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Lamia, Isabella, and The Eve of St. Agnes

Eros and “romance”

Keats’s final lifetime volume of poetry, published in the summer of 1820, is named for its three romances – *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems* – and the title page identifies the poet as “Author of *Endymion*,” his longest romance of all. Keats and his publishers sought to present him as a narrative poet on a literary scene dominated by popular writers of romances, such as Scott and Byron. This is remarkable, not only because *Endymion* had been ridiculed, but also because Keats himself had seemed intent to secure his name, like Homer or Milton, through epic. In *Sleep and Poetry*, the finale to *Poems* (1817), he imagined bidding farewell to the poetry of delight, “the realm . . . / Of Flora, and old Pan” (101–2), in order to treat “the agonies, the strife / Of human hearts” (124–25), matter for epic or tragedy. This pivot is most revealing, however, in projecting the way Keats’s farewells to romance stay dialectically engaged with it. Even his last attempt at epic, *The Fall of Hyperion* (late 1819), begins in a romance setting, amid the remnants of an Edenic feast, and takes the form of a Dantean dream-vision, a motif from quest-romance. From the 1817 *Poems*, with its various gestures of romance (“Lo! I must tell a tale of chivalry,” begins *Specimen of an Induction to a Poem*), through *Endymion*, to the 1820 volume and after, Keats seems always on a quest to write a few fine quest romances.

Romanticism, as this retrospective labeling of the era suggests, owed much to the eighteenth-century revival of medieval romance, which brought old texts back into circulation, spurring their positive evaluation in new literary histories and inspiring a large body of new works shaped with romance conventions, such as Southey’s *Thalaba* (1801), Scott’s *The Bridal of Triermain* (1813), and Thomas Moore’s *Lalla Rookh, An Oriental Romance* (1817). Drawing upon the conventional quest romance (“nearest of all literary forms to the wish-fulfillment dream,” says Northrop Frye), Romantic-era writers subjected “old romance” (as Keats called it in *Isabella*) to modern critiques and new purposes.¹

Isabella, composed in early 1818, has been taken as the harbinger of these newer modes. Yet Keats balked at publishing it, even though his friends praised it: Charles Lamb thought it the “finest thing” in the 1820 volume (*New Times*, 19 July 1820), and John Hamilton Reynolds hoped its “simplicity and quiet pathos” would “answer” and “annul” the negative criticism Keats had received in conservative journals for his “Cockney” innovations (*KL* 1.376). Keats was still concerned that it was “mawkish” and sentimental (*KL* 2.162) and gave Woodhouse “a few reasons why I shall persist in not publishing *The Pot of Basil*”:

It is too smokeable [. . .] There is too much inexperience of live, and simplicity of knowledge in it [. . .] I intend to use more finesse with the Public. It is possible to write fine things which cannot be laugh'd at in any way. *Isabella* is what I should call were I a reviewer ‘A weak-sided Poem’ with an amusing sober-sadness about it. [. . .] this will not do to be public – If I may so say, in my dramatic capacity I enter fully into the feeling: but in *Propria Persona* I should be apt to quiz it myself – There is no objection of this kind to *Lamia* – A good deal to *St Agnes Eve* – only not so glaring – (*KL* 2.174)

As Keats’s misgivings about *Isabella* make clear, romance, a mode of enchantment linked to wish-fulfillment, was prone to being seen as a weak indulgence, incapable of sterner stuff – in Keats’s summary term, “too smokeable.” This adjective, usually taken to mean “easily exposed in its faults,” carried a more precise sense of “too easily made fun of” – as Keats himself was in the conservative reviews.² If *Isabella* might seem to show the “inexperience of li[fe]” of an adolescent naively embracing the idealizations of romance, would its author risk finding himself the object rather than the master of humor?³ Particularly after Byron’s *Beppo* (published the month Keats began *Isabella*) and *Don Juan* (Cantos I–II, 1819) had demonstrated the sensational popularity of an ironic treatment of romance and romantic love, Keats may well have worried that his romances would court a defensive ridicule from readers intent to deny their susceptibility to the wish-fulfilling enchantments of the genre. Although Keats was finally persuaded that *Isabella* was worth publishing, his private judgment has been repeated in modern critical tradition, which has preferred the complexities of *St. Agnes Eve* and the blend of sophisticated irony and dramatic power in *Lamia*.

These judgments, together with the prospectus in *Sleep and Poetry* and the compositional order of the narrative poems of 1818–19, have encouraged assessments of Keats’s romances on a developmental model: *Isabella* is “early” apprentice-work, paving the way for the “mature” *Eve of St. Agnes*, and then *Lamia*, the characteristic work of the “late” Keats who takes up earlier forms and ideas only to ironize and to deconstruct them.⁴ But the

fourteen months between late April 1818, when Keats completed *Isabella*, to late June 1819, when he began *Lamia*, is a very short term for the logic of such a narrative (even for a poet who in three years could move from *Calidore*, a romance fragment about knights and ladies, to the “Great Odes”). A deeper motive for the developmental model is to privilege a “post-Cockney” Keats, the great poet who becomes the true heir of Shakespeare, Milton, and Wordsworth by outgrowing the so-called aesthetic weaknesses of the Hunt school and developing his mature art. *Blackwood’s* put Keats in the “Cockney School of Politics, as well as the Cockney School of Poetry” (3 [August 1818], 524), and so Keats’s “development” can seem to have a political arc, too. Jerome McGann, for instance, reads the 1820 volume as a “great and (politically) reactionary book,” the “whole point” of which was “to dissolve social and political conflicts in the mediations of art and beauty.”⁵ Whether the story is maturation or reaction, the developmental model suppresses the many ways in which the romances of the 1820 volume still reflect the ideological vision and poetic practices of the Cockney School – the intellectuals and artists of the Hunt circle that included, when Keats joined them in the fall of 1816, the Shelleys, Hazlitt, Godwin, Reynolds, Haydon, Vincent Novello, Peacock, and many more, with Byron as a kind of corresponding member.

The romances of the 1820 volume are not just documents of individual aesthetic development. They continue the Cockney campaign to reform poetry, culture, and politics.⁶ All embrace collective Cockney experiments. *Isabella* was planned as part of a collaborative project with Reynolds – who produced *The Garden of Florence* and *The Ladye of Provence* (*The Garden of Florence and Other Poems* [1821]) – to offer modern adaptations of Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, an idea urged by Hunt and Hazlitt, with Hazlitt’s *Lectures on the English Poets* (1818) recommending the tale of *Isabella* in particular.⁷ *Isabella* and *The Eve of St. Agnes* join the Cockney project of using traditional Italian literature to underwrite innovative English creations: hence Hunt’s infamous adaptation of the tale of adulterous love between Paolo and Francesca, related in the fifth canto of Dante’s *Inferno*, in *The Story of Rimini* (the first Cockney School paper saw it celebrating incestuous love)⁸ and Shelley’s Dantesque *Epipsychidion*, which argues for free love beyond patriarchal controls. *The Eve of St. Agnes*, owing some of its luxurious sensuousness to Hunt’s romance, joins *Rimini* and *Epipsychidion* in sympathizing with lovers in revolt against restrictive societies. *Lamia*, akin to Peacock’s *Rhododaphne* (1818) and Hunt’s classical romances, *Hero and Leander* and *Bacchus and Ariadne* (1819), advances another Cockney theme, the turn to classical myths and forms as embodying a pre-Christian vision found in works from Hunt’s *Nymphs* (1818) to Horace Smith’s

Amarynthus the Nympholept (1821); as Marilyn Butler remarks, Lycius's attack on Apollonius (2.277–90) is “a call on behalf of the pagan and against the Christian approach to the life of the senses.”⁹ The triangular relationship between Lycius, his tutor Apollonius, and his exotic love, Lamia, resonates with other works produced within the circle, such as Reynolds's *Romance of Youth*, in which a mysterious “Queen of the Fairies” enchants a young man who is destroyed when he follows an Apollonius-like counselor, who turns him from enchantments to “reality.”

Pursuing Cockney themes, Keats's romances also engage a Cockney style. While critics in our century have tended to see Hunt's new school through Keats's language of disenchantment (“mawkish”), contemporary reviewers, as McGann notes (31), recognized the experimentalism. This “new fangled” poetry (as Gold's *London Magazine* [1820] called it) was patently urban, chic and cheeky. It could be “vivacious, smart, witty, changeful, sparkling, and learned,” said Scot's *Edinburgh Magazine* (1817) – but maybe seem “too full of conceits and sparkling points.” With the *Lamia* volume in its sights, *Monthly Review* (1820) described a “laboriously obscure” style, full of “strange intricacies of thought, and peculiarities of expression,” “continually shocking our ideas of poetical decorum.”¹⁰ Flashing a Cockney style, Keats's romances advertise their modernity. In these lights, the seeming sentimentalities of *Isabella* appear as controlled by wit: opening with “Fair Isabel, poor simple Isabel,” Keats tweaks “simple” to suggest the naivete which will fall, with black humor, to “wormy circumstance” (385). Scot's *Edinburgh Magazine* discerned the Cockney style of *Endymion* even in *Lamia*, where Keats flaunts Cockney coinages and compounds such as “psalterian” (114) and “cirque-couchant” (46), indulges a cocky humor unusual in romance, and happily risks a sensuality that often embarrasses.¹¹ Keats stayed a poet of romance but he did so through the ironizing he explained to Woodhouse: “in my dramatic capacity I enter fully into the feeling: but in Propria Person I should be apt to quiz it myself” (*KL* 2.174). Woodhouse discerned a tone of Byronic quizzing in the last stanza of *The Eve of St. Agnes* (*KL* 2.163), and such tones are quite audible at the opening of *Lamia* Part II. At the same time, the order of the romances in the 1820 volume also makes an argument for full feeling: the movement from *Lamia* to *Isabella* to *The Eve of St. Agnes* produces the enchantments of the last romance beyond irony, beyond the self-smoking procedures of *Lamia*'s distancing effects, beyond even *Isabella*'s “amusing sober-sadness.”

Read in the volume's sequence, the poems also offer, as Stuart Curran points out, an experiment with the modes of “Greek (in couplets), Italian (in ottava rima), and British (in Spenserian stanzas)” romance, as Keats plots a cultural movement from the classical past through the Christian middle ages to the

present.¹² Keats could have learned how to use traditional materials for contemporary purposes from his model, Dryden's *Fables* (see Woodhouse; *KL* 2.165), for Dryden also modernizes classical (Ovid), Italian (Boccaccio), and English (Chaucer) romances. Moreover, by engaging Milton's *Paradise Lost* but shifting from his epic ground to romance, Dryden showed Keats how to "translate" the generic and cultural power of epic to another form, the "epic as cento."¹³ As a sequence, the three romances of the 1820 volume offer a modern equivalent to the synoptic vision of epic.

Lamia opens the volume with an evocation of the past cultures these poems will move beyond:

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 . . . (1-5)

The realm of romance is already marked by the politics of dynastic struggle. Keats places his romance within slow time, particularly the time of cultural history, as he explores the "pastness of the past," the experience of a difference between our moment and earlier cultural systems.¹⁴

As many note, Keats is concerned in *Hyperion* with the historical movement between cultural periods, defined as the shift from the Titans to the Olympians. *Ode to Psyche* – closer to *Lamia*, which echoes it (1.66, 2.22-25) – moves from the classical period of "antique vows," when "holy were the haunted forest boughs, / Holy the air, the water, and fire" (36-39), through the period when the "faint Olympians" (42) were replaced by the Christian God, the vanquisher of paganism celebrated in Milton's *Nativity Ode* (echoed throughout the middle section of *Psyche* [Allott, 518]), then to Keats's own day, beyond these earlier belief systems. The modern poet must turn for inspiration to Psyche, the self, and to "warm Love," the hope for connection with the other – even though he knows that the "shadowy thought" of modern poetic fancy may only "feign" where others could believe (58-67).

The opening of *Lamia*, "Upon a time," and the distancing close of *St. Agnes* ("And they are gone: ay, ages long ago"; 370) call attention to the outmoded beliefs and fictions of "old Romance." So, too, *Isabella's* authorial interruptions: these are not (as sometimes argued) a Keatsian affectation; they are a Cockney tactic. Keats describes *Isabella* as an attempt to "make old prose in modern rhyme more sweet" (156) for an age that may yearn "for the gentleness of old romance" (387); Reynolds makes the same point in *Ladye of Provence* when he notes that his tale offers the "old Italian"

Boccaccio “tamed into Northern verse” (p. 156); and Hunt justifies his intrusions in the *The Florentine Lovers* by arguing that a writer seeking to revive “the good faith and simplicity in the old romances” cannot forget that he writes in a modern time marked by an “accursed critical spirit” (*Liberal* 1 [1822], 70). The authorial asides in *Isabella* are tuned to the Cockney consciousness of their critical, ironic, self-conscious times, an age in which not even romance can avoid romantic irony.

Yet Keats moves beyond irony, including the historicizing irony that distances the beliefs of “old Romance.” His impulse, indeed his devotion, is to discover a new eroticized romance, with *eros* not as a power of dubious enchantment but as a means of connecting with the physical world. The quest of Keats’s lovers is not for any world of wish-fulfillment (Frye), nor for the powers of the wishing self (Harold Bloom), but for an erotic reality that fulfills even as one strips away the self’s illusions. As Porphyro proclaims to Madeline in *The Eve of St. Agnes* after they make love, “This is no dream, my bride, my Madeline!” (326).

To win such consummation, Keats insists, one must confront and dispel the illusions surrounding the erotic. His advertised source for *Lamia* (excerpted in an endnote to the poem), Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), places the story of Lycius and Lamia within an analysis of “Heroical Love causing Melancholy.” *Lamia*, too, explores the vicissitudes of desire, as love easily shades into jealousy, possessiveness, and violence in a world dominated by what René Girard calls the “triangulation” of desire. By this, Girard means that desire is not straightforward, but always vectored through other factors: through dreams formed by literary romance (“I want a love just like the ones I have read about”), through the desires of others (“I want her/him because my rivals want her/him”), through displacement onto a mediator (I really desire X, but – for whatever reasons – I cannot admit it, so I desire Y who is desired by X).¹⁵ Keats’s “ever-smitten Hermes,” “bent warm on amorous theft” (*Lamia* 1.7–8), burns in “celestial heat” for a nymph because “a world of love was at her feet” (21–22). In heat for the nymph because this world of others desires her, Hermes is appropriately marked by “jealous curls” (26); he is “full of painful jealousies / Of the Wood-Gods, and even the very trees” (33–34). The “pleasures” of the “long immortal dream” that Keats’s narrator tells us Hermes eventually finds with his nymph (127–28) depend upon their escape from the economy of triangulated desire and its travails of competitive love. Secured by Lamia where she is “unaffronted, unassail’d / By the love-glances of unlovely eyes” (101–2), the nymph can fulfill one Hermetic desire, a male dream of a fully erotic relation that is fulfilling only because the woman is aware of no one but her lover.

Lamia entices Lycius as a similarly unmediated object of desire. The narrator calls him happy, for Lamia is a “virgin purest lipp’d, yet in the lore / Of love deep learned to the red heart’s core” (1.189–90); though “still unshent” (untouched), Lamia has the aura of a “lovely graduate” of “Cupid’s college” (197–8). A virginal “full-born beauty new and exquisite” (172), she is a kind of erotic Athena born from the desirer’s mind into the art of love. Coming to her first erotic contact seemingly with no prior life, Lamia can evoke no jealousy. Forging a paradise, the lovers form “so complete a pair” (2.12) that they need no one else. They seemingly escape the triangulation of desire. Except that their love is beset from both within and without. If Lamia appears to Lycius as a “new” beauty, we know she has been a serpent (described in a set-piece of Keatsian sensuous verse; 1.47–67). This duplicity is part of what dooms their romance, but Lycius, too, is a flawed lover, now the gullible youth, now a tyrant over Lamia, now “senseless Lycius” (2.147). We first meet him when, after a visit to the temple of Jove to pray for a happy marriage (1.226–29; Allott, 626), he has turned from his comrades, “wearied of their Corinth talk” (1.232). The implication is that he has rejected Corinth’s preoccupation with pleasures of the flesh (its Temple of Venus, Burton notes, was a famous whorehouse). Lycius is “lost” in a “phantasy” of “Platonic shades” (235–36), of love free of sensuality. Like Madeline in *The Eve of St. Agnes*, Lycius prays to a supernatural force for a dream-mate. Appearing as if a gift from above, Lamia plays right into this dream.

Even as the pair would secure a love completely apart from society, the cynical lines that open Part II (1–6) remind us that love – whether in a hut or a palace – must face limits imposed by social context. The external world invades the erotic retreat as Lycius (like Antony recalled from Cleopatra’s arms) is awakened from dreams of eternal passion by “a thrill / Of trumpets” (27–28). His “golden bourn” now seems a “purple-lined palace of sweet sin,” condemned by the “noisy world almost forsworn” (30–33). As if renewing his loyalty to this world, Lycius turns from his harbor of “bliss” (9) and starts to think of Lamia as his “prize”:

My thoughts! Shall I unveil them? Listen then!
What mortal hath a prize, that other men
May be confound and abash’d withal,
But lets it sometime pace abroad majestic,
And triumph, as in thee I should rejoice
Amid the hoarse alarm of Corinth’s voice.
Let my foes choke, and my friends shout afar,
While through the thronged streets your bridal car
Wheels round its dazzling spokes. (2.57–64)

Returning Lamia to desire's triangulations, Lycius finds enjoyment in domination:

Perverse, with stronger fancy to reclaim
 Her wild and timid nature to his aim:
 Besides, for all his love, in self despite,
 Against his better self, he took delight
 Luxurious in her sorrows, soft and new,
 His passion, cruel grown, took on a hue
 Fierce and sanguineous. (2.70–76)

As pleasure shifts from otherworldly bliss to worldly boasting, eros turns to violence, creating an unequal though still powerful relationship: “She burnt, she lov’d the tyranny” (2.81).

It is an irony of Lycius’s sensation of imminent social and erotic victory in a world of triangulating desires that Lamia is most threatened by the cold stare of his mentor, Apollonius. As he announces the “truth” about her life as a snake, his “sophist’s eye / Like a sharp spear, went through her utterly, / Keen, cruel, perçant, stinging” (2.299–301). The historical Apollonius, half Pythagorean philosopher, half magician, lived in the early Christian era, and his presence in Keats’s poem signals the shift from Classical to Christian culture found in the opening lines. In Keats’s day, Apollonius was a charged figure, with Edward Gibbon slyly paralleling him with Jesus (his disciples credited him with many of the same miracles), and with Edward Berwick’s translation of the *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* (1809) challenging such connections, in order to protect Christianity from a corrosive comparative mythology.¹⁶ Keats’s Apollonius – kin to Apollo with his vision of rational order and a Jesus wannabe – also epitomizes the “cold philosophy” (science) that dispels “all charms,” reduces the sublime rainbow to “the dull catalogue of common things,” and conquers “all mysteries by rule and line” (2.229–35). Apollonius embodies what Nietzsche would later call the great error in Western thought: the belief in a transcendent truth that renders the “mere” appearances of lived life false. In “How the ‘True World’ Finally Became a Fable: The History of an Error” (*The Twilight of the Idols*), Nietzsche traces this denigration from Plato’s claim that the “true world” is attainable only by the virtuous sage (i.e. Plato), through the Christian version of the “true world” as the afterlife won by “the sinner who repents,” to modern science’s faith in its will to truth. With ties to the Greek philosophical quest, to Christianity, and to science, Apollonius is the *ne plus ultra* (supreme instance) of triangulation: everything has value only insofar as it is mediated through the ultimate Other – the Ideal, God, the Truth. No pleasure, whether the passing experience of the rainbow, a fluctuating desire, or what Keats called “a fine isolated

verisimilitude caught from the Penetrarium of mystery” (*KL* 1.193–94) can survive such triangulation. Keats appropriately has Apollonius preside over the destruction of erotic life at the poem’s close.

If *Lamia* stages the threat posed by the triangulation of desire, *Isabella* uses its “amusing sober-sadness” to expose what happens when even unviolent love is caught up in what Hunt called the “spirit of money-getting.” From Baldwin’s *London Magazine* (1820), with its complaint that Keats’s description of the brothers as “money-bags” is “no better than extravagant school-boy vituperation of trade and traders,” through George Bernard Shaw’s praise of these same stanzas (14–18) as a “prophecy” of Marx, to the best recent work on the poem, critics have recognized Keats’s attack upon a money-mad society.¹⁷ Lorenzo and Isabella are implicated in the economic oppression that is central to their world, however much their romance seems opposed to “money-getting.” What the lovers share in “private” has links to “private enterprise”: they and the merchant-brethren are ensnared in the same isolating social configuration, with the economics of desire mimicking mundane economics. The brothers are involved in a global, imperial capitalism whose grasp extends from Ceylon to the arctic, from the depths of the seas to the depths of mines, from the gathering of raw materials to the manufacture of goods in “noisy factories” (105–20). Yet for all their worldly reach, these consummate capitalists are isolated, distanced from the reality of the suffering that is their main product: “Half-ignorant, they turn’d an easy wheel, / That set sharp racks at work, to pinch and peel” (119–20). Keats’s narrator intrudes just after these lines to ask, repeatedly in stanza sixteen, “Why were they proud?” Quizzing the brothers’ pride – their public arrogance, a boastful “glory” socially defined in contrast with the misery of others – this stanza sets up the sharp turn of the next stanza:

Yet were these Florentines as self-retired
In hungry pride and gainful cowardice,
As two close Hebrews in that land inspired,
Paled in and vineyarded from beggar-spies.

(129–32; my emphasis)

For all their economic and political power, the brothers are utterly cut off from human contact, encamped within an estate built and “Enriched from ancestral merchandise” (106). In his draft, Keats added that these Florentines may have seemed “Two young Orlandos far away,” but “on a near inspect their vapid Miens” showed these venture capitalists to be anything but venturesome. Playing on the myth that a child’s features reflect a mother’s thoughts during pregnancy, Keats imagines that the brothers’ mother “dream’d / In the longing time of Units . . . / Of proudly-bas’d

addition and of net – / And both their backs were mark'd with tare and tret" (Stillinger, *Poems*, 250). These human "Units" were marked from birth for self-enclosed, isolated commerce.

Coming together in love, Isabella and Lorenzo would seem a stark contrast to these "money-bags" (145), these "ledger-men" (137); but the language with which Keats surrounds the lovers places them within the same world of private enterprising. Everything about their love – except their sexual contact – suggests more solitude than sociality. Their secrecy is, in part, enforced by class strictures, in which Isabella should wed "some high noble and his olive-trees," rather than the "servant" of her brothers' "trade designs" (165–68). But it is also a seclusion built upon illusions, for the lovers are every bit as "self-retired" as the brothers, first so isolated from one another that they cannot speak except alone, to their pillows, and then, after they have consummated their love, retreating like Lamia and Lycius into a society of two. Keats repeatedly describes their union as "close" ("All close they," "Close in a bower"; 81, 85), and he applies the same word to the brothers: "self-retired . . . / As two close Hebrews" (129–31). Just as these money-bags seem sick in their "hungry pride and gainful cowardice" (130), so Isabella and Lorenzo experience love as an illness, "some malady" (in the very opening stanza, 4), a "sick longing" (23) that makes Isabella actually ill. When Lorenzo disappears, she pursues an even more internalized love or, rather, "instead of love, O misery! / She brooded o'er the luxury alone" (235–36), as "Selfishness, Love's cousin," (241) holds vigil. She fixates upon his severed head in the basil pot as an emblem of her totally private emotion. The pot, for which she asks "amorously" (490), is her perfect love object, for hers has always been a narcissistic love, happiest perhaps with the dead "prize" (402), a "jewel, safely casketed" (431). Wolfson, Heinzelman, and Everest have drawn attention to the language of riches that defines Isabella's relation to the dead Lorenzo: she and her brothers are secret sharers in a world of private enterprise, privatized emotion, and isolation, even in love. Appropriately, the brothers end in exile, and Isabella dies alone.

The Eve of St. Agnes is set in another flawed world, divided between the otherworldly aspirations of an Apollonius and the crass materialism of the sensual Corinthians or Isabella's brothers. The Beadsman (employed to pray for his patrons) dreams so strongly of a better world that he neglects this one. Depicted in a freezing landscape (1–4), he seems dead to this life: "his frosted breath . . . Seem'd taking flight for heaven, without a death" (6–8); "already had his deathbell rung; / The joys of all his life were said and sung" (22–23). Yet the next life seems only to repeat the sorrows of this one: as he passes by the tombs of the dead, he imagines how they "seem to freeze, / . . . how they may ache in icy hoods and mails" (14–18). He divides this world

with those for whom he prays, the selfish, violent revelers, prideful (32) and “blood-thirsty” (99). With their “argent revelry” and “rich array” (37–38), they are rapacious predators, “barbarian hordes, / Hyena foeman, and hot-blooded lords” (85–86). This bifurcated world, turned now to the life-denying spirit, now to the violently physical, is set against the lovers: like Romeo and Juliet, like Lorenzo and Isabella, even a little like Lycius and Lamia, Porphyro and Madeline find their love opposed by families and mentors.

Coming in the 1820 volume after *Lamia*'s satire on the triangulation of desire and after *Isabella*'s ironic investigation of privatized emotion, *The Eve of St. Agnes* can offer a celebration of the erotic that is not “smokeable,” because Keats has already demonstrated his ironic credentials. In much the way that *Don Juan* can embrace eros while lampooning various canting attitudes towards the erotic, so Keats, having produced ironic versions of classical and medieval Italian romance, can offer a modern British return to erotic romance. This is not a sudden shift. The narrator of *Lamia* allowed some sympathy with Lamia's love-longing, sympathy even with Lycius's sudden enchantment. Refusing the myth of unhappy love, the narrator of *Isabella* asks of its lovers, “Were they unhappy?” (89), and then proceeds to answer that the only truly unhappy lovers are those such as Ariadne and Dido, abandoned by men with worldly ambitions. All others reap, in “the general reward of love, / The little sweet [that] doth kill much bitterness” (97–98); the “richest juice” of sexual pleasures is found even in “poison-flowers” (104). Even so, in *Lamia* and *Isabella*, the general reward of love cannot forestall disaster and death.

In *The Eve of St. Agnes*, though this fate haunts the poem's similes and allusions, eros remains liberated and liberating. At first, Madeline, like Isabella, shares in her world's errors. Kept from Porphyro by a family feud, she ignores the courting of “many a tiptoe, amorous cavalier” (60), cherishing the “whim” (55) of the Eve's rituals, which promise “visions of delight” (47) in dreams. Like Lycius, she is enchanted by fantasy, so “Hoodwink'd by faery fancy” that she seems “all amort” (70), as dead to earthly life as the Beadsman in his spiritual “flight for heaven” (8). Pursuing his spellbound lover, Porphyro is a strategizing date-rapist, argued Jack Stillinger in a once controversial reading (“The Hoodwinking of Madeline”) that has gained considerable support. Yet the poem's dramatic, ironic distance also allows Porphyro to appear as Keats's most straightforward lover, questing his way through a household of dangers in order to rescue and release Madeline from “those enchantments cold,” as she lies “asleep in lap of legends old” (134–35). Keats's skill in keeping open a number of perspectives is an ironic negative capability essential to the poem's revival of romance, for it protects

Keats from being “smoked.”¹⁸ Yet what permeates Keats’s poetry, early and late, is the strain that endorses Porphyro’s stance against the dangers of cold fairy-fancy. In *Sleep and Poetry*, despair follows when an enchantingly ideal vision evaporates: “The visions all are fled,” and a “sense of real things comes doubly strong, / And, like a muddy stream, would bear along / [the] soul to nothingness” (157–59). In his verse epistle to Reynolds, Keats wonders if the aspiring “Imagination” courts the fate of being “Lost in a sort of Purgatory blind,” cut off from “any standard law / Of either earth or heaven,” and poisoning the pleasures with a false ideal: “It forces us in Summer skies to mourn: / It spoils the singing of the nightingale” (*KL* 1.262). Desiring heaven (as do those who pursue Nietzsche’s error), Imagination may belittle earthly life, the life that is all we know and all we need to know. To wish for an idealized dream-lover may be (as Porphyro fears) to miss the vitality of warm, breathing human love.

Porphyro lures Madeline back from her dreams to a reality that he hopes to show her is as rich as any ideal she might imagine. To reveal the wonderful depth of physical reality and the glorious abundance of lived life, he presents a sensuous feast of luscious fruits, spices, and sweets “From silken Samarcand to cedar’d Lebanon” (270). When, however, she finally stirs from her “woofed phantasies (287), Porphyro’s fears prove sound. She sees her real lover only as a pale imitation of her dream lover:

“ . . . those sad eyes were spiritual and clear:
 How chang’d thou art! How pallid, chill, and drear!
 Give me that voice again, my Porphyro,
 Those looks immortal, those complainings dear!
 Oh leave me not in this eternal woe,
 For if thou diest, my love, I know not where to go.” (310–15)

Preferring the “spiritual” Porphyro of her dreams, Madeline would protect love from death. But for Keats, this is simply a denial of life. Keatsian romance rejects the quest for the immortal in order to endorse a romance of reality.

Faced with a Madeline who cannot return to life from her dreams, Porphyro offers her the one thing her dream lover cannot: sex, embodied love. He may not be immortal, but,

Beyond a mortal man impassion’d far
 At these voluptuous accents, he arose,
 Ethereal, flush’d, and like a throbbing star
 Seen mid the sapphire heaven’s deep repose;
 Into her dream he melted, as the rose
 Blendeth its odour with the violet, –
 Solution sweet . . . (316–22)

“This is no dream, my bride, my Madeline!” he assures her (326).

The sexuality was not lost on the publisher’s advisor, Woodhouse, who was particularly bothered by a revision Keats fervently wanted:

See, while she speaks his arms encroaching slow,
Have zoned her, heart to heart . . .

More sooth, for that his quick rejoinder flows
Into her burning ear . . .

With her wild dream he mingled, as a rose
Marrieth its odour to a violet.
Still, still she dreams (Stillinger, *Poems*, 314)

Woodhouse read these lines with dismay, and transmitted a report to John Taylor:

As the Poem was orig^y written, we innocent ones (ladies & myself) might very well have supposed that Porphyro, when acquainted with Madeline’s love for him, & when “he arose, Etherial flush^d &c &c (turn to it) set himself at once to persuade her to go off with him, & succeeded & went [. . .] to be married, in right honest chaste & sober wise. But, as it is now altered, as soon as M. has confessed her love, P. winds by degrees his arm round her, presses breast to breast, and acts all the acts of a bonâ fide husband, while she fancies she is only playing the part of a Wife in a dream. (KL 2.163)

Taylor was prepared to tell Keats to take this sexually explicit tale elsewhere (KL 2.183), despite the “Keats-like rhodomontade” (so Woodhouse reported) that “he sh^d despise a man who would be such an eunuch in sentiment as to leave a maid, with that Character about her, in such a situation” (2.163).

Keats’s insistence suggests that he sought something in this scene beyond titillation, “flying in the face of all Decency & discretion” as Taylor thought (KL 2.183). Sexuality offers Porphyro and Madeline a way to heal the splits in their world, “saved by miracle” (339). Having framed their erotic romance in opposition to life-denying religion (the Beadsman), to the riots of the merely material (the foemen), and to fairy-fancy “all amort,” Keats wants his lovers to discover a physical reality that has the value of an ideal, that offers earth as heaven. The lovers escape to another realm – “o’er the southern moors I have a home for thee,” Porphyro promises Madeline (51) – leaving this cloven world to collapse into nightmares and death. Keats closes his romance both on this grotesque note of “ashes cold” (378) and

with a sudden historicizing distancing – “And they are gone: ay, ages long ago” (370) – that assigns erotic success to remote legend. Both gestures protect *The Eve of St. Agnes* from being “smoked” out, and thus preserve the powerful sensuousness at its center: the rejection of a world turned against eros, the celebration of fulfilled lovers, the narrative climax as sexual climax.

Together, *Lamia*, *Isabella*, and *The Eve of St. Agnes* combine a critique of society’s mishandling of desire with an argument for the erotic as a power of social transformation. Beyond *Lamia*’s triangulation of desire and *Isabella*’s privatized emotion, *The Eve of St. Agnes* reclaims the immediacy and power of erotic pleasure, fulfilling, on the far side of irony, the liberatory, salvific promise suggested in the preceding poems. As McGann writes of Shelley, “Eroticism [. . .] is the imagination’s last line of human resistance against [. . .] political despotism and moral righteousness on the one hand, and on the other selfishness, calculation, and social indifference.”¹⁹ The conservative opponents of Keats and the Cockneys did not miss the political point, and they counterattacked vigorously, especially against the leader Hunt, “the most irresistible knight-errant erotic extant,” as *Blackwood’s* called him in 1822. In 1818, the *Gazette* attacked Hunt’s politics as “a noxious and disgusting mixture of libertinism and jacobinism.” *Eclectic Review* found the Cockneys’ use of mythology particularly suspect, arguing in 1818 that Hunt’s was the “creed of the heathen,” and suggesting in a review of Keats’s 1820 volume that the turn to myth by “Mr. Keats, and Mr. Leigh Hunt, and Mr. Percy Bysshe Shelley, and some of the poets about town” panders to a taste for “grossness – its alliance to the sensitive pleasures which belong to the animal.” In 1818, *The Quarterly Review*, objecting to a poem addressed to Shelley in Hunt’s *Foliage (On the Degrading Notion of the Deity)*, argued that the Hunt circle was conspiring to bring about a “systematic revival of Epicureanism. [. . .] Lucretius is the philosopher whom these men profess most to admire; and their leading tenet is, that the enjoyment of the pleasures of intellect and sense is not to be considered as the permitted, and regulated use of God’s blessing, but the great object, and duty of life.”²⁰

The Cockneys’ critics got it right. Keats does embrace intellectual and sensual pleasure – the joys of the ironic intellect and of the sensuous body – as the goal of life. Together with his fellow Cockneys, he evokes a Lucretian vision in which life can have meaning without relying upon any degrading notion of a deity, without resort to “vulgar superstition” (*Written in Disgust of Vulgar Superstition*; 1816). The three romances that title the 1820 volume trace a path beyond the great explanatory systems of classical and Christian cultures, in search of what Keats calls (in a letter to divinity-student Bailey) “a recourse somewhat human independent of the great Consolations of

Religion and undepraved Sensations. of the Beautiful. the poetical in all things” (KL 1.179). Through the ironizing turn of historicism, Keats not only leaves behind the consolations of earlier belief systems but also turns a satirical eye on the ways contemporary society organizes desires in various fantasies of escape and retreat. When we read these poems chronologically and biographically, our tendency is to see the opposition of Lamia’s beauty and Apollonius’s truth as unraveling or deconstructing the more positive vision of earlier poems such as *The Eve of St. Agnes*. Read in the volume’s sequence, however, the poems move through various forms of quest romance to discover, beyond irony and the unmasking of our erotic illusions, an eroticism that is no dream.

NOTES

- 1 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 186–87. Recent evaluations include: Harold Bloom, who sees Romantic-era romance “internalizing” the old external quest as modern psychic journey (“The Internalization of Quest Romance,” in *Romanticism and Consciousness*, ed. Harold Bloom [New York: Norton, 1970], 3–24); Jack Stillinger, who sees Keats creating a kind of “anti-romance” genre, tuned to the sorrows of life beyond wish-fulfilling enchantments (“*The Hoodwinking of Madeline*” and *Other Essays on Keats’s Poems*, 31–45); Tilottama Rajan, who reads Keatsian romance as a deconstructive mode, both engaging and turning from its conventions (*Dark Interpreter: The Discourse of Romanticism*, 97–142); and Susan J. Wolfson, who sees Keatsian “new romance” as “meta-romance,” a reading of the genre itself (*The Questioning Presence: Wordsworth, Keats, and the Interrogative Mode in Romantic Poetry*, 270–300, 333–43). For a comprehensive account of the genre in the age, see Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism*, 128–57.
- 2 K. Everest, “*Isabella* in the Market-Place: Keats and Feminism,” in Roe, ed., *Keats and History*, 109–10.
- 3 See Wolfson, *Questioning Presence*, 285–86.
- 4 See Paul de Man, “Introduction,” xxvi–xxvii, and Stuart Sperry: “*Lamia* is a work written by a poet against his better self” (*Keats the Poet*, 292).
- 5 Jerome J. McGann, “Keats and the Historical Method,” *The Beauty of Inflections*, 53.
- 6 See the essays by John Kandl and Duncan Wu in this volume, as well as work in the bibliography by William Keach, Greg Kucich, Nicholas Roe, and myself.
- 7 Keats and Reynolds drew from the fourth day of the *Decameron*, as did another member of their circle, Bryan Waller Proctor (“Barry Cornwall”) who adapted, like Keats, the fifth tale in his *Sicilian Story* as well as two others (in *A Sicilian Story, with Diego Montilla & c* [1820] and *Dramatic Scenes & c* [1819]).
- 8 Hunt’s mind “seems absolutely to float over all the details of adultery and incest,” said Z. (“On the Cockney School of Poetry. No. 1,” *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* 2 [October 1817], 42).
- 9 Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels, and Reactionaries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 134–35; cf. Miriam Allott, *Poems*, 614.

- 10 Gold's *London Magazine* 1 (April 1820), 401; Scot's *Edinburgh Magazine* 1 (October 1817), 254-57; *Monthly Review* n.s. 92 (July 1820), 305-10.
- 11 *Edinburgh [Scots] Magazine* 7 [August 1820], 107-10. For the embarrassments of sensuality, see Ricks, *Keats and Embarrassment*. For the poem's new tones, see Georgia S. Dunbar, "The Significance of the Humor in 'Lamia,'" *KSJ* 8 (1959), 17-26; similarly, Sperry, *Keats the Poet*, 297.
- 12 Curran, *Poetic Form*, 150. For a case for reading the 1820 poems as a sequenced volume, see Neil Fraistat, *The Poem and the Book: Interpreting Collections of Romantic Poetry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 95-140.
- 13 See Earl Miner, "Dryden's Admired Acquaintance, Mr. Milton," *Milton Studies* 11 (1978), 3-27.
- 14 See Terence Hoagwood, "Keats and Social Context: *Lamia*," *Studies in English Literature* 29 (1989), 689-90; Daniel Watkins, *Keats's Poetry and the Politics of the Imagination*, 140-42.
- 15 René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965). See Marjorie Levinson, *Keats's Life of Allegory: The Origins of a Style*, 296n.10; and Martin Aske, "Keats, the Critics, and the Politics of Envy," in Roe, ed., *Keats and History*, 46-64.
- 16 See Maneck H. Daruwala, "Strange Bedfellows: Keats and Wollstonecraft, *Lamia* and *Berwick*," *Keats-Shelley Review* 11 (1997), 83-132.
- 17 Baldwin's *London Magazine* 2 (September 1820), 315-21; George Bernard Shaw, "Keats," in *The John Keats Memorial Volume*, ed. George C. Williamson (London: John Lane, 1921), 173-76; Wolfson, *Questioning Presence*, 280-83; Kurt Heinzelman, "Self-Interest and the Politics of Composition in Keats's *Isabella*," *ELH* 55 (1988), 159-93; Everest, "Isabella in the Market-Place"; Michael J. Sider, *The Dialogic Keats: Time and History in the Major Poems* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1998).
- 18 See Sperry, *Keats the Poet*, 199-200; Anne Mellor, *English Romantic Irony*, 89-92; Wolfson, *Questioning Presence*, 291-94.
- 19 Jerome J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 118.
- 20 *Blackwood's* 12 (December 1822), 775; *Gazette* 4 (25 May 1880), 49; *Eclectic* 2nd ser. 10 (November 1818), 485, and 14 (September 1820), 169; *Quarterly* 18 (January 1818), 327.

They told her how, upon St. Agnes's Eve, Young virgins might have visions of delight,
And soft adorings from their loves receive
Upon the honey-moon's middle of the night,
If ceremonies due they did aright;
50 As, supperless to bed they must retire,
And couch supine their beauties, lily white;
Nor look behind, nor sideways, but require
Of Heaven with upward eyes.Â Keats, John. Lamia, Isabella,
The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems. London: Talor and Hessey, 1820. Permanent link to this article: <http://keats-poems.com/the-eve-of-st-agnes/>. Poems by First Line. Poetry. Keats's final lifetime volume of poetry, published in the summer of 1820, is named for its three romances - Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems - and the title page identifies the poet as "Author of Endymion," his longest romance of all. Keats and his publishers sought to present him as a narrative poet on a literary scene dominated by popular writers of romances, such as Scott and Byron. This is remarkable, not only because Endymion had been ridiculed, but also because Keats himself had seemed intent to secure his name, like Homer or Milton, through epic. In Sleep and Poetry, the finale to Poems (1817), he imagined bidding farewell to the poetry of delight, "the realm . . . / Isabella is a fine narrative poem, but The Eve of St. Agnes (1819), written soon after, is peerless. In Lamia (1819) Keats revived the couplet form, long thought to be dead, in a gorgeous, romantic story. Above all it was in his development of the ode that Keats's supreme achievement lies. In just a few months, he wrote the odes "On a Grecian Urn" (1819), "To a Nightingale" (1819), "To Melancholy" (1819), and the marvelously serene "To Autumn" (1819). Keats is the only romantic poet whose reputation has steadily grown through all changes in critical fashion. Once patronized as a poet of beautiful images but no intellectual content, Keats is now appreciated for his powerful mind, profound grasp of poetic principles, and ceaseless quest for new forms and techniques. "The Eve of St. Agnes" is first published in Lamia, Isabella, the Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems (1820) is Romantic poet John Keats's tale of passion, legends, danger, and dreams. In this narrative poem, Porphyro, a young nobleman, creeps into the castle of his enemies to catch a glimpse of his love, the beautiful Madeline. Madeline happens to be performing a magical ritual that very night, calling on St. Agnes to send her a dream of her future husband.Â 24 His was harsh penance on St. Agnes' Eve: 25 Another way he went, and soon among. 26 Rough ashes sat he for his soul's reprieveÂ 46 They told her how, upon St. Agnes' Eve, 47 Young virgins might have visions of delight, 48 And soft adorings from their loves receive.