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Romantic fantasy and the grotesque in John Keats's "Lamia"

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Abstract

The present article examines the notions of fantasy, illusion and logic in Keats's romance Lamia *(1819) from the perspective of the aesthetic and literary category of the grotesque. In his text Keats puts the grotesque to two uses. First, it serves to mark his ambiguous attitude to both reason and imagination as two exclusive modes of cognition; secondly, it records his uneasiness in relation to the romantic ideal of love. Two conflicting points of view inform and battle in the poem: one might be called Romantic, as it endorses imagination and beauty as values per se; the other invites an interrogation of the idealistic approach. Neither of these two perspectives is unequivocally applauded in the text, and the Romantic grotesque appears a perfect vehicle for expressing this incongruity.*

Keywords

Romantic poetry, the grotesque, John Keats, fantasy, imagination, reason

The complicated dialectics between fantasy and reality is a structuring principle of much of Keats's poetry. It underpins, among other poems, "Ode on the Grecian Urn," "Endymion," "La Belle Dame sans Merci," "The Eve of Saint Agnes," "Lamia" and "Hyperion." In his well-known letter to Benjamin Bailey of November 22, 1817 Keats states: "The Imagination may be compared to Adam's dream: he awoke and found it truth."[1] Sometimes, then, imaginative dreaming is synonymous with attaining a supernatural, semi-divine vision understood as a momentary insight granted the ontological status of "higher" reality; more often, however, the escapist dreams and fantasies of Keats's characters bring them distress, physical and mental disintegration, ultimately threatening them with decay and death. The present article examines the notions of fantasy and illusion in his romance "Lamia" (1819) from the perspective of the aesthetic and literary category of the grotesque. In his text Keats puts the grotesque to two uses. First, it serves to mark his ambiguous attitude to both reason and imagination as two exclusive modes of cognition; secondly, it records his uneasiness in relation to the romantic ideal of love.

The narrative of "Lamia," in short, is a doomed love story, an account of how Lycius, a young man from Corinth, meets a beautiful seductive lady with whom he falls in love. The heroine Lamia is a snake-goddess from a mythical forest who has changed shape and become a beautiful woman but retained her magical, enchanting qualities. Having fallen in love with Lycius, she has given up her immortality for him. In Corinth, she transports Lycius to a wondrous palace of her own design, a dwelling which cannot be seen by anyone else, although it allegedly exists as a real place. After a short period of bliss in their love bower, Lamia is unmasked by Lycius's tutor Apollonius as a monster serpent woman, and as a result of a confrontation with his cold, dissecting gaze she disappears (dies?). Lycius, not being able to survive without her, passes away soon afterwards. The inspiration for the poem is believed to have come from Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, although Keats gave the account a wholly new shape. He followed Burton in omitting the vampirism associated with the legend of Lamia.[2] Unlike in Burton's story, however, Apollonius's wisdom does

1 John Keats, *Selected Letters,* ed. Robert Gittings and Jon Mee (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 36.

2 John Keats, *The Complete Poems,* ed. M. Allott (London: Longman, 1970), 613.

not save Lycius, but indirectly kills him. The poem's overemotional elements, almost comic in their exaggerated sentimentality, mingle with tragic ones, and Lamia as the main female character is also unstable and incongruous: half-woman, half-serpent, not fixed in her identity but ever liminal. She embodies both the fantasy of romantic love and a satirical caricature of it. These qualities legitimize the discussion of the romance in terms of the subversive aesthetics of the grotesque.

The origin of the aesthetic term "grotesque" can be traced to the discovery of bizarre wall decorations in Domus Aurelia, the ancient Roman palace of Nero built in the first quarter of the fifteenth century. The ornaments presented fanciful figures – half-men, half-animals, monsters or chimeras, combined with the natural and organic forms. Soon later, the full splendor of the grotesque style was developed by Raphael, who then decorated the walls of the Vatican loggiae in this manner.[3] The grotesque thus came to be associated with fancifulness, strangeness, artificiality and decoration. The grotesque appeared later as a category relating to literature when in the sixteenth century Michel de Montaigne compared the whimsical and digressional style of his *Essays* to monsters decorating walls, thus defining the grotesque in opposition to classical canons and the rule of decorum. In the following centuries the term took on pejorative connotations. Particularly in the Enlightenment the grotesque came to be associated with ugliness, eccentricity, bad taste, deformity, absurdity, even vulgarity and a hostility to nature.[4] Romanticism, however, brought about the rehabilitation of the grotesque, which ideally suited the Romantic aesthetic in its self-contradictory, incongruous nature, with its fantastic, dreamlike, exaggerated and sometimes terrifying elements. Not surprisingly, the grotesque resonates perfectly with the Gothic tradition, which strongly relies on the bizarre and the unnatural, yet uses these features to explore psychological states of inner, individual, subjective experiences.

Twentieth century scholars and theorists of the grotesque usually concentrated on two aspects of the concept, stressing its ties to the outrageous, the carnivalesque, the bizarre and the comic, as well as linking it to the tragic, terrible, traumatic and/or uncanny. The first of these two strands is expansively treated in Bakhtin's analysis of Rabelais in his now classic text *Rabelais and his World*. For Bakhtin, the grotesque is a deeply transgressive, revolutionary category, a type in opposition to hierarchy and order. The grotesque image is strongly connected to the body; it is frequently incomplete, revolting, frightening and humorous at the same time, while remaining ambivalent and contradictory.[5] On the other hand, the grotesque is also shocking or even terrifying, leading to a sense of estrangement and pain, a theoretical position advocated primarily by Wolfgang Kayser and Geoffrey Harphram.[6] More recently, in her book *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture: The Image at Play*, Frances C. Connelly neatly and perceptively categorizes its diverse aspects and manifestations.

3 Frances S. Connelly, *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture: The Image at Play* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 3.

4 Cf. Lech Sokół, "O pojęciu groteski", *Przegląd Humanistyczny* 15 (1971): 71–75, Katarzyna Gałysz, "O pojęciu groteski," *Sztuka i Filozofia* 14 (1977): 113, Philip Thompson, *The Grotesque* (London: Methuen & Co, Ltd 1972), 13.

5 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Helen Iswolsky, (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1984), 25–26.

6 Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, trans. Ulrich Weisstein (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), Geoffrey Harphram, "The Grotesque: First Principles," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 34, no.4 (1976): 461–468.

> [T]he grotesque truly is the image at play, and its humor and irreverence offer a welcome antidote to all forms of conventional thinking. Another characteristic of the grotesque is that it is not content to be solely the object of the aesthetic gaze. Instead, it is engaged in the world, always pushing against boundaries and raising questions. . . . Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there is a fundamental humility to the grotesque, rooted as it is in the living (and dying) body, an embrace of the relativity and changefulness as we live it.[7]

Moreover, most theorists of the grotesque agree on the element of disharmony as a unifying principle among the diverse characteristics associated with the term. In his attempt to offer a comprehensive and inclusive definition of the grotesque, Philip Thompson describes how "[t]he most consistently distinguished characteristic of the grotesque has been the fundamental element of disharmony, whether this is referred to as conflict, clash, mixture of the heterogeneous, or conflation of disparates."[8] There is a fundamental tendency to view the grotesque as essentially a blend "of some way or other of both the comic and the terrifying (or the disgusting, repulsive, etc.) in a problematical (i.e. not easily resolvable) way." While the content of the grotesque must include "abnormality,"[9] the mode is "incongruous, and its incongruity is funny. However, the grotesque incongruity may be so jarring and disturbing that revulsion or sympathy overpowers the sense of comedy."[10]

These comments relate to "Lamia" in a number of ways. The poem startles the reader with its emphasis on the sensual and the bodily, with the exquisite excess of Keats's synesthetic description along with the story's mixture of the sentimental, tragic and comic elements as well as its fundamental incongruity and ambiguity. The most grotesque element, naturally, is Lamia as a poetic character, a blend of the comic and serious, human and animal, mortal and divine. Neither a real woman nor fully a goddess and only temporarily a snake, her nature is as incongruous as it is mysterious. As a serpent inhabiting the mythological forest near Corinth, she longs for a human shape she allegedly once had, and requests the winged god Hermes to change her back into a mortal woman. When we meet her at the beginning of the story, she is a "palpitating snake," "a Gordian shape of dazzling hue,"[11] but her body resembles more only than one animal. Keats constantly stresses her essential incongruity: she is "striped like a zebra, freckled like a pard/ Eyed like a peacock."[12] As an absurd mixture of body parts, Lamia is the essence of the grotesque. She emanates a feeria of colours: vermilion, golden, green and blue; the varied colours of her body dissolve, flow one into another, an aspect which points to a liquidity of hue, arrangement and pattern, all contributing to the imagery of fluidity and transformation. Her appearance strongly emphasises her ambiguous, manifold nature, her excessive sensuality/corporeality and her transformative potential. As if to

7 Connelly, *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture: The Image at Play,* ix.

8 Thompson, *The Grotesque*, 21.

9 Thompson, *The Grotesque*, 21, 25.

10 Michael Gillum, "'Great God, What They Got in That Wagon?': Grotesque Intrusions in *As I Lay Dying,*" in *The Grotesque*, ed. Harold Bloom and Blake Hobby (New York: Bloom/s Literary Criticism 2009), 14. I have previously discussed the concept of the grotesque in relation to Keats in my article "Keats, the Grotesque and the Victorian Visual Imagination: *Isabella; or the Pot of Basil,*" in *Romantic Dialogues and Afterlives,* ed. Monika Coghen and Anna Paluchowska-Messing (Kraków: Jagiellonian University Press 2020).

11 Keats, *The Complete Poems,* I. 45, 47.

12 Keats, *The Complete Poems,* 49–50.

underscore the voluptuous excess of her palpitating body, Keats describes her skin as adorned with silver moons and stars, which together with precious stones cover her entire form, shifting and changing shape as she breathes. She sparkles, dazzles, attracts and causes revulsion. At the same time, she is also partly human, endowed with a human voice, beautiful eyes and "a woman's mouth with all its pearls complete."[13] She is ultimately unhappy and she pleads for empathy and compassion. In accordance with the main principles of the grotesque, the overall effect is perplexing in its disharmony. Simultaneously with the aesthetic shock as a result of the vision of a striped and freckled reptilian body with a woman's mouth with pearly teeth, the reader also experiences amusement, instinctively feeling this incongruity to be comic. Lamia is aberrant, absurd and droll, while a comic effect is also present in the forced, overdone sentimentality of her pleas. This effect has been noted by some critics; David Perkins, for instance, observes that "at least in the first part of the poem, she is described in a tone tinged with mockery."[14]

The scene which follows of the serpent's metamorphosis into a woman is equally bizarre. The changes that have befallen Lamia remind the reader of Mary Russo's analysis of the grotesque as located in the human body. Russo suggests that while the "classical body is transcendent, and monumental, closed, static, self-contained, symmetrical and sleek," by contrast the grotesque body is "open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing."[15] Russo's definition recalls Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque body, always "in the state of becoming," "never finished, never completed" but "continually built, created" as it continually "builds and creates another body."[16] Keats's description of how Lamia transforms into a woman is a fantastic account of the bizarre, the misshapen, the wondrous and the disgusting all in one. The grotesque surfaces in elements of distortion, aberration, incongruity and excess. The metamorphosis is simultaneously repelling, fascinating and comic: as Lamia's "blood in madness [runs]" and her mouth foams, her eyes are fixed in torture, but flash what Keats describes as "phosphor and sharp sparks."[17] Writhing and in convulsions, Lamia is deprived of all her previous adornments, as her silver and gold stars, jewels, freckles, bars and stripes are eclipsed, dissolve and disappear altogether. This description relies heavily on two, typically mutually exclusive qualities: on the one hand, the intense visual appeal of wondrous colours, shapes and precious stones, while on the other, their spectacular destruction, a process represented as the agony of a convulsing, salivating, writhing, tortured body. Keats's description is fully congruous with the aesthetics of the grotesque which, as Frederick Burwick reminds us, operate through an alternation of attraction and repulsion.[18] Finally, Lamia's transformation can also be seen as a grotesque rebirth: through a process that closely resembles agony, the snake, having shod its skin, takes on another life in another world and another form.

13 Keats, *The Complete Poems,* I. 60.

14 David Perkins, *The Quest for Permanence: the Symbolism of Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1959), 145.

15 Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque. Risk, Excess and Modernity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 8.

16 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helen Iswolsky (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1984), 317.

17 Keats, *The Complete Poems,* II. 147–164.

18 Frederick Burwick, *Romanticism: Keywords* (West Sussex: Wiley and Blackwell, 2015), 94.

In her book on grotesque, Frances S. Connelly identifies mutability, metamorphosis and play as crucial elements of the grotesque mode.

> [I]n order to understand the grotesque it is essential to understand it as being "in play." It always represents a state of change, breaking open what we know and merging it with the unknown. As such, the one consistent visual attribute of the grotesque is that of flux.[19]

Keats's Lamia, with her unclassifiable, multiple identities as well as with her changing body is always in the state of (actual and potential) becoming, constantly tantalizing, provoking questions, eliding answers. The narrating voice underlines this slipperiness, describing her as "at once, some penanced lady elf,/ Some demon's mistress, or the demon's self."[20] In these characteristics, she emulates the classical mythological figure of a female demon under the same name, one who in John Lempiere's *Classical Dictionary* of 1788 is described as having "the face and breast of a woman, and the rest of the body like that of a serpent."[21] The mythological Lamia is likewise an ambiguous and fluid character, on the one hand a monster and a predator who threatens pregnant women, steals their children and preys on human beings, while on the other a wronged victim. As an exceptionally beautiful woman and the Queen of Lybia, she was noticed by Zeus, who seduced her and whom she bore several children, all of which were killed by Hera out of jealousy. As a result, Lamia turned insane and murdered every child she encountered.[22] Similarly, in Keats's poem, incongruity, ambiguity and malleability emerge as the most distinctive qualities both of the eponymous character of the main heroine and of the story itself. From the start, the text poses questions as to Lamia's origin, intentions, motifs and, eventually, her influence on Lycius. The primary ambiguity relates to her nature – she simultaneously appears a femme fatale, seductive and manipulative, a woman who lies about her family and origin and lures Lycius into her illusory and dangerous world, precipitating his downfall, *and* a woman longing for love who sacrifices her immortality for her lover and who leads him to the palace of imagination of her own making.

Most importantly, the grotesque is frequently deployed to convey a psychological meaning. Michael Gillum perceptively claims that it "calls into question human idealisms and human pretensions,"[23] an insight which is pivotal for my reading of Keats's romance. In the figure of Lamia, Keats shows an embodied romantic fantasy of a mortal man: a woman both innocent and mature, young and experienced, exotic and familiar, completely devoted to love, pliant and understanding, a goddess, an enchantress, a lover and an innocent maiden all in one.

> A virgin purest lipped, yet in the lore
> Of love deep learned to the red heart's core;
> Not one hour old, yet of sciential brain.[24]

19 Connelly, *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture*, 5.

20 Keats, *The Complete Poems,* I. 55–56.

21 John Lempiere, *Lempiere's Classical Dictionary* (Boston 1832), 203.

22 Silke Binias, *Symbol and Symptom: The Femme Fatale in English Poetry of the 19th Century and Feminist Criticism* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2007), 49–50.

23 Michael Gillum, "'Great God, What They Got in That Wagon?': Grotesque Intrusions in *As I Lay Dying,*" 14.

24 Keats, *The Complete Poems,* I. 189–191.

In the same vein, the lovers' existence in Lamia's palace – the magical love bower – represents a parody of the romantic fantasy of a self-sustaining love based on total absorption and enchantment, a vision which the poem unmasks as idealistic and eventually harmful. In the initial phase of their relationship, the lovers have eyes only for each other; they inhabit a cocooned, private space where no one and nothing can intrude. They depend entirely on each other, their mutual attention and reverence almost conditioning their existence; even asleep, they refuse to lose the sight of the other.[25] The moment when the bliss is broken is imagined as a sound from the outside world which disturbs Lycius, breaking his reverie. Mutual recriminations follow, as the lovers try to outdo each other in proving their devotion and involvement to the other person. The argument ends with a marriage proposal. What is necessary to emphasize here is how the whole conversation is exaggerated, strained, unnatural, grotesque; in trying to sustain the idealistic fantasy, the text verges on a caricature of itself.

Lycius's downfall mostly results from the fact that, infatuated, he embraces the fantasy embodied by Lamia and chooses to linger within the enchanted, idealistic realm of the illusory palace of her creation. He wishes to remain engulfed in the exquisite sensations of love and beauty, rejecting realistic, logical thinking. In the poem, Lycius is persistently described as blinded, intoxicated, dreaming or in a trance. A blinded perception or otherwise deceived understanding and the dichotomy between illusion and truth is a recurring motif in the story. Lamia's spells mostly involve perception: she can make places and people visible or invisible; she changes shape, induces trances through perfume, and enchants with her voice. Lycius's dazed state precludes a sharp realistic vision. Blinded as to the essentially problematic origin and nature of his lover, Lycius willingly refrains from asking deep questions and he accepts at face value Lamia's vague and elusive answers about her descent and family, as he is convinced that these two propositions – sensual enchantment and logical thinking – are mutually exclusive. This motif dramatizes Keats's famous statement about the primacy of sensations over reasoning. In his letter to Benjamin Bailey of 22nd November, 1817 Keats writes: "O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!" advocating the position of those who "delight in sensation rather than hunger . . . after Truth." [26] Likewise, Lycius opts for sensations, love and charm, disregarding reflection and the cognitive mode.

The other approach of favoring objective truth and reasoning becomes embodied in the figure of Lycius's tutor, Apollonius, who is called a "sage,"[27] "trusted guide,"[28] "sophist,"[29] and "philosopher"[30] and offers guidance and advice. Yet, when Lycius tries to sneak out with Lamia unnoticed to hide in their love bower, he unexpectedly meets his teacher, who then seems to him "the ghost of folly,"[31] although in fact he is the person with "stern eyes"[32] who retains a detached, cold, objective vision. This change of perspective shows how deeply Lycius has entered into his

25 Keats, *The Complete Poems,* II. 25.

26 *Selected Letters,* 36.

27 Keats, *The Complete Poems,* II. 222.

28 Keats, *The Complete Poems,* I. 275.

29 Keats, *The Complete Poems,* II. 291.

30 Keats, *The Complete Poems,* II. 245.

31 Keats, *The Complete Poems,* I. 377.

32 Keats, *The Complete Poems,* I. 364.

illusory love trance, and how much this makes him defy logic. Keats plays with the concepts of wisdom and folly, inviting a closer scrutiny of these ideas: is it "folly" to fall in love? Is "wisdom" always right? In the same vein, at the end of the poem Apollonius becomes a direct threat as an uninvited guest at their wedding. In the final scene, the degree to which Lycius's perception has become distorted is apparent: he now sees as a demon instead of his tutor Apollonius, yet he had never been able to see the snake instead of Lamia.

This play of meanings and motifs culminates in the crucial question about the ultimate outcome of the story, the death of Lycius: can we really see the event as a victory of reason over the mind's tendency to escape into its own illusions? If so, it is a Pyrrhic victory at too high a cost. By the same token, it would be difficult not to commiserate with the lovers. Consequently, the poem's ambiguity is unquestionable, with tension, the constant play of opposing qualities, and the creation of identities which rupture boundaries at its very heart. As can also be observed in other texts of the period (Coleridge's *Christabel,* Blake's *The Four Zoas*), the Romantic grotesque frequently becomes a psychodrama of human incongruous tendencies. In Keats's poem, the conflict inside Lycius is externalized; Apollonius embodies the intellect, the logical mind and the analytical, unemotional tendencies of the hero, while Lamia symbolizes the temptation to fall in love with the beauty of the world, to become engrossed in voluptuous, luxuriant sensations rather than in logical scrutiny.

The pivotal last scene of the poem – where truth surfaces, unmasking illusion but, at the same time, causes unhappiness, chaos and death of both protagonists – is also grotesque in its overdone sentimentality coupled with essentially tragic outcome of the love story. Lamia falls victim to Apollonius' gaze and dissolves as the power of his eyes brings about her ultimate destruction. She is punished for an attempt at entering a world she does not belong to; fantasy is unmasked in confrontation with rational, realistic perception of Apollonius. Lamia cannot survive such a confrontation – illusion destroyed becomes illusion dispersed – and she dissolves into nothingness, causing the death of Lucius at the same time. His death, in turn, signifies his persistent denial and renunciation of reality, or at least one version of it. As John Barnard writes: "The poem is therefore about mutually exclusive categories of perception, and Lamia's doomed attempt to cross their boundaries."[33]

However, as incongruity is the essential feature of the grotesque, the ending of the poem is far from univocal. If Apollonius is right to destroy the beautiful illusion with his philosophic mind and stern eyes, why then does Lycius have to die? Surely, Apollonius's intention was to save his pupil? The problem of interpreting Lamia, thus, depends on our evaluation of Apollonius's share in the story. From one vantage point, it is plausible to suggest that although we may sympathize with Lamia because she acts out of love, essentially she embodies delusion and treachery; thus, her destruction is only advantageous for all, even if the price is high. Lycius, we might argue, entered too far into the world of his romantic fantasies, mislead by the femme fatale, and his death is a sad but understandable consequence. A contradictory reading of this passage, however, may show how cold, objective reasoning can truly strip the beauty away from any ideal, while love, imagination and faith cannot satisfactorily contend with the unemotional scrutiny of logic.[34]

33 John Barnard, *John Keats* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987), 123, quoted in Paul Endo, "Seeing Romantically in Lamia," *ELH* 66, no. 1 (Spring 1999), 111.

34 I have previously suggested this interpretation in my book *Soft-Shed Kisses: Re-visioning the Femme Fatale in English Poetry of the 19th Century* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 60–62.

In the same spirit, in *The Age of Wonder* Richard Holmes notes that Keats appears to be attacking cold, demystifying science in "Lamia" when in the final scene he includes the famous passage:

> . . . Do not all charms fly
> At the mere touch of cold philosophy?
> There was an awful rainbow once in heaven:
> We know her woof, her texture; she is given
> In the dull catalogue of common things.
> Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings . . .
> Unweave a rainbow, as it erstwhile made
> The tender-personed Lamia melt into a shade.[35]

Holmes sums up the question posed by Keats: "What is the role of science (represented by the fierce old sage Apollonius) in protecting man from seductive but destructive delusions?"[36] Holmes also notes that during a dinner at the painter and diarist Benjamin Haydon's residence in London in December 1817 (other guests were William Wordsworth and Charles Lamb), Keats joined a discussion concerning the experiments of Newton, observing that the physicist "had destroyed all the poetry of the rainbow, by reducing it to a prism." At the same time, however, Holmes actually stresses the ambiguity of the quoted passage and of Keats's comment by explaining that:

> Keats was wittily referring to the classic experiment in Newton's *Optics* […] in which a shaft of sunlight was passed through a prism, and separated out into the rainbow light of the spectrum. In fact the point of the experiment was that when the separated rainbow colours were *individually* passed through a second prism, they did *not* revert to white sunlight but remained true colours [. . .]. The rainbow was *not* a mere scientific trick of the glass prism. […] It seems unlikely that Keats did not know this; but perhaps he did not wish to admit (in that company) that Newton had actually *increased* the potential 'poetry of the rainbow', by showing it was not merely some supernatural sky-writing [. . .].[37]

This comment supports a reading of "Lamia" as a poem about different ways of perception, and it shows Keats's indeterminate view on the matter: Lamia, the romantic fantasy embodied, dies at the end of the story, but Keats cannot refrain from presenting her as *both* beautiful and victimized *and* destructive for Lycius. Sentimental, dramatic, at times almost comic in its exaggerated emotionality, the poem also provokes deep sadness; we all sometimes fall in love with beautiful illusions and hate to see them dispersed. This opposition is fully compatible with the concept of the grotesque, which is characterized by an unresolvable nature of the conflict it presents. Philip Thompson writes: "the special impact of the grotesque will be lacking if the conflict is resolved, if the text concerned proves to be merely funny after all, or if it turns out that the reader has been quite mistaken in his initial perception of comedy in what is in fact stark horror. The unresolved nature of the grotesque conflict is important, and this characteristic helps to mark off the grotesque from other modes or categories of literary discourse."[38] Thus, "Lamia" embraces both comedy

35 Keats, *The Complete Poems,* II. 229–234, 237–238.

36 Richard Holmes, *The Age of Wonder: How the Romantics Discovered the Terror and Beauty of Science* (London: Harper Press, 2008), 324.

37 Holmes, *The Age of Wonder*, 319.

38 Thompson, *The Grotesque*, 21.

and tragedy and it triggers laughter and pity. Keats discloses himself as virtually torn between two clashing viewpoints: a Romantic ideology glorifying intuition, imagination and the irrational side of man's psyche, and the logic of his own mind. As a consequence of this conflict, he makes Lamia the irrational imaginative ideal and the *femme fatale* at the same time. Likewise, just as Lycius's disastrous love affair tests the limits of his unreflexive idealism, we can also suggest that it is Keats who in this story tests his poetic theories – the appeal of a life of sensations rather than of thoughts and negative capability, "when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason."[39] Treated with approbation in his letter, these two concepts are probed and explored in the romance "Lamia," written almost two years after this letter. Two conflicting points of view inform the poem and do battle in it. The grotesque, understood both as an aesthetic and a literary category, appears the perfect vehicle for expressing this incongruity.

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