

## Serpents Named and Naming: Representations of Confrontation in Keats's *Lamia*

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### I

John Keats composed his narrative poem *Lamia* from late June to early September 1819. The story of the poem is based on a short anecdote about a sage in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* by Robert Burton. The wise philosopher rescues his disciple from marriage to a woman who is “found out to be a serpent, a lamia” (188). While Burton’s narrator does not reveal that the woman is a serpent until the middle of the tale, Keats’s heroine appears as a snake at the beginning and then metamorphoses into a beautiful woman in the middle of the poem. According to the *OED*, “lamia” is the name of “a fabulous monster” which is “supposed to have the body of a woman, and to prey upon human beings and suck the blood of children.” However, it is not clear that Lamia in this narrative tries to prey on a man or a child. The female serpent of Keats’s poem dares to approach a young man purely for love and wishes to be loved by him. At the end of the story, she seems to be rather the victim. She is annihilated by the stare of an old philosopher, Apollonius, and a shout from her lover, Lycius; however, she retains a woman’s figure when she disappears.

The poem has been discussed as the confrontation between the magical enchantment of Lamia and the cold philosophy of Apollonius. The accusation aimed at Lamia has been considered as the recognition of reality by Lycius, and it causes him to die. Though there are many critics who admit that Keats stands by Lamia, most analyses have pointed out the moral ambiguity of her character.<sup>1</sup> Some scholars take her for a fatal serpent woman who lures young Lycius to his death and others appraise her as a victim.<sup>2</sup> Recent interpretations of *Lamia*, however, tend to avoid moral definitions and focus instead on the representation of the heroine as a woman.<sup>3</sup> Since the current gender criticism has offered numerous explications of “femininity” in the poetry

of Keats, *Lamia* has been discussed from this view point because it is one of his most problematic works in this respect.<sup>4</sup> However, some of these studies of femininity in his poetry treat his works generally and it seems that there remains room for a discussion focused on *Lamia*.

It is interesting that the critics who regard *Lamia* as a disastrous being consider her a tempter like Satan in *Paradise Lost*.<sup>5</sup> They seem to ignore that a lamia in its original form is not a tempter but a monster which preys upon human beings. The name *Lamia* has lost its original meaning, signifying simply a serpent woman as defined by Burton. *Lamia* in Keats functions as a womanly sexual seducer to a young man. Though the heroine succeeds in captivating Lycius, her power later decreases. A woman is given the force to control the opposite sex, but the male characters later recover their powers. The announcement of the male characters that she is a serpent makes her vanish at the end. Old Apollonius is a stronger male character than young Lycius. The text makes the philosopher more spiteful than the serpent woman. His stare deprives *Lamia* of her beauty and vigour, and it gives a cue to Lycius's fatal exclamation. The conclusion implies the powerful existence of a masculine superintendency which can define the other and, at the same time, its ironic, contradictory failure. I will consider why the heroine must finally be expelled, and why Apollonius wants to annihilate her, through an analysis of the representations of serpents manifested in the text.

## II

Keats's narrator tells how *Lamia* dissolves into nothing at the end of the story. The trigger for her vanishing is a shout from Lycius. He cries "A serpent!" (2. 305).<sup>6</sup> It is true that she has appeared as a snake, but she has changed her figure to "A woman's shape" (1. 118). Therefore, the accusation that she is a snake is made not against her present form but against her nature as a serpent. The strictures will need their ground.

It is true that, while the heroine takes the serpent form, the narrator of the poem describes it as the "snake" (1. 88), the "serpent" (1. 113), or "the brilliance feminine" (1. 92). He does not call her a woman.<sup>7</sup> Though he tells how she has "a woman's mouth," it is merely a reference to one part of the body and is not equal to defining her as a woman. The snake for itself says that "I was a woman" (1. 117), but this also reveals that she is not a woman. After the change of her

appearance from serpent to human, the narrator calls the heroine “a lady bright” (1. 171), “a maid” (1. 185), and “this fair creature” (1. 200). He does not call her a serpent or a snake after the metamorphosis; the narration distinguishes the heroine in a woman’s shape from the same person in a snake’s form. However, we can recognize that the woman is the serpent. Our perception is provided by the impression that there is some continuity between both *Lamias*, the snake and the woman.

There are two common factors between them. One is the femininity of both bodies and the other is the attachment to Lycius. Hermes finds “a palpitating snake” (1. 45), which is the heroine with puzzling colours and patterns.

She was a gordian shape of dazzling hue,  
 Vermilion-spotted, golden, green, and blue;  
 Striped like a zebra, freckled like a pard,  
 Eyed like a peacock, and all crimson barr’d;  
 And full of silver moons, that, as she breathed,  
 Dissolv’d, or brighter shone, or interwreathed  
 Their lustres with the gloomier tapestries—  
 So rainbow-sided, touch’d with miseries,  
 She seem’d, at once, some penanced lady elf,  
 Some demon’s mistress, or the demon’s self. (1. 47–56)

The depiction seems to reject any precise definition, though the colours and patterns of the snake are exceedingly vivid and flowery. The pronoun tells us that the snake is female, but the last line of this quotation evokes an insecure feeling about the gender of the serpent. The narrator implies that the appearance of the snake apply to both sexes by “Some demon’s mistress, or the demon’s self.” If we see only the depiction of the body, the demonstrative pronoun is apparently the chief support of our judgement that it is female. Although line 56 evokes the ambiguity of the sex of the snake, it is soon solved. The expressions after that line make it more clear that the serpent is female.

Upon her crest she wore a wannish fire  
 Sprinkled with stars, like Ariadne’s tiar:  
 Her head was serpent, but ah, bitter-sweet!  
 She had a woman’s mouth with all its pearls complete:  
 And for her eyes: what could such eyes do there  
 But weep, and weep, that they were born so fair?  
 As Proserpine still weeps for her Sicilian air. (1. 57–63)

There are two similes which compare her body parts to two famous

ancient Grecian princesses. Ariadne is a girl whose love is her undoing and Proserpine is a maid who is deflowered because of the love of Dis or Pluto. The “wannish fire / Sprinkled with stars” implies a feminine frailty like Ariadne and eyes that “weep” suggest a womanly violated helplessness. Her mouth is also described as “woman’s.” These phrases supply more decisive female elements for the snake. Moreover, as I mentioned above, she is described as “a brilliant feminine” (1. 92). The femininity of the serpent is thus repeatedly depicted.

After the transformation, it is said that the woman has a desire to see herself in “a clear pool” (1. 182). Looking in a mirror is one of the traditional icons of womanly behavior. The outward appearance of the woman is depicted as a beautiful maid.

Ah, happy Lycius! — for she was a maid  
 More beautiful than ever twisted braid,  
 Or sigh’d, or blush’d, or on spring-flowered lea  
 Spread a green kirtle to the minstrelsy:  
 A virgin purest lipp’d, yet in the lore  
 Of love deep learned to the red heart’s core: (1. 185–90)

Her feminine beauty is praised and the narrator lets out an envious exclamation to Lycius. Each wording of this praise follows a convention. She is compared with other maids, whose charms are supposed to consist in their twisted braids, sighing, blushing, and spread kirtles. Sighing and blushing are also traditional signs of loving somebody though they can be applied to both sexes. Braids and kirtles may indicate more female elements. The old romance represented by “the minstrelsy” has regarded these kinds of ornaments as for women. The word “maid” and “virgin” contains more sexual implication than “woman,” but they make it clear that she is a female. Her attractiveness is reported by the narrator. Though the quotation seems to show the womanly loveliness of the heroine, her femininity is depicted with conventional diction.

The constancy of her love to Lycius is more obvious. The serpent confesses to Hermes her affection for “a youth of Corinth” (1. 119) when she asks him to change her figure to a woman, and she cries “Lycius! Gentle Lycius!” (1. 168) when she finishes her transmutation. The call is one piece of evidences that she is attached to him and it makes the reader presume that Lycius is the name of the person whom she loves. After the transformation, the narrator talks about a prehistory of her affinity and it informs us that Lycius is a youth of Corinth and that her affection for him causes her formal change. Once she

becomes a woman, she makes her appeal, and easily succeeds in cajoling him with her overwhelming enchantment.

The heroine appears as a glaring snake and changes her figure to a brilliant woman. Her continuity through her metamorphosis consists in her conscience and her sex. In spite of her physical transformation, she is banished as a serpent at the end of the story. It is true that she has a strong enchantment for the young man and manipulates others in Part I. These abilities result from her nature as a serpent or a monster. In Part II, however, she is deprived of her power to dominate others and the male characters come to possess it. The power shift suggests that her quality as a snake is decreasing.

The serpent is originally discovered by Hermes, who was looking for a “sweet nymph” (1. 30) in Crete. He hears her voice before seeing her appearance.

There as he stood, he heard a mournful voice,  
Such as once heard, in gentle heart, destroys  
All pain but pity: thus the lone voice spake:  
“When from this wreathed tomb shall I awake!  
When move in a sweet body fit for life,  
And love, and pleasure, and the ruddy strife  
Of hearts and lips! Ah, miserable me!”

(1. 35–41)

The introduction of “a mournful voice” has the power to cultivate the listeners’ pity or sympathy and it shows the narrator’s compassion for its speaker. The “wreathed tomb” indicates the form of a snake as a coiling figure. However, the diction suggests that the snake form is just a grave with a flowery appearance. The declaration about being “awake” indicates that the speaker thinks that being in the body of a serpent is like sleeping. The utterance is a lament that the speaker is buried in a tomb, in the body of a serpent. The voice wants a body, which is qualified as “sweet.” It is the common adjective given to the nymph whom Hermes seeks. This “sweet nymph” is adored and given gifts by “all hoofed Satyrs” (1. 14) and “the languid Tritons” (1. 15). However, her charm is not fully explained. She has “white feet” (1. 15) and it is the only concrete description of her. Certainly, the narrator exclaims “what a world of love was at her feet” (1. 21) but the direct epithet for herself is only “sweet.” The sweetness seems to be the main factor in her character that attracts satyrs, tritons and Hermes. It is not clear whether this quality of the nymph attaches itself to her nature or just to her looks; however, the “mournful voice” directs the word to “body.” A “sweet body” is supposed to enjoy the pleasure of

life and sensual satisfaction in the following phrase. Especially, “the ruddy strife / Of hearts and lips” suggests a vivid and lively sensation. The voice declares that the snake’s body is a “wreathed tomb” and it wants “a sweet body.” It demands to be revived from the state of death to an active existence.

After the formal change of the heroine, there is an expression given by the narrator which refers to the serpent. It is the phrase that “she could muse / And dream, when in the serpent prison-house” (l. 202–03). It means that the body of the snake is regarded as a “prison-house” and that she is now free from it. It also suggests the existence of some inner self imprisoned in the form of the snake. Therefore, the diction makes a contrast between the outer form and the inner essence of the heroine. We usually consider that the serpent and the lady have the same identity in spite of the physical transformation. It is because we take her consciousness for her essential quality and we think that the continuity of her nature guarantees her stable identity. The phrase shows that the snake body is given without her will. The heroine thinks that her identity does not depend on her changeable form but on the sequence of her senses.

The implication by Apollonius at the end of the story determines that the heroine is a serpent. Lycius accepts the suggestion of the sage. Their definition made her vanish. Readers of the poem may also infer that she is a serpent woman since they know that she was a serpent. The responsibility for the decision of the readers partly lies with the narrator. The name of Lamia is given to the heroine after her transmutation. Except for the title of the poem, this proper noun for the protagonist first appears at line 171, which is the very first appearance of “A full-born beauty new and exquisite” (l. 172). The heroine makes her appearance as a womanly figure. The name functions as a label informing us that she is a monster despite her formal change. She is known to be a lamia or a serpent by her name. Wolfson suggests that the name of Lamia is “a sign of her true identity” (*Questioning Presence* 337). However, if her identity is not in her form but in her consciousness, there is a possibility that the naming by the narrator provides another prison-house for her. She can not escape from this identity as a monster or a serpent as long as she is trapped by the act of naming.

## III

Apollonius is the man who exposes her as a serpent. He is an old philosopher and sage. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, there is a possibility that the compulsion of Lamia by Apollonius is tyrannical. The sage related by Burton, on the other hand, seems to be judicious and righteous. Keats has given him another dimension. This section argues that Apollonius is not just a sage but a malicious man in Keats's text and that he is described as like a serpent at several points. To begin with, I want to confirm the main evidence that he seems to be the champion of right. The following citation is Apollonius's reaction when accused by Lycius, who had been astonished because the gaze of his teacher made his bride "no longer fair, there sat a deadly white" (2. 276).

"Fool! Fool!" repeated he, while his eyes still  
Relented not, nor mov'd; "from every ill  
Of life have I preserv'd thee to this day,  
And shall I see thee made a serpent's prey?" (2. 295-8)

Apollonius seems to insist that he will prevent young Lycius from being "a serpent's prey." If his assertion were admitted, he would be the guardian of his disciple with justice and goodwill. He does not say directly that Lamia is a snake. He merely implies it. But his other discourses and behavior betray this sense. When they are considered, it is difficult to say he is simply a man of good faith.

Apollonius represents "cold philosophy" (2. 230). The text resolves the conflict between the "cold philosophy" of Apollonius and the magical enchantment of Lamia. This struggle in the poem has invoked a number of controversies. The narrator says that "all charms fly / At the mere touch of cold philosophy" (2. 229-30). Metaphysics is traditionally taken as a male force of intellect and Apollo is its ruling God. Apollonius's authority is considered as a conventional male strength. Lucy Newlyn suggests that Apollonius is the reality principle. While commenting on the love of Don Juan and Haidee in Byron's poem, she compares Lambro, who is the father of Haidee, with Apollonius (187).<sup>8</sup> His character has the aspect of a paternal male master.

He first appears towards the end of Part I, when Lamia and Lycius come to Corinth. This encounter episode is not found in Burton's text; it is an insertion by Keats. It is conceivable that the teacher is an inhabitant of the same city. In fact, the first description of Apollonius comes after a brief report of town street with flaring lights at night,

which describes the obscenity there.

As men talk in a dream, so Corinth all,  
 Throughout her palaces imperial,  
 And all her populous streets and temples lewd,  
 Mutter'd, like tempest in the distance brew'd,  
 To the wide-spreaded night above her towers.  
 Men, women, rich and poor, in the cool hours,  
 Shuffled their sandals o'er the pavement white,  
 Companion'd or alone; while many a light  
 Flared, here and there, from wealthy festivals,  
 And threw their moving shadows on the walls,  
 Or found them cluster'd in the corniced shade  
 Of some arch'd temple door, or dusky colonnade. (1. 350–61)

Immediately after this quotation, Lamia and Lycius see Apollonius passing nearby. The account of the town, which looks like a voluptuous shadow play, provides the impression that all over the city is the world of night and loose morals, and that there is every sort of unchaste person. Corinth has been considered notorious for its sensual corruption. One of the reasons for this is that there was a temple sacred to Aphrodite, that is, to Venus. It is said that there were hundreds of male and female temple prostitutes there. It is also well known that the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians treats sexual immorality as one of its main issues. The city's name, "Corinth," is also used as meaning a house of ill fame in *The Life of Tymon of Athens*.<sup>9</sup> Though there is a line space between the information of the dreamlike vision of this lewdness and the encounter of Lamia and Lycius with Apollonius, the sequence can raise a slight doubt about the authenticity of the teacher in Corinth.

The second time that he makes his appearance is at the reception of the wedding banquet for Lamia and Lycius. The old man seems to have something in mind due to his attitude to Lycius. Apollonius is not invited to the feast because Lamia has demanded that Lycius exclude the philosopher. Though uninvited, he comes to the palace established by the magic of Lamia. He speaks to Lycius as follows:

He met within the murmurous vestibule  
 His young disciple. "'Tis no common rule,  
 Lycius," said he, "for uninvited guest  
 To force himself upon you, and infest  
 With an unbidden presence the bright throng  
 Of younger friends; yet must I do this wrong,  
 And you forgive me." Lycius blush'd, and led



The old man through the inner doors broad-spread;  
 With reconciling words and courteous mien  
 Turning into sweet milk the sophist's spleen. (2. 163–72)

His way of talking and apologizing here is indirect. He may have reason to be in a bad temper, but he seems to carry something in mind. Moreover, the narrator reports “the sophist’s spleen.” “Spleen” is derived from a Greek word meaning one of the internal organs, which has been considered to have an influence on human emotion. Emotion is not in keeping with the sage of “cold philosophy.” If “cold philosophy” includes “spleen,” “cold” does not mean intellectual calmness, but heartlessness or anger that is barely controlled and this showing of Apollonius’s spleen reminds us of a similar attitude in evil spirits from fairy tales like “Sleeping Beauty.” In these fables, a bad fairy who is not invited to the feast celebrating the birth of a prince or a princess brings evil upon them. Apollonius, who is not invited either, effects the vanishing of Lamia and the death of Lycius in the middle of their celebration. The visit of Apollonius is based on ill will, like that of an evil fairy.

In the last part of the story, Apollonius gazes at Lamia and the force of his eyes makes her lose her charm and power. It causes Lycius to reproach him, though the philosopher used to be considered by the youth as a “sage, my trusty guide / And good instructor” (1. 375–76). Here is Lycius’s accusation:

“Shut, shut those juggling eyes, thou ruthless man!  
 Turn them aside, wretch! or the righteous ban  
 Of all the Gods, whose dreadful images  
 Here represent their shadowy presences,  
 May pierce them on the sudden with the thorn  
 Of painful blindness; leaving thee forlorn,  
 In trembling dotage to the feeblest fright  
 Of conscience, for their long offended might,  
 For all thine impious proud-heart sophistries,  
 Unlawful magic, and enticing lies.  
 Corinthians! look upon that gray-beard wretch!  
 Mark how, possess’d, his lashless eyelids stretch  
 Around his demon eyes! Corinthians, see!  
 My sweet bride withers at their potency.” (2. 277–90)

This indictment makes it clear that, for Lycius, Apollonius is no longer a trusty guide, but rather a “ruthless man” and a “wretch.” The voice of the former young pupil grows more intense. The words, “forlorn,” “impious proud-heart,” “possess’d,” indicate that Lycius takes his

teacher for someone far from the grace of God, and these expressions represent Apollonius as a demonic figure. What is more, the power of his cold philosophy is not the opposing force to magic but “Unlawful magic, and enticing lies.” From all of these descriptions, Apollonius could not be regarded as merely a sage. Rather, he appears malicious.

#### IV

Apollonius is not portrayed as having only ill will. It has been pointed out that he has the element of a serpent also. His characterization should be considered in more detail from this viewpoint. Harmione de Almeida discusses the leading image of the serpent in *Lamia* (418). She insists that representations of snakes fill this narrative poem above and beyond the snake woman, Lamia herself. Building up her argument on studies of venom, the bionomics of serpents and some legends about adders during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century in Britain, she suggests that both Lycius and Apollonius have some of the qualities of predatory animals or serpents. Her view rests on the fact that Lycius stares at Lamia as if he would drink her beauty up unless she should vanish (1. 251–56) and that Apollonius destroys Lamia by his powerful gaze. According to de Almeida, the very force of eyes to possess the body and mind of the prey is considered as characteristic of serpents during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Bruce Clarke also thinks that the eyes of Apollonius have the destructive force of a basilisk. Though Apollonius says to Lycius, “shall I see thee made a serpent’s prey,” he himself has made Lamia the prey of his powerful eyes.

Lycius delineates the eyes and eyelids of his teacher as “juggling eyes,” “lushless eyelids,” and “demon eyes.” As de Almeida asserts, they can be read as the accounts of a serpent. Leaving aside the question of whether they are a portrait of reptiles’ eyes, there has been some discussion about the power of Apollonius’s eyes as a form of evil strength. These descriptions of the eyes of Apollonius are part of the evidence that he has the qualities of a snake. However, other elements also seem to imply his potency as a serpent.

Apollonius comes to the feast in Lamia’s magic palace among other guests:

Save one, who look’d thereon with eye severe,  
And with calm-planted steps walk’d in austere;  
’Twas Apollonius: something too he laugh’d,

As though some knotty problem, that had daft  
 His patient thought, had now begun to thaw,  
 And solve and melt: — twas just as he foresaw. (2. 157–62)

This portrait shows his eyes and his way of walking. This “eye severe” is characteristic for Apollonius, and it is the very thing that comes to play an important role at the end of the story. His manner of walking is also described in a strange phrase. According to the *OED*, to use “plant” as “the sole of the foot” is very rare. If the poet just wanted to say that Apollonius walks calmly, “planted” might not be needed. It sounds curious that he dares to use the expression which puts emphasis on “the sole of the foot.” The wording about the calmly planted sole of the foot may suggest the movement of a snake, which crawls silently on the belly. Furthermore, the expression may indicate another “plant” or vegetation, which is a homonym of this “plant” or sole. If the term intimates both a serpent and green plants, it is not difficult to associate it with Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, in which the serpent and the garden are closely connected. Then, Apollonius could be taken for a character associated with the Satan of *Paradise Lost* as their potent eyes and serpent-like movements indicate.

In *Paradise Lost*, Satan performs similar actions. He takes on the body of a snake and coils in front of Eve before he tries to seduce her.

As when a ship by skilful steersman wrought  
 Nigh river’s mouth or foreland, where the wind  
 Veers oft, as oft so steers, and shifts her sail;  
 So varied he, and of his tortuous train  
 Curled many a wanton wreath in sight of Eve,  
 To lure her eye; (PL, 9. 515–20)

This is the very point when Satan tries to speak to Eve. Keats had his own two volume *Paradise Lost* and underlined “of his tortuous train / Curled many a wanton wreath in sight of Eve.”<sup>10</sup> Satan’s movement and Apollonius’s description could be considered to be in a parallel relation. It is useful to examine the portrayals of Apollonius again, taking the description of Satan in *Paradise Lost* into the consideration. He is a figure “With curl’d gray beard, sharp eyes, and smooth bald crown, / Slow-stepp’d, and robed in philosophic gown” (1. 364–65). As mentioned above, “curl’d” is the expression that Milton uses for Satan as a serpent, and “sharp eyes, and smooth bald crown, / Slow-stepp’d” implies the quality of a snake.

“[F]orlorn” (2. 282) and “the feeblest fright / Of conscience” (2. 283–84) propose that destiny is far from the grace of God. Pride in

“thine impious proud-heart” (2. 285) is the worst of the seven deadly sins, and it is the cause of the fall of Satan. Furthermore, a curious fact emerges from the lines that are “all thine impious proud-heart sophistries, / Unlawful magic, and enticing lies” (2. 285–86). Satan invades the body of a snake by “Unlawful magic,” and “entices” Eve with “lies.” Apollonius makes Lamia lose her vitality by his powerful eyes, which work like “magic.” However, he does not “entice” her with “lies” or “sophistries,” because he does not speak to her. It is possible that the “lies” were told to Lycius while he was an obedient disciple of Apollonius. Lycius criticizes his educator for his former teachings. Though he puts the responsibility for Lamia’s change at the wedding banquet on the old philosopher, there is a distortion. Furthermore, there is the likelihood that Lycius’s expression about Apollonius was written with a conscious awareness of Milton’s Satan.

It has been pointed out by Lucy Newlyn, Beth Lau, and other scholars, that Keats composed *Lamia* when he was reading *Paradise Lost* and writing large number of notes and comments in it. These critics also insist that the depiction of Lamia as a snake woman is influenced by Satan, the serpent, in Milton. However, the influential expression from *Paradise Lost* is not only that concerning the woman but also Apollonius. Lamia is a serpent, but Apollonius also has a serpent-like nature. Apollonius exercises the power of “cold philosophy” as a paternal guardian of youth. Although Burton writes that he was originally a conventional sage, his portrait by Keats invites suspicion about his righteousness. Recent study of the feminizing Keats shows that the poet often values powerful masculinity less than the effeminacy of sweetness and softness.<sup>11</sup> The “cold philosophy” that Apollonius represents is a masculine energy in reason. However, he also has the nature of a serpent.

## V

As I mentioned in section II, Lamia’s character seems different from that of the imagined monster that devours human beings. When she is named Lamia and accused of being a serpent, she has already shed the serpent form. The labeling given to her character does not come from her personal qualities nor from her physical appearance. However, since her attempt to keep hold of Lycius is considered an act that will effectually cut him off from his associates, her desire for him has the same aspect, in terms of his relationship to society, as eating

him materially. Her act will deprive the old philosopher Apollonius of his young disciple. It is likely that the youth has been expected to inherit the wisdom of his mentor. Lamia's love for Lycius poses a threat to this inheritance of wisdom. Since the old age and austerity of the philosopher imply that his wisdom has some established authority in society, the failure of succession between the old man and the young can be damaging to the ruling force of that society. Then, the love of Lamia may be regarded as a power that destroys the continuity of male communal order.

Her destructive force derives from her sexual attraction for Lycius. The mysterious attractiveness of her body is repeated in the text by the narrator and she herself tries to conceal her nature, emphasizing what can be called womanly charm.

There is not such a treat among them all,  
 Haunters of cavern, lake, and waterfall,  
 As a real woman, lineal indeed  
 From Pyrrha's pebbles or old Adam's seed.  
 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,  
 With no more awe than what her beauty gave,  
 That, while it smote, still guaranteed to save. (l. 330-39)

Her "playing" a woman's part is achieved by throwing off "the goddess" in her. This means that her implied natural status is actually higher than a real woman's and Lycius's. She has adopted the strategy of pretended inferiority in order to secure the love of Lycius. The inferiority of women to men makes up a part of admitted femininity as manifested in meekness and mildness. Lamia appeals to Lycius by such "womanliness." As a sexually attractive woman she is dangerous to male society. A woman can form a relationship with a man that is satisfying both physically and spiritually to him but she can also cause damage to what he represents by shaking the foundation of society; if she leads him astray, the established order, which has given him his superiority over women, may collapse. Therefore, a woman can be simultaneously pleasing and accursed for a man. Love of a man for a woman may make her sacred and damnable at the same time. These contradictory views about a seductive woman are closely related to the image of the serpent permeating *Lamia*. It should be noticed that the serpent as an emblem indicates also both the omen of evil and the sign

of goodness. It is a remarkable symbol that has multifarious and mutually conflicting meanings. The symbolism of the serpent has the same ambivalence as that of the alluring woman. The labeling of the heroine of the poem as a serpent suggests that a woman has a markedly ambivalent potential in relation to society. The identification with a snake is a stigma which is given to an entity that can threaten the established social bond formed between its men.

*Lamia* can be read as the story of an unsuccessful attempt by a woman who has intruded into men's exclusive community. The elimination of the heroine at the end of the poem is effected by the old philosopher, who can be regarded as the champion of male society. However, as I suggested in previous sections, this poem implies the possibility that Apollonius is also a serpent. If the identification with a snake is associated with a menace to society, it is possible that he should be ejected from the community like Lamia because of his uncommon power. It is true that he has remarkable force. His attributes in being an old philosopher, as I have mentioned above, show that he possesses outstanding intelligence and authority. Despite his exceptional, potentially destructive power, he is not forced to go into exile. The difference in the final outcome of the plot for Lamia and Apollonius results from the contradictory functions that their respective powers have for the social order. While Lamia threatens the male homosocial bond between the wise man and his pupil, Apollonius plays the role of protector to the established relationship. Moreover, his superintendency stems from the foundations of the phallogocentric society because the superiority of knowledge produces authority and maintains social order. It is his power that keeps the community intact. Therefore, this powerful, serpentine man is not to be expelled from the society he himself is supporting.

Both Lamia and Apollonius have a unique power of influence and both are described as serpents. The former is a challenger to the existing social bond and the latter is the guardian of its authority. Yet, however powerful they be, it should be noted that there exists in *Lamia* a yet more potent entity, namely, the narrator of the story. As for Apollonius, it is the narrator who gives descriptions which allow the identification of the old sage with a serpent. It is the narrator also who gives the heroine the name of Lamia after her metamorphosis. It is he again who depicts Apollonius as a stern man bearing something dark in his mind. Finally, at the end of the story, he makes the fatal encounter between Lamia and Apollonius a confrontation between two

serpents. The battle of the two opposing snakes presents an emblematic image of ouroboros, which means eternal recurrence, and, consequently, a stalemate.

Apollonius's power is comparable with this omnipotent narrator's; he can give a name, define the other, thus capturing it inside his system of signification. The conclusion of the poem seems to present the victory of Apollonius, the guardian of society, since Lamia, the challenger, vanishes with a scream. As a philosopher, he seems to bear the power of intelligence. In fact, he has the force to define and reveal that the heroine is a serpent while the others are unable to see that she is one.

"From every ill  
Of life have I preserv'd thee to this day,  
And shall I see thee made a serpent's prey?"  
Then Lamia breath'd death breath;

. . . . she[Lamia], as well  
As her weak hand could any meaning tell,  
Motion'd him to be silent; vainly so,  
He[Lycius] look'd and look'd again a level—No!  
"A Serpent!" echoed he; no sooner said,  
Than with a frightful scream she vanished: (2. 296–99, 301–06)

The cry by Lycius, "A serpent!," suggests that he finally accepts the definition made by the philosopher. The young man "echoes" the word of his teacher. The old man establishes the principle that this woman is a serpent, and this defining act makes her disappear. He seems to defeat the heroine in the confrontation between them. The weakness of Lamia makes her look like a loser. However, it is Lamia who actually dissolves their condition of ouroboros. Her disappearance may suggest that she refuses to obey the patriarchic order which Apollonius tries to save. She makes the authority ineffectual by means of escape. On the other hand, Apollonius, who occupies a central position in androcentric society, can not give up the conflict as Lamia does. He can not vanish from society if he continues to be himself. He must continue to fight to keep his authority because he is its producer. He may be potent enough to overwhelm any challenger against him and protect the hierarchical structure of his world. However, since the establishing of hierarchy is always accompanied with potential conflicts, the organizer of the social rule can never keep the confrontation between opposing forces from ultimately coming to the fore.

Lamia, by escaping from Apollonius and his system, has preserved

her identity; she has nullified the definition that she is a serpent. Her vanishing forces the narrator to finish his story. She has escaped even from the grip of the narrator. This means that, as she flees from the foreground of the story, she can be free from any forced labeling. The story seems to have come to an end with the exclusion of the invader into society. However, by making his narrative question the dubiousness of male social authority and consequently the authoritarian narrative itself, Keats has finally revealed the positive import in an escape that seems deceptively negative.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Many critics use “ambiguous” to describe Lamia. See Cox, Little, and Rajan.

<sup>2</sup> Stillinger also says that “we must . . . keep in mind that Lamia is still basically an evil character, a snake-woman who is associated with demons, elves and fairies . . .” (57). Little defines how she is “a beautiful, probably deceitful, and certainly uncategorizable woman” (107). Rajan says that “[t]hough deceptive, she is herself is the victim of Lycius and Apollonius, and originally of the being who may have changed her into a serpent” (128).

<sup>3</sup> Wolfson says that “Lamia herself is no portent of spiritual repetition in a finer tone but an embodiment of the deceptive operations of the artist’s illusions.” (*Questioning Presence* 334). Bennet treats her with allegories. Kuchich focuses the analogy between the poem and the Psyche myth.

<sup>4</sup> See, Brisman, Newlyn and Lau.

<sup>5</sup> Wolfson examines how Keats has some gender ambivalence and confirms his feminization with biological and historical details in her *Feminizing Keats*. As for general arguments, see Bewell and Homan. The relationships between Keats and two woman writers, Mary Tighe and Mary Wollstonecraft, has been analysed. See Daruwala, Gross, Henderson, and Kuchich.

<sup>6</sup> All quotations from the poetry of John Keats are to the Stillinger edition.

<sup>7</sup> It seems that the distinguishing the gender of the narrator is also difficult, but I will take it as male according to the custom.

<sup>8</sup> Newlyn discusses the influence of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* to the poets of Romanticism. As for the works of Keats, she mainly deals with *The Eve of St. Agnes*. However, there are some references to *Lamia*, and about Apollonius she says, “As the bearer of authority, law, and morality, Lambro is indeed closer to Keats’s Apollonius than to Milton’s arch-fiend.”

<sup>9</sup> *The Life of Tymon of Athens* (II. ii. 83).

<sup>10</sup> Lau has worked on the volume of *Paradise Lost* which Keats possessed.

<sup>11</sup> See Kuchich and Henderson.



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