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**Beyond the Reality Principle:  
Identity and the Dialectic of Gender In Keats**

**by**

**Michèle Richman**

A Thesis  
in  
The Department of English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts at  
Concordia University  
Montréal, Québec, Canada

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## **Abstract**

# **Beyond the Reality Principle: Identity and the Dialectic of Gender in Keats**

**Michèle Richman**

My thesis focusses on the "reality" problem that so frequently figures in Keats, particularly in relation to ambiguous gender identity. His poetics relates directly to such issues as definitions of identity. Keats's ontological anxieties about bodily extinction and how to situate "reality" and "identity" in the subject-object worlds are inextricable from his Bloomian anxieties about tradition and authorship.

My argument comprises four chapters divided into three sections. In the first section, I discuss the impact of "The Reality Principle" on Keats as it displays itself both in an anxiety of influence over living up to the expectations for Poetic Greatness and in resistance to the masculine paradigm. My first chapter of this section considers these issues in their general bearing on a number of texts, while my second chapter gives particular attention to the "seminal" poem, "On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer."

The next section, "Beyond the Reality Principle," concerns itself with how Keats's blurring of distinct boundaries and merging of categories — what I call boundary confusion — ambiguates reality so as to deconstruct traditional dichotomies.

In Part III, "The Pleasure Principle," I attempt to orchestrate the first two sections to bring out the implications of boundary confusion for the texts' sexual politics. In that final section, I explore, primarily with reference to psychoanalytic and deconstructive theory, Keats's erotics of writing as revealing an androgynous consciousness divided in its allegiance between male and female. Here I take up the irresolvable fluctuation between the Reality and the Pleasure Principle in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" before concentrating on how that poem's profound ambivalence towards the patriarchal value-system manifests itself in the Nightingale and Grecian Urn odes, which I see as complementing one another in their opposing views of gender.



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Above all, I want to thank my parents and sister who always had faith that I could complete this project.

. . . I do not seek some sort of liberation from identity. That would lead only to another form of paralysis — the oceanic passivity of undifferentiation. Identity must be continually assumed and immediately called into question.

—Jane Gallop

Far from following the incessant slippage, the unfixable movement of the signifying chain from link to link, from signifier to signifier, the critic . . . seeks to stop the meaning, to arrest signification, by a grasp . . . by a firm hold on the Master-Signifier. . . .

—Shoshana Felman

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## Introduction

Dreaming figures ubiquitously in Keats's poetry as a metaphor for the creative process. For that reason, these sentiments in *The Fall of Hyperion*, a poem which Keats subtitled "A Dream," have continued to strike critics as puzzling:

["]Thou art a dreaming thing;  
A fever of thyself — think of the earth;  
What bliss even in hope is there for thee?  
What haven? Every creature hath its home;  
Every sole man hath days of joy and pain,  
Whether his labours be sublime or low —  
The pain alone; the joy alone; distinct:  
Only the dreamer venoms all his days . . . (1.168-75)  
"Art thou not of the dreamer tribe?  
The poet and the dreamer are distinct,  
Diverse, sheer opposite, antipodes.  
The one pours out a balm upon the world,  
The other vexes it." (1.198-202)

Why should the poet be "distinct" from the dreamer? The same question inheres like a dark jewel in the passages' setting of other contraries (joy/pain, sublime/low, balm/vexes), with their (syntactic) emphasis on their distinction. The fact that *The Fall* here, in so forcefully proposing the disjunction between the poet and the dreamer, is so remarkably untypical of Keats (who rarely unperplexed dichotomies) invites critical enquiry.

*The Fall of Hyperion* actually begins with categories that separate the false dreams of the fanatic and savage from those of the poet. Yet at the same time, it laments the exclusion of such false dreams from written records. While the text appears to be defining the true poet in terms of who cannot become a poet, it is also defensive on that very subject: "Who alive can say, / 'Thou art no Poet; may'st not tell thy dreams?'" (1.11-12). The same question and categorizing impulse are repeated later (in the passage[s] quoted above), only more intensely as a series of chastising queries that

the austere and godlike Moneta puts to the poet, who meets them with a like defensiveness.

Moneta's words have often been commented upon but without sufficiently taking into account their context. That such questions should be raised in an epic, traditionally considered the highest poetic genre expressing the noblest themes (originally those celebratory of masculine physical prowess and heroic exploits) is relevant to the passage's marked expression of hierarchical opposition. That it should occur in a poem entitled *The Fall of Hyperion*, whose most intense moments concern an arduous ascent (which precedes these questions) is especially worthy of attention. And that it should attack dreaming in particular, associating it with poison or pain, constitutes almost a transvaluation of values in the Keatsian oeuvre.

It is no coincidence that it is in an epic (i.e., in Keats's first *Hyperion*) that a male protagonist most intensely, most agonizingly questions his "strong identity, his *real* self" (1.113-14; my italics) and that dream and poetry are presented as opposing one another. For that epic, in ostensibly questioning who is the true visionary and who the self-deceiver, is also addressing questions about primal identity related to epic/societal expectations. In fact, one can read the entire dynastic struggle informing the plot of the *Hyperion* poems as really turning upon questions about male identity that inevitably arise for Keats (as they do for Shelley) within the epic genre — questions that call attention to what Robert Con Davis identifies as the "paternal authority [that] permeates the epic as the cultural backdrop, the code within which the epic is articulated" (12).

Keats's ambivalence about patriarchal notions of masculinity as explored through the role of the poet highlight the psychological dynamics inherent in such generic distinctions. Since dreaming in the romance is connected to the feminine, to sensual pleasure, in the

context of the epic it becomes a venom. Such words as "venom" and "balm" recall the telling phrase "disanointing [*sic*] poison" (2.98) in the earlier *Hyperion*.

When Moneta attacks dreaming, epithets that describe a condition of belonging follow in the sequence: "earth," "bliss," "haven," "home," and finally "tribe." Thus it appears that "bliss" names the original home that gradually succumbs to the sense of separation and divisiveness signified by "tribe." The poet-speaker who would disavow the bower of bliss as the "refuse of a meal / By angel tasted or our Mother Eve," (1.30-31) — a rejection fortified by the allusion to Milton's *Paradise Lost* — reflects Keats laboring to overcome his romantic pleasure-seeking tendencies to steel himself for his great epic. Yet in another sense (and pronunciation) of the word, the bower of bliss "refuses" to be triumphed over; on the contrary, it proliferates and pervades the poem. The garden of delights suffuses the very Word even as language itself takes on its luxuriant characteristics:

As the moist scent of flowers, and grass, and leaves  
Fills forest dells with a pervading air  
Known to the woodland nostril, so the words  
Of Saturn fill'd the mossy glooms around,  
Even to the hollows of time-eaten oaks,  
And to the windings in the foxes' holes (*Fall* 1.404-09)

Such a refusal is correlative to Keats's own poetic struggle to rid himself of his Miltonic ventriloquist voice. The emerging awareness that he must discover his own voice, resulting in his abandonment of the epic altogether, is traceable to such assertions as the one that opens *The Fall*: that "every man" "would speak, if he had lov'd / And been well nurtured in his mother tongue" (1.13-15).

"Mother tongue" has a resonance beyond its primary meaning. The epic would recount heroic action and sacred themes; yet the masculine nature of such an enterprise is literally not to the *The Fall*'s taste: "Instead of sweets, his ample palate takes / Savour of

poisonous brass and metals sick" (2.32-33). Even in the holiest and most ascetic of shrines, Moneta's "altar's blaze / Was fainting for sweet food" (1.232-33). Following a luxuriant description of appetitive satisfaction, the text announces "[t]hat full draught is parent of my theme" (1.46); but considering that the fullness of carnal appetite threatens to undermine the mastery of godlike knowledge it is meant to metaphorize, the reader might well wonder whether the real conflict does not arise from the doubt as to which "parent" this assertion is referring to: aggressive dominance, a masculine value, or the nurturant female love that the dethroned Saturn is apparently seeking when he "listen[s] to the Earth, / His antient mother, for some comfort yet" (1.325-26).

Earl Wasserman points out that while Wordsworth's idiosyncratic words are "power" and "presence," Keats's is "happiness" (4). Though rarely dissociating thought from feeling, Keats is nevertheless disturbed by his attraction to those qualities and habits of mind connected with the latter — and chiefly, empathy, sensuality, pleasure, indolence, and an attention to the particular and experiential — because these, unlike abstract and rational thought, would align him with the female. But while he is ambitious for the authority and prestige accorded to the male in a patriarchal society, and especially for the rewards and status granted to the "great" poet, he is equally alienated from the masculine identity. In short, if Keats was "in thrall" to the female, he was equally "in fealty" and a "vassal" to the normative male model.

Inherent in that double pull — of the masculine and feminine or, correlatively, of the two poles that I term "reality" and "pleasure" — is the complex dilemma that Keats tries to negotiate in his poetry. The contention that he had an inclination to resist the conventional male model is meant to be implicit in my title. In that regard, too, *Beyond the Reality Principle* is a deliberate reversal of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In opposing Pleasure to the Reality

Principle so as to give hierarchical precedence to the latter and its awareness of the supposedly biologically-based imperative for socially imposed constraints on instinctive drives, that work is not only typical of Freud but symptomatic of the tradition of Western philosophy to privilege mind over body. Freud's concept of a sublimated "reality" is likewise symptomatic in that it includes a host of other binary oppositions which invariably relegate the female to a position inferior to that of the male of the human species. Thus understood, Freud's Reality Principle offers a way to reformulate the source of, but *not* the solution to, the Keatsian dilemma that I have just spoken of. Keats's poetry, that is to say, represents his ambivalent reaction to the social constraints placed on the male to transcend the body, repudiate "feminine" impulses, and "subliminally" rise to a higher intellectual "truth."

This "reality" problem, which so frequently figures in Keats's writings, is what I intend to investigate in the following chapters, particularly in its relation to ambiguous gender identity. For the purposes of my argument, I have retained Freud's terminology because it has a felicitous relevance to Keats's own vocabulary. Their affinity should not be surprising, given Keats's strong preoccupation with the mind-body problem. But in recognizing this, we should not forget that Keats's concern frequently takes the form of an anxious questioning (as in the *Hyperion* poems) of the real (which for Keats, but not for Freud, can be indistinguishable from the dream). Hence Freud's terms as I employ them are always to be understood as having Keatsian valences, so to speak.

Accordingly, the Reality of the Reality Principle as I apply it to Keats is invariably problematic, while the Pleasure Principle has connotations almost at antipodes to those which Freud would give it. What I mean by Pleasure Principle has to do with Keats's valorization of the sensuous (as distinguishable from "a mediated, sublimated, visual sexuality" Gallop [*Daughter's* 27]) which, aligned with his



identification with femaleness, bespeaks a desire — albeit an ambivalent one — to break out of the masculinist mold. I connect the Pleasure Principle in this sense to Cixous' concept of *écriture féminine* as the fluid nonlinear text which in its openness to the play of *différance* deconstructs phallogentric dichotomies.

Cixous, of course, has in mind "writing the body" as a feminist strategy; she does not restrict the practice to modern female-authored texts. In *The Newly Born Woman* (*La Jeune Née*), for instance, she claims *Anthony and Cleopatra* (one of Keats's favourite Shakespearean plays) as such an open text. Nor is it difficult to add Keats titles to her list. Lamia, for instance, bears more than a passing resemblance to Cleopatra in her infinite variety; and, I might add, her protean identity can readily be interpreted as a projection of Keats's own as chameleon poet. So, too, Keats's luxurious sensuality and fine excess corresponds to Cixous' "en-core."

While the exploration of the psychological and epistemological boundaries of the self is common to the Romantic poets, Keats stands out among them as the Poet of Sensation, whose "self" begins with the evidence of the senses. "[A]xioms in philosophy are not axioms until they are proved upon our pulses" (*Letters* 1: 279) is one of those characteristically paradoxical Keatsian assertions that interweaves objective and subjective truth. The imagery and language of this statement recall Keats's medical training — and by extension eighteenth-century empiricism. At the same time, in exploiting the technical language to its own purpose, it can be taken as a rebellious expression of the Romantic self in its intimation that truth is a matter of emotionally private experience. Also (playfully) implicit in Keats's pronouncement is the question of how axiomatic those "axioms" are: on the one hand, their sense data can be "proved" externally by scientifically measurable instruments; but on the other hand, the language subverts itself since such data, as

"pulses" suggests, do not offer an adequate record of the individual's fluctuating moment-to-moment interior reality.

One can only speculate to what extent Keats's initial training as a doctor accounts for the intense physicality of his writing, for an imagery so voluptuous, so tactile that it does indeed convey the sense of the word made flesh. But surely that physicality unsettles or problematizes our common-place notions of "reality," "perception," and "identity." In the process, it suggests that these concepts, while seemingly so rock-solid, so coherent, so unquestionably to be taken for granted, are really marvellous mental "fictions," constructs that have their basis in — but do not derive their ultimate "understanding" from — our sense perceptions.

In Keats, bodily sensations that assert the self (and a solid sense of reality) at the same time paradoxically always have underlying them the threat of death, extinction, nothingness. The tension of the multiple interconnected paradoxes in many of the poems problematizes the "inside" and "outside" of the ego-boundary. Reality and dream constantly invade one another. Their distinction is blurred either implicitly or expressly. States of consciousness — waking, lassitude, imagining, sleeping, dreaming, intoxication, illness, numbness — are not distinct entities but often make up a continuum, with one state of being merging into another and undermining any definitive "sense" of a knowable reality ("Was it a vision, or a waking dream?").

Such destabilized and destabilizing moments are a source of Keatsian anxiety. Usually they lead to — or indeed, are accompanied by — a marked sense of unease (often literally *dis-ease*). This arises primarily not so much from epistemological uncertainty per se as from his awareness of the disparity between his own experience and his social identity-in-the-making as a "great" poet. Indeed, Keats's ontological anxieties about bodily extinction are inextricable from those related to his social identity. That his poetics relates directly

to such issues as defining his/one's identity — is indeed intimately bound up with his concept of selfhood — is certainly no coincidence.

Keats's anxiety of influence is also inseparable from his preoccupation with the male role as poet: masculine control and the notion of transcendence are both invoked and undercut by his poetry. Often his obsessive contemplation of some external object (both æsthetic and natural) reveals not merely a philosophical preoccupation with the subject-object problem but an anxiety about gender related to his ambivalent treatment of the object-ifying/idealizing male gaze. The body is so present in Keats's poetry that it is often difficult to assess whether the subject of the poem is mastering — or indeed entirely separate from — the external world he is so physically responding to.

All of this raises the question of the extent to which luxuriant sensuality disrupts the conventional equation of the masculine with mind and culture and the feminine with nature and the body. His poetry and letters make clear the conflict within his mind between allying with æsthetics of pleasure and empathy and conforming to the conventional expectations of hierarchal tradition. In this struggle, imperative ambition propels him toward poetic genres that assert the masculine exploits of both hero and its creator; and he accordingly dismisses his early poetic attempts as the beckonings of the "syren" romance and "humbly assay[s]" the manlier, higher reaches of tragedy. Yet the unfinished *Hyperion* poems, in particular, reveal the strain of conforming to traditional poetic structures that are reflective of gender roles.

Keats has to clear a space for his imaginative vision not only figuratively but literally. Not coincidentally, "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer," which concerns itself with geographic and imperialist dominance and also with *vision*, is the first poem wherein Keats speaks in his "own" authentic voice. Despite its much-proclaimed air of confidence and control (respects in which it is

unlike most of his earlier poems), the sonnet's discrepancies and suppressions (both psychological and actual) reveal Keats's ambivalence towards the entire enterprise of the ongazing (transcendent-visionary) poet-conqueror.

In *Lamia* Keats undertakes a Romantic rereading of *Paradise Lost* that is roughly comparable to Blake's in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and *Milton*. Yet tellingly, *Lamia*'s apparent opposition of dualities (and the values of good and evil attaching to them) divides along gender lines (in contrast to the all-male central conflict in *Milton* and in Blake's two Prophecies directly respondent to *Milton*). Keats's work constructs a world from a *Lamia*-like physical imagery that at times is almost too voluptuous, too exquisitely lush to be "true" — an imagery whose very excess of material details paradoxically calls into doubt the "reality" of corporeal existence.

As Keats's anxieties about tradition and authorship thus flow into the problem he has about situating "reality" and "identity" in the subject-object world, they also may relate to his background as an underclass outsider in the privileged world of Letters. Added to these concerns, his experience as a doctor and his own personal struggle against illness (both his own and that of his mother and brother) — so that his standpoint shifts between the subject's mastery and lack of control — supply yet another dimension to the complex relationship between the physical emphasis of his poetry and the body politic. While his social position connects him to the marginalized female writer, his sense of his vulnerabilities reflects a specifically male bias.

In discussing the dialectic of the masculine and feminine in Keats, I am indebted to two concepts: Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence" and Cixous' *écriture féminine*. These I implicitly play off against each other. Drawing upon other feminist literary criticism, I argue for an ambivalence in Keats in adapting to his role as "great" male poet, an ambivalence that swerves between a phallogentric

Freudian or Lacanian or Bloomian reality and pleasure-dream of Cixousian *jouissance*. When the latter is suppressed, it often draws attention to itself in problematical or "mad" — i.e., "unreadable" (in Shoshana Felman's sense) — textual eruptions.

My argument comprises four chapters divided into three sections. In the first section I discuss the impact of "The Reality Principle" on Keats as it displays itself both in an anxiety of influence over living up to the expectations for Poetic Greatness and in resistance to the masculine paradigm. My first chapter of this section considers these issues in their general bearing on a number of texts, while my second chapter gives particular attention to the "seminal" poem, "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer." The next section, "Beyond the Reality Principle," concerns itself with how Keats's blurring of distinct boundaries and merging of categories — what I call boundary confusion — ambiguates reality so as to deconstruct traditional dichotomies. In Part III, "The Pleasure Principle," I attempt to orchestrate the first two sections to bring out the implications of boundary confusion for the texts' sexual politics. In that final section, I explore, primarily with reference to psychoanalytic and deconstructive theory, Keats's erotics of writing as revealing an androgynous consciousness divided in its allegiance between male and female. Here I take up the irresolvable fluctuation between the Reality and the Pleasure Principle in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" before concentrating on how that poem's profound ambivalence towards the patriarchal value-system manifests itself in the Nightingale and the Grecian Urn odes, which I see as complementing one another in their opposing views on gender.

Before concluding these preliminary remarks, two caveats are in order. The first pertains to my reliance for my conceptual models on Freud and Lacan, and more precisely on their respective notions of the Reality Principle and Symbolic Order (which, by the way, I understand to be roughly analogous). For employing their ideas, I may

be accused of perpetuating their male bias of their theories, a charge to which I may appear all the more liable in view of my liberal use of Bloom, whose anxiety of influence takes the Oedipal complex as its assumptional basis. This possible indictment points to what is always a tricky problem for feminist theorists, who in their very reaction against and critique of the dominant phallocentric discourse thereby risk reproducing it. Yet by the same token, and on the premise that masculinity has always defined itself against femininity, it can also be said that Freudian and Lacanian theories reveal as much about *their* ideological biases as about what they purport constitutes the "human" (which turns out to be the male psyche, in relation to which the female is a Shadow and an Other). In any event, I trust that this double awareness — of the perils and the biases — has kept me from falling headlong into the "strategic" trap I just now identified.

Complementing this caveat is another concerning the terms "masculine," "feminine," and "effeminate." These without exception signify cultural constructs, and I mean them to be read as if they were always set off by quotation marks (even though that is not always the case). Nowhere, that is to say, are they to be understood as endorsements of prejudicial attitudes or traditional gender stereotypes.

## **I. The Reality Principle**

## Chapter 1. "How Many Bards Gild the Lapses of Time!": Keats's Anxiety of Influence

[T]he Cliff of Poesy Towers above me — yet when, Tom who meets with some of Pope's Homer in Plutarch's Lives reads some of those to me they seem like Mice to mine. . . . There is no greater Sin after the 7 deadly than to flatter oneself into an idea of being a great Poet.

—Keats to Benjamin Robert Haydon, May 10-11 1817

Keats always sought to attain a Shakespearean disinterestness in his work as opposed to Wordsworthian egocentricity. Yet "disinterest" implies an independent, neutral transmission of reality and thus suggests that works of fiction are ahistorical, universal, and unchanging. Keats's method of achieving impersonality, however, relates specifically to a male psychology reacting to social constraints within the patriarchal order. Looked at from one angle, Keats's disinterest empathically encompasses humanity and even the entire object world; looked at from another, it functions, in a sinuous, convoluted way worthy of Lamia's arts, as self-interest.

An observation of Harold Bloom's in *The Anxiety of Influence* is particularly apposite here. Discussing the poet's emerging sense of poetic self-consciousness, he notes that "a potential poet first discovers (or is discovered by) the dialectic of influence, first discovers poetry as being both external and internal to himself":

Poetic Influence [*sic*] in the sense — amazing, agonizing, delighting — of *other poets*, as felt in the depths of the all but perfect solipsist, the potentially strong poet. For the poet is condemned to learn his profoundest yearnings through an awareness of *other selves*. The poet is *within* him, yet he experiences the shame and splendor of *being found by poems* — great poems — *outside* him. To lose freedom in this center is never to forgive, and to learn the dread of threatened autonomy forever. (25-26)

This dialectic of discovering and being discovered, of external and internal selves, is particularly applicable to Keats's "poentiality" since his poetics, for all its professed aim of disinterest obsessively focusses on the question of identity, a focus that alternately widens out on a multiplicity of selves and narrows anxiously to the single, egocentric self. Keats's work exhibits an



"anxiety of influence," in the Bloomian sense of the Oedipal rivalry between the poet and his precursor, to the nth degree; but it also shows a resistance to masculinist values. His contradictory identity, part of the rhythm of tension and diffusion in his work, has a political dimension: it is a strategic response to meet the pressures of having to conform to conventional norms of masculinity and at the same time elude them. Correlatively, Keats's ambitious drive for poetic fame alternates with a skepticism towards any institutionalizing, orthodox position that extends to questioning the practices of writing poetry itself.

For feminist readers, this skepticism has important consequences for the study of gender in his work. Political reality or the dominant patriarchal discourse consists of oppositional, hierarchical categories (male/female, sun/moon, mind/body, nature/culture, speech/writing) which traditionally relegate the female to the inferior pole. While Keats sets up these "phallogocentric" classifications, he simultaneously destabilizes, or decentralizes, them and subsequently calls them into doubt.

While it is a mistake to study in isolation a single poem by any poet, in Keats's case it is particularly dangerous because he is deliberately inconsistent, experimental, and self-critical. Sometimes he alternately takes on a feminine sensibility in one poem (or a single moment or mood of a letter) or masculine consciousness in another; at other times, the poem (or epistle) dialectically accommodates both. He treats either position as unstable, insecure, constantly shifting; anxieties attend both. At moments in his writing, the seemingly unbridgeable rift between them holds genuine terror for him.

In this first section, consisting of this chapter and the one following, my reading will focus on those pressures on Keats to conform to the model of great poet, or to the Reality Principle, and will consider how his fragmented identity represents a strategy to

resist it. In this regard, I would argue that Keats's "chameleon poet" simultaneously sets up and attempts to resolve a double anxiety: the Bloomian anxiety of influence on Keats to measure up to and overtake his paternal predecessors and the anxiety of gender occasioned by a refusal or reluctance to be a player in the game that risks the social degradation of being unmasculine, abnormal, marginal, "female." This first chapter, an overview of how these forces interact in his work, concentrates on the first anxiety of influence and serves as an introduction to as well as a context for the next chapter, which will focus on a single work: "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer."

\* \* \* \* \*

"How many bards gild the lapses of time!" bewails Keats in an early poem, "And often, when I sit me down to rhyme, / These will in throngs before my mind intrude" (5-6). Such a lament is consistent with Keats's comments on "identity" in the letter of October 27, 1818 that he wrote to Richard Woodhouse:

A Poet . . . has no Identity — he is continually in for — and filling some other Body — The Sun, the Moon, the Sea and Men and Women who are creatures of impulse are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute — the poet has none; no identity — he is certainly the most unpoetical of all God's Creatures. . . . When I am in a room with People if I ever am free from speculating on creations of my own brain, then not myself goes home to myself: but the identity of every one in the room begins to [*for so?*] to press upon me that, I am in a very little time an[*ni*]hilated. . . . (*Letters* 1: 387)

This passage is full of the same contradictions that are present in Keats's poetry. In — or despite — the loss of ego, the poet nevertheless still depends upon the physical senses. "Non-identity" for Keats in fact entails, not a loss, but an expansion of sensation (one identifies with another person, say, or with a sparrow pecking about in the gravel). Empathy, a feeling of oneness with an Other, presides over such moments; and from them, one returns to the self with a renewed awareness of otherness, of there being consciousnesses

different from one's own. Keats's words on the subject are thus ambivalent: they express both a desire to escape from the self ("if I ever am free from speculating") and an anxiety about the extinction of that self by being overwhelmed by the influx of others' identities ("begins to . . . press upon me that, I am in a very little time an[ni]-hilated"). The ambiguity of "that" signals that there may also be a less conscious meaning at work here: these other identities are annihilating his own not by taking possession of him but by making him aware of his mortality, of his being ultimately a nothing — and hence of *having* no identity (as distinguished from acquiring non-identity). (Given that the end-result is the same, this may appear to be a distinction without a difference . . . except with regard to the final line of "When I Have Fears," which I take up below.)

Keats's ontological anxieties are inextricable from those related to his social identity. "The *poet* has none; no identity — he is certainly the most *unpoetical* of God's Creatures" (my italics) is merely a curious line until one considers that the contradiction between "poet" and "unpoetical" reflects another of Keats's obsessions, this time concerning his poetic reputation. That his poetics is intimately bound up with his concept of selfhood is surely no coincidence. Nor is it fortuitous that in the above-quoted letter to Woodhouse, Keats turns to describing other people's annihilating pressure on him just at the time he has left off speculating on his own creations. The transition, that is, seems to demand a psychological reading.

The same is true of the little flutter of anxious qualification that introduces his entire subject of the "chameleon poet": "As to the poetical Character itself, (I mean that sort of which, if I am any thing, I am a Member; that sort distinguished from the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime . . .)" (*Letters* 1: 386-87). All of this, but especially the parenthesis, smacks of an inferiority complex ("if I am any thing") on the part of an ego somewhat feebly and

apologetically rallying itself by capitalizing the "M" of "Member" and reinforcing that gesture through a compensatory emasculation of Wordsworth (whose "W" is relegated to the lowercase). Keats, moreover, not only dismisses that giant predecessor for being egocentric; he also makes a virtue of his own perceived weakness. If he, Keats, is too threatened or influenced by others, then he will become the chameleon poet. (It is worth recalling that a chameleon takes on the coloration of those things around it as a means of protection — a protection against annihilation by its/his [poetic] antecedents.) Having no identity, Keats will become the spirit of identity. The poet's greatness will lie in his impersonality, in an invisibility that paradoxically ensures the self's visibility — a dying into life (a favourite motif of Keats's).

This is the same paradox that Keats was conscious of and writes about in *Sleep and Poetry*:

Will not some say that I presumptuously  
Have spoken? that from hastening disgrace  
'Twere better far to hide my foolish face?  
That whining boyhood should with reverence bow  
Ere the dread thunderbolt could reach? How!  
If I do hide myself, it sure shall be  
In the very fane, the light of Poesy. (270-76)

Through apparent self-effacement — a protective coloration that spares him from the "dread thunderbolt[s]" of his Jovian forefathers — his works will survive him and rescue his name from the second death of the poet, that of "painful vile oblivion" (*Hyperion* 3.87).

In a wonderful and psychologically slippery passage that appears later on in Keats's letter about poetic (non)identity, he writes with his usual blend of modest self-effacement and ambitious drive for greatness:

I feel assured I should write from the mere yearning and fondness I have for the Beautiful even if my night's labours should be burnt every morning and no eye ever shine upon them. But even now I am perhaps not speaking from myself; but from some character in whose soul I now live. (*Letters* 1: 388)

Keats's poems and letters are rife with what this sentiment points to: an anxiety of influence. It may suffice to observe, however, that one need not go much beyond casual perusal of the titles of his poems to discover this obsessive preoccupation. His very first poetical effort, for instance, though entitled "Imitation of Spenser," intriguingly owes practically nothing to his putative poetic model (cf. Bush, *Selected* 305). Meanwhile, the poem is replete with Oedipal rivalry. Consider, for example, "There the *king-fisher* saw his plumage bright / *Vieing* with fish of brilliant dye below" (10-11; my emphasis) — lines recalling the "poet kings" in *Sleep and Poetry* (267) — and note, too, that the final couplet ends less triumphantly than wishfully: "In strife to throw upon the shore a gem / Outvieing all the buds in Flora's diadem."

One can only speculate about whether such an acute consciousness of past models as the "Imitation of Spenser" heralds reflects a desire on the part of Keats, fatherless at age nine and orphaned at age fifteen, to adopt these poetic forebears as literary parents, fashioning from the world of *belles lettres* a more illustrious heritage than his own genealogy provided. Ironically, Keats's quasi-religious reverence for powerful literary mentors contributes to his unique self-created identity and lends a sense of secular modernity to his work. As Bloom remarks: "The others [i.e., among the Romantic poets] were Bible-haunted, but there are only a handful of biblical allusions in Keats's entire body of work, and they are never central. Keats's Bible was made up of Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, and, to some extent, Wordsworth" (*The Visionary Company* 410).

As with the wreath that figures so often in Keats's poetry — at once a funeral and a laurel wreath, and thus conveying as well a sense of the intricately woven — it is difficult to separate Keats's anxieties about his poetic immortality from his fear of bodily extinction. "When I Have Fears That I May Cease To Be," for example, ends with the speaker "on the shore / Of the wide world," "stand[ing]

alone, and think[ing] / Till love and fame to nothingness do sink." This extinction of love and fame enables the poet to exorcize those demons raised by ambition since he must "win over" both the living woman (in the case of Love) and the muse (in the case of Poetry). At the same time, the line displaces anxiety about his own annihilation onto Love and Fame by having them (rather than himself) "sink" "to nothingness."<sup>1</sup>

The relics that figure in his poetry (Keats clings to Milton's lock of hair as Isabella does to Lorenzo's rotting head) are yet another manifestation of that fear of absolute extinction. Isabella may "die a death too lone and incomplete" (487 — one of Keats's many prophetic remarks about his own fate) and number among the "dead and senseless things" (489), yet in fiction the lovers live on.

The consequent tension between a desire for the immortality which art affords and an awareness of one's own mortality is central to Keats's poetry. In that regard, Harold Bloom's account of a poet's development is apropos:

[E]very poet begins (however "unconsciously") by rebelling more strongly against the consciousness of death's necessity than all other men and women do. The young citizen of poetry, or ephebe as Athens would have called him, is already the anti-natural or antithetical man, and from his start as a poet he quests for an impossible object, as his precursor quested before him. (*Anxiety* 10)

Keats is Bloom's "antithetical man" *par excellence*.

Keats's preoccupation with death and immortality is something that he often and openly expresses in his early poetry. Nor does this concern of his entirely diminish with time and the maturing of his poetic powers. Rather, the anxiety becomes assimilated, perhaps even in direct proportion to the increasing impersonality of the work, as the chameleon poet identifies with his subject. In an early effort, "On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again," Keats expresses his dissatisfaction with *Endymion: A Poetic Romance* (which he was revising at the time), imploring the "syren" (2) romance to "Shut up thine olden pages, and be mute" (4) so that he

can "humbly assay" (7) the higher reaches of tragedy. According to the sonnet on *Lear*, dreaming can induce poetic insight, but it also carries the fear of deception. "Let me not wander in a barren dream" (12) recalls Lear's anguished cry (and its scenic context), "O! let me not be mad," (1.05.46) in a tragedy about pride, self-deception, and madness; and madness likewise attends other of Keats's expressions of his artistic self-doubts, as in "On Seeing a Lock of Milton's Hair" ("O, what a mad endeavour / Worketh he" [6-7]; "And mad with glimpses at futurity!" [31]). Indeed, such statements anticipate the remark of another Romantic poet, Gérard de Nerval (who did lose his sanity finally — although some would say he never had it): "The last madness which will remain with me will probably be that of believing myself to be a poet" (cited in Felman, 57).

There is something else significant about the subject of Keats's early sonnet: that *Lear* is about a power struggle between father and child. In those poems of Keats's dedicated to his precursors, the father-poets or "Chief" poets, it is not hard to detect ambivalent feelings occasioned by a similar struggle. "On Sitting Down," for one, refers to "this Shakspearean [*sic*] fruit" as "bitter-sweet" (8). Also revealing in this regard are the last two lines of *Sleep and Poetry*, an apprentice work about artistic apprenticeship (the rigorous ten-year plan Keats sets out for himself) as well as an expression of his poetics. The poem's penultimate line, suggesting rebelliousness against the standards laid down by his poetic forefathers ("These lines . . . howsoever they be done"), is immediately followed by an appropriation of their power and a delightfully presumptuous declaration on Keats's part expressive of a Freudian fantasy that he is already a member of the club ("I leave them as a father does his son"). Keats, that is, has to clear a space for his imaginative vision not only figuratively but literally. Thus the desire for "untrodden green" (10) in "To Homer" becomes the rivalry over "green turf" in *Hyperion*. (3.94). While the old god Saturn in the latter poem — fallen

from power and "buried from all godlike exercise / Of influence" (1.107-8), he is initially found "Deep in the shady sadness of a vale / Far sunken" leaving his footprints "Along the margin-sand" (1.1-2, 15) — questions "My strong identity, my real self," (1.114), his usurper, Hyperion, complains to his muse in a rather childish fit of petulance about establishing a "new born" (3.79) poetic identity:

why should I  
Spurn the green turf as hateful to my feet?  
Goddess benign, point forth some unknown thing:  
Are there not other regions than this isle? (*Hyperion* 3.93-96)

It is worth noting, too, that the last line of this expression of a poetic territorial imperative echoes "O, where are thy dominions?" (16) in "Lines on Seeing a Lock of Milton's Hair."

The desire for originality takes on the same territorial expression when, in "Ode to Psyche," the poet-prophet vows to "build a fane [to his muse] / In some *untrodden* region of my mind" (50-51; my emphasis. Cf. "high rival fanes" in *Hyperion* 2.59). And the same symptom of an anxiety of influence subtextually pervades "Ode to a Nightingale." The ideal spirit of Poesy there, the immortal nightingale (which the poet does not "envy" [5]), hovers invisibly above "some melodious plot / Of beechen green" (8-9) where "[n]o hungry generations tread [it] down" (62); whereas the poet, in so far as he is human and therefore mortal, is forced to return to the limitations of his corporeal existence: "the fancy cannot cheat so well / As she is *fam'd* to do, deceiving elf" (73-74; my emphasis). This last line carries the tangled hope and anxiety of cheating death with fame.

The central organizing metaphor of "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" is not simply topological (as in the Nightingale Ode) but specifically geographical. Even more to my point, that sonnet deals with the physical/mental discovery of territory where another "ancient Power" (*Hyperion* 3.76) already rules supreme: "Oft of one wide expanse had I been told / That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne" (5-6). Furthermore, there is a recognition that the



fledgling poet will have to negotiate his way "Round many western islands. . . / Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold" (3-4) before he can scale the poetic heights to reach the lofty "peak" (14) which is the imaginative free space above the well-trodden horizontal plane.

The poet's relation to the muse often reveals this same anxiety for original space. Thus Keats begins "Ode To Psyche" by apologizing to her for his less-than-magnificent efforts, and does so in such a way as to reveal his fear that everything has already been said and done: ". . . pardon that thy secrets should be sung / Even into thine own soft-conched ear" (3-4). The poet expresses the same misgivings in *Hyperion* through the voice of the title-character:

"Mnemosyne!

Thy name is on my tongue, I know not how;  
Why should I tell thee what thou so well seest?  
Why should I strive to show what from thy lips  
Would come no mystery?" (3.82-86)

It is no coincidence that Mnemosyne (Memory) and Moneta (the Admonisher) are the same Muse (indeed, Keats confuses the two names in *Fall of Hyperion*) and that the Admonisher should succeed Memory as the name for the muse in this, Keats's second attempt at a long epic poem on Hyperion. Memory, after all, is she who summons the spectre of the past brilliant exploits of his artistic predecessors, whose challenge the young Keats must rise up to. (The strain of imitating all those Miltonic inversions and adapting his genius to the epic mode has its objective correlative in Hyperion's daunting task of climbing the marble staircase to avoid death). And Memory also evokes the prodigious labour of studying their past efforts: "these tuneless numbers, wrung / By sweet enforcement and remembrance dear" ("Psyche," 1-2; the "dear" reveals the high personal cost of risking one's own poetic vision).

"Useless" (1.229) though it proves to be in *The Fall of Hyperion*, the poet's (phallic) tongue is something that Keats appears to have

finally mastered in the last stanza of "Ode on Melancholy," thereby sensing the intoxicating delight of creative vision:

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. (26-30)

"Cloudy," however, carries with it the nagging thought that perhaps the "trophies," while ethereal, are also not quite entirely and permanently substantial or "real" either. Indeed, as regards their (im)-materiality, "cloudy trophies" have the same ambiguity as the "rainbow of the salt sand-wave" (16). Their cloudiness may be a sign of delusion, as is the "blissful cloud" that "Benumb'd my eyes" in the "Ode on Indolence" (16-17). Moreover, for the poet to settle for being "among her cloudy trophies hung" is perhaps not quite as glorious as the earlier boast that the muse is "seen of none save him." As well, the idea of the speaker's being a collectible, a trophy (another one of his relics rescued from the ravages of time), leads one to wonder who is doing the "Emprison[ing]" (19): the mistress-Muse or the poet? A larger uncertainty lies in the ode's play of dualities: pleasure/pain, substantial/insubstantial, mortal/immortal, "shade to shade" (9). Once again, in the very act of exquisite sensation (the poet-conqueror's bursting of the grape against his palate) the solid world (and the conviction that his fame should live on) eludes him ("His soul shall taste the sadness" [29]).

A similar intricate ambivalence occurs in "Lines on Seeing a Lock of Milton's Hair." Before the Romantics, the desire of poets to find their own voice was counteracted to some extent by the institutional demand to imitate the classics. The Romantics rebelled against that training. Whereas originality was not antithetical to imitation in the English classical tradition (Pope's famous epigrammatic couplet, "True wit is Nature to advantage dressed, / What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed" [*An Essay on Criticism* 297-

98], pretty well sums up classical thinking on the subject, with its articulation of the principle that one could say something old in a new way), with the Romantics there was the (proto-Ezra Poundian) imperative to say something new. The anxiety occurs because of that reversal of values which makes originality prized for its own sake. Thus, while Keats pays tribute to Milton, the latter's spirit is something of a Gothic haunting, one which "never slumbers, / But rolls about our ears / For ever, and for ever" ("Milton" 3-5). So, too, the image of the flood at the end of "Milton" signals a sense not only of tradition but also (inasmuch as the Flood washes the previous civilization away) of breaking away from that tradition and beginning anew. At the same time, while a lock of hair or shank of bone asserts the endurance of things, the memory of the flood triggers a denial of that certainty (the speaker of the poem is both "startled" and "temperate" [38, 40]). This vulnerability is conveyed by the fact that while the poem wrestles agonizingly with the immense freight of the poetic past, it is finally a *human* relic that it cherishes. (The poem begins by hailing Milton as the "Chief of *organic* numbers!") Although he pursues fame as lustily as one of the lovers on the Grecian urn, Keats ultimately does not share Wordsworth's assurance that "[p]oetry is the first and last of all knowledge — it is as immortal as the heart of man" ("Supplementary Essay" 396).

The focus of "Milton" on a human relic alerts us to yet another, implicit conflict: an opposition between body and mind. C. D. Thorpe observes that this is the poem in which, for the first time, Keats asserts the need for philosophic mind (65-66). Yet Keats's apparent privileging of intellectual pleasure is not so much balanced as undercut by the physical one that the splendid ambiguity of "Live temple" (12) of Milton's legacy suggests. Along with Milton's "soul" (18), the sonnet resurrects his "ear" (17), his "mortal lips" (19), his "earthly love" (20). And while the philosophic mind is valued as something "nobler" (15) than the merely physical, that nobility is



After its airy maze —  
 As doth a mother wild  
 When her young infant child  
 Is in an eagle's claws. 15  
 And is not this the cause  
 Of madness? — God of Song,  
 Thou bearest me along  
 Through sights I scarce can bear;  
 O let me, let me share 20  
 With the hot lyre and thee  
 The staid philosophy.  
 Temper my lonely hours  
 And let me see thy bowers  
 More unalarmed! 25

Keats here is questioning the "terrible" division of body and mind, forcing himself to "temper" his emotions and accommodate a sense of overpowering alienation to "staid philosophy" (22), an alienation that aligns itself with the "wild" (13) female and her emotion at seeing her child sacrificed to the eagle's claws. I would argue that the last lines, in their strained desire (and goal of "*staid* philosophy"), suggest a strong resistance to the patriarchal value-system and not, as Douglas Bush would have it, unproblematical "affirmations on the side of philosophic knowledge, ethical wisdom" (*Selected* 326).

In this critical period of Keats's poetic development, he is not merely opposing "sensation" and "thought" or the natural and the artificial as antithetical categories but, in a more complex way, conveying his ambivalence about patriarchal notions of high art in poems which expressly address the consecrated art object. "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles" repeats the negative image of the patriarchal eagle and the steep ascent to High Art where:

. . . each imagined pinnacle and steep  
 Of godlike hardship tells me I must die  
 Like a sick eagle looking at the sky. (3-5)

There is an "undescribable feud" (10) attached to the work "[t]hat mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude" (12). The conflict ostensi-

bly is one evoked by the emotional turmoil in the speaker's apprehension that even grandeur is perishable. Yet an underlying meaning critiques the primary one, the wish to achieve elevation. There is virtually a caesura after "rude," which contributes to bonding it with its rhyme-word; and this suggests that the feud may be between grandeur and the rude, period — this being consonant with the brain/heart opposition in lines 9-10 — rather than between "grandeur" and "the rude / Wasting of old time." The "rudeness" of the syntax that concludes the sonnet reinforces such a reading, which may be "unwilling" (2) to entirely reveal itself.

In the companion poem, "To Haydon with a Sonnet Written on Seeing the Elgin Marbles," Keats writes even more despairingly of his artistic self-doubts and ambivalence towards "high" art. Opening with the poet's heartfelt confession that he lacks the authority of knowledge, the sonnet suggests that he cannot measure up to the noble and lofty artistic heights (repeating yet another variant of the eagle motif) — this in a poem addressed to the man (the painter Benjamin Haydon) who introduced him to the splendours of the Elgin Marbles:

Forgive me, Haydon, that I cannot speak  
Definitively on these mighty things;  
Forgive me that I have not eagle's wings —  
That what I want I know not where to seek . . . (1-4)

It is significant that this latter sonnet, that titles itself as a comment on the more consciously public utterance of "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles," adopts a more personal, more overtly confessional stance although both poems express the strain of attempting to overcome profound self-doubts.

Overcoming his initial uncertainty, the poet rallies himself with the promised gesture of an artistic striving of Sisyphean proportions to emulate the splendour of the Elgin Marbles:

And think that I would not be overmeek  
In rolling out upfollow'd thunderings,

Even to the steep of Heliconian springs,  
Were I of ample strength for such a freak. (5-8)

Yet even if we put aside the sense of poetic belatedness suggested by "thunderings" that are "upfollow'd," the counterposing of "overmeek" with "freak" undermines the bravado of these sentiments. According to the sense of the poem, those rhyme-words are in opposition; but once again the rhyme establishes an underlying connection between them. Keats presumably means to say that he is primed for making an unnatural prodigious effort, although contrary to his own nature — that he is ready for a Jovian undertaking. But the pairing of "overmeek" with "freak" introjects an anxiety that such a lack of authority as Keats admits to is abnormally effeminate.<sup>3</sup>

It is significant that when Keats turns to an older, less obviously "literary" genre with the two poems on the "outlaw" Robin Hood unapologetically "[i]dling in the 'grenè shawe'" ("Robin Hood" 35-36), he is free to express a different ethic:

Souls of poets dead and gone,  
What elysium have ye known,  
Happy field or mossy cavern,  
Choicer than the Mermaid Tavern? ("Lines on the Mermaid Tavern" 1-4)

The subject and genre, relatively free from the inhibition of historical precursors, seems to provide him with a "choic[e]" other than the agonized ambition to attain a higher philosophical truth. Indeed, these "Lines on the Mermaid Tavern" mock High Art in a playful and Falstaffian lusty spree while unequivocally expressing an alliance with bodily pleasure, the feminine, and the "rude" lower social orders. Significantly, in this different form of "story," the "host's sign-board" is supplanted by a "new old sign," with the joke about pub signs setting up a punning title that suggests that the poem's lines "on" the tavern can both be about and *be* the Mermaid Tavern; not uncoincidentally, the poem adopts the "sign" of Woman.

The side of Keats that would thus experiment with a non-hegemonic green, untrodden world rarely emerges so purely as this in his

more consciously "serious" works. A letter to Reynolds of February 3, 1818 — the one in which his two Robin Hood poems appear — expresses the same defiant mood: "they are . . . written in the Spirit of Outlawry." In attacking Wordsworth (because he is Keats's most immediate — and hence threatening — mentor) for poetry that enforces personality or doctrine (its "palpable design" — ironically, another physical-mental oxymoron), Keats scornfully dismisses the separation of mind and body: "are we to be bullied into a certain Philosophy engendered in the whims of an Egotist. . . . Sancho will invent a Journey heavenward as well as any body" (*Letters* 1: 223-25). "Robin Hood," echoing the letter's lament for the "old Poets" and its nostalgia for some simpler *écriture*, "uncontaminated and unobtrusive," suggests that such freedom is now "buried" "[u]nder the down-trodden pall / Of the leaves of many years" (4-5).

That Keats's rebellious mood should vent itself in a "new old" genre imprinted, as it were, with the female gender is no coincidence. "The Mermaid Tavern" — Keats refers to it in his letter as "the Mermaid lines" (225) — unconsciously returns us to the "syren" Romance that, howsoever much it embarrasses Keats, refuses to stay "mute" or repressed. While he strives to adapt himself to the conventional higher philosophical truth, his work calls into doubt high/low categories. He subconsciously aligns himself with femaleness even as he attempts to distance himself from it.

This double pull — a masculine drive for poetic immortality that necessarily involves conformity to patriarchal rules and a rebellion against established categories that aligns him with the "unmasculine," the feminine — is intricately involved with his preoccupation with identity. His representation of subjectivity is on a remarkable sliding scale ranging from a "presumptuous" assertion of identity to androgynous nonidentity . . . and frequently entailing both at the same time. In *Sleep and Poetry* (see above), he presumptuously asserts the masculine authority of language. Yet such a presumption,



by reason of the very manner of his asserting it, appears to derive from an inferiority complex over his childishness and effeminacy. Like the man, he "presumptuously [speaks]"; like the woman, he must hide behind the veil and resort to manipulative wiles, he must "hide" or disguise his unmanly "disgrace," his "foolish face" and "whining boyhood" or else suffer the consequences of the "dread [patriarchal] thunderbolts." By such intricately convoluted methods, his poetry will assert yet *disguise* its "bisexual" nature and be both brazenly presumptuous and underhandedly devious: he will "hide [him]self . . . / In the very fane, the light of Poesy."

\* \* \* \* \*

Having traced the masculine and feminine elements at work in Keats and some of their complications, I now return to his sonnet on *King Lear* to consider its richer entanglements in greater detail than was hitherto possible.

It is significant, first of all, that the Shakespearean play Keats chose for expressing his dissatisfaction with romance and his concomitant desire to move up the scale from a relatively "light" genre to a "serious" one was *King Lear*. That tragedy is already bound up with the issue of gender; and although its theme concerns the power struggle between parent and child, its main plot focusses more specifically on the relation between a father and his daughters. Containing some of Shakespeare's most condemnatory lines on female sexuality, *Lear* is also embroiled in the traditional binaries relating to gender.<sup>4</sup> As his *Lear* Sonnet articulates the matter, Keats's rejection of romance is similarly tied up with the male displacement of sexuality onto women, the ancient condemnation of women as physical and sensual creatures. Romance is a "syren," a "queen," who must be "[s]hut up" and "mute" (like Keats's childish offerings which must be "hushed" in "Milton") so that the poet can "humbly assay" the higher peaks of tragedy.

Keats reads — or rereads — *Lear* through his (Keats's) own turmoil about gender, his own anxiety about effeminacy. In a way that recalls the vituperative denigration of the female body in *Lear*, Keats's poem plays upon the tradition that equates maleness with creativity and femaleness with the merely reproductive. The males, according to his sonnet's opposing clusters of gender-images, are the creative "Begetters" of the "fruit" poetry while the female, with whom Keats does not wish to identify, is the "barren dream," the fear of self-deception, of writing inferior poetry. However anxious he is to qualify as a "Chief Poet," Keats represents this as a tremendous (self-) conflict, a "fierce dispute" "[b]etwixt damnation and impassion'd clay" that he "*must . . . burn through; once more humbly assay*" (5-7; my italics). Yet not only the intensity of that struggle but also his rapturous description of Romance may make us wonder about the real orientation of the "desire" with which the poem (literally) ends. The Romance that he must "[l]eave" (3), must tenderly bid "Adieu" (5) to, is already plaintively "far-away" (2) (and note that many of the words here recall the Nightingale Ode); it is also something contrasted with "*wintry*" reality (3; my emphasis).

There thus seems to be a dynamic at work here that makes Keats's "desire" decidedly ambivalent. Indeed, his determination to leave Romance (and its feminine values) is about as credible as the wish he expresses in "God of the Meridian" not long after offering a horrifying image of a mother's terror at seeing her infant swept up in the patriarchal eagle's claws (13-15; see the text as quoted above): the wish to "[t]emper" the "hot lyre" with "staid philosophy" (21-22). His immediately subsequent question, "And is not this the cause / Of madness?" (16-17), connects with his "mad endeavour" to emulate Milton, and implicitly with the madness of Lear. Furthermore, the *Lear* Sonnet, as it evokes such madness via the line "Let me not wander in a barren dream," associates it with femaleness so

as to aggravate the threat that any impulse to identify with the female represents for Keats.

In psychological terms, the sonnet offers itself as the Freudian version of romance, so to speak. *Lear* on Keats's (re)reading of it is about the male child's transfer of identification from the mother, the "[Q]ueen," to the King. But beyond that, Keats doubly transfers his reaction towards *Lear* (the father) to Shakespeare, the father — "Chief Poet" whom he both loves and fears (hence the ambivalence of "*bitter-sweet . . . [is] this Shak[e]spe[a]rean fruit*"; my italics)

To escape the giant shadow of Shakespeare, Keats invokes the myth of self-recreation: "That which is creative must create itself" (*Letters* 1: 374). The "Phoenix"-poet will be consumed and be born again as true to himself, indebted to no one.

The Phoenix that rises at the very end of the *Lear* Sonnet is thus meant to address the problem Keats has with the father-poet. Additionally, by virtue of its traditional male associations and "new . . . wings," it is also intended to supplant the female, the "Fair plumed syren" of Romance. Yet the poem's image-content suggests that each of these projects is to some extent self-opposed: one in so far as the Phoenix itself is intimately bound up with mortality in all its Keatsian implications, the other because "fly[ing] at my desire" describes the bird in terms suggesting a return to/of eros and the world of romance.<sup>5</sup>

The *Lear* Sonnet thus betrays Keats as suffering from a double anxiety of influence: not only from the Bloomian disease, as it were, stemming from the relationship between father and son, but also from the anxiety of having — or appearing to have — a female identity and hence seeming to be effeminate. These two anxieties, moreover, are inextricable in Keats, and are so for a reason having to do with his conflicting impulses. He must rival his paternal poets in order to win membership in the patriarchal order, yet he cannot accept the patriarchal classification of values that such a rivalry/

membership entails; he cannot entirely refuse to identify with the female. In other words, he cannot subordinate or sublimate the Pleasure Principle to the Reality Principle.

The title, "On Sitting Down to read *King Lear* once again" points to the act of re-reading as a revisionary process (an idea emphasized by the repetition of the phrase "once again" in the poem itself). Yet the tangled skeins of the sexual/intertextual politics of this particular rereading of *Lear* tend towards transforming the masculinist notion of revision as a linear progressive movement into one of a process involving constant renewal and discovery. In any event, it is certain that Keats's selective rereading of Shakespeare<sup>6</sup> influences him to reread one of his own previously-published poems: *Endymion*.

The renunciation of romance that the *Lear* Sonnet opens with reflects the same dissatisfaction and the same misgivings about "mawkish" effeminacy that Keats gives voice to in the preface to *Endymion*, whose published version he was revising at the time. If, as the *Lear* Sonnet intimates, the phoenix's "new . . . wings" return us to an original desire, *Endymion* makes it clear that it is a "new old" desire that we (re)discover. That, at least, is what he himself says in other words about his great flawed experiment, of which he wrote at the start (which perhaps makes the sentiment all the more significant, especially since he repeats himself, quoting from one of his own previous letters [no longer extant]):

"I . . . 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 . . . ?*" (To Benjamin Bailey, October 8, 1817, in *Letters* I: 170; my italics).

## NOTES

1. The same tension is conveyed by the three phantoms of "Ode on Indolence," stanza 4. Here Ambition is situated between the female figures of Love and "demon Poesy" (40). Although the gender of Ambition is unspecified in the poem, Keats refers to it as male in a

letter that repeats the same configuration (See ch. 4, n. 4 where I quote the passage). Whereas "When I Have Fears That I May Cease To Be" attempts to control ontological and creative anxieties by disappearing Love and Fame, in the letter (written about a year later) the obverse is true: Keats is empowered by the fantasy of his unique ability to "distinguish [the figures of Poetry, Ambition and Love] in their disguisement" (*Letters* 2: 79). Correlative to the letter's euphoric mood is the optimistic faith in the primacy of sensation: "This is the only happiness; and is a rare instance of advantage in the body overpowering the Mind." This prosaic statement is transmuted into the opposite mood of the sonnet, which associates anxiety and pessimism with the possible *loss* of sensation:

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. (9-12)

"Unreflecting," then, plays on the pun of being invisible in the various annihilative senses in the sonnet (the poet can only exist in the muse's reflection if she reflects or returns the poet's loving gaze). The word also signifies sensation without thought, a longed-for state of being that is identified with creative originality (i.e., fame is awarded to those whose works are not "reflecting" another's influence).

This notion of reflection reinforces the question in the sonnet of who is disappearing. That question in turn is related to the ambiguity as to who is the "fair creature of an hour": the poet or the objects of his contemplation?

2. About a year later, in a letter to Reynolds of September 21, 1819, Keats writes: "I have given up Hyperion [*sic*] — there were too many Miltonic inversions in it — Miltonic verse cannot be written but in an artful or rather artist's humour. I wish to give myself up to other sensations" (*Letters* 2: 167). On the same day he repeats that information to the George Keatses, "I prefer the native music of

["Chatterton's language"] to Milton's. . . . I have but lately stood on my guard against Milton. Life to him would be death to me. Miltonic verse cannot be written but i[n] the vein of art — I wish to devote myself to another sensation" (*Letters* 2: 212).

3. According to the *OED*, "freak" in Keats's time usually meant "capricious"; it also denoted "a product of irregular or sportive fancy" as "Thy most magnificent and mighty freak [i.e., an ice-palace], the wonder of the north" (Cowper *The Task* 5.130, as qtd. in *OED*). Apparently, "freak" in the modern sense of an abnormal or monstrous "freak of nature" did not become current until 1847. Yet surely the *OED* is in error since we find the word being used in this very sense in Book 7 of the 1805 text of Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, composed between 1798 and 1805:

All out-o'-th'-way, far-fetched perverted things,  
 All *freaks of Nature*, all Promethean thoughts  
 Of Man; his dullness, madness, and their feats  
 All jumbled up together to make up  
 This Parliament of Monsters. (7: 688-92; my italics)

In Wordsworth's use of the word, it unequivocally means something grotesque rather than fanciful. Keats's perception of himself as "overmeek," then, may carry this stronger, anxious sense of freakishness.

4. In "The Patriarchal Bard," an essay in *Political Shakespeare*, Kathleen McLuskie analyzes how the patriarchal institutions of family and state in *King Lear* are threatened by a specifically misogynistic construction of social chaos:

The representation of patriarchal misogyny is most obvious in the treatment of Goneril and Regan. . . . Family relations in this play are seen as fixed and determined, and any movement within them is portrayed as a destructive reversal of rightful order (see I.iv). Goneril's and Regan's treatment of their father merely reverses existing patterns of rule and is seen not simply as cruel and selfish but as a fundamental violation of human nature — as is made powerfully explicit in the speeches which condemn them (III.vii.101-3; IV.ii.32-50). Moreover when Lear in his madness fantasises about the collapse of law and the destruction of ordered social control, women's lust is vividly represented as the centre and source of the ensuing corruption (IV.vi.110-28). (98-99)

5. If the eagle and the phoenix are the birds associated with masculinity, the thrush and the nightingale represent the feminine.

In "What the Thrush Said," (the commonly cited title of the poem which appears in Stillinger as "O thou whose face hath felt the winter's wind"), an early version of the themes in *Ode to a Nightingale*, Keats presents a point of view entirely different from that of "On Sitting" (which he had written a few weeks before). Reversing the movement from fair romance and its melodic song which must yield to the "wintry day," "What the Thrush Said" begins with winter and heads toward the warmth of spring. Correlatively, the poem appeals to nature instead of culture: "O thou whose only book has been the light / Of supreme darkness" (5-6); "O fret not after knowledge — I have none, / And yet my song comes native with the warmth" (9-10).

6. I am deliberately (in my own defensive rereading) not using Bloom's Oedipal-antagonistic vocabulary of "misreading," "misinterpretation," "misprision," etc. Such terminology, after all, suggests only a negative understanding of reading, reading as a distortion, while I wish to emphasize a positive practice.

## Chapter 2: "Bards in Fealty to Apollo": Conformity and Resistance to the Patriarchal Model

This turning from the mother to the father . . . signifies above all a victory of spirituality over the senses — that is to say, a step forward in culture, since maternity is proved by the senses whereas paternity is a surmise based on a deduction and a premiss. This declaration in favour of the thought-process, thereby raising it above sense perception, has proved to be a step with serious consequences.

—Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*

This is the place.

And I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair  
streams black, the merman in his armored body

—Adrienne Rich, "Diving into the Wreck"

If "On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again" alerts us to rereading as a revisionary process, "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer," written about a year earlier, directs our attention to the problematics of a first reading. There is also an obvious difference in focus: while both concern reading, the *Lear* sonnet concentrates on that tragedy (i.e., on tragic drama), "Chapman's Homer" on the epic, which (as Keats reminds us) is the "king" of genres ("To Charles Cowden Clarke" 66). In this chapter I will explore in depth the ideological implications of that latter sonnet's "reading."

\* \* \* \* \*

Through his association with Leigh Hunt and his circle, Keats was immediately branded as one of the "Cockney" poets. In contemporary usage, "Cockney" — as Susan Wolfson points out in her recent groundbreaking essay, "Feminizing Keats" — carried with it derogatory "associations of effeminacy, sexual immaturity, and social inferiority" (320). Hence it is a term that links the otherness of gender *and* class. In regard to both these categories, Keats had a marginal position that other poets against whom charges of unmanliness were being levelled (notably, Byron and Shelley) did not share. (Those two poets, after all, "benefitted not only from social rank but also from a reputation for womanizing" [Wolfson 321].) It is



therefore no accident that Keats's work provokes his readers "to gender [his] sensibility" (Wolfson 349) — either by questioning his masculinity or vigorously defending it.

Wolfson systematically and convincingly demonstrates what hitherto passed as anecdotal truth: that the issue of class and gender has always surrounded Keats's poetry. This she does by way of a historical survey of derogations of him:

Keats "was spoilt by Cockneyfying and Surburbing," Byron decides. He also thought him spoilt by sexual immaturity: he calls him "the Mankin," and sneers at "Johnny Keats's *piss-a-bed* poetry"; its "drivelling idiotism"—"the *Onanism* of Poetry." The term *cockney* implies attitudes about both, as *Blackwood's* first full attack on Keats, appearing in August 1818 as part of a series on the "Cockney School of Poetry," makes abundantly evident. The reviewer, John Lockhart, opens the case ridiculing both female and lower-class aspirations to what he clearly felt ought to remain male aristocratic pursuits. . . . Like Byron, Lockhart also summons a puerilizing rhetoric to exclude Keats from adult male company, and by extension, from serious consideration as a poet. He is "Mr. John," "good Johnny Keats," "Johnny," the author of "prurient and vulgar lines," and "Mr. Keats . . . a boy of pretty abilities"—boy and class conflated in the summary advice to this "young Sangrado" to return to the apothecary shop. (320)

While contemporary detractors like Byron were scornfully dubbing Keats a presumptuous and effeminate "Johnny," even his champions were paying him dubious gender-loaded compliments. The most notorious example is to be found in *Adonais*, at the point where Shelley eulogizes Keats as "a pale flower" (48), "[t]he broken lily" (54) — the kind of imaging which was not only largely responsible for initiating the myth of Keats as a delicately constituted poet whose death was hastened by savage reviews, but also has an ambivalence about it in view of the aspersions by others of Keats's masculinity.

The almost obsessive preoccupation with gender in nineteenth- and twentieth-century discourse on Keats — also on his own part in his poetry and letters — "reveal[s] a sensibility fascinated with the permeable boundary between masculine and feminine" (Wolfson 318). Considerations of gender are thus inseparable from what I have

called the reality problem, having to do with the fluidity of boundaries found in Keats's work (the subject of my next chapter).

Gender ambiguity as it applies to Keats is perhaps best highlighted by his early struggles to conform to the paradigm of masculinity and by the subtextual resistances to this model. The sonnet "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" deserves special attention in this regard, not only because critics generally agree that it is Keats's first "mature" poem, and a poem of "great" literary merit (usually with the tacit understanding that the qualities of maturity and greatness are synonymous with masculinity), but also for a reason having to do with the subject matter and form of the sonnet itself, the circumstances in which it was written (or, more accurately, the selective way in which biographers have recounted the legendary events surrounding the poem), and the critics' interpretation of it: namely, that all are relentlessly preoccupied with the masculine.

In a way, "Chapman's Homer" represents the exception that proves the rule. The contrast between Keats's usual sensuous luxuriance and the classical restraint of this famous sonnet sheds light on the ideological implications of Keats's boundary confusion. Generally viewed as Keats's coming-of-age poem, both in a literary and psychological sense, "Chapman's Homer" is repeatedly presented, explicitly or implicitly, in terms of a test of manhood. Its critical reception alone, then, gives some indication of the pressures to conform to a certain model. What I will be arguing, moreover, is that a case — equal to the one in favor of a coming-of-age interpretation — can be made for the sonnet's resistance towards the masculinist tradition by way of its suppression of otherness. In the process, I shall endeavour to show that devoting a chapter to this sonnet is not the "fine excess" it may appear to be, that these fourteen lines compress profound ideological implications that resonate through all of Keats's work.

\* \* \* \* \*

It might at this point be useful to look at the atmosphere in which Keats's poem first appeared and consider how the text continued to be perceived by subsequent critics/biographers. An analysis of the interactions between the poet's expectations and critical responses to the poetry may shed light on why Keats felt such a powerful need to cast poetic creativity in such imperialist and privileged trappings and to conquer his own self-doubts so compulsively.

Most accounts place the writing of the Chapman Sonnet after the fateful meeting with Leigh Hunt that initiated Keats's acceptance into his future mentor's literary circle. But in conflict with this view, there is also evidence suggesting that Keats wrote it before that visit,<sup>1</sup> which he undoubtedly realized would be important to his poetic ambitions. Whether it was written in a mood of anticipatory excitement or exhilarated aftermath, there is no doubt that Keats was aware that Hunt's reaction to the poems would largely decide whether or not he would be at least initiated into that patrilineage of great poets which preoccupies so much of his early poetry. "I can now devote any time you may mention to the pleasure of seeing Mr. Hunt," he writes on October 9, 1816 to Charles Cowden Clarke — "it will be an Era in my existence" (*Letters* 1: 113). Keats had written the sonnet at a crucial period in his life when he was half-decided that he would leave his medical career and devote himself full-time to the pursuit of a career in poetry (cf. Giddings 84-85).

Given those circumstances in Keats's career and considering his ambition, it is perhaps not surprising that a poem written at this time is so couched in metaphors of masculine dominance, both in subject matter and imagery, as almost to provide proof of his legitimacy to the pantheon of poets at the very point of making that claim. In that sense, the Chapman Sonnet is as much a wish-fulfilling fantasy of being discovered as it is about discovery.

The point has not been lost on biographers. Here, for example, is Aileen Ward's psychological reconstruction of the atmosphere in which the poem was written:

[t]he poem as a whole expresses his rising excitement of the previous weeks, from the moment Clarke promised to introduce him to Hunt. Saluted by Hunt and his friends, his eyes opened to new kingdoms of poetry, Keats felt the horizons of his world expanding beyond all expectation. It was the limitless possibilities of his own future that he saw spread out before him that morning. . . . (76)

As so many other commentators on the sonnet have done, Ward's own description bears traces of the masculine-conquest imagery of the sonnet. Even the figurative "salut[e]" to Keats by the male poetic circle has a faintly militaristic air. Certainly legend has it that it was "Chapman's Homer" in particular that brought Keats to the attention of Leigh Hunt. Yet for all the putative (and certainly compared with the other early writings submitted at the same time) uncharacteristic "masculine" control that the sonnet masters — or because of it — it still manages to inspire gender anxiety.

In his reminiscences in *Lord Byron and Some of His Contemporaries*, Leigh Hunt proclaimed Keats's sonnet, written when the poet was 21 years old, "a remarkable instance of a vein prematurely masculine" (248). A bit further on, he elaborates on this theme:

"Endymion," too, was not without its faults of weakness, as well as of power. Mr. Keats's natural tendency to pleasure, as a poet, sometimes degenerated, by reason of his ill health, into a poetical effeminacy. There are symptoms of it here and there in all his productions, not excepting the gigantic grandeur of *Hyperion*. His lovers grow "faint" with the sight of their mistresses; and Apollo, when he is superseding his divine predecessor, and undergoing his transformation into a *Divus Major*, suffers a little too exquisitely among his lilies. But Mr. Keats was aware of this contradiction to the real energy of his nature, and prepared to get rid of it. (253)

One can only speculate to what extent Hunt, who undoubtedly was the most important living mentor to Keats at this formative time, encouraged his young charge to express "real" masculine energy and to purge himself of any "natural tendency" toward the effeminate (equated with degeneracy and illness). The irony of Hunt's statement is that he himself was considered overly effeminate; indeed, it was

Keats's association with Hunt, and the the circle dubbed the Cockney School which he headed, that provoked some of the negative criticism of himself.

A shared, subliminal anxiety about the effeminacy of their poetry may underlie a sense of containing the female that appears in the poet., Hunt and Keats wrote in tribute to one another. In Hunt's case, this containment is a literal one. In the first of his four sonnets dedicated to Keats, which begins by celebrating the sensitivity toward "the loveliness of things" that Keats attributes to Hunt, there appear intriguingly the lines:

And surely as I feel things lovelier still,  
The human look, and the harmonious form  
Containing woman, and the smile in ill,  
.....

As surely as all this, I see, ev'n now,  
Young Keats, a flowering laurel on your brow. ("To John Keats" 9-14; qtd.  
in Forman, 1: 150)

Echoing his prose writing, the poem repeats Hunt's association of the female with illness ("the smile in ill").

There is a similar nervous awareness of the necessity to curb the feminine in Keats's acknowledgments of indebtedness to Hunt. In "Keen, fitful gusts are whisp'ring here and there," reportedly written after one of his visits to Hunt, Keats writes of being "brimfull of the friendliness / That in a little cottage I have found"; yet Keats's poem is full of gender ambivalence connected to poetic ambitions even as his title/first line itself intimates a certain rebelliousness. While the sonnet turns on the contrast between the warm cheer of Hunt's cottage and the coldness and deadness of the autumn air (reminiscent of the "cold and sacred busts" [357] of poets that Keats describes in *Sleep and Poetry* — perhaps after having seen them in Hunt's study), the warm assurance is undermined by the last lines:

Of fair-hair'd Milton's eloquent distress,  
And all his love for gentle Lycid drown'd;  
Of lovely Laura in her light green dress,

And faithful Petrarch gloriously crown'd.

Keats seems torn between an "effeminate" sensibility (it is a "fair-hair'd" Milton who suffers such "distress") and loyalty to the masculine model, which is the one that gets the last, crowning word. The juxtaposition of the rhymes "And all his love for gentle Lycid drown'd;/ . . . And faithful Petrarch gloriously *crown'd*" (my italics) — counterposing the values of love and gentleness against the masculine-imperialist model — is very telling: it is a crowning at the expense of drowning. As well, there is an intriguing ambiguity as to whether "drown'd" applies to "gentle Lycid" or to "love." Embedded in these lines, themselves ostensibly offering unqualified gratitude for Hunt's hospitality and enthusiastic allegiance ("faithful") to his poetic predecessors, is the notion of winning literary success at the expense of an illegitimate femininity that threatens the unquestionable loyalty to the legitimate patriarchal order — and hence must be suppressed.

In *Sleep and Poetry*, Keats freely vents all manner of moods and indulges in the most luxurious sentiment. At the same time, however, he valiantly strives to be counted among the "poet kings." These conflicts find their moment of poignant awareness that questions gender restrictions: "Is there so small a range/In the present strength of manhood, that the high/Imagination cannot freely fly/As she was wont of old?" (162-65).<sup>2</sup>

There is nothing in Keats's letters that directly refers to (and hence fixes the date of) the incidents that led up to the composition of "Chapman's Homer." The legendary speed and confidence with which Keats wrote the sonnet and the enthusiastic reception of this poem by Hunt and his circle that led to the wider discovery of Keats as a poet of promise are two such closely related events that they have become fused in the biographical rendering of the legend (although, as I have already said, there is some conflicting evidence as to which event preceded the other).

Ifor Evans, in a 1931 essay, regrets the absence of any mention of the sonnet in Keats's letters, the lack of a "primary source" to ascertain the legendary events surrounding the poem (29). But given all the romantic emphasis, both by the sonnet itself and by the biocritical discourse describing its conception/reception, on its claim to "firstness" of various kinds, Evans's lament has a certain irony to it. That irony is all the greater in view of Evans's own stress, in tracing the psychological connections between the "original [literary] stimulus" (28) and the profusion of memory associations that led up to the sonnet's creative synthesis, on the near-unique spontaneity and original genius of the poem's conception:

Seldom have the conditions under which a poetical work is created and conceived been so closely circumscribed. The genetic impulse from which the sonnet arose could not have existed in Keats's mind previously, for he had not seen a complete rendering of Chapman's translation of Homer until that evening in Clarke's room [i.e., when Clarke and Keats read the folio for the first time]. The actual composition must have taken place between five and ten o'clock on the following morning, probably on that dawn walk from Clerkenwell to the Poultry. All reference to books and sources was severely limited: the sonnet had to depend on the memories and associations already existent in Keats's mind. The MS. of the first version . . . is written without revision except for the correction of a few scribal errors. It has the appearance, too, of being the first draft on paper. . . . (27)

"For the *first* time," Evans concludes, "Keats found himself as a poet" (28; my italics).

Such emphasis on the sonnet's firstness is in fact traditional. Indeed, the following comment by John Middleton Murry typifies pronouncements about the poem:

It [the Chapman Sonnet] is worth contemplating for many reasons: because it is one of the greatest sonnets in the English language . . . [,] because it is the first great poem that Keats wrote, because he wrote it at a very early age — in the very month that he became twenty-one — because it was to take him many months, even of his brief and pregnant poetic life, to reach such certain mastery again . . . (15)

Critics have perceived the Chapman Sonnet in terms not only of firstness, but of a firstness particularly identified with a masculine form of initiation to maturity. Murry, for one, begins the chapter on "Chapman's Homer" in his *Studies in Keats* with the militaristic (yet

ambiguously gendered) line "Great poems have an air of springing fully armed, like Minerva, from the head of Jove" (15) and claims for the sonnet a "sovereign place in English poetry" (17). Amy Lowell, for another, praises its source as "Virile old Chapman" in her biography of Keats (1: 178) and images the sonnet as a nemesis wind, with Keats's true masculine nature triumphing over the preciousness and triviality, the "false beauty" of Hunt's poetic influence:

this honest, swaggering, extraordinarily masculine kind of poetry must have been like a great puff of wind swishing across a room full of trifling knick-knacks, knocking them off the tables, twisting them about, swirling the pictures from the walls, and filling the stagnant, scented air with a rush of inconsequence. Something was needed to tip *Rimini* off the table of Keats's mind — *Rimini*, and the false beauty it stood for. (1: 178)<sup>3</sup>

And finally, we can enter into exhibit Walter Jackson Bate's comment: that while "[t]he virile, penetrating idiom of this poetry [i.e., "Chapman's Homer"] was not completely new to [Keats]," "[t]he masculine strength of this language was in another world" — i.e., in total contrast to his earlier phase of poetry inspired by Spenser in his sensuous aspect (*John Keats* 85).

Douglas Bush, despite his awareness of certain of Keats's complexities, toes a similar line. This is clear from his backhanded praise for Keats's empathic quality: "Keats has, for one thing, a genius for entering into and becoming and recreating in words an object or sensation. That capacity may not be the greatest of poetic gifts but it is a rare one . . ." (*Selected Poems* xvi). Bush prefers to stress the "hard" Keats even at his most synæsthetic: "Even when he is hovering in or near a dream-world, his natural magic is never misty but is marked by clarity of line and more or less tactile solidity . . ." (xvi). He remarks that "[t]he masculine and classic style of the sonnet on Chapman was not recaptured until Keats wrote *Hyperion* ("Keats" 17), and we are not surprised that while he admires Keats in his *Endymion* mode as "luscious, half feminine, and



often beautiful" (18), Bush prefers *Hyperion* for its "monumental grandeur" (17) and regards the epic poems *Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion* as "the culmination of Keats's poetic progress" (31).

Such declarations of masculinity, identified with poetic progress, are not wholly inappropriate to a sonnet which casts itself as something of a male rite of passage in its concern with firstness. By the same token, however, they smack of protesting too much. One of the subconscious ulterior motives for critics' extending the Chapman Sonnet's metaphors is, I would argue, to enforce, (self?) reassuringly, the idea — and image — of Keats as comfortably continuing in the patriarchal mould. This is not surprising, given the "anxiety of gender" that Keats's poetry generates (as Wolfson's broader historical survey demonstrates). Yet — other than its obvious literary merits and the fact that, in terms of its masculinist pose, it is the exception that proves the rule — why should *this* sonnet in particular, which seems to reflect Keats at his most unequivocally masculine, inspire such insistent declarations of masculinity in its praise? The answer, I shall maintain, has to do with the poem's ambiguity about gender: despite appearances of being authored by a persona who is the ideal patriarchal son — indeed, providing its own historical self-justification, as it were, to that end — the sonnet shows in its very insistence on its masculine credentials a very ambivalent attitude towards that model. I will further argue, by means of a different psychological-deconstructive reading, that the same sources critics have first posited for the Chapman Sonnet and then enlisted in the service of a masculinist reading of the poem can be used as well to prove the contrary, especially once one recognizes that these critics have themselves suppressed interpretations of that evidence contradictory to their own.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Chapman's Homer" is perhaps the most supremely confident of Keats's poems, and it is no coincidence that its confidence is expressed in terms of masculine prowess and imperialist expansionism. It is as if Keats, to summon up such confidence, had to cast the poem in this extreme imperialist mode — implicitly making a connection between imperialist greed and poetic ambition in the process.

Every biographer and editor of Keats's poetry draws attention to his confusion between Balboa, the "discoverer" of the Pacific Ocean, and Cortez who first sights Mexico City. All of them likewise suggest that this confusion is a mere "accident" (Lowell 1: 181); an innocuous "historical slip" (Ward 75); "a slip of the memory" since Cortez "is much more prominent in Robertson than Balboa" (Bush, *Selected Poems* 309), the understandable result of converging associations in Keats's mind of various texts; or a deliberate substitution of names "for the sake of euphemy" (Evans 45). I would argue, however, that the confusion is not exactly accidental; that it is more on the order of a complex Freudian slip that reveals Keats's discomfort with the entire imperialist patriarchal enterprise that his sonnet ostensibly celebrates.

This implicit transmutation of imperialist greed for gold into ambition for literary "gold" perhaps becomes clearer if one examines some of the putative sources for the sonnet. With regard to the sonnet's "realms of gold" metaphor, these, according to Claude Lee Finney, include not only Greek mythology but William Robertson's *History of America* (in its 1803 ed.).

Robertson [Finney writes] described the "western islands," or West Indies, which Columbus discovered. He said that a greed to discover gold was the motive of every discovery which the Spaniards made in America. He said that Balboa was induced to cross the Isthmus of Darien [Panama] and discover the Pacific Ocean by stories which the Indians told him of Peru, a vast and opulent country, in which gold was so common that the meanest utensils were made of it. And he described Peru, which Pizarro discovered and conquered, as a veritable realm of gold.... (123)

Robertson, however, is not Keats's only possible source. There is also another, mentioned in the Forman (87) and Allott (60) editions of Keats's poetry, but only in those (at least so far as I am aware). Furthermore, from the standpoint of this other conceivable source, the conflation of Balboa and Cortez makes complete sense . . . on the level of denial and subtextual resistance as they operate in the Chapman Sonnet. Indeed, the source in question serves for making a strong case for a deconstructive explanation of why Keats confounds the two explorers.

The work I am referring to is the dedicatory poem that John Evelyn wrote for the Thomas Creech translation (1682) of Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*. Since Evelyn's poem can hardly be called a canonical text (the only quotation of it I could find — and that only of a small part of the text — was in Allott's edition of Keats's poetry, and she does not give any bibliographical data about it), I shall begin my consideration of "To Mr. Creech / On His Accurate Version of Lucretius" as it relates to "Chapman's Homer" by quoting the Evelyn in full in its original version (whose lines I have numbered to facilitate future reference):

Tis true, Perswaded that there was rich Ore,	
I boldly Launch'd, and would new Worlds explore:	
Deep Mines I saw, and hidden Wealth to lie	
In Rocky Entrails, and in Sierras high:	
I saw a fruitful Soil by none yet trod,	5
Reserv'd for Hero's, or some <i>Demi-God</i>	
And urg'd my fortune on	
'Till rugged billows, and a dang'rous Coast	
My vent'rous Bark, and rash Attempt had Cros't;	
When Landing, un-known Paths, and hard access,	10
Made Me Despond of Pre-conceiv'd success,	
I turn'd my Prow, and the Disco'very made,	
But was too weak, too Poor my self to Trade,	
Much less to make a Conquest and Subdue,	
That glorious Enterprise was left for You:	15
<i>Columbus</i> thus, only discover'd Land,	
But it was Won by Great Corteze's hand:	
As with rich Spoils of goodly Kingdoms fraught,	



"Chapman's Homer." In particular, we might expect the notion Evelyn couches in terms of the inferior outsider — of poetic ambition and fear of failure — to have struck a chord with the young Keats, who because of his lower-class origins was himself something of a class outsider to the world of letters (and, as we have seen, was made a vulnerable target of criticism because of it). Yet, curiously enough, the self-deprecation in Evelyn's tribute to Creech ("But was too Weak, too Poor my self to trade"; "hard access, / Made me Despond; of Pre-conceiv'd success") is entirely absent from the supremely confident Chapman Sonnet.

Superimposing Evelyn's poem onto Keats's, one is made more sharply aware than one might otherwise be of certain elements of anxiety and doubt which Keats may have been suppressing. Indeed, it can be said that Evelyn's poem throws into relief such elements as they survive — but only obliquely — in the Chapman Sonnet. The latter, by its emphasis on discovery rather than on conquest, tones down considerably the overt military meanings of "the Discovery made," the ability "to make a Conquest and Subdue," and "just Title," and thus gives them far subtler expression than is to be found in the Evelyn. By the same token, however, Keats has also appropriated only the positive aspects of the Evelyn. While retaining central metaphors remarkably similar to his predecessor's, he suppresses any overt reference to the possibility of failure.

In contrast, the Evelyn poem not only calls up the spectre of the anxiety of influence; it also, conveniently, provides for its exorcism. It invokes the failed poet ("too weak, too Poor myself to Trade," etc.) only to purge any resulting anxiety by affecting the role of sardonic self-disparagement (the better to flatter and aggrandize Creech's achievement). But it also removes the anxiety it raises in another way: by embodying the cure for it in none other than the figure of Cortez. Cortez' usurping Columbus's original discovery is, in Evelyn, the metaphor for Creech's translation trumping the work of the

"unknown" originator on which it is based — a metaphoric connection which confers legitimacy (at once political and literary) on the entire blatantly exploitative Enterprise. By invoking Cortez (and not Balboa), Keats's work retains the cure but conveniently obscures the originating disease.

The Evelyn poem also serves to make clear the implicit connection in Keats's sonnet between imperialist exploitation and translation: their erasure of the origin of things that they both exploit. Evelyn makes gross satirical play of the fact that historical/literary meaning is not invested in the original or originating Columbus/Lucretius (in regard to which it is worth remembering that even Columbus and Lucretius were not "original": the one displaced the aboriginal peoples, the other Epicurus) —i.e., that such meaning has been adapted and changed by its appropriator, Cortez/Creech, who (thereby) makes it His Own. The anxiety of influence that Evelyn thus overtly takes on, the Chapman Sonnet deals with as well, but does so covertly. Detectable behind its supreme confidence is a fear on Keats's part of not making it into the patriarchal pantheon, a fear that his poems are not original but only "translations" of his poetic forefathers — an understanding of the sonnet reinforced by the possibility that Keats, in omitting from his text any original trace for the Cortez "slip," may be denying an ancestral relation of Evelyn's text to his own.

The literal subject of Keats's poem is, after all, *Chapman's Homer*, a translation of an original poem. That "reading," moreover, immediately opens on the prospect of a further remove from Homer — i.e., from "originality" — inasmuch as the sonnet is, as it were, Keats's Chapman's Homer. This chain of indebtedness gives a different interpretative twist to "bards in fealty to Apollo hold," especially in view of the strong possibility of Keats's own (unacknowledged) indebtedness to the text submerged beneath his sonnet, Evelyn's, which is itself presented as a mock-humble tribute

to a worthier translator of a "first" poet and which, mindful of the sense of inferiority engendered in — and by — the poet who merely translates, half-playfully celebrates the literary oneupmanship of translators at the expense of the originators they exploit. Evelyn definitely hints at all of this in the lines (16-22, as quoted above) which, before they award Creech "the Crown," remind him of the poet's indebtedness to his translator. At the same time, there is a certain saving grace to Lucretius' being "unknown [t]o th[e] English world" since Creech can in consequence be viewed simultaneously as both ruthless exploiter and benevolent rescuer of the Latin poet's reputation.

\* \* \* \* \*

If "Chapman's Homer" likewise equates translation with imperialist hegemony, it treats the theme with great ironic subtlety and self-questioning. Keats's sonnet does not merely overcompensate for an anxiety of influence; it also radically, if only implicitly, criticizes the patriarchal imperialist equation of seeing with transparent understanding of meaning. Keats may have suppressed the more obvious doubts of the poem, yet the subject matter itself is self-contradictory and thereby calls into question the entire issue of interpretation. The very title of the poem calls attention to the idea of "first looking" — i.e., seeing something for the first time — yet at the same time denies us that possibility. For all its metaphors of first discovery, in other words, the poem defers the discovery of any origin of meaning; for all its visual imagery, it denies transparency.

Martin Aske places Keat's poem in a historical context which already takes Homer for granted as the original genius, "the supreme poet of beginnings, embodying the virtue of 'priority'" (44):

. . . Chapman himself, in his "Preface to the Reader," claimed that "of all books extant in all kinds, Homer is the first and best. No one . . . before him . . . was there any whom he imitated: nor after him, any that could imitate him." When read in the

light of this tradition, Keats's sonnet cannot be taken simply as a record of a new and liberating experience. Silently proclaiming its own privileged anteriority, the name "Homer" — immediately displaced and screened by 'Chapman' — must necessarily reaffirm the modern poet's belatedness. (45)

Aske further points out that as the poem moves from a sense of perceiving things for the first time, of fresh experience and first discovery, toward consciousness of its belatedness, it "begins to deconstruct itself" (42):

Like Cortez staring ("with eagle eyes") at the Pacific, the poet gazes back across the wide expanse of history to the highest monument of ancient Greece, and yet his vision cannot avoid being mediated and refracted through Chapman. Both literally and metaphorically, the Elizabethan poet must translate Homer to Keats. And in the process something is lost. . . . (That Chapman speaks out '*loud and bold*' might also give rise to the profoundly ironic possibility that the voice of the translator could even, indeed, erase — drown — the original voice.) (43)

That the poem begins loudly and boldly and ends in silence is also an area of enquiry in Anthony John Harding's essay, "Speech, Silence, and the Self-Doubting Interpreter in Keats's Poetry." He makes the point that the epiphanous silence constitutes part of the ironic response to the sonnet's claim to "firstness": "Like the poet, the reader may interrogate Chapman's text, but will do so, it seems, in the same spirit as Cortez interrogates the vast prospect before him, in silent wonder. The poem accepts its own inevitable secondariness, having graciously and devoutly yielded the privilege of Apollonian speech to the double precursor, Homer-Chapman" (90).

While my own position is similar to both Aske's and Harding's with respect to the anxiety of influence the sonnet bespeaks, I would wish to stress, or at least incorporate, the gender component missing from their analyses. Neither of them raises the question of gender *vis-à-vis* the speaking subject inherent in such phrases as "loud and bold" versus "silent." "Silent" may indeed express awe or humility towards the "vast prospect" of a prior tradition, but the sense of phallic mastery conveyed by Cortez on the mountain peak ambiguates any notion of "graciously and devoutly" submitting.



Here it is pertinent to consider what Marlon B. Ross has to say in "Romantic Quest and Conquest: Troping Masculine Power in the Crisis of Poetic Identity." Elaborating on the two classic studies, Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* and Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert's feminist revaluation of Bloom in *The Mad Woman in the Attic*, Ross analyzes how the Romantic "masculine metaphors of power" (29), particularly in Wordsworth's poetry, reinvent the poet's identity as quester and conqueror. Ross holds that the "myth of masculine self-possession" was a reaction to the male poet's perception of his "impending change in socio-economic status" (28), largely due to such forces as the increasing patronage of women readers controlling the literary market — this while female writers were still excluded from the canon — and the rising competition for authority that the poet was getting from the scientist and the capitalist-industrialist as the "new strong man" (29-32). Taking as his text Wordsworth's image of transcendence above time or space as embodied in the Hannibal-among-the-Alps passage in the "Preface to *The Lyrical Ballads*," Ross discourses on imagination as a shaping power that "must be defined through distinctions of gender" (49): "The condition of Hannibal among the Alps is the condition of the man who single-handedly conquers the world, makes a road for others to follow, *but makes them lesser men in following* and makes other and greater roads more difficult to create. It is the poet as man of action, as masculine quester, as ruler of visionary empires" (41; my italics).

This (by that time) well-established Romantic image is one which Keats seems to be problematizing in the Chapman Sonnet. Certainly — to apply Ross's contention about the entire second generation of Romantic poets — he would have been more aware of such masculine metaphors and their import than his Romantic predecessors (which does not mean that he, any more than they, could escape them altogether).

That consciousness ultimately bears on what the Chapman Sonnet does with visibility. Various critics have noted that, for all its emphasis on the apparently and transparently visual, the poem calls into doubt the equation of seeing with unmediated interpretation. What has been overlooked, though, is the extent to which the sonnet, in its acknowledgment of difference, of the otherness of class and gender, critiques the dominant patriarchal ideology. Equally important is the direct connection between these elements of otherness and those aspects of the poem concerned with doubt and unknowability, uncertainties that the poem in its surface meaning attempts to suppress.

This erasure of uncertainty is a literal one. We can establish that to be the case thanks to Charles Cowden Clarke's memorandum of the original manuscript, the extant manuscript believed to be the surviving fair copy, and Keats's comments recalled by Clarke. By considering these together, we can retrace and recover what Keats deleted from the Chapman Sonnet as published. Moreover, the interpretation these deletions encourage tallies exactly with what is suggested by both their corresponding substitutes and even the apparently straightforward justifications Keats provides for his revisions.

The story they tell is the opposite of the sonnet's overt message about sovereign (in)sight. In the earliest surviving manuscript, Keats had made a single — and rather extraordinarily telling — substitution: he replaced his original "low-brow'd" with "deep-brow'd Homer." This substitution, which is the only one Keats makes in his fair copy, every editor of Keats's poetry mentions; but neither they nor any critic offers an analysis of it. This is all the more surprising given the reams of commentary on various other emendations of the poem as well as on its biographical context, its sources and their psychological associations, and so forth.

I would argue that the deletion of "low" is well worth attending to as a(nother) highly significant Freudian slip. It alerts us to the deletion of otherness in a poem so seductively taken with the monolithic patriarchal model of masculine conquest and imperialism.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the excision of "low" as a word potentially redolent with (self) depreciation is connected to Keats's subsequent alterations. According to Clarke, line 7, for example, originally read: "Yet could I never tell what men could mean" (130). Keats (may have) subsequently revised this slightly to read: "Yet could I never judge what men could mean."<sup>6</sup> What he finally came up with — supposedly prompted by Hunt's criticism that "mean" does not rhyme with "demesne"<sup>7</sup> — was "Yet did I never breathe its pure serene," phrasing from which any self-questioning has been totally effaced.

Putting aside for the moment the various prosodic justifications for these substitutions and looking at them from a psychological and socio-political perspective, we can see the revisions of this one line alone as a significant evolution. "I cannot tell" discloses a double anxiety in the writer, especially the young, as-yet-unestablished writer: he can neither confidently understand nor articulate meaning. But it also smacks of denial in the psychological sense (according to which, "I cannot tell" translates into "I cannot reveal"). In this respect, the choice of "tell" is particularly telling. Even as it echoes "what I been told," it problematizes that earlier assertion, especially since the very obvious weakness of the line in which the "tell" appears reinforces Keats's actual admission of weakness and hesitancy. Moreover, the plainness of the line, its almost plebeian straightforwardness, is strangely out of keeping with the highly symbolic, metaphoric nature of the rest of the sonnet. There is almost something poignant in its very confessional nakedness and simplicity. In the phrase "what men [or, in another draft, "Men"] mean," the noun may have either a generic sense (as a synonym for

"people") or be gender-inflected (so as to apply to men specifically, but not women).

What is noteworthy — especially by comparison — about the substitute line is that Keats has not merely replaced his original with something poetically stronger, but extinguished all doubt about meaning and interpretation in exchange for its diametrical opposite: absolute certainty and confidence: the distrustful, future-oriented "never could" becomes the certain, past-accomplished "never did"; its absoluteness stressed by the purity, clarity, and emotional calm of "pure serene." It may also be observed that "kingdoms" and "in fealty," along with the would-be rhyme-word "demesne" (which, curiously enough in light of Hunt's criticism, at best makes for a slant-rhyme), impart to "serene" associations with royalty, hence evoking the Romantic quest to be numbered among the poet-kings. At the same time, Keats by such revisions has extinguished doubt and replaced it with an image of poetic originality/discovery established by the word "breathe" — that is, as a literal Romantic inspiration, an epiphanous breathing in.

A similar substitution of certainty for doubt occurs in line 11, where "eagle eyes" replaces "wond'ring eyes." Here it is worth taking note of the explanation Keats gave for this change in this epithet describing Cortez. He altered the wording, he says (according to Clarke's *Recollections of Writers*), because the line was "bald, and too simply wondering" (130). The choice of words (whether they be Keats's verbatim or Clarke's) is striking since "bald" suggests naked exposure and "wondering" is a repetition of the very word that was deleted in the sonnet. It thus sounds as if Keats were straining to disavow all trace of "wondering" or doubt (in a poem that wonders, or wanders, on a voyage of imaginative exploration and discovery) and overdetermining that denial by emphasizing the majestically masculine transcendence connoted by the term which usurps "wond'ring": "eagle."

Such revisions do not represent the editing of a poem in a mere attempt to make it more unified, more "coherent" in the usual poetic sense. Rather the poem's insistence on this unity reflects on a deeper level an anxiety to obliterate any dissonant element that threatens to subvert that unity. The poem's latent inconsistencies and suppressions, then, betray the anxiety which Keats endeavoured to cover up by means of his deletions and substitutions.

No doubt the most problematical moment in the poem — the moment disruptive of the unity it would achieve, at least on its surface — is generated by the "wild surmise" that Keats introjects to describe the state of mind of the ordinary troops, but not of their great leader. Without exception, critics have interpreted "wild surmise" neutrally: as merely echoing Robertson's description of the excitement of Balboa's men, their wild hope that their leader has indeed discovered the New World, and/or as reflecting Keats's own "sudden, glorious, unmitigated surprise" upon discovering Chapman's Homer (Woodring, "On Looking into Keats's Voyagers" 35). Yet even leaving aside the fact that such notions, especially of the latter sort, ultimately rely on Keats's very selective memory, we may notice that the linkage of "surmise" to the rank and file is no mere coincidence: that the connection of a word signifying not only "wonder" (in the sense of awe or surprise) but also supposition or conjecture (made on slight evidence) to representatives of the otherness of class has no small significance in relation to Keatsian anxiety. So, too, it is highly significant, particularly in a poem where the visual is an important motif (as we instantly learn from its title, which likewise associates "seeing" with "reading" or interpreting), that as soon as we are given the imperious, detached gaze of Cortez towards the Pacific, we are informed that his followers "loo[k] at *each other* with a wild surmise" (my italics) which literally interrupts (with a punctuational dash) the imperial confidence of the poem.

One can, of course, read this interruptive line as merely a device for heightening suspense and reinforcing the status quo; that is, as the repetition of the gaze motif, this time by "all his men," in a way that would appear to echo and thus support Cortez's point of view. I would argue, however, that these two sets of gazes, the transcendent and detached one of Cortez and that nonhierarchical, empathic one of his men, simultaneously and equally suggest opposed meanings, especially in connection with the troubling phrase "wild surmise." I would also point out that the line in which "wild surmise" appears constitutes itself as a little "wild" or marginalized space,<sup>8</sup> one that is at once enclosed by and detached from the main body of the poem, both visually by being dramatically set off by dashes (at least in the text as first published in 1817) and conceptually in that its meaningful content problematizes the poem's seeming confidence in the interpretability of the world (because that world is visible and transparent). Indeed, the line forms its own little western isle of doubt which the reader's own eye has to navigate around — and negotiate — before reaching the sonnet's supreme peak of isolated and transcendent overview.

At this point it would be useful to turn to another source for the sonnet. Clarke informs us that Keats was particularly excited by a passage in *The Iliad* that Clarke called to his attention, and that he was especially thrilled by the line which Clarke italicizes in the account of the event in his *Recollections*:

One scene I could not fail to introduce to him — the shipwreck of Ulysses, in the fifth book of the "Odysseis," and I had the reward of one of his delighted stares, upon reading the following lines:—

Then forth he came, his both knees falt'ring, both  
His strong hands hanging down, and all with froth  
His cheeks and nostrils flowing, voice and breath  
Spent to all use, and down he sank to death.  
*The sea had soak'd his heart through; all his veins*  
His toils had rack'd t'a labouring woman's pains.  
Dead-weary was he. (130)

This account serves to emphasize (in the typographical sense first of all) something that critics have not taken cognizance of in identifying the nautical voyage imagery that "Chapman's Homer" has in common with the Chapman translation which made such an impression on Keats just before he wrote his sonnet. What it underscores — a point that the critics have not made — concerns an obvious difference: that whereas Keats's sonnet is about successful travel and discovery, the passage which reportedly enthralled him the most and provided the main impetus for him to write his poem some few hours later is about failure.

Going by the various biographical accounts which attempt to trace the sonnet's genesis and its labyrinthine visions and revisions, one might say that Keats's "delighted stare" at the literary ocean becomes transformed into Cortez's stare at the Pacific Ocean (though it may instead or additionally be the case that Clarke's memory of the event was retrospectively influenced by — and hence contributed to — the legendary story that surrounds the poem's inception). In any case, Keats's selective memory-association is revealing in view of the fact that the relation of the sonnet's heroic figure to the ocean is exactly the opposite of the Odyssean hero's in the work which "Chapman's Homer" models itself on. Nor is it simply the case that "The sea had soaked his heart through" stands in marked contrast to Cortez's magnificent detachment *above* the ocean. It is also true that, in contrast to Cortez's masterly control in the Keats, Chapman's description of Ulysses's failing struggle is simultaneously connected both to a submergence into — indeed *with* — the ocean and also, explicitly, to an almost primal reference to femininity, to a "labouring woman's pains."<sup>9</sup>

Keats's poem appears to be dominated by the masculine gaze and the equation of vision with discovery/knowledge. That impression, however, does not entirely hold once we begin examining closely the

moments of revelation, or realization, in the poem. Consider, for instance, the lines:

Yet did I never breathe its pure serene  
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold.

The speaker has "seen" many kingdoms; but his awakening, according to the lines just quoted, comes not in active doing but in passive receiving. Similarly, the passive mode of "When a new planet swims into his ken" opposes the active control of the previous line's "watcher of the skies." "Swims," moreover, intimates a dissolution of the (masculine) self, not only by evoking the traditional feminine associations of water, but also in recalling Keats's idiosyncratic connection of swimming with the moon and the female.

That connection is evident from "I stood *tip-toe* upon a *little* hill" (my italics are meant to bring attention to the title's effeminate inversion of Cortez on the high mountain top). In that loosely-structured lyrical poem (an early version of *Endymion* — indeed, Keats originally referred to it by the latter name — written sometime in the same year as the Chapman Sonnet), there appears the same configuration as in "Chapman's Homer" of planetary movement and swimming, but here the planet is identified with the moon-goddess, Cynthia:

the moon lifting her silver rim  
Above a cloud, and with a gradual swim  
Coming into the blue with all her light. (113-115)

So, too, Endymion immerses himself in the ocean under Cynthia's guidance in Book 3 of the Keats poem bearing his name — an incident which Mario L. D'Avanzo, in *Keats's Metaphors for the Poetic Imagination*, interprets as being a metaphor for the release into poetic creativity, with the ocean having archetypal suggestions of the womb as the source not only of all creation but of cognition. "Swimming, then," he writes, "is an act of imagination by which the poet can know one of Cynthia's realms" (90).



In Keats's early poetry, Cynthia is as important and oft occurring a deity as Apollo. And while the presiding genius of "Chapman's Homer" is Apollo, in relation to whom the speaker of the poem is yet another "bard in fealty," Cynthia remains, as it were, another — albeit repressed — presence. Even more significantly, it is the Cynthia element of the poem, the presence of female otherness, that is connected with doubt and the possibility of misinterpretation (but also, perhaps paradoxically, with discovery in so far as the sonnet associates passive creative receptivity with the female).

It may be a measure of how disturbing these oblique references to the sensuous feminine imagery are in a sonnet supposedly free of such contaminants that Murry imposes upon its subtle interplay of passive and active imagery a hierarchy of intellect over emotion. This notion he once again expresses in military vocabulary, here of a particularly ruthless kind: "[Keats's] two crowning sense-discoveries were those of the moon and the sea, and those are instantly *pressed into the service* of his thought: the images of the moon and the ocean *can serve at will* to embody the objects of his thought" (32; my italics). Murry goes on to point out that the use Keats makes of the ocean in *Sleep and Poetry* is reminiscent of the Chapman Sonnet's imagery. But so intent is Murry on pursuing the "deep" and "*organic*" unity of the sonnet (18) that he remains entirely oblivious to the intense self-doubts the poem raises in that connection, particularly in these lines:

Stay! an inward frown  
Of conscience bids me be more calm awhile.  
An ocean dim, sprinkled with many an isle,  
Spreads awfully before me. How much toil!  
How many days! what desperate turmoil!  
Ere I can have explored its widenesses.  
Ah, what a task! upon my bended knees.  
I could unsay those — no, impossible!  
Impossible! (304-12)

This passage, as Evans (too) notes, shares many of the elements found in "Chapman's Homer" but lacks that earlier poem's unity and economy of expression:

Everything within this passage had been in his mind on that evening a few weeks before when the Chapman poem had been composed: the thought of an ocean — the many isles — friendship — the sonnet certain to be finished by the morning — the precious book — a borrowed book — and the recognition of a new experience. Even the anxiety for the rhymes, seen in the scrawls in the margin of the first draft, is recollected. There has disappeared only the passionate energy which gave a poetic identity and strength to the sonnet itself. This passage from *Sleep and Poetry* confirms Leigh Hunt's opinion that in the Chapman sonnet a new poet was taking possession. (Evans 30-31)

Accordingly, Evans dismisses the passage as merely evincing "a mood of undisciplined exaltation" (30) and depreciates its desperate tone as merely indicative of Keats's anxiousness over the rhymes.

What Murry and Evans thus entirely overlook is that in mood and import, this passage from *Sleep and Poetry* resembles the one in Chapman's translation of Homer that so excited Keats even more closely than does the sonnet commemorating that encounter. There the metaphor for poetic insight is the virtual opposite of Cortez's first clear sighting of the ocean: "an ocean dim." Similarly, the poet's creative "toil" recalls Ulysses' "toils [which] had rack'd t'a labouring woman's pains." So, too, the ocean's daunting "widenesses" cause the poet to despair at the possibility of exploring them, in contrast to his acquiescence toward the "one wide expanse" that he "had . . . been told" of in the "Chapman's Homer" sonnet. "Sprinkled with many an isle" likewise creates the impression of a threatening diffusion unlike anything we find in the opening of the sonnet, where the notion of variety (the "many" islands) is held in check by the subsequent line emphasizing patriarchal unity ("Which bards in *fealty to Apollo hold*"; my italics).

What produced this moment of panic (as it might be characterized) in *Sleep and Poetry*? In the lines which lead up to this moment (284-304), Keats is struggling with the tension

between a recognition of the mind's flux of ideas and a desire for a totalizing, teleological conception of poetry's aims (order underlying change as the four seasons, like the grid of the Christian cross, form a distinct pattern that underlies mutable nature). The contradiction leads to thoughts of madness, evinced by a cowardly not "speaking out what I have dared to think," quite the opposite of Chapman "speak[ing] out loud and bold." Indeed, the passage from *Sleep and Poetry* is about — and even enacts — repression and self-censorship: "I could unsay those — no, impossible!" This moment of intense anxiety is then immediately smoothed over by the recollection of the "brotherhood" (generally understood to be a reference to Hunt and his circle), "the friendly aids/ That smooth the path of honour." We can, of course, "confir[m] Hunt's opinion" — and Evans's — by choosing to see the passage in *Sleep and Poetry* as marking Keats's successful transition from the self-doubting versifier to the masterful poet of "Chapman's Homer" who succeeds in "tak[ing] possession" (like the masculinist values which that sonnet itself appears to celebrate unequivocally). Or we can read *Sleep and Poetry* otherwise: as a less guarded expression and exposure — in the very act of repression or dispossession — of those anxieties underlying, and undermining, the dominant voice of the Chapman Sonnet.

*Sleep and Poetry* is the messy, flawed, luxuriantly meandering poem that Keats spills his thoughts into after the tightly controlled "masculine" economy (in a double sense) of the Chapman Sonnet.<sup>10</sup> As Evans writes: "*Sleep and Poetry* recalled to mind the same associations as he possessed on the night of the Chapman sonnet, but he converted them there, not into a single poetic reality, but into rambling discursive lines" (47). Yet precisely because it is less controlled, *Sleep and Poetry* represents a kind of return of the repressed, recording the tensions and contradictions in Keats's mind more openly than the sonnet does.

*Sleep and Poetry* and "I stood tip-toe" both explore the process of creativity in ways that make them the precursors of *Endymion* (an early incarnation of which a friend of Keats's referred to in a letter as "Diana and Endymion"; qtd. in Allott 85). In "I stood tip-toe" Keats writes, "There was wide wand'ring for the greediest eye, / to peer about upon variety" (15-16), the sense and wording of which are reminiscent of the Chapman Sonnet's opening and its treatment of the theme of exploratory travel (and greed) for intellectual wondering. And at the end of the former, an empathic gaze of wonder is, as it were, carried over from the sonnet, except that here — significantly — the gaze is between male and female:

Young men and maidens at each other gazed  
With hands held back, and motionless, amazed  
To see the brightness in each other's eyes  
And so they stood, filled with a sweet surprise. ("I stood" 231-34)

Even in such a light passage as this, full of sweetness and light, there is a note of tension — characteristic of Keats — in that their hands are "held back."<sup>11</sup> None the less, the mood here, in a passage relatively free from gender restraint, is predominantly one of unalloyed "sweet surprise" rather than a "wild surmise." It thus looks ahead to much of Keats's subsequent poetry, which questions hierarchical structure or a "single poetic reality"<sup>12</sup> more insistently than "Chapman's Homer" or the ur-*Endymion* poems do.

In contrast to the ur-*Endymion* poems, "Chapman's Homer" begins with a notion of travel and diversity ("Much," "many," "Round many") which is subsequently restrained, and restrained by a single monolithic patriarchal reality, evoked implicitly by the poem's subject matter and wording (especially by "fealty" and "one wide expanse"). Yet the image of a single wide expanse, echoed obliquely in "deep-brow'd Homer," represents a unity which (as we have seen) is highly problematic not only in Keats's original lines, but also in the "wild surmise" that vestigially preserves them, as it were.

The ending of the poem, as it repeats the notion of "one wide expanse" in its image of the Pacific Ocean, is also problematical. Keats is using the ocean as an image of limitless discovery: to the eye, even elevated to a mountain top, the ocean appears infinite. But this is also a self-contradictory idea in so far as the poem equates "looking" (at) with "knowing" the ocean. The ocean, after all, is unlike a tract of land (specifically the "western islands" which the eye circumscribes) in a certain respect which dissociates it from the unity of the "one wide expanse" of whose existence the poet "oft" "has been told": namely, in respect to the very limitlessness, shapelessness, and mutability which make the ocean ultimately unknowable. So, too, the ocean by its very physical nature calls into question the solidity of the object, or "real," world. If the ocean is a symbol of potential beginnings,<sup>13</sup> it is also something that cannot be possessed, for all the critics' claims about the sonnet's "taking possession."

Keats, then, leaves Cortez (and himself) on a peak overlooking an ocean which by its unknowability and otherness problematizes the phallic mastery of knowledge which that concluding view is (or may be) supposed to image. Furthermore, the truth here is not simply literal; it is also susceptible to metaphoric extension. It points, that is, to the poem's surface meaning of patriarchal unity and the denial of otherness — its apparent "single poetic reality," to use Evans's phrase — as being constantly undermined by the unstable and fluid.

Of course, it should not be surprising that the young Keats, intent as he was upon conforming to and being accepted by the male literary establishment, would devote so much of the energy of the poem to the task of denying otherness and bolstering the patriarchal-imperialist model. And given the intractability of that enterprise for a mind so differently constituted from the upper-class norm as Keats's was, could it be that one of the attractions of using Darien as a final image had to do with Robertson's description

of it as "a barrier of solidity sufficient to resist the impulse of two opposite oceans" (qtd in Evans, 44)? Could it be, in other words, that Darien comes out of a — or rather, yet another — subconscious memory which would endue even this symbol of conformity to the patriarchal vision with at least a hint of Keatsian resistance to that same model?

#### NOTES

1. "It is generally stated that the meeting with Hunt took place before Keats wrote the sonnet. Hunt himself, however, implies that the sonnet was among a "sheaf" of poems — the fair copies Keats mentions on October 9th — handed to him by Keats" (Gittings 83, n. 3).

2. Whatever ambivalence Keats may have felt towards Hunt (about "Chapman's Homer" in particular) he did not express. Even before their meeting, Keats had adopted many of Hunt's unconventional verbal and prosodic idiosyncracies through his reading of him (Bate, *Stylistic* 9-19). We can be certain, however, that though Hunt's influence was undoubtedly important to his growth as a poet, Keats eventually became more independent in his judgment and critical of his mentor's tastes. In a letter of January 23, 1818, he complains about Hunt's (and Shelley's) being "much disposed to dissect and anatomize, any trip or slip I may have made" (Letters 1: 214; cited in Zillman 48). In another letter written the same day wherein Keats comments on his "Lines on Seeing a Lock of Milton's Hair," he remarks with irritation: "This I did at Hunt's [house] at his request [i.e., Hunt had asked Keats to extemporize on the same subject as he had in a poem of his own] — perhaps I should have done something better alone and at home" (Letters 1: 212).

Keats was conscious of, and ambivalent about, Hunt's stylistic influence on his writing of *Endymion* (Bate *Stylistic* 15): "You see Bailey how independant [*sic*] my writing has been — Hunts [*sic*]

dissuasion [presumably from Keats's writing a long poem] was of no avail. . . . [A]fter all I shall have the Reputation of Hunt's *elevé* [*sic*] — His corrections and amputations will by the knowing ones be trased [*sic*] in the Poem — This is to be sure the vexation of a day" (Letters 1: 170). And after *Endymion*, he tried to emancipate himself from Hunt's influence altogether (Bate *Stylistic* 29-30). Characteristically, his way of rejecting a strong influence is by projecting his own anxieties, invoking "egoism" and "nothingness," the terms that he used to castigate Wordsworth (see above, p. 11-12):

[Hunt] is certainly a pleasant fellow in the main when you are with him — but in reality [*sic*] he is vain, egotistical and disgusting in matters of taste and in morals — He understands many a beautiful thing; but then, instead of giving other minds credit for the same degree of perception as he himself possesses — he begins an explanation in such a curious manner that our taste and self-love is offended continually. Hunt does one harm by making fine things petty and beautiful things hateful . . . many a glorious thing when associated with him becomes [*sic*] a nothing — This distorts one's mind . . . perplexes one in the standard of Beauty. . . . (Letters 2: 11)

According to Zillman, Keats's ideas and practices on the sonnet derive primarily from Hunt, who at a time when standards for the sonnet form were not yet set, held firm principles on the subject and formulated critical theory concerning the Petrarchan type, then the predominant sonnet form (Wordsworth wrote only Italian sonnets). Hunt's overriding principle for those "conditions requisite to a perfect sonnet" was to insist on the "legitimate sonnet after the proper Italian fashion" and on its unity — i.e., that it "confine itself to one leading idea, thought, or feeling" (qtd. in Zillman, 51).

Keats initially conformed to this prescription but may have been dissatisfied with its restrictive "unifying" structure (Zillman 30). As Hunt's influence on him began to wane, he turned to the Shakespearean type of sonnet (considered "unartistical" by Hunt [qtd. in Zillman, 71]), which allowed for a greater naturalness of emotional expression and intensity. Keats had written about

Shakespeare's sonnets, "they seem to be full of fine things said unintentionally — in the intensity of working out conceits" (*Letters* 1: 188). The word "conceit" here suggests that Keats thought the Shakespearean model would allow him greater flexibility to employ the oxymorons he is so fond of. In this connection, we might also remember that Hunt criticized Keats for his love of contraries. (See n. 7 below and also chapter 3, n. 1.)

3. This extraordinarily aggressive yet domestic spring-cleaning wind of (gender) change may express as much about Lowell's own ambivalent position as a female poet as it does about Keats's.

4. See *TLS*, Jan. 25, 1936, p. 75, not only for Wagenblass's discussion of the resemblances between Evelyn's poem and Keats's "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" (along with *The Fall of Hyperion*), but also for his persuasive argument with regard to the circumstantial evidence that Keats might have read this much-reprinted edition of Creech's Lucretius.

5. I am not suggesting here that Keats was referring to "low-brow'd," in its present meaning. In fact the word did not become current until the middle of the nineteenth century, when it denoted persons with a low brow, as in a "coarse, lowbrowed fellow" (according to the *OED*, which cites this usage in a text from 1855) — presumably with connotations anticipating its modern sense, coined in America around 1905-10: pertaining to an uneducated person. It is not inconceivable, however, that Keats, with his special fondness for creating compound words, could have intended his (subsequently deleted) "low-brow'd" to be a kind of neologism comprising its modern meaning.

In any case, associations of class inferiority inevitably attach themselves to "low" (as, for instance, in "low-bred" or "low-born"); and this is clearly the case with the Chapman Sonnet and its revisions, especially in view of Keats's substitute-word "deep-brow'd," connoting as it does superior intelligence, power and



authority. Compare "To Apollo," which Keats seems to have written to apologize for an embarrassing incident (in high spirits, he and Hunt had playfully put on laurel wreaths, but he neglected to remove his when visitors, apparently female, arrived on the scene):

When like a blank idiot I put on thy wreath,  
 .....

Or was I a worm, too low-creeping [originally, "-crawling"] for death  
 O Delphic Apollo!

Clearly this is expressive of an inferiority complex on Keats's part — and, in context, of considerable social unease as well. Yet consistent with Keats's ambivalence, the poem is also one of his rare early experiments in lyrical poetry (see Allott 110-11). We also have Hunt's impression, recorded in his *Autobiography*, that "Keats, being a little too sensitive on the score of his origin, felt inclined to see in every man of birth a sort of natural enemy" (2: 36).

6 Some biographers dismiss Clarke as misremembering the line: they hold that line 7 of the first draft probably read "judge," not "tell" (cf. Stillinger 553).

7. Zillman (55) points out that Keat changed this original line of his (composed in October 1816) only after Hunt criticized it in print. Hunt had written in his review of the first published poems: "there is one incorrect line [demesne-mean], which might easily be altered, but which shall serve in the meantime as a peace offering to the rhyming critics" (*The Examiner*, Dec. 2 1816, qtd. in Zilman, 55). In his remarks on the 1817 volume, Hunt takes Keats to task for his "tendency to notice everything too indiscriminately and without an eye to natural proportion and effect" and his "other fault . . . arises from a similar cause, that of contradicting over-zealously the fault on the other side " (see n. 2 above).

8. In this connection, it is noteworthy that "wild" seems to have a particular meaning for Keats, arising in contexts where there is a division of allegiance or identification between the dominant social order and the marginalized sphere. It is interesting, too, that the

only time that "wild surmise" resurfaces is in one of the sonnets Keats had written in praise of Hunt:

. . . I would fain  
 Catch an immortal thought to pay the debt  
 I owe to the kind poet who has set  
 Upon my ambitious head a glorious gain —  
 Two bending laurel sprigs — 'tis nearly pain  
 To be conscious of such a coronet.  
 Still time is fleeting, and no dream arises  
 Gorgeous as I would have it — only I see  
 A trampling down of what the world most prizes  
 Turbans and Crowns, and blank regality;  
 And then I run into most wild surmises  
 Of all the many glories that may be. (3-14)

The phrase recurs, then, in a poem which (as the title, "On Receiving a Laurel Crown from Leigh Hunt" suggests) seems to celebrate poetic indebtedness (again); yet a sudden shift of mood (at the point of saying "no dream arises/Gorgeous as I would have it") propels the speaker to a revolutionary sweeping away of false idols. Keats does not seem to be merely chastising himself for the materialism of debased ambition (as the disparity between "glorious gain" and "sprig," for example, indicates), but also implicating poetic ambition with patriarchal authority (this time in its monarchical expression). Here "wild surmises" clearly stands in opposition to, and criticizes, the patriarchal order as the phrase points beyond mere false modesty to a wishful fantasy of some other unattainable dream-space outside the social order.

In this connection, we might recall that La Belle Dame Sans Merci, a "gorgeous" dream-figure who is herself outside the patriarchal order, also has "wild eyes" and speaks in "language strange" (her foreign name, too, establishes her marginality) and that she leaves the poet bereft of otherworldly dreams. We might also observe that the ambivalence towards being in someone else's power expressed in "La Belle Dame" in terms of being "in thrall" (which so often in/for Keats involves both pleasure and pain)

operates as well in "Chapman's Homer" (which is equally conscious of its enthrallment, its "fealty to Apollo"), but with the difference that there it is a male figure doing the enthralling.

9. Given all the gender-anxiety that Keats provokes, it is significant that critics usually leave out these last three lines despite their zeal to quote extensively from Chapman's translation. It is also tempting to speculate on the extent to which the mention in those three lines of a labouring woman's pains may also have struck a personal note with Keats, who at the time was approaching a crisis of decision about discontinuing his medical career in favour of a literary one.

10. Beyond its apparent meaning, a host of anxieties attend the name "Chapman." There is a double anxiety of influence in that, following from the chain of indebtedness I have already referred to, Chapman is being invoked in Keats's sonnet in his role as a translator and not as a poet in his own right. The name also is a kind of latent pun. In "Nebuchadnezzar's Dream," (date unknown), a poem about a greedy political tyrant, Keats writes "Of loggerheads and chapmen." Miriam Allott informs us that in this context "chapmen" means "moneygrubbers" (290). According to the *OED*, "chapman" signified a "merchant, trader or dealer; ("Chapmanship is the vogue of the day" the *Gentleman's Magazine*, as quoted in the *OED*, proclaims in 1827). This reverberates with latent associations in a sonnet that connects an imperialism greedy for gold (and "consuming" older alien cultures to make them Its Own) with the poetic ambition for "realms of gold" (assimilating previous texts/traditions). Poetry, in other words — as Anthony John Harding reminds us and as Keats may well be saying in his play on Chapman — is now a commodity in the market-place and no longer supported by aristocratic patronage.

"Chapman" in its mercantile meaning ("chapmanable" was synonymous with "marketable"), then, contains an allusion to

capitalism that further links Keats's sonnet to the underlying ideology of capitalist-imperialism, and especially to a consequence of that ideology which Evelyn's poem draws attention to more blatantly than Keats's does: that the poet is in rivalry not only with the past but with his contemporaries as a result of his "trading" on his poetry for a niche in the marketplace.

The opening of the sonnet may reflect the fact that a chapman was also an "itinerant dealer who travel[led] about from place to place selling or buying." A "petty chapman" was a "retail dealer" in the sense a 1639 reference defines the occupation: "[p]etty chapmen buy up commodities of those that sell by whole sale; and sell them off dearer by retaile, and parcell them out." Furthermore, poetic indebtedness carries overtones of just such an economic transaction. The name also resonates with Keats's lower-class origins (in which regard it is worth recollecting Evelyn's dismissive representation of himself as a mere "tradesman").

Finally, the name can be regarded as a double masculine (chap/man). ("Chap" is both an "abbreviation of chapman" and a "customer; fellow, lad." "Todd, in 1818, said it usually designates a person of whom a contemptuous opinion is entertained"; it also "humourously applied to a female" — *OED*). Chapman thus seems to play into all of Keats's other anxieties, his multiple insecurities about male poetic identity: it holds in suspension, as it were, both the inferiority of class and gender and the superiority inherent in the generic term "man."

11. Compare the lovers in their half embrace in "Ode to Psyche."

12. In *The Imagery of Keats and Shelley*, Richard Fogle analyzes some of the differences between Keats's and Shelley's visual imagery and notes that "Shelley's vision is usually directed either up or down, while Keats looks out before him, horizontally" (37). Referring to "I stood tip-toe," Fogle remarks that Keats "looks *about* him, not *above* him, as far as the horizon." Part of our sense of Keats

as empathic as well as concrete and intense comes from his focus on the minute and particular; he "projects his vision in fancy into the details of the scene". In contrast, Shelley's gaze is towards the spatially vast, panoramic, often cosmic scale (Fogle 37-40).

13. In *The Enchafèd Flood: The Iconography of the Sea*, W.H. Auden discusses the Romantic view of the sea as a positive "symbol of potentiality" (20). A sought-after place of freedom, the sea (Auden argues) represents a reversal of values from the classical tradition, which associated the ocean with social conflict and disorder and thought a sea voyage "never voluntarily entered upon as a pleasure" (12). (Strangely enough, Auden does not cite any of Keats's poetry apropos of any of these generalizations.)

## **II. Beyond the Reality Principle**

### Chapter 3. "Real Are the Dreams...": Boundary Confusion in Keats

Art is almost always harmless and beneficent; it does not seek to be anything but an illusion. Except for a few people who are spoken of as being "possessed" by art, it makes no attempt at invading the realm of reality.

—Sigmund Freud

Keats was the most paradoxical of poets; yet his paradoxes shift and shade into one another. They are like the inscrutable figures on the urn in "Ode on Indolence":

They pass'd, like figures on a marble urn,  
When shifted round to see the other side;  
They came again; as when the urn once more  
Is shifted round, the first seen shades return;  
And they were strange to me, as may betide  
With vases, to one deep in Phidean lore. (5-10)

The imaginary figures, at first plainly "seen" (in the ode's first line), refuse to stay fixed. The flat, yet visionary figures become progressively even more phantomlike as the poem progresses ("shade" plays on the meaning of a screen or mask or ghostly transparency or nuance). Though inscribed, as it were, on an object belonging to the seemingly most simple, static, and concrete of arts, they prove to be shimmeringly elusive, simultaneously invoking and calling into doubt the polarities of art and life, surface and depth, abstract and concrete (which can also be regarded as instances of the boundaries that Keats traduces; what else I mean by *boundary confusion* will become clear in the course of this chapter devoted to the subject). The flat surface of the imaginary vase invoked here, having no distinct "other side" available to sense perception, depends upon its viewer for a complexity and resonance commensurate with the depth and activity of the intellect of that perceiver (in this case, one deep in Phidean lore). So many poems seem to need to apostrophize some single object or relic from the past to fix that restless conscious-

ness: here there are three figures, but three joined together like the three Graces (Vendler 21), circling round as if they were painted on a marble urn. Their apparent flatness, circularity, and "masque-like" (56) stasis, "muffled in so hush a masque" (12), would seem to reflect a static state of mind appropriate to the subject matter (indolence). Yet, like the chimerical identity of the chameleon poet as I discuss it in chapter one, the outward, single-dimensional "face" (32) proves a "mask" (12) for the "deep-disguised plot" (13) of the poem's complexity of language and emotion.

Helen Vendler speculates that "Indolence" (which was published posthumously) was the first of the great odes (20). She points out that the repetitive, static structure of the poem is actually full of rich variation and that many of its images are embryonic versions of the later odes (20-39). These observations are appropriate to the Ode's theme of indolence as creative potentiality.

The wonderful poetic weight the Ode puts on "betide" (9) imbues that word with ambiguity: largely by virtue of puns, which Keats was so fond of, it signifies, at one and the same time, the fixed (to "be tied" or chained to something) and the perpetually changing ("tidal"). Indeed, in those multiple senses, Keats's imagination was "betide" with vases, with the object world — both æsthetic and natural — which his poetry attempted to capture in the flux of thought and emotion arising from his contemplation of an object. As he says in a letter to Benjamin Bailey of January 23, 1818, "perhaps more goes through the human intelligence in 12 days than ever was written" (*Letters* 1: 209)

All of this perhaps accounts for why Keats generally preferred the ode over any other poetic form: because its plasticity makes it eminently suitable to moment-to-moment sensibility.<sup>1</sup> From that standpoint, the ending to "Ode on a Grecian Urn" — "Beauty is Truth, truth beauty, — that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know" — has a deliberately false ring to it. Irrespective of whether



or not these lines should be enclosed by quotation marks, they are such a chilling injunction — reminiscent of the Neoclassical "rocking horse" (186) inversions that Keats himself mocked in *Sleep and Poetry* — and at the same time are so perplexing (consider the amount of ink shed on those two vexing lines alone) that their absolute closure becomes, paradoxically, a form of openness. Their jarring rigidity is so antithetical to the "jouissance" of this entire Ode that the certainty (as fixed and "cold" as the urn itself) contradicts — indeed, is a positive affront to — the complex irony of the poem as a whole. (Irony here is to be understood in Geoffrey Hartman's sense: as "a rhetorical or structural limit that prevents the dissolution of art into positive and exploitative truth" [viii].) Like the apparent circularity and stasis of the chimerical figures of the nonexistent urn of "Indolence," contradicted by the nuanced complexity of the language and internal contradictions, the Grecian Urn "dost [indeed] tease us out of thought." As Susan Wolfson puts it:

Urn and aphorism together go round and round each serenely self-enclosed, endlessly circular, resonating with mysterious promise, but "still unravish'd" at last. The only consequence is a further mockery of the questioner: "— that is all ' Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know". . . . The irony against interpretation is as wry as Robert Frost's couplet: "We dance round in a ring and suppose, / But the Secret sits in the middle and knows." (*The Questioning Presence* 327)

As Wolfson also observes, Keats's "'Cold Pastoral' is no reconciliation but a tensed collation of opposites — a dynamic, because unresolvable, oxymoron" that was in opposition to Coleridge's "poetics of reconciliation" (325).

The urn befriends its readers the way Keats's rhyme does — by encouraging our imaginative activity in a perpetual fixing and unfixing of what we think we know. We come to value its artistry not so much by what it yields to thought as by what it does to thought, provoking questions and refusing to confirm any sure points and resting places for our reasonings. (*The Questioning Presence* 325-26)

Yet as a speaker of its famous but hollow aphorism, the urn in its role as "friend to man" is as suspect and open to question as Apollonius' function is in *Lamia*. As "trusty guide" to Lycius (line

1.375), Apollonius may have dispelled that youth's delusion; but he also acted (however indirectly) as the hapless victim's judge and executioner.

Although *Lamia* is, I believe, far more sympathetic to its title character than to Apollonius (an issue that I will address from a gender perspective later), *Lamia* does not represent Art in its truest sense. The evidence for that assertion comes from her metamorphosis into a woman and her method of seducing Lycius:

Ah, happy Lycius! — for she was a maid  
 More beautiful than ever twisted braid,  
 Or sigh'd, or blush'd, or on spring-flowered lea  
 Spread a green kirtle to the minstrelsy:  
 A virgin purest lipp'd, yet in the lore  
 Of love deep learned to the red heart's core:  
 Not one hour old, yet of scintillating brain  
 To unperplex bliss from its neighbour pain;  
 Define their pettish limits, and estrange  
 Their points of contact, and swift counterchange;  
 Intrigue with the specious chaos, and dispart  
 Its most ambiguous atoms with sure art;  
 As though in Cupid's college she had spent  
 Sweet days a lovely graduate, still unshent,  
 And kept his rosy terms in idle languishment. (1.185-99)

This passage problematizes the notion that there is "sure art" — that art expresses any certainty of absolute truth. It is significant that the very lines stating that *Lamia* will make the ambiguous unambiguous — will "unperplex bliss from its neighbour pain," thus separating the paradoxical into clearly defined binaries — are the most abstract, obfuscating, and circumlocutory in a poem notably devoid of such abstractions.

Their content, moreover — *Lamia*'s noble plan of clarifying everything for Lycius — has a dizzying contextual irony. To begin with, there is the disparity between *Lamia*'s disguise as an innocent virgin and her knowledge of the arts of love (once again, as in "Ode on Indolence," surface appearance is problematized by the words "deep" [190] and "lore" [189]). "[T]wisted braid" (186) immediately alerts us to her intricate deception and gives a sinister cast to the

entire proceedings. But more subtly, these same words also prompt the reader to examine critically Lamia's professed aim of disentangling all dualities. Hence they make the reader wonder if it is possible — or even desirable — for art to have that objective.

Whereas Lamia thus represents false art, the poem bearing her name expresses both art's positive capacity for "making all disagreeables evaporate" (*Letters* 1: 192) and its counterpart, or "swift counterchange" (*Lamia* 1.194) — viz., "Negative Capability." (The latter term, which in itself is an oxymoron, suggesting both negative and positive, Keats defines in a December 1817 letter to his brothers as the capacity "of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason" [*Letters* 1: 193].) Lamia and Apollonius thus each individually stands for a half-truth, or (as Keats puts it) "half knowledge" (*Letters* 1: 194). Lamia, in her concrete physicality (and Palace of Art), and Apollonius, whose physical appearance is scarcely described since it is his rational gaze, his intellect, that analyzes and destroys the chimera of the false physical world, together represent Keats's "method" — Beauty and Truth in an endless circular chase.

Keats's work constructs a world from a Lamia-like physical imagery that at times is almost too voluptuous, too exquisite, to be "true" — an imagery whose very materiality calls into doubt the "reality" of corporeal existence. Keats's poetry offers a heightened sensory world that, like Lamia's heightened world, both invites and deflects critical enquiry, expressing a Lamia-Apollonius tension or oscillation or dilemma — or madness — that lies at the heart of both fiction and experiential "reality." As Shoshana Felman remarks in her study *Writing and Madness*: "The symbol simultaneously conceals and reveals. That is, the symbolic revelation solicits the interpreter, but also resists him [*sic*]; truth only travels under a mask. It takes on its full significance only by being *unreadable*" (71).

To read Keats's poetry as governed by a simple opposition between Reason and Imagination, the Real versus the Ideal, or the like is a distortion tantamount to seeing only one side of the urn or giving it a "virginal" reading (of the sort that *Lamia* warns us against). In this regard, Keats's theory of negative capability (if, indeed, it can properly be called a theory when it arises spontaneously within a personal letter and is thus neither formalized nor set off from the chaos of life)<sup>2</sup> is essentially what we now call "deconstructive." Beautifully demonstrating in its form Keats's philosophy of life — not to separate knowledge from feeling — it suggests that the creative spirit is the apprehension of a larger (unstable) truth.

Boundary confusion in Keats, then, as it subverts traditional oppositions — and most commonly, the division of dream from reality — can be regarded as programmatic with him. This is especially true to the extent that his undermining of such distinctions is intimately connected to his belief that remaining in a state of ambiguity, without insisting upon certainty (be it a physical or intellectual or moral or emotional "truth" or realism), is the necessary condition for human salvation.

\* \* \* \* \*

Reality and dream constantly invade one another in Keats's poetry. Their distinction is blurred either expressly ("It was no dream; or say a dream . . . it was, / Real are the dreams of Gods" [*Lamia* 1.126-27]) or by implication ("he from one trance was waking / Into another": *Lamia* 1.296-97). "Ode to a Nightingale," for instance, is a poem whose trajectory runs through the entire spectrum of waking, sleeping, imagining, dreaming, and (near-) death before returning (ambiguously) to waking again — in all its myriad biological, psychological, epistemological, and even political "senses." Each gradation of consciousness, moreover, is not "pure" but contaminated

with one or more of the others — a process which culminates problematically with "Was it a vision, or a waking dream? / Fled is that music: — Do I wake or sleep?"

This relation of dream to reality is a chief point of difference between Keats and his fellow Romantics. Wordsworth, for one, maintains the distinction between dream and waking states. The dream sequence which opens Book 5 of *The Prelude*, for example, not only is set up as such; it also itself leaves no doubt that we are *in* a dream (and hence that we must give some kind of psychological interpretation to its symbols, as the text itself suggests by its insistence on the double-nature of the stone and the shell). Poems like "Tintern Abbey" and the Intimations Ode likewise preserve an awareness of boundaries (in this case primarily temporally<sup>3</sup>): indeed, the ephiphanous moment, or "spot of time," that raises from the unconscious a dreamlike childhood memory derives its intensity and anguish from the mind's present recognition of being severed from that past. Coleridge's dream-poems, too — and most notably "Kubla Khan" and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* — never truly confound dream with reality, in his case because the kind of suspension of disbelief that Coleridge demands places reality in the kind of abeyance that the Mariner leaves the Wedding Guest in (which is to say, the poems efface reality for the duration of the dream).

It may appear to be true that reality and dream invade one another in Shelley's poetry. But with Shelley this is by and large a highly abstract smoke-and-mirrors affair; so that it would be more accurate to say that dreams invade dreams. In *The Triumph of Life* or *Prometheus Unbound*, for instance, wraiths and vapours give way . . . to more wraiths and vapours.

In Keats's poetry, on the other hand, there is always a physical presence constantly calling into question the reality (as opposed to the Reality in Shelley's Platonic/"Intellectual" sense) of the phenomenal world. The "vision," like the entire physical structure of

Lamia's palace, may only be an imaginative mental construct, an elaborate, magnificent fiction held up by music (as indeed it is since it is a poem). At the same time, however, the fiction is "real": the language in its rich luxury imaginatively recaptures for the reader an experience that, without being a matter of direct sense-perception, has a certain physicality about it since we *imaginatively* perceive the sounds, sights, smells, and feelings described; indeed, in a Proustian sense, we do so more vividly than if that experience were what we call "real" (or so Keats claims: "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter" ["Ode on a Grecian Urn" 11-12]).

Keats's use of synæsthesia heightens this (imaginative) sensual awareness. But the physical intensity of the solid world in the poem is also for that reason — and paradoxically — the more dreamlike, more like the disturbing "hyperreality" of Magic Realism. Walter Jackson Bate has observed that the language of Keats's poetry becomes progressively concrete (*Stylistic* 2-6), and that it was through the "evolution of the [ode] stanza . . . [that] he sought to satisfy his yearning for an almost physically felt intensity of image and of sound" (*ibid.* 132-33). At the same time, however, Keats confounds that sense of concreteness by his extraordinary use of synæsthesia, whereby seemingly distinct and "palpable" sense-perceptions merge into one another, creating the simultaneous effect of being sharply real yet diffusely dreamlike.

A somewhat different sort of boundary confusion inheres in "more happy, happy love!" The frenzied joy of that exclamation in the "Grecian Urn" is poignant for being an assertion that is really a denial (the emotional correlative of the urn's lovers, who are eternally denied the physical relief of sexual consummation); indeed, it approaches in mood Lear's realization, while teetering on (or over) the brink of madness, of the eternity of death. Like Lear's five *never's*, the Ode's six *happy's* threaten to rupture the rhythm of the line(s) in which they occur, just as its temporary manic delirium —

or, in Lear's case, bottomless horror/depression — threatens to break down the fiction of linguistic order and even invite hysterical laughter (as a release from unbearable tension).

The full realization of mortality here — what de Man calls "absolute irony" — risks madness. Inasmuch as one can hold in one's consciousness the full tragedy and absurdity of human existence only for a short time before such knowledge is mercifully and necessarily effaced from memory by denial, the uppermost pitch of anguish (both in *Lear* and in "Ode on a Grecian Urn") is not — and cannot be — sustained.

The process of withdrawal is even more pronounced in the "Ode to a Nightingale." That poem's concluding question presents us with the most starkly overt instance of boundary confusion in Keats as it asks us to ponder which vision is "real" and which the "dream." But in the doubt it raises about the reality of the world of "weariness," "fever," and "fret" (23), it *also* holds out the possibility of consolation: Are we to come away with the terrible knowledge of the absolute and inevitable certainty of extinction ("To thy high requiem become a sod" [60]) or the relatively benign knowledge of our immediately physical (if ambiguous) existence in a continuous present time, which we experience as "real" time and in which death and senselessness cannot, after all, ever be ultimately "experienced" as such. "The fancy cannot cheat so well" (73) in a double sense. On the one hand, the poet cannot entirely escape the sensory world of the too, too solid flesh because perception, reality, and identity are all coexistent with and dependent upon the physical self; and the imagination, too, necessarily fails ("fades" [75]), the returning "I" "to my sole self" (72). On the other hand, an awareness of time ("this passing night" [63]) and of the annihilability of that self cannot be sustained for long ("opening on the foam / Of perilous seas" [69-70]); it must be "buried deep" (77), words recalling the "Lethe-wards had sunk" (4) of the ode's opening stanza. Our sanity in a sense depends

upon such fictions, wherein our imaginative interpretation or recreation of reality is "A haunting music, sole perhaps and lone / Supportress of the faery-roof" (*Lamia* 2.122-23) that must protect itself from the unswerving (self-) analytical gaze or risk being "Unhaunted quite of all but — nothingness" ("Ode on Indolence" 20).

Sleep, death, haunting, and dreaming are all closely allied in the Keatsian poetic imagination. What enhances the ambiguity among these various states is that the distinction between them is usually in the mind's eye of the beholder/dreamer. Lycius, for instance, in the delightful grip of deception, sees the austere sober Apollonius as a nightmare: "The ghost of folly haunting my sweet dreams" (*Lamia* 1.377). Similarly, in one of the most startling dream/reality inversions, Lorenzo's ghost appears to Isabella, and in a terrifying, defamiliarizing twist, we see from the dead man's alienated perspective. Here it is Isabella or "reality" that is "strange" to him and "distant in Humanity" (312) as well, like a figure in a dream.

Indolence, passivity, sleep, intoxication, and dreaming are all channels to the positive aspects of creativity. Yet at some undemarcated point of the spectrum, the valences change: indolence becomes sloth, dreams become delusions or nightmares, drugs induce anæsthesia, and sleep is tantamount to death. In the "Ode on Indolence," the poet yearns for the dreamy state named in the title to loosen like a drug the grip of inhibition; but too large a dose of the blissful narcotic can have the opposite effect, of totally numbing the senses; and an overdose can be fatal:

Ripe was the drowsy hour;  
The blissful cloud of summer-indolence  
Benumb'd my eyes; my pulse grew less and less;  
Pain had no sting, and pleasure's wreath no flower.  
O, why did ye not melt, and leave my sense  
Unhaunted quite of all but — nothingness? (15-20)

Similarly, in the first stanza of "Ode on Melancholy," abstract notions of (diminishing) states of consciousness (pleasure?



numbness? pain?), intertwine with the tightly (and, here, sinisterly) twisted roots of physical sensations, where a sense of confusion and anxiety is heightened by an even stronger catalogue of negatives:

No, no, go not to Lethe, neither twist  
 Wolf's-bane, tight-rooted, for its poisonous wine;  
 Nor suffer thy pale forehead to be kiss'd  
 By nightshade, ruby grape of Proserpine;  
 .....  
 For shade to shade will come too drowsily,  
 And drown the wakeful anguish of the soul. (1-4; 9-10)

Here we have Keats the pharmacologist: one must prescribe the right measure. All entities in his work admit of gradations; and at a certain critical point, positives subtly "shade" into negatives and vice versa — a couple of drops too much turn the drug into a poison and make the hallucinogen a blunter, not a sharpener, of the senses: "and aching Pleasure nigh, / Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips" ("Ode on Melancholy" 23-24).

"Ode to a Nightingale" in significant part concerns itself with this crossover effect. Its opening lines immediately make the distinction between waking and dreaming ambiguous in their play on the druglike effect of too-intense (or too-diffuse) feeling as pain and/or numbness. Here, too, a tight compression of interlocking (or rather interfused) paradoxes instantly prompts us to ask whether this is a description of escaping *to* something or *from* it:

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains  
 My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,  
 Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains  
 One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk. (1-4)

Thus, before the external world and the nightingale are even brought up, we are introduced to the question: Is the poet clinging to the egotistical self ("Tis not through envy of thy happy lot") or is he selflessly empathetic ("being too happy in thine happiness")?

If Wordsworth worked from the outside in, evoking what Keats so perceptively calls an "intellectual Landscape" (*Letters* 1.174), Keats

often works from the inside out, from an inner sensory landscape.<sup>4</sup> Bodily sensations that assert the self (and a solid sense of reality) at the same time always — paradoxically — have underlying them the threat of death, extinction, nothingness. In "Ode to a Nightingale," the transcendent imaginative state (the view, as it were, from the "viewless wings of Poesy" [33]) is described as an intensely physical experience; and though one is never more intensely alive, funereal words undercut the lush, sensual imagery.

Significantly, the passage wherein all this is most evident is also one that asserts by denial:

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. (41-50)

Such phrases as "hangs upon," "guess each sweet," and "murmurous haunt" compound the ambiguity. They image a suspension between the burgeoning ripeness of spring's fertility and decomposition — which is appropriate to this stanza's being in mid-trajectory, as it were, of the poet-speaker's imaginative flight between the sublime heights of spiritual/creative ecstasy and the lowest depths provoked by a recognition of the body's corporeal limits (although at any point in the ode thought and sensation are never entirely disassociated). "The coming musk-rose" (49) and "[f]ast fading violets" (47) "caught," as it were, between the nightingale's "[song] of summer in full-throated ease" (10) and "high requiem" to the poet's inert "sod" (60) likewise (dynamically) suspend time, and thus leave a question as to which "seasonable month" (44) the passage alludes to. (We might also notice that the particular flowers here

are precisely the ones that intermingle in *The Eve of St. Agnes*: the [female] rose and [male] violet.)

This technique of "perfectly" ambiguous suspension, which Keats brings to its highest fruition in "Ode to Autumn," is similar to one that we meet with in *Lamia*, in a passage asserting the erotically visible while claiming invisibility for the title character:

Free as the air, invisibly, she strays  
 About these thornless wilds; her pleasant days  
 She tastes unseen; unseen her nimble feet  
 Leave traces in the grass and flowers sweet;  
 From weary tendrils, and bow'd branches green,  
 She plucks the fruit unseen, she bathes unseen:  
 And by my power is her beauty veil'd  
 To keep it unaffronted, unassail'd  
 By the love-glances of unlovely eyes. (1.94-102)

Of course, the reader of this playfully coy passage is invited to "assai[l]" the nymph innumerable times in the mind's eye despite Lamia's/the text's claim to protect her; that such coyness is tinged with guilt is suggested "[b]y the love-glances of unlovely eyes" (especially in connection with Keats's own ambivalence toward the male gaze in *Sleep and Poetry*).

If this passage in *Lamia* is less powerful than the last-quoted one from the Nightingale Ode, that is because the latter has not only a darker tone and more densely textured imagery, but also a greater tension of multiple interconnected paradoxes, which problematize the "inside" and "outside" of the ego-boundary. The first three words of that ode Bloom has vividly characterized as the three knocks that "batte[r]" on our consciousness (*Visionary* 434). What Keats confronts us with at the start of this exploration of the limits of consciousness are not the doors of perception cleansed by a kind of Romantic *fiat*: rather than arriving at infinitude in such absolute terms of purification, Keats's ode creates false doors, one opening onto the next, by questioning the validity of perception itself. His radical skepticism anticipates such modernist lines as Vladimir

Mayakovsky's: "My vision is clear / with all the clarity / hallucinations have" (qtd. in Safouan, 17).

Keats's gardens are mossy and winding, his magic casements open onto perilous seas. At the beginning of each of the odes of his I have mentioned in this chapter, we are already unbalanced, in a state of readiness to explore the labyrinthine processes of thought and feeling since each immediately dulls our faculties into pain or sensually lulls them into intoxicated fulfillment ("*full* of the warm South, / *Full* of the *true*" ["Nightingale" 15-16; my emphasis]). This is an experience so rich that it seems "true"; yet "[o]ne minute past" (4) it dies (and, for all its physicality, is a perception that is arguably no more true than is its philosophical counterpart — as expressed in the later oxymoronic line: "Now more than ever seems it rich to die" [55] — that "leave[s]" [19], "fades away", "dim[s]" [20], "[f]ade[s] far away" until it finally "dissove[s]" [21] without ever managing to "quite forget" [21] harsh reality). The fog lifts, the faculties clear, and we are left with the mammoth hangover called The Human Condition. The boldly senses are wrecked and death is inescapable. Yet no sooner does the full realization hit us than we retreat into denial ("Away! away!" [31]), and the thoughts take flight only to have the entire cycle repeated with variations, this time in terms of an exploration of imaginative flight (since the aim of art is illusion) as opposed to mere chemically-induced escapism (although the boundary between the two is very fine).

At the outset of the Urn, Nightingale, and Indolence odes, we are in a state of temporal and spatial uncertainty, inhabiting a "brain" that is "dull" and yet "perplexes" (34) in its perpetual ambiguity (which teases us out of thought). Like the "deep-disguis'd plot" of "Ode on Indolence," we are trapped, or "buried deep," in a "real" fiction, a "melodious plot" (8), somewhat like Lamia's palace held up by music. There is always a wish for some meridian mark where one can "cease upon the midnight with no pain" (56); but there is no

resting place, since we are left with the irresolvable problem of disentangling illusory beauty from truth. Keats's sense of completeness, indeed of saturation, continually modulates, "dissolves," into nothingness, or openness, when the mind casts about for some grounding, only to be faced with the worrying prospect of being "buried deep." However anxious Keats may be in his ontological skepticism, he is made equally anxious by such moments of security.

The same themes involving the ambiguity of dream and reality recur with equal brilliance but in a different mood in verse 36 of *The Eve of St Agnes*:

Beyond a mortal man impassion'd far  
 At these voluptuous accents, he arose,  
 Ethereal, flush'd, and like a throbbing star  
 Seen mid the sapphire heaven's deep repose;  
 Into her dream he melted, as the rose  
 Blendeth its odour with the violet,—  
 Solution sweet: meantime the frost-wind blows  
 Like Love's alarum pattering the sharp sleet  
 Against the window-panes; St Agnes' moon hath set. (316-324)

Keats here suggests the particular self-involvement of the lovers impervious to the outside storm, but he does so in the larger context of subjective reality versus harsh objective reality. At the center of the verse (like lovers enclosed in one another) mingles ("blends," "melts") both "hard" objective and "soft" subjective reality: the "voluptuous" and the "ethereal." Their ambiguity is heightened by the double-entendre of "flush'd" and "throbbing star" — i.e., by a sexual metaphor combining dream with sense-perception. The effect is simultaneously and vividly real and dreamlike, the total impression psychologically very real. The erotic wit lies in the fact that the scene conveys sexual as well as ontological allusions. At the point of interfusion of the rose and the violet reality mingles with unreality, the slowing down of time communicated by "deep repose" while "meantime" (the "mean" of which suggesting also the *cruelty*

of time) the "sharp" storm outside is "pattering. . . [a]gainst the window-panes" of consciousness; "hath set" points to both consummation and a return to everyday consciousness. Like the tender union of male and female, there is no denigration of one in favor of the other, no sense of a "deflowering"; rather there is an efflorescence, a suspension of reality and dream which at the same time is an empathic respite from the self ("into her dream he melted . . . solution sweet") and mortality ("mid heaven's. . . deep repose"). Like the movement in the Nightingale Ode (except in miniature), the verse begins "beyond. . . mortal" and returns to the mortal self in the severe finality of "hath set."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Psyche" is perhaps the most apparently optimistic of Keats's odes in terms of the poet's confidence in his powers.<sup>5</sup> As such, it exhibits an initial burst of exhilaration after the relative restrictions of the sonnet form with which he had been experimenting.<sup>6</sup> (Weighing the pros and cons of such constrictions is the subject of his sonnet "If by dull rhymes our English must be chain'd.") Perhaps more than any other of Keats's poems, too, "Ode to Psyche" provides almost laboratory conditions for observing the intricate play among the various obsessions I have been discussing.

Keats's reference to its subject in one of his letters almost provides a blueprint for the poem's rich contradictions:

You must recollect that Psyche was not embodied as a goddess before the time of Apulieus [*sic*] the Platonist who lived afteir [*sic*] the A[u]gustan age, and consequently the Goddess was never worshipped or sacrificed to with any of the ancient fervour — and perhaps never thought of in the old religion — I am more orthodox that [*for than*] to let a he[a]then Goddess be so neglected. (*Letters* 2: 106)

It is just like Keats to choose a "neglected" and, as it were, unofficial goddess for his muse — and one, to boot, who almost missed out on such immortality. She embodies Keats's obsession with clearing the ground for his own poetic genius and his own bid for immortal-

ity. At the same time, she is perfectly respectable and of the right vintage. The double pull of father-figure and rebel son is reflected in the letter's wordplay on "orthodox" and "heathen." As well, the fact that Psyche means "mind" or "soul" or "spirit" and has historically never had a temple dedicated to her allows the poem to exploit dichotomous mental-physical realities.

This dichotomy characteristically finds expression in the dream/awake-state dilemma that appears at the opening: 'Surely I dreamt to-day, or did I see / The wingèd Psyche with awaken'd eyes?' (5-6). Material reality is made even more problematic by the poet's question: "The wingèd boy I knew; / But who wast thou. . . ? / His Psyche true!" (21-23; here "true" can mean both sexually faithful to Cupid or "real"). That reality is again called into question by the lines:

So let me be thy choir, and make a moan  
Upon the midnight hours;  
Thy voice, thy lute, thy pipe, thy incense sweet  
From swung censer teeming;  
Thy shrine, thy grove, thy oracle, thy heat  
Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming.  
  
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. (44-53)

The passage is multilayered with ambiguities related to either physical or mental "constructs." "Fane" (a conventionally bankrupt or "orthodox" poetic word that Keats reinvests here with a plurality of contradictory associations) can mean either a spiritual dedication or an actual physical structure, a temple that the poet "builds" in his mind (one translation of "Psyche," as I have already noted). The word calls attention to itself as ambiguous, as a metaphor, by its homophonic connection with "feign," which in its sense of "to pretend, to make believe" alludes to the creative process (as in "all. . . Fancy e'er could feign," later in the poem [62]). This physical-mental ambiguity

is reinforced by the sequence of physical entities which is end-stopped with an abstract/emotional one in "Thy shrine, thy grove, thy oracle, thy heat." (Here "heat" can relate either to physical passion or creative energy; the poem plays on both these aspects by its religion-of-love theme.) This particular fane is also a "sanctuary" (59) in which the solitary poet-priest can take refuge and express his own originality (as, indeed, this first ode by Keats succeeds in doing); for the poet has claimed Psyche for his own (what begins as "scarce espied" [12] becomes "by my own eyes inspired" [43]). All the poem's negatives ("*Nor* altar," "*No* voice," etc.) are at the same time converted into positives to the poet's advantage. Once again, things previously unseen are permitted to exist only through the poet's creative imagination (or the reverse in *Lamia*: "by my power is her beauty veil'd" [1.100]). The poet manipulates the visibility of the external world while his own identity remains hidden; and the ode thus fulfills the prophecy Keats makes in *Sleep and Poetry*: "If I do hide myself, it sure shall be / In the very fane, the light of Poesy" (275-76).

Through his alliance with Psyche, the poet proclaims a new order: "O latest born and loveliest vision far / Of all Olympus' faded hierarchy!" (24-25). Freed from competition with the past, Keats here eliminates almost effortlessly what proved to be an emotional and technical impasse in the *Hyperion* poems.

In the course of doing so, the ode through its vegetable imagery calls reality into question. The solitary and anxious poet begins by "wander[ing] in a forest thoughtlessly" (7); but with his vision of the lovers in the forest (often a place of magical transformation in medieval romance) and his dedication to Psyche's "fane," external nature (the solid world) now fuses with the poet's mind in a budding, erotic splendour of "branched thoughts, new grown with pleasant pain" (a double dichotomy) which affirms the poet's song ("murmur in



the wind"), as opposed to the wishful thinking or dreaming that "instead of pines" (i.e., pining) suggests.

This creative flowering is elaborated and even literalized by the lines:

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. (59-63)

Again, the dominant impression here is of creative success: "wreath'd trellis" suggests the bay laurel and prolific powers (cp. the "teeming" censers of lines 33 and 47 and line 60's "working brain") while the "stars without a name" and "Fancy [which] will never breed the same" point to a powerful, unsurpassable originality and prodigious fertility. (Nor should we ignore the fact that "fane," associated here and elsewhere with "the light of Poesy" [*Sleep and Poetry*, 276] sounds very like "fame.") Finally, the last two lines, with their casement open to love, celebrate the mind's creative receptivity.

Although "Psyche" is one of Keats's most joyous poems, there is — as always — strong evidence for another, latently negative, reading of it, one that arises from his anxiety of influence. After all, another homophone of "fane" is "fain," which can mean "reluctantly willing" as well as "eager or desirous." Similarly, "feign" can also apply to the kind of delusory artifice that "pale-mouth'd [i.e., linguistically inept] prophet dreaming" points to in its negative interpretation (which is reinforced by the subtle play on "believing lyre" [i.e., credulous liar] in line 37). Then again, "stars without a name" can equally assert the poet's *failure* to name or be a name (where the last meaning looks toward Keats's epitaph for himself: "Here lies one whose name was writ on water"). And finally, the "casement ope at night / To let the warm Love in!" is troubling since

"Love" with a capital "L" may denote that it is Cupid (an implied rival) and not the poet who is granted Psyche's favours.

Nevertheless, the Psyche Ode as a whole is "open" in that its intricately constructed ambiguities (imaged by the "wreath'd trellis") are left unresolved. So is the matter of whether the vision is real or a dream. Nor is this irresolution unprepared for. Keats figures it at the beginning of the poem, where the lovers, Cupid and Psyche, the immortal and the (originally) mortal, are neither united nor completely separate: "Their arms embraced and their pinions too; / Their lips touch'd not, but had not bade adieu" (16-17).

Like Laurence Sterne as Writer of Sensibility, to whom he is perhaps the spiritual heir, Keats often uses non-consummation to underline the unresolved tensions and deferral of closure in his work. The multitude of conflicting and complementary readings of the Psyche Ode that hinge on "fane"/"feign" — the physical and mental structures dependent on the word-play — generate the disparity between language and the object world (wherein the ambiguity of "Psyche true" is reminiscent of "And *sure* in language *strange* she said / 'I love thee *true*'" [27-28; my emphasis] of "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," a dream-poem that again (and by now we can say, typically of Keats) calls the "realness" of reality into doubt).

Keats's poetry does not only produce a sense of boundary confusion by at once setting up and merging distinct entities, be they sense-perceptions or states of consciousness or qualities such as abstract or concrete. It also frequently — and deliberately — draws attention to these border states by suddenly calling into question the coherence or "realness" of reality. One of the most succinct and brilliant expressions of this occurs in *Lamia*:

It was no dream; or say a dream it was,  
Real are the dreams of Gods, and smoothly pass  
Their pleasures in a long, immortal dream.  
One warm, flush'd moment, hovering, it might seem (1.126-29)

Once again we are in state of suspension between dream and reality, our dilemma reinforced by the phrase "hovering, it might seem" even as we hover or swoon between a single moment in time and its sustained passage into the long immortal dream signalled by the word "flush'd." Time "smoothly pass[es]" dreamily between these two states. Ordinarily, such irresolution might be disturbing; but here we are simultaneously lulled by the passage's languorous rhythm and by such evocative words as "warm," "flush'd," and especially "pleasure."

So far I have been discussing the physical/mental or reality/dream ambiguities in Keats as if they were value-free. That is not the case, however. Such moments of consciously questioning reality in his work always relate to issues of social identity, sexual politics, and so forth.

Confusion of — and about — boundaries, in other words, has much to do with gender ambiguity. It is thus connected to the subject (and argument) of my preceding chapters. But it also prepares for my next and concluding chapter, where I will consider more closely the contexts in which the dream/reality dilemmas occur (or fail to arise) in Keats and the significance of their presence (or, equally, of their absence).

## NOTES

1. Traditionally, critics have emphasized the greater unity provided by the ode over the sonnet form. Yet it could equally be argued that the ode afforded Keats a greater depth and range for fluctuations of concept and mood.

According to Bate, the "legitimate" sonnet that Keats complained about in one of his letters means the Petrarchan form (*Stylistic* 128-29), whose "pouncing rhymes" dissatisfied him. But he also objected to the Shakespearean sonnet for its "sharp division of three quatrains" and "the resulting synthetic effect" and hurried epigrammatic snap of its concluding couplet (132). He briefly

experimented with a hybrid form of the two before he turned to the ode (125-27). As Zillman writes, "[the odes] present basically emotional themes, and single leading ideas, in relatively brief space as contrasted with the drama, narrative, or epic. They would serve, therefore, as an outlet for the emotional expression that might otherwise have been treated in the sonnet, and they came as an interesting new medium which might reasonably replace for a time the vexing sonnet form" (67-68). See also n. 2 of my second chapter.

2. Cf. T.S. Eliot's comments in his study of "Keats": "His letters are what letters ought to be; the fine things come in unexpectedly, neither introduced nor shown out, but between trifle and trifle" (11). "Wordsworth and Shelley both theorise. Keats has no theory, and to have formed one was irrelevant to his interests, and alien to his mind" (12).

3. "Intimations of Immortality," for example, begins:

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,  
The earth, and every common sight,  
To me did seem  
Apparelled in celestial light,  
The glory and the freshness of a dream.  
It is not now as it hath been of yore . . . (De Selincourt 4: 279)

4. Cf. Harold Bloom's observation in *The Visionary Company*: "But whereas Wordsworth's scene is a given outward phenomenon, Keats's is built up within" (423).

5. The kind of optimism that the "Ode to Psyche" evinces may have contributed to the general agreement that it is the first of Keats's five great odes. (Certainly he plundered it, reworking much of its imagery in the succeeding four).

6. I am aware that I am here contradicting the comments I make about "Ode on Indolence" at this chapter's outset. I would point out, however, that Keats encourages such speculation, especially given the doubt as to which ode — Indolence or Psyche — he composed first.

### **III. The Pleasure Principle**

## Chapter 4. A World of "(Slippery) Blisses": Keats's Seduction of Mind

Punishment-dreams, too, are fulfilments of wishes, though not of wishes of the instinctual impulses but of those of the critical, censoring and punishing agency in the mind.

—Sigmund Freud

this too indulged tongue  
Presumptuous

—*Hyperion: A Fragment*

Carl Woodring, commenting on the resonance with the British occupation of the New World of the Chapman Sonnet's "realms of gold" and "fealty," refers to Robertson's descriptions of the Spanish conquistadors' "fanaticism and greed" (30). That account of ruthless power prompts him to ask: "Why did Keats show no . . . revulsion?" His question points us to two facts which, through the word "fealty," add yet another layer of indebtedness to "Chapman's Homer": (1) that Robertson conflated the British colonialists with the Spanish, and (2) that other contemporary historical texts reveal a consciousness that Britain's own history of tainted entanglements in the New World can be traced to their Elizabethan predecessors' envy of the glory and material booty of Spain. In this connection, a further possible influence on Keats is a passage in Book 4 of *The Faerie Queene* wherein Spenser, by comparing the English unfavourably with the warlike Amazons (in canto 11, stanza 22), not only displaces England's rivalry with Spain into a mythic realm but also, and by the same token, genders it.

The possibility emerging from these considerations — namely, that the Chapman Sonnet, again particularly in its "fealty," conceals virtually all of the Keatsian anxieties I have been discussing up to now — is reinforced by an additional piece of information that Woodring brings up in the course of addressing the question he himself raises. Woodring (31) quotes from one of Keats's letters to Bailey a remark which echoes a frequent argument in Robertson: "The Sward

is richer for the tread of a real, nervous, english foot." If, out of serendipity (which, as Woodring reminds us, "Chapman's Homer" celebrates along with every other variety of discovery), we examine in detail the letter from which that extract, like a single grain of gold, derives, we will find a veritable mother lode of associative thinking relating to the issue of gender.

Looking back to my discussion of Keats's anxiety of influence, this extraordinary example of Keats's associative thinking at the same time anticipates the argument I am about to make concerning his ambivalence toward gender. It may therefore serve as a touchstone to that argument, for which reason I will quote a large part of it.

Keats had been travelling for some three days in torrential downpours in Teignmouth, Devon. His letter of March 13, 1818 begins with a light-hearted complaint about the weather; and after going on for a considerable stretch about other matters (in a passage which I analyze in my subsequent two paragraphs but do not quote here), Keats takes off from weather conditions again, as follows:

splashy, rainy, misty snowy, foggy, haily floody, muddy, slipshod County. . . the Primroses are out, but then you are in — the Cliffs are of a fine deep Colour, but then the Clouds are continually vieing with them — The Women like your London People in a sort of negative way — because the native men are the poorest creatures in England — because Government never have thought it worth while to send a recruiting party among them. When I think of Wordswo[r]th's Sonnet "Vanguard of Liberty! ye Men of Kent!" the degenerated race about me are Pulvis Ipecac. Simplex a strong dose [the editor's note tells us that Simplex is "[n]auseating, for Pulvis Ipecac. Simplex in strong doses is an emetic"] — Were I a Corsair I'd make a descent on the South Coast of Devon, if I did not run the chance of having Cowardice imputed to me: as for the Men they'd run away into the methodist meeting houses, and the Women would be glad of it — Had England been a large devonshire we should not have won the Battle of Water'loo — There are knotted oaks — there are lusty rivulets there are Meadows such as are not — there are vallies of feminine [*sic*] Climate — but there are no thews and Sinews — . . . A[r]ms Neck and shoulders may at least b[e] seen there, and The Ladies read it as some out of the way romance — Such a queeling Power have these thoughts over me, that I fancy the very Air of a deteriorating quality — I fancy the flowers, all precocious, have an Acrasian spell about them — I feel able to beat off the devonshire waves like soap froth — I think it well for the honor of Brittain that Julius Caesar did not first land in this County — A Devonshirer standing on

his native hills is not a distinct object — he does not show against the light — a wolf or two would dispossess him. I like, I love England, I like its strong Men — . . . The Sward is richer for the tread of a real, nervous, english foot — the eagles nest is finer for the Mountaineer has look'd into it — Are these facts or prejudices? Whatever they are, for them I shall never be able to relish entirely any devonshire scenery — Homer is very fine, Achilles is fine, Diomed is fine, Shakspeare [sic] is fine, Hamlet is fine, Lear is fine, but dwindled englishmen are not fine — Where too the Women are so passable, and have such english names, such as Ophelia, Cordelia & — that they should have such Paramours or rather Imparamours — As for them I cannot, in thought help wishing as did the cruel Emperour, that they had but one head and I might cut it off to deliver them from any horrible Courtesy they may do their undeserving Countrymen — I wonder I meet with no born Monsters — O Devonshire, last night I thought the Moon had dwindled in heaven — I have never had your Sermon from Wordsworth but Mrs. Dilke lent it me — You know my ideas about Religion — I do not think myself more in the right than other people and that nothing in this world is provable. I wish I could enter into all your feelings on the subject merely for one short 10 Minutes and give you a Page or two to your liking. I am sometimes so very sceptical as to think Poetry itself a mere Jack a lantern to amuse whoever may chance to be struck with its brilliance — As Tradesmen say every thing is worth what it will fetch, so probably every mental pursuit takes its reality and worth from the ardour of the pursuer — being in itself a nothing — Ethereal thing[s] may at least be thus real, divided under three heads — Things real — things semireal — and no things — Things real — such as existences of Sun Moon & Stars and passages of Shakspeare [sic] — Things semireal such as Love, the Clouds &c which require a greeting of the Spirit to make them wholly exist — and Nothings which are made Great and dignified by an ardent pursuit — Which by the by stamps the burgundy mark on the bottles of our Minds, insomuch as they are able to "*consecrate whate'er they look upon*" . . . but what am I talking of — it is an old maxim of mine and of course must be well known that eve[r]y point of thought is the centre of an intellectual world — the two uppermost thoughts in a Man's mind are the two poles of his World he revolves on them and every thing is southward or northward to him through their means — We take but three steps from feathers to iron. Now my dear fellow I must once for all tell you I have not one Idea of the truth of any of my speculations — I shall never be a Reasoner because I care not to be in the right, when retired from bickering and in a proper philosophical temper — So you must not stare if in any future letter I endeavour to prove that Appollo [sic] as he had a cat gut string[s] to his Lyre used a cats'paw as a Pecten — and further from said Pecten's reiterated and continual teasing came the term Hen peck'd. . . . (*Letters I: 241-244; my ellipses*)

This letter, with its exuberance for wordplay (all the more remarkable considering Keats's obvious concern for his brother Tom, who was by this time very ill) reads like a Joycean monologue. It begins facetiously with remarks about nearly drowning in the rain



that pun with his negligence in not writing to Bailey ("I have sunk twice in our Correspondence"); then a joke about his own weakness gives way to another joke about his sinking into idleness ("have risen twice and been too idle"). This thought in turn gives rise to a playful self-defence against an imaginary chastising by Bailey ("Why did I not stop at Oxford in my Way? — How can you ask such a Question? how can you be so unreasonable as to ask me why I did not?"). This leads Keats to banter about concocting the perfect excuse with reference to conjuring tricks that his own wordplay illustrates ("rubbing up my invention"; "sleights" [*Letters* 1: 241]). The joking here eventuates in serious thoughts about Tom, just as facetious thoughts about drowning leach into questions of social and metaphysical identity. Such associations recall the line in Homer about Ulysses' submersion in the sea that had so appealed to Keats; they also remind us that the annihilation of identity frequently figures in his own work as a literal liquidation of the self.<sup>1</sup> (In this regard, we might note by the way the irony of the fact that the rain blurred the postmark on Keats's letter.)

The liquidation of self in the Other has a strong undercurrent of gender references in the letter to Bailey. Like Keats's poetry, the letter reveals a radical ambivalence about women; it associates them with all the traditional negatives. None the less, the letter-as-stream-of-consciousness has itself a feminine sensibility, a "feminine Climate," that "floody, muddy, slipshod County" of slippery binaries. While Keats avenges his ruined vacation by exploiting the foul Devonshire weather as a means of disparaging (or diluting) the virility of Devonshire men, he also identifies with the feminine sensibility in a positive, revitalizing sense by depicting himself as "all drench'd" yet "fresh from the Water." He whereupon introduces a socially rebellious sentiment, albeit in seemingly trivial terms: "I would rather endure the present inconvenience of a Wet Jacket, than you should keep a laced one in store for me" (*Letters* 1: 240)

The letter's images of drowning (Keats starts off, "[w]hen a poor devil is drowning") collect together like raindrops with other associations that are half-celebratory, half-anxious about femininity. Such associations are implicit in the merging of two expressions, "sink[ing]" and "drench'd as I am" (*Letters* 1: 240), with Keats's allusion to his idleness (which, significantly, he relates to his not writing). The latter in turn is fed by other tributary allusions (ablutions) — to weak men and phallic women — which finally pool together and flood into a conscious meditation on unreality and the loss of identity. Comments about the weather modulate into a "feminine Climate," exhibiting a negative capability that opens itself to all the various antitheses of soft/hard, inside/outside, male/female, healthy/diseased, and so on. The intelligence at work here is clearly an empathic one (as evinced by Keats's wish to travel mentally into Bailey's feelings so as to be able to write something to please him). It is also at once mindful of yet radically sceptical about such categories as the antitheses instanced above and the boundaries they imply — mindful and sceptical in a way that causes the language of the letter to dissolve into border states ("threshold brook" is a phrase that occurs in the poem quoted in this letter [1: 243]).

The scepticism at first vents itself in a questioning of art that quickly becomes self-critical and self-doubting, particularly as it attaches to the phrase "a mere Jack a lantern." But when those words by a process of association are followed by "As Tradesmen say," we may well begin to suspect that self-criticism and self-doubt have to do with Keats's sense of vulnerability in matters of gender and class. After all, his wisecrack about hard-headed commercial sense,<sup>2</sup> once it has served to connect the "pursuit" of art with economic possessiveness, sexual desire, and spiritual aspirations, flows into a stream of thoughts emptying out into metaphysical nothingness: turning over things real and semireal, Keats finally arrives at "no thing."

Keats in his sceptical mode recognizes that so much that passes for Great Art is merely a phantasm in the eye of the beholder-philosopher-tradesman. His argument, which turns intricately in on itself (everything in the letter can be either southward or northward, feathers or iron, Paramour or Imparamour [an "imp"-ish neologism created out of Keats's love of oxymorons], fact or prejudice), admits of only one certainty: that nothing in this world is provable. Distinctions are further confused by the ambiguous syntax that ellides pursuit and pursuer, Spirit and Nothing, into the proposition that "every mental pursuit takes its reality and worth from the ardour of the pursuer — being in itself a nothing." Something or someone (or nothing or no one) "by the by stamps the burgundy mark on the bottles of our Minds, insomuch as they are able to "consec[r]ate whate'er they look upon." (Significantly, Keats here misquotes —or parodies — the "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," reducing the consecrating light of Shelley's Spirit of Beauty to an operation [still disembodied!] specific to the wine trade.) Keats will return to that bottle — and to all of these questions that he never stopped turning over in his mind and art — only he will do so in the shape of the more "dignified" Grecian urn of an ode that has, ironically — by the by — itself become stamped as one of the consecrated.

The letter to Bailey, then, not only displays a number of qualities of Keats's mind that are also to be found in his poetry, but displays them in a way that makes it clear that they flow into one another. Thus the compassion and empathy that make for Keats's (deserved) reputation as a man of feeling (and thereby give rise to the question of Woodring's with which this chapter began) cannot be wholly differentiated from a scepticism which for its part is inseparable from Keats's thoughts-feelings of self-dissolution and all that it entails.

My first two chapters focussed on Keats's anxiety as influenced, or engendered, by certain factors which we can properly call masculine. But here, in my final chapter, I want to concentrate on the

Other side of Keats (always remembering that it is part of a continuum). By Other side, I mean the feminine aspects of Keats, those elements which, by virtue of their particular combination in his writings, make him singularly "effeminate" — and hence threatening — among male poets.

The elements which I have so far named — an extraordinary empathy, a certain kind of scepticism, and a pervasive sense of self-dissolution — hardly constitute an exhaustive list; and while they perhaps imply at least some of the others, it will prove useful to specify what those others are. Our catalogue should therefore include the following: his nonmoralistic (if ambivalent) affirmation of pleasure; a sensuousness in his writing that often shades into the erotic; his lack of any formal "theory" (in which regard, it is noteworthy that his thoughts-feelings — my hyphen is meant to signify that the two are inseparable — survive in journal-letters, i.e. in a form cognate to the "lower," female genres of the diary and epistolary novel); his sympathy towards his female characters, whom he often represents in a way that violates romance tradition; and his repeated introduction of figures who prove to be androgynous.

Frequently, too, his work poses philosophical arguments about philosophy that are cast in terms of a male-female power struggle in which his sympathy seems to lie more with the woman's side than with the man's. These feminine aspects intriguingly conflict with his explicit masculine ambition to be numbered among the immortal great poets. When these dual proclivities come most sharply into conflict, the poet is as often as not beset by a sense of unreality, where the questioning of a single metaphysical reality is connected to the resistance to and subversion of a univocal patriarchal one.

This last-mentioned feature points to the reason why any such catalogue of feminine elements in Keats necessarily involves a degree of misrepresentation: by requiring us to disentangle their entanglements, at least momentarily. This, however, brings us (back)

to what is perhaps most feminine about Keats's work: the way in which those elements are mutually entangled in it — or, more precisely, the way in which they dissolve into one another. The fact that the dissolution is a watery one (and not only in the images of Keats's letter to Bailey and the thoughts they associatively lead to; consider also Keats's epitaph for himself, his final word, as it were) unmistakably connects it with the remarks of Hélène Cixous (and others) on what constitutes "writing the feminine."

This in turn has to do, both directly and obliquely, with Keats's *Seduction of Mind*. That phrase of mine is meant to adumbrate the outcome of the feminine elements in Keats as they combine with, or flow into, each other. Put alternatively, part of my point is that the flow, or dissolution, of boundaries in Keats's poetry, together with its emphasis on pleasure, the sensuous, and so forth, amounts to writing the body (in Cixous' sense). But I shall be arguing as well for a further point which arises from the fact that Keats's endorsement of such feminine values is far from univocal: namely, that in the very dialectic of their opposition to masculine values in Keats they have a singularly subversive effect which is seductive of "mind" from the masculinist standpoint which valorizes "mind" at the expense of the body. I should add that in the following exploration of this idea through analyses (chiefly) of "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," "Ode to a Nightingale," and "Ode on a Grecian Urn," I shall be preserving a good many of the entanglements of Keats's poetry as I understand it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Keats, as we have seen in the previous chapter, is always setting up and then dissolving or merging dichotomies in a languorous dream-like description that paradoxically both problematizes and heightens one's sense of reality. The feel of entering a dream-reality owes much to Classical Greek and medieval romance traditions as Keats

uses them. He thereby evokes a sensuous and marvellous atmosphere in his poetry, wherein multiple gods and goddesses, wood-nymphs and faeries, reinforce an impression of a dissolution of a single (male) unified self. Contributing to this effect is Negative Capability in its "chameleon poet" aspect as a kind of pagan spirit that animates all things by its complete identification with them. The result is a dissolution of self and reality which, coupled with Keats's vocabulary of pleasure, threatens the masculine attributes of self-control and autonomy.

The loss of masculine control in Keats is often imaged in terms of a dream of pleasure. Just as often, such a dream is associated with the male pleasurably overwhelmed by a strong female figure. These dream states are given free play, although never without anxious ambivalence, in the romance poems or lyrics; but in the epic — not surprisingly given the masculinity of the genre — Keats exhibits an even greater degree of gender anxiety and certain reversals occur.

Part of what I have just said is related to a point that John Bayley makes in a disarmingly slim volume titled *Keats and Reality* (1962): that Keats's "characteristically modern kind of uneasiness" lies in his "feeling that reality may be elsewhere" — something "which we find neither in the eighteenth century nor in Keats's predecessors in the Romantic movement" (1). Bayley also has another wonderfully insightful comment germane to the argument I am in the process of developing: that while Keats and Byron are the (English) Romantics who most question the relation of art to reality, "[r]eality *changes* for Keats, as it never does for Byron, and the eclipse of reality in [Keats's] poetry is the eclipse of sex" (22).

How the eroticism serves to transact those shifts of reality is a matter that Bayley remains vague about. But here we get help from Evelyn Fox Keller and object-relations psychology. Summarizing the socialization of the male, she writes as follows:

Our early maternal environment, coupled with the cultural definition of masculine (that which can never appear feminine) and of autonomy (that which can never be compromised by dependency) *leads to the association of female with the pleasures and dangers of merging*, and of male with the comfort and loneliness of separateness. The boy's internal anxiety about both self and gender is echoed by the more widespread cultural anxiety and the longing that generates it. Finally, for all of us, our sense of reality is carved out of the same developmental matrix. Along with autonomy the very act of separating subject from object — objectivity itself — comes to be associated with masculinity. The combined psychological and cultural pressures lead all three ideal — affective, gender, and cognitive — to a mutually reinforcing process of exaggeration and rigidification. The net result is the entrenchment of an objectivist ideology and a correlative devaluation of (female) subjectivity. (180-81; my italics)

In view of these remarks, we may understand Bayley's "eclipse of sex," not in the more or less narrow sense that he seems to have in mind (which, he observes, names something whose presence other critics have generally recognized in Keats only to excoriate it), but, rather, as signifying the eclipse of gender. At issue, then, is an erotics of writing that subverts categories, including that of gender — or what Cixous has called writing the body.

Perhaps Keats's least ambivalent expression of writing the body is to be found in *The Eve of St. Agnes*. In a poem that is, after all, about a superstitious ritual whose proper observance holds the promise of a girl's envisioning the man she will marry, we meet with an extraordinary variety of dreams. There is an equally extraordinary obsession with awakening.<sup>3</sup> Frequently, states of waking and sleeping/dreaming/entrancement are blurred as border states (e.g., "she dreams awake" [232], or in "wakeful swoon, perplexed she lay" [236]) or even present themselves as gradations of dream (e.g., "shaded was her dream" [281]), until the escaping lovers at last escape the real world altogether by virtue of being described as part of a dream: "they glide, like phantoms. . . / Like phantoms . . . they glide" [361-62]).

Correlative to these blended dream-wake states, Keats's story realizes the young virgin's dream by actually working against the pertinent oral tradition. According to legend, St. Agnes was a Roman

woman whom a cruel emperor persecuted to the point of having her raped, tortured, and executed but whose virginity was miraculously preserved by spiritual forces (Allott 452). But the asceticism which this traditional account upholds Keats places a negative value on by making its representative the "[n]umb" Beadsman, whose worship of the Virgin Mary — another woman who owes her virginity to a miracle — figures in the opening scene of the poem, whose cold "exterior" frames the warm interior of the lovers' story. Like the lovers in *Romeo and Juliet* (Shakespeare's play was, of course, a strong influence on *The Eve*), Madeline loses her virginity outside of marriage; but unlike Shakespeare's hapless lovers, she and Porphyro escape their persecutors. Still, as in Shakespeare, the playing off of dream-like states against harsh reality has meaning not only on an emotional and imaginative level but also in political terms.

Take, for instance, the compression in one of the passages where Keats describes the Beadsman's emotional imperviousness as he makes his way:

Along the chapel aisle by slow degrees:  
 The sculptur'd dead, on each side, seem to freeze,  
 Emprison'd in black, purgatorial rails:  
 Knights, ladies, praying in dumb orat'ries,  
 He passeth by; and his weak spirit fails  
 To think how they may ache in icy hoods and mails. (13-18)

Keats is not just speaking of a figurative imprisonment. The oppressors (usually male), here and elsewhere in his poetry, are synonymous with Cold Reality (or masculine rationality, as in the case of *Lamia*), which is relentlessly unambiguous, imprisons "on each side," and always threatens to destroy the dream shared between the lovers. This is not to say, however, that Keats divides the Rational and Imaginative entirely in terms of the conventional masculine and feminine polarity. The male characters are pleasurable infused (in the case of *The Eve of St. Agnes*, literally) with the feminine, creating the "honey'd riddle" (49), just as dream inter-



mingles or liquifies with reality in Keats's poetry. His version of the St. Agnes tradition thus works not only against the moral paradigm of virginity but also against any "pure" state of gender. Unlike the Men of Power (that the Baron and Co. represent), whose masculinist value of divide "on each side" and conquer (as opposed to the "slow degrees" of a sliding gradation) the above quotation suggests, Keats's male characters "wake into a slumberous tenderness" (247).

The eclipse of reality is the eclipse of gender: Keats's poetry "disconcerts" with its "fine excess" (*Letters* 1:238) because it so often deconstructs gender categories, the case with this passage:

Sudden a thought came like a full-blown rose,  
Flushing his brow, and in his pained heart  
Made purple riot. . . (*The Eve of St. Agnes* 136-38)

The "flush" here serves a multiplicity of purposes. It first of all suggests the tender pink of a rose that corresponds to Porphyro's emotion. But in association with Madeline (referred by name one line earlier and later [243] imaged as a rose bud ), it not only also signals Porphyro's love for her in a conventional sense but describes his complete identification with her on a number of levels. The flush dissolves the barrier and associative hierarchy between mind and body, abstract and concrete, rational and emotional, male and female, since the thought rises spontaneously in his mind like a "sudden," "full-blown rose," physically flushing his brow and simultaneously — or nearly so, since the sequence of events and the word "and" in line 137 could suggest "and then" — creating purple emotional havoc in his heart. (Porphyro, by the way, means purple.) The passage thus anticipates the climactic "efflorescent" fusion between the lovers (in stanza 36).

Christopher Ricks, in *Keats and Embarrassment*, observes that the flush or blush in Keats, as well as being descriptive, has a profound relation to interpretive ambiguity:

The sense . . . that the blush was necessarily deeply ambiguous (and one remembers Keats's speaking of "any temporary ambiguousness in their *behaviour* or their

tongues") is at home with the belief that language itself is so. When George Eliot remarks that "A blush is no language: only a dubious flag-signal which may mean either of two contradictories", she is in danger of forgetting the extent to which this shows that a blush is like, not unlike, language. (53; my italics).

Furthermore, Keats shares with Laurence Sterne an obsessive delight with blushing. Like Sterne, too, he also has a self-conscious joy of wordplay; and it is the slippage of his language, coupled with its (often) excessively rich and sensual writing, that creates the languorous dreamlike atmosphere which makes his art so "disconcerting." As well, his writing is about dreams that are almost always connected to descriptions of opulent luxury, indolence, and sensual pleasure. One dream is almost continuous with another; yet the poetry never lapses into a state of misty vagueness; it remains — perhaps paradoxically — particularized, thanks to the workings of Keats's poetic imagination. By the same token, the latter correspond to the psychological hyper-awareness of the self for the loved Other in erotically heightened states of mind which are themselves reminiscent of the primal love affair between mother and child.

\* \* \* \* \*

Keats is sympathetic to his female figures while evincing an uncomfortable awareness of this. He often images poetic creativity as the male poet-persona in some way overpowered or engulfed and losing his identity to the female. In the above-quoted letter to Benjamin Bailey, for instance, the *jouissance* of Keats's dissolved self is undermined by an anxiety about strong women and weak men; and such a countercurrent (as runs through this letter) to the delight of dissolving in the feminine is often present in his poetry. In "I stood tip-toe upon a little hill," for instance, there is a kindred awareness of being smothered, however pleasantly, in the gentle, predominantly matriarchal world of "milky" (28) paradisiacal bliss: "The soul is lost in pleasant smotherings" (132). In *The Eve of St.*

*Agnes*, Porphyro dissolves into a "solution sweet" (322) by "melting" (320) into Madeline's dream. In "Ode on Indolence," the masculine-seeming figure of Ambition is flanked by Poesy and Love.<sup>4</sup> And Lorenzo — to offer a final example of Keats's ambivalence toward female domination — after Isabella's brothers murder him, survives in her nurturant, vegetable love as the potted plant Basil (whose name is contained by, as well as being an anagrammatic permutation of, *Isabella*); and he would have flourished there indefinitely were "he" not uprooted by those same brothers.

Isabella's tears watering the plant grotesquely parody the female Muse's role of nurturing and protecting the male poet (compare *The Fall of Hyperion*'s Apollo, who "standest safe beneath th[e] statue's [i.e., Moneta's] knees" [181]). Keats seems to align himself with the female figures against the patriarchal ones; the sympathetic male character likewise frequently shares with his female lover an anxiety about the male gaze as a destructive force. Porphyro and Madeline escape unseen from the Baron and his henchmen. *Lamia* begins (with Oberon) and ends (with Apollonius) with a forbidding, nay-saying (nay-gazing) patriarchal figure (representing, in Lacanian terms, the Law/Name [Non or Nom] of the Father): "He look'd and look'd again a level — No!" (304). Rationality (a masculine quality) is here associated with death and the visible: Apollonius's death-dealing gaze destroys Lamia's imaginative world. Lamia, in her "serpent prison-house" (203), cannot "see" directly (i.e., she has non-referential knowledge), but she does dream freely. Her out-of-body spirit, soaring like poet's imaginative spirit in quest of the night-ingale, allegorizes the human imagination trapped in the prison-cell of the body. (Here we might recall that even the chastising Moneta in *The Fall of Hyperion* has an inward gaze, a "blank splendour" [269], although, significantly, like Lamia, she can confer the gift of seeing to her male charge.)

All of the sympathetic figures in *Lamia* are invisible in one way or another. Hermes, for instance, "escape[s] the sight" (10) of stern Jove at the beginning of the poem. Lamia renders the nymph invisible and elusive: "Her loveliness invisible, yet free / To wander as she loves, in liberty" (1.108-09). Keats may have intended to portray Lamia's world as the world of escapist deception (her Palace of Art owes a great deal to Satan's Pandemonium in *Paradise Lost*). Nevertheless, he shows considerable sympathy for "[p]oor" (2.255) Lamia (and all the lovers who attempt to elude the monolithic patriarchal gaze — among whom, Lamia surely must be numbered, since she is motivated, after all, by love, not by selfish ambition).

Lamia has an identity which, like that of the chameleon poet or anyone else operating under the power of negative capability, takes on many forms. Furthermore, in her weakness and strength — by her imitative and transformational capacities — she personifies Keats's perception of his own qualities. She also has his ability to escape the "dread thunderbolt" of the father (see ch.1) by retreating (for a time anyway) into an invisible, empathic, amorphous self.

Various critics have puzzled over why Lycius shows off Lamia, thereby incurring the wrath of Apollinius. Apart from answering that it provides suspense in the plot, I would argue that this forms part of a counter-discourse in Keats. Since the pleasure-seeking, the feminine, and the invisible are often clustered together in his work to represent the marginal, the showing off entails a kind of perverse pleasure in baiting, in resisting, the dominant discourse of prohibition. This ties in with a point that Michel Foucault makes, that pleasure and power are not strictly oppositional entities but discourses that feed and reinforce one another :

The pleasure that comes of exercising a power that questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out, . . . brings to light; and on the other hand, the pleasure that kindles at having to evade this power, flee from it, fool it, or travesty it. The power that lets itself be invaded by the pleasure it is pursuing; and opposite it, power asserting itself in the pleasure of showing off, scandalizing, or resisting. . . These attractions,

these evasions. these circular incitements have traced around bodies and sexes, not boundaries not to be crossed, but *perpetual spirals of power and pleasure*. (*The History of Sexuality* 1: 45)

When Lycius attempts to dissolve the unrelenting philosopher-patriarch's hard-heartedness, he assumes the ingratiating feminine role. Blushing, he utters "reconciling words" "[t]urning into sweet milk the sophist's spleen" (*Lamia* 2.171-72). The new poet-gods of the *Hyperion* poems are feminine; they swoon or shriek fairly easily.<sup>5</sup> Their passivity "works" in the lyrical poetry, but in the Miltonically-modelled epics that Keats strains to conform to they are out of place — which is why the *Hyperion* poems break down. Keats could not adapt the private feminine sensibility to an outmoded form that celebrates the male public exploit.

Significantly the first *Hyperion* breaks down at the point where Apollo "die[s] into life" (3.130). His orgasmic "wild commotions" (3.124) take place "at the gate of death" (3.126), where immortality (male ambition for fame) and femininity come together in the description of his hair: "his golden tresses famed / Kept undulation round his eager neck" (3.131-32; compare the nymph's hair of "weïrd syrops" [*Lamia* 1.107] or Lamia's "gordian shape" [1.47], "interwreathed . . . lustres" [1.52-53], and "rainbow-sided[ness]" [1.54]). At the point of crisis, Apollo lets out an orgasmic "shrie[k]" (3.135) and the poem spermatically peters out (it breaks off with "from all his limbs / Celestial. . . " while, in an inversion of gender-roles, Mnemosyne phallically upholds her arms). This fits in with what Kenneth Muir observes about *Hyperion*:

Saturn speaks of his "strong identity," his "real self"; but Apollo has no identity. He possesses to a supreme degree the negative capability that Keats had laid down as the prime essential of a poet. In other words, the old gods are *men of power*, the new gods are *men of achievement*. (215; the terms in Muir's italics are Keats's)

. . . th[is] new race of men imagined by the poet were not stronger or cleverer than their predecessors, but more sensitive and vulnerable. . . (217)

Moments of indefinite gender frequently occur in conjunction with dream-reality ambiguity. The androgynous male characters are

frequently confused as to whether they are dreaming. When Lamia breathes upon Hermes' eyes to bestow the gift of magical (in)sight that reveals to him the hidden delight of his beloved wood-nymph, a confusion about reality comes over him:

It was no dream; or say a dream it was,  
Real are the dreams of Gods, and smoothly pass  
Their pleasures in a long immortal dream.  
One warm, flush'd moment, hovering, it might seem (1.126-29)

The reader of this passage, too, "hovers" between the real and the dreamlike, the eternal and the transient, the instant flash of revelation and the drawn out swooning moment of indeterminate yet omniscient godlike pleasure. This pleasant confusion recalls Endymion's enchantment by the vision of Cynthia:

Yet it was but a dream: yet such a dream  
That never tongue, although it overteem  
With mellow utterance (1.574-76)

The delicious ambiguity of Hermes' vision modulates into another serpentine complication, significantly a reciprocal act of liberation for Lamia and Hermes that makes us wonder, Who is the beguiling serpent — the male or female? — and who the beguiled?, a question that anticipates the more deadly serious ambiguity later on concerning Lamia's versus Apollonius's "[u]nlawful magic" (2.286). The messenger of the Gods, Hermes, is likewise implicated in Lamia's serpentine seductiveness. In that regard, it is noteworthy that he frees Lamia from her serpent prison-house by means of the Caduceus, the magical rod intertwined with serpents which he possesses. Hermes "turn'd":

To the swoon'd serpent, and with languid arm,  
Delicate, put to proof the lythe Caducean charm. (1.132-33).

So, too, "languid" has a resonance with "swoon'd" that serves to reinforce an identification of Hermes with Lamia.

A mercurial Hermes is also prominent in "On a Dream," a sonnet apparently written between "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" and *Lamia*

and at a moment when Keats had given up on his first attempt at his Miltonic epic *Hyperion*. Here in miniature he embodies one of his favourite themes: escaping patriarchal tyranny into the feminine world of love. In this sonnet, he conflates the roles of Lamia and Hermes. The latter is invoked as an ambiguously gendered enchanter who eludes the phallic gaze. He "so play'd, so charm'd, so conquer'd, so bereft / The dragon-world of all its hundred [Argus] eyes" that he is able to escape, "Not to pure Ida with its snow-cold skies, / Nor unto Tempe, where Jove griev'd a day, / "But to that second circle of sad Hell" (7-9), the "flaw[ed]" (10) world of human love that the poet-speaker chooses to "fla[t] with" (14). Contrary to the Greek myth, where one expects to find Hermes avoiding Juno's wrath, the poem instead suggests a rejection of Jove, associated here with cold Olympian purity. Keats had remarked in a letter that he was disappointed with "On a Dream" for failing to capture an actual dream he had had after reading of Paolo and Francesca in the fifth canto of Dante's *Inferno*. Dreaming of that putative "region of Hell," Keats writes, was "one of the most delightful enjoyments I ever had in my life" (*Letters* 2: 91).

\* \* \* \* \*

Karen Swann, in a recent essay titled "Harassing the Muse," rather ingeniously attacks "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" as a fantasy-enactment of sexual abuse against the female. Epitomizing the plot of the poem as a form of date rape, she sees Keats's romance as typifying the chivalrous mystification of patriarchal oppression. While I do not want to strain the argument in the opposite direction and exonerate Keats utterly of that charge (there is, after all, a power struggle going on in "La Belle Dame"), I do wish to recover the sense of ambivalence in Keats towards the patriarchal mindset — something which is largely absent from Swann's reading.

Before considering in detail her interpretation of "La Belle Dame" proper, I want to address a point of hers which she thinks clinches her argument that violent power relations lie behind Keats's as well as the traditional identification of poetry with women. Connecting "La Belle Dame" with Keats's sonnet "If by dull rhymes our English must be chain'd," she supposes that Keats approves the latter's binding of Andromeda (and presumably of the sonnet form as well, since the fettering of it is analogous to Andromeda's). Her reading, however, misses the irony of the fact that all the measurements in the sonnet — which she rightly identifies — are deliberate negatives. Hence, the bound(ed) female images represent the undesirable restrictions and rigidity that men impose upon the language in the outworn and formulaic structure that Keats is rebelling against. (That is why he eventually abandoned the sonnet form and turned to the ode, which allowed for a more natural use of language to accommodate the vicissitudes of emotion and thought.) Moreover, the myth of Andromeda that Keats is alluding to is as much about her release from bondage as about her confinement. Nor, if we are interpreting this poem with regard to its female images, should we overlook (as Swann does) a subtextual tragic point about the Midas myth as Keats evokes it — that the Cretan King's miserly greed led to the eternal loss of his beloved daughter, whom he inadvertently transformed into an inanimate gold statue — from which we are meant to infer the lifelessness of institutionalized art (the product of the miserly or narrow imagination that chooses to perpetuate the "dead leaves" [12] of past achievements). More significant still, Swann understands the sonnet's last line as if it consisted only of "she will be bound." But while those words by themselves neatly fit her thesis that the poem demonstrates chivalric mystification of sexual oppression, in Keats's text they are followed by "with garlands of *her own*." (my italics). The three words I have emphasized complicate the image of the bound woman in a way that, at the least, makes for



a delicate ambivalence towards gender, and one that is typical of virtually all of Keats's poetry.

Swann reads "La Belle Dame" as endorsing sexual violation: the knight first encounters the lady as wild and free, but "although he seems to find this self-abandonment smiting, his first impulse is still to control her, to bind her, even with lovely chains: he makes a 'garland for her head,' 'bracelets' and a 'fragrant zone'" (88). Swann interprets the knight's actions as being abusively forceful and the lady's responses as passive sexual services, so that "the exchange between lady and knight looks less like a domestic idyll or a fatal encounter and more like a scene of harassment" (89): "we are tempted to interpret this encounter through a familiar romance plot — recognizing not the domestic angel but a false Florimel, a Duessa, a Morgan le Fay, or a belle dame sans merci, not the ideal but the fatally ambiguous woman" (88).

I would argue, however, that "La Belle Dame," though undeniably presenting a male point of view, admits of a more complex, more ambivalent reading: that Keats is both tempting us to view the faery lady along such stereotypical lines as Swann suggests and critiquing the tradition from which such stereotypes derive. My case depends first of all on a *donnée* that Swann notes but does not satisfactorily comment on: namely, that the Belle Dame gains power over the knight in her interactions with him. On the other hand, to see the poem as consisting merely of a series of actions is to reduce it to the purely "actual," a reading which the poem's insistent dreaminess resists. Furthermore, the dynamic plural shifts of meaning — shifts which the text itself draws attention to — ambiguate the "real" actions of the poem, complicating its various dichotomies.

The beginning of the poem sets up an antithesis of lack and plenitude within the questions posed to the knight:

The sedge has wither'd from the lake,  
And no birds sing. (3-4)

The squirrel's granary is full,  
And the harvest's done. (7-8)

Yet this is a false antithesis. There is no joyous sense of fullness or completion in the second verse, any more than there is in the first, in part because the word "full" is undercut by the clipped sound and negative overtones of "done." The real completion - outside both the natural and the social order - is the faery world of the lady, who is described as being "[f]ull beautiful" (14). In relation to her "fairy's song" (24), the repetition of "wild" ("her eyes were wild" [16], "honey wild" [26], "her wild, wild eyes" [31]) and the words "sidelong" and "bend" (23) likewise suggest an imaginative potentiality outside the restrictive social order. She feeds all the appetites, earthly and imaginative ("meads" [13] carries the homophonic association of intoxicating meed). The sense of lack only returns in the "starv'd lips" and "gaped wide" (41-42) of the ghoulish dream of the men.

If, then, we are tempted to read the faery lady as a *femme fatale*, we should attach an equal sense of horror to the men, to the kings, princes and warriors, the Men of Power whom Keats condemns in his other writings. The death-palour and horridness of their warning suggests the empty hollow of the skull (their "horrid warning gaped wide" [42]) and the anxiety of castration. Yet their deathliness may refer to a death-in-life. Thus part of the indeterminacy of the poem comes from its divided allegiance, to the men and the faery lady.

As so often in Keats's poetry, the categories in "La Belle Dame" are never strict because they take on elements of each other. "Begone, foul dream!" (2.271) Apollonius cries just before his phallic gaze impales Lamia. If tradition urges us to read Lamia as a deceiving temptress (something which Keats's sympathetic depiction of her resists), then Apollonius, by reason of the counterclaim that his "juggling" (277) and "demon eyes" (289) support, may be guilty of a more serious, death-dealing chicanery. So, too, if "La Belle Dame" encourages the idea that the lady is an illusion — or if, in terms of

Swann's Lacanian reading, "'the Woman does not exist' except as fantasmatic construct" (90) — it equally works against that notion since the men, too, occurring in and as the knight's "*latest* dream" (35; my italics), are a likewise phantasm, and a more ghoulish one.

The ambiguity here as to what is real, what is nightmare recalls the description of the enemies of love in the final verse of *The Eve of St. Agnes*: of the Baron and "all his warrior-guests . . . long be-nightmar'd" (373-75). The hyphenated "be-nightmar'd" signifies not only that these "warriors" are having bad dreams (their just deserts as cruel oppressors), but also their *being* a nightmare (from the point of view of the escaping lovers). In like fashion, *Lamia* undermines the notion of a single stable (political) reality. As Martha Nochimson points out in her study of *Lamia*, "Keats refuses to identify either the world of Corinth and Apollonius or the world of Lamia as reality. On first perceiving Lamia, Lycius 'from one trance was wakening / Into another'" (35).

We tend to judge the lady in "La Belle Dame" as we do Lamia, through the poem's incriminating title. Yet we might well ask, as Keats does in the different context of his letter to Bailey, "Is this Fact or prejudice?"<sup>6</sup> Is it Fact, for example, that the knight is in thrall to the lady sans merci whose physical abandonment of him leaves him soul sickened in non-comprehending bewilderment? Is he not as much at the mercy of the compassionless men whose arrival announces (literally) the lady's absence (*sans* = without)? As those phantom Men of Power would have it, they are justly exposing the lady as an delusive enchantress. But may it not be equally accurate to see them as unjustly evicting her from the Symbolic realm? That alternative opens another in so far as we can view them as standing for the forbidding Law of the Father — "forbidding" in the sense of prohibitive but also stern, repellant. In such Lacanian terms, the Lack, or horror of castration, inscribed on their "starved lips" and vented in their "warning gap[ing] wide" is, according to them, wholly

owing to the lady's devastating effect. But while she possibly has the status of a dream, the poem none the less represents her as presence, fullness; so that any absence afflicting them would seem to be their responsibility (and, even more significantly, a consequence of what they say), not an attribute of her. After all, it is the phantom men who "cried — 'La belle dame sans merci'" (40), thereby censoriously labelling her — fixing her not only by naming her, but by giving her an appellation which marks her as unambiguously foreign or other.

Swann is no doubt right to explode the myth of chivalry in male-authored texts as obfuscating the fact of oppressive social conditions. But such fantasies can also operate (simultaneously) in another, and perhaps opposite, direction. Certainly a *prima facie* case of that sort can be made for "La Belle Dame" on the basis of the fact that it immediately juxtaposes two sets of questions (each beginning, "What can ail thee . . . ?") and thus implies a parallel as well as a contrast between the lack and fullness informing each of them respectively and (as we have seen) the poem as a whole. At the same time, that kind of connection of opposites prepares us for the overlapping of the poem's other antitheses: dream/ nightmare, female/male, and fullness/absence. Hence "La Belle Dame" refuses to satisfy "the passion that animates us as readers of narrative" as Roland Barthes identifies it: that is, "the passion for . . . meaning" (cited in Brooks, 282). More precisely, the poem by its irresolution denies us "the full predication, [the] completion of the codes in a 'plenitude' of signification" that we find in Barthes' "'classical' or 'readable' text" (Brooks 282). In this regard, it can be thought of as analogous to its own "pacing steed"; for in its display of erotic, "unbound energy" (Brooks 289), it not only moves apace rather than staying put but also (again, so to speak) paces back and forth between its multiple positions.

To be sure, the knight attempts to bind the Lady-muse with garlands and bracelets. But those physical objects dissolve into a decidedly ambiguous (and erotically suggestive) "fragrant zone" (18) which would seem to aromatically enwrap him as much as her. He is equally drawn into her circle, the elfin grot to which she takes him, a magic cave or womb outside the Symbolic order. The various repetitions (and perhaps most notably, the four *wild*'s corresponding to the knight's four kisses) likewise inscribe a circle that draws us into its magic enclosure — but not closure — of meaning. The same is true for the reiteration of the first verse in the last (with its unsatisfyingly vague "this" offered up as if it were a neat and final explanation), the effect of which is to create something of a narrative loop that returns us, albeit with a different consciousness, to the beginning of the poem.

"La Belle Dame" derives tremendous pathos from the desire to recover a lost dream. The knight is like Alain-Fournier's adolescent protagonist in *Le Grand Meaulnes*, another Romantic text that combines dream and reality, as he wanders in the forest searching for the vanished glamorous world of Le Grand Meaulnes, whose bliss he had savoured only too briefly and completely. But the knight's loss of the faery lady (who had fed him and lulled him to sleep) may also bring to mind a child's separation from its mother. In this respect, the knight's contradictory desire to possess and control the faery lady and be possessed by her may be seen, first, as reflecting the larger workings of the narrative in its repetition of the motif of presence and loss, and thence as enacting the child's symbolic game of the appearing-and-disappearing mother that Freud treats at some length.

Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* deals with this symbolic game as a performance enabling the child to develop a sense of mastery over his separation anxiety. But as Peter Brooks points out in the course of relating that analysis to the effect of narrative

repetition in an essay titled "Freud's Masterplot," Freud himself became dissatisfied with his original explanation. His consequent modification of it, in a paper on "The Uncanny," includes a further discovery: that such repetition-compulsion — the desire to repeat, rather than just remember, repressed thoughts — is also a contradictory practise, one born not only of a desire for mastery but also (in Brooks's words) of a "sense of being fatefully subject to a 'perpetual recurrence of the same thing,'" of being "pursu[ed] by a daemonic power" (287). While Brooks himself sees repetition in all its literary forms, including "repeat, recall, symmetry," and the like, as a "binding of textual energies that allows them to be *mastered* by putting them into serviceable form within the energetic economy of the narrative" (289; my italics), the hypothesis of Freud's that he calls attention to lends itself to a different application in regard to "La Belle Dame." For just as the knight fails to "bind" or "master" entirely the lady, so the poem, despite its repetitions, likewise fails to master entirely its textual energies (although it attempts to do so).

This failure is partly owing to the slippage of the "daemonic power" of the uncanny between the lady and the phantom kings; but it is also a consequence of the fact that the first repetition is in the form of a question. Shifting Brooks's argument from Freudian to Lacanian terms, we can say that the poem oscillates between the Imaginary and the Symbolic in its desire to control or bind its instinctive energy and its desire to repeat; it is "unsettling," or uncanny, because — unlike, say, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* — it does not arrive at any resolution.

The narrative irresolution relates to other problematical expressions in "La Belle Dame" indicative of ambivalence towards the patriarchal establishment. Swann asserts that while the lady simply disappears, the knight stands to gain membership in the "all-male community" (90). His lingering, however, would seem to sug-

gest the opposite: that he does not show the slightest inclination to join those ranks. On the contrary, he is "alone," and his "loitering" suggests that he hopes for the lady's return. His loitering, moreover, is an act of recreance. As Wolfson remarks, the questions put to the knight suggest "a slightly chiding 'what ails you?' reproach for the appearance of negligence" (*Interrogative* 297). The squirrel's granary is full and the harvest is done, but the knight just hangs around in idleness. His state of mind is recreant; he is alone in a no *man's* land, haunted and desiring a return to otherness, a state of being in which he is an outlaw.<sup>7</sup>

His recreance can be taken as crucial to this poem's radical ambiguity. To be recreant is to be A.W.O.L., to be in an unsanctioned place. "Knight-at-arms" (Keats's portmanteau word for men-at-arms and knight-in-arms) suggests this ambivalence. Is the knight (at arms) against the lady or with (in the arms of) her? The gaps in the poem leave space for either possibility and hence allow us to interpret "La Belle Dame" itself as being for or against tradition.

Although the last verse repeats most of the first verbatim, there are certain key differences. For one, there is a hint of perverse defiance to the word "though" in "though the sedge is wither'd from the lake" (47). More crucially, the use of the word "sojourn," two lines earlier, is telling since it means to abide temporarily in a foreign land. It may thus lead us to ask, what is "foreign," what alienating: the cold hillside of patriarchal Law, the Name (naming) and prohibition of the father, or the ambiguous imaginary order (whose oxymoron-filled "language strange" may effectively alienate us from familiar speech and the patriarchal order that such speech sanctions)?

There is another aspect to "La Belle Dame" that subverts any simple, or "monological," reading (in Mikhail Bakhtin's sense): a sensuous language that here, as in *Lamia*, allies itself with the faery lady's "sidelong" song. In this regard, it is telling that Keats has named

this and other late ballads of his after its female principal; for in a sense it is their language which the poems speak. As Wolfson says, "the balladeer repeats the spell of that language strange in the title of his own song" (*Interrogative* 300). "Language strange" is Keats's phrase, not Wolfson's; and as it figures in "And sure in language strange she said — 'I love thee true'" ("La Belle Dame" 27-28), it imparts the kind of instability to certainty and truth which, if it does not call into question the fixity of order and meaning altogether (but cf. Keats to Bailey: "nothing in this world is provable"), at least intimates that in the faery world language is ambivalent and meaning deferred. On similar grounds, the sensuality of Keats's writing is inseparable from its ambiguity, particularly inasmuch as the sensuous language threatens to subvert the traditional philosophical dichotomy, which his poetry so often calls attention to, that privileges body over mind.

To put the point another way, the poet uses the language of the temptress; he *is* the seductress. In "Imitation of Spenser," Keats (with little selfconsciousness) "dipp'd luxuriously" (28) into and transformed stock phrases, so that he already appears in that very first extant poem of his as the chameleon and androgynous poet who boasts that he can outseduce the seductress: "I could e'en Dido of her grief *beguile*; / Or rob from . . . Lear" his raging bitterness (21-22; my italics). The "or" separating those two assertions might suggest a gender difference between the "beguiler" and the "robber." But that idea cannot withstand our realization that the latter, Lear's comforter, must (in the first instance, as it were) be Cordelia, whose implicit identification with the poet reinforces his assumption of the female role. On the other hand, at another level of irony, Keats-as-female is undercut by masculine ambition and the rivalry ("the king-fisher . . . / Vieing with fish" 10-11) that that entails: he will out-woman Woman, he will rob or usurp the "aged" king. This difference-as-sameness, aligned with the magical and feminine, the poem



captures in the image of the swan mirrored differently, as Other, in the water:

There saw the swan his neck of arched snow,  
And oar'd himself along with majesty  
Sparkled his jetty eyes; his feet did show  
Beneath the waves like Afric's ebony,  
And on his back a fay reclined voluptuously. (14-18)

Language in Keats's poetry is eternally other in the sense the just-quoted passage exemplifies: it is, metaphorically speaking, a seductress, a "deceiving elf." It is true that Keats does not intend such metaphors as compliments. But before we dogmatically assume that they are univocal terms of condemnation, we should reflect on the fact that a brand which Lamia bears, "the demon's self" (1.56), while it stamps disapproval more clearly than does the Nightingale Ode's "elf," is also one that he applies to his own art in the "Ode on Indolence" (where he speaks of "my demon Poesy" [40]).

His increasing self-consciousness about his own "mawkish" language, his own "language strange," is perhaps nowhere better expressed than in those passages that establish a connection between the protagonist's fascination with a powerfully enchanting female figure and his equally powerful but ambiguous speech. In this respect, "La Belle Dame" merits comparison with the moment in *Endymion*, for instance, when Endymion's awe for Cynthia, who has been appearing to him in visions increasingly strange, eventuates in his loss of his identity (characteristically in Keats, Endymion at this point is "gulf'd in a tumultuous swim" [l.571], or in other words dissolves into the feminine Imaginary):

Yet it was but a dream: yet such a dream.  
That never tongue, although it overteem  
With mellow utterance, like a cavern spring  
Could figure out and to conception bring  
All I beheld and felt. (l.574-78)

Here, in this dream-space, everything is problematical ("Yet . . . but, yet; That never . . . although"). Indeed, as these lines express disor-

ientation, they also tend toward liquidating categorical thinking ("conception") as they represent language as excess ("overteem"), as non-speech ("never tongue"), and finally as a flowing from a hidden spring (an image of the way these lines themselves are working that also describes Keats's letter to Bailey as quoted above).

A similar sensuous flow introjects itself into *Lamia*, starting with the moment when she is introduced:

She was a gordian shape of dazzling hue,  
-----

And full of silver moons, that, as she breathed,  
Dissolv'd, or brighter shone, or interwreathed  
Their lustres with the gloomier tapestries —  
So rainbow-sided, touch'd with miseries,  
She seemed, at once, some penanced lady elf,  
Some demon's mistress, or the demon's self.  
-----

Her throat was serpent, but the words she spake  
Came, as through bubbling honey, for Love's sake. (1.47, 51-56, 64-65)

Such a gordian complication<sup>8</sup> of ambivalent responses is likewise reflected in *Lamia*'s concluding line, which describes Lycius's corpse: "And, in its marriage robe, the heavy body wound." It seems appropriate that the last image we are given, of his "heavy body," allows a final, lingering hint of the sensuous to triumph, figuratively at least, over cold philosophy. Lycius, at least in death, is married to Lamia. But it is a Blakean marriage of irreconcilable contraries. "Wound" suggests his final sympathy with her in its evocation of a coiled serpent; but sounded another way, it also implies a wounded body or castrated male and thereby intimates the penalty of emasculation that such an identification risks. Finally, "wound" evokes the irreconcilable breach between these dichotomies that recalls the terror in "God of the Meridian": of a "terrible division," "a gulf austere / To be fill'd with worldly fear" (6-8).

Virtually all of Keats's poetry is wound up in and bears the wounds of such conflicting impulses. His inclination towards sensuous particularity, evident not only in the images he uses but also

the pleasurable flow of his poetic language, is at odds with his aspiration towards epic-tragic grandeur and the arduous goal of maintaining a single and coherent (masculine) gender identity. The resultant tension, reflected in what I have called Keats's boundary confusions — and perhaps most notably, in his blurring of any line of demarcation between dream and reality — persists to the end, and contributes as mightily to the deep ambivalence of the Nightingale and Urn odes as it does to "La Belle Dame Sans Merci."

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The most well-known instance of the dream-or-reality dilemma in Keats is the one which concludes the "Ode to a Nightingale." By comparison, "Ode on a Grecian Urn," with its apparently resolute ending, seems at first sight to be virtually the Nightingale's diametrical opposite. I shall argue, however, that the Urn is its companion poem, its "twin" (Vendler 92), and that the two have to be connected with and read through one another, in something of the way that each of Blake's Songs of Experience needs to be referred to its complementary Song of Innocence (and vice versa). This is to imply not that the Nightingale (Ode) is "innocent" and the Urn "experienced" in the Blakean sense, but rather that the two odes enrich, complicate, and even subvert one another. To put the point differently, if "La Belle Dame" were analytically sundered so as to separate two of its meaningful components, its Imaginary half would roughly correspond to the Nightingale and its Symbolic to the Grecian Urn. Such a comparative approach, moreover, reveals that structural and thematic differences between the two odes directly relate to their differing representations of femaleness.

It is significant that the ambiguity concerning gender in the Nightingale Ode exists in conjunction with an open-endedness which is not just an effect of its final question, but part of the atmosphere of the poem as a whole. The ode moves fluently between closeness

and withdrawal, empathy and distance. Meanwhile, its nightingale, "in full-throated ease," becomes a signifier subsuming both the natural bird and a symbol for art while correlatively the ode associates it with the female (the "Dryad of the trees" [7]) and represents it as sexless (a disembodied voice or song) (Vendler 82).

Like "La Belle Dame," the Nightingale Ode identifies the female with the magical and sensuous; but it also identifies its poet-speaker (whom I shall hereafter simply call the poet) with the female to a degree that "La Belle Dame" does not nearly equal. The poet's desire to join the nightingale in some pastoral paradise, to "leave the world unseen / And with thee fade away into the forest dim" (19-20), does, after all, occupy far more than a brief moment; indeed, it can be said to dominate the ode. Nor does the gender of the nightingale (in the poem as well as by tradition) supply the only reason for characterizing the poet's impulse as I have. For the same point is also inscribed in the poem's (and poet's) movement towards the nightingale's world. The second stanza, celebrating the intoxicating pleasure of wine, is populated by female deities: "the deep-delved earth, / Tasting of Flora . . . Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene" (12-16). Yet when harsh reality threatens to intrude on the dream (in stanza 3) and the poet spirits himself away on the wings of imagination (stanza 4), his express repudiation of physical intoxicants as the means for this ascent is directed towards a male, not a female, deity: "Not chariot-ed by Bacchus and his pards" (32). Even if we totally discount the notion that "pards" is suspiciously close to "bards," it is hard to overlook the evocation of the male world of war in "chariot-ed," especially when the latter half of this same stanza positively depicts a female world of moonlight and gentleness:

Already with thee! tender is the night,  
And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne . . . (35-36)

Cynthia of the *Endymion* poems is thus reinstated, re-enthroned as the "Queen-Moon . . . / Clustered around by all her starry Fays" (36-

37). "[H]ere," in this faery world of magical transformation, "there is no light" (38), traditionally a masculine symbol of metaphysical presence, be it God's light, the sunlight of Apollo, or the Platonic light of philosophical truth.

At this point, the poet describes the sensual pleasures of Nature with abandon. It is particularly telling, however, that he does so while hidden. His invisibility cannot be taken as just a kind of corollary of Absolute Imagination (an interpretation we might give it in so far as he is hidden by virtue of "viewless wings" (33), but not in consideration of his being "cover'd up in leaves" [47]). We have already noticed how recurrent is Keats's anxiety over the dread thunderbolts of the masculine gaze and how often he aligns himself with a female figure who eludes that gaze. It is surely, then, no mere coincidence that he revels in the sensual at a moment when invisibility defends him from that gaze, especially when he celebrates, among other things, "the fruit-tree wild" (45), a phrase whose adjective recalls the "wild" Otherworldliness of "La Belle Dame."

Such celebrations, however, are rarely "pure" in Keats. This is a rule to which the Nightingale is no exception. On the contrary, it shows a curious obedience to that proposition; for while dealing with the sensual for the most part obliquely rather than unambivalently embracing it, this poem of Keats's in effect renounces the sensual at the very moment of recuperating it ("I cannot see. . . / Nor. . ." [41-42]). So, too — as has often been noted — even the most sensuous passage of stanza 5, for example, is tainted by a suspicion of decay (perhaps concealed in those otherwise protective covering leaves) that foreshadows death in the next stanza.

In calling upon the male figure of Death, the poet sounds as if he were himself the seductive female lover: "Call'd him soft names in many a *mused* rhyme" (53; my italics). He has become — as indeed the entire poem has — "mused" or feminized. Similarly, the world that

the poet (and the Nightingale) seeks escape from is not only temporal, or mortal, but one fraught with the values of competitive rivalry ("hungry generations" [62]) and hierarchical station ("emperor and clown" [64]) symptomatic of male ambition.

At the point of the most sublime near-union ("self-same") with the nightingale, the symbol for the highest pitch of the soaring poetic imagination, the poet's empathy with femaleness likewise approaches the absolute — this in the most detailed and personalized human image of suffering in the ode: "Perhaps the self-same song . . . found a path / *Through* the sad heart of Ruth" (65-66; my italics).<sup>9</sup> The fusion, however, primarily involves the nightingale and Ruth (who, as "through" tells us, mediates between the bird and the poet). Furthermore, it begins to disintegrate almost immediately — or even in advance of its occurrence — thanks to the reservation or the holding back that "[p]erhaps" introjects. What instantly follows, displacing any idea of union, is an image of isolation and alienation: Ruth as "sad heart[ed]" gleaner in a foreign field, "sick for home" and standing "in tears amid the alien corn" [66-67].

The concluding three lines of this seventh stanza intimate the motive for the displacement in their intense expression of fear regarding the consequences of union, or openness:

The same that oft-times hath  
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam  
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn. (68-70)

The "charm'd magic casements," as they open onto the chaos resulting from the loss or lack of an ego/gender-boundary, become "perilous" and the faery lands "forlorn." The watery submersion of identity is here characterized as hazardous ("foam"; "perilous seas"). "Forlorn" anticipates, but does not yet unmistakably toll, the transition from the out-of-body imaginative soaring, or ecstasy, to the return to the limited self; but the subsequent use of the same word (which is also the only one which the poem self-consciously names

as such) establishes an echo-effect (Chase 223) which may, by a convoluted process of thought (perhaps involving the origin of *echo*) bring to mind Lacan's theory of the mirror-stage of discovery of self and otherness.<sup>10</sup>

Once the poet has returned, albeit reluctantly, from this magical transformation to his own body and gender, the old boundary lines and dichotomies are re-established. For one, the play on "soul" (72) in "sole self" suggests that mind has become disassociated from body. As the poet withdraws from his empathic state into self-isolation, what was previously the sublime imagination referred to as "Poesy" (stanza 4) is now demoted to the second-class imagination, mere "fancy."<sup>11</sup> This in turn is connected to the ode's reinstatement of the traditional view of the female. The nightingale retains that gender-value — indeed, is perhaps more emphatically associated with the female now than anywhere else in the ode — but "she" is denigrated as the delusive enchantress: she is no longer a "starry Fa[y]" but a "deceiving elf" (74). Indeed, however regretful the poet's words are, however gentle he is in chiding her (in an envoie whose ambivalence brings to mind the farewell to the "Syren Romance" of "On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again"), he voices his strongest expression of disapproval:

Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well  
As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf. (73-74)

Yet with the return to the self and the loss of the nightingale to the lowest depths of repression ("buried deep" [77]), the poem ends on a note of irresolvable conflict and a sense of unreality:

Was it a vision, or a waking dream?  
Fled is that music: — Do I wake or sleep?

Nevertheless, we should not lose sight of the fact that the Nightingale Ode all along identifies the flight of "Poesy" with an openness which is profoundly related to female otherness. Put in the terms Keats uses in one of his letters, the ode intimates that poetic

creativity has more to do with the female flower than the male bee, so to speak ("we should rather be the flower than the Bee," he writes, adding: ". . . and who shall say between Man and Woman which is the most delighted?" [*Letters* 1: 232]). It is not simply the case that positive female presences for the most part dominate the poem; the female also informs the ode's (fluid and open) structure, its language (sensuous to the point of languor), and its movement (wavelike and hence natural —or, as Richard Harter Fogle describes it, a "complex of feeling and thought which move in alternate swellings and subsidences, a series of waves, each with its attendant trough" [*Odes* 40]).

In dealing with the relation of art to actual experience or reality, the Nightingale Ode frames those concerns within the context of the natural world. The nightingale itself, though signifying the supernatural and the symbolic, not the natural order (it is, after all, immortal, "not born for death" [61]), nevertheless integrates nature (the birdsong of the natural world) with culture (the art of music, suggested by such words as "requiem" (60) and "anthem" (75) (Vendler 97). But just as the symbolic merges with the natural in it, so the ode blends the natural images with literary and mythological references. The wine, for instance, "tast[es] of Flora . . . , Dance, and Provençal song," and its cooling "a long age" in the earth suggests literary as well as natural time (in somewhat the same way that "Madeline asleep in lap of legends old" does in *St. Agnes* [135]). Still, the total effect is very "natural": art, that is, subtly infuses the natural or mythological world.

This is not the case with the Urn Ode in its preoccupation with the relationship of art to an outside world. The division between the natural and the artificial there is (to all appearances at least) sharply defined. Correlative to what we may style this shift from the integrative to the segregated, or analytical, we move from the predominantly temperate atmosphere ("Cool'd" [12], "warm" [15]) of



the Nightingale to the extremes of the Urn ("Burning forehead" [30], "Cold Pastoral" [45]) — and from escape (from the realm of the mortal) to entrapment (in the ideal).

The point of view of the two poems is relevant here as well. In the Nightingale Ode, Keats adopts "the first-person and self-expressive voice, imitative of the bird's own"; in the Urn he turns to "the impersonal voice of the contemplative poet-spectator" and "abandons for good the idea of an effortless, purely spontaneous, and socially indifferent art" (Vendler 109). It is no coincidence that in making these shifts — from natural to artificial, from personal to critically detached — the poem that self-consciously titles itself as being "on" an art object has an entirely different perspective on the relations between men and women.

The switch from "nonconceptual" to "representational" art (Vendler 116) enforces, as it were, corresponding changes in the representation of women. Whereas any boundary between male subject and female object in the Nightingale was relatively fluid and the gender of both poet and bird relatively amorphous, in the Urn gender distinctions are fixed in patriarchal relations of power. The gentleness and fluidity of the Nightingale world become the thematically, technically, and emotionally, "overwrought" (42) world of brutality and sexual assault in the Urn. There the urn itself is an "unravish'd bride" (1), the youths "winning near the goal" (18) pursue "maidens loth" (8), and a priest leads a heifer to her sacrifice.

In going from the Nightingale Ode to the Urn, we shift from the art of music to plastic art; and this, too, is not arbitrary with respect to the politics of gender. The females in the Urn Ode are notably silent; the urn itself is a "bride of quietness" (1), a "foster-child of silence" (2), a "silent form" (44) suggestive of purity and chastity; by extension the "little" town (35) — the diminutive carries the suggestion of femininity — is silent, empty and desolate. In contrast, the (traditionally female) nightingale has a voice and is heard; in-

deed, she "pour[s] forth [her] soul abroad . . . in ecstasy" (57) and "singest of summer in full-throated ease" (10). In its most empathic moments, then, the Nightingale Ode valorizes the very female voice traditionally depicted (also by Keats himself) as threatening and destructive: the siren song. The nightingale's voice is like the "sidelong" song of the faery lady in "La Belle Dame," the voice of *jouissance* connected to the sensuous, to maternal presence and comfort, and to plenitude.<sup>12</sup>

While Keats's urn, too, is female, its silence and emptiness point to a lack, a void, an absence. Although there is the same movement as in the Nightingale — i.e., emotional and intellectual involvement and subsequent withdrawal — the urn's "natural" scenes, towards which the empathy of the poet is directed, are ironically mediated by that same artifact since they are an artificial creation on (and of) it. Here the "men and maidens" are not of flesh and blood, but of "marble . . . overwrought" (42); they are cold and fixed, like the gender relations that the ode defines as operating between them.

The integration of all the various elements in the Nightingale relating to the unselfconsciousness of the bird points to a naïve view of art as direct communication between equals. Artistic selfconsciousness in the Urn, on the other hand, is connected to appropriation and power: it represents, indeed embodies, the authority of an art that would master or "possess" its subject, which thereby becomes its object.

We have here, in sum, shifted from the pleasure principle to the reality principle, from "No generations tread thee down" to the "trodden weed." The gender distinctions in the Urn are correlative both to this shift and to the putative message of the poem as it apparently declares the superiority of art over nature. Yet the history of critical disagreement over that last matter — over what the Urn's concluding lines mean and whether "truth" in them indicates a (neo-)Platonic or Aristotelian or some other philosophical

position — is testimony to the ode's own contradictory messages. By its contradictions and indeterminacies, moreover, the ode (as I shall argue) reveals an astonishing awareness: that the privileging of art over nature, spirit over flesh, male over female constitutes a violation of a kind not unlike the one the urn/Urn represents as confronting its always-about-to-be victimized females.

Read together, the two odes make for an extraordinary gordian knot of complication regarding gender. Although the Nightingale presents the female in traditional terms, as "natural" and "unselfconscious," it also deconstructs such traditional polarities. Addressed to the nightingale (as equal subject) rather than being a poem on the nightingale (as lesser, object), the ode reinforces the empathic identification of the male poet with his/that Muse by integrating art with nature and implicitly valorizing sensual pleasure, tenderness, and so forth. Nor, I would argue, does the Urn reject those values so much as assert that they — and the relations they entail — do not exist in the real world of market economies and exploitative power arrangements. Indeed, while it propagates them by reserving self-consciousness as a male attribute (if, that is, we take its impersonal poet-spectator and questioner to be a man), the Urn itself extends this self-awareness to comprehend those exploitative arrangements (i.e., evoke a consciousness of them). Here the urn itself offers the most notable example. Like the Virgin Mary, the virgin-bride urn is a male representation of the female, so that like an artifact (indeed, as the artifact which "urn" names her as being) she is (in traditional parlance) *man-made*. Yet that is not simply a given, but an assumption which the ode invites us to examine.

The Urn especially encourages that kind of critical reading inasmuch as a large part of it is structured as a series of questions which, predicated as they are on the fact of the sexual harassment of women, pose a forceful assault on the patriarchal mind-set:

What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?

What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape? (9-10)

Such questions, when viewed from a gender perspective, sensitize us to what is concealed in the abstract assertions they give way to. "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter" (11-12) accordingly appears not just as an affirmation of the spiritual, or imaginative, ear at the expense of the sensual. It also (in consequence) repudiates the sensual (predominantly female and natural) world of the nightingale in particular, since, as Vendler points out (116), it/she is most associated with the art of music. At the same time, it introduces the notion of a hierarchy of mind over body. In that respect, it gets reinforcement from the following line, "Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd," whose ambiguous last word (which may refer to material as well as emotional value) links the hierarchical privileging of abstract intellect and economics.

The relation between economic and aesthetic value-judgments that "more endear'd" suggests is not gratuitous. The key to their connection lies with the Elgin Marbles. Keats's visit to the British Museum to see them led to his writing of the sonnet (which I discuss in chapter 1) in whose title they figure by name. But, as is generally acknowledged, they were also a source of inspiration for Keats's *Urn*. There, however, they are not named; nor do we find anywhere in Keats an acknowledgment of what he surely knew about them—viz., that England's seizure of them from the Parthenon resulted in a public furor among the British public.

All of this forms the basis for Marjorie Garson's argument in "Bodily Harm: Keats's Figures in the 'Ode on a Graecian Urn.'" On the premise that the *Urn* suppresses the events underlying it, she spells out the connection between England's act of appropriating Greece's cultural icons and Keats's act of appropriating that appropriation by writing his "Ode on a Grecian Urn":

To write an ode was to appropriate the language of cultural power; to write an ecphrastic poem was in 1819 to employ a fashionable form with distinct academic and class associations. What better genre could be chosen by a young poet ardently

hoping for membership in a pantheon from which his detractors had sought to exclude him at least partly on grounds of social class? A successful attempt to capture in words a cultural icon like the urn would win him permanent place of honour in a culture that had invested heavily in such artefacts and in the values they had been made to stand for. (37)

At this point, Garson connects the ode's suppressing the fact of the appropriation of Greek culture (from which seizure Britain stood to gain political and material power) to its suppression of sexual politics. The historical and ideological link between them comes from the public debates over the Marbles, debates in which the violated woman was repeatedly invoked to convey the notion that "[a] ravaged culture is metaphorically female" (Garson 40). Garson contends that Keats's ode not only reenacts these same metaphors but also consistently distracts us from them.

"What men or gods are these?" draws attention to the provenance of the urn in a potentially topical way. . . . However, even critics who have sought the urn have not tended to give the poem a political reading. And for good reason. The poem does not really want to know what men or gods these are, for any archaeological answer would defeat the claim to universality upon which it bases its own appropriation of Greekness. It poses its questions so that they are not really questions, to make sure that they are not really answered. The rhetoric successfully excludes the very political issues the opening questions might seem to raise. (41-42)

Without disputing Garson's claims, I would shift the emphasis of her argument: from the question of how the poem "successfully" suppresses its self-critical moments to the question of how it negotiates them.

Garson herself admits in the course of her essay that the ode is problematical. I have just quoted her as saying that the ode's opening questions "dra[w] attention to" their historical context and "raise" "the very political issues" they would rhetorically "exclud[e]." Other assertions she makes likewise serve to raise my question at least as much as they do hers — e.g., "the metaphor of rape is more applicable to Keats's own project than the poem's serene and enigmatic ending might suggest" (44); or "by extracting from the urn its neatly

chiastic aphorism, 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,' Keats imposes on the poem at least a rhetorical circularity" (46).

I contend that those areas which are enigmatic and circular are precisely the ones where the text *alerts* us to its suppressions, i.e., is "unreadable" in Shoshana Felman's sense . . . and thereby expresses a profound ambivalence towards the patriarchal value-system. As testimony for the first part of that claim, I would cite T.S. Eliot's comment (perhaps his most *unwittingly* sagacious critical remark) on the Urn's final lines: "Th[is] statement of Keats seems to me meaningless: or perhaps the fact that it is grammatically meaningless *conceals another meaning from me*" (qtd. in Murry, 72; my italics).

While recognizing that concealment of this sort (too) operates in the ode, Garson downplays it. Yet the Urn's politico-historical context as she establishes it reinforces the impossibility of a politically innocent reading of the ode. "Reinforces" is the proper word, because a disturbed consciousness of the ode's masculinist values antedates feminist criticism. Earl Wasserman, for example, goes to some trouble to apologize for those values in the course of interpreting the Urn in *The Finer Tone* (1953):

Only our fecund talent for recognizing the rapacity of love, and not anything in the explicit description, leads us to see the pursuit and struggle as a love-game instead of a brutality; and it is significant that instead of "What mad pursuit?" Keats originally wrote, "What love? what dance," but revised, no doubt in order to keep the image of the lovers beneath the threshold of conscious attention. (21)

Yet his terms of defence suggest his perturbation. As well they might. "[B]eneath the threshold of [whose?] conscious attention," if anything, foregrounds the Urn's suppression of brutality, and certainly Wasserman's unfelicitous choice of the phrase "*rapacity* of love" does nothing to allay that suspicion. (We might also wonder by the way whether he intends for the slippage of "fecund talent" to be of rhetorical help in naturalizing what he is perceiving as a kind of biblical fruitfulness?)

Surely it is no mere coincidence that a poem which prominently images sexual violence and the ritual sacrifice of an animal ends with Keats's most resolute, platonic-sounding statement on what is humanly knowable. Yet there is more than a simple, or single, irony in the fact that that assertion has also proved to be one of the most exasperatingly enigmatic in the history of English poetry. For it is highly appropriate that a question mark should hang over a poem whose own queries about representation ("What gods and men are these?," "Who are these coming to the sacrifice?," etc.), while seeming to bespeak a naïve or purely aesthetic understanding of art (Vendler 124), profoundly call attention to the ode's underlying ideology. Indeed, I shall be arguing that they serve to question the Urn's complicity with the masculinist culture from which that ode draws its images and values.

The Urn's enigma lies with — and in — its complex interplay of dominant discourse and counter-discourse. The sense of a poem divided against itself (much of it structured as question alternating with proposition) is revealed by the often disjointed, broken sentences and the endstopped hesitations that bring a line to a halt before we have reached the syntactic conclusion. The sensuous and undulating sonority and rhythms of the Nightingale Ode (which reserves its questions until its very end) here give way to violent and percussive sounds. "What mad pursuit!" brings to mind "mad in pursuit" in Shakespeare's Sonnet 129, not uncoincidentally one of the Bard's most violent. With that sonnet a line like "More happy love! more happy, happy love!" (25) offers another point of comparison: though apparently expressing a quite different message, the Urn here conveys the same intensity of sexual frustration as threatens to break down the regular rhythm of "Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust" in Sonnet 129 (line 4). Perhaps an even more striking similarity has to do with the last lines of the ode, which in their assertion of knowledge ("that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye

need to know" [49-50]) and chiasmatic opposition of "Beauty" and "Truth," seem like a rewriting of the sonnet's:

All this the world well knows, yet none knows well  
To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell. (13-14)

We may even be inclined to speculate that the final snap of this couplet of Shakespeare's influenced the aphoristic phrasing of the Urn's conclusion.

Nor do the points of this comparison end with poetic structure; they also extend to theme. Sonnet 129, like the Urn, sets up epistemological dichotomies ("All . . . knows"/"none knows," "heaven"/"hell") and at the same time subverts them. So, too, the tension in the Urn between sexual desire and sexual fulfilment — especially as it entails the infinite frustration of desire — is reminiscent of the sonnet's meditation on the impossibility of any resting point between "lust" (Shakespeare does not mince his words) and sexual conquest:

A bliss in proof, and prov'd, [a] very woe,  
Before, a joy propos'd, behind, a dream. (11-12)

(These lines afford an appropriate occasion for taking note of something else about this sonnet that Keats would have found very congenial: its relentless scepticism.)

The violence of lust, in Sonnet 129 as in the Urn, has to do not only with emotions but also with the violation of conventional boundaries (poetic and philosophical). As well as being about sexual frustration and its corollary, postcoital disillusionment, Shakespeare's sonnet concerns itself with the philosophical problem of desire and time, here expressed as a problem of "possession":

[Mad] in pursuit and in possession so  
Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme. (9-10)

Put in Derridean terms, these lines adumbrate the absence of a metaphysical "presence."



For the most commonsensically wise explanation of Derrida's concept, I turn to Jonathan Culler:

Consider, for example, the flight of an arrow. If reality is what is present at any given instant, the arrow produces a paradox. At any given moment it is in a particular spot; it is always in a particular spot and never in motion. We want to insist, quite justifiably, that the arrow *is* in motion at every instant from the beginning to the end of its flight, yet its motion is never present at any moment of presence. The presence of motion is conceivable, it turns out, only insofar as every instant is already marked with the traces of the past and future. Motion can be present, that is to say, only if the present instant is not something given but a product of the relations between past and future. Something can be happening at a given instant only if the instant is already divided within itself, inhabited by the nonpresent.

This is one of Zeno's paradoxes, purported to demonstrate the impossibility of motion, but what it illustrates more convincingly are the difficulties of a system based on presence. We think of the real as what is present at any given instant because the present instant seems a simple, indecomposable absolute. The past is a former present, the future an anticipated present, but the present instant simply is: an autonomous given. If motion is to be present, presence must already be marked by difference and deferral. We must, Derrida says, "*penser le présent à partir du temps comme différance*" [think the present starting from/in relation to time as difference, differing, and deferral] . . . . (94-95)

Shakespeare's ungraspable satiation of lust is in effect Zeno's paradox as Derrida rewrites it. We can not "possess" the present moment (since "Had, having, and in quest to have" exhaustively define time) any more than we can fully "possess" the human loved object. To attempt to arrest the process of infinite deferral is what Sonnet 129 and the Urn's questioner assert or assume it to be: a "mad pursuit." Moreover, life in so far as it is devoted to such "pursuit" must be a "dream" because there is no resting place (hence Shakespeare's "not to trust" and Keats's "teases us out of thought").

The same negations apply to sexual desire and time in the "Ode on a Grecian Urn." The fact that the urn of the ode pictures time as a frozen moment before the men can "ravish" the maidens or the priest put to death the heifer shows that the desire to arrest the infinite deferral of difference is, paradoxically, a death-wish. And since that desire for (self-)possession, for mastery and control, is (represent-

ed as) masculine, its linkage with the oppression of women is entirely appropriate.

Keats's *Nightingale* illustrates *différance* in a way that almost immediately belies our notion of "the *real*" — and here I repeat Culler's words — "as what is present at any given instant because the present instant seems a simple, indecomposable absolute." For the *Nightingale Ode* affords no stable moment (sensuality at its ripe-est is already beginning to decompose, life is at its most intense at the moment an awareness of death intrudes). Open to this play of difference, beyond masculine control, the poem is likewise quite open to empathy and equitable gender relations. By contrast, the *Urn's* "indecomposable absolute" — which is to say, the urn "itself" — is a false ideal, a Cold Pastoral, a violation both of life and of women.

Being a longer and more thematically elaborated poem than Shakespeare's sonnet, the *Urn* can explicitly relate sexual "pursuit" and "possession" to the kind of art that attempts to "capture" reality in marble — or, in postmodern terms, an art that constructs reality. At the same time, the *Urn* implicitly reveals such a construction as being inscribed with the values of a patriarchal system that underwrites gender relations. Absent in Shakespeare's sonnet and present in Keats's ode, in other words, is the reference to art or representation of the loved object, be it man or woman.

How is the *Urn's* representation of the woman problematized? The question pulls in an opposite direction from this ode's emphasis on silence and speech. If the urn is a "still bride of quietness," a "foster-child of silence," a "silent form" depicting a little town which must forever be "silent," it is also, paradoxically, a "Sylvan historian" (3). Coupled with "What leaf-fring'd legend *haunts* about thy shape?" (5; my italics), the fact that "she" can express a "flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme" (4) suggests an ambiguity even as the question proposes an interrogation, an investigation, of

that "legend." Some repressed or unexpressed alternate "tale" existing outside the realm of art — existing in "nature" (as "leaf-fring'd," "Sylvan," and "flowery" suggest) — problematizes the ode's "shape," its unified meaning. "Haunts" in this context indicates a sense of unreality or uncanny otherness, operating here to subvert a single reality (again — as in, say, "La Belle Dame." "Flowery" and "more sweetly," too, hark back to the early "flowery" effeminate *Endymion* phase of Keats's poetic development.)

In this oppositional questioning and insistence on silence, the ode compulsively draws attention to its silences and suppressions. Here we should take note of an observation of Foucault's:

Silence itself — the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name . . . — is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element than functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies. (*The History of Sexuality* I: 27)

That this remark about the unsaid, or forbidden-to-name, has a special application to the Urn becomes clear when we parallel it to something that Shoshana Felman says about the totalizing impulse: "the principle of totality being the very principle of a boundary and of the repression inherent in it, the text's irony lies in its suggestion [of] the illusion of total mastery, of 'seeing all'" (167). That statement, like Foucault's, is not intended with reference to Keats at all; but the two together may serve to make us aware that the Urn achieves its unitary visual "shape" (41) or "form" (44) in significant part by means of the unsaid, which in this case is not left out altogether but somewhat obtrusively repressed (i.e., it is expressly named silence). In this regard, too, we should not forget that what the poet sees is an urn whose hollowness reflects the "hollow" message of its concluding lines.

In the Nightingale Ode, the poet "hears" but does not see the (hidden) nightingale, suggesting that speech is natural and direct communication; in the Urn, he is predominantly a spectator and sees but does not hear the female figures: the urn is silent and the would-

be "female victims" (Garson 37) of the poem, the maiden(s) and the heifer, are the only figures that are not apostrophically called upon to speak, as it were (Garson 37; cf. Vendler 138).

This is not a neutral difference in detail necessarily dictated by the shift from music to the plastic arts. Rather, it signals a radically different point of view for Keats, who (as we have seen) frequently empathizes with the position of the female invisible from the masculine gaze. On the one hand, he is now assuming the role which he criticizes so often elsewhere: that of the patriarchal male "with eye severe" (*Lamia* 2.157), whose cold piercing phallic gaze violates the female. On the other hand, the poet-as-spectator gazing upon his artificial counter-part, the Urn's piper, in effect appears outside the Platonic frame, viewing critically the artistic "ideal" of the poet.

It seems that even the poet idealized on the urn must pay a price for society's artistic rewards. Whereas in the Nightingale Ode there is a (temporary) reprieve from the world of competition and hierarchy ("No hungry generations tread thee down"), the Urn holds no such promise of surcease from anxiety of influence in a realm "overwrought / With . . . the trodden weed." Just as the female there is threatened with sexual assault, so the poet has to forfeit artistic integrity in return for conforming to the artificial "ideal." Instead of the world of (temporary) escape that the poet experiences in the Nightingale Ode, here — rather ominously — the "Fair youth" is warned, "thou canst not leave / Thy song" (15-16). And in the context of all those frantically labouring *happy's*, the lines "happy melodist, unwearied, / For ever piping songs for ever new" (23-24) present the desire for originality as an exhausting "pursuit," rather than a dream come true.

Wolfson points out that the hierarchy of artistic love over human love suggested in this stanza is an unstable one:

For ever panting, and for ever young;

All breathing human passion far above,  
 That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,  
 A burning forehead, and a parching tongue. (27-30)

The lines threaten to disintegrate syntactically, so that the effect of the "burning forehead," for example, appears to be in ambiguous opposition to, as well as the result of, all those happy pantings on the urn (*Interrogative* 322-23). Keats is not able to maintain a clear hierarchical relationship ("far above") between the mortal and the immortal — the supposedly lower, or physical, and higher, or spiritual — realms. The entire project of stanza 3 is strained to the point that — appropriately, for Keats — it collapses into a description of physical distress. "Parching tongue" indicates the constraints and limitations of the mortal world; but its significance goes beyond that by virtue of the connotations which "parched" has in Keats's poetic vocabulary. Inasmuch as Keatsian bliss is so often connected to the liquid element — and more specifically, to a watery dissolution into the feminine — we should understand "parching" to have an especially negative value; but in this particular usage, ambiguities of syntax and, even more, of context, raise the doubt as to whether the condemnatory judgment falls on the world of physical experience or on the dissociation of body from mind which makes that world (perpetually) dissatisfying. A further uncertainty likewise attaches to "parching" as being either identical with "parched" or the present-progressive tense of the verb. In this case, the syntactic possibilities, as they combine to suggest a tongue, a voice, whose insistent wish to speak is self-opposed, anticipate the mysteriously imposed silence in the next stanza.

The physical distress which figures primarily (or ultimately) in the third stanza as a dessication indicative of emptiness presently takes on other, more overt forms while gaining wider scope. Stanza 4, describing a tableau wherein a priest leads to the altar the "heifer lowing at the skies / . . . all her silken flanks with garlands drest," (33-34) reads like an allegory of those sacrificed on the

altar of Cold Art. Ironically, this scene, the least empathic in the ode with regard to its depiction of the human relationship to nature, is the one that the poet-spectator is most empathically drawn (in)to. "[M]ysterious" (32), the adjective describing the priest, seems to infect the passage as a whole, which in its very mystery resembles the concluding lines of the ode in inviting us to question it. Like the urn itself, the heifer is female and young, and like the maidens, "loth" (a point of similarity which may serve to remind us — if we need the reminder — that women have traditionally been viewed as Nature, and hence as closer to the animals than men supposedly are). Its "lowing at the skies" seems in protest against the gods and men.

In view of the impending sacrifice, the scene presented in the next three lines of stanza 4 seems strangely peaceful:

What little town by river or sea shore,  
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,  
Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn? (35-37)

The apparent discrepancy between this serenity and the foregoing prospect of the heifer's sacrifice may well prompt us to apply Woodring's question: Why does Keats feel no revulsion? I would propose that the answer, albeit a rather oblique one, lies with the stanza's mysteriousness.

That sense of mystery in large measure derives from our not being fully told — or rather, shown — what is actually happening. Crucial in this regard is the narrative gap or break between the stanza's final question (quoted above) and its immediate predecessor, "What green altar . . . ?" We can, of course, infer that in that interval the fate of the heifer is brought to completion (and here let us note, by the way, that the fact that this completion is not shown — or rather, is shown as being frozen in prospect — refers the idea of sacrifice back to the [perpetually] impending ravishment of the opening stanza's "maidens loth"). Still, that prospective outcome occurs off-stage, so to speak. And so does everything else that

might answer the question that looms over the final three words of the stanza's concluding lines:

And, little town, thy streets for evermore  
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell  
Why thou art desolate, can e'er return. (38-40)

We are thus left in some doubt as to whether the connection between the stanza's second and third questions — and between the heifer's sacrifice and the emptying of the town — is simply causal or also (logically) sequential.

That there is at least a causal connection can hardly be doubted. We are virtually compelled to infer (what "*pious* morn" warrants) that the town is "emptied" because its "folk" have gone off to witness the sacrificial rite. Yet the kind of causal inference required to spell out the relationship between these two events refuses to stop there. That is to say, we might also wonder whether the causal connection between the sacrifice and the emptying of the town extends to the absolutizing of that emptiness in "not a soul . . . can e'er return" (39-40).

Certainly there is a grim tinge to the pathos of the heifer's fate; and inasmuch as that grim pathos extends to the "desolate" (i.e., sad and deserted) town and casts a cloud over its "peaceful *citadel*," we may easily conceive of the sacrifice as contaminating the entire community — as if the procession that disappeared, presumably following the "mysterious priest" to attend the heifer's sacrifice, went to its own, in effect sacrificing itself. This fits in with stanza 4's oft-noted displacement of death, which at this point in the ode is transferred from the individual to the collective represented by the "desolate" town. (It accordingly also tallies with my earlier remarks about the ode's tendency towards death as it seeks to render the Eternal by freezing of time in perpetuity.) But it ties in as well with an observation of Vendler's: that "the mysterious priest has some-

thing of the folk-tale force of a pied piper: we are all led willingly on, by many pieties, into life and then out of it" (125).

Her strikingly perceptive comment admits of a political reading. There seems to be a half-realization in the grim pathos of the urn's little town "emptied of [its] folk" that those who offer up the sacrifice to their priests and gods are themselves sacrificed, not in being condemned to death directly, but in having to pay a price which in the ode is tantamount to death: the price of being "evermore . . . silent." That absolute silence, however, can also be understood as a punishment logically appropriate to the crime as well as causally related to it. The townspeople, that is, may deserve some such fate as accessories to the heifer's (ritual) murder; but they may also merit this particular consequence because they are participating in a conspiracy of silence.

On that understanding, we may detect in "Who are these coming to the sacrifice?" an accusatory ring (which perhaps is also to be heard in "What men and gods are these? What mad pursuit?"). The empty town, forever relegating to silence its dark mystery, might accordingly be regarded as eerily anticipating those sleepy East European villages with their peaceful citadels whose inhabitants maintained a guilty conspiracy of silence while the Holocaust was going on, virtually in their back gardens.

Such a connection is far from irrelevant to the ode's datum that the town's inhabitants can never return, the sense and tone of which suggest a curse as well as a statement of fact. But perhaps more importantly, the parallel I am making between one portion of the Urn and the Holocaust may serve a further purpose precisely because Keats (and for that matter, his contemporaries) cannot possibly have imagined it — may serve, that is, to direct our attention to the way in which the meaning of the Urn itself refuses to be contained, refuses to remain under control.



The point I am moving towards has some relation to Wolfson's gloss on "not a soul to tell / Why," "There is no historian" (*Interrogative* 324), especially if that reading be understood with the materialist twist that Garson gives it: "The town's silence is the suppression of history" (46). I would make a further claim which, while it complements Garson's argument, also goes beyond it: namely that the Urn participates in that suppression for reasons largely, but not exclusively, internal to the ode itself.

Here I am referring, first of all, to something that we have already observed from a somewhat different angle: that the ode's staging — and not-staging — of the urn's depictions (and non-depictions), its express and implicit silences, in effect reproduces the conspiracy of silence as I have discussed it with regard to the ode's penultimate stanza. From that standpoint, one message which the Urn does unmistakably convey is about an Art which ritually sacrifices victims whom it condemns to silence: that such art must be silent about its own origins.

From such an awareness that the art it represents variously feeds on appropriation, the Urn "returns" — in a movement paralleling the Nightingale Ode's — to its initial boundaries, here not of the individual self, but of the wholeness and harmony of the cultural icon and the self-possession of mastery. In the speaker's near-worshipful address to it as "O Attic shape! Fair attitude" (41), "fair" is perhaps meant to anticipate the subsequent union of Beauty and Truth; but one of the requisite synonyms, "just" (which in its platonic connotations would embrace "true"), should be troubling with regard to the insidious possibilities redounding on the "Cold Pastoral" urn from what I have identified as the Urn's conspiracy of silence. The "attitude" the poem wishes to assume requires withdrawal into some pristine — or in its terms, "unravished" — state; but the damage has already been done: the poem's images of assault double back and work against itself. Meanwhile, however, beneath its threshold of

consciousness glimmers some understanding that art is not politically neutral and outside relations of power.

In its indecidability, the ending is not dissimilar to the Nightingale Ode's as it poses the question: which the reality, which the dream? The Nightingale's doubt on that score intrudes after the poet identifies too closely with the feminine. But in the Urn, ambiguity enters in an abstract assertion — this in keeping with this ode's question-proposition format. Whatever the assertion might exactly mean, "Beauty" and "Truth" in it are to be understood as correlative to dream and reality (on the basis of Keats's use of "truth" interchangeably with "reality" — in the above-quoted letter to Bailey, for instance). But these terms also have gender properties, thanks to the traditional association of Beauty with femaleness ("Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes" [Nightingale 29]) and Truth with male logical detachment. Hence, the union which the Urn proclaims would eliminate, among other conflicts, at least one that is inscribed on the urn itself.

Yet for all its (self-)assurance, that concluding statement comes no closer to its "goal" of resolution than do the youths pursuing the maidens on the urn. Instead, Beauty and Truth circle around one another in perpetual speculation, making for an irresolvable interplay of *différance* involving nature-culture, body-mind, female-male, and so on. Hence the Urn's conclusion has an impact which is the reverse of the Nightingale's. Whereas Poesy's final transformation into an enchantress, a deceiving elf, makes us question the feminine values of the Nightingale and turn against them, the chaste urn becomes a deceiving hussy who "dost tease us *out* of thought" — whose logical abstractions figure in a language of seduction inviting us to deconstruct the phallogocentric categories of subordination and domination in which the Urn itself deals.

Garson argues that the tradition consecrated in the Urn continues to be consecrated in that ode's canonicity, in the treatment of the

Urn itself as cultural icon. In that connection, it is worth looking again at a passage I have already quoted once as part of a much larger extract from Keats letter to Bailey of March 13, 1818. With unparched tongue well in cheek, Keats writes:

Nothings . . . are made Great and dignified by an ardent pursuit — Which by the by stamps the burgundy mark on the bottles of our Minds, insomuch as they are able to "consecrate whate'er they look upon" . . . but what am I talking of — . . . Now my dear fellow I must once for all tell you I have not one Idea of the truth of any of my speculations — I shall never be a Reasoner because I care not to be in the right.

Written about a year before he composed his odes, these words stand as a critique of both the canonical impulse and the "ardent pursuit" on which his own Urn stamps its "burgundy mark" of approval. By the same token, we are not imputing to Keats speculations that never entered his head — and more importantly, his poetry — when we interpret these just-quoted sentiments as at least a partial rejection of the male Reality Principle, if not as an outright endorsement of a female Pleasure Principle.

#### NOTES

1. Even the epitaph Keats wrote for himself is an elequent haiku that meditates on the liquidation of self ("Here lies one whose name was writ in water"). While this appears to be about the transience of life, the words convey a double awareness: the water both claims and *proclaims* the "name." Its ambiguity in that regard (continued into perpetuity) is compounded by this circumstance: that the epitaph is carved in stone — more precisely, in the cold marble that, appearing so frequently in Keats's poetry, represents both the permanence and the rigidity of art.

2. Keats often introduces a jarring inelegant note (as perhaps it should be) about the exigencies of earning a living. "Robin Hood," for example, begins with a nostalgic lament for a time when "men knew nor rent nor leases" (10); the rift between present and past is represented by the fact that Robin's oak trees have "[f]all'n beneath

the dockyard strokes" and "ro'led on the briny seas" (44-45; a reference to profiteering?); and Marion "would weep that her wild bees / Sang not to her — strange! that honey / Can't be got without hard money!" (46-8). Keats (no doubt speaking from experience) may also be making the point here that financial insecurity tends to crimp one's creativity. His most famous — and provocatively pragmatic — lines bearing on the subject are the ones that, quite unromantically, introduce the second book of *Lamia*: "Love in a hut, with water and a crust, / Is — Love, forgive us! — cinders, ashes, dust" (1-2); but consider also that lovely moment when the guests, surveying the sumptuous wonders of Lamia's palace, have the bad taste to wonder at the cost of all that luxury (2.197-98).

3. By my count *The Eve of St. Agnes* expressly mentions 10 instances of sleeping, 12 dreams, 3 visions, 4 enchantments (excluding 4 references to fairies or faeries), 3 deceptions, 1 intoxication, 1 nightmare, and 1 "woofed phantas[y]." On the other side of the ledger or horizon of consciousness are 6 awakenings.

4. In the March 19 entry in Keats's Feb 13-May 3, 1819 journal-letter to George and Georgiana Keats, the gender of the figure of Ambition is made clear as is Keats's ambivalence towards this passive creative state:

This morning I am in a sort of temper indolent and supremely careless. . . . My passions are all asleep [*for asleep; is "asleep" another instance of seepage?*] from my having slumbered till nearly eleven and weakened the animal fibre all over me to a delightful sensation about three degrees on this side of faintness. . . . I must call it Laziness — *In this state of effeminacy* 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. Neither Poetry, nor Ambition, nor Love have any alertness of countenance as they pass by me: they seem rather like three figures on a greek vase — *a Man and two women* — whom no one but myself could distinguish in their disguise. *This is the only happiness; and is a rare instance of advantage in the body overpowering the Mind.* (Letters 2: 78-79; my italics)

5. Keats was fond of the word "swoon": there are 21 variants of the word in his work to Shelley's 5 and Wordsworth's 4.

6. In Keats's revised version, his sympathy for the belle dame is even greater than in the original. Consider such substitutions as "sideways" (19) for the more loaded "sidelong," "her wild sad eyes" (31) for "wild wild eyes," and the egalitarian "And there we slumber'd on the moss" (33; my emphasis) instead of the half-suggested menace in "And there she lulled me asleep."

For a sociohistorical analysis of the two versions of "La Belle Dame," see Jerome McGann's "Keats and the Historical Method in Literary Criticism," which argues for ideological motives underlying the privileging of the publication of one version over the other.

7. Compare the ambivalence in "Robin Hood": "the tough-belted outlaw / Idling in the "grenè shawe" (35-36).

8. Cf. Keats to Bailey, July 18, 1818: "I am certain I have not a right feeling towards Women . . . an obstinate Prejudice can seldom be produced but from a gordian complication of feelings, which must take time to unravel[led] and care to keep unravelled — I could say a good deal about this" (*Letters* 1: 341-42)

9. The story of Ruth is apposite to this evocation of empathy since it is about a Moabite woman who, abandoning her own land and people, chooses out of compassion and loyalty to her dead husband's Hebrew mother to follow her back to her homeland in Bethlehem. Ruth's words to her mother-in-law are: "Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee; whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God" (Ruth 1: 16). Finney points out that Keats probably was also influenced by images in Wordsworth's "The Solitary Reaper," which compares the nightingale's song with that of an (unidentified) melancholy woman as she is gleaning alone in the fields.

It is noteworthy that Keats, following Wordsworth's and Coleridge's example, ostensibly rejected the tradition, revived in the Renaissance, of depicting the nightingale as singing a bitter-sweet

lament — a tradition based on the Greek myth of Philomela, who was transformed into a nightingale after being raped and mutilated. Keats purportedly draws instead on medieval tradition, where the nightingale figures as "the bird of love" and "defends the pleasures of the senses" (Finney 621) in such debate poems as *The Owl and the Nightingale* or *The Cuckoo and the Nightingale*.

I would argue, however, that the gender ambivalence in the Nightingale points to Keats's conflation of the two traditions. The joy and "ease" of the nightingale's song contrasts with the poet's melancholy joy in hearing her. It is the poet who has no "tongue," not Philomela — a detail that recalls those (other) moments in Keats's poetry when the poet is poetically impotent before his Muse.

While rape and the silencing of women figure in both the Nightingale and Urn odes, Keats, significantly, chooses not to emphasize the sexual violence in the Philomela tradition that informs the Nightingale ode. Instead, it is displaced onto the poet, who is in some sense violated by his dissociation from the female figure(s) in the poem.

10. Cynthia Chase reiterates John Hollander's observation that Keats's echo-like "forlorn" is itself an echo of Milton's description of Adam's anguish at the prospect of Paradise without Eve:

How can I live without thee, how forgo  
Thy sweet Converse and Love so dearly join'd,  
To live again in these wild Woods forlorn? (*Paradise Lost* 9.910; qtd. in Chase 223)

As Chase points out, the self-reflecting word "forlorn" points to "Adam's self-delusion, loving Eve" so that "Keats reneacts the effect of Milton's syntax, where the 'forlorn' applied by Adam to himself makes the wild woods of paradise forlorn too, fallen with him even as he speaks. This is the ode's question also: 'how can I live without thee?'" (Chase 223). Yet while that echo of *Paradise Lost* continues to figure the nightingale as the female deceiver, Keats's version of the latter is more problematical than the one we encounter in the Biblical or Miltonic reading of the Fall, in that for Keats it is the

poet who "falls" and the nightingale who rises significantly at the point of their separation.

That the mirrorlike repetition of "forlorn" should occur at the moment of the poet's dissociation from the nightingale brings to mind Lacan's transitional mirror stage as marking the infant's first awareness of its body, previously "perceived" as fragmented, as a coherent unity. As Nelly Furman summarizes Lacan on this matter:

The primitive union with the mother is ruptured at the mirror-stage, which is the moment when the child recognizes its reflected image, identifies with it, and becomes aware of being a separate entity from the mother. . . . The splitting of the subject and the separation from the mother allow for the eruption of desire, determine the need for intersubjective communication, and force the child's inscription in the oedipal triangle. . . .

The mirror-stage is the initial step in the process of an individual's integration in the social system; it marks the child's entrance into the symbolic order which is the realm of what Lacan calls the Law-of-the-Father . . . .(70-71)

In this connection, but also harking back to the comments above on the pertinence of Milton, we should take into account Jane Gallop's observation that Lacan's mirror stage constitutes itself as a "lost paradise":

When Adam and Eve eat from the tree of knowledge, they anticipate mastery. But what they actually gain is a horrified recognition of their nakedness. This resembles the moment by which the infant, having assumed by anticipation a totalized, mastered body, then retroactively perceives his inadequacy (his "nakedness"). Lacan has written another version of the tragedy of Adam and Eve. (*Reading Lacan* 85)

The double "forlorn," then, at once marks the end of the Imaginary stage depicted in the world of the Nightingale ode and initiates the (male) subject's entry into the Symbolic order and its imperative for mastery, a theme taken up by the Urn.

11. In chapter 13 of his *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge makes the hierarchical distinction between Imagination, which is the order-discovering faculty, and "fancy," which is largely subjective (Shawcross 1: 202).

12. Even death is initially described in the Nightingale Ode in terms of fullness: "Now more than ever seems it rich to die"; as

Garrod writes, "[Keats] make[s] . . . death itself a kind of sensuous luxury" (109). *Full* appears four times in the Nightingale Ode, but not once in the Urn.



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