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Keats: Women, Readers and Revision

Thesis submitted to the University of Glasgow

By

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In fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of

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Abstract

This thesis examines three apparently unrelated matters, Keats's representation of women in his poems, his responses to his readership, and his habits of revision, and argues that these are in fact aspects of Keats's work that are intimately connected one with another. It is divided into three parts.

The first part is introductory. In the first chapter I place my own work in relation to the recent trends in Keats criticism that have impinged on it most forcibly. In particular, I consider the recent work, best represented perhaps by Susan Wolfson, that has countered the traditional emphases of Keatsian scholarship by developing an approach that might loosely be described as feminist, and the work, best represented by Andrew Bennett, that has focused on Keats's responses both to the assumed readers of his poems and to their reviewers, most importantly their hostile reviewers. The two critical approaches are connected, as Wolfson amongst others notes, by the fact that during the course of Keats's professional career women became, and were recognised as having become, a constituency of the poetry reading public so powerful as to determine the commercial success of any volume of poetry. My second chapter is biographical. In it, I attempt to ground Keats's complex responses to women in the material, social realities of his life by examining his relationship with three women in particular: Jane Cox, Isabella Jones, and Fanny Brawne, although I call attention also to the striking absence in Keats's writing of a fourth woman, his mother.

The division between the second and third parts of the thesis borrows Andrew Bennett's understanding of the distinction between narrative poetry, which is always and explicitly addressed to a reader, and lyric poetry, in which the poet sings to himself and is only overheard by his reader. In the second part of the thesis I treat, in chronological order of their composition, Keats's major narrative romances; *Endymion*, 'La Belle Dame sans Merci', *Isabella*, *The Eve of St Agnes*, *Lamia*, and the two versions of *Hyperion*. In each case I focus on the erotic relationship between a man and a woman that is at the centre of the poem, the relationships between Endymion and Cynthia, la belle dame and the knight at arms, Isabella and Lorenzo, Madeline and Porphyro, Lamia and Lycius, and, in *The Fall of Hyperion* between the poet dreamer and Moneta. But in each case, too, I focus on significant acts of revision, for example, the original and revised preface to *Endymion*, the two texts of 'La Belle Dame sans Merci', and the revised stanzas in *The Eve of St Agnes*. Sometimes I employ an extended notion of the act of revision, understanding, for example, the second part of *Lamia* as a revision of its first part, and *The Fall of Hyperion* as a revision of *Hyperion*. I argue throughout that through the erotic relationships Keats explores the relationship between the masculine poet, himself, and the poet's reader, who is consistently figured as feminine, but I seek to show also that for Keats himself, as for the culture of which he was a product, masculine and feminine are inherently unstable terms, terms that resist any attempt to fix their significance. Keats's revisions, I argue, both attest to and explore this instability.

In the final part of the thesis, I turn to Keats's lyric poems, first the great odes and then the sonnets that Keats wrote at the very end of his poetic career. Of all Keats's poems the odes have received the fullest critical treatment. My own study of them is distinctive in that it understands Keats's practice in these poems in relation to his handling of the romance form. It follows that for me the 'Ode to Psyche' is the critical poem, because Keats chooses a topic that lends itself to treatment in the form of a verse romance such as *Endymion*, and had indeed already given Mary Tighe the subject matter for one of the more popular verse romances of Keats's day, and self-consciously refuses the possibility. The visionary encounter with the goddess does not yield a narrative, but rather a still tableau in contemplating which Keats comes to apprehend the nature of his own poetic authority. In this chapter I explore the consequences of replacing the erotic encounters that mark the verse romances with a solitary contemplation of an object such as a nightingale's song or a Grecian urn, but in the odes, as I argue, such objects are consistently feminised. In my final chapter I turn to a group of poems by Keats, which have, by contrast, received rather little attention. The odes are public poems, poems written with publication in mind, whereas the late sonnets seem private poems. Keats seems to have had no thought of publication when he wrote them, and they were not finally published until long after his death. They were written, it seems, not for a readership, but for a private reader, whether that reader be Keats himself or an intimate friend such as Fanny Brawne. In these poems, too, I locate the themes and many of the devices that I have identified in the poems that Keats himself chose to publish, but they appear here in a

new guise. Fanny Brawne is the central figure in this chapter, but I present her rather differently from the manner in which she has often been presented by Keatsean scholars. I am less interested in the details of her emotional relationship with Keats than in the activities that they shared together, and one activity in particular: they read together. In the months before he finally left England for Italy Keats enjoyed an experience that he had not fully known before, an intimate social relationship with a woman reader, and a woman reader of his own poems.

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Abbreviations

<i>ELH</i>	<i>English Literary History.</i>
<i>ELN</i>	<i>English Language Notes.</i>
<i>FL</i>	<i>The Letters of Fanny Brawne to Fanny Keats.</i> Ed. Fred Edgumbe. London: Oxford University Press, 1939, cited by page number.
<i>HLB</i>	<i>Harvard Library Bulletin</i>
<i>HW</i>	<i>The Complete Works of William Hazlitt.</i> Ed. P. P. Howe. 21 vols. London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1930-1934.
<i>JEGP</i>	<i>Journal of English and Germanic Philology.</i>
<i>KC</i>	<i>The Keats Circle. Letters and Papers 1816-1878 and More Letters and Poems 1814-1879.</i> Ed. Hyder E. Rollins. 2 vols. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1948.
<i>KL</i>	<i>The Letters of John Keats 1814-1821.</i> Ed. Hyder Edward Rollins. 2 vols. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958, cited by volume and page number.
<i>KP</i>	<i>The Poems of John Keats.</i> Ed. Jack Stillinger. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1978.
<i>KSJ</i>	<i>Keat-Shelley Journal.</i>
<i>KSR</i>	<i>Keats-Shelley Review.</i>
<i>MLQ</i>	<i>Modern Language Quarterly.</i>
<i>N&Q</i>	<i>Notes and Queries</i>
<i>OED</i>	<i>Oxford English Dictionary.</i>
<i>PL</i>	<i>Paradise Lost in Complete Poems and Major Prose.</i> Ed. Merritt Y. Hughes. New York: Odyssey, 1957.
<i>PMLA</i>	<i>Publications of the Modern Language Association in America.</i>
<i>PQ</i>	<i>Philological Quarterly.</i>
<i>SER</i>	<i>Studies in English Literature.</i>

<i>SIR</i>	<i>Studies in Romanticism.</i>
<i>W1</i>	Transcripts in the smaller of the two volumes of Woodhouse copies of poems at Harvard
<i>W2</i>	Transcripts in the larger of the two volumes of Woodhouse copies of poems at Harvard
<i>W3</i>	Woodhouse transcripts in the Morgan Library

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Part I.

I. Introduction: Women, Readers and Keatsian Revision

This thesis will focus on three apparently unrelated matters: Keats's representation of women in his poems, the readership of those poems, and Keats's habits of revision. It will argue that, in fact, the three areas of enquiry are intimately connected. None of the three is simple in itself. Almost all of Keats's poems centre on an encounter with a woman, but the women are cast in very different roles. The woman may be an uncomplicated object of desire, like Madeline in *The Eve of St Agnes*, sisterly, like Peona in *Endymion*, maternal like Moneta in *The Fall of Hyperion*, or threatening like 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'. This remains a rather conventional cast of female characters, but, I shall argue, it is complicated by two factors. First, in the encounters with their women characters the poems reveal and explore the anxieties generated in Keats by the question of gender, and particularly by the instability of gender distinctions that marked the period in which he wrote, and to which his particular social and literary position gave him peculiar sensitivity. Second, it is through the encounters with women that Keats explores most alertly his own relationship with his assumed readers.

This leads directly to a consideration of Keats's readership. Once again, the first point to make is that the reader implied by Keats's poems is not single but various. Some of the poems are addressed, as Jeffrey Cox has shown, to a

coterie, to the literary circle that formed around Leigh Hunt, and that shared similar literary, social and political values.¹ The readers of such poems are invited to become themselves members of that coterie, enrolled by virtue of their ability to engage in the intimate social conversation that a properly sympathetic reading of such poems demands. Other poems, as Andrew Bennett has shown, seem written to a readership that is yet to be, to posterity.² Hence, it is Keats's habit to present his poems as if they were already posthumous works, the poems of a writer who is already in his grave. But Keats is also conscious, I shall argue, and becomes more intensely conscious throughout his career, of the actual readership to which his poems are addressed, and he very often reveals that he is conscious of that actual readership as threatening. For him, the threatening presence of the reader most often took two forms. The first, which became increasingly powerful for him after the savaging of *Endymion* in the *Quarterly Review*, and J. G. Lockhart's attacks on 'the Cockney School of Poetry' in *Blackwood's* cast the reader in

¹ According to Cox, the Romantic poets should be considered not simply as individual writers, each distinguished by their development of a particular voice, but rather as poets who were affiliated with particular groups, of which he suggests two as the most important, the Lake School and the Cockney School. He goes on to argue that the members of the Cockney School conceived of themselves as a coherent circle, something in between the kind of manuscript coterie circle that is so important in the production of early modern poetry and the kind of self-consciously avant-garde movement that has distinguished the production of poetry in the twentieth century. See Jeffrey Cox, 'Keats in the Cockney School', *Romanticism*, vol. 2.1 (1996), pp. 27-39.

² Bennett argues that the Romantic period is remarkable for the cultivation in that period of a distinctive notion of posterity. Poets in this period could no longer address a coherent reading public, for that public had fragmented. In consequence, the period's major poets, with the single exception of Byron, failed to achieve a wide readership. In response, they formulated an aesthetic that measured a poet's originality by the extent of his neglect by contemporary readers. The poet should write not for a contemporary audience, but for an audience of the future. He examines the works of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley and Byron in order to show that Romantic poets found their poetic identity on the figure of the neglected genius who can only be properly appreciated after his death by an audience as yet unborn, that is, posterity. For the application of the argument to Keats, see Andrew Bennett, *Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 139-157.

the form of the malevolent reviewer.³ The second, which came to increasing prominence in Keats's sense of things after his dispute with his publisher, John Taylor, concerning his proposed revisions to *The Eve of St Agnes*, cast the reader of his poems as a woman.⁴ Keats, like Byron during the years in which he worked on *Don Juan*,⁵ became increasingly sensitive to what seems to have

³ Useful general profiles of the various literary magazines in the Romantic period are given in Alvin Sullivan (ed.), *British Literary Magazines: The Romantic Age, 1789-1836* (London: Greenwood Press, 1983). John Hayden's two books offer comprehensive summaries of contemporary critical responses to Keats's three volumes, *Poems* of 1817, *Endymion* and the *Lamia* volume, and, more generally, to the Cockney School as a whole. See John O. Hayden, *Romantic Bards and British Reviewers* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), ch. IV, pp. 297-379; Hayden, *The Romantic Reviewers: 1802-1824* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), ch. V, pp. 176-216. Hayden's work should be supplemented by Klancher's, whose research on the wide range of writings in the period that addressed similarly diverse audiences helps to establish the configuration of a hitherto unknown world of text-making in the Romantic period's journals. See Jon P. Klancher, *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790-1832* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), ch. 5, pp. 135-171. Whereas Hayden and Klancher focus on the critical reception of Keats's poetry in the major literary journals of the time, Schwartz focuses his attention on the poet's reception in contemporary newspapers. See Lewis M. Schwartz, 'Keats's Critical Reception in Newspapers of His Day', *KSJ* 21-22, double issue (1972-1973), pp. 170-187. Wolfson evaluates Keats's reception in the contemporary journals which are designed to appeal primarily to female subscribers, journals such as the *British Lady's Magazine*, *Pocket Magazine*, the *Young Lady's Book of Elegant Poetry*, the *Ladies Companion*, the *Girl's Second Help to Reading* and the *Victorian Magazine*. These journals deemed the qualities of Keats's poetry to have a particular appeal to women readers. See Susan Wolfson, 'Feminizing Keats', in Hermione de Almeida (ed.), *Critical Essays on John Keats* (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1990), pp. 317-356. For further analysis of a representative sample of women's magazines appearing between 1693-1865 as periodicals primarily intended for female consumption, see Cynthia L. White, *Women's Magazines 1693-1968* (London: Michael Joseph, 1970), pp. 23-57. On the relationship between Keats's poetic style and Hunt's two magazines, the *Examiner* and the *Indicator*, see Richard Cronin, 'Keats and the Politics of Cockney Style', *SEL*, vol. 36, no. 4 (Autumn 1996), pp. 785-806. On Keats's own familiarity with contemporary literary journals in his school days at Enfield, and their role in exposing Keats to the culture of political dissent, see the 'Introduction', in Nicholas Roe, *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 1-26.

⁴ John Taylor's letter to Richard Woodhouse of 25 September 1819 regrets the revisions that Keats had proposed to *The Eve of St. Agnes*. See Hyder Edward Rollins (ed.), *The Letters of John Keats*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), vol. 2, pp. 182-184. Subsequent references to Keats's letters abbreviated as *KL* are placed in the text.

⁵ The unprecedented success of *Childe Harold*, as Ian Jack argues, persuaded Byron of the importance of women readers, a matter that was in the forefront of his mind when he came to publish *Don Juan*: "I have not written for their pleasure [that of the English]; - if they are pleased - it is that they chose to be so, - I have never flattered their opinions - nor their pride - nor will I. Neither will I make 'Ladies books' 'al dilettar le femine e la plebe' - I have written from the fullness of my mind, from passion - from impulse ... but not for their 'sweet voices'". In fact, Byron finally agreed to "the omission of certain words which 'ladies may not read'" in *Don Juan*. On the reception of Byron by women readers, see Ian Jack, *The Poet and His Audience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), ch. III, especially, pp. 76-85 (p. 76).

become a simple commercial reality, that women readers figured so prominently in the social group that purchased volumes of poetry that they acted as a decisive influence on the market. Publishers were unwilling, and increasingly unwilling, to publish volumes of poetry if they were not confident that the poems would appeal to women readers.⁶

Keats's habits of revision are again various in themselves. Keats might publish two very different versions of the same poem, the prime example being 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'. He may undertake a major revision before publication, as for example when he re-wrote the preface to *Endymion*. He may, like most poets, have second thoughts and revise accordingly, as in the revisions to *The Eve of St Agnes* that so offended Taylor, and in such cases the published version of the poem will be the result of a negotiation between the poet, his publisher, and the friends to whom he turns for advice. He may re-write a poem so completely as to produce two quite different poems, the prime example being the re-writing of *Hyperion* as *The Fall of Hyperion*. He may also allow a poem to revise itself. I shall argue that the second part of *Lamia* revises its first part. And he may, of course, write poems that revise the attitudes that he had expressed in his own earlier poems. I shall discuss instances of revision that take all of these forms, but my focus throughout will

⁶ It was not only John Taylor who was sensitive to the responses of women readers, so was John Murray, the publisher of Lord Byron. See, for example, his letter of 12 June 1812 to Byron: "I called upon Mr. Gifford to-day, and he expresses himself quite delighted with the annexed Poems, more particularly with the 'Song from the Portuguese', and 'Stanzas to a Lady Weeping'. The latter, however, he thinks you ought to slip quietly amongst the Poems in 'Child Harold'; for the present work is to be read by women, and this would disturb the poetical feeling. Besides, as it has been already published in a newspaper, it does not accord with your character to appear to think too much of it. If you allow me, I would transfer it to 'Child Harold', and insert the 'Impromptu' in its place". See Samuel Smiles, *A Publisher and His Friends: Memoir and Correspondence of the Late John Murray* (London: John Murray, 1891), p. 212.

be on investigating how this process of revision indicates the anxious and uncertain relationship that Keats has with his putative readership.

This thesis then will explore the inter-relatedness of the concepts of 'gender', 'readership' and 'revision', and in this chapter I will survey the treatment of these matters in the tradition of Keats scholarship. In some sense, of course, such a survey should begin with Keats's early reviewers, for critics such as John Wilson Croker and J. G. Lockhart, as several recent critics have shown, drew an implicit equation between Keats's insecure social position and a similarly insecure grasp of his own masculinity. To be a cockney poet was not only to lack the social and educational qualifications deemed necessary to those claiming the profession of poetry, it was also to be effeminate. It is an irony, though a familiar one, that Shelley's *Adonais*, the elegy in which Shelley so fiercely denounced the reviewers who had levelled these attacks against Keats, did not challenge their characterisation of Keats as effeminate, but in fact produced Keats as an icon of feminine vulnerability so powerfully that this depiction of the poet continued to inform responses to Keats for much of the nineteenth century.⁷ Monckton Milnes, Keats's first biographer, energetically repudiated any such characterisation of the poet, insisting on his robust manliness, but Milnes proved powerless to obliterate the image of Keats that Shelley had established.⁸

⁷ Susan Wolfson, 'Keats enters history: autopsy, *Adonais* and the fame of Keats', in Nicholas Roe (ed.), *Keats and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 17-45.

⁸ Milnes was, in an attempt to portray the most masculine Keats possible, obliged to ignore some evidence of Keats's weakness. He insisted that Keats led a "plain, manly, practical life". See Richard Monckton Milnes, *Life, Letters and Literary Remains of John Keats*, 2 vols. (London: Edward Moxon, 1848). According to William Henry Marquess, this editorial policy was derived from his adherence to the "current standards of decency" of the Victorian age: "the mid-nineteenth century was especially sensitive about the private conduct of its heroes. There is, though, more to Milnes's practice than a desire to conform to a public standard that was at best extremely elusive". See William Henry Marquess, *Lives of the Poet: The First*

So much is well enough known. A more interesting question is how far Keats's most recent critics have themselves co-operated in the exercise that was begun by reviewers such as Croker and Lockhart. Keats himself seems to have been impelled by the ambition to become what Harold Bloom has described, using appropriately masculine terms, as a 'strong poet'. He demanded, that is, that his active agency in his poems be recognised, and that he be granted a full, active subjectivity. It could be argued that many of the recent critics most anxious to celebrate Keats, critics such as Christopher Ricks, Jerome McGann, Marjorie Levinson, Andrew Bennett, Marlon Ross and Susan Wolfson,⁹ do so in a manner that worryingly aligns them with the characterisation of Keats that Shelley offers in *Adonais*. Put simply, they are apt to represent Keats and his poetry as the 'product' of his distinctive standing within the social world of Regency England, with the result that he is deprived

Century of Keats Biography (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1985), ch. 3, especially pp. 55-56. Some of Keats's modern biographers have seen it as their role to develop Milnes's defence of Keats's masculinity, most prominently Robert Gittings. Gittings is anxious to insist that Keats physically resembled his father rather than his mother, being short, stocky and thick-set. He is said to have been remarkable for his manly bearing during his schooldays, and to have displayed at times an aggressive and even violent temperament. He imitated Byron in dress and appearance in his days at Guy's Hospital, for example, dressing in a sailor costume and cultivating a set of Byronic moustaches according to his colleague, Henry Stephen. His abandonment of Hunt's sentimental style is represented as a recovery of his innate masculinity. See Robert Gittings, *John Keats* (London: Harmondsworth, 1968), p. 10, 24, 65. According to Duncan Wu, the image of Byron as a fashion icon, his open collar, was popularised in portraits by Richard Westall, Thomas Phillips and G. H. Harlow. At an early stage, Keats was one of Byron's most fervent admirers, which led him to compose a sonnet 'To Lord Byron'. See Duncan Wu, 'Keats and Byron: a Reassessment', *Byron Journal*, vol. 24 (1996), pp. 12-23 (p. 12) and Christine Kenyon Jones, 'Byron, Keats and the Fantasy of Consumption', *Byron Journal*, vol. 24 (1996), pp. 24-32.

⁹ Christopher Ricks, *Keats and Embarrassment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974); Jerome McGann, 'Keats and the Historical Method in Literary Criticism', in his *The Beauty of Inflections: Literary Investigations in Historical Method and Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), pp. 15-66; Marjorie Levinson, *Keats's Life of Allegory: The Origins of a Style* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988); Andrew Bennett, *Keats, Narrative and Audience: The Posthumous Life of Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Marlon Ross, *The Contours of Masculine Desire: Romanticism and the Rise of Women's Poetry* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1989); Susan Wolfson, *The Questioning Presence, Wordsworth, Keats and the Interrogative Mode in Romantic Poetry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986).

of agency just as forcefully as he was by Croker and Lockhart. Indeed, to be deprived of agency is itself, within the gender terms with which Keats was familiar, to be rendered effeminate, and to be cast indeed as the feminised victim of forces over which one is not recognised as having any active control. An over-commitment to the cultural materialist view risks reducing Keats's life to 'a life of allegory' in a sense quite other than he seems to have intended. The poetry becomes simply figurative of the material conditions of Regency culture.

I have no ambition to cast myself as a latter-day Monckton Milnes, attempting to rescue Keats as a 'strong poet' from those who confuse him with the hapless 'Adonais' portrayed by Shelley. Rather, my concern is to show how Keats's poems disrupt the simple binary oppositions on which critics of both schools seem too often to rely: distinctions between masculine and feminine, subject and object, public and private, and author and reader. It is by repeatedly crossing over such borders that Keats finds in his poems his own distinctive and ironised authorial integrity. Critics have perhaps been too ready to undo the 'gordian knot' of feelings out of which the poems arose and which they articulate. It is a knot that should, I would argue, be respected rather than brutally severed. Keats uses this phrase to describe his feelings about women, which is why his attitudes towards women will be at the centre of this thesis. Keats needs women, as Porphyro needs Madeline, because his conquest of her is the guarantee he seeks of his own masculine empowerment, but women are as likely to threaten his male sense of himself. *La belle dame* emasculates, after all, the knight she holds in thrall. Similarly, Keats can represent himself as potently seductive in his approach to the women readers that his poems so

often assume, and just as often he can experience his dependence on them as an emasculating affront. But he is not driven into a cul-de-sac by these powerfully contradictory emotions. Rather, he explores them by alternately embracing and rejecting the binary opposition on which both responses depend.

1. Lord Byron and Mr. Keats

Christopher Ricks's *Keats and Embarrassment*, itself dependent, as Ricks acknowledges, on an earlier essay by John Bayley, marks a decisive turn in Keats studies.¹⁰ Before Ricks Keats's admiring critics had been concerned to construct a narrative which traced Keats's determined and rapid progress to a poetic maturity which the publication of the *Poems* of 1820 marked as triumphantly complete. Keats reached maturity, we were told, by freeing himself from the debilitating influence of Leigh Hunt and developing a poetic style that had its only true precursor in Shakespeare. It was a process by which Keats transformed himself from being a poet of his times into a poet for all time, a process then through which Keats won release from the constrictive influences of his particular social experience and succeeded in composing a number of poems, primarily the great odes, that fully inhabited a closed

¹⁰ Bayley argued that Keats's genius was essentially 'unmisgiving', which suggests that it is itself free from the embarrassment that it may prompt in its readers. See John Bayley, 'Keats and Reality', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, vol. 48 (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 91-125. However, despite his generous acknowledgement of the debt that he owes to Bayley, Ricks argues that Bayley is too ready to identify embarrassment simply as a disadvantageous source of inhibition. For him, embarrassment is explored by the poems, not

aesthetic realm. In this narrative the crucial binary opposes childhood and adulthood. The child is imitative, dependent on others, whereas the adult is self-determined. It is evident that this opposition in itself implies a gender opposition. Keats emerges from a condition in which his poetry reveals a feminised dependence on Hunt, and achieves a manly independence. It is a critical argument that responds to reviewers such as Lockhart and Croker by accepting, at any rate to a limited extent, their characterisation of the early poetry, regretting only the lack of sympathetic generosity that prevented Lockhart and Croker from detecting in the early work the as yet unfulfilled promise of future greatness.

Ricks's intervention in Keats studies was startling because he celebrates in the early poems precisely those qualities that Croker and Lockhart had held up to contempt, and because he represents the later poems as a fulfilment rather than as a repudiation of the style of the earlier work. It is as an essential element in this strategy that Ricks gently dislodges the poems from the secure position in an enclosed aesthetic sphere in which earlier critics had so carefully deposited them. His concern with embarrassment re-introduces, as it were, the poems to the young man who wrote them and to their readers. He is concerned with 'blushing', but it is an extensive concern that stretches from Keats's own sensitivity to ridicule, his fear of being 'rediculous' (Ricks prizes the manner in which the preferred Keatsian spelling allows a blush to stain the word), the blushes that occur within the poems, as when Lamia "Blush'd a live

damask”(*Lamia*, 116),¹¹ and the blushes that Keats’s cockneyisms can provoke in the embarrassed reader. He responds to Lockhart and Croker by insisting on the value of those aspects of the poems that inspired their contempt, but it is at least as important to note that in important ways his response to the poems echoes theirs.

Lockhart’s attacks on Keats’s *Endymion* may be summarised under three headings. First, Keats’s appropriation of Greek mythology is presumptuous because Keats lacks the education, and in particular the knowledge of Greek, that an appropriate use of that mythology demands: “As for Mr. Keats’ “Endymion,” it has just as much to do with Greece as it has with “old Tartary the fierce;” no man, whose mind has ever been imbued with the smallest knowledge or feeling of classical poetry or classical history, could have stooped to profane and vulgarise every association in the manner which has been adopted by this “son of promise”.¹² Secondly, in his versification, in his metrics and rhyming, Keats betrays his inadequacy to his subject matter: “Mr Keats has adopted the loose, nerveless versification, and Cockney rhymes of the poet of *Rimini*”.¹³ Finally, there is the political charge that Keats belongs to the Cockney School of Politics as well as the Cockney School of Poetry. Lockhart concludes by characterising Keats’s publication of his poems as an entirely ill-advised attempt at upward social mobility: “It is a better and a wiser thing to be a starved apothecary than a starved poet; so back to the shop

¹¹ All quotations from Keats’s poems are taken from Jack Stillinger (ed.), *The Poems of John Keats* (London: Heinemann, 1978). Subsequent references are placed in the text after quotations with the line numbers and titles only except when page numbers are essential.

¹² Theodore Redpath, *The Young Romantics and Critical Opinion 1807-1824* (London: Harrap, 1973), p. 471. This article of Lockhart’s was originally published as ‘The Cockney School of Poetry’ in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* of August 1818.

¹³ Redpath, *The Young Romantics and Critical Opinion 1807-1824*, p. 471.

Mr John, back to 'plasters, pills, and ointment boxes,'".¹⁴ Croker's review in the *Quarterly Review* is also written from the point of view of the classicist. From this perspective the author of *Endymion* is denounced as 'a copyist of Mr. Hunt'.¹⁵ Croker presents himself as the severe but well-intentioned schoolmaster, who supplies Keats with the education that he has evidently failed to secure for himself. Keats is "of an age and temper which imperiously require mental discipline", and such discipline the review administers:

It is not that Mr. Keats, (if that be his real name, for we almost doubt that any man in his senses would put his real name to such a rhapsody,) it is not, we say, that the author has not powers of language, rays of fancy, and gleams of genius—he has all these; but he is unhappily a disciple of the new school of what has been somewhere called Cockney poetry; which may be defined to consist of the most incongruous ideas in the most uncouth language.¹⁶

Ultimately, Croker insists that his frivolous Cockney style, the 'bouts rimés' of *Endymion*, has the power to deprive Keats of his proper name, which becomes 'keats' a plural common noun. As Nicholas Roe indicates, Croker and Lockhart join in a concerted attempt "to disempower Keats by making him look ridiculous, inventing and enforcing his ephemeral presence as a writer in

¹⁴ Redpath, *The Young Romantics and Critical Opinion 1807-1824*, p. 472.

¹⁵ Redpath, *The Young Romantics and Critical Opinion 1807-1824*, p. 473.

¹⁶ Redpath, *The Young Romantics and Critical Opinion 1807-1824*, p. 473. John Wilson Croker's unsigned review of *Endymion* was first published in the *Quarterly Review* in April 1818, although this number was not in fact published until September 1818. *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* was first launched by William Blackwood, a moderately successful publisher to offset the influence of the Whig *Edinburgh Review*. As a Tory magazine, *Blackwood's* attacked both its political and literary enemies, its three major contributors being John Gibson Lockhart (alias, 'Z'), John Wilson ('Christopher North') and James Hogg ('The Ettrick Shepherd'). See Sullivan (ed.), *British Literary Magazines*, pp. 45-53. The *Quarterly Review* was published by John Murray, also the publisher of Lord Byron, but, like *Blackwood's*, the *Quarterly* was a Tory journal, though of a less witty, more respectable variety. It supported aristocratic authority, the supremacy of the Anglican Church and paternalism. John Wilson Croker, one of its chief reviewers, was angered at Hunt's continued attacks upon the government during his imprisonment for libel. For Croker's notorious review of Keats's *Endymion*, see Sullivan (ed.), *British Literary Magazines*, pp. 359-367.

terms of his youth, his social class, cultural status, and gender” with the intent of denying him the possibility of a place within the high literary culture of Britain.¹⁷

Croker and Lockhart agreed in their identification of the defining characteristic of Cockney poetry: it was ‘effeminate’. The term no longer denoted simply a character trait or a mode of behaviour, but had become a quasi-technical description of a particular literary style.¹⁸ The characteristics of the ‘effeminate’ style were agreed even by those at the furthest remove from Croker and Lockhart in their political opinions. Hazlitt, for example, knew Keats, and was indeed the critic that Keats most admired. He had himself been accused of being a Cockney writer, and yet he too shared the view of Croker and Lockhart that Keats’s style was characterised by its effeminacy, as he makes clear in his essay ‘On Effeminacy of Character’:

We may observe an effeminacy of style, in some degree corresponding to effeminacy of character. Writers of this stamp are great interliners of what they indite, alterers of indifferent phrases, and the plague of printer’s devils. By an effeminate style I would be understood to mean one that is all florid, all fine; that cloyes by its sweetness, and tires by its

¹⁷ Nicholas Roe, *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), p. 10.

¹⁸ Richard Cronin sensibly notes that “Cockney poetry is most easily defined not as a style but as a relationship between a style and a subject matter” that is best exemplified in Hunt’s *The Story of Rimini*. Hunt’s style, definingly cockney, derives from his “strange habits of word formation”: “A waist is ‘clipsome’, horsemen travel at a ‘pranksome’ speed, trees are ‘darksome’, and ‘lightsome’ does for the sit of a cap, the fall of a man’s back, the slope of his nose, and for the morning star”. But according to Cronin, these Cockneyisms are best defined socially, rather than linguistically, “by the perplexities, the awkward embarrassment, that they provoke in the reader” due to the fact that “Hunt writes as if he had the freedom of an earlier poet, of Spenser, say, to invent his own poetic diction, as if he were unaware that poetic diction could no longer be defined by the character of the words used but by the cultural authority that had been invested in them, an authority that allows ‘finny tribe’ to remain unobtrusive, but exposes ‘glary yellow’ as ludicrously affected”. In this way, Byron could secure himself from Lockhart’s attack, although he had chosen the same topic of incest in his *Parisina* as Hunt’s, “not by the soundness of his morals but by the soundness of his style”. See Richard Cronin, ‘Leigh Hunt, Keats and the Politics of Cockney Poetry’, in his *The Politics of Romantic Poetry: In Search of the Pure Commonwealth* (London: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 182-188.

sameness. Such are what Dryden calls "calm, peaceable writers". They only aim to please, and never offend by truth or disturb by singularity. Every thought must be beautiful per se, every expression equally fine. [...] Lord Byron is a pampered and aristocratic writer, but he is not effeminate, or we should not have his works with only the printer's name to them! I cannot help thinking that the fault of Mr. Keats's poems was a deficiency in masculine energy of style. He had beauty, tenderness, delicacy, in an uncommon degree, but there was a want of strength and substance.¹⁹

Keats was a habitual reviser of his own poems, and his habits of revision are one of the concerns of this thesis. In another surprising demonstration of the manner in which responses to Keats so regularly fade into questions of gender, Hazlitt here suggests that Keats's willingness to revise his own poems is itself a marker of his effeminacy. Byron was careful to maintain the illusion that he wrote with careless spontaneity, rattling on exactly as he talked (though an examination of the manuscripts even of the poem in which the illusion is most pronounced, *Don Juan*, exposes it as a fiction),²⁰ and this façade of aristocratic nonchalance is recognised by Hazlitt as a marker not only of Byron's superior social class, but of his masculinity. Hazlitt was certainly not

¹⁹ P. P. Howe (ed.), *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 21 vols. (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1930-4), vol. 8, p. 254

²⁰ Despite Byron's insistence on his 'Romantic spontaneity' in his letter - "There is no second - I can't correct - I can't - & I won't" -, revision, according to Peter J. Manning, was intrinsic to his manner of composition. Manning argues that the publication of *Don Juan* over several years enabled Byron to develop a mode of self-revision that was prompted by his awareness of his amorphous audience, "a mass audience, capable of purchasing ten thousand copies of *The Corsair* in a single day, but composed of myriad strata, different in education, taste, and values". For further details, see Peter J. Manning, 'Don Juan and The Revisionary Self', in Robert Brinkley and Keith Hanley (eds.), *Romantic Revisions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 210-226 (p. 215). Leader argues that Byron's reluctance to revise, or to be thought to revise, derives from both temperamental and class factors. Unlike Wordsworth, Byron had no illusions about the single and continuous nature of personal identity. Also Byron's class position often made him more rather than less insistent upon the gentlemanly or non-professional character of poetical composition. See Zachary Leader, 'Byron, Revision and the Stable Self', in his *Revision and Romantic Authorship* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 78-120 (pp. 90, 94). Jane Stabler also notes that *Don Juan* is "released volume by volume to its readers, so that consequent changes in Byron's relationship with the English public are foregrounded as a dynamic of the poem". See Jane Stabler,

an uncritical admirer of Byron, and certainly did not share his class, which makes it all the more significant that he should so closely echo here Byron's own views. His distinction is very close to that Byron himself had suggested when he distinguished himself from Keats by contrasting the easy negligence of a gentleman's dress with the fastidious care with which an apprentice boy dresses on a Sunday, a care that the apprentice foolishly believes will help to disguise his social origins, but which in fact betrays them. For Croker and Lockhart, of course, Keats is doubly effeminate, in that he employs an effeminate Cockney style, but even that is borrowed, imitated from Leigh Hunt, so that Keats is effeminately dependent on an effeminate poet.

It was not only Keats's literary associates such as Hazlitt who seem to have co-operated with his enemies in characterising him as effeminate: even his publishers seemed to co-operate in the venture. Keats's first volume, *Poems*, was published by Ollier in 1817, and attracted little notice. Thereafter Keats attached himself to the firm of Taylor and Hessey who published *Endymion* in 1818 and *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St Agnes, and Other Poems* in 1820 just eight months before his death. It seems on the face of it curious, given the furious attacks to which Keats had been subjected by Croker and Lockhart, that Taylor and Hessey should have chosen to describe Keats on the title page of the 1820 volume as "John Keats, Author of *Endymion*", and it seems equally curious that they should have added an 'Advertisement' in which they admitted that the description of Keats as "Author of *Endymion*" was retained in defiance of the poet's wishes, and that similarly "the

¹George Gordon, Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, in Duncan Wu (ed.), *A Companion to Romanticism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 247.

appearance of the unfinished *Hyperion*" in the volume was also a decision made by the publishers in opposition to the wishes of the author. The advertisement goes out of its way to remind potential buyers of the damaging attacks on *Endymion* that had appeared in the *Quarterly* and *Blackwood's* by reporting that *Hyperion* had been left unfinished because of the disheartening effect on Keats of these attacks, a suggestion roundly denounced by Keats himself as a "lie". It seems on the face of it a perverse marketing strategy, but only on the face of it. Taylor and Hessey seem to have taken the conscious decision that, since they could not undo the attacks by Croker and Lockhart, they would seek to turn them to their advantage. There was, they rightly believed, a groundswell of public opinion, later to be articulated by Jeffrey in his belated review of *Endymion*,²¹ that disapproved of the savagery that had become a favoured mode amongst reviewers. There was a recognition that savage reviews were more obviously entertaining than more measured reviews. Indeed, it might plausibly be argued that Lockhart himself was motivated in his articles on 'the Cockney School' less by a principled objection to a particular group of poets than by a desire to court publicity for *Blackwood's*, a review that had on its first publication not succeeded, and the fortunes of which he was, on joining the staff, anxious to turn around. It may well be that he was conscious from the first that a useful ploy would be to write a series of articles so venomous that they would attract the widespread attention that a new journal needs.²² If this was his thinking, it seems to have

²¹ Francis Jeffrey's unsigned review of *Endymion* and of *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and other Poems* was published in the *Edinburgh Review* in August 1820. See Redpath, *The Young Romantics and Critical Opinion 1807-1824*, pp. 493-496.

²² Lockhart's attacks were published under the pseudonym of 'Z', complying with the policy of anonymous authorship maintained by *Blackwood's*, which enabled reviewers and editors to

worked. But Lockhart's violence might itself be used by Taylor and Hessey to their advantage if they could present Keats as a youthful and sensitive victim of unscrupulous critics. Keats's volume might be carried to success by creating a climate of public sympathy for the poet. But, if this was their plan, it meant that they, just as much as Lockhart and Croker, had an interest in promoting the public sense of Keats's 'effeminacy'. They needed to present him as effeminate if he was to appeal to the public's chivalrously protective instincts.

Taylor's letters to and about Keats during the negotiations that preceded the 1820 volume are a lesson in themselves on the complexity of gender distinctions in the period. A good example is Taylor's letter of 25 September 1819 to Richard Woodhouse, in which he berates Keats for his foolish attempt to insist on retaining his revisions to *The Eve of St Agnes*.

This Folley of Keats is the most stupid piece of Folly I can conceive.— He does not bear the ill opinion of the World calmly, & yet he will not allow it to form a good Opinion of him & his Writings. He repented of this Conduct when *Endymion* was published as much as a Man can repent, who shews by the accidental Expression of Disappointment, Mortification & Disgust that he has met with a Result different from that which he had anticipated—Yet he will again challenge the same Neglect or Censure, & again (I pledge my Discernment on it) be vexed at the Reception he has prepared for himself. —This Vaporing is as far from sound Fortitude, as the Conduct itself in the Instances before us, is devoid of good Feeling & good Sense. (*KL*, II, p. 182)

Taylor is responding here to what might seem a somewhat extravagant display by Keats of his own masculinity. He was insisting on his own manly independence, refusing the advice of his friend Woodhouse, and of his publishers, and he was asserting that independence by insisting on the

be savagely offensive without incurring any personal responsibility. Such a practice guaranteed controversy and, as it turned out, commercial success. See Sullivan (ed.), *British*

publication of a stanza that, Taylor assured him and he accepted, would make his poem unreadable by women. He had insisted, in fact, that he wants only a male readership, and that he does not want to be read by women. But this apparently aggressively masculine stance is itself characterised by Taylor as effeminate, as the “vaporizing” of a poet who lacks the capacity to think clearly that is the prerogative of men. Hence, Keats desires the “good Opinion” of the world, and yet will not act in a manner that will secure it, a feminine confusion. The lack of business sense that Keats displays in his willingness to cut himself off from one crucially important market, women readers, is itself offered as a paradoxical proof of his effeminacy, his lack of “sound Fortitude”, and “good Sense”.

My point is simply that by 1819 gender signifiers were peculiarly unstable. Compare, for example, Taylor’s use of the idea of effeminacy with Keats’s use of the term in one of his letters. In a letter to his brother George, Keats identified ‘effeminacy’ with ‘laziness’. It is a condition in which “the fibres of the brain are relaxed in common with the rest of the body, and to such a happy degree that pleasure has no show of enticement and pain no unbearable frown” (*KL*, II, p. 78). This comes close to identifying the state of effeminacy with the sphere of the aesthetic, but Keats’s understanding of the notion is no more stable than that of his contemporaries. Such instability is, of course, itself an embarrassment, and the embarrassment is intensified when it concerns a notion, ‘effeminacy’, that is itself embarrassing. It was Ricks’s achievement to establish this matter at the heart of Keats studies, but he does little to establish the particularity of the social milieu that gave added vitality

to the idea of embarrassment. That task was taken up by the historicist critics who have dominated Keats studies since the 1980s.

2. Keats: 'A Life of Allegory'

Since the early 1980s, the task that has preoccupied most Romantic critics is to replace Romantic poetry within its historical contexts. The past twenty years have witnessed a very widespread reaction against the Yale school, represented most powerfully by M. H. Abrams and Harold Bloom, by critics intent on reading poetry as the product of particular social and political circumstances. Keats has been the test case for this criticism, because Keats's poems have traditionally been represented as completely or almost completely removed from the life of their times. The most important Keats critics of the past twenty years have been concerned to re-attach the poems to that life. Some, such as Marjorie Levinson, have used a methodology that would commonly be identified as 'new historicist',²³ others such as Nicholas Roe have relied on more traditional historicist methods, but they have shared a

²³ The movement called 'New Historicism' originated in the United States in the late 1970s and 1980s. Its first exponents were Renaissance scholars such as Stephen Greenblatt and Louis Montrose. Like the Renaissance, "the Romantic period had been the object of distinguished historical criticism well before that time. Some of this earlier work had been motivated by a traditional desire to get things right, to explain what had not before been explained in the form of a coherent and disinterested historical narrative". For a more theoretical discussion of how new historicism developed amongst Romantic scholars, see David Simpson, 'New Historicism', in Duncan Wu (ed.), *A Companion to Romanticism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 402-410 (pp. 404, 406). According to Levinson, the new historicism is an attempt to surpass the extrinsic and binary contextualism of twentieth-century scholarship, especially of the Yale school. The most typical distinction of the new historicism from the old historicism, as Levinson argues, is its adoption of some Marxian critical methods and values. See Marjorie Levinson, 'The New Historicism: Back to the Future', in Marjorie Levinson, Marilyn Butler, Jerome McGann, Paul Hamilton (eds.), *Rethinking Historicism: Critical Readings on Romantic History* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), pp. 18-65, especially, pp. 18-35.

common enterprise. One important strand of this criticism, the strand with which this thesis will have least to do, has been concerned to re-establish the political importance of Keats's poems. For this group of critics, the key text has been 'To Autumn', a poem that they have read as a disguised commentary on recent political events, in particular, the Peterloo Massacre of 1819.²⁴ At this point, I would note only that political discourse in the period is itself inseparable in this period from the dynamics of gender, as Keats himself reveals in one of the letters in which he is most concerned with politics, the letter to his brother George of 14 October 1818.

As for Politics, they are in my opinion only sleepy because they will soon be too wide awake—Perhaps not—for the long and continued Peace of England itself has given us notions of personal safety which are likely to prevent the reestablishment of our national Honesty—There is of a truth nothing manly or sterling in any part of the Government. There are many Madmen In the Country, I have no doubt, who would like to be beheaded on tower Hill merely for the sake of eclat, there are many Men like Hunt who from a principle of taste would like to see things go on better, there are many like Sir F. Burdett who like to sit at the head of political dinners—but there are none prepared to suffer in obscurity for their Country—the motives of our wo[r]st Men are interest and of our best Vanity—We have no Milton, no Algernon Sidney—Governors in these days loose the title of Man in exchange for that of Diplomat and Minister. [...] No sensation is created by Greatness but by the number of orders a Man has at his Button holes Notwithstanding the part which the Liberals take in the Cause of Napoleon I cannot but think he has done more harm to the life of Liberty than any one else could have done. (*KL* I, pp. 396-397)

²⁴ A special forum on "Keats and Politics", held at the MLA Convention in 1983 and published in 1986 in *SIR*, initiated the main concerns of Keats studies since the 1980s. The forum contains the following contributions: Susan Wolfson, 'Introduction'; Morris Dickstein, 'Keats and Politics'; William Keach, 'Cockney Couplets: Keats and the Politics of Style'; David Bromwich, 'Keats's Radicalism'; Paul H. Fry, 'History Existence and 'To Autumn''; Alan J. Bewell, 'The Political Implication of Keats's Classicist Aesthetics', *SIR*, vol. 25 (Summer 1986), pp. 171-229.

Keats is entirely representative in this letter in the manner in which he allows the term 'man' to slip between a general sense in which it is a synonym for a human being, and the more limited sense in which it signifies a particular gender, men as opposed to women. So, the phrase "the title of Man" seems entirely general in its signification, except that our sense of the term has already been inflected by a phrase such as "nothing manly or sterling". He is entirely representative, too, in the anxiety he feels to define the notion of manliness, and in the sense he betrays that the term has no generally acknowledged meaning on which he can rely. So, Keats describes those revolutionaries who are prepared to be "beheaded on tower Hill" (presumably he has in mind men like Arthur Thistlewood, one of the leaders of the Spa Fields riots of 1816, who finally achieved his ambition in 1820 when he was executed as a Cato Street conspirator) as effeminate in that they are motivated not by principle, but instead act "for the sake of eclat", as if they were the counterparts in the political world of someone such as Lady Caroline Lamb.²⁵ Leigh Hunt is feminised when his politics are said to be directed by a "principle of taste", as if systems of government might be chosen on the same basis that he chose the furnishings of his Hampstead living room. Even Napoleon, the most potent icon of masculinity that the period had to offer, is reduced to the decorative: he attracts by the "number of orders" he displays in

²⁵ Arthur Thistlewood was one of the five conspirators with Ings, Tidd, Brunt and Davidson who were hanged as traitors after a perfunctory trial in 1820. The Cato Street conspiracy was the clearest evidence of the Regency radicalism's movement towards revolutionary excess after Peterloo. According to Michael Scrivener, although it is difficult to determine how large the radical movement group was and how widespread the revulsion against the government was, "it is indisputable that in Scotland, Yorkshire and London some radicals did indeed take part in risings and government spies acted as 'agent provocateurs'". After his execution, Thistlewood was portrayed by John Thelwall as more humane than the spy Edwards who orchestrated the plot for the government. For more details, see Michael Scrivener, 'John

his button hole. True manliness, in Keats's typically narrow and nervous definition, requires that one be prepared to "suffer in obscurity" for one's principles. In other words Keats is reduced to commending a manliness that is only authenticated by its invisibility, and hence can only be embodied in figures from the past, Milton and Algernon Sidney, neither of whom, it might be thought, in fact lived a particularly obscure life.

A second important strand was inaugurated by Jerome McGann in his influential essay, 'Keats and the Historical Method in Literary Criticism' in which he introduced to Romantic studies the socio-historical method of the Bakhtin school that understood "all language utterances including poems as phenomena marked with their concrete origins and history", in a word, 'a social Act'.²⁶ If his *The Romantic Ideology* revealed that the function of the 'romantic ideology' was to deny the socio-political dimension of literature by claiming for it access to transcendental truth,²⁷ 'Keats and Historical Method in Literary Criticism' is concerned to establish a practical methodology for new historicist analysis taking the poetry of Keats as its example. Ironically, McGann proposes a return to old-fashioned bibliography and traditional textual criticism. In order to investigate the author's intentions, most importantly his social and political intentions, the critic should investigate the poem's "initial manuscript" and its various "printed constitutions". In other words, the critic should focus on the questions of when the poem was printed,

Thelwall's Political Ambivalence', in Michael T. Davis (ed.), *Radicalism and Revolution in Britain, 1775-1848* (London: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 69-83, especially, pp. 80-82.

²⁶ McGann, 'Keats and the Historical Method in Literary Criticism', in his *The Beauty of Inflections: Literary Investigations in Historical Method and Theory*, p. 19. For Bakhtin's neo-marxist literary criticism, see P. N. Medvedev and M. M. Bakhtin, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship*, trans. Albert J. Wehrle, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), ch. 2, pp. 16-37 (p. 19).

where, by whom, and what was the particular form of the publication. It is by answering these questions that the critic is able to establish the “social relationships between author and audience which the poem has called into being”.²⁸ According to McGann, any poem has “two interlocking histories”: one concerns “the author’s expressed decisions and purposes” and the other concerns “the critical reactions of the poem’s various readers”.²⁹ Both histories are best revealed by a careful examination of the text in its physical, material manifestation.

As an example of his method McGann analyses the two texts of ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’, the version that Jack Stillinger in his new edition of Keats’s poems³⁰ has followed all earlier Keats editors in reproducing, and the text that Keats chose to print himself. As is evident from the chapter on ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’ in this thesis, McGann’s essay has been a strong influence on my own work, though I differ from his findings. I am much less interested than McGann in the question of which text should be recognised as the more authentic. For me, the two versions of the poem are important because of their difference, and for what that difference reveals of Keats’s anxious and uncertain authorial strategies. McGann’s insistence on the importance of a poem’s readership, an aspect of the essay that has been developed by Andrew Bennett, has also been a large influence on my own work.

²⁷ Jerome J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

²⁸ McGann, ‘Keats and the Historical Method’, p. 23.

²⁹ McGann, ‘Keats and the Historical Method’, p. 24.

³⁰ Harvard Press announces this as ‘Definitive’ text. See McGann, ‘Keats and the Historical Method’, p. 32.

In *Keats's Life of Allegory*, Marjorie Levinson insists that her own study derives not from McGann but from Ricks. She makes clear her difference from McGann in her own chapter on 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', when she argues "in his textual decisions, I locate certain social and psychic tropes: objectifications of conditions *not* logically articulated precisely because they defined Keats's sense of the actual, or constituted his cognitive field".³¹ Christopher Ricks is her preferred model because it was Ricks who first called attention to a 'psychic trope', a 'cognitive field' that could not be logically articulated. 'Blushing', for Ricks, is the physical manifestation of the coincidence within the mind of antithetical notions such as taste and distaste, sensuousness and seriousness, and, the private and the public. He points, through a quotation from Feldman, to the strategy of ambivalence, or 'duplicité', delicately concealed in the psychology of 'blushing'.

At that time women were expected to blush whenever an embarrassing situation arose. One could not in the presence of a lady say the words "breast" or "bathroom" or other words of that nature. Women had to blush in order to "prove" their "innocence" and they did so to advantage. Thus they gave evidence of their chastity and at the same time revealed their interest in sexual matters. Men liked blushing in women because it stimulated them sexually, challenged their sexual aggression, and made possible rejection less disturbing to them.³²

But for Levinson psychology is understood as itself socially produced, or, more particularly, psychology is represented by her as determined by class. Levinson's argument is an attempt to account for the poetics of a marginally middle-class, professionally unequipped nineteenth-century male adolescent.

³¹ Levinson, *Keats's Life of Allegory: The Origins of a Style*, p. 56. The italics are Levinson's.

For her the poetic merges with the erotic, and Keats's poetic style finds its erotic equivalent in 'masturbation'. She points out that *Blackwood's* attacks on the 'Cockney School' employed a sexual invective revealed in the use of such terms as "profligate", "puerile", "unclean", "disgusting", "recklessly luxuriant and wasteful", "unhealthy, abstracted and insane".³³ By the use of this vocabulary Keats's poetic style could be represented as "stylistically self-indulgent verse": "prolix, repetitive, and metrically and lexically licentious".³⁴ She focuses on the class implications behind this sexual lexicon.³⁵

Keats's poetry was characterized as a species of masturbatory exhibitionism, an offensiveness further associated with the self-fashioning gestures of the petty bourgeoisie. The erotic opprobrium pinpoints the self-consciousness of the verse: its autotelic reflection on its own fine phrases, phrases stylistically objectified as acquired, and therefore *misacquired* poetry. The sexual language of the reviews was, of course, an expedient way to isolate Keats, but it is also a telling index to the social and existential project outlined by Keats's style. In his overwrought inscriptions of canonical models, the early readers sensed the violence of Keats's raids upon that empowering system: a violence driven by the strongest desire for an authorial manner and means, and for the social legitimacy felt to go with it. In the alienated

³² Christopher Ricks, *Keats and Embarrassment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 88. Ricks is quoting from an essay by Sandor Feldman, 'Blushing, Fear of Blushing and Shame', *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, vol. X (1962), pp. 368-385 (p. 372).

³³ Levinson, *Keats's Life of Allegory*, p. 3.

³⁴ Levinson, *Keats's Life of Allegory*, p. 3.

³⁵ In this sense, Levinson could be alleged to be continuing *Blackwood's* attacks on the 'Cockney School', for 'Z', like Levinson, explains Cockneyism as a configuration produced by class and sexual deficiency. Arguing against Levinson, Cox re-defines the 'Cockney School' as a literary group that was not summoned into existence by *Blackwood's*, but had its own independent and prior identity, as a key site for cultural production. According to him, the 'Cockney School' was given this title by Lockhart because "the word cockney provided Lockhart not only with a place name for the new school - useful in contrasting it with the Lake School - but also with the suggestions of sexual libertinism and effeminacy that would be a major part of the assault upon Hunt, Keats and their colleagues". Cox defends the subversive aspects of the Cockney style against Lockhart: "The Cockney style is part of the assault, analyzed by Olivia Smith, upon a class-based notion of what constitutes 'proper' or 'pure' language over against the 'vulgarity' of the working and even merchant classes". Jeffrey N. Cox, *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School: Keats, Shelley, Hunt and Their Circle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 24, 28.

reflexiveness of Keats's poetry, the critics read the signature of a certain kind of life, itself the sign of a new social phenomenon.³⁶

'Masturbation', itself represented as a solitary substitute for more outgoing forms of sexual activity, is a key term for Levinson, because it denotes a form of self-indulgence that is distinguished from and yet a copy of the sexual behaviour that is socially legitimated. For her Keats's poetry is a commentary on 'a life of Allegory'. She reads the allegory in class terms, as that of "a man belonging to a certain class and aspiring to another".³⁷ Hence, when Byron depreciated Keats's style as "frigging his Imagination", or as the "onanism of poetry", he fuses his aesthetic contempt for Keats's work with a sexual and a class contempt. Gentlemen, he implies, are both too confident and too successful with women to need to resort to "frigging".³⁸ Middle class culture is represented as a perverse copy of, or substitute for, legitimate high culture.

Levinson, it might be said, simply adds the social self-consciousness of the middle class to the psychological origins of Keats's embarrassment focused on by Ricks. However, her focus on masturbation is in one sense more limiting than Ricks's focus on embarrassment. Whereas embarrassment always implies the presence of another person, masturbation may be a solitary indulgence. Ricks's approach inevitably concentrates his attention on the

³⁶ Levinson, *Keats's Life of Allegory*, p. 4.

³⁷ Levinson, *Keats's Life of Allegory*, p. 5.

³⁸ On Byron's sexual invectives on Keats's poetry, for example, "Jonny Keats's *p—ss a bed poetry*", "why his is the *Onanism of Poetry*", and "he is always *f—gg—g his Imagination*", see Byron's three letters to John Murray on October 12, November 4, and November 9, 1820 in Leslie, A. Marchand (ed.), *Byron's Letters and Journals*, 13 vols. (London: John Murray Ltd., 1973-94), vol. 7, pp. 200, 217, 225. According to Sonia Hotkosh, Byron considers "authorship in an economic and sexual register" so much that he feminises rival writers. See Sonia Hotkosh, 'The Writer's Ravishment: Women and the Romantic Author - The Example

relationship between the poems and their readers. Levinson's, in an unlikely way, risks reproducing the earlier critical attitude in which Keats's poems were thought of as autonomous, enjoying a perfect, uncontingent existence in an enclosed aesthetic sphere. In addition, her masturbatory model reduces the women of Keats's poems to a single function, as the creatures of a masturbatory fantasy, and she seems to underestimate their variety.

Susan Wolfson is the critic of Keats who has shown herself most attentive to the gender dynamics of the early nineteenth century.³⁹ Whereas Levinson associates Keats's masturbatory poetic style with a collective middle class consciousness of their marginality, Wolfson focuses on the gendering strategy of Keats's male reviewers, who felt the need to deny Keats's masculinity in order to prohibit his literary intrusion into the high culture that they saw it as their duty to safeguard. Wolfson, particularly in her 'Keats and the Manhood of the Poet', explores the Regency era's ideal of the 'manly character' because "Keats was culturally installed as a sensitive and vulnerable boy, a creature of too-feminine delicacy".⁴⁰ Wolfson's work is important to me for raising a number of questions that I wish to explore further in this thesis. First, she suggests that one explanation of the increased anxiety with which the

of Byron', in Anne K. Mellor (ed.), *Romanticism and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. 93-114 (p. 95).

³⁹ See Susan Wolfson, 'Feminizing Keats', in Hermione de Almeida (ed.), *Critical Essays on John Keats* (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1990), pp. 317-356; Wolfson, 'Keats's "Gordian Complication" of Women', in Walter H. Evert and Jack W. Rhodes (eds.), *Approaches to Teaching Keats's Poetry* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1991), pp. 77-85; Wolfson, 'Keats and the Manhood of the Poet', *European Romantic Review*, vol. 6 (1995), pp. 1-3; Wolfson, 'A Lesson in Romanticism: Gendering the Soul', in Thomas Pfau and Robert F. Gleckner (eds.), *Lessons of Romanticism* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1998), pp. 349-375.

⁴⁰ Susan Wolfson, 'Keats and the Manhood of the Poet', p. 2. For more on the historical and cultural background of the construction of 'masculinities' in Britain, see Michele Cohen, 'Manliness, effeminacy and the French: gender and the construction of national character in

masculinity of male authors is regarded may be the increasing impact of female readers on book sales, and the increasing importance of female writers. She argues that in the Regency period there was an increasing interest in attempting to define the 'manly character', which is itself an indication that "when concerns were growing over the softening of manly character, the vocation of poet was being read within a cultural nervousness about the gender of the poet".⁴¹

Male Romantic writers may contend with uneasy sensations of their souls being or becoming feminine, the gender difference often naming a decentered power of creation, and so courting important questions about male poetic authority.⁴²

In her essay 'Feminizing Keats', she goes on ask why Keats has provoked such persistent - one is tempted to say obsessive - description in terms such as masculine, effeminate, and feminine.⁴³ Her answer is to locate an ambivalence towards gender at the centre of Keats's work:

Keats's repeated figuring in nineteenth-century discussions as feminine or effeminate is not an arbitrary or willful misreading. It reflects and reinscribes, with varying degrees of ideological pressure, the ambivalence in his own writing about the difference between "masculine" and "feminine". In his effort to create a poetic identity and win acceptance as a poet, he profoundly internalizes and struggles with social and psychological attitudes about gender: at times, he is sensitive to tendencies in himself susceptible to interpretation as feminine; at other times, and with more irritation, he imagines the masculine self being feminised or rendered effeminate by women exercising power and authority; at still other times, he projects

eighteenth-century England', in Tim Hitchcock and Michele Cohen (eds.), *English Masculinities, 1660-1800* (London: Longman, 1999), pp. 44-62.

⁴¹ Wolfson, 'Keats and the Manhood of the Poet', p. 5.

⁴² Wolfson, 'A Lesson in Romanticism: Gendering the Soul', p. 352.

⁴³ Wolfson, 'Feminizing Keats', p. 318.

feminine figures as forces against manly self-possession and its social validator, professional maturity.⁴⁴

She argues persuasively that Keats by espousing negative capability and a poetics of no self might be said himself to be articulating a feminine poetics which may be set against “the strong boundaries and self-assertions taken to characterise masculine practices”,⁴⁵ but, as Wolfson also recognises, evidence for Keats’s antipathy towards women is everywhere apparent in his poetry and letters. In these essays Wolfson raises many of the issues that I will explore in this thesis.

Margaret Homans and Greg Kucich, both of whom write from a feminist viewpoint, share many of the same concerns with Wolfson. Homans focuses narrowly on the anxiety produced in male authors by the new dominance of the female readership of poetry.⁴⁶ Kucich focuses on Keats’s anxious and often contradictory responses to contemporary female authors, for example, Mary Tighe and Anne Radcliffe.⁴⁷ The work of both has been important to me. In the chapters that follow I hope to develop their work in part by calling attention to the importance in Keats’s poetic career of a particular group of women. I will concern myself not just with contemporary women poets and with a poetry reading public that was coming to be gendered as feminine, but with the importance for Keats’s work of the small group of women who were members of his private circle. It is through these women, readers of his poetry known to him personally, I shall argue, that Keats was able to develop his strategies for

⁴⁴ Wolfson, ‘Feminizing Keats’, p. 325.

⁴⁵ Wolfson, ‘Keats and the Manhood of the Poet’, p. 2. Those viewpoints are, according to Wolfson, characteristic of the feminism of the 1970s.

⁴⁶ Margaret Homans, ‘Keats Reading Women, Women Reading Keats’, *SIR*, vol. 29, no. 3 (Fall 1990), pp. 341-370.

addressing the reading public at large. Most important of all these women was, of course, Fanny Brawne.

⁴⁷ Greg Kucich, 'Gender Crossings: Keats and Tighe', *KSJ*, vol. 44 (1995), pp. 29-39.

II. Keats's Circle of Women and the Female Reading Public

Keats lived in a male world. For most of his adult life he shared lodgings with other men; with fellow students at Guy's, with his brothers, and with Charles Brown. It fits the pattern that he should die while sharing his lodgings at Rome with yet another man, Joseph Severn. His closest friends, those with whom he enjoyed an intellectual companionship, were again, almost all of them, men; Charles Cowden Clarke, Leigh Hunt, Benjamin Haydon, Benjamin Bailey, John Hamilton Reynolds, Richard Woodhouse, etc.¹ When he visited Reynolds, he met his sisters and his mother, and he had other married friends such as Leigh Hunt and Charles Dilke, but he relied for much of his social life on convivial parties with his bachelor friends. He enjoyed sitting late into the night with a single friend, talking of books and of poetry, whether his own or the poetry of others,² and he enjoyed raucous bachelor parties, at which there was a lot of drinking, much silliness – a favourite game in the Keats circle required a group of friends to make up an orchestra by each imitating a

¹ In this Keats was not atypical. The Regency period was, after all, the great age of the club, and clubs were exclusively masculine institutions. The so-called Cockney School was itself a kind of informal club, and most those associated with it were members of other clubs, too. Cockney School. For example, Reynolds, Rice and Bailey were members of the Zetosophian Society, a literary club composed of fourteen young men. Reynolds had been part of the Breidden Society, which held an annual festival with feasting, poetry singing and dancing. Horace Smith was part of an expatriate group at Versailles similar to the one Shelley attempted to create at Pisa. Byron belonged to the Whig Club and Hampden Club. Cox argues that they sought in a group both an immediate audience not unlike earlier manuscript circles, where one could share one's thoughts and ideas with a coterie, and a cultural, social, and political project not unlike that pursued by later explicitly avant-garde movements. See Jeffrey Cox, *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School: Keats, Shelley, Hunt and their Circle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 4.

different musical instrument – and a great deal of joking, not much of which would have been appropriate in mixed company. Keats's correspondence disguises the masculinity of his world because almost 40% of his surviving letters are written to women, but of these more than three-quarters are written either to his sister, Fanny Keats, or to Fanny Brawne. The correspondence with Fanny Brawne was the most intense that Keats ever entered into, but it was short-lived, beginning only in July 1819 and ending just over a year later. For the rest of his adult life his most important correspondents were men, with the single exception of Georgiana, his brother's wife, who shared the letters that he wrote to his brother George in America. Finally, Keats's literary heroes were almost exclusively male, whether they were contemporary figures such as Hunt, Wordsworth and Hazlitt or poets of the past such as Dante, Spenser, Shakespeare and Milton. The only woman writer he admits to having admired is Mary Tighe, and he admits it only by way of insisting that it is an enthusiasm that he has outgrown.³

Nevertheless, in Keats's poems, unlike his life, meetings between men and women are pervasive. There is scarcely a poem without its female figures, whether mortal or divine, and the poems characteristically drive towards a moment of ecstatic union in which the female figure is united with her male counterpart, who is himself often transparently presented as a type of the poet. It is also true that, although the circle within which Keats distributed his

² Keats's epistle poem, 'To Charles Cowden Clarke', would be an example of such correspondence.

³ In his letter of 31 December 1818 to the George Keatses, Keats writes: "but I have made up my mind never to take any thing for granted—but even to examine the truth of the commonest proverbs—This however is true—Mrs Tighe and Beattie once delighted me—now I see through them and can find nothing in them—or weakness—and yet how many they still

poems in manuscript was predominantly male, Keats was always and increasingly aware that amongst the reading public, the readership to which his poems were directed when they were translated from manuscript into print, women were an important, and perhaps even a dominant constituency. Andrew Bennett has argued that Keats was unusual in the intensity of the anxiety that the attempt to address the reading public provoked in him especially “when the poet was caught between the contradictory desire for a personal artistic integrity” and “for the appreciation and applause from a wider public”.⁴

I suggest that the nature of the poetry book market was a particularly acute problem, as well as a particularly powerful energising force for the poetry of Keats, poetry which at once seeks to express the personal, the private, the ‘inward feel’, while at the same time attempting to appeal, through this very privacy of experience, to a mass audience.⁵

Bennett argues that Keats resolves his problem by directing his poems not to the existing reading public but to the ideal audience that he thought of as ‘posterity’. I shall argue that Keats’s poems are at least as concerned to figure an ideal relationship with the reader in the here and now as they are to postpone such a possibility to the future, and that Keats’s anxieties about the reading public were always for him intimately connected with his anxieties about the relationship between men and women. I will argue that Keats’s anxieties were at their most intense when he conceived of that ‘mass audience’ as predominantly female. It is an anxiety that became most concrete for Keats

delight!”. See Hyder Edward Rollins (ed.), *The Letters of John Keats*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), vol. II, p. 18.

⁴ Andrew Bennett, *Keats, Narrative and Audience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 40. Bennett coins the term ‘anxiety of audience’, as he explains, in a deliberate echo of Bloom’s term, ‘the anxiety of influence’. See Bennett, ‘Introduction’, in *Keats, Narrative and Audience*, p. 23.

when his publisher, John Taylor, made it clear to him that he would not, both for moral and commercial reasons, publish Keats's poetry if he deemed it unacceptable to women readers. It was an anxiety, then, that was produced by a particular formation of the market for poetry.

It was produced, too, by the cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity from which Keats was no more free than any of his contemporaries. But those constructions were, as I will show, themselves unstable. Keats often, and emphatically, asserted the 'masculinity' of his address to a reading public that he very often thought of as feminine, but he was equally capable of internalising the 'femininity' of his imagined readership, as when he thinks of himself as 'weaving' his poems, figuring the production of poetry as a typically feminine activity. But Keats's anxious relationship with his women readers also, I suspect, has its origins in his own particular experience of women, and it is this biographical background that I will briefly explore in this chapter.

1. Keats's Women Circle and Regency Taste

Keats has often in recent years been accused by his feminist readers of misogyny.⁶ He seems, for example, to recognise his own antipathy towards women in a letter sent to Benjamin Bailey on 18 July 1818.

⁵ Bennett, *Keats, Narrative and Audience*, p. 40.

⁶ Wolfson regards this critical tendency to insist on Keats's misogyny as a reaction against the feminism of the 1970s. Feminist critics in that period had frequently identified Keats's literary stance with the 'marginality of women'. She comments that "Within a decade, however, this adoption was contested by another turn of reading that restored Keats to the patriarchy, not only marking his commitment to male heroes, 'brother Poets', and to fame in the patrilinear

I am certain I have not a right feeling towards Women—at this moment I am striving to be just to them but I cannot—Is it because they fall so far beneath my Boyish imagination? When I was a Schoolboy I thought[t] a fair Woman a pure Goddess, my mind was a soft nest in which some one of them slept though she knew it not—I have no right to expect more than their reality. I thought them ethereal above Men—I find them perhaps equal—great by comparison is very small—[. . .] 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 dis severing Power*”. This is a difficult thing; for an obstinate Prejudice can seldom be produced but from a gordian complication of feelings, which must take time to unravell<ed> and care to keep unravelled—I could say a good deal about this but I will leave it in hopes of better and more worthy dispositions—and also content that I am wronging no one, for after all I do think better of Womankind than to suppose they care whether Mister John Keats five feet high likes them or not. (*KL*, I, pp. 341-342, my italics)

The “gordian complication” seems unresolved by the self diagnosis that Keats attempts. As a schoolboy Keats thought of “a fair Woman” as a “pure Goddess”, as a being as removed from him as Cynthia is from Endymion, and yet, even imagining his boyhood, Keats describes how he internalised his image of woman, securing her, as he promises to secure Psyche in a region of his mind, and when she is internalised the goddess becomes diminished and tenderly vulnerable, like a fledgling. When in adulthood he comes to think of women as “perhaps equal” to men, they have shrunk from divinity to mere mortality, but have also grown from creatures that might be fondly petted in the mind like a small bird to beings that are, as most women were, at least as tall as “John Keats five feet high”. Since boyhood, Keats admits, he has been “full of his suspicions” and these have prevented him from finding true companionship with women. He breaks off in wry paradoxical self-mockery,

canon, but also pointing to the sexism, sometimes misogyny, informing his figures of women and the feminine”. See Susan Wolfson, ‘Keats and Gender Criticism’, in Robert M. Ryan and Ronald A. Sharp (eds.), *The Persistence of Poetry: Bicentennial Essays on Keats* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), p. 89.

claiming that he thinks better of women than to believe that they care whether he thinks well of them or not. But the paradoxes enter deeper into his remarks than he registers. When he describes his feelings for women as a “gordian knot”, he invokes the figure of Alexander the Great, who resolved his problem by a bold display of warrior masculinity, slicing through the knot with his sword, but he invokes Alexander only after he has quoted from *Comus* the lines in which the Attendant Spirit rebukes the Lady’s brothers for chasing Comus away before he has freed their sister from the spell that he has cast over her:

What, have you let the false enchanter scape?
 O ye mistook, ye should have snatched his wand
 And bound him fast; without his rod reversed,
 And backward mutters of dissevering power,
 We cannot free the lady that sits here
 In stony fetters fixed, and motionless . . .
 (*Comus*, 813-18)⁷

In his quotation from Milton Keats becomes himself a lady, and the Lady in *Comus* will be freed at last not by the masculine enchanter, but by Sabrina, who is the goddess of the river Severn, and who loves “maidenhood”. These unstable complications of gender are, as we shall see, entirely typical of Keats when he considers the relationship between the sexes.

The importance of the first woman in Keats’s life is signalled most powerfully by her absence from Keats’s correspondence.⁸ The only reference

in all of his correspondence to Mrs. Fanny Keats occurs in a letter to Fanny Brawne on 25th July 1819 in which Keats mentions that "My seal is mark'd like a family table cloth with my Mother's initial F for Fanny: put between my Father's initials" (*KL*, II, p. 133). Even in the poems direct references to mothers are oddly rare. The word is used in any of its forms only 11 times, whereas Wordsworth has 212 uses, Coleridge, 254, Byron 153 and Shelley 163. Of those 11 uses perhaps only two carry a strong emotional resonance. Once when he imagines his brother George's child:

To sweet rest

Shall the dear babe, upon its mother's breast

Be lull'd with songs of mine.

('To My Brother George', 101-3)

The second is the description of Isabella pining for love, so that her cheek "Fell thin as a young mother's, who doth seek / By every lull to cool her infant's pain" (*Isabella*, 35-6). Keats's biographers have discovered little of Keats's relationship with his mother, except for the bare but powerful fact that she abandoned her children when she re-married and returned to them only when she was dying. Keats nursed her in her last illness, and one significant account remembers him as reading to her as she lay in bed. If so, this was Keats's first and most intense experience of woman as literary consumer.

⁷ John Carey, and Alastair Fowler (eds.), *The Poems of John Milton*, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, 1980).

⁸ According to Gittings, Keats's mother, Fanny Jennings (Francis Keats), returned to her children after five years absence when Keats was thirteen years old and died of tuberculosis the next year, March 1810. During the period that he spent nursing her, "John pinned his hope on the proper administration of these drugs, and would allow no one to give them to her but himself. He cooked for her, he put his ruling passion for books at her disposal, sitting up all

Another tradition remembers Keats's mother as flighty, and perhaps sexually untrustworthy. Biographers who present her in this way seem dependent ultimately on the reminiscences of Richard Abbey, which may well be thought untrustworthy because prompted by malice. It certainly seems too emphatic to describe her as virtually 'nymphomaniac'.⁹ But Amy Lowell regards Abbey's allegation as at least half convincing. She supposed that "Keats's mother must have been a woman of strong passions and appetites, with no particular desire to curb either, but with something redeeming and attractive about her just the same".¹⁰ Such speculations may be too strident, but Keats, in his mature dealings with women, showed himself capable of pangs of jealousy that may have had their psychological root in the insecurity that his mother's behaviour produced in him. It may not be by a simple coincidence that Fanny Brawne shared his mother's name, and Keats's inability to trust her clearly caused him pain, as for instance when he rebuked her for her indiscreet 'flirtation' with Charles Brown in the letter of 5 July 1820.

night in an armchair and reading her novels at all times". See Robert Gittings, *John Keats* (London: Harmondsworth, 1968), p. 29.

⁹ Gittings's somewhat salacious account of Keats's mother seems based on Abbey's insinuations. He claims, for example, that "it was dangerous for a man to be alone with her" and that she was abnormally fond of displaying her extremely good legs—"she used to go shopping in Bishopsgate, opposite the church of St. Botolph Without where her eldest son was baptized. Crossing the muddy market thoroughfare, Abbey remarked, she used always to lift her skirts higher than she need have done". See Gittings, *John Keats*, pp. 14-15.

¹⁰ Amy Lowell, *John Keats* (Cambridge, Mass.: Riverside Press, 1924), p. 9. In the first biography of Keats Milnes seems deliberately to avoid any direct comment on his mother, confining himself to a single sentence in which he remarks that "The mother, a lively intelligent woman, was supposed to have prematurely hastened the birth of John by her passionate love of amusement, though his constitution gave no signs of the peculiar debility of a seventh months child". In line with his intention to emphasise Keats's 'manliness', Milnes repeatedly insists that "John resembled his father in feature stature and manners while the two brothers were more like their mother, who was tall, had a large oval face, and a somewhat saturnine demeanour". See Richard Monckton Milnes, *Life, Letters, and Literary Remains of John Keats*, 2 vols. (London: Edward Moxon, 1848), vol. 1, p. 4. For discussion of other early biographical accounts, see William Henry Marquess, *Lives of the Poet: the First Century of Keats Biography* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1985).

You may have altered—if you have not—if you still behave in dancing rooms and other societies as I have seen you—I do not want to live—if you have done so I wish this coming night may be my last. I cannot live without you, and not only you but *chaste you; virtuous you*. The Sun rises and sets, the day passes, and you follow the bent of your inclination to a certain extent—you have no conception of the quantity of miserable feeling that passes through me in a day.—Be serious! Love is not a plaything—(*KL*, II, p. 304, Keats's italics)

It may have been, of course, that Fanny Brawne was flirtatious, but it is equally likely that Keats's love fed on its own insecurities. If so, he was perhaps recreating in his relationship with Fanny his relationship with his mother. Certainly the kind of love he demands from her often seems maternal.

Jane Cox and Isabella Jones seem to have embodied for Keats a different kind of 'womanhood'. Jane Cox was the cousin of the Reynolds sisters, who themselves were important to Keats, if in a negative sense, because the sentimentality that he disliked in them became a type of the taste of women readers in general. Keats acknowledges his admiration for Jane Cox in a letter to his brother George and Georgiana on 14 October 1818.

She is not a Cleopatra; but she is at least a Charnian. She has a rich eastern look; she has fine eyes and fine manners. When she comes into a room she makes an impression the same as the Beauty of a Leopardess. She is too fine and too conscious of her Self to repulse any Man who may address her—from habit she thinks that nothing *particular*. I always find myself more at ease with such a woman; the picture before me always gives me a life and animation which I cannot possibly feel with any thing inferiour—I am at such times too much occupied in admiring to be awkward or on a tremble. I forget myself entirely because I live in her. [. . .] They [the Miss Reynoldses] think I dont admire her because I did not stare at her—They call her a flirt to me—What a want of knowledge? she walks across a room in such a manner that a Man is drawn towards her with a magnetic Power. This they call flirting! they do not know things. They do not know what a Woman is. I believe tho' she has faults—the same as Charnian and Cleopatra might have had—Yet she is a fine thing speaking in a worldly way: for there are two distinct tempers of mind in which we judge of things—the worldly, theatrical and pantomimical; and the

unearthly, spiritual and ethereal—in the former Buonaparte, Lord Byron and this Charmian hold the first place in our Minds; in the latter John Howard, Bishop Hooker rocking his child's cradle and you my dear Sister are the conquering feelings. As a Man in the world I love the rich talk of a Charmian; as an eternal Being I love the thought of you. I should like her to ruin me, and I should like you to save me. (*KL*, I, pp. 395-396)

She has an enthralling power like, but less than, Cleopatra's: hence she is a Charmian. This might seem to make her dangerous, threatening Keats with an emasculating enthrallment of the kind suffered by the knight in 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'. But Keats describes the experience of watching her as liberating: it frees him from his own embarrassed self-consciousness. She is "theatrical", by which Keats seems to suggest that he looks at her not as Antony might, but rather as a member of the theatre audience, free to admire her frank display of womanhood while remaining unthreatened by it. The reference to the leopardess suggests the less flattering possibility that the experience is not unlike that of watching a dangerous wild animal from a position of safety, as at a zoo when the animal is securely enclosed behind bars. But the letter seems very emphatically to present Jane Cox as an ideal type of womanhood until Keats turns to compare her not, as one might expect, to some woman other than Cleopatra but to Byron and Bonaparte, the two most melodramatically 'manly' figures in the cultural panorama of Keats's time. They are both, like Cleopatra, associated with the East, Byron by his Eastern tales and Napoleon by his conquest of Egypt, and they are both, like her, figures of power, but the real connection seems to be that all three have the power to transform the world into their audience: hence they are "worldly, theatrical and

pantomimical".¹¹ In contrast to them Keats offers another unlikely trinity to represent "the unearthly, spiritual and ethereal"; Howard, the philanthropist, Hooker, the divine, pictured "rocking his child's cradle", and Georgina herself. The three seem to represent something like those mentioned in *The Fall of Hyperion* who "seek no wonder but a human face; / No music but a happy-noted voice" (Canto I, 163-4). But the distinction between the two groups also seems to foreshadow the difference that Keats was to insist on between himself, as a 'figurative' poet, and Byron as the poet who merely 'cuts a figure' (*KL*, II, p. 67). It is a letter in which Keats seeks, as he does in many of his poems, to define an essential womanhood. Hence his rebuke to the Reynolds sisters: "They do not know what a Woman is". But the attempt is immediately attended by complications that, as we shall see, also characterise the poems. First, the attempt to essentialise womanhood is countered when Keats immediately proceeds to compare Jane Cox with men, Byron and Bonaparte. Second, through the explicit reference to Byron and the implicit reference to Shakespeare, Keats's exploration of his relationship with the

¹¹ According to Simon Bainbridge, several British writers of the Romantic period, especially such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey, Byron and Hazlitt, "saw Napoleon as occupying a place in the public imagination" (p. 1) and constructed and appropriated different Napoleons as a crucial part of their sustained and partisan engagement in the political and cultural debates of the day. As Bainbridge argues, "they both identified with him, appropriating him as a figure of power, and used him as an *Other* against which they could define themselves" (pp. 1-2). As "the supreme embodiment of the hero in an age in which the artist was increasingly seen as heroic" (p. 2), Napoleon was regarded by the Romantic poets from Byron to Keats as a figure of "genius, energy, imagination and daring, qualities which they saw as central to their own work" (p. 2). For example, Napoleon's successful career, despite his class and height, provided an important role model for Cockney poets. On the other hand, Byron also dramatised himself through analogy with Napoleon as the "grand Napoleon of the realms of rhyme" in his poem *Don Juan* (XI, 55). His lifelong identification with the figure of Napoleon was derived from his attempt to make himself publicly perform a role on a world stage as once Keats described the two of them as "worldly, theatrical and pantomimical" in his letter. See, for more details, Simon Bainbridge, *Napoleon and English Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 'Introduction', pp. 1-16 (pp. 1-3), and for his comparison between Byron and Napoleon, see Bainbridge, *Napoleon and English Romanticism*, ch. 4, "Staging history: Byron and Napoleon, 1813-1814", pp. 134-152 (pp. 134-136).

woman that he looks at is extended into thoughts of a poet's relationship with his audience, and finally the two contrasting types that the letter has sought to define are represented not as antithetical but as complementary, when he remarks to Georgiana, "I should like her to ruin me, and I should like you to save me".¹²

Keats mentions Mrs Isabella Jones just a few days later also in the letter to his brother of 24 October 1818. According to Gittings, she had so strong an influence on Keats that the first version of 'Bright Star' was addressed not to Fanny Brawne but to her.¹³ Keats seems to have seen Isabella Jones on the afternoon of Saturday, October 24 and wrote that night to his brother. Isabella was thought by many members of the Keats circle, such as, Taylor, Reynolds and George Keats, to have as her 'protector' an elderly Irishman, Donat O'Callaghan. Keats seems to have behaved to her in a manner that was directed by his knowledge that she was a kept mistress.

She has always been an enigma to me—she has <new> been in a Room with you and with Reynolds and wishes we should be acquainted without any of our common acquaintance knowing it. As we went along, some times through shabby, sometimes through decent Street[s] I had my guessing at work, not knowing what it would be and prepared to meet any surprise—First it ended at this Hou{s}e at Islington: on

¹² Gittings explains this episode as an example of Keats's immaturity in his attitude towards women: "From somewhere in his early days, he still retained the double standard of judging women, itself as conventional in its way as the Reynolds girls' petty objections. He tried to sum up in his mind the contrast between Jane Cox and his own 'disinterested' sister-in-law; he still assumed that because Miss Cox was socially assured and sexually attractive, she could only be judged in what he called a worldly way". See Gittings, *John Keats*, p. 237. In contrast to Gittings, Amy Lowell credits Keats with an unconvincingly idealised sexual response: "In spite of her rich talk and leopardess-like bearing, Miss Cox had not the qualities essential to the making of a deep impression upon Keats. The dual love which he unconsciously craved, that longing for a lover who should also be a mother, that necessity for believing in the spirit even while adoring the flesh, all this girt Keats as with a magically tempered armour. Miss Cox had no weapon to pierce such metal as this, and of her we hear no more". See Lowell, *John Keats*, p. 95-96.

¹³ Gittings, *John Keats*, p. 264.

parting from which I pressed to attend her home. She consented and then again my thoughts were at work what it might lead to, tho' now they had received a sort of genteel hint from the Boarding School. Our Walk ended in 34 Gloucester Street Queen Square—not exactly so for we went up stairs into her sitting room—a very *taty* sort of place with Books, Pictures a bronze statue of Buonaparte, Music, aeolian Harp; a Parrot a Linnet—A Case of choice Liquers &c &c &c. she behaved in the kindest manner—made me take home a Grouse for Tom's dinner—Asked my address for the purpose of sending more game—As I had warmed with her before and kissed her—I though[t] it would be living backwards not to do so again—she had a better *taste*: she perceived how much a thing of course it was and shrunk from it—not in a prudish way but in as I say a good *taste*—She cont[r]ived to disappoint me in a way which made me feel more pleasure than a simple kiss could do—she said I should please her much more if I would only press her hand and go away. Whether she was in a different disposition when I saw her before—or whether I have in fancy wrong'd her I cannot tell—I expect to pass some pleasant hours with her now and then: in which I feel I shall be of service to her in matters of knowledge and *taste*: if I can I will—I have no libidinous thought about her. (*KL*, I, pp. 402-403, my italics)

The 'enigma' at first seems to be simple enough. Keats is unsure whether he is being propositioned by the woman. If she is inviting him to embark on a sexual relationship, then, it seems, he would despise himself if he did not take advantage of the opportunity, in much the same way that, as he claimed, he would despise Porphyro were he to pass up the opportunity of consummating his relationship with Madeline. But, as the passage proceeds, the enigma deepens, and it is transferred from Isabella Jones to Keats himself. Isabella's ambiguous social status as a kept woman, a mistress, and yet apparently respectable seems to perturb Keats, leaving him unsure how to behave. On the way home Isabella calls at the house of a friend who keeps a boarding school, a visit that Keats describes as "a genteel hint", a subtle indication, apparently, that he is expected to treat her as a respectable woman, but when she agrees that he should escort her home, and invites him into her sitting room, once again his "thoughts were at work what it might lead to". The room itself, "a

very tasty sort of place", again seems to communicate contradictory suggestions. He notices some items, "A Case of choice Liquers", for example, that seem to identify this as the room of a kept woman. It becomes a Regency version of the room in Holman Hunt's 'The Awakening Conscience', and some of the items, particularly the caged birds, "a Parrot, a Linnet", seem to carry the same significance in the letter as the picture.¹⁴ But there are also contrary indications in the "Books, Pictures", and in the presence of an object so heavily weighted with literary associations as the "aeolian Harp". Over it all presides the "bronze statue of Napoleon", a type of worldliness in Keats's account of Jane Cox, and an effigy of masculinity that might recall for Keats the absent male figure who is presumably responsible for providing all these luxurious trappings. But, one remembers here, it was a woman, Jane Cox herself, who reminded Keats of Byron and Napoleon.

Keats attempts to kiss her, because he had "warmed with her before and kissed her": "I though[t] it would be living backwards not to do so again". He seems to feel that he owes it to himself, to his own masculinity, to make a pass at her, but the passage ends with a tribute to the dignity and delicacy with which she rebuffs him. Keats's response is complex. There is a certain relief, perhaps, in her saving him from a situation in which his inexperience and

¹⁴ By the opening of the Regency in 1811, interior design was subject to two new influences. One was Greek architecture and the other was the impact of the cult of the Picturesque. As Clifford Musgrave notes, the Regency age is "the time of a more sumptuous, florid and amply proportioned richness in classical decoration, especially of palatial interiors" and also "an age of growing Picturesque transformation of houses, of the full tide of the Grecian Revival, and the rich flood of Regency medieval romanticism". The predominant trend in smaller houses was towards greater simplicity: "decoration would be confined to a single circular garland of husks upon the ceiling with a small central ornament of leaves, a narrow frieze of delicate swags around the walls, and a similar frieze, or reticent decoration of an urn, vase or medallion gracing the chimney-piece, which might be of painted wood, composition or marble". On the typical interior design of the Regency age, see Ralph Edwards and L. G. G.

awkwardness might have been exposed, and also a shamed sense that there was a vulgarity in his assumption that he ought to make a sexual advance to her as “a thing of course”. But most of all there is an admiration for Isabella Jones’s delicacy, which Keats responds to erotically – it gave him “more pleasure than a simple kiss” – and yet also as a delicacy that frees him from the burden of his own sexuality: “I have no libidinous thought about her”. It prompts Keats swiftly, and rather unconvincingly, to re-imagine his relationship with her as one in which her dependence on him will not be coarsely sexual but refined and intellectual: “I feel I shall be of service to her in matters of knowledge and taste”.

As I shall show, Keats became increasingly preoccupied with the pressure to accommodate his poems to the taste of a predominantly female readership, and what strikes most in this passage is the recurrence to the issue of ‘taste’. The furbishment of the sitting room is “tasty”, Isabella rejects his advance “in a good taste”, and he plans to be of service to her in matters of “taste”. It is as if Keats explores the enigma of his social and sexual relationship with Isabella Jones until it reveals to him the enigma that most deeply concerns him, the enigma of the aesthetic relationship between a male poet and his woman reader. Gittings suspects that it was Isabella Jones that Keats had in mind when he wrote, “I have met <wh> with women whom I really think would like to be married to a Poem and to be given away by a Novel” (*KL*, II, p. 127). Her literary preference, it seems, was for the Gothic and sentimental, and it is certainly suggestive that, as Keats told Woodhouse, it was she who first

gave him the hint for the story of *The Eve of St Agnes*.¹⁵ More generally, the letter about Isabella Jones is significant because it reveals how closely connected for Keats were the notions of sexual partnership and literary partnership.

Keats's love letters to Fanny Brawne were first published by Henry Buxton Forman in 1878. As Marquess remarks, their publication prompted "such prominent figures as Matthew Arnold and Algernon Charles Swinburne to hesitate and reconsider their high estimates of Keats's character".¹⁶ His early biographers, not only Milnes but even Sidney Colvin, seem to have been so embarrassed by these letters that they passed over them in silence. It was not until Amy Lowell's biography that one finds a more sympathetic account both of Fanny Brawne herself and of Keats's relationship with her. Even twentieth-century critics have shown themselves disapproving of what they have considered the "unmanly and adolescent affectation" revealed in these letters.¹⁷ Fanny Brawne herself has very often been represented as unworthy of the poet's love. The jealousy that Keats reveals when he accuses her of

¹⁵ Because Isabella Jones is known to have referred Keats to the gothic source of *The Eve of St. Agnes*, Gittings remarks that "Isabella's tastes tended to the fashionable quarter of the Gothic novel and the romantic legend, and she had an eye for the popular superstitions". But Gittings greatly over-simplifies the connection between Keats's romances and Isabella Jones when he goes on to remark that "it can hardly be doubted that their subject was the real Isabella, whose companionship they secretly had in work she brought to the forefront of his mind". See Gittings, *John Keats*, pp. 273-274. In contrast to Gittings's magnification of Keats's relationship with her, Amy Lowell thinks her influence was so trivial that she is even prepared to doubt that she was a real person at all: "When we remember Keats's habit of concealing real names from the prying curiosity of the indefatigable Woodhouse by substituting imaginary ones in their stead, the puzzle becomes a puzzle no longer, I think. We know nothing of Mrs. Jones, because there is nothing to know; there was no such person". Lowell goes on to speculate that, if there was a woman, it might be either Mrs. Brawne, or old Mrs. Dilke, or even Fanny Brawne herself who supplied him with information about the legend. See Lowell, *John Keats*, p. 154.

¹⁶ William Henry Marquess, *Lives of the Poet: The First Century of Keats Biography* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1985), p. 16.

flirting with Charles Brown and of retaining a liking for parties and dances has led some biographers to make scarcely concealed insinuations about her moral character.¹⁷ I want to change the emphasis of the discussion of the relationship between Keats and Fanny by focusing on their literary partnership. For Keats, friendship was always closely associated with the activity of reading. With Cowden Clarke, Leigh Hunt, Benjamin Bailey and Richard Woodhouse, friendship expressed itself in the habit of shared reading. All these were men, of course, but when Keats entered for the first and only time into a deep relationship with a woman outside his own family, he brought this habit with him. He and Fanny read together.

Fanny Brawne is first mentioned in his letter of 16 December 1818 to his brother George written after Tom's death. Although the date of their first meeting is variously placed by biographers on any of several dates between August and December 1818, it rapidly became the dominant relationship in Keats's life, and, it began to change the pattern of his life. In 1819 and in the first half of 1820, until he sailed for Italy in September, for example, more of Keats's letters to Fanny Brawne and to his sister, Fanny, survive than letters to any male correspondent. Before the meeting with Fanny Brawne Keats's relationships with men were at the centre of his life, after that meeting it was

¹⁷ Susan Wolfson, 'Keats and Gender Criticism', in Robert M. Ryan and Ronald A. Sharp (eds.), *The Persistence of Poetry: Bicentennial Essays on Keats* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), p. 88.

¹⁸ Keats's bawdry in his letters to Fanny Brawne and his confessions of jealousy were both inconsistent with the Victorian ideal of 'gentlemanliness'. 'Politeness' became in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries "a complete system of manners and conduct based on the arts of conversation" at the centre of which were the polite arts which supplied the essence of "men's self-fashioning as gentlemen" in Britain. For the history of the concept of the 'gentleman', see Michele Cohen, 'Manliness, Effeminacy, and the French: Gender and the Construction of National Character in Eighteenth Century England', in Tim Hitchcock and Michele Cohen (eds.), *English Masculinities 1600-1800* (London: Longman, 1999), p. 46.

his relationships with women that became central, and in particular his relationship with Fanny Brawne:

My dear love, I cannot believe there ever was or ever could be any thing to admire in me especially as far as sight goes—I cannot be admired, I am not a thing to be admired. You are, I love you; all I can bring you is a swooning admiration of your Beauty. I hold that place among Men which snubnos'd brunettes with meeting eyebrows do among women—they are trash to me—unless I should find one among them with a fire in her heart like the one that burns in mine. You absorb me in spite of myself—you alone. (*KL*, II, p.133)

The tribute to Fanny's beauty seems conventional enough, except that it feminises Keats, reduces him to "swooning" impotence, much in the way that *la belle dame* emasculates the knight-at-arms. But once again gender distinctions begin to shift dizzyingly, as Keats introduces in contrast to Fanny a picture of unattractive women, "snubnos'd brunettes with meeting eyebrows", and dismisses them as "trash" in a callow display of masculine callousness, but only in the course of a comparison in which he compares himself with them. He is the male equivalent of the snub-nosed brunettes with the meeting eyebrows, and is only redeemed, as they can only be redeemed, by the hidden fire within him. He approaches Fanny here as the enchanted male connoisseur of female beauty, but also as the plain woman pleading with a man to respond not to her looks but to her passion.

Keats is asking here that Fanny finds a way of reading his heart rather than reading only his outward appearance. In several of his letters to her he is preoccupied with the activity of reading.

I have been turning over two volumes of Letters written between Rousseau and two Ladies in the perplexed strain of mingled finesse

and sentiment in which the Ladies and gentlemen of those days were so clever, and which is still prevalent among Ladies of this Country who live in a state of reasoning romance. The Likeness however only extends to the mannerism not to the dexterity. What would Rousseau have said at seeing our little correspondence! What would his Ladies have said! I don't care much—I would sooner have Shakespeare's opinion about the matter. The common gossiping of washerwomen must be less disgusting than the continual and eternal fence and attack of Rousseau and these sublime Petticoats. One calls herself Clara and her friend Julia two of Rousseau's Heroines—they all the same time christen poor Jean Jacques St Preux—who is the pure cavalier of his famous novel. Thank God I am born in England with our own great Men before my eyes--Thank god that you are fair and can love me without being Letter-written and sentimentaliz'd into it. Mr Barry Cornwall has sent me another Book, his first, with a polite note—I must do what I can to make him sensible of the esteem I have for his kindness. (*KL*, II, pp. 266-267)

Keats was given to conventional disparagement of 'bluestockings',¹⁹ often accusing them of a repellent cultivation of sentiment, but here the charge is more precisely articulated. In the correspondence he detects a capacity for feeling that has wholly dissolved into the cultivation of a prose style. It is a correspondence in which the requirement to represent oneself as elegant and literary has wholly superseded the requirement to express one's feelings, and it is in contrast to this that Keats defines his own correspondence with Fanny, that he compares daringly both to the 'common gossiping of washerwomen' and to Shakespeare. Victorian readers of the correspondence, such as Arnold,

¹⁹ The bluestockings, an informal literary circle of men and mainly women interested in literature and other intellectual matters, flourished in England in the last half of the eighteenth century. It included figures such as Elizabeth Carter, Elizabeth Montagu, Catherine Talbot, Hester Chapone, the Duchess of Portland, Mary Delany, Elizabeth Vesey, Hester Thrale, Fanny Burney and Hannah More. It has been argued that "in a tentative way they were approaching professional authorship—a pursuit which includes a concern with making a living by writing, if possible, and a long-term commitment to productive work—but they could not and did not reach that stage, because of their own internal constraints and the lack of support of their society". For more details, see Sylvia Harestark Myers, *The Bluestocking Circle: Women, Friendship, and the Life of the Mind in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp.1-20, 243-244. From the late eighteenth century 'bluestocking' became a common and usually disparaging term for any woman engaged in intellectual pursuits.

were shocked by what they thought its vulgarity, but here we see that Keats anticipated their objection, and defiantly embraced it. What is more, the references to Shakespeare and to the 'great Men' of England make clear that he thought of these letters as continuous with his poetry. In both he sets himself against the cultivation of false sentiment, which, he implies, is what contemporary women readers demanded of poets, and from which he carefully excepts Fanny Brawne. It is significant that he immediately goes on to tell Fanny that Barry Cornwall has just sent him his new volume. The implication is that Barry Cornwall's success is built on his willingness to cater to the corrupt female taste that Keats repudiates.

Keats was determined to do for Fanny what he had imagined doing for Isabella Jones, to be of service to her in matters of taste, as for example in his letter to her of 4 July 1820: "For this Week past I have been employed in marking the most beautiful passages in Spenser, intending it for you, and comforting myself in being somehow occupied to give you however small a pleasure" (*KL*, II, p. 302). It was Keats's habit to mark the intimacy of his closest relationships in such ways. In a letter to George and Georgiana, he had suggested "coincident reading": for example, "I tell you that I shall read a passage of Shakespeare every Sunday at ten oClock—you read one {a}t the same time and we shall be as near each other as blind bodics can be in the same room" (*KL*, II, p. 5). He requires from Fanny Brawne the same "direct communication of spirit" within their enclosed sphere. In fact, while he recuperated at home in Hampstead after his first haemorrhages, "they initiated

a private system by which she sent him a note every evening, sometimes just the words, 'Good night' to put under his pillow".²⁰

The letters of Fanny Brawne to Fanny Keats after Keats's death dispel the notion canvassed by several of Keats's biographers that she never fully returned his love.²¹ In fact she resented Keats being, as she imagined, sent away from her to die, and she thought of herself as keeping alive the memory of the poet when his other, so-called friends had forgotten him, as in her letter of 23 May 1821.

All his friends have forgotten him, they have got over the first shock, and that with them is all. They think I have done the same, which I do not wonder at, for I [have] taken care never to trouble them with any feelings of mine, but I can tell you who next to me (I must say *next* to me) loved him best, that I have not got over it and never shall. (*FL*, p. 25)

The most telling tribute here, perhaps, is in her refusal to indulge in the kind of sentimental display that she imagines Keats's friends expect of her. She had taken to heart the lesson that Keats taught her in his description of Rousseau's correspondence. In attempting to guide Fanny's taste Keats was, it seems clear, trying, even if unconsciously, an experiment: he was attempting in the person of Fanny to re-mould the taste of the reading public of women that, he believed, was responsible for the failure of his own poems. In refusing to make a parade of her own feelings Fanny showed, as it were, that, under his tutelage, she had learned to distrust the work of sentimental poets such as

²⁰ Gittings, *John Keats*, p. 383.

²¹ Fred Edgcumbe (ed.), *Letters of Fanny Brawne to Fanny Keats* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937). Hereafter abbreviated to *FL*, and references included in the text.

Barry Cornwall. But for Keats, throughout most of his writing career, the crucial figure was Byron.

2. Keats Reading Women and Women Reading Keats

Keats's opinion of Byron is explained by Richard Woodhouse in a letter sent to Taylor, Keats's publisher. It is the special mark of the true poet that as a poet he has "no identity", and hence is "the most unpoetical of God's creatures". Byron, paradoxically, is not a true poet by virtue of his being himself 'poetical':

Ld Byron does not come up to this Character. He can certainly conceive & describe a dark accomplished villain in love—& a female tender & kind who loves him. Or a sated & palled Sensualist Misanthrope & Deist—But here his power ends.—The true poet can not only conceive this—but can assume any Character Essence idea or Substance at pleasure. & He has this imaginative faculty not in a limited manner, but in full universality. (*KL*, I, p. 390)

Hence Byron remains merely a 'literary womaniser', his success ensured by the skill with which he presents himself to his women readers as himself the object of their sentimental interest. Taylor himself offered a more practical, publisher's reason for Byron's extraordinary success: "Lord Byron is a splendid and noble egotist...he is liked by most of his readers, because he is a Lord".²² It is a notion that Keats entertained himself, as when he wrote to George and Georgiana that "You see what it is to be under six foot and not a lord" (*KL*, II, p. 61). Paul Magnuson has commented on the importance of the

'public signature' in the Romantic period, pointing out that such signatures functioned not only as a mark of the author's ownership of the text to which he gave his name, but also as a sign of the author's public position, legal standing and legitimacy. He recognises the authorial signature as not so much a name as a public title. For example, Coleridge described himself on the title page of *The Fall of Robespierre* as "Of Jesus College, Cambridge", a suffix that specified not so much a geographical location as a claim to intellectual authority. Byron himself introduced *Hours of Idleness* with the signature "Lord Byron Minor", and throughout his career John Murray marketed him not just as a poet but a lord.²³ Thus Byron's signature became a crucial element in the successful commodification of his poetry. Keats had no such commercially powerful signature to deploy. It is significant, perhaps, that against Byron he championed a poet such as Thomas Chatterton, a poet who suffered from much the same social disabilities as Keats, and made his attempt at winning fame under a frankly forged signature, that of the invented medieval poet, 'Thomas Rowley'.

Sometimes, Keats despaired of ever making his way in the world of letters, as when he threatens to go to Edinburgh to resume his medical studies because "it is not worse than writing poems, & hanging them up to be flyblown on the Reviewshambles" (*KL II*, p. 70). But for the most part he self-consciously attempted to educate the taste of his readers, and that meant educating them out of a taste for Byron. Once again, Fanny Brawne emerges as, for Keats, the representative reader. Between November 17th and December

²² Gittings, *John Keats*, p. 252.

12th, 1821, she writes to Fanny Keats, "I having been credibly informed that Lord B. is not *really* a great poet, have taken a sort of dislike to him when serious and only adore him for his wit and humour" (*FL*, p. 39), and on an undated day of 1823, "I can remember being half wild about them [Byron's serious poems which had been given to her by a schoolfellow] learning and repeating continually when alone but as my dear Keats did not admire Lord Byrons poetry as many people do, it soon lost its value with me" (*FL*, p. 63). One should note here not only Fanny's compliance with Keats's teaching, but her resistance to it. She continues to admire Byron for "his wit and humour", remaining immune from Keats's view of *Don Juan* as "Byron's last flash poem" (*KL*, II, p. 192), and in this she may have influenced Keats as much as he influenced her, at any rate to judge by Keats's final poem, the comic and Byronic fragment *The Cap and the Bells*. If Fanny came to embody for Keats the female readership of his poems, then it is important to note that, through her, he developed a two-way relationship with that readership, not only teaching, but prepared, however reluctantly, to be taught.

Keats's hostility towards literary women seems to have focused on two groups; the 'Bluestockings' or women as writers, and the 'sentimental' who seemed to him to comprise the majority of women readers. In fact, the two groups overlapped, because it seemed to him that the primary function of the Bluestockings was to provide for women readers the sentimental romances that they craved.

²³ Paul Magnuson, *Reading Public Romanticism* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), ch. 2, pp. 42-43. Magnuson insists that the signature and title should be of more concern to critics as a "connection that links the text to its context".

The world, and especially our England, has within the last thirty year's been vexed and teased by a set of Devils, whom I detest so much that I al<ways> hunger after an acherontic promotion to a Torturer, purposely for their accommodation; These Devils are a set of Women, who having taken a snack or Luncheon of Literary scraps, set themselves up for towers of Babel in Languages Sapphos in Poetry—Euclids in Geometry—and everything in nothing. Among such the Name of Montague has been preeminent. The thing has made a very uncomfortable impression on me.—I had longed for some real feminine Modesty in these things— (*KL*, I, p. 163)

When Keats accuses the Bluestockings, “these Devils”, of lacking “some real feminine Modesty” in his letter to Reynolds, with particular reference to Elizabeth Robinson Montagu, a famous bluestocking, he shows how deeply he is himself implicated in the gender stereotypes of his period. As an example of the Bluestocking I choose at this point two sisters, Jane and Anna Maria Porter, both of whom were writers of turgid historical romances.

Keats never met the Porter sisters in person. According to Woodhouse's letter to John Keats of 10 December 1818, Jane and Maria Porter had expressed a wish to be introduced to the ‘author of *Endymion*’ after they had borrowed Woodhouse's copy of the poem. In their note, they expressed the pleasure that reading *Endymion* had given them, and hoped that “the ill natured Review will not have damaged (or damped) such true Parnassian fire” (*KL*, II, p. 10). Keats seems to have at least entertained the thought of accepting the invitation, but decided against it: “I must work – I must read – I must write – I am unable to afford time for new acquaintances” (*KL*, I, p. 412). His refusal may have been prompted by a social embarrassment. Woodhouse rather ingenuously speaks of “the opportunity of naming to you (Keats) [...] the opening there is for an introduction to a Class of society, from which you may possibly derive advantage, as well as gratification, if you think proper to avail

yourself of it" (*KL*, I, p. 410). The Porter sisters, whose brother was a diplomat, moved in higher circles than Keats had access to, and, as Woodhouse well knew, their beauty and the success of their novels, particularly Jane's *Thaddeus of Warsaw*, had made them figures of some power in the London literary world whose good opinion could only have been helpful to Keats. Keats responded, as the letter in which he describes the incident to George and Georgiana shows, petulantly: "Now I feel more obliged than flattered by this – so obliged that I will not at present give you an extravaganza of a Lady Romancer" (*KL*, II, p. 10). In his immediate response to Woodhouse he is even more rudely dismissive: "I must needs feel flattered by making an impression on a set of Ladies – I should be content to do so in meretricious romance verse if they alone and not Men were to judge" (*KL*, I, p. 412). Woodhouse, kindly as ever, noted only that the "modesty with which he speaks of his work is singular", but by the end of 1818 Keats habitually spoke slightly of *Endymion*. The letter is more remarkable for the scarcely concealed contempt with which Keats responds to a gracious invitation. The sisters are first demeaned as "a set of Ladies", and then their admiration of a poem is adduced as a proof of its meretriciousness. Keats would be prepared to furnish for them the kind of verse that they would enjoy "if they alone and not Men were to judge". Keats here seems to make a simple and rather crude equation between poems that appeal to women and "meretricious romance verse". The mark of the true poet is that he writes for men: poets who write for women are literary prostitutes. As Keats himself recognises, this had not always been his view:

Mrs. Tighe and Beattie once delighted me—now I see through them and can find nothing in them—or weakness—and yet how many they still delight! Perhaps a superior being may look upon Shakespeare in the same light—is it possible? No—This same inadequacy is discovered (forgive me little George you know I don't mean to put you in the mess) in Women with few exceptions—the Dress Maker, the blue Stocking and the most charming sentimentalist differ but in a Slight degree, and are equally smokeable. (*KL*, II, pp. 18-19)

Here the equation between dressmakers, women writers and sentimentalists is frankly insulting.²⁴ It was, as Keats later confessed to Taylor, at least in part a conscious policy to adopt such attitudes, because he was persuaded that “this Pride and egotism will enable [him] to write finer things than any thing else could” (*KL*, II, p. 144). But even here his characterisation of Mary Tighe and her school is as much a description of an aspect of himself as of her, a point that becomes clear as soon as one recalls his anxiety that his own *Isabella* might be too ‘smokeable’.

A poem is smokeable for Keats if it makes too direct an appeal to the taste of this “mawkish population”. It was a population that was most fully represented for him in the persons of the two sisters of John Hamilton Reynolds, who at the last he was “affraid to speak to for fear of some sickly reiteration of Phrase or Sentiment” (*KL*, II, p. 244). He was especially struck by Marianne Reynolds’s susceptibility to the charm of his friend, Benjamin Bailey. Bailey, who had an illegitimate child by a servant girl who had become his mistress, was for Keats a cynical womaniser. The sentimental Marianne,

²⁴ Mary Tighe and James Beattie were the two of “the most noteworthy recent avatars of the Spenserian stanza in Keats’s era” (p. 398), excluding Byron. According to Chandler, “smokeability here implies a conception of intelligibility or understanding that is itself understood, in its circumstance, as a vulnerability to being grasped- captured -by a higher-order intelligence” (p. 400). For more details on this term, see James Chandler, *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism* (Chicago &

far from being repelled by such a man, as one would expect, seemed evidently attracted to him. It offered Keats the clue as to how it was that a poem such as *Don Juan*, a poem that seemed arrogantly to flout the sentimental expectations of its women readers, might still contrive to win popularity amongst them. But this, too, as I will argue, is a response that has its impact on Keats's own writing practice, helping, for example, to explain the motivation behind his revisions to *The Eve of St Agnes*.

My point is that it is impossible to disentangle Keats's understanding of his own poetic processes from his anxious and unstable responses to gender. Take, for example, Keats's use of the image of the 'Spider' to represent the poet's work.

Many have original Minds who do not think it—they are led away by Custom—Now it appears to me that almost any Man may like the Spider spin from his own inwards his own airy Citadel—the points of leaves and twigs on which the Spider begins her work are few and she fills the Air with a beautiful circuiting; man should be content with as few points to tip with the fine Webb of his Soul and weave a tapestry empyrean—full of Symbols for his spiritual eye, of softness for his spiritual touch, of space for his wandering of distinctness for his Luxury. [. . .] Man should not dispute or assert but whisper results to his neighbour, and thus by every germ of Spirit sucking the Sap from mould ethereal every human might become great, and Humanity instead of being a wide heath of Furze and Briars with here and there a remote Oak or Pine, would become a grand democracy of Forest Trees. (*KL*, I. pp. 231-232)

At first, he explains 'writing poetry' by internalising the traditionally feminine concept of 'weaving'. Then, as Susan Wolfson indicates, there follows a "swift counterchange of gender": "a 'Man' thinking the way a she-Spider spins; the Citadel, the defense-building of men, transforming into a tapestry-making, the

labor of women; then the resorption of this female art as the metaphor for Man's soul".²⁵ But the passage reveals not only gender crossings but also age-crossings, and even tree-crossings. In other words, when Keats tries to elucidate the task of the poet in this world, he emphasises the need to resolve disparities such as feminine and masculine, age and youth, or oak and pine. Like a female spider, the male poet should weave an ambiguously gendered tapestry by making a "solution sweet" of the feminine work and the masculine soul. But this is to express the problem too idealistically, for Keats recognises that all his poetic efforts are subject to the commercial pressures inescapable within the literary market place, as he reveals when he takes up again the image of the spider

I mean I should *do* something for my immediate welfare—Even if I am swept away like a Spider from a drawing room I am determined to spin—home spun any thing for sale. Yea I will traffic. Any thing but Mortgage my Brain to Blackwood. (*KL*, II, p. 178-179)

In the thesis that follows I shall trace Keats's anxious relationship to gender, and try to show how that relationship is always implicated for him in the relationship that his poems figure with their readers, but I shall bear in mind throughout that for Keats the implied reader was not an idealised figure, but the would-be purchaser of a volume of his poetry. This thesis will attempt to show that Keats's poems respond to his anxieties about gender, about his

of *Psyche*", pp. 398-402.

²⁵ Susan Wolfson, 'Keats and Gender Criticism', in Robert M. Ryan and Ronald A. Sharp (eds.), *The Persistence of Poetry: Bicentennial Essays on Keats* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), p. 98. Her analysis of Keats's "circularity of speculation" as revealed in the "double-sexed spider figure" is remarkable.

audience, and about his economic situation, and that these responses are not separate but implicated one with another.

Part II. The Narrative Poems

I. *Endymion*: Gendering the Romance and Pacing “towards the temple of fame”

Endymion, a poem of more than 4,000 lines, is, in terms of its length, the most ambitious poem that Keats was ever to write. In the poem Keats offers his own rendering of the love story of Endymion and the goddess of the moon.¹ Keats’s version of the story is distinctive in that it focuses less on the plight of the goddess, condemned to love a mortal, than on Endymion’s quest to secure his ideal love object. Endymion’s ambitious desire to win the love of an immortal is clearly offered as a counterpart to the ambition that Keats displays in the composition of the poem. His letters indicate that he thought of it as his first major attempt. When *Endymion: a Poetic Romance* was launched on the public Keats was making an attempt to prove himself a poet:

As to what you say about my being a Poet, “I can retu[r]n no
answer but by saying that the high Idea I have of poetical fame

¹ Different versions of the myth often contradict each other, assigning, for example, Endymion to different places and differing over his parentage. One of the versions of the story, Hesiod’s, assigns to the Elcan Endymion a rich family history that is absent from other versions of the story that focus on the sleeper of Latmus. Pausanias’s version tells us that Endymion’s father, Aethlius, was the first ruler of Elis and that Endymion held the first games at Olympia when he set his sons to run in a race with the kingdom as the prize. But Ovid’s Endymion, like Keats’s, was firmly attached to a fixed locale, “Latmius heros”, the “Carian”. Endymion’s everlasting sleep was in different versions imposed by Zeus as a punishment for loving his wife, or, alternatively, by Hera, as a privilege that enabled her lover to retain eternal youth. The association between Hera and the Moon was strong: Hera’s Roman counterpart, Juno, derives from the same Aryan root, meaning ‘bright’, that gives us Diana. In most versions, Endymion is loved by the goddess of the Moon, who visits him every night while he lies asleep in a cave on Mount Latmus in Caria, and bore him 50 daughters. On the history of the Greek myth in Britain, see Edward S. Le Comte, *Endymion in England: The Literary History of a Greek Myth* (New York: King’s Crown Press, 1944), ch. 1, pp. 1-8.

makes me think I see it towering to high above me. At any rate I have no <wi> right to talk until Endymion is finished--it will be a test, a trial of my Powers of Imagination and chiefly of my invention which is a rare thing indeed---by which I must make 4000 Lines of one bare circumstance and fill them with Poetry; and when I consider that this is a great task, and that when done *it will take me but a dozen paces towards the Temple of Fame* ... it makes me say---God forbid that I should be without such a task! I have heard Hunt say and may be asked---why endeavour after a long Poem? To which I should answer---Do not the Lovers of Poetry like to have a little Region to wander in where they may pick and choose, and in which the images are so numerous that many are forgotten and found new in a second Reading: [. . .] Besides a long Poem is a test of Invention which I take to be the Polar Star of Poetry, as Fancy is the Sails, and Imagination the Rudder. Did our great Poets ever write short Pieces? I mean in the shape of Tales---This same invention seems i[n]deed of late Years to have been forgotten as a Poetical excellence{.} But enough of this, I put on no Laurels till I shall have finished Endymion, and I hope Apollo is {not} angered at my having made a Mockery at him at Hunt's". (KL, I, pp. 169-170, my italics)

It was the length of the poem, its "4000 lines", that, Keats insists, establishes it as a true test of his powers as a poet, and hence the first pledge of his ambition to win for himself a place amongst the "great Poets". The letter to Bailey seems clearly to implicate Keats in the belief that the importance of a poem was in proportion to its length that Lockhart was to detect and to denounce as vulgar.² The references to "Laurels", and to "the Temple of Fame" suggest that his ambition is to win public acclaim, rather than to appeal to an as yet unborn posterity, and yet his ambition clearly

² Lockhart disparaged Keats's notion that the quantity of the poem rather than its quality might determine its excellence: "The old story of the moon falling in love with a shepherd, so prettily told by a Roman Classic, and so exquisitely enlarged and adorned by one of the most elegant of German poets, has been seized upon by Mr John Keats, to be done with as might seem good unto the sickly fancy of one who never read a single line either of Ovid or of Wieland. If the quantity, not the quality, of the verses dedicated to the story is to be taken into account, there can be no doubt that Mr John Keats may now claim Endymion entirely to himself. To say the truth, we do not suppose either the Latin or the German poet would be very anxious to dispute about the property of the hero of the 'Poetic Romance'". This is a

extends into the future. He seems to want at once to become famous and to secure poetic immortality. And yet there remains a certain modesty in his admission that even this long poem will advance him only "a dozen paces" towards his goal. On its publication the poem was presented in a way that highlighted the anxious coincidence of presumption and diffidence evident in the letter.

Keats added a sub-title, 'a Poetic Romance', that works on one level to deny that the poem has epic pretensions of the kind that Wordsworth, for example, makes explicit in his preface to *The Excursion*.³ Taken together, the title and sub-title dissociate the poem even from the masculine versions of romance that Scott and Byron had popularised, and align *Endymion* rather with the feminine version of romance of which the most popular recent example was Mary Tighe's *Psyche*.⁴ Keats adds an epigraph that proudly challenges comparison with the greatest of all English poets, Shakespeare. But the sense of the epigraph, taken from sonnet 17 of Shakespeare,⁵ "The

review signed 'Z' in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* of August 1818. See G. M. Matthews (ed.), *Keats: the Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 103.

³ The extract from *The Recluse* included in the Preface seems designed to establish Wordsworth's as an epic enterprise besides which Milton's seems insignificant.

⁴ I take the text of the poem from Duncan Wu (ed.), *Romantic Women Poems: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp. 376-461.

⁵ Here is the whole sonnet:

Who will believe my verse in time to come?
 If it were fill'd with your most high deserts—
 Though yet heaven knows it is but as a tomb
 Which hides your life and shows not half your parts,
 If I could write the beauty of your eyes,
 And in fresh numbers number all your graces,
 The age to come could say: 'This poet lies;
 Such heavenly touches ne'er touch'd earthly faces',
 So should my papers, yellow'd with their age,
 Be scorn'd, like old men of less truth than tongue,
 And your true rights be term'd a poet's rage
 And stretched metre of an antique song;
 But were some child of yours alive that time,

stretched metre of an antique song", remains self-deprecating. Keats applies to himself Shakespeare's description of his own poetry, but modestly chooses a phrase in which Shakespeare imagines future generations dismissing his poems as absurd examples of an antiquated taste for hyperbole. Even the decision to take an epigraph from one of Shakespeare's sonnets casts its own mocking light on Keats's insistence that only long poems properly entitle one to a place in the temple of fame. The dedication to Chatterton crystallises this ambivalence, for Chatterton had secured posthumous fame, but secured it as the preeminent type of the poet who remains in his own lifetime unrecognised and neglected.⁶ The title page of *Endymion* in itself betrays in a compressed form that anxious relationship with the reading public and with the idea of fame that is evident in the poem itself and in its preface, and more evident still if one compares the published preface with Keats's first attempt.

Contemporary reviewers responded to this anxiety in moral terms, but also in class terms and in terms of gender. *Blackwood's*, the newest of the Tory reviews, in a series of articles the first of which appeared in October 1817, published under the name of 'Z', contemptuously designated Keats a protégé and disciple of Hunt's 'Cockney School of Poetry'. 'Z' or J. G. Lockhart, only a year older than Keats, focused on the "extreme moral depravity" of Hunt's poems, which he represented as a political and religious

You should live twice—in it and in my rhyme.

On source, see W. G. Ingram and Theodore Redpath (eds.), *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (London: University of London Press, 1964), p. 43.

⁶ On Chatterton's importance for Keats, see Andrew Bennett, *Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 143-147.

affront to the established orthodoxy.⁷ From the first, Lockhart defines 'cockneyism' as incorporating both the inferior social status of its practitioners, and their effeminacy.

All of the great poets of our country have been men of some rank in society, and there is no vulgarity in any of their writings; but Mr. Hunt cannot utter a dedication, or even a note, without betraying the *Shibboleth* of low birth and low habits. . . . The extreme moral depravity of the Cockney School is another thing which is for ever thrusting itself upon the public attention, and convincing every man of sense who looks into their productions, that they who sport such sentiments can never be great poets. How could any man of high original genius ever stoop publicly, at the present day, to dip his fingers in the least of those glittering and rancid obscenities which float on the surface of Mr. Hunt's Hippocrene? His poetry is that of a man who has kept company with *kept-mistresses*. He talks indelicately like a tea-sipping milliner girl. . . . He is completely a Plebeian in his mind as he is in his rank and station in society.⁸

As Levinson shows, Keats also was implicated in the charge of effeminacy, that was levelled at him even more fiercely than it was levelled at Hunt: "He outhunted Hunt in a species of emasculated pruriency, that ... looks as if it were the product of some imaginative Eunuch's muse within the melancholy inspiration of the Harem".⁹

But it was not only the hostile critics who were alarmed by the sensual effeminacy of Keats's poetry. Even Leigh Hunt urged him not to offend the

⁷ Keach regards Keats's loose couplets as a stylistic analogue of the liberal politics that he shared with Hunt, and argues that his 'cockney couplets' were regarded by Tory critics as an affront to the orthodoxy of the closed Augustan couplet. See William Keach, 'Cockney Couplets: Keats and the Politics of Style', *SIR*, vol. 25 (Summer 1986), pp. 182-196. For another discussion of the political importance of cockney poetics, see Jeffrey N. Cox, 'Keats in the Cockney School', *Romanticism*, vol. 2.1 (1996), pp. 27-39.

⁸ John Lockhart, 'Cockney School of Poetry', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 2 (October 1817), p. 38-41.

sensitivities of his women readers, as did his publisher, John Taylor. In *Endymion*, Keats already displays a characteristic self-consciousness about the reception of his poetry, and this anxiety is already implicated with an anxiety about his own masculinity, and his relationship with women, because he already conceived himself as a male poet condemned to address a readership composed primarily of women. In *Endymion*, as elsewhere in Keats's poems, it is an anxiety that finds its most intense expression in those elements of the ancient story which represent a vulnerable and inexperienced youth engaged in a quest for ideal beauty which is figured as a visionary, ecstatic encounter with a female figure.

It is because of this that, since the 1980s, *Endymion* has attracted the attention of a number of feminist critics, amongst them Susan Wolfson, Margaret Homans, Marlon Ross, Karen Swann and Anne Mellor.¹⁰ Unlike Lockhart, they have focused on the political significance of Keats's adoption of a 'feminine' subject position, understanding it either as a response to the new dominance of women amongst the readership of poetry, or to a new cultural sensitivity concerning the gendering of the poet. Susan Wolfson is in the forefront of this critical tendency. She focuses on the emergence of a more

⁹ Levinson uses this quotation from *Blackwood's* of January 1826 as one of the epigrams for her book. See Marjorie Levinson, *Keats's Life of Allegory: the Origin of a Style* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1988), p. 1.

¹⁰ Susan Wolfson, 'Keats and the Manhood of the Poet', *European Romantic Review*, vol. 6 (Summer 1995), pp. 1-37 and Wolfson, 'Feminizing Keats', in Hernioner de Almeida (ed.), *Critical Essays in John Keats* (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1990), pp. 317-356; Margaret Homans, 'Keats Reading Women, Women Reading Keats', *SIR*, vol. 29 (1990), pp. 341-370; Marlon Ross, 'Beyond the Fragmented Word: Keats at the Limits of Patrilineal Language', in Laura Claridge and Elizabeth Langland (eds.), *Out of Bounds: Male Writers and Gendered Criticism* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1990), pp. 110-131; Karen Swann, 'Harrassing the Muse', in Anne K. Mellor (ed.), *Romanticism and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. 81-92; Anne Mellor, 'The Female Poet and the Poetess: Two Traditions of British Women's Poetry, 1780-1830', *SIR*, vol. 36 (1997), pp. 261-276.

complex cultural consciousness of what constitutes ‘manliness’ in the post-war Regency era:

In the post-war Regency, when concerns were growing over the softening of manly character during the Regency era, the vocation of poet was being read with a cultural nervousness about the gender of the poet. This sensitivity was inflected by the growing influence of female readers on book sales, the burgeoning of publishing female poets, and the perceived influence of female reading and writing on male-authored poetry of the kind Keats was producing with great facility in 1816-1817—a poetry of luxuries, of rapture, of romance.¹¹

What I shall focus on in this chapter is Keats’s own reinterpretation or revision of the Greek myth. I shall also discuss the two prefaces that Keats wrote for the poem, both of which reveal his anxiety about the critical response to his poem. I shall then consider the three chief female characters within the poem as figures through which Keats works out the possibilities of relationship with the readership of his poem.

1. Two Prefaces and the Reception of *Endymion*

According to Ovid, Lucian, and Apollonius of Rhodes, Endymion was a shepherd on Mount Latmos in Caria who was beloved by the goddess of the Moon. Pausanias, Ibycus and others describe him as King of Elis and the father of three sons and a daughter and in their accounts Endymion is not associated either with sleeping or the Moon.¹² Although, sometimes, these two

¹¹ Wolfson, ‘Keats and the Manhood of the Poet’, p. 5.

¹² On the Greek sources of the Endymion myth, see the ‘Introduction’ in David Bevington (ed.), *John Lyly: Endymion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp. 10-14. On

Endymions were conflated, in the most common version of the Endymion myth, it is the Moon, Selene, who falls in love with Endymion, and, in order to make him immortal, lulls him into a perpetual sleep. These two aspects of the narrative, the love relationship that is wholly initiated by the goddess, and Endymion's perpetual slumber, are both of them heavily revised by Keats. Whereas the various versions of the Greek myth agree in focusing on the love for Endymion of the goddess, whether she goes under the name of Hera, Selene, Cynthia, or Pheona, Keats's romance focuses on Endymion's quest for his immortal love. Endymion is the more active agent in the story, which is why Keats cannot follow the Greek myth in showing him overtaken by a never-ending sleep. In most versions of the story it is the goddess who visits the sleeping Latmus lad in his mountain cave as he lies asleep. The most distinctive characteristic of this Endymion is his 'inertness'. His perpetual sleep renders him the passive object of the goddess's love, whether it is presented as imposed on him as a blessing or as a punishment. It is the goddess rather than Endymion who is infatuated.

Keats's *Endymion* differs from the commonest version of the Greek myth, and from the versions that Drayton and Lyly had offered, by making Endymion the active agent in the story. Although at the beginning of the poem Keats's Endymion seems to have been rendered inert by his lovesickness, as the poem proceeds we are shown how he engages in his own quest for immortality. But Keats does not simply transfer agency from the goddess to Endymion. Rather, he insists on the reciprocity of their union. However much

the adoption of the Endymion myth in English literature, especially in Michael Drayton's *Endymion and Phoebe* and John Lyly's *Endymion*, see Edward S. Le Comte, *Endymion in*

Endymion may attempt to take control of his own narrative, he never loses sight of the existence of another corresponding narrative, the female's. As a consequence, Endymion's immortality is achieved not simply as a boon conferred by the goddess, but as the result of their achieving a union marked by mutuality and reciprocity. Even though Keats's Endymion cannot free himself completely from the vulnerable and effeminate posture of the original Endymion, he is much more authoritative in assuming control of his own narrative. His visionary dreams do not function simply to establish the private space that Cynthia needs in order to assuage her love longings. Rather, as in Shelley's *Alastor*, they supply the impetus that drives Endymion on in his quest to arrive at his own interpretation of the emblematic world. The immortality that Endymion seeks within the poem is revealed as precisely analogous to the immortality that Keats seeks by writing the poem, which represents Keats's first sustained attempt to win for himself a place amongst the "mighty dead" (Book 1, 21). In *Endymion*, poetry itself is the divine potion that confers immortality:

And such too is the grandeur of the dooms

We have imagined for the mighty dead;

All lovely tales that we have heard or read:

An endless fountain of immortal drink,

Pouring unto us from the heaven's brink.
(Book 1, 20-24)

The exordium of the poem is concerned to make clear from the very first that Endymion's love for the moon goddess is an allegorical rendering of Keats's devotion to the art of poetry:

Nor do we merely feel these essences
 For one short hour; no, even as the trees
 That whisper round a temple become soon
 Dear as the temple's self, so does the moon,
 The passion poesy, glories infinite,
 Haunt us till they become a cheering light
 Unto our souls, and bound to us so fast,
 That, whether there be shine, or gloom o'ercast,
 They alway must be with us, or we die.
 (Book I, 25-33)

In a passage such as this, the temple and the moonlight, the solid building and the transient effect of light, are somehow reconciled in a manner that prefigures the perfect reciprocity that Keats will contrive in the love between a human shepherd and an immortal goddess, and in a manner too that perfectly expresses Keats's notion of all art, the beauty of which is at once the perception of a moment, and something that is "a joy for ever".

When the original preface of *Endymion* was first sent to the publishers on 21 March 1818, it met with strong objections from J. H. Reynolds and Keats's publishers, Taylor and Hessey. After finishing the first draft of *Endymion* on 28 November 1817, Keats, guided by his publishers, undertook a process of revision from 20 January 1818 to 21 March 1818, though he had already

started the suggested revision in some sense by corresponding with Taylor beforehand.¹³ Taylor was commercially competent enough to know that he needed an assurance from Keats that “‘the poet was not likely to repeat such indiscretions as the dedication to Leigh Hunt in any later work’ because the ‘association with Hunt meant instant enmity from the *Quarterly Review*’”.¹⁴ For the same reason Taylor rejected Keats’s original preface, as revealed in Keats’s letter to Reynolds of 9 April 1818.

Since you all agree that the thing [the first preface] is bad, it must be so—though I am not aware there is any thing like Hunt in it, (and if there is, it is my natural way, and I have something in common with Hunt) look it over again and examine into the motives, the seeds from which any one sentence sprung— (KL, I, p. 266)

In this draft of the preface, Keats at once anticipates and defies the hostile response that he anticipates from the professional critics, and betrays the urgency with which he seeks their authentication of his talent. In the first preface this ambivalence results in a strained nonchalance:

In a great nation, the work of an individual is of so little importance; his pleadings and excuses are so uninteresting; his “way of life” such a nothing; that a preface seems a sort of impertinent bow to Strangers who care nothing about it—[. . .] now I here declare that I have not any particular affection for any particular phrase, word or letter in the whole affair. I have written to please myself and in hopes to please others, and for a love of fame; if I neither please myself, nor others, nor get fame, of what consequence is Phraseology?¹⁵

¹³ On the history of the revision of *Endymion*, see Zachary Leader, *Revision and Romantic Authorship* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), ch. 6. pp. 268-279.

¹⁴ Leader, *Revision and Romantic Authorship*, p. 269.

¹⁵ Stillinger (ed.), *The Poems of John Keats*, pp. 738-739.

On the one hand, he pretends audaciously to be quite indifferent both to his readers and his reviewers. He writes, he claims, only in order to please himself. Poetry becomes a form of self-pleasuring, or, in the metaphor that Levinson borrows from Byron, 'masturbation'. On the other hand, he ingenuously admits his anxiety to secure immediate poetical fame, when he confesses that "in duty to the Public I should have kept it back for a year or two, knowing it to be so faulty: but I really cannot do so". But, at least on the surface, Keats maintains a stance of cool indifference to the potential indifference of the reading public. He expects, he claims no greater success than had attended his first volume which had succeeded only in pleasing "some dozen of his friends' who lik'd it". Keats explains his posture in his letter of 9 April 1818.

When I am writing for myself for the mere sake of the Moment's enjoyment, perhaps nature has its course with me—but a Preface is written to the Public; a thing I cannot help looking upon as an Enemy, and which I cannot address without feelings of Hostility—If I write a Preface in a supple or subdued style, it will not be in character with me as a public speaker—I woud be subdued before my friends, and thank them for subduing me—but among Multitudes of Men—I have no feel of stooping, I hate the idea of humility to them—I never wrote one single Line of Poetry with the least Shadow of public thought.
(*KL*, I, pp. 266-267)

He maintains here his apparent carelessness of the public response to the poem. It is for the sake of his own enjoyment that he writes poetry. In poetry, then, he addresses a readership of one, namely himself, a readership that he is prepared to extend only to the small circle of his friends. But a preface is written to the public, that is, to an anonymous, abstract readership to which Keats rather transparently feels himself vulnerable, and expresses that

vulnerability as aggression. The uncompromising tone of the first preface and of the letter to Reynolds seem to make an exaggerated claim of indifference to critical response. This at least serves to underline the paradox of his position: he can address the public, he can write poems designed to be published, only by contriving to forget its existence.

The second preface appeared with *Endymion* when it was published in April 1818. It differs from the first draft in its assumption of a posture of extravagant humility. In particular, he admits the gaucheness of his poem's 'manner':

What manner I mean, will be quite clear to the reader, who must soon perceive great inexperience, immaturity, and every error denoting a feverish attempt, rather than a deed accomplished. The two first books, and indeed the two last, I feel sensible are not of such completion as to warrant their passing the press; nor should they if I thought a year's castigation would do them any good; —it will not: the foundations are too sandy. It is just that this youngster should die away: a sad thought for me, if I had not some hope that while it is dwindling I may be plotting, and fitting myself for verses fit to live.¹⁶

From the first paragraph, his anxiety and embarrassment are concealed within a supple and subdued style. Whereas in the first draft he had suggested that *Endymion* should be considered rather "as an endeavor than a thing accomplish'd, a poor prologue to what, if I live, I humbly hope to do", in the revised preface he offers the poem as evidence of his "great inexperience, immaturity", and characterises it as "a feverish attempt". He concedes even that he "may deserve a punishment" for his presumptuousness. In this respect Leader is accurate when he argues that "the trouble with the preface is not so

much 'affectation', as Reynolds claims, nor what Keats call 'an undersong of disrespect to the Public'",¹⁷ as a too evident fear of criticism, that prompts Keats to a transparent attempt to disarm hostile criticism of his poem by preempting it. The revised preface fails, then, to meet the request of his friends that he write a more 'manly' preface. In another letter to Reynolds on 10 April 1818, Keats certainly seems to strive for a 'manly' nonchalance:

I am anxious you shod find this Preface tolerable. if there is an affectation in it 'tis natural to me. —Do let the Printer's Devil cook it—and 'let me be as the casing air.' You are too good in this Matter—were I in your state, I am certain I should have no thought but of discontent and illness—I might tho' be taught patience: I had an idea of giving no Preface; however, don't you think this had better go?—O, let it—one should not be too timid—of committing faults. (*KL*, I, p. 269)

But, as Tim Chilcott observes, it is also obvious that "by rewriting the preface in a quieter tone and by omitting the more barbed of the darts he had thrown at the public", Keats, in one sense, merely made his ground seem to be more clear and reasonable, although it was not reasonable enough to avoid his enemies.¹⁸ Keats, it seems clear, was anxious to write a 'manly' preface, but unsure how to do so, and one reason was, perhaps, that the ideal of manliness was for him already a self-contradictory one. Is the nervous, defiant self-assertion of the first preface more or less manly than the exaggerated humility of the second? In the poem itself, much more delicately than in the prefaces, masculinity and femininity are revealed as inherently unstable concepts.

¹⁶ Stillinger (ed.), *The Poems of John Keats*, p. 102.

¹⁷ Leader, *Revision and Romantic Authorship*, p. 277.

2. Romantic Encounters and Female Figures

In Keats's *Endymion* the relationships between the central figure and the three chief female characters allow Keats to explore his sense of the complexity of gender relations, and also allow him to explore the relationship between the masculine poetic imagination and a readership that Keats characteristically thought of as feminine. As Homans suggests, the three figures serve to define Keats's sense of the relation between authorship and readership.¹⁹ Especially in the encounter scenes, the moments of epiphany, the gender relationship between Endymion and three women is exquisitely elaborated.

Endymion encounters his goddess, Cynthia, three times. He does so in dream as in the ancient myth, but the reduced number of their meetings in itself suggests the less active role that the goddess plays in Keats's version of the myth. It is Endymion himself who must, as it were, make up the deficiency. Keats's Cynthia is not the human goddess of the Greek myth, who cannot rest until she satisfies her desire for Endymion, and who takes advantage of his sleeping vulnerability in something of the same way that Keats's Porphyro is to take advantage of Madeline. Nor is she a temptress like la belle dame sans merci. Cynthia's role is rather to act as Endymion's guiding light, like the "cheering light" of the moon that shines over the temple at the beginning of the poem.

¹⁸ Tim Chilcott, *A Publisher and His Circle: the Life and Work of John Taylor, Keats's Publisher* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 30.

¹⁹ Homans remarks that although "Keats defines his poetry as a woman, he always makes it clear that it is not he himself who is the woman, but rather that he is the male suitor courting

Nevertheless, she is enticing enough for Endymion to be reduced to “melting ecstasy” as soon as he encounters her.

‘She took an airy range,
 And then, towards me, like a very maid,
 Came blushing, waning, willing, and afraid,
 And press’d me by the hand: Ah! ’twas too much;
 Methought I fainted at the charmed touch,
 Yet held my recollection, even as one
 Who dives three fathoms where the waters run
 Gurgling in beds of coral:

 I was distracted; madly did I kiss
 The wooing arms which held me, and did give
 My eyes at once to death: but ’twas to live,
 To take in draughts of life from the gold fount
 Of kind and passionate looks;
 (Book I, 633-640, 653-657)

It is the state of emasculated enervation to which such “melting ecstasy” reduces him that inspires Peona’s sisterly misgivings. Peona listens to her brother’s story. She is, in some sense, the reader of his romance, and, like all readers, she seeks to exercise control over the narrative. But it is a control that Endymion actively resists, and in doing so he acts out Keats’s resistance to the demands that he feels are imposed on him by his readership. Keats’s

Endymion is “chieftain king” of a kingdom of shepherds. He is represented as at once exaggeratedly manly in appearance, and as a grown-up version of Ganymede:

Who stood therein did seem of great renown
 Among the throng. His youth was fully blown,
 Shewing like Ganymede to manhood grown;
 And, for those simple times, his garments were
 A chieftain king's: beneath his breast, half bare,
 Was hung a silver bugle, and between
 His nervy knees there lay a boar-spear keen.
 (Book 1, 168-174)

The phrase, “His youth was fully blown”, anticipates the “full-grown lambs” of the final stanza of ‘To Autumn’. It allows Keats to represent Endymion as at once boyish and in his manhood prime. A more subversive complexity establishes him as a ‘Ganymede’, emasculated, the catamite of a powerful god, and as a kingly figure of almost comically exaggerated masculinity, his “boar-spear keen” jutting up from between his knees. The effect of his first encounter with Cynthia is to deprive him of his potent masculinity. He becomes effeminate and passive, finding his true mirror image in the sleeping Adonis of Book 2.

For on a silken couch of rosy pride,
 In midst of all, there lay a sleeping youth
 Of fondest beauty; fonder, in fair sooth,

Than sighs could fathom, or contentment reach:
 And coverlids gold-tinted like the peach,
 Or ripe October's faded marigolds,
 Fell sleek about him in a thousand folds-
 Not hiding up an Apollonian curve
 Of neck and shoulder, nor the tenting swerve
 Of knee from knee, nor ankles pointing light;
 But rather, giving them to the filled sight
 Officiously. Sideway his face repos'd
 On one white arm, and tenderly unclos'd,
 By tenderest pressure, a faint damask mouth
 To slumb'ry pout; just as the morning south
 Disparts a dew-lipp'd rose.
 (Book 2, 392-407)

This is the male figure exposed for the delectation of the viewer, offered as an object of consumption, in a manner that more commonly attaches itself in Western art to representations of the female nude.²⁰ Even the flesh-tinted "coverlids" function very much like the diaphanous drapery which in so many paintings folds about the female body, concealing only in order to make the exposure of the body more piquant. The mouth is uncovered and opened with a pornographic tenderness, as if it were genital rather than a part of the face. It is significant that this scene occurs just before Endymion's ecstatic encounter

²⁰ Levinson insists that "allusions to the indeterminacy of Keats's gender [...] should be taken as responses to Keats's mode of literary production or to the androgyny thereby implied". See

with the goddess, and the diction works to establish Endymion's as the feminine role in their relationship. The sensual palpability of Adonis is realised in a vocabulary that is strongly gendered, by means of words such as "rosy", "peach", "damask", and "a dew-lipped rose". His innocent unconsciousness of any observer, like Madeline's, serves only to render his exposure of himself the more enticing.

When Peona reprimands her brother for his sleepy enervation,²¹ she is concerned about the melting of his kingly nature. As soon as she notices Endymion's "deep intoxication", she attempts to recall him to his kingly duties. She summons him back to the masculine public realm from the enclosed and shadowy world of dreams, which occupy for her a despised feminine space.

"The Morphean fount

Of that fine element that visions, dreams,
And fitful whims of sleep are made of, streams
Into its airy channels with so subtle,
So thin a breathing, not the spider's shuttle,
Circled a million times within the space
Of a swallow's nest-door, could delay a trace,
A tinting of its quality: how light

the footnote no. 17 of Levinson, *Keats's Life of Allegory*, p. 40. In this sense, the androgynous characteristics of Adonis could be transferred to Keats himself.

²¹ Watkins understands Peona as a counterpart to Cynthia, assisting Endymion in his effort to achieve visionary bliss. Daniel P. Watkins, *Keats's Poetry and the Politics of the Imagination* (London: Associated University Presses, 1989), p. 50, but in my argument she must be understood as threatening the relationship between Endymion and Cynthia.

Must dreams themselves be, seeing they're more slight
 Than the mere nothing that engenders them!
 Then wherefore sully the entrusted gem
 Of high and noble life with thoughts so sick?
 Why pierce high-fronted honour to the quick
 For nothing but a dream?"
 (Book 1, 747-760)

She reasserts the reality principle. To succumb to dreams is unmanly and unkingly behavior. For her, Endymion's kingliness "melts away" and "thaws" when he is subjected to the power of the goddess. The firm outlines that signify his masculine power are threatened by dissolution. He is revealing the signs of "maidenhood", or, weakness, rather than the 'manliness' appropriate to his character as prince.

"Is this the cause?

This all? Yet it is strange, and sad, alas!
 That one who through this middle earth should pass
 Most like a sojourning demi-god, and leave
 His name upon the harp-string, should achieve
 No higher bard than simple maidenhood,
 Singing alone, and fearfully, -
 (Book 1, 721-727)

Peona distinguishes here between two kinds of poetry; the one masculine, the other feminine. As a king, Endymion's proper ambition should be to "leave / His name upon the harp-string". His duty is to make of himself the kind of

“demi-god”, like Achilles, who is commemorated in epic poetry. By transforming himself into a love-sick youth, he has made himself a character fit only to be commemorated in women’s poems, the kind of ballad that women sing in order to relieve their erotic yearnings.

But for all her intransigence, Peona is powerless to persuade Endymion to abandon his quest to win immortality by achieving a perfect union with his goddess. In replying to her Endymion explains his own idea of visionary union. He imagines an enthrallment that is not accompanied by any dissolution of the self and, at the same time, insists that the pursuit of such a union is not an abdication of his human responsibilities, but rather their most complete, their richest, expression: “but there are / Richer entanglements, enthrallments far / More self-destroying, leading, by degrees, / To the chief intensity: the crown of these / Is made of love and friendship, and sits high / Upon the forehead of humanity” (Book 1, 797-802). He refuses Peona’s distinction between the human and the dreamy, and by implication he refuses also her distinction between masculine public poetry and a feminine poetry of private emotions.

The second encounter occurs after Endymion’s descent to the underworld, a symbolic place of near death, to which he journeys following the goddess’s guiding voice only. In this world, Endymion is described as a wanderer. Traditionally, the descent to the underworld, signifying the ritual passage of the heroic wanderer, is an epic motif, and yet in *Endymion* the descent is into a cave, a mysterious feminine space. The episode seems designed to counter Peona’s strict division of poetry into two kinds, and its significance is encapsulated when Endymion finds in the depths of the cave

his own counterpart, the sleepily languorous Adonis. Adonis's androgyny works to mock Peona's rigid distinction of the masculine from the feminine, and at this point the poem *Endymion* seems itself to mock the rigid aesthetic hierarchy that Peona's notions of gender support.

It is after this, in response to his appeal, that the goddess appears in the jasmine bower where Endymion has lain down, wanting to sleep and needing to dream. She reveals herself first to his sense of touch, as a "naked waist" that, when he stretches, his arms embrace, and then as a voice, when she says, "sweetest, here am I!" (Book 2, 714). Their love-making is prolonged: "long time they lay / Fondling and kissing every doubt away; / Long time ere soft caressing sobs began / To mellow into words" (Book 2, 734-737). Their erotic union is suspended in time, as if they were lovers on a Grecian urn, and yet, unlike them, they retain an impassable distance from each other, like the distance that separates the dreamer from Moneta. For Endymion the goddess, like Moneta, is an embodied paradox, a "known Unknown" (Book 2, 739), and so too is his relationship with her, for, as the goddess explains, he exists in time, and she exists out of time: "Yet, can I not to starry eminence / Uplift thee; nor for very shame can own / Myself to thee" (Book 2, 777-779).

Book 3 seems in its entirety a digression.²² It tells the story of Glaucus, who has been cursed by Circe to live for a thousand years, growing ever older, at the end of which he is to suffer a lonely death. But, like Endymion, Glaucus

²² Bennett explains the episodic structure of *Endymion* as a response to the "need to fill 4,000 lines". The Glaucus digression is the longest of the various episodes which are termed by Bennett "surrogate stories": "we might term the dilatory delays in the narrative progression of *Endymion* 'surrogate stories', stories which stand in for the main plot by providing narrative energy lacking in the dilated tale of *Endymion* as it wanders from its narrative path". Andrew Bennett, *Keats, Narrative and Audience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 76.

is engaged in a quest, and the quests of both men are the same. Glaucus aspires to be reunited with Scylla, and for the two of them to find together an immortality of love. It is because he recognises Glaucus as his fellow that Endymion's defiance of him is immediately replaced by sympathy:

He spake, and walking to that aged form,
 Look'd high defiance. Lo! His heart 'gan warm
 With pity, for the grey-hair'd creature wept.
 Had he then wrong'd a heart where sorrow kept?
 Had he, though blindly contumelious, brought
 Rheum to kind eyes, a sting to humane thought,
 Convulsion to a mouth of many years?
 He had in truth; and he was ripe for tears.
 The penitent shower fell, as down he knelt
 Before that care-worn sage, who trembling felt
 About his large dark locks, and faltering spake:
 (Book 3, 281-291)

In Glaucus, Endymion sees, he fears, his own future fate, and hence he says to him, "we are twin brothers in this destiny!" (Book 3, 713). So it is that by rescuing Glaucus from Circe's curse, by making it possible for him to be re-united with Scylla, and by re-uniting with their loves all the lovers who have drowned at sea, Endymion is preparing the way for his own happiness. Perhaps we should understand the episode as a response to Keats's complaint in Book 2 that "the count / Of mighty Poets is made up" (Book 2, 723-4), and that the modern poet lacks the "old power" that was wielded by "Old Homer"

(Book 2, 731, 717). In this narrative the poetic youth is abandoned by the 'old' and left to yearn for their power, and in the Glaucus episode the position is reversed. The old man must await the rejuvenating power of the youth Endymion. If this reading is correct, then once again one is struck by the completeness with which Keats identifies love and fame, the success of Endymion within the poem and the success of the poem itself.

The goddess's final appearance to Endymion, the poem's last epiphany, is very different from her previous appearances. This time the goddess chooses to appear to Endymion in the guise of the Indian Maid rather than as an invisible voice. It is an episode that has no precedent in any of the classical versions of the myth,²³ and it allows Keats to introduce two significant new aspects. First, as the Indian maid the goddess is fully visible to her lover. Second, the power that she wields over him is the power of language. The Indian Maid appears just after Endymion has heard Glaucus's painfully human story. This has led some critics to argue plausibly enough that, in comparison with the first two books, Books 3 and 4 are dominated by human feelings, such as, pity, sympathy, love and compassion for other human beings.²⁴ In this

²³ The appearance of the Indian Maid has no source in the original Greek legend. Watkins interprets the relationship between Endymion and the Indian Maid in terms of the "historical role of gender relations and of the imperial ideology". He argues that "while the poem throughout voices a desire to escape entirely the historical moment, and while the subject matter itself seems to suggest Keats's readiness to deny historical determination - or at the very least his willingness to remain silent about the major and unsettling questions facing his age - the portrayal of gender relations and the reconstruction of the idea of the East for consumption by the Western mind locate the poem immediately at a particular historical conjuncture where the triumph of the individual masculine ego is made possible by the imperialistic conquest of the East by Western capitalism". Daniel P. Watkins, *Keats's Poetry and the Politics of the Imagination* (London: Associated University Presses, 1989), p. 47.

²⁴ Wolfson indicates three important roles for the Indian Maid. First, her sorrow parallels Endymion's own; secondly, she gives him opportunities to demonstrate his emerging humanitarian sympathies; lastly, she is significant as a flesh and blood alternative to the goddess. Susan Wolfson, *The Questioning Presence, Wordsworth, Keats and the Interrogative Mode in Romantic Poetry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 246. Although Barnard also regards the entry of the Indian Maid as a test for Endymion, he denies her a subjectivity,

sense, the change in Cynthia's appearance reflects a change in the poem itself. In her new role, as the Indian princess, she challenges Endymion to interpret her song.

"Come then, Sorrow!

Sweetest Sorrow!

Like an own babe I nurse thee on my breast:

I thought to leave thee

And deceive thee,

But now of all the world I love thee best.

'There is not one,

No, no, not one

But thee to comfort a poor lonely maid;

Thou art her mother,

And her brother,

Her playmate, and her wooer in the shade."

(Book 4, 279-290)

Glaucus's sorrow is dispelled by Endymion, vanquished by the appearance of a masculine redeemer. But in this song sorrow is not vanquished but nursed. Maternal tenderness replaces heroic fortitude as the key value. The spell that Glaucus attaches to Endymion has the power to waken the dead, to dissolve the barrier that separates the living from the dead.

focusing instead on Endymion's right of choice: "His choice of human love is, ironically, the last test in his progress to godhead". John Barnard, 'Endymion: Pretty Paganism and Purgatory Blind', in Hermione de Almeida (ed.), *Critical Essays on John Keats* (Boston: G.

The Indian maid's song too is a spell, but it works to dissolve the barrier between genders. Once Endymion listens to the song, and understands it rightly, he achieves a perfect freedom of identity. He is able to act at once as mother, brother, friend and lover to the Indian Maid, and as the dialectics of gender are transcended, so too is the dialectical opposition between the mortal and the immortal. Keats finds an alternative here both to a masculine appropriation of female power, and to an effeminate surrender to that power. Keats's poetry, here as elsewhere, is at its most powerful when he delicately negotiates between binary opposites rather than choosing one of them. As Kucich comments, it is "this striking display of border crossings that has inspired radically divided readings of Keats's gender position from his own time to the present".²⁵ Once Endymion has freed himself from his constrictingly gendered identity, he is able to enter into a loving relationship which is founded on a multiple reciprocity, and in such a relationship a union between the two sexes may be accomplished without either surrendering to the other's dominance. It is only when this point has been reached that the Indian maid reveals that she is, in truth, also Cynthia, and hence that the distinction between a mortal woman and an immortal goddess is itself unreal.

At which that dark-eyed stranger stood elate
 And said, in a new voice, but sweet as love,
 To Endymion's amaze: 'By Cupid's dove,
 And so thou shalt! And by the lily truth

K. Hall & Co., 1990), p. 48. However, I focus not on his prerogative of choice but on their reciprocal understanding.

²⁵ Greg Kucich, 'Gender Crossings: Keats and Tighe', *KSJ*, vol. 44 (1995), p. 29.

Of my own breast thou shalt, beloved youth!²

And as she spake, into her face there came

Light, as reflected from a silver flame:

Her long black hair swell'd ampler, in display

Full golden; in her eyes a brighter day

Dawn'd blue and full of love. Aye, he beheld

Phoebe, his passion!

(Book 4, 977-987)

Keats chooses to take his stand on the permeable boundary between masculine and feminine, not by subordinating one to the other, but by a reciprocal relationship that is figured in the union between Endymion and the Indian Maid, not the goddess. It is only through such a relationship that Endymion can find in his relationship with the goddess the "enthrallments far more self-destroying", which bestow immortality upon him. Immortal lovers, it seems, like the immortal poet that Keats aspired to be, are characterised by their freedom from any single self.

Until almost the end of the poem, Peona's role is confined to that of the auditor of Endymion's story. She is the reader of his romance, and it is for this reason that she is able to act as the representative within the poem of the reader of the poem. Her fear that Endymion's infatuation with the goddess has unfitted him for the discharge of his proper masculine responsibilities anticipates, as it were, the charge that the poem, *Endymion* itself provoked from readers who thought the sensuality of the poem weakly effeminate. But as Endymion proceeds on his quest, Peona's role changes. Instead of offering him warning admonitions, she begins to offer him her sympathetic sisterly

assistance. She begs the Indian Maid to relieve her brother's pain: "Tell me, my lady-queen, how to espouse / 'This wayward brother to his rightful joys!" (Book 4, 841-842). Even in the poem's conclusion, when Endymion and Cynthia, celebrate their rapturous union, a place is found for Peona. Erotic, heterosexual love is supplemented by sisterly affection.

Peona, we shall range

These forests, and to thee they safe shall be

As was thy cradle; hither shalt thou flee

To meet us many a time.' Next Cynthia bright

Peona kiss'd, and bless'd with fair good-night:

Her brother kiss'd her too, and knelt adown

Before his goddess, in a blissful swoon

She gave her fair hands to him, and behold,

Before three swiftest kisses he had told,

They vanish'd far away! - Peona went

Home through the gloomy wood in wonderment.

(Book 4, 993-1003)

The three of them exchanges kisses. Endymion enters into his immortality and Peona is granted the right to visit the forest where this immortal couple will reside whenever she wishes. The poem ends with this picture of a free interchange between the mortal world and the immortal world of love and poetry. It is a picture that recalls Keats's own description of his poem in his letter to Bailey of October 8, 1817:

Do not the Lovers of Poetry like to have a little Region to wander in where they may pick and choose, and in which the images are so numerous that many are forgotten and found new in a second Reading: which may be food for a Week's stroll in the Summer? (*KL*, I, p. 170)

Keats imagines his readers visiting his poem, much in the way that Peona is invited to visit her brother and Cynthia. They give Peona the freedom of their forest retreat, and in the same way Keats offers his readers the freedom of his poem, "to pick and choose", to open it when they will, and read for so long as they will. In *Endymion* Keats is most obviously concerned with dissolving the boundaries between the mortal and the immortal and between men and women, but he also writes a poem that he hopes will dissolve the barrier that separates a poem from its readers. Of all Keats's major poems *Endymion* is the 'unchariest', the most 'unmisgiving' in its relationship with its readers. That Keats was never to be so unchary again has much to do with the response that the poem provoked, but that is a matter for future chapters.

II. 'La Belle Dame sans Merci': Anxiety about Gendering

'La Belle Dame sans Merci' differs from *Endymion* in registering through its interrogatory tone a new scepticism as to the nature of the writer's control over his audience. Keats, no matter how much he tried to preserve his 'manly' nonchalance in the face of the public response to *Endymion*, seems to be evidently more susceptible than before to the need for critical authentication of his talent. From February to March 1819, just before 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' was published, as Finney indicates, Keats felt sure that "the malignant reviewers of *Endymion* had destroyed his poetic reputation and prevented the sale of copies of the poem".¹ Lord Byron's commercial and critical success was another factor to impel Keats's new sense of the 'dependency' of the author upon his readership, as revealed in his consecutive letters of 14 and 19 February 1819.

I was surprised to hear from Taylor the amount of Murray the Booksellers last sale—what think you of 25,000 Pounds? He sold 4000 copies of Lord Byron. [. . .] I have not said in any Letter yet a word about my affairs—in a word I am in no despair about them—my poem has not at all succeeded—in the course of a year or so I think I shall try the public again—in a selfish point of view I should suffer my pride and my contempt of public opinion to hold me silent—but for your's and fanny's sake I will pluck up a spirit, and try again—I have no doubt of success in a course of years if I persevere—but it must be patience—for the Reviews have enervated and made indolent mens minds—few think for themselves—These Reviews too are

¹ Claude Lee Finney, *The Evolution of Keats's Poetry*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1936), vol. 2, p. 573.

getting more and more powerful and especially the Quarterly—They are like a superstition which the more it prostrates the Crowd and the longer it continues the more powerful it becomes just in proportion to their increasing weakness. (*KL*, II, p. 62, 65)

This preoccupation with a public felt to be enthralled by some powerful, malign force finds its most searching expression in 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'. What is striking in this poem is that, unlike *Endymion*, even the ecstatic visionary encounter between the knight and la belle dame, to say nothing of the dialogue between knight and interlocutor (he may, for all the poem tells us, be a woman rather than a man), suggests Keats's own uneasiness as to his authorial position countered by his determination not to "be held silent". The poem records at once Keats's determination to retain or achieve a manly poetic authority, and his unhappy conviction that the manly poet is disastrously vulnerable to a female readership that he despises.

The earliest surviving version of 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' was transcribed in Keats's letter to his brother, George, of April 28 1819 and after some revision was published in the *Indicator* in May 20, 1820, but, oddly, Keats did not include this poem in *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St Agnes, and Other Poems* in June 26, 1820. It is the earlier of the two versions that has been accepted as canonical ever since it was published in Richard Monckton Milnes's *Life, Letters, and the Literary Remains of John Keats* in 1848. Milnes's text derived from a copy of the poem made by Charles Brown. Just as Keats wrote two prefaces to *Endymion*, he wrote two versions of this poem, which differ, like the two prefaces, in the degree to which they adopt a 'masculine' authorial posture.

1. "Caviare to the general"

After it first appeared in Keats's letter to his brother in 21 April 1819, 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' was revised probably in early May and possibly at the instigation of Leigh Hunt, and published in the *Indicator* above the signature "Caviare" on May 20, 1820.² Jerome McGann, the first critic to focus critical attention on the *Indicator* text, questions "why the post-authorial critical tradition from 1848 to the present has normally printed, read, and studied the poem in the Brown / 1848 text", even though it differs greatly from the text printed by Keats himself.³ As McGann insists, it could be argued that Keats's

² On Hunt's possible instigation to revise this poem, Finney argues as follows: "He was warned by Hunt doubtless that the unique and striking phrases of the original version might be ridiculed, and he was too ill at the time to trust his own judgement". See Finney, *The Evolution of Keats's Poetry*, vol. 2, p. 599. On Keats's intention in choosing the "Caviare" pseudonym, I agree with Kelley's comment: "Instead of being led by Hunt, he probably recognized that publishing one of his poems in a Hunt periodical would inevitably create an ideologically charged context for its reception. For this reason, Keats may have shaped the poem and its pseudonym to fit the goals and intended audience of this periodical in ways that would invite a more sympathetic reception than his early published poetry had received". The pseudonym "Caviare" is taken from a speech in which Hamlet explains that a play did not succeed because it was "caviare to the general" (Act II, Scene 2, *Hamlet*), that is, "food too rich or elevated for plebian tastes, the pseudonym ironically presents the poet and the poem as just this kind of poetic food". So Kelley argues that "Keats thus makes it clear that he is still the Cockney poet who dares to offer the public a poetic fare that is supposed to be beyond his and their capabilities—a reminder that is all the more pungent for its appearance in one of Hunt's periodicals". See Theresa M. Kelley, 'Poetics and the Politics of Reception: Keats's 'La Belle Dames Sans Merci'', in Karl Kroeber and Gene W. Ruoff (eds.), *Romantic Poetry: Recent Revisionary Criticism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993), pp. 411-412.

³ Jerome McGann, 'Keats and the Historical Method in Literary Criticism', in his *The Beauty of Inflections: Literary Investigations in Historical Method and Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), pp. 15-65 (p. 33). McGann's argument is significant in that it establishes the ideological power of the conditions that govern the revision, publication and reception of a particular poem. He insists that the proper matter of concern should not be "for restoring the authority of *The Indicator* text, but merely to understand the history" which produced it, and the history of the editorial processes that have led to it being rejected. McGann, 'Keats and the Historical Method in Literary Criticism', p. 34. But it is not enough in itself to attend to the bibliographic history of the poem. It is still necessary to establish the authorial intention that each of the texts of the poem embodies, and intention, in the case of both texts, is a notion that

'authorial intentions' are better embodied in the *Indicator* text because it was the only version published by Keats himself. Nonetheless, he quotes from Sidney Colvin's defense of the 1848 text, to indicate his awareness of the force of Colvin's argument that "it is surely a perversion in textual criticism to perpetuate the worse version merely because it happens to be the one printed in Keats's lifetime".⁴ In other words, if the *Indicator* text better expresses Keats's consciousness of his readership, it could be said that for that very reason it is less fully his own. The *Indicator* text might be judged an attempt to re-cast the poem in a manner designed to placate the reader. The appropriate comparison may be with the revised preface of *Endymion*.

Two questions arise concerning the question of the authorial anxiety about gendering if we concede to McGann's argument: the *Indicator* text implies a more masculine, a more masterful author. The pseudonym "Caviare" in the *Indicator* text itself assumes, even if it does so self-mockingly, a posture of masterful disdain towards the reader. The recurrent use of Spenserian archaic diction in the *Indicator* text presents the text as 'romantique', in the style perhaps of the 1798 version of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* or of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. The archaism works to place Keats at an amused distance from his own poem. Although critics have already analyzed the differences between the two texts, it is appropriate at this point to summarize their findings.

is played out in the relationship that the two versions of the poem establish with their readership. For the textual history of 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', see Jack Stillingr, *The Text of Keats's Poems* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), pp. 232-234.

⁴ For Colvin's defence of the 1848 text, see Sidney Colvin, *John Keats* (London: Macmillan, 1917), pp. 468-470 (p. 469).

2. The *Indicator* Text and the Brown Text

The *Indicator* text differs from its predecessor most strikingly in its revision of the relationship between the knight and La Belle Dame Sans Merci. The first text dramatizes 'loss of control' as the cause of the knight's mental disorder, whereas the *Indicator* text emphasizes the 'loss of love'. The two versions of the poem share the same plot as such: in stanzas 4-7 we have the progress of the knight, in stanza 8, the ecstatic climax in the elfin grot and in stanzas 9-12 his withdrawal from the grot.⁵ But in the first version the plot dramatizes a loss of manly authority, whereas in the second what is lost is loving fulfillment.

In the first text the transfer of power from the knight-narrator to la belle dame or the female enthraller is more marked. In stanzas 4-6, the knight is the agent of the poetic action, the sentences begin with the pronoun 'I': "I met", "I made" and "I set". But after he listens to the fairy's song, it is la belle dame who dominates the narrative and controls the action. Sentences begin: "She found", "She took", and "She lulled".⁶ There has been no reciprocal union

⁵ Earl R. Wasserman, *The Finer Tone: Keats's Major Poems* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1953), p. 68. There are three principal literary sources for 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci': Alain Chartier's medieval poem of 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', Thomas the Rhymer's ballad, which Keats would have known from Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Borders*, and Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. See Kelley, 'Poetics and Politics of Reception: Keats's La Belle Dame Sans Merci', p. 406.

⁶ Wasserman also focuses on the gender dynamics between knight and la belle dame and argues that the more power the knight lost over the action, the more dominant the 'she' becomes: "There is, then, a progressive shrinkage of the 'I' as a power and a corresponding dominance of the 'she' until in stanza seven, where the height of the pleasure thermometer is

even in their melting ecstasy in her grot comparable with the union between the mortalised Cynthia and Endymion in Book IV of *Endymion* or even between the wight and la belle dame of the *Indicator* text.

Quite contrary to the first text, the *Indicator* text implies a more mild and sad romance world where two idiosyncratic figures rather easily submit to the moment of complete union without any apparent barrier: for example, after three sentences beginning with an 'I': "I met", "I set", "I made", come two 'She' sentences, "She found" and "She took". The reciprocal sexual ecstasy follows directly, using the 'We' plural pronoun, "we slumbered". Because of this narrative form, we tend to read the wight's disorder as caused by the loss of love rather than by the loss of authorial power. On this premise their seeming achievement of union through ecstatic vision looks like an attempt by Keats to conceal his anxieties about the relationship between the poet and his readership, and about the relationship between men and women, relationships that were for him intimately connected.⁷

The dominant action of the first text is 'the loss of control': the less the knight grasps the lady, the less he grasps his own narrative. It is also true that the less he grasps his own story, the less his story appeals to the romance reader, because he is forced to abandon his own knightly mastery to such an

reached, the lady alone controls the entire action, and the knight passively yields to her". See Wasserman, *The Finer Tone: Keats's Major Poems*, p. 79.

⁷ Kelley argues that Keats may play a double game with his audience by writing 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' as a ballad: "For if writing ballads is on the surface less ambitious than writing in the more aristocratic genres of epic, tragedy, or allegorical romance, writing ballads after Scott and Wordsworth is also a bid for a contemporary poetic fame and audience". See Kelley, 'Poetics and Politics of Reception: Keats's La Belle Dame Sans Merci', p. 406.

extent that "his story in turn perplexes rather than enlightens his audience".⁸

Why does the knight lose his power over his own narrative? The loss occurs just after the fairy's song, which itself reminds us of the Indian Maid's song in *Endymion*. Like Endymion who has to interpret the Indian Maid's song in order to achieve an ideal union without any threat of dissolution, it is the knight's task to translate the strange language and interpret the lady's needs and desires without either party surrendering to the other's dominance. At this point, the sequence of stanzas of the first text is more convincing.

It is a narrative that hinges on the ambiguous identity of the knight in relation to masculine power. It is not only the knight who has no proper name: neither do the balladeer or la belle dame. To name oneself is to claim an identity, it is an act of self-assertion, but it is the interlocutor rather than the knight himself who defines the protagonist's identity as knight-at-arms or wight. In the same manner, it is not la belle dame herself but others, "pale kings, princes and pale warriors", who give her that name.⁹ In the *Indicator* text the story concerns an anonymous "wretched wight", but in the first text the knight's masculinity is at once asserted by his rank and put into question by his failure to claim his knightly name, as, say, Sir Lancelot or Sir Gawain.

⁸ Karen Swann, 'Harassing the Muse', in Anne K. Mellor (ed.), *Romanticism and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 81. Swann notices the fact that the knight's story finally begs more questions than it answers both for the interlocutor and the readers of this poem. On the interlocutor's puzzlement and uncertainty in relation to the interpretation of the language, see Susan Wolfson, 'The Language of Interpretation in Romantic Poetry', in Arden Reed (ed.), *Romanticism and Language* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 34-39.

⁹ Kelley goes on to suggest that the belle dame is constructed as an object by the pale kings, princes and pale warriors, "she is a fetish, a figure whose alien status is the product of a collective decision to name her 'la belle dame sans merci'". In other words, 'la belle dame' figure was defined by her antithetical relation to the speakers of the poem. See Kelley, 'Poetics and Politics of Reception: Keats's La Belle Dame Sans Merci', p. 401.

By emphasizing his ‘emasculated’ condition despite his manly naming, his identity becomes more mysterious and his “haggard” authorial condition more anxious. It is this that lends force to Swann’s suggestion that “the poem knowingly reveals that it is not ‘about’ woman at all but, rather, about the unmasterability of language and the gender-neutral subject’s enthrallment in the symbolic order”.¹⁰ Unlike the wight whose comprehension of la belle dame’s strange language makes him better able to empathize with the sigh revealed in her “wild *sad* eyes” (my italics, marking the word that distinguishes Keats’s phrase from the “wild *wild* eyes” that focus Wordsworth’s empathic relationship with his sister in ‘Tintern Abbey’), the knight cannot overcome the distance separating himself from the lady because he feels only that her eyes are “*wild*”, which implies his failure to bring her eyes under the control of his language.

In the second part of both texts dream-vision is an important clue to understanding the knight’s perplexity. It is in his dream that la belle dame wields her power over kings, princes and warriors, all of whom are enthralled. This scene reminds us of the erotic enthrallment by Circe who prohibits the union between Glaucus and Scylla in *Endymion*. Although she is closer in other ways to Cynthia than Circe, she is also ‘la dame fatale’ in that she has power enough to emasculate even kings, princes and warriors, not to speak of the knight himself. Kings, princes and warriors are emblematic of masculine power, but, once enthralled, they are withdrawn from their social obligations, and lose their masculine prestige. As McGann indicates, la belle dame of the

¹⁰ Swann, ‘Harassing the Muse’, pp. 90-91.

first text offers a more dominant image of "the lady as a bewitching siren".¹¹ In this sense, the knight's dream is quite different from Endymion's. Whereas Endymion pursues the possibility of an equal union with Cynthia in his dream, the knight is deprived of his dream of ecstatic union by losing his authorial integrity and power, with the result that he becomes alienated from la belle dame, his landscape and even from himself. Whereas Endymion progresses towards an ideal gendering that is revealed in the figure of Adonis to be androgynous, the knight progresses only towards a state of emasculation. In this he is representative:

The "pale" kings and princes, all predecessors and successors of each other and representative of the knight's own "patrilineage" are robbed of life and identity and gape with "starv'd lips" and "horrid warning". Sexual union, once transcendent, has become the ultimate destruction, leaving the male immolated by the female, deprived of a masculine past as well as a present.¹²

Without any possible vision, of 'a happily symmetrical reciprocity', the knight is doomed only to linger:

The knight is as mysterious to his readers as the lady is to the knight; the woman is thus not the privileged repository of the poem's significance (and insofar as we are led to think so she functions as a lure) but one among numerous mysteries merely "accentuat[ing] the gap between the strangeness of signs and their proposed translations," eluding interpretive certainty.¹³

¹¹ McGann, 'Keats and The Historical Method in Literary Criticism', p. 36.

¹² Karla Alwes, *Imagination Transformed: The Evolution of the Female Character in Keats's Poetry* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), p. 105.

¹³ Karen Swann, 'Harassing the Muse', p. 83.

If we allow them an allegorical role, then it could be argued that Keats's female figures figure the readership whose approval Keats knew was required if his status as a poet were to be authenticated. Sometimes Keats is eager to reach for their favor even at the risk of sacrificing his own authorial integrity. At other times he tries to maintain a manly nonchalance as a defense against the public, and in recognition that he cannot achieve that androgynous reconciliation between the sexes that represents for him, amongst other things, an achieved union between the poet and his readership.

Last, let me analyze the identity of interlocutor. His dual function is to question the knight's disorder and to comment on a corresponding disorder in the landscape. In stanza 3, the desolation of the landscape merges with the knight's morbidity:

I see a lily on thy brow
 With anguish moist and fever, dew
 And on thy cheeks a fading rose
 Fast withereth too.
 (9-12)

As a way of answering the interlocutor's question, the knight recounts what has happened to him in the past. Compared with the auditors of Wordsworth's ballads, the anonymous interlocutor of 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' seems passive, only allowed to participate in the self-interpretation of the narrator's romantic quest. However, it is he who designates the knight's identity as narrator. It is also he who suggests his negligence of his knightly duties by

asking the cause of his anxiety. Furthermore, although he seems to appear only in the very first part of the poem, his silent presence throughout is signaled by the knight's final answer, an exact repetition of his opening question. For him, the knight's disorder is as incomprehensible as the momentary vision of la belle dame is for the knight. From this point of view the interlocutor resembles another Keatsian interlocutor, Peona of *Endymion*. Like Peona, he or she (for the gender of the interlocutor is unspecified) interrogates the cause of the knight's disorder and implicitly chides his negligence of manly duty, as if in recognition that the knight has been rendered as effeminate by his erotic enthrallment as Endymion by his, at least in the view of his sister Peona. Peona and the interlocutor at this point both figure a reader scornfully conscious of the 'mawkish' weakness that Keats feared was the weakness of his own poetry.

As in *The Thorn* and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the central event (the perhaps fatal entanglement of a knight with an enigmatic woman of the meads) emerges only as a troubled memory, the primary action becoming instead the exchange between a perplexed questioner and a would-be tale-teller. The poem opens on an explicitly interrogative note, as a voice arrested by a strange impression queries its cause: "O what can ail thee, knight at arms, / Alone and palely loitering?"¹⁴

Wolfson's argument that both the interlocutor and knight feel the same perplexity caused by their inability to control the mysterious narrative is persuasive, though it is unsatisfactory to narrow down the primary action of this poem to the relation between interlocutor and knight. When the

¹⁴ Susan Wolfson, 'The Language of Interpretation in Romantic Poetry', p. 35.

interlocutor names the man he addresses as “knight at arms” rather than “wretched wight”, he seems confused by the knight’s ‘unknightliness’ and puzzled by his inability to understand his disorder. In this sense, it is true that “the knight’s final, haunting repetition of his questioner’s voice only magnifies the interrogative mood of the whole, whose irresolution now involves the reader, too”.¹⁵

In the first text, especially, the more the knight loses his authorial power over his narrative, the more the interlocutor’s perplexities deepen. This is surely one of the reasons that there is no apparent response from the auditor after the knight tells his tale. He or she seems stunned, like the Wedding Guest after hearing the Mariner’s story. In general, the *Indicator* text is more defensive, reserved and compromised. Such defensiveness could be understood as an attempt by Keats to conceal his authorial anxiety, which is handled more delicately in his original text, which he wrote, it seems, without a thought of publication.

¹⁵ Susan Wolfson, ‘The Language of Interpretation in Romantic Poetry’, p. 38.

III. *Isabella, or, The Pot of Basil*: Making “old prose in modern rhyme more sweet”

Isabella: or, The Pot of Basil, another romance from the 1820 volume, is a unique poem in that it raises the question of authorship by its ‘adaptation’ of an earlier text rather than by the ‘revision’ to which it was subjected by Keats himself.¹ Motivated by Hazlitt’s suggestion in his ‘Lectures on English Poets’ which he began to deliver on 13 January 1818 that adaptations of Boccaccio might prove successful², Keats and Reynolds launched a collaborative project to publish a volume of versified romances based on the *Decameron*. *Isabella*, Keats’s only adaptation of Boccaccio, his one attempt “to make old prose in modern rhyme more sweet” (*Isabella*, 156), points to another pressure informing Keats’s notion of authorship, the commercial pressure to write in a way attractive to the poetry-buying public.³

Hazlitt’s lecture on Dryden and Pope delivered on 3 February 1818 seems to have inspired three attempts to produce a modern version of a tale from the *Decameron*. Two were published in 1820: Keats’s *Isabella* in the volume *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes and Other Poems* and Barry Cornwall’s

¹ Jack Stillinger gives a full account of the revisionary history of *Isabella*. He sets out its history chronologically as follows: “JK draft--JK fair copy--Woodhouse shorthand--W2--W1--1820”. This poem, however, underwent only negligible revision by Keats himself, and Woodhouse limited himself to the correction of some rhymes, grammar and punctuation. See Jack Stillinger, ‘Keats and His Helpers: the Multiple Authorship of *Isabella*’, in his *Multiple Authorship and the Myth of Solitary Genius* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 27.

² P. P. Howe (ed.), *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt in Twenty-One Volumes*, 21 vols. (London and Toronto: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1930-1934), vol. 5, ‘Lectures on the English Poets and a View of the English Stage’, especially, ‘On Dryden and Pope’, pp. 68-85.

³ Kurt Heinzelman is persuasive when he argues that Keats’s impelling motive in making his attempt to adapt Boccaccio was to “narrate a tale about the role of self-interest in an economic and poetic network of production and consumption”. See Kurt Heinzelman, ‘Self-interest and the Politics of Composition in Keats’s *Isabella*’, *ELH*, vol. 55 (1988), p. 160.

A Sicilian Story. The third was John Hamilton Reynolds's *The Garden of Florence and Other Poems*, which was not published until 1821.⁴ Keats completed *Isabella* in April 1818, but despite Reynolds's enthusiasm, Keats decided against immediate publication, judging the poem too "smokeable". Reynolds encouraged the immediate publication of *Isabella* in his letter to Keats on 14 October 1818:

As to the Poem I am of all things anxious that you should publish it, for its completeness will be a full answer to all the ignorant malevolence of cold lying Scotchmen and stupid Englishmen. The overweening struggle to oppress you only shews the world that so much of endeavour cannot be directed to nothing. Men do not set their muscles, and strain their sinews to break a straw. I am confident, Keats, that the Pot of Basil hath that simplicity and quiet pathos, which are of sure sovereignty over all hearts. I must say that it would delight me to have you prove yourself to the world, what we know you to be;—to have you annul the Quarterly Review, by the best of all answers. (*KL*, I, p. 376)

Despite not only Reynolds's confidence in its commercial potential but also Keats's evident anxiety for commercial success the poem remained unpublished until 1820. The voluntary delay suggests in itself Keats's ambivalence towards the public that he was aiming to please, an ambivalence closely related to his recognition that for the first time in literary history women constituted a majority of the reading public for poetry. Very outspokenly, especially in his letters to his publisher Taylor, he insisted that he had no ambition to become a popular poet.

⁴ The first two were based on the same source, "Lisabetta's story", the 5th of the fourth day in the *Decameron*, whereas Reynolds adapted respectively the 7th and 9th tales of the fourth day. On the influence and popularity of Boccaccio in the 19th century in England, see Herbert G. Wright, *Boccaccio in England: from Chaucer to Tennyson* (University of London: The Athlone Press, 1957), ch. 6, 'The *Decameron* in the Nineteenth Century', pp. 331-478.

I feel every confidence that if I choose I may be a popular writer; that I will never be; but for all that I will get a livelihood—I equally dislike the favour of the public with the love of a woman—they are both a cloying treacle to the wings of independence. I shall ever consider them (People) as debtors to me for verses, not myself to them for admiration—which I can do without. [. . .]—You will observe at the end of this if you put down the Letter ‘How a solitary life engenders pride and egotism!’ True: I know it does but this Pride and egotism will enable me to write finer things than any thing else could—so I will indulge it—Just so much as I am hu[m]bled by the genius above my grasp, am I exalted and look with hate and contempt upon the literary world. (*KL*, II, p. 144)

A bewildering complexity of feeling is evident here. There is a relentless acknowledgement of his own economic position, revealed in the sequence of words from “livelihood”, through “independence” to “debtors”. There is a fear that poetry could not survive its new status as a market commodity: that the imagination, once re-located in the market-place, would lose its ability to fly. Finally, in the analogy between “the favour of the public” and “the love of a woman”, Keats’s anxieties about his lack of commercial success became entangled with his anxieties about women, and the threat that they pose to his emotional independence. The “cloying treacle” seems not just a bar to flight, but a description of the kind of poetry that women readers demanded, and the kind of address that they required from their male admirers. Keats rejects success and women together, and his rejection of both is at once proud and defensive; at once an assertion of his own manly independence and a defence against the pain of rejection.⁵

⁵ In this sense, as Heinzelman insists, the joint project with his friend Reynolds offered a means for Keats at once to eschew mawkish popularity while still retaining a possibility of commercial success: “While paying respect to a great original like Boccaccio, Keats could also redirect his ardent pursuit of a poetic career into a cooperative venture (with Reynolds) that just might result in a marketable commodity as well, thus resolving his literary aspirations and his skepticism about poetry’s material status by having it both ways at once”. See Heinzelman, ‘Self-interest and the Politics of Composition in Keats’s *Isabella*’, p. 171.

I will read *Isabella* as a narrative crucially concerned with Keats's ambivalent response to a readership that he thought of as composed principally of women, and with the new status of poetry as a commodity the status of which was determined by the market. I shall compare Boccaccio's original with Keats's and Cornwall's adaptations and show that both attempt to redesign "old prose" in order to fit it for a modern market, and in doing so I shall reveal Keats's self-hating complicity with the commercial imperatives to which *Isabella*'s brothers are so callously obedient. I shall also consider the implications of 'manliness' by analysing Hazlitt's 'Lectures on English Poets' in order to reveal manliness as a value culturally produced in nineteenth-century England that quickly became a site of ideological conflicts.

1. Hazlitt's 'Lecture on Dryden and Pope'

According to Kenneth Muir, both Keats and Cornwall were inspired to adapt the *Decameron* by Hazlitt's lectures on the English Poets at the Surrey Institute, especially his lecture on Dryden and Pope.⁶ Hazlitt thought that some stories of Boccaccio might be made palatable to the 'modern' English public: "I should think that a translation of some of the other serious tales in Boccaccio and Chaucer, as that of *Isabella*, the *Falcon*, of *Constance*, the *Prioress's Tale*, and others, if executed with taste and spirit, could not fail to

⁶ Muir supports his argument that "most of Keats's famous critical remarks were crystallized from his consideration of Hazlitt's opinion" cataloguing the critical vocabulary that was used in common by both of them. On Hazlitt's literary influence on Keats, see Kenneth Muir, 'Keats and Hazlitt', in his *John Keats: A Reassessment* (Liverpool: Liverpool U.P., 1969), pp. 139-158 (p. 142).

succeed in the present day".⁷ In fact, Hazlitt does not seem to have known the *Decameron* well, and may have been conversant with only 10 stories of the 100.⁸ Wright notes that "it was Boccaccio's mastery of pathos and of sentiment that Hazlitt especially admired" and it was for this reason that "he recommended it to Byron, so that he might 'get rid of his hard bravura taste, and swash-buckler conclusions'".⁹ If so, what is meant by the "true sentiment" of which Hazlitt believed Byron destitute? It betokens, I shall argue, a kind of 'manliness' quite different from that affected by the Byronic lover as he is represented in *Don Juan*, who displays a seemingly callous and brutal indifference to the women in the poem, and by extension to the woman readers of the poem. For Hazlitt it is a kind of manliness best exemplified by Boccaccio and Dryden.

In his lecture on Dryden and Pope, it is Pope whom Hazlitt characterised as feminine.

There is none of this rough work in Pope. His Muse was on a peace-establishment, and grew somewhat effeminate by long ease and indulgence. He lived in the smiles of fortune, and basked in the favour of the great. [. . .] His Satires are not, in general, so good as his Epistles. His enmity is effeminate and petulant from a sense of weakness, as his friendship was tender from a sense of gratitude. I do not like, for instance, his character of Charters, or his characters of women. His delicacy often borders upon sickness; his fastidiousness makes others fastidious.¹⁰

⁷ Howe (ed.), *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt in Twenty-One Volumes*, vol. 5, 'Lectures on the English Poets and a View of the English Stage', p. 82.

⁸ Wright, *Boccaccio in England: from Chaucer to Tennyson*, pp. 344-349.

⁹ Wright, *Boccaccio in England: from Chaucer to Tennyson*, p. 347.

¹⁰ Howe (ed.), *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt in Twenty-One Volumes*, vol. 5, 'Lectures on the English Poets', pp. 71, 77.

Pope, according to Hazlitt, displays in his satires a “fastidious petulance” against the public which is the sign of his “effeminacy”, or unmanliness. Dryden, on the contrary, particularly in his imitations, was able to adjust himself to the taste of the readers: “his alterations from Chaucer and Boccaccio show a greater knowledge of the taste of his readers and power of pleasing them than acquaintance with the genius of his authors”¹¹. Like Porphyro who pleased Madeline with a “fine extreme of relish”, his ‘catering’ functioning as a culturally determined assumption of a manly role in his ‘stratagem’, Dryden was able to appeal to the taste of his readers in his adaptations, by displaying at once true sentiment and true manliness. It was within this context that Hazlitt mentioned the commercial possibilities of adapting Boccaccio.

If Hazlitt could detect ‘the true sentiment’ in the *Decameron*, a sort of authorial ability to please the reading public, not ‘an affected manliness’ like Byron’s, then how did Keats and Cornwall try to emulate this quality?

2. “All this wormy circumstance” and Boccaccio

¹¹ Howe (ed.), *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt in Twenty-One Volumes*, vol. 5, ‘Lectures on the English Poets’, p. 82. Here is Hazlitt’s own comparison of Dryden and Pope: “Dryden was a better prose-writer, and a bolder and more varied versifier than Pope. He was a more vigorous thinker, a more correct and logical declaimer, and had more of what may be called delicacy of feeling. Dryden’s eloquence and spirit were possessed in a higher degree by others, and in nearly the same degree by Pope himself; but that by which Pope was distinguished, was an essence which he alone possessed, and of incomparable value on that sole account”. Hazlitt, p. 79. Pope was characterised as feminine because he was associated with the French luxury in the Romantic period. By the early nineteenth century, the French were construed as an effeminate Other whose revolutionary excesses were thought to be totally foreign and much inferior to the manly, rational patriotism of the English. It is not only Hazlitt but also Hunt who castigated Pope for being Frenchified and thus effeminated. See

Keats is thought to have read the fifth edition of the anonymous English translation of the *Decameron*, with the title *The Novels and Tales of the Renowned John Boccaccio*, published in 1684.¹² It is Lisabetta's story, the fifth story of the fourth day, which Keats chose for his 'modern' adaptation, as suggested by Hazlitt. The story is narrated by Filomena, meaning 'the beloved' or, 'the lover of song'. From the very start of her story, she, as the narrator, directs her narrative to the taste of the seven "fair ladies", and through them to the women readers of fourteenth-century Italy. The sympathetic applause from the ladies when she ends her story proves her success: "the story related by Filomena was much appreciated by the ladies, for they heard this song on a number of occasions without ever succeeding, for all their inquiries, in discovering why it had been written".¹³ But it is the male author, Boccaccio, who designs this reader-oriented narrative frame, offering Keats a model of how a man might write for an audience of women without surrendering the manliness that Hazlitt had taught him to think of as characterising the work of Boccaccio and of Dryden. It is as if Keats deduced the kind of criticism to which Boccaccio was, in fact, vulnerable, as recorded by his modern translator.

Ayumi Mizukoshi, 'The Cockney Politics of Gender—the Cases of Hunt and Keats', *Romanticism on the Net*, vol. 14 (May 1999), p. 4.

¹² For the text of the Boccaccio the book consulted was Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. G. H. McWilliam, 2nd edition (London: Penguin, 1995). Wright gives a brief history of the translation of *The Decameron*, translations of which were published both in 1620, and 1640. It was the 1684 edition, a republished version of the 1620 volume that Keats is assumed to have read. On the variations between two editions and Boccaccio, and for the general characteristics of English anonymous translations, see Wright, *Boccaccio in England: from Chaucer to Tennyson*, p. 397.

¹³ Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. G. H. McWilliam, 2nd edition (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 330.

First, he says, he is accused of being a womanizer, who takes an unseemly delight in consoling and entertaining the ladies and in singing their praises. The second criticism follows on from the first, and centres on the disparity in age between himself and his young female readers. No man of Boccaccio's age, say his critics, should be discussing the ways of women and providing for their pleasure.¹⁴

Boccaccio, though accused of "being a womanizer", is enabled by this very quality to "entertain the ladies" and "provide stories for their pleasure". It is a condition of his commercial success. If he believed that Boccaccio could help him to a similar success, why did Keats wish to withhold *Isabella*, his 'sweet' adaptation, from publication, despite his publisher's enthusiasm and for all that he desperately needed money: "I could not raise any sum by the promise of any Poem—no, not by the mortgage of my intellect. We must wait a little while. I really have hopes of success. I have finish'd a Tragedy which if it succeeds will enable me to sell what I may have in manuscript to a good advantage" (*KL*, II, p. 185). If he aspired to commercial success, why did he so rapidly transfer his hopes to his newly completed tragedy, *Otho the Great*?¹⁵

Keats wrote to Woodhouse on 22 September 1819:

I will give you a few reasons why I shall persist in not publishing The Pot of Basil—it is too smokeable—I can get it smoak'd at the Carpenters shaving chimney much more cheaply—There is too much inexperience of life, and simplicity of knowledge in it—which might do very well after one's death—but not while one is alive. There are

¹⁴ Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. G. H. McWilliam, 2nd edition, 'Introduction', p. xv.

¹⁵ According to Miriam Allott, Keats had incubated his Shakespearian aspirations for a long time: "he seems, in effect, to have thought of his narratives as part of the limbering-up process by which he might prepare himself eventually for the supreme goal—the writing of a few fine plays". See Miriam Allott, 'Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes and Lamia', in Kenneth Muir (ed.), *John Keats: A Reassessment* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1969), p. 43. Keats reveals his ambition himself in his letter of 14 August 1819: "...{c}ompleted 4 Acts of a Tragedy. It was the opinion of most of my friends that I should never be able to {write} a {s}cene— I will endeavour to wipe awa{y} the prejudice—} — One of my Ambition is to make as great a revolution in modern dramatic writing as Kean has done in acting" (*KL*, II, p. 139).

very few would look to the reality. I intend to use more finesse with the Public. It is possible to write fine things which cannot be laugh'd at in any way. *Isabella* is what I should call were I a reviewer 'A weak-sided Poem' with an amusing sober-sadness about it. Not that I do not think Reynolds and you are quite right about it—it is enough for me. But this will not do to be public—If I may so say, in my dramatic capacity I enter fully into the feeling: but in *Propria Persona* I should be apt to quiz it myself—(*KL*, II, p. 174)

Keats suggests that the most 'smokeable' factor of *Isabella* is its "amusing sober sadness". It seems that *Isabella* is too 'sweet' for a tragedy, for all that it is the most tragic poem in the 1820 volume, and hence incapable of provoking a truly tragic response. 'On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again', written on 22 January 1818, just before beginning *Isabella*, can be thought of as expressing Keats's recognition of the inadequacies of romance even before he began work on the poem. Moreover, the verse epistle sent to Reynolds on 25 March 1818, just before resuming work on *Isabella*, provides additional evidence of Keats's decreasing interest in the romance genre.¹⁶ If we accept the fact that while Keats worked on *Isabella* "his mind" was "filled with the idea of the uselessness of romance for any other purpose than escape", as Stillingner suggests, then we might suspect that in writing *Isabella* Keats was attempting something more than a mere 'reversion to romance', whether his intention was to foster a new "anti-romantic realism" as Stillingner suggests, or whether, as Rajan prefers, his attempt was to bend the romance towards tragedy.¹⁷ Against Stillingner it might be pointed out that one of the

¹⁶ Stillingner, however, indicates this fact rather as an evidence of Keats's increasing interest in 'realism', or, anti-romance, while he agrees with Douglas Bush's opinion that "it seems strange that the author of the sonnet on *King Lear* and the *Epistle to Reynolds* could, in the same few months, produce *Isabella*". Jack Stillingner, 'Keats and Romance: The Reality of *Isabella*', *The Hoodwinking of Madeline: and Other Essays on Keats's Poems* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971), pp. 33-37.

¹⁷ Rajan describes Keats's late romances, like *Isabella*, *Lamia* and *The Eve of St. Agnes*, as poems 'on the threshold of tragedy'. The main characteristics of his late romances, therefore,

conspicuous differences of Keats's adaptation from Boccaccio's story is its 'idealization' of the pitiable love between Isabella and Lorenzo. The two brothers of Isabella are depicted as more malign villains than Lisabetta's three brothers, which allows the narrative structure to be more overtly antithetical in its contrast between ideal love and cold actuality.¹⁸ The purer the love of Isabella and Lorenzo, the farther from "the wormy circumstances" of the secular, the more pity might be incited.

Boccaccio's Lisabetta is depicted as a more active and aggressive woman than the Isabella of Keats. It is she who first entices Lorenzo, the young Pisan of "dashing and handsomely proportioned" appearance.¹⁹ When he is said to "abandon all his amours and begin to set his own heart on winning Lisabetta", he is established as a rather typical handsome young man, a gay blade rather than a romantic lover, realistic rather than idealised. It is Lisabetta who makes nocturnal visits to Lorenzo's "sleeping quarters", and it is this that incites her brothers to murder Lorenzo. Moreover, it is Lisabetta herself who excavates and decapitates the corpse of Lorenzo without any assistance from her maidservant. By contrast, Keats highlights Isabella's womanliness by giving her a nurse as a collaborator in disinterring Lorenzo, just as Madeline in *The Eve of St Agnes* is given Angela. Also, Keats focuses on the mutual love between Isabella and Lorenzo from the very beginning of the poem, using the

arc for Rajan derived from the co-existence within them of Keats's ironic revision of the romance mode and the tragic adaptation of a Hellenic mode. See Tilottama Rajan, *Dark Interpreter: The Discourse of Romanticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), p. 99.

¹⁸ Everest summarises the general opinion of the structure of *Isabella* when he suggests that it is founded on the contrast of two worlds, 'imaginative idealism' vs. 'rationalist empiricism': "The lovers in the poem embody an idealism, founded on an imaginary conception of the good life in a close union of spiritual and physical modes of fulfillment, which is opposite to, and thwarted by, the cold, hard-headed pragmatic realism and financial acumen of the brothers". See Kelvin Everest, 'Isabella in the Market-Place: Keats and Feminism', in Nicholas Roe (ed.), *Keats and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 112.

plural noun “they” successively: “They could not... / They could not... / They could not...” (3-8), although Lorenzo is given a lower social status and less striking physical attractions than Boccaccio allows him.

Another major difference flows from this. Boccaccio’s Lisabetta is a passionate lover whereas Keats’s Isabella seems to feel a love for Lorenzo that one would rather characterise as maternal. As Heinzelman points out, Isabella’s labour in exhuming Lorenzo’s body is analogous in Keats’s poem to the labour of childbirth: “although in Isabella’s life there will be no infants, yet with her nurse at her side Isabella next gives birth”.²⁰ Isabella’s love for Lorenzo is frequently identified with maternal love:

Until sweet Isabella’s untouch’d cheek

Fell sick within the rose’s just domain,

Fell thin as a young mother’s, who doth seek

By every lull to cool her infant’s pain:
(33-36)

She tends the pot of basil as if it were her baby: “And when she left, she hurried back, as swift / As bird on wing to breast its eggs again; / And, patient as a hen-bird, sat her there / Beside her basil, weeping through her hair” (469-472). In the same way, Keats’s Lorenzo becomes childlike as soon as he falls in love with Isabella: “Fever’d his high conceit of such a bride, / Yet brought him to the meekness of a child ; / Alas! When passion is both meek and wild!” (46-48). Consequently, when Isabella is deprived of her pot of basil by the

¹⁹ Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, p. 366.

brothers, she becomes not so much like Iseult, wailing for the loss of her lover, Tristram, as a Niobe, driven insane by the loss of her children:²¹

Piteous she look'd on dead and senseless things,
 Asking for her lost basil amorously;
 And with melodious chuckle in the strings
 Of her lorn voice, she oftentimes would cry
 After the pilgrim in his wanderings,
 To ask him where her basil was; and why
 'Twas hid from her: 'For cruel 'tis,' said she,
 'To steal my basil-pot away from me.'
 (489-496)

Given this, it is inevitable that the poem should lack the erotic intensity of *The Eve of St Agnes* or *Endymion*, because any such intensity would compromise Keats's emphasis on maternal love rather than erotic ecstasy: "Parting they seem'd to tread upon the air, / 'Twin roses by the zephyr blown apart / Only to meet again more close, and share / The inward fragrance of each other's heart" (73-76). Their consummation seems both less erotic and less physical, and hence, less substantial than those of *Endymion* and *The Eve of St. Agnes*. In this way, Keats establishes Isabella's love as more ideal, less disturbingly physical, and hence more easily pitiable. It is a love very little likely to offend a woman reader.

²⁰ Heinzelman persuasively points out that Isabella has an "ego-emptying kind of love for Lorenzo", which can be identified as the essential factor of maternity. See Heinzelman, 'Self-Interest and the Politics of Composition in Keats's *Isabella*', p. 165.

The other important alteration is the different characterisation of the brothers. The ruling vice of Keats's brothers is their avarice, a rather awkward vice for the romance genre.²² What drives them to kill Lorenzo is their desire to make a good bargain for their sister in the marriage market: "When 'twas their plan to coax her by degrees / To some high noble and his olive-trees" (167-168).

How was it these same ledger-men could spy

Fair Isabella in her downy nest?

How could they find out in Lorenzo's eye

A straying from his toil? Hot Egypt's pest

Into their vision covetous and sly!

How could these money-bags see east and west? --

Yet so they did - and every dealer fair

Must see behind, as doth the hunted hare.
(137-144)²³

²¹ Heinzelman convincingly suggests that Isabella is reminiscent of Niobe, the acme of maternity. See Heinzelman, 'Self-Interest and the Politics of Composition in Keats's *Isabella*', p. 166.

²² After Watkins, it has become the general consensus between critics that the characterisation of the two brothers as 'capitalistic exploiters' may be regarded as a reflection of the reality of nineteenth century industrialism in England. Furthermore, Watkins insists that the *Decameron* should be recognised as a "suitable source for a poem (*Isabella*) about the transition from feudalism to commercialism" (p. 199), and at the same time concerned with the ideological dimensions of the emerging commercial world. In other words, Keats's concern with social transition may be mirrored in his transition of interest from the romance genre to kinds of anti-romance. See Daniel P. Watkins, *Keats's Poetry and the Politics of the Imagination*, (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1989), p.57 and note 7 (p. 199).

²³ According to Everest, in the cancelled stanza between stanzas 17 and 18, Keats intended to make the contrast between two worlds clearer: "In these cancelled lines Keats all but spells out the terms by which the brothers are set in thematic opposition to the lovers; a juxtaposition that is also strongly emphasized by the stylistic contrasts". See Everest, 'Isabella in the Market-Place: Keats and Feminism', p. 117. Here is the cancelled stanza:

Two young Orlandos far away they seem'd,
But on a near inspect their vapid Miens -
Very alike, - at once themselves redeem'd
From all suspicion of Romantic spleens -

The two brothers are depicted here at once as predatory hunters and as omniscient spies, as intently focused on their sister's doings as if she had been a valuable piece of merchandise, which for them of course she is. By contrast, Boccaccio gives Lisabetta's three brothers an almost respectable motive for murder. Their sister's love affair threatens them with "ignominy" by bringing "discredit upon her family". They decide to kill Lorenzo so that "the affair should leave no stain upon the reputation either of themselves or of their sister" in Messina. Like Keats's two brothers in *Isabella* they are cruel, but in comparison their cruelty seems a perversion of brotherly love. At the very least they act out of a misplaced sense of family honour, and they display nothing of the sly, predatory quality that Keats ascribes to his brothers. Keats seems to recognize his infidelity to his model, because his description of the brothers as "ledger-men" prompts him to apologise to his source: "O eloquent and famed Boccaccio! / Of thee we now should ask forgiving boon, / . . . / For venturing syllables that ill beseem / The quiet glooms of such a pitcous theme" (145-152).

Lastly, Keats transforms Lorenzo, who in Boccaccio is an accomplished and dashing young lover, into a figure of near infantile puerility, insists on his subordinate social status, and deprives him of all the eloquence that we might expect in a successful lover. Keats's Lorenzo entirely lacks the aggressive, dominating male qualities of Porphyro. Lorenzo has no stratagems. Indeed, the

No fault of theirs, for their good Mother dream'd
 In the longing time of Units in their teens
 Of proudly-- bas'd addition and of net --
 And both their backs were mark'd with tare and tret.

one stratagem of the poem, and a poor enough stratagem at that, the concealment of Lorenzo's head in the pot of basil, is given to Isabella. It is Lorenzo's passivity, his status simply as victim of the powerful, that has prompted some critics to identify him with Keats himself. But if Lorenzo is a self-portrait, it is a self-portrait born out of self-hatred and self-contempt:

Isabel and Lorenzo, both representative of the 'dispossessed', dependent on the largesse of the monied economy the brothers embody, stand in relation to the brothers as Keats stood to Abbey and the larger culture. The identification reveals that Keats felt himself to be both 'Feminized' and infantilized, a 'mankin' (in Byron's notoriously mocking use of the term).²⁴

Of the three lovers represented by Boccaccio, Keats and Barry Cornwall, Cornwall's Guido is the most distinguished in his appearance and lineage.²⁵ His social status is raised, and he is depicted as the last member of the famous house, driven to exile at Geona. It is Cornwall's aim to develop Guido into a 'romantic' figure, fit for manly adventures and captivating to women, and in achieving this Cornwall contrived a poem so appealing to contemporary readers, many of them we must presume women, that it went through three editions in two years. It may be that Keats was prompted to make his Lorenzo so inappropriately a contemptible figure in part because Keats recognised himself as he wrote the poem as a man intent on fulfilling what seemed to him the degrading ambition of pleasing the ladies, writing a poem designed specifically to appeal to the women readers that he could not bring himself not to despise.

²⁴ Diane Long Hoeveler, 'Decapitating Romance: Class, Fetish, and Ideology in Keats's *Isabella*', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, vol. 49, no. 3 (1994), p. 328.

Boccaccio clearly identifies his narrator as feminine. It is Filomena who tells the story, and she directs it chiefly to her women listeners. She holds their attention by the speedy colloquial style of her narrative, avoiding description and digression that might threaten to weaken her hold on her readers' attention. Filomena also allows Lisabetta the dominant role within the narrative. Lorenzo's voice remains inaudible, buried within the narrative as effectually as his head will be buried in the pot of basil. Even after Lorenzo is murdered, Lizabetta retains her control of the narrative by her persistent and audacious questioning of her brothers about Lorenzo. Even to the last, her song is accusatory "Whoever it was, / Whoever the villain, / That stole my pot of herbs" (330), is strikingly different from the song of Isabella: "O cruelty, / To steal my basil-pot away from me!" (503-504).

Cornwall manipulates the story in order to intensify suspense. By telling the story from the masked ball scene, where Isabella looks for Guido unaware that he is already dead, the narrator successfully stimulates the readers' curiosity. In addition, Cornwall romanticizes the story as much as possible in order to appeal to the sentimentalism of the romance readers who admired poets such as Mary Tighe and Mary Robinson, downplaying as far as he could the story's more gruesome elements. Both Boccaccio and Cornwall, we might say, write narratives addressed very specifically to audiences of women, but they remain quite different audiences. Boccaccio is able to employ a woman narrator and show her addressing herself specifically to other women without at all compromising the quality that Hazlitt admired in him, the 'true

²⁵ For the text of the poem, see Barry Cornwall, *A Sicilian Story* (London: C & J. Ollier, 1820).

sentiment' which marked Boccaccio as a writer of true 'manliness', a manliness that had no need to display itself in the "hard bravura taste and swash-buckler conclusions" that Hazlitt associated with Byron. But no one could imagine that Hazlitt would have detected a similar manliness in Barry Cornwall's poem. By 1820, it might seem, it was impossible to address a female readership without the poet feminising himself.

Keats's telling of the story seems to lack the easy confidence of Boccaccio's. One of the signs of this increased self-consciousness is that his narration has none of Boccaccio's directness. Keats's narrative manner is characteristically digressive,²⁶ and none of the digressions is more revealing than that in which Keats pauses to make an apology to the writer he is adapting:²⁷

Grant thou a pardon here, and then the tale

Shall move on soberly, as it is meet;

'There is no other crime, no mad assail

To make old prose in modern rhyme more sweet:

But it is done - succeed the verse or fail -

²⁶ In another view of the function of digression in the poem, Louise Smith argues that the digression works to "interrupt their idyll by reminding the reader not to waste his tears on lovers' sorrows", but rather to keep a "balance between the romantic sympathy for the lovers and the realistic detachment". See Louise Z. Smith, 'The Material Sublime: Keats and *Isabella*', *SIR*, vol. 13 (1974), p. 306. Susan Wolfson focuses her argument on the importance of digression as a sign of New Romance: "these suspensions of story-telling are not displays of humorous narrative incompetence or willy satiric inversion; they are acts of scrutiny that yield critical vantage points on the code of the romance genre". In other words, digression is a deliberate device to "provoke us to reread this tale in a way that calls into question the manner of its telling and the manner of its listening". See Susan Wolfson, 'Keats's *Isabella* and the Digressions of Romance', *Criticism Quarterly JNL Literature & Arts*, vol. 27 (Summer, 1985), pp. 249-251.

²⁷ Heinzelman suggests that Keats's narrator has the same role as the chorus of the Greek Tragedy, who intrudes, comments, bemoans, questions and chastises the public. See Kurt Heinzelman, 'Self-Interest and the Politics of Composition in Keats's *Isabella*', *ELH*, vol. 55 (1988), p. 174.

To honour thee, and thy gone spirit greet,
 To stead thee as a verse in English tongue,
 An echo of thee in the north wind sung.
 (153-160)

Keats registers here that his very project embarrasses him, making “old prose in modern rhyme more sweet”. It is as if he writes his poem as an act of homage to Boccaccio, and also as an attempt to win favour with the poetry-reading public of the early nineteenth century, and the result is that the poem is embarrassed by Keats’s recognition that the two objectives are inconsistent. In celebrating Boccaccio Keats places himself in the great tradition of writers to which it was his highest ambition to belong, and for Keats this was an exclusively male tradition. And yet, by writing a poem explicitly addressed to an audience of women, to a “Fair reader”, Keats seemed to himself to have betrayed his right to a place within that very tradition. So it is that Keats in *Isabella* contrives at once to write a poem designed to appeal to women, and a poem that, by dwelling on “wormy circumstance”, by showing Isabella kissing a “soiled glove” and a decomposed head, seems wantonly to risk alienating the very readership that it addresses. It is an embarrassment that Keats seems to confront in the poem’s most embarrassed stanza:

Ah! Wherefore all this wormy circumstance?
 Why linger at the yawning tomb so long?
 For the gentleness of old Romance,
 This simple plaining of a minstrel’s song!
 Fair reader, at the old tale take a glance,

For here, in truth, it doth not well belong

To speak: - O turn thee to the very tale,

And taste the music of that vision pale.

(385-392)

It is a stanza in which Keats mourns his own belatedness, a belatedness that has deprived him of the readership that Boccaccio could so confidently address, a readership in which the 'Fair reader' would not be offended by "wormy circumstance". Possibly the most famous of all criticisms of *Isabella* is that included by Matthew Arnold in the preface to his *Poems* of 1853. After praising the poem as "a perfect treasure-house of graceful and felicitous words and images", he adds:

Let the reader after he has finished the poem of Keats, turn to the same story in the *Decameron*: he will then feel how pregnant and interesting the same action has become in the hands of a great artist, who above all things delineates his object; who subordinates expression to that which it is designed to express.²⁸

There is no clearer indication of Keats's divided purposes in *Isabella* than that Arnold's suggestion is anticipated by Keats himself: "O turn thee to the very tale".

²⁸ Kenneth Allott (ed.), *The Poems of Matthew Arnold* (London: Longmans, 1965), p. 601.

IV. *The Eve of St. Agnes:*

“purple riot” and a Readerly Stratagem

Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes and Other Poems (1820) is the third and final volume that John Keats published during his life. In comparison with the sale of 4,000 copies of Lord Byron's *Child Harold Canto IV*, its success was unremarkable. As his publisher, John Taylor, commented to John Clare: “we have some Trouble to get through 500 Copies of his Work, though it is highly spoken of in the periodical Works”.¹ Taylor was not the first of Keats's publishers who had ‘trouble’ with book sales. Charles and James Ollier, publishers of his first collection, the 1817 *Poems*, declined further dealings with Keats because of his poor sales. Moreover, *Endymion*, published by Taylor in April 1818, had been violently attacked by the critics and had sold poorly.

By the end of 1818 Keats was driven to the somewhat desperate recourse of asserting at once his determination to write for the benefit of mankind, and his defiant carelessness of the response to his poems of ordinary men and women. He wrote to Haydon on December 22, 1818:

I have a little money which may enable me to study and to travel three or four years—I never expect to get any thing by my Books: and moreover I wish to avoid publishing—I admire Human Nature but I do not like *Men*—I should like to compose things honorable to Man—but

¹ Edmund Blunden, *Keats's Publisher: a Memoir of John Taylor* (London: J. Cape, 1936), pp. 111-112. Blunden also records that: Keats was paid £100 for the copyright and at the time of his death his publishers claimed to have suffered a loss of £110 from their publication of *Endymion*. Blunden, *Keats's Publishers*, p. 85. Matthews mentions this fact as well in G. M. Matthews (ed.), *Keats: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 8.

not fingerable over by *Men*. So I am anxious to exist with[out] troubling the printer's devil or drawing upon Men's and Women's admiration—in which great solitude I hope God will give me strength to rejoice. (*KL*, I, p. 415, Keats's italics)

His distinction between the singular noun 'Man' and the plural 'Men' indicates that he has been driven to postulate two readerships. In his letters, particularly to his publishers, but significantly not in his letters to his brother, George, Keats outspokenly denies that he is at all concerned with the judgement of the second readership, that consisting of the leisured, moneyed people who constituted the actual reading public and determined the sales figures of volumes of poetry.

I feel every confidence that if I choose I may be a popular writer; that I will never be; but for all that I will get a livelihood—I equally dislike the favour of the public with the love of a woman—they are both a cloying treacle to the wings of independence. I shall ever consider them (People) as debtors to me for verses, not myself to them for admiration—which I can do without (*KL*, II, p. 144).

Keats, in fact, however, could not always despise and disregard "Men's and Women's admiration", and, sometimes reluctantly, sometimes voluntarily, he appeals for their favour, and to make such an appeal was for Keats especially humiliating because he was aware that the poetry-reading public was composed disproportionately of women:

Some part of Keats's ambivalence towards his audience—including his reluctance to revise to meet its needs and tastes—derives from issues of gender, issues already hinted at not only in phrases like

'manly singleness' and 'manly vigour' but in the association of public favour with 'the love of a woman'²

Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes and Other Poems is the volume through which this ambivalence may be best explored. For Keats, this volume was his first chance to "try the public" since the failure of *Endymion*,³ and, of the three volumes that he published, it is the one that seems marked most clearly by an anxious sense of the responses that it will provoke from its readers.

1. "Try the Public Again"

The Eve of St. Agnes enables us to trace Keats's attempt to "try the public again" through the history of two draft versions. Keats wrote the first draft perhaps during the early months of 1819. In September 1819, however, he revised the draft for publication by making three significant alterations.⁴ First, he added one stanza after line 54. Secondly, he revised lines 314-322. Lastly, he re-wrote the final stanza. In addition to these revisions there are other differences between the revised fair copy, and *W1* and *W2*, two manuscript books of Richard Woodhouse, including an additional stanza after line 27 in

² Zachary Leader, *Revision and Romantic Authorship* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 298.

³ According to Leader, who is in agreement on this matter with McGann and Levinson, the question of commercial and critical reception is suggested "not only by the creation and revision of 'Isabella', 'Hyperion', and 'The Eve of St. Agnes', but by the 1820 collection as a whole". See Leader, *Revision and Romantic Authorship*, p. 311.

⁴ On the history of the revision 'The Eve of St. Agnes', see Jack Stillinger, *The Hoodwinking of Madeline and Other Essays on Keats's Poems* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971), Appendix II, pp. 158-166 and Stillinger, *The Text of Keats's Poems* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), pp. 214-220.

W1, *W2*, and slight differences in lines 340-342, and 350-351 in *W1*, *W2* from the copy text.⁵ This textual history is very important in two senses.

The publishers preferred the original draft, which we may consider a more 'effeminate' version of the romance, whereas Keats wanted to publish the revised version, a version in which the revisions seem self-consciously to aspire to a manner that Keats associated with Byron's *Don Juan*, a manner that Byron considered distinctively, even exclusively masculine. If we compare the two drafts, we can surmise Keats's own 'stratagem': in the first version he woos the reader with a certain shy tenderness, which is compromised in the second by insertions that seem marked by a more brutal masculine assertiveness. But this is to over-simplify. It would be truer to say that an uneasy alternation between the two manners is evident in all texts of the poem,

⁵ Here, in brief, is Stillinger's account of the various transcripts of the poem. Charles Brown, one of Keats's closest associates since 1818, began copying Keats's poems during the walking tour to Scotland in the summer of 1818. By the spring of 1820 he had compiled "four MS books in my hand writing of Mr. Keats's Poems" that was given to Milnes in 1841. Of the forty-three texts of Brown, thirty-nine are at Harvard. The Harvard transcripts are all from the MS volumes that Brown gave Milnes. Brown's MS may have included some or all of the four long poems published in 1820—*Lamia*, *Isabella*, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, *Hyperion*. Some of his copies became the principal authorial MS versions after Keats gave away or discarded the holographs from which they were made. Brown's MSS were seen and copied by Dilke, George Keats and Woodhouse. Woodhouse in particular made extensive use of taking texts and noting headings, dates, and variants from more than thirty of them, extant and lost. Twenty-four of Brown's texts serve as copy-texts in the present edition. Richard Woodhouse, a legal and literary advisor of Keats's publishers, Taylor and Hessey, made or directed various clerks in making no fewer than 182 of the surviving transcripts of Keats's poems. The extant materials fall into eight groups including *W3*, *W2*, *W1*, the sigla of Garrod, which are retained by Stillinger as well. *W3*, twenty-nine of the transcripts, were once part of a scrapbook that contains not only poems by Keats but a great many letters, poems, and other documents connected with Keats. In general they seem to be a group of preliminary transcripts that were set aside after he recopied the poems in *W2*. The *W2* book of transcripts at Harvard contains—all in Woodhouse's hand—copies of seventy-three Keats poems and two sonnets by J. H. Reynolds. This is the collection that Woodhouse took the most care with, entering variants, sources, dates, and annotations. The *W1* book of transcripts, also preserved at Harvard, contains thirty-four copies of Keats poems in Woodhouse's hand. These appear to be a partial set of duplicates, perhaps for insurance against the loss of the *W2* copies. For more details, see Stillinger (ed.), *The Poems of John Keats* (London: Heinemann, 1978), Appendix V, pp. 741-752; Stillinger, *The Text of Keats's Poems* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), pp. 214-220; 'The Eve of St. Agnes', in his *The Hoodwinking of Madeline and Other*

and that the revisions function only to make the discords more strident. In comparison with *Endymion* or with the knight at arms of 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', Porphyro seems a confidently self-assertive lover, whose task is to rescue from her captivity the seemingly innocent and virginal Madeline. But Keats never seems quite comfortable with the uncomplicated display of masculinity that the poem's plot seems to demand, and the revised version leaves intact almost all the elements of the poem that so clearly distinguish it from a Byronic love-roman.

It was Richard Woodhouse who first copied Keats's original draft and commented on his revisions. His letter to Taylor of 19 September 1819 makes clear that Keats disagreed with Taylor's own view that the new volume should open with *Isabella*, because he considered the poem "too mawkish", and that Keats was more satisfied with *The Eve of St Agnes* and *Lamia*.⁶ Keats seems concerned that *Isabella* would leave him vulnerable to the same kind of criticism to which *Endymion* had been subjected, whereas the other two narrative poems seemed to him better protected against the charge of 'mawkishness' by virtue of sharing a poetic character that Keats seems to equate with 'manliness'. This lends support to an assumption that the revisions of *The Eve of St Agnes* are intended to stamp the poem with a more aggressively masculine character, and thus to armour it still more strongly against a charge of mawkishness or effeminacy. But the responses of both Woodhouse and Taylor indicate their conviction that Keats had avoided

Essays on Keats's Poems (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971), Appendix II, pp. 158-166.

effeminacy only at the cost of alienating the feminine, and women readers, as both knew, constituted a market that no publisher of poetry could afford to ignore:

As the Poem was origy written, *we* innocent ones (ladies & myself) might very well have supposed that Porphyro, when acquainted with Madeline's love for him, & when "he arose, Etherial flush'd &c &c (turn to it) set himself at once to persuade her to go off with him, & succeeded & went over the "Dartmoor black"(now changed for some other place) to be married, in right honest chaste & sober wise. But, as it is now altered, as soon as M. has confessed her love, P. <instead> winds by degrees his arm round her, presses breast to breast, and acts all the acts of a bonâ fide husband, while she fancies she is only playing the part of a Wife in a dream. (*KL*, II, p. 163)

If 'mawkishness', as Kurt Heinzelman argues, denotes a poetic manner bent on "capturing an audience by capitalizing on its sentimentality, on the popular sense of what will 'succeed'",⁷ then the readily available alternative seems to be to develop a poetic mode designed to outrage the audience's feelings, and Byron had shown in *Don Juan* how such a mode might even win popular and commercial success. As an alternative to a "too smokeable" effeminacy Keats chooses,⁸ especially in his revisions, to develop a cynical and masculine character that allows him, in the poem's style as much as in its plot, to address his women readers with the same kind of confident, sometimes

⁶ See Woodhouse's letter to John Taylor of 19 September 1819. Hayder Edward Rollins (ed.), *The Letters of John Keats* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), vol. II, p. 162.

⁷ Kurt Heinzelman, 'Self-Interest and the Politics of Composition in Keats's *Isabella*', *ELH*, vol. 55 (1988), p. 168.

⁸ Not only the first version of *The Eve of St. Agnes* but also *Endymion* had been criticised because of its effeminacy. *Endymion*, Keats's first attempt in the romance genre, was impeached by the Tory critics due to its 'smokeable' characteristics, which seem to include a certain 'unmanliness'. It is true that Keats, as Leader acknowledges, was placed in the difficult position of being required at once to write 'manly' poetry and poetry that appealed to women readers: "Keats's needed women in order to achieve immediate success and thus support himself as a poet; yet many of the qualities for which his poems were ridiculed by the critics were implicitly female or 'unmanly'". See Leader, *Revision and Romantic Authorship* p. 299.

brutal, disregard for 'feminine sensitivities' that many contemporary readers identified as the distinguishing characteristic of *Don Juan*.

Woodhouse disliked the revised draft. Taylor represented it still more severely as "the most stupid piece of folly", and a decision likely to provoke exactly the response that Keats seemed to have intended to evade, ensuring that the new volume would be met with "the same Neglect or Censure" that *Endymion* had received. He wrote in his letter to Woodhouse of 25 September 1819:

Had he known truly what the Society and what the Suffrages of Women are worth, he would never have thought of depriving himself of them. —So far as he is unconsciously silly in this Proceeding I am sorry for him, but for the rest I cannot but confess to you that it excites in me the Strongest Sentiments of Disapprobation—Therefore my dear Richd if he will not so far concede to my Wishes as to leave the passage as it originally stood, I must be content to admire his Poems with some other Imprint, & in so doing I can reap as much Delight from the Perusal of them as if they were our own property, without having the disquieting Consideration attached to them of our approving, by the "Imprimatur", those Parts which are unfit for publication. (*KL*, II, p. 183)

According to Woodhouse's letter to Taylor of 19 September 1819, Keats's revisions were intended to secure two effects: one was "to make the legend more intelligible" and the other was to "leave on the reader a sense of pettish disgust" by the darkened ending. For Taylor, however, the revisions showed only that Keats was "too dull to discover Right from Wrong in Matters of moral Taste", and rendered the poem "unfit for publication". It seemed to Taylor that Keats's revisions demonstrated his ignorance of the commercial importance of women readers, and that this in itself, paradoxically, displayed a failure of masculine intelligence, because being a man, to Taylor, meant

“facing up to the facts of the audience and the value of women that is, knowing what women ‘are worth’ in several senses”.⁹ If Keats’s revisions are inspired by the self-imposed need to confront the world with a ‘manly defiance’, then, how does he manage such a ‘stratagem’? Nor is the question confined to the revised version, for even in the first draft there is intermittent evidence of a desire to cultivate an authorial stance characterised by its manly defiance.

2. A Stratagem and Revision

Porphyro, especially in the revised consummation scene, reminds us of the more impetuous ‘knightliness’ of the protagonist in the *Indicator* text of ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’ who dominates la belle dame and his narrative simultaneously, unlike the ‘androgynous’ Endymion or the ‘haggard’ knight-at-arms of the Brown / 1848 text. Madeline in the revised text, especially in her relationship with her dauntless lover, resembles la belle dame of the *Indicator* text who readily falls in love and willingly submits to the sexual demands of her lover, and is quite unlike the Indian Maid or Cynthia of *Endymion*, or the femme fatale of the Brown text. If Keats aims at “making the legend more intelligible” through revising the bed chamber scene (II, 314-322), how does this greater clarity alter his mode of address to his readership, and what is the ‘stratagem’ involved?

⁹ Leader, *Revision and Romantic Authorship*, p. 305.

In their treatment of Porphyro modern critics have in the main alternated between two approaches: one is Earl R. Wasserman's, the other is Jack Stillinger's. For the former Porphyro makes a spiritual pilgrimage in the course of the poem, ascending higher by stages until he arrives at transcendent reality in Madeline's bed, hence, the union between the human Porphyro and the ideal Madeline, "the completed form of all completeness by the magic of St. Agnes's Eve",¹⁰ unites the mortal and the divine in a consummation very similar to that achieved in the union of Endymion and Cynthia.¹¹ Stillinger, on the contrary, focuses on Porphyro's "peeping Tomism", so that he, "the villainous seducer", is regarded as representing the ordinary cruelties of life in the world.¹² At the same time, Madeline, "a victim of self-deception", is a "hoodwinked dreamer" rather than the emblem of immaculate spirituality. In short, *The Eve of St Agnes*, like many other poems by Keats, represents life as "a complexity of pleasure and pain".¹³ Neither of these two approaches, however, is able fully to explain Keats's own 'stratagem' and the perplexed relationship with his readership that the stratagem reveals.

It is best to begin with a consideration of the genre within which Keats writes. Stuart Curran has pointed out the centrality of the romance in Keats's entire oeuvre.

¹⁰ Earl R. Wasserman, *The Finer Tone: Keats's Major Poems* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1953), p. 107.

¹¹ On Keats's metaphysical interest in the action of imagination in the dream of Madeline, see Wasserman, *The Finer Tone: Keats's Major Poems*, pp. 84-137.

¹² Stillinger, *The Hoodwinking of Madeline and Other Essays on Keats's Poems*, p. 83.

¹³ On more details, see Stillinger, *The Hoodwinking of Madeline and Other Essays on Keats's Poems*, pp. 67-93 (p. 93).

It is an interesting fact that the only titles Keats used in presenting his three poetic volumes to the public are romances: *Endymion* is followed in 1820 by *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes and Other Poems*, whose identified titles are romances in the mode of the Greek (in couplets), Italian (in ottava rima) and British (in Spenserian stanzas). .

..

Keats in his romances writes wholly within the liminal. The art is polished to a high sheen, but it is without question the art of Scott and Shelley, and even, with its touches of wit, the art of Moore. Most particularly, it is the art of Byron, who in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*—with its sinuous, associative structure, its doubled sensibility, its innumerable thresholds between antitheses, its endless demystification, and equally inexhaustible quest—wrote the quintessential romance of the period.¹⁴

Even though Curran does not note it, we may suspect an interrelationship between Keats's recurrent choice of the 'romance' title for publication and his consciousness of Scott's and Byron's commercial success. But it was a success that seemed to result from their re-creation of the romance as a 'manly' genre. There is at least a suggestive analogy between the 'stratagem' that Porphyro uses to position himself for his attempt on Madeline, and the 'stratagem' by which Keats sought to win his way into the affections of the reading public.¹⁵

According to Karla Alwes, Porphyro has two roles in this poem: one is to awaken Madeline to consciousness and the other is to restore her passion and her own vision. As Alwes points out "it is a strangely aberrant role for Keats's male, but, as the only character to live outside the castle and, thus, outside the

¹⁴ See Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 150-151.

¹⁵ According to Sperry, Angela's objections to Porphyro's intruding into Madeline's chamber forced him partly to conceal, and partly to disguise his full intention. In this sense, Angela could be identified with Keats's publishers: "It is somewhat ironical to reflect that the hero's plight was in certain ways similar to Keats's own when he discovered that passages in the completed manuscript of the poem offended the scruples of his publishers and he was forced to revise them, partly unwillingly, to bring them into conformity with the demands of propriety".

religious ceremony that has caused the blindness, he is the only one in the poem capable of such restoration".¹⁶ It is true that Porphyro is a sufficiently aggressive male hero to propose a stratagem to Angela as soon as he realizes that tonight is the eve of St. Agnes:

Sudden a thought came like a full-blown rose,
 Flushing his brow, and in his pained heart
 Made purple riot; then doth he propose
 A stratagem, that makes the beldame start:
 (136-139)

There is a marked discrepancy between the 'riot' in his heart, and his emphatic protestations that his intentions are wholly innocent: "'I will not harm her, by all saints I swear,' / Quoth Porphyro: 'O may I ne'er find grace / When my weak voice shall whisper its last prayer / If one of her soft ringlets I displace, / Or look with ruffian passion in her face: / Good Angela, believe me by these tears'" (145-150). What is the riot that he imagines exactly? On the surface, his promise is that he will restrict his role to that of the voyeur.¹⁷ Angela's response, however, anticipates a closer contact between the two:

See Stuart M. Sperry, *Keats the Poet* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 212-213.

¹⁶ Karla Alwes, *Imagination Transformed: The Evolution of the Female Character in Keats's Poetry* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), p. 79. According to Alwes, the name Porphyro derives from the Greek word for 'purple', 'porphura', which denotes passion, wine and sensuality, whereas the name Madeline connotes 'obsessive piety'. See Alwes, *Imagination Transformed: The Evolution of the Female Character in Keats's Poetry*, pp. 80-81.

¹⁷ Bennett argues that voyeurism itself, or gazing, could be dangerous and harmful to Madeline because it is related to the power of seeing: "Despite the fact that Porphyro promises not to harm Madeline by his gaze, not to 'look with ruffian passion in her face' looking in 'St. Agnes' is represented as potentially violent: sight constitutes power – the power of seeing and of not

'All eates and dainties shall be stored there
 Quickly on this feast-night; by the tambour frame
 Her own lute thou wilt see: no time to spare,
 For I am slow and feeble, and scarce dare
 On such a catering trust my dizzy head.
 Wait here, my child, with patience; kneel in prayer
 The while: Ah! Thou must needs the lady wed,
 Or may I never leave my grave among the dead.'
 (173-180)

His role is 'catering' for Madeline's enjoyment by providing food and music.¹⁸

It is by means of his role as caterer, as Alwes suggests, that Porphyro turns from a passive voyeur to an active seducer.¹⁹

In the revised version, Keats grants this 'catering' role to Porphyro more emphatically by adding one stanza and altering several lines.

'Twas said her future lord would there appear
 Offering, as sacrifice - all in the dream -
 Delicious food, even to her lips brought near:

being seen". See Andrew Bennett, *Keats, Narrative and Audience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p.99.

¹⁸ According to Leader, the role of 'catering' to the audience, especially when the audience is conceived of as female, again opens Keats to the accusation of weakness, effeminacy and lack of power, because of its class associations: "on the one hand, women's tastes are conceived of as inferior, women in general associated with subordination, as in such sub-definitions of 'Cockney' [...] as 'a squeamish or effeminate fellow. [...] Sometimes applied to a squeamish, over-nice, wanton, or affected woman', or 'a derisive appellation for a townsman, as the type of effeminacy in contrast to the hardier inhabitants of the country'; on the other hand, the specific women who bought and read books of poetry, and made poetical careers, were Keats's social superiors, and thus resented". See Leader, *Revision and Romantic Authorship*, p. 301.

¹⁹ Alwes regards this festive food as providing an oral analogy for genital enjoyment, so that Porphyro's supper can be construed as an initiation into sex. See Alwes, *Imagination Transformed: The Evolution of the Female Character in Keats's Poetry*, p. 85.

Viands, and wine, and fruit, and sugar'd cream,
 To touch her palate with the fine extreme
 Of relish: then soft music heard, and then
 More pleasures follow'd in a dizzy stream
 Palpable almost; then to wake again
 Warm in the virgin morn, no weeping Magdalen.
 (Added stanza after 54 of the first draft)²⁰

This added stanza replete with opulent sensual images suggests very clearly what Porphyro will do as “her future lord”; that is, to entertain her with ‘palpable’ sexuality. The final line is ambiguous, but, on the most obvious reading, it contrasts rather than equates Madeline with the “virgin” morn. She will awaken as a “Magdalen”, that is, as a sexually experienced woman, but she will be happily unrepentant, and hence she will not be “weeping”. Moreover, if we connect this added stanza with stanza 6 of the original, it is clear that the situation has become a more male-dominated one. According to stanza 6, the virgins are required to be supine, motionless:

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 that they desire.
 (52-54)

²⁰ Stillinger, *The Poems of John Keats*, p. 301.

It is in such a supine condition that her lover tantalises her with “the fine extreme of relish”. It seems a consummation in which the woman’s role is that of passive partner rather than the reciprocal union that Keats pursues as an ideal relationship between authorship and readership in *Endymion*. It is also quite different from the emasculated ecstasy of the Brown text of ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’, which, as I have already argued, reflects Keats’s authorial anxiety concerning ‘gendered manliness’.

His second revision renders the sexual consummation more explicit:

See, while she speaks his arms encroaching slow,
 Have zoned her, heart to heart, - loud, loud the dark winds blow!

 For on the midnight came a tempest fell;
 More sooth, for that his quick rejoinder flows
 Into her burning ear: - and still the spell
 Unbroken guards her in serene repose.
 With her wild dream he mingled, as a rose
 Marrieth its odour to a violet.
 Still, still she dreams - louder the frost wind blows.²¹

One crucial difference is that the revision deprives Madeline of control over her speech. In the first version Madeline is allowed to complete what she has to say. Sympathising with “those *sad* eyes” of Porphyro (my italics), she represents her thought, or, in some sense, her decision, as a response to his ‘catering’ to her desires by providing food and music: “O leave me not in this

eternal woe, / For if thou diest, my love, I know not where to go" (l. 314-315). It is the "voluptuous accents" of her voice that make him "arise" and melt "into her dream". Their "solution" is "sweet" because it is a reciprocal melting ecstasy, neither surrendering to the other's dominance: "Into her dream he melted, as the rose / Blendeth its odour with the violet" (l. 320-321). In this sense, Porphyro's song 'La belle dame sans merci' which comes just before the consummation scene is as important as the songs of the Indian Maid and la belle dame. Madeline's entreaties imply that she can hear his song and interpret it. In the revised version, Porphyro's arms are "encroaching to her while she speaks" and the effect is to silence her. Her final words are drowned out by the dark winds. She is forced to "be silent" and be dreamt continuously by a powerful male authority. Their sexual ecstasy is more one-sided, more like rape than the first text: "With her wild dream he mingled, as a rose / Marrieth its odour to a violet" (320-321). It is a "mingled" sexual ecstasy, not a melting one. Porphyro feels that her dream is "wild", which implies that he still feels the distance between them. Compare the "wild wild eyes" of la belle dame of the Brown text. In the revised text, it is the man who controls the whole romance world.²² The more Porphyro exerts his sexual masculinity to keep her silent, the further he is estranged from Madeline's dream. The more he feels strangeness, the stronger and the "louder" the "frost winds" blow

²¹ Stillinger, *The Poems of John Keats*, p. 314.

²² Bennett explains the meaning of 'emblazon', a part of 'a casement' in her chamber. In short, the successful consummation of Porphyro's purple plan is to emblazon himself on Madeline. Significantly, he goes on to suggest that this emblazoning desire can be connected to Keats's own desire towards his readers: "But we also look at Porphyro, and his desire to emblazon himself has implications for the text itself: 'The Eve of St. Agnes' is a blazon that guarantees Keats's poetic credentials, that identifies him as a descendant of poets". See Bennett, *Keats, Narrative and Audience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 110.

outside. It is appropriate in the original text for Porphyro to interpret the “elfin storm” in stanza 39 as “a boon indeed”, whereas, in the revised version, this description seems to be incongruous with the loud, silencing wind of stanza 36.

Lastly, Keats revised the ending of this poem as follows; “Angela went off / Twitch’d by the Palsy; and with face deform / The Beadsman stiffen’d-- ‘twixt a sigh and laugh, / Ta’en sudden from his beads by one weak little cough”. This is very different in tone from the original ending:

And they are gone: ay, ages long ago
 These lovers fled away into the storm.
 That night the Baron dreamt of many a woe,
 And all his warrior-guests, with shade and form
 Of witch, and demon, and large coffin-worm,
 Were long be-nightmar’d. Angela the old
 Died palsy-twitch’d, with meagre face deform;
 The Beadsman, after thousand aves told,
 For aye unsought for slept among his ashes cold.
 (370-378)

Even in the first version the final stanza is astringently discordant with the poem that it ends. The bustle of the feast is ended, the lovers have gone, and Keats himself withdraws. A chilly, temporal distance separates him from those who remain in the castle. But in the revised version the coolness has intensified into a tone at once harsh and derisive. Up to this point the story has been told even somewhat sentimentally. Wolfson argues that the narrator

himself revels so much in the 'romantic' entertainment that he is providing for the reader that he is tempted at times into somewhat melodramatic affectations like "Ah, bitter chill it was!".²³ He tells the story until the final stanza from a close distance, as if he is at the shoulder of his characters, as, for example, when he depicts the chapel aisle along which the Beadsman returns to his room, the portal doors and banquet hall along which Porphyro sneaks into Madeline's room, the balustrade that old Angela grasps as she goes downstairs, the peep-hole through which Porphyro enjoys secretly Madeline's undressing²⁴ and, lastly, the wide hall again as two lovers make their tip-toe exit from the castle. It is a narrative method that propels the reader towards an intimacy with the poem's characters, and it is this intimacy from which the first version of the final stanza withdraws, and which, in the revised version, is shattered by a harsh chuckle.

If Keats changed this ending in order to "leave on the reader a pettish disgust", what was his purpose? Clearly, his intention is to ensure that the poem is armed against the "mawkish popularity" that, as we have seen, in some moods Keats affects to despise.²⁵ Just as clearly, he is concerned to

²³ Susan Wolfson considers this narrator as a stage-manager with dramatic skills. She argues that "Keats's narrator so foregrounds the devices of romance and romance tale-telling that fiction-making becomes as important a part of the occasion as the fiction itself". See Susan Wolfson, *The Questioning Presence: Wordsworth, Keats and the Interrogative Mode in Romantic Poetry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 289.

²⁴ In this undressing scene, however, Bennett argues that a certain distance is maintained: "Although readers are figured, with Porphyro, as voyeurs in this erotic display, the words provide an opaque screen, a teasing veil over the spectacle of Madeline's body: the picture is painted in non-visual colours". See Bennett, *Keats, Narrative and Audience*, p. 108.

²⁵ But, as Levinson makes clear, the manliness that Keats aspires to was not easily available to him: "Keats was a man whose almost complete lack of control over the social code kept him from living his life. He could not write his poetry in the manner he required, marry the woman he loved, claim his inheritance, hold his family together, or assist his friends. He could not, in short, seize any of the appurtenances of manhood. Keats was as helplessly and ignominiously a 'boy' poet as Chatterton, and Byron's 'Mankin' was a viciously knowing insult". See Marjorie

render his poem less 'smokeable'. But the poem ends even in the first version by consigning its reader to perplexity, and in the revised version it provokes conflicting emotions for which perplexity is too weak a term.²⁶ My own suggestion is that Keats's revisions clearly indicate that the poem's ambivalence has its origins in Keats's ambivalent feelings towards the genre within which the poem operates, the romance, which for Keats remained a feminine literary mode, and aroused in him the same kinds of ambivalence that women themselves did. So it is that his revisions insist, even too emphatically, on a strange duality. The poem's hero, Porphyro, yields tenderly to the enthralling power of love, and he and Madeline leave the castle secure in its spell. But Keats is unwilling himself to be 'hoodwink'd', and in the final stanza that he preferred he chose not to imitate his hero, but to abandon his reader with a callous, even brutal indifference, as a Byronic lover might abandon his mistress of a night.

Levinson, 'Keats and the Canon', in Karl Kroeber & Gene W. Ruoff (eds.), *Romantic Poetry: Recent Visionary Criticism* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1993), p. 391.

²⁶ Sperry suggests that this poem's main concern is with the 'romantic spell', hence, "indeed, the reader is himself invited at Keats's own request not only to accept but to take part in a world where wishing has the force of willing". See Stuart M. Sperry, *Keats the Poet* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 209.

V. Two *Lamias*:

"in pale contented sort of discontent"

Keats adopted the story of Lamia from Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, adapting Burton's example of 'heroical love causing melancholy' into a two part poetic romance.¹ The first part of *Lamia* was completed in July, 1819, after he had composed the first act of *Otho the Great*, while waiting for Brown to return before beginning the second act.² The second part of *Lamia* was composed about one month later between, August 23 and September 5, 1819. Though the interval between the composition of the two parts was so short, the second part is characterised by a very different narrative style, and acts, in some sense, as a revision of the first part much as *The Eve of St Agnes* was revised when Keats re-wrote some of its stanzas.³ Indeed chronologically Keats revised the ending of *The Eve of St. Agnes* only after completing the

¹ Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, eds. Thomas C. Faulkner, Nicholas K. Kiessling, and Rhonda L. Blair, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), vol. 3, Part 3, Sect. 2, Mem. 1, Subs. I, pp. 39-48.

² On the biographical and bibliographical history of the relationship of *Lamia*, *Otho the Great* and *The Eve of St. Agnes*, see Claude Lee Finney, *The Evolution of Keats's Poetry*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1936), vol. II, pp. 649-678. Significantly *Otho the Great* was completed "with the purpose of winning the patronage of the public" through the collaboration with Brown. According to Finney, *Lamia* was also obviously composed under the necessity of earning by means of poetry, see Finney, *The Evolution of Keats's Poetry*, vol. II, p. 649. According to Keats's letter to Benjamin Bailey on 14 August 1819, he composed three poems (*Isabella*, *The Eve of St. Agnes* and *Lamia*) almost at the same time in the middle of writing *Otho the Great*. He seems to have expected their rapid publication and resultant commercial success with confidence except for the "too smokeable" *Isabella*. See Hyder Edward Rollins (ed.), *The Letters of John Keats*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), vol. II, p. 139.

³ Most of the articles on *Lamia* mention the generic differences between the two parts. In particular, Claude Finney, Terence Allen Hoagwood and Leon Waldooff insist on noticeable changes in terms of narrative style and characterization in the following: Finney, *The Evolution of Keats's Poetry*, vol. II, pp. 649-703; Terence Allen Hoagwood, 'Keats and the Social Contexts of *Lamia*', *SEL*, vol. 29 (1989), pp. 675-697; Leon Waldooff, *Keats and the Silent Work of Imagination* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), ch. 6, pp. 163-177.

second part of *Lamia*. The two acts of revision, I will suggest, have a common origin in that both seem to have been produced by Keats's increasingly anxious relationship with the reading public.

Supporting evidence of Keats's increased anxiety is supplied by the letters that Keats wrote immediately before and after writing the second part of *Lamia*. When Keats wrote on July 11, 1819, to John Hamilton Reynolds, his friend, like Keats, a man anxious to secure his name as a poet, he seems confident of the poem's chances of success.

You will be glad to hear under my own hand (tho' Rice says we are like sauntering Jack & Idle Joe) how diligent I have been, & am being. I have finish'd the Act, and in the interval of beginning the 2nd have proceeded pretty well with *Lamia*, finishing the 1st part which consists of about 400 lines. I have great hopes of success, because I make use of my Judgment more deliberately than I yet have done; but in Case of failure with the world, I shall find my content. (*KL*, II, p. 128)⁴

Here, Keats grounds his hopes of success on his ability to make better use of his own "Judgment", and he staunchly asserts, however defensive we may take the assertion to be, that if he is mistaken and success once again eludes him, he will still rest "content", confident in his own mind of his achievement. But Keats does nothing here to indicate precisely what kind of judgement he believes that he has displayed in his new poem, nor does he explain why he is so confident that it will secure for him a better public reception. Keats's letter to his brother of 18 September, immediately after completing the second part of *Lamia*, is very different in its tone from the previous letter.

⁴ Much attention has been paid to this paragraph as attesting to Keats's confidence in *Lamia*, whereas comparatively little attention has been paid to the last sentence, which reveals his anxiety about its possible failure.

I have been reading over a part of a short poem I have composed lately call'd 'Lamia'—and I am certain there is that sort of fire in it which must take hold of people in some way—give them either pleasant or unpleasant sensation. What they want is a sensation of some sort. (*KL*, II, p. 189)

On the one hand, this letter makes clear exactly what kind of judgement Keats has in mind: he believes that in *Lamia* he shows better judgement of what it is that contemporary readers demand of poetry. On the other hand, even as he makes this point, he expresses his lofty contempt of the very public that he is confident that he has successfully appealed to. Keats has satisfied, he feels, a public demand for 'sensation',⁵ and one may suspect that he is half-ashamed of the cynicism that he so brazenly flaunts. After all, the contemporary poet that Keats most admired was William Wordsworth, and he could hardly have forgotten that in Wordsworth's great Preface he had proudly defied the demands of a public taste that he judged corrupt. His poems would have no appeal, he had insisted, to readers who could not "be excited without the application of gross and violent stimulants" and were driven only by a "degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation". It may be that the letter betrays Keats's shame-faced recognition that he had himself written one of the "idle and extravagant stories in verse" that Wordsworth had accused the reading public of demanding, a shame-faced recognition, that is, that in *Lamia* he had given the public precisely what it wanted.

⁵ Finney argues that Keats was as ambivalent about popularity as Byron: "Keats believed that Byron won the favor of the public by stimulating their instinctive passions and by shocking their moral sensibilities in a word, by giving them violent sensations both pleasant and unpleasant", so Keats "disliked the public but he tried consciously to compose a romance which the public would buy". See Finney, *The Evolution of Keats's Poetry*, vol. II, p. 695. But I think that Keats's interest in romance as a genre should be considered as a generic strategy not only to make a commercial appeal to a female readership but also for an

In *The Eve of St Agnes*, Porphyro spreads a feast before Madeline. In *Lamia*, it is the woman, Lamia herself, who furnishes the feast for her bridegroom and his guests. Both poems, then, include episodes of catering, as if in tacit recognition that Keats had adopted a new role, that he now saw himself as catering to the tastes of the reading public. It is significant, I think, that this is the incident that Keats chose to copy out for his publisher, in his letter to Taylor of September 5, 1819, as a specimen of the poem, and significant, too, that this version of the episode is marked by a fiercer contempt for the guests for whom Lamia is providing than survived in the published poem:

A Glutton drains a cup of Helicon,
 Too fast down, down his throat the brief delight is gone.
 "Where is that music?" cries a Lady fair.
 "Aye, where is it my dear? Up in the air?"
 Another whispers 'Poo!' saith Glutton "Mum!"
 Then makes his shiny mouth a [k]napkin for his thumb. & & &--
 (KL, II, p. 159)

In this essay, I shall read the second part of *Lamia* as a sort of revision of the first part and compare the two parts in terms of narrative style and the characterization of the narrator and of Lamia and Lycius and their relationship. In his letter to Reynolds Keats insists that whatever the public verdict on his poem he will rest "content", but I hope to show that the poem reveals him as

allegorical representation of the ideal union between authorship and readership that he

himself participating in the ambivalent mood that he ascribes to Lamia as she sets about preparing her own feast. Like her, he feels "pale contented sort of discontent".

1. Lamia's Creation: the Oxymoronic

Though Keats found the story of *Lamia* in Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the relationship between the two texts. According to Jane Chambers, "*Lamia* criticism has virtually remained at a standstill on the question of Burton's influence", even though Keats insisted on quoting the relevant source in full at the end of the published version of his poem.⁶ The critic who has done most to explore this relationship is Marjorie Levinson. She lays bare the poem's central narrative structure while explaining the most enigmatic parts of *Lamia*, such as "Lycius's sadism, Corinth's murkiness, Lamia's interior decor, the repulsiveness of the wedding guests and above all Keats's sympathy for the devil".⁷ Her approach to this 'fairy tale-like' romance remains, however, too narrowly 'Marxian'. She focuses on the materialistic existence of Corinth, "a

represented by the reciprocal love between the two sexes in the romance.

⁶ An approach to the relationship between *Lamia* and *The Anatomy* as its literary source has been pursued by Jane Chambers. She ascribes the 'Keatsian ambiguity' in *Lamia* to the influence of Burton's idea of 'love melancholy' in *The Anatomy*. In other words, the lamia tale is offered "as an illustration of love's universal power to inflict upon beings in all realms the disease Burton calls 'love melancholy', popularly called in his day 'heroical love'". See Jane Chambers, 'For Love's Sake: *Lamia* and Burton's Love Melancholy', *SEL*, vol. 22 (1982), p. 387. Her approach to *Lamia* as a Keatsian reproduction of Burton's 'love melancholy' is, however, too much focused on a thematic level excluding the cultural and historical background.

city of immensely profitable trade" and "concupiscence within a specifically economic causality", that was established by Burton just a few pages beyond telling the lamia story while analyzing 'the effects upon love of various external conditions' as follows: "It was that plenty of all things, which made Corinth so infamous of old" and "In that one temple of Venus a thousand whores did prostitute themselves ... all nations resorted thither as to a school of Venus".⁸ Levinson's marxian interpretation of *Lamia*, however, has the effect of reducing Keats's 'Lamia' to Burton's 'lamia', the proper noun to a common noun, by implication a person to a thing, so that the character can easily be reduced to a commodity of exchange value in Corinth. Moreover, as the Levinsonian 'Lamia' never functions as more than a medium of exchange, like money, it is very difficult to fully explain her role as a 'subject', endowed with the capacity to create a palace and decorate it simply by the power of thought. She is, in other words, allowed the same power that Keats claims for himself in 'Ode to Psyche', a poem that Keats had written earlier that same year. If, as Levinson suggests, Lamia's role within this scene is merely as a 'conjurer', then it seems hard to explain Keats's complex description of her feelings during the creative process, a "pale contented sort of discontent". It seems better to recognise that at this moment, as Keats describes Lamia furbishing the Corinthian palace for the feast, character and author merge. It is this surely that helps to explain the intense sympathy for Lamia that Keats registers, and that Levinson recognises but is unable to account for. It seems

⁷ Marjorie Levinson, *Keats's Life of Allegory: The Origins of a Style* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1988), p. 270.

⁸ Levinson, *Keats's Life of Allegory: The Origins of a Style*, p. 259.

improbable that any such sympathy could be generated by the objectified Lamia of Levinson's account.

For Levinson Lamia is only another Keatsian version of 'la femme fatale', like Circe of the Glaucus episode in *Endymion* and la belle dame sans merci of the Brown / 1848 text, by whose power kings, princes, warriors and knight-at-arms are enthralled and emasculated. Even the sexual relationship between Lamia and Lycius is very different from those depicted in the other poems.

Let me begin by examining 'the creation scene' of Part 2.

So being left alone,
 (Lycius was gone to summon all his kin)
 And knowing surely she could never win
 His foolish heart from its mad pompousness,
 She set herself, high-thoughted, how to dress
 The misery in fit magnificence.
 She did so, but 'tis doubtful how and whence
 Came, and who were her subtle servitors.
 About the halls, and to and from the doors,
 'There was a noise of wings, till in short space
 The glowing banquet-room shone with wide-arched grace.

...

Lamia, regal drest,
 Silently paced about, and as she went,
 In pale contented sort of discontent,

Mission'd her viewless servants to enrich
 The fretted splendour of each nook and niche.
 Between the tree-sterms, marbled plain at first,
 Came jasper panels; then, anon, there burst
 Forth creeping imagery of sligher trees,
 And with the larger wove in small intricacies.
 Approving all, she faded at self-will,
 And shut the chamber up, close, hush'd and still,
 Complete and ready for the revels rude,
 When dreadful guests would come to spoil her solitude.
 (Part II, 111-121, 133-145)

Lamia, left alone, begins to create the illusory reality of a banquet-room by her "high-thoughted" idea alone. This might recall God's primal act of creation, as, for example, described by Milton in *Paradise Lost*.⁹ In Genesis, God creates the signified, such as 'lightness and darkness, sky and land, and living creatures and human beings' only by Words, the signifier. Similarly, in Book 1 of *Paradise Lost* the divine act of creation is parodied in the creation of Pandemonium which is erected as if by diabolic fiat: it "Rose like an exhalation".¹⁰ Lamia creates an illusory signified, "creeping imagery", to

⁹ Finney describes the Miltonic influence on *Lamia* in style: words inversions such as "blossoms blown", "brilliance feminine", "gardens palatine", "indifference drear", "palaces imperial", "temples lewd", "pavement white", "revels rude", "twin-clouds odorous", "eye severe", "vales deflower'd", and "forest trees branch-rent", and the phrases in which two or more adjectives follow the nouns or pronouns which they modify like "summer heaven, blue and clear", "shut the chamber up, close, hush'd and still" and "So they hurried all, maz'd, curious and keen". See Finney, *The Evolution of Keats's Poetry*, vol. II, p. 670.

¹⁰ Here is Milton's description of the construction of Pandemonium.

As in an organ, from one blast of wind

bestow grace and splendour on the wedding hall. Her creation, which, if we remember Milton, we can think of as ambivalently divine and diabolic, is defined by the 'oxymoronic' characterization of what she has done. First, she creates her imagery in order to "dress the *misery* in fit *magnificence*", secondly, she carries out the work in a "pale *contented* sort of *discontent*" (my italics), lastly, she is struck by a sudden fear that all that she has wrought may fade, and in response she chooses, "at self-will", to fade herself in a grim anticipation of the fate that will befall her when she is subjected to Apollonius's withering gaze. She shuts up the chamber, grimly expecting the intrusion of the "dreadful guests" who will disturb her hushed solitude with their "revels rude". At this moment Lamia rehearses the situation of Keats himself, who is about to send his *Poems* of 1820 out into the world, at which point "dreadful" critics and readers will be invited into a poetic chamber that has until then remained hushed and private. It is not hard to imagine that Keats would have looked forward to the prospect in much the same mood as Lamia, with a "pale contented sort of discontent".¹¹

To many a row of pipes the sound-board breathes.
 Anon out of the earth a fabric huge
 Rose like an exhalation, with the sound
 Of dulcet symphonies and voices sweet,
 Built like a temple, where pilasters round
 Were set, and Doric pillars overlaid
 With golden architrave;
 (I, 708-715)

See John Carey, and Alastair Fowler (eds.), *The Poems of John Milton*, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, 1980), pp. 502-503.

¹¹ Andrew Bennett, like most critics, accepts an allegorical interpretation of *Lamia* as "a drama of private creation and a mortal fear of publication", even though the focus of the different critics may vary. Bennett's diagram suggests, however, their agreement on the allegorical reading of Lycius as Keats himself, poet, or, reader, and of Lamia as text, poetry, or, poem itself, in other words, Lycius as the 'subjectivity' and Lamia as the 'objectivity', which is in the end not so far from the Levinsonian 'Lamia', an objectified commodity for Lycius like the

In submitting to Lycius's demand that she allow the public world to intrude into her private chambers, Lamia surrenders to the wishes of an imperious lover suddenly become "fierce and sanguineous", a lover who has learned to whet his sexual appetite with her pain, and take "delight / Luxurious in her sorrows" (Part II, 73-74), and in submission Lamia finds in her turn the pleasure of submitting to pain: "She burnt, she lov'd the tyranny" (Part II, 81). Keats is no doubt exploring here the darker recesses of his own sexuality, but the episode expresses too, surely, his painfully ambivalent feelings at once again placing his poetry before the public after the critical mauling to which the 1817 volume had been subjected.¹² He has, as it were, steelled himself to

text *Lamia* itself when on sale to the reading public. First, let me show that *Lamia* has generated a series of allegorical readings by reproducing the following diagram from Bennett:

Lamia	Lycius	Apollonius
Fanny Brawne	Keats	Charles Brown (Murry)
Poetry	Poet	Philosopher (Bush, Bate)
Poem	Keats / Poet	Reviewers (Finney, Fogle)
Illusion / Dream	Dreamer	Reason/Reality Principle (Slote, Perkins, Rzepka)
Id	Ego	Superego (Dickstein)
Text	Reader	Public (Wolfson, Bernstein)

Bennett draws our attention to Wolfson and Rzepka's allegory of reading, "by reading the poem in terms of audience, such that while Lamia (and *Lamia*) figure the desired (textual) object, Lycius, Apollonius, and the public, or Lycius's friends, each figure different ways of reading or different types of audience: Lycius, in this reading, would figure the enthralled, seduced, enticed, entrapped or entrammelled reader; Apollonius would figure the critical or allegorical reader; the public, who are 'maz'd', curious and keen' would figure both what Rzepka characterizes as "the cheap tastes and infantile raptures of [Keats's] literary public, and the material conditions of publication themselves". See Andrew Bennett, *Keats, Narrative and Audience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 173-175. In this schematic summary, no matter how much we accept Susan's and Rzepka's elaboration, it is still true that they read Lamia as object, production or commodity. They overlook the importance of the creation scene in terms of audience and authorship, and, as a result, they cannot recognise that Lamia is a subject, endowed with self-conscious authority, or authorship by Keats, even though she is not consistently identified with the Poet. Furthermore, we cannot always identify even Lycius with Keats or the Poet. I think that Keats intended to prevent the conventional identification of poetic personae with the Poet by maintaining a narrative distance, although it is true that sometimes they are congruent.

¹² On the external factors that determine the content and form of the *Lamia* volume, Hoagwood argues: "another form of the externally conditioned pressures on the *Lamia* volume appears in the broadly political and narrowly economic concerns about hostile critical responses to the 1817 volume; Taylor and Hessey, the publishers of the 1820 volume, suggest

expose his muse once more to the "dreadful" attentions of the critic and the poetry-reading public, and the decision seems to have produced in him deeply ambivalent feelings. Oxymoron is a favourite figure of Keats's through his career, but it becomes appropriately enough the presiding figure of *Lamia*, because it expresses in condensed form the intensely divided feelings with which the prospect of imminent publication inspired him.

This 'creation scene' conducted by Lamia has another significance if it is compared with Keats's deployment in Part II of the poem of a narrative style sharply discordant with the style of Part I. Since Finney, critics of Keats have insisted on the narrative 'difference' between Part 1 and Part 2. Finney elucidates the difference of theme, sentiment and style by offering a biographical explanation: "the first part reflects the healthy, resolute mood in which he went to Shanklin to compose poetry which would please the public", whereas "in the second part, lack of money, thwarted love, frustrated ambition and steady composition stirred him into an intensity of feeling and thought, exhausted his diseased and weakened vitality, and cast him into a mood of defiant egotism".¹³ Hoagwood is another critic who draws attention to the skepticism and cynicism of Part 2, comparing the relationship between the two parts of *Lamia* to that between the two *Hyperions*: "the movement from the ostensibly epic *Hyperion* to the openly skeptical *The Fall of Hyperion* is

that this concern contributed to determining the contents of the later book". The internal factor that clearly operates in the poem is "Keats's anxiety for the public". See Terence Allen Hoagwood, 'Keats and Social Context: *Lamia*', *SEL*, vol. 29 (1989), p. 686.

¹³ Finney, *The Evolution of Keats's Poetry*, vol. II, p. 667, p. 686.

reproduced in the passage from *Lamia* I to *Lamia* II".¹⁴ Waldoff points to the ironic tone of the narrator that topples the romance world of Part 1 into disillusionment. According to him, the narrator's ironic tone is most evident when he depicts Lamia, especially in her metamorphosis.¹⁵ It is obviously true that the narrative tone of the creation scene of Part 1 is very different from that of Part 2, although it is a little awkward when Waldoff insists that the narrator feels the same gothic delight while depicting Lamia's pain in her metamorphosis as Lycius feels when he subjects her to his tyrannical will. In the first scene the pain is like that of childbirth: it is the pain attendant on Lamia's re-creation of herself. In the second Lamia is the creator of something outside herself, something more like a work of art. This is the relevant passage from Part I:

Left to herself, the serpent now began
 To change; her elfin blood in madness ran,
 Her mouth foam'd, and the grass, therewith besprent,
 Wither'd at dew so sweet and virulent;

 A deep volcanian yellow took the place
 Of all her milder-mooned body's grace;
 And, as the lava ravishes the mead,
 Spoilt all her silver mail, and golden brede;
 Made gloom of all her frecklings, streaks and bars,

¹⁴ "It is a movement from the abstract but personalized pretense of that which is avowedly beyond belief, to a concrete and socialized presentation of a human actuality that no one can evade". See Hoagwood, 'Keats and Social Context: *Lamia*', p. 690.

¹⁵ Waldoff, *Keats and the Silent Work of Imagination*, pp. 171-172.

Eclips'd her crescents, and lick'd up her stars:
 So that, in moments few, she was undrest
 Of all her sapphires, greens and amethyst,
 And rubious-argent: of all these bereft,
 Nothing but pain and ugliness were left.
 Still shone her crown; that vanish'd, also she
 Melted and disappear'd as suddenly;
 And in the air, her new voice luting soft,
 Cried, 'Lycius! gentle Lycius!'-- Borne aloft
 With the bright mists about the mountains hoar
 These words dissolv'd: Crete's forests heard no more.
 (Part I, 146-170)

The most conspicuous difference between Lamia in this scene and Lamia in the creation scene of Part 2 is her 'objectivity' during the creation process, in other words, she is here described as an object and a creature rather than as a subject and creator. Her transformation is most completely exemplified in "her new voice" rather than her womanly appearance. "Her new voice" as the synecdoche of her metamorphosis is important in that it forecasts the power of her eloquence over Lycius throughout Part 1. In fact, Lycius is persuaded to turn back when he first meets Lamia not by the enchantment of her body but by the enchantment of her words, "so delicious were the words she sung" (Part I, 249) that he felt that "he had lov'd them a whole summer long" (Part I, 250). Her song, like that of *la belle dame sans merci*, has the enthralling power to

emasculate Lycius and disarm all the rational defences with which his tutelage by Apollonius had armed him:

To see her still, and singing so sweet lays;
 Then from amaze into delight he fell
 To hear her whisper woman's lore so well;
 And every word she spake entic'd him on
 To unperplex'd delight and pleasure known.
 (Part I, 323-327)

At this point Lamia figures the happy poet who has the power to enthrall readers by her song. At the moment of transformation her blood gushes within her almost as if it has become the "mighty fountain" spouting from a "deep romantic chasm" of *Kubla Khan*. The transformation is also compared with a volcanic eruption, Byron's favourite figure for poetic composition, and to the madness that inspires so many romantic poet figures, like the poet of *Kubla Khan* with his "flashing eyes and floating hair". The experience culminates in ecstasy, but it is an ecstasy quite different from that of 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' in that it is neither a reciprocal nor a sexual consummation. Rather, it is a sort of self-consummation necessary in order for her to appeal to Lycius by her words, or by her self-text, *Lamia*. Bennett's comment is persuasive when he says that "Apollonius's allegorical reading is itself generated by the solccism of the private made public and that what it destroys is not the 'text' of Lamia (which only ever exists in Lycius's imagination or reading), but

rather Lycius's enthralled reading".¹⁶ Through this transformation scene, a 'lamia' is metamorphosed into 'Lamia' and this Lamia has the power to become a figurative text, just such a text as Keats's poem *Lamia*.

2. Lycius and the Public

Not only Lamia but also Lycius has distinct identities in the two parts of the poem. Lycius in Part 1 is like the wretched wight of the *Indicator* text rather than knight-at-arms of the Brown text. Lycius of the first part is more 'romantique' in the sense that he is easily entrapped by la femme fatale and willingly abandons his social obligations for the sake of love without any self-conscious perplexity. It is only later, in Part 2, that he begins to question Lamia's name and identity. This is unsurprising because the Lamia of Part 1 behaves like the conventional belle dame sans merci of the romance world:

This cruel lady, without any show
Of sorrow for her tender favorite's woe,
But rather, if her eyes could brighter be,
With brighter eyes and slow amenity,
Put her new lips to his, and gave afresh
The life she had so tangled in her mesh:
(Part I, 290-295)

¹⁶ Bennett, *Keats, Narrative and Audience*, p. 175.

What Lycius worries about in Part I, when he meets Apollonius who "tonight seems / The ghost of folly haunting my sweet dreams" (Part I, 376-377), is the loss of his love rather than his manly authority. Such lovesickness resulting from his fear that his dream will dissolve seems to beget melancholy in Lycius, but seems designed to produce only "pleasant sensations" in the women readers who are supposed to be vulnerable to this sort of romantic sentimentality.

In Part II, however, Lycius suffers a transformation scarcely less striking than the transformation that Lamia undergoes in Part I. The unmanned, sentimental lover is transformed into a Byronic lover, the index of whose sexual glamour is the extent to which he wields tyrannical control over the woman. He seems suddenly and unaccountably released from the fear that had absorbed him in Part I, that exposure to the public world, and particularly to his old tutor, Apollonius, might threaten his ecstatic relationship with the woman. Instead a new fear besets him, the fear that in surrendering to his love for Lamia he risks losing his manly authority. Lycius now wants "something more, more than her empery / Of joys; and she began to moan and sigh / Because he mused *beyond her*" (Part II, 36-38, my italics). It is as if, having awoken from his dream of love, he begins to feel that his identity and status have been placed in doubt. He asks himself questions such as "where am I now?". Sadly, he now recognizes 'smallness' as the price of love: "bending to her open eyes, / Where he was mirror'd small in paradise" (Part II, 46-47). It is because of Lycius's insistence on the public authentication of his love that

Lamia finally “knelt before him”, “beseeching him, [...] To change his purpose” (Part II. 66, 68-69), a situation the opposite of that in Part I.¹⁷

He thereat was stung,
Perverse, with stronger fancy to reclaim
Her wild and timid nature to his aim:
Besides, for all his love, in self despite,
Against his better self, he took delight
Luxurious in her sorrows, soft and new.
His passion, cruel grown, took on a hue
Fierce and sanguineous as ‘twas possible
In one whose brow had no dark veins to swell.
Fine was the mitigated fury, like
Apollo’s presence when in act to strike
The serpent—Ha, the serpent! certes, she
Was none. She burnt, she lov’d the tyranny,
And, all subdued, consented to the hour
When to the bridal he should lead his paramour.
(Part II, 69-83)

Lycius’s aspiration towards something beyond Lamia creates a distance between them, and from this distance the ‘*wild*’ nature of Lamia became serpent which reminds us of the “wild *wild* eyes” (my italics) of la belle dame

¹⁷ Levinson notes that Lycius’s demand for an ostentatious wedding comes from his desire “to establish his ownership” of Lamia. In other words, Lycius’s project is related to the idea of constituting Lamia as property. This comment is pertinent when we notice Lycius’s awakening

sans merci. Becomes apparent The more cruel the tyranny he exercises over her, the more he reduces 'Lamia' to a 'lamia', bending his eyes on her "like Apollo's presence when in act to strike / The serpent" (Part II. 79-80). As soon as the thought strikes him, the moment that he objectifies Lamia as a mere serpent, he seeks to dismiss it, "Ha, the serpent! Certes, she / Was none" (Part II. 80-81), but the thought prompts him nevertheless immediately and for the first time to interrogate Lamia as to her name and social status. Unable himself to retain his sense of 'Lamia' as a subject, unable himself to resist the impulse to reduce her to the status of an object, a 'lamia', Lycius seeks a public authentication of his love, as if wishing the external world to do for him what he can no longer do for himself. Lamia's words are no longer sufficient to constitute reality for him. Hence her plea "bid / Old Apollonius—from him keep me hid" has no effect on Lycius, who is "perplex'd at words so blind and blank" (Part II, 100-102). In this state, having already half-lost her magic power, Lamia creates the banquet scene in order to cast her spell over Lycius once again, in other words, to present herself to him as 'Lamia' rather than a 'lamia', but she can no longer rid herself of the fear that her spell may prove only short-lived in its effect.¹⁸

Lycius in Part 2 seems to change into a shadow, or, become once more a proper pupil, of his authoritative master, Apollonius, beneath the gaze of whose interrogative eyes Lamia completely loses her power, is revealed as a

to his identity as master. See Levinson, *Keats's Life of Allegory: The Origins of a Style*, p. 278.

¹⁸ On this point, attention should be paid to Chambers's remarks on 'Lamia's peculiar dependence on others', her dependence on human recognition and response. Public recognition could be the way to keep her integrity as Lamia rather than as a mere serpent lamia. See Chambers, 'For Love's Sake: *Lamia* and Burton's *Love Melancholy*', p. 590.

lamia, and vanishes. Apollonius is depicted as a sophist or a cold philosopher throughout Parts 1 and 2. He does not undergo any transformation of his identity, remaining throughout a man defined by his serpentine eyes. In order to emphasize his uncanny power of insight, the narrator mentions his eyes repeatedly, "juggling eyes", "lashless cyclids", "demon eyes", and "eye like a sharp spear". Although he penetrates the illusory reality surrounding Lycius with such "keen, cruel, perçant, stinging eyes", his uncanniness is more significant than his insight when he shows himself prepared to sacrifice even Lycius's life. As Bate has noted, "Apollonius is not really engaged in a struggle with Lamia to rescue his pupil. He is far more interested in solving a problem, though his diagnosis is to end by killing the pupil".¹⁹ Also, according to Chambers, Apollonius has come "not so much out of friendship as out of curiosity and pride, not so much to display his love, but his superiority".²⁰ It seems to be true that Apollonius's main concern is "to thaw and solve and melt some knotty problem", the gordian complications of Lamia, with his superior authority. Very like the revised version of *The Eve of St. Agnes*, which is designed to "leave on the reader a sense of pettish disgust" in its darkened ending, Apollonius's uncanniness harshly frustrates the desires of the reader who expects a restitution of the romance world of Part 1 in Part 2.²¹ The 'stratagem' of the poem seems oddly perverse. Its first part seems designed to

¹⁹ Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), 557.

²⁰ Chambers, 'For Love's Sake: *Lamia* and Burton's Love Melancholy', p. 598.

²¹ Wolfson notes that there is an ulterior plot designed by Keats against his readers: "Keats's occasional disposition to alienating his readers had already emerged in the grotesqueries of *Isabella* and the last stanzas of *The Eve of St. Agnes*. Woodhouse, generally an appreciator of all things Keatsian, lamented the way those stanzas impose "on the reader a sense of pettish disgust" and was perplexed to discover that "this Change of Sentiment" was what Keats

appeal precisely to the 'feminine sensitivities' that the second part turns on, an attack as unprovoked as Lycius's bitter verbal assault on Lamia. This discord or incongruence between Part 1 and Part 2, however, is significant not so much because it provides a sensation for the reader but because it reflects Keats's ambivalent feelings about his own "deliberate judgment".

In the first part of the poem Keats is still recognizably the 'unmisgiving' author of *Endymion*. Phrases that would outrage readers such as Lockhart or Byron as glaring instances of callow affectation, phrases such as "but a young bird's flutter from a wood", are subjected by the second part of the poem to what one can only call an Apollonian stare. But even in the poem's first part Keats's unmisgiving cockney style alternates with a very different kind of writing, and at the end of the first part Keats even experiments with a style that seems directly modelled on that of *Don Juan*:

Let the mad poets say whate'er they please
Of the sweets of Faeries, Peris, Goddesses,
There is not such a treat among them all,
Haunters of cavern, lake, and waterfall,
As a real woman, lineal indeed
From Pyrrha's pebbles or old Adam's seed.
(Part I, 328-33)

Apollonius does not come as an innocent guest to the feast to which Lycius has invited him. He comes intent on his own design. Similarly, Keats's

"aimed at & was glad to find from my objections to it that he had succeeded"". See Susan Wolfson, *The Questioning Presence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 334.

handling of his poem is directed by an evident design, that Keats explains in a letter to Bailey of August 14, 1819:

I have written two Tales, one from Boccacio call'd the Pot of Basil; and another call'd St. Agnes' Eve on a popular superstition; and a third call'd Lamia—(half-finished—I {hav}e a{l}so been writing parts of my Hyperion and {c}ompleted 4 Acts of Tragedy. [...] One of my Ambitions is to make as great a revolution in modern dramatic writing as Kean has done in acting—another to upset the drawling of the blue stocking literary world—if in the course of a few years I do these two things *I ought to die content*. (KL, II, p. 139, my italics)

Keats mentions all his most recent major poems, but it is the two on which he is at present working that seem to be in the forefront of his mind. The first ambition, to be the Shakspeare of his time, rests presumably on *Otho the Great*. The second, “to upset the bluestocking literary world”, seems to rest on *Lamia*. If he fulfils these two ambitions, Keats writes, “I ought to die content”. The word reminds us of the letter to Reynolds in which Keats claims “in Case of failure with the world, I shall find my content”. In *Lamia*, we may say, Keats will not rest ‘content’ until he has worked out his ambition to affront “the blue stocking literary world”, that is, the women readers who were, it was supposed, peculiarly susceptible to poetic romances, to poems, that is, of a kind of which *Lamia* purports to be an example. Keats is himself like Lamia in his trembling sensitivity to the potentially destructive intrusion of the public into the private world of his poetry, like Lycius in his reckless determination that nevertheless the public should be admitted, and like Apollonius in his desire to fix on Lamia, who figures here both the poem and the women readers that it might seem designed to please, a withering, destructive stare. *Lamia*, like *Isabella* and *The Eve of St Agnes*, is the poem of a poet anxious to win

success, but, even more strikingly than the other poems, it is uncertain about the success that it hopes to achieve. If a commercial success is desired, then it seems peculiarly maladroit to pursue it by deliberately affronting the women readers that poets and publishers agreed in recognizing as increasingly important in determining a poem's sales. And yet, as Keats must have recognized, the first canto of *Don Juan*, was the most talked of, and amongst the best-selling poems of the day, and in that canto Byron had notoriously, in the person of Donna Inez, herself a transparent version of his own estranged wife, subjected the bluestocking to merciless ridicule.

The ambivalent feelings that produced *Lamia* resulted in a poem that can only be described as oxymoronic. The first example is the characterization of Lamia. Keats, who alternates between close sympathy with and cool detachment from her, characterizes Lamia as "a gordian shape of dazzling hue", as a metaphor, that is, for the gordian complication of feeling out of which the poem was produced. Hence, the most distinctive characteristic of Lamia is her capacity to unite the incompatible: "Her head was serpent, but ah, *bitter-sweet!* / She had a woman's mouth with all its pearls complete" (Part I, 59-60), or "A *virgin* purest lipp'd, yet in the lore / Of love *deep learned* to the red heart's core" (Part I, 189-190), or "In pale *contented sort of discontent*" (Part II, 135, my italics). In *Endymion* the power to reconcile contradictory principles marked an imaginative ideal, figured for example in the androgyny of Adonis. But in *Lamia* the attempt to bring about such a reconciliation produces only a monster, a 'lamia'. It is a poem then that offers a bleak testimony to the limitations that Keats now recognizes in the power of the imagination.

In the end the oxymoronic character of the poem is most fully demonstrated in the manner in which it links one to another its two inconsistent and incompatible 'Parts'. It is a poem designed to produce in its reader "bitter-sweetness" or a "pale contented sort of discontent", and one may suppose that it produced similar emotions in Keats himself. He shows himself prepared, as it were, to subject his own poem to a withering stare under the power of which he dissolves, reduced, one might say, from 'Keats' to a 'keats'.

VI. Two *Hyperions*: Unaccomplished Reconciliation with “the trickery and iniquity of these Plagues”

1. “An Un-Keatsean Project”

In *Lamia* Keats betrays his anxious relationship with the poetry-reading public, which by 1819 he had come to think of as an audience composed primarily of women. In the two *Hyperions* his anxieties seem concentrated on his relationship with the reviewers, from whose judgements, he had come to recognise, there was no possibility of appeal. In Part 1 of *Lamia* Keats seems determined to appeal to the romance-reading public by offering them another version of the story of ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’, a story in which Lycius is enthralled by the enchantress Lamia, but even in Part 1 Keats deploys intermittently an edged, ironic style that seems at odds with this ambition, and in Part 2 Keats turns aggressively on the sentimentality of his own story. By the time that he came to write *Hyperion* Keats was absorbed by the reviewers’ characterisation of him as “Hunt’s simple neophyte”,¹ and by their characterisation of his poetry as ‘effeminate’. His response is, on the one hand, to reject defiantly the claim that his lack of a proper classical education ought properly to disqualify him from taking his subject matter from classical mythology, and on the other hand to cultivate, as if in an attempt to placate the

reviewers, an epic manner that would in itself assert the strong masculinity of his talent.²

The 'Hyperion project' was first launched presumably on or after October 24, 1818 and finally abandoned as a fragment on September 21, 1819, although Keats had steadily worked on it in the interim.³ Of the two *Hyperions* - *Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion* - significantly it was the former that Taylor chose to end the 1820 volume, excusing in the publisher's 'Advertisement' its fragmentary state. It was not only his publishers, Taylor and Hessey, who drew attention to the poem's incompleteness. So did the reviewers whose treatment of *Endymion* was offered by Taylor as the reason for Keats's failure to complete the poem. The *British Critic*, for example, was one of three reviews to congratulate Keats on his decision to abandon the poem, because "it is plainly projected upon principles that would infallibly

¹ See John Wilson Croker's unsigned review of *Endymion* on April 1818 in *The Quarterly Review* in Redpath, *The Young Romantics & Critical 1807-24*, p. 476.

² Ruthven attributes Keats's mythological interest to his financial troubles: "what more economical way of reconciling this contradiction than by creating a myth in which he could imagine himself confronting a goddess who acknowledged both the claims of poetry and those of cash necessity, a Mnemosyne-Moneta whose daughters the Muses sustain the dream of art, and a moneta-Moneta who invigilates the real world of capitalistic finance?" See K. K. Ruthven, 'Keats and Dea Moneta', *SIR*, vol. 15 (Summer, 1976), p. 456.

³ According to Finney and Bate, the chronological details of two *Hyperions* are as follows:

From 24 October 1818 onwards he worked on *Hyperion*.

Before and after Tom's death on 1 December 1818 he suspended work on the poem.

For the two last weeks of December 1818 and the two first weeks of January 1819 he resumed *Hyperion*.

In the latter part of January he paused for the composition of 'The Eve of St. Agnes' and 'The Eve of St. Mark'.

Between April 15 and 20 he composed the fragment of the third book of *Hyperion* and then finally abandoned the poem.

On April 20, 1819 Woodhouse copied the manuscript.

On July 18, 1819 he began a reconstruction of *The Fall of Hyperion* (Bate).

On September 19, 1819 he composed 'Ode to Autumn' and quoted some passages from *The Fall of Hyperion*.

On September 21, 1819 he finally abandoned the poem.

See Claude Lee Finney, *The Evolution of Keats's Poetry*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1936), vol. II, pp. 487-494, and Jonathan Bate, 'Keats's Two Hyperions and the Problem of Milton', in Robert Brinkley & Keith Hanley (eds.), *Romantic Revisions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 324.

lead to failure, even supposing the subject were not, which we think it is, somewhat above the pitch of Mr. Keats's peculiar genius, which lies altogether in the region of fancy and description".⁴ Byron and Shelley joined in thinking *Hyperion* Keats's major achievement, but even for them it is an incongruous, "unKeatsian achievement",⁵ the one poem in which Keats successfully laid claim to the masculinity that is wanting in the rest of his work. *The Fall of Hyperion* until its first publication by Lord Houghton (Monckton Milnes) in vol. 3 of *Biographical and Historical Miscellanies of the Philobiblion Society* in 1856 remained unknown. It was Houghton who first confused the compositional sequence of the two poems, and, following him, the Victorians consistently regarded *The Fall of Hyperion* as an earlier version of *Hyperion*.⁶ As Marjorie Levinson has argued, it is a revealing error, suggesting perhaps that when he revised the poem Keats brought it closer to his own earlier work, made it more 'Keatsian' than it had been in its original form. In addition, the mere fact of the re-writing, like the antagonistic relationship between the two parts of *Lamia*, suggests that the poem is born out of anxiety, and, as the letter written in the middle of composing *Hyperion*, on 19 February 1819 to George Keats, indicates, it is an anxiety that had its origin in the virulently hostile reviews of *Endymion*.

⁴ Quoted from John O. Hayden, *The Romantic Reviewers: 1802-1824* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 198. According to Hayden, *Hyperion* was the most popular of the longer poems with the reviewers: "The *Monthly Review* considered it 'decidedly the best of Mr. Keats's productions'; the *Monthly Magazine* thought it 'the most powerful', and John Scott in the *London Magazine* termed it 'one of the most extraordinary creations of any modern imagination'". Two reviewers who congratulated Keats on his decision to leave the poem incomplete were Leigh Hunt in the *Indicator* and Francis Jeffrey in the *Edinburgh Review*.

⁵ Quoted from Marjorie Levinson, *Keats's Life of Allegory: the Origins of a Style* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1988), p. 206.

⁶ Marjorie Levinson, *The Romantic Fragment Poems* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1986), p. 169, p. 254 (footnote).

I have no doubt of success in a course of years if I persevere—but it must be patience—for the Reviews have enervated and made indolent mens minds—few think for themselves—These Reviews too are getting more and more powerful and especially the Quarterly—They are like a superstition which the more it prostrates the Crowd and the longer it continues the more powerful it becomes just in proportion to their increasing weakness—I was in hopes that when people saw, as they must do now, *all the trickery and iniquity of these Plagues they would scout them, but no they are like the spectators at the Westminster cock-pit—they like the battle and do not care who wins or who looses.* (*KI*, II, p. 65, my italics)

The letter marks Keats's realisation that without the favour of the reviewers there would be no commercial and literary success. In the *Quarterly*, one of the "more powerful Plagues" to Keats, John Wilson Croker included amongst his notorious comments on *Endymion* in April 1818, a reference to Keats's revised Preface.

Mr. Keats, (if that be his real name, for we almost doubt that any man in his senses would put his real name to such a rhapsody), [. . .] however, deprecates criticism on this 'immature and feverish work' in terms which are themselves sufficiently feverish; and we confess that we should have abstained from inflicting upon him any of the tortures of the '*fierce hell*' of criticism, which terrify his imagination, if he had not begged to be spared in order that he might write more; if we had not observed in him a certain degree of talent which deserves to be put in the right way, or which, at least, ought to be warned of the wrong; and if, finally, he had not told us that he is of an age and temper which imperiously require mental discipline.⁷

The preface to *Endymion*, according to Croker, provoked the very response it seemed intended to pre-empt, which may suggest why Taylor, who had been deeply involved in Keats's re-casting of that preface, should have chosen to write himself the Advertisement for the 1820 volume:

⁷ John O. Hayden, *Romantic Bards and British Reviewers* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), pp. 324-6.

If any apology be thought necessary for the appearance of the unfinished poem of *HYPERION*, the publishers beg to state that they alone are responsible, as it was printed at their particular request, and contrary to the wish of the author. The poem was intended to have been of equal length with *ENDYMION*, but the reception given to that work discouraged the author from proceeding.⁸

The Advertisement insists that the decision to publish *Hyperion* was taken by the publishers against the express wishes of the author, and it explains Keats's failure to complete the poem by reference to the disheartening effect on him of the hostile reviews of *Endymion*. This is all quite clearly meant kindly. Taylor takes upon himself the task of rebuking the hostile reviewers: he, as it were, interposes himself between Keats and his attackers. But he does so at the cost of representing Keats as a poet passively obedient to his publishers' decisions, and morbidly sensitive to the hostile criticism of the reviews. Taylor appeals, so to speak, for a tenderly protective, a maternal, response to a sensitive and vulnerable young poet whose ill-treatment by the reviewers has reduced him to silence.⁹ It is an appeal for "Popularity" that Keats could only have considered "Mawkish", hence Keats's pained and angry description of the Advertisement as a "lie".¹⁰ In fact, Keats's response to the hostile reviewers was a good deal more robust than Taylor would have us believe. The more

⁸ For the text of the Advertisement, see Jack Stillinger (ed.), *The Poems of John Keats* (London: Heinemann, 1978), pp. 736-737.

⁹ Finney regards Taylor's statement as a misrepresentation of Keats: "The statements in their Advertisement were not only false but they also represented Keats as a weakling who was discouraged from completing *Hyperion* by hostile criticism of *Endymion*. As a matter of fact, the malignant reviews of *Endymion* appeared before Keats began *Hyperion* and they impelled him to begin the poem before he had intended". See Claude Lee Finney, *The Evolution of Keats's Poetry*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1936), vol. II, p. 537.

¹⁰ Bennett distrusts the Advertisement on two counts: first, Keats's own statement that "This is a lie", and second the chronological fact that Keats started writing *Hyperion* after the reviews of *Endymion* had appeared. However, he argues that "nevertheless, the Advertisement does indicate a very important source of authorial anxiety which informs the narrative shape of *Hyperion* and of its rewriting *The Fall of Hyperion*". See Andrew Bennett, *Keats, Narrative and Audience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 145. I agree that

violent the attacks on his work, the more steadily and deeply he interrogates the nature of his own poetic authority, and the more confidently he adopts a poetic manner that refuses to seek any merely "Mawkish Popularity".

In this chapter, I shall investigate Keats's self-consciousness about the reviewers as it is revealed in *The Fall of Hyperion*, focusing on the relationship developed in the encounter between the male poet-dreamer and the goddess Moneta, another version of the mortal-immortal relationship of Endymion and the goddess Cynthia. The encounter with Moneta is the one crucial action of *The Fall of Hyperion*, and from it we shall deduce a poetic self-identity manifested in defiance of, and also, in some sense, in compliance with the reviewers. I shall argue that the relationship between the male poet and Moneta may be thought of as a revised version of the relationship between a seemingly humanised and feminised Apollo and Mnemosyne in the third book of *Hyperion*. I will go on to argue that in *The Fall of Hyperion* Keats himself occupies the ambivalent position in which he places Lamia in the second part of that poem, when she responds to the public, the wedding guests, with a "pale contented sort of discontent".

2. "Too many Miltonic Inversions"

Hyperion was appreciated by contemporary reviewers because of its Miltonic reconstruction of the mythological overthrow of Saturn by the

the hostile reception by the reviewers to *Endymion* should be regarded not as a motive of incompleteness but as a generating force for the poem's composition and re-writing.

Olympian gods.¹¹ It was characterised as an "UnKeatsian achievement" presumably because it is an epic rather than a romance, masculine rather than feminine in its idiom. Ironically, however, less admiring critics believed that the attempt demonstrated not, as Keats himself suspected, that the poem retained "too many Miltonic inversions", but only that Keats had no aptitude for the Miltonic sublime. The notice in the *Monthly Review* of July 1820, for example, judged that Keats lacked the intuitive understanding of the classical antique possessed by Milton, and, amongst the moderns, only by Byron:

The wild and high imagination of ancient mythology, the mysterious being and awful histories of the deities of Greece and Rome, form subjects which Mr. Keats evidently conceives to be suited to his own powers: but, though boldly and skilfully sketched, his delineations of the immortals give a faint idea of the nature which the poets of Greece attributed to them. The only modern writer, by whom this spirit has been completely preserved, is Lord Byron, in his poem of 'Prometheus.' In this mould, too, the character of Milton's Satan is cast.¹²

The composition of the poem is made to seem an overweening project for a "shabby genteel" poet such as Keats although reviewers recognised its

¹¹ Jonathan Bate, 'Keats's Two Hyperions and the Problem of Milton', in Robert Brinkley & Keith Hanley (eds.), *Romantic Revisions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 322. In this essay, however, Jonathan Bate is less concerned with Milton's influence, arguing rather that in *The Fall of Hyperion* Keats moves away from Milton's divinely comic vision towards a more tragic vision. See Jonathan Bate, 'Keats's Two Hyperions and the Problem of Milton', p. 336. Following Keats's own explanations of his suspension of the *Hyperion* project, it has been accepted that Milton was a generating force in the composition and abandonment of *Hyperion* by Bloom and others who are interested in the 'anxiety of influence'. See Harold Bloom, 'Keats and the Embarrassment of the Past', in his *The Ringers in the Tower: Studies in Romantic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 131-144. Trott also examines the 'Miltonic' aspect of *Hyperion* poems and concludes that "the *Hyperion* poems are so inescapably Miltonic, it seems, because this hard task of relinquishment is especially associated with Milton". See Nicola Trott, 'Keats and the prison house of history', in Nicholas Roe (ed.), *Keats and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 269.

¹² John O. Hayden, *Romantic Bards and British Reviewers* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), pp. 349-350.

prominence among the poems of the 1820 volume.¹³ It was only Lord Byron whom they regarded as a modern poet culturally qualified to undertake such a 'Grand Narrative'. Byron, like Milton, was a classical scholar, familiar with both Latin and Greek, and his classical education was the qualification that enabled him to enter the masculine world of the epic. Surprisingly, even Leigh Hunt, in his review of the 1820 volume in the *Indicator* seems to accept this analogy when he too congratulates Keats on having abandoned *Hyperion* as a fragment:

The fragment ends with the deification of Apollo. It strikes us that there is something too effeminate and human in the way in which Apollo receives the exaltation which his wisdom is giving him. He weeps and wonders somewhat too fondly; but his powers gather nobly on him as he proceeds. (*The Indicator*, 9 August 1820)¹⁴

Leigh Hunt preferred it that the poem was left incomplete because of the gradually increasing tint of effeminacy in Book 3. It is true that in comparison with the unfaltering sublime of the Titans, Apollo's obscure melancholy seems very far from the virile posture appropriate to a conqueror.¹⁵ In some sense, despite his deity, he recalls the dejected Endymion, particularly in the encounter scene with the goddess Mnemosyne. Furthermore, his

¹³ Mellor pays attention to the fact that Byron's attack on the 1820 volume focused on the class and gender ambiguity of Keats, which contributed to the feminization of Keats. "Shabby genteel" is the Byronic term that calls attention to Keats's lack of proper gentlemanly poetic qualifications: "Byron also called Keats's masculinity into question by defining his works as "p-ss a bed poetry", "a sort of mental masturbation" produced by "frigging his imagination". See Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (New York: Routledge Press, 1993), p. 173. For Byron's remarks on Keats, see Leslie Marchand (ed.), *Byron's Letters and Journals*, 13 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973-1982), vol. 7, p. 200, p. 217, p. 225.

¹⁴ Hayden, *Romantic Bards and British Reviewers*, pp. 359-360.

¹⁵ Most Keatsian scholarship agrees that there are some discrepancies between Books 1 and 2, and Book 3. For instance, Finney insists that Book 3 suggests "a new and significant development in Keats's philosophy", a more humanitarian turn. See Finney, *The Evolution of Keats's Poetry*, vol. II, pp. 530-531.

metamorphosis into an immortal is represented as the same sort of humanised ecstatic exaltation undergone by the knight of 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'. Nevertheless, Apollo's relationship with Mnemosyne has been treated as a minor one in *Hyperion*, in comparison with two other grander scenes: Saturn's awakening to the loss of his realms and Hyperion's anxious premonition of a similar fate.¹⁶

There are three kinds of gender relationship in the two *Hyperions*: one is the Saturn-Thea relationship, another is the Apollo-Mnemosyne relationship, and the third is the male poet-Moneta relationship, which is best seen as a calculated revision of the relationships explored in the first version of the poem. Let me begin with the Saturn and Thea relationship.

Book 1 of *Hyperion*, like *Paradise Lost*, begins with Saturn fallen, and with the loss of identity that he suffers as a consequence of his dethronement. It is appropriate, then, that the first action of Thea, "a Goddess of the infant world", should be somewhat maternal, consoling Saturn for his loss. Hers is an entirely conventional feminine role. Even though Thea's stature is so huge that "By her in stature the tall Amazon/ Had stood a pigmy's height" (Book 1, 27-28) and her power is so overwhelming that "she would have ta'en / Achilles by the hair and bent his neck; / Or with a finger stay'd Ixion's wheel" (Book 1, 28-30), her appearance does not seem to be at all intimidating. Saturn may, like the knight-at-arms of 'La Belle Dame sans Merci', be emasculated, defeated, but in this case he is the victim of masculine power not of feminine enchantment. Thea comforts him with a motherly tenderness:

¹⁶ Levinson focuses attention on the 'romantic voice' of Book 3 as a distinctive discrepancy from Books 1 and 2. See Marjorie Levinson, *Keats's Life of Allegory: The Origins of a Style*

One hand she press'd upon that aching spot
 Where beats the human heart, as if just there,
 Though an immortal, she felt cruel pain:
 The other upon Saturn's bended neck
 She laid, and to the level of his ear
 Leaning with parted lips, some words she spake
 In solemn tenour and deep organ tone -
 (Book 1, 42-48)

Thea is represented here in the fullest possible sense as "a kneeling Goddess". Her Niobe-like blind love recalls the weeping Isabella deprived of her pot of basil, but she abases herself more fully even than Isabella, gracefully accommodating herself to the womanly role expected of her, to be the door-mat of her man:

So came these words and went; the while in tears
 She touch'd her fair large forehead to the ground,
 Just where her falling hair might be outspread
 A soft and silken mat for Saturn's feet.
 One moon, with alteration slow, had shed
 Her silver seasons four upon the night,
 And still these two were postured motionless,
 Like natural sculpture in cathedral cavern;
 The frozen God still couchant on the earth,

And the sad Goddess weeping at his feet:
(Book 1, 79-88)

Thea's unnoticed, one-way maternal love will be revised in Moneta who is accorded additional, stronger maternal qualities, becoming a figure not just of maternal tenderness but of maternal authority. Moneta does not simply comfort, she admonishes. Probably the fact that Saturn has been deprived of his kingship not by enchantment like the dethroned kings and warriors of 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' but "by course of Nature's law" (Book 2, 181) enables him to retain his position of masculine dominance over Thea in spite of his fall. His imposing and dauntless air, like Satan's in *Paradise Lost*, culminates in a majestic discourse:

'But cannot I create?
Cannot I form? Cannot I fashion forth
Another world, another universe,
To overbear and crumble this to nought?
Where is another Chaos? Where?' - That word
Found way unto Olympus, and made quake
The rebel three.
(Book 1, 141-147)

There is another masculine representative in this Keatsean epic, "Blazing Hyperion" who "still kept his sov'reignty, and rule, and majesty" (Book 1, 165). Like Saturn, however, no matter how assertively Hyperion vaunts his power, he cannot evade the anxiety that he will be supplanted by Apollo, his counterpart:

At this, through all his bulk an agony
 Crept gradual, from the feet unto the crown,
 Like a lithe serpent vast and muscular
 Making slow way, with head and neck convuls'd
 From over-strained might.
 (Book I, 259-263)

Such anxieties about the loss of authority cause physical numbness and apathetic melancholy. Saturn and Hyperion both feel their divine identity threatened as they detect the formation within themselves of a newly vulnerable identity more akin to the human.

Whatever sympathy Keats accorded to his two tragic heroes, Saturn and Hyperion,¹⁷ his letter of 23 January 1818 to Haydon suggests that the true hero of the poem will be Apollo, and it is on Apollo's heroism that Keats relies to differentiate the poem from a poetic romance such as *Endymion*:

¹⁷ Levinson reads the political allusion to Napoleon by representing Apollo as a type of all things Greek, liberal, republican and aesthetic. She differentiates the concept of 'authority' from that of 'legitimacy' so that Keats's sympathy is inclined to Hyperion rather than Apollo. But if we keep it in mind that the Apollo-Mnemosyne relationship of Book 3 is revised in *The Fall of Hyperion*, we might conclude that what Keats problematised in his *Hyperion* project had more to do with a questioning of his poetic identity than with the political debate between evolutionists and revolutionists. See Levinson, *Keats's Life of Allegory*, pp. 196-198. Michael O'Neill is another critic who draws our attention to the relationship between history and writing in the two *Hyperions*: "*Hyperion's* relationship with 'history' shares in the 'knowledge of contrast, feeling for light and shade' (*Letters*, ii. 360) informing the poem. It is a poem about the loss of authority (that of the Titans) which seeks to assert the authority of a poet (Keats); a poem of great stylistic control whose most powerful moments concern loss of control (especially as experienced by Saturn and Hyperion); a poem that rehearses one myth (that of evolutionary progress) only to find its imaginative sympathies engaged by an elegiac mood (that induced by the spectacle of fallen greatness); a poem that withdraws from the contemporary but is responsive to Napoleon's dubious bequest, his legacy of paralysed aftermath". See Michael O'Neill, 'When this warm scribe my hand: Writing and History in *Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion*', in Nicholas Roe (ed.), *Keats and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 153.

I have a complete fellow-feeling with you in this business—so much so that it would be as well to wait for a choice out of *Hyperion*—when that Poem is done there will be a wide range for you—in *Endymion* I think you may have many bits of the deep and sentimental cast—the nature of *Hyperion* will lead me to treat it in a more naked and grecian Manner—and the march of passion and endeavour will be undeviating—and one great contrast between them will be—that the Hero of the written tale being mortal is led on, like Buonaparte, by circumstance; whereas the Apollo in *Hyperion* being a fore-seeing God will shape his actions like one (*KL*, I, p. 207).

Keats's reference to Napoleon has, of course, induced many critics to understand the poem as a political allegory, but, in fact, Keats locates the crucial difference between the two poems in the fact that the hero of *Hyperion*, unlike *Endymion*, is an immortal. Another less noticed category that Keats uses to differentiate the two poems is 'sentimentality'. Whereas *Endymion* betrays a "deep and sentimental cast", the *Hyperion* story leads Keats to treat it "in a more naked and grecian manner", namely, in the manner of an epic. The letter reveals that Keats is anxious to avoid the sentimental aspects of the romance genre in *Hyperion*. If so, Book 3 seems scarcely to accord with his intentions.¹⁸

First, the established luxurious Keatsean vocabulary reappears in the description of Delos and the victory of Apollo. It is, quite literally, a highly coloured piece of writing:

Flush every thing that hath a vermeil hue,

Let the rose glow intense and warm the air,

And let the clouds of even and of morn

¹⁸ On the stylistic distinctiveness of Book 3, Finney suggests that its more sensuous, sentimental, romantic tone might be a result of Keats having written this part of the poem after he had confessed his love to Fanny Brawne. See Finney, *The Evolution of Keats's Poetry*, vol. II, p. 532.

Float in voluptuous fleeces o'er the hills;
 Let the *red* wine within the goblet boil,
 Cold as a bubbling well; let faint-lipp'd shells,
 On sands, or in great deeps, *vermillion* turn
 Through all their labyrinths; and let the maid
Blush keenly, as with some warm kiss surpris'd
 (Book 3, 14-22, my italics identify words expressing redness)

Such voluptuous luxuries coloured symbolically in 'red' recall the description of Adonis in Book 2 of *Endymion*. It is a colour scheme that seems pointedly to contradict the white marble of antique statuary that Keats had evoked in stating his ambition to write the poem "in a more naked and Grecian manner". It is amidst all this floridity that Apollo sits and weeps like a forlorn lover. Moreover, he cannot define the cause of his melancholy when he first encounters the goddess Mnemosyne: 'I strive to search wherefore I am so sad, / Until a melancholy numbs my limbs' (Book 3, 88-89). Only his incessant questioning of the nature of 'power' identifies him as someone fit for immortality.

His transformation into a deity is again described luxuriously:

Soon wild commotions shook him, and made flush
 All the immortal fairness of his limbs;
 Most like the struggle at the gate of death;
 Or liker still to one who should take leave
 Of pale immortal death, and with a pang
 As hot as death's is chill, with fierce convulse

Die into life: so young Apollo anguish'd:

His very hair, his golden tresses fained,

Kept undulation round his eager neck.

During the pain Mnemosyne upheld

Her arms as one who prophesied.—At length

Apollo shriek'd,

(Book 3, 124-135)

Such a splendid metamorphosis seems to reiterate the transformation of Lamia from snake to woman. As a 'lamia' is transformed by convulsive pangs into 'Lamia', so a neophyte god is transformed into the deified god, Apollo, through a 'wild commotion' in which he dies into life. The ecstatic 'convulsion' and 'undulation' suggest sexual consummation. Hunt's complaint that the passage lapses into effeminacy and attributes to Apollo an inappropriate humanity seems accurately to expose the manner in which the passage attributes to Apollo an Endymion-like vulnerability rather than the marmoreal masculinity with which Saturn and Hyperion have been endowed. It is only through "a wondrous lesson" learned in the encounter with Mnemosyne, a god of memory, that young Apollo accomplishes his deification, after he reads her "silent face" and finds that "Names, deeds, gray legends, dire events, rebellions, / Majesties, sovran voices, agonies, / Creations and destroyings, all at once / Pour into the wide hollows of my brain" (Book 3, 114-117).

Mnemosyne's approach to the melancholic Apollo seems mortal rather than divine, and fully feminine rather than simply maternal, despite the fact that Apollo is her foster child. He has dreamed of her, just as Endymion

dreamed of Cynthia, and she invites him to open his heart to her in a manner that almost leads one to expect a lover's confession:

Show thy heart's secret to an ancient Power

Who hath forsaken old and sacred thrones

For prophecies of thee, and for the sake

Of loveliness new born

(Book 3, 76-79)

Their union, however, seems to be rather easily accomplished through Apollo's ability to read Mnemosyne as though she were a fully transparent text, and Mnemosyne's spectator-level sharing of the pangs that he suffers in his re-birth. Their relationship at this point may recall that of the wretched wight and la belle dame in the *Indicator* text, but, in fact, Apollo is more fully feminised. In suffering birth-pangs, he becomes, as it were, his own mother. Mnemosyne presides as midwife not simply over his accession to godhead, but also over his accession to the central mystery of womanhood. In undergoing re-birth, Apollo is reconciled with the mutable world, but the reconciliation remains sentimental, too easily achieved. In particular, Mnemosyne's role as spectator of the process is represented with an uncomplicated benignity that masks the more complex feelings that Keats so clearly registers when he considers the power of the reviewers: 'when people saw, as they must do now, *all the trickery and iniquity of these Plagues, they would scout them, but no they are like spectators*'. Here, the passive role of the spectator is guiltily complicit rather than innocently benignant.

3. The Poet and "Unknown Femininity"

The Fall of Hyperion is a fragmentary 'dream vision', which is a genre frequently adopted by the Romantic poets.¹⁹ The stylistic transition from the heroic epic to the romantic dream quest in itself produces several other distinctions between the two *Hyperions*. One is the replacement of the third person narrator with an 'I' narrator.²⁰ As a consequence, it is generally said that whereas *Hyperion* aspires towards an objective narrative mode, *The Fall of Hyperion* moves in a more subjective direction, its theme becomes the quest of a poet for his own self-identity. By emphasising these discrepancies, Keatsian scholarship generally dismisses the fact that, from the very beginnings of the *Hyperion* project, Keats paid incessant attention to the reciprocal relationship between the author and the audience, between the author's authority and the reviewers' authentication of that authority, and between the act of writing and the act of reading, which he figures, as he commonly does, in the relationships within the poem between men and women.²¹

¹⁹ It is generally agreed that the style of *The Fall of Hyperion* displays a more pervasive Dantean influence than *Hyperion*, revealed, for example, in the use of the term 'Cantos' instead of 'Books'. Jonathan Bate notes that "Keats had been reading in the Italian classics, especially Dante and Ariosto, over the summer of 1819 and this is the likeliest source of the change in form". Moreover, Bate argues that "the revised structure was also bound up with the state of contemporary English poetry, where 'visions' and 'dreams' seemed to be having more success than epics". See Jonathan Bate, 'Keat's Two Hyperions and the Problem of Milton', in Robert Brinkley & Keith Hanley (eds.), *Romantic Revisions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 325-326.

²⁰ Bennett notices the change from the third person to the first person and notes that it enables the narrator to be a 'reader-surrogate'. See Andrew Bennett, *Keats, Narrative and Audience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 154.

²¹ For instance, Balachandra Rajan argues that whereas *Hyperion* meditates "the defeat of history" like *Paradise Lost*, *The Fall of Hyperion* investigates the roles of the poet and poetry in relation with the audience: "Indeed, the contrast between 'the electrical changing misery' of vision as experienced and the 'wonder' of vision as disclosed strongly suggest the relationship between writer and audience". See Balachandra Rajan, 'The Two Hyperions: Compositions

If the poet-Moneta relationship is a revised version of the Apollo-Mnemosyne relationship in that it seeks a kind of reconciliation with the poem's readers and its critics, it is necessary to examine the precise nature of the revision. On the surface, the poet narrator's first rendezvous with Moneta seems to be a re-writing of Apollo's encounter with Mnemosyne:

I heard, I look'd: two senses both at once
 So fine, so subtle, felt the tyranny
 Of that fierce throat, and the hard task proposed.
 Prodigious seem'd the toil; the leaves were yet
 Burning, --when suddenly a palsied chill
 Struck from the paved level up my limbs,
 And was ascending quick to put cold grasp
 Upon those streams that pulse beside the throat:
 I shriek'd; and the sharp anguish of my shriek
 Stung my own ears—I strove hard to escape
 The numbness; strove to gain the lowest step.
 (*The Fall of Hyperion*, Canto I, 118-128)

Just arrived at the bottom of the "old sanctuary" of Saturn in his dream vision, the poet confronts Moneta at first in the shape of "An image, huge", next, by

and Decompositions', in Duncan Wu (ed.), *Romanticism: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Ltd., 1995), p.281. Michael O'Neill insists that "both poems concern themselves with problems of representation, whether in relation to history or the self". See Michael O'Neill, 'When this warm scribe my hand: Writing and History in *Hyperion* & *The Fall of Hyperion*', in Nicholas Roe (ed.), *Keats and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 154. It is persuasive when Bennett reads the two *Hyperions* in terms of Keats's developing interest in the relationship between audience and poet. However I think that this idea could be developed by investigating the relationships in the poems between men and women.

means of her "language" when she issues a warning: "If thou canst not ascend / These steps, die on that marble where thou art" (Canto 1, 107-108). When he is under this threat, the poet narrator can 'see' and 'hear' at the same time, that is, he perceives the threat by means of "two senses both at once". In *The Fall of Hyperion*, the monological perception of *Hyperion* is revised into a dialogical perception. This doubleness is the condition of the poet's and Moneta's reciprocal knowledge of each other from the first moment of their encounter. Like young Apollo, the narrator poet undergoes a sort of metamorphosis rite, and the experience for him, as for Apollo, is accompanied by pain. In this revised metamorphosis, however, his ordeal is not completed when he manages to perceive with "two senses". He is required to ascend the next step in order to 'read', in some sense 'penetrate' Moneta's face, which is the only way to escape the 'numbness' that the experience has induced in him. The idea of 'numbness' was also important in *Hyperion*, where it seems a consequence of Saturn's dethronement and Hyperion's premonition. Its figurative symbol is perhaps the Naiad who "mid her reeds / Pressed her cold finger closer to her lips". The hushing 'numbness' figures the same enchanted state of paralysis suffered by the emasculated kings, warriors and knights of 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', a numbness which results finally in death.

What the poet narrator is scheduled to learn from his catechism with Moneta is already epitomised at the very beginning of *The Fall of Hyperion*.

Fanatics have their dreams, wherewith they weave

A paradise for a sect; the savage too

From forth the loftiest fashion of his sleep

Guesses at heaven: pity these have not
 Trac'd upon vellum or wild Indian leaf
 The shadows of melodious utterance.
 But bare of laurel they live, dream, and die;
 For Poesy alone can tell her dreams,
 With the fine spell of words alone can save
 Imagination from the sable charm
 And dumb enchantment. Who alive can say
 "Thou are no Poet; mayst not tell thy dreams"?
 Since every man whose soul is not a clod
 Hath visions, and would speak, if he had lov'd
 And been well nurtured in his mother tongue.
 (Canto 1, 1-15)

Fanatics and savages have their own dream in which they only "live, dream, and die" without noticing life's "bareness" and "shadowiness", because they are, to some extent, enchanted, hushed by "the sable charm" of the dream, reduced to the state of the wretched wight. Their dreams leave them trapped in a world of shadows. The poet's dream is different because he "With the fine spell of words alone can save / Imagination from the sable charm / And dumb enchantment". If so, whether the dream that it is "purposed to rehearse" should be a Poet's or Fanatic's entirely depends on the dreamer's ability to escape "the sable charm", that is, to arrive at a reciprocal sympathy in his encounter with the other, without falling into enchanted numbness. The first step is his self-recognition of his role as an Apollonian poet, as Waldoff

notes,²² that is, in addition to his role as god of poetry, he must become aware that he is also the god of medicine, and hence has peculiar power over the forces that Keats refers to as "these Plagues". It is for this reason that Moneta reproaches the poet narrator as a naïve dreamer, "a fever of thyself", and contrasts him with the man who is "a sage; / A humanist, physician": "What benefit canst thou do, or all thy tribe, / To the great world?" (Canto 1, 169, 189-190, 167-168). After the poet comes to a true recognition of his role, the voice of Moneta becomes less intimidating and more feminine, a transformation signalled when she begins to weep. Nevertheless, the narrator cannot completely dispel his fear of this "Unknown femininity" because it makes him feel still "too small". Without his confessing it, by the sense of sight alone, she recognises that his terror is concentrated on her robe and her veils:

But yet I had a terror of her robes,
 And chiefly of the veils, that from her brow
 Hung pale, and curtain'd her in mysteries
 That made my heart too small to hold its blood.
 This saw that Goddess, and with sacred hand

²² Waldoff persuasively argues that "in *The Fall of Hyperion* the poet pursues such a godlike understanding in his quest for the identity of a poet", that is, an Apollonian role, "whose principal identity as god of poetry is linked to his identity as god of medicine". See Leon Waldoff, *Keats and the Silent Work of Imagination* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), p. 190. However, I don't agree with his idea that "the Keatsean poet-hero in the odes and *The Fall of Hyperion* is confronted less with the kind of limited, personal problems that Endymion, Porphyro, the Knight-at-arms and Lycius must deal with, often relating to the inconstancy, or separation from a feminine ideal, and more with the naked and fundamental problems inherent in nature and human life". See Waldoff, *Keats and the Silent Work of Imagination*, p. 192. I think that Keats continues to investigate the ideal union with the opposite, the other and the female without losing his self-identity even in *The Fall of Hyperion*.

Parted the veils.
(Canto 1, 251-256)

It is necessary for him to read or penetrate her unveiled face. The most distinctive feature of her face is the oxymoronic coexistence in it of incompatibles, like Lamia's mind in the second part of *Lamia*.

Then saw I a wan face,
Not pin'd by human sorrows, but bright blanch'd
By an immortal sickness which kills not;
It works a constant change, which happy death
Can put no end to; deathwards progressing
To no death was that visage; it had pass'd
The lily and the snow; and beyond these
I must not think now, though I saw that face—
But for her eyes I should have fled away.
They held me back, with a benignant light,
Soft mitigated by divinest lids
Half closed, and visionless entire they seem'd
Of all external things—they saw me not,
But in blank splendor beam'd like the mild moon,
Who comforts those she sees not, who knows not
What eyes are upward cast.
(Canto 1, 256-271)

Her wan face, "blanched by immortal sickness", shows "a constant change", but, ironically, though it is "deathwards progressing", it is a progress only

towards "no death". No matter how mutable, there is an immortal consistency in her face. Her eyes have a power that is at once hypnotic, like the gaze to which Apollonius subjects Lycius, and yet also "benignant", so that the dreamer is held back at once by kindness and constraint. However, Moneta's gaze is quite different from the searching, penetrative gaze of Apollonius in that, despite its consoling power, her eyes seem blind, "visionless" like "the mild moon, / Who comforts those she sees not"²³. Moneta's face is an incarnated oxymoron, and hence an enigmatic text for the poet who is destined to read the vision beyond its visionlessness: "I ached to see what things the hollow brain / Behind enwombed: what high tragedy / In the dark secret chambers of her skull / Was acting," (Canto 1, 276-279). Just as Moneta reads the poet's terror simply by seeing it, he is forced to rely on a strange power of sight. He sees the vision enwombed in Moneta's skull by reading her blank eyes:

Whereon there grew

A power within me of enormous ken,

To see as a God sees, and take the depth

Of things as nimbly as the outward eye

Can size and shape pervade. The lofty theme

At those few words hung vast before my mind,

With half-unravel'd web. I set myself

²³ Ruthven interprets Moneta as 'Juno Moneta' who is traditionally associated with the Roman mint. I don't agree with his Marxian notion that "Keat's Moneta, with her death-in-life appearance, and her sightless eyes shining 'in blank splendour' like two gold coins, hideously prefigures Marx's conception of the alienation characteristics of money". K. K. Ruthven, 'Keats and Dea Moneta', *SIR*, vol. 15 (1976), p. 450. I think that such a reading fails to account for the fact that Moneta actively co-operates in the poet's transformation.

Upon an eagle's watch, that I might see,

And seeing ne'er forget
(Canto 1, 302-310)

This is the culmination of their union. There is no further development in Canto 2, which offers only a re-writing of the 'Titans' tragic history as it had been told in *Hyperion*.

The Moneta of *The Fall of Hyperion* is a more Janus-like figure than Mnemosyne, and establishes a more complex relationship with the poet narrator. Although she captures the vagrant poet with her visionary power, at the same time she empowers him, freeing him from numbness by the spell of enchantment. Although she admonishes him for his naïve lack of self-knowledge, like Peona, at the same time she consoles him like the Indian Maid. Moneta seems to be less a sensual enchantress than a figure at once maternal and forlorn. Her identity seems to be as indefinable and ambivalent as the "constant change" that characterises her face. In consequence, her relationship with the poet narrator becomes more complicated than those of Endymion and Cynthia, or, of Apollo and Mnemosyne. Moneta seems to be less feminine than Cynthia in her union with the male poet and more co-operative than Mnemosyne in the poet's metamorphosis. At least, she is not like "the spectators at the Westminster cock-pit who like the battle and do not care who wins or who loses". In the confrontation between the dreamer and Moneta, Keats works out a new possibility of relationship between poet and reader, the reader representing here at once the reviewers and the poetry-reading public. Readers are neither repudiated even as they are catered for, like the wedding-guests of *Lamia*, nor humbly courted in the manner of a poet

content with a "Mawkish Popularity". Rather, as the poet gazes on Moneta's face, his recognition of her is also a moment of self-recognition, and the poem that results, the poem that is enwombed in Moneta's brain, is a poem of which he is at once the midwife and the father, a poem that he at once records and composes. *The Fall of Hyperion* is a poem that struggles painfully towards the conclusion that poetry is neither produced by the poet, nor by its reader, but by both. Poetry is a project that requires the poet and the reader to enter into a relationship characterised by reciprocity and mutuality, like the relationship between the dreamer and Moneta.

Part III. The Lyric Poems

I. The Great Odes: a Series of Hieroglyphics

Keats's great odes are, like the scriptures, 'figurative'. These are poems in which the speaker gazes at figures and at objects as though they were hieroglyphs, like those "hieroglyphics old" that Keats refers to in *Hyperion*, except that in the odes it is the lyric 'I' rather than 'sages and keen-eyed astrologers' who has the task of recovering their 'import'.¹ The odes represent, as it were, a dialogue of the mind with itself, as if Keats were weary of addressing a reading public for which he no longer had respect, for which his feelings had become as cynical as the feelings toward his friend Benjamin Bailey that he betrays in the letter from which I have already quoted. It is significant that Keats prefaces his thoughts on the 'figurative' in poetry by

¹ I adapt this term from Hazlitt's characterisation of Shakespeare's use of language: Shakespeare "translates thoughts into visible images". See P. P. Howe (ed.), *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 21 vols. (London and Toronto: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1930-1934), vol. 5, 'Lectures on English Poets and A View of the English Stage', especially 'On Shakespeare and Milton', pp. 54-55. Hazlitt celebrates Shakespeare's ability to fashion his language into visual images: "He has a magic power over words: they come winged at his bidding; and seem to know their places. They are struck out at a heat, on the spur of the occasion, and have all the truth and vividness which arise from an actual impression of the objects. His epithets and single phrases are like sparkles, thrown off from an imagination, fired by the whirling rapidity of its own motion. His language is hieroglyphical. It translates thoughts into visible images". I borrow my idea of 'hieroglyphics' as a sort of enigmatic text awaiting interpretation from Wolfson who understands Keats's odes as "an exploration of the operation of these 'mysterious signs' by turning the 'charactered language' of poetic inquiry into a mirror of its own processes—its limits and inadequacies, as well as its power and productivity". See Susan Wolfson, *The Questioning Presence: Wordsworth, Keats and the Interrogative Mode in Romantic Poetry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 301-302.

gesturing his impatience with women as readers not of poems on this occasion, but of men:

All this I am not supposed by the Reynoldses to have any hint of—it will be a good Lesson to the Mother and Daughters—nothing would serve but Bailey—If you mentioned the word Tea pot—some one of them came out with an a propos about Bailey—noble fellow—fine fellow! was always in their mouths—this may teach them that the man who ridicules romance is the most romantic of Men—that he who abuses women and slights them—loves them the most—that he who talks of roasting a Man alive would not do it when it came to the push—and above all that they are very shallow people who take every thing literal A Man's life of any worth is a continual allegory—and very few eyes can see the Mystery of his life—*a life like the scriptures, figurative*—which such people can no more make out than they can the hebrew Bible. Lord Byron cuts a figure—but he is not figurative—Shakespeare led a life of Allegory; his works are the comments on it—(KL., II, p. 67, my italics).

When Keats was invited to tea with Mrs Dike and Mrs Brawne on 18 February 1819, he was struck by the manner in which Bailey's predatory and contemptuous attitude toward women -- Bailey was a renowned womanizer -- served only to secure him the good graces of the "Mother and Daughters". Significantly, Bailey's attitudes and his sexual success lead Keats to compare him to Byron.² It is the man who "ridicules romance", and "abuses women and slights them" who is taken by women to be "the most romantic of Men". For Keats this womanly preference for "sentiment and sneering" is a kind of

² Benjamin Bailey became engaged to Hamilton Gleig, daughter of George Gleig, Bishop of Brechin and primate of the Scots Episcopal Church, after having ardently courted Marianne Reynolds. Keats's correspondence with him ended on August 14, 1819, the day of Bailey's marriage. He was alleged to have proposed to Tamsine Leigh, one of the three daughters of William Leigh. We cannot be quite so certain that Bailey made advances to Miss Martin - because Miss Martin is known to have married another Bailey. This episode reveals Keats's suspicions of female readers' ability to recognise what is truly 'romantic' in men, a suspicion that he seems to have extended to their understanding of literature when he used it to explain the unaccountable popularity of *Don Juan*. On Benjamin Bailey, see 'Biographical Sketches', in Hyder Edward Rollins (ed.), *The Letters of John Keats*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), vol. I, pp. 63-65.

literal-mindedness that renders true poetry, figurative poetry, as unintelligible as a "hebrew Bible". Keats made his revisions to *The Eve of St. Agnes*, in "an attempt to play with his reader and fling him off at last", as he explained in his letter to Taylor of 19 September 1819. Woodhouse disliked the alterations because he believed that in making them Keats "affected the 'Don Juan' style of mingling up sentiment and sneering". The comments on Bailey suggest the possibility that Keats was tempted in his revisions to try to "cut a figure", and that he was quite aware that the cultivation of a Byronic contempt for sentiment and for womankind might be one way of appealing to a female audience. Unlike the narrative poems, the great odes focus on a 'still picture', a stationary spot, so they are figurative rather than narrative, and the result is a sequence of poems that seem to exclude or to ignore their audience. The manuscript history of the odes does not reveal the process of anxious revision that is evident in the narrative poems, which suggests in itself a greater confidence, but it is the confidence that comes to the poet who is no longer self-consciously aware of the hostile criticism to which he has been subjected, and of the reading public who will determine the success of his volume, but who seems content to write for himself.

His five great odes, 'Ode to Psyche', 'Ode to a Nightingale', 'Ode on Melancholy', 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' and 'Ode on Indolence' were composed at the end of April and in May 1819. 'Ode to Psyche' was first copied into his journal letter to his brother on 30 April, given to Reynolds on 4 May, then published in the *Poems* of 1820, while 'Ode to Nightingale' and 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' were published, before their appearance in the 1820 volume, in

The Annals of the Fine Arts, in the summer and winter numbers in 1819.³ Except for 'Ode on Indolence', all the other odes were published in the 1820 volume together with the narrative poems. However, the great odes should perhaps be grouped not so much with *Lamia*, *Isabella*, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, and *Hyperion* as with *The Fall of Hyperion*. In other words, they are earlier applications of Keats's interest in 'reading' itself, and in the processes of reading of the kind that is displayed when the dreamer attempts to read an enigmatic text such as Moneta's "wan face" as an allegory of the oxymoronic coexistence of incompatibles in the world. In this sense, his lyric manner is consciously produced as a defence strategy to evade his authorial predicament, as a way of remaining on a threshold without crossing over into either a sentimental or a sneering relationship with his audience. In much the same way that the Wordsworthian lyric epic *The Prelude* resonates with the political and revolutionary disillusionment of the poet so the great odes reflect Keats's authorial anxiety, though in both cases the covert theme of the poems is only reluctantly disclosed to the public.

As I have shown, Keats consistently figures his relationship with the reader of his poems in the erotic relationships between the men and women in the poems. Hence it is not surprising that in the odes such relationships are evaded or elided. Except for the story of Psyche and Cupid, there is no reference in these poems to the kind of love roman out of which Keats fashions his narrative poems. Rather he contemplates on a Grecian urn, a nightingale or a single mood such as melancholy or indolence. However all of

³ On the textual history of the odes, and the evidence that they were revised less extensively than the romances, see Claude Finney, *The Evolution of Keats's Poetry*, 2 vols. (Cambridge,

these objects of contemplation are figured as feminine. Even in the case of 'Ode to Psyche' the mythological male and female relationship has attracted much less critical attention than that of *Lamia*, as unwittingly shown in Greg Kucich's analysis of the influence of Mary Tighe's *Psyche* on Keats's *Lamia*, rather than on the 'Ode to Psyche'.⁴ Kucich, like Weller and Gross, chooses *Lamia* rather than 'Ode to Psyche' when he wishes to explore the gender dynamics of Keats's poetry. Their conventional avoidance of the 'Ode to Psyche' itself serves to indicate the more obscure gender dynamics of Keats's odes in their resistance to the flimsy sentimentalism of female readers who reserve their admiration for a 'literary Benjamin Bailey'.

In the great odes, the erotic narrative is superseded by a lyric meditation on a still picture of Psyche and Cupid, a Grecian urn, a nightingale or a private mood.⁵ These icons are delivered to their contemplator as the hieroglyphics of a disembodied feminine in place of the palpable, fleshly women that populate the narrative poems. Such a replacement of subjects, whether mortal or immortal, by feminine objects might in itself betray a cultural anxiety of the kind suggested by Richard Cronin.

Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1936), vol. 1, pp. 572-648.

⁴ Kucich analyses the gender dynamics of Romanticism taking as his example the relationship between Keats and Tighe. Keats, according to him, demonstrates border crossings in his gender positions, an argument that he supports through a comparison between Tighe's *Psyche* and *Lamia*. However importantly his comments on their similarities and differences display Keats's sensitivity to gender, his argument is more significant in its insistence on comparing Tighe's poem with *Lamia*, a narrative poem, rather than with 'Ode to Psyche'. It was not Kucich who initiated this comparison. George Gross argues for the strong influence of Tighe on *Lamia*, borrowing himself from an argument of Earle Vonard Weller's. See Earle Vonard Weller, 'Keats and Mary Tighe', *PMLA*, vol. 42 (1927), pp. 963-985; George C. Gross, 'Lamia and the Cupid - Psyche Myth', *KSL*, vol. 39 (1990), pp. 151-165; Greg Kucich, 'Gender Crossings: Keats and Tighe', *KSL*, vol. 44 (1995), pp. 29-39.

⁵ Andrew Bennett sensibly indicates the difference between 'lyric' and 'narrative' in terms of audience. Although the lyric embodies the desire to escape temporality and to escape an audience, seeking for 'the subjectivity of the poetic speaker', Bennett insists that "if the poet 'conceals' the audience from himself, then the act of concealment is, at the same time,

In the lyric poems Keats confronts some item so heavily freighted with cultural associations that it can serve as a metonym for the whole tradition of high culture. Keats stands in contemplation of the Elgin marbles, a Grecian urn, a nightingale or melancholy, the emotion that beyond all others the poetic tradition has dignified as a badge of cultural attainment. The poems chart the fluctuations by which Keats successively demands his right to a place within that culture, and betrays his bitter sense that its boundaries are patrolled by cultural monitors such as J. W. Croker and Lockhart, whose function it is to preserve culture from the encroachments of those like Keats, whose education and social station do not qualify them for entry.⁶

The cultural "encroachment" of Keats into the forbidden world of the Byronic love roman, or the Miltonic epic narrative had rendered him vulnerable to the literary censorship exercised by class 'monitors' such as Croker and Lockhart. So too do his lyric poems in so far as they address objects so closely associated with 'high culture', or at least objects which are "commercially viable art-products".⁷ If Keats denies narrative in his odes, or, in some sense, condenses it into a sequence of distinct visual artefacts, what does this development betoken in terms of the sexual politics of Keats's poetry, and its concern with its readership? If Keats in his odes is attempting to establish an autonomous aesthetic realm, in which art may exist free from contamination by the 'literary fashionables', then is this the mark of a new found confidence or of an unassuaged anxiety in terms of male poet's relationship with the feminine

necessarily an acknowledgement". See Andrew Bennett, *Keats, Narrative, and Audience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 129.

⁶ Richard Cronin, 'Keats and the Politics of Cockney Style', *SEL*, vol. 36, no. 4 (1996), p. 793.

⁷ Elizabeth Jones, inheriting the idea from Marjorie Levinson, focuses on the commercial aspects of the great odes in which "Keats was conscious of his role as a producer in the literary marketplace". In other words, as a literary Kaufmann, Keats tots up "a poetic catalogue of cultural artefacts, fetishised as commodities...: Chapman's Homer, King Lear, the Elgin marbles, a Grecian urn, and so on". Those icons are another catalogue of his desire for producing commercially viable materials, although Keats was torn "between contempt for the taste of the literary fashionables and the realisation of their necessity for his living". Elizabeth Jones, 'Writing for the Market: Keats's Odes as Commodities', *SIR*, vol. 34 (Fall, 1995), pp. 343-364.

icons and his readership? Does it come from his consciousness of the illiteracy of the reading public, or vice versa?

In an attempt to answer these questions, I shall read the great odes as poems which attempt to decipher the import of a series of hieroglyphics; as an exploration, then, of the process of reading of the kind that is most fully developed in the later poem *The Fall of Hyperion*.⁸ I shall, first, examine how Keats converts the narrative poem into the visual lyric, focusing on the alteration that this development implies in Keats's relationship with his audience. Then, I shall explain the male poet's relationship with a series of icons gendered as feminine as an exploration of Keats's relationship with his reader of the kind that is figured in the narrative poems by the erotic relationships that they record.

1. 'Ode to Psyche': Sustaining the Romantic Narrative

The story of Cupid and Psyche has been continuously reproduced as an archetypal romance. Lucius Apuleius seems to have invented the story.⁹ When this mythological romance was adapted by Mary Tighe, Psyche was unprecedentedly empowered to conduct her own allegorical journey becoming

⁸ Helen Vendler emphasises "the totality of the other odes". See Helen Vendler, *The Odes of John Keats* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard U.P., 1983), p. 6.

⁹ See Lucius Apuleius, *Cupid and Psyche: a Mythological Tale from the Golden Ass of Apuleius*, ed., and trans. E. J. Kenney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). The main story is as follows: Psyche's beauty was so great that she distracted men from the worship of Venus. Venus arranged for Cupid to make Psyche fall in love with "some base wretch to foul disgrace allied", but Cupid fell for her himself. Cupid promised Psyche that she would give birth to "an immortal boy" so long as she did not look at him or seek to discover his identity. Out of jealousy, her sisters persuaded her that she was in fact sleeping with a monster, and urged her to kill him. With a lamp and a knife close by, she discovered her lover

a female knight errant. Tighe's reconstruction of the story focuses on Psyche's quest in which "she is tested by encounters with such personages as Vanity, Flattery (Canto III), Credulity, Jealousy (Canto IV), and Indifference (Canto VI) before being united with love".¹⁰ Tighe's *Psyche* has been generally appreciated by feminist critics for its reversal of the conventional gender dynamics of romance, supposedly those of *The Faerie Queene*. She describes a quest in which Psyche graduates from the subordinate position of woman to achieve a sense of female solidarity before achieving an independent union with Cupid.¹¹ If Tighe's Psyche is represented as subversive in terms of gender, this is in stark contrast to the opinion of her contemporary reviewers, not to speak of her intimate friends, who, as the preface to the 1811 edition explains, encouraged the publication of the poem because they felt it "a sort of duty no longer to withhold from the public such precious relics". Unlike Keats's *Endymion* and even the 1820 volume, the rapid sale of Tighe's posthumous *Psyche*, which entered a fourth edition in the year of its publication and reached a fifth edition in 1816, suggests that there was little in the poem that its readers found unacceptable, and this is predictable even from the introduction supplied by her editor William Tighe. He pointed to her

to be Cupid. He is scared away when she drops the lamp and deserts her. At this, in Tighe's version, Psyche departs on an allegorical journey, while Apuleius's version ends in death.

¹⁰ For the text of the poem, see Mary Tighe, *Psyche*, in Duncan Wu (ed.), *Romantic Women Poets, an Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1997), pp. 376-461. Subsequent citations of *Psyche* appear parenthetically in the text by page number. This allegorical journey is what distinguishes her version of the story most sharply from Apuleius's: in his version, "Psyche is scolded by Venus and given a series of hard and worthless labours that ultimately cause her death". See Apuleius, *Cupid and Psyche: a Mythological Tale from the Golden Ass of Apuleius*, pp. 12-17.

¹¹ Greg Kucich and Harriet Kramer Linkin argue that Tighe's *Psyche* is subversive enough to make a "revisionary view of Apuleius's standard version of the myth" apparent to anyone equipped with a keen feminine romantic sensibility like Mary Shelley. See Greg Kucich, 'Gender Crossings: Keats and Tighe', *KSJ*, vol. 44 (1995), pp. 29-39, Harriet Kramer Linkin, 'Romanticism and Mary Tighe's Psyche: Peering at the Hem of Her Blue Stockings', *SJR*, vol.

"strong feelings and amiable affections" expressed in a style remarkable for its "nice discrimination", and these, according to him, are the general attributes of female writers. He went on to lament her "unhappy lot of suffering frame and a premature death". Reviewers took up both elements of this description.¹² It was not only Tighe's unhappy marriage and untimely death that inspired in the poem's readers, especially its female readers, a pleasing melancholy. So did the story of the poem itself, which re-writes the myth as a rather sentimental love story of a woman who was once discarded, but wins back her lover by demonstrating her capacity for self-disciplined devotion. It is a narrative that offers obvious satisfactions to the romance reader. Despite the feminist readings of the gender dynamics of *Psyche* offered by several modern critics, it is apparent that her romance audience appreciated it for its melancholy and its sentimentality. Tighe transforms the Greek myth into a sentimental romance, but Keats's procedure seems almost perversely contrary. He takes a story that has the potential to generate a lengthy narrative poem such as *Endymion*, and reduces it to an ode, rejecting the whole allegorical journey in favour of one picturesque still point, Cupid and Psyche lying together side by side.¹³

35 (1996), pp. 55-72. However, their claims for the subversive potential of Tighe's poem seem exaggerated.

¹² The complimentary notices in contemporary journals of *Psyche* were often preceded by reminders to the reader of her untimely death, itself procuring a 'pleasing melancholy' from the reader. The *Quarterly Review* praised her for a "pleasing repose of style and manner, a fine purity and innocence of feeling, and a delightful ease of versification", concluding that "the poem is, on the whole, pleasing rather than great, amiable rather than captivating". Also the *British Review* said that "the vein of sentiment which runs through the poem under our consideration is far superior to that which pervades the generality of those compositions which may be termed romantic". Other journals like the *New Annual Register*, the *British Critic*, the *Poetical Register*, the *Monthly Review*, the *Eclectic Review*, the *Gentleman's Magazine* reached similar verdicts. See the Introduction to Tighe in Duncan Wu (ed.), *Romantic Women Poets* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1997), pp. 370-375.

¹³ The generally accepted opinion in Keats studies on the relationship of Keats with Tighe is that Keats underwent a "gradual progression from an early infatuation with its enchanting imagery...to a repudiation of Tighe's superficial beauties for a more substantial poetics of intellectual and psychological depth". See Greg Kucich, 'Gender Crossings: Keats and Tighe',

Keats's 'Ode to Psyche' is neither a romance nor a narrative, hence it offers no story to intrigue or to entertain its reader.¹⁴ Another distinction from Tighe's romance is the single scene offered by Keats as an epitome of the relationship between Cupid and Psyche. Unlike Tighe's Psyche who journeys through an enlarged geographical space, Keats's Psyche prefers to remain enclosed within "the bedded grass" of the deep forest. Thirdly, Keats, much more clearly than in his romances, offers the mythological relationship to us only through the manner in which it is perceived by the poem's speaker.¹⁵ He is the only witness and the only reader of this hieroglyph, with the result that there are two sorts of male-female relationships in the ode: that between Cupid and Psyche, and that between the speaker and Psyche.

While Tighe begins by offering an apology for "the light labours of [her] muse" (Part I, 3) to the "high brow" in a manner that reminds us of the revised preface of *Endymion*, Keats, from the very outset of the ode, insistently disclaims the existence of any audience to overhear his song except for herself:

KSJ 44 (1995), pp. 30-31. Keats repudiated Tighe in 1818, which accounts for Tighe's lesser influence on his later work. Hence, I shall concentrate on their differences rather than similarities, while Kucich, nevertheless, tries to demonstrate an influence through comparing *Psyche* with *Lamia*. Gross is another critic who insists that Keats's *Lamia* is influenced by Apuleius, the male poet, not by Tighe. See George C. Gross, 'Lamia and the Cupid - Psyche Myth', *KSJ*, vol. 39 (1990), p. 153.

¹⁴ Contrary to my suggestion, Elizabeth Jones focuses on 'the marketable aspects of Keats's odes', and hence, treats the odes as "conscious attempts at commercially authorised material-as proof that he could write what the public wanted to read". See Elizabeth Jones, 'Writing for the Market: Keats's Odes as Commodities', *SIR*, vol. 34 (Fall 1995), p. 347. I am not sure to what extent the commercial intention of Keats is revealed in his odes. What I shall propose is that the odes seem to be related to *The Fall of Hyperion* rather than the other romances, all of which disclose a more conspicuous design on the favour of the public.

¹⁵ Watkins suggests that Psyche is "the symbolic projection of the masculine poet's dreaming ego". Hence, the idealisation of Psyche parallels the idealisation of the poet himself: "On such a view, her beauty and truth lie most significantly in her consumability as an object that will quench the poet's desire to be aligned with godhead, beyond the pressures and contradictions of material circumstances". Watkins's argument seems right in that it places Keats's odes within a cultural history, but it is less plausible when he goes on to argue that Keats consciously tries to exalt himself as a strong masculine subject by appropriating the female object as a consumable. See Daniel P. Watkins, *Sexual Power in British Romantic Poetry* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), pp. 118-119.

"And pardon that thy secrets should be sung / Even into thine own soft-conched ear" (3-4). Psyche is represented at once as his muse and his confidante or confessor. It is as if she combines the roles of Peona and Cynthia in *Endymion*. As in 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', the woman remains the sole auditor of the song, but in the ode there is no indication of intrigue of the kind that establishes 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' for all its brevity as a condensed romance.

The secret that the speaker shares with Psyche is simply a vision of Cupid and Psyche lying side by side, apparently in a post-coital slumber. The speaker, like Porphyro watching Madeline undress, seems confined to the role of the voyeur.

'Mid hush'd, cool-rooted flowers, fragrant-eyed,
 Blue, silver-white, and budded Tyrian,
 They lay calm-breathing on the bedded grass;
 Their arms embraced, and their pinions too;
 Their lips touch'd not, but had not bade adieu,
 As if disjoined by soft-handed slumber,
 And ready still past kisses to outnumber
 At tender eye-dawn of aureoan love:
 The winged boy I knew;
 But who wast thou, O happy, happy dove?
 His Psyche true!
 ('Ode to Psyche', 13-23)

This vision is represented by Keats as a moment of narrative suspension, like one of the scenes depicted on the Greek urn. Cupid and Psyche seem enthralled, each in the grip of the other's enchantment. Though they are stationary, the ecstasy of their encounter seems to overflow, leaving the speaker, the only witness, "fainting with surprise". Awkwardly, Keats seems to suspend the romance narrative at this point, at the moment when he identifies the lovers as Cupid and Psyche. The lovers are unmoving, suspended between the love-making of the past and the love-making of the future, as if to protect them from the intrusive curiosity of the reading public. Lying together in the grass, Cupid and Psyche seem an emblem of repletion, of satiety, but seeing them makes the speaker aware not of a fullness but of a lack. It inspires him to attempt to repair an absence, to build the temple that Psyche, because she is "the latest born [...] / Of all Olympus' faded hierarchy", has never known. The stanzas catalogue all the things that Psyche lacks; no temple, no altar, no virgin choir, no voice, no lute, no pipe, no incense, no shrine, no grove, no oracle, and no prophet. Keats seems as enchanted by Psyche as Lycius by Lamia, but unlike Lycius he seems to refuse any notion that his adoration should be made public. He does not want to show Psyche off to an audience of his friends. Unlike the magical palace built by Lamia, the temple here is enclosed within the mind of the poet. Its construction, then, does not invite, but prohibits the intrusion of any wedding guest.

Yes, I will be thy priest, and build a fane

In some untrodden region of my mind,

Where branched thoughts, new grown with pleasant pain,

Instead of pines shall murmur in the wind:
 Far, far around shall those dark-cluster'd trees
 Fledge the wild-ridged mountains steep by steep;
 And there by zephyrs, streams, and birds, and bees,
 The moss-lain Dryads shall be lull'd to sleep;
 And in the midst of this wide quietness
 A rosy sanctuary will I dress
 With the wreath'd trellis of a working brain,
 With buds, and bells, and stars without a name,
 With all the gardener Fancy e'er could feign,
 Who breeding flowers, will never breed the same:
 And there shall be for thee all soft delight
 That shadowy thought can win,
 A bright torch, and a casement ope at night,
 To let the warm love in!
 ('Ode to Psyche', 50-67)

His temple is not a place in which to cater for an audience but a site within which he will serve Psyche as her priest. As Vendler proposes, it seems that "each of the subsequent odes worships a single divinity; each is female; after Psyche, all are unpartnered".¹⁶ From a "fane" which will be built in "some untrodden region of his mind", "thought" is "grown with *pleasant pain*". It is produced, that is, out of a deep emotional ambivalence that seems almost, in this version of it, to be associated with childbirth. It is as if the temple is the

¹⁶ See Helen Vendler, *The Odes of John Keats* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 48.

child of Cupid's union with Psyche, with Keats acting at once as midwife and as surrogate mother. The temple, built within a "wide quietness", remains a secret place, enclosed within Keats's mind, but in building it the speaker's role changes from passive to active, from that of the passive voyeur to that of the creative artist. One recalls Porphyro's transformation from Peeping Tom to active seducer, and certainly the "rosy sanctuary" that Keats builds in his mind seems a place designed for seduction, a garden of love, less a temple than a nuptial chamber, rather like the room in which Adonis lies in *Endymion*. But one never feels that the poem is driven by Keats's desire to oust Cupid and to take his place in Psyche's arms. His own role in the poem remains detached and formal; he officiates at the construction of the temple. No more than when he hears the nightingale's song does Keats seem inspired by the sleeping lovers to 'envy' their 'happy lot'. Rather he seems empowered by the sight to assume his proper role as poet-priest, able to interpret the hieroglyph of the lovers entwined on the grass and build to it his own monument. But, if the Psyche myth appears to him as a visual hieroglyph, then it is also true that he hears the nightingale's song as a sort of audible hieroglyphics.

2. 'Ode to a Nightingale': Vision, or, Dream?

The fact that 'Ode to a Nightingale' was published in *The Annals of the Fine Arts* together with 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' in 1819 suggests that they were understood by the editor of this journal, James Elmes, a friend of

Benjamin Robert Haydon, as companion pieces.¹⁷ In the one Keats meditates on the meaning of a song, an expression of natural beauty and mystery; in the other on an urn, which, unlike the song, has shape and solidity, and is not a natural but a cultural product. As Kelley suggests, Haydon's energetic defence of the Elgin Marbles was impelled by his belief that "the marbles expressed the highest form of Greek art because they were naturalistic, so lifelike that Hazlitt called them 'living men turned to stone'".¹⁸ Greek art, in other words, challenged the difference between art and nature, between an urn and a bird. But, for Keats, the invisible nightingale and visible urn share another characteristic. For him, they are both enigmatic texts, as enigmatic as the Greek myth that had furnished him the materials for 'Ode to Psyche'.¹⁹ Haydon, or Keats's editor, Elmes, would have recognised both poems as attempts to embody the ideal beauty that was for them the distinctive excellence of Greek art, but for Keats himself such attempts seem to have been empowering. In 'Ode to a Nightingale' just as in 'Ode to Psyche' Keats apprehends a beauty which seems to awaken him to a full sense of his own poetic identity.²⁰

It may be, however, that Haydon encouraged the publication of these two poems in *The Annals of the Fine Arts* in order to implicate Keats in the claim that he had made for himself in his impassioned defence of the Elgin marbles.

¹⁷ For the circumstances of the publication, see Claude de Finney, *The Evolution of Keats's Poetry*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1936), vol. 1, p. 620.

¹⁸ See Theresa M. Kelley, 'Keats, ekphrasis and history' in, Nicholas Roe (ed.), *Keats and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 216.

¹⁹ The literary nightingale has its origin in the Greek myth of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela, according to which, Philomela, having been raped and mutilated by her brother-in-law Tereus, was transformed into a nightingale after having her tongue ripped out. See Finney, *The Evolution of Keats's Poetry*, vol. 1, p. 621.

Hazlitt and Haydon had both been included in Lockhart's attacks on the Cockney School. As Magnuson has shown, Lockhart's attack was impelled by his disdain for "Hunt's pretensions in appropriating classical subjects" despite his lack of a proper classical education.²¹ The same charge was made still more forcibly against Keats, who knew no Greek.

His Endymion is not a Greek shepherd, loved by a Grecian goddess; he is merely a young Cockney rhymester, dreaming a phantastic dream at the full of the moon. Costume, were it worth while to notice such a trifle, is violated in every page of this goodly octavo. From his prototype Hunt, John Keats has acquired a sort of vague idea, that the Greeks were a most tasteful people, and that no mythology can be so finely adapted for the purposes of poetry as theirs. It is amusing to see what a hand the two Cockneys make of this mythology; the one confesses that he never read the Greek Tragedians, and the other knows Homer only from Chapman, and both of them write about Apollo, Pan, Nymphs, Muses and Mysteries, as might be expected from persons of their education. (*Blackwood's*, August 1818)²²

Had Keats fashioned the Greek myth of Psyche into the romance-length of *Endymion*, or the epic grandeur of *Hyperion*, he might have rendered himself more vulnerable to charges such as Lockhart's than he risked when he compressed the mythic materials into the modest compass of an ode. But however that may be it seems certain that the reviewers' categorization of Keats as a 'Cockney dreamer' lacking the education proper to a poet seems to have impelled him on a quest for his own poetic identity, as is evident in his anxious differentiation of the poet from the dreamer in *The Fall of Hyperion*.

²⁰ Keats's own reply to James Elmes where he excuses his delay suggests the editor's eagerness to publish this poem. See Keats's letter to James Elmes on 12 June 1819 in Gittings (ed.), *The Letters of John Keats*, vol. II, pp. 118-119.

²¹ Paul Magnuson, *Reading Public Romanticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 171-172. Even though Magnuson limits his cultural study to 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', generally regarded as the embodiment of an autonomous art, I wish to extend to 'Ode to a Nightingale' his argument concerning 'public poetry', and the consciousness of an audience.

Although it is true that "Keats's affection for Greek subjects implied to his contemporary readers a cluster of subversive themes",²³ it is not simply the themes that he had chosen, but the style in which he rendered them that had made him the object of critical attack.²⁴ His reviewers obviously noticed 'mawkishness' and 'smokeable' intentions, the signs of effeminacy, even in Keats's epic.

In this sense, 'Ode to a Nightingale' has been generally accepted as an embodiment of his desire to escape from an uncaring world populated by merciless critics, an expedient by which he refuses an audience, and establishes instead a closed poetic world, figured in the poem by his rapt union with the nightingale. But the escape is represented even within the poem as delusory, or incomplete, or at best transient. The visionary encounter with the nightingale is revealed at the end of the poem as an enigmatic experience that eludes any precise construction or definition. Keats seems confused and uncertain of the meaning of the invisible hieroglyphics that have led him into the deep forest.

The nightingale, unlike Psyche, is from the first unpartnered, hence, Keats has no rival in his devotion to the bird. The speaker appears this time as the auditor of the nightingale, the "light-winged Dryad of the trees", who "singest of summer in full-throated ease". He experiences the bird's song at first as a

²² G. M. Matthews (ed.), *Keats: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 103.

²³ Magnuson, *Reading Public Romanticism*, p. 171.

²⁴ Cronin sensibly points out that although Byron dealt with the incest theme in *Parisina* as Hunt did in *The Story of Rimini*, "Byron is protected from Lockhart's indignation not by the soundness of his morals but by the soundness of his style, by an ease that remains gentlemanly without ever descending to jauntiness". See Richard Cronin, 'Keats and the Politics of Cockney Style', *SEL*, vol. 36, no. 4 (1996), p. 791. But, when I employ the term style, it refers simply to the generic style of epic, romance, or lyric rather than the Cockney poetic style. My

"drowsy numbness", which is itself a sort of "pleasant pain" because it is produced "not through envy of thy happy lot, / But being too happy in thine happiness". His langour produces a "dull brain" rather than the "working brain" of the 'Ode to Psyche', and consequently inspires a wish to "fade away" rather than actively to set about the construction of a temple of the mind. This state of intoxication is compared to the paralysed unconsciousness produced by an "opiate" or "hemlock". Although the nightingale exists for the poet only as a sound, the speaker identifies it as feminine, as when he refers to 'I' as a "Dryad", and hence his state of mind is figured as the aftermath of some sexual ecstasy.²⁵ For example, the wine that he longs to drink is represented as sensual rather than eucharistic:

O for a beaker full of the warm South,
 Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
 With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
 And purple-stained mouth;
 That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
 And with thee fade away into the forest dim:
 ('Ode to a Nightingale', 15-20).

argument is that Lockhart's attack was provoked not only by Keats's Cockney style but also by Keats's appropriation of traditionally high genres like the epic, or, romantic epic.

²⁵ As for the 'sex' of this nightingale, Vendler supposes that "Keats's bird is faintly female, but the poet's identification with the bird is so strong, and Keats's rejection of the legend of Philomela so conclusive, that we feel the bird to be sexless, no more than a 'wandering voice' to which the poet attends". See Helen Vendler, *The Odes of John Keats* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 82. Although it is true that the Nightingale scarcely has any association with the Greek legend of Philomela, I am very reluctant to accept the notion that Keats regards it a sexless being, no matter how much he identifies with it himself. Rather, we should accept Keats's desire for identification with it as a sort of desire for sexual consummation with an object figured as feminine in the ode.

His desire to "fade away" delivers him up to the perilous state of being 'dissolved' in ecstatic vision. But it is a potent dissolution, a dissolution necessary if the poet is to take flight, upborne on "the viewless wings of Poesy". The flight, though, is short-lived, and at its end Keats finds himself in a place rather like the 'wandering wood' of *The Faerie Queene*.

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
 Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
 But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet
 Wherewith the seasonable month endows
 The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;
 White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;
 Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves;
 And mid-May's eldest child,
 The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
 The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.
 ('Ode to a Nightingale', 41-50)

In the darkness of the forest, the sense of smell provides the only means of identifying the invisible objects. Guided by the scent of the flowers, he distinguishes "white hawthorn", "pastoral eglantine", the "fading violet" and the "coming musk-rose". It is his ability to identify these flowers, the fact that they claim his attention, that keeps him from wandering through this metaphoric forest looking only for his 'Una'. Enchanted by the song and the

odours of the wood, Keats revives again his death-wish,²⁶ which may be understood here as an aesthetic escape into purely lyric poetry, which is one possible reading, or misreading, of the hieroglyphic significance of the nightingale's song. The lyric solipsism could enable him to disregard his audience, to surrender to a perfect indulgence of his sole self. But is this the implication of his vision?

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
 No hungry generations tread thee down;
 The voice I hear this passing night was heard
 In ancient days by emperor and clown:
 Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
 Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
 She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
 The same that oft-times hath
 Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
 Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.
 ('Ode to a Nightingale', 61-70)

In this stanza Keats offers the fullest interpretation of the meaning of his viewless vision, and it occurs significantly at the moment when he seems to awaken from his melting, ecstatic union with the bird's song. What he first construes from it is the 'immortality' of the song. Secondly, he insists on its

²⁶ Bennett regards Keats's recurrent death-wish as a desire to end the narrative, because if narrative generally requires an unresolved tension in order to 'move', and hence expresses at once a desire for and an antagonism towards an audience, Keats's death-wish would be a

egalitarian nature: it offers itself to its listeners regardless of birth and rank. Third, the nightingale is represented as independent both of time and place. It inhabits at once the present and "ancient days". It is heard in "faery lands" as much as in Moab or in Wentworth Place. It is also independent of gender, heard both by the male poet and by "the sad heart of Ruth", and the song of the nightingale achieves this universality precisely because the nightingale does not sing to anyone, but only to itself. At the end of the stanza the song becomes a kind of beacon or lighthouse, shining from "magic casements" and guiding those adrift on "perilous seas". Like the open casements of the temple of Psyche, the casements of the nightingale's temple of song are always open. In this sense, both poems find in paradox a solution to Keats's anxieties about his audience. Both suggest that in writing only for himself the poet might somehow contrive to open his poems to their readers. Nevertheless, Keats cannot be certain whether or not his reading of the audible text of the nightingale's song is right.²⁷ Does he enclose the text, or open it, like those "magic casements"? In the final stanza Keats first ascribes his loss of confidence in his reading of the nightingale's song to the deceptive power of the song itself. The song, like fancy, is repudiated as a 'deceiving elf'. But he does not sustain the charge. At the last, it is enough to say that the song invites its listener to defer any fixed interpretation of it, so that the poem ends with the same questions that inform the whole of 'Ode to a Nightingale': "Was it a vision, or a waking dream? / Do I wake or sleep?"

desire to escape such a tension. See Andrew Bennett, *Keats, Narrative, and Audience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 132.

²⁷ I agree with Wolfson who concludes that the self-quest of the speaker of the 'Ode to a Nightingale' ends in uncertain definition and restless questionings. See Susan Wolfson, *The Questioning Presence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 331-332

3. 'Ode on a Grecian Urn': An Enigma

'Ode on a Grecian Urn' was first published in *The Annals of the Fine Arts* in 1819 and republished in the 1820 volume. The second version was slightly revised only in two stanzas. In the first stanza, "What love? What dance?" is replaced by "What mad pursuit?", and in the final line quotation marks enclose the phrase, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty". It is not only formalist critics who have understood the poem exclusively as an emblem of the "perfect and complete embodiments of a perfect and complete idea of The Beautiful".²⁸ The idea of the urn as a 'well-wrought whole' has been explained as a notion derived from the 'Romantic Hellenism' of Benjamin Robert Haydon and his associates, which was championed by the journal, *The Annals of the Fine Arts*. According to Magnuson, from its first issue, throughout the five years of its publication, *The Annals of the Fine Arts* promoted "the study of the Marbles as models of excellence in art, ridiculed the Royal Academy of Art, and promoted Haydon's career".²⁹ Haydon had insisted on the Elgin marbles' superiority to the artificial and abstract idea of beauty propounded by the Royal Academy because of their naturalness. In the Elgin marbles natural and ideal beauty were perfectly reconciled, and the two odes that were first

²⁸ Jerome McGann, 'Keats and the Historical Method in Literary Criticism', in his *The Beauty of Inflections: Literary Investigations in Historical Method and Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), pp. 43-46 (p. 44).

²⁹ For more historical details on the public debate on the Elgin marbles between Haydon and Hazlitt, and Sir Joshua Reynolds, see Paul Magnuson, *Reading Public Romanticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 177-201.

published in *The Annals of the Fine Arts* might be thought of as dedicated to the same notion.

'Ode on a Grecian Urn' is on the face of it an ekphrastic poem of the same kind as 'Ode to a Nightingale'. However, if Keats attempts to interpret a visual hieroglyph in the 'Ode to Psyche' and an audible hieroglyph in the 'Ode to a Nightingale', 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' operates on both of these two levels simultaneously. The urn is at once an "attic shape" to be looked at, and the origin of "unheard" melodies which are available only to the spiritual ear. In this sense, Keats presents the Grecian urn as a still more enigmatic icon than Psyche or the nightingale's song, for it requires to be decoded by two senses operating in collaboration one with the other. It is certainly the enigmatic quality of the pictures on the urn that impels the series of unanswered and unanswerable questions that constitute so much of the poem.

What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape

Of deities, or mortals, or of both,

In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?

What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?

What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?

What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?
(*'Ode on a Grecian Urn'*, 5-10)

The recurrent use of "or" reflects the speaker's embarrassed hesitation in defining what he sees. He cannot easily identify the figures, the place or the action in the picture, to say nothing of his uncertainty as to the character of the

urn itself which is compared successively to a bride, a child, and an historian.³⁰ By revising the "love" and "dance" of the first published text into a "mad pursuit", and thus introducing a sharp antithesis with the "struggle to escape",³¹ Keats embeds the picture on the urn more deeply into the world of Greek myth. One is reminded of Apollo's mad pursuit of Daphne and her desperate attempt to escape from him, and the many similar mythological stories.³² After the viscosity of the urn is established, we are immediately invited to imagine a musical accompaniment, by the "pipes and timbrels". But unlike the song of the nightingale, this is emphatically a silent music, made up of "unheard" melodies, unavailable to the corporeal ear. This is a figurative rather than a literal music. Only the "spirit[ual]" ear can hear the soundless sound of the urn. In this sense the speaker of the ode is rather like the speaker of *The Fall of Hyperion* who is accorded the special prerogative of seeing into the visionless vision of Moneta's face. What is more evident in this ode is Keats's assumption of his authority as a poet to create from these visible but enigmatic and soundless shapes a lifelike narrative. But what kind of narrative does Keats read in the urn? He reads, I think, stories of two kinds; one is a

³⁰ Watkins investigates what is feminised in the ode. First, the urn itself; secondly, the female figures on the surface of the urn which are frozen in time like the stationary urn. Lastly, he comments on the sacrifice in terms of the feminine and masculine. Although his argument is persuasive that the urn is allegorically feminised, it is less convincing when he insists that this feminine is silenced by the masculine aggression of the male poet. See Daniel P. Watkins, 'Historical Amnesia and Patriarchal Morality in Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'', in G. A. Rosso & Daniel P. Watkins (eds.), *Spirits of Fire: English Romantic Writers and Contemporary Historical Methods* (London & Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1990), pp. 244-247.

³¹ Magnuson suggests another reading of this revision: While the original sentence denotes a more explicitly sexual pursuit, the revised one suggests the more ideal quest. See Paul Magnuson, *Reading Public Romanticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 205.

³² Sara Brown insists that the myth of Apollo and Daphne is explored in the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' as a main motif. I am not sure how much it is implied throughout the whole poem, but this stanza at least reminds us of the mythological pursuit and escape. Sara Brown, 'Apollo and Daphne and Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'', *Romanticism*, vol. 1.2 (1995), pp. 239-251.

secular love roman, and the other is a liturgical narrative, the kind of narrative that underlies religious ceremonies.

The love-roman is inscribed in the first stanza in a much more dynamic and vigorous manner than in any other of Keats's romance narratives. The "men or gods" seem more robustly "impassioned" than Porphyro or Lycius, and, predictably and understandably, this has prompted some feminist critics to read the stanza as a distasteful celebration of the masculine power of the rapist. Art, Keats tells us, has the special power to make all "disagreeables" evaporate, and so, one might add, does pornography. If the silence of this scene as it is inscribed on the urn implies the forced silence of raped women, the silence so forcibly figured in the myth of Philomel, then how can we explain or excuse the ecstasy with which Keats regards the scene as a spectator? It is worthy of note that this narrative is intended to be suspended immediately before the consummation of the 'rape', if it should be called that. Rather than producing another sentimental romance of the kind that he offers in the narrative poems, Keats chooses to suspend the narrative immediately before an ecstatic but fierce and secular consummation. In the second stanza, these same lovers, or, more likely, the figures from a different scene on the urn, are far more gently suspended. If the first stanza seems to celebrate an ideal of sexual abandon, the second and third seem to entertain a different ideal in which the moment of consummation is delicately and infinitely deferred. But the two stanzas have in common, for all the contrast between them, the fact that in both the act of love is suspended, frozen in the moment before gratification, so that the violent "men or gods" and the "maidens loth", and the pastoral lovers are alike preserved "For ever panting, and for ever

young" and spared the post-coital tristesse which the poem grimly registers as a kind of hangover, "A burning forehead, and a parching tongue". The poem seems consistent in its refusal of temporality, and its suspension of all relationships before union is achieved, which, given Keats's figurative habits, in itself seems to indicate a new unwillingness to accept that the poet and the reader might ever achieve a perfect union, or that the poet might become one with his audience.

The transition in the fourth stanza to a scene apparently of a very different kind, a scene describing a sacred ritual ceremony, is puzzling in itself, and seems to instil puzzlement in the poet. Hence it is that the stanza begins with a series of questions.

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?

To what green altar, O mysterious priest,

Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,

And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?

What little town by river or sea shore,

Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,

Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?

And, little town, thy streets for evermore

Will silent be; and not a soul to tell

Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

('Ode on a Grecian Urn', 31-40)

The questions here seem quieter, more bewildered, than the questions of the first stanza, which seem to express an excited curiosity. They suggest a

perplexity that has its origin, perhaps, in the speaker's inability to find a relation between this and the other scenes on the urn.³³ The sacrifice is to be performed by the unidentified "mysterious priest", who is followed by an unidentified multitude of folk who are themselves the residents of a town uncertainly situated "by river or sea shore", or built on a mountain. All are enigmatic figures to the speaker who is eager to imagine a narrative that will contain and identify them. He imagines another scene, a desolate town, itself, one supposes, not inscribed on the urn, its desolation itself a product of the devoutness of the townsfolk. One is reminded of the "silent street" of 'The Eve of St. Mark'. In this poem, however, the empty streets are more disturbing because the sacrificial ritual insinuates violence and death into the emptiness, whereas the religious ceremony of 'The Eve of St. Mark' does no more than predict a coming natural death. The sacrificial altar is the only temple extant in this vision. It is quite different from the medieval cathedral of 'The Eve of St Mark' or the temple built in the mind of 'Ode to Psyche' or the sacred grove in which the nightingale sings in that it is explicitly both a sacred place and a site of destruction. The "secret" reason that the town is vacant will always remain unrevealed for none of those who could explain it can ever return. It seems that, as in the first three stanzas, Keats is once again determined to suspend the narrative, to freeze it at its most solemn and tension-filled moment.

³³ Wolfson also suggests that the incessant questionings of the speaker are caused by his own perplexities. See Susan Wolfson, *The Questioning Presence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 321. On the other hand, Kelley understands the questionings of the speaker as a sort of resistance to the urn: "For by restricting his verbal description to a series of questions, he can direct attention away from the beauty of the urn as a self-contained form toward the history it does not represent". See Theresa M. Kelley, 'Keats, ekphrasis and history', in Nicholas Roe (ed.), *Keats and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 226.

The tension in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' comes from Keats's perplexed recognition of the difficulties of deciphering the hieroglyphic discrepancies not only between sacred piety and secular ecstasy but also between the speaker and the urn, that is, the generic discrepancy between the speaker's lyric and the urn's narrative.³⁴ Although it is not certain whether the meaning of the pastoral picture on the surface of the urn identifies it as a pastoral romance or a pastoral elegy, surely there is a hidden narrative in the pictures, but even in the final stanza Keats refrains from revealing it. The urn is addressed at the last as a blankly unmeaning icon. In the last stanza, the urn is no longer personified as in the first encounter with it as a "bride", a "child" and a "historian". Instead it is objectified, described in non-humanised terms such as "Attic *shape*", "Fair *attitude*" and "silent *form*" (my italics). "Beauty is truth, truth beauty", the maxim figured by the urn, offers the only possibility of a communion between the speaker and the object on which he gazes, the only clue as to how the paradox encapsulated in a phrase such as "cold pastoral" might be deciphered. Is the maxim presented as a revelatory oracle offered by the urn to Keats?³⁵ Although the urn is seductive enough to tempt Keats to pursue an ecstatic communion with it, as though it were a bride that he might win as Porphyro wins Madeline, in the end it turns to him a blank face, a face like Moneta's,

³⁴ According to Friedman, the title itself represents a "conflict in textual strategy": On the one hand, 'ode' implies "the sounding of the voice", on the other hand, 'on' means "the silence of the inscription" on the urn. Such a double analogy, or, dichotomy, is broadly indicated by other critics. See Geraldine Friedman, 'The Erotics of Interpretation in Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn': Pursuing the Feminine', *SIR*, vol. 32 (Summer 1993), p. 225.

³⁵ This last line raises famously difficult questions as to who says what to whom at the end of the ode, which are addressed by many critics including Jack Stillinger and Thomas Meade Hawell. See Geraldine Friedman, 'The Erotics of Interpretation in Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn': Pursuing the Feminine', *SIR*, vol. 32 (Summer 1993), pp. 231-233.

and hence the narrative of Keats's poem, like the narratives figured on the urn, remains forever in suspension.

4. 'Ode on Melancholy': Moneta and Melancholy, the Feminine

In the 'Ode on Melancholy' a single mood of the speaker himself is cast as a hieroglyphic, as in the 'Ode on Indolence'. While other odes investigate the possibilities of a complete communion between the speaker and visionary beings like Psyche, the nightingale and the urn, in the 'Ode on Melancholy', Keats's gaze turns inwards, into the abyss of his own mind, and he attempts to figure what he finds there, to give it shape and definition. Keats seems at first to represent this process of introspection as a heroic romance quest to the underworld, a quest impelled perhaps by love for a goddess rather like Proserpina. As Vendler suggests, the cancelled first stanza of the original draft describes "a heroic romance quest, a voyage to the ends of the earth to seek out the fabulous Melancholy, a female goddess".³⁶

Though you should build a bark of dead men's bones,
 And rear a phantom gibbet for a mast,
 Stitch creeds together for a sail, with groans
 To fill it out, bloodstained and aghast;
 Although your rudder be a Dragon's tail
 Long sever'd, yet still hard with agony,

³⁶ Vendler, *The Odes of John Keats*, p. 157.

Your cordage large uprootings from the skull
 Of bald Medusa; certes you would fail
 To find the Melancholy—whether she
 Dreameth in any isle of Lethe dull.
 (cancelled stanza of 'Ode on Melancholy', 1-10).³⁷

By using marine terms like bark, mast, sail, rudder and cordage, Keats certainly seems to figure the action of the poem as an epic or romance voyage. Possibly, he chose to cancel the stanza precisely because of this, because the metaphors established the action of the poem too clearly within the genre of the romance quest, reminding Keats too strongly of his *Endymion* or even of Dante's *Inferno* as he had read it in Carey's translation. Although there is no explicit reason for the cancellation, it seems true that it allowed Keats to avoid the more mimetic narrative of *Endymion*, and substitute for it a quest which has as its goal much more directly his own poetic identity. It is in this sense that for all its brevity and even obscurity the 'Ode on Melancholy', should be recognised as a precursor of *The Fall of Hyperion*. As soon as one makes this connection, Melancholy brings to mind another veiled goddess in a temple, Moneta. In its revised form the poem opens in a tone of strong negation: "No, no, go not to Lethe". In the light of the cancelled opening stanza this reads like an impassioned rejection of romance narrative, and of the journeys to the underworld that feature so commonly in such narratives, but it also suggests a rejection of the audience to which such narratives appeal, and to reject the

³⁷ On the cancelled stanza and its manuscript details, see Jack Stillinger (ed.), *The Poems of John Keats* (London: Heinemann, 1978), p. 374, and Robert Gittings (ed.), *The Odes of Keats and Their Earliest Known Manuscripts* (London: Heinemann, 1970), pp. 70-79. He insists that "it is very clear that the abrupt opening of the ode owes something to the fact that Keats is

demands of an audience constitutes for Keats, as always, an emphatic assertion of his own poetic integrity.

Melancholy becomes in the poem a metaphoric icon of the poet's own unfathomable inner mind. It inhabits a region in which destruction and creation, death and life, seem to merge in an undifferentiated union. Melancholy "fosters the droop-headed flowers all, / And hides the green hill in an April shroud". The near oxymoron, "April shroud", seems to condense the ambivalence of Melancholy's significance into a single phrase. The poet can avoid being frozen, or, enthralled, by the feminised enchantment of Melancholy only by staring unabashed into "her peerless eyes".

She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die;³⁸

And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips

Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,

Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips:

Ay, in the very temple of Delight

Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine,

Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue

Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine;

His soul shall taste the sadness of her might,

And be among her cloudy trophies hung.

('Ode on Melancholy', 21-30)

answering his own cancelled stanza, with its grotesque list of the conventional symbols of Melancholy, adapted from Burton's very similar catalogues of symptoms".

³⁸ In his original draft, Keats wrote "She lives in Beauty" which might be read as 'an echo of another poet, Byron's lyric 'She walks in beauty, like the night'. So his publishers altered 'She lives in beauty' to 'She dwells with beauty', almost certainly to avoid this echo in the final printed version. See Robert Gittings (ed.), *The Odes of Keats and Their Earliest Known Manuscripts* (London: Heinemann, 1970), p. 79.

Melancholy remains an enigmatic text for Keats because she seems to embody the possibility of the coexistence of incompatibles, like "aching Pleasure". She achieves an identity that can only be deciphered as an allegory of paradox itself, so that the meaning of her identity can never be spoken but only deferred. Like the temple of Moneta, which seems to be littered with the debris of a dead culture, Melancholy's temple is decorated with the bodies of those who have failed in their quest to find themselves, to establish their own identities. Melancholy's temple allows no survivors except for one. In his revised draft, Keats wrote "those", a plural noun, in line 27, but, in the published version Keats revised this to "him", a singular pronoun, which indicates surely that the only survivor from the temple of Melancholy, as from Moneta's temple, is the poet himself. Just as only the person who can ascend the steps of Moneta's temple can survive his quest, so only the man who can release "the sadness" hidden within "Joy's grape" by bursting it with his "strenuous tongue" can survive the temple of Melancholy. But his only reward is to be hung "among her cloudy trophies". It is as if Melancholy, like all the other figures addressed in the odes, is an icon that figures in some way the creativity of the poet, but at the last that creativity itself is revealed as an enigma, as involving both strenuous action and limp passivity, as figured equally well by the powerful lover who restrains his mistress by imprisoning her hand and takes a lordly relish in her anger, and as the lover whose fate is more like that of the fly, bound in thread and hung up in the spider's larder.

II. Late Sonnets: "I'll love and fame to nothingness do sink"

1. Fame: "a wayward girl"

Keats wrote sonnets throughout his literary career. They are of various kinds. One group of sonnets continues Wordsworth's project to revive the political sonnet as written by Milton. The 'Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty' included in Wordsworth's *Poems in two Volumes* of 1807 seem to provide the models for sonnets by Keats such as 'To Kosciusko' and 'Written on the Day That Mr Leigh Hunt Left Prison'. Since the sixteenth century the sonnet had often been a self-reflexive form, a form that encouraged poets to meditate on the nature of poetry, the poetic calling, and the sonnet itself. Wordsworth is aware of this tradition too, as is evident from sonnets such as 'Milton! Thou shouldst be living at this hour', and 'Scorn not the sonnet'. In another group of sonnets Keats writes within this tradition. He explores his own relationship to poetic tradition in sonnets such as 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer' and 'On Sitting Down to read *King Lear* Once Again', and he explores the formal nature of the sonnet in 'If by dull rhymes our English must be chained'. Another group of sonnets such as 'On the Grasshopper and the Cricket' seem to have been social in their origin, a product of the sonnet writing contests that

Leigh Hunt encouraged his young poet friends to join in.¹ It is an exercise that even Keats's admirers have reprehended, Robert Gittings, for example:

More significantly, as Tom Keats noted, the sonnet was written as a kind of exercise in a quarter of an hour; this shows he had already picked up the dangerous habit from Hunt of the sonnet-competition, reducing poetry to a parlour-game. In Hunt's circle, the pastime of writing sonnets on a set subject with a fifteen-minute time-limit was a well-known evening sport.²

But recent critics such as Kandl and Cox have viewed the practice more favourably, representing it as a challenge not only to the literary world but also within the social and political sphere.³ Jeffrey Cox has argued that this was one of the ways in which Hunt sought to consolidate the group identity of the poets identified by their enemies as the Cockneys, and also a means by which he established a circle of people who would read the poems of the club in manuscript, and hence constitute an alternative audience for his young poets, smaller than the public audience that bought printed volumes, but more sympathetic and less threatening.⁴ However, in this chapter I shall focus on love lyrics of late sonnets, which are both formally and thematically distinct from the bulk of the earlier sonnets. They are formally distinct because these

¹ Curran convincingly offers this practice as an explanation of "why the title 'On the Nile' appears among the poetical works of Hunt, Keats, and Shelley alike, the result of a quarter-hour sonnet-writing contest among the three friends in Hunt's parlor, and why so many of the sonnets in Keats's 1817 *Poems* share titles with those in Hunt's *Foliage*. The latter fact, confirming his tutelage, did not accrue to Keats's advantage among reviewers". See Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 51.

² Robert Gittings, *John Keats* (London: Harmondsworth, 1968), pp. 110-111.

³ See John Kandl's insistence: "Hunt's rhetorical linking of poetic and political revolution, and his association of the new school with the authority of British literature prior to the Restoration, constitutes not only an aesthetic challenge, but a challenge to political authority as well, encoded in aesthetic terms". John Kandl, 'Private Lyrics in the Public Sphere: Leigh Hunt's *Examiner* and the Construction of a Public 'John Keats'', *KSJ*, vol. 44 (1995), p. 87.

⁴ Jeffrey Cox, *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School: Keats, Shelley, Hunt and their Circle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), especially, pp. 82-122.

sonnets are usually Shakespearean or English in their rhyme scheme, whereas the Hunt circle favoured the Italian sonnet, and they are thematically distinct both because the bulk of these sonnets seem to have their origin in Keats's relationship with Fanny Brawne, and because they repeatedly address a single topic, the relationship between love and fame. It is a topic, of course, frequently addressed in Shakespeare's own sonnets, and these sonnets share with Shakespeare's a potentially embarrassing privacy of the kind that was avoided by Keats's male contemporaries, partly no doubt because it had become so firmly associated with the poems of women sonneteers such as Helen Maria Williams and Charlotte Smith.⁵

Most of these sonnets remained unpublished until after Keats's death, and seem from the first not to have been intended for publication. They are poems therefore in which Keats frees himself from any obligation to 'cater' to public tastes. But they are also written out of a new crisis in Keats's characteristically anxious apprehension of the relationship between the public and the private. The climax came in August 1820, when Keats, despite the fact that he was weak and very sick, insisted on leaving the Hunt household where he had gone to be nursed because a letter to him from Fanny was delivered to him two days after it had been received with its seal broken. The incident dramatically indicates how the relationship with Fanny Brawne intensified Keats's sense of

⁵ Charlotte Smith's sonnets were extremely popular in the Romantic era, and were themselves a principal factor behind the 'romantic revival of the sonnet' in the 1780s. Her *Elegiac Sonnets*, first published in 1784, and reaching a ninth edition in 1800, focused on the single 'sentiment' of mourning, and also established a distinctive mode. The sonnets express a melancholy which is attributed to private miseries which are never more than darkly alluded to. On the sonnets of Charlotte Smith, see Judith Hawley, 'Charlotte Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets*', in Isobel Armstrong & Virginia Blain (eds.), *Women's Poetry in the Enlightenment* (London: Macmillan Press, 1999), pp. 184-192. On the general traditions of female poetry in the Romantic period, see Anne K. Mellor, 'The Female Poet and the Poetess: Two Traditions of British Women's Poetry: 1780-1830', *SIR*, vol. 36 (Summer 1997), pp. 261-276.

the need to retain his privacy to a point that it seems reasonable to describe as neurotic.

From the first Keats seems to have determined that his relationship with Fanny Brawne should be kept secret even from his own most intimate circle. He erected a barrier of privacy around the relationship and responded fiercely to any breaches in it. A letter written to Fanny in June of 1820 is particularly revealing:

My friends laugh at you! I know some of them—when I know them all I shall never think of them again as friends or even acquaintance. My friends have behaved well to me in every instance but one, and there they have become tattlers, and inquisitors into my conduct: spying upon a secret I would rather die than share it with any body's confidence. For this I cannot wish them well, I care not to see any of them again. If I am the Theme, I will not be the Friend of idle Gossips. Good gods what a shame it is our Loves should be so put into the microscope of a Coterie.... People are revengeful—do not mind them—do nothing but love me. (*KL*, II, pp. 292-293)

Keats's friends become people not far removed from the "wedding guests" who intrude into the nuptial 'privacy' of Lamia and Lycius, and Keats is not at all so forbearing in his response as Lamia. He is outraged at the thought that his most intimate feelings are being made a public spectacle. As Rollins indicates, it is the Reynoldses, Mrs. Reynolds, and her daughters, Jane and Marianne,⁶ that Keats seems principally to have in mind. They seem to have indicated their disapproval of Keats's engagement to Fanny Brawne ever since

⁶ According to Rollins, "George and Charlotte Reynolds had five children. Jane became the wife of the poet Thomas Hood in 1825. Marianne, a favorite of George Keats, after being proposed to and then jilted by Benjamin Bailey, married H. G. Green before 1833... Eliza Beckford married Dr. George Longmore, of Upwell, Norfolk, in February 1822... Charlotte, born in 1802, lived until 1884". Keats had kept on good terms with the Reynolds women for a while but was quickly displeased by their taste. See 'Biographical Sketches', in Hyder Edward Rollins (ed.), *The Letters of John Keats*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), vol. 1, p. 87.

the Christmas of 1818. Keats's antipathy to the Reynolds women had become fixed at least by 15 January 1820, when he wrote to his brother and sister-in-law that he had become "afraid to speak" to them "for fear of some sickly reiteration of Phrases or Sentiment" (*KL*, II, p. 244). Keats seems to have come to regard the Reynolds sisters as embodying the sickly sentimentality that marked the taste of a reading public increasingly dominated by women. His revisions to *The Eve of Saint Agnes* show a new determination to outrage such readers, but in this letter the intensity of his response is a recognition that he has himself become the text that is exposed to such a readership. His relationship with Fanny Brawne is a text in small print, that they pore over with a "microscope". In his anger at the power of sentimental "tattlers" and "idle Gossips" one senses an outrage that coalesces in Keats's mind with his resentment that his literary as well as his personal reputation should be at the mercy of the tattle of sentimental women, and it is in this odd and very uncomfortable collision of feelings that his linking of the two topics of love and fame has perhaps its origin.

Keats's two sonnets 'On Fame', composed on a single day, April 30, 1819, are best understood as an expression of these emotions. In these sonnets fame is represented as a woman very much like one of the Reynolds sisters, a woman who is at once sentimental and yet as easy a prey to a poet like Byron, whose cool contempt of that sentimentality is construed by them as a seductive demonstration of masculine power, as the Reynolds sisters were to Benjamin Bailey, whose illegitimate child and cold-hearted promiscuity made him an enticingly dangerous companion. The first of the two sonnets represents 'fame' as "a wayward girl":

Fame like a wayward girl, will still be coy
 To those who woo her with too slavish knees,
 But makes surrender to some thoughtless boy,
 And dotes the more upon a heart at ease;
 She is a gipsey, will not speak to those
 Who have not learnt to be content without her;
 A jilt, whose ear was never whisper'd close,
 Who thinks they scandal her who talk about her;
 A very gipsey is she, Nilus born,
 Sister-in-law to jealous Potiphar;
 Ye love-sick bards, repay her scorn for scorn;
 Ye artists lovelorn, madmen that ye are!
 Make your best bow to her and bid adieu;
 Then, if she likes it, she will follow you.
 ('On Fame')

Fame is compared with a woman, it seems, as a gesture of contempt.⁷
 Fame is first "a wayward girl" and then "a gipsey", a word which seems to be
 used in *OED*'s sense 2b, as a contemptuous term for a woman. But when the
 gipsey is identified as "Nilus-born", Fame becomes like Cleopatra, who is still
 "a wayward girl" in that her passion is intensified when its object threatens to
 withdraw his affections, but who exercises queenly power. Finally, and very

⁷ 'Fame' was, later worshipped as a goddess in mythology, delicately described by Virgil as a female 'Monster' that has a self-inflatable disposition that allows her to assume any dimensions from 'the Pigmy to gigantic Size'. On her description, see Fra. Poemy, *The*

oddly, fame is Potiphar's sister-in-law. Potiphar is not recorded as having had any such relation, so the phrase can only mean that fame is a female equivalent of Potiphar, sharing Potiphar's susceptibility to jealousy. Potiphar, like Cleopatra, is a figure of power: he has Joseph thrown into prison, but he is also a dupe and the dupe of a woman. His wife accuses Joseph of attempting to seduce her only in resentment at his refusal of her advances. On one level then the sonnet seems to derive from Keats's identification of the audience that decides whether or not a poet becomes famous with women like the Reynolds sisters (the strange introduction of Potiphar's sister-in-law may even have been unconsciously prompted by his feelings about the Reynolds household); women who find attractive men like Benjamin Bailey who treat them with a callous disregard for their feelings, and poets like Byron whose *Don Juan* is admired as a poetic enactment of this version of masculinity. Paradoxically, it is Keats's reverence for fame and for women, his "too slavish knees", that disqualifies him from winning either. In the sonnet Keats schools himself to assume the indifference to which fame, like wayward girls, is more likely to respond. But the sonnet is oddly complicated by brief moments in which Keats seems to identify himself with fame rather than to repudiate her. By the April of 1819 Keats's relationship with Fanny Brawne had already taught him to recognise his own capacity to become a "jealous Potiphar", and the fame "Who thinks they scandal her who talk about her" is a prey to exactly the same kind of paranoia that Keats was to display in his responses to the Reynolds women. Keats ends his sonnet by recommending artists to take a polite leave

of fame, "Make your best bow to her". It is impossible not to remember at this point the sentence with which Keats closed his final letter, "I always made an awkward bow". The whole sonnet is best thought of as an awkward bow.

It is significant that the sonnet was first published in 1837 in an American women's magazine, the *Ladies' Companion*,⁸ as if the editors recognised that it was not so much a poem about literary fame as a poem that their readers might be better expected to respond to, a poem about the complex and troubled relationships between men and women.

The second sonnet 'On Fame' was written, Keats records, while Brown was transcribing the first, and it was not published until 1848. Like the first sonnet it is marked by odd complications of gender:

How fever'd is the man who cannot look

Upon his mortal days with temperate blood,

Who vexes all the leaves of his life's book,

And robs his fair name of its maidenhood;

It is as if the rose should pluck herself,

⁸ I agree with John Kandi when he insists that the public location of Keats's lyrics is a matter which should be investigated in its relation to and participation in a public discourse. Kandi examines the literary politics of two of Keats's lyrics, 'On first looking into Chapman's Homer', and 'To Kosciusko' on the basis of their public location in the political journal, the *Examiner*. It is his point that "this destabilization of public / private orientations, significantly reflective of much of the lyric poetry of this period, can be historicized in respect to the categories of public and private as modes of author / reader relations in the public sphere of the time". See John Kandi, 'Private Lyrics in the Public Sphere: Leigh Hunt's *Examiner* and the Construction of a Public 'John Keats'', *KSI*, vol. 44 (1995), p. 85. The first of the two sonnets on fame is similar. According to Wolfson, "the gendered scheming of this address is animated by Keats's irritation at the power he imagines female readers hold over his fame in the market place". Although she also notices the historical ironies of Keats's posthumous fame, pointing out the irony that "this piece of 'masculine' discourse would be published first in *Ladies' Companion* and *Ladies's Pocket Magazine*, reaching a culture of female readers all too prone to dote on the vulnerable 'boy'", she does not explain why this sonnet might be preferred by the journal for women readers in spite of its masculine rodomontade. See Susan Wolfson, 'Keats's Enters History: Autopsy, *Adonais* and the Fame of Keats', in Nicholas Roe (ed.), *Keats and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 18.

Or the ripe plum finger its misty bloom,
 As if a Naiad, like a meddling elf,
 Should darken her pure grot with muddy gloom;
 But the rose leaves herself upon the briar,
 For winds to kiss and grateful bees to feed,
 And the ripe plum still wears its dim attire,
 The undisturbed lake has crystal space;
 Why then should man, teasing the world for grace,
 Spoil his salvation for a fierce miscreed?
 ('On Fame')

The sonnet recommends that the poet preserve a calm indifference to his worldly success. His devotion, it seems, should be to his art, and he should inhabit that enclosed artistic space without consciousness of the external world of publishers and readers and reviews. The individual who pursues fame is emphatically identified in the first line of the sonnet as a "man", and the identification is reinforced by the "man" of line 13, but in between the poet is consistently feminised. He is furnished with a 'maidenhood', compared to a "Naiad", and an explicitly feminine "rose" as well as an implicitly feminine "plum" and "lake". The poet then is a maiden, but, in his "fierce" pursuit of fame, he becomes at once the maiden and the aggressive, corrupting male sexuality that threatens to besmirch his virginity by plucking the rose, fingering the plum, and muddying the pure lake. The aspirant for fame is a man who prostitutes himself rather literally, by becoming his own customer.

At the centre of the poem seems to be an anxiety about publication. In the third line the published book's material existence intrudes into the poem when

the aspirant is accused of "vexing all the leaves of his life's book", presumably by crumpling, dog-earing or dirtying its pages. In publishing, the poet makes himself a book that he invites his readers to pry into, much in the way that Keats accused the Hunts of prying into his correspondence with Fanny, and the Reynoldses of placing his relationship with her under a microscope. At the last, the pursuit of worldly fame is dismissed as a "fierce miscreed", a heretical misprision of the true creed, which is perhaps that stated by Milton in *Lycidas*:

Fame is no plant that grows on mortal soil,
Nor in the glistening foil
Set off to th' world, nor in broad rumor lies,
But lives and spreads aloft by those pure eyes,
And perfect witness of all-judging Jove;
As he pronounces lastly on each deed,
Of so much fame in heaven expect thy meed.
(*'Lycidas'*, 78-84)

The two sonnets 'On Fame' are minor poems, but they provide the best introduction to the four late sonnets that I shall consider in the second part of this essay. They expose with perhaps unintentional clarity the preoccupations that continue to exercise Keats in the later poems. First, there is a newly intensified horror of publicity, which extends from a fear of publication to a fear of his private relationship with Fanny Brawne being sneeringly canvassed amongst his friends. Second, and consequent upon this, there is an insistent association between the attempt to win fame and the process of courtship. Third, and again consequently, there is an intensified sensitivity to sexual

relationships whether between a male poet and a feminised fame or between a feminised poet, and all those masculine, public forces that threaten his 'maidenhood'. In these poems Keats is painfully sensitive to the intrusion of the public into the private, and to the need to maintain his artistic purity, and the sonnet, which is the verse form that, as used at any rate by poets such as Shakespeare and Charlotte Smith, is preoccupied with the relationship both between men and women and between the public and the private, is the most appropriate medium.

2. Posthumous Fame: "a curious old Bitch"

The four late love lyrics that I shall discuss were all of them written in or around October 1819.⁹ All four poems are sonnets except for 'What can I do to drive away' which includes an embedded sonnet, and all four poems seem directly to address Keats's relationship with Fanny Brawne. The Brawnes were Keats's neighbours during the period that he lodged with Charles Brown in Wentworth Place. According to Gittings an intimacy sprang up between Keats and Fanny in November 1818 that developed quickly enough for the two

⁹ The textual history of these four poems is as follows: 'The day is gone and all its sweets are gone!' was probably written on 10 October 1819 in the evening after visiting Fanny Brawne for a few hours in Hampstead. It was first published in the *Phymouth and Devonport Weekly Journal* on 4 October 1838. 'What can I do to drive away' is presumed to have been written on 13 October 1819 and it was first published in the 1848 volume. Three composition dates have been suggested for 'Bright star'. Gittings has suggested that it was composed in October 1818 and argues that the poem was addressed not to Fanny Brawne but to Mrs Isabella Jones. The second suggested date is July 1819 because of the parallels between the sonnet and the conclusion of Keats's letter to Fanny on 25 July 1819. The final possible date is October 1819, and is supported by the fact that Fanny Brawne transcribed the poem in the copy of Carcy's

young people to enter into an informal engagement on December 25, 1818, shortly after Tom's death on December 1.¹⁰ Their engagement, however, was not approved even by his close circle of friends, which included people such as the Dilkes and the Reynoldses. The disapproval of his friends, and more importantly his own increasingly bad health and lack of financial security from early on in the relationship complicated, embittered, and rendered increasingly desperate Keats's feelings for Fanny. It was during precisely the same period that the critical reception of *Endymion*, and its failure to sell were rendering Keats increasingly bitter in his response to the reading public, the reviewers by whom their tastes were formed, and the whole process of publication, which required the poet to agree to humiliating compromises with the commercial demands that publishers insisted must be met, and resulted in the end only in the poet making himself vulnerable, exposing himself, to a readership that he despised. It is unsurprising that these two reasons for discontent became 'perplexed' in Keats's mind, and it is this perplexity that the late sonnets explore.¹¹ The late sonnets have been valued by Keatsian scholars more for their biographical than their aesthetic interest, presumably because it is felt that the poems are too completely enclosed in the private sphere for public

Dante, which Keats had given her in that month. See the notes to John Barnard (ed.), *John Keats: the Complete Poems* (New York: Penguin Books, 1973), pp. 682-684.

¹⁰ Gittings describes Fanny Brawne as follows: "This young girl was a totally different type of woman from those of Keats's recent encounters. Jane Cox and Isabella Jones were formed and mature characters, the one 'imperial' and self-assured, the other enigmatic and controlled. Fanny was, as he himself had been during his Byronic student days, unformed, fluid, and trying to work out a personality. She alternatively repelled and attracted him, a dynamic combination". See Robert Gittings, *John Keats* (London: Harmondsworth, 1968), p. 267.

¹¹ Wolfson suggests that the poetic form of the sonnet, a very private lyric form, might have been chosen, because it is a 'self-occupied' form: "During these months, Keats was not only desperately in love but also despairing of success as a poet and struggling with financial difficulties and failing health. With no idea of publication, he was using poetic form to grapple with a passion, so he confessed to Fanny Brawne herself, that he sensed had turned him 'selfish', that is, self-occupied". See Susan Wolfson, "Teasing Form: The Crisis of Keats's

critical commentary to be appropriate. The directly personal reference of the poems is also perhaps embarrassing for critics anxious to view the mature Keats as pre-eminently characterised by his capacity for 'Negative Capability'. It may well be true that these poems were written for a readership that may have been as small as one, Fanny Brawne herself. But a readership of one is still a readership, and I shall contend that in these poems Keats's response to his readership is particularly intense, intensified perhaps precisely by the compacting of an anonymous reading public into the single figure of Fanny Brawne.

The close association that Keats made between love and fame is already evident in a poem that he wrote in January 1818, before his relationship with Fanny Brawne had commenced. Significantly, it is the sonnet in which Keats first turns away from the Italian to the Shakespearean sonnet form:

When I have fears that I may cease to be
 Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain,
 Before high piled books, in charactry,
 Hold like rich garners the full ripen'd grain;
 When I behold, upon the night's starr'd face,
 Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,
 And think that I may never live to trace
 Their shadows, with the magic hand of chance;
 And when I feel, fair creature of an hour,

That I shall never look upon thee more,
 Never have relish in the fairy power
 Of unreflecting love; - then on the shore
 Of the wide world I stand alone, and think
 Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.
 ('When I have fears that I may cease to be')

The sonnet addresses the three figures who pass before Keats in 'Ode on Indolence', Love, Ambition or Fame, and Poesy, but there is a fourth figure present in the sonnet that threatens to reduce the other three to 'nothingness', the figure of death. In the first quatrain Keats presents his fear of death practically, as an anxiety such as any careful farmer might feel who considers that winter might come before he has finished his harvest, before the corn has been safely stored in the granaries. Keats's anxiety that he might die before he has written the poems that are in him is represented by the metaphor as provident, even altruistic, a concern that the world should not be deprived of the fruits of his talent. The second quatrain moves from the land to the sky. Keats's project is no longer represented as richly earthy, but as cloudily grand. He desires to trace the lines that will transform the "night's starred face" into the "high romance" that they symbolise. He is perhaps thinking of those maps of the stars in which the constellations are picked out by lines that reveal the hidden figures of Hercules with his club, the twins Castor and Pollux, and Virgo. The ambition revealed in this quatrain could scarcely be more grandiose. The utmost pitch of human fame is marked by the hero's transformation into a star, which is the most powerful type of immortality, but Keats's aspiration is much higher. His ambition is for the starry sky to become

a text written by himself, so that henceforward to look up at the skies will be to read his poems. The third quatrain turns from the night sky to a woman, dismissively described as the "fair creature of an hour". In comparison with the preceding quatrain the fear that he "will never look upon thee more" seems pathetic, and yet the couplet insists that the two anxieties are equal.

The turn in this poem to the Shakespearean sonnet is of more than formal interest. All the topics of Keats's sonnet seem drawn directly from Shakespeare, but they are differently arranged. Shakespeare entertains thoughts of his own death in sonnets such as 'No longer mourn for me when I am dead' and 'That time of year thou mayst in me behold'. The first seventeen sonnets, which urge the young man to marry and procreate, recur repeatedly to the metaphor of Keats's first quatrain, a fertile earth that fails to yield its proper harvest. The claim that poetry confers immortality is central to the whole sequence, as is the notion that youth and beauty are short-lived, the "fair creature of an hour!". But Shakespeare, when he imagines his death, never imagines it as the death of a poet, and never fears that it may pre-empt the full harvest of his talents, and Keats never suggests that poetry has the power to redeem human beauty from mortality, or make love eternal. In the first seventeen sonnets Shakespeare argues that the young man can preserve his beauty by having children, in later sonnets beauty is made immortal in the poem, in Shakespeare's own "eternal lines". Keats alludes to both positions but offers them not as solutions to the problem of mortality, but rather as considerations that serve only to increase its pathos. He may die before he is able to compose immortal poetry, and before he is able to marry and have children. The second point is only lightly indicated in the poem, in the third

quatrain when Keats fears that he will not live to enjoy “unreflecting love”, but it is much more powerfully present for readers who trace the origin of the harvest metaphors with which Keats begins his poem to Shakespeare’s early sonnets, and also to those readers who are reminded by the “shore” on which Keats stands at the end of the sonnet of the climax of Wordsworth’s great *Ode* when he sees ‘the Children sport upon the shore’.

As Andrew Bennett has pointed out Keats is very apt to think of himself posthumously, as if he is already dead, ‘When this warm scribe [his] hand is in the grave’,¹² but in this poem and elsewhere the fear of dying unfulfilled as a poet is complicated and humanised by the fear of dying unmarried and childless, before his ‘pen’ has fulfilled its richly fertilising potential, and for Keats the two fears were connected with brutal simplicity. His chance of ever marrying depended on his winning recognition as a poet. The connection between love and fame, already evident in this sonnet, was one that remained important to him to the end of his life. Hence the recurrence of the dominant metaphors of this poem, the ‘star’ and the ‘hand’, in late lyrics such as ‘Bright Star’, and ‘This living hand, now warm and capable’.

But a quite different perspective, bitter and contemptuous, had also been established rather early. When Keats visited Burns’s cottage on May 11, 1818, he wrote a sonnet there. Keats represents himself as half drunk after drinking whisky in Burns’s name. He downs a glass and ends the sonnet with the mordant line, “O smile among the shades, for this is fame”. Burns had secured his poetic immortality, and he had also been famously procreative, but sitting

¹² Andrew Bennett, *Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 7.

in his cottage listening to the drunken bore who acted as custodian Burns's achievements sank "to nothingness": "he talked with Bitches – he drank with Blackguards, he was miserable" (*KL*, I, p. 325)¹³.

3. Fanny Brawne, a Reader

Susan Wolfson has usefully extended the conventional simply biographical account of Keats's relationship with Fanny Brawne. Fanny became, she argues, the necessary antithesis to Keats's male poetic self. For Wolfson, Fanny Brawne is "not just a person, but a personification of erotic passion in conflict with poetic self-possession and autonomy".¹⁴ She came then to embody in her own person the threat to Keats's poetic autonomy that he had until then displaced onto the poetry-reading public in general, dominated, as it seemed to him, by women readers to whose taste, his publishers insisted, his poems must conform. Through his relationship with Fanny, then, Keats in some sense acted out his relationship with his readers with peculiar intensity. It is significant that soon after the Brawnes became

¹³ Here is the letter in which Keats describes the experience: "We went to the Cottage and took some Whiskey—I wrote a sonnet for the mere sake of writing some lines under the roof—they are so bad I cannot transcribe them—The Man at the Cottage was a great Bore with his Anecdotes—I hate the rascal—his Life consists in fuz, fuzzy, fuzziest—He drinks glasses five for the Quarter and twelve for the hour, —he is a mahogany faced old Jackass who knew Burns—He ought to be kicked for having spoken to him. He calls himself "a curious old Bitch"—but he is a flat old Dog—I shod like to employ Caliph Vathek to kick him—O the flummery of <the> birth place! Cant! Cant! Cant! It is enough to give a spirit the guts-ache—. . . —His misery is a dead weight upon the nimbleness of one's quill—I tried to forget it—to drink Toddy without any Care—to write a merry Sonnet—it wont do—he talked with Bitches—drank with Blackguards, he was miserable". See *KL*, I, pp. 324-325.

¹⁴ Susan Wolfson conceives Fanny Brawne as an antithesis to Keats's male poetic self. In other words, Keats suffers from an authorial anxiety about being dissolved or possessed by the

Keats's neighbours in Wentworth Place in April 1819, Keats began to read with Fanny. In fact it was through reading poetry together, such as the fifth Canto of Dante's *Inferno*, and the poems of Spenser and Shakespeare, that their relationship was forged.¹⁵ Keats's sense of Fanny's presence was oddly precarious. She might be achingly palpable to him at one moment, and the next dissolve. He records these dissolutions in his poetry, and when he does so they seem weighted not just with the anxiety of a lover who can no longer imagine clearly his mistress's face, but of a poet who begins to fear that no-one will read his poems. One such moment is recorded in the poem, 'The day is gone':

The day is gone, and all its sweets are gone!
 Sweet voice, sweet lips, soft hand, and softer breast,
 Warm breath, light whisper, tender semi-tone,
 Bright eyes, accomplish'd shape, and lang'rous waist!
 Faded the flower and all its budded charms,
 Faded the sight of beauty from my eyes,
 Faded the shape of beauty from my arms,
 Faded the voice, warmth, whiteness, paradise,
 Vanish'd unseasonably at shut of eve,
 When the dusk holiday – or holinight—

female power of Fanny and losing his commitment to poetry. See Susan Wolfson, 'Teasing Form: The Crisis of Keats's Last Lyrics', p. 166.

¹⁵ Keats was very impressed by Dante's *Inferno*, especially the scene of his meeting with Paolo and Francesca, as he reveals in his letter to George on 16 April 1819. In his sonnet 'Hermes once took to his feathers light', Keats insinuates his dislike of his friends' curiosity about his relationship with Fanny Brawne in the phrase: "lovers need not to tell / Their sorrows". His desire to identify his intense communion with Fanny with that of Paolo and Francesca was so strong that he calls Fanny Francesca in his early letter to her on 1 July 1819. See Michio Sugano, 'Was Keats's Last Sonnet Really Written on Board the Maria Crowther', *SIR*, vol. 34 (Fall 1995), p.432.

Of fragrant curtain'd Love begins to weave

The woof of darkness, thick, for hid delight;

But, as I've read Love's missal through to-day,

He'll let me sleep, seeing I fast and pray.

('The day is gone, and all its sweets are gone')

Keats records the loss of "sweets" by enumerating one by one each disintegrated part of his lover's body, "voice", "lips", "hand", "breast", "eyes", and "waist". Successively he conceives his loss of his lover first as a loss of sight, then of touch, and, at last, of hearing. Fanny fades like Lamia, but there seems no reason for her fading, except that darkness is falling. As in 'When I have fears that I may cease to be', love is sinking into 'nothingness'. According to Susan Wolfson, "the closing couplet [...] reconceives his master-passion, love, as a personification who is also a writer, and whose book compensates for the vanished shape of the beloved".¹⁶ But the "missal" that love writes is a book that can only be read in the daytime, and the whole sonnet hinges on an antithesis between day and night, between a secret, interior darkness that is associated with the night, and the bright publicity of daytime. It is in darkness, in "the dusk holiday – or holineight" that the mind "begins to weave" the *texture* of "the woof of darkness", that is, the lyric *text*, and it does so because all true poetic delight must remain secret, hidden. The reading of 'love's missal' during the daytime seems less like a fulfilment of ritual requirements of the kind that Madeline believed were necessary if she was to dream of her lover, but rather the fulfilment of a social obligation the

¹⁶ Wolfson, 'Teasing Form: The Crisis of Keats's Last Lyrics', p. 174.

reward for which is that the poet will be left to himself, left to 'sleep' at night, and it is in the darkness, after the fading away of his mistress, when he resumes his solitude, that the rich work of poesy, the weaving of the "woof of darkness" takes place.

Keats's letter on 13 October 1819 to Fanny, possibly the same day on which he wrote 'What can I to do to drive away', has Keats rather than Fanny 'dissolving', but as in the poem the dissolution seems to be necessary in order for love to preserve its sacred character, in order for it to be safely removed from the public and secular.

I cannot exist without you—I am forgetful of every thing but seeing you again—my Life seems to stop there—I see no further. You have absorb'd me. I have a sensation at the present moment as though I was dissolving—I should be exquisitely miserable without the hope of soon seeing you. I should be affraid to separate myself far from you. My sweet Fanny, will your heart never change? My love, will it? I have no limit now to my love—You note came in just here—I cannot be happier away from you—"T is richer than an Argosy of Pearles. Do not threat me even in jest. 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. (*KL*, II, pp. 223-224)

The jerky syntax of the letter itself betrays the panic underlying the extravagant protestations of love. It is the panic of someone who feels himself "absorb'd" into the person of the other, condemned, as by a religious conversion, to live a life wholly in the service of his goddess, and a life that has no contact with his previous existence. The references to martyrdom are pointed: they acknowledge that Keats imagines such a life as itself constituting a kind of death. It is possible to read in this letter a confession that Keats finds himself in precisely the position to which he condemned his knight in 'La

Belle Dame Sans Merci'. He has become a victim of the dissolving power of erotic love.

'What can I do to drive away' may have been written on October 13, 1819. It rehearses, at any rate, the rapid transition that Keats makes in that letter, which he writes in order to "assist me in dismissing you from my Mind for ever so short a time", only to admit that Fanny has "absorb'd" him, and that he lives only to see her again. The poem begins by aspiring to 'kill' the memory of Fanny's presence so that he will be once again "free / In [his] old liberty". He yearns for the freedom that he knew when his "muse had wings", and he was able to soar "above / The reach of fluttering love". The poem ends when Fanny reappears, and all his doubts are forgotten:

Enough! Enough! It is enough for me

To dream of thee!

('What can I do to drive away', 56-57)

But a sonnet is embedded in the poem in which Keats visualises his state as precisely that of the knight of 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci':

Where shall I learn to get my peace again?

To banish thoughts of that most hateful land,

Dungeon of my friends, that wicked strand

Where they were wreck'd and live a wretched life;

That monstrous region, whose dull rivers pour,

Ever from their sordid urns into the shore,

Unown'd of any weedy-haired gods;

Whose winds, all zephyrless, hold scourging rods,
 Iced in the great lakes, to afflict mankind;
 Whose rank-grown forests, frosted, black, and blind,
 Would fright a Dryad; whose harsh herbage meads
 Make lean and lank the starv'd ox while he feeds;
 There flowers have no scent, birds no sweet song,
 And great unerring Nature once seems wrong.
 ('What can I do to drive away', 30-43)

It is worth asking why Keats embeds a sonnet in the middle of a poem that seems formally to approximate to an ode?¹⁷ At first, the sonnet seems to promise a comic interlude. The "hateful land, / Dungeoner of my friends" is marriage, but as Keats imagines this land it assumes all the nightmare characteristics of a landscape in which "the sedge is withered from the lake / And no birds sing". It is a landscape within which "great unerring Nature" goes "wrong", a meadow the grass of which makes "lean and lank the starved ox while he feeds". The joke of describing marriage as hell is displaced by a nightmare vision in which the natural world moves into reverse, becoming as uncreative and sterile as it had once been fertile and productive. The fear revealed is obvious enough, that his love for Fanny is inconsistent with his vocation as a poet, both because his love blinds him to anything but its object, and hence distracts him from working at his craft, and, presumably, because the only possible outcome of such a love is marriage, and marriage would

¹⁷ There are several other embedded sonnets in Keats's poems. As Wolfson indicates, "I stood tip-toe" opens with a double sonnet in couplets: the opening tableau and first stanza of *Hyperion* is a blank verse sonnet, and she detects two embedded sonnets in *Lamia*. The first parodies the ubi sunt topos in an erotic vein and the second gives a satirical view of the

leave him with a responsibility for supporting a wife, and possibly children, that would be incompatible with his continuing to devote his life to poetry. The sonnet expresses a bitter truth, that sexual and poetic reproduction are mutually exclusive, that Keats must choose between marriage and poetry. The nightmare is dispelled as soon as Fanny reappears. She is the "sunny spell" that has the power to "dissipate the shadows of this hell!". But because the 'hell' is embodied as a sonnet, it cannot be dispelled, but remains entire, unwithdrawn, in the midst of the poem that rejects it.

In 'I cry your mercy, pity, love – ay, love' Keats once again places himself in the position of the 'knight-at-arms', as Fanny's "wretched thrall", but in this sonnet he is enthralled not by his inability to tolerate her absence, but by the inadequacy of her presence.

I cry your mercy —pity—love ! -- ay, love!
 Merciful love that tantalises not,
 One-thoughted, never-wand'ring, guileless love,
 Unmask'd, and being seen - without a blot!
 O, let me have thee whole, - all, — all—be mine!
 That shape, that fairness, that sweet minor zest
 Of love, your kiss - those hands, those eyes divine,
 That warm, white, lucent, million-pleasured breast,—
 Yourself – your soul – in pity give me all,
 Withhold no atom's atom or I die,

Or living on perhaps, your wretched thrall,
 Forget, in the mist of idle misery,
 Life's purposes, the palate of my mind
 Losing its gust, and my ambition blind.
 ('I cry your mercy-pity-love!-aye, love')

Keats's demand here is that Fanny give herself to him completely: "let me have thee whole" and "in pity give me all". The paradox is that Keats can only summon up her wholeness by cataloguing her separate parts; her "shape", her "hands" and "breast". Even a single part of the body, the breast, disintegrates into a bewildering multitude of qualities, as soon as he thinks of it: it is "warm, white, lucent, million-pleasured". How can he have Fanny whole, if he cannot exhaust the possibilities of a single breast? Susan Wolfson has identified the sonnet's opening words as an echo of *Othello*. Othello bitterly responds to Desdemona by saying, "I cry your mercy, / I took you for that cunning whore of Venice" (Act 3, Scene 3, 91-2).¹⁸ Her description of the syntax that characterises Keats's sonnet serves also to align it with the fractured utterance that marks Othello's speech in his jealousy: "his syntax ruptures, his grammar contracts and disjoins, his meters halt and fracture". Much in the sonnet certainly seems to be accusatory. There is the traditional sonneteer's complaint that the mistress has not shown 'mercy' to her lover by offering him full satisfaction, but there are also darker suggestions; that she "tantalises" and that she is not "without a blot". Even the description of her breast as "million-

¹⁸ Wolfson understands this literary allusion in the more detailed context of "Othello's sarcastic response to Desdemona's protestation of chaste and honest love", and hence she understands it as a metaphor through which Keats identifies his own crisis with Othello's, which was caused by the "all-absorbing force" of woman. See Susan Wolfson, 'Teasing Form: The Crisis of Keats's Last Lyrics', p. 175.

pleasured" risks the suggestion that she allows promiscuous access to it. The poet demands that she give him her whole self "or I die", which is the conventional sonneteer's threat, but the poem ends when Keats imagines a far more distinctive alternative: that he live on as her wretched thrall, losing his sense of purpose and his capacity for enjoyment and becoming "to my ambition blind". It is monstrously indecorous for the sonneteer to confess to any ambition except that his mistress return his love, and Keats compounds his offence by implying clearly enough that she should surrender her whole being to him so that he can regain the peace of mind that will allow him to return to the undistracted practice of poetry.

In August 1820, a few month before his death in Rome, Keats wrote to Charles Brown:

The sale of my book is very slow, though it has been very highly rated. One of the causes, I understand from different quarters, of the unpopularity of this new book, and the others also, is the offence the ladies take at me. On thinking that matter over, I am certain that I have said nothing in a spirit to displease any woman I would care to please: but still there is *a tendency to class women in my books with roses and sweetmeats, --they never see themselves dominant.** (Note) If ever I come to publish "Lucy Vaughan Lloyd", there will be some delicate picking for squeamish stomachs. (KL, II, pp. 327-328)

Brown added the following note to this letter:

(Note) On what grounds can this opinion rest? Is not "Isabella" dominant <to> to an extreme, <?> in affection and in heroism? Are not his other poetic women mentally dominant, only in a minor degree? As for what he says respecting his poem by the supposed "Lucy Vaughan Lloyd", there is nothing in the fragment he has left, nothing in the intended construction of the story, (for I knew all, and was to assist him in the machinery of one part,) but to the honour of women. *Lord Byron, really popular among women, reduced them, to the offence of some men, to "roses and sweetmeats."* (KL, II, pp. 327-328, my italics)

Keats may strike us as a more sensitive critic of his own work than Brown, but the letter and the commentary on it reveal very clearly that Keats believed his failure to establish a reputation and to earn a living as a poet to have been occasioned by his failure to please his women readers, and that Byron, in contrast to Keats, was really popular amongst women, despite the manner in which his poems might seem to denigrate them. Fanny Brawne, it is worth noting, was herself one of the women who admired Byron's poetry, and indeed reserved her admiration for that portion of Byron's work that women readers might be expected to find particularly offensive. In a letter to Fanny Keats written a few months after Keats's death, she wrote:

Don't you or do you admire Don Juan? perhaps you like the serious parts best but I having been credibly informed that Lord B. is not *really* a great poet, have taken a sort of dislike to him when serious and only adore him for his wit and humour. I am by no means a great poetry reader—and like few things *not* comic out of Shakespeare. Comedy of all sorts pleases me. I think Beppo nearly as good as Don Juan. When you read it you will notice that gratifying account of us English young ladies—I believe I did not tell you that Donna Inez was intended for Lady Byron to whom he wrote that fine sentimental, 'Fare thee well'. The character is beautiful and I have no doubt very like for I have heard Lady B. is a bluestocking. (*FL*, p. 39)¹⁹

It is a fascinating letter, in which Fanny describes herself as a reader of poetry. She is, in Brown's view, an entirely representative reader, sharing the taste of most women readers, who, it was rumoured, had secured, against all the predictions of Byron's friends and John Murray, his publisher, the extraordinary commercial success of *Don Juan*. She also emerges as an entirely unlikely reader of the poetry of John Keats. The two facts together

¹⁹ Fred Edgcombe (ed.), *The Letters of Fanny Brawne to Fanny Keats* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), p. 39.

serve to indicate that the late poems to Fanny should not be read as private documents of an exclusively biographical interest. In these poems, just as much as in his earlier work, Keats is preoccupied with the readership of his poetry, and whether it is possible to secure a readership and at the same time to remain true to his own poetic ideals. In the poems to Fanny the issue takes its most intense and intimate form: it is rendered in the guise of a lover's quarrel. It remained an unresolved quarrel, or perhaps a quarrel resolved just once, in a single sonnet.

Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art -
 Not in lone splendor hung aloft the night,
 And watching, with eternal lids apart,
 Like nature's patient, sleepless eremite,
 The moving waters at their priestlike task
 Of pure ablution round earth's human shores,
 Or gazing on the new soft-fallen mask
 Of snow upon the mountains and the moors;
 No - yet still stedfast, still unchangeable,
 Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,
 To feel for ever its soft swell and fall,
 Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,
 Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,
 And so live ever - or else swoon to death.
 ('Bright Star, would I were steadfast as thou art')

This sonnet celebrates Keats's version of a "marriage of true minds", so that it is appropriate that it should hinge, like Shakespeare's sonnet, on the contrast between the star and the sea. The star is first offered, as Shakespeare offers it, as a type of steadfastness, but immediately it is rejected because of its solitude and because it exists at a remove from mortal life. But even as it is rejected, the star's role is movingly rehearsed. The octave of the sonnet at once renounces and celebrates what had been for Keats a longstanding dream, that he might win a place as a poet that preserved him in splendid isolation from publishers, readers, reviewers, and all the tawdry acts of compromise that seemed inescapable for anyone who wanted to make a career out of poetry. In the sestet, the lordly isolation of the star is exchanged for the posture of the lover "Pillowed upon my fair love's ripening breast", and the rise and fall of the tides that the star watches so distantly are exchanged for the breast's "soft swell and fall", which is also the swell and fall of Keats's iambic line. It is a "ripening breast", a word which recalls 'When I have fears that I may cease to be', and suggests that in accommodating that breast the sonnet has become a "rich garner" that houses "full-ripened grain". It is a sonnet in which poetry and love, warring entities in almost all of Keats's love lyrics, seem perfectly reconciled. Keats dreams that he might "live for ever" pillowed on the breast, and as he dreams this he enables the breast to live for ever in his poem. He could "so live ever – or else swoon to death", but the death he imagines is the opposite of the 'nothingness' that ends 'When I have fears that I may cease to be': it is the same death that the nightingale's song invites to, and is the product of an excess of fullness. It is almost certainly wrong that 'Bright star!' was the last poem that Keats wrote, but the tradition that held that this was the

case is at least understandable: it is a poem in which Keats arrives at a calm resolution of the troubled relations with women, with the readers of his poetry, and with their women readers that had provoked a large part of his verse.

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