CHAPTER V

The Goddess of Many Aspects

The Eve of St. Agnes
Isabella
Lamia
La Belle Dame Sans Merci
To Fanny
Ode to Fanny
I Cry Your Merci, Pity, Love
This Living Hand,
I

The dominant motifs of Keats's epics can be located in his other poems also. Mythic images are incorporated spontaneously into his poetry. That he can modulate them to suit subtle as well as dynamic contexts shows the range of his mythic sensibility.

Keats's ballads and medieval romances are a reworking of the tales of ritual origins. Other poems especially, the ones addressed to or inspired by Fanny Brawne, his beloved, present an interlocking of personal psychological impulses with mythical images, structures and archetypes.

In this chapter we shall consider eight representative poems.

*The Eye of St Agnes* is a medieval romance. Finney describes it as --

> a spontaneous expression of genius springing like Pallas Athena full grown from the forehead of the poet. 1

The romantic treatment of erotic fantasy is considered to be a result of his association with Fanny Brawne. 2 Right from the beginning Keats had been fascinated by love-
However, this was the first poem that was inspired by his own love affair.

St. Agnes' Feast is celebrated annually on January 21. Keats derived the information, probably, from John Brand's *Popular Antiquities* (1813 edn.) --

A Roman virgin and martyr, who suffered in the tenth persecution under the Emperor Dioclesian A.D. 306. She was condemned to be debauched in the common stews before her execution, but her virginity was miraculously preserved by lightning and thunder from Heaven. 3

According to tradition, virgins who followed certain rites on St. Agnes' eve, would see in a dream their future husbands on the same night.

Keats's rendering of the romance is in the Gothic mode. The chief effects are atmospheric, created out of associative magical, mythical and supernatural imagery.

Porphyro loves Madeline with whose clan, his own has bitter differences. On the enchanted St. Agnes' Eve, he undertakes a dangerous quest. He secretly enters her ancestral castle, follows her old faithful nurse Angela through mazes of cold, tortuous passages to her chamber. The lovers consummate their union and then disappear, like
Endymion and Cynthia, into the stormy night.

The three opening stanzas describe the penance of the old beadsman on the saint's night in the chapel of the castle. The portrayal of the old man is typically Christian whereas his role is a mythic archetype. He tells his rosary, says his prayers before the Virgin's picture —

... and soon among
Rough ashes sat he for his
soul's reprieve,
And all night, kept awake, for
sinners' sake to grieve.

(Stz. III. 11. 25-27)

The old beadsman, like Glaucus and Saturn, is the foil character. Through his lonely, ritualistic prayers he is casting out evil and thus extending ethical support to the quest of the younger man. In the context, provided by the myth of the seasonal cycle, his death on the same night is necessary in order to preserve the new cycle launched by the consummation of the union of Porphyro and Madeline. The inevitability of the beadsman's death is prophesied in the following lines —

But no already had his
death bell rung,
The joys of all his life
were said and sung;
His was harsh penance on
St. Agnes' Eve.

( Stz. III. 11. 22-24 )

The host of images of bitter cold, old age and implied
death in these three stanzas suggest the cyclical conclu-
sion of one calendrical year.

Like the seasons run their course replacing one
another, the 'sculptur'd dead' of the chapel are subtly
replaced by the 'carved angels, ever eager-eyed' of the
dance hall. Madeline, the chaste and pure heroine, is
among the gay dancers. She is engrossed in her plans for
the rites she is to perform under 'wing'd St. Agnes's
Saintly Care'. These rites have been described to her by
'old dames' --

They told her now, upon
St. Agnes' Eve,
Young virgins might have
visions of delight,
And soft adorings from
their loves receive
Upon the honeyed middle
of the night
If ceremonies due they'd
did aright;
As, supperless to bed
they must retire,
And couch supine their
beauties, lily white,
Nor look behind, nor
sideways, but require
Of Heaven with upward eyes
for all they desire.

( Stz. VI. 11. 46-54 )

In the meantime, her lover, "Young Porphyro, with heart of fire", comes across the moors for a "sight of Madeline". Porphyro is a Greek name — in fact the only Greek name in the entire poem. Keats mentioned Porphyrion in Hyperion. Porphyrion was one of these Titans who was "the brawniest in assault". The poet is decidedly more sympathetic to Porphyro than he is to Porphyrion for Porphyro is allowed to be successful in his quest.

Porphyro's quest is of a dangerous nature. His enemies are "more fang'd than wolves and bears" the poet's sympathies are with his hero, as is elaborated in the following lines —

He ventures in — let no buzzed whisper tell,
All eyes be muffled, or a hundred swords
Will storm his heart, love's feverous citadel.

( Stz. X. 11. 82-84 )

The only person who has 'any mercy' for him is 'one old beldame' called Angela. Angela, too, is destined to die on this eventful night. She is described as —
A poor, weak, palsy-stricken
churchyard thing,
Whose passing-bell may ere
the midnight toll!

( Stz. XVIII. ll. 155-56 )

Angela represents the archetypal nurse of the fertility
mumblings who brings up the child-substitute of the King.
The nurse also initiates the substitute in the consumma-
tion rites that he has to perform with the Queen. Angela
addresses Porphyro as 'my child' and he looks at her
like an 'urchin'. She is invested with the knowledge
of the occult and she advises him in the following words--

    Thou must hold water in a
    witch's sieve,
    And be liege-lord of all
    the elves and fays
    To venture so;

( Stz. XIV. ll. 120-21 )

Having thus educated him, she leads him through many
dusky, mysterious galleries, reminiscent of Endymion's
subterranean journey. Finally, she hides him in a closet
from where he has a view of Madeline's bed-chamber.

Madeline's chamber is a variation of the regenera-
tive green bower which is the usual Keatsian setting for
the consummation of love --
All garlanded with carven imageries
Of fruits, and flowers,
and bunches of knot-grass,

(Stz. XXIV. 11. 209-10)

The chamber, in its architectural mode, is associated with the lush vegetation of Adonis's bower. The "splendid dyes" used on the "diamonded" panes are like "the tiger moth's deep damask'd wings" reminiscent of the hovering cupids of Adonis's bower in *Endymion*. Keats uses this novel device to blend the medieval and the mythic elements, adding yet another dimension to his mythic vision.

Madeline enters her chamber, holding a silver taper like "a missioned spirit". In her innocence and purity -- 'She seemed a splendid angel, newly dressed/ Save wings, for Heaven'. She says her prayers and then retires to bed. The poet compares her sleeping from a 'missal' in a pagan country. In *Endymion* the bride had been a real goddess but in *The Eve* the poet's use of exalted religious metaphors to praise her suggests that he visualizes her as one. It also suggests that like *Endymion*'s love for Cynthia, her love for Porphyro is not base. It also implies that the act which is soon to be performed has sacred sanction. Madeline falls into a 'wakeful swoon'. 
Her bed is described as 'a soft and chilly nest'. The seasonal myth has been reversed. Instead of the hero, the maiden has fallen asleep.

Porphyro now prepares the archetypal sacramental feast. Angela, his official tutor in the context of the myth, had stored food in the closet. Porphyro spreads a gorgeous banquet —

Of candied apple, quince, and plum, and gourd
With jellies soother than creamy curd,
And lucent syrops, tinct with cinnamon;
Manna and dates,

( Stz. XXX, 11. 265-68 )

Manna has distinct Biblical associations. Endymion had feasted on manna from Syrian trees. In 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' the knight was fed on 'manna-dew'. The Dreamer in The Fall 'ate deliciously' the remains of a divine meal. However, Porphyro's banquet is not eaten. By preparing the banquet, the hero fulfils the ritual requirement of appeasing the fertility powers and invoking their blessings at his union with Madeline.

The next ritual is the waking of the sleeper.
Porphyro rouses Madeline from her symbolic winter sleep. 'And my love, my seraph fair awake'. Madeline who is 'asleep in lap of legends old' wakes. The union is consummated. Porphyro now begs her to accompany him over 'the southern moors'.

The lovers disappear into the stormy night. Porphyro, like Endymion, has passed the various tests and reached the end of his quest. On the same night the old beadsman and Angela die, suggesting that one cycle of the ancient seasonal rituals has come to its calendrical end and has been supplanted by a new one symbolized by the union of Madeline and Porphyro.

Porphyro has been treated by generations of readers and critics as Keats's negative hero. One critic describes him as --

a young pagan ravisher with no regard for the religious taboo he is breaking. 4

The mythic framework protects him from this condemnation. In this context he becomes the archetypal fertility god who redeems the Earth from its frozen winter sleep and provides it with vegetational abundance for another calendrical year.
The _Eve_ is a blend of specifically Christian and pagan mythological elements. Keats discovers intense and beautiful parallels between Christian and pagan mythology.

In a letter to Fanny Brawn, dated October 1819, Keats described his own concept of religion --

> 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....

In love, Keats could experience the kind of human fulfillment that has conventionally been termed as religion. Mythology attracted him with its whole spectrum of beautiful and intense love experiences, and thus became, for him, a source of religious experiences. Keats's blending of mythical idiom with the Christian metaphors must not be dismissed as simply a passionate rhetorical flight because it represents the successful completion of the poet's own quest for meaning in religion.

*Isabella, or The Pot of Basil* is a romantic expansion of Boccaccio's narrative in *Decameron*. Keats derived the story from the fifth novel of the fourth day.

Isabella, the only daughter of a mercantile family,
has fallen in love with a poor employee called Lorenzo. Her two evil brothers wishing her to marry someone of wealth, trick Lorenzo into going on a journey with them, murder him and bury him secretly in a forest. Lorenzo comes to Isabella in a dream and describes the place where he is buried. Isabella brings home his head and buries it in a pot of basil. Her brothers steal the pot. As a result Isabella goes mad and her brothers have to flee into the desert.

Like Endymion, Isabella also follows the seasonal cycle. The love story commences in May —

A whole long month of May
in this sad plight
Made their cheeks paler
by the break of June:

( Stz. IV. 11. 254-56 )

The lovers' conversation also contains the substratum of the fertility myth —

Love, thou art leading me
from wintry cold,
Lady, thou leadest me to
summer clime,
And I must taste the
blossoms that unfold
In its ripe warmth this
gracious morning time.
So said, his erewhile
timid lips grew bold,
And posied with hers in
dewy rime.
Great bliss was with them,
and great happiness
Grew like a lusty flower
in June's caress.

(Stz. IX. 11. 65-72)

Their love, along with the seasonal heat, reaches its full flush in June. The romance concludes when Isabella discovers her lover's corpse "In the mid-days of autumn" and then brings the head home to bury it in a pot of basil.

That Lorenzo is to die is implicit in his utterances right from the beginning. He tells Isabella 'I cannot live/ Another night and not my passion shrive'. In christian terms 'Shriving' is the sacrament of confession and absolution. Isabella, like Madeline, is the pure and chaste woman. Lorenzo, like Porphyro, imagines her to be 'A seraph chosen from the bright abyss/ To be my spouse'.

Their love is consummated in the archetypal green bower --

All close they met before
the dusk
Had taken from the stars
its pleasant veil,
Close in a bower of hyacinth
and musk
Unknown of any, free from
whispering tale.

(Stz. XI. 11. 83-86)
Concealed by a veil of dusk and performed by hyacinth and musk, the bower symbolizes the traditional seed-bed of nature. It is secret like Cynthia's jasmine-bower in Enjmyon. All of Keats's archetypal vegetational symbolism is associated with this bower.

Isabella, through her erotic associations with Lorenzo assumes some of the aspects of the Great Goddess. The Great Goddess is maternal as well as sensuous in her associations with the fertility god who is both her son and her lover. Isabella, too, has a double relationship with Lorenzo. When she first falls in love, the poet says her cheek --

Fell thin as a young mother's,
    who doth seek
By every lull to cool her
    infant's pain.

( Stz. V. 11. 35-36 )

Love inculcates in Lorenzo 'the meekness of a child'. When she learns that he is dead, she visits his grave to sing him 'one latest lullaby'. And later when she has planted his head in a pot of basil, she sits by it, 'patient as a hen-bird'. She leaves it only for an occasional visit to the chapel and hurries back 'as swift/ As bird on wing to breast its eggs again'. 
The Lorenzo will die is a foregone conclusion in the structure of the poem also. Isabella's evil brothers perform the ritual killing easily --

So the two brothers and their murdered man
Rode past fair Florence,
to where Arno's stream
Gurgles through straitened banks, and still doth fan
Itself with dancing bulrush,
and the bream
Keeps head against the freshets, sick and wan
The brother's face in the ford die seem,
Lorenzo's flush with love.
They passed the water
Into a forest quiet for the slaughter.

( Stz. XXVII. 11. 209-16 )

Lorenzo, being a mere mortal, cannot fight destiny. His murderers take him beyond the gurgling river into a silent forest. Water is symbolic of the life-principle in Keats's mythic vision and the green forest is symbolic of regeneration. The ill-fated man is the healthiest of the three who reach the selected spot. The use of 'Slaughter' suggests the sacrificial ritual. In ancient tradition the purest and most beautiful of the herd was sacrificed for the appeasement of the deity.

The autumnal part of the year sets in. The
'breath of winter' kills all vegetation as it plays 'a roundelay of death'. Lorenzo returns to his 'widow' in a dream and describes his vegetational grave to her—

Saying moreover, Isabel my sweet!
Red whortle-berries drop above my head,
And a large flint-stone weighs upon my feet;
Around me beeches and high chestnuts shed
Their leaves and prickly nuts;
a sheep-fold bleat Comes from beyond the river
to my bed:

(Stz. XXXVIII. 11. 297-302)

Lorenzo is killed in the summer. However he cannot return until the winter, when preparations for the launching of the new seasonal cycle are to be made. Also, Isabella, must pass the test of endurance, like Endymion and Porphyro, before she can wake her sleeping consort.

Escorted by "an agei nurse" who is symbolic of the old crone of the fertility mumings, she proceeds to the "liminal forest-hearse" when she reaches the grave, the vegetation-magic works on her and—

Upon the murderous spot she seemed to grow,
Like to a native lily of the dell—
Then with her knife, all
sudden, she began
The dig more fervently
then misers can.

( Stz. XLVI. 11. 365-68 )

In the mythical context this is the exhumation of the
fertility-daemon. Upon this ritual depends the rebirth
of the vegetation. There is a host of maternal images
in this section. Isabella and her nurse "labour" for
three hours at "this travail sore". She finds Lorenzo's
mouldy glove --

And put it in her bosom,
where it dries
And freezes utterly unto
the bone
Those dainties made to
still and infant's cries.

( Stz. XLVII. 11. 372-74 )

Then she cuts off the head, and --

In anxious secrecy they
took it home,
And then the prize was
all for Isabel.
She calmed its wild hair
with a golden comb,
And all around each eye's
sculptural cell
Pointed each fringed lash.

( Stz. LI. 11. 401-5 )
This is the ritual resurrection of the manhood of the lover. The greatest service of Isis, the Egyptian moon-goddess, was to locate and tend to the castrated organ of Osiris.

Isabella buries the head in a garden pot of 'sweet basil, which her tears kept over wet'. Now at last the lovers are united and Lorenzo can 'drink her tears' as he had wanted to do at the beginning of the romance. The basil flourishes 'as by magic touch'. Isabella's brothers steal the pot and they recognize the face of Lorenzo —

And so left Florence in a moment's space,
Never to turn again, Away
they went,
With blood upon their heads,
to banishment.

( Stz. LX, ll. 478-80 )

Isabella's brothers face the exorcism usually faced by infidels or worshippers of false gods. Like sinners repelled at the touch of a sacred thing, they flee away into the desert.

And so she pined, and so she died forlorn
Imploring for her basil to the last.

( Stz. LXI: ll. 497-98 )
Both Madeline and Isabella are chaste and virtuous women. These pure, virginal attitudes represent but one aspect of the Great Goddess. In a sinister shift, the love goddess becomes the death goddess or the archetypal young witch of Keats's poetry. She is cruel and scheming, a harlot and a murderess. She leads the hero into a field of demonic forces where she ensnares him in a net of illusory love and this ultimately results in the destruction of the hero. Lamia and the Belle Dame, the heroines of the next two poems that we are going to discuss, represent this evil aspect of the goddess of many aspects.

II

Keats derived the story of Lamia from Robert Burton's The Anatomy of Melancholy (part 3, Sec. 2, Memb. Ist, sub. Ist). Burton relates how Lycius, a young philosophy student of Corinth, met a 'phantasm' in the guise of a beautiful, young woman and how --

The young man, a philosopher, otherwise staid and discreet, able to moderate his passions, though not this of love, tarried with her a while to his great content, and at last married her, to whose wedding amongst other guests came Apollonius, who by some probable conjectures, found her out to be a serpent, a lamia; and that all her furniture
was like Tantalus' gold, described by Homer, no substance but mere illusion. When she saw herself thus described, she wept, and desired Apollonius to be silent, but he would not be moved, and thereupon she plate, house and all that was in it vanished in an instant.  

The harsh criticism that Keats had received for his loose couplets in *Endymion* had made him seek the polished couplets of Dryden, recommended as a model by Hazlitt. He said --

I intend to use more finesse with the Public. It is possible to write fine things which cannot be laugh'd at in anyway. There is no objection of this kind to Lamia. 

The poem begins with an introductory episode set in a forest on the island of Crete. The messenger-god, Hermes during his search for an elusive wood nymph is accosted by an unusual snake --

She was a gordian shape of dazzling hue, Vermilion-spotted, golden, green and blue; striped like a zebra, freckled like a pard, Eyed like a peacock, and all crimson barred;...

( Bk.I.11. 47-50 )

She had a woman's mouth in her 'Jircean head'. She claimed that she had made the nymph invisible and if Hermes
would change her into a woman's shape, by touching her with his caducean wand, she would once again make the nymph visible. The deal is transacted. Her transformation, rather Dantesque in its rendering, is a painful and hideous process --

Her mouth foamed, and the grass, therewith besprent, Withered at dew so sweet and virulent; Her eyes in torture fixed, and anguish drear, Hot, glazed, and wide, with lid-lashes all sear, Flashed phospher and sharp sparks, The colours all inflamed throughout her train, She writhed about, convulsed with scarlet pain.

( Bk. I. ll. 148-54 )

Hermes, along with his nymph, disappears into the forest --

Into the green-recessed woods, they flew; Nor grew they pale, as mortal lovers do.

( Bk. I. ll. 144-45 )

Hermes was famous for his amorous intrigues. Keats uses this episode, which does not occur in Burton's account, to suggest the purely amorous nature of Lycius's liaison with Lamia.

Lamia, appears in a valley near Corinth. Now she is
a 'virgin purest lipp'd'. Before her metamorphosis, she had a Circean head and now she is to play a Circean role in the life of Lycius. Circe, in _Endymion_, had practised black magic and had changed her lovers into beasts. In _Lamia_, a Circean snake assume the form of a woman.

Lycius, is serene "like a young Jove". He has a rational purity about him --

His fantasy was lost, where reason fades,
In the calmed twilight of Platonic shades.

(Bk.I. 11. 235-36)

Lamia tells him that she fell in love with him on the night of "the Adonian feast" in the temple of Venus. Thus establishing a link with the fertility goddess, she proceeds to ensnare him in her dangerous trap. Lycius is enchanted and like Endymion, he swoons into a death-like trance of love. 'The Cruel Lady' --

Pur her new lips to his, and gave afresh
The life she had so tangled in her mesh;
And he from one trance was wakening
Into another...

(Bk.I. 11. 295-97)
She now leads him to her 'purple-lined palace of sweet sin' in Corinth. On the way, they pass Apollonius—

With curl'd gray beard, sharp eyes, smooth bald crown,
Slow stepp'd, and robed in philosophic gown:...
(Bk. I. 11. 364-65)

Lycius shrinks from him as 'tonight he seems/ The ghost of folly haunting my sweet dreams'.

Lamia confined Lycius in the palace. He is separated from 'all the congregated world'. His ambition is lost and his earlier rational purity is replaced by pleasures that are ruinous and perverse.

In Endymion the self-destroying effect of love had been idealized because he had loved the chaste and pure goddess who had furnished him with the energy to evolve into an immortal. In Lamia the same self-destroying effect becomes a threat to Lycius's intellect because his beloved is a monstrous, incubus snake. The snake, more than any other bestial form, embodies a threat to the consciousness because it comes from the underground.

Lycius desires a marriage with 'his paramour'. After much resistance, Lamia prepares for the nuptial feast. She
converts the banquet hall into a leafy glade. The spherical tables have legs like leopard's paws and the goblets are made of pure gold. The illusory nature of Lamia's love is reflected in this inversion of the fertility ritual. In this illusory green recess, life is going to be annihilated with philosophic truth.

Apollonius, Lycius's 'trusty guide and good instructor' comes uninvited to the feast. Apollonius in Lycius's spiritual father. Lempriere described Apollonius as --

a Pythagorean philosopher, well skilled in magic, and thoroughly acquainted with those arts which can captivate and astonish the vulgar... he aspired to the name of the reformer of mankind. 8

In Keats's poem, Apollonius is the patriarch of a rational and masculine orthodoxy.

The citizens of Corinth, who are the invited guests at the nuptial feast, are a 'gossip rout'. They arrive 'mazed curious and keen'. Lamia serves them wine so that --

When the wine has done its rosy deed,
And every soul from human trammels freed...

(Bk.II. 11. 209-10)
each guest will be too intoxicated to recognize the illusory nature of the feast. However, the magic of the wine does not work on the wise Apollonius and --

The bald-head philosopher
Had fixed his eye, without a
twinkle or stir
Full on the alarm'd beauty
of the bride.

(Bk. II. 11. 245-47)

Lamia wilts and withers, her own eyes recessing like a snake's. Lycius cries out in protest but Apollonius declares 'Shall I see the made a serpent's prey?' The 'Spear of his gaze' cuts through her 'keen, cruel per- ceant, stinging' and Lamia vanishes before the entire congregation --

And Lycius' arms were empty
of delight,
As were his limbs of life,
from that same night.
On the high couch he lay! --
his friends came round --
Supported him -- no pulse,
or breath they found,
And in his marriage robe,
the heavy body wound.

(II. 11. 307-11)

The dramatic conclusion invests the scene with the solemn inevitability of a Greek tragedy.
According to Robert Graves the Lamiae of Greece were beautiful women who seduced and then sucked the blood of travellers. In Aristophanes' day, they were regarded as emissaries of the Triple Goddess Hecate. Hecate is associated with the lower world and the night. She is the queen of ghosts and magic and the protectress of enchanters and witches. Graves assumes that they 'had been the orgiastic priestesses of the Libyan Snake-goddess Lamia'. Keats's adaptation and elaboration of the myth is a re-enactment of the archetypal attraction and menace of archaic forces and of conscious resistance to them. In a variant treatment of the fertility theme, he describes the ominous outcome of such a liaison. By surrendering to charms of the snake-goddess, Lycius loses his life. Their union results in decay and degeneration --

The myrtle sickened in a thousand wreaths.
By faint degrees, voice, lute and pleasure ceased;
A deadly silence step by step increased,
Until it seemed a horrid presence there
And not a man but felt the terror in his hair.

( II. 11, 264-68 )

Lycius's death at the end of the poem symbolizes
his release from the demonic clutches of evil. Apollonius 'the reformer of mankind' exposes the bestial, paralyzing lure of illusory love and allows his foster-son to escape into the precincts of death which represents the logical continuity of the natural order.

Critics have differed widely over the poem's meaning and value. Some find the symbolism autobiographical, others feel that it is an expression of Keats's preoccupation with the destructiveness of love, and of the contrast between the illusory and the actual. In its mythic format, the poem incorporates all these themes, when it offers a parodistic treatment of the recurrent fertility theme.

'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' by Keats and 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' by Coleridge are two of the most famous ballads of the Romantic period. The rediscovery of the traditional English and Scottish folk-ballad in the later half of the eighteenth century is considered to be an important landmark in the reaction against Augustanism which led eventually to the Romantic movement. The Romantic writers published collections of ballads and also wrote a number of new poems in the ballad form.10

The title used by Keats 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'
may be roughly translated as 'The beautiful woman without mercy'. According to Leigh Hunt, Keats used the title of Alain Chartier's poem 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' (1424). Keats probably knew the poem from the English translation included in the 1782 edn. of The Poetical Works of Geoffrey Chaucer. In The Eve he says of Porphyro that in order to wake Madeline --

He played an ancient ditty,  
    long since mute,  
In Provence called 'La Belle  
dame sans mercy...'  
( Stz. 11. 291-2 )

The poem has a circular form established by the echoing of Stz. 1 at the end of the poem. This poem also follows the seasonal cycle. The Knight meets the Circean maid in summer. He describes her as --

    Full beautiful, a  
        fairy's child  
    Her hair was long, her  
        foot was light,  
    And her eyes were wild.  
( Stz. IV. 11. 14-16 )

The description of the love encounter is exquisitely romantic. The Knight-at-arms, who is the ideal figure of a man of action, weaves garlands and bracelets for the beautiful wild maid. She offers him the ritual feast --
She found me roots of
relish sweet
And honey wild and
manna dew
And sure in language
strange she said,
"I love thee true".

( Stz. VII. 11. 25-28 )

Like Lamia, she ensnares the Knight in a web of sensual illusion. She leads him 'to her elfin grot' which is reminiscent of Lamia's 'purple lined palace of sin' and here she 'lulls' him into a deep sleep and thus makes him her 'thrall'. To the Knight it seems that only a day has passed, but it is autumn when he wakes "on the cold hillside". The season of the year is indicated through associative imagery --

The sedge has withered
from the lake
And no birds sing:...
The squirrel's granary
is full,
And the harvest's done.

( Stz.I, 11. 3-4, Stz.II, 11. 7-8 )

On that cold hillside, the Knight has a sinister dream. He dreams of pale Kings, princes and warriors who gape skeletallly in the gloom and tell him that they too had been enchanted by the Belle Dame and then killed after the rapturous experience. This ghastly vision of the
charnel house leaves the Knight unnerved and impotent.
The poet establishes an identity between the fall of the year and the physical decline of the Knight --

I see a lily on thy brow
With anguish moist and fever dew
And on thy cheek a fading rose
Fast withereth too.

( Stz. III, 11. 9-12 )

The will of the Knight has been broken with his brutal awakening and he cannot resume his old life.

In the portrayal of the Belle Dame Keats may have been influenced by Spenser's fatal enchantress Phaedria in *Fairie Queen*. Phaedria invited the Knight Cymochiles to her little boat, dressed herself in garlands, sang enchantingly to him and then put him to sleep with his head on her lap. Finally she marooned him on an island. Robert Graves identifies a parallel between Keats's poem and the folk ballad of 'Thomas the Rhymer'. Thomas was taken by the Queen of Elfland on her milk-white horse to a beautiful garden. She fed him on bread and wine and lulled him to sleep and gave him the gift of poetic insight. However, she warned him that he may be the victim of a Sabbatical sacrifice going to hell by the road
that 'lies out owr yon frostly fell'. Graves identifies the 'frosty fell' with Keats's 'Cold hillside'. He further suggests that the Belle Dame is the hag Death, one of the triple forms of the 'White Goddess'. Keats's brother Tom had died of consumption few months earlier. Graves feels that the Belle Dame specifically represents the plague tuberculosis which leaves 'anguish moist and fever dew' on the brow of its victim.  

In terms of the mythic vision, 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' is simply another metaphor for the darker aspects of the Great Goddess. The exquisite rapture of ruinous sensual allurement is an articulation of the self-destructive psychological impulse ever present in the human mind. Birth, love and death represent the continuities of the natural order. However the concept of illusory love and the vision of death as complete annihilation suggests the presence of hurdles in the path of the ideal man. The mystery that shrouds the figure of the Belle Dame, suggests an obscurity of emotional attitude also identifiable in some of Keats's letters. In a letter to Bailey, he described this attitude as a 'gordian complication' —

I am certain I have not the right feeling towards women... When among Men I have no evil thoughts, no malice, no spleen...
When I am among Women I have evil thoughts, malice, spleen... You must be charitable and put all this perversity to my being disappointed since Boyhood -- Yet with such feelings I am happier alone among Crowds of men, by myself or with a friend or two... I must absolutely get over this -- but how? The only way is to find the root of evil and so cure it "with backward mutters of dissipering Power". That is a difficult thing; for an obstinate Prejudice can seldom be produced but from a gordian complication of feelings, which must take time to unravel and care to keep unravelled.

Keats's romances are the 'backward mutters of disserving power' on this gordian complication. His romantic heroines are the various projections of it. In the basic mythical plot they represent the many aspects of the mother figure whose maternal principle binds mankind to the ever-revolving wheel of time.

III

Keats's medieval romances represent the poet's nostalgia for the past. They are tales of lovers of long ago, set in the beautiful Renaissance Florence, in the ancient Corinth, in a feudal castle and in the enchanted fairy world of white studs and romantic knights where true lovers achieve an eternity of bliss and the false suffer alienation, impotence and even death. So deep was Keats's
preoccupation with these romantic archetypes that he transported them into his own situation. In the poems addressed to, or inspired by Fanny Brawn the same motivations are seen at work. Fanny is cast as a character in his larger mythical plot. She subtly blends with the Great Goddess and assumes at times her beneficent and at other times her chilling aspects. Keats becomes sometimes her votary and sometimes her 'thrall'.

Keats first met Fanny Brawn in September 1818. The Brawns had rented Charles Dilke's house. At a later stage, he told her "the very first week I knew you I wrote myself your vassal".

The sonnet 'As Hermes once took to his feathers light' describes a love dream associated with Fanny Brawn. Keats's draft appears in Inferno I of the copy of Cary's Dante which he presented to her. In the journal letter of 14 February-3 May 1819 Keats described his actual dream --

The dream was one of the most delightful enjoyments I ever had in my life -- I floated about the whirling atmosphere as it is described with a beautiful figure to whose lips mine were joined as it seem'd for an age -- and in the midst of all this cold and darkness I was warm -- even flowery tree tops sprung up and we rested on them
sometimes with the lightness of a cloud
till the wind blew us away again — I
tried a Sonnet upon it — there are four-
teen lines but nothing of what I felt in
it — O that I could dream it every night—

In the poem he says —

Pale were the sweet lips I saw,
Pale were the lips I kiss'd,
and fair the form
I floated with, about the
melancholy storm.

( ll. 12-14 )

The dream-figure is visualized as a goddess invested with
secret knowledge and bound by divine chastity.

'To Fanny' expresses the confused intensity of
Keats's feelings for Fanny. Keats expresses a fear that
his poetic ambition and passion for Fanny are at variance.
This was the problem faced by Endymion in the Indian-Maid
episode where he described her as his 'executioner' who
'stolen hatch away the wings wherewith I was to top the
heaven'. Lycius also had the same problem when he was
ensnared in Lamia's 'purple-lined palace of sin' and
unable to interact freely with men. There is a rueful
element in Keats's emotional surrender —

What I can do to drive away
Rememberance from my eyes
for they have seen,
Aye, an hour ago, my
brilliant Queen!

Touch has a memory.
Oh, say, love, say,
What can I do to kill
it and be free.
In my old liberty?

(ll. 1-6)

'liberty' represents his creative activity. In his earlier poetry, the heroine was identified with the Muse. In Endymion Cynthia was the empyreal Muse who promised to teach the hero the poetry of cosmic essence. In the romances, the Muse was replaced by the sensual witch who either killed him or left him impotent and purposeless in a barren land. Through his emotional association with Fanny, the problem appears in Keats's own life. Fanny now appears as the Circean enchantress of the poems wielding a cruel and dangerous power through her beauty. In a letter to her, Keats wrote --

Why may I not speak of your Beauty, since without that I could never have lov'd you -- I cannot conceive any beginning of such love as I have for you but Beauty. There may be a sort of love for which, without the least sneer at it, I have the highest respect and can admire it in others; but it has not the richness, the bloom, the full form, the enchantment of love after my own heart. So let me speak of your Beauty, though to my own endangering; if you could be so cruel to me as to try elsewhere its Power. 15
In 'Ode to Fanny' Keats uses the image of the ritual feast that he has used in his poems --

Let none profane my Holy See of love,
Or with a rude hand break The sacramental cake;

(Stz.VII, ll. 51-53)

In the same poem he is a distraught and possessive lover --

Who now, with greedy looks, eats up my feast?
What stare outfaces now my silver moon?
Ah, keep that hand unravished at the least;
Let, let, the amorous burn,
But, prithee, do not turn the current of your heart from me soon.
On, save, in charity, the quickest pulse for me!

(Stz.III, ll. 17-24)

The same sentiment is expressed in another letter to her--

How have you pass'd this month? Who have you smil'd with? All this may seem savage in me. You do not feel as I do -- you do not know what it is to love.... Do not write to me if you have done anything this month which it would have pained me to have seen.... I cannot live without you, and not only you but chaste you, virtuous you. 16

Keats made a valiant effort to distance himself from
Fanny. He wrote a 'Jint-worded letter' to her from Winchester where he confessed that he could see her only 'through a mist' and that he was 'excessively unlover-like and un gallant' —

I cannot help it -- I am no officer in yawning quarters; no Parson-romeo... I can no more use soothing words to you than if I were at this moment engaged in a charge of Cavalry -- 17

However, he soon realized that his involvement was too intense and too overwhelming to be ignored. The sonnet 'I cry your Mercy, pity, love' expresses his complete surrender to love. His letter of 19th October 1819, written to Fanny, parallels the intensity of passion --

I sho ld like to cast the die for love or death -- I have no Patience with anything else -- if you ever intend to be cruel to me as you say in jest now but perhaps may sometimes be in earnest be so now -- and I will -- my mind is in a tremble, I cannot tell what I am writing. 18

In the sonnet, the poet requires the 'whole' and 'all', down to the last 'atom's atom' of her body and soul. This is a frantic demand for a God-like monopoly over her. If she does not comply, he threatens to die --

Or living on perhaps, your wretched thrall,
Forget, in the mist of idle misery,
Life's purposes -- the palate of my mind
Losing the gust, and my ambition blind!

(11.11-14)

The last lines restructure the archetypal image of the isolated, alienated and impotent thrall of the evil goddess who gives life only to give death.

Destiny intended no outcome for this romance except its termination through death. Strangely enough this is what Keats, too, unconsciously desired --

I have two luxuries to brood over in my walks, your Loveliness and the hour of my death, O that I could have possession of them both in the same minute. I hate the world; it batters too much the wings of my self-will, and would I could take a sweet poison from your lips to send me out of it.\(^{19}\)

When he went to Italy he wrote to Brown 'If I had any chance of recovery, this passion would kill me'.

Keats's intensity of passion for Fanny seems to be an overwhelming unconscious obsession. The darker aspect of the Great Goddess seemed to extend to his own life as it drew to a close. His own love-affair too seemed to correspond with the mythic mode he used for his poetry.
From what is known of Fanny Brawn, she was a sheltered and well-bred girl and not promiscuous as Keats's letters project her to be.

The following fragment is treated by some critics as Keats's final address to Fanny Brawn. The beloved, in these lines is, directly accused of being her lover's murderer.--

This living hand, now
warm and capable
Of earnest grasping,
would, if it were cold
And in the icy silence
of the tomb,
So haunt thy days and
chill thy dreaming nights
That thou would wish
thine own heart dry of blood
So in my veins red life
might stream again,
And thou be conscience-
calmed. See here it is --
I hold it towards you.

It is interesting to note that Keats's mythic vision was so deeply ingrained in his psyche that it, at times, could influence even his personal life. He sought the Great Goddess in his beloved. Fanny, being a mere mortal, fell short of his requirements and thus caused much pain and heartache to him.
Notes and References

10. Sir Walter Scott published a collection of ballads in 1802.
