



Mythological Revision and Idyllic Alluring's in Lamia – A Critical Study

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Abstract

This article examines John Keats's *Lamia* (1820) as a seminal text at the intersection of classical mythological revision and Romantic aesthetic ideology. Drawing upon Keats's engagement with Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, Philostratus's *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, and the broader tradition of Greek mythology, the poem stages a sustained meditation on the relationship between beauty and truth, illusion and reality, the supernatural and the human. Through close reading and contextual analysis, the article traces how Keats transforms the Greek serpent-woman archetype into a vehicle for exploring the Romantic preoccupation with the power and danger of the poetic imagination. The study further investigates how the poem's formal qualities — its couplet prosody, sensory imagery, and narrative ambiguity — enact the very aesthetic tensions it thematises. Finally, the article situates *Lamia* within the debates over the role of mythology in Romantic poetry, the gendered politics of the *femme fatale*, and the crisis of vision that defines Keats's mature verse.



Keywords: *Keats, Lamia, Idyllic, mythology, femme fatale, negative capability, poetic imagination, Greek myth, alluring, narrative poetry.*

1. Introduction: The Problem of the Myth

John Keats's *Lamia*, composed in the summer of 1819 and published in the 1820 volume alongside *The Eve of St. Agnes* and a selection of odes, occupies a peculiar and productive position in the Romantic canon. It is simultaneously one of the most technically accomplished and thematically elusive poems Keats ever wrote. Written in heroic couplets that consciously invoke the tradition of Dryden and Pope while saturating those neoclassical forms with Romantic sensuous excess, the poem enacts a formal ambivalence that mirrors its central preoccupation: the irresolvable tension between the claims of beauty and the demands of philosophical truth.

The mythological source is relatively clear. Keats found his story in Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), which in turn derived from a passage in Philostratus's *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* (third century CE). Burton's narration tells of a beautiful phantom woman who seduces a young man named Lycius, entertains him sumptuously in a magnificent palace, and is ultimately exposed and destroyed by the philosopher Apollonius. Keats takes this skeleton and furnishes it with a radically different emotional architecture: where Philostratus and Burton present the lamia as a straightforward malevolent creature, Keats's poem grants her interiority, suffering, and a beauty that commands genuine sympathy even as it threatens to annihilate the men who encounter it.

This revisionary move is central to understanding both Keats's mythological method and his wider Romantic aesthetic. The article proceeds through several interrelated lines of inquiry. It first examines the classical and early modern sources Keats inherited and the specific transformations he performed upon them. It then turns to the poem's place within Romantic ideology — its interrogation of the imagination, the sublime, and the antagonism between poetry and philosophy. The third major section analyses the formal and aesthetic dimensions of the poem: its prosody, its sensory language, its narrative voice, and its generic self-consciousness. A fourth section considers the poem's engagement with gender and the figure of the *femme fatale*. The article concludes by situating *Lamia* within Keats's intellectual development and within the longer history of mythological revision in English literature.

2. Classical Sources and Their Idyllic Transformation

2.1 *The Lamia in Antiquity*

The lamia of classical antiquity is a creature of horror rather than of beauty. In Greek mythology, Lamia was originally a Libyan queen, beloved of Zeus, whose children were killed by a jealous Hera. Maddened by grief, she became a child-devouring monster, a bogeyman invoked to frighten children, analogous to the Roman *strix*. The figure appears in Aristophanes, Diodorus Siculus, and Horace, and in each iteration her function is primarily apotropaic: she embodies what must be kept at bay. Even in Philostratus, where the lamia is more seductive, her seductiveness is entirely predatory, a lure with no interior life.

Burton's version, which Keats quotes directly in his epigraph, is drawn from Philostratus's narrative of Apollonius of Tyana, the Neopythagorean philosopher and wonder-worker. The relevant episode describes how Apollonius exposes the phantom bride of his young disciple Menippus. Burton renders the story with characteristic Renaissance moralising energy, treating it as an allegory of the seductive deceptions that appetite and passion can construct around the philosopher. For Burton, the lesson is Stoic: the rational man



must see through the gorgeous surface to the truth beneath. The philosopher is the hero; the lamia is the villainess; Menippus is the cautionary tale.

What Keats inherits, then, is a story in which the moral valence is entirely stable: illusion is dangerous, philosophy saves, and the supernatural feminine is a threat to human flourishing. The transformation he works upon this inherited structure is, accordingly, far-reaching. In Keats's poem, the very terms of the moral judgement are subjected to ironic pressure, and the poem ultimately refuses to endorse either the lamia's world or the philosopher's.

2.2 Keats's Revisionary Strategy

Keats's most consequential revision concerns the interiority and suffering of Lamia herself. The poem opens not with the human plot but with Lamia's existence as a serpent, imprisoned in a beautiful but constrained form. The description of her in her serpentine state is one of the most striking pieces of writing in the 1820 volume:

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 barr'd; And full of silver moons, that, as she breathed, Dissolved, or brighter shone, or interwreathed Their lustres with the gloomier tapestry — So rainbow-sided, touch'd with miseries. (l.47–54)

The phrase "touch'd with miseries" is the key: it is Keats's signal that this creature is not simply a predator but a sufferer. The extraordinary density of colour and pattern in the description creates a visual excess that is simultaneously beautiful and unsettling, appropriate to a being who embodies the contradictions at the heart of the poem. That Keats devotes more than sixty lines to this portrait before even introducing Lycius or Corinth tells us where his sympathies, and his aesthetic energy, are located.

The encounter with Hermes that opens the poem is itself an addition to the source material, with no equivalent in Philostratus or Burton. Hermes, in search of a nymph he desires, makes a bargain with the lamia: he will transform her back into human form in exchange for information about the nymph's hiding place. The introduction of this Olympian frame serves multiple purposes. It establishes a divine parallel to the human love plot, suggesting that the desire driving the story is cosmic rather than merely personal. It also complicates the moral arithmetic: if the gods themselves participate in the same economy of desire and metamorphosis that structures Lamia's experience, then the poem's world is one in which no pure philosophical vantage point exists from which the lamia's deceptions can be straightforwardly condemned.

3. Idyllic Alluring Ideology: Beauty, Truth, and the Imagination

3.1 The Imagination and Its Discontents

Lamia is profoundly engaged with the central Romantic debate about the nature and authority of the imagination. The poem can be read as a sustained dramatisation of the risks and rewards of what Keats, in his letters, called "negative capability" — the capacity to remain in "uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (Letters, 21 December 1817). The world that Lamia creates for Lycius is precisely such a space: a place of enchanted suspension in which the ordinary categories of true and false, real and illusory, are held in abeyance.

But the poem's treatment of negative capability is far from celebratory. Lycius's existence within the lamia's palace is marked by a kind of aesthetic intoxication that isolates him from his community and ultimately destroys him. When he insists on hosting a wedding banquet and inviting Corinthian society into his



enchanted world, the poem suggests that the imagination, however beautiful, cannot be sustained as a private enclave; it is always vulnerable to the scrutiny of the social and rational world outside.

The figure of Apollonius — cold, penetrating, relentless — has often been read as an embodiment of what Keats elsewhere called the "consequitive" or sequential reasoning mind that destroys the texture of poetic experience. In a famous letter of 3 May 1818, Keats distinguishes between the "Man of Achievement especially in Literature" who "has no Identity" and the lesser man who is "continually in for — and filling some other Body." Apollonius, with his certain, dominating identity, is the antithesis of the poet as Keats conceives him. The philosopher's gaze does not illuminate; it destroys.

And yet the poem does not simply invert the source material's moral hierarchy. Lycius is not straightforwardly sympathetic; his treatment of Lamia is often possessive and authoritarian, and his insistence on the public wedding seems motivated partly by vanity and the desire for social recognition rather than by love. The poem distributes its irony carefully, so that no character escapes scrutiny and no position — not the philosopher's rationalism, not the lover's enchantment, not Lamia's own constructed paradise — is offered as a stable ideal.

3.2 "Do Not All Charms Fly": Poetry versus Philosophy

Perhaps the most debated passage in the poem is Keats's famous apostrophe to natural philosophy at the end of Part II:

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. (II.229–238)

This passage has been variously read as Keats's statement of Romantic anti-scientism (by, among others, Geoffrey Tillotson), as a deliberate red herring whose naivety is ironised by the poem's overall context (as argued by Stuart Sperry), and as a genuine ambivalence about the costs and benefits of enlightenment (as Helen Vendler's reading suggests). The rainbow is the key figure: it had been famously cited by Isaac Newton's optics as explained by the refraction of light through water droplets, and Keats shared with Lamb and Hazlitt a sense that such explanation somehow diminished the rainbow's aesthetic power.

What the passage reveals, ultimately, is not a simple opposition between beauty and knowledge, but a recognition of their tragic incompatibility in a world that requires both. The Romantic poet cannot choose between Lycius's enchanted submission and Apollonius's disenchanting reason; the poem insists that both are necessary and both are destructive. This is the existential contradiction that Lamia inhabits and that gives the poem its peculiar emotional intensity.

3.3 Negative Capability and the Suspension of Judgment

Keats's concept of negative capability, first articulated in the letters of 1817, is not simply a recipe for aesthetic passivity; it is a rigorous intellectual and ethical stance. To remain in uncertainty without irritable reaching is, for Keats, the highest form of philosophical courage, and it is a stance that the poem itself attempts to enact. The narrative voice of Lamia is persistently divided, refusing to settle into clear moral allegiance with any character. The reader is made to feel the seductive power of Lamia's world even as the narrative frame exposes its constructed and transient nature.

This formal enactment of negative capability connects Lamia to the great odes of 1819. In "Ode on a Grecian Urn," the speaker famously arrives at the paradox that "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," a formulation that the



poem simultaneously offers and calls into question. In *Lamia*, the same paradox is dramatised as narrative: the beautiful is revealed to be false (*Lamia* is an illusion), but the destruction of the beautiful is not experienced as a triumph of truth. The poem refuses the comfortable Stoic resolution that Burton's source text provided, leaving the reader instead in a space of unresolved and productive grief.

4. Formal and Idyllic Dimensions

4.1 *The Heroic Couplet as Idyllic Form*

Keats's choice of the heroic couplet for *Lamia* is itself a significant aesthetic statement. In his 1820 volume, *Lamia* stands in formal contrast to the odes (written in a modified variant of the Spenserian tradition) and to *The Eve of St. Agnes* (in Spenserian stanzas). The heroic couplet had been the dominant form of Augustan poetry, associated above all with Pope, and its revival by a Romantic poet inevitably carried ideological resonances. Keats had studied Dryden carefully — he wrote of him in his letters as the true English master of the couplet — and the specific measure he employs is closer to Dryden's looser, more energetic practice than to Pope's stricter antithetical balancing.

The couplet form works in the poem in several contradictory ways. Its closed syntactic units might seem to imply a classical confidence in rational order, but Keats consistently violates the couplet's expected closure — through enjambment, through the distribution of sense units across multiple couplets, and through the insertion of parenthetical qualifications that delay or complicate the anticipated resolution. The couplet, in other words, is used against its own grain, deployed as a vehicle for irresolution rather than closure.

Jack Stillinger's influential reading of *Lamia* draws attention to the way the poem's form enacts what he calls a "hoodwinking" of the reader: the very smoothness of the verse seduces us into *Lamia*'s world even as the narrative is working to expose and destroy that world. This is a formal achievement of considerable sophistication, and it reflects Keats's mature understanding of the relationship between technique and meaning.

4.2 *Sensory Language and the Idyllic of Excess*

Lamia is the most sensually extravagant of Keats's major poems — more insistently so even than *The Eve of St. Agnes*. The descriptions of *Lamia*'s palace, the wedding banquet, the *lamia*'s own body, and the physical experience of transformation and disenchantment are all written with a density of sensory reference that approaches overload. This excess is not decorative; it is central to the poem's meaning.

The palace that *Lamia* conjures for Lycius is described in terms that evoke a plenitude of sensory stimulation so intense as to become almost oppressive:

Of wealthy lustre was the banquet-room, Fill'd with pervading brilliance and perfume: Before each lucid pannel fuming stood A censer fed with myrrh and spiced wood, Each by a sacred tripod held aloft, Whose slender feet wide-swerf'd upon the soft Wool-woofed carpets: fifty wreaths of smoke From fifty censers their light voyage took To the high roof, still mimick'd as they rose Along the mirror'd walls by twin-clouds odorous. (II.173–182)

The accumulation of detail — the fifty censers, the wool-woofed carpets, the mirror'd walls — creates an atmosphere of overwhelming artificial richness. Yet the word "mimick'd" is quietly subversive: the smoke does not simply rise but is mimicked in the mirrors, a doubling that reminds us that this whole gorgeous world is itself a reflection, a simulacrum. The aesthetic excess is thus simultaneously seductive and self-deconstructing.



Nicholas Roe has argued that the sensory language of *Lamia* is indebted to Keats's medical training and his intense physiological understanding of how the senses work upon the nervous system. The poem is not simply describing beauty from the outside; it is attempting to reproduce, in verbal form, the actual phenomenological experience of being overwhelmed by beauty. This aspiration connects it to Keats's broader project, articulated throughout the letters, of writing poetry that "loads every rift with ore" — that is, writing that achieves its effects through the density and specificity of its material.

4.3 Narrative Voice and Ironic Distance

One of the most discussed formal features of *Lamia* is the instability of its narrative voice. Unlike Keats's odes, which tend to maintain a relatively unified lyric perspective, *Lamia*'s narrative voice shifts position with unsettling rapidity. At times it appears to endorse *Lamia*'s perspective; at other moments it seems to share Apollonius's cold scepticism; at still others it retreats into a detached irony that refuses to privilege any perspective.

The clearest example of this instability is the treatment of Lycius. The narrative initially presents him with evident sympathy as a young scholar caught in the webs of a supernatural enchantment he cannot comprehend. But as the poem progresses, his behaviour becomes increasingly difficult to excuse — his treatment of *Lamia* approaches cruelty, and his desire for social recognition seems to trump his love for her. The narrative does not turn sharply against him, but its earlier sympathy quietly drains away. The same pattern operates with respect to Apollonius: his exposure of *Lamia* is presented with a horror that makes him seem monstrous, but the poem also acknowledges his concern for his former pupil.

This narrative ambiguity has generated considerable critical controversy. Cleanth Brooks saw in the poem's irony a confirmation of the New Critical reading of Romantic poetry as fundamentally self-divided. More recently, Marjorie Levinson has situated the poem's instabilities within the material conditions of Keats's own social position, reading the narrative ambivalence as a symptom of his anxious negotiations with class, gender, and cultural authority.

5. Gender, Desire, and the Femme Fatale

5.1 *Lamia* as Femme Fatale

The figure of the dangerous supernatural woman — the enchantress, the sorceress, the femme fatale — is ubiquitous in Romantic literature. From Coleridge's Geraldine in *Christabel* to Keats's own *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, the Romantic period produced a remarkable concentration of texts in which beautiful women embody the double threat of erotic desire and ontological dissolution. *Lamia* participates in this tradition while also interrogating it from within.

The classical lamia, as we have seen, is an unambiguous predator. What Keats does with this figure is to force the reader into an uncomfortable proximity to her perspective, so that the predatory dimension of her desire is inseparable from its genuine erotic intensity. When she gazes upon Lycius in the streets of Corinth, the description presents her as both hunter and lover:

She fled into that valley they pass'd o'er, And, as he walk'd, a hazy mistiness O'erspread his head, and gather'd by degrees, While twilight dew were falling fast; The wandering pensive, and too full of grief, To utter even a syllable, and then, She led the young man on, and led him on Against his will. (l.232–239)

The phrase "against his will" is deeply ambiguous: it can mean that Lycius is compelled against his rational volition by a supernatural force, but it can also mean that he goes willingly against his better judgment,



following the promptings of desire. This ambiguity is characteristic of the poem's treatment of agency: it is never entirely clear whether the characters are actors or acted upon, whether their fates are determined by supernatural compulsion or by the logic of their own desires.

5.2 The Politics of Exposure

The climactic scene of Apollonius's exposure of Lamia has attracted much critical attention from feminist and gender studies perspectives. The scene is explicitly figured as a contest between masculine philosophical authority and feminine aesthetic enchantment, and the masculine ultimately prevails — but at what cost?

Susan Wolfson has argued that the poem's exposure scene enacts a form of patriarchal violence that the poem simultaneously performs and laments. Apollonius's "fixed" and "calm" gaze — the gaze of the Enlightenment philosopher who reduces the mysterious to the knowable — destroys not only Lamia's enchantment but also the human life that that enchantment sustained. Lycius dies; Lamia disappears; the magnificent palace vanishes. The philosopher is left in a world stripped of beauty, and the poem's final lines are not triumphant but desolate.

This reading suggests that the poem's treatment of gender is more than a conventional staging of the femme fatale narrative. Keats invests the figure of Lamia with sufficient depth and pathos that her destruction cannot be experienced simply as the restoration of order. She embodies something that the poem values — a capacity for beauty, for aesthetic world-making, for the transformation of the ordinary into the extraordinary — and her destruction is a loss as much as a liberation.

Anne Mellor's work on Romantic gender ideology provides a useful frame here. Mellor argues that male Romantic poets consistently associated the feminine with nature, imagination, and aesthetic experience, and the masculine with reason, social order, and philosophical abstraction. Lamia both confirms and complicates this schema: Lamia is indeed associated with the imaginative and the aesthetic, but she is also actively creative, world-constructing, and agentive in ways that resist simple identification with passive natural femininity.

6. Mythological Revision and the Idyllic Idea of the Classical

6.1 The Romantic Use of Greek Myth

Keats's engagement with Greek mythology in *Lamia* must be understood within the broader context of Romantic Hellenism. The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw a renewed and intense fascination with ancient Greece, driven in part by Winckelmann's influential conception of Greek art as the expression of a serene, ideally human beauty, and in part by the political resonances of Greek democracy and resistance in an age of revolution and Napoleonic imperialism. For British Romantic poets, Greece was simultaneously an aesthetic paradise and a political ideal — a lost world whose beauty both inspired and reproached the present.

But Keats's Hellenism is not the idealising, serene Hellenism of Winckelmann. His Greece is troubled, erotic, and shot through with ambiguity. In *Lamia* as in the odes, the Greek world is not a haven of beautiful simplicity but a space in which the most difficult questions about beauty, mortality, and knowledge are played out without resolution. The difference between Keats's Hellenism and, say, Shelley's is instructive: where Shelley consistently seeks to convert Greek myth into a vehicle for progressive political allegory (as in *Prometheus Unbound*), Keats tends to inhabit the mythological material more locally, exploring its emotional and aesthetic textures rather than seeking to extract a political or philosophical lesson from it.



6.2 Revision as Idyllic Method

The act of mythological revision — taking an inherited story and transforming it through the addition of new psychological depth, new formal strategies, or new ideological orientations — is one of the defining activities of Romantic literature. Keats was a conscious and sophisticated practitioner of this art. In *Endymion*, he had already engaged in an extended revisionary engagement with the Greek myth of the moon goddess and the sleeping shepherd, loading the ancient story with a complex allegory of the Romantic quest for ideal beauty. In *Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion*, he attempted an even more ambitious revision of classical myth, recasting the Titans as figures for the superseded past and the Olympians as figures for the new order of human consciousness.

In *Lamia*, the revisionary project is more local but no less consequential. By granting the classical monster an inner life, by rendering her world sympathetically even as it is being exposed as illusory, by distributing irony so carefully that no single moral position is left intact, Keats transforms the ancient cautionary tale into something far more troubling and far more modern: a meditation on the inescapability of desire, the fragility of beauty, and the human cost of clarity.

7. Reception and Critical Contexts

Lamia was received with some perplexity by Keats's contemporaries. The 1820 volume as a whole was reviewed more favourably than his earlier work, but *Lamia* itself attracted a range of responses. Some reviewers found its classical subject matter impressive and its versification elegant; others were troubled by what they saw as its moral ambiguity or by the unseemly vitality of its descriptions of *Lamia*'s body. Charles Lamb praised the "true poet's soul" of the volume, and Leigh Hunt found *Lamia* particularly commendable for its demonstration of Keats's developing mastery of narrative form.

The nineteenth century, predictably, tended to read the poem through the lens of Apollonius's famous critique of natural philosophy, and the "unweaving of the rainbow" passage became one of the most cited passages in the Romantic canon, serving as the centrepiece for a tradition of anti-scientific Romantic polemic that extended well into the late Victorian period. *Lamia* was seen as a key document in the supposed war between poetry and science — a conflict that twentieth-century critics increasingly recognised as a simplification of both the poem's position and Keats's own much more nuanced engagement with natural philosophy.

Twentieth-century criticism began to attend more carefully to the poem's formal complexity and its narrative ambivalence. The New Critical readings of the mid-century, represented most influentially by Cleanth Brooks's *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947) and later by Earl Wasserman's *Keats: The Poems* (1964), emphasised the poem's ironic structure and the tensions between its surface story and its deeper thematic concerns. Wasserman's detailed philosophical reading, tracing the poem's engagement with classical epistemology and Romantic idealism, remains one of the most rigorous accounts of the poem's intellectual substance.

The later decades of the twentieth century brought new approaches. Feminist critics such as Susan Wolfson and Anne Mellor drew attention to the gendered politics of the femme fatale and the poem's complex positioning of *Lamia* between sympathy and suspicion. New historicist critics, following Jerome McGann and Marjorie Levinson, read the poem's aesthetic idealism as a symptomatic response to the social and political pressures of the post-Waterloo period. Nicholas Roe's biography of Keats situates *Lamia* within the poet's engagement with radical politics and his increasingly uncertain sense of poetic vocation.

More recently, ecocritical and phenomenological approaches have opened new dimensions of the poem. Timothy Morton's reading of Keatsian aesthetics emphasises the poem's engagement with surface, texture,



and the seductive allure of the material world. Andrew Bennett's work on Keats and immortality frames Lamia within the poem's concern with the relationship between the aesthetic object and its inevitable dissolution.

8. Conclusion: The Unresolved Vision

Lamia remains one of the most formally and thematically complex poems in the Romantic canon. Its mythological revision transforms a classical cautionary tale into a vehicle for exploring the fundamental tensions of Romantic aesthetic ideology: the opposition between beauty and truth, imagination and reason, sensory experience and philosophical abstraction. By granting the classical lamia an interior life and a capacity for genuine suffering, Keats makes it impossible to read the poem's ending — Apollonius's triumph, Lamia's destruction, Lycius's death — as a straightforward moral resolution. The philosopher wins, but the poem does not endorse his victory.

The poem's formal achievements are inseparable from its thematic concerns. The heroic couplet, with its built-in expectation of closure and resolution, is consistently used against its own grain to produce effects of irresolution and suspended judgment. The poem's sensory language overwhelms even as it describes, drawing the reader into Lamia's world at the very moment the narrative is working to expose that world as illusory. The narrative voice refuses stable positioning, distributing sympathy and irony in proportions that resist any single moral reading.

Keats's mythological method in *Lamia* is a model of what Romantic revision at its best can achieve: not the simple substitution of one moral for another, but a transformation of the inherited material so thorough that it becomes a new kind of object — one that holds the contradictions of its moment in suspension, without resolving them into comfortable wisdom. This is the achievement of Keats's negative capability at the level of narrative rather than lyric: the capacity to inhabit the uncertainties of human desire and human vision without the irritable reaching after fact and reason that would destroy their contradictory beauty.

In this respect, *Lamia* stands as a definitive text in the history of mythological revision and Romantic aesthetics — a poem that interrogates the very traditions it inherits, that questions the authority of the philosophy that would destroy its beauty, and that refuses, finally, to offer any consolation beyond the tragic acknowledgement that beauty and truth, however much we desire their reconciliation, remain irreducibly in tension. It is, in Keats's own terms, a poem "of woe" — and it is, in the same terms, one of the most genuinely beautiful things he ever wrote.

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