

Severed Tombs: Keats's Elegiac Art in *Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil*
and Other Late Poems

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Isabella's lover lies buried in a dark forest in medieval Italy, murdered at the hands of her greedy brothers. His ghost appears at her bedside, beseeching her to weep upon his remote grave. Despondent with lost love, she rides to the forest in the dark of night. With the help of her nurse, Isabella unearths Lorenzo's remains. In a flash of steel, she decapitates the corpse and carries the severed head back to her castle. She hides the morbid token in a garden pot under a sprout of basil, and her tears foster the herb until it grows tall and lush. But alas, her suspicious brothers steal the pot away and discover the horrible secret buried within. They discard the pot and disappear, leaving Isabella to die in devastation.

This is the spine-chilling melodrama of John Keats's 1818 poem *Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil*, a retelling of a tale from Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Despite the movement of recent scholarship towards a more serious interpretation of Keats's romance, *Isabella* is still generally regarded as being among Keats's lesser poems. Indeed, Keats himself disparaged the poem and hesitated to publish it, fearing it would be reviewed as weak and laughable. Though he was convinced to include the poem in his 1820 volume of poetry, his condemnation of the poem has nonetheless influenced its reception. Many critics still consider *Isabella* juvenilia or apprentice work.¹

While *Isabella* seems to revel in abhorrent tragedy rather than artistic creation, in fact the poem reveals a core aspect of Keats's artistry. With the severed head concealed inside, the pot of basil demonstrates how artwork made in the wake of loss is at the root of Keats's artistic act. The pot of basil thus sheds light on an important, elegiac aspect of Keats's artwork, a pattern of severed, mournful art one also finds elsewhere in Keats: the speaker's craft in *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, Melancholy's shrine in *Ode on Melancholy*, and

the fragmented texts that characterize Keats's posthumous legacy. The fragmentation and artifice of the pot of basil thereby provide a model of artistic grief central to Keats's body of work.

The first sections of this paper delve into *Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil*, finding a model of artistic creation in the severed head, the secretive garden pot, and a mournful ditty that closes the poem. The middle sections of this paper trace *Isabella's* patterns through Keats's letters and two of his more well-known poems: *Ode on a Grecian Urn* and *Ode on Melancholy*. *Ode on a Grecian Urn* further connects *Isabella's* negotiation of absence with the endeavor of poetry while *Ode on Melancholy* asserts the role of grief in artistic creation. I close with two of Keats's poetic fragments and speculate that *Isabella's* themes inform Keats's oeuvre and legacy.

I. *Isabella's* Artistic Roots: The Severed Head in the Pot of Basil

Many critics approach *Isabella* through Keats's biography. Nicholas Roe reads Keats's *Isabella* as an expression of personal tragedies in Keats's life (p. 26). Similarly, Diane Hoeveler argues that the "horror of the decapitated head" embodies Keats's desire "to bury his grief for his parent's deaths, repudiate his middle class origins, and deny his attraction to 'Romance'" (324). Both critics read *Isabella* through details from Keats's biography. Hoeveler is right to contemplate the symbolic significance of the decapitated head for its distinct "horror." Yet, her essay skirts around the transformation of that "horror" into an aesthetic object and doesn't pay due diligence to the creative work this requires from *Isabella*. Likewise, Jack Stillinger dismissively refers to the "bizarre details of *Isabella's* care for the head" as a component of the abject horror of the scene (2006, 29). However, the specific ways that *Isabella* dotes upon Lorenzo's decapitated skull are

not simply “bizarre details” meant to shock or disgust the reader, but instead offer a window into the artistic concerns of the poem.

Consider this passage, which describes Isabella adorning the head and placing it within the pot:

She calm'd its wild hair with a golden comb,
And all around each eye's sepulchral cell
Pointed each fringed lash; the smeared loam
She drenched away: – and still she comb'd and kept
Sighing all day – and still she kiss'd, and wept.

Then in a silken scarf, -- sweet with the dews
Of precious flowers pluck'd in Araby,
And divine liquids come with odorous ooze
Through the cold serpent-pipe refreshfully,--
She wrapp'd it up; and for its tomb did choose
A garden-pot, wherein she laid it by,
And cover'd it with mould, and o'er it set
Sweet Basil, which her tears kept ever wet. ² (ll. 403-16)

Isabella's care for Lorenzo's head is ceremonial and beautifying. She cleans the dirt from his face with the water from her tears and combs his hair – even his eyelashes. She enshrouds the head in Arabian perfumes and a “silken scarf.” Perhaps one might read the detached head – beautified, fragmented, enclosed– as a Catholic saint's relic, and the pot of basil its reliquary. Isabella's careful cosmetic attention to the amputated body part and its enclosure certainly invoke the aesthetics of a reliquary. Such a parallel would imbue the pot of basil with a transcendent power, accessible by Isabella's reverence. Yet, Lorenzo is no saint and his head is no relic. Isabella does not worship Lorenzo's head to access the divine. While many reliquaries are enclosed by clear windows so pilgrims can gaze upon the fragmented body of the saint, Lorenzo's head is enshrouded by a “scarf,” the “mould,” the structure of the pot, and the “Sweet Basil.” The head is not meant to be seen but secreted, and known only to Isabella. She does not uphold it as a mystical

artifact with healing power, but rather curates the pot of basil as performed mourning. Indeed, her grieving tears supply the water that cleans the head and wets the basil plant.

The pot of basil is both decorative and deliberately made. Isabella's creation of the Pot of Basil in an exercise of choice and arrangement. Isabella cleans the head, taking great care to arrange every hair. The texture of the scarf is luxurious and the flowers are "sweet" and "precious," as is the basil. In a deviation from the original text of Boccaccio where the nurse brings the "garden-pot" to Isabella, Keats's version gives Isabella the agency to "choose" precisely how she entombs Lorenzo's head.³ Isabella transfers Lorenzo's "wild" head from an unmarked grave in a dark forest to a beautified "garden-pot." She lays and sets and covers, thus molding the "tomb" with her "garden" craft. A "garden" implies a deliberate arrangement of plants and other natural elements, often for aesthetic or agricultural value. The "garden-pot" inside the castle would likely take on a decorative or ornamental function rather than an agricultural one (although the herb basil is edible). Gardens are curated, fundamentally separated from wild nature by human touch, such as by the barriers of a wall or a pot.⁴ Isabella's pot of basil is Lorenzo's "tomb," beheld in the civilized aesthetic of a garden. In these ways, the pot of basil has aesthetic value by its ornamental artifice and deliberate formation.

While the "garden-pot" separates the tamed from the untamed, it also contains and conceals a part separated from a body. The severed head is a fragment of the absent whole of Lorenzo's body, signifying the absence of Lorenzo as a living lover. It is a literal synecdoche, a part standing in for the whole. While the craft and artifice of the pot of basil suggest an artistry in Isabella's actions, the synecdochal severed head indicates a deeper allegory at work. By comparing Keats's scene of decapitation with that of

Boccaccio's original text, it appears that Keats enhances the uncanny incompleteness of the severed part in ways that the original does not. For Keats, the action of decapitation is the true source of Isabella's artistry. The pot of basil is its apparatus. By next examining how Keats revises both how and why Isabella creates the pot of basil, I find Isabella's act of severance and the resultant severed head central to both Isabella's and Keats's art-making.

As mentioned above, Keats's *Isabella* retells a story from Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Set during an outbreak of the Black Death in Florence, the *Decameron* is framed by the tale of ten young people taking refuge in a country villa. Isabella's story is one out of a hundred the group tells during their retreat before returning to the diseased-ravaged city. In Boccaccio's tale, Isabella's decision to sever Lorenzo's head is a practical compromise:

Gladly would she have carried the whole body with her, secretly to bestow honorable enternment on it, but it exceeded the compass of her abilities. Wherefore, in regard she would not have it all yet she would be possessed of a part, and having bought a keene razor with her, by help of the Nurse, she divided the head from the body... (Boccaccio, Day IV, Novel 5, translated by Florio, printed in Wolfson 2006, p. 336)

Boccaccio explains the reason why Isabella decapitates Lorenzo as a necessary compromise because transporting the entire body is too difficult for the women to manage. The head is the consolation for the denied whole. Isabella seems reluctant to perform the amputation, and only resorting to decapitation at the last minute. The partial quality of the decapitated head is a sacrifice of the integrity of the whole that Isabella desires. To grant him a proper burial, she wants as much of Lorenzo as possible. She seems to grit her teeth, resigned to possessing only, but at least, a part. Importantly, Boccaccio shows the "whole body" which conjures the image of Lorenzo's entire corpse

from head to toe before the head is removed. Lorenzo is fully exhumed before Isabella severs the head with a “keene razor.” The decapitation is out in the open, represented from beginning to end in Boccaccio’s prose.⁵

In contrast to Boccaccio’s logistics, Keats’s poem suggests the decapitation was premeditated. When Lorenzo’s ghost appears at Isabella’s bedside in Keats’s poem, he beseeches her to visit the grave. However, his words foreshadow severance and suggest that decapitation was Isabella’s goal from the beginning:

Go, shed one tear upon my heather-bloom,
And it shall comfort me within the tomb. (303-04)

Upon first reading, Lorenzo seems to call Isabella to express her grief at his graveside by weeping. However, the phrase “shed one tear” actually foreshadows the decapitation by describing it. Of the many definitions of “shed” given by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Keats invokes them all: a “separation (of one thing from another),” the top of the head, the act of parting the hair with a comb, the object of a broken off fragment, and a plot of land (*OED*). Therefore, Isabella cutting off Lorenzo’s head “sheds” (severs) a “shed” (head) which she then “sheds” (combs and parts the hair). By planting the head, she places the “shed” (separated) “shed” (head) into a “shed” (parcel of land). “Tear” as well has an admittedly less impressive double meaning, both as the water Isabella weeps and the act of “tearing” she performs. Thus, she abides by Lorenzo’s posthumous desire to the fullest possible extent of his meaning. In straining to account for all of these meanings across both noun and verb, some meanings are certainly stronger than others. The weaker meanings hang like ghosts, an uncertain punning presence.

Keats is known to embrace puns as a demonstration of literary showmanship, thus “shed one tear” unites his artistic awareness with a concern for the process of separation.

Isabella seeks the grave endeavoring to decapitate, beautify, entomb, and then weep. These puns in Keats's verse not only cleverly include all of these meanings but also mimic the work of severance at the level of language. This paronomasia creates multiplicity at the level of the word similar to how Lorenzo's decapitation creates multiplicity by dividing a whole into parts. By making a pun on a word that can mean many different types of separation, Keats reveals the figurative status of the severed head in *Isabella*. If her motivations are to remove the head from Lorenzo's body, as "shed one tear" implies, then the head becomes more than a just compromise of part for whole.

The suggestion that Isabella's violent action was premeditated is a significant revision of Boccaccio's original material. While bringing the knife betrays her forethought, the puns in "shed one tear" implicate Keats's artistry in the concept of decapitation. Regarding the artistic elements of the pot of basil, Keats's premeditated severance furthers Isabella's deliberate, aesthetic creation of the pot. Moreover, the revision indicates that Keats's *Isabella* is not just a mere retelling and replication of Boccaccio's story. The ways in which Keats alters and reformulates Boccaccio demonstrate his own poetic craft. By taking up the mantle of Boccaccio, Keats inserts himself within a literary tradition. However, Keats simultaneously alters the inherited material in both plot and genre. He vets Boccaccio's material through his poem, material which has already been mediated by a translator. The revision of Isabella's motives alerts us to Keats's negotiation of literary tradition. Though he participates in the tradition, he simultaneously differentiates himself from it. His revised retelling indicates that readers should pay attention to the Keats's treatment of the sources of art and poetry. The sources

so far are all related to death – the plague in Florence, the history of Boccaccio, the death of Lorenzo.

Keats's poem arises from a transformed *Decameron* and the pot of basil arises from the transformed Lorenzo. Keats's poem furthers tradition by its difference from Boccaccio. Likewise, the pot of basil carries forth Lorenzo by the transformation of his body. The moment of severance begins Isabella's mourning work of differentiation and transformation:

With duller steel than the Perséan sword
They cut away no formless monster's head⁶ (393-94)

Unlike Boccaccio, Keats never shows us Lorenzo's body in full. The whole body is absent in Keats, only implied by the part-for-whole configuration of the head and the censored source material. Likewise, Keats alters the translated verb "divided" to "cut away." While Boccaccio's version beholds division as one part cut into two, Keats's "cut away" places much greater emphasis on the severed object. It also highlights the physical work that Isabella performs, a visceral labor of separation. The severance in "cut away" is a movement "away," which creates distance. This gap between the severed object and that from which it is severed is fundamental to the symbol of severance. The distance is a chasm between the severed parts that can never be reversed. Perhaps this is similar to the chasm forged between Boccaccio and Keats by way of translation and retelling. Yet, Boccaccio is ever present in Keats's poem.⁷ Lorenzo's body, haunts Keats's narrative by its simultaneous absence and the spectral presence of its un-severed form.

These two lines are the only information Keats provides regarding the moment of incision. The "Perséan sword" is the sword of Perseus who slays the gorgon Medusa by decapitating her dangerous head. Medusa's head has an intense power to turn whomever

looks upon it to stone. Even in death and severed from the rest of her body, Medusa's head threatens to freeze viewers to stone, becoming a tool of transformation and a source of power. Perseus conceals her head in a bag in order to protect himself from unwitting petrification. Comparing Isabella's "steel" to the "Perséan sword" likewise compares Lorenzo to Medusa and his decapitation to hers, suggesting a similar power of Lorenzo's severed head. The Medusan aspect of Lorenzo's beheading conjures Freud's reading of Medusa's decapitation as castration (*SE* 18:273). Isabella's work of mourning grieves the sexual relationship with her murdered lover.⁸ The Medusan resonance and the parallel to castration in Lorenzo's decapitation are clues for reading severance as an act of troping.⁹ The allusion to Medusa further incorporates transformation and mutilation as artistic acts undertaken by both Isabella and by Keats, characterized by differentiation and carrying forth tradition. Indeed, Keats also carries forth the myth of Medusa in this stanza.

Overall, Keats's *Isabella* revises Boccaccio's measured and logical tone for a much more frenzied and violent scene. Keats's version entirely cuts away Boccaccio's logistical explanation of the head removal. His alterations of plot reimagine Isabella's motivations for mutilating the body from reluctant but necessary to premeditated and essential. In Keats, the severed head becomes more complex and allegorical than Boccaccio's, emphasizing the creativity realized through Isabella's decapitation of Lorenzo. Keats's *Isabella* emphasizes the ability of the poem itself to manipulate, reconfigure, and revivify Boccaccio's material, an ability that runs nearly parallel to Isabella's mutilation, reconfiguration, and earthy resurrection of Lorenzo in the pot of basil.

Keats's revision of Boccaccio and Isabella's amputation of Lorenzo lead towards a model of art dependent on differentiation. To further develop severance as the source of this differentiation in Keats's *Isabella*, I turn to his narration. At the very moment of Lorenzo's decapitation, Keats's narrator intervenes with an address to the reader:

XLVIII.

At last they felt the kernel of the grave
And Isabella did not stamp or rave.

XLIX.

Ah! wherefore all this wormy circumstance?
Why linger at the yawning tomb so long?
O for the gentleness of old Romance,
The simple plaining of a minstrel's song!
Fair reader, at the old tale take a glance,
For here, in truth, it doth not well belong
To speak: -- O turn thee to the very tale,
And taste the music of that vision pale.

L.

With duller steel than the Perséan sword... (383-93)

The interjections of *Isabella's* narrator are curious. Susan Wolfson argues that the periodic digressions in *Isabella* reflect Keats's ambivalence towards the genre of romance (Wolfson 1985). Her reading indicates that the narrative oddities in the poem betray Keats's self-awareness of poetic form and, therefore, of his own artistry. Stanza XLIX is deeply self-conscious of its genre. It ponders "old Romance" and "the simple plaining of a minstrel's song" and instructs the reader to read on in the poem. However, the placement of the stanza interjects directly between Isabella's gravedigging and the decapitation. This intrusion ruptures the linear movement of the verse. The digression creates a lapse in the reader's knowledge of the original scene and effectively replaces Boccaccio's logistical explanation. In this way, the narrative rupture enacts a sort of textual severance, a significant erasure of the source material that alters both the plot and meaning. It disrupts the linear chronology of the medieval tale, raising awareness of the 19th Century retelling and the time of the "Fair reader." These anachronisms emphasize

Keats's poetic and Romantic alterations of Boccaccio's prose. The dislocation of time and narrative accomplished by this moment also imitate the bodily severance that follows in the next stanza. The text itself slashes a temporal and spatial gap between Lorenzo's intact body in the grave before Stanza XLIX and his severed head, exhumed and partial, directly following in Stanza L. This gap forges distance between Keats and Boccaccio.

The narrator calls the reader to "take a glance" at the "old tale" before continuing the "very tale" where Isabella dismembers Lorenzo in Stanza L. The "old tale" invokes the medieval genre of "old Romance" and prods the reader to consult Boccaccio. Indeed, a "glance" at Boccaccio's tale would reveal Keats's omissions. Immediately after the narrator draws attention to these modifications, he claims "For here, in truth, it doth not well belong / To speak." Though the narrator seems to shy away from the "wormy circumstance" of unearthing Lorenzo's decaying corpse, the story resumes at the very moment of decapitation. I prefer to read these lines as the narrator admitting his digressions from "it"—the "old tale"—and asserting the distance between Boccaccio's text and Keats's inheritance of the story. By calling the reader to "taste the music of the vision pale," the narrator highlights the distance between the sight of Isabella in the graveyard and the "taste" of its "music." The subject of the art is mediated through a synesthesia, where the real thing eludes the viewer's eyes and ears. To access the art, the reader must accept the "taste" as a substitute for the "music," itself a substitution of the "vision." This description illuminates the indirect access granted by art. These layers of mediation resemble the layers of translation and retelling Keats's poem contains. The synesthesia parallels the wordy layers of Keats's own art.

Here, Keats's own reading, interpretation, and revision of Boccaccio is at the forefront of the narrator's purpose. The narrative intrusion reminds readers of the sheer distance between themselves and the original tale – mediated through time, interpretation, and an assertive narrator. But even by taking a “glance” at original tale from *The Decameron*, a reader would only access a mediated substitute of Isabella's story: a fiction within a fiction. This distance and mediation alludes to the gap that exists between a present, aesthetic, referent object and some absent thing to which it refers, but denies access. This strikes a comparison between the pot of basil as the repurposed container that mediates Lorenzo's head through a vegetable and Keats's repackaged, retold *Isabella*. Isabella's creation of the pot of basil resembles Keats's creation of the poem, indicating the fundamental artistry of the deliberate, decorative, and detached head in the pot.

II. Severance and Elegy; or, Art in *Isabella*

Isabella is full of severed circumstances. Isabella cuts off Lorenzo's head. Keats's narrator pierces through the narrative illusion and temporal continuity of the verse. The “garden-pot” severs a contained version of nature from the dark forest outside the castle walls. Each example is connected by a shared aspect of cutting: cutting away, cutting off, cutting through. Isabella's art—the beautification of the head and curation of the pot – begins by her removal of Lorenzo's head. Keats's poetry excavates and reforms Boccaccio's story and its narration deliberately pokes through the cracks. Art both of and in *Isabella* is fragmented. At the same time, Isabella's actions are primarily motivated by loss. Her mourning manifests in the creation of the pot of basil out of the fractured body

of Lorenzo. To read the pot of basil as an allegory for Keats's art, we must account for its relationship to Isabella's grief.

The pot's artistry depends on its status as Isabella's mourning object and as Lorenzo's tomb. It is a funerary object that serves as a constant, visceral reminder of Isabella's loss. The pot of basil isn't quite a metonymy – or substitute – for Lorenzo because it is an actual fragment of his body. But of course, the head isn't Lorenzo either. His corpse is something other than him, a reduced material remain. As a severed portion of those remains, the head uncertainly occupies a space between symbol and allegory. It is too severed to be a symbol, but too material to be allegory. In the framework of mourning in Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia*, Isabella resists and rejects typical mourning, which declares "the object to be dead" by accepting a substitute wholly removed from Lorenzo (*SE* 14: 257; Fosso 32). Instead, she declares Lorenzo dead by harvesting a piece of his body which is both part of him and apart from him. Rather than a full-stop substitute for Lorenzo, Isabella obtains a material synecdoche. Rather than reattaching her affections to a substitutive token, Isabella becomes further attached to the tangible material of loss. By secreting the head in the pot of basil, she seems to pretend that the artifice of the pot is the substitute for Lorenzo when it actually contains him. The funerary disguise of its aesthetic concealment belies both presence and absence.

While the graveyard scene begins Isabella's active mourning and artistic creation, her grief continues after she crafts the pot of basil. In fact, she grows ever more attached to the pot through her mourning. Isabella's attachment to the pot of basil is both emotional and physical. She remains by its side and continuously weeps:

And so she 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 (425-29)

As Isabella weeps into the pot of basil, it flourishes from being “fed” with her “tears.”

The basil is nourished by Isabella’s body, specifically her eyes. The fluid “Nurture” between the woman and the object resembles an umbilical connection. Isabella’s water, “life” and “human fears” nurture and become the basil. The “life” of the basil plant is derived not only from the corpse within the pot, but from the eyes of a person beside it. As the basil takes more and more of its life from Isabella’s, the basil and Isabella become entwined, even interchangeable. Indeed, the word basil is nearly an anagram of the name Isabel (Hoeveler 334). The title of the poem is *Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil*. Keats uses the semicolon to equate the status of Isabella and the pot. By physically feeding on Isabella, the basil becomes her, and they are united by the repeated cycle of Isabella’s mourning. In this way, Isabella’s mourning is productive, fostering growth and beauty. Lorenzo gets refigured into the basil, as Keats implies that the basil is actually fertilized by the decaying head.¹⁰ After Isabella deepens the divide between herself and Lorenzo by fragmenting his body, she becomes ever more connected to his symbol. Isabella and Basil unite; Isabella and Lorenzo depart. Of course, the basil is deeply connected to a piece of Lorenzo, but only a piece. There is no clear cut (pun intended) delineation between symbol and referent, for head and basil and pot are fused together with Isabella at the same time they are fragmented from Lorenzo.

As the basil feeds upon Isabella, she becomes consumed and loses track of all else:

And she forgot the stars, the moon, and sun
And she forgot the blue above the trees,
And she forgot the dells where waters run,

And she forgot the chilly autumn breeze;
 She had no knowledge when the day was done,
 And the new morn she saw not (417-22)

The anaphora “and she forgot” creates a sense of freezing by its repetition. The language mimics the cycle that Isabella and the pot of basil create together. Isabella’s figurative separation from Lorenzo also divorces her from the rest of the world. This separation further but binds her to the pot of basil in unity.¹¹ The world outside ceases to exist. Her world shrinks to the pot of basil. She falls out of time, losing knowledge and memory of days and seasons. Her world is dictated only by the movement of her grief into a “garden-pot” to grow a basil plant from the head of a corpse. Her tears become the “dells where waters run.” By forgetting time and the cycles of the natural world, Isabella’s anaphoric freeze stalls. Though there is still movement of her tears into the basil, this movement is contained, small, and lacks the energy of the world outside. In a sense, Isabella becomes a severed object in her estrangement from the outside world. In one sense, she is an artwork – a frieze. In another, she is a reader sucked into the fictive, symbolic world of her making by her eyes. Either way, she seems to be in danger by the figurative powers of the pot of basil. It seems to be both too figurative (after all, what solace does she find in the basil besides its scent, which we know from the synesthesia to be mediating?) and not figurative enough – the basil *is* Lorenzo. Perhaps the petrifying power of the Medusan head is at work in Isabella’s oblivion which abstracts her from natural cycles. The transformative power of Medusa’s head petrifies, a freezing often read as the creation of art. The crafts of sculpture and the gardening are not able to protect Isabella from the transformational power of the severed head. She is so intimately entwined with the basil that she has no aesthetic distance from her object. She forgets everything but the synecdochal, partial substitute for Lorenzo. She effectively gives her own life for the

growth of the basil, a morbid substitution that imperils her body and self. Perhaps the ambiguous allegorical or symbolic status of the pot tests the limits – and powers – of art.

Here, we see Isabella transformed by direct contact with aesthetic token of her lost love, which begins her own conversion into severed, mournful art. This cycle of Isabella's tears feeding the basil continues until her brothers steal the basil pot from her and discover its rotten secret. At the sight of the decaying head, they discard the pot of basil and flee. The loss of the pot of basil, the second loss of Lorenzo, mortally wounds Isabella and she dies, "implored for her Basil to the last" (498). She has reattached her longing to the metonymy of the basil, though of course the basil actually contains the head. This is the second time that Lorenzo has been taken from Isabella by her brothers, and the second time that Lorenzo's head is severed. Rather than being separated from the rest of its body, this time the basil is severed from the source of its life – Isabella. Already fragmented from the rest of the world, Isabella again suffers separation as she is torn from her role in the ecosystem of the pot of basil. Missing part of her very self, Isabella "died forlorn" (497).

However, the poem does not end with Isabella's despondent death. Instead, Isabella's story is transformed into an oral song:

And a sad ditty of this story born
From mouth to mouth through all the country pass'd
Still is the burthen sung—" O cruelty,
"To steal my Basil-pot away from me!" (501-03)

After being severed from the pot of basil, Isabella herself transforms into the subject of art. Like the "garden-pot" was repurposed to contain Lorenzo's remains and like Keats's rendition of Boccaccio's story, Isabella's life becomes a "story" which is transformed into a "ditty." It is modified, translated, and repurposed throughout the countryside by

frequent repetition. It is “born” like a child from a womb (though the word “born” also denotes carrying, as in ‘borne’). The poem closes with a flurry of reproduction and replication, but the process of birth also requires the infant to be severed from its mother. The image of the ditty “born from mouth to mouth” compares the mouth with a birth canal, foregrounding a verbal creativity. And of course, mouths are on the head. The severance and re-figuration of the ditty from mouths invokes decapitation, recalling Lorenzo’s. Like the synesthesia in the narrator’s poetic interjection, the ditty curiously inhabits mouths rather than ears in the final stanza. This oral emphasis describes a repetitive storytelling, the ditty being (re)created by makers of art. The ditty is described as a “burden,” denoting the labor of retelling. The ditty goes viral, compelling countless of mouths across the country to repeat and spread the tale. While this invokes the plague that originates Isabella’s story, it also invokes the literary tradition where stories are “passed” down through generations. Keats implies that his poem is part of this viral retelling and that his is one of the mouths compelled to repeat Isabella’s tragedy, got from a translated version of Boccaccio.

The final events of *Isabella* repeat the model of severed and mediated art portrayed in the pot of basil. The connection between Isabella and her counterpart is severed. They are both lost and preserved as art emerges out of this loss. The labor of repetition energizes, even enlivens, the “sad ditty.” The sustained life of the ditty resembles the flourishing of the basil, which lives from Isabella’s continuous weeping. While the genre of *Isabella* is frequently identified as romance, the ending indicates the elegiac mode of the poem. The mouths inheriting the “sad ditty” tell and retell the story of *Isabella*, just as Keats inherits and retells Boccaccio’s story. Isabella becomes an oral

tradition, passed through “mouths,” as an artifact of culture passed through generations. Just as Isabella mourns the loss of Lorenzo in the pot of basil, the singers (and the poets Boccaccio and Keats) mourn the loss of Isabella through her story and “sad ditty.” These artistic tokens of mourning conjure Peter Sack’s reading of two myths from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*: Apollo’s loss of Daphne and Pan’s loss of Syrinx. The mourning tokens that Apollo and Pan take as substitutes for their lost nymphs are severed forms of natural objects. Apollo cuts a piece of the laurel tree and makes a wreath; Pan cuts the reeds and fashions a pipe. Both the laurel and the pipe are artistic – laurel signifies poetry and the pipe makes music.

Like the wreath and the pipe, the basil and the ditty are transformed figures of loss. And yet, despite the similar pattern of severance in each, the pot of basil and the ditty are very different types of art. The pot is visual, relatively still (though growing), silent, and filled with the actual substance it mourns. The ditty is verbal, linguistic, produced through hollow mouths, mobile, and survives in the form of Keats’s poem we are all reading. The differing characteristics of these two artistic forms delineate *Isabella*’s model of elegiac artistic creation. Both the reeds and the wreath are symbols of art, but what of the basil? Perhaps the edible status of the basil, which is perhaps its only function, takes away from its symbolic power. It may not be symbolic enough for sustaining art. It grows, unlike the inert wreath and reeds severed from living plants. Perhaps because it is living, it cannot duly represent and elegize the dead in the same way. The ditty is wordy, severed and lifeless like the wreath and the reeds. While the ditty, the wreath, and the reeds all produce sustaining – perhaps immortal – art in music and the poetic tradition, the basil sustains Lorenzo only through its own mortal life.

While the “sad ditty” is removed from the things it substitutes, the pot of basil is deeply connected to a part of the thing it signifies: Lorenzo’s head. Lorenzo’s transfiguration into the basil plant resembles how Daphne and Syrinx transform into objects in the natural world – the laurel tree and reeds. Sacks argues that Apollo and Pan successfully mourn their lost nymphs by clipping and refashioning pieces of their plant replacements. They stand out from other grievers throughout *Metamorphoses* who “fail to invent or accept an adequate figure for what they have lost and all of whom are consequently altered or destroyed” (Sacks 6). Though Isabella also cuts and refashions a piece of her lost love, she cuts Lorenzo's actual body. This is a degraded form of him, rather than a replacement. As such, it may not be an “adequate figure” for proper, healthy mourning as Freud describes. Instead, her melancholic mourning overtakes her life, alters her, and ultimately kills her.

However improper or transgressive Isabella’s mourning artwork is, it results in the sustaining ditty. The pot of basil and the ditty are both, ultimately, the result of loss. Lorenzo’s death and decapitation initiates the creation of the pot of basil. The loss of the pot of basil transforms Isabella the mourner into *Isabella* the elegy. The ditty relies on Isabella’s failure to accept a proper substitute for Lorenzo. Rather than being a cautionary tale about the dangers of coveting the remains of loved ones, *Isabella* demonstrates how art comes with a sacrifice. The substitution of mourning is the same as the differentiation of art-making. Together, mourning and art-making comprise the tradition of elegy. In the *Isabella* model of art, there is *a priori* loss. Beneath all the layers of mediation, the original tale of Isabella is told during a ravaging plague. Every iteration of her tale, at least in Keats’s poem, is related to a preceding loss. The “sad ditty” is an elegy of

Isabella, relying on the sacrifice of her life in order to be “born.” The song, like Pan’s reeds, becomes an elegiac token that symbolizes the death and loss of Lorenzo, Isabella, and the pot of basil all together. The lost are irrevocably lost and art takes their place. The “sad ditty” comes in the tradition of elegy and accepts the “very act and means of substitution” (Sacks 8). Art in *Isabella* is this substitution, which requires a lack or a loss. Art comes out of this loss and sacrifice – symbolically in the case of the pot of basil; more semiotically in the cases of the “sad ditty” and of Keats’s poem. Thus, Keats imbues *Isabella* with a model of art that not only requires severance – a synecdoche or metonymy allowing symbol or allegory – but also relies on repeated retellings to further trope the original loss.

III. Beyond *Isabella*: Tracing the Elegiac Model in Letters & the Odes

The elegiac model of art found in *Isabella* is part of Keats’s larger project of creating analogues for his own artistry, or “laying bare the archaeology of his own poetic endeavor” (Rajan 130). Through the representation of artworks and art-making like the pot of basil and the sad ditty of *Isabella*, Keats explores art as a kind of severance pay (pun intended) for the absence it represents and requires. This the model of elegiac art developed in *Isabella* is crucial to Keats’s other poems and artistic philosophy. In course, my examination of Keats’s letters and poems further develops *Isabella*’s model.

There is an important spatial aspect of *Isabella*’s model of art. While the pot of basil depends on the lack of Lorenzo, it also depends on Isabella filling the empty space of the pot with soil, a plant, and ultimately the head. The “sad ditty” also inhabits the internal spaces of mouths. Like the pattern of severance, interior spaces are requisite in the artworks of *Isabella*. Keats’s letters speak directly to the spatial depths and role of

grief in regards to making and viewing art. By bringing Keats's letters to bear on the artistic spaces of *Isabella*, we begin to see how the poem connects with a larger body of Keatsian aesthetic concerns.

Written only days after the completion of *Isabella*, Keats's letter to J.H. Reynolds on May 3rd 1818 ponders the spatial relationship between grief and poetry in a metaphor Keats calls "The Mansion of Many Apartments."¹² He writes:

I compare life to a large Mansion of Many "Apartments" ... [where by living, one] convinc[es] one's nerves that the World is full of Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness and oppression – whereby This Chamber of Maiden Thought becomes gradually darken'd and at the same time on all sides of it many doors are set open – but all dark – all leading to dark passages: – We see not the ballance of good and evil. We are in a Mist – *We* are now in that state – We feel the "burden of the Mystery." To this point, Wordsworth has come, as far as I can conceive when he wrote "Tintern Abbey" and it seems to me that his Genius is explorative of those dark Passages. Now if we live and go one thinking, we too shall explore them. He is a Genius and superior to us, in so far as he can, more than we, make discoveries, and shed a light in them – (p. 245)

Leading away from the "Chamber of Maiden Thought" Keats describes a network of "dark passages" seen behind the thresholds of "dark" doorways. These inner spaces of darkness are foreboding. Darkness falls by gaining knowledge of "Pain," "Misery," and "unpleasantness." The "dark passages" are also internal spaces where the contents are concealed by the darkness.¹³ The darkness of these "passages" conceals, "Mist"-ifies, and otherwise clouds the space within them as well as any space that exists on the other side. The darkness hides any place that the "dark passages" may lead toward. Keats considers Wordsworth's "Genius" in *Tintern Abbey* as "explorative of those dark passages." In this way, he credits Wordsworth as a kind of surveyor who enters the space of the "dark passages." By shedding "light" through "passages" of poetry, Wordsworth discovers the utter darkness within. Keats does not describe transcendence in Wordsworth's

excavation. Rather, Wordsworth's poetic "light" shows the very darkness, emptiness, and "Mystery" beheld in the "dark passages."

Perhaps the art in *Isabella* accomplishes something similar. Indeed, Isabella excavates a dark passage when exhuming Lorenzo's body. The way the darkness is a concealing cloak over the "passages" in the letter is similar to the concealment offered by the pot of basil. The phrase "dark passages" may also refer to poetic stanzas or sections of writing. The pot of basil by comparison becomes part of the same artistic category. The "dark passages" harbor sorrow and misery within their darkness. The pot of basil carries the same. Moreover, this letter describes "Misery and Heartbreak" as the requisite for unveiling the veiled dark passages, which are further veiled and unveiled by the work of poetry. There is a fascinating ambiguity of concealment and revealing, an inconstancy wholly consistent with the ambiguous signage of the pot of basil, both too symbolic and not enough. Loss and grief in *Isabella* are also necessary for the creation of art. Lorenzo's absence is highlighted by Isabella's artistic signage like the empty interior space of the "dark passages" is highlighted by Wordsworth's poetics. By drawing attention to the losses, art is gained. Substituting or symbolizing loss with art is a net aesthetic gain.

In this letter, Keats suggests that poetry helps ease the "Burden of the Mystery." Another borrowed phrase, this from Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey*, the "Mystery" seems to be related to the misty space of the passages.¹⁴ However, an easement of the "Burden" does not solve the "Mystery." Rather, the "Burden" is eased by accepting the "Mystery" as fundamentally unsolvable. Wordsworth's and *Isabella*'s art show the very impossibility of illuminating the "dark passages," solving the "Mystery," or recovering

what is lost. In other words, the “Mystery” is the absent whole made inaccessible by severance and symbolized through art. The “Burden” is emotional grief, or mourning. The ability to “ease” the “Burden,” according to Keats in this letter, comes from making art that represents the darkness, the mystery, and the burden itself. By aestheticizing and symbolizing the “Mystery,” Keats’s model of art accepts the “Mystery” precisely for its distance from what can be known and realized. This distance, this spatial chasm, this emptiness, this absence – that is the source of art in Keats’s *Isabella*. The presence of art is a substitute for the absence of loss, but a substitute that declares itself so. By the very act of substitution, the loss is invoked.

Elegiac Ekphrasis in *Ode on a Grecian Urn*

Of all Keats’s poems, the *Ode on a Grecian Urn* is perhaps his most recognized for questioning the status of art itself. Tilottoma Rajan notes two “aesthetic objects” that the poem contains: “the poem itself and the urn” (133). The duplicate, differentiated artworks in the ode resemble the visual pot of basil and the verbal ditty which is passed down to Keats. Both the pot and the urn have interior spaces with a funerary function.¹⁵ *Isabella* transforms the “garden-pot” into a grave-like urn by filling it with human remains. The interior space of the urn is more of a mystery, but Keats may have been thinking of a funerary urn that contained ashes. Though the pot and the urn take the same shape, the pot is filled while the urn presumably stands empty. Though each vessel is feminized, they are in different ways. The urn is virginal, yet fertile: “Thou still unravish’d bride” (1). The pot, too, contains fecundity with the flourishing, germinated basil, but has been “ravish’d” by Lorenzo’s head. While the objects of pot and urn share

important aspects – each visible, mute, feminized, still, containing depth – so do Isabella and the urn. Like the urn, Isabella is an “unravish’d bride.” Like the figures on the urn, Isabella becomes divorced from time and nature outside the world of the pot of basil. She is caught in an enclosed cycle with the pot. Her relationship with the pot of basil resembles the figures on the urn who are caught on the enclosed circular surface of the urn.¹⁶

Though Rajan identifies two artworks in the ode, there is a third. Keats references a silent ditty in the second stanza:

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear’d,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone (11-14)

Isabella’s closing ditty has an echo here. This stanza invokes the elegiac pipes of Pan and the genre of the ditty. Interestingly, neither this ditty nor *Isabella*’s are meant to be heard. The speaker of the ode directs the “soft pipes” away from the “sensual ear” to “ditties of no tone.” The melody is silent. While “no tone” could mean soundless, it might also refer to words divorced from their music. One meaning of “ditty” is the words of the song estranged from the melody (*OED*). The ditty in *Isabella* seems to be an analogue for the story that Keats inherits from Boccaccio, removed from its subject and repeatedly severed from its previous tellers. This ditty has a similar estrangement, being an “spirit” that the pipes merely “play to” like an invocation of absence. Of course, the pipes don’t “play” since the urn is silent. While the image of the pipes are present on the surface of the urn, the ditties are not. The speaker supplements the silent pipes with the “ditty,” just as he supplements the silent urn with the ode. His verse isn’t a melody, but words that describe the absence of the melody. The ditties in both *Isabella* and the ode seem

analogous with the poems themselves. Just as Isabella's death enables her elegiac ditty, so do the silence of the urn and the lost music of the represented pipes provoke the speaker's language.

The speaker speaks out about the musical art portrayed by the visual art of the urn. The speaker's invention of the "ditty" demonstrates the ekphrasis of *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. The term "ekphrasis" is often defined as "the verbal representation of visual representation" (Scott 1) More broadly, it means to "speak out, to tell in full; an extended and detailed literary description of any object, real or imaginary" (Kelley 170). Ekphrasis is highly visual, as much about "sighting" an artwork as "citing" it (Scott 1). While much of the ode describes the visual appearance of the urn, this stanza highlights auditory artwork portrayed on, but denied by, the surface of the urn. The speaker's ekphrasis moves beyond describing the sight of the urn to pondering the sound the urn both evokes and denies. *Isabella* helps us see how the "ditties" are an artistic, poetic counterpart to the speaker's poem. The silent and supplemented ditties in the ode betray absence and distance, similar to the severed artworks in *Isabella*. Perhaps there is a rhetorical severance at work in the ode, where the speaker's ekphrasis departs from the urn to recognize the absence its images show.

While the "ditties" in the second stanza illustrate the speaker's preoccupation with absences represented by the urn, the fourth stanza mourns these absences. Once again, the verse leaves the urn:

What little town by river or sea shore,
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?
And, little town, thy streets for evermore
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
Why thou art desolate, can e'er return. (34-40)

Here, the speaker constructs the space of a “little town” where he imagines the people of the urn are from. This is a highly imaginative, creative turn that moves beyond a description of the urn. It also recalls the spatial aspect of the letter. From the presence of the people of the urn, the speaker imagines a place where they are absent. He supplies an elegiac coda to the enclosed frieze of the urn, and claims his own creative agency. The “little town” invokes the image of ruined civilizations of antiquity such as ancient Greece, “empty” and “desolate.” This supplementing scene reminds us how the urn is cut off from the culture from whence it came, like the figures on the urn are estranged from their home. The urn is a severed object, an aesthetic figure apart from the world to which it once belonged. Keats replaces it in a historical scheme, supplying the urn with a past. Though the urn is not dead in the same way that Lorenzo is, its possible funerary function evokes similar loss. The speaker reinforces the severed condition of the urn by describing the absent space from which it and its own subjects are separated. By addressing the “little town” directly as an apostrophe, he turns from ekphrasis to elegy. The verse ceases to describe the surface of the urn, instead acknowledging the losses which have enabled its presence as an artwork rather than a tool for use. The speaker of the poem actively seeks and invents the loss that is the empty town, using his own verbal skill to draw attention to an absence invoked by the urn.

From *Isabella* and from the stories of *Metamorphoses*, elegy requires a troping of what is lost. The decapitation of Lorenzo, the plucked wreath, and the cut reeds all follow a pattern of severance, which constitutes the troping or figuring of the lost object (Sacks 5).¹⁷ The urn seems rhetorically severed from the ancient culture it is from, but there is also a scene of animal sacrifice on the surface of the urn:

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?

To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies (31-33)

The speaker describes a scene just before an animal “sacrifice.” While the funerary status of the urn is ultimately uncertain, the “sacrifice” brings death directly to bear on the urn, and therefore on the poem. Even though the “sacrifice” is only anticipated by the figures on the urn and the “altar” isn’t even pictured, the speaker nevertheless asserts it. Just as the speaker asks “what little town,” he asks “what green altar.” Both questions without answers, the “altar” and the “town” are supplied by the speaker’s artistic imagination. While the “little town” gives the urn a past, the impending “sacrifice” supplies a future. The speaker’s poetry revises the severed condition of the urn, instead offering a temporal scheme. Yet, both supplemental scenes regard loss. Why include, among all the scenes of pursuant love and trees and music, a scene of sacrifice? The sacrifices in *Isabella*, namely the deaths of Lorenzo and Isabella, enable artistic creation first in the visual pot and second in the elegiac ditty. Though the heifer is eternally un-sacrificed because it is frozen on the surface of the urn, the anticipated loss seems to inspire the speaker to delve into the conditions of absence implicated by the presence of the figures on the urn.

This penultimate stanza is wrought with loss – the “sacrifice,” the empty town condemned to eternal silence. As the speaker transitions from ekphrastic description to elegiac sorrow, his verse becomes concerned with the task of telling. The absence of any “soul” for the town to tell its story confirms its desolation. Yet, the speaker doesn’t just tell why the town is empty and silent. His language invents the town in the first place. Instead of making ekphrastic art out of the presence of the urn, he creates a historical, mournful fiction from its absences. In the final stanza, the speaker is no longer wandering through the surface of the urn, and remarking on its missing music. He beholds the urn

not as a code to crack, but as the subject over which to exert his verbal skills. He places the urn in a literary genre just as he placed it in a historical scheme: “Cold Pastoral!” Just as *Isabella* ends with the ditty’s verbal art in place of the pot, *Ode on a Grecian Urn* substitutes visual art with its own verbal art. Though such substitution is largely ekphrastic throughout the poem, the penultimate stanza suggests an elegiac mode at work within the pastoral.

A reading of *Ode on a Grecian Urn* through the model of loss, elegy, and substitution accomplishes two things. First, it recognizes the elegiac turn in the penultimate stanza of the ode as crucial to the speaker’s artistry. The speaker recognizes the urn as a testament to loss, but only does so through his own poetics.¹⁸ Secondly, locating in the *Ode on a Grecian Urn* a type of artistic mourning similar to what we find in *Isabella* confirms that the early romance offers more than just sentimental drama. Rather, the similar tombs spaces – pot and urn – and the various verbal artworks that replace and mourn the losses signified by the vessels indicate *Isabella* is fundamental to Keats’s aesthetic philosophy. In turn, *Ode on a Grecian Urn* develops the spatial philosophy of Keats’s letter and reinforces the sustaining creativity Keats attributes to language.

Mediation and Productivity of Grief in *Ode on Melancholy*

Keats’s *Mansion of Many Apartments*, the *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, and *Isabella* all pair making art with mourning loss. While the *Ode on a Grecian Urn* is famous for its ekphrastic dialogue, Keats’s *Ode on Melancholy* is largely concerned with how one should negotiate grief. To characterize melancholy, Keats employs various symbols that

resemble those of *Isabella*. In particular, the second stanza conjures melancholy through metaphorical objects and the final lines of the poem cloak melancholy in layers of physical and linguistic concealment. *Ode on Melancholy* reinforces the spatial aspects of Keats's elegiac model, helps establish the primacy of grief in Keats's art, and suggests the importance of art in coping with grief.

In the second stanza, Keats describes melancholy as a spring shower:

But when the melancholy fit shall fall
Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud,
That fosters the droop-headed flowers all,
And hides the green hill in an April shroud; (11-14)

Like a rain shower, “melancholy” is a “weeping cloud” that can “fall” from the sky and “foster” flowers. This image invokes *Isabella* “weeping” over the pot of basil, fostering the greenery beneath. In these lines, “melancholy” conceals, hiding “the green hill in an April shroud.” The landscape is fragmented from the narrative perspective as the “cloud” obscures the “green hill.” If the hill is hidden, how does the speaker know it is there? Again, we see a poet conjuring the presence of an object via its absence and concealment. The “weeping cloud” of melancholy is an “April shroud,” signifying the ceremony of funerals and mourning. A “shroud” is a sheet put over the deceased or funeral garb, which not only symbolizes death, but conceals it.¹⁹ Thus, the “weeping cloud” has a funerary aesthetic, entombing and mourning like the pot and urn. As the basil grows out of the concealed head, the “weeping cloud” obscures and cultivates the “green hill.” Unlike the pot of basil, however, the melancholy cloud doesn't harbor a severed limb. The shroud, partially covering the hull, enacts a semi-burial, a kind of severance. Rather than a body part, the concealing cloud “fosters” life in sodden flowers and greenery. The

funerary exterior implies a deathly interior, though the shroud is reportedly productive and fecund.

This passage describes the “weeping cloud” of melancholy as a “fit.” While “fit” at first seems to mean the onset of an emotional ailment, another meaning, from “fytte,” invokes a section of a poem or song (*OED*). This meaning describes melancholy in terms of language arts and suggests that the “melancholy fit” is section of a whole. The “melancholy fit” falls from “heaven,” as if it was once part of heaven but is no longer. “Melancholy” becomes a fragment, severed from “heaven.” This falling makes melancholy a fit – both an ailment and a fractured section of poetry, separated from heaven.²⁰ This interpretation tells us that we are reading a “melancholy fytte,” a stanza within a poem that considers melancholy as subject. The poetic melancholy fashioned by this pun compares the emotion of “melancholy” to the experience of writing a poem.²¹ The double meaning of “fit” brings the poetic themes from *Isabella* into *Ode on Melancholy*. It invokes verbal arts in close relation to grief, loss, and death, therefore invoking the genre of elegy. It reminds the reader of the poetic status of the stanza, merging the endeavor of parsing melancholy with the project of writing poetry.

After characterizing melancholy as obscuring, productive, poetic, and fragmentary, the stanza lists parts of the natural world through which a melancholic might express his emotion, such as a “morning rose” or “peonies.”²² These flowers invoke the plant fragments that carry elegiac meaning, but the final item on the list is the anger of one’s lover:

Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows,
Emprison her soft hand, and let her rave,
And feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes. (18-20)

This stanza describes melancholy in highly metaphorical terms – as a series of objects that invoke or stand in for melancholy. The image of an imprisoned body part – the “soft hand” – stands out in this stanza. To “emprison” is a kind of concealment, as an incarceration or detainment. But moreover, capturing the “soft hand” effectively captures her entire body, confirmed by the presence of her “peerless eyes.” This is also a kind of severance, as imprisoning requires enclosure and separation. Though presumably connected to the rest of her body, the “soft hand” becomes a synecdoche. Her entire being is arrested by the incarceration of just one part. As the severed head facilitates Isabella’s grief, the “soft hand” facilitates the subject’s melancholy and transmits the mistress’s “rich anger.” While “rich anger” isn’t melancholy, it seems to be a sufficient substitute, enough so that the subject is able to glut his sorrows on her ravings. The hand is enclosed similarly to the severed head and its partiality has comparable emotional implications.

After he captures the “soft hand” and arrests the mistress, the melancholic harvests “rich anger” from her “peerless eyes.” These “peerless eyes” emphasize a visual quality to this melancholy expression, suggesting that her eyes are unmatched in beauty, but also denoting blindness – as in the “eyes” do not “peer.” Isabella’s eyes are connected to Lorenzo’s dead eyes not by seeing but by tearful mourning. The subject forges a similarly emotional conduit between his and his mistress’s eyes. He seeks an emotional presence – anger – in eyes that carry a kind of absence in their blindness. The verb “feed,” consistent with the language of gluttony Keats employs, suggests growth. Like the flowers fostered by the “weeping cloud” and the basil nourished by Isabella’s tears, the subject “feeds” on emotional anguish. As Isabella expresses her mourning, the man

satiates his “melancholy.” There isn’t a figure in *Ode on Melancholy* that is an analogue for art in the same way as the pot, ditty, or urn (though the pun on “fit” comes close). Instead of showing art made out of absence, *Ode on Melancholy* depicts growth and satiation stemming from the emotion of melancholy. Though the source of the melancholy isn’t stated, the sorrow is all-consuming, similar to Isabella’s. The loss of melancholy creates an appetite and desires satiation. Perhaps this clarifies the edible function of the basil, alongside its uninhibited growth. In this way, *Ode on Melancholy* touches on the elegiac model of *Isabella*, deepening the role of grief in Keats’s poetics.

The grief suggested by melancholy is what one feels in the wake of a loss. While the pot of basil contains and conceals the presence of the lost object, this ode also conceals the promise of presence – such as the enshrouded “green hill.” However, the presence is denied, hidden, and the character of melancholy is always metaphorical. The metaphors which describe melancholy in the second stanza are objects like clouds, flowers, and hands. The identification (and expression) of melancholy seems to require symbols, never being directly addressed in the same way as the urn. In *Ode on Melancholy*, the task of understanding grief relies on the representative function of language. In other words, melancholy is always shrouded in symbol, metaphor, and comparison. This concealment provides satiation and productivity – the imprisoned hand facilitates grief; the clouded hill grows green. The rhetorical cloak of metaphor is productive for feeling sorrow and essential to crafting the poem.

And indeed, the final stanza illustrates melancholy’s concealment:

Ay, in the very temple of Delight
 Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine
 Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue
 Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine;
 His soul shall taste the sadness of her might,

And be among her cloudy trophies hung. (25-30)

Secreted within the “very temple of Delight,” Melancholy hides. The “temple” and the “sovrán shrine” are sacred spaces celebrating deities, yet these deities are absent.²³ The structure of the temple is a testament to the absence of its subject, Delight. It is a symbolic representation that evokes absence as it conjures the memory of Delight. Like the pot of basil, the “temple of delight” has interior space. Instead of being empty due to the absence of Delight, the temple contains the “sovrán shrine” of “Veil’d Melancholy.” The exterior artifice of the temple effectively cloaks “Veil’d Melancholy” by its structure. There seem to be three different layers of concealment at work in the temple: the exterior structure of the temple, the container of the shrine, and Melancholy’s veil. While a “temple” is an edifice for the gods rather than a tomb-like container, a “shrine” can certainly hold the remains of the dead. In this way, the “sovrán shrine” of Melancholy may contain death like the pot of basil. Like the shrine, the “veil” both enshrouds Melancholy and invokes mourning. As the presence of Melancholy is mediated through the objects in the second stanza, the layers of concealment in the final verse evoke Melancholy through her absence. Does the shrine belong to Melancholy, or does the shrine contain Melancholy? Is Melancholy veiled because she is mourning a death, or is she veiled because she is the dead? Like the temple symbolizes Delight, the shrine too is a symbol for Melancholy, albeit one that may actually contain death secreted away like the severed head in the pot of basil.

Each possibility of the symbolism and contents of the shrine reinforce the mediated, enclosed, and unseen status of Melancholy. However, the final lines describe a shadowy “him” who is able to see Melancholy beneath all her cloaks. Although the poem says Melancholy is “seen,” the verse only describes “him” – perhaps the subject of the

poem – tasting, not seeing. Instead of describing what Melancholy looks like, the poem describes the subject’s “strenuous tongue” bursting “Joy’s grape against his palate fine,” allowing him to “taste the sadness of her might.”²⁴ Like the synesthesia of *Isabella*’s narrative self-consciousness, the sight of Melancholy is translated into taste. However, even the taste of Melancholy is intermediate, described as the aftertaste of “Joy’s grape” and the “sadness of her might.” In attempting to describe Melancholy in oppositional terms by what she is not, the poem continues to hedge by offering “Joy’s grape” in place of Joy. The speaker doesn’t actually see Melancholy, but neither does he actually taste her. The taste is rather of a feeling “of” her “might,” accessed through one singular grape belonging to Joy. The final image of the subject “among her cloudy trophies hung” recalls the “weeping cloud” of Melancholy from the second stanza.²⁵ While “trophies” are symbolic objects that serve as monuments to events of the past, the adjective “cloudy” obscures even these.

Throughout the ode, Melancholy is repeatedly troped, absent, made into something else, dead, and evoked by her absence. As the topic of the ode, Melancholy herself is elusive. Yet, there is an intense desire to find and describe Melancholy. The subject of the poem seeks Melancholy in the landscape, in his lover, in the temple of Delight. He is intent to find her, but all he finds is what is not her. The absence of Melancholy and the substitution of language and objects for her, paradoxically, is precisely what defines Melancholy through the poem. And of course, Melancholy is related to grief, being described in funerary terms in both stanzas, and is therefore coupled with loss. Again, loss, absence, and substitution are at the very core of Keats’s *Ode on Melancholy*. *Ode on Melancholy* is perhaps Keats’s most explicit treatment of

grief, and it too carries the similar spatial depths and differentiating tropes as *Isabella's* pot of basil.

IV. Severed Tombs: Keats's Fragments

The first section of this paper discovered a model of artistic creation, grief, and elegy in *Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil*. In Keats's letters and in two of his more famous odes, I find similar patterns of art requiring grief and loss. In turn, Keats's negotiation of grief and loss seems to require an artistic medium. In exploring the similarities between *Isabella* and the odes, the pot of basil helps locate and interpret elegiac aspects of Keats's poetry, especially in the represented artworks contained within the poems. As such, early and dismissed *Isabella* becomes a crucial source for reading Keats, particularly in terms of his artistic self-awareness. *Isabella* demonstrates how the act of severance is the root of Keats's artistry, which relies on differentiating the sign from the signified in order to become art. Severed fragments like the head are transformed into tokens; they pay tribute to the loss they require while also fostering new life. This productivity is figured in the basil plant, the repeating ditty, the elegiac turn in *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, and *Ode on Melancholy's* satiation and growth. To close this essay, I take the themes discovered in the enclosed worlds of Keats's poems to two of Keats's sustaining poetic fragments in order to see how *Isabella* may be fundamental not only to Keats's art, but also to his legacy. I discuss a deleted opening stanza of *Ode on Melancholy*, which is wrought with the imagery of corpses. Lastly, I track the elegiac and mournful elements of *Isabella* through Keats's most disputed poem, the enigmatic "This Living Hand." These

fragmentary pieces of Keats's writing allow us to see the model of *Isabella* not only in Keats's other poems, but also as a phenomenon of his oeuvre.

Ode on Melancholy doesn't have a severed object in the same way that *Isabella* and, as I argue, *Ode on a Grecian Urn* do (though the hand and the hill come close).

However, the manuscript that served as the basis for Keats's first biography includes the following deleted opening stanza:

Tho' you should build a bark of dead men's bones,
And rear a phantom gibbet for a mast,
Stitch creeds (shrouds) together for a sail, with groans
To fill it out, bloodstained and aghast;
Altho' your rudder be a Dragon's tail,
Long sever'd, yet still hard with agony,
Your cordage large uprootings from the skull
Of bald Medusa; certes you would fail
To find the Melancholy, whether she
Dreameth in any isle of Lethe dull. (p. 473-74)

I certainly understand why this stanza was cut. It is overwrought with blatant images of death and strewn with severed body parts. The ode is far more elegant and understated without it. Perhaps Keats's discarded the opening on the same impulse that led him to denigrate *Isabella*. Indeed, intense energy of building a boat out of the fragments of dead bodies that originally opened *Ode on Melancholy* strongly evokes the bursting energy and severed symbol of *Isabella*'s creativity. The construction of the bark has the same frenzy of *Isabella* sawing through bone and sinew to decapitate Lorenzo. The bodily mess of a "sever'd" and "bloodstained" "Dragon's tail" is even more grotesque than *Isabella*'s mutilation. One of the most remarkable connections between this stanza and *Isabella* is the decapitated "skull" of "bald Medusa" and its "uprootings." This opening adds a frenzied beginning to the search for Melancholy, requiring a boat built out of fractured corpses. The stanza provides a long list of symbols for loss and death – "dead men's bones," sails made out of shrouds, ropes from Medusa's head. From this stanza, the

melancholic takes on deep similarities with Isabella – from severed creativity to his own transformation into the symbolic “cloudy trophies.” This stanza offers clues regarding what losses the subject of the poem, or perhaps Melancholy herself, might be mourning, figured in the deathly bark.

There is an interesting part-for-whole aspect of this stanza. It declares that the subject will “fail to find the Melancholy,” predicting the ending of the poem where the subject’s discovery of Melancholy remains cloaked. This stanza represents severed objects galore – an entire boat made out of them. Likewise, the stanza itself is severed, a discarded section that haunts the reproduction of the poem. Ultimately, Keats left this stanza behind, removing it from the published version of *Ode on Melancholy*. Yet it wasn’t lost entirely and still appears in anthologies of Keats as supplementary material for the poem. Keats’s readers and anthologizers have retained the section, but why? It has a present absence from the poem, perhaps helping us interpret *Ode on Melancholy* and certainly offering insight into Keats’s creative process. The legacy of this stanza gives Keats’s most explicit poem about grief severed circumstances. Death is at once removed from and bound together with the other three stanzas that encompass the ode in the canon. This relationship recalls the absent presence of the pot of basil. A removed section, representing fragments of death, haunts the ode. Somehow, the stanza seems both superfluous and essential. Moreover, it was an opening stanza. The first line of the official version of *Ode on Melancholy* opens with an *a priori* loss. Keats decapitated his *Ode on Melancholy*.

That a severed portion of *Ode on Melancholy* (a portion that may have been dismissed for similar grotesque images to *Isabella*) follows its print history suggests a

continued fascination with Keats's discarded material. I am unaware of anyone wishing to recuperate the deleted stanza back into the poem, but perhaps some aspect of Keats's persona hinges on his marginalia. The first full scale biography of Keats is titled *Life, Letters, and Literary Remains, of John Keats* (1848). "Literary Remains" suggest that his biographers scrounged up every bit and piece of his writings they could find. His legacy is not just of the final versions of the poems published during his lifetime, but the fragments which piece together his truncated life. Keats died in 1821 at the age of 25 from tuberculosis, not a year after *Isabella* and the odes were published. Many believe he was on the cusp of his best work. The fragments and deletions like the first stanza of *Ode on Melancholy* and over a hundred other poems published after his death characterize what Stillinger coins "posthumous Keats" (1997, 557). His legacy is linked to his own death, which determines many of the ways we read Keats's poems and his place in the canon of English literature.²⁶

No discussion of Keats's posthumous legacy, fragmented verses, or severed figures would be complete without considering "This Living Hand." It has been often speculated whether or not "This Living Hand" was even written by Keats. It was found written up-side-down on a manuscript, among his last writings before his death. Even if it was written by Keats (which critics have lately tended to believe), no one knows whether it is a fragment of a play, love letter, poem, or if it might actually be a complete poem. While it's unlikely the mystery of "This Living Hand" will ever be solved, the lines have been widely anthologized and reproduced under Keats's name. Regardless of who wrote it or why, "This Living Hand" is considered a Keats poem and will likely remain so. The verse is an emblem of his posthumous legacy, always and forever linked to his death. Not

only does the poem describe the death of an author, but its mystery depends on the death of Keats.

Remarkably, but perhaps unsurprisingly, “This Living Hand” has several key resemblances to *Isabella* including a severed body part concealed within a tomb and an address to the reader. By reading “This Living Hand” by way of *Isabella*’s artistic model, severance and concealment converge upon the figure of the hand:

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

Like *Isabella*, “This Living Hand” mentions a “tomb” that holds and contains a severed body part. By containing the “hand,” the “tomb” reveals its interior space. Within this interior space, the “hand” is concealed. The spatial organization of the severed hand within the tomb resembles the pot of basil and Melancholy’s shrine. This concealment conjures and facilitates the uncanny presence of the “hand” which next “haunts” and “chills” the addressee outside the “tomb,” unable to see or touch the “hand.” The “hand” is estranged from its body just as Lorenzo’s head is estranged from his body. Within the frame of the poem, there is no other part of the speaker’s body represented that is not the “hand” or the “veins” therein. Though perhaps the rest of the body is implied, at least while the hand is still “living,” an implied body is not a represented body. The separation of a body into represented and implied parts is a type of severance. Therefore, the text removes and distances the “hand” from its implied whole. The reader is tormented by hand’s death and entombment, desiring to bring it back to life. The reader seeks access to

the secreted tomb space and wishes to reanimate the hand. Again, there is the promise of presence concealed within the tomb, which contains a dead, synecdochal part-for-whole.

At the end of the poem, the hand is held out to the reader but it is unclear whether it is the “living hand” or the dead one. Wolfson notes the simultaneity: “The image of ‘hand’ not only invokes the ghoulishly amputated, somatic animation, but also, by denoting ‘handwriting,’ proposes a textual vitality” (2001, 116). Wolfson points to the poetic allegory at work in the poem, revealed first by the double meaning of “hand” to denote both the body part and “handwriting.” This pun betrays the self-awareness of the poem, which declares its written status at the very beginning. Similarly, the word “tomb” gains a second meaning by its homonym neighbor “tome,” reinforcing the text’s concern with its medium. Yet another literary pun is “red life” which both refers to blood and “read life.” Each of these literary puns is imbued with either life or death – “living hand,” “tomb,” “red life.” Wolfson reads “textual vitality” in the finale of the verse, where the reanimated hand lives sustained by a readership. Yet, as she notes, the “living hand” is simultaneously dead and hidden in the tomb. The poem belies both its absence and its presence by the final claim that the hand – which we know to be dead, entombed, and moreover, a mere fiction – is held out to us. This assertion unites the repetitive, sustaining tradition of elegy with the productive, textual negotiations of absence seen throughout Keats’s poems.²⁷

The ambiguous life and death, and presence and absence, captured in this poem resembles the uncertain substitution in *Isabella*. In “This Living Hand,” the reader wants to sacrifice his or her own lifeblood to reanimate the hand. Several critics derive a parasitic relationship between reader and poem, addressee and “hand” (Lagory 339;

Culler 154). Like *Isabella* pouring tears into a severed head and growing the basil, the reader siphons blood into a severed hand, which is even more severed by the exposure of its “veins” that must exist for the reader’s blood to be transfused. The veins “stream” with a vigor and fullness that comes at the dry heart’s expense. This is a kind of morbid substitution – one life for another. The reader surrenders to the “hand” by the very act of reading the poem. The hand’s reanimation, read by Wolfson as a “textual vitality” by which the poem persists, depends on its troping. First, the hand dies, then is severed and entombed. From this severed and entombed state, the hand becomes reanimated in a poetic form from the life of the addressee. Here again is the severance of Ovid’s elegiac tokens and *Isabella*’s substitutive act, moored in synecdoche and an ambiguous negotiation of presence and absence.

Neither “This Living Hand” nor *Isabella* end with transcendence where part becomes whole, such as the type promised by the fragmented bodies of saint’s relics. Rather, each end in the transmission of art. “This Living Hand” states “I hold it towards you,” offering its poetic self to the reader. As Timothy Bahti argues and Wolfson extends, the poem operates in a cycle. The end finds the hand alive again, “warm and capable.” This returns the reader to the beginning of the poem, where the hand “writes itself back into the silence of the grave, thence to emerge again” (Wolfson 2001, 116). This repetition recalls the mournful ditty that moves into and out of the enclosed verbal spaces of the mouths. Here, the “hand” moves into and out of the tomb/tome by also inhabiting the bodies of readers. However, *Isabella* is clearer regarding who exactly the ditty elegizes. In “This Living Hand” the readers mourn as the poem elegizes the “hand” in the “tomb,” but perhaps the poem simultaneously elegizes the reader who sacrifices his

or her blood for the sake of the poem. “This Living Hand” points towards a reader-response model of elegy, where the reader and the poem collaborate to mourn the absences required by art. The poem can only offer a symbolic etching of the very letters on the page that stand in place of the “living hand” of the author and the subject of the poem, which in “This Living Hand” seem to be the same.

My reading of Keats’s art and legacy through *Isabella* points towards more versions of Keats – Keats the elegist alongside Keats the elegy. Keats the elegist writes poems that are not only concerned with loss, but with the function of poetry and art in mourning. Keats the elegy survives in the stories we tell through his “literary remains.” There are other places in Keats that invoke the elegiac art of *Isabella*, examples I neither have the time or space to treat in this paper: “in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn” in the final stanza of *To Autumn*, “margin-sand foot-marks” betray a lost presence by their negative space in *Hyperion* (also a self-reported fragment), another warm hand predicts its own burial in *The Fall of Hyperion*, the early poem “When I have fears that I may cease to be” seems to anticipate elegy. As we trace the elegiac model of art found buried in *Isabella* through Keats’s other poems, the model is tested and modified as demonstrated by my discussion of the odes and fragments. Despite the many incongruences and indeterminacies found within and between each of the poems, the model of the pot of basil is a traceable pattern through Keats’s writings and the continued presence of his work. Thereby, *Isabella* can be recuperated into Keats’s legacy, considered alongside the great odes that serve as living monuments for Keats’s poetic depths.

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Endnotes

¹ See the opening of Michael Lagory’s “Wormy Circumstance: Symbolism in Keats’s *Isabella*” for an extensive list of Keats studies that have ignored or dismissed *Isabella*.

² All poems and writings of Keats from *Keats’s Poetry and Prose* ed. Cox (2009).

³ “Not long after, the Nurse having brought her a large earthen pot...” (Boccaccio IV, 5).

⁴ Jonathan Bate discusses the human control exerted by the designation of a garden in a chapter on the picturesque in *The Song of the Earth*: “the whole point of a formal garden was that it was a controlled space, an ‘inside’ that was different from the untamed nature ‘outside’” (136).

⁵ A note on translation: it is likely that Keats would have read Boccaccio in Florio’s 1620 translation, which is the version I reproduce here. This adds a layer of distance between Boccaccio’s story and Keats’s rendition, as does the poetic revision of the translated prose.

⁶ For a discussion of Keats's choice to revise Boccaccio's "keene razor" to the "dull steel," see Stillinger's "Keats and Romance: The 'Reality' of Isabella" (Stillinger 1971, 40).

⁷ See *Isabella*, Stanza XIX: "O eloquent and famed Boccaccio!" (145).

⁸ Hoeveler writes that Isabella may have been Keats's "case-study of female neurosis, of thwarted sexuality and maternity" (338). She reads graveyard exhumation as an inverted birth scene and describes Isabella's dotting upon the severed head as fetish.

⁹ Tilottoma Rajan suggests that the materials that enshroud the head "form a surface which seeks to protect itself from a hideous reality: to regress, to idealize or somehow preserve the beautiful through images that transmute the ugliness of an alien world" (131). The mutilation of castration, and of beheading, is also a transformation. See Grant Scott's *The Sculpted Word* (1994) for a discussion of Medusa and *Ode on a Grecian Urn* (132).

¹⁰ Other retellings show the head never decaying.

¹¹ Perhaps lyrics poems such as Donne's that describe lovers as the whole world are beneath the surface of Isabella's lovesick mourning.

¹² The metaphor of the "Mansion of Many Apartments" is borrowed from John 14:2 which describes Heaven as "In my Father's house there are many mansions." Already, Keats's spatial awareness is cloaked in the language of heaven. Although his theory is of "life" rather than afterlife, a transcendent notion of paradise as a "house" or "mansion" invokes a religious context, perhaps in the same way that the pot of basil invokes the transcendent power of a reliquary

¹³ In Roe's biography, the chapter about 1818 which discusses *Isabella* is titled "Dark Passages."

¹⁴ William Wordsworth, *Tintern Abbey*: "Nor less, I trust, / To them I may have owed another gift, / Of Aspect more sublime; that blessed mood, / In which the burthen of the mystery, / In which the heavy and weary weight / Of all this unintelligible world, / Is lightened" (35-41).

¹⁵ Rajan notes several critics who read the urn as funerary, including Ian Jack and Bernard Blackstone (p. 133, n50)

¹⁶ See Rajan for a fuller comparison of the pot and urn.

¹⁷ On this subject, note the "leaf-fring'd legend" (5) that circles the urn.

¹⁸ Indeed, the final stanza addresses the urn: "When old age shall this generation waste, / Thou shalt remain, in the midst of other woe" (46-47).

¹⁹ Shroud" can also refer to a shelter or structure (*OED*).

²⁰ There is a religious element of this stanza, enforced by the "April shroud" which invokes Easter and the empty tomb.

²¹ The concept of a poem falling "sudden" resemble the notion of "spontaneous overflow" in Wordsworth's "Preface to Lyrical Ballads" (p. 295). Indeed, one also thinks

of “Lines Written in Early Spring”: “That sweet mood when pleasant thoughts / Bring sad thoughts to the mind” (l. 3-4).

²² “Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose, / Or on the rainbow of the salt sand-wave, / Or on the wealth of globed peonies” (15-17)

²³ The first part of the stanza describes the absence of deified figures: “She dwells with Beauty – Beauty that must die; / And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips / Bidding adieu: and aching Pleasure nigh, / Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips” (21-24).

²⁴ Many read Joy’s grape as Keats’s sensuality (Stillinger 1997).

²⁵ See also Shakespeare, Sonnet 21, ll. 9-10: “Thou art the grave where buried love doth live, / Hung with the trophies of my lovers gone” (*KPP* p. 474 n3).

²⁶ Stillinger’s “Multiple Readers, Multiple Texts, Multiple Keats” discusses the phenomenon of Multiple Keats, where Keats fulfills infinite roles. Poor Keats, Philosophical Keats, Sensuous Keats, and Heroic Keats are just a smattering of the different versions of Keats critics have found. Keats’s multiplicity, Stillinger argues, is enabled by his “self-division” (1997 p. 558).

²⁶ See Jonathan Culler for a discussion of apostrophe’s function through “This Living Hand.”

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