

Political Contexts

- 1815: Leigh Hunt (friend of Keats, journalist) released from prison
- 1815: Battle of Waterloo
- 1816: Spa Fields riots (London)
- 1816: Mass meeting in Glasgow (40,000 people)
- 1817: Suspension of habeas corpus (permitting unlawful detention of suspects)
- 1817: Uprisings in the provinces
- 1817: Trials of William Hone (radical publisher)
- 1818: Riots in Edinburgh
- 1819: Peterloo Massacre (Manchester)

1819-1821 was 'The most revolutionary set of events seen in Britain since 1640': John Gardner, *Poetry and Popular Protest: Peterloo, Cato Street and the Queen Caroline Controversy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011)

Keats and the world

August 1818: violent attack on Keats's poetry published in *Blackwood's Magazine* as part of a series on the 'Cockney School of Poetry': 'back to the shop, Mr John'
September 1818: publication of attack on Keats's poetry in government-sponsored *Quarterly Review* by John Wilson Croker

'[John Hamilton] Reynolds has returned from a six weeks enjoyment in Devonshire, he is well and persuades me to publish my pot of Basil [*Isabella*] as an answer to the attacks made on me in *Blackwood's Magazine* and the *Quarterly Review*'
Keats, letter to George and Georgiana Keats, 14-31 October 1819

On William Holman Hunt's *Isabella and the Pot of Basil* (1867)

'The patterned rug which has slipped from her waist reveals a transparent dress through which we can discern both her dark pubic hair and the radiance of her skin's texture. In this painting, female sexuality is paradoxically equated with death and material riches (the latter themes are visually twinned in the adornment of the majolica urn with skull-head handles). Primarily, Hunt emphasises the luxuriance of Lorenzo's decomposition in the rich ornamentation of the painting and the thriving bush that has germinated out of his murder' Sarah Wootton, *Consuming Keats: Nineteenth-Century Representations in Art and Literature* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

Keats and Gender

'the extremely subtle and complex ways in which Keats challenged the existence of fixed, stable boundaries between the sexes'. Anne Mellor, 'Keats and the Complexities of Gender', *Cambridge Companion to Keats* (2001)

'What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the *camelion Poet*...A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity - he is continually in for - and filling some other Body...When I am in a room with People...the identity of every one in



the room begins so to press upon me that I am in a very little time annihilated', Keats, letter to Woodhouse, 27th Oct 1818.

Task for group work

- Choose one of the themes below
- Find a detail in Keats's poem that helps you explore it, and come up with some ideas about how Keats explores this theme.
- Consider these questions:
 - o Does Holman Hunt's painting present the theme differently?
 - o Are there other artworks that explore this theme differently?
 - o If *you* could produce an artwork (not necessarily a painting – a film, a novel, something else) inspired by *Isabella*, what would it be?
- Then: Get ready to report back to the rest of the group on one of these themes.

Themes for *Isabella*

1. Women and the Home: does Keats present women as confined to the home in 'gilded cages'? How is the home represented?
2. Men and Society: what role do men play in the poem? Is their role criticised?
3. Ideal and Real Worlds: is the poem cut off from 'reality'? What political or social commentary might it be making?
4. Death: how does Keats present death? Is the tragedy inevitable? What causes the tragedy?
5. Objectification: is Isabella an object for consumption by men? If not, how does Keats challenge that view?

John Keats, *Isabella; Or, The Pot of Basil. A Story from Boccaccio* (written February-April 1818, published 1820)

Brief plot synopsis: Isabella and Lorenzo are in love, and hope to marry. Lorenzo works for Isabella's brothers, who are wealthy merchants. They hope to marry Isabella off to a rich nobleman. They lure Lorenzo off into the woods and murder him. Isabella has a vision of Lorenzo's ghost and realises he has been killed. She searches for his body, and brings back his severed head, putting it in a plant pot with a basil plant in it. She mourns over it; her brothers eventually find the head and remove it. Isabella goes mad, and dies.

The opening

I

- 1 FAIR Isabel, poor simple Isabel!
- 2 Lorenzo, a young palmer in Love's eye!
- 3 They could not in the self-same mansion dwell
- 4 Without some stir of heart, some malady;
- 5 They could not sit at meals but feel how well
- 6 It soothed each to be the other by;



7 They could not, sure, beneath the same roof sleep
8 But to each other dream, and nightly weep.

II

9 With every morn their love grew tenderer,
10 With every eve deeper and tenderer still;
11 He might not in house, field, or garden stir,
12 But her full shape would all his seeing fill;
13 And his continual voice was pleasanter
14 To her, than noise of trees or hidden rill;
15 Her lute-string gave an echo of his name,
16 She spoilt her half-done broidery with the same.

Lorenzo and Isabella in love

IX

65 "Love! thou art leading me from wintry cold,
66 "Lady! thou leadest me to summer clime,
67 "And I must taste the blossoms that unfold
68 "In its ripe warmth this gracious morning time."
69 So said, his erewhile timid lips grew bold,
70 And poesied with hers in dewy rhyme:
71 Great bliss was with them, and great happiness
72 Grew, like a lusty flower in June's caress.

X

73 Parting they seem'd to tread upon the air,
74 Twin roses by the zephyr blown apart
75 Only to meet again more close, and share
76 The inward fragrance of each other's heart.
77 She, to her chamber gone, a ditty fair
78 Sang, of delicious love and honey'd dart;
79 He with light steps went up a western hill.
80 And bade the sun farewell, and joy'd his fill.

Isabella's brothers

XIV

105 With her two brothers this fair lady dwelt,
106 Enriched from ancestral merchandize,
107 And for them many a weary hand did swelt
108 In torched mines and noisy factories,



109 And many once proud-quiver'd loins did melt
110 In blood from stinging whip;---with hollow eyes
111 Many all day in dazzling river stood,
112 To take the rich-ored driftings of the flood.

XV

113 For them the Ceylon diver held his breath,
114 And went all naked to the hungry shark;
115 For them his ears gush'd blood; for them in death
116 The seal on the cold ice with piteous bark
117 Lay full of darts; for them alone did seethe
118 A thousand men in troubles wide and dark:
119 Half-ignorant, they turn'd an easy wheel,
120 That set sharp racks at work, to pinch and peel.

Isabella and her pot of basil

LIII

417 And she forgot the stars, the moon, and sun,
418 And she forgot the blue above the trees,
419 And she forgot the dells where waters run,
420 And she forgot the chilly autumn breeze;
421 She had no knowledge when the day was done,
422 And the new morn she saw not: but in peace
423 Hung over her sweet Basil evermore,
424 And moisten'd it with tears unto the core.

LIV

425 And so she ever fed it with thin tears,
426 Whence thick, and green, and beautiful it grew,
427 So that it smelt more balmy than its peers
428 Of Basil-tufts in Florence; for it drew
429 Nurture besides, and life, from human fears,
430 From the fast mouldering head there shut from view:
431 So that the jewel, safely casketed,
432 Came forth, and in perfumed leafits spread.

The last stanza

LXIII

497 And so she pined, and so she died forlorn,
498 Imploring for her Basil to the last.



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499 No heart was there in Florence but did mourn
500 In pity of her love, so overcast.
501 And a sad ditty of this story born
502 From mouth to mouth through all the country pass'd:
503 Still is the burthen sung---"O cruelty,
504 "To steal my Basil-pot away from me!"



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