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Capital, Class, and Representations of Isabel/la in John Keats's ISABELLA

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Diane Long Hoeveler argues that *Isabella* is a response to John Keats's resentment of the "old aristocratic system of class privilege" and "the growing mercantile commercialism that was spreading throughout Georgian England" (335). Hoeveler adds that Keats's anxieties about his lower-class origins are reflected in the poem's "anti-capitalist" portrayal of the brothers (327–28). Although Isabel is no doubt a beneficiary of the labor of her brothers' servants, including Lorenzo, the poem early on emphasizes the commonalities between Isabel and Lorenzo (Hoeveler 326), by default underscoring the differences between the young woman and her brothers. The poem's representation of Isabel as a victim of a love forbidden by her brothers appears to distinguish her from them even further; for her, Lorenzo is, beyond a source of financial revenue, a person she loves. However, some details complicate a tidy dissociation of Isabel from her brothers.

The very beginning of the poem—"Fair Isabel, poor simple Isabel!" (line 1)—presents a tortured characterization of Isabel, with the words *fair* and *poor* evoking sympathy, but the term *simple* evoking the very "inexperience of life" that caused Keats to dismiss the work in a 1819 letter to Richard Woodhouse (*Selected Letters* 351). Another peculiarity is that in one of Keats's earlier drafts, he began the line with "Fair Isabella" but crossed out the "la" in the first occurrence of "Isabella" and proceeded to end the line with the new spelling, "Isabel."¹ On the surface, the change simply enabled Keats to compose within ottava rima and deploy an anaphoric internal rhyme. Curiously, however, the title continues to refer to her as "Isabella," but Keats alternates between the two spellings throughout the poem without

any discernible pattern for differentiation beyond metrical considerations. Despite allowing for flexibility to maintain metrical consistency, the fixity of Isabel's identity is compromised and destabilized at the outset of the poem by her representation through two competing signifiers.

Significantly, in Keats's source text of Boccaccio, the narrator's description of the brothers excludes their sister: "In Messina there dwelt three young men [Keats changed the number of brothers from three to two], Brethren, and Merchants by their common Profession, who becoming very Rich by the death of their Father, lived in very good fame and repute" (182–83). The very act of adaption affords opportunities for alteration, and Keats exercised several liberties in his adaptation of Boccaccio's version. For instance, it is worth noting that in the source text, the synopsis preceding the tale explains, "The three Brethren of Isabella, slew a Gentleman that secretly loved her" (182). Thus the reader of the original text is informed of the brothers' deed before being introduced to the narrative itself, and therefore knows not to associate Isabella with her brothers but rather to recognize that she a victim of their cruelty. It is Keats's adaptation of Boccaccio that blurs the distinction.

In Keats's version, the indecision of Isabel/la is confounded further by one particular grammatical ambiguity that complicates efforts to dissociate Isabel from her brothers: "With her two brothers this fair lady dwelt, / Enriched from ancestral merchandize / And for them many a weary hand did swelt" (lines 105–07). The speaker describes the brothers as greedy and class-obsessed merchants in stanzas 14 through 16, distinct from Isabel, who apparently shares none of these traits or aspirations. However, it should be noted that the referent to the pronoun *them* in line 107 can be either the brothers alone or Isabel and the brothers collectively, potentially implicating Isabel as a beneficiary of the labor of those "many a weary hand." The speaker does not clarify until much later, in stanza 17, when he draws parallels between the brothers and "two close Hebrews" (line 131), in a move that "marks them as 'Other' from Isabel and Lorenzo, who are now figured as the 'Same'" (Hoeveler 327–28). The ambiguity challenges the portrayal of Isabel as mere victim of her brothers' exploitation and intolerance of class difference.

The ambiguous pronoun compels us to reconsider not only the speaker's misgivings about the brothers but about Isabel as well. For instance, in the repeated questions "Why were they proud?" (lines 121, 123, 125, 127) and "Why in the name of Glory were they proud?" (128), because the pronoun referent is not clarified until after these lines, the word *they* can, technically

speaking, be inclusive of Isabel, thereby refiguring the speaker's disgust for the brothers and challenging the narrative structure of the poem. We know that Keats's father was of the lower middle class, and this was the class into which Keats was born. It is plausible that, as Hoeveler suggests, Lorenzo's head "stands as the essence of what Derrida has called 'the trace,' the residue of the father who both traps the son in the realities of the class system and proffers an escape through the metaphorically transformative power of the knife/pen" (Hoeveler 323). But if the "destruction of the brothers stands as the final moment of wish fulfillment in the poem" (335), and Isabel is figured with them, she persists as a spectral trace of the brothers even after their departure. *Isabella* demonstrates that individuals are born into, and therefore trapped within, their respective classes. Although Isabel attempts a class descent through her affair with Lorenzo, seemingly minor textual ambiguities paralyze Isabel's aspirations and underscore the inescapability and impermeability of class strata.

Such details, of course, may appear insignificant, especially given the critical reception of *Isabella*. In the explanatory notes to *John Keats: Complete Poems*, editor Jack Stillinger remarks that, in readings of *Isabella*, it had been "standard procedure . . . to condemn its sentimentality, mawkishness, and vulgarity (all the qualities we call Huntian), then to praise Keats's idealization of the lovers in the first half of the poem and the strength of some of descriptive stanzas in the latter half, and finally to label the poem transitional and rush on to *The Eve of St. Agnes*, *Hyperion*, and the odes" (442). Perhaps the most notable of these "standard" criticisms is provided by M. R. Ridley, who argues that virtually every aspect of the poem is flawed, from the technical difficulties Keats faced with ottava rima, a "metrical crucible" that Keats was unfamiliar with (18), to Keats's unnecessary emphasis and elaboration on the love of Lorenzo and Isabel (23). Ridley also notes the "downright obscurities" within *Isabella* (27–28) and argues that the sheer poetic inexperience evident in the work is excusable on the grounds that Keats was still learning his craft (56). Nonetheless, the presence of competing potential referents is not insignificant, in spite of the technical difficulties faced by Keats and in spite of other reasonable grounds for dismissal, such as his notoriously inconsistent spelling in this poem and elsewhere. Keats's poems in general and this one in particular were revised heavily prior to publication, and in *Isabella*, Taylor, Woodhouse, and Brown were actively involved in the composing process, with Woodhouse even making "revisions independently—and perhaps divergently—from Keats's surmisable intentions" (Stillinger 39). These facts make it difficult to dismiss

incongruities in the work as mere oversights by a clumsy and inexperienced poet.

Note

¹See editor Jack Stillinger's *Poems of John Keats* (245). The manuscript facsimile is available in Lyle H. Kendall's *Descriptive Catalogue of the W. L. Lewis Collection*, plate 3.

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