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Visceral Romanticism: The Literature and Culture of Digestion, 1780-1830

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Visceral Romanticism:

The Literature and Culture of Digestion, 1780-1830

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in English

by

Shawn Cailey Hall

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Visceral Romanticism:

The Literature and Culture of Digestion, 1780-1830

by

Shawn Cailey Hall

Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Los Angeles, 2019

Professor Saree Makdisi, Chair

This dissertation argues that the bowels are the Romantic period's paradigmatic organ: a somatic and figurative space that connects body, environment, and literal as well as literary consumption. I contend that when viewed through the alimentary canal Romantic literature and culture appear very different from the still dominant critical narrative that emphasizes imaginative transcendence of the body. I also depart from the more recent, materialist turn in Romantic literary study that tends to focus solely on the nervous system or on largely clinical considerations of medical history. Defamiliarizing Romanticism, this dissertation assembles an archive of poetry, memoir, a novel, essays, and popular science that links food, the body, and the

environment. (In)digestion is also a figurative conceit: the literary texts — by Dorothy Wordsworth, Sydney Owenson, John Keats, and Lord Byron — I examine are often formally undigested, in the sense that they are disjointed, chaotic, or difficult to categorize.

Throughout my project, I contend that these texts shaped, and were shaped by, the era's medical and environmental discourses. Rather than focusing on either the body, food, or the environment in Romantic literature, I consider these concerns as integrated phenomena, as writers at the time did. The Romantic period can be read as a sort of medical interregnum, an era unencumbered by a coherent ideology to express the relationship between a healthy body and a healthy society. This dissertation traces some of the relationships between environment and identity — often in a collective sense — during a time when Britain's medical and agricultural practices were modernizing and becoming standardized. As these transformations took place, but had not yet taken hold, they opened up a new range of possibilities for understanding and expressing the connection between bodies and the wider world, a connection mediated by the bowels.

The dissertation of Shawn Cailey Hall is approved.

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2019

To my parents,

Jill and Michael Hall,

with gratitude and love.

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The digestion process for this dissertation was long and sometimes painful, and I am grateful to the scholars, friends, and family who contributed to its eventual excretion — and who tolerated my uninvited scatological jokes along the way.

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INTRODUCTION

Visceral Romanticism

In Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's famous formulation, "history seen from above and history seen from below are irreducibly different."[1] Reading neither from above nor below in the sense that Stallybrass and White describe, this dissertation instead reads from the gut. The bowels, I argue, are a somatic and figurative system in the Romantic period that connect body, environment, and literal as well as literary consumption. The gut is both a middle space and part of the alimentary canal, which traces a complex passage from above to below, and connects bodies to the world around them. The texts I examine engage with different aspects of digestion, a somatic process that involves both deconstruction and synthesis — and encompasses taste, appetite, aliment, and waste. Yet they are very different from earlier, Augustan scatological writing that draws on the grotesque and the monstrous in order to disavow it.[2] They also differ from visceral literature of the Victorian era, which writes from a more medicalized perspective that accepts the brain as the body's dominant organ.

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[1] Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 4.

[2] Stallybrass and White write that Augustan poetry "nourished and replenished its refined formalisms from the symbolic repertoire of the grotesque body *in the very name of exclusion.* It took the grotesque within itself so as to reject it, but this meant only that the grotesque was now an unpalatable and interiorized *phobic* set of representations associated with avoidance and with others. It could never be owned. It was always someone else who was possessed by the grotesque, never the self. In this way the bourgeois public sphere, that 'idealist' realm of judgement, refinement, wit and rationalism was dependent upon disavowal, denial, projection" (108). Daniel Cottom's *Cannibals and Philosophers: Bodies of Enlightenment* reads disgust in a more positive register, arguing that "the artifact known as the Enlightenment was defined from the beginning through an obsession with guts and disgust as much as through the mind and reason" (xii). While Cottom helpfully elucidates some of the messiness haunting any seemingly tidy discourse of taste, his book is primarily focused on offering a cultural history of the central role the disgusting plays in supposedly refined European Enlightenment philosophy. Daniel Cottom, *Cannibals and Philosophers: Bodies of Enlightenment* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

While some works in this dissertation do address scatological topics, the aftermath of the digestive process, they do not do so to shock or shame. In Dorothy Wordsworth's *Grasmere Journals*, for example, she writes about the "melancholy" bowel troubles plaguing her and Samuel Taylor Coleridge with a sense of affective distress, but not embarrassment. Although attentive to the relationship between taste and the alimentary, this dissertation also departs from a work like Denise Gigante's *Taste: A Literary History*, which argues that digestion and waste become sublimated over the course of the eighteenth century as "the middle-class road of the gastronomical Man of Taste…intentionally dismissed attention from the extremities of appetite — hunger and luxurious overindulgence — as unworthy of philosophical attention."[3] I instead read discourses of digestion as neither effaced nor abject. Questions of taste do arise, but they are not my primary focus. The focus of Chapter Two, Sydney Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl*, was, and often still is, held up as an example of bad taste; the novel, however, plays on the idea of bad taste in order to portray Ireland as a source of taste that is not only good but also nourishing. At different points in the dissertation, I attend to the alimentary canal as organ system and as trope, and to various ways in which the digestive process is represented as a somatic reality and used as a metaphor. Digestive discourses, although literally about interiors, are not necessarily about interiority. Instead, they often demonstrate the ultimate opacity of interiors at the same time they interrogate the body's permeability, and its openness to the outside world.[4]

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[3] Denise Gigante, *Taste: A Literary History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 172.

[4] Recent work by Parama Roy and Kyla Wazana Tompkins helpfully explores the anxieties and possibilities that surround the idea of permeable bodies in connection to issues of identity and race. [4] For Roy, the "body in alimentation stages the fraught relationship between an inside and an outside whose boundaries are not always known or fixed, and between subject and object status" (194). Tompkins details how, in nineteenth-century America, "eating threatened the foundational fantasy of a contained autonomous self – the 'free' Liberal self – because, as a function of its basic mechanics, eating transcended the gap between self and other, blurring the line between subject and object" (3). Parama Roy, *Alimentary Tracts: Appetites, Aversions, and the Postcolonial* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press,

When viewed through the alimentary canal, Romantic literature and culture appear very different from the still dominant critical narrative that emphasizes the imaginative transcendence of the body. I also depart from the more recent, materialist turn in Romantic literary study that offers largely clinical portrayals of medical history, and considers bodies as undifferentiated entities, classified as either standard or aberrant.[5] Alan Richardson's work on the nervous system as "situated in and lived through the body" offers a more nuanced take on the interplay between bodies, organ systems, and literature, and makes a compelling argument for the ways that certain Romantic writers engaged with early neuroscience. However, he assumes a primacy of the brain that even he admits did not yet exist: "Only toward the end of the Romantic era did the brain become widely accepted as the 'organ of the mind.'"[6] In his 1807 medical tract, *A View of the Nervous Temperament*, physician Thomas Trotter stressed the centrality of the gut: "The human

2010); Kyla Wazana Tompkins, *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century* (New York: NYU Press, 2012).

[5] A number of scholars have written on different aspects of how Romantic-era literature engages with medicine or science. See, for example: James Robert Allard, *Romanticism, Medicine, and the Poet's Body* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); Hermione De Almeida, *Romantic Medicine and John Keats* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Jeremy Davies, *Bodily Pain in Romantic Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Joel Faflak, *Romantic Psychoanalysis: The Burden of the Mystery* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008); Janelle Schwartz, *Worm Work: Recasting Romanticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Richard C. Sha, *Perverse Romanticism: Aesthetics and Sexuality in Britain, 1750-1832* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009); David E. Shuttleton, *Smallpox and the Literary Imagination, 1660–1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Paul Youngquist, *Monstrosities: Bodies and British Romanticism* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003). A handful of other studies explore how Romantic writers address and portray the topic of health in particular. Gavin Budge's *Romanticism, Medicine, and the Supernatural* and Martin Wallen's *City of Health, Fields of Disease* both consider how Romantic writers engage with Brunonian medical theories, although neither work considers diet, appetite, or digestion at any length. Gavin Budge, *Romanticism, Medicine and the Natural Supernatural: Transcendent Vision and Bodily Spectres, 1789-1852* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Martin Wallen, *City of Health, Fields of Disease: Revolutions in the Poetry, Medicine, and Philosophy of Romanticism* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).

[6] Alan Richardson, *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), ix, 146. See also: *The Neural Sublime: Cognitive Theories and Romantic Texts* (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

stomach is an organ endued by nature, with the most complex properties of any in the body; and forming a *centre* of sympathy between our corporeal and mental parts, of more exquisite qualifications than even the brain itself."[7] By later in the century, the brain had been established as the central organ of the human body, and the gut relegated to its less sophisticated workhorse.

This somatic great chain of being continues to influence how we conceive of the hierarchy of organ systems. Yet the Romantic period had a much less restrictive view of this organ hierarchy. Certain writers and physicians lamented the continuing centrality of the stomach in both senses: as an insufficiently elevated middle region, and as the focus of medical care. Despite his preoccupation with his own gut troubles,[8] Samuel Taylor Coleridge complained that doctors were "'*shallow* animals, who having always employed their minds about Body and Gut…imagine that in the whole system of things there is nothing but Gut and Body.'"[9] The physician Edward Jenner, inventor of the smallpox vaccine, declared: "'I want to do away with the whole stomach pathology at a sweep and to place the brain upon the top of the lofty pedestal

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[7] Thomas Trotter, *A View of the Nervous Temperament: Being a Practical Inquiry into the Increasing Prevalence, Prevention, and Treatment of Those Diseases Commonly Called Nervous, Bilious, Stomach and Liver Complaints, Indigestion, Low Spirits, Gout, &C* (Newcastle and London: Edw. Walker; Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1807), 205.

Trotter builds on the work of physicians like Robert Whytt, who, as Ian Miller explains, "depicted the stomach as an epicenter of the nervous system, an approach that allowed him to implicate the organ for poor health throughout the body. Whytt believed that the stomach contained an innumerable amount of nerve endings that linked the organ to other bodily regions…such perspectives bore cultural relevance in early nineteenth-century Britain, a society increasingly defined as nervous." Ian Miller, "Digesting in the Long Eighteenth Century," in *Bellies, Bowels, and Entrails in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Rebecca Anne Barr, Sylvie Kleiman-Lafon, and Sophie Vasset (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 70.

[8] See, for example: George Rousseau, "Coleridge's Dreaming Gut," in *Cultures of the Abdomen: Diet, Digestion, and Fat in the Modern World*, ed. Ana Carden-Coyle Christopher E. Forth (New York: Palgrave Macmillas, 2005).

[9] Quoted in: Roy Porter, *Flesh in the Age of Reason: The Modern Foundations of Body and Soul* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003), 62.

allotted to it; to shew it as exercising a complete sovereignty over every vital action.'"[10] As Ian Miller explains, Coleridge and Jenner were in the minority, as "medical authors continued to find new ways of elevating the stomach in the bodily economy" well into the nineteenth century."[11] Jenner's desire for brain "sovereignty" also foregrounds the connection between the brain and individual subjectivity. In contrast, focusing on the bowels rejects this kind of Cartesian dualism. The bowels represent a less clearly centralized, and less individualized region, in which there is not a clear distinction between thought and body.

Recent work on the gut microbiome offers striking evidence for the idea that our bodies are not only permeable, but also not our own. Instead, we share them with billions of other microorganisms.[12] Such evidence supports post-humanist work by philosophers like Donna Haraway, who helpfully theorizes "the temporalities, scales, materialities, relationalities between people and our constitutive partners, which always include other people and other critters, animal and not, in doing worlds, in worlding."[13] While current scientific research addresses how the gut acts as a kind of switchboard or interface between different parts of the body — and outside world — Romantic-era physicians like Trotter were mounting similar arguments, albeit without the molecular biology to back up their claims. Miller describes how late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century doctors emphasized the millennia-long "intimate relation between the stomach and the psyche" in their treatment recommendations, showing an awareness of the

[10] Quoted in: Miller, "Digesting in the Long Eighteenth Century," 69.

[11] Ibid.

[12] For a helpful overview of this topic, see: Ed Yong, *I Contain Multitudes: The Microbes within Us and a Grander View of Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 2016).

[13] Nicholas Gane and Donna Haraway, "When We Have Never Been Human, What Is to Be Done?," *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, no. 7-8 (2006): 143.

stomach as "a key space within the body whence all manner of sensations, ailments and problems emitted."[14] Robert Mitchell reads in Trotter's *A View of the Nervous Temperament* a view of "the stomach" as "not simply part of the individual body, but also a nexus that linked individual desires to social dynamics."[15] My project proposes that thinking about digestion and the gut in the Romantic period helps us better understand how this era and its literary productions function as their own kind of interface, negotiating the transition into modernity. Digestion is not simply a metaphor for the transitional moment of Romanticism, a time in which older social, medical, and cultural systems began to break down, and new ones take shape. It is also a significant physiological experience — one that was only partially understood and yet also seen as central to health and to the relationship between bodies and the outside world — that is reflected across Romantic-era print culture, including in novels, poetry, essays, agricultural tracts, and medical advice.

The idea that the alimentary canal connects bodies to the world around them also recalls Bruno Latour's theorization of networks as having no hierarchies, and no inside or outside; he focuses instead on the connections networks make possible.[16] The digestive system functions in a similar, albeit far more material and messy way. While the alimentary canal connects the body to the outside world, it does so via a meandering route; the intestines, after all, ramble back and forth, and up and down through the center of the body. In her recent book, *Gut Feminism*,

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[14] Miller, "Digesting in the Long Eighteenth Century," 74.

[15] Robert Mitchell, *Experimental Life: Vitalism in Romantic Science and Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 115.

[16] Latour explains that "the notion of network allows us to dissolve the micro-macro-distinction that has plagued social theory from its inception…A network is never *bigger* than another one, it is simply *longer* or *more intensely* connected" (371). Bruno Latour, "On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications," *Soziale Welt* 47, no. 4 (1996).

Elizabeth Wilson helps elucidate the protean quality of the gut: "the belly takes shape both from what has been ingested (from the world), from its internal neighbors (liver, diaphragm, intestines, kidney) and from bodily posture. This is an organ uniquely positioned, anatomically, to contain what is worldly, what is idiosyncratic, and what is visceral, and to show how such divisions are always being broken down, remade, metabolized, circulated, intensified, and excreted."[17] Digestion and indigestion also serve as reminders of the limits of bodies' legibility. Writers like William Godwin might have fantasized about a level of human perfectibility in which all bodily functions came under conscious control. But digestion is, of course, an autonomic process, one that takes place within opaque bodies, and acts as reminder that bodies can never fully be known or understood. Defamiliarizing Romanticism, this project excavates medical and environmental history at the same time it turns to the literary archive as an important place to understand the Romantic period's theory of the body and its bowels, and challenge assumptions about the isolated Romantic individual. These assumptions continue to shape our ideas about subjectivity, as well as our relationship our own bodies, other people's bodies, and the environment.

A Brief History of Romantic (In)digestion

This section functions as a primarily historical interlude, providing an overview of how Romantic-era medical and lay writers understood their bodies and digestive systems, and the relationship between the two. I begin by addressing the lingering legacy of humoral medicine, which emphasized the vital role the stomach and diet played in emotional, mental, physical health. Then, I discuss how understandings of the stomach began to change in response to late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century scientific research into the biochemistry of the digestive

[17] Elizabeth A. Wilson, *Gut Feminism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 6, 43.

process. Finally, I explain how Romantic-era writers represented the gut's connection to the outside world, both of agricultural production, and of the consumer revolution, as well as the relationship between diet and identity.

Over the course of the eighteenth century, medical knowledge and advice had begun to shift from a reliance on an older, humoral understanding of the body to a more recognizably "modern," anatomically informed conception. Yet the transition was neither inevitable nor linear. As Roy Porter explains, "around 1800 clinical judgment was still drawing upon the threads and patches of humoralism. Disease theories remained multifactorial (later critics would say confused)."[18] Humoral medicine — chiefly based on the writing of Galen, a second century, C.E. Greek physician — depicted each body as a unique microcosm requiring its own particular form of treatment, one attentive to balancing a person's humors, comprising blood, phlegm, choler (yellow bile) and melancholy (black bile); these four humors were the "essential fluids manufactured in the body that regulate physiological functions."[19] The ideal of this regulated body informed early-modern theorizations of the relationship between the individual, humorally-balanced body and a balanced body politic.

By the end of the eighteenth century, medical professionals were increasingly hypothesizing a standard, or "proper body," as Paul Youngquist calls it, and designating illnesses and deformities as deviations from this paradigm, although this was not yet a widespread practice.[20] With the 1798 publication of Thomas Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population,*

[18] Roy Porter, "The Eighteenth Century," in *The Western Medical Tradition: 800 BC to AD 1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 412.

[19] Ken Albala, *Eating Right in the Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 48-49.

[20] Youngquist, *Monstrosities*, xiv.

healthy bodies came to be seen as threatening healthy societies with their purported ability to reproduce faster than farmers could produce food to feed them. As Catherine Gallagher argues, "by insisting that healthy bodies eventually generate a feeble social organism, Malthus departed from nearly all his contemporaries," and "the social and economic significance of the vigorous body was radically reconceptualized."[21] Thus, the Romantic period can be read as a sort of medical interregnum, an era lacking a coherent model to express the relationship between a healthy body and a healthy society. Significantly, this medical interregnum occurred during interregnums of different sorts in both France and England. In France, the break was, of course, quite literal; in England, it was symbolic, and tied to George III's fluctuating health. Threatened from without by the French Revolution and its subsequent wars, and from within by the precarious health of their own king and the questionable consumption practices of his heir, the English had cause for consternation on multiple fronts. However, a significant subset of their concerns centered on the gut; these concerns were informed by humoral medicine and Enlightenment experimentation.

Unraveling the mysteries of the digestive process had become a crucial scientific and medical project during the Enlightenment, and continued well into the nineteenth century. By the late eighteenth century, "the stomach became a prioritized site within the human nervous structure;" the organ was believed to contain "an abundant supply of nervous energy," which it

[21] Gallagher explains how Malthus demonstrates that "the spirited health and strength of the utopian body leads within two generations to social chaos, want, warfare, and, finally, starvation…the healthy, and consequently reproducing, body thus is the harbinger of the disordered society full of starving bodies: 'Provisions no longer flow in for the support of the mother with a large family. The children are sickly from insufficient food. The rosy flush of health gives place to the pallid cheek and hollow eye of misery.'" Catherine Gallagher, "The Body Versus the Social Body in the Works of Thomas Malthus and Henry Mayhew," *Representations* 14, no. Spring (1986): 83, 85.

"dispens[ed]…throughout the body."[22] For many writers, medical and lay alike, understanding the stomach was crucial for understanding bodily, mental, and emotional functions — and malfunctions. Contemporary conceptions of digestion were also in flux. Scientists were still trying to understand the nature and function of gastric juices, and to resolve the vitality debates. Was digestion simply a mechanical process? Or was it influenced by the mysterious spark of life? While eighteenth-century anatomists and chemists contributed to a better understanding of the physiological and chemical aspects of digestive process, confusion remained regarding how, exactly, digestion happened and what physical and chemical processes caused it.

The famed anatomist John Hunter studied the stomach in order to better understand the digestive process. His 1772 lecture to the Royal Society: "On the Digestion of the Stomach After Death" contributed to the understanding of digestion as a chemical process facilitated by gastric acid; prior to this, most medical practitioners had believed that the stomach either effected digestion by way of heat — cooking the chewed-up food that entered it, according to these models — or by muscular contractive force alone. Although this lecture shed light on the digestive process, it also presented the stomach as having mysterious powers that defied normal understandings of life and death. Hunter detailed what he found when "opening the abdomen" of recently deceased cadavers and emphasized the critical skill required by anatomists to distinguish between anatomical anomalies that might have caused death, compared with those that are the result of "natural change after death."[23] The powers of the digestive process blur these distinctions, he argued, offering for study "a case of a mixed nature, which cannot be reckoned a

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[22] Ian Miller, *A Modern History of the Stomach: Gastric Illness, Medicine and British Society, 1800-1950* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2011), 13-14.

[23] John Hunter, "On the Digestion of the Stomach after Death," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* 62 (1772): 452fn, 48.

process of the living body, nor of the dead; it participates in both, inasmuch as its cause arises from the living, yet cannot take effect till after death."[24] Based on his extensive experience with dissecting human corpses, Hunter deduces that "there are very few dead bodies, in which the stomach is not, at its great end, in some degree digested."[25] In other words, the stomach digests itself after death. Hunter concluded that his research "shew[s] that it is not mechanical power, nor contractions of the stomach, nor heat, but something secreted in the coats of the stomach, which is thrown into its cavity, and there animalizes the food, or assimilates it to the nature of the blood."[26]

While some of Hunter's conclusions are faulty — he claimed that a "living principle" keeps the stomach while alive from digesting either itself or other live things that might find their way into the stomach[27] — he is correct in his conclusion that something about the stage of the digestive process that occurs in the stomach defies normal understandings of life and death. Research into the chemical components of gastric juice finally proved that it was, indeed, acidic.[28] (That these experiments often involved the scientists themselves tasting the gastric juice adds another level of digestive flair to the mix.) Anatomists seemed to understand that the mucus membranes lining the alimentary canal served to protect it from what the surgeon Alexander

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid., 451.

[26] Ibid., 453-4.

[27] Hunter believes in the superstition that "we find animals of various kinds living in the stomach, or even hatched and bred there: but the moment that any of those lose the living principle, they become subject to the digestive powers of the stomach" (449).

[28] Harry Bloch explains that American surgeon William Beaumont's 1833 *Experiments and Observations on the Nature of Gastric Juice and the Physiology of Digestion* finally cleared up many of the remaining questions. Harry Bloch, "Man's Curiosity About Food Digestion: An Historical Overview," *Journal of the National Medical Association* 79, no. 11 (1987).

Monro termed "the acrimony of its contents."[29] But what they could not realize, as Mary Roach puts it, is that "stomachs can digest themselves. Gastric acid and pepsin digest the cells of the stomach's protective layer, or mucosa, quite effectively. What no one in Hunter's day realized is that the organ swiftly rebuilds what it breaks down. A healthy adult has a new stomach lining every three days."[30] Although understanding the regenerative properties of the stomach lining would have been beyond anatomists of Hunter's day, Hunter's lecture nevertheless grasps the mysterious and wondrous nature of the digestive process. For Romantic-era lay people and physicians, the stomach was simultaneously a source of wonder, confusion, frustration, and worry. As Miller explains, in the early nineteenth century, "stomach complaints remained notoriously difficult to diagnose and treat, even as new perspectives on digestion evolved."[31]

While some anatomists and chemists attempted to parse the remaining mysteries of the digestive process, many medical professional focused on the less scientific connection between individual alimentary canals and British strength. They identified the enervating, digestion-threatening dangers of the consumer revolution[32] as one of the main threats to British health on

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[29] Alexander Monro, *Elements of the Anatomy of the Human Body in Its Sound State: With Occasional Remarks on Physiology, Pathology, and Surgery*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Edinburgh and London: Maclachlan & Stewart; Baldwin, Chadock, & Joy, 1825), 473.

[30] Mary Roach, *Gulp: Adventures on the Alimentary Canal* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013), 156.

[31] Miller, "Digesting in the Long Eighteenth Century," 71.

[32] Few literary studies of food and Romantic-era consumer culture exist; those that do focus on sugar and tea, two of the commodities that Sidney Mintz identifies as growing the most swiftly during the eighteenth century and becoming "a diagnostic of the standard of living" (264). Both Charlotte Sussman's *Consuming Anxieties*: *Consumer Protest, Gender & British Slavery, 1713-1833* and Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace's *Consuming Subjects: Women, Shopping, and Business in the Eighteenth Century* are primarily concerned with the fraught figure of the female consumer in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; when they do address food, they focus on specific imported luxury food commodities.

Sidney Mintz, "The changing roles of food in the study of consumption," in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, eds. John Brewer and Roy Porter (New York: Routledge, 1993); Charlotte Sussman,

an individual and a national level. Scottish physician William Buchan's immensely popular *Domestic Medicine*,[33] first published in 1769, warned that "no person can enjoy health who does not properly digest his food."[34] Yet those living in "manufacturing countries" such as England and Scotland were increasingly prone to leading sedentary and luxurious lives; such "inactivity" could only "weaken the powers of digestion."[35] This growing number of sedentary people not only had trouble digesting their food, but they also no longer participated in its cultivation. Buchan lamented that "agriculture, the first and most healthful of all employments, is now followed by few who are able to carry on any other business."[36] Given the centrality of agricultural production to gut health, the decreasing number of people working the fields posed a problem for the nation's digestive well-being.

Not only were people less active and less involved in food production, but this sedentariness was also corrupting their agriculture, compounding the negative effects. Buchan's concerns about inactivity even extended to beef, the agricultural product most associated with English identity and strength. Buchan elucidated how the food chain could corrupt English guts when he lamented that "most of our stalled cattle are crammed with gross food, but not allowed

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Consuming Anxieties: Consumer Protest, Gender & British Slavery, 1713-1833 (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2000); Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects: Women, Shopping, and Business in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

[33] "Between 1769 and the last edition, which appeared in Philadelphia in 1871, there were at least 142 separate English-language editions." Christopher Lawrence, "Buchan, William (1729-1805), Physician and Author," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004).

[34] William Buchan, *Domestic Medicine: Or, a Treatise on the Prevention and Cure of Diseases by Regimen and Simple Medicines*, 16th ed. (London and Edinburgh A. Strahan, T. Cadell, W. Davies; J. Balfour, and W. Creech, 1798), 56.

[35] Ibid., 47, 56.

[36] Ibid., 48.

exercise nor free air;" like the English themselves, their cows were becoming too sedentary, and "no animal can be wholesome which does not take sufficient exercise."[37] In his vegetarian manifesto, *A Vindication of Natural Diet,* Percy Shelley made a similar point, albeit with a different political agenda:

> Man, and the animals whom he has infected with his society, or depraved by his dominion, are alone diseased. The wild hog, the mouflon, the bison, and the wolf, are perfectly exempt from malady…But the domestic hog, the sheep, the cow, and the dog, are subject to an incredible variety of distempers; and, like the corrupters of their nature, have physicians who thrive upon their miseries.[38]

For Shelley and for Buchan, such agricultural failings were evidence of the creeping evils of luxury. Both proposed different versions of a return to nature as the most hopeful cure. Shelley counseled a vegetarian diet and drinking only distilled water to prevent the "gradual depravation of the digestive organs."[39] Buchan recommended that "every person who follows a sedentary employment should cultivate a piece of ground with his own hands," in order to regain health.[40] While writing from different vantage points, both Buchan and Shelley focused on how changes in food systems were affecting digestive systems. Many feared such changes would also disrupt the political system, especially in the aftermath of the French Revolution.

Written almost forty years after Buchan first published *Domestic Medicine*, and in the middle of the Napoleonic wars, Trotter's *A View of the Nervous Temperament* evinced more palpable concern about the connection between the changing nature of agricultural production,

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[37] Buchan, *Domestic Medicine*, 64.

[38] Percy Shelley, "A Vindication of Natural Diet [1813]," in *Radical Food: The Culture and Politics of Eating and Drinking 1790-1820*, ed. Timothy Morton (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 276.

[39] Ibid., 277.

[40] Buchan, *Domestic Medicine*, 52-53.

increasingly sedentary Britons, and indigestion. Linking an increase in luxury and a decrease in activity with the rise in nervous complaints, in which the stomach "particularly suffers," Trotter worried that his countrymen would be unable to defend themselves due to the growing number of urban dwellers no longer capable of a hard day's work plowing — or fighting in — the fields.[41] He celebrated Sir John Sinclair's role in founding England's first Board of Agriculture in 1793, lauding his "noble attempts to regenerate the physical strength of the country, by recalling mankind to agricultural life," for "a nation of sedentary people, can never be a nation of heroes."[42]

Sir John Sinclair himself, in his *Code of Health and Longevity* (1807) maintained that, "on the state of the stomach indeed, depends that of every organ and function of the system."[43] He noted that others had identified the stomach as "the conscience of the body, and the seat of the soul."[44] As befitted an agricultural reformer, Sinclair not only recommended the "two arts…of the gardener and of the husbandman" as "the most useful, and the most essential of

[41] Trotter, *A View of the Nervous Temperament*, 204.

[42] Ibid., 149-50.

[43] John Sinclair, *The Code of Health and Longevity*, 5th ed. (London: Sherwood, Neely & Jones, 1817), 171. This echoes the view of mid-to-late eighteenth century French chemists who elaborate "a model of nutrition as a process connecting the animal and natural economies. They represented the human body as the culmination of a scale of being whose function was to elaborate the raw material of nature from coarse and unrefined forms into organized bodies. Each living body was a chemical laboratory within the bigger natural economy, itself portrayed as a great chemical machine, endlessly cycling matter through various states of organization, from simple to complex and back again" E.C. Spary, *Feeding France: New Sciences of Food, 1760–1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 89.

[44] Sinclair, *The Code of Health and Longevity*, 177n. Thomas Trotter makes a similar point: "Anatomists have discovered an unusual share of nerves about the upper orifice of the stomach ; from which it was thought by some philosophers to be *seat* of the soul. These nerves of the stomach are derived from the *par vagum*, or eighth pair, which communicates with the *great intercostal* or *sympathetic*; and by it, is connected with almost every other nerve of the body…it would appear, that this nerve is the grand link or chain, which *connects* the vital, animal, and natural functions with one another" (Trotter, 204-5).

any," but also described the connection digestion forges between bodies and their natural surroundings: "In the course of a life of ordinary duration, the produce of many acres of land, the flesh of a number of oxen, and the contents of many tons of liquor, are consumed by one individual; whilst, in regard to size and bulk, he continues nearly the same…All these phenomena are explained by the process called digestion."[45] Although writing from a different perspective than the anatomist, Hunter, Sinclair similarly emphasizes the wondrous quality of digestion, a process that somehow manages to synthesize acres, multiple oxen, and tons of liquor into the relatively unchanged body of a single human. As Buchan, Trotter, Sinclair and others maintained, the health of England was contingent on the vitality of English subjects, a vitality rooted in the bowels, and in the bowels' connection to the wider world. These medical writers not only underscored the relationship between the bowels, digestion, and health, but also stressed that this health depended upon human engagement with the natural environment that produced their food.

Food and digestive systems were under attack. But dietary changes also offered the most promising cure for digestive discomfort, and tracts offering advice on diet and digestive health proliferated during the period.[46] For Buchan, "there is no doubt but the whole constitution of the body may be changed by diet alone."[47] Dorothy Wordsworth anecdotally underscored this belief

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[45] Ibid., 176.

[46] In addition to the texts I have cited in this section, see, for example: G. Fordyce, *A Treatise on the Digestion of Food* (London: Printed for J. Johnson, 1791); John Gibson, *A Treatise on Bilious Diseases and Indigestion* (London: Murray and Highley, Fleet Street; J. Harding, St. James's Street; and J. Cuthell, Middle Row, Holborn, 1799); William Prout, *Chemistry, Meteorology and the Function of Digestion: Considered with Reference to Natural Theology* (London: William Pickering, 1834). In the February 1827 edition of *The Eclectic Review*, one intrepid reviewer indicated the extent of such books' popularity when he attempted to synthesize the suggestions made by a "formidable array of...treatises on diet and digestion" Paris and Others on Indigestion, &C," *The Eclectic Review*, February 1827, 9.

[47] Buchan, *Domestic Medicine*, 62.

in the transformative power of food in a March 18, 1802 entry, in which she writes: "I felt myself weak, & William charged me not to go to Mrs Lloyds – I seemed indeed, to myself unfit for it but when he was gone I thought I would get the visit over if I could – so I ate a Beef-steak thinking it would strengthen me so it did, & I went off."[48] Unknowingly attesting to the power of the placebo effect, she connects "thinking it would strengthen me" with being strengthened: "so it did." Her trust in the invigorating powers of beef-steak surely derives from its characterization as the quintessential fortifier of hearty Englishmen, honored in songs such as "In Praise of English Roast Beef" and "The Faithful Camp Butcher," a French Revolutionary wartime celebration of the victorious contribution "good old English roast beef" could make to the war effort.[49]

As this example suggests, a sense of national identity was created and consolidated in late eighteenth-century England in part by establishing what constituted the ideal national diet, in contrast to other parts of Britain and especially to France. According to Alan Bewell, "diet during the eighteenth century was radically politicized, as differences between nations and peoples were articulated through ideas about differences in diet and its impact on culture."[50] Despite expanding urban populations, the image of the quintessentially English diet that emerged was associated with a rosy but outdated picture of its depleting rural population: hearty, simple

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[48] Dorothy Wordsworth, *The Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 80.

[49] First published in *A Complete Collection of Old and New Scotch Songs* (1735), it reappeared in songbooks throughout the eighteenth century. The song begins with these lyrics: "When mighty Roast Beef was the Englishman's Food, / It ennobl'd our Veins, and enriched our Blood / Our soldiers were brave, and our Courtiers were good." Richard Leveridge, "In Praise of English Roast Beef." *A Complete Collection of Old and New English and Scotch Songs, with Their Respective Tunes Prefixed* (London T. Boreman, 1735), 5-6.

[50] Alan Bewell, *Romanticism and Colonial Disease* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 139.

food associated with a local, agrarian world.[51] However, this natural, non-urban ideal was just that: an idealization, and one that responded to the ever more apparent effects of the Agricultural Revolution, which dispossessed and displaced many farmers.[52] Placing an emphasis on the power of diet to form and regulate identity increasingly became the way to stabilize the self, be it as a good English citizen, or, in the case of a vegetarian like Percy Shelley, to mark out one's revolutionary identity.[53] Yet, empowering diet in this way also made digestive misfires — either somatic or metaphoric — more fraught.[54]

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[51] Ibid., 147.

[52] G.E. Mingay explains that the idea that the Agricultural Revolution only occurred during the eighteenth century "has long been abandoned in favor of a much longer time span," covering the seventeenth through late-nineteenth centuries (1). Historians still point to something significant about the period roughly spanning 1750-1850, a time of unparalleled population growth in England. In 1750, the population was 6 million; in 1800, 9 million; in 1850, 18 million. This growth was a key factor in spurring post-1750 "increased output and…changes in farming methods" (ibid). According to Mark Overton, "although change was under way by the mid-seventeenth century," the period of 1750-1850 was "when change was most rapid and was making the most significant contribution to output and productivity" (206). While more positive "agrarian change" occurred in sixteenth and seventeenth century England, Robert C. Allen explains, "in the eighteenth century…the effect of agrarian change was far less beneficial…The biggest contribution of agrarian change was the release of labor, but it was not successfully re-employed – these people became the legions of paupers who so distressed upper-class opinion during the Industrial Revolution" (268-9). G.E. Mingay, "Introduction," in *The Agrarian History of England and Wales: 1750-1850*, ed. G.E. Mingay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Mark Overton, *Agricultural Revolution in England: The Transformation of the Agrarian Economy 1500-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Robert C. Allen, *Enclosure and the Yeoman: The Agricultural Development of the South Midlands 1450-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

[53] In *Shelley and the Revolution in Taste*, Timothy Morton argues that, "drawing on the aversive rhetoric of vegetarianism, Shelley refashioned taste, in revolt against what he conceived to be the hierarchical powers which controlled consumption, production and culture." Timothy Morton, *Shelley and the Revolution in Taste: The Body and the Natural World* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 1.

[54] In the same entry in which she documents the perceived restorative properties of beef-steak, Dorothy Wordsworth also hints at the hazardous nature of this attempt at identity formation through diet, and the way one's eating practices resonate in the environment. On her way to the Lloyds, steak presumably digesting in her stomach, she writes: "I went through the fields, & sate ½ an hour afraid to pass a Cow. The Cow looked at me & I looked at the cow & whenever I stirred the cow gave over eating" (80). The threat of stampeding cows is a genuine one; on June 10, 1802, Dorothy records: "Coleridge came in with a sack-full of Books &c & a Branch of mountain ash he had been attacked by a cow" (108). Yet her attentiveness to the cow seems heightened by her having just eaten a beefsteak, an unusual dietary occurrence for her. Faced with a real life manifestation of the creature she just ingested in order to fortify

Reading from the Gut

What was a writer to do when faced with the choice between literary production and digestive health? In the final letter he wrote before his death, John Keats lamented:

> 'Tis the most difficult thing in the world to me to write a letter. My stomach continues so bad, that I feel it worse on opening any book…There is one thought enough to kill me—I have been well, healthy, alert, &c., walking with her[55]—and now—the knowledge of contrast, feeling for light and shade, all that information (primitive sense) necessary for a poem, are great enemies to the recovery of the stomach.[56]

Keats's description of his stomach troubles reflects the prevailing medical belief that sedentary literary pursuits were dangerous to bodies, and especially to guts. Trotter, for example, warned that "few men attached to literary pursuits are active, strong and athletic," a lifestyle that negatively affects their "powers of digestion…the debility and inactivity which take place in the chylopoeitic organs, read on the nervous part of the frame; and the faculties of intellect, as sympathizing in a great degree, with all these highly sensible bowels, are influenced by the general disorder."[57] Keats, a theorist of poetry to the very end, moves beyond the proscriptions about work and the stomach that he would have learned in his training as a surgeon to think about what is "necessary for a poem," and how such demands are at odds with what the stomach needs. He also, perhaps unconsciously, puns on the dual meaning of "necessary." While explicitly referring to what is required — "the knowledge of contrast, feeling for light and shade"

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herself, Dorothy is now "afraid," and unable to move, as all the strength she ingested from the beef-steak seems to fade away.

[55] Keats refers here to his fiancée, Fanny Brawne.

[56] John Keats to Charles Brown, 30 November 1820.

[57] Trotter, *A View of the Nervous Temperament*, 39.

— for creating poetry, he also evokes the necessary, or privy, a space for waste associated with the demands of the stomach.

The poetry, fiction, and autobiographical prose I examine in the following chapters explores the tension between the gut and the literary production, albeit in less diametrically opposing terms than the ones set up here by a dying Keats. While these chapters trace a rough chronology through the Romantic period, I do not argue that a standard narrative surrounding digestive discourses emerges, or that the texts follow a linear progression. Although the final chapter on Lord Byron's *Don Juan* does function as a culmination of what has come before, it would be possible to read these chapters in a different order without a loss of meaning — and with the possibility of uncovering different connections between the texts. Focusing on one key text per chapter, I practice a mode of reading that asks: what happens if we put digestion first? This allows the texts to elucidate their specific take on digestion, rather than tracing a particular aspect of the digestive process or superimposing digestive themes. Each chapter thus unfolds some of the surprising places the digestive can take us.

My first chapter, "Melancholy Bowels and Sociable Privies in Dorothy Wordsworth's Writing," considers digestion on an intimate, interpersonal scale, and argues that Dorothy Wordsworth theorizes a mode of sociability premised on moments of crisis or rupture, rather than happy communal meals. In recording the often "melancholy" bowel troubles she and Samuel Taylor Coleridge experience, Dorothy Wordsworth's *Grasmere Journals* (1800-1803) construct a different sort of being, a being premised not on individual, gendered bodies but instead on linked, ungendered body parts. Her literal and figurative references to the bowels expose how she thinks across different scales in a way that makes connections between bodies, and between bodies and the natural world. Dorothy's later poem, "Floating Island at

Hawkshead," moves from the bodies in Dove Cottage to a very different body — the floating island — and rethinks the relationship between waste and the body of England.[58]

While Dorothy Wordsworth theorizes a connection between bodies, waste, and the body of England, Sydney Owenson's bestselling 1806 novel, *The Wild Irish Girl* explores the collective, national relationship between Irish bodies, appetites, and diet. In Chapter Two, "*The Wild Irish Girl* Diet," I argue that Owenson's novel not only functions as an apologia for Irish culture but also powerfully demonstrates that Ireland's cultural heritage and production — as well as their hope for survival — are intimately related to Irish diet. For Owenson, Irish agriculture, often of a subsistence variety, produces and sustains Irish culture and Irish bodies. Written at a transitional point in Irish political and literary history, the novel counters agricultural reformer Arthur Young's portrayal of Irish agriculture as the lowliest "link" on a "chain" ascending to the British state. Owenson instead focuses on the local world of peasant agriculture and the mouths it feeds, as well as the cultural production and appreciation that it sustains.

Chapter Three, "Undigested Sentiment in John Keats's *Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil*," shifts the focus to non-human digestion, contesting the divide between human and environment via the alimentary canal. Drawing on Erasmus Darwin's prose, Romantic-era agricultural tracts, and Alexander Pope's theorization of bathos, this chapter addresses the paradox at the heart of Keats's poem: Even as "Isabella" depicts a basil plant efficiently eating away at the severed head fertilizing it, the poem is most notable for reveling in excess, both in its composition, and in its representation of sentiment. In Keats's bloated retelling of Boccaccio's tale, Isabella's tears are not a tasteful symbol of feeling but an excessive and messy manifestation of it. These tears help to facilitate a bizarre tale of digestion that grants agency to plants as digestive, feeling bodies.

[58] To avoid confusion, this chapter refers to both Dorothy and William Wordsworth by their first names.

The poem represents sentiment as peculiarly visceral, and as capable of transgressing the boundary between humans and plants.

The dissertation ends with Chapter Four, "Difficult Digestion in *Don Juan*," which considers digestion as its own literary form, and asks why Lord Byron's *Don Juan* (1818-1824) is obsessed with both the material process of digestion and with the metaphorical digestion of Romantic-era popular culture, politics, and world historical events. This chapter takes seriously the repeated references *Don Juan* makes to the somatic experience of digestion, and to moments when that process fails, sometimes with mortal consequences. At crucial moments throughout *Don Juan*, Byron turns to alimentary topics — some figurative, some literal — as a way to process and express the overwhelming and often violent experience of modernity. The poem explores the violence bodies can enact, and how that violence redounds on these bodies, especially on their stomachs. I argue that *Don Juan* portrays the Romantic period as difficult to digest and offers a retrospective on Romantic (in)digestion.

Throughout my project, I contend that the poetry, novel, life writing, and essays I examine shaped, and were shaped by, the era's medical and environmental discourses. Rather than focusing on either the body, food, or the environment in Romantic literature, this dissertation considers these concerns as integrated phenomena, as writers at the time did. As noted earlier, the Romantic period can be read as a sort of medical interregnum, an era unencumbered by a coherent ideology to express the relationship between a healthy body and a healthy society. Steven Shapin argues that, while "our vocabularies for understanding the relationships between what we eat and who we are have always been resonant…much has changed in fundamental ways over time," and our "modern dietary vocabulary has resulted in a

reconfigured relationship between the environment and" identity.[59] This dissertation traces some of the relationships between environment and identity — often in a collective sense — during a time when Britain's medical and agricultural practices were modernizing and becoming standardized. As these transformations took place, but had not yet taken hold, they opened up a new range of possibilities for understanding and expressing the connection between bodies and the wider world, a connection mediated by the bowels.

[59] Steven Shapin, "'You Are What You Eat': Historical Changes in Ideas About Food and Identity," *Historical Research* 87, no. 237 (2014): 378, 91. Shapin argues that "during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the vocabularies of both Galenic dietetics and analogical reasoning about the qualities of aliment lost their grip on medical and physiological expertise. In their place, nutritional science supplied a new language: the constituents of foods were no longer the qualities of heat and cold, moist and dry, nor of the virtues and powers of the plants and animals eaten – they were carbohydrates, fats and protein; vitamins; minerals; and that power attached to chemical constituents, the calorie. This is what is *in* what you eat, and this is what makes you what you are and what powers your physiological functions" (390).

CHAPTER ONE

Melancholy Bowels and Sociable Privies in Dorothy Wordsworth's writing

> *O the Darling! Here is one of his bitten apples. I can hardly find it in my heart to throw it into the fire.*
>
> — Dorothy Wordsworth, *The Grasmere Journals* (March 4, 1802)

To Lord Byron, William Wordsworth's poetry was "trash."[1] To Dorothy Wordsworth, even her brother's trash represented something to treasure. While William has decided to stop eating an apple, presumably having exhausted its alimentary benefits, Dorothy feasts on it her own way; the decaying apple offers her nourishment of a different kind. At once trash and treasure, the "bitten apple" represents different things to different people, evidence for the familiar anthropological adage that "there is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder."[2] Dorothy Wordsworth's writing has occupied a similarly liminal position. Exactly how to categorize and explain her *Grasmere Journals* (1800-1803) and the relationships described therein has long proven a challenge for editors, biographers, and readers. Bizarre interludes like the one quoted above, as well as the messy, often bowel-related health concerns that Dorothy documents further complicate the picture. William Knight, a Victorian-era editor of William and Dorothy's poetry and prose, silently excised all Dorothy's references to somatic troubles.[3] More recent, often Freudian-influenced feminist readings of Dorothy's writing usually

[1] Lord George Gordon Byron, *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1973-1982), IX, 42.

[2] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge, 1966), 2.

[3] In the introduction to his edited volume of Dorothy Wordsworth's writing, Knight explained that he employed asterisks to signal where he removed many of the repetitive, and according to him, "trivial details" Dorothy records (primarily her domestic labor). Yet he does not allude to, or mark, his elimination of Dorothy's references to her own, William's, and Coleridge's somatic troubles. William Angus Knight, ed. *The Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (London: Macmillan, 1897), vii.

dwell only briefly upon these overlooked and uncomfortable moments. Instead, these scholars tend to view Dorothy's writing as emblematic of a "female Romanticism" that falls somewhere along the spectrum between communal domesticity and the abject.[4]

Contrary to the expectations referencing "bowels" or cherishing an apple core might excite, Dorothy's writing is, in my view, neither deliberately transgressive nor explicitly abject. This chapter proposes a way of reading her work that examines some of these puzzling, often inadvertently humorous moments in the *Grasmere Journals* from a different perspective. This encounter with the "bitten apple" exemplifies Dorothy's literary ability to move between scales, from bowels to bodies to rural ecologies and back again. The human body is, after all, bisected by the alimentary canal. As Maggie Kilgour points out, "the idea of incorporation…depends upon and enforces an absolute division between inside and outside; but in the act itself that

[4] Margaret Homans, one of the first scholars to focus exclusively on Dorothy Wordsworth and her writing, could not fully escape the long-standing narrative of Dorothy as William's deeply devoted sister and helpmeet. Homans reads in Dorothy's journals a "selfless style," contrasting it with Dorothy's "poems' disturbances," which she argues "usually occur because her selflessness contradicts what she has learned about writing poetry from her brother and from literary tradition, that poetry demands a central self" (86). Susan Levin examines Dorothy's life and writing primarily through the lens of feminist psychoanalytic theory, and theorizes the "formed/formlessness" of her writing; for Levin, this "represents the suspension of male romanticism as well as the suspension of its literary forms (8, 7). While Levin's work is less polemical than Homans, her readings also tend to assume a clear divide between "male" and "female" romanticism. Similarly, Anne Mellor argues that, "reading Dorothy Wordsworth's Alfoxden and Grasmere journals, we find a very different concept of self from the egotistical sublime proposed in her brother's poetry" (125). In recent years, critics have begun to explore how Dorothy helped to shape the aesthetics of the Wordsworth circle, reading in her prose and poetry positive contributions rather than passive reactions to the force of William's poetic personality. Susan Wolfson argues for "Dorothy's evident genius, for writing against, and in alternatives to, the forms and forces of her brother's imagination" (178). Lucy Newlyn admits that "something of interest is preserved in…antinomies" of (male) selfishness and (female) selflessness, but maintains that "something else is in danger of being forgotten or obscured: what we might call Dorothy's personality, or voice, or 'character'" (326). Margaret Homans, *Women Writers and Poetic Identity: Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Bronte and Emily Dickinson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); Susan M. Levin, *Dorothy Wordsworth and Romanticism*, revised ed. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2009); Anne K. Mellor, "British Romanticism, Gender, and Three Women Artists," in *The Consumption of Culture, 1600-1800: Image, Object, Text*, ed. Ann Bermingham and John Brewer (London and New York: Routledge); Lucy Newlyn, "Dorothy Wordsworth's Experimental Style," *Essays in Criticism* 57, no. 4 (2007).

opposition disappears, dissolving the structure it appears to produce."[5] The apple, which likely came from the Wordsworths' small orchard, serves as a reminder of the way food penetrates the body via this canal, initiating a digestive process that begins with biting and chewing and ends with excretion. Blurring the line between outside and inside, the *Grasmere Journals* dwell less often on the experience of eating than on the aftermath of it, in all its discomfort and messiness, representing the amalgamation of body parts, bodies, and the natural world. Dorothy Wordsworth's writing refocuses our attention on the sociable potential of uncomfortable digestive experiences and reorients how we perceive the aftermath of these processes, negotiating a new space for a melancholy sociability that undoes the logic of the binary of waste and value.

Although the Wordsworths' cottage in Grasmere was a former inn, Dorothy's accounts do not evoke the merriment and conviviality often on display in literary representations of inns and taverns, from *Joseph Andrews* to *The Pickwick Papers*. While recent scholarship has developed and extended an idea of Romantic sociability by focusing on conviviality, coteries, publics, and counterpublics, among other subjects,[6] the presumed centrality of the shared experience of eating and drinking persists. Rather than continuing to see spaces like the dining table and the tavern function as ground zero for sociability, I turn our attention to the excluded middle that the distinction between "the solitary self" and the "sociable other" — as Gillian Russell and Clara Tuite set up the opposition in their introduction to *Romantic Sociability* —

[5] Maggie Kilgour, *From Communion to Cannibalism: An Anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 4.

[6] See, for example: Tim Fulford, *Romantic Poetry and Literary Coteries: The Dialect of the Tribe* (New York: Palgrave, 2015); John Mee, C*onversable Worlds: Literature, Contention, and Community, 1762 to 1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Gillian Russell, *Women, Sociability, and the Theatre in Georgian London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Wolfson, *Romantic Interactions*.

leaves out.[7] To examine this excluded middle is to find a messier, more material in-between state of sociability, one that challenges the assumption of bounded liberal subjects interacting around a dinner table, and which might be considered the opposite of sociable. In the *Grasmere Journals,* bodies come together in unusual moments, which are rarely convivial, and are often uncomfortable and even disgusting. Yet Dorothy's scatological spots of time do not fall into the category of Augustan satire, with all its misogynistic associations. Her writing instead documents another basis for sociability, one premised on moments of crisis, breakdown, or rupture, rather than happy communal meals, a sociability that moves away from the dining table and towards the privy.

Neither dwelling in nor satirizing the abject, Dorothy theorizes a mode of sociability that, I will argue, exemplifies the status of the bowels as the paradigmatic organ system of the Romantic period. In documenting the often "melancholy" bowel troubles she and Samuel Taylor Coleridge experience, Dorothy reveals the dual meaning of bowels still circulating in the Romantic period.[8] At the time, older but still influential humoral medicine held the bowels to be the seat of affection and care, while then contemporary medical approaches categorized the bowels as an organ participating in the still somewhat mysterious process of digestion. As Ian Miller explains, in the Romantic period, "even as new perspectives on digestion evolved," the the gut "remained elusive and recalcitrant, mostly evading the diagnostic repertoires of

[7] Gillian Russell and Clara Tuite, "Introducing Romantic Sociability," in *Romantic Sociability: Social Networks and Literary Culture in Britain, 1770–1840*, ed. Gillian Russell and Clara Tuite (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 4.

[8] Dorothy Wordsworth, *The Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 50.

physicians."[9] At the same time, "disordered stomachs also had emotional significance," and "nineteenth-century physicians routinely linked eating and digestion to mental disturbance."[10] The introduction to this dissertation addressed the larger medical contexts in which digestion and the bowels would have been understood during the Wordsworths' time, and the way in which writers theorized the relationship between individual bodies and the body of England, a connection mediated by the stomach. This chapter considers how Dorothy Wordsworth documented the gastro-intestinal difficulties of Dove Cottage during this transitional era in British medical history, and how she represents the relationship between bowels, bodies, and England.

The first section argues that Dorothy's literal and figurative references to the bowels expose how she thinks across different scales in a way that makes connections between bodies, and between bodies and the natural world. At the same time, her writing pushes against a sense of "human" and "environment" as discrete entities. Then, I reconsider Dorothy's later poem "Floating Island at Hawkshead," moving from the bodies in Dove Cottage to a very different body — the floating island — that rethinks the relationship between bodies and England. The chapter ends by putting the poem in conversation with the caricaturist James Gillray's "The French Invasion; – or – John Bull bombarding the Bum-Boats," which offers a related, and yet starkly different vision of England as body and island. In "Floating Island at Hawkshead," intimate ecology becomes metonymic of the nation and an exemplum of the interpenetrability of selves and environment.

[9] Miller, "Digesting in the Long Eighteenth Century," 71.

[10] Ibid., 74.

Bowels and Affect

In his 1755 *Dictionary*, Samuel Johnson offered four entries for "bowels": "1. Intestines; the vessels and organs within the body…2. In the inner parts of any thing…3. Tenderness; compassion…4. This word seldom has a *singular*, except in writers of anatomy."[11] Given their connection with interiors in general and the seat of emotion in particular, "bowels" connote interiority — on both individual and earthly scales — and sentiment. The fourth definition, noting that "this word seldom has a *singular*, except in writers of anatomy" underscores the idea of bowels as collective. While bowels' affective import was waning by the end of the eighteenth century, writers still regularly invoked bowels in Johnson's third sense of the word. The Church of England's standard authorized version[12] of the Bible, revised in 1769, retains the earlier version's numerous references to bowels in the sympathetic sense. For the less literate, the association of bowels with Christian compassion would also have been reinforced on Sundays by the Church of England's *Book of Common Prayer*. Of its six mentions of "bowels," four are in the sympathetic sense: Isaiah 63:15: "Where is thy zeal and thy strength, the founding of thy bowels and of thy mercies towards me?"; 1 John 3:17: "But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?"; Philippians 1:8, in which Paul writes: "For God is my record, how greatly I long after you all in the bowels of Jesus Christ;" and Colossians 3:12, in which Paul writes: "Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness,

[11] Samuel Johnson, "bowels, n.f.," in *A Dictionary of the English Language* (London: Printed by W. Strahan, 1755).

[12] By the end of the eighteenth century, the standard Anglican version of the Bible was Benjamin Blayney's 1769 corrected version of the Authorized Bible (now more commonly called the King James Bible).

humbleness of mind, meekness, long-suffering, forbearing one another, and forgiving one another."[13]

Echoes of these passage can be found in various works. While anatomical bowel troubles are a recurring theme in Tobias Smollett's *The Adventures of Humprhy Clinker* (1771), Jeremy Melford quotes Matthew Bramble referring to bowels in the other sense, albeit ironically: 'You perceive (said the 'squire, turning to me) our landlord is a Christian of bowels."[14] In Thomas Holcroft's *Anna St. Ives* (1792), Coke Clifton writes: "I entreated this straight-backed youth, stiff in determination, to condescend to lend a pitying ear to our petitions; to suffer us to permeate his bowels of compassion."[15] Hannah More also echoes Colossians in "The apprentice turned master; or, the second part of the two shoemakers" (1796), one of the many stories from her *Cheap Repository Tracts*: "She said she hated your godly people, they had no bowels of compassion, but tried to set men, women, and children against their own flesh and blood."[16] In a less explicitly Christian context, William Godwin's persecuted Caleb Williams reflects that "the law has neither eyes, nor ears, nor bowels of humanity; and it turns into marble the hearts of all

[13] Church of England, *The Book of Common Prayer, According to the Use of the Church of England; Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David, Pointed as They Are to Be Sung or Said in Churches* (London: C. Corrall, 1800). The excerpt from Isaiah would be read the Monday before Easter. The excerpt from 1 John would be read on the second Sunday after Trinity. The excerpt from Philippians would be read on the twenty-second Sunday after Trinity. The excerpt from Colossians would be read on the fifth Sunday after Epiphany.

[14] Tobias Smollett, *The Expedition of Humprhy Clinker* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015).

[15] Thomas Holcroft, *Anna St. Ives*, 7 vols., vol. 5, Eighteenth Century Collections Online (London: Shepperson and Reynolds, 1792), 140.

[16] Hannah More, "The Apprentice Turned Master; or, the Second Part of the Two Shoemakers," (London: J. Marshall, 1796), 17.

those that are nursed in its principles."[17] Godwin here classes the "bowels" as one of the fundamental organs of sense perception, second only to the "eyes" and "ears;" the brain does not even figure into the equation. That the law — emblematic of "things as they are," or the flawed state of Britain — lacks "bowels" represents its inability to sympathize with, and therefore possibly improve, the common well-being of the country.

On the opposite end of the political spectrum, Edmund Burke's "Reflections on the Revolution in France" (1790) also appeals to bowels as the seat of shared natural feeling. Only a small but vocal minority of Britons support the French revolution, he argues, while the silent majority has not been swayed by the new-fangled philosophies of Rousseau, Voltaire, and Helvetius:

> In England we have not yet been completely embowelled of our natural entrails; we still feel within us, and we cherish and cultivate, those inbred sentiments which are the faithful guardians, the active monitors of our duty, the true supporters of all liberal and manly morals. We have not been drawn and trussed, in order that we may be filled, like stuffed birds in a museum, with chaff and rags and paltry blurred shreds of paper about the rights of men. We preserve the whole of our feelings still native and entire, unsophisticated by pedantry and infidelity. We have real hearts of flesh and blood beating in our bosoms.[18]

While Burke ends with an appeal to the English's "real hearts of flesh and blood," his primary anatomical touchstone is the bowels. Likening contemporary French philosophies about the rights of man to the meaningless "chaff and rags and paltry blurred shreds of paper" that stuff the empty cavities of dead, disemboweled birds on display, Burke identifies "natural entrails" as the foundation of any decent society. Referencing the "natural" and the "inbred," he argues that English "morality," "principles of government," and "ideas of liberty" are gut instincts. He also

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[17] William Godwin, *Things as They Are; or, Caleb Williams* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2000), 378.

[18] Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 86.

draws upon the connection between bowels and feelings: because the English retain their "natural entrails," they have the capacity to "*feel*," and "to *cherish* and cultivate, those inbred *sentiments*" that have, for generations, filled the guts of faithful Englishmen (emphasis mine). Burke appeals here to novelistic language of interiority, suggesting that bowels protect against volatile outside forces. Moving from the image of disemboweled birds stuffed with the flimsy ideas of false prophets back to tangible English guts, Burke more clearly identifies bowels with sensibility: "We preserve the whole of our feelings still native and entire." Bowels function here as both the receptacle of and the synonym for "feelings." With his repeated references to "we" and "our," Burke invokes a collective English gut, one whose "natural entrails" preserve a common national feeling.

Dorothy Wordsworth's references to bowels build on the meanings outlined here, integrating the anatomical and the sympathetic to portray the bowels' capacity for collectivity. Her *Journals* depict how the bowels — and bowel disturbances — mediate the relationship between bodies and the natural world. Her focus on the bowels also recalibrates gender divisions. While thinking about her literary contributions and biography in the context of gender has been productive, from reading Dorothy — and, by extension, William and Coleridge — through the ambiguously gendered space of the bowels offers a different perspective. In contrast to some other body parts and organs, which were more explicitly gendered, Romantic-era medical writers did not dispute the anatomical similarity of male and female viscera, although they tended to acknowledge that women might have more delicate digestive systems.[19] Dorothy's *Journals*

[19] For example, Thomas Trotter notes: "As the dyspeptic symptoms which attend gout, are so much alike in both sexes, making allowance for the greater sensibility of the female, they strongly support the idea, that the chylopoeietic [*sic*] viscera are the *original seat* of this disease." Trotter reasons that, given the similarity of gout-related dyspepsia in men and women, it must be caused by a system men and women

focus on the ungendered quality of the alimentary canal, as she repeatedly documents the interconnected guts — male and female — of Dove Cottage.

A Sociability of the Bowels

In the Wordsworths' small home at Grasmere, community does not often take shape around the table. "Feasting" occurs only once in the *Journals*, on an occasion when Dorothy and Coleridge continued their walk and "left William sitting on the stones feasting with silence" (90). It reads like a now tired Romantic trope: William the poet — who would celebrate "a mighty mind /…that feeds upon infinity" — is portrayed here as finding the greatest nutritional benefit in solitary quiet.[20] References to non-transcendental forms of nourishment most often appear when Dorothy either notes what she baked, the fruits and vegetables they grow in their garden, or the meals she makes and feeds to others, primarily William or Coleridge. In other words, these references tend to emphasize Dorothy's domestic labor. Many scholars have noted the ways in which Dorothy often served as William's drudge, as well as the gendered division of the siblings' labor, and the relative values placed on poetic composition and household work.[21] Yet Dorothy's *Journals* also document a strange, relatively egalitarian if also uneasy sociability, one

share in common: the chyle-producing digestive system. Trotter, *A View of the Nervous Temperament*, 171.

[20] William Wordsworth, "The Prelude [1805]," in *William Wordsworth: Selected Poems*, ed. Stephen Gill (New York: Penguin, 2004), 13: 69-70.

[21] Both Alan Liu and Kurt Heinzelman address this topic in detail, although each complicates the narrative. According to Liu, Dorothy asserts her subjectivity by writing in a way that captures the "autobiographical present;" for Liu, "the true idiom of Dorothy's autobiography lies not in the finished writing on the page so much as in the laborious motions of hand, body, and heart behind the writing" (116). Heinzelman explores how William and Dorothy jointly theorized a kind of domesticity that "was a result of…mutual labor" (52). Alan Liu, "On the Autobiographical Present: Dorothy Wordsworth's 'Grasmere Journals'," *Criticism* 26, no. 3 (1984), 116; Kurt Heinzelman, "The Cult of Domesticity: Dorothy and William Wordsworth at Grasmere," in *Romanticism and Feminism*, ed. Anne K. Mellor (Bloomington and Indianapolis Indiana University Press, 1988).

based on the less-gendered space of the bowels. This is exemplified in her rare documenting of a shared meal, one that significantly takes place outside of the home: "the ashes glittering spears with their upright stems — the hips[22] very beautiful, & so good!! & dear Coleridge — I ate twenty for thee when I was by myself. I came home first — they walked too slow for me" (48). Eating "for" Coleridge and "by myself," Dorothy acts as a lonely mouth and stomach for two, creating a connection with Coleridge via the alimentary canal. Here, and elsewhere, Dorothy constructs a different sort of being, a being premised not on individual bodies but instead on linked body parts. In these instances, there is a sense that the individual bodies that inhabit or visit Dove Cottage somehow merge together, and that, as Burke suggests in *Reflections*, "our bowels" have a collective force. This runs counter to the idea that one's bowels are fundamentally one's own, that going to the bathroom is, as Tobias Smollett puts it in his translation of *Don Quixote*, "that which could not be performed by proxy."[23]

The shadow of Coleridge's dejection and his related ill health looms over the *Journals*, especially in 1801 and 1802, which keep scrupulous track of his many ups and downs. Coleridge had moved to nearby Keswick in 1800; either he or the Wordsworths would make the roughly 12-mile walk to visit each other with some regularity, and would write to each other with even greater frequency. Instances in which Coleridge "did not look very well" and the number of times he sends the Wordsworth siblings a distressing letter constitute a running theme in the *Journals* (see, for example: 37, 45, 63, 100). While Dorothy does not always document the particular ways in which Coleridge is ailing, she tends to be specific when recording digestive

[22] Dorothy is referring to the berries that grow on ash trees (in late autumn) after they are done flowering.

[23] Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *The History and Adventures of the Renowned Don Quixote*, trans. Tobias Smollett (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2003), 132.

troubles. Coleridge's "melancholy letters," which arrive on December 21, 1801, reporting that "he had been very ill in his bowels" introduce the specter of disordered digestion to the *Journals* (50).[24] Notably, this is the first entry that uses the word "bowels." Coleridge's gastrointestinal problems have a collective force, affecting both Dorothy and William. "We were made very unhappy," she writes. Here, both meanings of the word "bowels" seem to be invoked. On the one hand, Coleridge is physically suffering from severe gastrointestinal distress, as he did for much of his life. This distress was both treated with, and exacerbated by, his addiction to opiates. On the other hand, the association of "bowels" with emotion is also at play. Coleridge's gut troubles connote emotional troubles on his behalf, and explicitly cause emotional distress in the Wordsworth siblings. Noting that these letters arrive on "the shortest day" Dorothy also calls to mind the particular darkness associated with the Winter Solstice, and with melancholy as a humoral disorder that shared "a commonality [with] all dark things."[25] Humoral medicine held that an excess of black bile caused melancholy; many eighteenth-century medical writers reinforced the long-held belief associating stomach disorders with melancholy.[26]

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[24] George Rousseau demonstrates that Coleridge had a decades-long fascination with gut and his many digestive difficulties. He argues that Coleridge focused on, and talked about his gut in such detail in part because of the eighteenth-century medical theorization of the connection between hypochondriasis and stomach problems, and the related connection between hypochondriasis and genius. In Rousseau's reading, Coleridge saw "his defective gut [as] the proof of his genius and vice-versa." Rousseau, "Coleridge's Dreaming Gut," 113.

[25] Jennifer Radden, *Moody Minds Distempered: Essays on Melancholy and Depression* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 8.

[26] The Scottish physician Alexander Crichton posited that black bile aggravated "diseases of the abdominal viscera, most especially those of the stomach and liver," which in turn "occasion feelings of anxiety, and the feelings of anxiety occasion dejection of mind," which "aggravate[s] the primary complaint" (192). Alexander Crichton, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Origin of Mental Derangement. Comprehending a Concise System of the Physiology and Pathology of the Human Mind. And a History of the Passions and Their Effects*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (London: T. Caddell, W. Davies, 1798).

Even if William is apparently spared from the full contaminating force of Coleridge's melancholy indigestion, this joining of suffering body parts occurs in a different way with Dorothy and William. On November 4, 1800, she writes: "Wm sadly tired, threatenings of the piles" (30). The threatenings actualize a day later: "I made tea for William. Piles" (31). In both cases, these fragments end Dorothy's journal entry for the day. Although she concludes on the definitive note of "piles," it is unclear *who* actually suffers from them. Piles (hemorrhoids), which are often a side effect of constipation, are noted here with a brevity that itself reads as occluded. Lucy Newlyn argues that Dorothy "deliberately" developed her style, and that "identity is everywhere implicit in her writing," reflected particularly in her "idiosyncrasies of phrasing, syntax, and rhythm," whose key formal features include "the removal of personal pronouns" and "compressed syntax," both of which are clearly on display in the above entries.[27] Yet, this characteristic style paradoxically makes it difficult to discern the subject. Dorothy's writing does reveal an identity here, but it is a collective one.[28] With its pronoun-eliminating elision of William, Dorothy, and piles, Dorothy's entry documents the inclusivity of identity as constructed via the bowels.

Dorothy's writing resists easy analysis, in part because, as Pamela Woof observes, "there are no rules and structures for diary writing, as there are not for living: we take the fast and slow of it as it comes."[29] On days when Dorothy had more time to write, her entries tended to be

[27] Newlyn, "Dorothy Wordsworth's Experimental Style," 326, 28.

[28] Despite its suggestive subtitle, Newlyn's joint biography, pays little attention to the corporeal, although it helpfully attends to "the communal nature of their creative process" (xiii). Lucy Newlyn, *William and Dorothy Wordsworth: 'All in Each Other'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[29] Pamela Woof, "Introduction," in *The Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), ix.

longer and more narrative; when she had less time to herself, she wrote brief, impressionistic fragments or jotted down matter-of-fact notes about the quotidian events of the day.[30] Although written in prose, Dorothy's entries often take on a poetic quality, as others have noted, Newlyn and Woof most extensively.[31] Newlyn offers perhaps the most nuanced consideration of Dorothy's prose style, analyzing the "wide range of metrical patterns' with which "Dorothy experiments," in her journals, which are "responsive to the changing rhythms of the day."[32] For Newlyn, it is "through rhythm" that the *Journals* "kni[t] the poetic intensities of life into the sequential, prosaic ordinariness of living."[33]

But Dorothy's attentiveness to the digestive difficulties of Dove Cottage seems peculiar even by the relatively experimental standards of life writing. As Coleridge continues to send letters about his bowel troubles, they not only cause unhappiness but also viscerally affect Dorothy. Their bowels seem to be in sympathy with each other. A few days later, the siblings travel to Keswick to stay with Coleridge, where Dorothy notes: "We all went weary to bed. My Bowels very bad" (53). On February 22, 1802, she learns from Coleridge's letter that he "had another attack in his Bowels;" three days later, on February 25, "I was very bad in my Bowels" (71, 72). A few months later, on May 19, after Dorothy and Coleridge have gone on a walk together, she records: "Coleridge's Bowels bad, mine also" (101). Somehow their physical proximity, and the "melancholy" that she has noted (in journal entries both several days before

[30] "The writing…had to be fitted into corners of the day…when Wordsworth was away, and often when he was asleep…entries were more sustained, and sentences longer" (Ibid., xviii).

[31] See, especially: Pamela Woof, "Dorothy Wordsworth, Writer," *The Wordsworth Circle* 17, no. 2 (1986).

[32] Newlyn, "Dorothy Wordsworth's Experimental Style," 344, 45.

[33] Ibid., 347.

and after May 19) is plaguing Coleridge, combines to affect Dorothy on a gut level (100, 101). And yet Dorothy does not seem aware of anything potentially humorous about these sympathetic bowels. Instead, she remains steadfastly focused on the doleful force of Coleridge's dyspepsia, which has a stylistic force that transcends the somatic, even as it derives from it. At a later point, on May 18, 1802, when Coleridge is staying with the Wordsworth siblings, Dorothy records: "Terribly cold. Coleridge not well. Froude called, Wilkinsons called, I not well. C & I walked in the evening in the Garden warmer in the evening wrote to M & S" (100). Here, it is unclear whether Dorothy's being "not well" occurs independent of Coleridge or in sympathy with him, but the odd parallelism of the phrasing suggests that the force of his being "not well" influences Dorothy on a syntactical level, and likely a corporeal level.

The way in which Coleridge's bowel pain induces emotional pain in Dorothy and William introduces the idea of emotional contamination, a concept that develops and merges with a sense of physical contamination over the course of the *Journals*. Until the later nineteenth century, the theory of "contamination" rather than "contagion" informed Western understanding of disease transmission, as Alan Bewell explains: "it was believed that people became sick, either directly or indirectly, from the noxious air or *miasmas* produced by the places where they had lived."[34] As I will address in more detail in a moment, Coleridge's contaminating melancholy seems to reverse this equation, as the suffering it induces in Dorothy and William extends outwards, moving beyond the human scale to the animate and inanimate world. This idea about the contaminating force of disease finds similar expression in David Hume's theory of how feelings are transmitted between people. In *A Treatise of Human Nature*, he writes: "The passions are so contagious, that they pass with the greatest facility from one person to another,

[34] Bewell, *Romanticism and Colonial Disease*, 30.

and produce correspondent movements in all human breasts."[35] Given the bowels' dual status as a physical organ and the seat of compassion, they stand at the intersection, as it were, between theories of physical contagion and emotional transmission. The early nineteenth-century physician Thomas Trotter, in fact, takes issue with the phrase "'*dying of a broken heart*,'" and implies that a broken stomach is more to blame: "such afflictions of mind commonly, sooner or later, produce some disease of the nervous system, which quickly draws into consent the digestive organs, and others of equally acute sensibility. Hence, a certain hue of the countenance is said to mark melancholy and despair, which is brought on by vitiated digestion, and imperfect assimilation of the food."[36]

Dorothy's writing reveals her attentiveness to the effects of this visceral melancholy, which she captures in both form and subject, documenting how it reverberates in the wider world. She attends to the events of her days in a way that reads as both deliberate and lateral. In the May 18 entry quoted above, she moves from the temperature, to illness, to calls, to illness, to the joint sufferers of that illness communing in the Dove Cottage garden, to the change in temperature, and finally to a written note of other writing she has done. In this movement across subjects, Dorothy's writing has a leveling effect, depicting each aspect of her day as equal to the others. Dorothy is not ideologically invested in the radical idea of leveling. In terms of form, however, her *Journals* place all events on an equal footing.

The day after Dorothy had recorded Coleridge's "melancholy letters" that arrived on the Winter Solstice, she and William apparently received more bad news about their friend's

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[35] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature: Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects. ... . Of the Understanding*, ed. Eighteenth Century Collections Online, 3 vols., vol. 3 (London: John Noon, 1739), 254.

[36] Trotter, *A View of the Nervous Temperament,* 87-8.

suffering body. Although Dorothy's entries vary in length, this one is particularly long, and it circles back to digestive concerns in various ways:

> Wm & I went to Rydale for letters…We had a melancholy letter from C, for he had been very ill, tho' he was better when he wrote. We walked home almost without speaking…We stopped a long time in going to watch a little bird with a salmon colored breast…pecking the scattered Dung upon the road – it began to peck at the distance of 4 yards from us & advanced nearer & nearer till it came within a length of Wm's stick without any apparent fear of us. (50-1)

The bowels — and their after-products — remain on the minds of both Dorothy and William, as does the sadness they bring with them. Seemingly unable to communicate after reading yet another "melancholy letter" from Coleridge, William and Dorothy are, for "a long time," drawn to the little bird who seems unaware of, or unbothered by, their presence and their sorrow, as it focuses on its task of "pecking the scattered Dung upon the road." The unhappiness and its associations with the (in)digestive process linger. Although we cannot know exactly what bowel troubles Coleridge was suffering from at the time as the letters Dorothy references have been lost or destroyed, he seemed to vacillate between diarrhea and constipation. In either case, the "scattered Dung upon the road," likely the product of horses or cattle, offers a particularly literal, palpable reminder of Coleridge's letters and their content. Bogged down by the thought of Coleridge's disorderly gut, Dorothy and William seem incapable of maintaining their home-directed forward motion, and powerless to do anything but simply observe the bird. Yet Dorothy also suggests that the brightly colored, fearless bird finds the dung's presence positive, rather than a nuisance, as it would likely appear to human pedestrians. Indeed, in noting that the bird is "pecking the scattered dung" Dorothy also inserts a sense of hope, considering the far end of the digestive tract as she documents the bird's ability to extract nutrition — however minimal — from waste. Unable to communicate in words, Dorothy and William nevertheless participate in a silent, if strange, bodily communion, which incorporates them in with both bird and dung.

As she chronicles the day, Dorothy continues to home in on digestive themes. Later in the same entry, Dorothy returns home where she and William's fiancée, Mary, "were very sad about Coleridge" while "Wm walked further. When he came home he cleared a path to the necessary – called me out to see it but before we got there a whole housetop full of snow had fallen from the roof upon the path & it echoed in the ground beneath like a dull beating upon it" (50). William's thwarted attempt to clear a path to the necessary seems a comic climax, or "the emblem of the day so far," as Alan Liu observes. Liu argues that Dorothy's *Journals* construct a narrative of labor attentive to cleansing and purgation; in his reading, Dorothy aspires to unblocking in order "to allow the rites of cleanliness."[37] Rather than reading the re-blocked path to the outhouse as representative of the dirt Dorothy wishes to purge, I want to consider the significance of William being the one who attempts to unblock the path and finds himself almost instantaneously defeated by nature. In contrast to the earlier scene in which he and Dorothy were content to linger in their unhappiness over Coleridge by halting to observe the dung-pecking bird, William tries to assert his dominance over this blockage. Dorothy represents the natural repercussions as disproportionate. William's path is not only re-blocked, but re-blocked with an excess of what seems to have been there before, by "a whole housetop full of snow." The indifferent forces of nature have the last word — or the last sound, at least — as they "echoed in the ground beneath." The echoing "ground beneath" calls to mind the bowels of the earth, and elides the necessary house with its earthly host.

Sociable Waste

While Dorothy represents her brother's path-clearing project as attempting to defeat the indigestive themes that have permeated their day, she is also documenting a literal infrastructural

[37] Liu, "On the Autobiographical Present: Dorothy Wordsworth's 'Grasmere Journals'," 129.

conundrum. In our era of individual flush toilets, it can be difficult to conceive of earlier forms of bathroom infrastructure, and the way a privy could represent an unexpected space of sociability. Descriptions and pictures of privies before the advent of indoor plumbing offer evidence that toilet matters were a somewhat less isolated function than they became over the course of the nineteenth century in middle-class British households. Toilet seats "often filled the entire back wall of the privy, and frequently contained more than one hole…occasionally three or more holes were provided…using a privy was not necessarily a solitary activity."[38] Photographs of surviving privies further support this claim, depicting English privies built during the long eighteenth century with capacities ranging from two to six seats.[39] Although often physically removed from the home proper, privies offered a domestic space of their own, one with the potential for companionship — as the existence of multi-hole privies suggests — and for sociability via print culture. According to David Eveleigh, "printed material, verses, or pictures sometimes decorated the walls" of privies.[40] At the same time that privies offered a space for literary consumption, they also prompted literary anxieties, as evidenced in the trope of the book-as-toilet paper.[41] Ronald H. Blumer explains that "as books became commonplace, many had a second life in the chamber pots of Europe and America," especially "printed ephemera such as pamphlets and newspapers…in 1753, the printer J. Lewis decided to go with

[38] David Eveleigh, *Bogs, Baths, and Basins: The Story of Domestic Sanitation* (Stroud: Sutton, 2003), 8.

[39] Lucinda Lambton, *Temples of Convenience & Chambers of Delight* (Stroud: The History Press, 2007), figs. 10-11, 13, 17-18.

[40] Eveleigh, *Bogs, Baths, and Basins: The Story of Domestic Sanitation*, 6.

[41] Specially made toilet paper first appeared in the second half of the nineteenth century: "Gayety's Medicated Paper Co. started business in America in 1857. The first British patent for toilet paper was taken out by F. Feichtinger in 1863 and specified the use of unsized paper treated with a mixture of boiled willow bar, 'china bark' and gall nuts…The Scott Paper co. of Philadelphia is credited with invented rolled toilet tissue in 1879" (Eveleigh 136).

the flow and published a work of doggerel verse in the form of a loosely bound folio entitled, *Bum-Fodder for the Ladies: a Poem upon soft paper.*"[42]

Yet, at the same time the term "bowels" was narrowing in favor of its modern anatomical meaning, thereby losing their connotation of collectivity, communal non-flushing privies were slowly being replaced by private single-unit flush toilets. There are few histories of the toilet in the West, and those that exist tend to focus on the relatively recent, and better documented, history of the flush toilet. These histories inevitably begin with Sir John Harington, godson to Queen Elizabeth I. In the early 1590s, Harington conceived of a rudimentary water closet, which he subsequently had "constructed and installed in his fine manor house at Kelston."[43] Although Harington's is presented as England's seminal flush toilet project, "it appears very likely that attempts to flush closets with water had been tried before," according to Eveleigh.[44] In 1596, Harington published *A New Discourse of a Stale Subject*: *Called the Metamorphosis of Ajax,* "a complex blend of scatological comedy, moral reflection, and social satire," that also included instructions on how to assemble a water closet like his, along with explanatory diagrams.[45] For Harington, the material reality of his invention, as well as "his repeated insistence on its usefulness in poor cottages, stately houses, or the goodliest palaces of the realm" also functioned as a guiding metaphor for his Rabelaisian political critique, which took aim at some of Elizabeth

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[42] Ronald H. Blumer, *Wiped: The Curious History of Toilet Paper* (New York: Middlemarch Media Press, 2013), 110.

[43] Elizabeth Story Donno, "Introduction," in *Sir John Harington's a New Discourse of a Stale Subject, Called the Metamorphosis of Ajax*, ed. Elizabeth Story Donno (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1962), 18.

[44] Eveleigh, Bogs, Baths, and Basins: The Story of Domestic Sanitation, 20.

[45] Jason Scott-Warren, "Harington, Sir John (Bap. 1560, D. 1612)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. and Brian Harrison Matthew (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), np.

I's favored courtiers, among other prominent figures.[46] The concluding lines of his *Metamorphosis* — "To keepe your houses sweete, cleanse privie vaults, / To keepe your soules as sweete, mend privie faults" — play on the dual meaning of "privie," and underscore how privies can function simultaneously as literal infrastructure and rhetorical figure.

Unsurprisingly, the rise of the flush toilet in England beyond the homes of monarchs and courtiers neatly maps onto the rise of England's middle class, and its emphasis on the value of the private, contained liberal subject; the flush toilet was already a feature in wealthier homes by the time Dorothy was writing her *Journals*.[47] While privies typically contained more than one hole, the flush toilet always seems to have been conceived as a single unit, likely due to the demands of plumbing, and early difficulties in having adequate water available to flush out a toilet. Although "piped mains water had been introduced in some cities…supplies were unreliable," flowing for only a couple hours, a few days a week at best.[48] As the flush toilet gained popularity, it follows that using the toilet became an increasingly solitary experience. Norbert Elias has famously traced the longer arc of this civilizing process, which significantly

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[46] Donno, "Introduction," 19.

[47] While the earlier eighteenth century witnessed some innovations in flush toilet design, the device rapidly grew in popularity during the final third of the century. In 1775, Alexander Cummings had filed a patent for a more effective flush toilet. Three years later, Joseph Bramah patented an improved version of Cummings's invention, and set the standard for future water closets; his was "the first water closet to enjoy major commercial success" (Eveleigh 26). Eveleigh writes that, "by the early 1800s, the manufacture of water closets…was established in most large towns and cities," which occurred at the same time as a building boom, when "the rate of house building grew steadily in the early decades of the nineteenth century reaching a peak in the 1820s…These late Georgian town houses were probably the first major category of housing to have water closets as more or less a standard fitting" (29-30). In an 1815 biographical notice about Bramah, Dr. William Cullen Brown celebrates Bramah's "very useful invention…one which ought to ensure to its author the gratitude of every individual in these realms by whom *personal cleanliness* (the boast of Englishmen), comfort, and health, are held to be, as they unquestionably are, objects of the first consideration." William Cullen Brown, "Biographical Memoir of Mr. Joseph Bramah," *The New Monthly Magazine* April 1 1815.

[48] Munroe Blair, *Ceramic Water Closets* (London: Shire Publications, 2008), 5.

included "changes in attitudes towards the natural functions."[49] Quoting from a variety of early modern and eighteenth-century conduct books, Elias outlines an increasing trend towards privatized bathroom activity, and corresponding levels of shame in even discussing the acts.[50] Yet he also acknowledges that the continued publication of manuals including advice for privy-related behaviors, "make it apparent how slowly the real process of suppressing these functions from social life took place."[51]

In the Wordsworths' time, Mary Wollstonecraft's concerns about hygiene and excessive female intimacy in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* make this clear. In addition to endorsing "frequent ablutions," Wollstonecraft adds that "girls ought to be taught to wash and dress alone, without any distinction of rank; and if custom should make them require some little assistance, let them not require it till that part of the business is over which ought never to be done before a fellow-creature; because it is an insult to the majesty of human nature."[52] For Paul Youngquist, "Wollstonecraft betrays material fear here not merely of certain bodily functions but more importantly of the collective knowledge they occasion and the relationships that result,"

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[49] Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, revised ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 109.

[50] As Elias notes, the development of infrastructure and the privatization of bodily habits experienced something of a symbiotic relationship: "But this weeding out of the natural functions from public life, and the corresponding regulation or molding of drives, was only possible because, together with growing sensitivity, a technical apparatus was developed which solved fairly satisfactorily the problem of eliminating these functions from social life and displacing them behind the scenes…once, in conjunction with a general transformation of human relations, a reshaping of human needs was set in motion, the development of a technical apparatus corresponding to the changed standard consolidated the changing habits to an extraordinary degree. This apparatus served both the constant reproduction of the standard and its dissemination" (118-119).

[51] Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*, 116.

[52] Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, and the Wrongs of Woman, or Maria* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2007), 158.

and she particularly "fears the prospect of a carnival of this raucous body, or what would be worse, a politics of collective embodiment that affirmed rather than abjured the fetid facts of physical life."[53] If Wollstonecraft indeed discloses her fear of the "raucous body" and of "collective embodiment," her anxieties likely have their roots in the quotidian infrastructural realties of collectively-oriented non-flushing privies. The multi-seat privy, in other words, enabled a collectivity both literal and figurative.

For the overwhelming majority of England's population, the flush toilet remained a foreign concept well into the nineteenth century. When Dorothy records William's thwarted attempt to "clea[r] a path to the necessary," she reminds us that there is a different story to be told about less privileged privies, one that does not record the hygienic rise of the middle-class, or the triumph of English invention and innovation. Nor does it document the forward motion of sewers and their progressive connotations. Whereas sewers were larger and unidirectional, usually moving towards the nearest body of water flowing out to the ocean, the contents of rural middens could simply "be buried in trenches in gardens."[54] Thus, the midden represented a small, local motion, in which necessary waste that did move only made the small step from midden to garden. For many people in Dorothy Wordsworth's England, especially the less wealthy, the country-dwellers, or both, the story of human waste removal was one in which the waste did not get flushed away. It was a story of chamber pots and privies, and of "necessary" activities that were not as isolated or private as we might assume. Instead, both the material aftermath of eating and the space where it (often) took place enabled the formation of a different sort of being, one that was not represented by individual bodies, but instead by linked bodies and

[53] Youngquist, *Monstrosities*, 154.

[54] Eveleigh, *Bogs, Baths, and Basins: The Story of Domestic Sanitation*, 14.

body parts. Considering the privy as an extension of the digestive system, whose processes include waste as a byproduct, serves as a reminder of the ways in which bodies extend out into the wider world, creating communities with each other and their surroundings.

In *Reminiscences of Wordsworth Among the Peasantry of Westmoreland*,[55] one Grasmere local describes the amanuensis role Dorothy often played for her brother in these strangely material terms: "'Mr Wordsworth went bumming and booing about, and she, Miss Dorothy, kept close behint him, and she picked up the bits as he let 'em fall, and tak 'em down, and put 'em on paper for him.'"[56] The speaker — a former servant in the Wordsworth household — is, of course, literally describing Wordsworth's habit of walking and dictating poetry to Dorothy, his faithful transcriber; in that sense, this anecdote reinforces what has become the standard narrative about Dorothy as William's dutiful helpmeet. Yet, by referring to William's poetry as "bits" that he "let…fall," she also evokes an image of Dorothy picking up William's litter rather than his words, or perhaps even salvaging flecks of food that fly from his mouth.

Dorothy fills the *Grasmere Journals* with moments documenting her attentiveness to waste, and the melancholy sociability it enables. In her March 4, 1802 entry, which records her encounter with William's discarded "bitten apple" that opened this chapter, Dorothy forges a link with William, *and* with the material object — the apple — that is both metonymic for, and in excess of him. Dorothy's encounter with the apple is predicated on a sense of lack. In the first two sentences of an entry considerably longer than her average, she documents an unfinished breakfast, an inadequate number of pens, and a Dorothy left without her beloved brother:

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[55] These were originally published in *Transactions of the Wordsworth Society* (1882).

[56] H.D. Rawnsley, *Reminiscences of Wordsworth among the Peasantry of Westmoreland* (London: Dillon's University Bookshop, 1969), 13.

"Before we had quite finished Breakfast Calvert's man brought the horses for Wm. We had a deal to do to shave — pens to make — poems to put in order for writing, to settle the dress, pack up &c & The man came before the pens were made & he was obliged to leave me with only two" (74). With the rushed morning recorded, Dorothy shifts into what is, by this point in the *Journal*, a familiar recital of the most recent ways in which she has fulfilled her domestic duties. Then, the entry moves into the present tense as Dorothy takes stock of the world around her: "The Bees are busy — Wm. has a nice bright day — It was hard frost in the night — The Robins are singing sweetly — Now for my walk." This declaration of immediate purpose — "Now for my walk" — is quickly followed by a vow in the future tense: "I *will* be busy, I *will* look well & be well when he comes back to me." Documenting her resolution of self-maintenance, and, perhaps, of self-improvement, Dorothy links these goals to her anticipation of William's return, and to "look[ing] well & be[ing] well" for him. Despite his absence, William remains in Dorothy's mind, motivating her in her resolve not to languish away, pining for his return.

As Dorothy looks to the future, to William's return and her own progress, she comes to a full stop, wrenched back into the present — and the present tense — by William's waste. In a moment of immediacy that suggests she really has just come upon William's discarded apple core, that she is truly writing to the moment, she jots down: "O the Darling! Here is one of his bitten apples. I can hardly find it in my heart to throw it into the fire." This moment is arresting not only for Dorothy, but also for the reader. The worshipful tone of her exclamation followed by her reluctance to discard William's discarded food suggest a moment of devotion, in which Dorothy makes a relic out of William's garbage. She resists labeling the apple as unclean or worthless: "I can hardly find it in my heart to throw it into the fire." As an object Dorothy cannot find in her heart to remove from what she realizes is its incongruous location, the "bitten apple"

is neither an object of waste nor of value. An in-between object, the apple has no use but still holds meaning for Dorothy, who creates a connection with her brother via William's digesting bowels and her own sympathetic bowels. The apple itself is never mentioned again, disappearing from the text faster than it would have decayed. The anecdote about the apple remains, however, salvaged in the pages of what were themselves salvaged journals: each of the four surviving[57] notebooks that comprise the *Grasmere Journals* had already been partially filled with notes by William and Dorothy.

Dorothy was of course being thrifty, and making use of all available paper. Yet, in almost the last entry of the final journal, she declares: "I will take a nice Calais Book & will for the future write regularly &, if I can legibly, so much for this my resolution on Tuesday night, January 11th, 1803" (137). Instead, her habit of regular journal-keeping ends. Somehow the singularity of an unused journal seems wrong for a project that has unfolded in such communal terms. By keeping her journal in notebooks she has shared haphazardly with William, Dorothy reinscribes the messy sociability that her entries capture, and imbues these neglected, partially used notebooks with a different kind of value. As the final section of this chapter will address, Dorothy's attentiveness to waste and her salvaging impulses persist and expand in her post-*Grasmere Journals* literary production.

Fertilizing Fragments

> *A divine morning — at Breakfast Wm wrote part of an ode — Mr Olliff sent the Dung & Wm went to work in the garden we sate all day in the Orchard (83).*

This especially brief entry transitions seamlessly from William writing "part of an ode" to spreading dung in the garden. Dorothy's rhetorical construction places both productive acts on seemingly equal footing, representing the shift from nurturing a poem to fertilizing plants as a

[57] The journal documenting Dec. 23, 1800 – October 10, 1801 has never been found.

lateral one. While brother and sister then spend "all day in the Orchard," there must be a smell of "dung" in the air. At the same time, a sense of the sacred lingers: it was, after all, a "divine" morning. The day in the dung-covered garden represents the precursor and aftermath of eating; the garden is a space of food production, and one infused with nutrients derived from the byproduct of food consumption.[58] Recalling a sociability of the bowels, this messy coming-together occurs outside a convivial space, and brings to the fore an awareness that what the body excretes into the world it also takes back. In contrast to Dorothy's depiction of the contaminating force of Coleridge's melancholy bowels spreading out into the environment, this dung consecrates the garden. Both dung and poetic composition have in fact been on the mind; on March 17, Dorothy records "Mr O[lliff] met us & I went to their house he offered me manure for the garden. I went & sate with W & walked backwards & forwards in the Orchard till dinner time — he read me his poem" (78). Linking poetic with other forms of labor, Dorothy accentuates the generative, if grubby, potential of writing and gardening.

With this equalizing of poetic composition and generative waste in mind, I want to conclude with a reconsideration of what is perhaps Dorothy's best-known poem, "Floating Island at Hawkshead" (late 1820s).[59] This short lyric draws inspiration from an actual natural phenomenon observed in the Lake District's Esthwaite Water, in which a small island-like

[58] It is unclear whether the dung referenced here is from farm animals or a privy, although both Johnson's *Dictionary* and the OED connect "dung" to animal — not human — excrement. That said, "night-soil…had been used by English cultivators since at least medieval times, and such usage was reinforced by the study of classical authority which enthusiastically recommend the 'residue of human banquets as one of the best manures.'" Donald Woodward, "'An Essay on Manures': Changing Attitudes to Fertilization in England, 1500-1800," in *English Rural Society, 1500-1800: Essays in Honour of Joan Thirsk*, ed. John Chartres and David Hey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 273.

[59] Dorothy Wordsworth, "Floating Island at Hawkshead, an Incident in the Schemes of Nature [1820s]," in *Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. Susan M. Levin (New York: Longman, 2009).

formation would periodically appear and disappear.[60] In Dorothy's poem, the speaker begins with a grand address, a first stanza celebrating how "Harmonious Powers with Nature work / On sky, earth, river, lake, and sea / Sunshine and storm, whirlwind and breeze / All in one duteous task agree" (1-4). After this sweeping celebration of the vast but seemingly unified powers of nature, the speaker focuses on a specific, minuscule "slip of earth" — a piece torn asunder from a larger whole — that comprises the "peopled *world*" of the titular floating island, an entity that flourishes and then disappears. The poem somewhat hopefully concludes that it leaves behind "lost fragments" that "shall remain / To fertilize some other ground" (27-8).

Given the poem's subtitle in manuscript version, "An Incident in the Schemes of Nature," and its subject matter, scholars such as Margaret Homans have drawn on the long-standing connection between the natural and the feminine to read the poem in gendered terms. I would argue that Dorothy complicates such a reading by emphasizing the fertilizing potential of the island.[61] Yet, the critical tendency has been to read the poem as a meditation on female selfhood and subjectivity, either one that dissolves, that negotiates its own control, or that becomes collective (or at least moves beyond the individual self).[62] Dorothy is often reductively equated with the idea of a feminine nature — by William, Coleridge, DeQuincey, and modern scholars. However, as I argued in the previous section, and want to keep in mind here, Dorothy's prose

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[60] The more famous Floating Island would appear in Derwent Water, near Keswick.

[61] Homans, *Women Writers and Poetic Identity: Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Bronte and Emily Dickinson*, 84-86.

[62] See, especially: Jill Ehnnen, "Writing against, Writing Through: Subjectivity, Vocation, and Authorship in the Work of Dorothy Wordsworth," *South Atlantic Review* 64, no. 1 (1999): 83-5; Susan J. Wolfson, "Individual in Community: Dorothy Wordsworth in Conversation with William," in *Romanticism and Feminism*, ed. Anne K. Mellor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), especially 145; Mellor, "British Romanticism, Gender, and Three Women Artists," 154-7; Levin, *Dorothy Wordsworth and Romanticism*, 114; Nicola Healey, *Dorothy Wordsworth and Hartley Coleridge: The Poetics of Relationship* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 222-30.

and poetry are attuned to a different, messier kind of nature. Rather than reading the island as a metaphorical marker of identity, perception, or artistic expression, I want to explore its vexed status as a material object. What happens when we read "Floating Island at Hawkshead" from below, focusing on the "fragments" into which the island collapses, and the "glittering deep" that digests these fragments?

Multiple Romantic-era Lake District guidebooks and maps describe the material antecedent for Dorothy's "floating island," and emphasize the island's affiliation with waste. In his popular guidebook, *A Concise Description of the English Lakes*, first published in 1823, Jonathan Otley notes that although many theories have been "proposed to account for this phenomenon," he deems the most likely cause of the island's periodic appearance to be "air or gas…generated in the body of the island by decomposition of the vegetable matter of which it is formed," an explanation that evokes a bloated creature fueled by decaying vegetation, and which affiliates the island with the stomach and the digestive process.[63] William Wordsworth describes the phenomenon of the floating island in different but also unflattering terms in his revised 1835 edition of *A Guide through the District of the Lakes in the North of England*:

> It may be worth while here to mention (not as an object of beauty, but of curiosity) that there occasionally appears above the surface of Derwentwater, and always in the same place, a considerable tract of spongy ground covered with aquatic plants, which is called the Floating, but with more propriety might be named the Buoyant, Island; and, on one of the pools near the lake of Esthwaite, may sometimes be seen a mossy Islet, with trees upon it, shifting about before the wind, a *lusus naturae* frequent on the great rivers of America, and not unknown in other parts of the world.[64]

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[63] Jonathan Otley, *A Concise Description of the English Lakes, the Mountains in Their Vicinity, and the Roads by Which They May Be Visited: With Remarks on the Mineralogy and Geology of the District* (Keswick, 1823), 119.

[64] William Wordsworth, *A Guide through the District of the Lakes in the North of England: With a Description of the Scenery, &C., for the Use of Tourists and Residents. 5th Ed., with Considerable Additions* (Kendal: Hudson and Nicholson, 1835), 22.

For William, the floating island is a slimy-sounding "tract of spongy ground covered with aquatic plants" that "occasionally" emerges from the water like some creature from the deep. Noting that such phenomena occur in America and "other parts of the world," William imputes a sense of the foreign to this island. Either alluringly exotic or disturbingly other, such islands are definitely out of place in this idyllic corner of England. Bizarre and a little off-putting in William's description, the floating island is at best a *lusus naturae* or "freak of nature," but not an object of lasting value. In Dorothy's composition, however, the island becomes a waste object capable of its own poiesis or self-composition, one neither traditionally valuable nor entirely valueless.

Unlike William, who represents the island as a repetitive (albeit) freakish occurrence, the speaker of "Floating Island" initially represents the island as singular event. "Once did I see a slip of earth, / By throbbing waves long undermined, / Loosed from its hold — *how* no one knew / But all might see it float, obedient to the wind," she explains, endowing the island with a sense of the exceptional — and the precarious (5-8). In contrast to William's island, which apparently surfaces from nowhere, this island is "a slip of earth," "loosed" slowly yet violently ("by throbbing waves long undermined") from another piece of earth. This origin story evokes the opening lines of Charlotte Smith's "Beachy Head" (1807), in which the speaker bids that "Fancy should go forth, / And represent the strange and awful hour / Of vast concussion," an act of time travel and geologic time condensation undertaken to depict the separation of England "from the Continent."[65] In "Floating Island," the speaker represents herself as bearing witness to the exact moment at which the slip of earth separates, this time portraying the creation of a much smaller

[65] Charlotte Smith, "Beachy Head," in *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*, ed. Stuart Curran (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 4-6, 9.

island within the larger island of England. In evoking Smith's poem and the creation of England as an island, "Floating Island" foregrounds the role its island plays as a little England, and the speaker becomes the island's venerable Bede — or, perhaps, its Gibbon.

From the beginning of its existence, the floating island is aftermath. Anticipating the fragmented form in which the island will cease, the island also begins as a fragment, one "loosed from its hold," that "dissevered float[s] upon the Lake" (10). Yet the island also represents a kind of unity, as it becomes a flourishing microcosm that not only sustains life but also becomes a world unto itself. Despite its diminutive size, the island offers "food, shelter, safety" to trees, birds, berries, and insects alike (13). Even if this island does, as Otley argues, derive its buoyant power from decaying plant matter, it puts that waste to good use. At the same time, its use value remains entirely outside the realm of the human. The speaker and others can look at the island, but they cannot touch. Perhaps because of this, for the insects at least, the island is a place of stability. They know no other place: "There insects live their lives — and die" (15). As "a peopled *world*…in size a tiny room," it represents a space of unexpected and somewhat cramped sociability that recalls the uncomfortable sociability of the tiny rooms at Dove Cottage (16).

While it does not specify when, the poem makes clear that the threats of violence, which have lingered around the island from the beginning, will, at some point, come to pass. The speaker prophesies the island's disappearance: "Perchance when you are wandering forth / Upon some vacant sunny day / Without an object, hope, or fear / Thither your eyes may turn — the Isle is passed away" (21-24). Yet there is a final stanza, almost in excess of the poem's message, and moving beyond the previous stanzas' reliance on ocular proof. The speaker ends by intimating that the island has a less obvious but nonetheless enduring presence and worth: "Buried beneath the glittering Lake! / Its place no longer to be found, / Yet the lost fragments shall remain, / To

fertilize some other ground" (25-28). These floating island fragments and their fertilizing power are not only pleasingly alliterative, but also emphasize the potential (re)generative power of detritus, as the lake digests the fragments. Yet the poem refuses an easy celebration of the productive uses of detritus, keeping the potential of the "lost fragments" as mere potential. Although commanding that "the lost fragments *shall* remain," the speaker leaves the when and where indeterminate: "to fertilize *some other ground*" (my emphasis). Unlike William's *lusus naturae*, this floating island does not seem poised to appear periodically in the usual location. Both singular and uncertain, the island evades a regular, or even a cyclical, temporality. We do not know whether it will come again, or where it might appear. Although "Floating Island at Hawkshead" does hold out some slim generative potential, implying that fertilization will eventually occur, it ends with the "lost fragments" undetectably and decidedly "buried beneath the glittering Lake." In its temporary, uncertain state, the island is not measurably valuable to humans. Like the "bitten apple" that commenced this article, the Floating Island reminds us that Dorothy's journals and poetry place a non-numerical value on waste that, if not redemptive, is also not expulsive.

The poem's own fragments seemed to remain in Dorothy's increasingly disjointed mind. She reused five of the poem's seven stanzas, almost verbatim, in her later poem, "Lines addressed to my kind friend & medical attendant, Thomas Carr" (1836).[66] As the title suggests, the poem was written for the physician who treated Dorothy during the early years of her long decline (she would live until 1855). John Price details how, "for many years, [Dorothy] was troubled with attacks of severe abdominal pain, accompanied by fever and vomiting," and also

[66] Dorothy Wordsworth, "Lines Addressed to My Kind Friend & Medical Attendant, Thomas Carr," (Jerwood Center, 1836).

suffered from mental confusion and memory lapses.[67] The poem begins by alluding to her deteriorating health: "Five years of sickness & of pain / This weary frame has travelled oer / But God is good & once again / I rest upon a tranquil shore" (1-4). Reminiscent of the opening of "Tintern Abbey," Dorothy's poem recounts a half decade of suffering followed by a reprieve. The following two stanzas celebrate her return to "quietness of mind" after a time when she lingered on the brink of death (5). Then she transitions to a shortened, slightly altered "Floating Island," in which the island itself has gained a new level of autonomy. In the published version of "Floating Island," the speaker represents the island's formation as an act of violence: "a slip of earth / By throbbing waves long undermined, / Loosed from its hold" (5-7). In this rendering, the speaker instead sees "a slip of earth / Self-loosened from the grassy shore" (17-18). For Dorothy, revisiting and revising "Floating Island at Hawskhead" represents the proper way to celebrate her return to health. She connects her own revitalized body with an island capable of regeneration and reinvention.

Written over twenty years after the *Grasmere Journals,* "Floating Island" is, of course, a product of a different Dorothy writing in a different England. However, in closing, consider the poem in conjunction with both her *Journals* and James Gillray's striking representation of England as a bloated body defecating onto France.[68] Envisioning England as a semi-definite entity — the cartoon includes Wales riding on England's coattails, but only gestures at Scotland and Ireland — Gillray conflates England with the hearty body of the quintessentially English John Bull, although his face more closely resembles Gillray's cartoons of George III. At the time

[67] John Price, "Dorothy Wordsworth's Mental Illness," *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 91 (1998): 390.

[68] James Gillray, "The French Invasion; or John Bull, Bombarding the Bum-Boats," 1793. Hannah Humphrey.

of the print's publication (1793), the nation had, of course, recently commenced what would become a long and violent war with the French. The cartoon's subtitle, "The French Invasion; – or – John Bull bombarding the Bum-Boats" underscores the threat posed by Revolutionary France, although Gillray mocks that threat by representing an invading naval force comprised of small, unthreatening "bum-boats," defined as "a boat attending ships to retail greens, drams, &c. commonly rowed by a woman; a kind of floating chandler's shop."[69] The English defense resembles the French offense in size and shape, except with a scatological twist that clearly plays on the other meaning of "bum." Significantly, the cartoon reminds us of the various scales on which the digestive operates, indicating a correspondence between individual bodies and the nation: England's anus aligns with Portsmouth, one of its main naval bases. At the same time, the implied port city's name invokes the "mouth," at the opposite end of the alimentary canal. The mouth is the more logical orifice from which to issue what Gillray has labeled a "British Declaration." The excretory form taken by the declaration implies, however, that communication issuing from the far end of the digestive tract is more apt.

Gillray's cartoon captures some of the anxieties about English vitality articulated in a work like Thomas Trotter's *A View of the Nervous Temperament*. Trotter had warned that "nervous disorders," which he argued were closely related to the stomach, would, "if not restrained soon…inevitably sap our physical strength of constitution" and "make us an easy conquest to our invaders."[70] Whether Gillray represents the body of England as emblematic of digestive strength or indigestive breakdown is debatable. In either case, however, his vision of

[69] Francis Grose, "Bum Boat," in *A classical dictionary of the vulgar tongue* (London: S. Hooper, 1788).

[70] Trotter, *A View of the Nervous Temperament: Being a Practical Inquiry into the Increasing Prevalence, Prevention, and Treatment of Those Diseases Commonly Called Nervous, Bilious, Stomach and Liver Complaints, Indigestion, Low Spirits, Gout, &C*, xi.

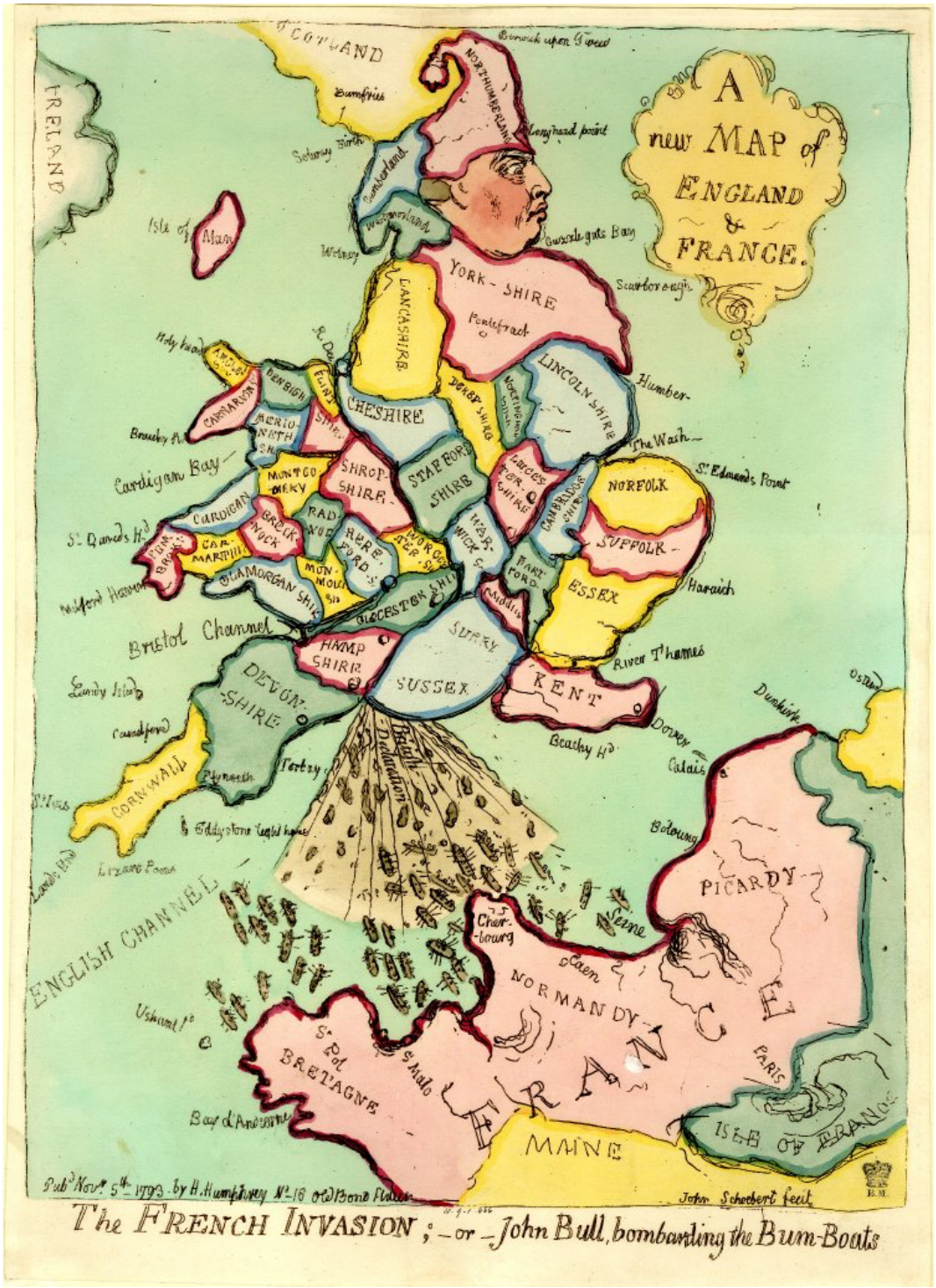

Figure 1: James Gillray, "The French Invasion; – or – John Bull bombarding the Bum-Boats" (1793)

England as island and body clearly participates in a long, easily recognizable tradition of scatological satire. “Floating Island at Hawkshead” could similarly be read through a Rabelaisian lens, but such a reading would overlook the non-satirical, non-abject, and sociable potential of the bowels that Dorothy develops in the *Journals* and continues to explore in her iterations of this poem. “Floating Island” tells a different story about self and environment from an image like Gillray’s vision of England as “John Bull bombarding the Bum-Boats.” Rather than envisioning the nation within an anthropocentric frame of the body politic, “Floating Island” offers another, very different body as metonymic for the island nation. With its precarious “peopled *world*,” the poem instead reminds the reader of the slippage between self, selves, and world, and the often melancholy sociability made possible by the bowels.

CHAPTER TWO
The Wild Irish Girl Diet

In 1780, the influential agricultural writer Arthur Young published *A Tour in Ireland, with General Observations on the Present State of the Kingdom in 1776-78*, his multi-volume tome detailing his experience traveling in Ireland and working as the agent on Lord Kingsborough's large estate in Co. Cork. The book casts Ireland as a country full of agricultural potential and little else. As Katie Trumpener explains, the *Tour*'s "scale of analysis occludes the history of human presence in the landscape, clearing it of cultural tradition and local attachments and transforming it instead into an open field of agricultural experiment."[1] Making a bold claim for the importance of agriculture, Young began by reminding his readers that they were connected to, and reliant on, their food systems:

> The minutiae of the farmer's management, low, and seemingly inconsiderable as he is, are so many links of a chain which connect him with the State. Kings ought not to forget that the splendour of majesty is derived from the sweat of industrious, and too often oppressed peasants. The rapacious conqueror who destroys, and the great statesman who protects humanity, are equally indebted for their power to the care with which the farmer cultivates his fields.[2]

If Young played up the importance of Ireland, it was primarily because he — along with other English agricultural improvers — wanted the country to increase its agricultural output, and therefore expand the role it was already playing as a key source of grain and dairy for Britain.

Young is one of many improvement-minded writers whose opinions on Ireland and its inefficiencies loom in the background of Sydney Owenson's bestselling 1806 novel, *The Wild Irish Girl: A National Tale*. Written at a transitional point in Irish political and literary history,

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[1] Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 43.

[2] Arthur Young, *A Tour in Ireland: With General Observations on the Present State of That Kingdom*, (Dublin: George Bonham, 1780). Hathitrust. v-vi.

The Wild Irish Girl counters the Youngian portrayal of Irish agriculture as the lowliest "link" on a "chain" ascending to the English "State." Unconcerned by the great chain of agricultural being that Young articulated, the novel instead focuses on the local world of peasant agriculture and the mouths it feeds, and, more importantly, the cultural production and appreciation that this agriculture sustains. The novel not only functions as an apologia for Irish culture but also powerfully demonstrates that Ireland's cultural heritage and production — as well as their hope for survival — are intimately related to Irish agriculture and diet. In a novel attentive to the significance of both "mental and bodily food," Owenson often blurs the lines between the two.[3] Although *The Wild Irish Girl* engages with familiar narratives about Irish culture, appetites, and agricultural production, it also subverts them by demonstrating how Ireland produces nourishment for bodies *and* minds.

Owenson is considered one of the progenitors — if not the founder — of the generic conventions that came to shape the relatively brief phenomenon of the "national tale," which arose at the same time as the 1800 Acts of Union, which had officially incorporated Ireland into the British empire.[4] National tales usually resemble the plot of *The Wild Irish Girl*: the male and female of a couple-in-the-making represent different nations, most often England and Ireland, and act out a tacitly politicized courtship plot allegorizing the meeting, clash, and hopefully

[3] Sydney Owenson, *The Wild Irish Girl: A National Tale* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2000), 122-3. Subsequent citations of the novel will appear in text.

[4] Ina Ferris credits Sydney Owenson with coining the term "national tale," although she acknowledges that writers such as Maria Edgeworth also helped to shape the genre (11). For Katie Trumpener, the national tale "is consolidated as a genre partly through the decision of Sydney Owenson or of Henry Colburn, her publisher, to subtitle a whole series of her novels with the generic designation 'A National Tale' or 'An Irish Tale'" and "this generic designation then continued to be used for a number of works by other authors" (fn7, 719). Ina Ferris, *The Romantic National Tale and the Question of Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Katie Trumpener, "National Character, Nationalist Plots: National Tale and Historical Novel in the Age of *Waverley*, 1806-1830," *ELH* 60, no. 3 (1993).

happy union of their different cultures and religious denominations.[5] *The Wild Irish Girl,* the first of Owenson's national tales, is an epistolary novel narrated by Horatio M., the younger son of an absentee Anglo-Irish peer, who is banished to his father's estate on the west coast of Ireland as a punishment for his dissipated London life. The estate, in the wilds of Connaught, had been bloodily won by Horatio's ancestors in the time of Cromwell; the descendent of the former owners, the Prince of Inismore, lives nearby in a crumbling castle with his daughter, Glorvina, who is part Rousseauvian "unspoiled and natural woman," part learned scholar, and part Irish apologist.[6] Although he has been sent to Ireland in order to devote himself to the study of English law in preparation for his assigned legal career, Horatio instead insinuates himself into the Prince's household by posing as a traveling artist. There, instead of instructing Glorvina in art, he ends up being the sole participant in an impromptu remedial course on Irish literature, language, and culture, led by Glorvina, with assistance by Father John, the family's devoted Catholic priest, and occasional input from the Prince.

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[5] Joep Leersen reads the ending of the novel as genuinely happy, an example of "a harmonious union in the bonds of wedlock…held up as an example for the political relationship between the two countries: old grievances should be forgotten, worn-out prejudices should be abandoned and England and Ireland should co-operate in a happy, loving partnership" (54). Reading Owenson's novel against Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent*, Thomas Tracy argues that Owenson "reimagines union as the comic resolution to her narrative, encoded in the egalitarian marriage of the English hero and the Gaelic Irish heroine" (83). That said, many readers of *The Wild Irish Girl* remain skeptical about the degree of optimism with which we are supposed to read the projected marriage between Glorvina and Horatio at the novel's end. Claire Connolly, for example, argues that "neither the romantic relationship at the center of *The Wild Irish Girl* nor the Act of Union itself can be assimilated to a single reading. Love and marriage do not necessarily equate to reconciliation or submission, and may mean both more and less than partnership. Union had been rapidly succeeded by Robert Emmet's rebellion in 1803, and so by 1806 had already proved far from harmonious" (xxvi). Joep Leersen, *Remembrance and Imagination: Patterns in the Historical and Literary Representation of Ireland in the Nineteenth Century* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996); Thomas Tracy, "The Mild Irish Girl: Domesticating the National Tale," *Éire-Ireland* 39, no. 1&2 (2004); Claire Connolly, "Introduction: The Politics of Love in *the Wild Irish Girl*," in *The Wild Irish Girl: A National Tale*, ed. Claire Connolly and Stephen Copley (London: Pickering & Chatto 2000).

[6] Kathryn Kirkpatrick, "Introduction," in *The Wild Irish Girl* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), xi.

Horatio's previous life in the capital of the British Empire had been one of bad appetites that literally sickened him and landed him in debtor's prison after being sued for criminal conversation. In a letter to his silent interlocutor, J.D., Horatio describes how, "my taste impoverished by a vicious indulgence, my senses palled by repletion, my heart chill and unawakened, every appetite depraved and pampered into satiety, I fled from myself, as the object of my own utter contempt and detestation, and found a transient pleasurable inebriety in the well-practiced blandishments of Lady C –" (8). In Ireland, Horatio's education in all things "Milesian," a term the novel favors because it connects the Irish to an exalted Judeo-Christian pseudo-genealogy,[7] reinvigorates his body and mind. Upending stereotypical expectations about Irish excess and English restraint, Owenson represents Horatio's Irish immersion disciplining his profligate body, suggesting that what English guts truly need is an Irish cleanse. Yet *The Wild Irish Girl* is in many ways an undisciplined, excessive novel, one with extensive yet often confusing references to tastes and appetites deployed in a dizzying variety of ways; Horatio's convoluted litany of his bad London appetites is a representative example. This chapter cannot dwell on every instance in which the novel itself uses alimentary language. This is, after all, a text in which "taste" appears forty-one times, "delicious," twenty-one times, and variations on

[7] When characters in *The Wild Irish Girl* refer to "Milesians," they are referring to Irish origin legends first assembled in the *Leabhar Gabhála* (late eleventh century), and largely created by monks whose "primary purpose was not to collect native traditions as such, but to find a place for Ireland in the biblical history of the world," by tracing the journal of the mythical Milesians — ostensible descendants of Noah — from Spain to Ireland (15). An English translation of Geoffrey Keating's *Foras Feasa ar ´Eirinn* (seventeenth century), which was largely based on the *Leabhar Gabhàla,* was published in English in 1723 (21). Fueling — and fueled by — the growing antiquarian interest in national origins, this revival of Milesian legend was particularly attractive to native Irish who had been doubly dispossessed in the seventeenth century (first by James I's Ulster plantation project and then by Oliver Cromwell's bloody conquest), as these legends "supported the claim of a great pre-colonial golden age" and "emphasized the independence of Ireland from Britain at all periods prior to the twelfth century when the first phase of English colonization took place" (5, 14). Clare O'Halloran, *Golden Ages and Barbarous Nations: Antiquarian Debate and Cultural Politics in Ireland, C. 1750-1800* (Cork: Cork Univeristy Press, 2004).

"nourish" and "nutriment" occur twelve. These words often appear in a haphazard fashion, frustrating any attempt to fully map how and why they get deployed. Yet the frequency of their appearance makes it impossible to overlook how appetitive themes permeate the novel. As this chapter will address, *The Wild Irish Girl* often uses its unruly alimentary lexicon to force a confrontation with clichés about Irish appetites, hunger, and taste.

According to Denise Gigante, the development over the eighteenth century of an aesthetics and vocabulary of taste "became the most vivid strand of a complex civilizing process in which individuals were taught to regulate themselves, and their motivating appetites, from within."[8] Owenson represents an entry in an archive of Romantic-era literary explorations of "taste" that is different from the one Gigante examines, but equally important. Drawing on the language of taste in a way that can come across as far from regulated, Owenson nevertheless uses this vocabulary in service of portraying Ireland as a place of good tastes. Although reviewers at the time found much to criticize in *The Wild Irish Girl*'s seemingly radical sensibilities, they especially focused on its linguistic excesses. As an anonymous reviewer in the *Literary Review* declared: "If the fable of this novel appear somewhat extraordinary, the language will perhaps be allowed to be much more so. Often as we have been obliged to censure certain female writers for the liberties they take with the English language, in what they think *fine* writing, we must say that Miss Owenson outstrips them all in her approaches to the bombast."[9]

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[8] Gigante, *Taste: A Literary History*, 7.

[9] Jacqueline E. Belanger, *Critical Receptions: Sydney Owenson, Lady Morgan* (Bethesda: Academica Press, 2007), 88. In *The Book of the Boudoir*, Owenson describes her interaction with the actor John Kemble, who after "reading, with his deep, emphatic voice, one of the most-high flown of" her novel's "passages…paused, and…said, 'Little girl, why did you write such nonsence? and where did you get all these d——d hard words?' Thus taken by surprise, and 'smarting with my wounds' of mortified authorship, I answered, unwittingly and witlessly, the truth: 'Sir, I wrote as well as I could, and I got the

To what extent Owenson is in control of her "bombast" remains unclear. That the novel is almost entirely voiced by Horatio — both English overlord and interloper, and prone to making uninformed and derogatory assumptions about Irish people and every aspect of their lives and culture — makes it more perplexing. It can be difficult to discern when the novel is in agreement with Horatio and when it is satirizing him, both within the text and the paratext, as the novel also includes extensive footnotes. Written in the voice of an anonymous editor, these footnotes expand on and reinforce the diegetic lessons on Irish history and cultural production while also poking fun at Horatio's assumptions and prejudices. In contrast to the lengthy footnotes and "glossary" of Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent*,[10] which satirize the antiquarian craze for footnotes and mock the Irish as prone to laziness and drunkenness, Owenson's even lengthier footnotes celebrate Irish cultural production and express indignation at Irish suffering. Intently focused on the Irish experience as one of colonial subjects under English occupation, Owenson's novel insists on the value of the Irish people and their cultural production in the era in which she was writing.[11]

For *The Wild Irish Girl* is not just a travelogue or Irish apologia masquerading as a novel, as some have accused it of being, but a nuanced examination of the way Irish culture and agriculture are mutually sustaining — and of the different kinds of nourishment both provide.

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hard words out of Johnson's dictionary.'" *The Book of the Boudoir*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (London: Henry Colburn, 1829), 111-12.

[10] Maria Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent [1800]* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[11] Confounding stereotypes of Irish backwardness and barbarism that had become a commonplace in the stadial discourse of the time, Owenson also plays with temporality in the novel. As Kevin Whelan argues, "the 'native Irish' suddenly become coeval, co-present, and co-subjects," and Owenson "refuses the temporal distancing of allochronic discourse by establishing the importance of simultaneous cultural time" "Foreword," in *The Wild Irish Girl: A National Tale*, ed. Claire Connolly and Stephen Copley (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2000), xv, xvi..

The shifting meaning of "culture" that Raymond Williams argues occurred over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries can be traced in the novel. Williams explains that "Culture…in all its early uses was a noun of process: the tending *of* something, basically crops or animals."[12]According to Williams, "**culture** as an independent noun, an abstract process or the product of such a process, is not important before [the late eighteenth century] and is not common before [the middle of the nineteenth century]. But the early stages of this development were not sudden" and were starting to be associated with "a general social process" which "acquired definite class associations though **cultivation** and **cultivated** were more commonly used for this."[13] While *The Wild Irish Girl* uses "cultivation" and "cultivated" to refer to the process of tending land and of developing intellectual and artistic abilities, it is nevertheless interested in interrogating the relationship between Irish agriculture and Irish culture, even if it does not quite use those terms. By the end of the nineteenth century, Williams argues, culture "came to mean 'a whole way of life, material, intellectual and spiritual.'" [14] In this sense, I would add, "culture" can be seen as a replacement for "diet," which had originally referred to a "course of life: way of living or thinking."[15]

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[12] Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society [1976]* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 49. Emphasis Williams.

[13] Ibid., 50.

[14] Raymond Williams, *Culture & Society: 1780-1950* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday & Company, 1960), xiv.

[15] "Diet, n.1," in *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, March 2019). Timothy Morton makes a similar argument: "In its etymology *diet* is close to *culture*. The Greek *diaitia* implied Raymond Williams' idea of culture, 'a whole way of life.' Diet studies constantly gesture toward ways in which life is lived" (257). Timothy Morton, "Afterword: Let Them Eat Romanticism: Materialism, Ideology, and Diet Studies," in *Cultures of Taste/Theories of Appetite: Eating Romanticism*, ed. Timothy Morton (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

While *The Wild Irish Girl* was written well before this meaning of "culture" became prevalent, and after "diet" in this sense had gone out of style, the novel nevertheless grasps the way these two terms are related. For Owenson, Irish agriculture, often of a subsistence variety, produces and sustains Irish culture. The novel draws on the language of nourishment to resist a nature/culture divide that would, especially according to the stadial theory of the time, relegate the Irish to nature and elevate the English to culture. Instead, the novel represents nature and culture as mutually constitutive, most obviously in the titular phrase, "Wild Irish." Although "wild Irish" was a derogatory phrase that already had a long history at the time Owenson was writing — it originally referred to "any of the Gaelic-speaking people inhabiting the areas of Ireland not under English control" and subsequently came to mean an "uncivilized, unruly" Irish person — the novel works to reclaim the term.[16] "Wild," of course, does not just mean a thing that is untamed or savage, but also denotes something uncultivated or growing in a state of nature. "Irish" refers to both a people and a culture. Together, these words imply a state both natural and cultural, one different from English culture but not less than — according to the novel — and related to cultivation in both senses of the word. The novel represents and advocates Wild Irishness as a diet in the more complete, if archaic, sense of the term: a course of life, and one that is attentive to what nourishes.

Cultural Sustenance

The opening pages of *The Wild Irish Girl* establish the novel's extensive, and often perplexing, discourse of taste. Horatio draws on an alimentary vocabulary to express his own bad appetites, his prejudices about Ireland, and his changing perception of Ireland and its culture. He arrives in the country in dire need of a diet change, having characterized his existence in London

[16] "Wild Irish, n.," in *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, March 2019).

as nauseous. He laments falling into an affair with the married Lady C, wishing that, "in that sunny season of existence when the ardors of youth nourish in our bosom a thousand indescribable emotions of tenderness and love" he had found a good woman to love (9). Instead, he encountered a woman who preyed on his "craving passions," a memory that "produces a *nausea* of every sense and feeling" (9). While the "craving" mentioned here relates to passions rather than food, the end result of the bad metaphorical nourishment Horatio ingests is, apparently, a very tangible experience of "nausea," one that straddles the divide between somatic "sense" and abstract "feeling." As with so many alimentary references in *The Wild Irish Girl*, the shift from the figurative to the literal happens with dizzying speed.

In defiance of his expectations, Ireland awakens healthier appetites in Horatio. Based on reading Fynes Moryson's seventeenth-century account of his Irish travels, Horatio confesses that when he thinks of the Irish, he thinks of "an *Esquimaux* group circling round the fire which was to dress a dinner, or broil an enemy" (13). Given his association of Ireland with exotic tribes, rudimentary cooking, and cannibalism, it comes as little surprise that he views it as an "anarchical" country "where for a series of ages the olive of peace has not been suffered to shoot forth *one* sweet blossom of national concord, which the sword of civil dissention has not cropt almost in the germ" (13). Transitioning from lazy cannibalistic stereotypes to a strange, somewhat biblical extended metaphor about farming and strife, Horatio also foregrounds the contentious but significant role agriculture plays in Irish life and the English colonial project in Ireland. Based on his poorly informed impressions, Horatio expects his time in Ireland will primarily involve animal appetites. He anticipates that, once at his father's estate, "I shall have a fair opportunity of beholding the Irish character in all its *primeval* ferocity" and "where, with no other society than that of Blackstone and Co. I shall lead such a life of animal existence, as

PRIOR gives to his Contented Couple – 'They ate and drank, and slept – what then? / Why slept and drank, and ate again'" (17). Owenson, however, elevates the appetitive focus — Horatio will develop a craving for Irish literature and culture — even as she continues to connect it to the material antecedents to which taste discourse alludes.

Horatio soon discovers that it is "Blackstone and Co." who offer him a savage existence, while the excellent taste of Glorvina functions as a civilizing force. Indeed, as Horatio's appreciation for Irish culture increases, he almost viscerally rejects his English legal reading, unable to reconcile it with his new Irish diet:

> 'But while your days and nights are thus devoted to Milesian literature,' you will say, 'what becomes of Blackstone and Coke?'…the mind, like the heart, is not to be forced in its pursuits; and, I believe, in an intellectual as in a physical sense, there are certain antipathies which reason may condemn, but cannot vanquish. Coke is to me a dose of ipecacuhana; and my present studies, like those poignant incentives which stimulate the appetite without causing repletion. It is vain to force me to a profession, against which my taste, my habits, my very nature, revolts (89).

Sir Edward Coke, who served as a Chief Justice under James I, produced some of the foundational texts of modern English common law. William Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765-1770) helped to explain and further establish English common law. By likening the writing of England's most famous jurist to an emetic, Horatio uses particularly embodied language to explain how he has come to favor the healthier reading practices he learns in Ireland. His violent reaction to Coke implies a gut-level rejection of the fundamental Englishness Coke represents, as well as a repudiation of the English legal codes that structure the empire. Whereas Horatio seems to have been burdened by "craving passions" and "nausea" in his London life, his experience of Ireland is quite the opposite, as he begins to see how Irish cultural production sustains in a nourishing way (9). Horatio represents this reshaping of "taste" taking place in both body and mind.

As I noted earlier, it can be difficult to determine when the novel is mocking Horatio and when it endorses him and his increasingly positive, if still at least semi-colonialist, representations of Irish life and culture. To the extent that there is a place in which the novel and Horatio agree, it comes when he expresses genuine appreciation for Irish culture. Yet the novel also satirizes his partial and colonizing appreciation, as in this passage:

> I am devoured by *ennui*, by apathy, by discontent! What should I do here? Nothing. I have spent but four days here, and all the symptoms of my old disease begin to re-appear; in short, like other impatient invalids, I believed my cure was effected when my disease was only on the decline. I must again fly to sip from the fountain of intellectual health at Inismore, and receive the vivifying drops from the hand of the presiding priestess, or stay here, and fall into an incurable atrophy of the heart and mind! (131)

After leaving Inismore for his father's nearby estate, Horatio realizes that his experience of true wild Irishness only brushes the surface of what there is to appreciate — and that the education he received has genuinely restorative effects. The response to the devouring force of ennui is not to devour in return, but to respond with a display of moderated ingestion; he must return to Inismore to "sip." Yet he also situates this "vivifying" cultural education entirely in terms of what it can do for him. By contrast, Owenson's novel argues that Irish culture provides literal and figurative sustenance that does not end at the boundary of individual bodies.

In its portrayal of Horatio's rural revitalization, *The Wild Irish Girl* of course participates in a familiar narrative: the city is a place of corruption while the country is a place of purity and good values. But it tells the familiar story in reverse: rather than portraying the innocent Glorvina being corrupted in the city, it depicts the corrupt Horatio being purified in the country. As Raymond Williams points out, idealizing the country, demonizing the city, and lamenting the loss of a pastoral way of life has a very long history in England, although he also makes a case

for this lamentation reaching a critical point in the late eighteenth century.[17] As Williams also emphasizes, the country and the city are inextricable. Yet *The Wild Irish Girl* has an added wrinkle: the country in question is not the English countryside but the Irish countryside. Williams argues that the relationship between country and city expanded in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to encompass the relationship between metropolitan countries and rural countries. In Ireland, which is often considered England's first colony, it is possible to trace the expansion of the relationship between country and city, and colony and urban center of power. *The Wild Irish Girl* is attentive to the different power structures at work, and to the role changing agricultural practices and demands play in this shift.

Irish agri/culture

For *The Wild Irish Girl* — a novel supersaturated with alimentary language that often frenetically toggles between the metaphoric and the material — Irish eating, and the agricultural labor that makes it possible, form a crucial part of Irish culture. Indeed, Irish food and Irish culture are never far apart in the novel, especially when it depicts Horatio, his impression of Ireland explicitly influenced by Moryson's portrayal of Ireland as a savage, cannibalistic country, swiftly adjusting his impressions of Irish life. One of his first positive impressions of the Irish comes from their food. En route from Dublin to his father's estate, Horatio befriends a cottier, Murtoch O'Shaughnassy, and the two shelter for the night in another Irish peasant's cabin. There, Horatio encounters potatoes for the first time: "on being admitted into the social circle, I found its central point was a round oaken stool heaped with smoking potatoes thrown promiscuously over it" (29). Here, and elsewhere, the novel emphasizes the "central" role — both literally and figuratively — potatoes already played in the lives of the Irish, especially the

[17] See: Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

laboring classes, and how closely potatoes were connected to Ireland by the beginning of the nineteenth century. Horatio's subsequent mention of how "the cow which supplied the luxury [sweet milk] slumbered most amicably with a large pig at no great distance from where I sat" is a vivid reminder of the proximity in which many Irish lived to their agriculture.[18] This agriculture also produces something more: a satisfying meal that results in song. There is, in fact, little distance between literal and metaphoric sustenance, as Murtoch swiftly moves from ingesting potatoes to exhaling song: "As soon as supper was finished the old man said grace, the family piously blessed themselves, and the stool being removed, the hearth swept, and the fire replenished from the bog, Murtoch threw himself on his back along a bench, and unasked began a song, the wild and plaintive melody of which went at once to the soul" (28). What occurs in this cabin scene is not a stereotypical portrayal of the Irish, their potatoes, and their livestock, but a more complex reminder of the kind of culture Ireland's most quintessential agricultural product makes possible. In other words, cultivated potatoes make possible the expression of "wild" Irish culture.

Reading *The Wild Irish Girl* — or any work of Irish literature composed before the potato blight of 1845-9 — can be difficult in hindsight. As Claire Connolly writes: "The hardening of

[18] The novel, however, remains silent on another agricultural feature found in close proximity to the homes of Irish peasants: the dunghill, which other writers seemed to consider a key image of Irish rural life. As David Lloyd explains: "No traveler in Ireland ever failed to note the ubiquity of the peasant's dunghill and its immediate proximity to the cabin door…Dung fertilized the potato field, without which the 'Poor Man' and his family would have starved; it was frequently the means to reclaim waste and barren land and its closeness to the cabin door bespoke the real value it embodied" (42). In her 1807 collection of essays, *Patriotic Sketches of Ireland, Written in Connaught*, Owenson relates a brief encounter with "a poor peasant who was literally not driving but pushing a poor lean horse up before him, laden with panniers filled with manure, with which he was going to enrich a future hill" (193). While *The Wild Irish Girl* is far from silent on the topic of Irish agricultural production, it elides perhaps the most necessary — and characteristic — component of that process. David Lloyd, *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity 1800-2000: The Transformation of Oral Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Sydney Owenson, *Patriotic Sketches of Ireland, Written in Connaught* (Baltimore: Geo. Dobbin & Murphy, 1809).

cultural identities that began in the post-Famine period continues to affect readers' responses to novels which were, however, written in the years just before the cultural nationalism of the 1840s;" these novels therefore "speak from a lost landscape: the Ireland that they represent is a thickly populated place that has yet to undergo the trauma of mass deaths and emigration." [19] That *The Wild Irish Girl* displays a sustained interest in alimentary and agricultural topics — and is set on the west coast of Ireland, which would be hardest hit by the famine — makes it difficult to read knowing what was to come. Even before the famine, representations of Irish eating and Irish hunger were fraught. Edmund Spenser's *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (1596) and Fynes Moryson's *Itinerary* (1617) set the tone for portraying Ireland as a savage and starving country, which later works like Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* (1729) did little to dispel. As noted earlier, Moryson shapes Horatio's expectation of Ireland as a place of filthy cannibals. The lasting influence of these accounts also contributed to the modern tendency to see the potato blight as inevitable and part of a trend of famine in Ireland. Yet, as L.A. Clarkson and E. Margaret Crawford argue, "Ireland was not chronically a famine-stricken society and…in normal years it was well stocked with nutritious food." [20] With the exception of a particularly severe famine in Ireland in 1740 and 1741, "from the mid-seventeenth century until the early nineteenth century, the frequency of famine [in Ireland] was remarkably similar to that of England's, perhaps better than Scotland's and no worse than that of continental Europe."[21] But the specter of

[19] Claire Connolly, *A Cultural History of the Irish Novel, 1790-1829* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 11.

[20] L.A. Clarkson and E. Margaret Crawford, *Feast and Famine: Food and Nutrition in Ireland 1500-1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2001), 112.

[21] Ibid., 131.

Irish hunger was never far off: *The Wild Irish Girl* was published only a few years after a food crisis lasting from 1799-1800.[22]

Yet the Irish poor were also known for being healthier and heartier than the average European peasant, in large part due to the potato, which had "conquered the diets of poor cultivators for roughly a century" prior to the blight and offered surprisingly well-rounded nutrition.[23] Although intimately associated with Ireland by the eighteenth century, potatoes had only been cultivated there since the early seventeenth century, when they arrived from the Americas. William H. McNeill describes how, following Cromwell's brutal Irish conquest (1649-1653), which resulted in the relocation of "the dispossessed Irish into Connaught," where *The Wild Irish Girl* is set,[24] "potato gardens and milking cattle were what allowed many (perhaps most) of them to survive even on comparatively very small patches of land."[25] At the same time, as Ireland became one of England's biggest agricultural producers, and as English and international demand for Irish-grown grain and animal products increased, there was what John Reader describes as "a rush to convert arable land to pasture," which resulted in poorer

[22] Although the English also suffered, as "the final decade of the eighteenth century was one of rising food prices triggered by wartime inflation, bad weather, and the disruption of the European grain trade" (Clarkson and Crawford 131).

[23] Ibid., 60.

[24] "In Cromwell's own words, any who refused to accept English rule must be sent either 'to hell or to Connaught'" (Reader 139). By virtue of its remoteness, and its status as stronghold of anti-English sentiment, this region was, for many, the quintessential, "authentic" Ireland. In *The Wild Irish Girl*, Horatio participates in this thinking, describing how his father's estate is located "on the north-west coast of Connaught, which I am told is the classic ground of Ireland. The native Irish, pursued by religious and political bigotry, made it the asylum of their sufferings, and were separated by a provincial barrier from an intercourse with the rest of Ireland, until after the Restoration; so I shall have a fair opportunity of beholding the Irish character in all its primeval ferocity" (17).

[25] Wlliam H. McNeill, "How the Potato Changed the World's History," *Social Research* 66, no. 2 (1999): 75.

populations being relocated to areas "where the soils were poorest."[26] As David Lloyd explains, they turned to potato farming on "reclaim[ed] marginal land in the most inhospitable regions of the island," including Connaught.[27] "Up to four times more productive than grain crops," potatoes "could be boiled and eaten straight from the ground," in contrast to cereal crops.[28]

In 1742, following the famine of 1740-1, the Anglo-Irish government passed legislation "'to encourage the reclaiming of unprofitable bogs' by allowing Roman Catholics (till then barred from occupying vacant land) to claim 50 acres of bog, together with half an acre of adjoining arable," which also contributed to "the expansion of potato cultivation."[29] This echoes an observation made by Owenson in *Patriotic Sketches*: "I have been repeatedly assured by persons of undoubted veracity, that it is usual to let the least fertile parts of the mountains to the peasantry, at a low rent; from whom, after they have by the greatest labour improved their soil, it is reclaimed, and relet at a higher rent to some more wealthy tenant: mean time the original cultivator takes another barren tract, and continues to use the same exertions to the same effect."[30] Later in the century, farmers growing corn and grain who "could not afford to pay their laborers in hard cash…gave them a scrap of land on which to grow potatoes."[31] All these forces combined to aid Ireland's astonishing population growth: "there were probably no more than 1-1.5 million people living in Ireland before the potato arrived in the early 1600s. By 1700 the

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[26] John Reader, *Potato: A History of the Propitious Esculent* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 144.

[27] Lloyd, *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity 1800-2000: The Transformation of Oral Space*, 19.

[28] Reader, *Potato: A History of the Propitious Esculent*, 147.

[29] Ibid., 148.

[30] Owenson, *Patriotic Sketches of Ireland, Written in Connaught*, 196.

[31] Ibid.

population had risen to 2 million; a century later it reached 5 million and by 1845 had soared to 8.5 million."[32] The potato is inextricable from some of the most tragic moments in Irish history and yet helped make Ireland possible. Not unlike the mythical Milesians from whom the Irish were ostensibly descended, the potato represents a crucial part of Irish culture that is both intrinsically of Ireland and yet imported from elsewhere. In both cases, Ireland somehow transforms the foreign entities with which it comes in contact. In the case of potatoes, when these now-quintessential Irish objects were threatened, Irish culture was also endangered.

When *The Wild Irish Girl* was reissued in 1846 — a year into the blight — Owenson's preface to the new edition remained largely silent on the topic of Irish starvation. Because "few people died during the winter of 1845-6, and it appeared that there was enough food to hold off mass starvation in the spring," many believed that there would not be a famine.[33] When the potato crop failed again in the summer of 1846, the government was not prepared to deal with the results, and no one expected that the blight would last for another two years. Although Owenson's 1846 preface could not predict what was to come, she did acknowledge that the political and agricultural situation in Ireland had degenerated. The preface laments that Ireland was — and continued to be — "'The most wretched country that is under Heaven,'" although it also maintained that at the beginning of the nineteenth century, "the Irish people still had some spirit, were able to experience joy, laugh but not so much any more" (252). And she lambasted the "resident landlords who multiply the causes of Irish misery, and Irish crime, by ruthlessly sweeping from the soil of long and laborious cultivation, the wretched cottier, with whom they dispute even the ditch" (261). Owenson here conflates the peasants tilling the soil with what they

[32] Ibid., 130.

[33] Andrew F. Smith, *Potato: A Global History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011), 44.

grow in it: potatoes. She was far from alone in this tendency to connect Irish peasants to potatoes and the soil from which they sprang.

Examining eighteenth- and nineteenth-century debates about the potato, Catherine Gallagher explains that they demonstrate how "the autochthonous body had become the locus of new, identifiably modern, hopes and fear" and how "above all, [this autochthonous body] had been soiled and transported to Ireland, where it could be imagined as both foreign and threateningly close."[34] For the poorer Irish, potatoes notoriously comprised the majority of their diet. But for thinkers like Thomas Malthus, "plenty of potatoes translate[d] immediately and ineluctably into plenty of people, but into very little of anything else."[35] However, *The Wild Irish Girl* seems less concerned with questions of Malthusian traps or with how the inherent dirtiness of potatoes was often used to describe those who consumed potatoes as similarly grubby. Instead, the novel examines Irish agriculture in relation to issues of labor and culture, portraying the growth of Irish industrial production and English agricultural improvement as fundamentally interfering with the production and appreciative consumption of true Irish culture.

This becomes most apparent in the third volume of the novel, when Father John and Horatio travel to the Ulster province in northern Ireland, the base of English proto-industrial projects. The priest characterizes this region as "'a Scottish colony,'" alluding to the Protestant Scottish colonists who had moved to the Plantation of Ulster in the early seventeenth century, as part of James I's colonial expansion in Ireland following the defeat of Gaelic Irish chieftains in the Nine Years' War. Using an agricultural metaphor, he predicts that Horatio "will be glad to

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[34] Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, "The Potato in the Materialist Imagination," in *Practicing New Historicism*, ed. Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 134-5.

[35] Ibid., 128.

have an opportunity of viewing the Irish character in a new aspect; or rather of beholding the Scotch character engrafted upon ours" (168). Yet in the process of engrafting, something is lost. In Ulster, "'the convivial pleasures, dear to the Milesian heart, scared at the prudential maxims of calculating interest, take flight.'" While "'the north of Ireland may be justly esteemed the palladium of Irish industry and Irish trade,'" a place where "'the peasant, stimulated to exertions by the rewards it reaps for him, enjoys the fruits of his industry, and acquires a relish for the comforts and conveniences of life… on the heart they make little claims, and from its affections they receive but little tribute'" (192-3). Northern Irish peasants might experience better labor conditions and pay, but that translates into a kind of work-leisure divide in which, during their leisure time, they prioritize comfort and convenience rather than culture.

In this sense, they seem to share a similar outlook to Horatio's father, Lord M, who begins the novel by mandating that Horatio dedicate himself to legal studies and "resign the fascinating pursuits of polite literature and belles lettres" in favor of "the dry facts of law reports," because "the elegant enjoyments of literary leisure are never so keenly relished as when tasted under the shade of that flourishing laurel which our own efforts have reared to mature perfection" (6). For Lord M., cultural consumption fits into a prudent, economic worldview that clearly delineates work and leisure time. In the Ireland Horatio encounters, however, work — primarily, agricultural labor, but also the consumption of the food produced by that labor — and literary production and appreciation are inextricable from each other. Although the Protestant work ethic might increase one's "relish" for leisure time, it does not genuinely nourish cultural production; it offers only seasoning, rather than sustenance.

On the wilder west coast, the main employment of potato farming, while intensive, still left time for Irish culture to develop and flourish. While farmers had to undertake the hard work

of reclaiming marginal land in order to grow potatoes, the tubers were hardy, capable of flourishing in a variety of tough climates, and guaranteed both a hearty meal and greater independence. Kevin Whelan explains that "the prolific potato and the prevalence of turf achieved a greater freedom for Irish agricultural laborers, reflected in the ease with which they could set up separate households. Their independence was purchased at the expense of depressed living standards as they were paid a potato wage."[36] Father John's idealizing of western Irish subsistence farming over the growth of industry in northern Ireland could be seen as problematic. But Owenson evinces a genuine awareness of the more complex agricultural situation of the western Irish poor. Only a few pages before his dubious celebration of the more "'convivial pleasures'" found in the true Milesians located on the wild west coast of Ireland, Father John laments how the poor "'pay a considerable rent for liberty to cultivate a barren, waste, and rigid soil. In short, there is not in the creation a more laborious animal than an Irish peasant, with less stimulus to exertion, or less reward to crown his toil. He is indeed in many instances the creature of the soil" (183). Yet the answer, the novel argues, is not a complete overhaul by English agricultural "improvers," but instead an approach that acknowledges how Irish culture and agriculture are inextricably linked.

The Wild Irish Girl makes the case that Irish agricultural labor of the kind found in Connaught is what produces true Irish culture. Prefacing his transcription of an "ancient" Irish poem, "Cathbein Nolan," Horatio declares: "Here then is a specimen of Irish poetry, which is almost always the effusion of some blind itinerant bard, or some rustic minstrel, into whose breast the genius of his country has breathed inspiration, as he patiently drove the plough, or

[36] Kevin Whelan, "The Modern Landscape: From Plantation to Present," in *Atlas of the Irish Rural Landscape*, ed. F.H.A. Aalen, Kevin Whelan, and Matthew Stout (Cork: Cork University Press, 2011), 82.

laboriously worked in the bog" (86). The labor of bog reclamation—which preceded the planting of potatoes—and farming is not only related to but also responsible for the production of Irish art, which occurs as a byproduct of that labor but does not itself seem laborious. Instead, as the bard works, he seems to inhale Irish "genius" and exhale, or effuse, poetry. Poetic production thus represents part of a cycle: as the bard reshapes the Irish earth, it also shapes him — and Irish culture. During his Ulster critique, Father John repeats this idea of an ingesting — and subsequent regurgitation — of Irishness from the land. Describing the decline of Irish bards, the priest explains to Horatio how "Ulster, you perceive, is now the last resort of the most ancient of the surviving of the Irish bards, who, after having imbibed inspiration in the classic regions of Connaught, and effused his national strains through every province of his country, draws forth the last feeble tones of his almost silenced harp amidst the chilling regions of the north" (200). Whereas Connaught nourished bardic expression, Ulster slowly kills it.

Even in Connaught, the separation of the Irish from their land affects their relationship to Irish culture. Writing to J.D., Horatio declares:

> Here is a *bonne bouche* for your antiquarian taste, and *Ossianic* palate! Almost every evening after vespers, we all assemble in a spacious hall, which had been shut up for near a century, and first opened by the present prince when he was driven for shelter to his paternal ruins…
>
> The windows, which are high, narrow, and arched, command on one side a noble view of the ocean, on the other they are closed up.
>
> When I inquired of Father John the cause of this singular exclusion of a very beautiful land view, he replied, 'that from those windows were to be seen the greater part of that rich tract of land which once formed the territory of the Princes of Inismore; – and since…the possessions of the present Prince are limited to a few hereditary acres, and a few rented farms, he cannot bear to look on the domains of his ancestors…' This very curious apartment is still called the banqueting-hall – where 'Stately the feast and high the cheer, / Girt with many a valiant Peer.' was once celebrated in all the boundless extravagance and convivial spirit of ancient Irish hospitality. But it now serves as an armory, a museum, a cabinet of national antiquities, and national curiosities. In short, it is the receptacle of all those precious relics, which the Prince has been able to rescue from the wreck of his family splendor. (98-99)

As with so many passages in the novel, this one toggles between the language of taste and the language of appetite, combining what would otherwise be an unremarkable phrase like "antiquarian taste" with "Ossianic palate" and "bonne bouche." In referring to his friend J.D.'s "Ossianic palate," Horatio implies not simply that J.D's literary tastes run to James MacPherson's epic poem, but also that literary consumption is somehow fundamentally linked with the alimentary. Yet, despite acknowledging the appeal of Irish culture, he also minimizes it, likening it not to something nourishing or sustaining, but to a "*bonne bouche*," a sweet, easily consumable dainty, one that is frivolous and unnecessary, if also delectable. In this sense, Horatio replicates the traveler's tendency to view the culture of the ostensibly backward place he is visiting as a thing to be ingested, both literally and figuratively. *The Wild Irish Girl*, like the other national tales it would help influence, is influenced by the genre of the travelogue, and plays to the post-Union English zeal for accounts of travel in Ireland. But it also critiques the colonizing impulses of tourism, anticipating the ways in which tourism often participates in a re-literalized version of what bell hooks calls "Eating the Other." Indeed, other early nineteenth-century Irish writers also seem aware of this phenomenon. Describing Alicia LeFanu's *Tales of a Tourist*, a satire of John Carr's earnest travel account, *The Stranger in Ireland*, Trumpener explains how LeFanu's travel writer particularly attends "to Irish culinary delicacies," which "reminds us [that] the most important literary model for the Carrian tourist itinerary is the menu."[37] Despite Horatio's thoughtless introduction to his description of the great dining hall, his description actually reveals more than he realizes it does. For Horatio, especially at this relatively early point in the novel, the hall is no more than a "bonne bouche," a kind of well-

[37] Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire*, 57.

staged set for his experience of Irish culture, which he portrays as perhaps entirely comprised of bonnes bouches available for easy consumption in a museum-like setting.

Father John's explanation of the reason behind the blocked windows introduces a more nuanced idea about what comprises Irish culture and how it relates to Irish agriculture. The Prince, who had been driven from his home in part by the machinations of Horatio's father's conniving steward, was forced to take refuge in all that remains of his ancestors' ancient stronghold: the castle at Inismore. Yet the castle is now disconnected from the "rich tract of land," presumably used for agriculture, that once supported the Prince and his family. The hall, when properly connected to — and supported by — the surrounding domains, could also generate the "convivial spirit of ancient Irish hospitality." Owenson echoes what seems to be a frequent refrain — including elsewhere in *The Wild Irish Girl* and in Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* — about the generosity of the Irish and their commitment to feasting and hospitality, and the sense that this way of life is dying out. But this passage does not stop at the familiar celebration of Irish sociability and lamentation of its decline. Instead, it suggests that the disconnect of the castle from the land results in a kind of fossilizing of Irish culture, in which the best that can be done is to preserve relics rather than generating new culture.

Despite this decline, *The Wild Irish Girl* also portrays the vitality of Irish culture as preserved by Irish agricultural production. If the great hall has become a reliquary rather than a living site of Irish hospitality that looks onto the lands that makes that hospitality possible, the novel demonstrates that Irish culture derives vitality from what remains of Irish agriculture, subsistence level though it may be. The industry of Ulster poses one threat, as does the more general English impulse to agricultural improvement. Horatio, of course, cannot at first — or ever fully, I would argue — appreciate the lifestyle that potatoes make possible. He is simply

horrified to discover that he has feelings for "a simple rusticated girl, whose father called himself a *prince*, with a *potatoe ridge* for his *dominions*!" (65). At the beginning of his time on the wild west coast of Ireland, Horatio derisively notes that "*agriculture* appears in the least felicitous of her aspects," and praises the "young and flourishing plantations," that he sees developing on his father's estate (18, 35). Yet his praise for these "plantations" adds a note of doubt. While "plantation" most explicitly refers here to "a cultivated bed or cluster of growing plants of any kind," the word already had notorious connotations in the time, given its connection with colonialism in general and slavery in particular.[38] Indeed, only pages earlier, Horatio had explicitly raised the subject of slavery, declaring: "it is certain, that the diminutive body of our worthy steward, is the abode of the transmigrated soul of some West Indian planter" (33). As Murray Pittock explains, the slavery comparison would have been apparent to those familiar with the Irish cause: "the…analogy between English government over Ireland and West Indian slavery was one used by the United Irishmen."[39] This of course replicates the problematic impulse shared by eighteenth-century British feminist writers like Mary Wollstonecraft to equate the injustices suffered by white females with the far more brutal system of chattel slavery. Yet comparisons of the situation in Ireland to that in the West Indies also serves as a reminder of certain similarities shared by England's colonies; they are on a spectrum of oppression that has its basis in agriculture, and in the kind of agricultural production undertaken for English profit.

In fact, post-Cromwellian conquest Ireland increasingly became a primary agricultural supplier to England and beyond, catering to "the widening demand for Irish beef, butter and

[38] "Plantation, n.," *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

[39] Murray Pittock, *Scottish and Irish Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 96.

ships' biscuit that English involvement in the slave and sugar trades had generated."[40] Reader describes how, "as economic pressures intensified, more and more of the cottiers' grain and butter went to market rather than into their stomachs," a system that should have collapsed but which was "given a new lease of life by the potato."[41] And yet English skepticism about Irish agricultural methods persisted, as we can see in the improving impulses of Horatio and his father. As Clarkson and Crawford explain: "Irish farming has suffered from a dismal image. Arthur Young must bear some of the blame. He focused his English-conditioned eye and enthusiasms for improvement on to Ireland and found much to condemn…although on a broader view of land productivity in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the Irish record was respectable."[42] *The Wild Irish Girl* resists the Youngian narrative of improvement in favor of a more complicated celebration of Irish subsistence farming.

In pre-Famine Ireland, Lloyd explains, one could often find "an older Gaelic system of communal land-holding known as *clachan* or rundale," which "ensured that most tenants would have access to a variety of land types, from the higher reaches of the mountain where a few sheep might be grazed to the more fertile patches where potatoes or, on occasion, oats could be cultivated."[43] According to Whelan, "the annual allocation of strips in the infield guaranteed an environmental egalitarianism" and "was a viable and sustainable adaptation to distinctive ecological and demographic conditions," which were overwhelmingly marginal."[44] While the

[40] Reader, *Potato: A History of the Propitious Esculent*, 144.

[41] Ibid., 146.

[42] Clarkson and Crawford, *Feast and Famine: Food and Nutrition in Ireland 1500-1920*, 119.

[43] Lloyd, *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity 1800-2000: The Transformation of Oral Space*, 20.

[44] Whelan, "The Modern Landscape: From Plantation to Present," 87-8.

system "came…to symbolize the irrationality of Irish ways to colonial improvers oblivious to the actual inventiveness and sophistication of its practices," Lloyd argues that it "represented the outlines of viable alternatives to a capitalist economy that had not yet achieved the unquestionable dominance that now seems so foregone a conclusion."[45] Importantly, Lloyd notes that these alternatives are not yet fully "realized;" and yet, they provide "modes of quite material survival, forged in the damaged conditions of a colonized and ravaged people."[46]

The conclusion of *The Wild Irish Girl* stakes an ambivalent position on the question of agricultural practices. While Horatio learns to appreciate Irish cultural production, whether he sees the merit in communal land-holding practices is never clarified. This is due in part to his loss of narrative control near the end of the novel; a seemingly omniscient third-person narrator takes over to efficiently recount the final plot points leading up to the debatably happy union of Horatio and Glorvina. Rather than revealing Horatio's thoughts on his plantation future, the final word on the subject goes to his father, whose long letter concludes the novel. The Earl implies that Horatio (and Glorvina) will leave behind Wild Irishness to manage the M. family's plantation system, and predicts that his formerly wayward son will be able to derive "the very nutrition of [his] existence" from this Irish land (242). In contrast, this arrangement assigns a different fate to the native Irish, who, as Anahid Nerssessian has noted, are reduced to passive plants.[47] Lord M. describes them as "like the tender vine, which has been suffered by neglect to

[45] Lloyd, *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity 1800-2000: The Transformation of Oral Space*, 20, 23.

[46] Ibid., 83. Lloyd argues that these land-cultivation practices shaped a set of social values: "[they] gave rise to popular practices of the commons that embodied a conception and an 'ethic' of mutuality, of hospitality, and of 'indifference to the accumulation of wealth.'"

[47] Anahid Nersessian, *Utopia, Limited: Romanticism and Adjustment* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2015), 126.

waste its treasures on the sterile earth" (243). Although this letter uses alimentary language that echoes what has come before in the novel, it does so in service of a different end: to reduce the Irish to agriculture without culture. In defiance of this English prejudice, *The Wild Irish Girl* proposes that Irish culture — which Horatio also comes to view as sustaining and nourishing — and ostensibly backwards Irish agricultural practices are, in fact, mutually constitutive and the opposite of "sterile."

Ultimately, Owenson anticipates that the end of the potato will be the end of the variant of Irish culture that her novel celebrates. Whelan explains that British colonial rulers saw the 1845 potato famine as:

> An opportunity to replace the degenerate potato as a food-source by grain, a 'higher' form, which would forcibly elevate the feckless Irish up the ladder of civilization…These attitudes influenced the decision to import maize [Indian corn] as the preferred relief food. Maize could not be grown in Ireland and therefore would be a purchased food. This in itself would eliminate the potato wage which underpinned the cottier system, utilized by farmers as a source of cheap labor and regarded by experts as impeding agrarian modernization. Laborers would now have to be paid in cash rather than in kind (potatoes)…the Famine's long-term effect, then, would be as an accelerator of agrarian anglicization in Ireland, thereby copperfastening the Union."[48]

The Wild Irish Girl indicates that "agrarian anglicization" in Ireland is already occurring, and demonstrates that with it comes the decline of Irish culture and the dying out of bardic culture. For the novel, nourishing culture is closely related to the actual nourishment grown in Ireland, and one cannot fully survive without the other. Indeed, the novel offers a demonstration of anthropologist Anna Tsing's argument that "human nature is an interspecies relationship," one based on "varied webs of interspecies dependence."[49] The rise of "intensive cereal agriculture,"

[48] Whelan, 96-7.

[49] Anna Tsing, "Unruly Edges: Mushrooms as Companion Species," *Environmental Humanities* 1 (2012): 144.

Tsing argues, enacted a "biological transformation of people and plants" that "support[ed] elites" and solidified "hierarchical social arrangements."[50] While the Irish potato famine exposed the vulnerability of monoculture, the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century rise of the potato in Ireland, although "grown…with monocrop zeal," came from "a zeal forged in the reverse image of state-led grain expansion."[51] The potato enabled a very different kind of society to take shape among those at the bottom of this agricultural hierarchy, supporting the survival and expansion of wild Irishness. *The Wild Irish Girl* demonstrates how the interspecies relationship of the Irish and potatoes enabled this different form of human nature and culture. For Owenson, the most tangible symbol of Irish culture is the harp — identified in the novel as the "emblem" of Ireland — an instrument that the novel connects to agriculture in a peculiarly visceral way (50).

The Irish harp and the alimentary canal

> *The sounds that issue from the mouths of the Irish — as speech, song, or wail — pose a challenge for those who wish to represent them in print. Similarly, what is taken in by those mouths — food and drink — poses a problem of another sort…What is taken in by and emitted from the mouth cannot easily be represented in print. The movement from an oral to a print culture is not simply a matter of translating folk tales or customs from the mouths of the people to the page. It involves an attempt to control a strange bodily economy in which food, drink, speech, and song are intimately related. Can a printed account in English represent the history that lives in the mouths of the Irish?*
>
> — Seamus Deane, *Strange Country*[52]

Writing about the struggle in pre-famine Ireland to "articulate" the "prevailing deformation in the Irish social and political system," Deane points to basic issues of expression

[50] Ibid., 146.

[51] Ibid., 147.

[52] Seamus Deane, *Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing since 1790* (Oxford Oxford University Press, 1997), 55.

centered around the Irish mouth.[53] In Deane's reading, Irish orality cannot be simplified down to oral expression, but necessarily entails the inclusion of food, drink, and the body. *The Wild Irish Girl* is, of course, a "printed account," and one invested in the density that textuality makes possible, especially in its use of lengthy footnotes to establish Irish cultural and historical authority. Yet, as this chapter has argued, the novel also attempts to "represent the history that lives in the mouths of the Irish," which is perhaps one of the reason it can feel so scattered. As the previous section addressed, Owenson is attentive to the intricate relationship between Irish agriculture, Irish bodies, and Irish culture. As with potatoes, the Irish harp runs the risk of being an almost comically stereotypical Irish object. Yet Owenson manages to avoid falling into this trap, even as she profited from catering to the English enthusiasm for Irish culture in the wake of the union.

Following the success of *The Wild Irish* Girl, Owenson cannily traded on her popularity by performing in character as Glorvina, a sort of proto-cosplay that blurred the line between fiction and reality. In her familiar essay, "My First Rout in London," Owenson quotes from the invitation she received from the Countess Dowager of C——k to perform at her party: "'Every body has been invited expressly to meet the Wild Irish Girl: so she must bring her Irish harp;'" Owenson then recollects how, at the party, "I attempted to play; but my howl was funereal; I was ready to cry in character, but endeavored to laugh."[54] Owenson's anecdote highlights the centrality of the harp and song to Glorvina's character, and to Irish culture more broadly. At the same time, she suggests that all her English fans require for an experience of "authentic" Irishness is for an Irish person to show up with an Irish harp. For the Countess and other English

[53] Ibid., 54.

[54] Owenson, *The Book of the Boudoir*, 1, 102.

readers, Owenson implies, the Wild Irish Girl is incomplete without her "Irish harp," but also reducible to it. Owenson's anecdote about how she began developing a performance of easily digestible Irishness for English consumers belies both the Irish harp's nuanced status as an Irish cultural emblem and her novel's portrayal of the complexity of Irish culture, a culture — as the previous section argued — inextricable from its agriculture. As the mention of the "funereal howl" also makes clear, performance on the Irish harp involved singing, although Owenson describes her performance more closely resembling the Irish funeral tradition of keening. Both references—the singing that ought to accompany the harp and the howl that emerges instead—underscore the connection between Irish harps and Irish mouths.

Unlike its relative, the Aeolian harp, a classic figure of ostensibly unmediated English Romantic expression, Glorvina's Irish harp requires a player. But rather than suggest that Glorvina's harp is more artificial because it requires a player, the novel signals Glorvina's ability to channel both nature and culture through the harp. The figure of the Aeolian harp, by contrast suggests a more fundamental disconnect between the English Romantics and nature. Glorvina also foregrounds her harp's connection to a different kind of natural process — a more somatic one — in her unusual choice of harp string material. Describing Glorvina's harp, Horatio writes: "I began to examine the harp, and expressed the surprise I felt at its singular construction" (67). Glorvina explains: "'I have strung it with gut instead of wire, merely for the gratification of my own ear'" (68). The gut string is significant for several reasons. As I will address in more detail shortly, gut-strung harps had specific cultural and political significance at the time Owenson was writing. But they also hearken back to a more natural kind of musical string, one made from the gut of sheep or cows, offering another reminder of the way in which Irish agriculture serves as a resource for Irish culture. Glorvina's gut-strung harp embodies the connection between Irish

agriculture and Irish culture. Finally, the gut-strung harp, which is usually accompanied by singing, also connects Irish culture and agriculture with the mouth and the alimentary canal.

Connolly argues that *The Wild Irish Girl* "successfully appropriates" the "contested cultural symbol" of the Irish harp, and that "Glorvina's harp soon became a mainstay of nationalist iconography."[55] Thanks in part to Owenson's novel and her tireless self-promotion, the Irish harp has indeed become the semi-official emblem of Ireland. In fact, the image of the harp that today appears on the seal of the Irish President, the reverse of Irish euros, and, of course, every receptacle associated with Guinness is identical to Glorvina's (except for the gut strings, that is). All these harps are modeled on the medieval Brian Boru harp, now housed in Trinity College, Dublin.[56] Although the harp had a long history in Ireland, dating back to at least the seventh century C.E., only in the mid-seventeenth century could one find "a general acceptance among the formerly aristocratic native Irish, including the Catholic Confederates and the exiled Irish, that a gold harp was the emblem of the country."[57]

Starting "in the eighteenth century, the Irish harp, as icon and metaphor, assumed increasing importance as a marker of identity in contemporary Irish politics and culture,"

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[55] Connolly, "Introduction: The Politics of Love in *the Wild Irish Girl*," lvi.

[56] Glorvina explains to Horatio: "It is however, precisely the same form as that preserved in the Irish university, which belonged to one of the most celebrated of our heroes, Brian Boru; for the warrior and the bard often united in the character of our kings, and they sung the triumphs of those departed chiefs whose feats they emulated" (68).

[57] Mary Louise O'Donnell, *Ireland's Harp: The Shaping of Irish Identity, C. 1770-1880* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2014), 11.

O'Donnell explains that "the coding of the harp as an emblem of Ireland from the thirteenth to the mid-seventeenth century was, as the musicologist Barra Boydell observed, 'English or otherwise non-Irish in origin,'" as images of the harp primarily show up on the heraldic devices of Franco-English conquerors (10).

especially after the 1792 Belfast harpists' festival.[58] The festival was "intended, according to its 1791 circular, 'to revive and perpetuate the ancient Music and Poetry of Ireland,'" and therefore "gathered twelve elderly harpers from across Ireland, 'descendants of our Ancient Bards, who are at present almost exclusively possessed of all that remains of the Music poetry and oral traditions of Ireland,' to perform for a large, appreciative audience, while antiquarian Edward Bunting and a team of transcribers noted each song."[59] Owenson reinforced this narrative about the decline of the Irish harp and the need to preserve Irish bardic heritage in *The Lay of an Irish Harp; or, Metrical Fragments* (1807) — her quickly assembled follow-up to *The Wild Irish Girl*. In this collection of Irish ballads, Owenson opens with a preface describing her disappointment at being unable to find the "*Irish Harp* played in perfection" and lamenting "the decline of that tender and impressive instrument, once so dear to Irish enthusiasm."[60]

The Irish harp was not only associated with Irish cultural revival, but was also viewed as a potent symbol of Irish nationalism, and attempts to revive "the Irish harp tradition" implied a simultaneous desire to "symbolically revitalize the Irish people and the Irish nation."[61] By the time Owenson wrote *The Wild Irish Girl*, the Irish harp was also explicitly associated with the United Irishmen, who staunchly opposed British rule and advocated for an independent Irish republic. The United Irishmen "embraced the Irish harp and adopted it along with the motto 'It is new-strung and shall be heard' as the official insignia of the Movement at its inception in

[58] Ibid., 2-3.

[59] Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire*, 10.

[60] Sydney Owenson, *The Lay of an Irish Harp; or, Metrical Fragments* (London: Richard Phillips, 1807), 1-2.

[61] O'Donnell, *Ireland's Harp: The Shaping of Irish Identity*, c. 1770-1880, 3.

1791."[62] Leading up to the 1798 rebellion, around which time *The Wild Irish Girl* is set, "the harp metaphor become a more prominent literary device in the propaganda of the United Irishmen."[63] Although Glorvina claims that personal preference — "merely for the gratification of my own ear'" — guides her choice of harp string, the choice actually has more far-reaching political implications. The gut string not only brings to mind the United Irishmen's motto but also invokes a post-Union political and cultural project, when "the Irish harp was perceived to be in need of modernization and the field of harp production and improvement was viewed as a sphere for the espousal of patriotism."[64] As the presence of a dozen aging bards at the 1792 Belfast Harper's festival suggests, the harp tradition was at risk of extinction and needed to be revitalized. "The task of modifying the Irish harp was embraced by John Egan," who made a harp for Owenson herself, among others.[65] Significantly, Egan invented the Portable Irish harp, which differed from the traditional Irish harp in size and playing technique, and was strung with gut, unlike traditional Irish harps, which were strung with wire.[66]

Despite the association of the Irish harp with wire strings, the majority of string instruments at that time were strung with gut, and gut strings have been used on musical instruments for millennia. Jenny Nex explains that "although the term 'catgut'[67] is commonly

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[62] Ibid., 9.

[63] Ibid., 22

[64] Ibid., 89.

[65] Ibid.

[66] Ibid., 95.

[67] According to the OED, "So far as the name can be traced back, [catgut] distinctly means guts or intestines of the cat, though it is not known that these were ever used for the purpose…(Some have conjectured a humorous reference to the resemblance of the sound to caterwauling.)." "Catgut, n.," in *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, March 2019).

seen, it is usual to utilize the guts of sheep and cows, often depending on the length and strength required in the finished product. Gut is an ideal material to employ when strength and flexibility are needed since it is formed of a type of muscle tissue which is designed to stretch and contract as greater or lesser amounts of food are passed through the animal."[68] In early nineteenth-century Ireland, however, it seems that gut strings would primarily have been associated with harp innovation, and Irish cultural and political reclamation. A combination of ancient and organic, and new and revolutionary, Glorvina's gut-strung harp symbolizes the allure and persistence of Irish culture. It also serves as a reminder that Irish culture is not static but continues to evolve and change. Like the gut string itself, Owenson's Irish culture is both strong and flexible.

Thus, even though *The Wild Irish Girl* draws on and appeals to antiquarian histories of Irish culture, it is also — as conservative reviewers noted at the time — radical, not least in its portrayal of the resilience of Irish culture.[69] In a novel very much attuned to the radical possibilities of sensibility, Glorvina's gut-strung harp emphasizes the connection between viscera and sentiment. Claire Connolly has argued that Irish "novels that post-date 1798 can be seen to raise repeatedly the connections between sensibility and revolution."[70] *The Wild Irish Girl* in particular, she argues, "reinvent[s] 'the resources of sensitivity'…putting them to the

[68] Jenny Nex, "Gut String Makers in Nineteenth-Century London," *Galpin Society Journal* 65, no. March (2012): 131.

[69] At the same time, it repeatedly warns that such culture is under threat. This point is underscored by the description in the last pages of the novel of Horatio finding Glorvina's harp sitting unattended, being played only by the wind: "While he stood rapt in horror and amazement he heard the sound of Glorvina's harp, borne on the blast which sighed at intervals along the passage…The harp of Glorvina, and the couch on which he had first sat by her, were the only articles it contained: the former was still breathing its wild melody when he entered, but he perceived the melancholy vibration was produced by the sea breeze (admitted by the open casement) which swept at intervals along its strings" (227).

[70] Connolly, *A Cultural History of the Irish Novel, 1790-1829*, 97-98.

service of the language of 'nation-ness.'"[71] For *The Wild Irish Girl*, the harp functions as one of the key methods the novel uses to communicate its sentimental project. Indeed, as Leith Davis argues, "Owenson most frequently conveys Glorvina's sensibility by associating her with music."[72] The novel is characteristically unsubtle about this. Horatio describes how Glorvina "was created for a musician – there she is borne away by the magic of the art in which she excels, and the natural enthusiasm of her impassioned character: she can sigh, she can weep, she can smile, over her harp. The sensibility of her soul trembles in her song" (83). Connecting the harp with "enthusiasm" — both here and in the introduction to *Lay of an Irish Harp* quoted earlier — Owenson signals its radical leanings. The gut string not only connects the Irish harp to the Irish agriculture from which it is sourced, but also to the long-standing association between the gut and feeling, especially of a sympathetic variety. As I have addressed earlier in this dissertation, "bowels" were understood to refer to both "intestines" and "tenderness; compassion."[73] Glorvina's harp is a sympathetic medium in which she can convey "the sensibility of her soul." Her choice of gut strings further emphasizes this, reconnecting the harp back to the gut as the site of sympathy.[74] Given the source of the gut string—the viscera of sheep or cattle—the gut string also connects Irish culture to the agricultural tending of livestock.

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[71] "Introduction: The Politics of Love in *The Wild Irish Girl*," xlvii.

[72] Leith Davis, *Music, Postcolonialism, and Gender: The Construction of Irish National Identity, 1724-1874* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press 2006), 131.

[73] Johnson, "bowels, n.f.."

[74] In *A Treatise of Human Nature,* David Hume's draws on the metaphor of a string instrument to describe the process of sympathetic transmission: "the minds of all men are similar in their feelings and operations; nor can any one be actuated by any affection, of which all others are not, in some degree, susceptible. As in strings equally wound up, the motion of one communicates itself to the rest; so all the affections readily pass from one person to another, and beget correspondent movements in every human creature" (204-205). For Hume, sympathy seems to function in a somewhat harp like manner, connecting

The harp thus functions as a hinge between Irish culture, agriculture, and the alimentary. If Ireland is, as David Lloyd suggests, a country frequently associated with the often "unruly" mouth, which has resisted "multiple attempts to discipline it, taming its excesses and regulating its disrespect for the proper spaces and times of speech and performance, ingestion and utterance," Owenson reminds us that such mouths do not exist in a vacuum.[75] The novel uses Irish oral culture — especially as represented by Glorvina singing while playing her gut-strung harp — to remind us of the connection between the mouth and the gut, and it does not shy away from using alimentary language to do so. Horatio describes his experience of witnessing Glorvina sing while accompanying herself on the harp as a "rich feast of the senses and the soul" (51). As I addressed earlier in the chapter, he repeatedly frames his education in Irish cultural greatness in nourishing, healthful terms, representing Inismore as "the fountain of intellectual health" and contrasting the "ipecacuhana" of English legal writing with his Irish reading, which he likens to "poignant incentives which stimulate the appetite without causing repletion" (131, 89). The novel's positive portrayal of tasteful Irish culture rooted in agriculture and the alimentary counters the usual narrative — popular then and now — that Ireland was something of an undigested mess.

In political as well as literary contexts, the colonial relation between Great Britain and Ireland was often characterized as a digestive problem. This narrative is apparent in Lord Byron's April 12, 1812 speech to the House of Lords on the subject of Catholic Emancipation in Ireland. He explicitly draws on the metaphor of digestion to describe the matter of Ireland,

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sympathetic bodies. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature: Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects. … . Of the Understanding*, 3.

[75] Lloyd, *Irish Culture and Colonial Modernity 1800-2000: The Transformation of Oral Space*, 1.

lambasting the Acts of Union: "'If it must be called an Union,'" he declared, "'it is the union of the shark with his prey, the spoiler swallows up his victim, and thus they become one and indivisible. Thus has Great Britain swallowed up the parliament, the constitution, the independence of Ireland, and refuses to disgorge even a single privilege, although for the relief of her swollen and distempered body politic.'"[76] Like Jonathan Swift's brutal satire, *A Modest Proposal* (1729), which portrayed the English colonial presence in Ireland as cannibalistic, Byron's extended metaphor of a gluttonous shark suggests that themes of appetite and hunger, as well as predation, cannot help but come to the fore when discussing Ireland. Despite his statement that England has completely swallowed up Ireland, he depicts Ireland as undigested within, causing the English "body politic" to become "swollen and distempered."

Scholars today are less literal, but still suggest something undigested about the period in which Owenson was writing. For Joep Leersen, the Act of Union, instead of fulfilling its "intended" purpose "as a fresh departure…came to stand for a wrong turn in Irish history."[77] This led, post-Union, to a "sudden increase in the tendency to view Irish history as unfinished business," that he argues is reflected in the "failure" of Irish novels in general and *The Wild Irish Girl* in particular "to achieve the realist plausibility, cohesion and self-contained evenemental consistency of, say, Jane Austen."[78] Leersen sees this as "directly linked to the fractured nature of their source traditions, their Irish settings and their Irish historical background."[79] Ina Ferris

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[76] *Cobbett's Parliamentary Debates During the Sixth Session of the Fourth Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, and of the Kingdom of Great Britain the Twenty-First*, vol. 21 (London: T.C. Hansard, 1812), 651.

[77] Leersen, *Remembrance and Imagination: Patterns in the Historical and Literary Representation of Ireland in the Nineteenth Century*, 9.

[78] Ibid., 9, 64.

[79] Ibid.

echoes this theme of the incomplete Union: "from the start…the Union was an unstable and incomplete moment — indeed the motif of 'incomplete Union' became something of a mantra in the period."[80] Both Leersen and Ferris focus on how Irish literature was responding to politics and the country's shifting relationship with England. While *The Wild Irish Girl* is, of course, also responding to these events, it also manages to sidestep them in a way. Even if Ireland's place within Great Britain feels incomplete and undigested, the novel argues that the country can still be a tasteful place.

The Wild Irish Girl toggles between literal and figurative explorations of Irish taste and reminds us that tasting is in fact the very beginning of the digestive process. Indeed, even before the novel itself begins, its paratext sets the tone for what is to come. The epigraph quotes lines from "Fazio Delli Uberti's Travels through Ireland in the 14th Century" in the original Italian and then offers this translation: "This race of men, tho' savage they may seem / The country, too, with many a mountain rough, / Yet are they sweet to him who tries and tastes them" (1). Positing Ireland as both "savage" and "sweet," this epigraph hints at the beginning of a digestive process, one that involves not only the decision to "try" but also a further commitment to "taste." In the novel, Glorvina, both wild Irish and sweet (her name translates to "sweet voice") is also representative of the best taste, possessing a "decided talent for drawing, arising from powers naturally imitative, and a taste, early imbibed (from the contemplation of her native scenes), for all that is most sublime and beautiful in Nature" (74). For Father John, Glorvina's taste has a nourishing dimension: "the genius of Glorvina has ever appeared to me as a beam from heaven, an emanation of divine intelligence, whose nutritive warmth cherishes into existence that richness and variety of talent which wants only a little care to rear it to perfection" (75). Father

[80] Ferris, *The Romantic National Tale and the Question of Ireland*, 6.

John's somewhat labored simile comparing Glorvina's divinely-gifted "genius" to the sun does not simply emphasize that her taste and intelligence are a force for enlightenment. In invoking the sun's "nutritive warmth," he takes us into the realm of the agricultural, recalling the process of photosynthesis. Owenson portrays Ireland as a place of taste, yet one that is not separate from the material realities of Ireland in which other travelers and critics tend to get bogged down, sometimes literally. Glorvina epitomizes Irish taste and, with her gut strung harp, insists on the continuity between Irish agriculture and Irish culture. In contrast to the English impulse to divorce Irish agriculture from Irish culture — and to remake Irish agriculture for English profit — the novel instead emphasizes the many connections between them

CHAPTER THREE

Undigested Sentiment in John Keats's *Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil*

> *He once called her his basil plant; and when she asked for an explanation, said that basil was a plant which had flourished wonderfully on a murdered man's brains.*
>
> — George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (1871-2)[1]

In this famous passage from *Middlemarch*, the metaphor of the basil plant feeding on a man's brains satirizes the gendered parasitism of a failed marriage. For Eliot's ambitious physician, Tertius Lydgate, the unattributed allusion to Boccaccio's story of Isabella and her pot of basil is a fitting analogy for all that he has failed to achieve during his disastrous marriage to Rosamond Vincy. Having yielded to Rosamond's demands for financial comfort, he sacrifices his goal of contributing to medical innovation, establishes a practice catering to bourgeois patients, and distinguishes himself only with "a treatise on Gout, a disease which has a good deal of wealth on its side." Over the course of Middlemarch, Lydgate repeatedly proves himself to be a poor reader, especially of people; in the concluding pages of the novel in which this final insult to Rosamond is located, he again betrays his limited interpretative abilities with this rendering of Boccaccio's tragic story of Isabella and her basil. He reads in the poem the primacy of the brain and the human, and the validity of his own disappointed ambition. For Lydgate, his brain can offer far more than providing comfort to those afflicted by gout, a disease commonly associated with dietary excess and therefore the stomach.

This chapter turns to John Keats's stomach-centric adaptation of Isabella, and the questions it poses about the relationship between bodily, agricultural, and literary economies. A story of doomed love adapted from Boccaccio's Decameron, *Keats's Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil* (1817) narrates how Isabella's ambitious proto-capitalist brothers discover her passion for

[1] George Eliot, *Middlemarch [1871-2]* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), 835.

one of their employees, Lorenzo, and murder him in order to leverage their sister as an asset on the marriage market. When she learns in a dream where his body is buried, Isabella disinters Lorenzo, removes his head, and lovingly grooms it before she places the remain in a pot, plants some basil over it, and waters it — almost perpetually — with her tears. Isabella's brothers begin to suspect something strange about her attachment to the basil, which they examine in one of the rare moments Isabella is not "brood[ing]" over it (236). Upon unearthing a partially decayed head they recognize as Lorenzo's, the brothers flee Florence, and Isabella dies for want of her basil, although her dying words live on in the "sad ditty": "'O cruelty, / 'To steal my Basil-pot away from me!'" (501, 503-4). Focusing on the digestive process of the basil, rather than the brain being digested, Keats's adaptation downplays the primacy of human disappointment, as well as the human brain, focusing instead on that which flourishes upon both: the basil.

Relatively few scholars focus sustained attention on *Isabella*, despite the poem's intriguing and well- documented origin story. According to one school of thought, *Isabella* is, at best, a transitional work, an awkward growing pain of a poem that helped mark Keats's transition from an acolyte of Hunt's "Cockney school" of mawkish suburban romance to a great poet capable of writing the 1819 odes. Often viewed as Keats's unsuccessful attempt to write a poem with public and critical appeal, *Isabella* constituted one part of a Boccaccio-adaption project Keats and his friend John Hamilton Reynolds planned; they were jointly inspired by a lecture of William Hazlitt's — "On Dryden and Pope" — that they had attended in early February 1818. Discussing the success of Dryden's adaptations of Boccaccio and Chaucer, Hazlitt had remarked: "I should think that a translation of some of the other serious tales in Boccaccio and Chaucer, as that of Isabella…and others, if executed with taste and spirit, could

not fail to succeed in the present day."[2] In other words, Hazlitt seemed to promise commercial success, which had eluded Keats thus far. But this success was conditional, predicated on a tasteful execution. The question of what constitutes taste was a particularly vexed one for Keats, and a question that scholars continue to debate. For "the civilizing discourse of taste," Denise Gigante argues, "the knowledge that our material being mediates mouth and anus" was greeted with an "effort to repress, not to express, that knowledge."[3] This chapter offers a markedly different perspective. In *Isabella*, we encounter Keats at his least tasteful, decidedly *not* repressing the knowledge of material being. Instead, he plays up the "wormy circumstance" at the heart of the poem, depicting a basil that flourishes by digesting Lorenzo's "fast mouldering head," becoming a superlative basil that "smelt more balmy than its peers / Of Basil-tufts in Florence" (385, 430, 427-8).[4]

In Keats's retelling, Isabella's tears are not a tasteful symbol of feeling but an excessive and messy material manifestation of it. These tears in turn help to facilitate a bizarre tale of digestion that grants agency to plants as digestive, feeling bodies. The poem establishes a

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[2] William Hazlitt, "On Dryden and Pope," in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt: Lectures on the English Poets and a View of the English Stage*, ed. P.P. Howe (London: Frank Cass & Company, Ltd., 1967), 82.

[3] Gigante, *Taste: A Literary History*, 11.

[4] Discussing Keats's oft-maligned sensuousness in connection to *Isabella*, Christopher Ricks has argued that, "it is not an objection to Keats's erotic writing that it can cause a twinge of distaste, since the accommodation of distaste can be a humanly and artistically valuable thing, especially when it coexists with a frank delight" (97). Yet, he only mentions *Isabella* a few times in passing. Marjorie Levinson helped us understand Keats's "virtuous badness;" she convincingly argues that his poetry is significant not in spite of his being "a marginally middle class, professionally unequipped, nineteenth-century male adolescent" but because of these factors (106, 76). She represents Keats as a self-aware "scavenger," whose poetry "'feeds upon' but does not assimilate its sources," an approach that she argues deliberately "situates vulgarity at the heart of the literary action" (19, 26, 29). However, she dedicates a scant couple of pages to *Isabella*, and focuses only on the symbolic significance of the severed head. Christopher B. Ricks, *Keats and Embarrassment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974); Marjorie Levinson, *Keats's Life of Allegory: The Origins of a Style* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988).

recursive relationship between plant and human bodies — the equalizing "or" in the title emphasizes the interchangeability of Isabella and the Pot of Basil — reflecting and distorting the digestive process via its depiction of a robustly digesting plant and an increasingly starving Isabella. Occupied in a more-than-full-time capacity as the basil's gardener, Isabella's body seems to suspend its regular needs, for she almost never leaves the basil, and "seldom felt she any hunger pain," making the poem a tale of digestion in which the human body as the site of digestion is left out almost entirely (468). Instead, the poem calls attention to the digestive process of plants, upending anthropocentric narratives of digestion.[5] As this chapter will address in more detail, contemporary agricultural tracts emphasized the similarity between plant and animal bodies. In discussing the best way to feed plants, these tracts represented the soil surrounding a plant as a digestive body functioning as the plant's outsourced stomach. If plants were anatomically similar to humans, what were readers to make of the way a plant's soil-stomach foregrounded a body's connection to substances outside itself? Displacing the human digestive process onto plants is not just a neat aesthetic trick, but a means for reconfiguring and

[5] Those who have remarked upon the poem's strange fusion of the somatic and the horticultural all note something cyclical and possibly even recyclable in the poem's subject matter, which Keats himself recycled from the *Decameron.* However, they all tend to take the sentimental charge of the poem a bit too seriously, in my opinion. Alan Richardson does not devote much space to the poem in his chapter on Keats, but he does point to Lorenzo's frequent blushes as one of the ways Keats "represents motions of the heart and blood in a way that underscores the complications as well as the transports of an embodied sensibility" (133). Donald Goellnicht reads *Isabella* as "a clinically accurate account of melancholy madness," and considers how Keats seems to be coming to terms with the cycles of life, noting that one of Keats's themes is "new growth out of death that is symbolized by the luxurious basil" (192, 15). In her more extensive treatment of *Isabella*, Hermione De Almeida argues that the poem "bears illness as its dominant metaphor even as its subject, or essence, is love." *Isabella* reminds the reader of the "interconnection or reciprocity of life and death, and of the ambiguities that pervade all scientific and poetic attempts to mark their individual signs and define their distinctions." Highlighting the ambiguity of this life-death reciprocity, De Almeida emphasizes how, "the more she droops toward her deathly lover, the more the basil in parasitic reversal grows lush, tall, and looming; like Lorenzo's spirit, it consumes her life" (212, 86, 15). Richardson, *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind*; Donald C. Goellnicht, *The Poet-Physician: Keats and Medical Science* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1984); De Almeida, *Romantic Medicine and John Keats*.

expanding the boundaries of feeling.

Although Keats began writing *Isabella* as an attempt to court readers and critics, in the execution of the poem he betrays his inability or reluctance (or both) to strive for commercial and critical success. Despite Hazlitt's promise that an adaptation of *Isabella* "could not fail to succeed," Keats's adaptation seems especially attuned to the tale's status as one of ten stories from the *Decameron* "Concerning Such Persons, Whose Loves Have Had Successelesse Ending."[6] Like *Middlemarch*'s Lydgate, Keats also seems to find in the story of Isabella and her basil an apt allegory for the disappointments he has faced. Unlike Lydgate, however, Keats's adaptation interrogates the idea of success, acting as a kind of auto-autopsy, or a visceral examination of Keats's own poetic vocation and the purpose of literary production. It does so by engaging with discourses of efficiency that interrogate the purpose, use, and relationship between human and vegetable bodies, both above and below the ground.

Bathos, critics, and the literary marketplace

Perhaps unsurprisingly, *Isabella* often invites a casual application of the descriptor "bathetic," now understood to denote the swift move from the sublime to the ridiculous. As this section will address, bathos — as conceived of by Alexander Pope in *Peri Bathous* (1728) — is actually a more nuanced concept. Pope's writing was a source of contention in Keats's time. For the Cockney School, Pope's closed Augustan couplets exemplified his narrow minded, conservative views of politics and poetry. For the Tory reviewers at publications like *Blackwoods Magazine* and the *Quarterly Review*, attacking Pope (as Keats had explicitly done in

[6] Giovanni Boccaccio, "Fift Novell: The Three Brethren to Isabella, Slew a Gentleman That Secretly Loved Her," in *The Decameron Containing an Hundred Pleasant Nouels. Wittily Discoursed, Betweene Seauen Honourable Ladies, and Three Noble Gentlemen* (London: Isaac Iaggard, 1620), 122.

"Sleep and Poetry") simply offered more proof of the Hunt circle's bad politics and worse taste.[7] Yet, learning how Pope theorized bathos — and realizing that he wrote the treatise to attack what he deemed bad poetry written for popular consumption — can actually shed light on the central tension in *Isabella*. On the one hand, Keats wrote the poem with the goal of commercial success, adapting one of the "serious" tales from Boccaccio that Hazlitt deemed likely to appeal to the sentimental tastes of the day. On the other hand, *Isabella* was written in the wake of particularly excoriating reviews, and Reynolds proposed that it function as an "answer" to Keats's conservative critics. *Isabella* partially sidesteps both of these goals, however. The poem deliberately engages with tasteful sentimental conventions in order to upend them, practicing what Pope described as "the *Bathos* in Perfection…when a Man is set with his Head downward, and his Breech upright, his Degradation is compleat: One End of him is as high as ever, only that End is the wrong one."[8] For Pope, bathos represented the literary equivalent of inverting the alimentary canal. He helped set the standard for determining literary hierarchies in the eighteenth century and he did so by drawing on the metaphorical association between literature, food, and excrement.[9]

These literary hierarchies were on Keats's mind when he wrote on October 1818 to his brother, George, and sister-in-law, Georgiana, that Reynolds, his partner in Boccaccio adaptation, "persuades me to publish my pot of Basil as an answer to the attacks made on me in

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[7] For more on the topic, see: William Keach, "Cockney Couplets: Keats and the Politics of Style," *Studies in Romanticism* 25, no. 2.

[8] Alexander Pope, "Peri Bathous: Or the Art of Sinking in Poetry [1728]," in *The Art of Sinking in Poetry: A Critical Edition*, ed. Edna Leake Steeves (New York: Russell & Russell, 1952), 69.

[9] This language could be heard decades later in Wordsworth's famous Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, in which he attacked writers who "indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression, in order to furnish food for fickle tastes, and fickle appetites, of their own creation."

Blackwood's Magazine and the *Quarterly Review.*"[10] In the eyes of his conservative reviewers, Keats's poetic attempts had been interpreted as both sign and symptom of his aspiring above his ostensibly cockney origins, a striving that provoked a particularly visceral response in some of his critics. In *Blackwoods'* notorious review of Keats's first attempt at an epic poem, *Endymion*, John Gibson Lockhart, writing as "Z," sneeringly identified Keats as one of Hunt's "stars" on the "poetical horizon of the land of Cockaigne."[11] This article was the fourth installment in "Z's" ongoing attack on what he termed the "Cockney School of Poetry;" his criticisms derived from a clear disdain for the class Hunt and his acolytes represented. His pun here yokes "Cockney" with "Cockaigne," the mythical land of luxury, feasting and general abundance. Keats's attentiveness to the lush and the appetitive was held up as another example of his gauche desire for tasteless excess, proof of his inability to transcend his status as a petit bourgeois adolescent poet.[12] *Isabella* thus represents a somewhat puzzling rejoinder to Keats's critics. Instead of eschewing the tropes for which his poetry had been criticized, it appears to double down on them.

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[10] John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins., 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), 1.393.

[11] John Gibson Lockhart, "On the Cockney School of Poetry. No. IV," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, August 1818, 519.

[12] For Lockhart, Keats's luxuriant poetic attempts were diseased: "Whether Mr John had been sent home with a diuretic or composing draught to some patient far gone in the poetical mania, we have not heard. This much is certain, that he has caught the infection, and that thoroughly" (ibid.) In the *Quarterly Review*, John Wilson Croker's *Endymion* review similarly invoked the idea of illness, accusing Keats of poetry that "more than rivals the insanity of [Leigh Hunt's]." John Wilson Croker, "Keats's Endymion," *Quarterly Review*, April 1818, 205.

Outside of the conservative circles represented by these journals, the politically liberal Lord Byron proved himself still more than capable of being a snob: he sneered at the "shabby-genteel" qualities of Keats's poetry, which he frequently described as masturbatory. Some of Byron's choice phrases include describing Keats's writing as "'a sort of mental masturbation – frigging his *Imagination*,'" and as "'Piss-a-bed-poetry." He also referred to Keats as a "'Self-polluter of the human mind.'" Although Lord Byron drew on a different vocabulary to critique the poetry, it was also one that focused on Keats's unhealthy appetites. Qtd in: Levinson, *Keats's Life of Allegory: The Origins of a Style*, 18.

The perplexing nature of this rebuttal is particularly evident in the poem's central figure: the pot of basil. The term "pot" offers a palimpsest of cultural and historical meanings. In the original Italian, the "testo di bassilico" puns on the dual meaning of "testo" as "text" and "clay pot." When John Florio rendered the *Decameron* into English, his popular 1620 translation named "a pot" as the receptacle for Lorenzo's-head-*cum*-Isabella's-basil.[13] By Keats's time the pot derived additional classed significance from its association with suburban gardening. In one of the many biting set-downs he launched at the Cockney School, Lockhart (writing as "Z") accused Hunt and his acolytes of filling their poetry with "laborious affected descriptions of flowers seen in window-pots, or cascades heard at Vauxhall," an insult that reminded his readers of the Hunt circle's associations with the urban and suburban, rather than what was deemed the truly natural, as represented by Wordsworth's Lake School.[14] As Elizabeth Jones explains, Lockhart's "vitriol was directed at the social mobility associated with the suburbs, and a domestic lifestyle of luxury, abundance and comfort" usually limited to "the gentry," but increasingly available to suburban dwellers of dubious class origins.[15] Thus, "Z invoked a high ('Wordsworthian') Romanticism to prove that, by contrast, Hunt and his associates were pastoral charlatans. Their flowers were grown in pots and window-boxes; the mountains they climbed were paltry suburban hills; the streams beside which they reclined were manufactured by landscape architects" following the dictates of "a new aesthetic, the gardenesque – an affordable

[13] In the original Italian, Boccaccio writes: "ella occultamente disotterra la testa e mettela in un testo di bassilico." It seems likely that Boccaccio was also playing on the similarity between "testo" and "testa," which means "head."

[14] Lockhart, "On the Cockney School of Poetry. No. IV," 521.

[15] Elizabeth Jones, "Suburb Sinners: Sex and Disease in the Cockney School," in *Leigh Hunt: Life, Poetics, Politics*, ed. Nicholas Roe (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 60.

alternative to the picturesque" that soon would be named and celebrated by the suburban promoter John Claudius Loudon, author of *The Gardener's Magazine* and *The Suburban Gardener and Villa Companion*.[16]

Despite invoking the ease and lushness of suburban life associated with pot gardening, Keats nevertheless came to see *Isabella* as an inadequate rejoinder, as he explained in a September 1819 letter to his friend Richard Woodhouse: "The Pot of Basil…is too smokeable."[17] "Smokeable," a slang term, usually gets defined as "able to be ridiculed."[18] Scholars often quote this self-criticism as evidence that Keats was worried about the harsh reviews his poetry had received, as well as his lack of success in the literary marketplace.[19] It also seems possible that Keats worried no one would grasp the particular nature of the joke. James Chandler's analysis of the shades of meaning behind Keats's epistolary uses of "smokeable" and its variants helps

[16] Ibid., 84-85. Recent scholarly work emphasizes the political anxieties underlying the criticisms Lockhart and other conservative writers made of the Cockney ease and luxury associated with suburban living, particularly as exemplified by the Hunt circle. Conservatives like Lockhart saw uppity suburban Cockneys as threatening individually, but Hunt's formation of a suburban Cockney community particularly rankled. Greg Kucich focuses on the significance of Leigh Hunt's "Cockneyfied aesthetic excess that mocks authority and blurs social and political hierarchies," especially in *The Story of the Rimini* (121). Citing Hunt's transformation of his Surrey Gaol rooms and garden into a bower of bliss not found outside a "fairy tale," Kucich argues for the political statement made by Hunt's cozy suburban prison, and its relation to his "poetic luxuries." For Kucich, neither the poem nor the jail makeover "constitute a mode of escapism, but form part of a sustained effort to reimagine from within the iron centre of despotism, prejudice and self-interest a new liberated social order governed by art, beauty and sociability" (128). Greg Kucich, "Cockney Chivalry: Hunt, Keats and the Aesthetics of Excess," in *Leigh Hunt: Life, Poetics, Politics*, ed. Nicholas Roe (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

[17] Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*, 2.174.

[18] "Smokable, *adj.* and *n.*," in *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

[19] See: Kurt Heinzelman, "Self-Interest and the Politics of Composition in Keats's *Isabella*," *ELH* 55, no. 1 (1988); Kelvin Everest, "Isabella in the Market-Place: Keats and Feminism " in *Keats and History*, ed. Nicholas Roe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Jack Stillinger, *Multiple Authorship and the Myth of Solitary Genius* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

explain why.[20] According to Chandler, "most typically…'to smoke' involves a blending of…an act of *comprehension* that implies an act [of] *condescension*, toward 'weakness' or 'inadequacy.'"[21] Chandler elucidates how Keats's concerns about *Isabella*'s smokeability are not merely based on worry about further critical mocking:

> Keats thought of *Isabella, or The Pot of Basil* as 'smokeable' in spite of the pains he took to craft its obscurity. Most critics, as Jack Stillinger has noted, have met the poem with only 'puzzlement,'…We must not fail to recognize the extent to which Keats's sensitivity to being 'smoked' by the reviewing establishment contributed to the hermeneutic density for which he is now revered. 'Smokeability' here implies a conception of intelligibility or understanding that is itself understood, in its circumstance, as a vulnerability to being grasped – *captured* – by a higher-order intelligence.[22]

Chandler proceeds to discuss the term primarily in relation to Keats's 1819 composition, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, which Keats had grouped with *Isabella* in his criticism of the poem as "too smokeable." However, his analysis of both these poems functions as a preamble to his main reading, which is of *Ode to Psyche*. In this sense, he participates in the critical propensity to treat *Isabella* as a stepping stone, both within Keats's corpus, and as a scholarly interlude en route to a Keats poem that seems to invite more sustained critical attention. Nevertheless, he offers a way to think about the complexities of *Isabella* as a poem attempting "obscurity" and "hermeneutic density" but ultimately falling short in the eyes of its creator. Chandler also helps to highlight one of the central tensions of the poem: the fact that it was written in part as an attempt to be

[20] For Chandler, the "smokeable," and its permutations, track with Keats's complicated, changing, and gendered ideas about his poetic identity and "aesthetic development." James Chandler, *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 408.

[21] Ibid., 399.

[22] Ibid., 399-400.

commercially successful, a goal that seems at odds with its simultaneous attempt at impenetrability, to say nothing of its morbid intermixing of food and bodies.

In the same letter in which he deemed *Isabella* "too smokeable," Keats himself seemed attuned to the poem's contradictions. Identifying one of the central tensions of the poem, he confessed: "It is possible to write fine things which cannot be laugh'd at in anyway. Isabella is what I should call were I a reviewer 'a weak-sided Poem' with an amusing sober-sadness about it. Not that I do not think Reynolds and you are quite right about it; it is enough for me. But this will not do to be public. If I may so say, in my dramatic capacity I enter fully into the feeling: but in Propria Persona I should be apt to quiz it myself."[23] Here and elsewhere in the letter, Keats expresses concern about the poem's public reception in general and critical reception in particular. While the poem might have been inspired in part by Hazlitt's promise of commercial success, Keats soon looked on it as something that could be "smoak'd at the Carpenter's shaving chimney much more cheaply."[24] With this play on the multiple meanings of "smoke," Keats suggests that it would be foolish to go through the expense of publishing *Isabella* when the only result he can foresee is laughter, which he can come by for free. He instead wants to create a work that denies the possibility of laughter, especially laughter at the poet's expense.

Yet, like Isabella's tears, *Isabella* the poem seems to overflow with emotion to an almost laughable degree. After all, this is a poem in which the tragic Isabella tenderly plants the head of Lorenzo, her murdered beloved, in a pot of "sweet basil, which her tears kept ever wet" (416). Despite Keats's claim that "in my dramatic capacity I enter fully into the feeling," I find *Isabella* ultimately — and surprisingly — free of emotion understood as romantic excess. Indeed, the

[23] Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*, 2.174.

[24] Ibid.

poem's strange rendering of feeling seems to invite "quiz"ing, in the sense understood in Keats's time ("to make fun of"), and as regards the many questions we as readers would ask of it. Representing feeling without appearing in sympathy with it, the poem's excess of pathos works in service of what I argue is its dominant style: the bathetic. In other words, although the poem can be read as a sentimental work, its main aesthetic register is one of bathos. Today, "bathos" is generally understood to mean an anti-climax, or "ludicrous descent from the elevated to the commonplace."[25] However, as theorized in "Martinus Scriblerus's" 1728 satirical treatise *Peri Bathous: Or the Art of Sinking in Poetry*,[26] bathos is a more complicated concept. Pope's apprehensions about the changing face of the literary marketplace, and the language in which he articulated these concerns helped shape the modern lexicon used to describe "good" and "bad" literature. The literary critical heritage of bathos offers a new lens through which to explore some of the underlying tensions in *Isabella*, a poem written in the hopes of appealing to popular taste and — at least for a time — responding to critical disapproval.

Peri Bathous savaged the glut of poetic hacks it perceived as catering to, and shaping, the bad tastes of the time. Its title alludes to Longinus's[27] first century CE aesthetic treatise *Peri Hypsous*, usually translated as *On the Art of the Sublime.* "Hypsous" more literally translates to "height." Prior to *Peri Bathous*, "bathos" approximately translated to "profound depth." *Peri Bathos*, however, recast the term as one referring to the depths of bad art, and offered itself as a

[25] "Bathos, n.," in *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

[26] Scholars seem to agree that Alexander Pope wrote most of the brief treatise, although, as Edna Steeves argues: "Intended by its author, or authors, as a Scriblerus project, *Peri Bathous* belongs properly to the canon of that heavy scholar; and as he was originally the composite creation of the Club, so his individual works bear the mark in some degree of composite planning." Edna Leake Steeves, "Introduction," in *The Art of Sinking in Poetry: A Critical Edition*, ed. Edna Leake Steeves (New York: Russell & Russell, 1952), xxxii.

[27] The authorship of the treatise is unknown, but in Pope's time it was commonly attributed to Longinus.

detailed guide for the mediocre hack writers dwelling in "the Lowlands of Parnassus" to transition from the low to the lowest: "the *Bathos;* the Bottom, the End, the Central Point, the *non plus ultra* of true Modern Poesie!"[28] A companion piece of sorts to the *Dunciad*, *Peri Bathous* also functioned as an "attack on literary mediocrity," except its "critical approach…is perceptual; it tells us what bad writing is — and for that reason, *per contra*, what good writing is."[29] Bathos, as theorized in *Peri Bathous*, is a varied concept; the text uses over one hundred excerpts from a range of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century poetry to develop and support the claims it makes about what constitutes bathos. At its core, however, *Peri Bathous* concerns itself with indicting hack culture and the publishing infrastructure that allowed these hacks to disseminate their work: "the flourishing State of our Trade, and the Plenty of our Manufacture."[30] Although the text certainly takes on the bad taste of readers — popularity does not equate with quality, after all — it seems most preoccupied with how writers are shaping and then feeding these tastes, and uses the discourse of digestion to sharpen its attack.

In the voice of the pedantic scholar Scriblerus, Pope portrays this identification and classifying of poetic bathos as an act of literary digestion. He is, he claims, helpful "compil[ing] and digest[ing]" modern poetry.[31] Yet *Peri Bathous* soon moves from references to digestion as metaphorical organization to equating modern poetry with the material end product of the somatic digestive process: excretion. "Poetry is," he declares, "*a natural* or *morbid Secretion from the Brain*…there is hardly any human Creature past Childhood, but at one time or other has

[28] Pope, "Peri Bathous: Or the Art of Sinking in Poetry [1728]," 6.

[29] Steeves, "Introduction," li..

[30] Pope, "Peri Bathous: Or the Art of Sinking in Poetry [1728]," 6.

[31] Ibid.

had some Poetical Evacuation, and no question was much the better for it in his Health."[32] Later, Scriblerus advises: "The Physician, by the Study and Inspection of Urine and Ordure, approves himself in the Science; and in like sort should our Author accustom and exercise his Imagination upon the Dregs of Nature."[33] *Peri Bathous* of course participates here in the long tradition of using scatology in the service of satire, a rhetorical move not uncommon among the Scriblerians. Yet, by connecting bathos with the Scriblerian excremental vision in a text that also presents itself as a "digest" of bathetic modern poetry, *Peri Bathous* underscores the role that digestive language often plays in attempts to establish literary hierarchies. Often, this language had real-world referents. After all, in the eighteenth century, most "bad" books and ephemeral print matter were almost certainly destined to be repurposed as food wrapping at best, and toilet paper at worst. In contrast to the properly digested, properly hierarchized world of literary production, *Peri Bathous* presents bathetic writing as an indigestive affront.[34] Whether or not this affront can be intentional remains a topic of critical debate.[35] In my reading, *Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil*

[32] Ibid., 12-13.

[33] Ibid., 29.

[34] Scriblerus's larger claim is that bathetic writers do not "follow nature" as Pope advises in *Essay on Criticism* but are instead "Master[s] of this happy and antinatural way of thinking" (19). Ironically, this criticism about bathetic writers as unnatural would be leveled against Pope almost a century later by Hazlitt, in his lecture that inspired Keats and John Hamilton Reynolds to undertake their Boccaccio-adaptation project. According to Hazlitt, "Dryden and Pope are the great masters of the artificial style of poetry in our language, as the poets of whom I have already treated, Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton, were of the natural" (68).

[35] Keston Sutherland, one of the few critics to theorize bathos, argues that bathos comes into being when identified by a discerning reader. As Sutherland sees it, bathos "is not produced by the agency or decay of language itself, nor by the original authors of the language nominated as bathetic…but by the satirist who first attackingly discovers to public view the ridiculous destitution of truth in that language" (22). For the writers of bathetic poetry, bathos is inadvertent, diagnosable only after the fact. Sutherland thus theorizes "bathos" as entirely *ex post facto*, and remains silent on the possibility of intentional bathos. Yet other scholars *do* allow for the possibility of deliberate bathos. Peter Nicholls and Sarah Crangle observe that, "it is [Pope's] ironic notion of an *art* of sinking that leads a ghostly existence in much later attempts to undermine the hegemony of 'high' art and to find in certain forms of a designedly 'low' art a means by

deliberately engages with the kind of aesthetic, digestive criticism that Pope develops in *Peri Bathous*. There is also connection between how Pope represents literature as a commodity, and how Keats later thinks about this issue — and the labor associated with it — after Britain's publishing industry had experienced almost a century of growth.

In "Sleep and Poetry" and "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer," Keats had taken aim at Pope and the Augustan poetics he represented.[36] But in *Isabella,* Keats engages with the satire on popular poetry laid out in *Peri Bathous*, as he explores what it might mean to write a poem designed for popular sentimental tastes. *Isabella*'s bathos is, at least in part, deliberate, and attuned to the associations between literary hierarchies and digestive language, as well as to the undigested or unabsorbable. Given that *Peri Bathous* translates to *The Art of Sinking in Poetry*, it can be connected to a more explicitly somatic process of sinking: that of involuntary peristaltic motion and the gradual transformation of aliment moving through the digestive system. *Isabella* explores these digestive ideas via the horticultural — hinting at the basil's roots sinking into both the soil and Lorenzo's decaying head — and it accomplishes this in one of the quintessential bathetic styles: the florid.

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which to subvert a culture's ideological imperatives and its attendant metaphysical pretentions" (5). They are referring here to what they identify as a deliberate, relatively recent "'turn' to 'bathos' after 1900," in which "'bathos' may signal not only a degraded consumer world but also an aesthetic that critically reflects it while eschewing the easier consolations of kitsch and pathos." Of course, Romantic poetry has long been associated with kitsch, and, as Daniel Tiffany observes: "In the poems of John Keats, who may be considered not only a prodigy of Gothic verse but a child-like progenitor…of poetic kitsch, one discovers a dazzling inventory of special effects, a veritable 'toy-shop' of poetic commodities" (106). However, I am interested in the longer literary critical heritage of bathos in relation to the literary marketplace and the consumer world, both common themes in Keats's writing, and which shape *Isabella* in particular. Keston Sutherland, "What Is *Bathos*?," in *On Bathos: Literature, Art, Music*, ed. Sara Crangle and Peter Nicholls (London: Continuum Books, 2010); Peter Nicholls and Sara Crangle, "Introduction," ibid.; Daniel Tiffany, *My Silver Planet: A Secret History of Poetry and Kitsch* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).

[36] At the same time, conservative critics were taking aim at Keats for *not* being Augustan, specifically for his offenses with "loose liberal couplets" of a non-heroic variety (Keach 183).

Although Scriblerus identifies many categories and sub-categories of bathetic writing, he argues that no poetic style is "more proper to the *Bathos*" than "the florid, as Flowers which are the *Lowest* of Vegetables are the most *Gaudy*, and do many times grow in great Plenty at the bottom of *Ponds* and *Ditches.*"[37] He plays here on the definition of "florid" as both ornate speech or prose and literally abundant flora. In a treatise satirizing the aesthetic outcome of contemporary writing done for *"Profit* or *Gain*," it seems apt that Scriblerus remains particularly attuned to abundance and excess.[38] While each representative poetic example of the "florid" unfolds a scene of abundance, *Peri Bathos* especially targets poets who describe not just an abundant nature but an abundant nature *with agency*, one in which "willing Branches strove / To beautify and shade the Grove" or "trembling Palms their mutual Vows repeat."[39] The offense posed by the florid is one of excess that straddles the line between an uneasy abundance of language and vegetation, a criticism also leveled at Keats's poetry. Take, for instance, this 1850 set down in *The North British Review*:

> In the poetry of Keats, as all must feel, there is an excess of greenth and vegetable imagery; in reading his descriptions, we seem either to breathe the air of a hothouse, heavy with the moist odours of great-leafed exotics, or to lie full stretched at noon in some shady nook in a wood, rank underneath with the pipy hemlock, and kindred plants of strange overgrowth. In Wordsworth, as we have seen, there is no such unhealthy lusciousness ; he has his spots of thick herbage, and his banks of florid richness too; but what he delights in is the broad, clear expanse, the placid lake, the pure pellucid air, the quiet outline of the mountain.[40]

[37] Pope, "Peri Bathous: Or the Art of Sinking in Poetry [1728]," 63.

[38] Ibid., 11.

[39] Ibid., 63. The first excerpt comes from Aphra Behn's *The Golden Age*; the second from Laurence Eusden's "Court of Venus."

[40] "The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth, D.C.L., Poet Laureate, &C. ," *The North British Review* 13, no. 26 (1850): 494-95.

It is acceptable, this reviewer suggests, to occasionally indulge in "florid richness," as Wordsworth does to a judicious degree. Keats, however, does not seem to know when to stop. Excessive even in excess, Keats's poetry is particularly offensive for its horticultural profusion, an abundance that is not only unnatural but also unhealthy, continuing the ongoing theme in contemporary reviews that Keats's poetic pretensions represented an unnatural reaching beyond his station in life. What, then, should we make of *Isabella*, a poem that inflates its source material, and whose central figure is a disturbingly lush plant that becomes more than just a plant?

In what follows, I will argue that reading *Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil* with the "florid" in mind allows us to examine the relationship between the poem's aesthetics and its materialism and how digestion serves as a system that regulates the exchange between the internal and external. The florid style connects overwrought language, flourishing plant life, and somatic states of being. *Isabella* represents sentimental excess made material in the form of a disturbingly flourishing piece of foliage. Rather than view Isabella and her tears as rhetorical figures or allegories of sorrow, the poem portrays her tears literally nourishing their opportunistic vegetative recipient, the basil, which leverages Isabella's sentimental surfeit to its own purposes. Of course, Keats did not invent this tale, but only adapted it from the *Decameron.* Yet, he adapts the relatively well-known episode about Isabella and her basil in ways that defamiliarize and distend the tale. Even as *Isabella* depicts a flourishing basil plant efficiently eating away at the severed head fertilizing it, the poem is most notable for reveling in excess, both in its composition, and in its representation of sentiment. In adapting the story of Isabella from Boccaccio's relatively sparse tale in the *Decameron*, Keats bloated the source material. The poem's formal refusal to properly digest its Boccaccian original subverts the expectations readers

might have for a sentimental tale. His additions not only materially add to the size of the narrative, but they also emphasize the poem's messy, often gory material dimensions. *Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil* thus resists becoming a tool for popular sentiment, and at the same time challenges the hierarchies of literary taste; both fields of discourse were often conceptualized using digestive rhetoric.

"Shed one tear": Sentimental bloat

Although adaptation could be interpreted as a process of metaphorically digesting the original text, Keats's act of adaptation seems closer to one of indigestion, in which he performs the opposite of breaking down or refining his source material. Keats based his *Isabella* on a reprint of the popular, and first, English translation of the *Decameron*, originally published in 1620, and attributed to John Florio.[41] In Florio's translation, the story of Isabella comprised approximately 1800 words. Keats stretched out his version of the tale to almost 4000 words. Scholars sometimes briefly note certain aspects of how Keats adapts the Florio version; with the exception of Susan Wolfson, they do not pay attention to the significance of the degree to which Keats expands on the original. Often, *Isabella* is interpreted as Keats grappling with the romance tradition, moving from "the gentleness of old Romance" towards "wormy circumstance," frequently read as a variation on some form of "realism" (387, 385). For Jack Stillinger, the poem is an "anti-romance."[42] Wolfson meanwhile reads it as a new kind of romance that

[41] Herbert G. Wright, *Boccaccio in England: From Chaucer to Tennyson* (University of London: The Athlone Press, 1957), 397.

[42] Jack Stillinger, "Keats and Romance: The 'Reality' of *Isabella*," in *The Hoodwinking of Madeline and Other Essays on Keats's Poems* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971), 131.

incorporates "social criticism," making it a "meta-romance."[43] Wolfson considers how *Isabella*'s narrator "indulges numerous moments of digression from Boccaccio's story of Isabella" in ways that "both implicitly and explicitly, call into question the values Keats knows his readers cherish in the generic conventions of 'old Romance'" at the same time "that narrative decorum is being violated."[44] While I do not disagree with Wolfson's reading, Keats's additions are more than generically significant digressions that "reshape the genre of romance in [Keats's] literary practice."[45] Rather, I read them as a deliberate bloating of the source material, an inflation that reconceptualizes sentiment itself. Keats's additions materially add to the size of the narrative, while also emphasizing the narrative's material dimensions, particularly the somatic dimensions of its sentimental excesses. At the same time, the poem's narrator remains at a remove from the sentimental excess he describes.

Keats navigates this remove through his use of the *ottava rima* stanza form. Although Boccaccio's tale was written in prose, Keats adapted and expanded it into poetry. His choice of *ottava rima* contributes to the poem's affective disconnect, which is then reinforced by its attention to the material markers of sentiment. In Italian poetry, *ottava rima* had been used for centuries; Boccaccio himself might have invented the stanza, which he used in his epics *Teiseda* and *Filostrato*. As Jeffrey C. Robinson explains, *ottava rima* experienced a surge of popularity in later Romantic poetry due to British poets traveling to Italy, where they witnessed the performances of *improvvisatori,* or extemporaneous poets for whom *ottava rima* was the

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[43] Susan J. Wolfson, *The Questioning Presence: Wordsworth, Keats, and the Interrogative Mode in Romantic Poetry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 281, 85.

[44] "Keats's 'Isabella' and the 'Digressions' of 'Romance'," *Criticism* 27, no. 3 (1985): 249.

[45] Ibid.

preferred stanza form.[46] "An in-your-face verse form," Robinson writes, "*ottava rima* privileges ease and play over resistance and labor, language heterogeneity over purity, spontaneity over pre-meditation."[47] Early popular works in English *ottava rima* included John Hookham Frere's mock-heroic *Prospectus and Specimen of an Intended National Work* (1817), and Byron's *Beppo* (1817) and *Don Juan* (1818-1823). Although "Keats's use of the *ottava rima* stanza in *Isabella* seems to contradict the digressive, playful, transformative temperament found in Byron and Shelley," Robinson argues that "Keats employs *ottava rima* precisely for its poetics of renovation, precisely as a means of at once conveying Boccaccio's piteous theme while announcing a refusal to succumb to it."[48] Keats's use of *ottava rima* lacks either the comic timing of Byron's or the passionate extemporaneous quality associated with its Italian original.

The speaker only seems animated when criticizing Isabella's "proud" brothers, and yet displays a cool remove from Isabella's gushing grief. That Keats dedicates stanzas XIV-XVIII to making explicit the brutally exploitative reality of the brothers' anachronistically industrial business empire has led some scholars to read *Isabella* as a proto-Marxist critique,[49] taking seriously George Bernard Shaw's claim that "if Karl Marx can be imagined as writing a poem instead of a treatise on Capital, he would have written *Isabella*."[50] If the speaker's feeling seems to show through in these stanzas, a similar emotional charge is notably absent from later stanzas

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[46] Jeffrey C. Robinson, "Romantic Poetry: The Possibilities for Improvisation," *The Wordsworth Circle* 38, no. 3 (2007): 97.

[47] Ibid., 97-98.

[48] Ibid., 98.

[49] See especially: Heinzelman, "Self-Interest and the Politics of Composition in Keats's *Isabella*."; Daniel P. Watkins, *Keats's Poetry and the Politics of the Imagination* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1989).

[50] Bernard Shaw, "Keats," in *The John Keats Memorial Volume* (London: John Lane, 1921), 175.

relating the central tragedy of Isabella and the basil. Instead, he unfolds the excessively emotional tale with a sense of wry detachment that only emphasizes the poem's sentimental bloat.

In addition to using *ottava rima* to "renovate" Boccaccio, as Robinson argues, Keats amplified the sentiment and eliminated the pragmatic moments in the translation. After being visited by Lorenzo's ghost in a dream, Florio's Isabella dispassionately decides to make a hypothesis-testing inquiry regarding whether or not her vision of Lorenzo is true; she ventures out to the site she saw in the vision, "onely to make triall, if that which she seemed to see in her sleepe, should carry any likelyhood of truth."[51] As Florio writes when describing Isabella's exhumation of Lorenzo's grave: "Wisedome and government so much prevailed with her, as to instruct her soule, that her teares spent there, were meerley fruitelesse and in vaine." This version presents Isabella as capable of self-management and logistical thinking, and aware of the "fruitlesse." However, if Florio's Isabella is aware that tears can sometimes be "fruitlesse," Keats's Isabella is not.[52] Significantly, Keats's version restricts the basil's water source solely to Isabella's tears. While, in Florio's translation, Isabella does bathe Lorenzo's disinterred, severed head with her tears, she waters the planted basil "either with her teares, Rose water, or water distilled from the Flowers of Oranges."[53] This seems a more plausible approach to plant hydration than the one adopted by Keats's Isabella, who "had no knowledge when the day was

[51] Boccaccio, "Fift Novell: The Three Brethren to Isabella, Slew a Gentleman That Secretly Loved Her," 160.

[52] The story of Isabella and her basil takes place on the fourth day, as one of ten stories "Concerning Such Persons, Whose Loves Have Had Successelesse Ending," a categorization that further highlights the tension between the "fruitlesse" and the flourishing basil (ibid., 122).

[53] Boccaccio, "Fift Novell: The Three Brethren to Isabella, Slew a Gentleman That Secretly Loved Her," 159-61.

done, / And the new morn she saw not: but in peace / Hung over her sweet Basil evermore, / And moisten'd it with tears unto the core." (421-424).

Keats's poem depicts feeling — made manifest in tears — as a material resource that is limited and liable to exploitation, both as the diegetic source of basil hydration and, in an extradiegetic sense, as the excessive feeling produced by characters in, and readers of, sentimental tales. The narrator in fact suggests that we as readers are somehow responsible for these fictional lovers' sorrow. Lorenzo and Isabella might have remained happy, he implies, had they stayed "close in a bower of hyacinth and musk, / Unknown of any, free from whispering tale. / Ah! Better had it been for ever so, / Than idle ears should pleasure in their woe" (85-88). Deriving "pleasure" from the lovers' "woe," the prying reader is cast as a sadist. And yet we are sadists overpaying for the pleasure, as Keats implies in one of his notable digressions:

> Were they unhappy then? — It cannot be —
> Too many tears for lovers have been shed,
> Too many sighs give we to them in fee,
> Too much of pity after they are dead,
> Too many doleful stories do we see,
> Whose matter in bright gold were best be read (89-94).

Calling attention to the poem's apparent condemnation of Isabella's family corporation, Wolfson argues that Keats extends the attack to include the contemporary literary marketplace: "throughout the poem, literary and commercial riches, literary taste and commercial venture, wind up on the same axis of imagery."[54] For Wolfson, this stanza argues against the polishing of sorrowful stories into "bright gold" for easier consumption. But reconsider these lines' repeated references to readers' disproportionate sensibility, and the implication that their somatic displays of that sensibility have an exchange value. Suggesting that there is such a thing as "too many

[54] Wolfson, "Keats's 'Isabella' and the 'Digressions' of 'Romance'," 257.

tears" and "sighs," Keats represents feeling as primarily excretive, composed of material signs of sorrow issuing from the eyes and mouth. Feeling thus becomes a material resource, one poorly managed by readers, and offered in excess of what is necessary. If "sighs" have a "fee," then "we" ought to be budgeting them more judiciously, just as we ought to be watching out for how many "tears" we "shed." Such florid displays can only result in unpayable debts. At the same, Keats wrote the poem at least in part to pursue the commercial success Hazlitt had seemed to promise in his lecture. The poem might therefore embrace the commodification of sentimental excess, welcoming readers prepared to overpay for the sadistic pleasure of reveling in Isabella and Lorenzo's woe.

Isabella's own reaction to Lorenzo's ghostly visitation mirrors these readerly excesses, especially in lavish weeping. Visiting Isabella in a dream vision, Lorenzo asks her to "go, shed one tear upon my heather-bloom, / And it shall comfort me within the tomb" (303-304). In response to his ghostly request for "one tear," Isabella seeks out Lorenzo's unmarked forest grave, engages in lengthy, "dismal labouring" to disinter his body, and severs his head, which she washes with her tears and lovingly grooms (379). In the same letter in which he deemed *Isabella* "too smokeable," Keats lamented to Woodhouse: "Would, as I say, I could write you something sylvestran."[55] This wish might have something to do with the rapidity with which *Isabella* and Isabella leave the forest behind for the shrunken space of a garden pot. After her grotesquely disproportionate response — both in feeling and action — to Lorenzo's request for a brief memorial, Isabella's reburial of Lorenzo's head also feels disproportionate, but in the opposite direction. Whereas her previous actions felt excessive, what follows is strangely underwhelming: "She wrapp'd it up; and for its tomb did choose / A garden-pot, wherein she laid

[55] Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*, 2.174.

it by, / And cover'd it with mould, and o'er it set / Sweet Basil, which her tears kept ever wet" (413-416). The dramatic line break leaves the reader wondering what tomb she would select, before returning with the decidedly bathetic answer: "a garden-pot." Keats uses enjambment to similar effect again with the break between "set" and "Sweet Basil." I use bathetic here less to indicate the sense of repeated anti-climax that these lines convey, than to emphasize how these lines call attention to how the action of the poem sinks — and shrinks — into the small but florid realm of the garden pot.

Severed from Lorenzo's body — which presumably remains in its "dismal" but comparatively roomy "forest hearse" under a "heather-bloom" — his head is crammed into a pot, and set to work fertilizing a minor herb (344). Alan Bewell glosses the poem as "a grisly parody of urban horticulture and of poetic creation reduced to pot gardening."[56] Yet, at the same time, the poem represents Isabella's planting of Lorenzo's head and subsequent tending to the basil as more than mere grisly parody. In stretching out the tale of Isabella's sorrow — which both fuels and is fueled by her gardening efforts — the poem underscores the divide between Isabella's excessive feeling and the lack of feeling the narrator evinces for Isabella. The repeated references to her tears begin to feel deliberate. Isabella's tears become markers of grief in a poem that cannot otherwise convey much feeling about its ostensibly tragic central subject matter. While the speaker seems unable to display much sympathy for Isabella and Lorenzo, his repeated references to Isabella's tears supersaturate the poem with representations of material sentiment.

The numerous references to Isabella's abundant tears contribute to the poem's florid tone at the same time the tears themselves are represented as feeding the increasingly florid basil. When still alive, Lorenzo had declared: "If looks speak love-laws, I will drink her tears," a line

[56] Alan Bewell, "Keats's 'Realm of Flora'," *Studies in Romanticism* 31, no. 1 (1992): 94-5.

that could be read as morbidly foreshadowing his posthumous imbibing of Isabella's lachrymal glut (39). Yet it is actually the basil that ends up imbibing the tears, and Lorenzo's head that will sustain both the basil and Isabella's grief, which in turn nourishes the basil:

> And so she ever fed it with thin tears,
> Whence thick, and green, and beautiful it grew
> So that it smelt more balmy than its peers
> Of basil-tufts in Florence; for it drew
> Nurture besides, and life from human fears,
> From the fast mouldering head there shut from view. (425-30)

The poem contrasts Isabella's "thin tears" with the "thick," thriving basil. Isabella's florid emotional display thus feeds the florid basil. As addressed earlier, in *Peri Bathous*, the florid style seemed offensive not only because it combined uncomfortably lush prose with disturbingly abundant vegetation, but also because the vegetation itself displayed a kind of agency. In feeding the basil with her tears, Isabella contributes to the basil flourishing beyond "its peers / Of basil-tufts in Florence," and seemingly animates the basil itself. In mentioning how the pot of basil "drew / Nurture besides, and life from human fears, / From the fast mouldering head," the poem leaves vague the source of these "human fears." Is it some remnant of Lorenzo's former self represented by his "fast mouldering head"? Is it Isabella's own grief? Or are these fears somehow more generalized, and the basil capable of tapping into them? Regardless, in drawing "life from human fears," the basil is somehow taking in, and perhaps taking on, human feelings.

In distinguishing "nurture" from "life," the poem also suggests that the plant is not just growing but taking on a being of its own. The opportunistic carnivorous plant is eating and digesting both Isabella's morbid excess and Lorenzo's head, and metabolizing these resources into character. That such a process cannot last indefinitely seems borne out by the poem's title, which sets up an opposition between *Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil*, at the same time that it obscures the line between the two, interrogating the divide between the plant and the human. The

poem has already foreshadowed Isabella's own exchangeability for plant life; her brothers had hoped to marry her off "to some high noble and his olive-trees" (168). In a move that feels deliberately heavy-handed, *Isabella* repeatedly depicts Isabella as plant-like,[57] including shortly before her brothers steal the pot to examine it, when "she sat drooping by the Basil green" (458). Like a dehydrated plant, Isabella wilts while all her tears go towards propping up the basil. Yet, as we remain uneasily aware — and as Isabella's brother's discover for themselves — underneath that robust basil sits Lorenzo's decaying head, presumably merging with the basil via its roots. Soon to be unearthed as a "thing …vile with green and livid spot," Lorenzo's digesting head functions as a stark reminder of the poem's gruesome core (475). Rather than representing Isabella's tears as delicate sentimental expression, the poem keeps reminding us that Isabella's tears contribute to what will later be identified as the "vile" quality of Lorenzo's head, as she "moisten'd" it and the basil with which the head merges "with tears unto the core" (424).

At least one reader in Keats's time seems to have recognized and appreciated the strange materiality of the poem, and its relative absence of sentimentality: Elizabeth Kent, sister-in-law to Keats's poetic mentor Leigh Hunt, and author of *Flora Domestica; or, The Portable Flower-Garden* (1823). Written "to communicate such information as should be requisite for the rearing and preserving a *portable garden* in pots," the book also recalls *Isabella*'s relationship to suburban gardening. *Flora Domestica* uses excerpts from the work of many contemporary poets

[57] Before disinterring Lorenzo's grave, "Upon the murderous spot she seem'd to grow, / Like to a native lily of the dell" (365-366); Later: "for simple Isabel is soon to be / Among the dead: She withers, like a palm / Cut by an Indian for its juicy balm" (446-448).

to augment its descriptions of domesticated plants, and their care.[58] While Kent cites Keats multiple times, one of her longest references to his work occurs in the entry for basil:

> It is probably the custom to use [basil] in Italy also to adorn tombs and graves, and this may have been Boccaccio's reason for selecting it to shade the melancholy treasure of Isabella. The exquisite story which he has told us, has lately become familiar to English readers, in the poems of Mr. Barry Cornwall and Mr. Keats. The former does not venture, like Boccaccio, to describe Isabella as cherishing the head of her lover, but makes her bury the heart in a pot of Basil; first so enwrapping and embalming it as to preserve it from decay. Mr. Keats is more true to his Italian original, and not only describes her as burying the head, but makes the head itself serve to enrich the soil, and beautify the tree; nay, even to become a part of it…This young poet now lies in an Italian grave, which is said to be adorned with a variety of flowers. Among them Sweet Basil should not be forgotten.[59]

Kent's praise for Keats is multi-faceted. She admires him for being "more true to the Italian original" than Cornwall, and for paying attention to grisly detail. But she attributes the superior quality of his adaptation to how he "makes the head itself serve to enrich the soil, and beautify the tree; nay, even to become a part of it." Rather than being put off the by the "wormy circumstance" of the poem, Kent celebrates the metamorphosis by decay of Lorenzo's head, and its spreading into and merging with the soil and basil. By following up this reading with the hope that Keats's grave should be "adorned" by "Sweet Basil," she implies a wish for Keats's own decomposing body to manure a real life basil. If Kent reads a sentimental charge into *Isabella,* she does so by linking the beauty of decomposition with the pathos of Keats's early demise. Her reading of the poem highlights how it is more closely attuned to decay and plant appetites than to feeling. Rather than elevating sentiment, *Isabella* represents it as literally sinking into the bowels of the earth — or at least into the bowels of the suburban earth as represented by a potted plant. I

[58] Elizabeth Kent, *Flora Domestica, or the Portable Flower-Garden; with Directions for the Treatment of Plants in Pots; and Illustrations from the Works of the Poets* (London: Taylor and Hessey, 1823), xiii.

[59] Ibid., 50-51.

do not think it is an accident that *Isabella* — a poem that answers its conservative critics by upending literary hierarchies, so influentially established in digestive language — is itself preoccupied with the digestive process, and in unexpected ways.

"An Inferior order of Animals": Plants and the digestive process

To the extent that scholars think about *Isabella* as a representation of perverted bodily processes, they have done so in the context of childbirth, reading Isabella as a frustrated mother.[60] No attention has been paid to the more digestive dimensions of this poem, especially in relation to the agency of plants as digestive bodies. Although pre-Raphaelite painter John Everett Millais[61] later depicted an imagined scene from the tale in more typically sociable terms — he paints what is presumably Isabella's family feasting, while the pot of basil sits in the background, possibly seasoning the feast — the poem itself represents the subordination of human bodily processes in the service of growing a plant. In other words, the poem holds up a dystopian mirror to the digestive process, envisioning a world in which plants eat and digest people.

While this sounds like something out of *Little Shop of Horrors,* this section will address how eighteenth- and early-nineteenth century writers actually established a concordance between animal and plant bodies, as they investigated the best methods of nourishing plants and validated their prescriptions with the authority of science. These tracts offered a guide to the efficient nourishing of plants, advice offered in the service of making agriculture a respected, regimented scientific discipline. Even though Keats's poem is, arguably, a story about the unexpectedly

[60] See especially: Diane Long Hoeveler, "Decapitating Romance: Class, Fetish, and Ideology in Keats's *Isabella*," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 49, no. 3 (1994); Michael Lagory, "Wormy Circumstance: Symbolism in Keats's 'Isabella'," *Studies in Romanticism* 34, no. 3 (1995).

[61] John Everett Millais, *Isabella,* 1849.

Figure 2: John Everett Millay, "Isabella" (1849)

efficient digestion of somatic surplus (both Lorenzo's decaying head and Isabella's tears) to generate flourishing plant growth, it is far from a realistic tale of profitable horticultural inputs and outputs. As I argued earlier, the poem is floridly inefficient. In its bathetic portrayal of sentimental excess, the poem did not succeed in passing as an elevated work of art, nor did it achieve its ostensible goal of being a profitable poem catering to popular taste. However, reading these agricultural tracts in conjunction with *Isabella* highlights the way both the treatises and Keats's poem envision a weird slippage between plant and animal bodies. Writing about counterintuitive approaches to the present-day study of plant-human relationships, the anthropologist Natasha Myers proposes the term "plant/people involution" to describe "the

ongoing, improvised, experimental encounters that take shape when beings as different as plants and people involve themselves in one another's lives."[62] Keats's poem does not represent the encounter between Isabella, Lorenzo, and the pot of basil in quite as positively generative terms as does Myers. Yet Myers's concept of involution is helpful for illuminating how the poem depicts a plant-people involution in which sentiment becomes peculiarly visceral, and capable of transgressing the boundary between humans and plants. *Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil*, I argue, is rethinking what it means to be human or plant on a gut level, as it depicts the improbable sublimation of human bodily processes in the service of feeding a plant.

In his influential *The Horse-Hoeing Husbandry, or, An Essay on the Principles of Tillage and Vegetation*, first published in 1731, the agricultural innovator Jethro Tull set the stage for considering the similarities between plant and human bodies, and made an influential case for soil as the food of plants. Tull commenced his popular treatise with the chapter "Of Roots," which emphasized the centrality of roots to the process of "feeding plants," and proposed that "roots are but as Guts inverted."[63] Tull used this analogy as evidence for the importance of soil to plant nutrition, and to bolster his argument in favor of tilling as the most effective way to feed plants. According to Laura B. Sayre, "the more thoroughly the soil was broken up through tillage, [Tull] reasoned, the more nutrients would be available for plant growth;" yet he did not believe in supplementing the soil with manure.[64] Despite this blind spot in his agricultural

[62] Natasha Myers, "From the Anthropocene to the Planthroposcene: Designing Gardens for Plant/People Involution," *History and Anthropology* 28 (2017): 297.

[63] Jethro Tull, *The Horse-Hoeing Husbandry: Or, an Essay on the Principles of Tillage and Vegetation* (Dublin: printed by A. Rhames, 1733), 6.

[64] Laura B. Sayre, "The Pre-History of Soil Science: Jethro Tull, the Invention of the Seed Drill, and the Foundations of Modern Agriculture," *Physics and Chemistry of the Earth* 35 (2010): 855.

advice, Tull helped to establish a modern vocabulary for considering the similarities — and dissimilarities — between animal and plant bodies. With his focus on both "Theory" and "Practice," Tull presented agriculture as a rigorous discipline guided by "*true Principles*" and informed by "Experiments," which he encouraged his readers to replicate.[65]

Later in the century, agricultural writers such as Cuthbert Clarke and the polymath Erasmus Darwin built on the project begun by Tull and others, as they explicitly set out to make agriculture a respectable, well-organized "science." The title of Clarke's most popular work, *The True Theory of Husbandry: Deduced from Philosophical Researches and Experience* (1777), makes this rational goal explicit, with its emphasis on the empirical values of "researches and experience." In his Dedication (made to "the Proprietors and Occupiers of Land, in Great-Britain"), he declared that he wanted to "resolv[e] the hitherto random Art of Husbandry into a SCIENCE."[66] While Darwin's writings famously blurred the line between science and art, in his late work *Phytologia: Or the Philosophy of Agriculture and Gardening* (1800) ,[67] he expressed a goal similar to Clarke's, lamenting that "Agriculture and Gardening, though of such great utility in producing the nutriment of mankind, continue to be only Arts, consisting of numerous detached facts and vague opinions, without a true theory to connect them."[68] Both writers built

[65] Tull, *The Horse-Hoeing Husbandry: Or, an Essay on the Principles of Tillage and Vegetation*, vi-vii.

[66] Cuthbert Clarke, *The True Theory and Practice of Husbandry: Deduced from Philosophical Researches, and Experience*, Eighteenth Century Collections Online (London: G. Robinson, 1781), iii.

[67] Darwin presented *Phytologia* as a "corrected and enlarged" version of what he had argued in *Zoonomia* (1794) and in his notes to *The Botanic Garden* (1791).

[68] Erasmus Darwin, *Phytologia; or, the Philosophy of Agriculture and Gardening. With the Theory of Draining Morasses and with an Improved Construction of the Drill Plough*, Eighteenth Century Collections Online (Dublin: P. Byrne, 1800), vii.

on the analogies Tull had drawn between plant and animal anatomy, while also emphasizing that plants could not live on tilled soil alone.

Darwin drew on anatomical analogies[69] between plants and animals not simply to make a case for the importance of understanding plant nutrition, but also to establish that plants are animals of a sort, not mere inanimate objects. Arguing "that vegetables are in reality an inferior order of animals," Darwin outlined how numerous parts of "the anatomy of vegetables…correspond to those in the animal economy."[70] He also emphasized that the digestive processes of both animals and vegetables work towards the same goal, that of "conversion": "The digestive power of animals seems to be principally exerted in converting their food into sugar…In like manner the digestive powers of the young vegetable, with the chemical agents of heat and moisture, convert the starch or mucilage of the root or feed into sugar for its own nourishment."[71] In other words, in both animals and plants, digestion is a chemical process whose end result is a form of sugar. Animal and plant bodies might seem dissimilar, Darwin explains, as "we have accustomed ourselves to consider life and irritability to be associated with palpable warmth and visible motion, that we find a renitency in ourselves to ascribe them to the comparatively cold and motionless fibres of plants."[72] Yet they share a

[69] For more on Darwin's complex deployment of analogy, see: Dahlia Porter, "Scientific Analogy and Literary Taxonomy in Darwin's Loves of the Plants," *European Romantic Review* 18, no. 2 (2007); Devin S. Griffiths, "The Intuitions of Analogy in Erasmus Darwin's Poetics," *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 51, no. 3 (2011); Noel Jackson, *Science and Sensation in Romantic Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[70] Darwin, *Phytologia; or, the Philosophy of Agriculture and Gardening. With the Theory of Draining Morasses and with an Improved Construction of the Drill Plough*, 2, 5.

[71] Ibid., 69-70.

[72] Ibid., 1.

common need for sugar to survive. With shared tastes comes common ground, albeit of an uncanny variety.

Keats's poem predicates Isabella's strange bond with her basil on a similarly uncanny common ground of sweetness. In the original Italian *Decameron*, Boccaccio's heroine is named "Ellisabetta." The Florio translation changed the name to a different Italian variation on Elizabeth: "Isabella." Keats plays up the anagrammatic similarity between "Isabella" and "basil" by often shortening "Isabella" to "Isabel," including in the first line of the poem: "FAIR Isabel, poor simple Isabel!" He further elides the distinction between woman and plant by repeatedly referring to both as "sweet." The sweetness of both Isabel(la) and the basil belies the gruesomeness of what the plant is converting into sugar within its stalks and leaves. Lorenzo's "fast mouldering head" not only nourishes the basil, but also sweetens the air around it: "So that the jewel, safely casketed, / Came forth, and in perfumed leafits spread" (431-432). As the poem nears the end, the narrator stresses the connection to a degree that feels deliberately heavy-handed, foreshadowing the poem's tragic ending: "For Isabel, sweet Isabel, will die; / Will die a death too lone and incomplete, / Now they have ta'en away her Basil sweet" (486-488). With the rhyme between "incomplete" and "sweet," the poem implies that "sweet Isabel" is completed not just by the basil but by its sweetness.

In the poem, "sweet" becomes not just a catchword for softening the divide between plant and human appetites, but also a way to alert us to the revisionary poetic project Keats is undertaking. Following his outburst against Isabella's industrial capitalist brothers, the narrator apologizes to "eloquent and famed Boccaccio!" for the offense of "venturing syllables that ill beseem / The quiet glooms of such a piteous theme" (146, 150-1). Apologizing for the outburst without retracting it, the speaker requests of Boccaccio: "Grant thou a pardon here, and then the

tale / Shall move on soberly, as it is meet; / There is no other crime, no mad assail / To make old prose in modern rhyme more sweet" (152-6). This entreaty seems either insincere or overly optimistic. The speaker's claim that "the tale / shall move on soberly" is contingent on Boccaccio's "pardon," which the speaker neither waits for nor indicates has occurred. Thus, there is cause to doubt how "soberly" the tale will proceed. Despite this uncertainty, the speaker does follow through on his claim that he will not attempt to make Boccaccio's story "more sweet," because there is little genuine sweetness to the gruesome tale that follows, or to the way in which it is represented. Instead, sweetness is primarily associated with the strange union of Isabel and her basil, which excretes sweet perfume thanks to its hearty diet of head and tears.

In their writing, both Darwin and Clarke focus on more realistic plant diets. Both stress the importance of understanding how plants eat, and how best to feed them. For Clarke, "the land or soil is not itself the food of plants, but the receptacle of the various ingredients such food is composed of."[73] Thus, "the roots of plants…carry off the nutritious juices of the soil" just as "the lacteals in the stomachs and intestines of animals, are to carry off the nutritive contents of the aliment."[74] Building on Tull's anatomical analogy of roots as the guts of plants, Clarke implied that the amalgamation of plant and soil actually created a strange hybrid body: "the mould or soil in which the roots are dispersed therefore can only be considered as the stomach and intestines of plants."[75] What, though, do these plants want to put in these soil-stomachs? In his section entitled "Manures, or the Food of Plants," Darwin also emphasizes the importance of ensuring that soil is

[73] Clarke, *The True Theory and Practice of Husbandry: Deduced from Philosophical Researches, and Experience*, 84.

[74] Ibid., 160.

[75] Ibid., 57.

nutrient-rich.[76] Because animals have stomachs, "they can in a few hours decompose the tender parts of vegetable and animal substances by a chemical process within themselves."[77] Stomach-less vegetables on the other hand, must "wait for the spontaneous decomposition of animal or vegetable recrements."[78] Although Darwin is not as explicit as Clarke is in proposing soil as the stomach of plants, he nevertheless likens this "decomposition of vegetable and animal substances on or in the soil" to "the digestive processes in the stomachs of animals."[79] Darwin thus investigates "what kinds of manure contribute most to the luxuriant growth of vegetables," and argues that which nourishes animals also nourishes plants, because "plants are inferior animals, and are furnished with absorbent vessels in their roots correspondent to the lacteals in the stomach."[80] He concludes "that the same organic matters, which by their quick solution in the stomach supply the nutritive chyle to animals, will by their slow solution in or near the surface of the earth supply the nutritive sap-juice to vegetables;" for Darwin, "all kinds of animal and vegetable substances, which will undergo a digestive process, or spontaneous solution, as the flesh, fat, skin, and bones, of animals; with their secretions of bile, saliva, mucus; and their excretions of urine, and ordure; and also the fruit, meal, oil, leaves, wood, of vegetables, when properly decomposed on or beneath the soil, supply the most nutritive food to plants."[81] In

[76] Darwin, *Phytologia; or, the Philosophy of Agriculture and Gardening. With the Theory of Draining Morasses and with an Improved Construction of the Drill Plough*, 131.

[77] Ibid., 171.

[78] Ibid., 172.

[79] Ibid., 173.

[80] Ibid., 230.

[81] Ibid.

Darwin's estimation, many "properly decomposed" organic substances could contribute to nourishing plants, including the *Isabella*-appropriate "flesh, fat, skin, and bones."

Just as an animal stomach holds and digests food to make it available to the animal's body, so too does a plant's soil-stomach hold and partially digest food into a substance that plants can properly ingest and continue digesting. This soil-stomach must digest plant food *before* plants can digest it. In fact, other agricultural treatises of the time explicitly refer to the importance of allowing soil to "digest." In the context of soil, digestion more explicitly means a kind of productive decay, as agricultural writer William Marshall's recommendations make evident. Marshall outlined the steps for "bringing wooded lands into cultivation," instructing readers to rake "leaves and rotting wood…and pile them in heaps to digest; or burn them, and spread the ashes over the ground."[82] In a related work, he advised that, after meadows flood and drain, "the mould ought to be turned over to forward its digestion."[83] "Mould" refers here to the topsoil in which plants are grown.

Although "mould" can denote both "surface soil" and soil "suitable for cultivation," it can also mean "rotting earth considered as the material of the human body," and — in a less well known, but apt final variation — "the top or dome of the head."[84] Although "mould" only appears twice in the poem, it evokes all these meanings, and serves as a particularly apt reminder of the poem's messy materiality and the slippage between earth, plants, and bodies. Keats, of

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[82] William Marshall, *On the Management of Landed Estates: A General Work, for the Use of Professional Men* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1806), 235, 34.

[83] *The Rural Economy of Norfolk: Comprising the Management of Landed Estates, and the Present Practice of Husbandry in That County*, vol. II (London: G. Nicol, G.G. and J. Robinson, and J. Debrett, 1795), 90.

[84] "Mould | Mold, n. 1," in *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, 2017); "Mould | Mold, n. 2," in *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

course, is also molding his tale into a very different, more unwieldy shape, than its original. The poem is attuned to decay even before Lorenzo's head begins decomposing: "So sweet Isabel / By gradual decay from beauty fell" (255-6). Later, Lorenzo's forest grave is covered over with "fresh-thrown mould," and Isabella subsequently uses "mould" to rebury his now-severed head in the "garden-pot" (361; 414-415). Covered, unearthed from, and then recovered in "mould," Lorenzo's "fast mouldering head" begins a productive decay of its own, fictional support for Darwin's claim that plants could happily eat animal substances.

As Darwin made clear, this idea of a happy plant was not just a case of pathetic fallacy. Plant appetites, Darwin concluded, not only resemble those of animals in their omnivorousness, but also in their ability to derive pleasure from the activity. According to Darwin, "the vascular actions of vegetables, which perform their digestion, sanguisication, and secretion, convert the elements of air and water, or other aliments, which they receive from organized matter decomposing beneath the soil, into more compounded or more solid materials…and a degree of pleasureable sensation must be supposed from the strongest analogy to attend this activity of their systems."[85] In proposing a form of pleasure-seeking agency to plants, Darwin explicitly attempted to affirm a kind of benevolent design governing and softening the often brutal-seeming state of nature. But the section in which he made these observations, "The Happiness of Organic Life," also seemed to elevate the pleasure of non-human life forms above that of humans.

Immediately before this meditation on plant pleasure, Darwin included this intriguing aside, which he attributes to a visiting philosopher friend:

[85] Darwin, *Phytologia; or, the Philosophy of Agriculture and Gardening. With the Theory of Draining Morasses and with an Improved Construction of the Drill Plough*, 508.

> ‘It consoles me to find, as I contemplate with you the whole of organized nature, that it is not in the power of any one personage, whether statesman or hero, to produce by his ill-employed activity so much misery, as might have been supposed. Thus, if a Russian army, in these insane times, after having endured a laborious march of many hundred miles, is destroyed by a French army in defence of their republic, what has happened? Forty thousand human creatures dragged from their homes and their connexions cease to exist, and have manured the earth; but the quantity of organized matter of which they were composed, presently revives in the forms of millions of microscopic animals, vegetables and insects, and afterwards of quadrupeds and men; the sum of whose happiness is perhaps much greater than that of the harassed soldiers, by whose destruction they have gained their existence!…
>
> ‘I well remember to have heard an ingenious agricultor boast, that he had drained two hundred acres of morassy land, on which he now was able to feed an hundred oxen; and added, “is not that a meritorious thing!” “True,” replied one of the company, “but you forget, that you have destroyed a thousand free republics of ants, and ten thousand rational frogs, besides innumerable aquatic insects and aquatic vegetables.”‘[86]

The unnamed philosopher imagines a post-war world in which “millions of microscopic animals, vegetables and insects, and afterwards of quadrupeds and men” are “revived” by the death of soldiers fighting for and against the principles of the French Revolution. The mention of “a French army in defence of their republic” suggests a sympathy for their cause, as does his later reference to his friend’s advocating for “‘a thousand free republics of ants, and ten thousand rational frogs.’” Regardless of ideology, the violent deaths of Russian and French soldiers have had an equalizing effect, making available nourishment that “manured the earth” and brought the dead soldiers back to life, “revive[d],” albeit in radically different form. After all, “the quantity of organized matter of which they were composed” can be seen as having simply reconstituted itself. “Quadrupeds and men” seem an afterthought in this equation. This could be seen as playing a post-human utilitarian numbers game: if we are aiming to maximize happiness, is not the happiness of these millions of “microscopic animals, vegetables and insects” worth more than that of “forty thousand human creatures”? But if he engages with utilitarian principles, he

[86] Ibid., 507.

does so in service of enfranchising a far larger portion of Earth's population. To put it slightly differently: rather than thinking about maximizing the greatest happiness for the greatest number of humans, this philosopher is thinking about what brings about the greatest happiness for the greatest number of life forms. In its seeming disregard for human life, this aside could be read as troubling, or as anticipatory of recent new materialisms (or both), but the writer instead primarily appears to be searching for solace in "insane" times by conceiving of a more expansive view of life.

I include this rather long aside about a rather long aside in Darwin's *Phytologia* not simply because it is weird and delightful and unlikely to be found in agricultural textbooks today (although it is that, too), but because, like Keats's *Isabella*, it draws on the discourses of efficiency and utility only to turn them on their head (pun somewhat intended). Of course "the harassed soldiers" littering the sites of French Revolutionary war battles are not efficient or ideal sources of manure for plant and animal life, any more so than is Lorenzo's head. But in the case of Darwin's philosopher, there is a strange poetic justice to their doing just that. This section in *Phytologia* seems to be searching for consolation, a sign that the end result of human ugliness can produce a net positive for other life forms, and eventually for humans, too. If the philosopher's acquaintance points out the genocidal side effects of humans' "improving impulses," citing the "ingenious agricultor" and his draining of the "morasses" to make way for oxen, *Phytologia* still expresses faith in a larger force working towards a form of perfectibility beyond the human. At the end of this section of the treatise, Darwin explains how the "pleasure" experienced by both animals and plants attests "THE PAST FELICITY OF ORGANIZED NATURE! — AND CONSEQUENTLY OF THE BENEVOLENCE OF THE DEITY!"[87] But if

[87] Ibid., 508; emphasis Darwin's.

Isabella offers a more intimate rendering of this recursive process, it does not offer a more benevolent one, as this aside from *Phytologia* helps throw into more stark relief.

Despite depicting the basil plant thriving on Lorenzo's head and Isabella's grief, *Isabella* celebrates neither agricultural efficiency, nor a sense of benevolent design that generates beautiful verdant life from death. For Stacey McDowell, *Isabella* demonstrates that "through death and decay something regenerative, 'beautiful' even, can be produced."[88] However, I think that the poem ends on a note of despair that all that remains of the story is an inadequate "sad ditty…born / From mouth to mouth through all the country pass'd / Still is the burthen sung" (501-503). According to this self-referential logic, the poem both emerged from and produced the well-known "ditty" or "burthen" with which it concludes. All the Florentines "mourn," echoing Isabella's sorrow, and thus Isabella's personal lament becomes polyphonic, passing "from mouth to mouth." This could be read as evidence for Gigante's claim that "the Keatsian poet who 'lives in gusto' lives in world of consuming orality: he pounces upon, gorges, and digests beauty into essential verse. Everything in this restricted cycle of consumption circulates through the mouth, the portal through which one passes from appetite into expression, from leaden existence into aesthetic identity."[89] Yet, the almost 500 lines prior to the final stanza have told a different, messier story, one that emphasizes the material reality of the multiple forms of embodied — in human *and* plant form — labor that precede this concluding ditty, and that cannot be reduced to it. As Eric Gidal argues in a reading of Keats's "vale of soul-making" letter: "Keats mocks Godwinian dreams of perfectibility from a decidedly environmentalist

[88] Stacey McDowell, "Grotesque Organicism in Keats's *Isabella; or, the Pot of Basil*," *The Keats-Shelley Review* 24, no. 1 (2010): 26.

[89] Gigante, *Taste: A Literary History*, 153.

perspective…All attempts to move toward perfectibility are in error, not simply because, barring true immortality, such a state would make death even harder a burden to bear, but more so because human nature is inextricable from the climate of its dwelling."[90] Gidal's comment is made in the context of an article about "Romantic Climatology;" he is attentive to a different way to read Keats environmentally. His point about Keats's stance on perfectibility also rings true in relation to *Isabella*. Whereas Darwin saw in nature's cycles proof of God's benevolent plan, *Isabella* refuses this kind of consolation.

By eliding Isabella with the basil, the poem upends traditional understandings of the digestive process, representing human grief and the object that enables that feeling as so much food for plants. But *Isabella* does not offer much hope for this reoriented process as recuperative. Instead, it resists instrumentalizing, focusing instead on a kind of nihilistic equalizing of plants and bodies. Keats himself blurred the boundaries between poet, poem, and plant by almost exclusively referring to the poem in his letters as either "Pot of Basil" or, more suggestively, "my Pot of Basil."[91] In calling the poem "my Pot of Basil," he aligned himself with Isabella, slowly being drained by the plant. But in order for the plant to thrive, it needs food. In the final section, I will consider the significance of the basil's particularly corporeal food source.

Medicine, Dissection, and Grave Robbing

> *"[Keats] once talked with me, upon my complaining of stomachic derangement, with a remarkable decision of opinion, describing the functions and actions of the organ with*

[90] Eric Gidal, "'O Happy Earth! Reality of Heaven!': Melancholy and Utopia in Romantic Climatology," *The Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 8, no. 2 (2008): 95-6.

[91] See: Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*, 1: 274, 94, 371; 2: 62, 139. Keats only refers to the poem as "Isabella" in imagining how reviewers would critique it (2: 174).

> *the clearness and, as I presume, technical precision of an adult practitioner; casually illustrating the comment, in his characteristic way, with poetical imagery; The stomach, he said, being like a brood of callow nestlings (opening his capacious mouth) yearning and gaping for sustenance"*
>
> –Charles Cowden Clarke, *Recollections of Writers*[92]

Although *Isabella* prioritizes the vegetative, in the slippage that it portrays between Isabella and her basil, the poem also conceives of the body in a way that conflicts with neat anatomical categories. Keats spent a significant part of his brief life studying medicine, first in a required five-year apprenticeship — in his case, to the established apothecary-surgeon Thomas Hammond — and then for another year attending classes at Guy's Hospital in Southwark, London. It was an opportune time and place to study medicine. Both Donald Goellnicht and Hermione De Almeida identify London as a leading center of medical education in early nineteenth-century Europe. De Almeida argues that London hospitals helped lead the way "as the primary medical institutions for teaching and experimental study."[93] Although it does seem that Keats lost interest in practicing medicine towards the end of his training, the evidence points to Keats being, for the most part, a dedicated apprentice and student with genuine medical aspirations. Goellnicht reads Keats's appointment as a dresser[94] at Guy's, "the first member of his class to be so honored," and his passing "the examination to become a licentiate of the Society of Apothecaries" as evidence of Keats's dedication to the medical profession, as well as

[92] Charles Cowden Clarke and Mary Cowden Clarke, *Recollections of Writers*, 2nd ed. (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, & Rivington, 1878), 132.

[93] De Almeida, *Romantic Medicine and John Keats*, 5.

[94] A dresser is more than a pupil and less than a surgeon's apprentice. One paid much less to be a dresser; with it came the privilege to observe surgeons and to occasionally serve as what we would today recognize as the on-call doctor. Being a surgeon's apprentice gave the student more access and experience but was about ten times more expensive. Keats would not have been able to afford the tuition fees required of a surgeon's apprentice. Goellnicht, *The Poet-Physician: Keats and Medical Science*, 37.

his intelligence.[95] Keats's schoolmate and friend Charles Cowden Clarke identified one of the reasons Keats lost enthusiasm for studying and practicing medicine: his experiences with dissection at Guy's. According to Clarke, Keats confessed an "inability to sympathize with the science of anatomy, as a main pursuit in life."[96] This is, of course, only one anecdote, and Keats likely left medicine more to pursue poetry than to escape anatomy. Yet, the implication of this statement — that to be a successful surgeon in early nineteenth-century Britain, one needed to "sympathize with the science of anatomy" — remains intriguing. It suggests an inability to sympathize with the fragmenting of the body into clearly demarcated systems, as well as with the dubious ethical practices associated with the study of dissection, and with the utilitarian thinkers who encouraged both the exhumation and anatomization of corpses.

The "science of anatomy" was a relatively new course of study for British medical students. Anatomical education had developed much earlier in Europe, but "the mid-eighteenth century seems to have been a key period in the official recognition of the need for the study of human anatomy in Britain."[97] By the time Keats was attending classes at Guy's hospital, the influence of anatomist John Hunter had made "British surgery the best in Europe."[98] Hunter's students included Astley Cooper, the famed surgeon — he successfully removed a cyst from

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[95] Ibid.

[96] Clarke and Clarke, *Recollections of Writers*, 131. Clarke continues: "for one of the expressions that he used, in describing his unfitness for its mastery, was perfectly characteristic. He said, in illustration of his argument, 'The other day, for instance, during the lecture, there came a sunbeam into the room, and with it a whole troop of creatures floating in the ray; and I was off with them to Oberon and fairyland.' And yet, with all his self-styled unfitness for the pursuit, I was afterwards informed that at his subsequent examination he displayed an amount of acquirement which surprised his fellow-students, who had scarcely any other association with him than that of a cheerful, crotchety rhymester" (131-2).

[97] Ruth Richardson, *Death, Dissection, and the Destitute* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 35.

[98] Goellnicht, *The Poet-Physician: Keats and Medical Science*, 19.

King George IV's scalp in 1821, an operation that earned him a baronetcy — and respected teacher who helped to establish Guy's as a hub of anatomical education in England.[99] Even so, anatomy remained a somewhat indecorous practice. Although Hunter, Cooper, and others proved that success in surgery facilitated upward mobility, those engaged in the more genteel occupation of physician still looked down on the profession.[100] Surgeons and teachers of anatomy — even highly respected ones — were not only associated with trade and manual labor, but also with a reliance on dead bodies, most obtained by dubious means. Under Henry VIII, the Royal College of Surgeons had been granted a royal charter to dissect the bodies of hanged murderers as a final punishment for their crimes; in Keats's time, this charter still offered the only legal source of corpses. Thus, all other hospitals and private anatomy schools either supplied their dissecting rooms with corpses obtained by stealth — "hospital anatomists benefited directly from the high mortality inside their institutions" and often faked funerals for bodies that instead went to the dissecting table — or unearthed by resurrection men.[101]

Digging up recently buried corpses was not technically against the law, as "a dead body did not constitute real property, and therefore could neither be owned nor stolen," although body snatchers had to make sure to undress the corpse, as stealing graves clothes *was* a punishable offense.[102] Yet these bodies garnered high prices on the black market, sold to hospitals and private medical schools. In England, a dead body was therefore a liminal object, commodity but

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[99] W. F. Bynum, "Cooper, Sir Astley Paston, First Baronet (1768-1841)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004), n.p.

[100] For example, in 1834, Sir Henry Halford, president of the Royal College of Physicians dismissively referred to surgery "'as a manual operation'" (qtd in Richardson, *Death, Dissection, and the Destitute*, 34.)

[101] Ibid., 104.

[102] Ibid., 58.

not property, and thus an intriguing figure for Keats to experiment with in *Isabella*, especially given Shaw's interpretation of it as Marxist poetry *avant la lettre*. The victims of resurrection men were most often the poor, as they had easily accessible graves; they were usually buried either in relatively shallow mass graves, or in flimsy coffins. The middle class and the wealthy could afford burial in sturdier coffins, inside churches or crypts, or out in the country.[103] Starting in 1817, the year of *Isabella*'s composition, those particularly anxious about their posthumous lives could purchase Edward Bridgman's "Patent Coffin," which was "registered with the express purpose of frustrating the resurrectionists."[104]

Keats's reservations about studying anatomy would have placed him in good company with many of his fellow medical professionals. Richardson points out that "many members of the medical profession seem to have agreed with William Lawrence that the dissection room was 'a dirty source of knowledge'; and while recognizing the medical value of dissection, nevertheless held a profound distaste for it."[105] Even William Mackenzie, a physician and advocate for dissection acknowledged that "the study of anatomy is a severe and laborious study; the practice of dissection is on many accounts highly repulsive: it is even not without danger to life itself."[106] In a footnote to this sentence, he ominously declared: "A winter never passes without proving fatal to several students who die from injuries received in dissection." As Mackenzie's mention of "winter" also implies, anatomical education in Keats's time would have been limited to the

[103] The 1832 Anatomy Act made official this association between dissection and the poor, as it allowed unclaimed bodies from workhouses and prisons to be used for anatomical education (despite the ambiguity about what "unclaimed" meant).

[104] Richardson, *Death, Dissection, and the Destitute*, 81.

[105] Ibid., 91.

[106] William Mackenzie, "Use of the Dead to the Living," *The Westminster Review* 2 (1824): 92.

winter months, when bodies presumably would not decay as swiftly.

In Keats's time, the study of anatomy, and the gory dissection experiences it entailed, were wrapped up in Benthamite discussions of utility and human perfectibility. In his will, Jeremy Bentham asked that his body be dissected for the public,[107] "'so that my last moments have for their comfort the assurance that how little service soever it may have been in my power to render to mankind during my life time, I shall at least be not altogether useless after my death.'"[108] Bentham's bequest was in keeping with his own utilitarian philosophy, as well as with dissection-specific utilitarian principles put forth in Mackenzie's 1824 anatomical apologia, first published in Bentham's *Westminster Review*. In it, Mackenzie argued: "The basis of all medical and surgical knowledge is anatomy. Not a single step can be made either in medicine or surgery, considered either as an art or a science without it."[109] Because "the organs on which all the important functions of the human body depend, are concealed from the view," those who wish to understand "their situation and connections" and "their nature and operation" must have a way to "inspec[t] the interior of this curious and complicated machine."[110] For Mackenzie, preserving the sanctity of the grave only increased human suffering: "Veneration for the dead is connected with the noblest and sweetest sympathies of our nature: but the promotion of the happiness of the living is a duty from which we can never be exonerated."[111] Anatomy might have been

[107] And, more famously, to become the Auto-Icon of University College, London. Although as Richardson points out: "By ensuring that, though dissected, his body would remain as if entire, Bentham endeavored to endow the popular conception of dissection with altered meaning" (160).

[108] Qtd in: Richardson, *Death, Dissection, and the Destitute*, 110.

[109] Mackenzie, "Use of the Dead to the Living," 60.

[110] Ibid., 61.

[111] Ibid., 81.

disgusting, dirty, and dangerous, but the benefits outweighed the drawbacks, at least from a utilitarian perspective.

William Hazlitt, perhaps unsurprisingly, offered a less optimistic take on the utility of dissection. Writing in the immediate aftermath of William Burke and William Hare's trial for murdering Edinburgh residents in order to sell their bodies to anatomists, Hazlitt argued that "to take away life in order to *sell* the dead body…as if the vile carcass were of more value than the living soul…is the worst kind of cannibalism: for that may be hunger or savage rage, this is cold-blooded calculation."[112] For Hazlitt, Burke and Hare represented the unavoidable byproduct of a system that rewards the unearthing of bodies to sell for dissection, and perhaps by extension, the inevitable outcome of Utilitarianism itself: "We may see by this example (in spite of what the *Utilitarians* tell us) how impossible it is to sanctify the means by the end; or to direct bad instruments and passions merely to the salutary objects we may have in view."[113] The resurrection-man also seems the ineluctable result of sympathizing with the science of anatomy, a person who "looks at human bodies as containing so many bones and muscles, as so many moving anatomical preparations, and thinks that every pound of flesh, if it were dead, would be worth so much gold…The abstract utility does not purify these men's motives, as long as their imagination is a charnel-house."[114] Drawing a distinction between theoretical ideas about utility and the reality of ends-focused philosophy put into practice, Hazlitt made an impassioned case for *not* seeing efficiency as a good in itself.

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[112] William Hazlitt, "The Late Murders," in *New Writings by William Hazlitt*, ed. P.P. Howe (New York: L. MacVeagh, 1925), 100-01.

[113] Ibid., 101.

[114] Ibid.

A year later, however, in a speech published in Richard Carlile's radical journal, *The Lion,* "Our French Scholar"[115] offered his own unique take on the issue, decrying "how truly contemptible are the *assumptions* about the *uselessness* and *immorality* of anatomy."[116] Criticizing the *Morning Herald's* recently declared opposition to making more bodies available for the practice of dissection, the author labels the newspaper's attitude as "ROMANTICISM OF THE GRAVE."[117] Taking the Benthamite attitude on posthumous potential to its absurdly logical extreme, he outlines his own vision for the uses to which his remains could be put:

> In order that my death should not be unworthy of the course of life in which I am embarked, I request… that [my body] should be delivered to such surgeon, or surgeons, most deserving of public support, on account of their liberal conduct….In order that even the least particle of my extinguished frame should be rendered subservient to some *useful* purpose, I wish, that previous to the examination of my internal structure, my SKIN should be taken off, tanned or prepared, colored and employed, to manufacture some useful article of furniture…after a minute anatomical study, and a scrupulous investigation of the causes of my death, I wish that my full SKELETON should be offered to the anatomical, or a drawing class, of the contemplated university, or to any other public establishment; but should my said skeleton be deemed useless, I wish that my SKULL should be presented to the London Phrenological Society, and my BONES, transformed by a turner into as great a variety of useful articles as possible; either knife-handles, pin-cases, small boxes, buttons, &c…the REMNANTS of the dissecting-room should be put in one large, or two smaller china jars…after pouring upon the said remnants a sufficient quantity of quick-lime, or any other best chemical dissolvent, in order to prevent for ever any bad smell, I wish that such vases should be filled up with good garden earth, and a beautiful ROSE-TREE, or any other perennial flower, the most sweet and gay, should be planted in the middle, and the whole kept as an ornament, in any garden, court, or peristyle of the intended UNIVERSITY.[118]

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[115] Ruth Richardson identifies the author as Pierre Baume, a French socialist and staunch believer in dissection.

[116] "Speech of Our French Scholar," *The Lion* 3 (1829): 393. All emphases are the author's.

[117] Ibid., 396.

[118] Ibid., 397-8.

Advocating for a kind of nose-to-tail approach to his own corpse, the speaker considers the possible uses for every part of himself in what might be classified as a particularly morbid prose blason. His dedication to detail makes it difficult to decide on the level of satire at work in this passage. Is it Benthamism subjected to *reductio ad absurdam,* or a ruthless work of (literal) auto-autopsy, an unflinching analysis of how to maximize the utility of one's own fleshly remains by a person who does not want to be thought guilty of indulging in romantic notions about the sanctity of corpses? Richard Carlile himself donated his body to St. Thomas's Hospital for the purposes of dissection, so *The Lion* seems likely to have published articles favorable to the practice.[119] Of particular interest is the French Scholar's strategy for his "REMNANTS," which he envisions fertilizing not just any plant, but a "perennial flower" of some sort. Even the plant which his last stray bits nourish has to be durable.

Of course, this recommendation also calls to mind the central horticultural figure of *Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil*. Although this article was published almost a decade after Keats's poem, *Isabella* anticipates these kind of utilitarian arguments, especially the dissection-related ones, even as it mocks them with its excesses. Alan Richardson notes in passing that Lorenzo's "severed head dutifully washed and tended by Isabella harks back uncannily to Keats's period as an anatomy student," but does not consider the tantalizing anatomical possibilities in greater detail.[120] In conclusion, I will consider *Isabella* as its own kind of auto-autopsy, in which Keats reflects on his own poetic labor in part by portraying a decidedly inefficient approach to exhuming and dissecting bodies; this builds on my reading of the poem as a tale of plant

[119] "St. Thomas's Hospital: Examination of the Body of Mr. Richard Carlile," *The Lancet* 39, no. 1016 (1843).

[120] Richardson, *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind*, 133.

digestion that insists on the inefficiency of both vegetal and human ingestion, digestion, and decomposition.

In keeping with his distended adaptation of Florio's translation, Keats's rendering of the grave robbing scene expands its duration and detail, but excises all the (relative) pragmatism of his source. In Florio's version, the exhumation takes relatively little time and effort: "they digged not farre, but they found the body of murthered Lorenzo," and Isabella realizes that "neither did the time require any long tarrying there. Gladly would she have carried the whole body with her, secretly to bestow honourable enterment on it, but it exceeded the compasse of her ability. Wherefore, in regard she could not have all, yet she would be possessed of a part."[121] Keats instead calls attention to the impracticality of exhuming a corpse, highlighting the messy, arduous side of Isabella's resurrection of Lorenzo, which begins with the discovery of "a soiled glove," and goes downhill from there (369). Isabella's exhumation is "work," which she undertakes so vigorously that her hair will not stay in place: "Then 'gan she work again; nor stay'd her care, / But to throw back at times her veiling hair" (375-6). Isabella already has been working at this "dismal labouring" for an uncertain but not insignificant amount of time before her nurse "put her lean hands to the horrid thing: / Three hours they labour'd at this travail sore; / At last they felt the kernel of the grave" (379, 381-3). Adding another "three hours" to the unspecified but seemingly lengthy time Isabella has spent digging calls attention to the "labour" both women undertake; the word "labour" only appears twice in the poem, both times in this stanza.

In his reading of *Isabella* as exposing the "underlying structure" of capitalism, Daniel P.

[121] Boccaccio, "Fift Novell: The Three Brethren to Isabella, Slew a Gentleman That Secretly Loved Her," 160.

Watkins argues that this depiction of "manual labor under oppressive conditions…becomes virtually a caricature of the relations of production described early in the poem." In both cases, "these conditions prevent labor from being humanly productive and are surrounded everywhere by death."[122] Rather than read this scene as an allegory or caricature of early industrialized labor, what happens when we consider the poem offering a literal, if not un-ironic, portrayal of the very specific labor of exhuming a grave? *Isabella* represents not a neat efficient exhumation, but — as with the digestive process reflected by the basil — a bizarre, distended fun house mirror version of labor. Or perhaps it simply makes visible the arduous, distasteful work of graverobbing, although Isabella's labor is motivated by excessive grief, rather than a desire for profit.

Immediately after narrating this lengthy scene of labor, the speaker makes his own, perhaps profit-driven poetic labor visible. He cheekily asks: "Ah! wherefore all this wormy circumstance? / Why linger at the yawning tomb so long?" and contrasts this scene with "the gentleness of old Romance, / The simple plaining of a minstrel's song!" (385-8). As with his earlier appeal for forgiveness to Boccaccio after his multi-stanza rant about Isabella's proto-industrial capitalist brothers (105-144), Keats digresses here — and then calls attention to his digression — in the service of juxtaposing the versified scene of labor with his own poetic labor, here also implicated in robbing the grave of Boccaccio, so to speak. At the same time, he makes clear that his imaginative labor is still not as difficult work as physical labor, as the stanza immediately preceding the actual scene of exhumation makes clear. After reporting that Isabella and her nurse "had found Lorenzo's earthy bed," the speaker pauses the plot, offering an appeal to the reader's sympathy that ends in an abrupt reversal:

> Who hath not loiter'd in a green church-yard,
> And let his spirit, like a demon-mole,

[122] Watkins, *Keats's Poetry and the Politics of the Imagination*, 59-60.

> Work through the clayey soil and gravel hard,
> To see skull, coffin'd bones, and funeral stole;
> Pitying each form that hungry Death hath marr'd,
> And filling it once more with human soul?
> Ah! this is holiday to what was felt
> When Isabella by Lorenzo knelt. (XLV.353-360)

With this six-line long rhetorical question, the speaker seems to include the reader in the exhumation process by implying that, when in graveyards, we also practice a form of (spiritual) disinterment. "Who hath not loiter'd," after all, and sent his spirit to do the tough "work through the clayey soil and gravel hard"? Of course, he then undercuts his appeal to common ground by saying that "this is holiday to what was felt / When Isabella by Lorenzo knelt." The previously invoked recreational (and figurative) resurrection men experience a comparable "holiday" not only because their level of feeling is less, but also because they do not actually undertake physical labor in their imaginative exhumation. By exposing the reality of the work Isabella's ostensibly romantic gesture entails, the poem deromanticizes it, bringing Isabella — and the reader — literally back to the earth, back to the soil from which she unearths Lorenzo and into which she will rebury (part of) him. Reading *Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil* as a tale of sentimental indigestion helps reveal the connections it uncovers between human and vegetable bodies, and between the seemingly disparate discourses surrounding food, affect, decomposition, and literature as commodity and as nourishment.

CHAPTER FOUR
Difficult Digestion in *Don Juan*

> *'To be or not to be! That is the question'*
> *Says Shakespeare, who just now is much in fashion*
> *I am neither Alexander nor Hephaestion,*
> *Nor ever had for abstract fame much passion;*
> *But would much rather have a sound digestion,*
> *Than Buonaparte's cancer: – could I dash on*
> *Through fifty victories to shame or fame,*
> *Without a stomach – what were a good name?*[1]
>
> — Lord Byron, *Don Juan*

Composed in 1822, these lines from Lord Byron's sprawling, digressive *Don Juan* exemplify the poem's ability to assimilate world historic events, cultural commentary, and existential meditations, all in the span of a single stanza. Here, as is often the case in the poem, *Don Juan* speaks to a recent past, referencing Romantic-era Bardolatry[2] and the 1821 death of the exiled emperor of France, a death almost immediately described in detailed published accounts. This stanza encapsulates many of the poem's key preoccupations, including contemporary culture, classical learning, Byron's own shame, fame, and legacy as a poet, and the digestive system. As the rhyme scheme makes evident, the poem also gives these preoccupations equal weight, aligning the famous "question" of Shakespeare's Hamlet, the ancient civilization of Alexander and Hephaestion, and digestion. This chapter takes seriously the repeated references *Don Juan* makes to the material process of digestion, and to moments when that process fails, sometimes

[1] Lord George Gordon Byron, *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann, vol. V: Don Juan (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), IX.105-12. Subsequent citations will appear in text.

[2] Bardolatry of course begins before the Romantic period, and can be traced back at least to David Garrick's 1769 Shakespeare Jubilee. By the time Byron was writing, however, Shakespeare was held up as the largely undisputed pinnacle of English cultural and literary achievement in a way that mostly shut down dissenting opinion. Unsurprisingly, Byron was one of these Shakespeare dissenters, or at least had a more complicated, less uncritically admiring view of Shakespeare. See, for example: Jonathan Bate, *Shakespeare and the English Romantic Imagination* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), especially 222-47.

with mortal consequences. At crucial moments throughout *Don Juan*, Byron turns to alimentary topics — some figurative, some literal — as a way to process and express the overwhelming and often violent experience of modernity. In focusing on digestion, the poem also calls attention to its own metaphorical project of trying to digest all of Romantic-era popular culture, politics, and world historical events. All literary production can of course be read as trying to shape, or digest, the subjects on which it is writing. Yet *Don Juan*, in its size, scope, and attentiveness to the somatic, attempts an assimilation that feels embodied.

Scholars who write about Byron and the alimentary tend to focus not on digestive themes but on scenes of eating and references to food, of which there are many. The poem, which the narrator refers to as a "banquet" and "a conundrum of a dish," is a seemingly endless poetic feast that also offers detailed descriptions of several literal feasts, and keeps cycling back to descriptions of food, eating, (in)digestion, and the body (VI.956, XV.168). Although it is indebted to the visceral mock-epic tradition of Pulci, Dryden, and Pope, as well as to the trope of feast scenes in Homeric epics, *Don Juan* does not simply rehearse these familiar, expected alimentary conventions of epic and mock epic. *Don Juan* is a poem that calls attention to its calling attention to food, especially when that food is mundane and unpoetic. For example, after Haidée and her maidservant, Zoe, save the shipwrecked Juan, they nurse him back to health with food, including "a most superior mess of broth, / A thing which poesy but seldom mentions" (II. 981-82). Later in the poem, the narrator pauses to note: "The morning came, and breakfast, tea and toast, / Of which most men partake, but no one sings" (XVII. 98-9). From relatively brief meditations on the association between beef, beer, and Englishness to the thirteen stanza-long description of the feast at the Amundeville's estate in the final English cantos, food is often on the poem's mind. *Don Juan* engages with food, the body, and digestion in sustained, attentive,

and self-reflexive detail. References to the familiar and mundane violence of digestive difficulty also appear repeatedly, especially in conjunction with more explicit scenes of violence.

In his 1841 *Memorials of Gormandizing*, the novelist William Makepeace Thackeray either fell victim to — or created — the persistent critical narrative that apparently finds it impossible to discuss the multi-variant functions of food in *Don Juan* without also addressing Byron's complicated relationship with food and his body. Alluding to Byron's lifelong struggle with weight management, and his alleged dieting techniques, Thackeray declares:

> [R]emember that every man who has been worth a fig in this world, as poet, painter, or musician, has had a good appetite and a good taste. Ah, what a poet Byron would have been had he taken his meals properly, and allowed himself to grow fat — if nature intended him to grow fat — and not have physicked his intellect with wretched opium pills and acrid vinegar, that sent his principles to sleep, and turned his feelings sour! If that man had respected his dinner, he never would have written *Don Juan*.[3]

Thackeray does not explain why he thinks *Don Juan* was the logical result of Byron not respecting his dinner, nor does he elaborate on his oblique criticism of the poem, although his reference to taste echoes a common refrain by Byron's contemporaries that *Don Juan* was a work of bad taste.[4] Thackeray, however, takes the criticism one step further. The poem is not only proof of Byron's metaphorical bad taste, but also evidence of his literal bad taste *and* bad appetite. For Edward Trelawny, on the other hand, Byron's lack of respect for his dinner perhaps helped to facilitate great poetry:

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[3] William Makepeace Thackeray, "Memorials of Gormandizing [1841]," in *The Complete Works of William Makepeace Thackeray* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company 1889), 324.

[4] The reviewer for *The British Critic* declared: "'As far therefore as we are enabled to give it any character at all, we should pronounce it a narrative of degrading debauchery in doggerel rhyme,'" and labeled it " 'a manual of profligacy.'" At *The British Review*, the critic labeled it a "'pestilent poem.'" *Blackwoods*, after quoting "'a few of the passages which can be read without a blush,'" decided "'we dare not stain our pages with quoting any specimens of the disgusting merriment with which he has interspersed his picture of human suffering.'" Quoted in: Jerome Christensen, *Lord Byron's Strength: Romantic Writing and Commercial Society* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 221-22, 27, 31.

> He would exist on biscuits and soda-water for days together, then, to allay the eternal hunger gnawing at his vitals, he would make up a horrid mess of cold potatoes, rice, fish, or greens, deluged in vinegar, and gobble it up like a famished dog…Upon my observing he might as well have fresh fish and vegetables, instead of stale, he laughed an answered, 'I have an advantage over you, I have no palate; one thing is as good as another to me'…By starving his body Byron kept his brains clear; no man had brighter eyes or a clearer voice.[5]

In his letters, Byron often reports his own experiments in extreme eating and exercise, his weight fluctuations, and his digestive disturbances.[6]

Lingering on the edges of any discussion of Byron and his poetry is the issue of the poet himself. As Andrew Elfenbein explains, "for Byron's contemporaries, the sense that Byron was his heroes struck them with an oddly irresistible force…although only a few readers actually knew Byron personally, many supposed that his poems provided an almost unmediated knowledge of his mind."[7] This does not quite hold true for *Don Juan*, of course, as the ostensible subject of the poem is the hapless Juan, who displays little agency or interiority, as he repeatedly stumbles into affairs across Europe and the Ottoman Empire. The narrator emerges as a more vivid presence than Juan, as Elfenbein observes: "If the characters in *Don Juan*'s plot have impoverished subjectivities next to the loudly proclaimed depths of Byron's earlier heroes, the narrator becomes a different kind of character who can be read as 'Byron himself.'"[8] Byron's unconventional appetites, as detailed in Thackeray's censure and Trelawney's praise, make it

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[5] Edward John Trelawny, *Recollections of the Last Days of Shelley and Byron* (London: Edward Moxon, 1858), 51-3.

[6] See, for example: Byron, *Byron's Letters and Journals*, III, 226, 37; IV, 26.

[7] Andrew Elfenbein, *Byron and the Victorians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 13.

[8] Ibid., 44. He adds that, "from the vantage of *Don Juan* the monolithic inner self of the earlier poems looks too much like a concession to the littleness of those who want a private self to accompany their private property" (45).

especially difficult to discuss the plethora of alimentary topics in *Don Juan* without considering Byron himself, and his fraught relationship with food.

Almost all of the relatively few articles or chapters that consider Byron's poetry (primarily *Don Juan*) in connection with appetitive topics address his unusual eating habits, often to the detriment of their analysis. This biographical approach obscures other ways of reading his work, and lends itself to problematic psychoanalytic readings, such as the one Carol Shiner Wilson offers when reading *Don Juan* through the lens of Byron's eating disorder.[9] Other critics who address Byron, taste, and food tend to agree that *Don Juan* is aiming to outrage many of his English readers by satirizing their bourgeois tastes.[10] They also read in the poem's many food references a material counterargument to the transcendental aspirations of the Lake poets, especially Robert Southey, and, to a slightly lesser extent, William Wordsworth. Jane Stabler wisely warns against "homogenized" readings of the references to food and the body in Byron's poetry that "concentrate on the universalism of Byron's depiction of appetite" and insists on the "cultural relativity of Byron's scenes of eating."[11] Christine Kenyon-Jones makes a similar point, arguing for "Byron's understanding of the ideology of food and eating as a cultural activity."[12]

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[9] Carol Shiner Wilson, "Stuffing the Verdant Goose: Culinary Esthetics in 'Don Juan'," *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 24, no. Summer/Fall (1991).

[10] Denise Gigante focuses on the shipwreck survivors' cannibalism of Canto II, arguing that it functions as an outrage to high Romantic taste and a critique of consumer culture. Jocelyne Kolb keeps toggling between literal and figurative taste in the poem, to the point of exhaustion and meaninglessness. For her, the poem is a revolutionary mixture of high and low, which we can especially see in all the food references. Gigante, *Taste: A Literary History*; Jocelyne Kolb, *The Ambiguity of Taste: Freedom and Food in European Romanticism* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995).

[11] Jane Stabler, "Byron's World of Zest," in *Cultures of Taste/Theories of Appetite: Eating Romanticism*, ed. Timothy Morton (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 147, 49.

[12] Christine Kenyon-Jones, "'Man Is a Carnivorous Production': Byron and the Anthropology of Food," *Prism(s): Essays in Romanticism* 6 (1998): 42.

Considering *Don Juan* as proto-anthropological in its wide-ranging survey of how different cultural norms shape different literal tastes has yielded the most interesting and productive explorations of food in Byron; yet, these readings do not grapple with the formal elements of the poem — especially its adaptation of the *ottava rima* stanza form — or with its generic experimentation. If scholars do mention Byron's references to digestion and indigestion, they do so in passing, connecting these references to their larger arguments about Byron's rejoinder to taste. Only Jonathon Shears proposes to consider (in)digestion in *Don Juan* at greater length. Yet even he turns quickly from discussing digestion to addressing how readers, especially Byron's friends, responded to *Don Juan* with nausea.[13]

This chapter departs from these critical approaches by focusing on *Don Juan*'s attempt to digest the Romantic period. Fascinated with the inescapability of embodied experience, the poem repeatedly references digestion and the stomach to comment on, and attempt to process, recent world historical events, and cultural production and reception. Not unlike with Dorothy Wordsworth's *Grasmere Journals*, the task of classifying and explaining *Don Juan* eludes scholarly consensus. Is it an epic? A mock-epic? A satire? A verse narrative interspersed with lyric digressions? As Jerome McGann points out, Byron began the poem "with little forethought and, further…when he did begin it, he had no plan to write a long poem, least of all an epic poem."[14] His intention, at first, was to write a "literary and political manifesto to his age."[15] As he traced his unassuming hero Juan's journey across Europe and the Near East, Byron began to

[13] Jonathan Shears, "Digesting Don Juan, Cantos I and II," in *Aspects of Byron's Don Juan*, ed. Peter Cochran (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013).

[14] Jerome McGann, *Don Juan in Context* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), x.

[15] Ibid., 57.

reconceptualize the poem and to situate it in relatively recent history: the years between the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror. Had Byron lived, he apparently intended for Juan to meet his end on the guillotine in France. The narrator of *Don Juan* repeatedly — if often with debatable sincerity — refers to his poem as an epic, which it certainly is in scope, if not in tone. Although this chapter is not focused on whether *Don Juan* is a "proper" epic, the concept of epic is important to consider because it relates to the experience of war — or what Mary Favret refers to as "traumatized sense of history we have inherited from the romantic and Napoleonic era" — that hovers in the background of this poem.[16] *Don Juan* relates its own world-building project to the empire-building project of Napoleon, and, in turn, connects both projects to the stomach.

The first section of this chapter focuses on the poem's relationship to its most famous epic forebear: Homer, who serves as the poem's authority for war — and eating. Drawing attention to the poem's epic roots, *Don Juan*'s references to battles and banquets offer the narrator opportunities to reflect on the differences between Homer's age and his own. Invoking Homer allows Byron to reflect on the impact of two decades of war with France as well as what he sees as the disappointing outcome of those wars. He also repeatedly references Homer in relation to the "modern." While he is of course continuing the ancients versus moderns debate that preoccupied his Scriblerian forebears (especially Alexander Pope, a poet Byron famously admired), Byron is less concerned with taking sides than with reflecting on what Favret terms "the wartime culture called Romanticism."[17] *Don Juan* demonstrates how both war and eating have become degraded in "modern" times, a degradation that results in the two merging together.

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[16] Mary A. Favret, *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 32.

[17] Ibid., 18.

In the second section of this chapter, I continue to analyze how *Don Juan* merges the military with the alimentary. A bizarre pattern emerges as the poem details military leaders (especially Napoleon and Potemkin) who die from digestive issues. These men, who have been attempting epic, empire-building projects of their own are most definitively and humiliatingly defeated not in battle but by their stomachs. Finally, I address how the poem's own epic, world-building project is also threatened by digestive difficulty. This is where we can mostly clearly see Byron's poetic labor and the digestive capabilities — and limitations — of the *ottava rima* stanza form.

Before moving on to the first section, I want to briefly address the structure and significance of *ottava rima*. The eight-line, iambic pentameter stanza form comprises a seset of alternatingly rhymed lines and a concluding couplet. The rhyme form "orginat[es] in the Italian oral tradition of the *cantastorie* [story singers]" and in Renaissance Italy, was used in written narrative poems — most famously Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* and Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberate*.[18] The early seventeenth century English translator of Ariosto, John Harington, and Tasso, Edward Fairfax, preserved the *ottava rima* stanza form.[19] These Italian epics influenced Byron, as did Luigi Pulci's more irreverent *ottava rima* epic *Morgante Maggiore* (late 15th century)*,* the first canto of which Byron translated in 1822. Lindsay Waters convincingly argues that *Morgante* "proves the true analogue to *Don Juan,*" and that both poems are "mixtures of the comic and the serious" that draw on a range of "plebian and currently

[18] Catherine Anne Addison, "Ottava Rima and Novelistic Discourse," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 34, no. 2 (2004): 133-34.These Italian poets experienced a resurgence of popularity in eighteenth-century Italy as poets there searched for "an antidote to the florid, highly elaborate style" that the seventeenth century Baroque poet Giambattista "Marino and his heirs had fostered and to the practice of poetry by imitation of established models" (Waters 432).

[19] Andrew Wynn Owen, "Order and Disorder in the Ottava Rima of Shelley and Byron," *Essays in Criticism* 67, no. 1 (2017): 3.

popular…material."[20] As briefly touched on in the previous chapter, in the late eighteenth century, the English "discovered" the *improvisatore*, an oral poet associated with spontaneous composition and deep feeling who frequently used *ottava rima* in their poetic performances. This further contributed to the rise in popularity of Italian poetry and *ottava rima* in England. Byron would also have been familiar with John Hookham Frere's "The Monks and the Giants" (1817), the best-known Romantic-era use of *ottava rima* in English prior to Byron's relatively short carnivalesque poem, *Beppo* (1818).

Once Byron turned to writing in *ottava rima*, he took the stanza form and made it his own, at least in English. According to William Keach, "[Frere] told his nephews that he decided not to continue with his ottava rima burlesque in part because of 'the sort of stigma which at first attached to the metre after the publication of 'Don Juan.'"[21] The Victorian poet Algernon Charles Swinburne attributed later English "neglect" of *ottava rima* to Byron's mastery of the stanza form, as "no one could dare to challenge him in it."[22] Byron's shadow loomed over *ottava rima* into the twentieth century. Virginia Woolf argued that he "discovered in this style an 'elastic shape which will hold whatever you choose to put into it,'" illustrating how the form made room for Byron's epic narrative and his digressive musings.[23] For Drummond Bone, *ottava rima*'s elasticity takes the "instability" and "chaos" of the events described in *Don Juan* and "shape[s]

[20] Lindsay Waters, "The 'Desultory Rhyme' of Don Juan: Byron, Pulci, and the Improvisatory Style," *ELH* 45, no. 3 (1978): 438.

[21] William Keach, "Political Inflection in Byron's 'Ottava Rima'," *Studies in Romanticism* 27, no. 4 (1988): 553.

[22] Addison, "Ottava Rima and Novelistic Discourse," 140.

[23] Ibid., 138.

it," acting as proof that "there is civilized life to make the random mean."[24] Andrew Wynn Owen, by contrast, sees Byron's use of *ottava rima* as characterized by an "acceptance of chaos."[25] Owen focuses on how Byron uses *ottava rima* to foreground "the poem's fragmentariness and resistance to even minor narrative closures, because the world is chaotic, and meaning is a human superimposition on that chaos."[26] Other scholars connect *ottava rima* to the *improvisatore* tradition to which it is related. Caroline Gonda emphasizes how Byron "invokes the *improvisatore* in order to present an aesthetic of spontaneity and carelessness, effortless superiority."[27] Jeffrey C. Robinson similarly notes how Byron's use of the stanza form "privileges ease and play" and "moves the poetry forward with greater than expected speed."[28]

The propulsive rhythm of Byron's *ottava rima* also sweeps the reader up in its wake. As will become apparent in this chapter, it can be difficult to analyze just a little *Don Juan*. This is not simply because there is so much of the poem from which to choose, although that is partially the cause. It is also because each stanza flows into the next. Although the concluding couplet provides a moment of closure, it also sets up the next stanza, making it difficult to capture a discrete concept. As McGann writes, "once the poem was set in motion, the problem was anything but how to keep it going. The question was rather: could this Promethean monster be

[24] Drummond Bone, "Childe Harold Iv, Don Juan, and Beppo," in *The Cambridge Companion to Byron*, ed. Drummond Bone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 163.

[25] Owen, "Order and Disorder in the Ottava Rima of Shelley and Byron," 4.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Caroline Gonda, "The Rise and Fall of the Improvisatore, 1753-1845," *Romanticism* 6, no. 2 (2000): 207.

[28] Robinson, "Romantic Poetry: The Possibilities for Improvisation," 97-8.

kept in reasonable control?"[29] As I will discuss in more detail later, Byron's use of *ottava rima* appears to model the kind of ease and spontaneity associated with improvisation, and the stanza form does help him at least partially digest the chaos of the Romantic period. At the same time, the poem encourages a kind of excess in those analyzing it.

Battles, Banquets, and Modernity

Although Byron uses the alimentary as a way of processing and articulating the violent uncertainty of his historical moment throughout *Don Juan*, he does so most explicitly by connecting warring and feasting. Both experiences offer him the chance to contrast the world his epic records with that of the founder of epic: Homer. The narrator invokes Homer at moments in the poem when he is also addressing battles — and banquets. War cannot be contained; its violence infiltrates other experiences, especially dining. As this section will address, the alimentary also infiltrates war, especially the Siege of Ismail, the backdrop against which the action of Cantos VII and VIII is set. In the previous two cantos, Juan, having been sold into slavery by the father of his Greek love, Haidée, ends up in Constantinople, living in drag in the sultan's seraglio. There, he attempts to resist the amorous advances of the sultan's youngest wife, Gulbeyaz. Angered by Juan's resistance, and his accidental affair with his seraglio bedfellow, Dudu, Gulbeyaz has sentenced Juan and Dudu to death by drowning. The poem never specifies how they manage to escape. Yet, Juan, Dudu, and several others somehow arrive at the fort of Ismail (then part of the Ottoman Empire, now part of modern-day Ukraine) as Russian forces are preparing their siege.

Byron's description of the siege, which occurred in 1790 as part of the Russo-Turkish War, is based on Gabriel de Castelnau's account in his *Essai sur l'histoire ancienne et moderne*

[29] McGann, *Don Juan in Context*, 96.

de la Nouvelle Russie (1820). Byron's adaptation and expansion offers "'an ironic commentary on Castelnau's glorification of war,'" as P.G. Vassallo explains.[30] Byron's own letters emphasize his desire to undercut any celebration of war. Writing to the Irish poet and novelist, Thomas Moore, Byron describes how the siege cantos contain "much of the sarcasm on those butchers in large business, your mercenary soldiery," who helped lead Russian forces to victory without having any political stake in the battle.[31] Writing a few weeks later to his friend Douglas Kinnaird, Byron adds that the cantos include "a technical description of a modern siege…with much philosophy – and satire upon heroes and despots and the present false state of politics and society."[32]

The siege is also the event that situates *Don Juan* in a historical timeline. After writing the first five cantos without a clear sense of what he wanted the *Don Juan* to be, Byron reconceived his plans for the poem, and also switched from his long-time publisher, the conservative John Murray, to the radical John Hunt.[33] Including the Siege of Ismail, McGann argues, gives Byron's "epic narrative a specific historical and socio-political context…Such a decision indicates the point and seriousness with which he undertook to rededicate *Don Juan* to its new beginnings – that is to say, to its new, self-conscious, and more comprehensive aspirations towards political and ideological commentary and commitment."[34] As I addressed

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[30] Quoted in: Simon Bainbridge, "'Of War and Taking Towns': Byron's Siege Poems," in *Romantic Wars: Studies in Culture and Conflict, 1793–1822*, ed. Philip Shaw (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 169.

[31] Byron, *Byron's Letters and Journals*, IX, 191.

[32] Ibid., IX, 196.

[33] Jerome McGann, ed. *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, vol. V (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 716.

[34] Ibid., 718.

earlier, *Don Juan*'s status as an epic is debatable. The siege cantos in particular display elements of mock epic, although they are balanced with a stark look at the violence of war in a way the mock-epic battles of Alexander Pope are not. Claude Rawson argues that these cantos in particular "den[y]…the epic's moral worth," and represent a "removal of the difference between ill deeds in epic and in history;" he goes on to acknowledge that Byron also "jeer[s] at epic expectation by contaminating it systematically with the 'plain truth' of modern warfare."[35] Importantly for this chapter, these cantos comment on a distinct historical moment — one in which, as Favret argues, "writing and art are attuned to" a "new sense of a war that has potentially no limits or end, whose scope expands both internally and externally."[36] In response to the seemingly limitless scope of modern war, *Don Juan* turns to the alimentary.

Byron's transition into the poem's war cantos introduces the theme of the poem as banquet. As the narrator concludes Canto VI, in which Juan and Dudu's lives hang in the balance, he declares:

> I leave them for the present with good wishes,
> Though doubts of their well doing, to arrange,
> Another part of History, for the dishes
> Of this our banquet we must sometimes change,
> And trusting Juan may escape the fishes,
> Although his situation now seems strange,
> And scarce secure: as such digressions *are* fair,
> The Muse will take a little touch at warfare (VI.953-960)

Although the opening lines of *Don Juan*'s "Dedication" connect poetry and food via an extended attack on the Lake poets (and the Prince Regent), this is the first time Byron refers to the poem itself as a kind of meal. This reference both draws on and undermines Homeric tradition. As

[35] Claude Rawson, *Satire and Sentiment, 1660-1630* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 99, 128.

[36] Favret, *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime*, 17.

Susan Sherratt explains, "feasting appears as arguably the single most frequent activity in the *Odyssey* and, apart from fighting, also in the *Iliad*. It is clearly not only an activity of Homeric heroes, but also one that helps demonstrate that they are indeed heroes."[37] In Homer's epics, feasts serve multiple purposes: they "form the setting for the telling (or singing) of stories," act as "the prelude to important speeches in which intentions are announced or philosophies expounded," and often "herald the beginning of an exciting action or development or the close of a successful or harrowing episode."[38] Throughout *Don Juan,* Byron demonstrates the depth and breadth of his learning, especially when it comes to classical subjects. In a characteristically irreverent aside, he specifically communicates his awareness of the feast scene trope in Homer, declaring, "(His [Homer's] feasts are not the worst part of his works)" (XV.492).

Yet Byron's own feast scenes do not function in the same way as Homer's. Rather than signaling the beginning or end of some kind of action, feasts in *Don Juan* often become their own kind of battle, perhaps most notoriously in the cannibalistic feast of the shipwreck survivors in Canto II. At the same time, the main battle in *Don Juan* — the siege of Ismail — is punctuated with alimentary language and vignettes. Rather than recounting a literal feast as the precursor to "warfare," as would be the Homeric tradition, Byron presents the poem itself as a never-ending feast, and this militaristic "digression" as a dish[39] in the banquet. As the poem progresses, it becomes apparent that there is not a clear break between feasting and fighting. Instead, the battle

[37] Susan Sherratt, "Feasting in Homeric Epic," *Hesperia* 73 (2004): 301.

[38] Ibid., 308.

[39] Or many dishes, in the likely case that Byron is referring to the more common dining style of *à la Français*, in which a meal was served in several courses, each containing multiple dishes.

cantos are punctuated by alimentary moments, while the later Amundeville dinner is more battle than banquet.

The narrator's declaration that "the Muse will take a little touch at warfare" implies a light-hearted account of war awaits the reader in the next canto-dish. Instead, the poem transitions into a grueling two-canto-long description of the Siege of Ismail that exposes the brutality and purposelessness of war. For *Don Juan*, the tools and techniques of modern warfare are indigestible:

> …The work of Glory still went on
> In preparations for a cannonade
> As terrible as that of Ilion,
> If Homer had found mortars ready made;
> But now, instead of slaying Priam's son,
> We only can but talk of escalade,
> Bombs, drums, guns, bastions, batteries, bayonets, bullets,
> Hard words, which stick in the soft Muses' gullets. (VII.617-624)

Describing the Russian preparations for the siege of Ismail, Byron begins with an ironic reference to their "work of Glory." Comparing this siege with the ancient siege of Troy, the stanza alludes to *The Iliad* only to sharply distinguish between these two military campaigns. Whether or not Byron upholds the siege of Troy as more noble than the siege of Ismail is debatable. Both are "terrible," a word that could mean "dreadful" and "formidable," or could be used here in a hyperbolic sense.[40] Both sieges can also be read as purposeless, at least from Byron's point of view, for neither battle is fought to advance the cause of freedom. The *casus belli* for Troy is a kidnapped woman; Ismail is besieged as part of a multi-war land grab between the Russian and Ottoman empires. Rather than ennobling a purposeless siege by engaging in individual battle like Achilles with Hector, the Russians — and "we" more generally — rely on

[40] Samuel Johnson, "Terrible," in *A Dictionary of the English Language* (London: W. Strahan, 1755).

the nascent military industrial complex, which provides "mortars ready made." These mass-produced objects for mass killing negate the implied lightness of the Muse's "little touch at warfare."

The "hard words" of modern warfare are not only *not* conducive to poetry, but actively repel it, sticking "in the soft Muses' gullets." The exceptionally hypermetric line listing these hard words — "Bombs, drums, guns, bastions, batteries, bayonets, bullets" — feels like an assault, and enacts in meter what the poem claims occurs in the muses' gullets, sticking in the poem's throat, and leaving the reader stuck on this line. The mention of "gullets" also adds a somatic context: these words of war cannot make it down the alimentary canal, but remain lodged at its beginning. Byron later reinforces this connection between the tools of modern warfare and the alimentary canal. Describing the beginning of the bombardment, he offers this unusual account:

> Three hundred cannon threw up their emetic,
> And thirty thousand muskets flung their pills
> Like hail, to make a bloody diuretic (VIII.89-91).

Likening warfare to explosions at both ends of the alimentary canal, these lines also remove humans from the equation. Taking on an agency of their own, the cannons and muskets also behave like unruly human bodies. The cannons vomit forth the "emetic" of cannon balls, while the muskets eject bullets that violently rupture the flesh of those they hit, creating a "bloody diuretic," as blood flows from the bodies of the injured. These lines connect the tools of war to provoked digestive systems, and to the tools of medicine: emetics and diuretics, prescribed to remedy blockages. Such remedies are themselves violent, even outside the context of battle, prompting forcible evacuations from both ends of the human body.

The siege cantos continue to develop the analogy between war, unruly bodies and the alimentary. Late in the description of the siege, as the Russians enter the conquered city, the narrator relates the following anecdote:

> A Russian officer, in martial tread
> Over a heap of bodies, felt his heel
> Seized fast, as if 't were by the serpent's head
> Whose fangs Eve taught her human seed to feel:
> In vain he kick'd, and swore, and writhed, and bled,
> And howl'd for help as wolves do for a meal —
> The teeth still kept their gratifying hold,
> As do the subtle snakes described of old.
>
> A dying Moslem, who had felt the foot
> Of a foe o'er him, snatch'd at it, and bit
> The very tendon which is most acute
> (That which some ancient Muse or modern wit
> Named after thee, Achilles), and quite through 't
> He made the teeth meet, nor relinquish'd it
> Even with his life — for (but they lie) 't is said
> To the live leg still clung the sever'd head. (VIII.657-672)

These stanzas hearken back to the poem's earlier, oblique reference to Achilles, regarding how the tools of modern warfare preclude the kind of epic one-on-one battle of Achilles "slay[ing] Priam's son;" they also underscore the gulf between Homeric and modern warfare. Here, the "Russian officer," carelessly walking "over a heap of bodies," slain by the emetics and diuretics of modern warfare, finds his own Achilles tendon attacked by an unexpected source. The Muse also makes a reappearance, given possible credit for naming the Achilles tendon. Whereas Achilles' downfall is tragic, the Russian officer's is bathetic, and in a surprisingly literal way: he is attacked from below, and brought low by the "gratifying," freakishly tenacious grip of the "dying Moslem['s]" teeth. This anecdote is striking, not least because it is not based on

Castelnau's account of the siege.[41] While the officer's cry for help is likened to "wolves howl[ing] for a meal," only the head seems to derive any appetitive satisfaction from the encounter. Yet the meal itself is unproductive in the sense that it does not sustain the dying Moslem.

While the Siege of Ismail devolves into an unappetizing banquet for one — a severed head biting an Achilles' tendon — the banquet at the Amundevilles' English estate reverses the equation and becomes its own kind of battle. After surviving the siege and a time in Russia as Catherine the Great's new favorite, Juan finds himself shipped off to England on a vague diplomatic mission. There, he is befriended by Lord Henry Amundeville, and invited to his country seat, Norman Abbey, where Cantos XIII-XVII are set. The house party serves as an opportunity for Byron to satirize the English aristocracy that fêted and later exiled him. Although the narrator had proclaimed a canto and a half earlier that he would "not dwell upon ragouts or roasts" while recounting Juan's visit, he either changes his mind, or was not telling the truth earlier. As others have noted, his lengthy description of the ragouts, roasts, and other dishes on the Amundevilles' table comes from Louis Ude's *The French Cook* (1813). Ude had been the chef to Napoleon's mother before moving to England, where he soon found work as the chef for the Earl of Sexton.

Rendering Ude's menu in verse, Byron launches an assault on the reader at the same time that he performs a frantic act of poetic labor, repeatedly pausing to make declarations like "how shall I get this gourmand stanza through" (XV.502). His description of this particularly charged dinner occurs immediately after Juan's married hostess, Adeline, declares her intent to help him

[41] Peter Cochran, "Don Juan and Castelnau's History of New Russia " in *Aspects of Byron's Don Juan*, ed. Peter Cochran (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 393-414.

find a wife, at the same time that it becomes clear she also desires him. Their conversation is interrupted by the bell signaling it is time to dress for dinner, and Juan later finds himself seated between Adeline and the available Aurora. But first, the narrator dedicates thirteen stanzas to describing the meal, beginning in this martial tone:

> Great things were now to be achieved at table,
> With massy plate for armour, knives and forks
> For weapons; but what Muse since Homer 's able
> (His feasts are not the worst part of his works)
> To draw up in array a single day-bill
> Of modern dinners? where more mystery lurks,
> In soups or sauces, or a sole ragout,
> Than witches, b–ches, or physicians brew. (XV.489-96)

Presenting the table as a battleground, this stanza frames the elaborate meal as mock epic, in which combatants protect themselves with the weightiness of solid metal or "massy" dishes and fight with "knives and forks." Except, unlike the mock epic teatime battle of a work like Pope's "Rape of the Lock," the violence of this meal largely derives from its overwhelming abundance, both in the dishes that comprise it and the stanzas dedicated to describing it. Invoking Homer again, the narrator reiterates the connection between the siege he earlier described and the battle about to take place. For both, the "modern" is the common denominator. Just as the Muse seems unable to ingest the modern words of warfare, so too is she incapable of — or at least ill-suited to — turning "modern dinners" into poetry. Pausing after the first stanza describing the dinner, the narrator again protests that he is not going to dwell upon the meal, declaring:

> I must crowd all into one grand mess
> Or mass; for should I stretch into detail
> My Muse would run much more into excess. (XV.505-7)

Of course, despite these protestations, he spends another ten stanzas describing the meal.

In the course of these stanzas, Byron also reinforces the association between dining and warfare. This occurs most explicitly in his mention of one dish, partridges *à la Lucullus*, which

are described thus: “great Lucullus’ Robe triumphal muffles / (There’s fame) young partridge fillets, deck’d with truffles” (XV.527-528). Lucius Licinius Lucullus, a first-century BCE Roman politician and general, led Roman forces to victory in the Third Mithridatic War, which ended with the absorption of the Pontic Kingdom (comprised primarily of regions south and east of the Black Sea) into the Roman Empire. The narrator’s parenthetical — “(There’s fame)” — reads as ironic, and, in light of what follows in the next stanza, also serious:

> What are the fillets on the victor’s brow
> To these? They are rags or dust. Where is the arch
> Which nodded to the nation’s spoils below?
> Where the triumphal chariots’ haughty march?
> Gone to where victories must like dinners go.
> Farther I shall not follow the research:
> But oh! ye modern heroes with your cartridges,
> When will your names lend lustre e’en to partridges? (XV.529-536)

Moving from fillets of partridge to the fillets — or small bands — placed “on the victor’s brow,” the poem reflects on the ultimate meaninglessness of these empire-building victories. Such imperial *momento mori* can also be found in poems like Anna Letitia Barbauld’s “Eighteen Hundred and Eleven” (1812) and Percy Shelley’s “Ozymandias” (1818). Except, in a classically Byronic move, *Don Juan* illustrates this point with toilet humor. All these material trappings of military victory — fillets, arches, chariot processions — end up “where victories must like dinners go. / Farther I shall not follow the research.” Like dinners bound to be digested and excreted, military conquests have a similarly fleeting existence. Truer victory seems to lie in having one’s name grace a dish that will literally end up in the toilet, rather than erecting an arch that will end up in the metaphorical midden of history. Although the sestet reflects on the meaninglessness of all military victory and nation-building, the concluding couplet holds a final insult for modern warfare. Referring to “modern heroes” and one of the tools of modern warfare — “cartridges” — the line recalls the “hard words, which stick in the soft Muses gullets,” and

poetry's inability to digest modernity. The cultural legacy of having one's "name lend lustre…to partridges," although obviously ironic, nonetheless has a satisfying permanence that contemporary military victory lacks.

Byron's footnote to this stanza develop this idea in more detail. Describing "a dish 'à la Lucullus,'" he writes:

> This hero, who conquered the East, has left his more extended celebrity to the transplantation of cherries (which he first brought to Europe) and the nomenclature of some very good dishes; - and I am not sure that (barring indigestion) he has not done more service to mankind by his cookery than by his conquests. A cherry-tree may weight against a bloody quarrel: besides, he has contrived to earn celebrity from both. (764)

Footnotes in *Don Juan* are relatively rare, and this is the only one appending the banquet stanzas. Although Byron acknowledges the historic reason for Lucullus's fame — he is "a hero who conquered the East" — the footnote focuses on the appetitive reasons for his fame, which is what provides him with "extended celebrity." Not only does his name grace "some very good dishes," but he is also commonly designated the person who brought cherries to Europe, an association confirmed by eighteenth-century histories and horticultural texts. Once again, Byron draws a connection between the alimentary and the military, or between "cookery" and "conquests." In a poem that famously begins by searching for a hero, this footnote and the stanza it annotates cheekily propose that the truest hero is one who has military might but also contributes something to the table. At the same time, it acknowledges the potential violence ("indigestion") of delicious foods.

Fallible Guts

In the same cantos in which Byron melds the martial and alimentary, he also introduces a strange theme that will recur several times: the death of military leaders from stomach problems. In *Don Juan*, the stomach possesses a starkly literal ability to topple rulers. The first historical

figure whose indigestion woes are invoked is also the one most directly involved in the plot of *Don Juan*: Prince Grigory Potemkin, the Russian military commander, lover of Catherine the Great, and real-life architect of the siege of Ismail. After taking a few dozen stanzas to set the scene for the battle, the narrator reminds us that Potemkin is pulling the strings from afar:

> There was a man, if that he was a man,
> Not that his manhood could be called in question,
> For had he not been Hercules, his span
> Had been as short in youth as indigestion
> Made his last illness, when, all worn and wan,
> He died beneath a tree, as much unblest on
> The soil of the green province he had wasted,
> As e'er was locust on the land it blasted (VII.281-8)

This stanza refers to Potemkin's death in 1791, less than a year after the siege. Byron would likely have read about Potemkin in William Tooke's 1800 translation — and enlargement — of Jean-Henri Castéra's *Life of Catharine II*.[42] Tooke, who had served as an Anglican clergyman in St. Petersburg from 1774 through 1792, turned to writing and translating Russian history upon his return to England. According to Tooke, Potemkin, although suffering from a fever, "disdained th[e] advice" of the physicians Catherine sent to tend him in Jassy,[43] where he was negotiating peace talks, "and would follow no regimen."[44] Instead, "he carried even his intemperance to an uncommon height, his ordinary breakfast was the greater part of a smoke-dried goose from Hamburgh, slices of hung-beef or ham, drinking with it a prodigious quantity of wine and Dantzic-liqueurs, and afterwards dining with equal voracity. He never controlled his appetites in any kind of gratification," and imported sterlet soup, oysters, and oranges from St.

[42] "Byron, Don Juan, and Russia," 418.

[43] Iași in present-day Romania.

[44] William Tooke, *The Life of Catharine II,, Empress of Russia*, vol. III (London: T.N. Longman and O. Rees, 1800), 322.

Petersburg and Riga.[45] "With this sort of diet," Tooke continues, "it is no wonder that he perceived his distemper to be daily gaining ground," and decided to leave the fever-ridden Jassy.[46] But "scarcely had he gone three leagues of his journey when he found himself much worse. He alighted from his carriage in the midst of the highway, threw himself on the grass, and died under a tree, in the arms of the countess Branicka, his favourite niece."[47]

Byron omits the comforting presence of Branicka in relating the death of Potemkin, instead depicting the prince as a lone figure expiring against a bleak natural tableau. The human equivalent of a locust, he dies "unblest on / The soil of the green province he had wasted." In a poem rarely attentive to typically Romantic interactions between man and the natural world, this image stands out. The soil itself, and the tree from which it grows, deny their conqueror a final blessing. Tooke's history emphasized the international scope of Potemkin's gluttony. Like a good modern consumer, Potemkin imported his food from the far reaches of the Russian Empire and beyond. Byron's account of his death, by contrast, elides the main causes of Potemkin's deadly indigestion, focusing on how Potemkin's own "worn and wan" body and "the green province he had wasted" are bound up in each other. These defeated lands find a mirror in the defeated body of Potemkin: his forces have laid waste to the land, and the effort involved in this empire-building conquest in turn lays waste to Potemkin's body. The destruction of the land and of Potemkin's body also represents a waste of resources. Potemkin's gluttonous inclinations have put him in an imbalanced, antagonistic relationship with the land around him.

[45] Ibid., 322-323.

[46] Ibid., 324.

[47] Ibid.

Although this description of Potemkin's death conveys a sense of disgust, the poem also seems fascinated by the Prince's semi-mythological status, presenting him as somehow more than a mere human (while, in classic *Don Juan* fashion, also working in a dirty joke). How can someone as seemingly superhuman as Potemkin be felled not in battle but by something as inconsequential as too much food? Describing Potemkin's "gigantic stature, and…bodily strength," Tooke also explicitly likened him to Hercules, representing the military leader as "active, indefatigable, turbulent, bold, and discreet, with a capacity more comprehensive than just, he was capable of undertaking and of achieving the most dangerous and desperate enterprises. He paid little attention to the opinions of a world which he despised; and his passions acknowledged neither restraint nor limit, because his heart was destitute of morality and devoid of principle."[48] Peter Cochran suggests that Byron was fascinated with Russia — and incorporated it into *Don Juan* despite never having been there, in contrast to the rest of the European and Eastern locations Juan visits — because he enjoyed their openness about their goals and desires, whether in warfare or sex. For Byron, this Russian lack of hypocrisy stood in stark contrast to that found in England, where desires, especially for sex and power, were secretly indulged while being openly condemned.[49] Yet Potemkin's open embrace of his appetite does not seem to have prolonged his life. Instead, his ignominious death undercuts his achievements.

Although less integral to the plot of *Don Juan*, the Persian leader Nadir Shah also reinforces the poem's fascination with empire-building leaders brought low by digestive

[48] Tooke, *The Life of Catharine II, Empress of Russia*, III, 325.

[49] Cochran, "Byron, Don Juan, and Russia."

difficulty. The narrator references Shah during a brief aside while describing Juan's rescue of Leila from the ruins of Ismail:

> But Juan turn'd his eyes on the sweet child
> Whom he had saved from slaughter — what a trophy
> O! ye who build up monuments, defiled
> With gore, like Nadir Shah, that costive sophy,
> Who, after leaving Hindostan a wild,
> And scarce to the Mogul a cup of coffee
> To soothe his woes withal, was slain, the sinner!
> Because he could no more digest his dinner; — (IX, 257-264)

Nadir Shah, a Persian warrior and leader, "had risen from bandit leader to King of Persia by 1736. He defeated the Afghans, drove the Turks from Persia, forced Russia to relinquish her Caspian provinces…death and devastation followed him everywhere."[50] According to Père Louis Bazin, who served as Shah's doctor, his digestive difficulties were numerous: "il avoit des vomissemens fréquens; & une heure après ses repas, il rendoit tout ce qu'il avoit pris. Ces accidens étoient accompagnés de beaucoup d'autres: grande constipation, oppilation de foye, sécheresse de bouche, &c."[51] Shah's assassination most likely occurred because he was "relentlessly cruel," and was rumored to be planning to "kill the entire Persian part of his army (he preferred Uzbek and Tartar soldiers)."[52] Byron, however, recasts his slaying as explicitly related to his alimentary habits and afflictions. He was slain "*because* he could no more digest

[50] "Byron, Body and Soul," in *Byron and Women [and Men]*, ed. Peter Cochran (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 188.

[51] "He vomited frequently, and an hour after his meals he returned all he had eaten. These accidents were accompanied by many others: great constipation, liver obstruction, dry mouth, &c." Louis Bazin, "Mémoires Sur Les Dernières Années Du Règne De Thamas Kouli-Kan Et Sa Mort Tragique, Contenus Dans Un Lettre Du Frère Bazin [1751]," in *Lettres Édifiantes Et Curieuses Écrites Des Missions Étrangères* (Paris: Chez J. G. Merigot, 1780), 304.

[52] Ibid.

his dinner" (emphasis mine). A man who had "blinded his own son on suspicion of treason,"[53] Shah is costive literally and figuratively: he is both constipated, and hardened to any sense of kindness or forgiveness. He has laid waste to the land he conquers, regardless of religion, "leaving Hindostan a wild," and as the reference to the "cup of coffee" implies, destroyed the agricultural infrastructure and stores of the Mughal empire. In turn, he is undone by digestive failure. Like Potemkin, Shah's violence redounds upon his stomach.

The siege of Ismail provides the diegetic backdrop for the narrator's musing on the indigestive fates of Potemkin and Shah. In the aftermath of the siege, Juan finds himself in Russia, serving as Catherine's new favorite. Early in the canto, the narrator introduces Napoleon Bonaparte, the final — and most significant — military leader to be felled by his stomach:

> 'To be or not to be! That is the question,'
> Says Shakespeare, who just now is much in fashion
> I am neither Alexander nor Hephaestion,
> Nor ever had for *abstract* fame much passion;
> But would much rather have a sound digestion,
> Than Buonaparte's cancer: - could I dash on
> Through fifty victories to shame or fame,
> Without a stomach – what were a good name? (IX.105-12)

If Potemkin and Shah's deaths connect them outward to the land they have wasted, *Don Juan*'s reference to Napoleon's recent death by stomach cancer looks inward. As I noted in this chapter's introduction, this stanza touches on many of *Don Juan*'s central concerns, including popular culture, classical civilization, the impact of two decades of war with France, Napoleon's legacy, Byron's complicated relationship to fame, and digestive issues. Byron wrote admiringly of Napoleon, lamenting his downfall in a letter to Moore: "his overthrow, from the beginning,

[53] Cochran, "Byron, Body and Soul," 187.

was a blow on the head to me. Since that period we have been the slaves of fools."[54] At other times, he seems to admire Napoleon almost unwillingly, referring to the disastrous invasion of Moscow as "Napoleon on his bold and bloody track" (VIII.555).[55]

But here, Napoleon's boldness and grandeur fade into meaninglessness, and he becomes reduced to his diseased stomach. Detailed accounts of his death had circulated quickly; in 1821, only months after Napoleon's death, the dramatist Antoine Jean Baptiste Simonnin published *Histoire des trois derniers mois de la vie de Napoléon Bonaparte, écrite d'après des documens authentiques*. Simonnin relates how, in the last six weeks of his life, Napoleon diagnosed himself with stomach cancer, which had also caused his father's death. He also describes Napoleon's autopsy, which made clear that stomach cancer was to blame: "En examinant l'estomac, on s'aperçut que ce viscère était le siège d'une grande maladie…La surface intérieure de l'estomac présentait une masse d'affections cancéreuses ou de parties squirreuses se

[54] Byron, *Byron's Letters and Journals*, VIII, 166.

[55] *Don Juan*'s fascination with Napoleon extends beyond his military prowess and republicanism. The poem also compares its own poetic project to Napoleon's empire-building project. In addition to admiring Napoleon, Byron also identified with him, or least performed a kind of identification. When reminiscing on the height of his poetic fame, Byron describes himself as being "reckon'd a considerable time / the grand Napoleon of the realms of rhyme" (XI, 55). Then he proceeds to compare his post-1816 poetry (in other words, the poetry he wrote after leaving England) to the military failures that weakened and finally defeated Napoleon and his forces:

> But Juan was my Moscow, and Faliero
> My Leipsic, and my Mount Saint Jean seems Cain:
> 'La Belle Alliance' of dunces down at zero,
> Now that the Lion's fall'n, may rise again:
> But I will fall at least as fell my hero;
> Nor reign at all, or as a *monarch* reign;
> Or to some lonely isle of gaolers go,
> With turncoat Southey for my turnkey Lowe. (XI.441-8)

Byron imagines himself in the poetic version of Napoleon's exile on St. Helena: imprisoned by Robert Southey, the once radical Romantic poet turned conservative Poet Laureate.

changeant en cancer."[56] In 1822, the *Annual Biography and Obituary* published an English account taken in part from Simonnin's. This obituary also notes: "It was remarked before his death, that for more than nine days he had refused all nourishment, which was supposed to have proceeded from resignation or obstinacy; but the diseased state of his stomach fully accounted for it."[57] These anecdotes not only contextualize Byron's reference to Napoleon's death, but also offer a sense of the detail in which Napoleon's defeated and destroyed body was discussed, even in those accounts that mourned his death and celebrated his achievements, as both of these do. Simonnin also repeatedly remarks how the autopsy revealed Napoleon's fatness in a new level of detail: "A la première vue, le corps, qui avait de très-petits os et de très-petits muscles, paraissait très-gras, ce qui fut confirmé par la première incision vers le bas-ventre, où la graisse avait plus, d'un pouce et demi d'épaisseur sur l'abdomen."[58] This autopsy seems a final humiliation for a man doubly defeated: first by the Seventh Coalition and then by his own body, which is both wasted and smothered in its own fat. The contrast between "abstract fame" and Napoleon's very real, very destroyed stomach is stark.

As is often the case in *Don Juan*, introducing digestion prompts the narrator to ponder existential questions. Every time "digestion" or "indigestion" appears at the end of a line (a total of six times), Byron rhymes it with "question," a pairing that must partially derive from

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[56] "Examining the stomach, it was found that this viscera was the seat of a great disease…The inner surface of the stomach had a mass of cancerous or scirrhus lesions changing into cancer."

Antoine Jean Baptiste Simonnin, Histoire Des Trois Derniers Mois De La Vie De Napoléon Bonaparte, Écrite D'après Des Documens Authentiques (Bruxelles: Arnold Lacrosse, 1821), 24.

[57] *The Annual Biography and Obituary, for the Year 1822*, vol. VI (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown), 214.

[58] "At first sight, the body, which had very small bones and very small muscles, appeared very fat, which was confirmed by the first incision towards the lower abdomen, where the fat was more than one and a half inches thick on the abdomen" (Ibid., 23-24).

necessity. There are, after all, only so many words that rhyme with "digestion." But *Don Juan* is genuinely interested in attending to the inquiries of the gut, and this pairing holds significance for the poem beyond the demands of rhyme. In this instance, opening the stanza with the first line of Hamlet's famous soliloquy models a different kind of approach to profound reflection — one that might be more in keeping with the stormy persona Byron developed in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and his Turkish tales — than that offered by the ironic narrator of *Don Juan*. As is the case elsewhere in the poem, the "question" is less about life or death than it is about the meaning that often overlooked material circumstances give, or take, from life. The stanza juxtaposes the intangibility of "fame" — or, as Byron redundantly puts it, "abstract fame" — with "sound digestion," a decidedly tangible, non-abstract bodily state. Whether readers see Napoleon's "victories" bringing him "shame or fame" likely depends on which side of the Channel they were born. This stanza argues that, regardless of the reader's national allegiance, all should agree that Napoleon's stomach cancer renders his "victories" meaningless. A "good" — or bad — "name" is impossible without a stomach. In other words, the stomach is what truly structures identity — and has the potential to destroy it.

Mocking these digestive deaths, however, is the not-insubstantial figure of King George IV, who, in spite of his notorious stomach, remained very much alive. At various points in *Don Juan*, Byron offers his own contributions to a decades long tradition of satirizing

Figure 3: James Gillray, "A Voluptuary Under the Horrors of Digestion" (1792)

George's corpulence,[59] which is most famously portrayed in the caricaturist James Gillray's *A Voluptuary Under the Horrors of Digestion*.[60] Gillray's image plays on the disgust with the then-Prince Regent's notorious consumption habits,[61] which continued unabated throughout his time as Regent and then King, resulting in massive debts, his ever increasing waistline, gout, edema, and other health problems. Yet, despite the "horrors of digestion" that Gillray insists plague George, he displayed a remarkable skill for survival.

Of course, *Don Juan* would never be so dogmatic as to insist that stomachs are universally capable of properly enacting some kind of digestive poetic justice.[62] In the case of Napoleon at the very least, it remains unclear whether the poem even sees his death as poetic justice — or as a final tragedy. Earlier in *Don Juan*, Byron had mused that there is no guarantee indigestion will plague those who might deserve to suffer it. The reflection comes after Juan, just arrived in the Constantinople marketplace, is sold as a slave to Gulbeyez's servant, the eunuch, Baba. After describing the haggling between the merchant and Baba, which concludes when "the

[59] Writing during the 1822 famine in Ireland, Byron fumes: "Gaunt famine never shall approach the throne / Though Ireland starve, great George weighs twenty stone" (VIII.1007-8). He also imagines a distant future in which geologists unearth the skeleton of George IV and marvel at its dimensions, as early nineteenth-century geologists were doing with the bones of dinosaurs and mammoths: "Think then if George the Fourth should be dug up! / How the new worldlings of the then new East / Will wonder where such animals could sup!" (IX.305-7).

[60] James Gillray, *A Voluptuary under the Horrors of Digestion*, 1792. H. Humphrey.

[61] In her discussion of Gillray's cartoon, Corinna Wagner argues that, "in both his public and private lives, George embodied recklessness, promiscuity, disloyalty, irresponsibility, and lack of restraint — all of which were in evidence on a body marked by moral failure… In the politically exigent atmosphere of the 1790s and in light of mounting pressure on public figures to demonstrate personal probity, Gillray presented an individual whose excesses marked him as unfit for public office…Coming from an era in which private virtue became so closely aligned with civic virtue, this image reminds us that in the public imagination personal taste is linked to political events like famine, war, and revolution." Corinna Wagner, *Pathological Bodies: Medicine and Political Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Global, Area, and International Archive; University of California Press, 2013), 181-3.

[62] Chylopoetic justice?

merchant giving change, and signing / Receipts in full, began to think of dining," the narrator moves into a more philosophical digression:

> I wonder if his appetite was good?
> Or, if it were, if also his digestion?
> Methinks at meals some odd thoughts might intrude
> And conscience ask a curious sort of question,
> About the right divine how far we should,
> Sell flesh and blood. (V.233-8)

He starts out by asking a variation on the kind of question one might often ask about this sort of person: How can he live with himself? Except, in this poem, the question of course has a more alimentary focus: How can the merchant start thinking about eating when he has barely finished haggling over the cost of human lives? Is it possible to eat with a clear conscience? And not just to eat but to process one's food?

The narrator seems to hold out hope that it cannot be that easy, and that eating will in fact revenge itself upon the merchant's overly easy conscience, even if his alimentary canal does not feel the direct effects:

> When dinner has opprest one,
> I think it is perhaps the gloomiest hour
> Which turns up out of the sad twenty-four.
>
> Voltaire says 'No:' he tells you that Candide
> Found life most tolerable after meals;
> He's wrong – unless man were a pig, indeed,
> Repletion rather adds to what he feels,
> Unless he's drunk, and then no doubt he's freed
> From his own brain's oppression while it reels.
> Of food I think with Philips son, or rather
> Ammon's (ill please with one world and one father);
>
> I think with Alexander, that the act
> Of eating, with another act or two,
> Makes us feel our mortality in fact
> Redoubled; when a roast and a ragout,
> And fish, and soup, by some side dishes back'd,
> Can give us either pain or pleasure, who

Would pique himself on intellects, whose use
Depends so much upon the gastric juice? (V.238-56)

From the banality of the slave trader's evil and appetite, the poem transitions to contemplating eating and existence more broadly. If the stanza about the slave trader suggests that only those with a bad conscience are "opprest" by dinner, the poem upends that argument by revealing that is just what dinner is supposed to do. According to the logic of the narrator — who appeals to the classical authority of Alexander the Great — eating actually makes you feel more *and* increases the awareness of one's own mortality. On the one hand, this post-prandial awareness distinguishes us from baser creatures, and from particularly unfeeling humans. On the other hand, it is not so special or unique of an experience. These thoughts of mortality — and people's self-reflexive inclination to congratulate themselves for having these deep thoughts — are a kind of privilege accorded primarily to the well fed.

The Digestive System

Like Potemkin, Shah, and Napoleon, and unlike the overly complacent slave trader, *Don Juan* suffers from digestive difficulty:

If from great Nature's or our own abyss
Of thought, we could but snatch a certainty,
Perhaps mankind might find the path they miss —
But then 'twould spoil much good philosophy.
One system eats another up, and this
Much as old Saturn ate his progeny;
For when his pious consort gave him stones
In lieu of sons, of these he made no bones.

But System doth reverse the Titan's breakfast,
And eats her parents, albeit the digestion
Is difficult. Pray tell me, can you make fast,
After due search, your faith to any question?
Look back o'er ages, ere unto the stake fast
You bind yourself, and call some mode the best one.
Nothing more true than not to trust your senses;
And yet what are your other evidences? (XIV.1-2, 1-16)

As with many of Byron's introductory stanzas to the poem's cantos, this one begins with sweeping, extra-diegetic musing and a display of his wide-ranging knowledge. Here, Byron invokes the classical myth from Hesiod's *Theogony*, which relates the Titan Saturn's alimentary attempt to defy the prophecy he would be overthrown by his children. To prevent this, he would eat each of his newly born children, a tactic that worked well until his consort, Ops, birthed Jove in secret and gave Saturn a cloth-wrapped stone instead of his son to eat. Jove grew strong and forced Saturn to regurgitate his (still whole) children, who helped their brother to overthrow their father, and expel the Titans from Olympus. Byron does not work in these allusions simply to remind the reader of the classical education he enjoyed. Instead, he references this ancient myth in order to pass judgment on his present day, offering a commentary both philosophical and visceral.

These stanzas most obviously allude to the Enlightenment fascination with system. As Mark Canuel explains, system "had accumulated a double meaning by the end of the eighteenth century. A system was a mode of thought or physical organization that was 1) internally coherent to form a 'complex unity' and 2) guided by a philosophical 'law,' 'purpose,' or 'function.'"[63] Clifford Siskin argues that in the eighteenth century, system emerges as a genre, one that can be contrasted with the essay, which "then was not today's polished pearl but an irregular attempt…System, however, sought — and assumed the possibility of — completion, reducing

[63] Mark Canuel, "Introduction: Making and Unmaking Romantic Systems," *Romantic Circles* (2016), https://romantic-circles.org/praxis/systems/praxis.systems.2016.canuel.html.

'many things' to 'order.'"[64] System, he argues, reached its apex[65] in the late eighteenth century; he traces how the systematizing impulse of philosophers like Adam Smith contribute to what becomes "a central experience of modernity: the experience of 'The System' as something [that] works both too well — 'you can't beat The System' — and not well enough — it always seems to 'break down.'"[66] In the Romantic period, systems were not just political and economic, but also literary. William Wordsworth was the literary figure most closely associated with system.[67] Byron, of course, reveled in insulting the increasingly conservative Wordsworth, whom he sometimes referred to in a few letters as "Turdsworth."[68]

Yet he also took the radical poet Leigh Hunt to task for his system. In an 1818 letter to Moore, Byron describes Hunt's defense of the style in which he drafted "The Story of Rimini" as "a system, or *upon system,* or some such cant." As McGann explains, "Byron opposed the attempt to write poetry on a system, or to conceive that the intellectual end of the 'philosophic mind' was the revelation of the latent structure (total form) of the world."[69] A system skeptic, Byron tries and fails to persuade Hunt to change his style. "When a man talks of system, his case

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[64] Clifford Siskin, *System: The Shaping of Modern Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2016), 33.

[65] Using information visualization technology to aid his distant reading, Siskin analyzed the title pages of every book in the Eighteenth-Century Collections Online database. He includes maps and graphs as evidence that "not only did references to 'system' maintain their steeply linear growth during the 1790s…the percentage of texts with variants of *system* on their title pages suddenly took an exponential turn at precisely that time" (36).

[66] Ibid., 154.

[67] See, for example: Scott Hess, "Wordsworth's 'System,' the Critical Reviews, and the Reconstruction of Literary Authority," *European Romantic Review* 16, no. 4 (2005).

[68] Byron, *Byron's Letters and Journals*, VII: 158, 167, 168.

[69] McGann, *Don Juan in Context*, 123.

is hopeless," he declares to Moore.[70] For the narrator of *Don Juan*, these systems of "good philosophy" are equally hopeless. None of them lead to a sense of "certainty," or illuminate a "path" that guides one towards greater understanding. They only produce a cycle of eating and regurgitation, a kind of bulimia that produces meaninglessness. There is no Jupiter of philosophy to reign supreme. Instead, as the narrator laments earlier in *Don Juan*, "I knew that nought was lasting, but now even / Change grows too changeable, without being new" (XI.653-654). While these metaphorical systems are cause for disdain and can be resisted, the material reality of the digestive system[71] cannot be escaped.

Saturn's downfall begins with a failure of taste, the first step in the digestive process. Like a good Aristotelian, Saturn has prioritized his sense of sight. He sees a child-like shape in a swaddling blanket and devours it, clearly not pausing to consider what his other, lesser senses might be telling him. Had he paid attention to his taste, he might have been able to distinguish flesh and bones from stones. The final phrase of the first stanza — "of these he made no bones" — reinforces this. In the colloquial sense of the phrase, Saturn "make[s] no bones" about eating his children because he is honest and unashamed about his self-preserving filial cannibalism. But he is also not making bones in a literal sense because stones, unlike bodies, do not have bones. There is no flesh to be digested away, leaving only bones behind. The poem takes this extended digestive metaphor one step further. In a revision of the myth, victorious System (instead of Jupiter) ingests her parents, rather than merely overthrowing and imprisoning them. Yet, as the

[70] Byron, *Byron's Letters and Journals*, XI, 46.

[71] According to an Eighteenth-Century Collections Online search, the first use of "digestive system" appears in William Redmond's *The Principles and Constituence of antimony* (1763). The term begins to appear with greater regularity in early nineteenth-century medical texts and dictionaries. The phrase "alimentary canal" is used with greater frequency.

narrator explains, “the digestion / Is difficult.” This second stanza, in which the concept of difficult — but perhaps not impossible — digestion is introduced, is notable for its own difficulty.

In contrast with the usual ease of *Don Juan*’s flowing *ottava rima*, this stanza represents a rare moment in which the poem seems stuck. The accumulated archaisms — “doth,” “pray tell me,” “o’er” and “ere” — seem more suited to the early cantos of *Childe Harold* than the performatively casual, conversational style of *Don Juan*. Elsewhere in the poem, Byron explicitly encourages the association with the oral *improvisatore* tradition — a tradition intimately associated with *ottava rima* — declaring:

> I don’t know that there may be much ability
> Shown in this sort of desultory rhyme
> But there’s a conversational facility,
> Which may round off an hour upon a time.
> Of this I’m sure at least, there’s no servility
> In mine irregularity of chime,
> Which rings what’s uppermost of new or hoary,
> Just as I feel the ‘Improvisatore.’ (XV.153-160)

Downplaying the idea that any kind of “ability” goes into the “desultory rhyme” of *Don Juan*, Byron helps to feed the narrative that he is a lazy, haphazard nobleman dashing off poetry when he feels so inclined.[72] This kind of declaration exemplifies what I would call Byron’s *sprezzatura* — or studied effortlessness — that belies the labor that goes into a poem like *Don Juan*.[73]

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[72] In an 1822 review of Byron’s tragedy, *Sardanapalus*, for example, John Matthews writes in *Blackwood’s* of “the hasty negligence which deforms the very best of [Byron’s] poetry,” and notes that he “never condescends to the labour of correcting or polishing the rough creation of his energetic mind.” Donald H. Reiman, ed. *The Romantics Reviewed: Contemporary Reviews of British Romantic Writers*, vol. I: Annual Review - British Review, Part B: Byron and Regency Society Poets (New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1972), 180.

[73] *Sprezzatura* is a term that originates in the Renaissance writer Baldasar Castiglione’s *Book of the Courtier* (1528), in which he counsels aspiring courtiers to “practise in all things a certain nonchalance [*sprezzatura*] which conceals all artistry and makes whatever one says or does seem uncontrived and effortless. I am sure that grace springs especially from this, since everyone knows how difficult it is to

This stanza about difficult digestion, by contrast, offers a demonstration of deliberate poetic failure, or at least of a kind of pulling back the curtain on the usual *sprezzatura* of Byron's *ottava rima*. The uncomfortable meter of the actual moment of digestion: "albeit the digestion / Is difficult," throws the stanza into further disarray. Written entirely in hypermeter, as if it is having difficulty digesting its own message, the stanza is trying to do too much, and at the same time broadcasting its own laziness with the triple identical rhyme of "breakfast," "fast," and "fast." This moment in which the propulsive force of *ottava rima* sputters to a halt makes evident the labor involved in assimilating some of the things *Don Juan* is trying to assimilate: classical learning, modern philosophy, and clashing opinions about the best way to make sense of the modern experience. Moving from systems of thought (and with the reference to the overthrow of Saturn's *ancien regime*, systems of government) to bodily systems experiencing difficult digestion, Byron presents the time in which he is writing as one in which systems of thought and bodily systems seem disrupted, albeit in different ways. The stanza ends on a frequent *Don Juan* move: the return to the realm of the material: "Nothing more true than not to trust your senses; / And yet what are your other evidences?" In lieu of philosophical systems that make various, often cannibalistic, attempts to "snatch a certainty" from the "abyss/Of thought," the narrator concludes that to "trust your senses" might be all we can do, despite the complete inadequacy of such an approach.

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accomplish some unusual feat perfectly, and so facility in such things excites the greatest wonder; whereas, in contrast, to labour at what one is doing and, as we say, to make bones over it, shows an extreme lack of grace and causes everything, whatever its worth, to be discounted. So we can truthfully say that true art is what does not seem to be art; and the most important thing is to conceal it, because if it is revealed this discredits a man completely and ruins his reputation." Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. George Bull (London: Penguin Books, 1967), 67.

This is not the only time the poem connects systems of thought and the digestive system. In his opening stanzas to Canto XI, the narrator takes a swipe at Bishop Berkeley's supposedly unassailable "system," his "sublime discovery" that made "the Universe universal Egotism!" (XI.9-10). Berkeley's philosophy of immaterialism contended that the mind structured reality. As a rebuttal to this system, Byron offers his more visceral take on Samuel Johnson's famous stone-kicking rejoinder[74] to Berkeley:

> For ever and anon comes Indigestion,
> (Not the most 'dainty Ariel') and perplexes
> Our soarings with another sort of question. (XI.17-19)

Our senses, especially indigestion — or difficult digestion, in the case of System's patricidal devouring — can always be counted on to act as a counterbalance for too much abstract philosophy. Or, to put it slightly differently, we might be uncertain about the validity of the philosophical systems we use to inform our lives, but we can always be certain that our digestive systems will malfunction. Senses, especially those registering malfunctioning alimentary canals, act as a counterbalance to immaterial philosophy and ever changing system.

Writing in the traumatic aftermath of a later war, Theodor Adorno famously proposed that philosophical "system is the belly turned mind."[75] For Adorno, Yvonne Sherratt argues, system "'eliminates all heterogeneous being'" and "leaves nothing outside of its own system: it

[74] James Boswell describes the encounter with Johnson: "After we came out of the church, we stood talking for some time together of Bishop Berkeley's ingenious sophistry to prove the non-existence of matter, and that every thing in the universe is merely ideal. I observed, that though we are satisfied his doctrine is not true, it is impossible to refute it. I never shall forget the alacrity with which Johnson answered, striking his foot with mighty force against a large stone, till he rebounded from it, 'I refute it *thus.*'" James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 333.

[75] Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics [1966]*, trans. E.B. Ashton (Routledge, 1973), 23.

equates reality with itself, thereby 'exterminating' any potentially different reality."[76] Although *Don Juan* certainly shares this distrust of system, the poem is more attuned to the nuances of the belly, and holds out hope that the belly can embrace, rather than destroy, heterogeneity. The poem does not portray the gut as a primitive appetitive space, or as subservient to the mind. Instead, the stomach functions in *Don Juan* as a site for processing and questioning many different narratives about, and versions of, the Romantic period. Although *Don Juan* mostly makes this process look easy, it occasionally reveals the difficulty inherent to this monumental act of digestion.

"Sitting down to a whole Epic"

Don Juan emerged during a period of rapid growth — and increasing specialization – in the publishing market.[77] The poem repeatedly refers to the rise of specialized publications, especially the Gazettes[78] that recounted battles, injuries, and deaths during the Napoleonic Wars. In a description of Juan at the Amundevilles, Byron also notes how Gazettes made it possible for newspapers to overlook the violence of war:

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[76] Yvone Sherratt, *Adorno's Positive Dialectic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 121.

[77] For more on this subject, see: William St. Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Jon P. Klancher, *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790-1832* (Madison & London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987); Paul Keen, *The Crisis of Literature in the 1790s: Print Culture and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[78] As Catriona Kennedy explains, Gazettes were "Despatches written by Admiral or General following an engagement" and were "sent via courier to officials at Whitehall and the Admiralty, and then reprinted in the official news bulletin of the British government, the *London Gazette*. Reprinted in the London and provincial press and made available in cheap editions, the 'Gazette Extraordinary' would thus potentially be read by hundreds of thousands of British civilians." Gazettes were, in other words "state sponsored literature" and were greeted with skepticism by radical writers like William Cobbett. Catriona Kennedy, *Narratives of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars: Military and Civilian Experience in Britain and Ireland* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 178-9.

> Our gay Russ Spaniard was ordain'd to shine,
> Deck'd by the rays reflected from his host,
> With those who, Pope says, 'greatly daring dine.'
> 'Tis odd, but true, — last war the News abounded
> More with these dinners than the kill'd or wounded; —
>
> As thus: 'On Thursday there was a grand dinner;
> Present, Lords A. B. C.' — Earls, dukes, by name
> Announced with no less pomp than victory's winner:
> Then underneath, and in the very same
> Column; date, 'Falmouth. There has lately been here
> The Slap-dash regiment, so well known to fame;
> Whose loss in the late action we regret:
> The vacancies are fill'd up — see Gazette.' (XIII.420-32)

The main "news" outlets crowd out violence by focusing on the glamorous dinners of the peerage. Yet, as I argued in the section on the Siege of Ismail and the Amundeville dinner, *Don Juan* instead emphasizes the slippage between battles and banquets, denying the possibility of separating one from the other. In defiance of the Romantic-era publishing tendency to specialize literary production and digest it into discrete fragments, *Don Juan* instead attempts to become one big belly for the Romantic period.

Francis Jeffrey's review of Byron's first Turkish Tale, "The Giaour" (1813) helps to further contextualize the epic scale of *Don Juan*'s digestive ambitions. Praising the best-selling fragment poem, Jeffrey enthused in *The Edinburgh Review*:

> Nor can we think that we have any reason to envy the Turkish auditors of the entire tale, while we have its fragments thus served up by a restaurateur of such taste as Lord Byron. Since the increasing levity of the present age, indeed, has rendered it impatient of the long stories that use to delight our ancestors, the taste for fragments, we suspect, has become very general; and the greater part of polite readers would now no more think of sitting down to a whole Epic, than to a whole ox.[79]

[79] Donald H. Reiman, ed. *The Romantics Reviewed: Contemporary Reviews of British Romantic Writers*, vol. II: Cabinet – Evangelical Magazine, Part B: Byron and Regency Society Poets (New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1972), 842.

For Jeffrey, Byron's first Turkish Tale represents — and caters to — the best taste of the day, serving as an example of English restraint in the face of Eastern excess. By contrast, *Don Juan* is the opposite of a fragment poem: sprawling and digressive, it ended only with Byron's death in 1824. By that point, the poem had stretched to 16 completed cantos and over 16,000 lines. At the same time, Byron's death rendered *Don Juan* its own sort of fragment poem, albeit an unprecedentedly large one. Could Byron have actually finished this ambitious act of poetic digestion? Although his death was an accident of fate, it also left *Don Juan* open and unfinished, a state that feels appropriate for a poem so fascinated with the ongoing, permeable process of digestion.

EPILOGUE

A Return to the Visceral

> *"If we start with the presumption that mind and gut are keenly alive to each other rather than disengaged, perhaps our political intuitions (for cuisine; against the belly) can be rescripted. In particular, perhaps we can move away from a politics primarily informed by the rhetoric of domination (biology!) and rebellion (culture!) and look for theories that exploit the logic of imbrication"* —Elizabeth Wilson, *Gut Feminism*[1]

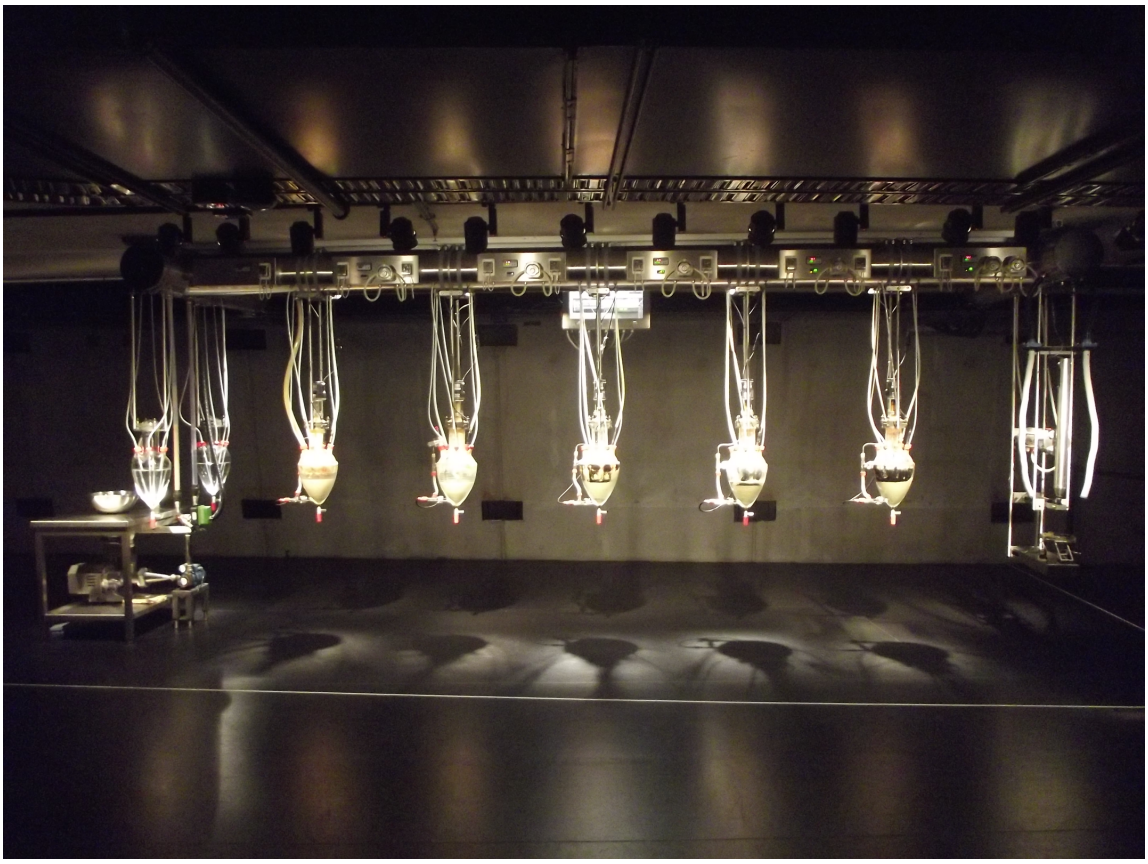

Figure 4: Cloaca (Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart, Tasmania)[2]

Cloaca, an installation by the contemporary Belgian artist Wim Delvoye, is a series of machines that replicate the digestive process, from ingestion to excretion. The food writer William Grimes described the process involved in tending the machines:

[1] Elizabeth Wilson, *Gut Feminism*, 37-8.

[2] Ché Lydia Xyang, "Berriedale TAS 7011, Australia," December 16, 2015. (CC BY-SA 3.0)

> For the next three months, someone at the museum will feed Cloaca lunch and dinner. When a blue light goes on, signaling that the machine is ready to eat, food will be introduced into the glass mouth and chewed in a garbage disposal unit and a meat grinder. Moved along by pumps, the food will make its way through six glass jars neatly lined up on two steel carts linked like the cars of a train. The jars, filled with acids, bases, pancreatin, bilirubin and bile, mimic the human digestive system. The journey lasts 22 hours and covers a distance of 33 feet.[3]

Grimes represents *Cloaca* as part disembodied and fragmented alimentary canal, part helpless baby cared for by anonymous humans. Delvoye has at times argued that his project is decidedly post-human: "We don't have to visually reproduce what the gastrointestinal system looks like, we just have to visually show the functions, not the forms…It's not trying to be anthropomorphic. It doesn't try to look like a human being. It's a live thing."[4] More recently however, he has claimed that *Cloaca* has an anthropomorphic side:

> I thought it would be more original to deal with human identity in general: with men and women, rich and poor, and with every nation in the world. I also wanted to do something that would be understood by kids. So I thought, what is life? It is reproduction and digestion – everybody makes energy.[5]

In this sense, despite Delvoye earlier implying that his project disrupts anthropocentric Enlightenment thought, *Cloaca* also shares the universalizing impulse characteristic of Enlightenment thinkers, including those who contributed to our understanding of the digestive process.

Delvoye's closest Enlightenment counterpart is, of course, the eighteenth-century French inventor Jacques Vaucanson, whose famous automata included the *Canard Digérateur*, or the Digesting Duck. First displayed in Paris in 1739 along with two humanoid automata — which

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[3] William Grimes, "Critic's Notebook: Down the Hatch," *The New York Times* (January 30 2002).

[4] Josefina Ayerza and Wim Delvoye, "Cloaca: Josephina Ayerza Interviews Wim Delvoye," *Lacanian Ink* no. 19 (Fall 2001).

[5] "'The Cloaca Are Machines, They're Animals, They're Us'," *Apollo: The International Art Magazine* (May 29 2017).

played the flute and the tambourine, respectively — the Duck enjoyed a long afterlife in an exhibit that traveled around Europe, remaining a topic of discussion well into the nineteenth century.[6] According to Jessica Riskin, "the Duck ate bits of corn and grain and, after a moment, excreted them in an altered form…Vaucanson said these processes were 'copied from Nature,' the food digested 'as in real Animals, by Dissolution.'"[7] Despite the mechanized appearance of the duck, its purpose was, as E.C. Spary explains, not to represent "a case of the application of mechanistic natural philosophy to the body," but to "presen[t] the digestive process as a *chemical* operation" reliant on gastric acid.[8] Delvoye explained that he only learned about Vaucanson after he began exhibiting early iterations of *Cloaca* in 2000.[9]

I end with this brief reflection on the twenty-first century *Cloaca* and the eighteenth-century Digesting Duck not to make the point that everything old is new again, but instead to consider the way these two similar projects actually offer very different views of digestion. This difference is, of course, due in part to the more than two-and-a-half centuries that separate Vaucanson and Delvoye. Yet, as I have argued throughout this dissertation, digestion is not a straightforward process with a standard narrative. Instead, attentiveness to the digestive exposes a variety of meanings, depending on the author, time, or place. Vaucanson's automata represented part of what Riskin identifies as a "new, simulative impulse" that "embraced, not

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[6] See, for example: David Brewster, *Letters on Natural Magic, Addressed to Sir Walter Scott* (London: John Murray, 1834).

[7] Jessica Riskin, "The Defecating Duck, or, the Ambiguous Origins of Artificial Life," *Critical Inquiry* 29, no. 4 (2003), 608.

[8] E.C. Spary, *Eating the Enlightenment: Food and the Sciences in Paris, 1670-1760* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 43.

[9] "'The Cloaca Are Machines, They're Animals, They're Us.'"

only the mechanisms underlying living processes, but also the matter of life, its material aspect."[10] If Delvoye is also thinking about the matter of life, he is doing so with a contemporary scientific awareness. As he explains, "the Cloaca were developed in a world in which germ technology, nanotechnology, and DNA had become the leading scientific reference points."[11]

The digestive preoccupations explored in this dissertation can be read as antecedents for the twenty-first century's return to the gut. In the last decade, scientists and lay people alike have evinced a preoccupation with gut health, the microbiome, and even the benefits of fecal transplants. Emerging industries and technologies of wellness center on the gut, promising better living through a return to the "natural" — think, for example, of the popularity of fermented foods — and an embrace of the cutting edge; multiple companies now claim they can sequence our gut microbiomes. While this return to personalized health via the gut may seem like a throwback to humoral medicine's focus on balancing individual humors, such medical approaches now operate on scales far larger (big data) and smaller (molecular biology) than could be conceived of in early nineteenth-century Britain. And if our focus has returned to the gut, it is all too often with the goal of individual optimization, rather than in service of the sociability of the bowels. Although Delvoye's *Cloaca* thinks about digestion as a "function" without a "form," this dissertation instead proposes that Romantic literature can help us see how the digestive takes many forms, and how reading from the gut can enable new explorations of intersubjective and interspecies relationships.

[10] Riskin, "The Defecating Duck, or, the Ambiguous Origins of Artificial Life," 606.

[11] "'The Cloaca Are Machines, They're Animals, They're Us.'"

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