‘Wherefore Flout / the Silent Blessing Fate’: Love, Fate and Metaphysics in John Keats and His Legacy

James Dowthwaite

In a famous letter of 3 July 1819, John Keats wrote to Fanny Brawne, asking her if she was aware of the power that she held over him: ‘Ask yourself my love’, he implores her, ‘whether you are not very cruel to have so entrammelled me, so destroyed my freedom’.[1] This sense that love has contravened his liberty is even stronger in a later letter dated 13 October of the same year:

> I have been astonished that Men could die Martyrs for religion – I have shudder’d at it. I shudder no more – I could be martyr’d for my Religion – Love is my religion – I could die for that. I could die for you. My Creed is Love and you are its only tenet. You have ravish’d me away by a Power I cannot resist; and yet I could resist till I saw you; and even since I have seen you I have endeavoured often ‘to reason against the reasons of my Love’. I can do that no more – the pain would be too great. My love is selfish. I cannot breathe without you.[2]

Keats’ letter performs love as a domineering force, one which dissolves the individual from without, and his melancholy tone suggests that love was for him a kind of doom, something not only beyond his control but which dissipated all his faculties, consuming him. It is a ‘Power’ he cannot resist, though this power is concretely bound up with the person to whom he writes, not an abstract force but an intimate relation between two people. In the earlier letter, Keats expresses surprise that love should come to him in this manner. This is corroborated by sentiments expressed in an earlier letter to his friend Benjamin Bailey, in which he lists love amongst the ‘things semireal’: ‘such as love, the Clouds etc., which require a greeting of the Spirit to make them wholly exist’.[3] This statement has long caused confusion amongst readers. The poet Anthony Hecht, otherwise sympathetic to Keats’ thought, finds the passage leaves much to be desired, philosophically. He argues Keats’ use of ‘semireal’ implies that he ‘does not altogether believe what he is saying. His tone *is* sceptical and worldly, though perhaps not sceptical enough to please us’.[4] Hecht’s intuition that this is sceptical

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1 John Keats, *Letters to Fanny Brawne*, ed. Harry Buxton Forman (London: Reeves & Turner, 1878), 5.

2 Keats, *Letters to Fanny Brawne*, 36–37.

3 John Keats, *Letters to Family and Friends*, ed. Sidney Colvin (London: Macmillan, 1925), 81.

4 Anthony Hecht, ‘Shades of Keats and Marvell’, *The Hudson Review*, 15:1 (1962), 50–71, 69.

comes from the fact that love and clouds should require different epistemological modes of thought to validate them, the one apprehended by the senses, the other extrapolated from the physical to the metaphysical. The only way to bring them together is if one is sceptical about actuality in general.[5] What is important, however, is less what Keats thought than how he framed the concept. In 1818, love was to Keats theoretical, and metaphysical, one of those things that the poet of negative capability should be able to suspend in their poetic apprehension of the life of sensations. Eighteen months later, after his encounter with Fanny Brawne, love is a totalising, semi-religious force, but one embodied wholly in his feelings for an individual: it is a real, perhaps even the most real, force in his life. It is easy to characterise Keats' and Fanny Brawne's relationship as 'tragic', and as with the tragic, to associate it with a sense of fateful destruction. Keats frames his love as a contravention of freedom, a power which works without him and destroys his will. We might easily put the two with other tragic lovers: Tristram and Isolde, Heloise and Abelard, Romeo and Juliet, lovers for whom fate provided an ill star. The relationship between love and fate being, in this case, the tragic sense of doom. Yet such a clear association ignores the most fascinating aspect of love and fate, one which is the source of the sense of the tragic: disjunction. Fate wills the lovers apart and yet love binds them; Keats' love for Fanny Brawne is the one aspect in which he wishes to defy the death to which his tuberculosis will soon consign him. The idea that love and fate are at cross-purposes is there too in Tristram and Isolde, in Romeo and Juliet: fate goes one way, and love is defeated, but love has defied the march of events.

The sense of incongruity between love and fate sets the two up in a dichotomy, and this dichotomy is the subject of this chapter. I will first address the way that Keats sets them up as rival forces in his work, particularly in *Endymion* (1818) and *Lamia* (1820). It is worth remembering in the context of grand metaphysical speculations which always accompany notions of fate that romantic love is intimate. Though it may be public, shown in letters or in poetry, the fundamental social relation it concerns is between individuals: in Keats' case between him and Fanny Brawne, Endymion and Cynthia, Lamia and Lycius – and, of course, the other forms of love in kinship and friendship. This intimate, concrete social relation is part of the dichotomy with the vague, circumstantial nature of a surrounding fate. Despite an intense critical focus on

[5] Bysshe Inigo Coffey's recent reassessment of Shelley's thought about actuality, *Shelley's Broken World: Fractured Materiality and Intermitted Song* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2021), makes the case that Shelley's work manifests a sense that actuality is itself weak. We might consider Keats in light of his reflections.

negative capability, one can make the case that Keats' personae are both strong individuals and engaging with broader ideas than sensory perception: 'Keats's speakers, characters, and figures', Magdalena Ostas reminds us, 'find that their "selves" are the openings to a precisely social, shared, and common experience'.[6] This, I argue, is the case with love and the importance of its relation to fate. Keats was writing at an important moment in Romantic thought. In his history of the concept of love, Simon May sees the eighteenth century as the time of what he calls the 'fourth transformation' in the way we conceive love.[7] This transformation 'which concerns *the lover*, who becomes authentic through love', is still going on today, placing Keats very much at the centre of a romantic (and Romantic) shift. May describes the 'fourth transformation' of the figure of the lover in the following way:

> In love he becomes not selfless but a self. He doesn't lose himself but finds himself. Far from striving to transcend nature he seeks to be guided by and in a sense to actualise his own nature. The true and the good lie not beyond the individual subject's experience but in an exploration of it. Indeed, as this transformation develops, the lover becomes the focus of love to such an extent that there are moments when the loved one almost drops out of the picture, reduced to a substitutable stage prop in the drama of the lover's life. Love comes to fall in love with itself.[8]

There is much here that applies to Keats and much that Keats' work complicates – though the complications in their own way confirm May's insights. Some of Keats' lovers, and perhaps even the Keats of the letters, struggle with the emotional turmoil of such a transformation: in 'Bright Star' (1820), for example, the object of the beloved is an occasion for the self-reflection of the lover. In other works, it is less that the lover is wilfully dropped out of the picture than that they drop through circumstances beyond the self's control: having become so attached to, so dependent on, the object of love, one might say, fate then works to remove them. I will return to this quotation at the close of this essay. May's reflections focus primarily on love as an emotion felt by a subject, but I wish to argue that the social dimension of Keats' work lies in the fact that lovers, as a plural entity, constitute an intimate relationship. Love, if unrequited or if non-dialogic (as in 'Bright Star'), is self-reflective, but if love takes the form of

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6 Magdalena Ostas, 'Keats's Voice', *Studies in Romanticism*, 50:2 (2011), 335–50, 336.

7 The preceding transformations occur in the ancient world, in which love is made a value, the second in the early middle ages, when love is conceived as a human power, and the third in the late middle ages, concerns the blurring of divine and secular love.

8 Simon May, *Love: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 14.

a romance, in which both characters play their part, then it is reflective of an intimate social relation. And this intimate social relation takes place within the broader context of wider relations: those of society at large. The rituals of love happen in private and in public, and these two strain against one another. As evidence of this we might think of another important shift in the concept of love also occurring at Keats' time: the love marriage. The turn of the nineteenth century saw a shift in the concept of marriage: the love match had been a part of the romance artistic tradition for millennia, but by 1800 – in line with the transformation May describes – it was increasingly seen as socially desirable. Once a confirmation of social and religious responsibility, marriage had now become the symbolic consummation of enduring romantic feeling.[9] As May writes, this is a phase we are still in. In part, we are still in it because such transformations are never smooth nor complete. As Hilary Schor has demonstrated, love in the nineteenth century underwent transformations of its own: romantic love had to contend with traditional visions, visions which are regulated by social norms.[10]

There is a question, of course, in how far Keats' views are reflective of his era. This question is difficult to answer insofar that Keats is, for us, an indelible part of his age, and part of what makes it such a formative part of literary, artistic, and social history. In his literary history of love, Robert M. Polhemus writes of Keats' era as transformative for the quotidian role of love: shifting from being the elevated theme of romance only, 'Erotic love became an important basis of everyday faith in the nineteenth century'.[11] Keats was part of a generation which made love part of the domestic and the everyday. If we follow May's and Polhemus' accounts of love, it is clear that Keats was part of a change from inherited ideas. Even if his treatment of love is still represented with figures from mythology and fancy, it is presented as part of a domestic, daily sphere. We see from Keats' letters to Brawne how deeply he struggled with these issues as part of daily existence. It is between social expectation and the expression of intimate desire that Keats's figures, and their author, suffer their tragic fates.

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[9] See Christopher Matthews, 'Love at First Site: The Velocity of Victorian Heterosexuality', *Victorian Studies*, 46:3 (2004), 425–54; Sally Holloway, *The Game of Love in Georgian England: Courtship, Emotions, and Material Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Maggie Kalenak, '"Consider yourself kissed": Intimacy, Engagement, and Material Culture in Nineteenth-Century Middle-Class English Love Letters', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 28:2 (2023), 243–62.

[10] H. M. Schor, 'Love', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 46:3–4 (2018), 752–56.

[11] Robert M. Polhemus, *Erotic Faith: Being in Love from Jane Austen to D. H. Lawrence* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 2.

Love and fate in Keats' work

There has long been a suspicion that despite Keats' claims for a life of sensations over a life of thoughts, his work is an attempt to philosophise in a radically different form. Paul Bentley understands Keats' poetic strategies as Romantic irony, part of a particular dialogue with his critics: 'the indeterminacies and contradictions of the poems are those into which the critics are led as a result of Keats's Socratic method'.[12] E. Douka Kabitoglou has also demonstrated that Keats clearly engaged with the Platonic tradition.[13] It is certainly true of Keats' letters that his protests against a 'life of thoughts' are nestled between long philosophical speculations, and his poetry has clearly been fruitful for philosophical discussion, but does this apply to love? Though Keats initially conceived of love as a metaphysical force, something which the speculations of philosophy might approach, he seems later to have considered it amongst sensations. Reflecting on Keats' famous 'last sonnet', 'Bright Star, would I were steadfast as thou art', Emily Gosholz argues that 'Keats must reject this distanced perspective that denatures as it observes', but he maintains his identification with the pole star. In the end, 'he will lie down besides his life, but – insofar as their closeness fills all his awareness – their place will be nowhere in particular and everywhere'. Ultimately, she concludes, the poet must 'have his last word: perhaps love is stronger than death'.[14] This might be an optimistic reading: one could easily conclude that the tragedy of Keats' final letters is that love does not survive death. Nevertheless, the significance of the argument lies in what is immortalised in poetry, not what survives of the person after death – that doom to which we are all fated. And what did 'fate' mean to Keats? The answer seems to be rather mundane: it meant much the same it means to most people when they use the term. That is to say, 'fate' is a vague – or at the very least vaguely defined – sense of circumstances beyond one's control, and in its most intense form the sequence of events leading to one's death. This may take the form of a named or implied force, or it may remain open and symbolic. The meaning of fate for Keats is less significant, however, than the use to which the term is put in poetry, and the particular relationship that it has to the other of his grand themes: love. Consider the following presentation of the role of the poet in 'I Stood a Tip-Toe Upon a Little Hill' from Keats' first volume of poems:

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[12] Paul Bentley, 'Keats's Ode, Socratic Irony, and Regency Reviewers', *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 62 (2013), 114–132, 132.

[13] E. Douka Kabitoglou, 'Adapting Philosophy to Literature: The Case of John Keats', *Studies in Philology*, 89:1 (1992), 115–36, 119.

[14] Emily Grosholz, 'Clouds, Sensation and the Infinite in the Poetry of John Keats', *The Hudson Review*, 53:4 (2001), 599–606,605–606.

> The Poet wept at her so piteous fate,
> Wept that such beauty should be so desolate:
> So in fine wrath some golden sounds he won,
> And gave meek Cynthia her Endymion.[15]

Here, the poet offers poetry, 'golden sounds', as recompense for 'piteous fate', while 'fate' remains undefined. Against this 'piteous fate', he also sets up a rival force, one which should not only redeem the situation, but offer a more fitting conduit for her beauty: love. The relation between love and fate is thus a dichotomy: fate casts down and love lifts up; love is conceived as passionate defiance against the cold capricious affordance of the universe. This is not to imply that love is successful in a conflict with fate: some of the most famous examples, such as *Romeo and Juliet*, demonstrate the opposite. It simply means that the tension between what the lovers desired and what transpired can be conceived in terms of resistance, however failed. Fate may work to keep lovers apart, but there are enough examples of refusal to acquiesce into fate's demands. Even if that way lies tragedy.

The dichotomy between love and fate cannot be so easily mapped onto the deterministic theories of Keats' day; it is not the conflict between free will and determinism as Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, or William Godwin may have addressed it, and much less LaPlace – though it does have an interesting bearing on them.[16] Keats' fate is literary, inspired not by philosophical doctrine, but by inhabiting a symbolic world of Graeco-Roman mythology and poetry: and even here his models of fate are Homer and Virgil, rather than Epictetus or Seneca, though undoubtedly the broad influence of the latter is felt in any consideration of the concept. We should think most readily of the *Moirai* (from *moira*, meaning 'portion' or 'part' but also 'destiny'), who apportioned lives to individual human beings in the form of spun pieces of thread.[17] Although the *Moirai* are not themselves featured in Homer's poem per se, the *Iliad* contains a similar figuration of fate as a metadivine determination. We might think of Zeus' famous weighing of the scales in Book 8, in which he turns

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[15] John Keats, *The Complete Poems,* ed. John Barnard (London: Penguin, 1977), 81

[16] For famous examples of the enlightenment treatment of the longstanding conflict between free will and necessity, see Chapter 21, 'Of the Liberty of Subjects' in Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651), Part III, Of the Will and Direct Passions' of David Hume's *A Treatise on Human Nature* (1739), and William Godwin's later discussion of the same subject in the twelfth essay of *Thoughts on Man* (1831). Pierre-Simon LaPlace's essay *A Philosophical Essay on Probabilities* (1814) was a well-known and succinct argument for determinism, though its influence waned as its scientific assumptions were considerably challenged later in the nineteenth century.

[17] See Hesiod, *Theogony and Works and Days*, trans. and ed. M. L. West (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 217.

the fortunes of the war in the directions of the Trojans, or, in Book 20, when he balances the lot of Achilles against that of Hector. This act of weighing, known as *Keroustasia*, has been read as Zeus' consultation of fate, the scales showing him whom the power of the universe favours. Zeus apportions death rather than decides for it, and it is the case that he himself anguishes over his role as the arbiter, yet not the decider, of fate. In Book 16, Zeus is pained by his role, watching his son Sarpedon struggling on the battlefield. Zeus knows that he is fated to die at this point, and yet is tempted in his role as head god to save him. The implication is that Zeus is indeed free to work against fate, though he is reminded, sternly, by Hera that acting against fate will have dire consequences. Zeus thus maintains the order of the universe, dictated by fate, but this remains a divine choice. This is a kind of divine compatibilism, where fate is undoubtedly a metadivine force but one which the gods are able to work against. We see fate as situational, but in a much more concrete form: it is the allotted situation, and more importantly the length of situation, of an individual human being. Fate is not just disposition or *habitus* or even external circumstances, but also the manner of one's death. From a human perspective, there is no question of this being altered, unless via the whim of a reckless god. Homer does not give much information about fate as power, but simply demonstrates an attitudinal stance towards it.

Keats' next treatment of the Endymion myth, in *Endymion* (1818), fleshes out the dichotomy. In Book I, Endymion sits with the shepherds, watching the heavens, the clouds 'ministering the potent rule of fate' (I.366).[18] In Book II, searching for his lost love in the underworld, he comes across Arethusa lamenting her own 'persecuting fate' (1006, 160). But the narrator of the poem seems to imply in Book III that even fate itself is subject to other powers: ''bove the withering of old-lipp'd Fate / A thousand powers keep religious state', (29–30, 161). This sets up a dramatic tension between the gods and the metadivine, one which is recognised by Cynthia herself at the end of Book III, telling Endymion, though he does not grasp it, that she has 'dwelt in fear of fate' (1034). Though the narrator never reveals the nature of this 'fate', it is significant that it serves the same role for the gods that divine caprice does for human beings: it is a perceived external pressure that has, at best, a limiting affect, and at worst dooms. That it exists as a metadivine force thus gives the gods their own dramatic situations and tensions, a conception of the external against which their will and desire strains.

The dramatic force of *Endymion* is built entirely on Cynthia's divine wrestling with metadivine fate. In Book III, she expresses her fear of fate, and in Book IV this comes to a dramatic head. As Cynthia reveals that she was the Indian maid

[18] Keats, *Complete Poems*, 116.

with whom Endymion felt he had fallen into a betraying love, she then justifies her delay in coming to him with the following words:

> Drear, drear
> Has our delaying been; but foolish fear
> Withheld me first; and then decrees of fate;
> And then 'twas fit that from this mortal state
> Thou shouldst, my love, by some unlook'd for change
> Be spiritualiz'd.
>
> (997–1002, 216)

Endymion has struggled to reconcile himself with his fate throughout the poem, lamenting his condition and ultimately giving up on love; Cynthia has mirrored this, in that she has acquiesced into the decrees of fate throughout, obeying an undefined metadivine law. At the end, however, she chooses to appear to him and to cross the immortal-mortal gap, taking him with her to the skies. The poem is unclear on whether this is a resolution that necessitated defying the decrees of fate or whether it was licensed by them, but what is clear is that the intimate relation between two individuals is measured against an external force; the dramatic tension of the romance relies on a conflict between love and fate, one which *Endymion* resolves by bringing the two into accord. The question of what fate is, the sort of question that might satisfy the philosopher or the scientist, is poorly answered by the poem: all that the reader knows, and perhaps needs to know, is that it is perceived as a metaphysical force, measured against the sensual and the sensory power of love.

Endymion ends with a resolution between the divine and the earthly, between the metaphysical and the physical, as the mortal subject of the poem is reconciled to his beloved goddess. This kind of material-metaphysical sublimation is not what we often associate with Keats, however, and particularly not in his more mature poetry of 1819 onwards. After this point, love, let alone fate, is conceived in more persecuting terms. Stanley C. Russell claims that we should not be led by the resolution at the end of *Endymion* into thinking that love held a redemption quality for the poet: 'love was a threat to Keats, a threat to his poetic creativity, to his identity as an artist'.[19] In *Endymion*, he claims, rather than offering a redemptive vision, 'love acts as a paralyzing and disintegrating agent on the will; its force is so powerful that it drains men of the desire to do great things'.[20] Alternatively, one may suggest that love is clearly idealised in the poem, in part by setting it against adverse powers of fate, 'idealized in *Endymion*; but it is idealized perforce

[19] Stanley C. Russell, '"Self Destroying" Love in Keats', *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 16 (1967), 79–91, 84.
[20] Russell, 84.

against the realisation of its potential destructiveness'.[21] Russell's argument is that love brought a destruction of Keats's liberty and artistic integrity and that this is clearly reflected in *Endymion*.

One of the issues with Russell's approach is that he believes that Keats maintained a stable concept of love across his short career. My own view is that there is a radical shift in his treatment of the concept, a difference between love in *Endymion* and love in *Lamia* (1820)– between the two lies his meeting Brawne. Russell applies biographical details from after their meeting to a poem (*Endymion*) written before it. Between the completion of the two poems there were other shifts. Brittany Pladek has argued that 'between 1817 and 1819 Keats reoriented his aesthetic and ethical perspective to accommodate a poetry tasked with transmitting suffering instead of alleviating', something she considers in light of his idea of the world as 'vale of soul-making'.[22] J. Robert Barth, drawing partly on Robert M. Ryan's work on Keats' religious sense, argues that the last years of Keats' life must be seen in the context of his attempt to wrestle with the problem of 'evil and suffering … rejecting as he did the doctrine of the Atonement, Keats was left to grapple in his own terms with this central mystery of human life – a mystery he was to experience so profoundly in his own life'.[23] And all of this was taking place while Keats was dealing with the failure of his first collection, which Duncan Wu claims, 'sucked its author into the oubliette of physical and mental strife within which he always seemed to have struggled'.[24]

Lamia is a markedly different poem from *Endymion*, in terms of poetic mastery and in terms of plot resolution. What it shares is a sense of earthly love in conflict with divine being, and both being held in dynamic conflict with external force. Fate as concept is present, but more implicitly than in *Endymion*: the poem is characterised by a series of interventions. First Hermes searches for the nymph he desires, and she is revealed by Lamia. When Hermes meets Lamia, she has been trapped in the form of a serpent. As thanks for her assistance in finding the nymph, he transforms her into a beautiful woman, returning her to her original

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[21] Russell, 85.

[22] Brittany Pladek, '"In Sickness not ignoble": Soul-making and the Pains of Identity in the "Hyperion" Poems", *Studies in Romanticism*, 54:3 (2015), 401–27, 403.

[23] J. Robert Barth, 'Keats's Way of Salvation', *Studies in Romanticism*, 45:2 (2006), 285–97, 288. Barth refers extensively to two works by Robert M. Ryan, first *Keats: The Religious Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976); second, *The Romantic Reformation: Religious Politics in English Literature, 1789–1824* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). In both, Ryan explores the various dimensions of Keats' religious thought, in its unorthodox and its Christian aspects. He argues ultimately that Keats' work has a concern with the divine and theodicy at its centre.

[24] Duncan Wu, 'Constructing Keats', *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 67 (2018), 122–39,134.

human form; Lamia then positions herself to entice Lycius, and together they go to Corinth where they construct a palace, away from the interventions of the city, and above all from the philosopher Apollonius. At their wedding, Lamia having reluctantly given in to Lycius' desire to celebrate their love in society, the philosopher then intervenes with his hard, rationalising stare, revealing Lamia's 'true' form. The poem is thus about doomed love, but it is not a love which is doomed in and of itself; rather it is the fragile and precarious nature of it that opens it up to the destructive power of external intervention. Love as the passionate, intimate relation between Lamia and Lycius is destroyed by a pressure which relents in *Endymion*. The poem opens with a rudimentary conception of love: Lamia tells Hermes of her love for the 'youth of Corinth' and reveals the nymph for whom he searches. She, on seeing Lycius, initially cowers but then is immediately won over by the warmth of his touch, and then 'Into the green-recessed woods they flew; / Nor grew they pale, as mortal lovers do' (144–45, 418).[25] Lamia's love, established having seen Lycius in a dream-vision while still in serpent form, is also presented in conventional terms:

> And once, while among mortals dreaming thus,
> She saw the young Corinthian Lycius
> Charioting foremost in the envious race,
> Like a young Jove with calm uneager face,
> And fell into a swooning love of him.
> (214–19, 420)

Hermes' and Lamia's love is drawn in distinctly aesthetic terms: it is appearance, accompanied by a sense of the mystical, which is the sounding note for love. The same goes for Lycius, though his aesthetic response is first acoustic, and then visual. Still, he swoons, 'murmuring love' (289, 422) immediately on meeting Lamia. She then sings 'A song of love, too sweet for earthly lyres' (299, 422) and tells him of her long-held love for him. This, the narrator tells us, is an explicitly human love, for it is in the intimacy and candour of her admission of her love for him that he was truly won over, and not by her invocation of heavenly decree: she 'won his heart / More pleasantly by playing woman's part' (337, 423). This mood is disturbed only when they enter Corinth and they gain sight of Apollonius, the old philosopher (and Lycius' tutor) who seems 'The ghost of folly' (377, 424) haunting Lycius's 'sweet dreams'. We learn in part II, after a brief description of the 'palace' in which they have sequestered, and above which Love itself keeps a jealous watch, that 'For all this came a ruin' (16, 425). The first condition of this 'ruin', which accelerates a sense of doom, is social: Lycius wishes to expand

[25] John Keats, *Complete Poems*, 418.

the dimensions of their love beyond the intimate space of the palace and parade their happiness around Corinth. Lycius dismisses Lamia's tearful fears, and she agrees to a public wedding: this contravention of the intimate sphere by the wider social should be understood as setting up the conditions for what dooms them.

Lamia clearly recognises that the conditions of their intimacy depend on her present state, and that exposure to the public realm exposes too the fragility of her ability to maintain appearances. It is at this moment that the narrator introduces the fateful dimension, asking of Lycius: 'Madman, wherefore flout / The silent-blessing fate, warm cloister'd hours'; why, he asks, 'show to common eyes these secret bowers?' (147–48, 429). But the use of the term can only be understood ironically: fate has not blessed Lycius; if anything, Hermes has by magic, and Lamia by intimacy. The narrative imperative of the poem is fate of a different kind: namely, Apollonius, who arrives at the wedding uninvited, suspicious of Lamia. This causes the narrator to speculate, famously, on the nature of rationality:

> 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,
> Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,
> Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine –
> Unweave a rainbow, as it erewhile made
> The tender-person'd Lamia melt into a shade.
> (229–38, 431)

On this, Richard Benvenuto argues that 'what Keats calls "philosophy" includes all systemic thinking whose procedure is to categorize realities into fixed, exclusive quantities'. The two representatives of this he sees as Apollonius and Lycius (though one might insist on a major degree of difference between the two), as both 'judge [Lamia] according to *a priori* standards of good and evil'.[26] This clearly applies to Apollonius, though there may be mitigating circumstances for Lycius, whose subsequent death would seem to testify to the depth of his Romantic proclivities and his symbolic significance as a lover. Lamia is doomed by Apollonius' appearance, which is the negative correlative of the 'silent, blessing fate'; he is a corrosive, public fate. She cannot bear his stare, turns pale, and disappears, causing Lycius to die of a broken heart. This narrative intervention

[26] Richard Benvenuto, '"The Ballance of Good and Evil" in Keats's Letters and "Lamia"', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 71:1 (1972), 1–11, 6.

at the very least predisposes the reader to favour the world of charms, the world of passionate love that Lamia and Lycius briefly inhabited together, against the world of cold philosophy. Why, the narrator seems to imply, does it matter that Lamia was once a serpent? There is nothing in the story to justify Apollonius's suspicions, other than adherence to an abstract essential truth.

A complex story, treated delicately, *Lamia* has defied critical consensus, especially on the questions of love and fate. Donald Reiman concludes that *Lamia* hinges on a difference between the gods and human beings. For Hermes, 'existing in an entirely fictive realm, he is subject to none of the limitations of the real world, so long as the human desires that produced *him* continue to find value in imagining his adventures'; Lycius by contrast: 'the dreams of men are *not* of a piece with *their* existential reality, and men are thus subject to disillusionment'.[27] Thus, 'the basic weakness of both love and of the palace into which Lycius and Lamia retreat is that they are of human construction'.[28] But is love of human construction in the same way that the Palace is? Both share the possibility of being eroded, of decaying with time, or being destroyed from without, but the one is the product of human imagination and artifice, and the other is a motivating force of life; internal, certainly, but not a construct in the same way. Rather the palace and Lycius share the quality that they are contingent on love. The tragedy of the poem is that love is volatile, dynamic, and weak, rather than permanent. If there is a central theme in Keats' poetry, it is beauty being sought in the impermanent; the great tragedy is that love is amongst the impermanent things. It is a living force, less powerful than what we might call fate.

Reiman's reading is predicated on the idea that love is always destructive in Keats, as Russell argued with *Endymion*. Michael Lagory also claims that in *Lamia* 'a sympathetic but vulnerable pair of lovers is destroyed by their love'.[29] But this reading is slightly too abstract: are Lycius and Lamia destroyed by their love? Left alone in the sphere of their love, they survive well enough, and one could even describe them as happy. It is when they enter wider Corinthian society that their love is doomed. It is not that love is destructive in *Lamia*, but rather that it is destructible, considerably more fragile than its idealised presentation in the history of romance would suggest. Love, conceived as a precious intimate relation between two (at least in the cases under discussion) individuals is at

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[27] Donald H. Reiman, 'Keats and the Humanistic Paradox: Mythological History in *Lamia*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, 11:4 (1971), 659–69, 665.

[28] Reiman, 'Keats and the Humanistic Paradox', 667.

[29] Michael Lagory, 'Wormy Circumstance: Symbolism in Keats's "Isabella"', *Studies in Romanticism*, 34:3 (1995), 321–42, 323.

the mercy of a wider social sphere, a wider social sphere which serves to license doom. This should not be understood as a dichotomy of the personal and the social. Rather, it is a dichotomy of two different social spheres, the intimate and the public. The relationship between Lycius and Lamia is a social relation of one kind, and its intensity is drawn in part from emotional weight, but also from the exclusiveness of the parties. Love as practiced by Lycius and Lamia in the Palace is one of emotional rawness, ritualised in its own way, but responding only to the requirements of each other. Furthermore, Lamia is free to perform the role she chooses, idealising herself in womanly form. It is when Lycius introduces the necessity of appearing before the city that the note of doom is introduced. Here their intimacy is threatened because Lamia might be exposed: before the larger public of the city, where love is ritualised by the regulatory norms of society – the expected behaviour, presentation, and integrity of the bride – she is no longer beholden only to herself. Thus, beknown to Lamia and unbeknown to Lycius, their shift into the public sphere works like an adverse fate; the norms and rituals of society are what dooms their relationship. In other words, it is not love per se, but public love, that is destructive in the poem. Apollonius is the symbol of this force. Lamia does not need to explain herself to Lycius, and she cannot explain herself to the people of Corinth, and so she disappears.

Other critics have noticed the significance of this social sphere and its relation to love, though their response has generally been a demythologising of the poem. In 1971, Warren Stevenson offered a new interpretation of *Lamia*, seeing it as an ironic portrayal of predatory relationships driven by sexual desire (Hermes towards the nymph, Lamia for Lycius). This reading is a justification of Apollonius, dispelling the delusive hold that Lamia has over Lycius.[30] Thus, we have demythologising readings for what is seen as a demythologising poem, the agonies of which are to be recast as farce. In another kind of demythologising, Terrence Hoagwood offers a translation of Keats' poem into Marxist orthodoxy: 'the relevant opposition is not between beautiful imagination (Lycius's love) and cold reason (Apollonius); the relevant conflict obtains rather between material conditions and the delusions of idealism which mask them, thereby to entrap the deceived'.[31] This reading is possible, though Keats' scepticism towards such thoroughgoing systemic explanations as such an interpretation implies should lead to some caution with it. But even then, the allegory does not fit completely.

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[30] Warren Stevenson, '"Lamia": A Stab at the Gordian Knot', *Studies in Romanticism*, 11:3 (1972), 241–52 (see especially 250–52 for Stevenson's explication).

[31] Terence Allan Hoagwood, 'Keats and Social Context: *Lamia*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, 29:4 (1989), 675–97, 691.

Hoagwood believes that the poem explicitly places love within a socio-economic context, and while this is true, his interpretation neglects the nature of love itself, leaving it purely idealist. Keats' treatment is more subtle and what love sets up in the poem, as figured by the palace, is a conflict between the intimate world of the two lovers and the broader socio-economic sphere of society. There are thus two competing social realities, the one between two people, governed by love, and an external social reality, governed by 'cold philosophy'. Certainly, these readings offer a rational basis for the poem, but they do so at the expense of the non-rational elements.

George C. Gross offers a useful warning about *Lamia* in comparing the poem to the Cupid and Psyche myth. Gross claims that the poem comprises Keats' recognition that there is a need for separation between dreams and reality, that the love between a mortal and immortal is doomed from the start because of an irreconcilability between the real and the ideal. That, in other words, Apollonius is correct. He concludes his essay, 'his deliberate denial of the possibility of lasting happiness in a mortal's love for an immortal, in contrast to the immortal bliss granted to Cupid and Psyche, reinforced the modern consensus that Keats is being very realistic in his exploration of illusion and reality in *Lamia*'.[32] Gross is convincing on the conflict between dreams and reality, but there is a sense in which this argument conflates two separate points: the first is whether love between a mortal and an immortal is possible; the second is whether it survives. Bringing the two together relies on a notion of what constitutes 'success' in love. For the long-term marriage, undoubtedly *Lamia* offers no vision of hope, but for the poetic treatment of sensual and emotional depths, it offers a different measure of success. Romeo and Juliet are no less 'doomed' in their love, and yet their love itself is successful in its passionate intensity. We should once again bear in mind Simon May's argument that the Romantic era was one in which a transformation in love was taking place. The 'fourth transformation' of which he writes, and to which we can surely add Keats' voice, was also a disturbance in the relation between the human and the divine. May writes that 'at the limit, love falls in love with itself', or in other words, romantic love itself becomes the supreme virtue, and thus 'comes to hold the position once occupied by God'.[33] Keats' claim that love is his 'religion' in the letter of October 1819 seems to support this, but it is clearly a personal religion. Love in *Lamia* fails at the edge of the public sphere; its rituals are too private, they strain too much against social expectation.

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[32] George C. Gross, '*Lamia* and the Cupid-Psyche Myth', *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 39 (1990), 151–65, 165.

[33] May, *Love: A History*, 164.

Paul Endo has written of *Lamia* that the poem 'captures a sensitivity to the workings of romance that, rather than reductively opposing disenchantment to enchantment, foregrounds the mechanisms of romance – seeing, anticipating, and plotting – as they contribute to the very shaping of reality'.[34] And this reality is social. The social is important in the poem as the dichotomy between philosophy, or the metaphysical, systemic conception of the real, and the romantic is not the only one in operation: there is also the contrast between the intimate and the public. Left alone to themselves, Lamia and Lycius are happy; in public, their relationship is threatened. It is not solely the metaphysical cast of mind that dooms them, but also a sense of social propriety. It is in the social realm, presented before the whole city, and not Apollonius alone, that Lamia turns white, returns to her 'true' form, and disappears. This, also, is part of the lovers' doom: their 'fate' lies in sense of propriety, expectation, and social norms: the question of whether Lycius can overcome his shock and horror and love Lamia in another form is foreclosed by her disappearance, and her choice to disappear was made in a highly pressured social environment.

The poem revolves around the same conflict between love and 'fate' as *Endymion*, but that this conflict is resolved for tragedy rather than comedy. 'Fate' need not be understood as anything more nor less than a term for the felt pressure of circumstance: there may be another force, a 'silent blessing fate', that takes the form of a metadivine power as in the *Iliad*, but this is never revealed. What matters is the conflict between the intimate, the sensual and sensory power of love, and the external, the circumstantial, that which cannot be controlled or which overwhelms a great effort: that which is felt as external circumstance and which is figured as 'fate'. As Endo notes in his reflections on the poem, 'the discourses of religion, ontology, and rationality are, no less than magic, grammars for shaping disorder into recognizable, ordered phenomena', adding that 'they neither impose order nor unveil it, but set up rules determining what will count as an "end"'. To the individual in society, this sense of being limited from without by powerful discursive 'grammars' can feel no less like 'fate' or 'doom' than a natural disaster.[35] Between two lovers, this can take the form of two modes of social interaction: the social world of the bower, which is composed of two people, and where Cupid sits jealously on the threshold, and the social world of polis, governed by social norms and by the rationalist power of 'cold philosophers' such as Apollonius. Endo thus argues that Apollonius destroys both Lamia and Lycius, because he destroys the shared space they have set up between each other,

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[34] Paul Endo, 'Seeing Romantically in "Lamia"', *ELH*, 66:1 (1999), 111–28, 111.
[35] Endo, 'Seeing Romantically in "Lamia"', 113.

the death of one leading to the death of the other as 'they prop up each other's desires and exist only collectively'.[36]

Endo's account is very convincing, even if it tends towards demythologising what is a poem invested with the supernatural. Keats of course encourages such allegorical readings in his letters, but there is a way to preserve the mythological dimensions of the poem, which is to stress the mystery of Lamia's and Lycius' love. There is no reason given for their love than it itself, and thus it emerges as a counter-force, be it to fate, to societal norms, to metaphysical 'reality' (be they one and the same). What Endo sees as the dynamic spatial and social relation between the two may be motivated by something spiritual and magical – love is, after all, a narrative and motivational mystery – and it becomes a radical force of its own. Thus love is not the source of Lamia's and Lycius' doom, so much as a failing resistance; the tragedy of the story lies in the fact that it is not strong enough to overcome those external forces of society which doom it.

To return, finally, to the overall theme of this volume, it is worth bearing in mind that the conflict between earthly love – as embodied in this case in two individuals – with metaphysical fate is rooted in a social relation, rather than a myopic struggle of the individual and the universe. Love succumbs to fate because relationships are fragile and break apart. Keats died hundreds of miles away from Fanny Brawne, Lamia disappeared and Lycius passed away – but these cold philosophical facts do not change the passionate intensity of the love that existed between them, even if fate had other plans. We can easily see elements of May's fourth transformation of love in *Endymion* and in *Lamia*. What good there is in both poems is revealed more in exploration than in experience (in *Endymion* the resolution is rushed at the end; *Lamia* ends in failure). But to this we need to add the difficulty of negotiating social relations, private and public. May points to the transformations of love in Keats' era, but the strains and difficulties of these transformations are played out in public spaces. The intimate is fragile before society, which comes to it, inevitably, with regulatory norms. This is Lamia's doom.

To appreciate Keats' poetic vision we need to abandon a sense of resolution between love and fate: both in the positive sense, in which love is ordained by heavenly powers and the stars minister over the bringing together of soulmates, and in the negative sense that metadivine forces conceive tragic situations in which 'star-crossed lovers' are to be doomed, or in the sense that love is simply the capricious manifestation of an ill-fate itself. All of these are possible interpretation of Keats' poems, but they rely on readings which elevate certain elements above others and

[36] Endo, 'Seeing Romantically in "Lamia"', 115.

diminish the paradoxes and complexities that he builds into them. I argue that Keats' understanding of 'fate' is more dynamic and flexible, perhaps even more rational: it is a figure, or a fiction, used to personify external forces and circumstances. I would not venture speculation on the ontology of those forces, suffice to say that they manifest themselves in philosophical abstractions, in divine whims, in narrative situations, and in broader societal pressures. Fate has, however, no objective correlative in Keats' work, whereas love does. Love is clearly manifest in the intensity of desire, an overwhelming passion of the will for the object of love, obsessive perhaps but earthly, sensual, and aesthetic – most importantly, it is an intimate concrete relation between two individuals. It is thus a mode of life separate from the caprices assigned to 'fate' or 'doom'. But it is, crucially, not a defence against them: it is temporal, mortal, and therefore fragile. The tragedy of *Lamia* hinges first on the question of whether reality, both social and philosophical, lies in the ontological space of fate or in the sensual aesthetics of love. It then hinges, second, on whether love can survive entrance into the broader social sphere.

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