

Wither Fled Lamia?: A Search for Signification

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Abstract

The "Peræa" in John Keats's poem "Lamia" has until now remained unidentified by literary scholars. Geographical and orthographical ambiguities cloud the issue, particularly because "Lamia" shows Keats inventing words and spellings. This article traces some of the implications of readings based on several possible candidates before identifying Keats's referent: Peræa Chora.

At a crucial juncture in the John Keats's "Lamia," an important feature of the setting has remained unidentified. Until now no one has been able to offer a definitive answer to Keats's rhetorical query: Whither fled Lamia?

Wither fled Lamia, now a lady bright,
A full-born beauty new and exquisite?
She fled into that valley they pass o'er
Who go to Corinth from Cenchreas' shore;
And rested at the foot of those wild hills,
The rugged founts of the Peræan rills,
And of that other ridge whose barren back
Stretches, with all its mist and cloudy rack,
South-westward to Cleone. There she stood
About a young bird's flutter from a wood,
Fair, on a sloping green of mossy tread,
By a clear pool, wherein she passioned
To see herself escap'd from so sore ills,
While her robes flaunted with the daffodils.

(1.171-84)

Miriam Allott's annotated *Poems of John Keats* tells us that "Peræa has not been identified" (624n). The difficulty of determining a single referent of "Peræan" derives mainly from two ambiguities, orthographical and geographical. The geographical ambiguity stems from a reading of this passage as referring to the place where Lamia meets Lycius on his return to Corinth from the island of Egina. It may be, however, that "Peræan" refers to a different place, where Lamia rests before she en-

counters her lover. The orthographical ambiguity results from trying to understand what Keats intended to refer to. Furthermore, as I shall demonstrate in this essay, "Peræan" may not be just a place name. Although this question could be reduced to whether or not Lamia goes directly to the Corinthian isthmus from Crete, I hope to show that it raises issues rather like the isthmus itself, land defined by water, part bridge, part barrier. The possible referents of "Peræan" inform intriguing arguments of the poem, but the various referents are exclusive of one another, so that we are left with ambivalences in the contending denotations that lead to a solution that silences all others.

Lines 1.175-76 may not refer to Lamia's destination in the valley on the Corinthian isthmus but to an intermediate resting place between Crete and the valley. In her flight from Crete across the Aegean Sea to the Corinthian isthmus, she "rested at the foot of those wild hills,/ The rugged founts of the Peræan rills." Paros, an island intersected by the twenty-fifth meridian and thirty-seventh parallel, is approximately halfway between Crete and Corinth. It lies directly on a line extended from the Corinthian Valley through Egina, whence Lycius returns after making sacrifices to Jove for a happy marriage (Allott 626n). One of the Cyclades, Paros was famed among the ancients for its white marble used in statuary. It appears on the map that is the frontispiece for the 1837 edition of John Potter's *Archaeologia Graeca, or the Antiquities of Greece*, shown by Douglas Bush to be an important source for much of the detailed description in "Lamia" (Bush 354). (I have seen only the 1726, 1820, and 1837 editions of Potter, each of which differs from the others; Keats's was the 1818.)

Given the Paros reading of "Peræan," the "rugged founts" probably refer to the quarried hills of the island. A variant of this line in a fair copy of "Lamia" shows "founts" as "paps" and "Paræan" as "little Perea's" (Stillinger, *Poems* 457). The discarded "paps" might have been associated with sculptured nudes, and the diminutive "little" would be an appropriate epithet for Paros, which covers eighty-one square miles. The variant "Perea's" introduces the orthographical ambiguity.

We need not impute ignorance of the English word "Parian" or its spelling to Keats. "Lamia" offers a precedent for neologism, as in "cirque-couchant" (1.46). "Cenchreas" (1.174, 225) stands as a corresponding precedent for Keats's coinage of a new spelling for a placename. Corinth's seaport to the east, Cenchrea, becomes "Cenchreas" perhaps in an attempt at association with the poisonous serpent of yore, the cenchrus, which has lent its name to the biological classification of rattle-

snakes. My point here is that "Lamia" shows Keats inventing words and spellings, whether for purposes of setting, of scansion, or of association, or for reasons we do not know.

The significance of Paros as the referent of line 1.176 is that Lamia stops halfway between Crete and Corinth. If Lamia "rested" there, we must explain why. I see two reasons for such a respite. First, travelling directly from Paros to the Corinthian isthmus would involve crossing over Egina either while Lycius is there or during his return trip. Their coincident paths would explain just how "well she knew" the Lycius "would return that way" (1.221). Second, because "rested" connotes more about the measure of her power than would, say "lighted," to indicate that Lamia may need to recover from her journey, this instance may be considered as the first of several indications that Lamia gradually declines in power after she assumes human form.

This proposed recovery at Paros would show that Lamia is far from all-powerful, that despite her magic she is limited in what she can accomplish, and that she must be enervated by her transformation into the body she now inhabits. Other signs of weakness appear when she first sees Apollonius (1.363-77), and in Part 2 Lamia loses power over Lycius regarding his plans for their debut into society. The ramification of the Paros reading predicates Lamia's tragic stature, also. It shows that for Lamia to maintain human form requires great energy; therefore, not only old Apollonius overcomes her. She knowingly sacrifices herself for the opportunity of sharing even a short time with Lycius. Lamia's humanity, an expenditure necessary for love, costs her her life.

But this is not necessarily the case, for besides Paros, "Peræan" may refer to Piræus, to Pieria, to Peræa, or even to the lamia herself. Lamia is a *peri*, a fairy, and she has a demonstrable affinity with nature. In this reading, the "rills" are associated with Lamia because of their proximity to her. Significantly, the landscape and she would then enjoy a reciprocal relationship, for while the rivulets are modified by her presence, she is enraptured "By the clear pool, wherein she passion'd/To see herself." Additionally, in the meantime, "her robes flaunted with the daffodils." A supernatural being, she enjoys a relationship with nature similar to the one she will have with Lycius, in which each influences the other.

As the referent changes, Lamia and her poem change, too. She has greater and lesser degrees of power as the word moves from retreat to reflection. Lamia, not always human, is nevertheless identifiable with women. In fact, when Keats compares "the sweets of Fairies, Peris,

Goddesses" with the virtues and allures of "a real woman," Lamia benefits from her identification with the latter (1.329, 331). Her humanity may be assumed, but her femininity is immanent. Curiously, either the *Paros* or the *peri* readings is extreme. The pull between magical strength and human weakness predicates the ambivalences of the "Peræan," for if the word reflects Lamia, then her influence is obviously greater than imagined under the *paros* reading or under other, more traditional readings. This ambivalence threatens to undermine the sexual hierarchy and puts Lamia in a no-lose situation. Her power is either more or less than commonly thought, and if her power diminishes, her tragic impact increases.

So far, the ambivalences of "Peræan rills" has more to do with power in Lamia than with the multiple, contending denotations. It may be that Keats intended to show Lamia as a supernatural being with limited powers. Alternatively, if Lamia goes directly from Crete to Corinth, then we do not see her falter until the appearance of Apollonius. The choice between these two readings has much to do with the ironic tension in the word "rested," which is made even more ironic by opposing the word's semantic meaning with the energy at issue in the arguments that hinge upon it. If Lamia "rested," i.e., relaxed, then that must be as new an experience for her as her human form; if Lamia "rested", i.e., settled, then we are left without any explanation how she knows Lycius will pass by on his return to Corinth from Egina. This last piece of information may not matter since we are talking about a shape-shifter. Lamia's knowledge of Lycius is in itself not more mysterious than her knowledge of his route home; she sees him in a dream (1.215-16). If we grant that Lamia knows about Lycius at all (and we must), then perhaps we should not quibble about whether she knows where to find him.

There is another placename that is in sufficient geographical and orthographical proximity to be considered as an alternative to *Paros* and *peri*, namely *Piræus*, the port that serves Athens. Essentially the same orthographical argument can be made to explain the corruption of *Piræus* as has already been made for *Paros*. Geographically, *Piræus* is intriguing because it does not force a reading of line 1.175 as anything but Lamia's arrival at her final destination. Moreover, *Piræus* is mentioned in the text of Potter's book (1.303 1820 ed.; 1.315 1837 ed), while I have not found *Paros* there. On the other hand, *Paros* is labelled on the map fronting the 1837 edition, while *Piræus* is not.

But even these are not the sole claimants in the case. *Pieria* is a district north of Thessaly, marked on the map in Potter. Its distance from

the setting of the poem renders it the least plausible of the three placenames considered thus far. Nevertheless, the plethora of possibilities grows, expanding the bounds of plausibility, as I try to pinpoint *Peræa*.

Perea is a variant name for an *aperea*, a cavy related to the guinea pig, according to the OED. *Piraña* is the Portuguese name for a caribe, the flesh-eating fish. Given the merciless lover that Lamia embodies in some readings, this is a more likely desired association than the rodentian.

Continued digging turns up more candidates. “*Peræan*” may not even refer to a particular place. Jack Stillinger, whose *Poems of John Keats* is the definitive edition (and my source for the text), suggests that it may not be “intended as a proper name” (*Complete Poems* 476). His source, *Harper’s Dictionary of Classical Literature and Antiquities*, supports a literal (if general) definition as “the country on the opposite side” (Stillinger, *Complete Poems* 476). Presumably, this definition traces the name back to the Indo-European root **per* or **peri*, from which Latin *per* ‘by’ and Greek *peri* ‘near’ derive. Having trailed this word and its possible referents into unforeseen readings of “Lamia,” I cannot help but comment on how appropriate it is that the IE root of “*Peræan*” yields us the words “near” and “far,” for the tortuous path has seemed at times as though it would never illuminate a reading of the poem based on a confident, assured recognition of what or where the “*Peræan* rills” are. But in fact, “*Peræan*” does refer to a specific placename.

On the way to finding out just what that place is, I have found that *Peræa* is the proper name of at least three locales. First and most easily dismissed from Keats’s setting is the Biblical *Peræa*, a province of Palestine at the time of Christ, west of Judaea and Samaria across the River Jordan and the Dead Sea and north of the River Arnon. Even if the spatial setting were not so far from the action of Keats’s poem, the temporal setting is wrong. The whole ambience of Palestine at the time of Christ is antithetical to the pagan mythology that governs Keats’s poem. The Palestinian *Peræa* does not belong in “Lamia.”

The next possibility, identified for me by *The New Century Classical Handbook*, is a “maritime district on the coast of Caria, Asia Minor, opposite Rhodes” (843). Some of the arguments that earlier supported the candidacy of Paros might be appropriated to make the Carian *Peræa* an intriguing, though strained, possibility. The Carian *Peræa* is closer to Crete than to Corinth, and a straight line from Caria to Corinth is much longer than that from Crete to Corinth. The Carian *Peræa*, though closer

to Lamia's setting than that of Palestine, is still not a creditable referent from "Peræan."

I hope my readers will not feel cheated if I show them that there is a grail at the end of this quest. I hope, too, they will judge the journey worthwhile. It has taken me to consider Keats's poem in new ways in order to credit him with referring to an actual *signifié*. As it turns out, the true referent will (of course, inevitably) undercut those proposed readings. But in critical reading we are acting as detectives, projecting from what we are sure of to a myriad of possibilities that may or may not be borne out by a final solution to the mystery, if we ever reach that solution. Here, as I have said, we do reach a final solution. The referent of Lamia's "Peræan" is Peræa Chora (or Perachora, or Peiræum) — otherwise known as Peræa, which was a part of Corinthia. It formerly belonged to Megara, a town on the isthmus marked on Potter's map (*Oxford Classical Dictionary* 665). *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Classical Sites* identifies it as "a large promontory at the E end of the Corinthian Gulf N of the Isthmus and opposite ancient Corinth" (687). The setting alone clearly establishes this as Keats's referent Peræa Chora.

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