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Decapitating Romance: Class, Fetish, and Ideology in Keats's *Isabella*

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Decapitating Romance:
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Isabella

DIANE LONG HOEVELER

WHEN a writer tells us that the personal does not signify, we know that he is trying to make a confession worth hearing. When Paul de Man observed that “in reading Keats, we are . . . reading the work of a man whose experience is mainly literary,” we know that de Man was protesting too much—both about Keats and about himself. And when Keats himself warns us away from one of his works in the same sort of self-concealing tones, we know that the text contains material that was threatening to the poet for highly personal reasons. Keats claimed not to care for his most critically neglected long romance, *Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil* (1818), calling the poem “mawkish,” “weak-sided,” with “an amusing sober-sadness about it.” He tried to dismiss the poem as “too smokeable” and worried that there was “too much inexperience of li[f]e, and simplicity of knowl[e]ge in it.”¹ But in fact “life” was exactly what Keats knew all too much about. Or should I say “death.”

When a poet inherits a story whose contours are already established, whose characters and incidents are already deter-

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¹ For de Man's comment, see his introduction to *John Keats: Selected Poetry*, ed. de Man (New York: New American Library, 1966), p. xi; for Keats's comments on *Isabella*, see *The Letters of John Keats, 1814–1821*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1958), II, 162, 174.

mined, how does he seize that tale and claim the poetic narrative as his own? How does he transform the material of another into matter that speaks to his own personal interests and identity themes? Or is such an enterprise guaranteed to be derivative, stale, academic—in short, an exercise in translation? When Keats decided to transform Boccaccio's famous prose tale of the sad fate of Isabella Filomela into English verse he confronted these very issues. And although there is disagreement about the success of his effort, I think there is no denying that the tale presented Keats with a number of entrees into his own personal and psychological territory. In short, the narrative, while predetermined, spoke on some deep level to Keats's worst fears about his class origins, his parents' futile and wasted lives, and his own anxieties about his identity and future as a poet.

These biographical facts are known: Keats's staunchly lower-middle-class father died while out riding when John (the eldest son) was nine years old. Keats's mother, above her husband in class, married again two months later and lived to regret her rashness. She died a slow and lingering death in 1810, six years later, religiously attended by her devoted eldest son. From 1810 to 1815 Keats was apprenticed to Thomas Hammond, an apothecary, and then spent the next year taking medical courses and working as a "dresser" in two London hospitals, Guy's and St. Thomas's.² He dabbled in herbs; he assisted in amputations; he fled into poetry.

In 1818, shortly after completing his lengthy apprentice poem *Endymion*, Keats resolved to write an adaptation of Boccaccio's story of Isabella, basing his decision on a comment made by Hazlitt during a lecture that Keats attended on 3 February. Hazlitt predicted that a collection of such adaptations would sell well with the public, and Keats and his friend

² There are numerous biographies of Keats, most of which date his apothecary and medical training slightly differently. As for his father's class origins and Keats's own class-consciousness, the best recent discussion can be found in Marjorie Levinson's *Keats's Life of Allegory: The Origins of a Style* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988). In one of the best biographies of Keats, Robert Gittings discusses Keats's mother as the "ultimate enigma" in his life: the "complete silence about her suggests some shattering knowledge, with which, at various times in his life, he can be seen dimly struggling to come to terms" (*John Keats* [Boston: Little, Brown, 1968], p. 30).

John Hamilton Reynolds saw themselves collaborating on just such a volume.³ Now you might be tempted to say that these facts do not in themselves reveal the psychological impetus of *Isabella*, but I would claim that the poem can be read as an extended meditation on the three issues that haunted Keats throughout his life: class anxieties, his parents, and his own ambivalence toward the desire to be a popular poet, a romancer in the sentimental Gothic ballad tradition. The head in the pot—the central trope of the poem—stands as the essence of what Derrida has called “the trace,” the residue of the father who both traps the son in the realities of the class system and proffers an escape through the metaphorically transformative power of the knife/pen—we are, as you can see, in the terrain of castration and decapitation.

Critics of *Isabella* traditionally focus on the poem’s “transitional” status between the early *Endymion* and the later and much greater odes. Or they castigate the poem’s failing as a “romance” and its incipient gestures toward “anti-romance.” Or they analyze its digressions in relation to its source material in Boccaccio. Or they read the poem as an attempt to move toward some sort of Keatsian resolution between suffering and joy.⁴ Now all of these readings are interesting in an academic manner, but they strike me at times as elaborate

³ Keats used as his source material *The Novels and Tales of the Renowned John Boccaccio*, 5th ed. (London: A. Churchill, 1684), pp. 182–85. Hazlitt’s lecture can be found in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe, 21 vols. (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1930–34), V, 82; Keats’s testimony, “I hear Hazlitt’s Lectures regularly,” is recorded in his letter to George and Tom Keats, 21 February 1818, in *Letters*, I, 237.

⁴ Early-twentieth-century critics condemned the poem’s lapses in taste, grammar, and meaning (see M. R. Ridley, *Keats’s Craftsmanship: A Study in Poetic Development* [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1933]), while other, more recent critics have tried to resuscitate the poem’s status. The best overview of the history of the poem’s early critical reputation can be found in Jack Stillinger’s “Keats and Romance: The ‘Reality’ of *Isabella*,” in his *The Hoodwinking of Madeline and Other Essays on Keats’s Poems* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1971), pp. 31–45. Other useful contemporary articles on *Isabella* include: Louise Z. Smith, “The Material Sublime: Keats and *Isabella*,” *Studies in Romanticism*, 13 (1974), 299–311; Daniel P. Watkins, “Personal Life and Social Authority in Keats’s *Isabella*,” *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 11 (1987), 33–49; Susan Wolfson, “Keats’s *Isabella* and the ‘Digressions’ of ‘Romance,’” *Criticism*, 27 (1985), 247–61; and Kurt Heinzelman, “Self-Interest and the Politics of Composition in Keats’s *Isabella*,” *ELH*, 55 (1988), 159–94.

ways of avoiding the very real core of this shocking and angry poem. And in order to confront the center of this poem we as readers have to ponder the horror of a decapitated head. We have to meditate on the very Gothic and macabre spectacle of a beautiful young woman digging up her lover's body with her own hands and cutting off his head. And then we have to ponder that head "growing" in a pot beside her bed, watered with her own tears. In short, we have to read Lorenzo's head as an emblem of class, as a fetish, and as an expression of the domestic ideology that Keats both valorized and undercut throughout his career. By interrogating the meaning of that decapitated head I read the poem as an expression of Keats's attempt to bury his grief for his parents' deaths, repudiate his middle-class origins, and deny his attraction to "Romance," the popular Gothic ballad tradition of his day. The fact that he claimed not to like the poem himself speaks volumes about his own perception of the success he had in shaping and claiming the predetermined content of it. The text explores Keats's very personal need to elide pain with words, the linguistic conventions of Romance. The fact that he could not bury the body of his pain, the fact that the body comes back to haunt and consume the living—these are the central issues that Keats could not resolve in *Isabella*. The hungry heart one always senses while reading Keats becomes in this poem the mouth that devours: the voice in his own head that would not die, that would not stop repeating the tale of his pain, anger, doubt, and grief.



In "Castration or Decapitation?" Hélène Cixous asks her reader, "What is woman for man?" She answers by way of stating that "if man operates under the threat of castration, if masculinity is culturally ordered by the castration complex," then women operate under castration's "displacement, decapitation." The culturally imposed silence on women is simply the opposite of the stereotype that has traditionally plagued woman—that she is an endless chatterer. For Cixous the "Absolute Woman in Culture" is the "hysteric,"

the woman who by being “prey to masculinity” actually makes possible her Other, the father. But Cixous saw this woman as characterized by other qualities—namely “tactility,” “disgorging,” and “mourning” for the property relations that circulate in her economy. She is not haunted by a “quest for origins” like the man but instead “takes up the challenge of loss in order to go on living.”⁵

It should be clear from the above brief synopsis of Cixous's essay that she was presenting a fairly explicit description of a woman who more than remotely resembles Keats's hysterically silenced heroine, Isabella Filomela. And note that the surname in Keats's source, “Filomela,” would have recalled to him the myth of Philomela, the Athenian princess who was raped and then had her tongue cut out by Tereus so that she could not name him as her attacker. Philomela's transformation into a nightingale later haunts Keats's “Ode to a Nightingale,” while her presence in *Isabella* as the silenced (“decapitated”) heroine stands as one end in the polarized, gendered warfare that Keats captured in this text. Philomela/Isabella represents the decapitated woman of Western culture, dispossessed and speechless, frozen in a *tableaux vivant*, inhabiting a living museum of horrors.

But just as we know from dream analysis that everything in the dream is a manifestation of the dreamer, so everything in the poem is a projection of some aspect of the poet. Isabel represents on some level Keats as a child impotently mourning the death of his parents; Lorenzo embodies Keats as victim of class prejudices; the greedy, proto-capitalistic brothers suggest Keats as he would like in his most unrealistic moments to see himself, a sort of literary pirate or buccaneer—plundering the spoils of literary capital from Italy and Greece. Or the brothers recall for us Keats's perceived sense of economic victimization by his guardian, Richard Abbey. In any case, each character manifests some split-off tendency in the poet, but finally the text elides the conflicting motives by burying all the characters, literally or metaphorically, so that

⁵ Hélène Cixous, “Castration or Decapitation?,” trans. Annette Kuhn, in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, 2d ed., ed. Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schleifer (New York: Longman, 1989), pp. 479–90.

the poet who came to be Keats could be born. As other critics have noted, Keats would never write another long narrative “failure” again. We can more accurately observe, however, that Keats never again allowed himself to be drawn into material that would expose as much of his own personal biography, veiled however darkly by the trappings of medieval or historically distanced “Romance.”



Let us begin our examination of the poem by observing that the two lovers—“Fair Isabel, poor simple Isabel” and Lorenzo, “a young palmer in Love’s eye”—are initially presented to us as being ill.⁶ Illnesses of various kinds pervade this poem: all of the characters are ill—psychically, physically, or spiritually—throughout the text. Both lovers, though, are initially presented as suffering from “some malady” (l. 4); both “nightly weep” themselves to sleep (l. 8). In short, both are lovesick; but are we in the presence of a love between two adults of equal stature? I think not. Consider the textual evidence. In the second stanza Isabel is described only as a “full shape” (l. 12), the only object that the infantilized Lorenzo can see as he speaks to try to gain her attention and approval. In the fifth stanza Isabel is compared to a “young mother” who is frustrated in her attempts “to cool her infant’s pain” (ll. 35–36). That “infant,” Lorenzo, is plagued by “the meekness of a child” (l. 47) as he contemplates his beloved’s superior social status. In short, Isabel and Lorenzo are presented to us in much the same manner as Keats’s other tabooed lovers. The male is once again in an inferior and infantilized position toward a higher-status woman (one only need recall the triple goddess Cynthia in *Endymion*, La Belle Dame, Lamia, or Moneta).⁷

⁶ John Keats, *Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil: A Story from Boccaccio*, in *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1978), p. 245, ll. 1–2. All quotations from *Isabella* are from this edition, with line numbers in parentheses.

⁷ I have discussed at length the taboo phenomenon and what I believe to be its incestuous basis in Keats’s poetry in my *Romantic Androgyny: The Women Within* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1990), pp. 61–75; 189–204; 243–49.

When Lorenzo, however, finally does declare his love to Isabel, the language is filled with the imagery of the seasons (“‘Love! thou art leading me from wintry cold, / Lady! thou leadest me to summer clime’” [ll. 65–66]), with the emphasis being on the deathliness of winter giving way to the growth and fertility of summer. The “great happiness” that the lovers share is then compared by the narrator to “a lusty flower in June’s caress” (ll. 71–72). Lorenzo’s salute to the seasons is ominous and foreboding, for we know as well as the lovers do that the seasonal wheel will turn yet again and that the flowers of June will be residue by September. And indeed the lovers have only a brief season of happiness (stanzas 8–11) before the narrator presents two stanzas of general meditation on the hopelessness and brevity of love. And yet why, the narrator asks, do we endure such pain for such a brief period of love? Because a “little sweet” kills “much bitterness” (l. 98), just as the bee knows that the “richest juice” is found “in poison-flowers” (l. 104). Other poisoned/silenced women—Ariadne and Dido—stand as precursors to the fate of Isabel, while Lorenzo, we are told, is not even “embalm’d” for his troubles (l. 102). As readers of a well-known love story we may know the fate of our lovers before the poem begins, but the narrator cannot resist the temptation of warning us yet again in an attempt to make explicable—more controllable—the impending tragedy.

We are next presented with the so-called “anti-capitalist” stanzas, in which Isabel’s two brothers are depicted in cartoon-like fashion (stanzas 14–18). And although the poem is set in Renaissance Italy, the two brothers are described to us as potentates of industrial England. They preside over “torched mines” and “noisy factories” (l. 108); they own slaves who are whipped as they work all day in a “dazzling river” (l. 111). The brothers have financial interests everywhere, from Ceylon to the Arctic Circle (stanza 15). Gaining this immense wealth has made them “proud” (l. 121), but it has also made them cowards. In fact, they have forfeited the natures of their birth and become like “two close Hebrews” (l. 131). The antisemitic quality of their portraiture has gone largely uncommented upon, but again it is all of a piece. The “Jewishness” of the two broth-

ers, now called “ledger-men” (l. 137), marks them as “Other” from Isabel and Lorenzo, who are now figured as the “Same,” as in the sameness of members of a family. Isabel and Lorenzo as a mother/son or woman/worker dyad stand opposed to the two brothers, now figured as “Other” in terms of blood and class. Isabel and Lorenzo, both representative of the “dispossessed,” dependent on the largesse of the monied economy the brothers embody, stand in relation to the brothers as Keats stood to Abbey and the larger culture. The identification reveals that Keats felt himself to be both “feminized” and infantilized, a “mankin” (in Byron’s notoriously mocking use of the term).

The struggle that ensues—the murder of Lorenzo by the “Jewish” brothers, Isabel’s recovery of the son’s body, and its resurrection as the pot of basil—refigures the Christian allegory in a particularly Keatsian fashion. Lorenzo becomes for Keats the Christ-like poet, sacrificed by narrow class prejudices and condemned to live on in mutated form only after his premature death. The class anxieties that Keats felt so acutely erupt most clearly in the final description of the brothers’ ability to “see east and west” and even “behind, as doth the hunted hare” (ll. 142, 144). But it is not the brothers who are hunted; it is Lorenzo, and by extension Keats the budding poet. It is Keats who feels scrutinized; it is Keats who knows that his every published word will be assessed by reviewers not by its worth but according to what they consider to be his lower-middle-class birth and *arriviste* social status. It is Keats who fears that he will be reviled and crucified by the reviewers. It is Keats who suffers from what we might call the “Christ complex.”

What annoys the brothers most about the romance between their sister and Lorenzo is that he is their “servant” (l. 165). Now recall that Keats’s father had married his wife against her parents’ wishes and that he had been a virtual servant—as livery stable manager—in the mother’s household. In rewriting the Italian tale Keats could not have failed to note the parallels to his own parents’ lives, and yet I do not intend to argue that Keats thought of Lorenzo as his father and Isabel as his mother. As I have tried to suggest, I think

the psychological strata are much more complicated than that. Furthermore, psychoanalytic criticism has moved much beyond working at the level of the simple biographical equation, and yet we cannot escape the biographical fact that the class issue in Keats's life, as well as in his parents', was paramount. When the brothers resolve to kill Lorenzo and bury him in the forest they are enacting every class-conscious man's worst fantasy—I have powerful enemies based solely on my class and they will seek me out and destroy me. The child-consciousness that is Lorenzo could not have known that he had such formidable enemies, but the mother-protector Isabel should have known. She surely should have known that her brothers intended to use her in a marital arrangement whereby her body would be traded for "olive-trees" (l. 168). The blindness of the lovers, their simple naïveté, can only be explained as a species of magical thinking: if I do not see it or do not want to see it, then it is not there. Or if I think I see it, then it is there. This sort of magical thinking, endemic in children, prepares the way for Isabel's fetishistic use of Lorenzo's head as a talisman, a substitute child that she feeds with the milk of her tears.

But before we dwell on the head, let us examine the murder scene. When the brothers lure Lorenzo into the forest and kill him they are enacting a sort of human sacrifice to their god, Mammon, but they are also practicing the pattern Marx describes in "The Fetishism of Commodities."⁸ Here Marx argues that in capitalism the social relations between people are controlled solely by what appear to be the autonomous interactions of their productions, their commodities. The brothers cannot see Lorenzo as anything other than a commodity they have purchased. The murder, which they see as justified by Lorenzo's arrogance and flouting of social class and conventions, asserts their class privilege to preserve

⁸ See "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret thereof," in *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, ed. Frederick Engels, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, 3 vols. (New York: International Publishers, 1967), I, 71–83. The most extensive discussion of the fetish, including a full theoretical analysis of both Marx's and Freud's contributions to the idea, can be found in William Pietz's three-part article "The Problem of the Fetish, I, II, IIIa," in *Res*, 9 (1985), 5–17; 13 (1987), 23–45; 16 (1988), 105–23.

their way of life against the usurper's disruptive presence. But it is not simply Lorenzo who has threatened to disrupt the order of the brothers' social system: it is Isabel too. One is reminded here of Julia Kristeva's description of certain tribes where among the aristocrats women are viewed as a divisive factor, largely because of male fear of women's generative capacities. While it is recognized that women are essential for reproduction, it is also clear that they threaten the ideal norms of the male-descended clan.⁹ While one always knows the mother of a child, paternity is uncomfortably conjectural. What appears to be at stake in Isabel's romance with Lorenzo is property and children, both forms of exchange value for the brothers. And surely Keats understood the class implications inherent in marriage, property, and children by observing his own mother's disastrous sexual history.

After Lorenzo's sudden disappearance and murder Isabel is haunted by his looming and unquiet presence. As in other Gothic ballads the demon lover reappears and claims his bride, and so in a vision that occurs "like a fierce potion" (l. 267), like a "gnawing fire at heart and brain" (l. 272), Isabel conjures up Lorenzo weeping at his forest tomb. Her focus is not on his face, as one might expect, but on his hair (stanzas 34–35). We can recall here Freud's comment that hair is one of the most common of fetishistic objects,¹⁰ but even more un-

⁹ An anthropological summary of reasons for the "fear of women" can be found in Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1982), pp. 77–83, 101.

¹⁰ Freud observes that "Psycho-analysis . . . has shown the importance, as regards the choice of a fetish, of a coprophilic pleasure in smelling which has disappeared owing to repression. Both the feet and the hair are objects with a strong smell which have been exalted into fetishes after the olfactory sensation has become unpleasurable and been abandoned" (*Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, et al., 24 vols. [London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74], VII, 155). Freud's most detailed discussion of fetishism occurs in his essay "Fetishism" (1927): "When now I announce that the fetish is a substitute for the penis, I shall certainly create disappointment; so I hasten to add that it is not a substitute for any chance penis, but for a particular and quite special penis that had been extremely important in early childhood but had later been lost" (*Standard Edition*, XXI, 153). In his "History of an Infantile Neurosis" (1918) Freud establishes the symmetry between the terms "faeces," "baby," and "penis," noting that all of these objects "can become separated from one's body" and therefore are symbols of "lack" (*Standard Edition*,

canny about this scene, which begins the most Gothic section of the text, is Lorenzo's voice—"its piteous tongue," its "languor," "tremulous shake," and "ghostly under-song" (ll. 282–87). The dead Lorenzo has lost the tenuous adult voice he possessed only briefly (stanza 26), and he has returned to the voice of an infant. But the ghost of Lorenzo, like the vampiric hero, the demon lover of the Gothic ballad, has the power both to enchant Isabel with his "wild" eyes, "all dewy bright / With love" (ll. 289–90) and to virtually draw her a map to his grave (stanzas 37–38). The *gaze* here functions as a sort of fetishistic screen, suggesting to Isabel a return of the repressed, the resurgence of a theater of phallogocentric illusion. In hungrily feasting on the dead Lorenzo with her eyes she is entering a pathologized discourse, the Gothic ballad tradition—a male libidinal economy that can only script her as a consumer of the beautiful masculine cadaver.

Lorenzo begs Isabel to visit his grave with one purpose only, "shed one tear upon my heather-bloom, / And it shall comfort me within the tomb" (ll. 303–4). Once again in Keats's poetry we are in the realm of the dependent male lover coming back to life through the power of the primal and much stronger female body. We recall the myth of Venus and Adonis, which Keats had dwelt on at such length in *Endymion* (Book II, ll. 450–533). Or we recall the contemporary vogue for the Egyptian goddess Isis, who sought and reassembled the broken pieces of her husband Osiris's broken body. Osiris (much like Lorenzo) had been the victim of Typhon, the masculine spirit of insolence and pride, while Isis, like other female Nature dieties, was thought to have the power to temper the masculine errors of power and discord. And just as these earlier goddesses had the power to resurrect their beloveds, so too does Isabel attempt to reanimate the spirit of Lorenzo through the recovery of his head. As a child is fed with its mother's milk, so the body of the dead lover will be nourished and comforted by the beloved's tears.

XVII, 84). I do not want to privilege Freud or Freudian theory (one lives these days in fear of being accused of political incorrectness), but I cannot help noticing the obvious parallels to the head in the pot.

A substitution formation occurs here: tears for milk, the body/head nourished by the breast/eyes. Lorenzo the lover may be dead, but the poem promises that something, some form of life and growth, can be salvaged, seized from the world of death. The poem refuses to mourn; it promises instead that activity generated by living bodies can redeem and renew the cycle of generation. As we read this image we know ourselves to be participating in a nostalgic recuperative gesture, the attempt of a child through magical thinking to reconstitute the life cycle as benign.

Isabel knows that the murder of Lorenzo was committed with “a brother’s bloody knife” (l. 333)—the phallic, homo-social, and incestuous implications are blatant—and so she seizes that same knife and takes her “aged nurse” to the scene of the crime, “Lorenzo’s earthy bed” (ll. 343, 351). The first object that Isabel uncovers is a glove that she herself had sewn for Lorenzo: “She kiss’d it with a lip more chill than stone, / And put it in her bosom, where it dries / And freezes utterly unto the bone / Those dainties made to still an infant’s cries” (ll. 371–74). The breasts that were intended to feed Lorenzo’s child now are frozen, but her tears are not blocked. What should have been milk will now be tears. What should have been a child will now be a head. We are here dealing with the lexicon of phallic substitution. For “three hours” the two women—like mother and midwife—“labour’d at this travail sore” until they succeed in producing the head—“the kernel of the grave” (ll. 382–83).

In the first version of the poem Keats wrote that Isabel and her nurse uncovered “no foul Medusa’s head” but he revised this line to read “no formless monster’s head” (l. 394). The revision is significant, particularly if we recall that the Medusa’s head, wreathed in writhing snakes, has traditionally been read as an icon troping castration anxiety. That Keats would initially represent the head as the very emblem of such anxiety and then seek to elide that anxiety by substituting the more neutral word “monster” points, I think, to his repeated tendency throughout the poem. He approaches his own psychological and personal terrors only to retreat, avoid, cover over, and distance them. But his heroine is not simply

in the presence of a “monster’s head.” She is in the realm of the uncanny and the fetishistic; she has found what was lost and only dimly remembered. She has found the missing signifier: “the prize was all for Isabel” (l. 402). Isabel does not use merely a dull knife to cut the head from the body; she uses a knife “with duller steel than the Perséan sword” (l. 393). Again we are reminded of Perseus’s attack on Medusa’s head, and we confront again the realization that castration or decapitation stand as the fates of the sexes. It is our worst cultural nightmare that the phallus/power can be severed; the tongue can be silenced. Both sexes fear that they actually do inhabit a world where their most basic identifications can be turned against them, where they are powerless to protect or speak for themselves.

The ensuing scene—the digging up of the corpse and the decapitation—read as a surrealistically macabre child-birth scene or, rather, a birth scene as it might have been written by someone who could only imagine birth as a form of death, an initiation into the world of rotting bodies, stinking fluids, and putrid waste. Birth, in a sense, becomes abortion. Isabel gives birth to aborted love, the dead promise of Lorenzo. In dealing with this material Keats could easily have felt that he was working through his own anxieties about his poetic career, aborted before it had even begun by the anti-Huntian reviews he feared he would receive on his first volume. Warned by friends that he would be censured for the “political” content of his first volume, Keats was determined “to use more finesse with the Public” (*Letters*, II, 174).¹¹ One can hardly imagine that less “finesse” could have been used than in the description of Lorenzo’s dirt-covered head. The power of the passage resides in the deep psychological sources of pain that Keats touched as he probed the issue of boundaries. Just exactly when does the self separate from its

¹¹ Although she does not employ psychoanalytic categories, Tilottama Rajan has written the most provocative recent discussion of *Isabella*. Rajan notes that what is puzzling about the poem is its “emotional indeterminacy,” its “lack of a clear rhetoric of fiction which will enable us to classify [the poem] as either sentimental or ironic in tone, as either romantic or antiromantic.” She claims that the poem appears “to be ironic and sentimental at the same time, to deconstruct and yet to cling to illusion” (*Dark Interpreter: The Discourse of Romanticism* [Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1980], p. 101).

other? At death or at birth? Or, as Keats suggests, are they not the same?

As Isabel grooms her prize, combing the “wild hair with a golden comb” (l. 403), cleaning the eye sockets, washing out the dirt with her own tears, kissing and sighing over her prize all day long, we know ourselves to be in the presence of what is euphemistically called a “borderline personality.” The head, the love object, tropes that partial object that we know is the essence of fetishism. The decapitation is a castration, and Isabel and Lorenzo (or what is left of him) stand as gender clichés, the very embodiments of what Cixous proffered as her vision of the sexes in Western culture. But Lorenzo’s head can also be read as an abject fetus. As Kristeva notes, “when a subject confronts the factitiousness of object relation, when he stands at the place of the want that founds it, the fetish becomes a life preserver, temporary and slippery, but nonetheless indispensable” (p. 37).

Wrapping the head in a silken, perfumed scarf, Isabel buries it in a garden pot and then plants “sweet basil” over it (stanza 52). And so we have a kernel in a pot, a seed in a pod, a child in a perpetually growing womb. Isabel’s obsession is now complete: she has eroticized her abjection. The nausea and horror that were Lorenzo’s body have been transformed into erotic longings for a new form of life. She can brood over her nest, feed it with her “thin tears” until it grows “thick, and green, and beautiful” (ll. 425-26). One recalls here the lugubrious nineteenth-century custom of preserving parts of the dead as relics (such as jewelry made from the deceased loved one’s hair). The head is the “jewel” within a casket, thriving in a maternal reliquary, a household shrine, producing a form of life—the basil—that feeds vampire-like on the body of its mother, Isabel. Wasting away, anorexic, the mother Isabel cannot bear to be separated from her flock: “As bird on wing to breast its eggs again; / And, patient as a hen-bird, sat her there / Beside her basil, weeping through her hair” (ll. 470-72). But “Sweet Isabel” and her “sweet basil,” as others have noted, have become interchangeable anagrams for each other; the boundaries between same and other have been obliterated in the determined quest of the

child to return to the mother.¹² The womb that is the pot of dirt absorbs the mother; the child has consumed his parents. Dare I say the obvious—that such fear and guilt could not have been unknown to Keats.

Isabel's brothers find her behavior puzzling and investigate the pot, only to discover that they have been returned to the scene of their crime. The head of their victim stares at them: "The thing was vile with green and livid spot, / And yet they knew it was Lorenzo's face" (ll. 475–76); they flee forever from Florence into a life of banishment. Isabel's brothers as corrupt "aristocrats" have reaped the harvest of their own greed; they have created nothing and they stare at that nothingness in Lorenzo's moss-grown face. In the logic of the poem we have reached the contradictions of Keats's personal frustration. If the brothers stand as the emblems of both the old aristocratic system of class privilege, while at the same time they embody the growing mercantile commercialism that was spreading throughout Georgian England, then Keats was doubly dispossessed. He (like Lorenzo) had neither the status that the aristocratic class could provide nor the capital and property that the merchants' industry had attained for them. The destruction of the brothers stands as the final moment of wish fulfillment in the poem; it is a denial of history—past, present, and future.¹³

¹² The head in the pot has been read variously, but some of the best readings are those that take Keats's medical training into consideration. The most sophisticated treatment of "the reciprocity of life and death as a medical and poetic complex in all of Keats's poetry" can be found in Hermione de Almeida, *Romantic Medicine and John Keats* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991), p. 92. Donald C. Goellnicht observes that "in the image of Lorenzo's head, over which Isabella broods like a mother hen, the motifs of skull, seed, and egg, so commonly associated in botany and anatomy, coalesce to enhance Keats's theme of new growth out of death that is symbolized by the luxurious basil" (*The Poet-Physician: Keats and Medical Science* [Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 1984], p. 115). See also Heinzelman, p. 185.

¹³ Donald Reiman has commented on the ideological implication of the poem when he observed that "in 'Isabella' Keats rewrites not only Boccaccio's tale but *The Duchess of Malfi*: in Webster's day the pride of the aristocracy had been insufferable; by Keats's day the same vicious pride had seeped into the wealthier bourgeoisie. 'Isabella,' like Westey's play, portrays the love of moral individuals set against a corrupting social system, and the corrupt nature of the brothers is as essential to Keats's purpose as is the purity of Lorenzo and Isabella" (see his review-essay of J. R. de J. Jackson's *Poetry of the Romantic Period*, in *Studies in Romanticism*, 20 [1981], 257).

Isabel's life, however, is also aborted by the unearthing of the head, the destruction of the fetus/fetish. No longer able to live without her basil pot, she sinks into death and her saga becomes "a sad ditty" passed "from mouth to mouth" throughout all of Italy (ll. 501–2). Pain becomes a poem just as death becomes a form of life, just as hair becomes basil, just as bodies become heads, just as milk becomes tears, just as a "coarse-bred son of a livery-stable keeper" (Yeats's description of Keats) becomes a poet. *Isabella* as an adaptation and poetic text becomes what Keats both valorized and feared—a reification of the very processes of transformation that he knew stood as the basis of all life. Women are fated to be silenced ("decapitated"), men are doomed to destruction ("castration"), yet both will be reborn by the inexorable cycle of life and growth, as well as by the art that depicts its illusory transcendence of both.



To transmute pain and suffering into a poem is to salvage some degree of control over one's fate. To become an artist allows one the luxury of shaping pain into poetry. When the narrator of *Isabella* muses on the "Melancholy" of "Music" (ll. 433–34), however, we are reminded of Freud's definition of melancholy as a "wound," an "internal hemorrhage," a "hole in the psyche."¹⁴ And when the narrator asks how and why we "touch the strings into a mystery" (l. 444), he diagnoses the power of art to refigure the psychic injuries all of us have suffered. He deals, that is, in the domestic ideology of the sentimental romance, the Gothic ballad. Consider the popularity of such Gothic ballads as Sir Walter Scott's "William and Helen," itself a transformation of Gottfried August Burger's German sensation, "Lenore." Numerous Gothic ballads deriving from the oral tradition of "William and Margaret" depicted the male lover coming back from the dead to claim his still-living betrothed. Such an ideology—that love survives even after death and that the tomb itself can be a

¹⁴ Freud, "Draft G: Melancholia" (1895); quoted in Kristeva, p. 55.

haven for lovers—had dominated the popular and best-selling poetry written by such women as Mary Tighe and Mary Robinson.¹⁵ If Keats was to survive and prosper as a poet he feared that he had to cultivate the tenets of the domestic ideology: he had to reaffirm the power of love to triumph even over death. The fact that he could not do so, at least without undercutting the ideological imperatives with ambivalence and ambiguity, suggests that Keats was more than a little doubtful about the conventions and gestures that he knew would sell.

But would an anglicized Boccaccio sell? The brooding presence of Boccaccio lingers in this text, much as Dante lingers throughout the works of Percy Shelley for the same reason; both, I think, functioned as Lacanian embodiments of the “Name of the Father,” masculine phallic presences of empowering language. The first digression on Boccaccio occurs in stanzas 19–20, with another one in the later disquisition on “the gentleness of old Romance” (l. 387). In the first passage the narrator expresses the self-consciousness of the English poet trying to transform “old prose” into “modern rhyme more sweet” (l. 156). And although we know that Keats’s motivation in adapting Boccaccio was to make a profit, the narrator claims that in fact his only motivation is “to honour thee, and thy gone spirit greet” (l. 158). But surely there is a tone of mockery here. Keats is saying not too subtly that the world of “old Romance” is built on the stinking remains of butchered bodies. The trappings and paraphernalia of sentimental romances—the scarves and lutes, the Gothic gestures—all are just so much frippery concealing corruption and the inevitable decay of love and life. The ideology of romance is repudiated rather decisively in *Isabella* by Lorenzo’s rotting head.

In the second digression we are confronted with “all this wormy circumstance,” the “yawning tomb” that stands at the heart of “old Romance” (ll. 385–87). But if death and decay, melancholy and mortality stand at the center of romance and the popular Gothic ballad tradition, then writing

¹⁵ The best recent discussion of Keats’s anxiety about “romance writing” can be found in Anne K. Mellor’s *Romanticism and Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 171–86.

about them—succeeding as a popular poet—can only activate for Keats the very real and very threatening memories of his parents. Keats may have been seeking to free himself from the conventions of nineteenth-century sentimental poetry; he may have been trying to strip bare the illusions that we construct to conceal from ourselves the painful realities of decay and death. As someone who walked the wards in two London hospitals, as someone who nursed his own mother to death's door, Keats was no stranger to the naked power of death. He may have wanted to study Isabel as a case-study of female neurosis, of thwarted sexuality and maternity. But always in his poetry (not to mention his letters) he was also studying himself, his own reactions to the specter and horror of both life and death. After writing *Isabella* Keats flees from "Romance," old or new—largely, I would claim, because the subject awakened in him his own unresolved mourning for the blasted promise of his mother, his father, himself.

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