

**KEATS IN LOVE: FANNY BRAWNE AND THE MIRACLE YEAR**

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The summer of 1818 found John Keats in Scotland on a walking tour with his friend Charles Brown. Keats was twenty-three. Although his letters from this season mostly describe his travels and his writing, his personal situation at the time was complicated: His elder brother George had very recently moved to Kentucky, and back in Hampstead, his younger brother Tom was suffering from tuberculosis. His epic poem, “Endymion” had been published earlier that year to less than spectacular reviews. Keats was running out of money and the executor of his family’s money, Richard Abbey, was withholding funds from him. Abbey was also limiting his access to Keats’s younger sister, Fanny.

Amy Lowell points out in her biography John Keats that in other areas of his life, Keats developed and matured early and quickly out of necessity and natural aptitude (2: 56). But a letter written by Keats from his Scottish tour to Benjamin Bailey illustrates Lowell’s observation that in one important area, Keats developed more slowly than most:

Is it not extraordinary? When among Men I have no evil thoughts, no malice, no spleen; I feel free to speak or be silent. I can listen and from every one I can learn; my hands are in my pockets, I am free from all suspicion and comfortable. When I am among Women I have evil thoughts, malice, spleen. I cannot speak or be

silent. I am full of Suspicions and therefore listen to nothing; I am in a hurry to be gone. You must be charitable and put all this perversity to my being disappointed since Boyhood [ . . ] I must absolutely get over this, but how? The only way is to find the root of the evil, and so cure it. (Keats, Letters 169)

Keats would meet his future fiancée, Fanny Brawne<sup>1</sup>, within six months of this letter.

Prior to the romance with her, his experience with women was very slight, and his opinion of them, as evidenced by the letter to Bailey, was not very high.

Keats's had little familiarity with women, particularly eligible, unmarried ones. His unfamiliarity bred a kind of fear, leading to an overall negative opinion of the female sex (Bate, 378-79). In letters to his friends and family he describes women as vain, stylish, lacking the straightforward honesty he appreciated in his male friends. He notes to his brother and sister-in-law, George and Georgiana, the hypocrisy and petty jealousy of his friends, the Reynolds sisters, towards a pretty cousin:

The Miss Reynoldses are very kind to me, but lately they have displeased me much and in this way [ . . . ] the first day I called they were in a sort of taking or bustle about a Cousin of theirs who having fallen out with her Grandpapa in a serious manner was invited by Mrs. Reynolds to take Asylum in her house [ . . . ] Now all is completely changed. They hate her, and from what I hear she is not without faults of a real kind, but she has others which are more apt to make women of inferior charms hate her. (Letters 199)

As Walter Jackson Bate points out in John Keats, the women Keats admires, the pretty cousin, Jane Cox, and Isabella Jones, are quietly graceful, and do not unsettle his emotions (383). Keats says of Jane Cox, "I always find myself more at ease with such a

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<sup>1</sup> Fanny Brawne is referred to as "Fanny" throughout this thesis.

woman [. . .] I like her and her like because one has no *sensations*; what we both are is taken for granted” (199-200). He describes Mrs. Jones’ good taste, but professes that he feels no libidinous thoughts about her (206). Bate argues that Keats’s abilities to identify and empathize with others were often frustrated by women, leading to strong negative reactions (379). Cox and Jones, while far from eliciting any kind of deep emotional recognition from Keats, at least did not frustrate him, or make him conscious of a lack of empathy.

It was not until Keats met Fanny that he experienced full-blown romantic love. While Keats was in Scotland, the Brawne family rented Brown’s house. The house, called Wentworth Place, consisted of two separate residences in one building. The Dilke family, friends of Keats, lived in one residence, and during Brown’s absence the other residence was let to Mrs. Samuel Brawne, a widow with three children. The eldest of her children was Frances Brawne, called Fanny. During their stay at Wentworth Place, the Brawnes and Dilkes became good friends, so much so that after Brown and Keats returned from Scotland, the Brawnes decided to stay in the neighborhood and moved to Downshire Hill, remaining much in contact with the Dilkes. Although there is no documentation of the exact date on which Fanny and Keats met, Amy Lowell claims they met upon his return from the walking tour of Scotland, sometime in August or September, and no later than October 1818 (2: 126). Bate posits it might have been as late as November 1818 (421).

During the fall, Keats nursed his brother, Tom, at Hampstead, but on December 1, Tom died from his illness. In that same month, Fanny appears in Keats’s letters for the

first time. In a long diary letter spanning several days Keats wrote to George and Georgiana in Kentucky:

Mrs Brawne who took Brown's house for the Summer, still resides in Hampstead. She is a very nice woman and her daughter senior [Fanny] is I think beautiful and elegant, graceful and silly, fashionable and strange. We have a tiff now and then and she behaves a little better, or I must have sheered off. (218)

Keats's treatment of Fanny in this letter reflects his early decision to downplay his relationship or even hide it from his brother and sister-in-law.

Shall I give you Miss Brawn? She is about my height, with a fine style of countenance of the lengthen'd sort. She wants sentiment in every feature. She manages to make her hair look well; her nostrils are fine, though a little painful. Her mouth is bad and good; her Profile is better than her full-face which indeed is not full but pale and thin without showing any bone. Her shape is very graceful and so are her movements. Her Arms are good, her hands baddish, her feet tolerable. She is not seventeen, but she is ignorant, monstrous in her behavior, flying out in all directions, calling people such names that I was forced lately to make use of the term *Minx*. This I think not from any innate vice but from a penchant she has for acting stylishly. I am however tired of such style and shall decline any more of it. (222)

And yet in comparing Fanny to another young lady whose style and fashionable demeanor Fanny admired, Keats writes, “[Fanny] is superior as a Rose to a Dandelion” (222).

Although later Keats would claim to have fallen in love with Fanny at first sight, his first letter to her was written in July 1819, after their relationship was already well underway. In addition to keeping his relationship with her from George, he was also less than forthcoming with his friends as well. There is little documentation of their relationship during the fall of 1818 and the winter and spring of 1819, although Fanny, in a letter written to Fanny Keats after Keats’s death, hints at some kind of declaration as early as December 1818 (Lowell 2: 126).

The romance between Fanny and John Keats coincides with Keats’s “miracle year,” which began in January 1819 and ended that same fall with the completion of “To Autumn.” It was during this year he wrote the poems that would eventually establish him as one of the greatest English poets. In the winter of 1819, Keats wrote the narrative romance, “The Eve of St. Agnes,” followed by the majority of the odes and the ballad “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” in the spring. During the summer, Keats wrote “Lamia” and, finally, “To Autumn” in the fall of 1819.

Keats became officially engaged to Fanny in December 1819. Despite the engagement, he was continually ill, cash-strapped and in a state of unhappiness and low productivity. Early in 1820 Keats experienced his first lung hemorrhage and was confined to his house, nursed by friends and frequently visited by Fanny. In June 1820, Keats suffered a second hemorrhage. In July his book of poetry Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes and Other Poems was published. The next month Keats moved to



Wentworth Place where Fanny nursed him until he left for Rome. Before he left for Italy, he had stopped writing to Fanny and refused to read her letters because the thought of her was too painful for him. When Keats died in Rome on February 23, 1821, he was twenty-six; Fanny, nineteen. Twelve years later, Fanny married Louis Lindon and during the course of their marriage had three children. She died at the age of sixty-five in 1865.

The surviving letters Keats wrote to Fanny can be divided into two groups: those written from July 1819 to October 1819, and those written from February 1820 to August 1820, after which Keats ceased writing to her. The first group of letters, Bate observes, were written: “while, with almost everything against him, he was trying to make one last effort, an effort crossed by so many shadows of apprehension that it was demanding more courage and taking a larger toll of his resources than any he had made” (543). Bate notes the second group of letters were written, “after everything for which he had most hoped had begun rapidly to dissolve” (543).

The first letter we have from Keats to Fanny was written in July 1819. They had been living side by side in the two-family Wentworth Place since the spring, but Keats had recently moved to Shanklin to make one last effort to write poetry that would succeed, artistically and financially. Keats wrote, “The very first week I knew you I wrote myself your vassal” (317). Whether this statement is strictly true, it definitely points to his being much occupied with her during the winter and spring of 1819. His description of himself as “a vassal” is typical of how he describes his feelings of love for Fanny; that is, he often speaks of romantic love as a trap, a prison, a jailer, an intoxicant. “Ask yourself my love, whether you are not very cruel to have so entrained me, so destroyed my freedom” (309). He asks her to write him, and to “make it as rich as a

draught of poppies to intoxicate me” (Letters 309). In this first letter another theme appears that threads its way through all the letters—Keats’s suspicion that Fanny does not care for him to the same degree that he cares for her, and that she might perhaps be unfaithful: “Though I could center my Happiness in you, I cannot expect to engross your heart so entirely; indeed, if I thought you felt as much for me as I do for you at this moment I do not think I could restrain myself from seeing you again tomorrow for the delight of one embrace” (309).

A few days after the first letter, he writes a letter in response to Fanny’s complaint that he praises her beauty too much:

Why may I not speak of your Beauty, since without that I could never have lov’d you? I cannot conceive a beginning of such love as I have for you but Beauty. There may be a sort of love for which, without the least sneer at it, I have the highest respect, and can admire in others, but it has not the richness, the bloom, the enchantment of love after my own heart.

(313)

On July 25 another letter protests that his love is stronger, that he cannot help but praise her beauty, and that he finds himself being “absorbed” by her: “It is impossible you should look with such eyes upon me as I have upon you: it cannot be [. . .] All I can bring you is a swooning admiration of your beauty [. . .] You absorb me in spite of myself, you alone” (318). In this same letter that Keats writes about death and love as somehow equivalent, “I have two luxuries to brood over in my walks. Your Loveliness and the hour of my death. O that I could have possession of them in the same minute: I hate the world; it batters too much the wings of my self will, and would could take a sweet poison from

your lips to send me out of it” (318). Keats could also be cold to Fanny when he sensed that he was being unproductive artistically. In response to her concern over this letter discussing her loveliness and his death, he assures her that she need not worry, for he is happily absorbed in writing and has no time for love letters: “I am not idle enough for downright love-letters. I leave this minute a scene in our Tragedy and see you through a mist of Plots speeches and counterplots [. . .] The Lover is madder than I am [. . .] Thank God for my diligence! Were it not for that I should be miserable. I encourage it, and strive not to think of you” (321).

The next letter Fanny receives is the famous “flint-worded” letter. In it Keats unconvincingly apologizes for taking so long to write. He tells her to believe in his earlier letters professing his love, but that he can not write such a letter at the moment.

“Remember I have had no idle leisure to brood over you. ‘Tis well perhaps I have not. I could not have endured the throng of Jealousies that used to haunt me before” (325).

Another July letter has Keats acknowledging his morbid temperament, laying it at the feet of his experiences: “You must have found out by this time that I am a little given to bode ill like the raven. It is my misfortune not my fault; it has proceeded from the general tenor of the circumstances of my life, and rendered every event suspicious” (315).

In August of 1819, Keats moved to Winchester, close to Fanny. He was experiencing the symptoms of tuberculosis. Although the disease was not apparent yet, he felt listless and indolent, unable to focus on poetry. As Keats’s illness advanced, the mood of his letters became more desperate, resentful, sorrowful. “I wish you to see how unhappy I am for love of you, and endeavor as much as I can to entice you to give up your whole heart to me whose whole existence hangs upon you [. . .] I am greedy of you.

Do not think of anything but me. Do not live as though I was not existing” (442). He resents that Fanny still goes out in society and fears that she is unfaithful, whereas he is confined to the house, and even his room. “If you could really what is call’d enjoy yourself at a Party; if you can smile in people’s faces and wish them to admire you now, you never have nor ever will love me [ . . . ] My recovery of bodily health will be of no benefit to me if you are not all mine when I am well” (443). In a subsequent letter he writes:

They talk of my going to Italy. ‘Tis certain I shall never recover if I am to be so long separate from you; yet with all this devotion to you, I cannot persuade myself into any confidence of you. [ . . . ] If you still behave in dancing rooms and other societies as I have seen you, I do not want to live. If you have done so, I wish this coming night may be my last. I cannot live without you, and not only you, but *chaste you; virtuous you.*

(450-1)

Keats’s final letter to Fanny, written in August, 1820, is full of pain and desperation. He will be leaving for Italy within the month: “I am sickened at the brute world which you are smiling with. I hate men and women more [ . . . ] I am sure I shall never have any rest till I get there. I wish I was either in your arms full of faith or that a thunderbolt would strike me”(458). Shortly before he left from Italy, he ceased to write to Fanny and refused to read her letters. It was too painful for him. He sent his final words to Fanny through Mrs. Brawne.

During Fanny’s lifetime, she retained possession of Keats’s love letters and willed them to her son. He took them to H. Buxton Forman, who published them in 1875 to

almost universal distaste. The Victorian audience found them indelicate and ignoble. According to the prominent Victorian critic, Matthew Arnold, the naked emotional honesty of Keats's love letters is an "abandonment of all reticence and all dignity," and unworthy of Keats's genius (206). Still others viewed the letters as a threat to his reputation because they exposed Keats's insecurity, jealousy and sexual frustration—and unpleasantly colored the way in which some of his poems could be interpreted (Najarian 30-31). Fanny was branded a "common, shallow, faithless, calculating flirt" who toyed with and tormented Keats (Richardson, 144-45). Such judgments were supported by Keats's friends and family in the years following Keats's death:

It was quite human of Keats's friends to look askance, after his death, at a woman they had known only slightly and who had treated them in a casual and independent spirit. All of them, and George as well, felt a little guilty after Keats's death. Even if they could not have saved his life, they could always have the uneasy sense that they might have done a little more.

Hence it was a relief to have something of a scapegoat in Fanny Brawne: they could convince themselves that nothing more could really have been done to help him in those last months in England when his mind was so hopelessly preoccupied with her. There may also have been a little pique on their part that they had been relatively unaware of this relationship until those last few months. (Bate, 421)

Although subsequent critics recognized the value of the letters, and rescued Fanny's reputation, there is still confusion over what to make of them, because they are unlike any of Keats's other correspondence. They reveal his emotions and feelings,

especially negative feelings, in an extremely unguarded way. They show him obsessive and unhappy, madly in love but not confident in that love. "Keats's love letter," wrote Matthew Arnold, "is the letter of a surgeon's apprentice. It has in its relaxed abandonment something underbred and ignoble, as of a youth ill brought up, without the training that teaches us that we must put some constraint upon our feelings and our expressions and upon our expression of them." (206). But for Keats, emotion, sensation and the expression of them were far superior to philosophy and reason. Keats famously wrote, "O for a life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!" and his best poetry is characterized by the surrender to and exploration of sensation. (Roberts 1129). The Victorian readers who complained that certain poems would be interpreted in light of the letters were right in a way: the importance Keats placed on sensation leads his readers to consider Keats's own sensations and the feelings and experiences he drew upon when writing poetry. The letters and poems to Fanny Brawne abound with sensation, especially the sensation of love as Keats experienced it.

In the following chapters I will explore to what extent the ideas and emotions regarding the romantic love expressed in the letters to Fanny were incorporated into his most famous and successful poems. To understand how Keats himself experienced these sensations, a familiarity with the letters is necessary.

Chapter Two is an examination of the poetry written to, or presumed to be written to, Fanny, including "To Fanny," "Ode To Fanny," "Lines to Fanny," "Bright Star Would I Were Steadfast as Though Art," and "This Living Hand." These poems share with the letters the concept of a love that is all-consuming, that causes the male to feel imprisoned against his will, irrationally jealous, and under an enchantment. Chapter Three is an

examination of the Narrative poetry of the miracle year, including, “The Eve of St Agnes,” “La Belle Dame Sans Merci,” and “Lamia.” I will explore how Keats’s ideas about romantic love affected his interpretation of classical and medieval romance in both the poems and the letters. Finally, Chapter Four is a study of the Odes, including “Ode to Psyche,” “Ode to a Nightingale,” “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” “Ode on Indolence,” “Ode on Melancholy,” and “To Autumn.” While the odes are not overtly romantic, the addressees are female (or characterized as female) and in them Keats explores the poet’s relationship to poetry using metaphors and themes of love and sexuality. Taken together, the miracle year poetry and the love letters provide singular insight into the role romantic love played in Keats’s work and life.

## CHAPTER II

### THE FANNY POEMS

Of the six poems written to Fanny, or associated with her, all are presumed to have been written in the fall and early winter of 1819, after Keats had returned to Hampstead from Winchester. His absence from Hampstead had been, in part, an attempt to distance himself from her and the distractions he believed she posed for his poetic ambitions.

Upon his return, Keats became depressed about his lack of poetic output, as well as about his financial state. He was also suffering from tuberculosis although the symptoms were not yet obvious. The miraculous output of the spring had passed, and, although “To Autumn,” “Lamia Part II” and “The Fall of Hyperion” were written this same autumn, Keats had begun his final decline. Gerald Enscoe, in his study of sexual love and Keats, describes the poet’s state of mind in Autumn 1819:

From what we know of the circumstances surrounding the frustrated young Keats—the fact that he had no money, that Fanny was a respectable if somewhat flirtatious female with no intense feelings toward her passionate young admirer and no intentions of embarking upon a romantic interlude with him, the fact that family, economic and social pressure seemed to combine in a vast conspiracy against the ultimate realization of



all his desires—all of these factors might well join to leave him in a frustrated, agonized condition with little hope of escape. (133-34)

Although it is arguable that Fanny's feelings were indeed intense, it is safe to say they did not match the intensity of Keats's.

The *Fanny* poems are special because in several we can infer, with some certainty, that the speaker is Keats himself. Like the letters to Fanny, they are replete with the experiences of love, including the dualities of pain and pleasure, stability and instability, coldness and warmth, relief and anxiety, and love and death.

This chapter will examine the poems to Fanny and demonstrate Keats's dependence upon, or addiction to, the sensation of love she elucidates. They demonstrate an unhealthy dependence on her. He seeks her proximity because her presence allows him to be completely taken over by the intensity of his love, a state of being he courts, pleads for and threatens. But this state of romantic ecstasy is always, in the poems, intruded upon by worldly cares. The spell of Fanny's love cannot stand the intrusion, and the sensation fades, leaving Keats agitated, uncomfortable, in a state of jealousy and uncertainty, unable to focus. Keats describes her effect on him several times in letters, but perhaps no more poignantly than in the letter written to Fanny after his first lung hemorrhage:

My Mind has been the most discontented and restless one that ever was put into a body too small for it. I never felt my Mind repose upon anything with complete and undistracted enjoyment, upon no person but you. When you are in the room my thoughts fly out of window; you always concentrate my whole senses. (430-31)

As in this letter, the restlessness and discontent of Keats's mind are very apparent in each of the Fanny poems.

In his study of the daemonic in Keats's poetry, Charles Patterson inadvertently hits upon what separates the poetry written to or about Fanny from the rest of Keats's poetry. Patterson argues that Keats draws heavily upon the daemonic in his poetry, which Patterson defines as focusing cognitive power "on something not of this world or upon something that impels the consciousness out of this world" (11). This process, Patterson argues, "results in startling separation of the self from the world of men and things" (11). This in turn leads to an ambivalence:

On the one hand, there is intense ecstasy, joy, and well-being as the particular object of this knowing takes on the magical qualities of rare, strange, and remote beauty; on the other hand, there floods through the consciousness, simultaneously or moments later, the aura of something desolate, sequestered, apart. Although the remoteness and apartness add to the magic and strangeness of the beauty for a time, this magical beauty quickly fades leaving the participant in an aftermath of varied feelings about these expiring daemonic ecstasies. At times he feels an overwhelming compulsion to experience them at any cost and a consequent strong aversion to the ordinary world. (11-12)

We know that Keats protected his relationship with Fanny even from those closest to him, in part because of his disdain for the ordinary world of commerce, gossip and fashion:

“If we love we must not live as other men and women do. I cannot brook the wolfsbane of fashion and foppery and tattle” (443).

According to Patterson, however, Keats

[a]lways kept the daemonic under the control of his intellect, although he used it more deftly and skillfully in his later poems. [. . .] Keats was not only fascinated by the daemonic but also was fully cognizant of the limits of its validity and aware of its dangers. He realized that it *could* be destructive, but through good sense and good judgment he prevented its becoming so. (14-15)

But when it came to Fanny, good sense and judgment abandoned Keats. The repetitive themes and imagery of the *Fanny* poems imply that he *is* aware of the danger of living too much in the daemonic, but the letters—which support the feelings expressed in poems—show that when it came to Fanny, he couldn’t help himself.

In the *Fanny* poems Keats depicts himself as losing this control; he writes of alternating between exquisite pleasure and pain, unable to end the need for ecstasy and joy even though he knows a crash will follow. The ecstasy sought by Keats, in these poems, is her presence: “I wish you could invent some means to make me at all happy without you. Every hour I am more and more concentrated in you. Everything else tastes like chaff in my Mouth” (457). She haunts him and comforts him; her presence is what unsettles and calms him. But despite his need for her and the sensations she brings out in him, he never finds any lasting peace in her; he is constantly in a state of agitation, even as he wishes it were otherwise. Toward the end of his life, he avoided seeing her because he could not “bear flashes of light and return to my glooms again” (457).

The *Fanny* poems, all written in the fall of 1819, with the exception of “Ode to Fanny,” which was written in January 1819, are:

- “Lines to Fanny” or “What can I do to drive away?”<sup>2</sup>
- “To Fanny” or “I cry your mercy—pity—love!—aye, love”<sup>3</sup>
- “This Living Hand”
- “Bright Star, would I were stedfast as thou art”
- “Ode to Fanny” or “To Fanny”<sup>4</sup>

Because exact dates for several poems are not available, they are discussed in approximate chronological order. The opening of “Lines to Fanny” poses the question of what the speaker can do to “drive away / Remembrance from my eyes? for they have seen, / Aye, an hour ago, my brilliant queen!” (1-3). The poem’s speaker is experiencing the painful withdrawal of communion with Fanny. Painful thoughts about his poetry and family life that had been neglected and suppressed in the presence of Fanny intrude upon his consciousness (30-36). He lays the blame for these feelings on love. He articulates the desire to “kill” the memory of his Queen and to be free of love (5), to fly “Above, above/ The reach of fluttering Love, / And make him cower lowly while I soar?” (21-23). (The “fluttering” nature of love will occur again in later poems, and addresses the theme of instability that will occur again in “Ode To Fanny.”) Love is likened to a trap:

O say, Love, say,

What can I do to kill it and be free

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<sup>2</sup> Bate and Lowell title this poem “Lines to Fanny,” while Stillinger uses the title “What can I do to drive away?”

<sup>3</sup> Bate and Stillinger give the title “I cry your mercy—pity—love!—aye, love.” Amy Lowell uses “To Fanny”.

<sup>4</sup> Bate, Lowell and Whale title this poem “Ode to Fanny,” while Stillinger uses “To Fanny”

In my old liberty?  
 When every fair one that I saw was fair,  
 Enough to catch me in but half a snare;  
 Not keep me there:  
 When, howe'er poor or particoulour'd things,  
 My muse had wings,  
 And was ever ready to taker her course  
 Whither I bent her force, (4-13)

The speaker seeks to regain peace and the control over his muse that love has taken from him and “banish thoughts of that most hateful land” which come upon him at the departure of the Queen (31).

Dungeoner of my friends, that wicked strand  
 Where they were wreck'd and live a wretched life;  
 That monstrous region, whose dull rivers pour  
 Ever from their sordid urns unto the shore,  
 Unown'd of any weedy-haired gods;  
 [. . . . .]  
 There flowers have no scent, birds no sweet song,  
 And great unerring Nature once seems wrong. (30-36, 42-43)

However, at the end of them poem, the poet manages to banish these painful thoughts with the reappearance of his “lady bright.”

O, for some sunny spell  
 To dissipate the shadows of this hell!

Say they are gone,—with the new dawning light

Steps forth my lady bright! (44-7)

This line implies that the night, in which he was separated from Fanny was the painful time in which other thoughts intrude. Her reappearance promises to dissipate his dejection. Despite his joy at her reappearance, he acknowledges that his dependence on this experience is part of the problem. His desire, “O, let me once more rest / My soul upon that dazzling breast!” (48-49) is tempered with the acknowledgement that there is also a negative, painful component to the cycle: “O the sweetness of the pain! / Give me those lips again / Enough! Enough! It is enough for me / To dream of thee” (54-57).

There is a deep ambivalence in this and the other Fanny poems. The negative emotions and “dismal cares” are brought on by the departure of his queen, and only relieved by her reappearance. Yet it is clear that the queen plays a role in his depression as well—her effect upon the speaker prevents him from achieving equilibrium in the parts of his life that do not involve her. Like that of the Belle Dame Sans Merci, her comfort is not real: as soon as she is not in front of him with her “flashes of light,” engrossing every emotion and the thought, the illusion of the eternal “rapture” fades, he is left again with his “glooms,” his unpleasant worries and thoughts, and he is unable to enjoy the freedom from the all-encompassing presence of the queen (457). He cannot be with Fanny and he cannot be without her—this cyclical pattern also appears in the letters.

The lost “liberty” which the speaker bemoans is described a letter from August 1819, and echoes the last lines of the poem about Fanny’s lips and the sweetness and pain they promise:

The thousand images I have had pass through my brain—my uneasy spirits, my unguess'd fate—all spread as a veil between me and you. [. . .] believe and see that I cannot think of you without some energy, although mal a propos. Even as I leave off it seems to me that a few more moments thought of you would uncrystallize and dissolve me. I must not give way to it, but turn to my writing again. If I fail I shall die hard. O my love, your lips are growing sweet again to my fancy. I must forget them. (325-26)

In a letter dated September 13, 1819, Keats explains his attempt to avoid the emotional upheaval that accompanies his interaction with Fanny. Although he is nearby after a long absence, he cannot visit Fanny because “If I were to see you today it would destroy the half comfortable sullenness I enjoy at present into downright perplexities. I love you too much to venture to Hampstead. I feel it is not paying a visit, but venturing into a fire” (339). As his sickness progressed, he admitted to needing and desiring her more than anything else, but continued to try to avoid the ecstasy that would lead to a crash: “I do not think my health will improve while I am separated from you. For all this I am averse to seeing you. I cannot bear flashes of light and return into my glooms again” (457).

As in “La Belle Dame Sans Merci,” in “Lines to Fanny” the fantasy of beauty can last for a while, but when the woman is gone, Keats is consumed by other, weighty and unpleasant cares until she comes again. And even though he knows she isn’t a cure, the promise of the daemonic experience causes him to sink into the fantasy once more.

The next poem, “Ode to Fanny,” addresses Keats’s despair over Fanny’s independence. According to both Lowell and Bate, “Ode to Fanny” was written upon the occasion of her going to a dance that Keats could not attend because he was ill. The speaker begins the poem by ordering “Physician Nature” to “let my spirit blood! / O ease my heart of verse and let me rest; / Throw me upon thy tripod till the flood / Of stifling numbers ebbs from my full breast” (1-4). Unlike “Lines to Fanny,” this poem has the speaker entering his dream before he encounters Fanny beckoning him “out into the wintry air” (8). He calls her “sweet home of all my fears / And hopes and joys and panting miseries” (9-10). Images of blood and fever occur in the third stanza.

Let, let the amorous burn—

But, prithee, do not turn

The current of your heart from me so soon:

O save, in charity,

The quickest pulse for me. (20-24)

In this poem, the speaker portrays love as a sickness, and he also expresses jealousy and sexual longing. The speaker refers to another, who with “greedy looks, eats up my feast” (17). He accuses Fanny of being inconstant, “a feather on the sea, / Swayed to and fro by every wind and tide” (38). These lines recall Keats’s first description of Fanny as “flying out in all directions” (*Letters* 22). The feather image contrasts with the stability of the tripod in the first stanza upon which his blood is being let. The instability trope is repeated, when the speaker’s heart “goes fluttering for you every where”

The speaker continues in a tone of jealousy and despair :

I know it—and to know it is despair



To one who loves as I love, sweet Fanny,  
 Whose heart goes fluttering for you every where,  
 Nor when away you roam,  
 Dare keep its wretched home:  
 Love, love alone, his pains severe and many,  
 Then, loveliest! Keep me free  
 From torturing jealousy. (41-48)

The poem concludes with the view that if any other should “with a rude hand break the sacramental cake” or “touch the new-budded flower” of their love, the speaker wishes for death: “may my eyes close Love! On their last repose! (52-56).

“Ode To Fanny” is an acknowledgement of the pain caused by Keats’s addiction to the experience of love. His love is “the sweet home of all [Keats’s] fears,/And hopes, and joys, and panting miseries” (9-10). Keats’s expectations of love are so demanding that they cannot possibly endure the pressure. Although he is fully conscious that his love for Fanny is not all he desires it to be, he cannot escape the “panting miseries” because of his dependence on the “hopes, and joys.” The thralldom described in “To Fanny” also reappears in this poem as Keats describes his own “ravished, aching, vassal eyes, / Lost in soft amaze” (14-16).

Of all the *Fanny* poems, “This living hand” has the weakest link to Fanny. Amy Lowell thinks this poem is about Fanny, but Bate is not so sure (Lowell 2:376 , Bate 626). Like Bate, I am not certain that Fanny is the person being addressed in this poem. In it, Keats confronts:

This living hand, now warm and capable

Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold  
 And in the icy silence of the tomb,  
 So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights  
 That thou would wish thine own heart dry of blood,  
 So in my veins red life might stream again,  
 And thou be conscience-calm'd. See here it is—  
 I hold it towards you. (1-8)

Although it shares with the Fanny poems an awareness of his own death, and his resentment towards those who are living at more liberty than he is, it also foretells the death of the addressee in a threatening way totally out of keeping with Keats's attitude toward Fanny in the letters and other Fanny poems. While he does imply in certain letters that perhaps her conscience is not crystal clear: "Do not write to me if you have done anything this month which it would have pained me to seen . . . And again do not write unless you can do it with a crystal conscience" (451), he also wishes that she could feel the agonies of what he feels: "You do not feel as I do. You do not know what it is to love" (451). Keats never went so far as to wish her to be haunted or to predict that she would wish for her own death due to her conscience regarding him. In the other Fanny poems, the speaker is always predicting his own death (which he does in this poem as well), but this piece, if it were written to Fanny, is threatening *her* with death. Even in his most bitter complaints to her, the threat that she will regret her bad behavior once he is gone never emerges.

Joseph Severn would claim that “Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art” was the last poem composed by Keats, on their voyage to Italy. But most critics agree that it was written in earlier, in 1819. Lowell places it in April, among the Odes, while Bate places it in the fall with the other Fanny poems. The poem is a contrast of two types of steadfastness. In the first half, the speaker wishes to be steadfast like a star—and then lists the ways in which he does not want to be like the star.

Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art—  
 Not in lone splendor hung aloft the night,  
 And watching, with eternal lids apart,  
 Like nature’s patient, sleepless, eremite,  
 The moving waters at their priestlike task  
 Of pure ablution round earth’s human shores,  
 Or gazing on the new soft-fallen mask  
 Of snow upon the mountains and the moors; (1-8)

Keats’s characterization of the star is monastic and deliberately sexless: the star never rests, is constantly watchful, never abandons itself to indolence or sensuousness; rather it is celibate, like an “eremite” at his “priestlike” task. Cold, that in Keats’s poetry is the opposite of emotion and love, is evoked by the snow on the mountains creating a lifeless “mask.”

The sonnet turns when the speaker describes how he *would* like to be like the star. Instead of coldly watching, he wishes to be eternally

Pillow’d upon my fair love’s ripening breast,  
 To feel for ever its soft swell and fall,

Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,  
 Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,  
 And so live ever—or else swoon to death. (10-14)

Whale writes of this poem that “The scene of earthly passion brings with it, inevitably for Keats, the ‘wakeful anguish’ of the human heart” (148). Keats ideal of immortality is sensuous in nature. The sexual description of his love’s “ripening breast” and the “soft fall and swell” of her body are contrasted with the moving waters at their celibate task. Instead, steadfastness is to be in the state of love eternally.

The detached watchfulness of the star contrasts with the anticipatory stillness of listening for his “love’s tender-taken breath,” which is a “sweet unrest” (12-13). There is some multiplicity in the “Still, still,” as though he must be still to listen for her breath, but also as a justification for the “sweet unrest,” as though to hear her “tender-taken breath” forever makes up for the unrest. In a letter to Fanny, the steadfastness of her beauty and the joy he takes in it are expressed: “You are always new. The last of your kisses was ever the sweetest; the last smile the brightest; the last movement the gracefulest. When you pass’d my window home yesterday I was fill’d with as much admiration as if I had then seen you for the first time” (430). Bate observes that Keats wants to “rescue the heart into attaining those qualities of permanence and detachment that are denied to the human being, but to attain this permanence and detachment without any of the inevitable limitations” (620).

The sonnet “To Fanny” directly describes Keats’s desire for the daemonic, which he locates in Fanny, or as Patterson calls it, the need for “Intense ecstasy; joy,”—a feeling he can only experience when his love for Fanny is wholly encompassing him (11).

I cry your mercy—pity—love! —aye, love,  
 Merciful love that tantalizes not,  
 One-thoughted, never-wand’ring, guileless love,  
 Unmask'd, and being seen—without a blot!  
 O, let me have thee whole, —all,—all—be mine!  
 That shape, that fairness, that sweet minor zest  
 Of love, your kiss, those hands, those eyes divine,  
 That warm, white, lucent, million-pleasured breast,— (1-8)

His jealousy can be read as the threat to this “one-thoughted” pleasure that depends on “never wandering.” The later lines, “Yourself—your soul—in pity give me all, / Withhold no atom's atom or I die, / Or living on, perhaps, your wretched thrall” (9-11), belie his need to be completely engrossed in a state of love in order to forestall death or thralldom. John Whale claims this poem shows that for Keats, being “engaged in such agitated possessive longing is seen as being possessed or in ‘thrall’ to the enchantment of love” (147). As is common in the Fanny poems and the letters, being a “thrall” costs Keats his poetic ambition. As an alternative to death, Keats suggests another fate if he cannot possess Fanny’s love. He will “Forget, in the mist of idle misery, / Life's purposes,—the palate of my mind / Losing its gust, and my ambition blind (12-14).

Keats was resentful in his belief that Fanny’s passion did not match his, that she did not as depend upon him for happiness as he depended on her. In a letter written in

July 1819, many of the elements of the poem—possessiveness, dependence and resentment—are present:

You have amusements; your mind is away. You have not brooded over one idea as I have, and how should you? You are to me an object intensely desireable; the air I breathe in a room empty of you is unhealthy. I am not the same to you. No, you can wait. You have a thousand activities. You can be happy without me. Any party, anything to fill up the day has been enough. How have you pass'd this month? Who have you smil'd with? All this may seem savage in me. You do not feel as I do. You do not know what it is to love. (451)

The *Fanny* poems, although not among Keats's most celebrated, provide invaluable insight into how Keats experienced love, and are directly supported by his letters to Fanny. Although both these letters and poems were composed after he had already written most of his best poetry, I believe they are useful in considering the poetry of the miracle year. Because Keats's poetry is concerned so much with the daemonic experience and sensation and its troubled relationship to the everyday world of money, commerce and fashion, understanding Keats's own troubled relationship to love and life will inform our understanding of his narrative poems and the Odes.

## CHAPTER III

### THE NARRATIVE POEMS

This chapter examines the three narrative poems completed during the Keats-Browne courtship and engagement. Written over the course of 1819, the subject of love and romance in these works reveals Keats's life-long commitment to the idea of love as a vehicle for spiritual and poetic transcendence. They also reflect a growing cynicism and despair that love can overcome the influence of harsh reality. The attitudes toward love in these poems are revisited again in Keats's letters to Fanny written many months later. In Fanny, Keats attempts to find the same transcendence through love sought by his narrative heroes. And like them, he is beset by doubt and frustration as he pursues this goal.

Before 1819, love in Keats's poetry was straightforwardly positive, the ideal vehicle through which to experience beauty and truth. In his book Eros and the Romantics, Gerald Enscœ examines Keats's early treatment of love. In his analysis of Keats's first major poem, "Endymion," Enscœ concludes:

Finally, love is defined as the one great force in the universe, upon which everything on earth is dependent for its very existence: this human, physical love, 'the mere commingling of passionate breath', the kissing

and greeting of human beings, the orgasmic experience of melting mingling and combining, is the one great principle of the universe. (114)

In "Endymion," the eponymous human hero gains immortality through the pursuit and attainment of love with a goddess.

The narrative poems of 1819 demonstrate a departure from love as an unquestioned positive, and beginning with "The Eve of St. Agnes," turn toward a more ambivalent and often destructive vision of love. Among many possible explanations for this change are a maturing poetic sensibility, an idealism battered by the death of his brother and by his financial and professional troubles, as well as the beginning of Keats's first and only romantic relationship.

None of the female figures in the narrative poems bears much, if any, resemblance to Fanny, and with the exception of "Lamia," we know little of the relationship between Keats and Fanny during the writing of the narrative poems. What is of interest in the poems is the extent to which Keats identifies with the heroes and the role love plays in these poems, what love looks and feels like, and how it can go wrong. These elements are of interest because they re-emerge in Keats's own romance with Fanny, and help to explain his perplexing reactions to her.

The earliest narrative poem of 1819, "The Eve of St. Agnes," is also the most hotly debated in terms of critical interpretation. There is little consensus among scholars about whether the portrayal of the love relationship is ultimately positive or negative. The poem marks the introduction of the deeply divided attitude toward love that weaves like a thread through all of the 1819 poetry. "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," written some months after "St. Agnes," finds Keats directly exploring the negative consequences of



pursuing love. In “La Belle Dame,” the ideal, intense love Keats thrives on and the real world of pain and suffering are imagined as equally strong, leaving the male character in stasis; not fully in one world or the other, unable to move and in danger of dying. Written in June, during a period of great uncertainty and desperation for Keats, “Lamia,” grants the lovers the greatest happiness of his poetic pairings, but also the most gruesome fate. Their happiness in love is not strong enough to withstand reality when it inevitably reasserts itself. Confronted with reality, both of the lovers are destroyed.

In January 1819, Keats traveled to Chichester with Brown, to visit Dilke’s parents. While there, he took the suggestion of Isabella Jones, made in the autumn of 1818, to write a poem about the legend of St. Agnes’ Eve. Written in Spenserian form, and set during medieval times, the poem was completed in a matter of weeks and describes a romantic encounter between two young lovers. At the time of its writing, Keats had known Fanny for several months. The relationship was new; it would be seven months before the letters from Keats to Fanny begin. That Fanny was in his thoughts in January of 1819, however, is evident from his letter to George and Georgiana in which he gives his famous description of her as “ignorant,” “flying out in all directions” and a “*Minx*” (222). Despite the exasperated tone, he is clearly taken with her, and she is described as no other woman in his correspondence.

In “St. Agnes,” the role of love can be interpreted as a mode of achieving happiness and self-knowledge or as an ineffectual buffer against the cruelties of the outside world. The ambivalence of the poem and the criticism surrounding it are a result of Keats’s questioning his own attitudes and beliefs about romance and its role in his poetry and in his life. This poem demonstrates not only his belief in the positive power

of love but also his doubts and fears regarding this belief. These lofty expectations and dreadful fears play out in his poetry and in his relationship with Fanny.

The central narrative of “St. Agnes,” the romantic encounter between Porphyro and Madeline, is contained within a frame; a chilly, inhospitable place. Its inhabitants are a the beadsman, who lives a cold, empty life dedicated to religion and death; the elderly Angela, a frail and weak-willed old nursemaid; and the occupants of the castle, a fashionable, cruel society antagonistic toward our hero and the relationship between the lovers. The purpose of the frame, argues John Whale, is to “emphasise the confined space of romance and the degree to which the surrounding environment is not simply uncongenial, but positively threatening” (70). Each lover individually puts into action a plan designed to escape the frame, to move into a warm, fulfilling state of being through a romantic experience. Both separate themselves from the frame and move toward the center into a warmer, more welcoming and sensual state.

The narrator of the poem opens with “St. Agnes’ Eve—Ah, bitter chill it was!” and then describes the numbness of the beadsman’s fingers and his breath rising “Like pious incense from a censer old” (7). Like Angela, the Beadsman is frail, weak, and practically lifeless: “the joys of all his life were said and sung” (24). The Beadsman has no hope for the kind of life-affirming sensation so highly prized by Keats. Instead, he spends the chilly evening wandering the aisles of the chapel, observing “the sculptur’d dead” who are “frozen in black, purgatorial rails” (15-16).

The Beadsman’s attention is drawn to the castle by music, but a sinister music of “silver, snarling” trumpets which rather than delight the ear, “chide” the castle and its inhabitants “ready with their pride” to “receive a thousand guests” (31-33). The people in

the castle are described as “argent revelry, / With plume, tiara, and all rich array”(37-38). Keats writes that they haunt the imagination of Porphyro with his “brain, new-stuff’d, in youth with triumphs gay / Of old romance,”—a brain not unlike Keats’s, who in his earlier youth was very much influenced by romance (40-41). But “St. Agnes” is not going to be a conventional romance, as we learn from the next line. Of these revelers so evocative of “old romance” Keats writes, “These let us wish away, / and turn sole-thoughted, to one Lady there” (41-42).

Madeline’s heart, the narrator tells us, had brooded all day “on love” (44). She has been promised “visions of delight, / and soft adorings” from her love if she follows the ritual of St. Agnes Eve (47-48). And so, despite the celebration going on around her, Madeline follows the rituals: fasting, keeping silent, and not looking behind her. In return, she believes, she will receive a vision of her future husband. While she waits for her moment to leave the party and continue with the ritual, the hero, Porphyro, comes onto the scene. Keats makes the allusion to Romeo and Juliet clear as Porphyro arrives uninvited and unwelcome at the party, even though Madeline’s family harbors murderous feelings toward him. Although he must hide himself, he has come to see Madeline: “That he might gaze and worship all unseen; / Perchance speak, kneel, touch, kiss” (80-81). Porphyro encounters Angela, a sort of nurse to Madeline. An old, weak woman, she is easily led by Porphyro. Upon hearing Angela tell of Madeleine’s St. Agnes Eve plan, Porphyro is emboldened, his purpose, more focused: “Sudden a thought came like a full-blown rose, / Flushing his brow, and in his pained heart / made purple riot” (136-38). The color and warmth of the erotic imagery in these lines is in strong contrast to the cold, metallic atmosphere of the night and the castle itself.

Porphyro decides to hide himself in Madeline's chamber and, during her vision of her future husband, present himself to her as her husband in the flesh. Angela is persuaded to help him, because of both goodwill and weakness. The subterfuge of Porphyro's actions is a common point of contention in criticism of the poem. Is he a cruel deceiver à la Lovelace, as Stillinger posits, or a pilgrim seeking salvation through sensual love, as Enscoe argues? (Stillinger 82, Enscoe 128-29). Porphyro's motives, noble or callous, color the nature of the romantic encounter at the heart of the poem. As Bate argues, there is a bit of Keats in Pophyro. "In entering the character of Porphyro, Keats is able to take some vicarious pleasure in the lover's 'stratagem'" (439-40). The connection between Keats and hero can also be seen in the way Porphyro uses the object of his affection as a gateway to the spiritual.

When Madeline finally enters the room, Porphyro watches her prepare for the ritual from the closet. Every sensation is heightened and warmed; Keats gives a splendid description of the "casement high and triple-arch'd" depicting "flowers and bunches of knot-grass," and how the wintry moon shining through it "threw warm gules on Madeline's fair breast"(208-10, 218). But despite the warmth and images of nature, the cold moon shines through lifeless representations of nature.

In sexually charged language, Keats describes Madeline as she undresses and enters into her vision:

Of all its wreathed pearls her hair she frees;  
 Unclasps her warmed jewels one by one;  
 Loosens her fragrant boddice; by degrees  
 Her rich attire creeps rustling to her knees:

Half-hidden, like a mermaid in sea-weed,  
 Pensive awhile she dreams awake, and sees,  
 In fancy, fair St. Agnes in her bed,  
 But dares not look behind, or all the charm is fled. (227-34)

Once Madeline enters into her vision state, Porphyro begins to put his own plan into action, and brings her a generous feast that adds to the richness of sensations:

While he from for the closet brought a heap  
 Of candied apple, quince, and plum, and gourd;  
 With jellies soother than the creamy curd,  
 And lucent syrops, tinct with cinnamon;  
 Manna and dates, in argosy transferr'd  
 From Fez; and spiced dainties, every one,  
 From silken Samarcand to cedar'd Lebanon. (263-70)

Whether this feast represents a generosity, a cornucopia of taste and texture, or is meant to trick Madeline is the question. Keats is well aware of the dangers of fairy food as is shown in his later poem, "La Belle Dame Sans Merci." Porphyro, unable to wake Madeline with his luscious feast, takes up a lute and appeals to her sense of hearing by singing a ballad title "La Belle Dame Sans Merci."

With the song, he wakes Madeleine – but not entirely – "Her eyes were open, but she still beheld, / Now wide awake, the vision of her sleep" (298-9). Her vision, which was of Porphyro, was beautiful and intense, but she wakes to find the real Porphyro, a painful contrast:

Thy voice was at sweet tremble in mine ear,

Made tunable with every sweetest vow;

And those sad eyes were spiritual and clear:

How changed thou art! How pallid, chill, and drear!" (308-11)

She begs to return to the vision of her sleep vision, and Porphyro, upon hearing her fear and disappointment, decides to join her vision:

"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 odor with the violet,—

Solution sweet" (318-22)

This melting is a sexual image, as Keats made clear in a letter written by Woodhouse to the poem's publishers. In response the publishers' concerns that the poem was too explicit to be read by ladies, Keats (according to Woodhouse) responded:

He says he does not want ladies to read his poetry, that he writes for men and that if in the former poem there was an opening for doubt what took place, it was his fault for not writing clearly and comprehensibly; that he should despise a man who would be such an eunuch in sentiment as to leave a maid, with that Character about her, in such a situation, and should despise himself to write about it. (342)

During their encounter in Madeline's bedchamber a storm rises, "meantime the frost-wind blows / Like Love's alarum pattering the sharp sleet / Against the window panes — St Angles moon has set" (323-24). Both characters emerge from the "solution sweet," as the "iced gusts still rave and beat" (327). Madeline is still dismayed about her dream becoming a reality: "No dream alas! Porphyro will leave me here to pine!" (329) but she

will not curse her fate, she tells Porphyro, “because my heart is lost in thine” (331).

Porphyro urges Madeline to flee with him where he has a home for them across the moors. Together they flee the castle, past the “sleeping dragons,” into the cold, hostile frame of the poem, which has taken on an even more haunting and deathly aura:

That night the Baron dreamt of many a woe,  
And all his warrior-guests with shade and form  
Of witch, and demon, and large coffin worm,  
Were long be-nightmar'd. Angela the old  
Died palsy-twitch'd, with meager face deform;  
The Beadsman after thousand aves told,  
For aye unsought for slept among his ashes cold. (372-78)

The nature and tone of the ending is inconclusive, and has led to various critical interpretations. For example, Charles Patterson argues that by the end of the poem, the lovers have emerged from their otherworldly state of visions into reality and flee to happiness and safety across the moors:

In short, [Porphyro] consummated the love relation with [Madeline] then and there, vowed eternal fidelity, promised immediate marriage, and led her away through the storm to a house “oe’r the southern moors” [ . . . ]  
That is, the lovers have left the daemonic world behind at the castle and have gone to fulfill their existence in the world of ordinary humanity.  
(117-18)

John Whale has a less happy view of the ending, and posits that it is

[. .] very typical of Keats's poetry in general that the moment of consummation [. .] is no sooner achieved than it is met by the cold wind of mortality [. . .] the sensuous excitement of the poem is immediately undercut not only by the chill wind, but by a historical detachment which is a tough minded counter-point to their sensuously realised excess of pleasure. (76-77)

And instead of the lovers escaping to fulfill their existence in the world, Whale argues, they are "frozen into the surrounding frame" of the castle and its nightmare-haunted and deathly inhabitants (77).

In his article "Has Keats's 'Eve of St. Agnes' a Tragic Ending?" Herbert G. Wright takes the questionable fate of the lovers a step further, arguing that throughout the poem Keats invites readers to "anticipate that the great adventure of the lovers would culminate in disaster" (90). Wright claims the storm "wears an air of menace" and is not a magical intervention to help the lovers escape (91). He points out that in the following narratives, "Lamia" and "La Belle Dame," the moment of happiness is followed by disappointment, and therefore if we are to imagine a fate that would be more in keeping with Keats's other treatments of love, we must admit the possibility of an unhappy ending for the couple (93-95).

Earl Wasserman argues that Porphyro and Madeline, cross from the infant chamber of the castle and worldly concerns, into the Chamber of Maiden Thought. They are "intoxicated with the light and atmosphere and think of delaying there ever in delight" but in "The Eve of St. Agnes," Keats "melts the lovers into a spaceless, timeless, selfless realm of mystery [. . .] When next we glance at them they have become indistinct and



have blurred into insubstantial things; their movement is the insubstantial essence of movement, not a human act, and they themselves have become visionary “ (30-31).

Enscoe argues the opposite, that rather than becoming visionary or indistinct, “Madeline and Porphyro, like Endymion and Cynthia, triumph over this world of kings and warriors. Their home across the southern moors waits them; theirs is a paradise based on the worship and exaltation of the flesh” (131).

Critical interpretations of *St Agnes* are dizzying in their variety. Depending on the critic, the lovers Madeline and Porphyro live happily ever after in the everyday world, die, or ascend to a higher spiritual plain. It is possible, however, that the ambivalence toward love is at the heart of the poem and reflects of Keats’s own uncertain attitude toward romantic love. His ideas about love, the extent of its power and its consequences, are not fully articulated in *St. Agnes*; rather they are explored in the poem. This results in a poem without a clear outcome or message but nevertheless containing rich ideas and language that rival the multicolored window in Madeline’s chamber.

“*La Belle Dame Sans Merci*” appears, quite suddenly, in a diary letter written to George and Georgiana in May of 1819. One of Keats’s most famous and problematic poems, it contains a startlingly dark treatment of romance and the erotic. The poem describes a lover trapped between a glamorous, sensual existence with an otherworldly woman and everyday human life with its pain and suffering. Rather than happy immortality in the human world granted to him through an erotic encounter with the otherworldly (as occurred in “*Endymion*” and arguably “*St Agnes*,”), the knight is in a painful stasis. Unable to reenter the world of his enchanted love and unable to fully reintegrate himself into the human world, he is at risk of dying.

The contrasts among “Endymion,” “St. Agnes” and “La Belle Dame Sans Merci,” are significant. In his book Eros and the Romantics, Gerald Encsoe observes that Keats, “in the space of roughly two months, the time between *St Agnes* and *La Belle Dame*, changes from a passionate celebrant of love’s victory to a cynical observer of love’s destructive effects” (132). The lovers in this poem are a human “Knight at arms” (1) and an other-worldly woman, “a fairy’s child” (14). There is another character in the poem as well, whom Charles Patterson identifies as an observer from the purely human world (129), and it is he who begins the poem with the question “O What can ail thee knight at arms, / Alone and palely loitering?” (1). This observer has found the knight in a blighted landscape where “the sedge has withered from the lake and no birds sing” (3-4). This, Patterson points out, is a notable contrast to the more positive autumnal imagery of the speaker’s own human world (132-33) in which “the squirrel’s granary is full, / and the harvest’s done” (7-8). The human questioner observes a lily on the knight’s brow and a rose on his cheeks, traditional symbols of death and love respectively.

The knight answers the speaker, telling of his encounter with “a fairy’s child,” and how he wooed her:

I made a garland for her head,  
And bracelets too, and fragrant zone;  
She look’d at me as she did love,  
And made sweet moan.  
I set her on my pacing steed,  
And nothing else saw all day long,  
For sidelong would she bend, and sing

A faery's song. (17-22)

The fairy woman returns his affections, and:

She found me roots of relish sweet,  
 And honey wild, and manna dew,  
 And sure in language strange she said—  
 I love thee true. (25-28)

After her proclamation of love, “I love thee true,” she seems to realize that their happiness is momentary and cannot last. “She took me to her elfin grot, / And there she wept, and sighed full sore” (29-30). The knight seems unaware of the reason behind her sadness and attempts to comfort her. But she in turn lulls him to sleep, and he enters a dream.

And there I dream'd—Ah! woe betide!  
 The latest dream I ever dream'd  
 On the cold hill's side.

I saw pale kings and princes too,  
 Pale warriors, death-pale were they all;  
 They cried—“La belle dame sans merci  
 Hath thee in thrall!” (34-40)

Like Endymion and Porphyro before him, the knight melts into the dream of a woman for whom he has romantic and sexual feelings. In the earlier poems, however, the male figure melts into a magical dream of beauty embodied in a female figure either otherworldly or in a state of contact with the otherworldly. In this case, the dream is a

nightmare of kings and princes, who represent more closely the unpleasantness of the human world, associated with the crowd at the castle in “St. Agnes.” And instead of drawing him to communion with the world of beauty and romance, the dream separates him from that world. According to Whale, “the poem illustrates the difficulty of maintaining a realm of romance, besieged as the knight is not only by those he meets, but even by the damning social conformity manifesting themselves into the unconscious of his dreams” (65-6).

Even before the vision, there is ample evidence that their love could not be maintained; however, it is the outside influences of the kings and princes that makes the knight clearly aware of his situation and rejects him from the world of love. With his connection to the world of love broken, he finds himself in a deathly state, a lily on his brow. Although no longer in the world of love, he has not reintegrated into human life. As Mark Sandy points out,

Keats’ knight hovers between an indistinct mode of existence—caught between dreaming and waking—as a ‘woe-begone’ figure in a landscape characterized by negativity and absence. He can never be reunited with the fairy creature and nature cannot provide him with a reassuring myth of consolation. Nature withdraws from the scene abandoning the knight to his plight, unable to comfort him, it reflects only his desolation.

It is tempting, as Enscoe does, to cast the princes and kings as powers of evil, as they separate the Knight from his love (141). But a letter written in the same diary letter in which the poem appears implies that the ability to live in the human world, and to learn from its pain and suffering, is absolutely necessary:

How then are Souls to be made? How then are these sparks which are God to have identity given them so as ever to possess a bliss peculiar to each one's individual existence? How, but by the medium or world like this? [ . . . ] Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains is to an Intelligence and make it a soul? A place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways! (290-1)

The knight's unwillingness to experience the world, its pains and experiences, and his desire to escape into the unreality of the Belle Dame and the pure delight she represents to him, result in enthrallment, stagnation, even death.

We have no letters to Fanny from this period, and critics such as Lowell are skeptical of claims that the poem is autobiographical (2: 225). In considering the poem in relation to Keats and Fanny, it is only in the subsequent letters during his decline in health and situation, in which we can see how deeply the ideas in this and the other narrative poems are part of his own experience of love. In his letters he displays a repeated tendency to cast Fanny in the role of the Belle Dame: the figure that puts all else, the worries and cares but also the ambition and willpower, out of his mind—and she is all he can think about; he dissolves and vanishes in consideration of her beauty. But they also show Keats's understanding that, as much as we would have it otherwise, the transformative power of the romantic encounters does not necessarily conquer the troubles of the human world, or lead to a happy existence in the real world. Once the letters to Fanny begin, Keats is already bitterly aware that “the enemies of love are stronger than he originally thought [ . . . ] love is less powerful, its foes more numerous and stronger; and the ultimate triumph of love is no longer certain” (Enscoe, 142-43). On

one hand, Keats suspects that perhaps that is the way it was meant to be. He was meant to struggle and suffer, and not to live on in an uninterrupted romantic bliss; the power of that possibility haunts his relationship with Fanny.

“Lamia” was written at the beginning of Keats’s final decline, when he was desperately low on funds, and considering a return to the surgeon’s trade, but determined to give poetry one last chance. In June of 1819, he was invited to stay with James Rice, who was ill, on the Isle of Wight. During his first weeks there, he wrote the first part of “Lamia.” The second part of the poem was written in August and September, although Bate claims that the majority of the poem, its ideas, tone, and plot trajectory were established firmly during the first weeks of work on the poem in June (543). The vision of love depicted in “Lamia” is Keats’s most destructive.

At the time of his visit to the Isle of Wight, Keats was experiencing disappointments, both in love and in the world, which he viewed as hostile to love. He was extremely low on funds and struggling to support himself and a future involving poetry; therefore marriage seemed more and more out of reach. It is during this very uncertain time that Keats’s letters to Fanny begin. The letters, written from his sojourn with Rice, show him deeply in love but also struggling very hard against it. In a July letter, Keats sees her at once, like Lamia, the embodiment of beauty in which he could happily lose himself forever:

All my thoughts, my unhappiest days and nights have I find not at all  
cured me of my love of Beauty, but made it so intense that I am miserable  
that you are not with me; or rather breathe in that dull sort of patience that  
cannot be called Life. I never knew before, what such a love as you have

made me feel was. I did not believe in it. My Fancy was afraid of it, lest it should burn me up. But if you will fully love me, though there may be some fire, 'twill not be more than we can bear when moistened and bedewed with Pleasures. (312-13)

By August 16, however, love was an enervating force bent on keeping him from his ambitions, and seemed a trap he must avoid.

A thousand images I have had pass through my brain—my uneasy spirits, my unguess'd fate—all spread as a veil between me and you. Remember I have no idle time to brood over you. [. . .] and believe and see that I cannot think of you without some sort of energy, although mal a propos. Even as I leave off, it seems to me that a few more moments thought of you would uncrystallize and dissolve me. (325-26)

This split vision of Lamia is evident in the letter written to George and Georgiana in September: "I have been reading over a part of a short poem I have composed lately call'd Lamia, and I am certain there is that sort of fire in it which must take hold of people in some way, give them either pleasant or unpleasant sensation. What they want is sensation of some sort" (363).

The uncertainty and unhappiness of Keats in his relationship, is mentioned in almost any critical treatment of Lamia. Although Namita Singh in Philosophy of Love goes to the extreme of directly identifying Lamia as Fanny and poetry, Lycius as Keats and the poet, and Appollonius as Brown and reason (80), others, such as Gittings and Alwes simply point out that as Keats wrote "Lamia," the state of his relationship with

Fanny weighed heavily on his mind, as evidenced by the letters (Alwes 146-47 Gittings 152-54).

The lovers in “Lamia” are a mortal man, Lycius, and an immortal woman, Lamia, whose true origins and nature are unclear. Set in the classical era, the beginning of the poem contains its own mini-narrative. The god Hermes has heard of the beauty of a certain nymph and has come to earth to find her and seduce her. At first he is frustrated in his search until he is offered help by a serpent called Lamia:

She was a gordian shape of dazzling hue,  
 Vermilion-spotted, golden, green, and blue;  
 Striped like a zebra, freckled like a pard,  
 Eyed like a peacock, and all crimson barr'd,  
 And full of silver moons, that, as she breathed,  
 Dissolv'd, or brighter shone, or interwreathed  
 Their lustres with the gloomier tapestries—  
 So rainbow-sided, touch'd with miseries, (47-54)

Lamia’s relationship to La Belle Dame as an enchanted lover is clear: “[Lamia] seem'd, at once, some penanced lady elf, / Some demon's mistress, or the demon's self” (55-56)

Lamia claims she was once a woman, but we are meant to understand that she is under some kind of spell that keeps her in a serpent’s shape. She longs to escape the serpent form, to have a human form again, and her desire for a human form is clearly erotic in nature: “When from this wreathed tomb shall I awake! / When move in a sweet body fit for life, / And love, and pleasure, and the ruddy strife / Of hearts and lips!” (38-41).



Lamia promises to reveal to Hermes the location of the nymph, if he in turn will give her a woman's form and place her in the way of Lycius, a youth of Corinth with whom she has fallen in love. She tells Hermes "I was a woman, let me have once more / a woman's shape, and as charming as before" (117-18). Hermes agrees. This is the only poem in which the female takes the active part in seduction, and echoes Keats's repeated accusations against Fanny that she has consciously entrapped him.

The transformation of her enchanted, beautiful serpent's form into a woman's form is painful and ugly but once complete, Lamia is

A virgin purest lipp'd, yet in the lore  
 Of love deep learned to the red heart's core: (189-90)  
 [ . . . . . ]  
 As though in Cupid's college she had spent  
 Sweet days a lovely graduate, still unshent,  
 And kept his rosy terms in idle languishment. (197-99)

From Keats's description, John Whale interprets Lamia as "the epitome of sexual pleasure and knowledge: woman made in the light of male gaze" (82). This is an opinion shared by Alwes who, thinks that "despite the facile connection between Fanny and Lamia that may be invoked by some, the complexities that make up Lamia, as indeed those that make up his vision of Fanny, too, belong more to Keats than to either of the women" (147).

Hermes places Lamia in the path of Lycius, and Lycius is enamored of her at first sight:

It seem'd he had lov'd [Lamia's words] a whole summer long:

And soon his eyes had drunk her beauty up,  
 Leaving no drop in the bewildering cup,  
 And still the cup was full,— “ (250-53)

Lycius believes Lamia to be a goddess, and she plays on this belief when she asks him what he will do to make her forget her fantastic palaces and other trappings of a goddess. The thought that Lamia might leave him causes Lycius to faint. While he is unconscious, Lamia makes a decision:

Thus gentle Lamia judg'd, and judg'd aright,  
 That Lycius could not love in half a fright,  
 So threw the goddess off, and won his heart  
 More pleasantly by playing woman's part,  
 With no more awe than what her beauty gave,  
 That, while it smote, still guaranteed to save. (334-39)

It is clear that on some level Lycius is aware of the deception, because as they enter Corinth together, he hides from those who know him: “Muffling his face, of greeting friends in fear,” including Appolonius his “trusty guide” and “good instructor” (362) who seems to him now “The ghost of folly haunting my sweet dreams” (375-77).

At the end of Part I, Lycius and Lamia have decided to retreat into a world of love, although they both must employ deceptions in order to maintain its power. She must pretend to be a purely mortal woman, and Lycius must withdraw from the world and hide his love from observation. That Keats sympathized with Lycius is clear from a letter to Fanny: “I hate the world; it batters too much the wings of self-will, and I would take sweet poison from your lips to take me out of it. I am indeed astonish'd to find myself so

careless of all charms but yours, remembering as I do the time when even a bit of ribband was of interest with me” (318).

When Part II of the poem begins, a month has passed for Keats, and year for the lovers. Once sequestered in Lycius’s home, he and Lamia together create a “purple-lined palace of sweet sin.”

They were enthroned, in the even tide,

Upon a couch, near to a curtaining

[ . . . . . ]

Betwixt two marble shafts:—there they reposed,

Where use had made it sweet, with eyelids closed,

Saving a tythe which love still open kept,

That they might see each other while they almost slept; (17-18, 22-25)

The palace has been made magically decadent by Lamia’s powers, and no one in Corinth knows where it is. The power of their love, fueled by sex, keeps them sequestered from the outside world, until one day Lycius hears the sound of trumpets from Corinth, and for the first time since he met Lamia, his thoughts turn from her:

Lycius started—the sounds fled,

But left a thought, a buzzing in his head.

For the first time, since first he harbour’d in

That purple-lined palace of sweet sin,

His spirit pass’d beyond its golden bourn

Into the noisy world almost forsworn. (27-33)

Lamia immediately senses the change in him, and like La Belle Dame before her, begins to mourn. Lycius responds that he still loves her dearly, but that he now desires to legitimize their relationship in the community of Corinth. He wants everyone to see and recognize her as his wife.

What mortal hath a prize, that other men  
 May be confounded and abash'd withal,  
 But lets it sometimes pace abroad majestic,  
 And triumph, as in thee I should rejoice  
 Amid the hoarse alarm of Corinth's voice.  
 Let my foes choke, and my friends shout afar,  
 While through the thronged streets your bridal car  
 Wheels round its dazzling spokes. (57-64)

Lamia knows instinctively this is not a good idea, but when Lycius is infuriated at her resistance and demands that she acquiesce, she weakens and agrees to the marriage. All she asks is that Apollonius not be invited. Patterson observes that it is this decision by Lycius that makes the confrontation with Apollonius inevitable (206-07). By trying to bring the demonic (Lamia) into his mortal life, Lycius forces a confrontation between the two. Describing their wedding day, the narrator of the poem makes the folly of this marriage clear:

O senseless Lycius! Madman! wherefore flout  
 The silent-blessing fate, warm cloister'd hours,  
 And show to common eyes these secret bowers?

The herd approach'd; each guest, with busy brain,  
Arriving at the portal, gaz'd amain," (147-51)

Apollonius, although not invited, attends. In contrast to the crowd, however, he is "severe" and "austere" (157-58). Apollonius apologizes to Lycius for coming uninvited, but does not leave, and here the narrator interjects:

[D]o not all charms flee  
At the mere tone of cold philosophy?  
There was an awful rainbow once in heaven:  
We know her woof, her texture; she is given  
In the dull catalogue of common things.  
Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings,  
Conquer all mysteries by rule and line, (229-25)

Keats had long struggled to find the exact relationship between emotion and reason. As early as 1817, he wrote:

O for a Life of Sensation rather than of Thoughts! It is a 'Vision in the form of Youth,' a Shadow of reality to come, and this consideration has further convinced me, for it has come as auxiliary to another favorite speculation of mine, that we shall enjoy ourselves hereafter by having what we called happiness on Earth repeated in a finer tone and so repeated And yet such a fate can only befall those who delight in sensation rather than hunger as you do after Truth. (54)

In his article, "The Significance of Lamia," John Hawley Roberts outlines Keats's ongoing struggle between feeling duty-bound to strive after Apollonian philosophical

truth, and his natural affinity for sensuous pleasure that revels in its own existence and does not “hunger . . . after Truth.” According to Hawley, “Lamia is something that the philosophic mind hates as corruptive, but to Lycius is a sweet delight” (554).

During the conclusion of the poem, Apollonius locks his eyes severely on Lamia and calls her a serpent. Under his relentless stare, Lamia is defeated—she is stricken, loses her beauty and, although Lycius begs Appollonius to look away, vanishes completely. Lycius, bereft of Lamia dies for love of her. Keats’s sympathies are clearly on the side of sensation and feeling, for Lycius’s death demonstrates that he chose Lamia and the sensual existence she represents over the cold philosophy of Appollonius. But the destructive power of love is made very clear in the fate of Lamia and Lycius.

Months later, in the last surviving letter to Fanny, written in the days leading up to Keats’s final departure from England, Keats revisits his oft-repeated wish either for happiness with her or for death: “I wish I was in your arms full of faith or that a Thunderbolt would strike me” (458). Love, as we have seen over the course of these three poems, is no longer a savior or path to happiness in Keats’s poetry. It is a highly pleasurable, but untenable state that vanishes when it is inevitably assaulted by the realities of the human world. The consequences of indulging in love become increasingly dire. And as Keats’s poetry about love moves along this trajectory, his attitude toward his personal romance becomes more despairing. It is hard not to compare him to the knight enthralled by the idea of Fanny. Kara Alwes is correct, I think, when she writes, “Brawne came to symbolize and internalize the emotion of love to Keats, and thus its pain as well” (157). Although Fanny from all accounts remained constant, Keats’s own evolving attitude toward love changed, influencing the way he reacted to her. Of love,

Keats said, "There may be a sort of love for which, without the least sneer at it, I have the highest respect, and can admire in others, but it has not the richness, the bloom, the full form, the enchantment of love after my own heart" (312). His dependence on intense "love after my own heart" made it increasingly difficult to deal with the everyday realities of his life, and specifically the everyday realities of his relationship with Fanny.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE ODES

In the months leading up to April 1819, Keats wrote little poetry. After completing “The Eve of St. Agnes” and abandoning “The Eve of St. Mark” in February, he went through a period of inactivity that lasted the rest of the winter and into early spring. On April 12 Keats wrote to his sister Fanny explaining his lack of output. His neglect in writing her, he wrote, is “but a small instance of my idleness of late, which has been growing upon me, so that it will require a great shake to get rid of it. I have written nothing, and almost read nothing, but I must turn over a new leaf” (249). In his biography of Keats, Walter Jackson Bate suggests that the fallow period leading up to the spring Odes was necessary, a time for Keats to digest the last year: Tom’s death, the publication and subsequent reviews of “Endymion,” George’s departure, Keats’s own blossoming romance with Fanny (457). Two weeks after Keats’s letter to his sister, the leaf turned: Keats composed “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” followed one week later by the first of the odes, “Ode to Psyche.” These two poems marked the beginning of a stunning and steady stream of poetic output which would last two months and include “Ode to a Nightingale,” “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” “Ode on Indolence” and “Ode on Melancholy.”

The spring odes represent a departure for Keats in tone, subject and form. Previously, Keats had written longer narrative poems and sonnets. Bate describes how



Keats came to the ode through a desire to find “a more richly capacious form than the sonnet” and discover “a more satisfying form for the sonnet itself” (496). In his pursuit of these goals, Keats experimented with elements from several forms of the ode to develop his own distinct form. The change in format and subject represented by the odes is also an example of Keats’s deliberate movement toward a less emotional type of poetry—one still deeply subjective, but philosophical at the same time. Happy with the balance he achieved in the first spring ode, “Ode to Psyche,” Keats wrote to his brother that he was determined to “write other things in even a more peaceable and healthy spirit” (294). Throughout a journal letter to George and Georgiana that spans February through April 1819, Keats repeated his belief that he must temper his sensations with reason in his poetry. Describing his process in writing “Why did I laugh tonight?” he argued that his experiences over the past year had made him stronger, better able to deal calmly and reasonably with adversity:

[ . . . ] ask yourselves whether I have not that in me which will well bear the buffets of the world. It will be the best comment on my sonnet; it will show you that it was written with no Agony but that of ignorance; with no thirst of anything but knowledge when pushed to the point though the first steps to it were through my human passions. They went away, and I wrote with my Mind—and perhaps I must confess a little bit of my heart—” (272)

Keats still relied heavily on his “human passions” in his poetry but believed he had gained a greater perspective that would temper those passions.

In his analysis of the spring odes, Robert Gittings observes that one of the contributing factors to their success was Keats's growing love for Fanny, which "anchored" him after a winter of drifting (133). Although the letters between Keats and Fanny follow the spring odes by several months, the treatment of love in the odes is crucial to understanding the letters to come. In each of the odes, a male speaker pursues something he wants to experience or understand. Keats's ecstatic feelings toward Fanny, like the speaker's feelings toward the nightingale's song, an urn, and other objects, moods and figures pursued in the odes, granted him access to a highly pleasurable emotional state that was always tempered by disappointment and pain. Keats and the poet-speakers of the odes were constantly in pursuit of love, but also exhausted by their feelings of love, let down by them, suspicious of them, and dependent on them.

Keats's final ode, "To Autumn," is a quiet poem about fall that acknowledges that the beauty being celebrated heralds the beginning of the end. In terms of love and Keats's relationship with Fanny, the poem is notable for its absence of romantic love. With that absence comes a peace not found in the spring odes: instead of striving for an elusive connection, the poem rejoices in what is. Instead of magical worlds and mythical figures, it celebrates the everyday world. In place of sexual love, there is platonic love. The poet-speaker is not attempting to do anything, get anywhere or accomplish anything. He only wants to fully appreciate the season for itself. The poem's peacefulness is in contrast with the spring odes, which more closely express Keats's philosophy of love.

Among the poems he included in an April letter to George and Georgiana, Keats claimed "Ode to Psyche" was the "first and only one with which I have taken even moderate pains" (294). In this first ode, Keats revisits a trope explored in "Endymion": a

mortal made immortal through love. In Roman mythology, Psyche represented the soul or mind, and Cupid, erotic love and beauty. Like Endymion, Psyche was a human made a goddess through love for Cupid, after suffering through long separations and many conditions placed upon her. “Ode to Psyche” begins with the speaker giving a highly sensuous description of the lovers who are no longer separated from each other, nor placed under any restrictions:

They lay calm-breathing on the bedded grass;  
 Their arms embraced, and their pinions too;  
 Their lips touch'd not, but had not bade adieu,  
 As if disjoined by soft-handed slumber,  
 And ready still past kisses to outnumber  
 A tender eye-dawn of aurean love:  
 The winged boy I knew;  
 But who wast thou, O happy, happy dove?  
 His Psyche true! (15-23)

The scene depicting two lovers blissfully together in an erotically charged embrace appears again in “Lamia,” but in this context there is no hint that doom awaits the lovers. In showing Psyche (Soul) and Cupid (Love) so entwined, Jean Hagstrum argues, “Poetry is imaged as wedded love, comfortable, bright, relaxed. [ . . . ] Here Keats has created in the mind an open, receptive love” (63). In fact, the contrast between the lovers in this ode and the lovers in “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” is so stark that Kara Alves goes so far as to say the poem is a “restoration” of the destruction of La Belle Dame.” She observes that in the following stanzas “Restoration can begin, this ode contends, only when passion

does not threaten to destroy the male" (118). Instead of inserting himself into the scene, the speaker takes Psyche as an object of worship. Because she is a late-born goddess, Keats explained in his letter to George and Georgiana, Psyche was "never worshipped or sacrificed to with any of the ancient fervour," and so proved an ideal figure for Keats to worship in his own distinctive way (294). Kenneth Allot interprets Keats's selection of Psyche for his subject because she represents "not an early and therefore simple personification of such forces of nature as the wind or the sea, but a late and more sophisticated personification of human nature" (85).

In the third stanza the speaker lists the rites of worship Psyche has not received and volunteers to fulfill those rites in her honor:

I see, and sing, by my own eyes inspired.  
 So let me be thy choir, and make a moan  
 Upon the midnight hours;  
 Thy voice, thy lute, thy pipe, thy incense sweet  
 From swungèd censer teeming;  
 Thy shrine, thy grove, thy oracle, thy heat  
 Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming. (44-49)

But although the speaker pledges to perform these rites, he does not mean to do so literally—he means to worship Psyche in his mind:

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: (50-53)

The speaker promises to create a pleasant environment for Psyche:

And there shall be for thee all soft delight  
 That shadowy thought can win,  
 A bright torch, and a casement ope at night,  
 To let the warm Love in! (64-67)

Love, or Cupid, plays a crucial role in the poem. In an analysis of Keats's Cupid, James Bunn argues that Cupid and Psyche together represent an "allegory of the way beautiful things are created [ . . . ] The sanctuary is built in anticipation of Love's entry, in preparation for the fulfillment of the process of generating beautiful things" (589). Together, love and the mind will produce poetry. Kenneth Muir goes so far as to argue that Keats meant for love to replace religion, "Keats was apparently looking for a surrogate for religion. [ . . . ] He is mainly concerned with the relationship between Psyche and Cupid. In becoming her priest he builds a fane where she can receive her lover—not as formerly in darkness, but with a bright torch" (66). Simply by observing the scene, the speaker benefits from the union between Love and the Mind through poetic inspiration. Love is absolutely necessary in order to generate the spirit of creation for the poet-speaker. Without love, the openness fades, along with the very spirit that lends Psyche her immortality. Keats's intense passion for Fanny, his insistence on the depth of his love, the desperation that enters the letters can be interpreted as this desire for a sense of openness and creative spirit:

[ . . . ] when the lonely day has closed, and lonely, silent, unmusical  
 Chamber is waiting to receive me as into a Sepulchre, then believe me my  
 passion gets entirely the sway, then I would not have you see those

Rhapsodies [sic] which I once thought it impossible I should ever give way to,  
 [ . . . ] For myself I know not how to express my devotion to so fair a form: I want a brighter word than bright, a fairer word than fair. I almost wish we were butterflies and liv'd but three summer days. Three such days with you I could fill with more delight than fifty common years could ever contain. (309)

Keats's love for Fanny is a casement through which he gains access to the soul and poetry.

"Ode to Psyche" also provides insight into Keats's role as lover. Excerpts from the letters show that, like the poet-speaker, he does not care to cast himself in the role of lover; he does not see himself as "a thing to be admired;" he sees himself as the admirer, the worshipper, like the speaker in the poem:

- "I cannot be admired; I am not a thing to be admired. You are. I love you. All I can bring you is a swooning admiration of your Beauty" (318).
- "Even if you did not love me I could not help an entire devotion to you" (430).
- "You are to me an object intensely desirable; the air I breathe in a room empty of you is unhealthy. I am not the same to you"( 451).

The speaker sees that his purpose as a poet is to recognize and worship beauty. In the letters we occasionally see Keats make the poet's purpose the lover's purpose as well.

In “Ode to a Nightingale,” the poet-speaker finds intense pleasure in listening to a nightingale sing “of summer of full-throated ease” (10). The speaker’s identification with the bird is made clear from the outset:

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:  
 ‘Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,  
 But being too happy in thine happiness,—” (1-6)

To deepen the sensation and strengthen his connection to the bird’s song, the poet-speaker wishes for wine as a form of transport:

That I might drink and leave the world unseen,  
 And with thee fade away into the forest dim:

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget  
 What thou among the trees hast never known. (19-22)

What the poet-speaker desires to “leave” is the world of human suffering:

The weariness, the fever, and the fret  
 Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;  
 Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs,  
 Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;  
 Where but to think is to be full of sorrow  
 And leaden-eyed despairs;

Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,  
Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow. (23-30)

Rather than live with the suffering and transience of the world, the poet seeks to join with bird, although he ultimately decides against using wine to transport him. Instead the speaker decides that he will “fly” to the bird “on the viewless wings of Poesy” (33). The gift or boon granted by joining with the bird through poetry is a sense of beautiful things barely seen, the ability to discern the minute and essential particulars using a different sort of sense, a finer sense, than plain sight:

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,  
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,  
But, in embalmèd darkness, guess each sweet  
Wherewith the seasonable month endows  
The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;  
White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine; (41-46)

This pleasurable “vision” moves him to consider death as an alternative to returning to the everyday world of miseries:

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time  
I have been half in love with easeful Death,  
Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,  
To take into the air my quiet breath;  
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,  
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,  
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad



In such an ecstasy! (51-58)

In his letters to Fanny, Keats expresses the same sort of contrast—the wish either to be lost in his love for her, or to die: “I have two luxuries to brood over in my walks, your Loveliness and hour of my death. O that I could have possession of them in the same minute” (318). In a highly emotional letter in which he expresses his overwhelming feelings for her which consume him, he writes: “My Life seems to stop there; I see no further” (390). Five days later his mood is much the same, when he writes “I should like to cast the die for Love or death. I have no Patience with anything else” (391).

Love, like the nightingale’s song, offers an escape from the world of miseries and is a gateway to the sensations that inspire him poetically. In his letters to Fanny, Keats apprehends his love for her in much the same way the poet-speaker perceives the nightingale’s song—something beautiful in which to lose one’s identity. At such a high point, the poet-speaker implies, a painless death is preferable to returning to the world of miseries. But the speaker realizes that to die would mean he would no longer be able to enjoy the song of the nightingale, which would continue after he had “become a sod” unable to appreciate its beauty (60).

The seventh stanza of this ode describes the ability of the nightingale to transport the speaker to a different place. Although a nightingale is not immortal, the speaker calls the bird “immortal” and “not meant for death” (61) Andrew J. Kappel, however, claims the bird is simply unaware of death (276). The speaker believes the song has been heard throughout human history:

The voice I hear this passing night was heard

In ancient days by emperor and clown

Perhaps the self-same song that found a path  
 Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,  
 She stood in tears amid the alien corn;  
 The same that oft-times hath  
 Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam  
 Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn. (63-70)

The social contrast between emperor and clown, the condition of Ruth (not in her native land but in a foreign one), and the magic casement that opens out to a different reality, all represent a movement from a familiar state of being to a strange one outside of everyday experience. But in considering these possibilities and the song's eternal nature, the poet breaks the spell by imagining of faery lands. The "forlorn" nature of faery lands reminds him of his own forlorn state: "Forlorn! the very word is like a bell / To toll me back from thee to my sole self!" (71-2).

When the connection between the bird and the poet-speaker is broken, the speaker immediately questions the song's sincerity and genuineness. He calls the bird's song a "fancy" which "cannot cheat so well / As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf" (73-4). The bird and its song are now under suspicion, and the speaker questions the veracity of his experience even further—he questions the experience itself: "Was it a vision, or a waking dream? / Fled is that music:—do I wake or sleep?" (79-80). This final stanza recalls the female figure of "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," described as "a fairy's child," through whom the knight-at-arms desired a connection to a more beautiful reality (14). Like the speaker in "Ode to a Nightingale," the knight-at-arms was unable to maintain the connection.

Although the nightingale is never referred to as *she*, female gender can be ascribed to the bird through the speaker's reference to the bird as "a Dryad of the trees" (7). Dryads are tree nymphs in Greek legend and nymphs are female. Although there are no romantic feelings expressed in the poem, the poet-speaker relates to the bird in the way Keats relates to Fanny, in a romantic way, as a higher experience than the everyday, something intensely beautiful and unique, something that will allow him to view the viewless. Both Alwes and Whale read the poem as a romance with the Nightingale taking on the role of La Belle Dame, enchanting the male speaker with a beauty that cannot be possessed or maintained (Alwes 122, Whale 102). Keats was often to react to Fanny in the same way he reacts to the bird's song, placing her on the highest pedestal, investing her with the purest qualities, even investing her with the power to give him a "viewless" vision—only later to suspect her of infidelity and treat her with suspicion. In a letter from March, 1820, Keats acknowledges his deeply divided attitude toward Fanny:

The more I have known you the more have I lov'd—in every way—even my jealousies have been agonies of Love. In the hottest fit I ever had I would have died for you. I have vex'd you too much. But for Love! Can I help it? [ . . . ] When you in the room my thoughts never fly out of window; you always concentrate my whole senses. (430-431)

"Ode on a Grecian Urn" is most commonly interpreted as an exploration of the difference between idealized art and human life with its imperfection and suffering. But the element with which the speaker most closely identifies is the situation of the lover. As the poem begins, the speaker is both knowing and uncertain in his observations of the urn

as he describes its silence and impenetrability, then proceeds to ask the urn questions about the scene depicted on it:

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,  
 Thou foster-child of Silence and slow Time,  
 Sylvan historian, who canst thus express  
 A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:  
 What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape  
 Of deities or mortals, or of both,  
 In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?  
 What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?  
 What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?  
 What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy? (1-10)

By the second stanza, however, the speaker drops the role of observer and inquisitor and enters into scene. He posits his own opinion that “Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter;” and directly addresses a male lover depicted on the urn (11-12). The difference between the speaker’s observations of the Urn and his observation of the lover is the speaker’s close identification with the lover. Rather than questioning, the speaker projects his own interpretation of the scene—presumably based on the speaker’s own desires—onto the lover:

Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave  
 Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;  
 Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss,  
 Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve;

She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,

For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair! (15-20)

The speaker's admiration and longing for the state of love is clear. In his article "Keats's Ideal in the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn,'" Jacob Wigod notes that "the lines about love are almost unbearable in the intensity of their yearning" (114):

More happy love! more happy, happy love!

For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,

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. (25-30)

In the speaker's idealization of the lover there is a foreshadowing of Keats's idealization of his love for Fanny. His proclamations of love recall the "happy, happy love!" of the urn's lover. In March, 1820, he wrote, "The last of your kisses was ever the sweetest; the last smile the brightest; the last movement the gracefulest. When you pass'd by my window home yesterday, I was fill'd with as much admiration as if I had seen you for the first time" (430). But because Fanny is not eternal but part of the everyday world, their relationship too leaves Keats with "a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd," as is evident in the letters in which he sees love standing in the way of his poetic ambitions, or doubts Fanny's fidelity. "Happy, happy love" is what Keats yearned for personally and poetically. In "Ode on a Grecian Urn," this desire—not unquestioned in the rest of the poem—illuminates much about the relationship between Keats and Fanny, that is, what Keats felt it should or could be, and what it actually was.

The mention of “all breathing human passion far above” in stanza three returns the speaker to his former state; as the word “forlorn” breaks the speaker’s spell in “Ode to a Nightingale.” In stanza four, the speaker returns to considering the urn, questioning it as an object. No longer viewing it through the eyes of the lover, he loses his ability to understand the scene. He wonders at the significance of the religious rite depicted on the urn, and even about the town where the figures on the urn supposedly live:

What little town by river or sea shore,  
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,  
Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?  
And, little town, thy streets for evermore  
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell  
Why thou art desolate, can e'er return. (35-40)

The return to questioning the urn, and the focus on silence, reiterates the speaker’s inability to connect to or guess at the significance or truth of the scene. Sensing the limitation of the urn, or his own limitations in being able to interpret it in the fifth stanza, the speaker pulls away from the scene on the urn and back to the urn itself. He refers to the its “Attic shape,”(41) and calls the figures—previously described as gods, lovers and maidens panting and piping in wild ecstasy—as “marble men and maidens”(42). The scene itself he calls a “Cold Pastoral!” (45).

Despite the impenetrability of the urn that frames the poem, the speaker credits the urn with the ability to “tease us out of thought / As doth eternity:” (44-45). The urn’s ability to engender the kind of feeling the speaker experienced in relation to the lover, as well as the reflection upon the urn’s meaning, causes him to view the urn as a “friend to

man” (48). As a friend to man, the urn will remind succeeding generations that “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,” —that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know” (49-51).

In “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” as in “Ode to a Nightingale,” the speaker attempts to experience transcendence through something else and only momentarily succeeds. And although the connection could not be maintained, it was the urn itself that inspired it. The urn’s ability to inspire the type of philosophical ruminations experienced by the speaker is one possible explanation for the famous, enigmatic statement: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” (49). The speaker, and all humans, cannot ultimately prevent the intrusion of a reality that is less than perfectly happy. The urn’s beauty is a channel, as the worship of Psyche and the Nightingale’s song are channels to brief moments where the speaker apprehends something he recognizes as truth.

The speaker in “Ode on Melancholy” is further removed from the poem’s action than the speakers in previous odes. Instead of actively seeking a connection or describing a scene, the speaker instructs another, an unknown listener, on how to find Melancholy, presented as a goddess through whom an individual himself can experience melancholy. This frame, writes Barbara Herrnstein-Smith, “*pretends* to direct us to melancholy but *intends* to define or describe it to us” (682). Despite the uniqueness of the ode’s frame, it has in common with the other odes a focus on connecting to something (in this case, a mood) in order to achieve a heightened experience. The poem’s speaker first tells the listener, who is purportedly looking for Melancholy, how *not* to find her:

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,  
 Make not your rosary of yew-berries,  
 Nor let the beetle, nor the death-moth be  
 Your mournful Psyche, nor the downy owl  
 A partner in your sorrow's mysteries; (1-8)

Such methods, states the speaker, are too dark: "For shade to shade will come too drowsily, / And drown the wakeful anguish of the soul" (9-10). As Herrenstein-Smith points out, the "wakeful anguish of the soul" that defines melancholy is not found in "shade to shade" or darkness, but in the contrast between shade and brightness (686). This state of being in both the dark and light is described by Alwes as "the precise moment that hangs, suspended, above joy and despair, the moment of intransience between 'aching pleasure' and the 'poison' it becomes" (141). In March of 1819, Keats wrote to George and Georgiana of feeling restless and indolent. He wrote of the pleasure he experienced spending a day alone, "fill'd with speculations even of an unpleasant color—" and contrasts it to the "capital crime" of "giving up, through good nature, one's time to people who have no light and shade" (268). These people without "light and shade" he describes as "unpleasant human identities who press upon one just enough to prevent one getting into a lazy position and not enough to interest or rouse one" (268). Melancholy, then, is not simply an idle unpleasant mood, but a state of being between pleasant and unpleasant that is actively sought out and must be carefully nurtured. The speaker of the poem suggests the listener take in scenes from transient nature in order to access melancholy: "Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose, / Or on the rainbow of the salt sand-wave, / Or on the wealth of globed peonies" (15-17). Or, the speaker proposes,



access melancholy through a lover: "Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows, /  
Emprison her soft hand, and let her rave, / And feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes"  
(18-20).

Because Keats's female figures are by and large even-tempered and passive, the uncharacteristic description of a woman showing anger and raving is notable in that it is likely a reference to Fanny. According to all accounts, she had a lively spirit and was known for possessing a sharp tongue.<sup>5</sup> In the months between their first meeting and the beginning of their correspondence, the pictures Keats paints of her in his letters to George and Georgiana supports this characterization. In his first direct mention of her in a letter, Keats describes Fanny as "monstrous in her behavior, flying out in all directions, calling people such names that I was forced lately to make use of the the term *Minx*" (222). A few months later, his admiration of her spirit is clear as he compares her to the "dull" Misses Reynolds: "I see very little now, and very few Persons, being almost tired of Men and things. [ . . . ] The Miss Reynoldses [sic] have been stopping next door lately, but all very dull. Miss Fanny and I have every now and then a chat and a tiff" (254). Fanny, with her energy, was capable of interesting and rousing Keats. She did not fall into the category of "people who have no light and shade."

The speaker in "Melancholy," through his mistress, gains access to beauty, pleasure and joy, and ultimately, Melancholy herself. The mistress:

[ . . . ] dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die;

And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips

Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,

Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips:

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<sup>5</sup> For descriptions of Fanny's character, see Bate (424-30) Lowell (II: 128-29) and Richardson (22-23).

Ay, in the very temple of Delight

Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine, (21-26)

Melancholy, the speaker implies, can only be accessed by actively pursuing a finer, mutable experience:

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. (25-30)

The poet's love for his mistress is part of the role of a poet. The poet seeks beauty, pleasure and joy and revels in the contrast between pleasure and pain that results from achieving them only partially.

The last of the spring odes, "Ode on Indolence," is considered the weakest of the group. Jack Stillinger doesn't acknowledge its place among the spring odes, claiming it "lacks the dramatic tension that characterizes the first four, and the sharpness of imagery of all five" (178). Bate concludes that the value of the ode is primarily biographical, while Lowell reduces it to a "poetic version" of an image from a letter (Bate 528, Lowell II 258). The letter Lowell refers to, written to George and Georgiana in March, speaks of Keats's feelings of idleness:

This morning I am in a sort of temper indolent and supremely careless: I long after a stanza or two of Thomson's *Castle of indolence*. My passions are all asleep 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. If I had teeth of pearl and the breath of lillies I

should call it languor, but as I am 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. (269-70)

“Ode on Indolence” follows the letter by two months. By the end of May, 1819, the personal, financial and professional pressures on Keats were mounting. He was in love, but without the money to marry; he had ambitions to be a great poet but was struggling to write; he was even considering taking up a profession in order to relieve financial pressures. These pressures appear to have colored Keats’s interpretation of the figures in the “Ode on Indolence.” In the letter, the figures that pass by (Love, Ambition and Poetry) have no “alertness of countenance” and Keats watches them lazily as they go by (270): “One morn before me were three figures seen, / With bowed necks, and joined hands, side-faced” (1-2). The speaker identifies the figures, as Love “a fair maid,” Ambition “pale of cheek,” and his “demon Poesy” (20, 25). He feels a strong attraction to the group:

A third time pass'd they by, and, passing, turn'd  
Each one the face a moment whiles to me;

Then faded, and to follow them I burn'd

And ached for wings, because I knew the three: (21-24)

The speaker actively rejects the figures, particularly Poesy: “no,—she has not a joy,— / At least for me,—so sweet as drowsy noons, / And evenings steep'd in honied indolence” (35-37). When the figures reappear again the speaker is resentful, recalling how before their appearance that morning

My sleep had been embroider'd with dim dreams;

My soul had been a lawn besprinkled o'er

With flowers, and stirring shades, and baffled beams:

The morn was clouded, but no shower fell,

Though in her lids hung the sweet tears of May;

The open casement press'd a new-leaved vine,

Let in the budding warmth and throstle's lay; (42-47)

The familiar nature imagery, reminiscent of “Ode to Psyche” and “Ode to a Nightingale” suggests that the speaker was in the midst of some sort of poetic experience, which the arrival of the figures drove away. Here the very things sought in the other odes—love, desire for fame and immortality, and poetry—are now obstacles. The pressures they exert on the speaker have become so strong that they have come to break the poet's connection to a poetic experience. And so he rejects the figures, sending them away, but not before accusing them of attempting to deceive him into playing a fool:

So, ye three ghosts, adieu! Ye cannot raise

My head cool-bedded in the flowery grass;

For I would not be dieted with praise,

A pet-lamb in a sentimental farce!  
 Fade softly from my eyes, and be once more  
 In masque-like figures on the dreary urn;  
 Farewell! (51-57)

“Ode on Indolence” defines the forces that drive Keats. The rejection of these forces in this poem allows him to maintain a state of indolence, which, argues John Whale, “removes Keats from the pressures of ambition, poetry and love” (108-9). Indolence, as described in both letter and poem, was a respite from the excited thoughts, offering a “pleasure” that “has no show of enticement and pain no unbearable frown” (270).

The relationship between love, poetry and ambition, and the pressure they placed upon him play out directly in Keats’s relationship with Fanny. Soon after he completed the odes, Keats would leave Hampstead in one last effort to make a living at poetry. In his letters to Fanny from this time, he talks about his poetic frustrations, how his love for her threatens his ability to write, and how he fears failure:

“*Seriously*, you say I may do as I please. I do not think with any conscience I can; my cash-resources are for the present stopp’d, I fear for some time. I spend no money but it increases my debts. [ . . . ] You see how I go on, like so many strokes of a Hammer. I cannot help it. I am impell’d, driven to it. I am not happy enough for silken Phrases and silver sentences.” (325-6)

Of his love for her, he writes, “I must not give way to it, but turn to my writing again. If I fail I shall die hard.” (326).

“Ode on Indolence” is notable for the insight it provides into forces at work within Keats. Indolence, as described by Keats, provides peace, a respite from his overactive brain that strives for love, poetry and fame. Although the poem is not of the same quality as the other odes, the idea of taking a step back from love, ambition and poetry, to experience a moment without striving after something, resurfaces far more successfully months later, when in September Keats writes “To Autumn.”

“To Autumn” stands apart from the spring odes, and not just chronologically. In Keats’s last and, some scholars say, best ode, the fantastic and antique are absent, the mythological figures (the sun and autumn) are abstract. The role of these figures is humble and generous—they do not inspire ecstasy or poetry, they “load and bless” the earth with abundance (3). In “To Autumn,” writes Jack Stillinger, “the imagination is now devoted not to visionary flights but to a detailed examining of every natural sight and sound at hand, and the focus and attitude show the speaker reconciled to the real world he lives in” (110).

The poem’s imagery is taken from the familiar world of contemporary agriculture:

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,  
 Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;  
 Conspiring with him how to load and bless  
 With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run;  
 To bend with apples the moss’d cottage-trees,  
 And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;  
 To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells  
 With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,

And still more, later flowers for the bees,  
 Until they think warm days will never cease,  
 For Summer has o'er-brimm'd their clammy cells. (1-11)

These observations of Autumn are made by a poet-speaker, although his presence is subtle. In his evaluation of the poem, Bate notes the absence of the "I," so prominent in the other odes. (581). In his evaluation of the ode, Theodore Gaillard imagines the poem as a monologue spoken by the speaker to the figure of Autumn, and posits that the speaker is reassuring Autumn of its own beauty and value (184). A season so often associated with barrenness and the beginning of decline is interpreted by the speaker as bountiful and at the fullest realization of its potential. The speaker reassures Autumn that is as lovely as other, more celebrated seasons: "Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they? / Think not of them, thou hast thy music too" (23-24).

Despite the generally positive tone of the ode, and the speaker's praise for the autumn season is permeated by a strong sense of melancholy. Melancholy, as defined in "Ode on Melancholy" consists of a contrast between brightness and shade. The "shade" present in Autumn is exposed in the poem's third stanza by the "soft-dying day," the "stubble plains," the "wailful choir of gnats," which "mourn / Among the river shallows, borne aloft / Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies." The poem retains its peaceful, celebratory nature throughout, but it also acknowledges that the songs of autumn, although beautiful, are also impermanent and will give way to winter:

While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,  
 And touch the stubble plains with rosy hue;  
 Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn

Among the river shallows, borne aloft  
 Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;  
 And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;  
 Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft  
 The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft,  
 And gathering swallows twitter in the skies. (25-33)

“To Autumn” is the least striving of the odes, the most accepting. It is also the least sexual, absent of romance and lovers. The figure of Autumn can be deemed female and sexual inasmuch as it is fecund and fertile, but the frenzied emotion of love is absent between season and poet-speaker. In this poem, Keats expands upon the central idea in “Ode on Indolence” by altering his traditional approach to beauty, love and poetry. Rather than being manipulated by love, poetry and ambition, in “To Autumn” he has freed himself from their pressures, consequently allowing him to recognize and appreciate the beauty in a peaceful, natural scene.

Keats’s career as a poet ends with “To Autumn.” Three days following its composition he abandoned “Hyperion” and did not return to writing poetry. The peaceful achievement of “To Autumn” is all the more remarkable because at the time of its composition, Keats was anything but at peace. He was living in Winchester, making one last effort at poetry. His financial straits had worsened, and he was also under intense pressure to procure money for George, who had lost most of his money through bad investments in America. Keats was finding it hard to write and fighting against his feelings for Fanny at the same time.



In the weeks leading up to “To Autumn,” Keats wrote several troubled letters to Fanny, effectively pushing her away. Five days before writing “To Autumn,” Keats was in London on business and could easily have arranged to see Fanny. Instead, he sent a letter explaining why he could not visit her:

I feel it is not paying a visit, but venturing into a fire. [ . . . ] Knowing well that my life must be passed in fatigue and trouble, I have been endeavoring to wean myself from you, for to myself alone what can be much of a misery? As far as they regard myself I can despise all events, but I cannot cease to love you. [ . . . ] I am a Coward. I cannot bear the pain of being happy. ‘Tis out of the question. I must admit no thought of it. (339)

That same September, Keats experienced the first symptoms of tuberculosis, which would eventually put an end to all of his hopes and ambitions. However, in his last poem, Keats managed, momentarily, to escape the “fatigue and trouble” that beset him and imagine a world in which the abundance of life and the inevitability of the death as beautiful and harmonious.

Although love and sexuality infuse them, the spring odes are not romances. As in the narrative poems, love is required in order to identify with the entity being addressed; the sensations and experiences being described in the odes cannot be approached or accessed without love. Through the odes, Keats’s own experience of love with Fanny can be better understood. His passion for her, which can often seem excessive, even unhealthy, can be understood through the role he assigns love in the odes. For Keats, no experience worth having can be devoid of love. The attitude of the poet-speaker toward

each entity and the way the poet-speaker approaches these subjects reflect the way Keats approaches Fanny. As each subject is a channel or gateway to a higher, more pure state of being, Keats perceived his feelings for Fanny, or Fanny herself, as granting him access to the same kind of pure sensation the poet-speaker experiences in the odes. By contrast, the absence of both romantic love and the conscious striving to connect in "To Autumn" results in a peace that eludes the poet-speakers of the spring odes and Keats himself.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

Over and over in his poetry and his letters to Fanny Brawne, Keats attempts to make the connection to higher, purer sensations through romantic love, and this attitude and practice colored his relationship with her. Because our knowledge of their relationship during much of 1819 is very limited, we will never know all that passed between them; however, what we do know about Fanny shows her to be a lively, intelligent and pretty young woman—but not unconventional, singular or particularly beautiful. And in fact, Keats's first description of her seems quite measured: "Her Arms are good, her hands baddish, her feet tolerable," (222). This description from December 1818 contrasts greatly with letters written in July that place great emphasis on her physical beauty. Fanny herself expressed concern over Keats's tendency to idealize her. But, as Keats explained, "Why can I not speak of your Beauty, since without that I could never have lov'd you? I cannot conceive any beginning of such a love as I have for you but Beauty" (313). His admiration of her beauty allows him to experience "the richness, the bloom, the full form, the enchantment of love" (313). Despite his more objective view of her early on, the need to idealize Fanny through her beauty is necessary in order to experience love "after his own heart" (313). For Keats, love served as a means to establish a connection with an ideal, elevated state of truth and beauty.

In the *Fanny* poems, we see that Keats desires Fanny because of the feelings she engenders in him. He presents a one-sided view of the relationship, concerned wholly with himself and his feelings. There is no praise for Fanny, (aside from her beauty, though he does not expand upon it) and no hint at her true personality, only the emotions that she excites in him, including jealousy, ecstasy and a sense of being enthralled. The *Fanny* poems are full of desperation either to be near her, or to escape her overwhelming influence upon him, and as we have seen, this dichotomy plays out in Keats's letters to her.

The narrative poems center on romance, and it is in them that the nature of love—the pains and the pleasures that characterize the miracle year poetry—clearly emerges. The darkening of Keats's attitude toward love can perhaps be partly attributed to his relationship with Fanny, a relationship that seems to have always been uneasy. But other factors, such as financial and personal hardships, as well as a maturing poetic sensibility perhaps also contributed to his “tendency to bode ill like a raven” in both his poetry and his love life (315). In the narrative poems, love is not an unquestioned positive, but a dangerous undertaking that can bring great ecstasy and joy, but also thralldom, despair and death. And because he identifies on some level with Porphyro, the knight-at-arms, and Lycius, and their desire for a woman who transports them from the everyday world into an intensely pleasurable state, we can say that Keats casts Fanny in the role of Madeline, La Belle Dame and Lamia even though she does not resemble them, physically or temperamentally.

The odes are farthest removed from world of romance, but most clearly illustrate the love dynamic Keats creates within his poetry and with Fanny. In each ode, the

speaker attempts to establish a connection to an idealized entity, and in each ode (with the notable exception of “To Autumn”) this connection is established through romantic love. Keats’s idealization of Fanny becomes quite clear in this context: in order to access the sensation and identification he craves, he needs love to get him there. There is surprising similarity, for example, between the speaker’s interaction with the nightingale in “Ode to a Nightingale” and Keats’s interaction with Fanny. The bird (and its song) and Fanny are praised as being exceedingly beautiful, so much so that it takes the speaker and Keats outside of himself, but when that spell is broken—through no fault of either the bird or Fanny—both speaker and Keats are resentful and suspicious as a result of being misled or denied access.

At the beginning of 1819, Keats’s personal experience of romantic love was practically nonexistent, and his poetic approach to love simplistic. Over the course of the year, however, his attitudes toward love became quite developed and explicit. Romantic, sexual love was absolutely necessary to Keats—in poetry and in life—to access the sensations that inspired him and brought him joy and pleasure.

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