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Lamia: Serpent and Disease. How John Keats's Medical Background and Personal Experience With Consumption Imprinted Themes of Disease Onto His Poem "Lamia"

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Introduction

John Keats was intimately acquainted with disease. Throughout his life he witnessed the death and physical decay of those around him. Even his career as an apothecary¹ led him closer to illness. Especially later in his short life, the mark of sickness can be seen in Keats's poetry. One significant example is the poem "Lamia" (1820). In this poem the hand of disease is seen in the serpentine form of the title character as well as in her bodily decay once she becomes human. She suffers from Tuberculosis, caused by her own humanity, and her suffering from the illness destroys the lives of those around her. Much like how Keats's life was destroyed by illness.

Before an understanding can be attained of the disease in "Lamia", first one must understand the disease itself. Tuberculosis is now considered to be a well understood and, in 1st world countries, nonexistent disease. However, at Keats's time in the early 19th century, much less was known. It was an aggressive disease. By first understanding what is known now, and then examining what was known then about the disease, one can better understand how tuberculosis affected Keats's life and informed his poetry.

Keats lived a life shaped by, and surrounded by death. Because of comparatively inferior medicine, loss of loved ones was much more common in the early 19th century than it is now. Even so, Keats experienced a large amount of death in his short life. This gave him an intimacy with death and disease that he put to use in a medical career. He chose to pursue a medical career before he decided to be a poet. This gave him a superior

¹ The name for an individual with medical training who was in charge of dispensing medicine and advice to other medical practitioners as well as patients. The closest modern day equivalent would be a combination of a pharmacist and a family practitioner.

knowledge, for the time, about health and illness. It was with this knowledge that he wrote his poems, and, more specifically, his later poems such as “Lamia”.

After one learns of Keats’s life and background, one can better examine his poem “Lamia” for the presence of disease. With this lens, the poem gains an obvious plotline of disease and dying. The poem, while still a typically lyrical poem of the romantic era, also becomes a medical poem and an outpouring of the grief and anger that Keats experienced when his family members died of Tuberculosis. Through all the other aspects of this poem that are rife with disease, one stands out. That is that Lamia’s humanity is her disease.

Tuberculosis or Consumption

Before looking into Keats himself, one must first understand a little about the disease that so shaped his life. The disease Keats died of is known today as Tuberculosis or TB. It is a degenerative bacterial disease that usually attacks the lungs but can also settle in other organs. It is passed from person to person as aerosolized droplet form from coughing, sneezing, or even singing. It is commonly passed from person to person in groups that are living close to one another, such as within a household. If someone contracts bacterial TB today, it is easily treated with a range of antibiotics before it begins to destroy tissues (U.S. Natl. Library of Medicine). Even viral TB (which is much harder to treat) is not a death sentence with today's medicine. However, left untreated, TB is a rather aggressive illness.

TB commonly attacks the lungs, so the first symptom of the disease is a persistent cough with fluid or mucus present. This cough can be accompanied with fever and fatigue, and the presence of mucus can cause secondary symptoms such as shortness of breath or a sore throat. At this point in time, the disease can either continue its attack until it kills the host or it can become dormant. This is known as a latent TB infection. An individual with a latent TB infection "[does] not feel sick and [does] not have any symptoms" (CDC). The individual will then later become sick and die. When a person is in the later stages of a TB attack, he develops the symptoms that we now associate with the disease through movies and television.

When a person is beginning to die of TB, he will have what is known as a hemorrhage. The disease weakens the walls of the lungs and, consequently, the walls of

the blood vessels in the lungs. Therefore, when the individual has a particularly aggressive coughing, the vessels in his lungs will rupture and spill blood into the lungs. This blood is then coughed up. This causes a lot of pain in the chest and also precipitates the coughing. The disease will continue to weaken the body through blood loss, fever, loss of appetite, and the degradation of the lungs until the host dies. Sadly, not this much was known about this very common disease in Keats's time.

Known as consumption during the 19th century, TB was often thought to be a hereditary disease of the constitution. This was so because, when one person in a family contracted the illness, others in the family soon did as well because of their proximity. Because of this, diet was often restricted in those ill because it was believed that not eating would help to rebalance the constitution of the body. However, this treatment just served to make people sicker, as their bodies did not have the nutrition needed to fight off the infection. Also, because medicine was so primitive, TB was rarely diagnosed until an individual suffered their first hemorrhage. By that point in time, the disease already had a hold on their body and was in the process of breaking it down. While the stethoscope had been invented in 1816, it was usually used to listen to the heart and so was not usually used in diagnosis of a pulmonary disease (Howard Hughes Medical Institute). Also, what is now a manageable but still present disease in third world countries was the number one killer of individuals in industrialized cities and countries (Contagion). It is not surprising, then, that Keats lost two members of his family to the disease before succumbing to it himself.

Life of John Keats

John Keats was born to a family that belonged to what would become known as the middle class. In 1795 when he was born to parents who managed a livery stable in northern London and would later go on to manage a pub (Bate, 1). Because they were not entirely well off, it was desired that Keats not only received a sufficient education, but also the training necessary to have a profession later in life. Therefore, his parents sent him to Enfield academy when he was eight years old so that he might receive a good education. His youth, however, was marred by multiple deaths in his family.

First was his father, Thomas Keats. Thomas Keats died in 1804 when he fractured his skull when his horse fell on the cobblestones (Bate, 12). Because of the death, the Keats family was suddenly without anyone to earn for them. Consequently, Keats's mother remarried and the children went to live with their grandmother. The marriage was not a happy one, and before too long Keats's mother had left her new husband to live with her mother and children. The actions of his mother had removed the financial strain from the family; however, it also seemed to mark the beginning in the decline of her health. Though his mother's health was declining, it was Keats's grandfather who next perished. In 1805 Keats's maternal grandfather died, and, though he left money to his family in his will, it was not nearly the standard of living that they were used to (Bate, 13).

The tragedies at home did not seem to affect Keats at this point in time. He was happy and well liked at his school. It was not long, though, before his mother's health deteriorated more. By the Christmas holidays of 1809, when Keats was only 14, his mother was gravely ill. During this time Keats, the eldest of his siblings, took on the

responsibility of caretaker to his mother. He was “jolted into a sudden sense of responsibility” by the illness of his mother and took to staying up with her, giving her medicine, cooking for her, and even reading novels to her (Bate, 21). By March 1810 Keats’s mother had died. Keats took the death hard and was said to have “crept ... into ‘a nook under the master’s desk’ in the schoolroom at Enfield” where he sat in an “‘impassioned and prolonged’ sense of loss” (Bate, 21).² Though the cause of his mother’s death is not certain, her symptoms and deterioration seem to be those of consumption.³

The next major death in Keats’s life came in 1818 when his younger brother Tom Keats died of consumption. While Keats was caring for his sick brother, Keats himself fell ill as well. Though he only suffered from a mild illness and a persistent sore throat at the time, it can be argued that these were the first symptoms of consumption in Keats himself. Despite being unwell, Keats stayed at his brother’s bedside and took care of him (Bate, 386). It was during this time that Keats began work on his poem *Hyperion*, the work that marks the beginning of the final year of Keats’s writing. After the death of Tom, Keats began to write to a prolific extent. His poems were not the same romantic verses as before. Instead he seemed to feel as though “he had to do something that he really cared about” (Bate, 389).

John Keats died of consumption in February of 1821 while in Rome. By the time that Keats travelled to Rome for the warmer weather, Keats was “listless, and seldom seemed even relatively happy” (Bate, 671). He physically wasted away while there. He experienced multiple consumptive hemorrhages and, because of his medical training

² Quoted within this quote is Edward Holmes

³ Tuberculosis. Will be referred to only as consumption from henceforth.

earlier in his life, Keats knew what was happening to him, so he was frightened, and waited with anticipation for his end. The doctor attending him, Dr. Clark, noted the anticipation saying, “Keats sees all this—his knowledge of anatomy makes it tenfold worse at every change—every way he is unfortunate” (Quoted in Bate, 691). When Keats died, he died with the knowledge of what was happening to him, as well as the severity of his condition. He knew all of this because of the medical training he received before becoming a poet.

Medical Career

In 1811, when Keats was not yet 16, he was sent to apprentice with an apothecary and surgeon named Thomas Hammond (Bate, 30). Hammond was the surgeon and apothecary for the school that Keats was attending. While not much is known about the time he spent there, he did not seem to dislike his time with the apothecary. He decided to pursue the same career himself after his time spent nursing his mother who was under the care of the same Thomas Hammond. It seemed reasonable as “socially it stood between the lower or middle ranks of trade” (Bate, 31). This career of surgeon and apothecary would not secure him the same place in society that a career as a physician would, but he would be socially equal with most involved in university study. His job would consist of what is now the job of the general practitioner and dentist. It was during this time, also, that Keats started writing more poetry. His love of poetry seemed to stem from the same place as his love of medicine. Keats “saw no difference in the commitment—and vulnerability of the psyche—necessitated by the practices of poetry and medicine” (De Almeida, 23). To Keats, both medicine and poetry came from the same place, and so his writing of poetry while studying medicine was merely an expression of the same passion for life and others that drove his love of medicine.

After almost five years apprenticing, in 1815, Keats went to Guy’s Hospital to continue his training. Keats seemed to enjoy his time there and was exceptional enough to be made a dresser after just a month at the hospital. Because antibiotics had not yet been invented, it was the job of the dresser to daily change the dressings on wounds that would almost all invariably become infected. He kept the wounds clean so that they might heal despite the infection. He also assisted a surgeon with pulling teeth, setting bones, and other such tasks (Bate, 48).

Even though he was experiencing much success in his studies, Keats still held a love for poetry and had begun to become more interested in poetry than medicine. A friend, Henry Stephens, once wrote, “poetry was to his mind the zenith of all his Aspirations” (Quoted in Bate, 49). He began to write more and more, some of his poems being brought to Leigh Hunt, the editor of a prominent newspaper at the time, as well as a poet and essayist, and even published. Despite this, Keats took the test in 1816 that would allow him to officially practice as an apothecary (Bate 67). During the two months that he had to wait before being allowed to practice, Keats went into the country side and continued to write.

After two months, he found out that he was officially licensed and could begin to practice. However, he continued to write. By this point in time he was no longer spending time with his medical friends, but instead with his friend and fellow poet Charles Clark. Together they gained the opportunity to read the Chapman translation of Homer’s *Odyssey*. After reading this translation, Keats wrote his now famous poem titled “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer”. The publication of this poem marked the end of his medical career and the beginning of his career as poet (Bate, 86). While he always kept up with the latest papers and advances in medicine, Keats chose to pursue his passion for poetry. This passion led him to create beautiful poems, as well as beautiful representations of the disease he had worked with as a medical student.

“Lamia”

In 1820 John Keats published his last volume of poetry, *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems*. He wrote to a friend that he considered this volume to “be [his] last trial” and that if it failed he would “try what [he could] do in the Apothecary line” (Keats as quoted in Cox 409). This statement has very little weight as, at this time in his life, Keats was already highly ill and was “contemplating a trip to Italy for his health” (Cox 409). However, as he often did in his letters, Keats behaved as though he was not ill and was merely considering a change in career path should this volume of poetry fail to become popular. In this statement, a bit of desperation can be seen. Keats had done well as a poet but had failed to become wildly successful in his time. At the age of 25 Keats is facing death never having truly excelled at what he loved. Therefore, he was, in many ways, desperate for this volume of poetry to do well because it was both his last attempt at success and, given his health, potentially his last attempt ever. The “last of the romances in the 1820 volume to be written” (Cox 412) was the poem called “Lamia” (1819). While this did not turn out to be the last poem he ever wrote, it was the last poem that he completed. Within its lines is a tale of love and loss which shows striking parallels between the main character Lamia and the progression of consumption as well as parallels between Lamia’s actions and those of someone who is terminally ill.

The basic plot of “Lamia” is as follows: One day the god Hermes is in the forest looking for a nymph. The nymph he is searching for is said to be the most beautiful in the land, and he wants nothing more than to make her his own. While looking for her, he runs across a serpent. The serpent, it turns out, is actually a lady elf who has been cursed into the form of a snake. The serpent tells him that the nymph he is seeking is invisible and that it was she who had made the nymph invisible. The serpent bargains with

Hermes and tells him that she will show him the nymph if he returns her to her human form and puts her near where the man she loves, known as Lycius, lives. Hermes agrees and the exchange is made. The transformation for Lamia is violent and painful, but once she is transformed she is strikingly and enchantingly beautiful. Lycius falls in love with her and the two of them are to be wed. However, his mentor, Apollonius, is a sage philosopher and Lamia is afraid of him. Against Lamia's wishes, Lycius invites Apollonius to the wedding, and once there Apollonius sees what Lamia really is, something not human. Once he sees this and proclaims her to be a serpent, she turns back into a snake and disappears. Lycius then goes on to die of grief.

In the poem Lamia plays the role of the individual stricken with consumption and those around her play supporting roles of infector and doctor. When Hermes changes her from serpent to human, the description of her transformation harkens to the description of an individual suffering from consumption. The first thing that happens is "[h]er mouth foam's, and the grass, therewith besprent⁴,/ [w]ither'd at dew so sweet and virulent" (Keats ln 148-9). This line describes the outward symptoms of a pulmonary hemorrhage. When an individual has consumption, the vessels in the lungs are weakened by both the presence of the bacteria as well as a persistent and rough cough. This would lead to one of the blood vessels in the lung rupturing and spilling blood into the lungs. The blood would then be coughed up by the individual, usually in a violent and voluminous fashion. The first part of the lines where Keats describes her mouth foaming and the foam being sprinkled over the grass allude to this experience of the lungs hemorrhaging. The second part of the line where he goes on to describe the grass withering because of the "virulent" effluvium further supports this analysis. The use of the word "virulent" clearly shows

⁴ Archaic word meaning sprinkled over

that Keats is showing Lamia to be sick. The word comes from the same root as virus and both have to do with something that is aggressive and all-consuming in nature. In 1819 people did not know that consumption was actually caused by a bacterium and, instead, considered it to merely be an aggressive or virulent disease. Because Lamia is coughing up a liquid that is vile and sick, we can infer that Keats is describing the violent and dangerous event of a pulmonary hemorrhage. At the time the hemorrhage was the only way to know that an individual had consumption. It was after their first hemorrhage that an individual would be diagnosed with the disease; however, we now know that after the first hemorrhage there was no hope of survival because the body was already too ravished by the disease. In the following lines of the poem, we see the ravishing of Lamia's body by disease.

Lamia's eyes are the next to be described in the poem. Keats calls them, "[h]ot, glaz'd, and wide, with lid-lashes all sear⁵" (ln 151). Each of these descriptors describes a person stricken with consumption. Lamia's eyes are hot and glazed. One of the main symptoms of consumption is a high and continual fever. The fever would consume a consumptive individual's mind and body, so that when he was having a spike in his temperature his eyes would glaze over and he would become delirious with fever.

Lamia's eyes are those of someone in a fever induced delirium. After her eyes Keats describes Lamia as writhing around "convuls'd with scarlet pain" (ln 155). This furthers the image of Lamia as a consumptive patient in a feverous state. Those in delirious states would often thrash about while their minds imagined terrible and frightening things.

Also the description of her pain as "scarlet" harkens to fevers. Heat is classically symbolized by the color red, and scarlet is also the color most often used to describe the

⁵ "to dry up, to wither away" www.OED.com

cheeks of a person with a fever. These things combined show Lamia as not only hemorrhaging, but also in a feverous delirium.

During the rest of the passage describing her transformation into human form, there appear images that further build the image of a consumptive woman. She is described as “[a] deep volcanian yellow” (ln 155) and “as the lava” (ln 157). Initially these two images of her being attributed to various colors may seem contradictory. However, once the description of a woman with consumption is looked at, the two seemingly opposing color images begin to work together. Clark Lawlor quotes Dr. Thomas Trotter (1809) in his book *Consumption and Literature* on the subject of the appearance of women who were consumptive. Trotter says that the woman have “a blooming complexion” and “a sickly sallow hue” (Lawlor 153). That is to say, as the woman becomes ill she becomes pale and yellow in color because the disease makes her constantly tired and malnourished. Also her cheeks are constantly flushed because of the persistent fever. Therefore, the fact that Lamia is at the same time yellow and red and hot like lava makes perfect sense. The two images work together to create the image of her body as a volcano. She is yellow as the dried volcanic clay but streaked with the red of the lava that is the flush of her fever. The volcano image also brings the description back to the initial coughing up of blood. As the volcano erupts a red hot liquid, so do Lamia’s lungs erupt blood as she makes this transformation and displays the outward signs of an individual extremely sick with consumption and coughing up blood.

Her behavior, as well, is common to women in a consumptive state. At the time women, especially those of a higher class, “had increasingly ornamental roles” (Lawlor 155). This was due to the fact that it had become the fashion for those of high class, as

well as those aspiring to raise their class, to have women who did not work but were instead sedentary. This was a way of showing wealth because it insinuated that the family was wealthy enough that they could afford to have superfluous members of the household. Lawlor also quotes Thomas Beddoes, a man who wrote on disease in the 18th century, as saying that consumption could be from a “hereditary disposition” (Lawlor 157). That is to say a woman could naturally, due to high-class living, have a “lie about” nature and this would cause her consumption. Both the societal acceptance of a sedentary woman as well as the belief that consumption was linked to the constitution of an individual support the thesis of Lamia as consumptive when Keats describes her, saying she felt “[a]s though in Cupid’s college she had spent/ [s]weet days a lovely graduate, still unshent⁶,/ [a]nd kept his rosy terms in idle languishment” (Keats ln 197-9). In this quote we can see the sexuality of Lamia in the line “and kept his rosy terms”. She is languishing idly with him, whoever the “him” may be. This is a sexualized description of Lamia, and also continues to fit the description of a consumptive woman. Women were considered sexy when they had consumption. They were desirable. In this quote Lamia is showing her desirability as well as her personal desire to lie about in languishment, behavior that usually accompanied consumption. Lamia has entered this human form and not only caused it to have a terrible disease, but also made it beautiful and ideal because of the disease. She has given her human form the life of an individual suffering from consumption.

As a human Lamia is considered to be “a lady bright,/ [a] full-born beauty new and exquisite” (ln 171-2). It is her consumptive constitution that makes her so beautiful. In the 18th century it first became fashionable for a woman to be sick with consumption. As

⁶ Meaning unspoiled

she became thinner, paler, and her cheeks became more flushed with fever, a woman became more and more desirable to men. At the time there was a strange fascination with the disease of consumption and women would spend time with consumptive friends and attempt to make themselves look ill even if they weren't. Lawlor says that "the perverse behavior of women in wishing to look seductively ill ... continued on to the Romantic period" (Lawlor 153). This trend means that some if not all of Lamia's striking beauty can be attributed to the consumptive complexion that was described as she transformed into a human. One of the next things that must be examined is her role as both human and serpent. At this point there are two ways of looking at the relationship between Lamia the serpent, Lamia the human, and disease. It can be seen that she, the serpent, goes into the human form.

There is a complicated and multifaceted mythological history associated with serpents, and Lamia embodies multiple types of mythological serpents. One of the "Greek deities connected with healing and therapeutic wisdom," Aesculapius, is "always depicted with two snakes, one wreathed around his staff and the other supporting his hand with its head" (De Almeida 183). This is the symbol that was adopted by the medical profession and, with a few alterations, is the image associated with medicine today. In this example the serpents are there as supports to the great mind of Aesculapius. Serpents were also associated with Apollo. It was said that "the snakes fed at Apollo's temples were credited with the power of prophecy" (De Almeida 183). Apollo was one of the main deities of healing. In fact "all the deities who share Apollo's power of healing almost always have a serpent by them" (De Almeida 183). This presents a mythological image of serpents as associated with healing.

Serpents, however, are also associated with illness. At the time little was known about snake venom. In fact it “could be known only by the symptoms it produced” (De Almeida 184), meaning that doctors only knew snakes had venom because of the way it would affect a human who had been bitten by a snake. It was a mysterious potential killer that seemed to defy medical science. This created a frightening situation. If someone were to come in contact with a snake, it was unknown how the snake venom killed or how severely it would hurt a person. This meant the individual was able to do nothing but fear for his life. While individuals at the time did know some snakes and the severity of their bites (vipers mostly), the majority of snakes were an unknown. It makes sense then that Lamia fulfils multiple roles as both woman and serpent. As explored earlier, the serpent is a representation of disease when Lamia is transformed from serpent to woman. While Lamia living is as a woman, the disease metaphor continues through her showing the perceived physical beauty that was associated with consumptive women.

Before one may leave the concept of the serpent in “Lamia,” one must look at one more thing. The sentience of the character of Lamia resides in the serpent. How then can the serpent be disease if it is also Lamia? This answer comes from the beginning of the poem. Early on when first describing Lamia in her serpent form Keats says, “she seem’d, at once, some pennanced lady elf” (Keats I ln 55). In this instance, calling Lamia a “pennanced lady elf” is a way of saying that she is an elf who has been put into a serpent’s body as punishment for some previous transgression. Therefore, Lamia is an immortal elf who has been forced into this body that is representative of disease. Because she is immortal, she is immune to the form that brings disease. However, when

she is given human form, the disease serpent infects and begins to destroy the human body (as seen in her transformation scene).

There is, however, a second way of looking at Lamia's disease. The fact that her transformation into a human marks her display of the defining symptoms of consumption at the time creates an interesting situation. Her humanity, then, can be seen as her disease. She is the disease itself that infiltrates and infects the human body that Hermes gives her. Right before she is transformed Hermes and his new nymph love frolic off into the distance. At the end of the description of their exit Keats adds that they will not "grow pale, as mortal lovers do" (Keats lln 145). This works as a subtle reminder that humans grow pale and die due to disease, and Lamia causes her human body to grow pale and show the outward vestiges of a disease that, at the time, almost exclusively ended in death. At the end of her transformation, Keats describes her saying, "nothing but pain and ugliness [are] left" (lln164). This serves to back up the fact that after she has entered the human body that is wracked with "pain and ugliness" and disease.

Before she is put into a human body Lamia is, as before stated, a "pennanced lady elf" (Keats I lln55). She is an autonomous, intelligent, free-thinking being. There is no sign of illness and no sign of anything wrong her except for the fact that she is cursed into a serpent form as punishment for a past transgression. She shows her strength of mind when Hermes calls her a "smooth-lipp'd serpent" (Keats I lln 83). In other words she is a "smooth talker". She is able to flatter Hermes into hearing her proposal so that she might be able to become human. A weak, ill, and frail individual would not have the strength of body or mind to spin the situation with Hermes into her favor. Therefore, it can be

assumed that before the transformation, the consciousness of Lamia, trapped in a snake's body, is healthy.

Once she begins to transform into a human, she leaves the serpentine behind. The first line of the transformation states, "the serpent now began/to change" (Keats I ln 146-7). Immediately after this Keats says, "her elfin blood in madness ran" (Keats I ln 147). While this line is beginning the description of her transformation and concurrent hemorrhage, the important part comes from her blood being described as "elfin". It is know that she is an elf trapped in a serpent's body. When she is transforming, the descriptors surrounding Lamia change from serpent, to elfin. This can be seen as an expression of her leaving behind the serpent form and momentarily returning to her natural state as an elf before she can become human.

If this is so, then it is Lamia's humanity that is her disease. It has been observed that before the transformation the sentience and being of Lamia were not ill. It has also been observed that as she transforms, she leaves behind her serpentine form and moves into a human form. However, as soon as she does this, the description turns to one of a consumptive hemorrhage. Logically one can then say that the only new factor in the situation is the human body and humanity that Lamia has taken on. Seeing that her humanity is the only new factor, the blame of disease can be placed upon it. Only in human form is she ill. However, as humans, we have a way of treating illness within ourselves. This treatment is facilitated by a doctor.

The role of the doctor, in this poem, is filled by Apollonius. The first evidence of this can be seen in his name. The root of the name Apollonius is Apollo. Apollo was described as "the god of all the fine arts, medicine, music, poetry, and eloquence" (De

Almeida 17). Not many individuals were aware of Apollo's dual nature as both god of poetry as well as medicine. However, Keats was. Hermione De Almeida says that "[a]lthough students of Keats have noticed the importance of Apollo ... marked [by] Apollo's "dual nature" as the god of medicine and poetry" (De Almeida 18) Keats was aware of this duality. Because of this "dual nature" Apollo was especially important to Keats as he represented the melding of medicine and poetry that Keats fostered within himself. It is, therefore, important that the man that shows Lamia to be a serpent is named after Apollo. While his role as poet is not used, Apollonius uses Apollo's role as physician.

It is the job of the physician to uncover, name, and treat disease. He brings the illness to light and gives it life by naming it. Before, the individual is merely stricken with something, but after, he is consumptive and knows that such a disease carries with it a death sentence. Lamia is aware of this fact. She is aware that Apollonius can name her for what she is, a disease, and so she fears him. Keats describes her worrying about Apollonius coming to the wedding saying, "Apollo's presence when in act to strike/ [t]he serpent—Ha, the serpent! certes⁷, she/ [w]as none" (Keats part 2 ln 79-81). These lines describe exactly what will happen. Apollonius will strike with his words and drive out the serpent. When the fact that Apollo is the god of medicine is considered, this image becomes a metaphor of disease. The physician, represented by Apollo, strikes out and drives out the disease, represented by the serpent. In Lamia's case she is literally a serpent and also is, when in a human body, the living embodiment of consumption. Therefore Apollonius becomes the physician when he drives her out of the human form.

⁷ A serpent of myth that arose after a flood and was slain by Apollo

At the wedding, Apollonius merely looks at Lamia and says, “[a] Serpent!” (Keats l. 305) and she is instantaneously transformed back into her serpent form. However, she is not cured. Consumption was not a disease that could be cured. As a trained medical professional who sat at the bedside of and nursed two family members through the slow and agonizing death of consumption, Keats was more aware than most that unlike in the myth, Apollo does not simply defeat the serpent. Instead the end of the poem continues on the course of the life of an individual with consumption. Once he is named as consumptive as Apollonius names Lamia as serpent, he is doomed to die. It could be days or months, but they may as well do as Lamia does and disappear because the diagnosis of consumption was a death sentence.

In this end to the poem, the connection of serpent and healing is seen. While the serpent is still, in essence, the disease, it is less of an image of venom and infection, and more of an ambiguous interaction of Apollo and his serpent. As previously stated, the Greek healing deities were almost always pictured with a serpent. However, in one of the Myths of Apollo he kills a massive serpent that has been terrorizing a town. Consequently the role of the serpent begins to become muddled. However, if one looks at the relationship of physicians and disease, it becomes much easier to understand the relationship of medicine and serpents. A doctor’s main purpose is to cure disease, yet, if there were no disease, the doctor would no longer have a purpose in life. Therefore the doctor needs disease to exist so that he may exist and serve his purpose. In Lamia this is the role that the serpent plays. It is the infecting factor and is driven out by the physician character in the end.

Keats does not romanticize medicine in this poem. Nor does he romanticize disease. He gives a life and a name to a disease and shows its effect on the life of the diseased as well as those around the diseased. Lamia enters into a human form and becomes ill. She then falls in love with a normal human man and, when she dies, leaves him “empty of delight” (ln 307). This emptiness is the same kind that Keats experienced. He was in a state of deep depression after the death of his brother and was facing his own upcoming death due to consumption. This truth of his life is evident in “Lamia”. The disease has a life and has desires. The disease also consumes and ravages the human body that it is in. And, in the end, the disease destroys the body that it is in and leaves those around it to die of heartbreak.

Conclusion

John Keats did not, by any definition, live a life that most would call happy. For most of his life, though, he seemed to try to make the best of it. However, after the death of his brother, he slipped into depression. From out of this depression he wrote the last poems that he would ever write. One such is “Lamia”. While not obviously terminally ill himself, Keats wrote “Lamia” full of imagery and themes that seem to center on medicine. What can be considered to be the most important point in the poem is that Lamia’s humanity is her disease. This makes the poem a heartbreaking commentary on the doomed nature of every human’s life. The mind and soul can be pure and intelligent, but the body will decay in some way. It is the body that is the disease of the mind, for its mortality holds us all back. This is the way Keats was seeing his own body as well as the bodies of those around him. His loved ones died too young, and his own life was beginning to be cut short by the disease of his body.

The conclusion of the poem is the horrors of disease. It is a life of disease that Keats led. Disease took away his family. Disease took away his future as a poet. Disease took away the potential of him ever marrying the woman he loved. In a sense Keats becomes Lycius and those around him become Lamia. He loved his mother and brother dearly, but they were taken away from him by disease. Because consumption was often thought to be passed through families, it can be assumed that Keats could have had at least an inkling of his potential future when, after his brother died, his health was not strong. Therefore, the poem can also be an expression of his own love of life and how it might be snatched away from him.

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