is monstrous? To borrow our formula of monstrosity from Aristotelian biology: the monster is that which is *aneidetic*, an entity impossible to categorise.

For, following what has been said, it remains to give the reason for such monsters. If the movements imparted by the semen are resolved and the material contributed by the mother is not controlled by them, at last there remains the most general substratum, that is to say the animal. Then people say that the child has the head of a ram or bull, and so on with other animals.

(*De Generatione Animalium*, M8r)

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<sup>8</sup> One might object that the infinite semiotic wealth of the serpent falters against a binary even more banal than gender: good and evil. There is a certain cliché that the serpent, as a icono-indexico-symbol of all elements repressed by monotheistic phallogocentrism, represents an incarnation of Christian “evil.” But this is not necessarily so. While the exoteric tradition crushes the serpent under the virginal heels of Mary, the esoteric Gnostic tradition elevates the serpent into a redeemer. Jung reports that “the Ophites celebrated the Eucharistic feast with a live snake, no less realistic than the Aesculapian snake at Epidaurus.” (Aion, 188). He also mentions Peratic doctrine in passing, which assigns a Christological role to the serpent (185). The beast that we find coiling around the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil has thus been associated with both Jesus and Satan.

When the masculine agent fails to set embryonic formation into motion, the maternal material degenerates into a misshapen lump with bestial impressions inscribed upon it: a monster. As Stephen Asma puts it, “Nature inadvertently creates monsters when the “essence” of the animal (its final or formal cause) is corrupted by wayward matter” (pp. 47-48). Noel Carroll has a similar definition, *category jamming*, which shifts the classical Aristotelian definition from the ontological to the phenomenological realm:

“The philosopher of horror Noel Carroll invented the term *category jamming* and makes an argument that fits nicely with findings from developmental psychology. Experiments demonstrate that animals and humans respond to their earliest experiences by internalizing a cognitive classification system based on the creatures they regularly encounter. After a certain time, however, the classification system “solidifies” into a cognitive framework, and any subsequently strange and unclassifiable encounter produces fear in the knower. [...] Things that we find impure and consider to be abominations are usually interstitial entities, in between normal categories of being.

(Asma, p. 184)

Is this the “scientific” explanation behind the grimace of the Medusa? Isbell argued that humans react *naturally* to the *essential form* of the snake. But while the snake may have a fixed biological form, the serpent has none: she is formlessness itself. We have tried to cut the beast into pieces with Peirce’s razor, but the patchwork monster has regenerated from every severed part. He is certainly plastic enough to do so: not only stealing limbs and organs from other animals but also lending its own flesh to

every kind of monstrous anatomy—and her monstrosity, I should argue, derives precisely from that reason. There would have been no Chimaera without the ophidian tail (and perhaps more crucially, there would have been no cosmic order without the dual imprisonment of Typhon and Echidna).

To conclude: the serpent is an animal rich in semiotic value—*too* rich, even. Not only is it a floating signifier which may signify dyadic and triadic oppositions, it is also often represented as connected to the primordial element(s) which predate, and make possible, all writing and becoming. The dragon Fafnir sleeps upon a hoard of ever-increasing gold: the semiotic serpent coils around an infinite chain of meaning (*apeirosemiosis*). The serpent is among animals what Helen is among women: ambiguity incarnate.<sup>9</sup>

Even Derrida felt the need to warn against hypersemiotic abundance in one of his rare conservative moments:

“In a word, we do not believe that there exists, in all rigor, a Platonic text, closed upon itself, complete with its inside and its outside. *Not that one must then consider that it is leaking on all sides and can be drowned confusedly in the undifferentiated generality of its element.*”

(*Dissemination*, p. 130 – italics mine)

But the serpent lurks precisely in that Lernean swamp where all meaning is hopelessly lost, entangling the reader in its coils and itself drowning in the primeval waters which predate all creation, all signification, all representation. I would furthermore argue that *not all* animal symbols exist in a state of absolute semiotic freedom.

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<sup>9</sup> cf. Gumpert, *Grafting Helen: The Abduction of the Classical Past*.

Certain animals are bound by time-hallowed, nigh-immutable hermeneutical conventions: certainly an animal as majestic and aerial as the eagle cannot serve as a crawling, chthonic metaphor without braving absurdity. Nor can the “splendid blond beast” of Nietzsche ever be fully disentangled from the royal-patriarchal symbology which surrounds it. Without doubt, there are other animals lurking in liminal and interstitial spaces, conjuring uncanny images out of our psychic depths—such as the dogs and apes of Kafka. Yet even these ambivalent creatures fall short of representing cosmic chaos and primordiality in all its formless grandeur: they simply lack the mythological lustre.

This exergue has attempted to show that it is impossible to classify and catalogue the character [χαρακτ□ρ] of the serpent. The serpent may and may not, can and cannot represent anything and everything and nothing: a Symbol not meaningless but meaning-*free*. Perhaps the only other animal that can match the serpent in terms of polysemous wealth is the human creature. And yet when we unite these two beasts in the workshop of Empedocles,<sup>10</sup> we find a creature that is peculiarly liminal and limited: the *mixoparthenos*. What emerges from their union is a creature not only fixed in form and gender (woman waist above, serpent waist below) but also trapped in a tragic narrative of dispossession and alienation. Their hybrid suffers a dramatic

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<sup>10</sup> “Here sprang up many faces without necks, arms wandered without shoulders, unattached, and eyes strayed alone, in need of foreheads... [...] Many creatures were born with faces and breasts on both sides, man-faced ox-progeny, while others again sprang forth as ox-headed offspring of man, creatures compounded partly of male, partly of the nature of female, and fitted with shadowy parts.”

(Empedocles, *Fragments B-57 and B-61* – qtd. in Richard)

*necrosemiosi*<sup>11</sup> in a “fantasy of total being”—the phallogocentric bisexuality-biformity Cixous warned us against. This is not to say that every manifestation of the mixoparthenos myth has been monolithically identical—indeed there is much to read between the slithering lines. But the lovechild of serpent and Eve has a semiotic *centre*, whereas neither had one in their independence:

The function of this center was not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure—one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganized structure—but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the *freeplay* of the structure. No doubt that by orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the center of a structure permits the freeplay of its elements inside the total form.

(Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 278)

That the she-serpent has a semiotic centre (unlike the serpent, or the human creature) has made this study possible. We shall, then, follow the she-serpent from its Hesiodic birth to Keatsian death—and witness her struggle as both monstrous object and tragic subject. It is my contention that the character of the she-serpent is bound by certain conventions and narratival elements which transfix it around a semiotic centre and that these elements, while being inherently paradoxical and ambivalent, do not prevent Western phallogocentrism from turning their serpentine captive into stone. Western tradition gazes *back* at the she-serpent and the gaze is sometimes cold, sometimes warmer—but always petrific and insolent. Every text is divided against

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<sup>11</sup> For a fuller treatment of this word and its ramifications, cf. Gumpert: *The End of Meaning: Studies in Catastrophe* (chapter 7).

itself in judging the mixoparthenos, though the judgement does fall upon the serpent without fail.

Can Keats, the aneidetic poet, break the vicious cycle (*ouroboros*) of tradition? We shall not circumvent that question, though the answer be impossible to capture.

CHAPTER I:  
THE GENEALOGY OF MIXOPARTHENOI

“But to the girdle do the gods inherit; beneath is all the fiends’.”

Shakespeare, *King Lear*

The procreation of eternity: this is the central and most fundamental paradox of Hesiod’s *Theogony*. Gods spawn gods in a bacchanalian frenzy which, when frozen in Apollonian stasis, culminates in the *construction* of the cosmic order. Every divine lineage begins with the parthenogenetic and (subsequently) heterosexual lust of Gaia (her seminal, incestuous *hieros gamos*). True, but even before that – there was Chaos. Chaos, then, is the neuter mother of the universe – in the Aristotelian sense of providing “the most general substratum” or simply “the animal.”<sup>12</sup>

Hesiodic Chaos is parentless and unique<sup>13</sup> as long as we are in the realm of ontology and cosmology. When we pass from the noumenal into the phenomenal, however, Chaos ceases to exist as a singular entity and divides itself into a legion of

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<sup>12</sup> One might observe that the Hesiodic universe has no father (again, in the Aristotelian sense of imparting an essential form). Uranus, Cronos, and Zeus merely rule the cosmos: none has full demiurgic capacity/agency. The construction of the universe is rather the product of various theobiological functions (copulation, birth, castration, disgorgement). The Hesiodic universe thus predates the thebiological essentialism of Plato and Aristotle.

<sup>13</sup> Compare and contrast with the Miltonic Chaos who, according to Rumrich, “is to God as Eve is to Adam. If God has no separate female other external to him, he nevertheless acquiesces in his own feminine otherness—a kind of gender-specific negative identity—and can only exercise sovereignty and creative power by virtue of her” (p. 1044). Milton’s Chaos thus spans the precarious gap between materialism and Platonism.

bizarre, misshapen monsters lurking within and beyond the reach of the senses. This chaotic brood is neither unique nor parentless: they are the children of Echidna.

Snake-limbed and tendril-limbed gods and goddesses abound in Mediterranean culture and art, but the singular figure of Echidna towers above this positively Empedoclean conflux of tails and limbs. This most notorious of *mixoparthenoi* plays a seminal and liminal role in the formation of the Western canon/pantheon. She is a threat to the phallogocentrism of Olympus, though she must ultimately sustain the order with the blood and flesh of her children.

The eldest *mixoparthenoi* were thus monstrous mothers<sup>14</sup> who threatened civilisation with their numerous, misshapen offspring. Echidna is the example and exemplar of this trope. Hesiod being the arch-patriarch of the Greek canon, it is little surprise that he has given birth to one of the most useful stereotypes to serve the phallogocentric tradition.

To quote from the *Theogony*:

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<sup>14</sup>Was there a cultural epoch, deep in time, which did not demonise the serpentine mother? Was the serpent-goddess once a benevolent creatrix? In other words, can we suggest a *zeroth* phase to the myth? If monstrosity suggests a fallen state as opposed to natural deviancy, was there a prelapsarian she-serpent? Some scholars posit an ophidian supreme goddess who reigned in pristine glory before the stamp of patriarchy, and assumes all she-serpents to be her avatars. However, the idea of a universal, perfect matriarchy predating a universal, continuous, nigh-indestructible patriarchy is essentialist to the core. On the other hand, it is perfectly acceptable to accept *multiple* anguipede goddesses (many of which were local and obscure characters) who were perhaps treated more sympathetically (or at least, more critically ambivalent) than Hesiod's demoness. Ustinova enumerates various examples.

And in a hollow cave she bore another monster, irresistible, in no wise like either to mortal men or to the undying gods, even the goddess fierce Echidna who is half a nymph with glancing eyes and fair cheeks, and half again a huge snake, great and awful, with speckled skin, eating raw flesh beneath the secret parts of the holy earth. And there she has a cave deep down under a hollow rock far from the deathless gods and mortal men. There, then, did the gods appoint her a glorious house to dwell in: and she keeps guard in Arima beneath the earth, grim Echidna, a nymph who dies not nor grows old all her days.

(l. 301-306)

Once again, it is the serpent which spans the gap between the mortal and the immortal (as with the Platonic *chora*): Echidna, though herself deathless, is “in no wise like either to mortal men or to the undying gods” —a character as liminal as she is precarious. What is more, she is unique: *sui generis*, first and last of her kind. She can only mate with Typhon, another unique creature who is not only *hyperophidian* but also *hypergigantic*.

The serpent of Greek myth is the most natural agent and ally of chaos: an elemental and primitive power which must ever be suppressed. Such hypersemiotic abundance is dangerous for the symbolic order. And yet it/she/he can never perish completely. The serpent is usually merely banished or imprisoned: Ophion exiled from Eurynome’s embrace, Typhon sealed underneath Etna, Echidna locked up in her cave. In other scenarios, there is a fetish-trophy left behind: the *omphalos* of Delphi, the venomous arrows of Hercules dipped in Hydra’s blood,<sup>15</sup> the petrifying head of

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<sup>15</sup> Or the immortal head, buried forever underneath the Lernean rock.

Medusa. At any rate, the brood of vipers never ceases “to be fruitful and multiply.” And though the more elemental or bestial serpents often defy binary gender, mixoparthenoi are almost always female. This is not to say that there were no representations of mythological man-serpent hybrids, such as Cecrops and the Gigantes. But Cecrops is an obscure character whose role as lawgiver and culture hero does not resonate well with that of the mixoparthenos (though Alban would perhaps disagree on that point – her reading of Melusine encompasses a primordial, utopian stage where the she-serpent was creatrix as well as culture-heroine). The male variant (mixoandros?) has faded into cultural obscurity: like the female centaurs of Ovid, they fulfil a purely symmetrical function and do not possess the symbological wealth of the she-serpent. For the centaur is an unmistakably masculine hybrid, just as the mixoparthenos is unmistakably feminine. And the dragon-slayer is invariably the valorised Olympian male: Zeus for Typhon, Apollo<sup>16</sup> for Python, Hercules for Hydra. The Greek hero is Greek and heroic because he has slain a serpent.

Though the hermeneutical scope of the serpent is infinite, the mythological *function* of the Greek dragon seems far less fluid. They often emerge as the watchful guardians of sacral and liminal spaces: for example, the dragon slain by Cadmus was the guardian of a fountain hallowed unto Ares. (The guardianship of space may be

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<sup>16</sup> The moment Apollo slays the Python represents the simultaneous suppression and fetishisation of Dionysian vitality. Keats does not miss this powerful moment. In his most tyrannical mood, Lucius pretends to become Apollo — and Lamia was the Python all along:

“Fine was the mitigated fury, like  
Apollo’s presence when in act to strike  
The serpent – Ha, the serpent!  
(Lamia, II: 78-80)

replaced or supplanted with the stewardship of treasure, as with the Colchian dragon and its lidless vigil upon the Golden Fleece, or Ladon, the sentinel of the Hesperidean garden). They may also be represented as divine scourges, as with the dragon Python summoned by Hera to pursue the pregnant Leto, the she-serpent Poine summoned by Apollo to punish the Argives, the aquatic serpents that strangled Laocoon by the command of Poseidon. The divine element is sometimes less conspicuous or missing (the Sybaris of Delphoi is certainly more of an animalistic pest, scouring the countryside). The third major function is that of the progenitor. This usually occurs in a metonymical and posthumous fashion: both the Colchian and the Ismenian dragons seem to possess the oddly specific virtue that their teeth grow into male humans whenever sown in the earth (an indirect example of *androgenesis*: the birth of male out of male). There are a few less circuitous examples, however: a serpent lay with a maiden to beget the Ophiogenes tribe (Atsma, “Theoi”).

The Lamia of Keats is by no means a solitary figure of myth, nor an idiosyncratic invention of the poet: she belongs to a tribe of monstrous *femme fatales* who have haunted both gynanic<sup>17</sup> and patriarchal narratives. Her rich genealogy begins in the depths of mythology. This is the tribe of she-serpents, *mixoparthenoi*, creatures stretching from prehistory to postmodernity and dispersed over many cultural landscapes: they “form a numerous class, and are found in all quarters of the globe” (Hartland, p. 188). They comprise a special variant of the serpentine character in that they are feminine, ambivalent, hybrid creatures.

“She was a gordian shape of dazzling hue,  
Vermilion-spotted, golden, green, and blue...

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<sup>17</sup> Alban’s peculiar usage of the term wavers between *egalitarian* and *matriarchal* – a paradoxical utopia where women rule as enlightened despots.

...So rainbow-sided, touch'd with miseries.”

(*Lamia*, l. 47-49)

Not only is *Lamia* the vivid rainbow of sensuous illusions which the “cold philosopher” must “unweave,” but also the Gordian knot at the floating centre of meaning in whose person opposites coincide and coalesce——vampiric vixen and coy maiden, demon and goddess, serpent and woman, matter and form. Keats may have tied the knot himself (after his own unique fashion), but the strings were not of his making. He was putting into verse a story written and rewritten many times before: the poem is the culmination of a serpentine dialectic which began in the world of myth and made its textual appearance with Hesiod.

Here, we hope to untie that Lamian knot—to disentangle the serpentine dialectic which begins with Hesiod and concludes with Keats. I am positing three seminal *transformations* in the (d)evolution of the she-serpent. What facilitates each transformation is an emblematic and powerful loss. The *mixoparthenos* begins her career as a monstrous yet universal mother, a hyperfertile and terrifying abomination with a unique status in the Olympian order. But the serpent soon loses her ferocious fecundity and becomes a barren phantom: cannibalistic, infanticidal, vampiric. At the nadir of her damnation, she is assigned to the realm of pure allegorical evil, where she writhes against her confines. When the vampire loses her power to terrify and confound the symbolic order, she becomes a tragic serpent. The transformations do not abrogate but sublate each other – in every tragic serpent, one may find the vampire and the monstrous mother.

“Lamia” is a text which beckons the reader to delve into a palimpsest of myth and meaning. Keats considered *Lamia* his masterpiece: scholars, “the critic’s puzzle” (Stevenson, p. 241). The two proclamations ring true, and perhaps echo each other, in a postmodern epoch which celebrates acentricity, intertextuality and infinite semiosis. The critical ambiguity notwithstanding, any attempt to capture this nebulous fairy must begin with a formulation of her identity. Here we follow Aristotle in putting biology before metaphysics: our formula is merely anatomical. *Mixoparthenos* is a mythological hybrid that is, to quote Hesiod: “half a nymph with glancing eyes and fair cheeks, and half again a huge snake.”

We have much to infer even from the merely anatomical definition. Generally speaking, the she-serpents of Western tradition are more anthropomorphic than their male equivalents, who remain purely bestial (Python, Typhon, Ophion). Yet this quasi-anthromorphism does not necessarily *humanise* them: the human element in *mixoparthenoi* makes them more *unheimlich* instead. The monster is given a face and a mouth: with that face she can mesmerise, with that mouth she can deceive. This uncanny visage transports the monster from the realm of abstract terror onto a plane of social anxiety: every mixoparthenos is a social disease, just like the plague-sphinx of *Oedipus Rex*. The mixoparthenos is thus less of a beast and more of a monster.

Hesiod seems to have codified and crystallised the mixoparthenos as a trope. His creation is hyperfertile and immortal, even though the sexual prowess of Echidna is inextricably bound up with her cannibalistic habits. The narrative evades the obvious question: to whom does the “raw flesh” belong? Does Echidna mate with mortal men, only to devour them? Does she devour her own? But she can spawn more than she devours: her hyperfertility is a curse upon the human race. Already at this phase we see every major thread in the Gordian knot: sexual mischief, irresistibility, a

body divided against itself, cannibalism, abjection, exile, motherhood. The emphasis is upon her chaotic hyperfertility.

Echidna, unlike Gaea, is no indispensable (and self-begotten) goddess to represent the totality of the elements. Nor is she like Demeter, the goddess of tame earth, who consents silently (and a-weeping) to herself and her daughter being raped. She crawls in that indefinable, anxious space between submission and rebellion—a necessary evil of irresistible beauty. Despite being the mother of all abominations, she is appointed “a glorious house to dwell in” where she can feast and copulate with her mate Typhon in genuine animal freedom. The privilege is as bizarre as it is necessary: Zeus allows her to conceive monsters in order to test the virility of his own heroic offspring. Echidna is thus the closest analogue to Satan that Greek polytheism can offer in being a necessary yet futile opponent to the theocosmobiologic order.

Unsurprisingly, Echidna plays a pivotal role in the construction of a Panhellenic identity, despite being imprisoned to a particular *space (chora)*. In Ancient Greek society, mythical legitimacy was often sought in the form of descent from a heroic lineage. An unlikely parallel might be sought in the example of the Muses who

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begin as Heliconian Muses: local divinities, tied, like the shepherd/poet himself, to a particular time and place. It is only at the moment of the shepherd’s transcendence [...] that the Muses ascend to their customary Panhellenic, generic status, with their appellation *the Muses of Olympus*.

(Gumpert, *End of Meaning: Studies in Catastrophe*, p. 6)

Echidna the parochial nymph, imprisoned in her subterranean mansion at Arima, can only achieve *Pan(anti)hellenic* transcendence through the ritual sacrifice of her

offspring. But while the Muses undergo their transformation in a catastrophic instant, Echidna must continually keep spawning to maintain her Panantihellenic status.

We have previously delineated that while the serpent is a figure of absolute plasticity, the mixoparthenos is not. The rigor mortis of *necrosemiosis* is already at work in Hesiod. Echidna is anatomically rigid in being neatly and symmetrically divided between woman and serpent: she is no quicksilver shape-shifter. Instead she possesses procreative plasticity or, to borrow a term from biology, *pluripotency*: she gives birth to a multifarious brood of monsters which are as dissimilar as they can possibly be from each other. What queer biology can engender the Nemean Lion and Cerberus out of a serpentine body? Echidna, though imprisoned in form and space, is yet plastic enough to work this miracle.

To focus on the word: mixoparthenos (μειζοπάρθενος). A rare and exotic word, it appears only thrice<sup>18</sup> throughout the Ancient Greek canon: once in the *Histories* of Herodotus [“μειζοπάρθενον τινά, ἰχιδναν διφυέα” -- 4.9.], once in the *Phoenissae* of Euripides [“μειζοπάρθενος” – l. 23], and once in the *Alexandra* of Lycophron [“ἰρνῖς μειζοπάρθενος κύων” – l. 669]. In each author, it is a hapax legomenon: a unique word which connotes lack (“half-maiden”) without telling us what manner of bestial part serves as its supplement. Echidna herself emerges as the mixoparthenos in Herodotus—where we find that the bestial supplement is unambiguously serpentine:

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<sup>18</sup> Roscher et. al., *Lexikon*, p. 3024.

When Heracles awoke, he searched for them, visiting every part of the country, until at last he came to the land called the Woodland, and there he found in a cave a creature of double form that was half maiden and half serpent; above the buttocks she was a woman, below them a snake. When he saw her he was astonished, and asked her if she had seen his mares straying; She said that she had them, and would not return them to him before he had intercourse with her; Heracles did, in hope of this reward. But though he was anxious to take the horses and go, she delayed returning them, so that she might have Heracles with her for as long as possible; at last she gave them back, telling him, “These mares came, and I kept them safe here for you, and you have paid me for keeping them, for I have three sons by you.”

*(Histories, 4.9)*

Of all the variants of the mixoparthenos, Herodotus perhaps offers the most benign variant of the mixoparthenogenetic narrative (though he cannot avoid the patriarchal and xenophobic implications inherent in the Hesiodic version). The mixoparthenos of Herodotus is the mother of the Scythian race (or at least their regal line) and the Scythians were noted for their utter barbarism in Ancient Greek literature and myth.<sup>19,20</sup> This notwithstanding, his Echidna is a less malicious, perhaps somewhat

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<sup>19</sup> The trope of the Scythian vagrant-cannibal and his “distressingly unsettled transhumant ways” was resurrected in Renaissance literature: conveniently enough, Scythia became a floating realm easily capable of passing as Ireland and the New World in the European imagination (Baker and Maley, 261).

<sup>20</sup> cf. Julia Ustinova, “Snake-Limbed and Tendril-Limbed Goddesses in the Art and Mythology of the Mediterranean and Black Sea.” Ustinova’s erudite analysis of the

humorous character<sup>21</sup> who tricks Hercules into copulating with her. Instead of being a passive receptacle [*hypodochē*], she is an agent of her own desire in tricking Hercules to copulate with her. True, mixoparthenoi often emerge as desiderative, autonomous agents in Western literature (irrespective of whether their treatment is sympathetic or not, and whether their desire is represented as monstrous or noble/tragic). What truly distinguishes Herodotus from the other (male) authors who inscribe the mixoparthenos, I would argue, is the fact that her children *survive*. The mixoparthenos is often a barren, cannibalistic creature: even the numerous brood of the Hesiodic Echidna is born for slaughter.

In Lycophron’s enigmatic poem, *mixoparthenos* is an epithet for an Erinys: the phrase translates to “half-maiden dog.”<sup>22</sup> In the Euripidean tragedy, the baroque word occupies an entire line by itself:

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You came, you came, O winged creature, born of earth and hellish viper, to  
prey upon the sons of Cadmus, full of death, full of sorrow, *half a maiden*, a  
murderous monster.<sup>23</sup>

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"Scythian anguipede goddess" reveals the wealth of she-serpent figures found in ancient iconography.

<sup>21</sup> Hartog opines that the story has a humorous tone: “they have Heracles sleep with this snake-girl—Heracles who has had, ever since the cradle, a bone to pick with snakes...” (p. 25).

<sup>22</sup> Dogs often appear as a chimeral component of various *mixoparthenoi*, such as Ovid’s Scylla and Milton’s Sin.

<sup>23</sup> □βας □βας,

□ πτερο□σσα, γ□ς λόχευμα

νερτέρου τ□ □χίδνας,

Καδμείων □ρπαγά,

πολύφθορος πολύστονος

We are told that the Sphinx, also a mixoparthenos, is the unholy offspring of “earth” and “hellish viper”—Echidna. Earth is the mother of all, Echidna of all monsters, Sphinx of none: the loss of maternal fertility proceeds categorically from generation to generation.

When the mixoparthenos lost her association with fecundity, the monstrous mother of Hesiod degenerated into a phantom and a vampire. Later versions of the myth render sterile mixoparthenoi: there are no longer any viable offspring, no matter how monstrous. Having lost the power of childbirth, the half-maiden must now capitalise on her erotic appeal: she becomes a seductress in whose person mingles great beauty and great abomination.<sup>24</sup> This loss of fertility takes its most extreme form in the act of child-killing: both Lamia (of the original myth) and Lilith, her Mesopotamian counterpart, are vampires who do not recoil from the deed. They thus threaten not only civilisation but the very propagation of the human animal. They also share a common appetite for blood and flesh.

To focus on the name: Lamia. The earliest monsters to bear this name were neither tragic nor beautiful: Keats was ennobling a character who began her career as a lowly monster. Aristophanes attributes male genitalia to “Lamia” in *the Wasps*, as well as the signature obnoxious smell. Other narratives also render Lamia as

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**μειξοπάρθενος,**

δάιον τέρας.

<sup>24</sup> Replacing the serpentine tail with other animal supplements would infinitely expand the category. Sirens (who were conflated with mermaids in later development) would be a prime example: the Homeric description is that of beautiful, man-eating maidens who live amidst “heaps of corpses rotting away.” Like the Lamia of Keats before her metamorphosis, their power comes both from the body and the voice.

quintessentially grotesque. Diodorus says she has the ability to pluck out her eyes and put them into a flask, a feat associated with prophetic mania. Echidna was an exile from the community of men and gods; Lamia's estrangement is more particular, more human. She is always the barbarian woman: according to Diodorus, she was the queen of Libya before her transformation into a monster. (Incidentally, Hesiod also exiled Medusa to Libya: the very edge of the known world at that time). Lamia, as she appears in *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, is referred to as "the foreign woman." Aristotle mentions her name alongside "certain savage tribes" who allegedly practice cannibalism. Lamia is therefore the inferior element of every binary opposition: female-queer, barbarian, inhuman: outside every circle.

So far the vampire: what of the phantom? Lamia had a much more particular and idiosyncratic association for the intellectual elite among the Greeks. To them, she was either a metaphor for the vanity of lust and worldly concerns or a figment of the imagination occupying the minds of the infantile *hoi polloi*. Keats borrowed the plot of his poem from Burton's 17<sup>th</sup>-century scholarly work, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, which in turn derives from the narrative of Philostratus. Philostratus represents Lamia as a metaphor for the vanity of hedonism, as "mere apparition." And yet she is real enough to deceive the young Lycian philosopher, real enough to drain his blood: and she would have strangled the young bridegroom too, had Apollonius of Tyana not intervened.

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"As such," replied Apollonius, "you must regard this adornment, for it is not reality but the semblance of reality. And that you may realize the truth of what I say, this fine bride is one of the vampires, that is to say of those beings whom the many regard as lamias and hobgoblins. These beings fall in love, and they are devoted to the delights of Aphrodite, but

especially to the flesh of human beings, and they decoy with such delights those whom they mean to devour in their feasts."

And the lady said: "Cease your ill-omened talk and begone"; and she pretended to be disgusted at what she heard, and in fact she was inclined to rail at philosophers and say that they always talked nonsense.

*(The Life of Apollonius of Tyana, Book IV, §25)*

The Lamia of Philostratus is a Coleridgean symbol: a metaphor for illusion as well as its incarnation. Strabo cannot tolerate such superstitious ambiguity and is perfectly content to doom Lamia into unambiguous non-existence:

Now every illiterate and uneducated man is, in a sense, a child, and, like a child, he is fond of stories; and for that matter, so is the half-educated man, for his reasoning faculty has not been fully developed, and, besides, the mental habits of his childhood persist in him. Now since the portentous is not only pleasing, but fear-inspiring as well, we can employ both kinds of myth for children, and for grown-up people too. In the case of children we employ the pleasing myths to spur them on, and the fear-inspiring myths to deter them; for instance, Lamia is a myth, and so are the Gorgon, and Ephialtes, and Mormolyce.

*(Geographica, 1.2.8)*

Strabo he is quite contemptuous of the serpentine phantom: whereas he classifies ancient Olympian gods and the "mythical deeds of heroism" as dignified fables which double as foundation myths, Lamia is no more than a scarecrow for children, a pathetic bugbear.

But the she-serpent was to suffer further abjection. Almost two centuries before Keats, the most irreclaimably evil and simple mixoparthenos in the Western canon appeared. She was the creation of an allegorist whose unwavering loyalty to dualism verged on Manichaeism: Spenser.

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This is the wandring wood, this Errours den,  
A monster vile, whom God and man does hate  
[...]           ...his glistring armor made  
A litle glooming light, much like a shade,<sup>25</sup>  
By which he saw the ugly monster plaine,  
Halfe like a serpent horribly displaide,  
But th'other halfe did womans shape retaine,  
Most lothsom, filthie, foule, and full of vile disdaine.  
*(Faerie Queene, Book I, Canto I, l. XIII-XIV)*

Spenser doth protest too much: “vile”, “ugly monster,” “horribly displaide,” “most lothsom,” “filthie,” “foule,” and “full of vile disdaine.” The rest of the passage adds “durtie,” “poisonous,” “ill favored,” “uncouth.” Spenser’s odium towards the she-serpent is absolute. He reduces her to mere abstraction and allegory, a non-entity and non-character. Ironically enough, when the mixoparthenos loses all complexity to become simplex allegory, she also returns to her biological roots as snake *qua* animal. “Spenser’s Errour,” according to Steadman, “reflect[s] contemporary superstitions

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<sup>25</sup>One may observe the similarity between Perseus’ mirrored shield and the “glistring armor” of Redcrosse: the same peripheral method of ophidiocide is preferred by both.

about vipers” with “her mortal sting, her method of sheltering her young in her own body, and the unnatural behaviour of her offspring” (p. 62).

Milton’s treatment on the other hand is somewhat less hostile, with a strong taste of *pathos*. The familial drama between Satan, Sin, and Death is absurdly incestuous and fantastic, but the mixoparthenos raises a cry for mercy nonetheless: unlike Error she is a *pathetic* creature.

"O father, what intends thy hand," she cried,

"Against thy only son?"

(*Paradise Lost*, Book II, ll. 726-730)

“One of the grimly impressive passages in *Paradise Lost* is somewhat un-Miltonic in its elaborate allegory and grotesque horror” claims Tatlock (p. 239). We may perhaps add that this is because the passage in question (i.e. the narrative of Satan, Sin, and Death) is distinctly Spenserian: Milton’s brief relapse into pure allegory.

In Christian axiology, the pagan she-serpent loses her liminal status and becomes a barren symbol of evil. While the mixoparthenos stood as a solitary, liminal figure in Greek phallogocentrism, the strict dualism of Christian allegory can only assign it to the lake of brimstone and fire. When the mixoparthenos can no longer be associated with an elemental principle predating the cosmotheological order, it must inevitably descend into the formless pits of Hell. Milton’s “Sin” and Spenser’s “Error” thus emerge as symbols that devolve into allegories (to cite the Coleridgean opposition).

The mixoparthenos had lost her monstrous hyperfertility already. After her mutilation at the hands of Milton and Spenser, all that was left to her was the power to inspire abject terror. With her final transformation, no more: she who was once a monstrous goddess is now a wretched woman. She may even aid the symbolic order (the male hero) through white magic, as with Shahmaran, or seek reconciliation with it through marriage and procreation, as with Mélusine. In this fashion, she recovers much of her former liminality and neutrality. Though still capricious and uncanny, the she-serpent of mediaeval imagination is a demon of the all too human kind.

The example par excellence of this trope would be Mélusine, a polymorphous mediaeval character. Many different variations exist [see Appendix for one version]. Mélusine is a solitary and “exceptional” character, a living artefact who has power in her own realm: a vestigial realm that is precariously limited and jealously protected. The basic narrative has Mélusine marrying a mortal man “upon conditions”—the violation of which prompts the mixoparthenos to abandon her husband. The moment of violation is often voyeuristic: the husband spies the serpentine form of Mélusine, a sight forbidden to him.

The concept of a supernatural bride marrying a mortal male “upon conditions” is widespread among many cultures: Hartland lists and discusses several. Such figures are exceptions to conventional patriarchal order: “what the law does not recognise is sometimes secured by contract” (Hartland, p. 198). Mélusine is not outright malevolent like the sexual predator Lilith or the cannibalistic Lamia: there is room for a greater scope of ambivalence in her narrational treatment. The mixoparthenos can only achieve temporary happiness in her marriage to the mortal man and it is always the male who violates the original contract. The loss of conjugal bliss in such a supernatural marriage is predestined, yet is presented as unmistakably tragic. Since the *human serpent* has neither the power nor the ambition to uproot the symbolic

patriarchal order, she is allowed to attract some sympathy even in the most conventional, “surface” reading. At the same time, such narratives about “exceptional” women are anxious to deny permanence and viability to such an “abnormal” state: the sudden, inevitable disappearance of Mélusine may very well serve as a morality lesson.

The once-dreadful, voiceless mixoparthenos has finally become human enough to experience desire as well as grief. Mélusine is no passive object of desire but very much an erotic subject herself. Not only can she forbid the male gaze, but she is capable of objectifying the male body as she pleases: the language she uses to express her heterosexual desire is symmetrical to that of her male lovers.

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Ah, Raimondin ... Alas that I ever saw your noble body, your manner, your beautiful face, alas that I desired your beauty...

(Jean D'Arras, *Roman de Melusine*, qtd in Brownlee, 31)

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She represents herself as a female human body capable of love and lust (Brownlee, 30-31). While Medusa was capable of petrifying all those who beheld her even after being beheaded. Mélusine, when her monstrous body is glimpsed, must instead exile herself and mourn her own monstrosity. True, the baleful sight usually destroys the voyeuristic husband also: but this destruction is presented as an intensely personal, justified vengeance. It is, after all, the husband who has broken his oath. The cathartic compassion that Mélusine elicits is perhaps due to this betrayal of conjugal Logos.

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CHAPTER II:  
THE KEATSIAN SYNTHESIS

What of Keats and his treatment of the myth? Keats has neither the patriarchal anxiety to vilify and demonise the mixoparthenos, nor the feminist desire to appropriate (and invert) Lamia as a symbol of power and freedom. Instead, he harmonises the complete serpentine dialectic. The different layers of meaning, instead of abnegation and abrogation, remain as if upon a palimpsest. In the story by Philostratus, Apollonius was the hero and Lamia the villain: the Lycian man was the victim. Sympathies and perspectives were already changing before Keats, however. Burton had suppressed the more bestial aspects of Lamia, such as cannibalism and vampirism, to portray a more sympathetic character (Parsons, p. 208). Keats ennobles Lamia with the grace and decorum of proper tragedy: she has all the magnanimity of an Aristotelian heroine who is about to succumb to her fatal flaw (*hamartia*). Through bare breasts, she acquires the power of sexual display: through an uncanny mouth, the power of speech.

“Her head was serpent, but ah, bitter-sweet!  
She had a woman’s mouth with all its pearls complete...  
...Her throat was serpent, but the words she spake  
Came, as through bubbling honey, for Love’s sake.”

*(Lamia, l. 59-62)*

The image of “bubbling honey” is a fascinating contrast to Lamia’s later metamorphosis where her blood will run like foaming venom: Eros and Thanatos are entwined, libido and death-drive become one. Lamia has never been more *pathetic*:

she has been cast out of womanhood, her very birthright—and now is trapped within “this wreathed tomb.” But even in this abject state, the power of Logos is hers to command: to persuade Hermes, she must speak and perform time-hallowed lines.

The whole passage reeks of Edenic symbolism: one can almost imagine Lamia winding around the forbidden tree, uttering sweet blasphemies. What was the original sin of Lamia? Was it speech or nakedness? The poetic narrative suggests that the serpentine shape is a disfigurement, that there was a primordial state of complete womanhood:

“I was a woman, let me have once more  
A woman’s shape, and charming as before.”

(Lamia, l. 117-118)

Who cursed Lamia thus? Keats does not say. The unhappy Lamia has the power to seduce, conquer, devour men: she is a womb-phallus “on whom the fantastic catastrophe of castration descends” (Clarke, 576). Lamia displays unfeminine traits in pursuing the object of her desire with masculine ferocity and sporting a phallic tail. Yet implicit in her hybrid form (serpent from waist down) is the disfigurement of the legs and genitalia, expressing a patriarchal fear of, and a curse upon, female mobility and sexuality. Yet even as the patriarchal myth demonises the feminine and feminises the demonic, the uncanny lifelikeness of Lamia becomes the means whereby she can struggle against her abject/object status and become a sympathetic victim.

Necrosemiosis reveals itself once more: Lamia’s corporeal metamorphosis is absolute and final. Mélusine, thanks to her bivalent nature, was capable of reverting

back to ophidian form at will (Brownlee, p. 36).<sup>26</sup> Lamia has no such option: she is therefore annihilated when her human body withers away (unlike Mélusine, who reverts back to her draconic form permanently, or simply disappears). Philostratus had nothing to say about the ultimate fate of the vampire-phantom, whereas Keats spells her end with definitive authority: Lamia must die. Philostratus had the Lycian man return to the community of philosophers after Lamia's defeat: Keats concludes his masterpiece with his death. Nor can Lamia's "weird" magic offer any protection in the end.

The poem opens with an idyllic description of mythological warfare and banishment:

“Upon a time, before the faery broods  
Drove Nymph and Satyr from the prosperous woods,  
Before King Oberon's bright diadem,  
Sceptre, and mantle, clasp'd with dewy gem,  
Frighted away the Dryads and the Fauns...”

(*Lamia*, l. 1-5)

Keats does not posit a world of changeless truths: gods and goddesses, as products of the human imagination, are subject to change themselves. As such, they cannot be immune to death (Reiman, p. 663). Lamia is revealed at last as the quintessential

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<sup>26</sup> Naturally, this capability is also a weakness: Mélusine has to assume serpentine form at regular intervals to sustain her masquerade, which makes it possible for her husband to spy her forbidden shape. Lamia has no such burden: she can mimic womanhood with uncanny skill.

human serpent: she has become all too human (all too woman). Indeed, her refusal to overwhelm Lycius with magic reflects this:

“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 woman’s part.

(Lamia, l. 1-5)

The “woman’s part” Lamia has donned is a performative identity which suppresses the ophidian essence. Keats suppresses the violent and vampiric past of Lamia, but the shadow of evil cannot be exorcised out of the poem. It is interesting to note that she can achieve sexual and romantic bliss with Lycius, a luxury denied to many *mixoparthenoi*. Her annihilation becomes imminent (and imperative) only when Lycius presses for marriage (and thus, procreation). Were they to marry, what monstrous children would emerge? Would she not have been a new Echidna then, a mother of monsters spawning in our midst?

Keats issues paradoxical warnings, lest we forget that Lamia has something of the demonic lurking just underneath the human skin:

“A virgin purest lipp’d, yet in the lore  
Of love deep learned to the red heart’s core:  
Not one hour old, yet of scintial brain  
To unperplex bliss from its neighbour pain.”

(Lamia, l. 189-192)

The paradox of the virgin whore countermands the tragic, 'human' Lamia. Keats conceals her monstrosity underneath a translucent film only. What is the fount of her uncanny magic? How does she prepare the "weird syrups" which can bestow invisibility? How does she fly? How does she conjure illusions? These are the very exploits of the mediaeval witch who boiled infants in her cauldron.

Keats calls his Lamia a riddle of colours, a "Gordian shape of dazzling hue." Like an opium dream, phantasmal impressions of sensuous colours haunt the poetic narrative: a flood of qualia. But the full dramatic irony of this statement becomes manifest only at the very end of the poem. Alexander the Great had answered the original riddle with a motion of his sword. Keats borrows that fateful moment: Lamia, as if impaled by the phallic gaze of Apollonius, disappears into thin air.

"Then Lamia breath'd death breath; the sophist's eye,  
Like a sharp spear, went through her utterly,  
Keen, cruel, perçant stinging..."

(*Lamia*, II: 299-301)

And yet this "answer" destroys Lycius, her lover, also: there is no freedom from Lamia's knot except through death. This was a new ending that Keats had worked into his borrowed plot—certainly an inventive and provocative twist. Keats accessed the story of Lamia and Menippus from Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, which in turn was borrowed from Philostratus' *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*:

Philostratus in his fourth book de vita Apollonii, hath a memorable instance in this kind, which I may not omit, of one Menippus Lycius, a young man twenty-five years of age, that going between Cenchreas and

Corinth, met such a phantasm in the habit of a fair gentlewoman, which taking him by the hand, carried him home to her house in the suburbs of Corinth, and told him she was a Phoenician by birth, and if he would tarry with her, "he should hear her sing and play, and drink such wine as never any drank, and no man should molest him; but she being fair and lovely would live and die with him, that was fair and lovely to behold." The young man a philosopher, otherwise staid and discreet, able to moderate his passions, though not this of love, tarried with her awhile to his great content, and at last married her, to whose wedding, amongst other guests, came Apollonius, who, by some probable conjectures, found her out to be a serpent, a lamia, and that all her furniture was like Tantalus's gold described by Homer, no substance, but mere illusions. When she saw herself descried, she wept, and desired Apollonius to be silent, but he would not be moved, and thereupon she, plate, house, and all that was in it, vanished in an instant: "many thousands took notice of this fact, for it was done in the midst of Greece."

(pp. 324-325)

The version of Philostratus is more elaborate, but Burton allows for a moment of true sympathy: while the empousa (vampire) of Philostratus sheds false tears, Burton allows the mixoparthenos to express genuine love and remorse. In both versions, Apollonius is successful in liberating Lamia's paramour from her serpentine clutches. Menippus survives the phantasmal ordeal and becomes a philosopher again: Apollonius is true to his theophoric name in vanquishing the serpent of sensuous ignorance. Keats was loyal enough to the original plot that any reader familiar with

*The Anatomy of Melancholy* would not have missed the conspicuous plot twist: the dual deaths of the serpentine bride and her mortal lover.

Keats confounds the straightforward philosophical didacticism of Philostratus while seizing the sympathy offered by Burton. The cold death-stare of Apollo brings neither freedom nor wisdom but mutual annihilation. The Gordian knot cannot be untangled: it can only be severed. Keats imagines an artistic freedom from totalitarian truth, a creative void where meaning is fluid and multiform, as the supreme good of poetry: “I mean negative capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.” (*Letter to George and Thomas Keats*). We must either love Lamia as she is, a byzantine and ophidian tangle, or face the Medusa-like gaze of cold philosophy. The epistemological quest has been divorced from the divine madness of poetry. They may even appear as enemies, as with Apollonius and Lycius.

Keats did not always hold such subjectivist views; they represent the culmination, or perhaps the frustration, of a long philosophical journey. *Lamia* is what comes after the collapse of the humanist ideology, of the epistemological quest even. Keats was, at least for a period, the consummate humanist. In his *Hyperion*, he had painted sublime disinterestedness as the ultimate goal of his Apollonian poet-hero: “perhaps the highest quality of genuine humanism,” or in the words of Oceanus: “to envisage circumstance, all calm” (Cornelius, p. 94). This stance of sublime disinterestedness crumbles in *Lamia*; the poetic subject either loses contact with the reality-principle and submerges into a world of chaotic fantasy, as with Lycius, or his imagination withers completely (to the point of Apollonian rigor mortis) –as with Apollonius. *Lamia*, according to Stevenson, was written in the wake (and perhaps because) of a creative catastrophe or paradigm shift: the implosion of the Apollonian poet-hero. This was an ideal that Keats had been ideologising in earlier verse,

especially in his Odes (p. 241). *Endymion* was a mythological narrative about the quintessential Romantic hero who struggled against the reality principle and, after restricting and sublimating his desires in accordance with his human limitations, arrived at a successful resolution. (Reiman, p. 662) *Lamia* denies this resolution, wherefore Lycius the fallen philosopher must die.

Lamia is thus the embodiment of negative capability, a protean state of flux which cannot tolerate concrete answers. Without serpentine freedom, there can be no poetic inspiration. Any attempt to bind this Lamia in an anthropomorphic form will fail. She also preserves her older, more traditional role: a metaphor for sensuousness, a challenge to the cold, sober pursuit of immutable, solid knowledge:

“Her mouth foam’d, and the grass, therewith besprent,

Wither’d at dew so sweet and virulent;”

(*Lamia*, I: 148-149)

The entanglement of pain and pleasure was no new theme for Keats. To him, “the extremity of delight” is coeval with “a suffering at the centre: and the profoundest expression of delight returns us to its origin in grief” (Cummings, p. 52). Extreme pleasure converges with extreme pain: Lamia’s blood is poisonous because it is *too sweet*.

“A virgin purest lipp’d, yet in the lore

Of love deep learned to the red heart’s core:

Not one hour old, yet of scintial brain

To unperplex bliss from its neighbour pain;

Define their pettish limits, and estrange

Their points of contract, and swift counterchange;

Intrigue with the specious chaos, and disport

Its most ambiguous atoms with sure art.”

(*Lamia*, I: 189-196)

That the passage starts with the paradox of the virgin whore only helps to undermine the promise that Lamia “can unperplex bliss” from suffering. Lamia employs her “sciential brain” to seduce the young philosopher through sensuousness, the Romantic antithesis to Enlightenment science. Keats’s elaborate description as to how Lamia can separate pain from pleasure does in fact emphasise the impossibility of the project in between the lines: “pettish limits” separate the neighbours, and even their constituent atoms are “ambiguous.” The proximity of pain and pleasure is a favourite Keatsian topic, explored elsewhere in his oeuvre:

Ay, in the very temple of Delight

Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine,

Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue

Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine;

(*Ode to Melancholy*, I: 25-28)

What about Apollonius? It has been argued that the sophist-philosopher reflects a Romantic fear of natural philosophy: “Apollonius, looking “too far into” Lamia’s beauty, discovers nothing but her loathsomeness.” (Fairchild, 99). As science unravels the mysteries of nature, the sense of wonder and fascination one feels before her majesty begins to fade away: the nymphs and satyrs of yore fall before the onslaught of Enlightenment reason. Keats fears that natural philosophy will dis sever

the mantic bond between oracle-poet and the Muse: a dissected rainbow can longer fascinate the viewer. The initial spell Lamia casts upon Lycius is not enough to confine him to their fairy mansion forever; when he has had too much of the serpent-witch, the spell fades away. Perhaps if Lycius had a lifetime to look upon his serpentine lover, he too would have slain her with his studious gaze—piecemeal, without the abrupt violence that we associate with tragedy.

This is consistent with Poe's famous admonishment to the cold philosopher whose "mere touch" is enough to scare off "all charms," who has unwoven the "awful rainbow" and clipped "an Angel's wings."<sup>27</sup> One cannot help noticing that the traditional metaphor of the death-gaze has also been inverted in the Keatsian paradigm. The petrifying gaze of classical monsters, such as that of Medusa and the mediaeval basilisk, threatened to overthrow the forces of progress and civilisation. But the relentless gaze of Apollonius threatens to suppress the very vitality of nature. This is all too reminiscent of Nietzsche's seminal criticism in *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* (in line with much of Romantic sentiment) that Western civilisation has become too Apollonian, that it must shift towards the Dionysiac end of the spectrum to achieve a fuller balance. The death of the Dionysiac serpent as embodied in "Lamia" is therefore a catastrophe for the West and not a victory.

Lycius is an anti-Platonist insofar as he cannot relinquish the world of illusions and their sensuous attractions: he loves them for their own sake. An epistemological quest at the expense of the sensuous world does not at all appeal to Keats. Lycius thus becomes the embodiment of a new kind of poet, a poet whose self-annihilation must precede the birth of the creative process.

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<sup>27</sup> cf. Poe's "To Science," inspired heavily by *Lamia*.

## CONCLUSION:

### “LAMIA” IN LIGHT OF KEATS’ POETICS

The rivalry between poetry and philosophy is an ancient theme, rooted as it is in Plato’s enmity to mimetic art. Keats was quite conversant with Plato, though theirs may not have been an affirmative relationship. Keats was not happy with the mimetic role assigned to poets, that “tribe of imitators.” He would rather believe that “the poet’s role is essentially creative, not merely imitative” (Sperry, 269).

Plato’s assault on poets was threefold. *Ion*, one of the earlier dialogues, allows no possibility of poetic knowledge whatsoever. Socrates here identifies poetry with *mania*, inspired madness: an irrational, psychic power flowing from the Muse to the poet, and thence to the rhapsode (to which corresponds the famous lodestone metaphor). This critique, however, distinguished between the original poet, viz. Homer, and the imitative poet, viz. Ion—Plato was not daring enough to disown Homer yet. By the time he wrote *The Republic*, a more mature work, he had articulated his theory of mimesis. The mimetic theory takes an even less affirmative view of poesis—dispossessing even Homer. Poesy is thrice removed from reality, and may potentially cause an infinite regression from authentic existents. Plato employs optical metaphors to express his distrust of artistic imitation: the poet may appear omnipotent in his ability to imitate anything, but all he does is “turning a mirror round and round.” Throughout the dialogue, “poet” becomes synonymous with “wizard.”

Mirrors, as symbols of this profound mimetic distrust, appear in a scene of *Lamia*:

“...fifty wreaths of smoke

From fifty censers their light voyage took

To the high roof, sill mimick'd as they rose  
Along the mirror'd walls by twin-clouds odorous.

(*Lamia*, II: 179-182)

The phantasmal mansion of *Lamia* is clad in mirrors. Keats combines the reflective, illusive mirror with evanescent, formless smoke to express the non-reality of *Lamia*'s feast. Smoke itself is intangible and prone to dissolution, in line with the Platonic conception of the phenomenal, sublunary world. The wreaths they form are not meant to last. *Lamia*'s enchanted mirrors proliferate this smoke, deepening the illusion: creating pleasing images that are thrice removed from reality.<sup>28</sup>

And yet the Romantics embraced Plato. How to reconcile this endorsement with Plato's own contempt towards poesy? The conception of the poet as a mere imitator runs *quite* contrary to Romantic aspirations. What they adopted was thus an eclectic exegesis of the earlier dialogue, *Ion*, and the notion of the poet as a vehicle of *mania*. Shelley's *Defence of Poetry*, a work that was particularly expressive of the Romantic zeitgeist, is rife with Platonic references and inferences; it "encourages a particular reading of the *Ion* which, in any case, was thoroughly attuned to the spirit of his age." (Stern-Gillet, p. 177).

The theory of divine madness in *Ion* "cunningly mixes flattering and unflattering language." The celestial inspiration that descends upon poets and rhapsodes makes them the mouthpieces of gods, soothsayers and hierophants. Yet this oracular metaphor steals from the poet the authorship of whatever beauty and/or truth he may be uttering during his frenzy. (Stern-Gillet, p. 178). However great and

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<sup>28</sup> In the age-old conflict between philosophy and poetry, *Lamia* comes very close to an allegoresis of fiction: Hermes calls her "Thou smooth-lipp'd serpent, surely high inspired!" (*Lamia*, I: 83).

sublime his poem be, the poet remains a vessel to be filled and emptied—just like Lycius, who has absorbed so much of Lamia that her abrupt dissolution must necessitate his own sudden death.

This conception of the poet as an empty vessel is echoed by Keats in one of his letters:

“A poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence; because he has no Identity – he is continually in for – and filling some other Body – The Sun, the Moon, the Sea and Men and Women who are creatures of impulse are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute.”

*(Letter to Woodhouse)*

This famous Keatsian formula (that the poet dissolves himself into his poetic object) is redolent of Platonic *mania*. (Kabitoglou, p. 115). These theoretical speculations in fact do affirm Plato’s judgement of poets and poetry, but in a subversive sense: instead of melancholising the intellectual quest denied to poets, Keats celebrates the *lack*. He does accept the possibility of an external world, of unchanging substances even; but the poet is a special kind of creature who is deprived of such an essence. As such, he can pass as any body. Again in *Ion*, Socrates accused the rhapsode of being like Proteus, the god of mutability, since he was continually changing the definition of his profession. Unsurprisingly, Keats also coined the phrase “chameleon poet”.

The statement that the poet is “the most unpoetical of anything in existence” is a subtle answer to a sinister comment in *The Republic*: that the real artist “instead of being the author of encomiums, would prefer to be the theme of them.” Keats again inverts and appropriates the accusation: the unpoetical poet becomes a paradoxical, if not ironic, ideal. To bridge the fundamental chasm between the poetical object and the

unpoetical subject (who nevertheless performs as a poet) is a feat which reason cannot perform: instead, such a task calls for “imagination.”

The dialectic of imagination was an integral element of Romantic philosophy. Keats’s letter to Benjamin Bailey, a friend who was an ardent Platonist, discussed the ontological role of imagination, another perennial concern of his:

“What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth - whether it existed before or not - for I have the same idea of all our passions as of love: they are all, in their sublime, creative of essential beauty. [...] The imagination may be compared to Adam's dream, - he awoke and found it truth. I am more zealous in this affair because I have never yet been able to perceive how anything can be known for truth by consecutive reasoning - and yet it must be.”

*(Letter to Bailey)*

To the ancient Greek philosophers, *phantasia* was a rather lowly faculty: even the simplest animals possessed it. “Imagination” in this archaic sense is understood as the capability of forming images out of sense perception: some translations even render the word as “representation.” The Greek philosophical tradition regarded imagination as a meagre tool in the service of philosophical truth: necessary for the operation of *nous*, which is reason proper, but also subject to it. In the case of Plato, imagination belongs to the realm of everyday perception, which is nothing more than illusion/opinion: his celebrated metaphor of the divided line, in *The Republic*, assigns imagination to the lowest of the four epistemological realms: *eikasia*.

“Imagination” as we conventionally understand today, as a high and inspired faculty, is a more or less Romantic invention, though we should not disregard the middle link, which is Neoplatonism. Plotinus was certainly a dear figure to the Romantics. Keats’s own understanding of imagination is more Neoplatonic than Platonic: he was an avid reader of Spenser, himself a Neoplatonist. Shelley based his own metaphysical speculations on the Plotinian schemata. According to Plotinus, poesy and philosophy had a more vital relationship: he did not deny the possibility of poetic vision. Since the material world was made up of shadowy reflections, a good poet might attain insight into the authentic existents throughout his creative labours. The power of the imagination, according to him, was *antilepsis*, “taking hold of the contrary.” In this manner, *phantasia* apprehends the world outside and makes external objects parts of itself (Warren, p. 277).

Keats does refer to Plato once in the poem, and not surprisingly, this is also in a context that concerns the *phantasia* dialectic:

“Thoughtless at first, but ere eve’s star appeared  
His phantasy was lost, where reason fades,  
In the calm’d twilight of Platonic shades.

(*Lamia*, I: 234-236)

The heavenly bodies were paragons of *being* to Plotinus: constant, eternal, incorruptible. The phrase, “Platonic shades,” necessitates a paradox in itself: Keats subverts the opposition between the immutable world of being and the mutable world of appearances. Reason fails against the power of illusion and “phantasy,” instead of leading the philosophical subject to sidereal truth, is trapped among errant “shades.” The immutable world is impossible to reach: indeed, it may have been an illusion in

the first place. Keats is ultimately suggesting that “such a realm of permanence is a product of human “phantasy” or desire” (Sitterson, p. 201). Keats therefore ascribes to *phantasia* an ontological value higher than that of *nous*.

This is consistent with the Keatsian claim that will follow: what separates gods from mortals is the plenitude of their imagination. The gods are perpetually happy because they live in a state of perpetual dream: there is no external reality principle that limits their desires. Aristotle imagined his gods as beings of pure motion: Keats, as phantoms of pure imagination. Their dreams become real and if only we could imitate this state, we would also become gods:

“It was no dream; or say a dream it was,  
Real are the dreams of Gods, and smoothly pass  
Their pleasures in a long immortal dream.”

(*Lamia*, II: 126-128)

Needless to say, this is an impossible promise: the gods are figments of the imagination and even if they were not, humans could never attain their perpetual bliss. In “*Lamia*,” Hermes and the nymph elude our grasp and elope to their “green-recessed woods,” fulfilling their too-godlike roles. They remain artificial, conventional, impossible to sympathise with.

*Lamia* is a clash between different narratives of beauty: every character has a different aesthetical imperative. Platonic love starts as the admiration of a beautiful body, but must eventually transcend the corporeal limits and become love for the abstract Good, “an ocean of beauty,” and this is to be accomplished through sublimation. This argument constitutes Diotima’s speech, who herself is a mantic priestess and commands poetic language, in *The Symposium*.

Apollonius in this respect may represent the failed (or *too* successful) Platonist who, in trying to sublimate his passions, completely erases them. A queer reading is not impossible either. On the erotic level, this is a conflict between homosexual-philosophical and heterosexual-sensuous love: the age-old struggle between Aphrodite Ouranos and Aphrodite Pandemos.

Does anyone doubt that she is double? Surely there is the elder, of no mother born, but daughter of Heaven, whence we name her Heavenly [*ourania*] while the younger was the child of Zeus and Dione, and her we call Popular [*pandemos*].

(*Symposium*, 180d)

The ideal, “Ouranian” love was a specific kind of sublimated homosexual relationship, as elaborated in both *Phaedrus* and *The Symposium*. The description of Apollonius as a man with “curly gray’d beard” and Lycius as a youth in his prime fits very neatly the opposition between *erastes* and *eromenos*, lover and beloved. Apollonius and Lamia compete over the same object of desire: Lycius.

Keats has puzzled many critics with his labelling of Apollonius as a “sophist.” Some have even speculated that Keats was unaware of the meaning of the word, and that he was simply seeking a disyllabic substitute to the word “philosopher” for purely metric reasons (Sitterson, 203). Sitterson refutes these comments, and correctly assumes that “Keats is making a rather subtle point about Platonic reality, namely that absolute belief in its ontological primacy is sophistic in claiming knowledge about that which is not certain” (212).

If Plato disliked poets, he positively abhorred sophists. Both poetry and sophistry were aspects of the imitative art to Plato: whereas poetry/art was “likeness-making,” sophism was “appearance-making” and thus in an even more ontologically inferior and epistemologically suspect status. This difference notwithstanding, he held poets and sophists to be alike in that they were both shapeless persons: *Ion* gives us the image of the Protean rhapsode, and *The Sophist* denounces the latter as “a wonderful and inscrutable creature” who escapes definition. Socrates proceeds to accuse the sophist of being an angler who hunts for, and corrupts, the youth of Athens. (The homoerotic connotations are again obvious: sophists and philosophers are not only ideological but erotic rivals, since they both have the same objects of desire: the Athenian youth).

How fundamentally ironic it is, then, that these are the very accusations brought against Socrates during his trial. His persecutors accused Socrates of corrupting the youth of Athens, of being a sophist even, the very people he (or at least his Platonic version) hated with a passion. And therein is the key to the consummate irony of that charged word, *sophist*, in the poem:

“For all thine impious proud-heart sophistries,

Unlawful magic, and enticing lies.

(*Lamia*, I: 285-286)

Keats is levelling the selfsame charges against Apollonius in desiring nothing less than to abolish the boundaries between sophistry and philosophy. Even Socrates admitted this difficulty in *The Sophist*: both philosophers and sophists are difficult to identify correctly. The philosopher is dark from an excess of light, a blinding angel, whereas the sophist takes refuge in the darkness of non-being. Keats beheld them both

and saw only (divine) blindness. Poetry and philosophy become equally dreamlike, equally nebulous in *Lamia*—equally *sophistic*. When Lycius abandons his philosophical pursuits for the love of Lamia, he wakes from one sleep into another.

“And as he from one trance was wakening  
Into another, she began to sing.”

(*Lamia*, I: 296-297)

The crystalline, triadic hierarchy comes crushing down: they all merge in an amorphous mass. The philosopher is the sophist. The sophist is the poet. The poet is the philosopher. And they are all wizards.

Keats has thus raised his voice against the harmony of the spheres. Of whose beauty does the chameleon poet sing with such *enthusiasm*? Not the Olympian messenger, to whom Keats assigns his most blasé verse. Not the invisible wood-nymph, whose perfection is just as artificial and lifeless. Not Lycius, who can be neither fully lover nor fully beloved. Not Lamia the woman, who has lost all colour and protean charm, like the Little Mermaid who sacrifices *Logos* for a handful of foam. Not the cold intellectual beauty Apollonius is lusting after, which perhaps even he himself cannot remember. No *anamnesis* in the shadowy world of *eikasias*. So the answer to the riddle would be: Lamia the serpent. Multicoloured and paradoxical and hypnotic, whose rainbow beauty can only be captured at the moment of her annihilation.

Thus ends Lamia. Even in her desperate struggle to become an Eve, she cannot escape being a Lilith. To stop being a monster, Lamia must cease to exist.

## APPENDIX

### THE WATER MAID

Ey, August. Trans. D. L. Ashliman. "Die Wasseriungerfer." *Harzmarchenbuch: oder, Sagen und Marchen aus dem Oberhanze* (Stade: Verlag von Fr. Steudel, 1862), pp. 173-76.

At the time when there was nothing in the Harz but virgin forest, a knight came here to hunt. Before he could orient himself, he became lost, and he wandered about for several days without finding a path.

Finally he came upon a beautiful castle situated in a large meadow and surrounded with water. A pathway led to a drawbridge, which had been suspended. He called out; he whistled; he waited. He didn't hear anything from within. It was as though the castle had died out.

"Wait," he thought. "The castle cannot be empty. Someone will have to appear shortly. Just sit here and wait until someone comes." So he sat and waited, but the castle remained silent. Finally his patience wore out, and he was just making preparations to leave when he saw a beautiful girl emerge from the forest and walk toward the bridge.

"Wait," he thought. "She knows her way around here. She is going inside." And that is what happened. When she was within a few steps of him, he spoke to her, telling her that he had lost his way in the Harz Forest, that he had camped out eight days in the open, and that he was eager at last to spend a night under a proper roof. He had already sat here for three hours asking for admission, but no one had shown himself or let himself be heard. Further, he asked if she would be so good to ask permission for him to enter once she was inside.

She said that that would not be necessary. He could come with her. She did not need to ask anyone for permission, for she herself was in charge here. With that she stepped on a stone that was mortared into the earth in front of the bridge, and the bridge immediately descended. Then she took out a large key and unlocked the gate. Together they walked through a large courtyard and into the castle.

She led the knight into a beautiful room and asked him to make himself comfortable. She told him that before anything else, she wanted to go and prepare a proper evening meal. Surely he would like something hot to eat, she said, adding that she too was hungry. Because she had no servants, she would have to take care of everything by herself.

With that she left the room. A short time later she returned with a beautiful roast, cakes, and many other delicious things. She set the table and invited her guest to help himself. He did not need to be asked a second time.

After they had eaten, they sat together and talked with one another. The knight said that he felt sorry for the friendly girl, because she lived here all alone, observing that time must pass very slowly for her.

"Oh no," she said. "Time does not pass slowly for me," adding that nonetheless she sometimes did wish for company, but if she did not have any, she could still manage just fine.

The knight answered that if she did not mind, he would stay here a few days and keep her company. The hostess replied that she would be happy if he would do so.

The guest remained one, two, three days, and they became so accustomed to one another that in the end the knight asked her if she did not want to become his wife. The girl was pleased with this, and she said that she would love to do so, if he would only promise her that every Friday she would be able to go out and do

whatever she wanted to, and that he would not try to follow her or look after her. This he promised her, and they became a couple.

They lived together a long time, satisfied with one another. They produced lovely children, and in their happiness they lacked nothing.

One day a strange knight came and was given lodging. It was on a Friday, and he asked about the lady of the house, because she had not made an appearance. The master of the house told him that his wife was never to be seen on a Friday, and that he -- in keeping with his promise -- had never sought after her. With that the strange knight asked what kind of a housewife would not tell her husband where she could be found. Nothing good could come from such behaviour.

This conversation so alarmed the master of the house that he immediately set out to find his wife. After a long search, he finally came to the cellar, where he found a door. Opening it, he saw his wife, half fish and half human, swimming in a small pond. When she saw her husband, she cast a sad and serious glance at him, and then disappeared.

The bewildered man went back upstairs to tell the strange knight what he had experienced, but he too had disappeared. Now the poor man realized that he and his wife had been cruelly deceived and victimized by the stranger. He grieved so much for his good wife that he died soon afterward. The lovely children also died one after the other, and the castle fell into ruins. It is not even known where it formerly stood. Only the story remains.

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