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John Keats's Isabella**

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“AND A SAD DITTY OF THIS STORY BORN”: REGENERATION THROUGH
DECAY IN JOHN KEATS’S *ISABELLA*

by

Erica G. Van Schaik

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate School,
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December 2017

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December 2017

Approved by:

Dr. Emily B. Stanback, Committee Chair
Assistant Professor, English

Dr. Craig Carey, Committee Member
Assistant Professor, English

Dr. Nicole Jordan, Committee Member
Associate Professor, English

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Dr. Luis Iglesias
Chair, Department of English

Dr. Karen S. Coats
Dean of the Graduate School

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ABSTRACT

“AND A SAD DITTY OF THIS STORY BORN”: REGENERATION THROUGH DECAY IN JOHN KEATS’S *ISABELLA*

by Erica G. Van Schaik

December 2017

John Keats’s *Isabella; or the Pot of Basil* (1818) has been read, like many of Keats’s works, as an allegory for the death that surrounded the poet and his life’s tragic circumstances. *Isabella* has also been studied in regard to its gothic horror elements. Such previous readings identify a theme of mortality and decay within the poem, but I argue these themes serve a larger purpose, one related to the possibilities created by regeneration. Isabella, a young woman whose lover, Lorenzo, is murdered by her own brothers, removes Lorenzo’s head from his corpse and places it in a potted basil plant. She sustains the plant on her own tears until her brothers steal it from her, and her “sad ditty” is born from her mourning. Because the poem ends with the memorialization of a loved one and the creation of an immortal story, I read the poem in a much more positive light than scholars typically do. I argue that Keats attempts to show decay’s natural role in our everyday lives, as well as how death serves as a source for the inspiration and the cultivation of art. Isabella’s devotion and the leaves of the basil plant and become metaphors for the poetic process and the creation of leaves of verse; the perpetuation of Isabella’s tragic story, her “sad ditty,” becomes a larger metaphor for the proliferation of those leaves of verse and the immortal potential of art itself.

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DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my parents. Thank you for all of your encouragement and for patiently listening each time I discussed a decapitated head over dinner.

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CHAPTER I – “AND A SAD DITTY OF THIS STORY BORN”

John Keats's (1795-1821) *Isabella; or the Pot of Basil* (1818) ends with the female protagonist's death, and, more importantly, with the perpetuation of her tragic story: “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!’” (501-504). A revision of “Elisabetta” from Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1313-1375), Isabella's story existed long before Keats's character did. While *Isabella*'s plot is nearly identical to Boccaccio's tale, Keats's descriptions of the story's characters are detailed differently. For example, after Isabella's partner, Lorenzo, is brutally murdered by her brothers, Isabella finds Lorenzo's decaying body in the woods—a description Keats makes far more graphic and grotesque than his predecessor had. Boccaccio claims Lorenzo's corpse remained “uncorrupted” within the grave, while *Isabella*'s speaker does not shy away from describing the corpse's decay. In both stories, Isabella mutilates Lorenzo's corpse when she decapitates his body and puts his head in a potted basil plant. Isabella's labor, the actual caretaking of the plant, spirals into obsession. Because this obsession is far more detailed and visceral in Keats's version, his poem is considerably longer than Boccaccio's.

The extended character descriptions Keats used are often graphic and alter aspects of the story's motifs, as scholars have noted. For example, in *Keats and Romance*, Jack Stillinger argues that Keats “chooses to emphasize corruption...” (600). Stillinger quotes Keats's description of Lorenzo's unearthed corpse as an example, noting that “Keats enlarges on the physical details, adding among other things...dirt in his ears” (600). By contrast, Awnsham Churchill's 1684 Boccaccio translation describes Lorenzo's buried

body as being “very little corrupted or impaired” upon its discovery (as quoted in Stillinger 600). These descriptions of corruption are what Stillinger refers to as the poem’s “anti-romantic” qualities. By “anti-romantic,” Stillinger is referring to the poem’s descriptions of decay as non-idyllic or anti-sentimental, not as against the Romantic movement.¹ More frequently, scholars have built on Stillinger’s argument and put it into conversation with what Aileen Ward’s *John Keats: The Making of a Poet* (1963) calls the “economic motive” behind Lorenzo’s murder: Boccaccio’s Lorenzo is murdered “merely because of his illicit passion for their sister. Keats added an economic motive with the brothers’ greedy ambition to marry Isabella to a wealthy noble...” (Ward 173).²

These previous readings flag Keats’s fascination with the corpse and the reality of the human body. These readings are informative, but, additionally, I believe these quotations are Keats’s attempt to demonstrate decay’s natural role in our everyday lives. The poem forces readers to reckon with and resurface the dead. The poverty and disease that pervaded Keats’s own life certainly aligns with these readings, but I am interested in a different dimension of decay. Keats’s *Isabella* demonstrates how that degeneration is necessary for regeneration, not only in nature but in the cultivation of art. If Lorenzo’s body had been left in the forest soil, he would have contributed to the growth of the

¹ To avoid confusion, I will capitalize the word Romantic when referring to the Romantic movement. When referring to sentimental or romantic qualities within a story, a lowercase ‘r’ will be used.

² For more on the economic readings and *Isabella*’s implications of the class system, see Kurt Heinzelman’s “Self-Interest and the Politics of Composition in Keats’s *Isabella*” (1988), Diane Hoeveler Long’s “Decapitating Romance: Class, Fetish, and Ideology in Keats’s *Isabella*” (1994), and Jerry W. Lee’s “Capital, Class, and Representations of Isabel/la in John Keats’s *Isabella*” (2012).

forest. Initially, Isabella's choice to unearth Lorenzo's body keeps him from that natural, regenerative afterlife, but she initiates a different kind of regenerative process when she places Lorenzo's head in the basil pot through cultivation. While her decision is unorthodox, she proceeds to grow a strong and healthy plant with a decapitated head at its center: "...the jewel, safely casketed, / Came forth, and in perfume leafits spread" (433). Herein Lorenzo is both memorialized and able to contribute to the life of something else—the plant itself. Because she nurses a plant that contains her lover's remains, Isabella's grieving process never actually ends. More importantly, this cultivation begins what eventually develops into Isabella's "burthen song." Rather than burying Lorenzo or even grieving in a traditional sense, the poem develops from the idea that death and the human corpse can become permanent aspects of the regenerative process. Although scholars have discussed Keats's modifications to Boccaccio's tale and their importance in understanding Keats's motives for the poem itself, they have yet to address the relationship between Isabella's "burthen song" and the living plant she uses to memorialize her partner, as well as how this relationship presents ideas of immortality and regeneration that are central to Keats's vision of poetry.

When scholars discuss John Keats, there is a pressure to recount at least some of the tragic aspects of his life, his own "sad ditty." Because Keats's works lend themselves so well to biographical interpretations, those tragic stories feel almost crucial to understanding his poetry. Indeed, I will rehearse a few of those sad stories here, but I focus attention on the basil itself as a metaphor for Keats's own poetic process. *Isabella* manages to represent both the anxieties that process caused him and his beliefs about the hopeful promise of poetry itself. In Keats's poem, Isabella's basil pot and the rotting head

therein become the source of the “leafits spread” or, in my reading, a metaphor for poetic production. Isabella’s tears allow the plant to grow and spread, just as the poet’s pen and ink enable the growth and proliferation of his poetry; the speaker draws readers’ attention to the material connection between leaves of paper and the leaves of the basil plant.

Those tangible leaves, I believe, represent Keats’s larger focus on the proliferation of paper and the immortality of art. As I discuss, Keats and Isabella both suffered physically and emotionally for the leaves they cultivated, but I intend to call attention to the positive result of that suffering. By memorializing her partner in the plant, Isabella is able to maintain a creative connection to Lorenzo, as well as produce and contribute to something with him. Through the “sad ditty” of Isabella’s story, the plant’s influence extends far past its own life, as well as Isabella’s. Isabella’s story demonstrates that even the most painful aspects of life have the potential to be inspirational to artistic cultivation; as a result, that story codes death and regeneration in a positive light, making her song an emblem for regeneration through decay.

In what follows, I demonstrate that Isabella’s relationship to her basil plant can be read as a metaphor for Keats’s creative process and his experience of authorship. By focusing on the basil plant, I read the poem as a discussion on Keats’s hopes for art itself. Through Isabella’s actions and story, Keats portrays poetry’s ability to become immortal through the regeneration of art. While Isabella’s story is made famous through her song, Keats is known for his own poetic “leaves” of verse. Through the proliferation of verse, like Boccaccio’s story, Keats’s work became immortal and inspired other artists to immortalize Isabella’s story. If previous biographical readings of *Isabella* are dark, then the basil’s leaves allow us a more positive reading of the poem—they are what remain

after both Isabella and John Keats's deaths and serve as metaphors for poetic regeneration and immortality.

First, I will give my own reading of *Isabella* alongside other scholarly readings that relate biographical contexts to Keats's ideas of poetic composition. This discussion highlights those aspects of the poem that allow us to understand the basil plant as a metaphor for poetic composition in general, and Keats's own poetic process in particular. Keats's creative circumstances are famous in and of themselves; after choosing to leave his medical training to pursue poetry, Keats became engrossed in poetic composition and produced most of his 130 or so poems in a three-year span, between 1817 and 1820. *Isabella's* descriptions of the human corpse link the poem evocatively to Keats's medical background. Next, I will demonstrate how *Isabella* serves as an allegory for Keats's own pursuit of immortality, as well as how closely related his own anxieties and their sources were to *Isabella's*. My reading will, I hope, suggest new ways not only to read *Isabella* but also to understand Keats's body of work and his career. Finally, I will demonstrate how other artists, especially visual artists, have represented positive readings of the story; more often than not, *Isabella's* name appears through these representations, rather than *Elisabetta's*. Keats's regeneration of *Elisabetta's* story allowed it to have an afterlife of its own.

CHAPTER II– READING ISABELLA

Although *Isabella; or the Pot of Basil* consists of sixty-three stanzas, its plot is not overly complicated. In typical Keatsian fashion, Lorenzo and Isabella's love and images of illness are immediately conflated, signaling their relationship's finality; within the poem's first stanza, we learn the pair are unable to "in the self-same mansion dwell / Without some stir of heart, some malady" (3-4). Lorenzo is murdered and buried in the forest, placing the human corpse and plant-life into a single image. After Lorenzo's murder, his ghost visits Isabella in a dream and asks that she "shed one tear" on his grave, to "comfort" him "within the tomb" (303-4). Isabella searches for "the clay, so dearly prized" that contains Lorenzo's body within the woods, the "forest-hearse" (339, 344). After unearthing the corpse, Isabella spends hours preparing the head for reinternment, deeply attached to it before she even places it in the basil pot. Her attention does not waver after the plant is growing strong; she remains "drooping by the Basil green" (458). In seeing her devotion to the plant and how it "flourish'd, as by magic touch," Isabella's brothers "wonder'd what the thing might mean" and "contriv'd to steal the Basil-pot" (460, 473). The brothers discover Lorenzo's head at the plant's center, "vile with green and livid spot" (475). Carrying what the speaker calls the "guerdon" (prize) of their murder, the brothers flee Florence, "with blood upon their heads, to banishment" (477, 479). Isabella dies mourning the basil pot's absence, and her fate becomes a legend, a "sad ditty" told among the city's people.

Lorenzo's body (or head) is buried and excavated three separate times within the poem; like Boccaccio's story, he's altered each time. In addition to human death and regeneration, the speaker reminds readers throughout the poem of a story's immortality.

Twenty stanzas in, the speaker stops to tell readers that the roots of the *Isabella*'s story are not his own, but it is no "crime" or "mad assail" to "make old prose in modern rhyme more sweet" (154-155). In this instance, the word "sweet" expresses Keats aims to modernize that rhyme, including removing many of its sentimental elements. Keats originally wrote *Isabella* in March of 1818 based on advice received from William Hazlitt during his time engaging with other members of what was called the "Cockney School of Poetry." It could be argued that Hazlitt encouraged Keats to rewrite the poem for the very purpose of making "old prose" into "modern rhyme," for the sake of demonstrating the changes in poetry initiated by the Cockney School.³ In the case of *Isabella*, the use of gothic and even grotesque elements warp Boccaccio's romantic images for the sake of composing macabre themes or a humorous poem, as scholars including Jeffrey Cox have claimed.⁴ Most scholarship on *Isabella* focuses on the collection in which the poem was published, *The Eve of St. Agnes*.⁵ This scholarship usually focuses primarily on the collection's title poem, its gothic elements, and the concurrent circulation of those elements in the literary market. Scholars have less often discussed *Isabella* specifically. While *Isabella* does not make any significant references to the architecture or setting typically found in the gothic, its plot and themes contain a

³ In fact, *Isabella* was initially meant to be written with his friend J. H. Reynolds within an entire volume of Boccaccio translations (Roe 221).

⁴ See Jeffrey Cox's "Lamia, *Isabella*, and *The Eve of St. Agnes*: Eros and 'Romance'" from *The Cambridge Companion to Keats* (2001). Cox claims the collection mocks some of Keats's contemporaries' sentimental poetry, and that the *Isabella*'s grotesque images are a direct product of Keats's "Cockney style" and "cocky humor" (56). Cox notes that Keats may initially refused to publish the poem in fear that he of becoming "the object rather than the master of humor" (54).

⁵ See Sandy or Hogle.

variety of gothic horror elements: a grisly murder, a tragic heroine, unconsummated love, and a conversation with a ghost. Earlier scholarly readings of *Isabella*, including Jack Stillinger's, are particularly interested in how it differs from its predecessor in Boccaccio, especially through those themes created from its morbid and grotesque details.⁶ Stillinger mentions multiple examples of this trend, but I am primarily concerned with what he calls, as Keats does, the "reality" of *Isabella* (598). The usage in which Stillinger refers comes from a September 1819 letter from Keats to his brother George. In it Keats insists he would not "persist in publishing *Isabella*": "It is too smokeable... There is too much inexperience of live [sic], and simplicity of knowledge in it—which might do very well after one's death—but not while one is alive. There are very few who would look to the reality" (*Letters* II:174). A few sentences later, Keats proceeds to say that the same inexperience could contribute to the poem's success "after one's death." For Stillinger, the "reality" of *Isabella* lies in the detailed descriptions of both *Isabella* and *Lorenzo*'s bodies. *Isabella*'s explanations of decay force the reader to recognize the realistic physicality of the poem and the reality of mortality. Stillinger quotes Aileen Ward in

⁶ Stillinger argues that the differences between Keats's *Isabella* and Boccaccio's *Elisabetta*, as well as the gothic qualities throughout *Isabella*, imply that the poem should be read as anti-romantic. Although the majority of readings that concern the poem's differences side with Stillinger, there have been occasional opposing arguments. For example, Billy Boyar's "Keats's 'Isabella': Shakespeare's 'Venus and Adonis' and the Venus-Adonis myth" (1972). Boyar claims these differences have been read incorrectly, and that *Isabella* is more closely related to Shakespeare's "Venus and Adonis" than Boccaccio's *Elisabetta*, and through this reading, the poem once again becomes a romance. Louise Z. Smith's "The Material Sublime: Keats and *Isabella*" (1974) actually makes the claim that the poem falls somewhere between a romance and an anti-romance. Smith also analyzes the poem through its references to mythology, claiming, "In *Isabella* the heart-easing love of *Isabella* and *Lorenzo* contends with the jostling world... the detachment Keats maintains by means of digression and juxtaposition affords the wisely passive acceptance of the tragically near-equal balance of love with destruction" (311).

order to fully explain just how bodily, gruesome, and “anti-romantic” these descriptions are: “imagery” including “a description of Isabella as thin and pale as a young mother with a sick child,” “a metaphor of amputation,” and “a detailed picture of a freshly exhumed corpse” indicate a “more direct confrontation of reality than Keats had yet made in his poetry” (as quoted in Stillinger 598). With the exception of Isabella’s “feverish unrest” (244) at Lorenzo’s initial disappearance, what is strange about the horrific details in Isabella, is the very lack of fear and anxiety the poem’s horror elements cause her. Consumed by the desire to memorialize her partner, she does not hesitate in any of her actions or even stop to consider the consequences of those actions. While Isabella’s original story is maintained, the poem’s speaker critiques her and Lorenzo’s naïve sentimentality, and mocks gothic tropes found in the contemporary literary marketplace. Descriptions of Isabella’s grotesque actions are so repetitive that the speaker almost naturalizes them to the reader. During Keats’s lifetime, the human corpse would have been a far more natural sight and society’s relationship to that corpse would have been very different than our own. People often died at home, and it was not unusual for families to bury their own dead. Between this more naturalized understanding of the human corpse, Keats’s own medical training, and the influence of his Romantic peers,⁷ a decaying body was something readers were accustomed to seeing.

Themes of death and mortality were not new to Keats’s work or, as mentioned, what was in circulation. Between Keats’s family history and his previous occupation’s

⁷ Wordsworth’s “The Thorn” (1789) or “A Slumber did my Spirit Seal” (1800), Byron’s *The Giaour* (1813), Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) are just some of the most famous examples of Keats’s contemporaries that focus largely on the grave and a human corpse therein.

bodily encounters, Keats often aestheticizes death in his poetry. In *Isabella*, in particular, Keats simultaneously maintains that the poem is somehow both disclosing and misleading towards themes he saw circulating among his contemporaries' work. By smokeability, Keats would have meant two things: first, it could be that he thought the poem might be too personally revealing; second, the "reality," or anti-sentimental aspects of the poem may have been more obvious and therefore less allegorical than he originally intended. Indeed, *Isabella* is morbid and revealing, but I believe Keats uses the opportunity to recognize the necessity and influence of his predecessor's work while still attempting to critique its sentimental elements. The poem's ultimate allegory, that the poet's life is revealed through his body of work, the "leafits" spread, needed declaration. The poet must adhere to the standards of what is in circulation, and he must recreate those themes and works in some way, while still making them new and individual. In Keats's case, he would have had to recreate aspects of the gothic genre and the Romantic movement, but recreating *Isabella* allowed him the agency to utilize and critique aspects of his predecessor's work. The grisly qualities Stillinger discusses only reinforces the positivity and even humor that Keats saw in death related themes.

While I largely agree with Stillinger's argument in terms of how the poem could initially *appear* anti-romantic (not anti-Romantic movement) to readers, I do not believe the poem as a whole serves as an anti-romantic statement. In order to better understand Keats's comments on the poem, it helps to establish what Keats means by the word "smokeable" in his aforementioned letter. In James Chandler's *England in 1819*, Chandler discusses the importance of the term in understanding Keats's work. As he notes, the term in this context "implies a conception of intelligibility or understanding

that is itself understood, in its circumstance, as a vulnerability to be grasped—captured by a higher-order intelligence” (400). Those biographical connotations were precisely what Keats feared readers would see during his lifetime, though he admitted these readings would “do very well” after his death. If Stillinger is correct, then scholars can assume what Keats called “inexperience” indicates a fear that readers would find his critique of the story’s sentimental aspects too obvious and allegories of his own life within the poem too revealing. The poem’s macabre themes align with Keats’s previous work and his own personal experiences. Family history and health concerns caused Keats to obsess over a potentially early death and the idea that he would not have much poetry to leave behind haunted him. Keats’s mother died of tuberculosis when he was fifteen, and Keats saw his younger brother, Thomas, die of the same disease eight years later. Additionally, Keats’s father was killed in a riding accident in 1804, and Keats was not yet ten years old when his youngest brother died in infancy. Keats’s paranoia of an early death has been discussed by scholars, especially through a psychoanalytic lens like Hoeveler’s. Between these encounters and those with death and disease at Guy’s hospital during his medical training, Keats likely would have had death and mortality at the forefront of his thoughts during composition. In fact, after receiving more negative than positive critical reception, Keats once wrote to his brother George that these critiques were “a mere matter of the moment. I think I shall be among the English Poets after my death,” and Keats worked to produce and contribute as much poetry as possible to the body of work he left behind (*Letters* II:199).

The prevalence of illness and death in his own life is undoubtedly why Keats frequently romanticized and aestheticized death in terms of growth and regeneration, in

both his work and personal letters. For example, in a letter to his once fiancée, Fanny Brawne, Keats' conflates death with Fanny's "loveliness": "I have two luxuries to brood over in my walks, your Loveliness and the hour of my death. O that I could have possession of them both in the same minute. I hate this world; it batters too much the wings of my self will" (318). Here, Keats acknowledges that he finds Fanny all the more lovely because his life has an expiration date. It's the only thought he finds as luxurious as that of his own death. Convinced his own life would be a short one, Keats frequently discussed death as a welcome experience. He once wrote to his friend Joseph Severn that he was thankful for the inevitable "quiet grave": "O! I can feel the cold earth upon me—the daisies growing over me...this quiet—it will be my first" (*Letters II*: 378). The grave becomes something for Keats to meditate on, a thought that brings him peace. He even notes that death will allow him to contribute to the growth of something else, daisies, without the same exhaustion he felt from living. In his poetry, too, Keats frequently romanticized mortality and themes and symbols thereof. "Bright Star, Would I were Steadfast as Thou Art" (1838), "Ode on Melancholy" (1819), "Sleep and Poetry" (1816), "Ode to a Nightingale" (1819), "To Autumn" (1820), "To Sleep" (1838), and "When I have Fears that I may Cease to Be" (1848) are just some of Keats's most famous death-themed poems. Death and mortality are at least referenced in many, many more. "Ode to a Nightingale" and "To Autumn" regard death as peaceful and utilize a variety of common symbols for death, peace, and slumber. For example, "To Autumn," a poem about life's final years and the realization of mortality, tells the reader that they may find themselves "Drows'd with the fume of poppies" if only they learn to appreciate the beauty of the season. The speaker claims that Winter, or death, is not as frightening if its

viewed as a deep slumber and a peaceful exit from life's hardships. However, Keats aestheticizes death most directly in the famous line from "Ode on Melancholy": "She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die" (21). Keats's comment to Fanny is explicated; the poem's subject, and the relationship the speaker has to her, are portrayed as beautiful because of their mortality. Keats refers to the poem's "mistress" as beautiful because her life and that beauty are temporary (18). He found their mortality inspiring and actually drew inspiration from their finality.

CHAPTER III– ISABELLA, THE ARTIST

As previously mentioned, death is often a central theme in Keats's work, and the anxiety that his life would be short one caused him to work compulsively toward poetic success. Keats often suffered from throat ulcers and other respiratory illnesses, and his obsessive work ethic certainly did not help his physical health. Isabella can be linked to Keats in this way, as well; her health declines as she obsessively aids the life of the plant. Diane Hoeveler's influential "Decapitating Romance: Class, Fetish, and Ideology in Keats's *Isabella*" discusses the potential relationship between Isabella's obsessive caretaking, Keats's rapid poetic production, and the potential impact that stress may have had on his body and mind. Hoeveler initiated many current analyses of the poem by reading Isabella's obsession as an allegory for the class system. Hoeveler reads the poem as "an extended meditation on the three issues that haunted Keats throughout his life: class anxieties, his parents, and his own ambivalence toward the desire to be a popular poet, a romancer in the sentimental Gothic Ballad tradition" (324).⁸ She states Lorenzo's decapitated head is the poem's primary trope, as well as a metaphor for what harbors Keats's agency as a writer: "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

⁸ Class anxiety would obviously imply Keats's desire for a higher income than that of his middle-class parents; however, while arguments like Hoeveler's are compelling, we must keep Keats's previous endeavors in mind. Before pursuing poetry, Keats studied apothecary medicine at Guy's and St. Thomas Hospital in London—a decision funded by the Keats's children's caretaker, Richard Abbey. When Keats left school, he had no stable financial income to pay the loan back. I tend to believe that if class anxiety had been the primary motivation for the poem, he would have returned to a medical career after writing for two years with no solid financial return.

escape through the metaphorically transformative power of the knife / pen” (323). In this instance, we can assume Hoeveler views the head in two ways. First, it could be said that the head in the pot is the head of the author—cut off from the resources necessary to climb the class ladder. Indeed there are hints of a class struggle with in the poem, and Lorenzo is of a lower class than Isabella. Keats, a victim of poverty and financial struggle throughout his life, can be likened to Lorenzo in that way. Or, readers can assume Hoeveler perceives the head as death itself—the looming reminder of what Keats knew could come earlier for him than most. I, on the other hand, liken the author much more to Isabella. Through Isabella, Keats adopts the voice of the female artist. Rather than making the female only the subject of the poem, Isabella initiates the perpetuation of her tragic story. The basil plant, the thing Isabella cultivates and endlessly pursues and protects, becomes a metaphor for art and writing itself.

Through her tears and the preparation of Lorenzo’s head, Isabella becomes connected to the creation of her lover’s grave and thereby is linked to his memorialization itself. By crying into the “smeared loam” she ties herself physically to the immortalization of those features. All at once, she solidifies herself as the artist, the sculptor, and the cultivator. Later, she feeds the growth and regeneration of the basil’s leaves as she continues to cry into the pot; finally, even after the basil is stolen, she keeps its story alive through her song. Initially, Isabella’s devotion to Lorenzo’s head becomes evident as she prepares its placement in the basil pot, its permanent, regenerative tomb. This is where one of the poem’s major shifts and one of its largest parallels to the actual cultivation of art takes place. A specific aspect of culture must be separated and placed into a frame or piece of writing in order for it to then be cultivated into a piece of art; the

pot in question becomes that frame or writing space and the basil leaves are Isabella's art. The speaker spends nearly two stanzas describing Isabella's preparation. One particular description reinforces her desire to immortalize Lorenzo's head by covering his features in a clay substance: "And all around each eye's sepulchral cell / Pointed each fringed lash; the smeared loam / With tears, as chilly as a dripping well..." (404-06). By covering Lorenzo's head in the loam, Isabella literally cements his features into an immortal "sepulchral" tomb.

In addition to Isabella's decision to sculpt and modify Lorenzo's features, Keats further adopts of the female artist's voice through more explicit instances of the word "clay." The OED defines clay as "used loosely for: Earth, moist earth, mire, mud; esp. the earth covering or enclosing a dead body when buried" or "Earth as the material of the human body; hence, the human body (living or dead) as distinguished from the soul; the earthly or material part of man..." ("clay, n."). Keats chooses a word that is both used to cement a shape, to make it permanent but also a material that can be molded, *reshaped* and allows us to see how decay and regeneration are interdependent in the poem.

"Clay" is used three times in the poem and in two different ways. First, the word is used to describe Isabella's brothers: "And at the last, these men of cruel clay / ... resolved in some forest dim / To kill Lorenzo, and there bury him" (173). Here, 'clay' manages to do two things. Marking another instance of regeneration, the word aligns Isabella's brothers with all men through a reference to countless creation stories; Keats, however, is most likely referencing *Paradise Lost*: "Did I request thee, Maker from my Clay / To mould me Man, did I sollicite thee / From darkness to promote me, or here place / in this delicious Garden?" (Milton 743-45). Second, readers are reminded that

Isabella's brothers are of "*cruel*" clay. Capable of the highest sin and the worst of human nature, they are simultaneously related to all mankind and dehumanized. Fearing her brothers will realize its contents and take it from her, Isabella stays so close to the plant.

In the second use of clay, Isabella is reinforced as the sculptor and creator. In the instance of Isabella's burial preparation, it becomes evident that the "clay" she imagines during her vision was prophetic—it becomes the inspiration to cement Lorenzo's features. As readers see Isabella's vision play out, it becomes obvious that she plans to cultivate the corpse before she even finds it. Instead of marking the grave with a tombstone and allowing Lorenzo's body to decay naturally, she removes him from an unmarked grave and paints his face in a substance, loam, to actually slow that decay, to protect his features from the basil's soil. Loam is defined by the OED as "a soil of great fertility composed chiefly of clay and sand with an admixture of decomposed vegetable matter" ("loam, n."). The word choice alerts readers to Isabella's decision to take a material created from the degeneration of another to immortalize her partner. Additionally, she chooses a matter that is "of great fertility" in order to encourage the plant to flourish around Lorenzo's head. This notion that Isabella immortalizes her partner from clay and loam reinforces how production and growth are dependent on the decay of something else. Scholars have assessed Keats's metaphors for decay, but the notion of regeneration adds a new dimension to these discussions. He reminds readers that art is often produced from that decay.

In addition to the necessity of decay, Keats uses the basil plant as a metaphor for art and cultivation by expanding Boccaccio's original descriptions of the plant's caretaking. Isabella devotes her life to that cultivation by feeding the growth and

regeneration of the basil's leaves as she continues to cry into the pot; finally, even after the basil is stolen, she keeps its story alive through her song. These passages have corresponding descriptions in the Decameron; they too focus on devotion, but Keats's version extends these descriptions to those of cultivation. For example, in Elisabetta's tale, the speaker describes her as overly attentive: "...for she carried it always with her, fighting and breathing forth bad Complaints thereto, even as if they had been utter'd to her Lorenzo" (Boccaccio 101). While Elisabetta talks to the basil in Boccaccio's story, she does not sit and cry over the plant to the same extent that Isabella does. In Keats's description, because she's afraid to leave the plant alone, she lingers kneeled next to it, to the extent that she does not notice changes in her surroundings, hanging over her "sweet Basil *evermore...*" (421-24, emphasis mine). As long as Isabella feeds the plant and nourishes its proliferation, she is tied to its production and to Lorenzo, and her devotion allows its leaves to flourish and expand.

Isabella's cultivation becomes obsessive and exhausting. Her overwork creates a theme that makes it possible to see similarities between Keats and Isabella. Scholars like Hoeveler have discussed the head as a symbol of anxiety or as a metaphor for Keats's anxieties toward his social status, but it should be noted that the head is not what Isabella *herself* fears. Indeed, the head is a source of anxiety for Isabella only insofar as it is precisely what she fears losing. Just as the poet fears that their work might be stolen, Isabella fears her plant will be taken. There are even two instances in which the speaker refers to Lorenzo's head as Isabella's "prize," a word the OED defines as "a reward, trophy, or symbol of victory or superiority..." and "something striven for or worth striving for..." ("prize, n."). First, Isabella initially begins looking for Lorenzo's burial

site: "...she had devised / How she might secret to the forest hie / How she might find the clay, so dearly prized" (337-339). In this instance, the word "clay" has a double meaning. As before, Isabella is presumably thinking in terms of the human body, made from clay, but it also allows the reader to see that Isabella planned to dig up the corpse even after Lorenzo requests her to only "shed one tear" on his grave. That is, Isabella plans the end result of her work before it begins. Readers are made aware that her decision to remove Lorenzo's body from the ground was calculated, rather than solely an act of passion.

In the second use of the word "prize," Isabella succeeds in taking a part of the corpse for herself: "In anxious secrecy they took it home, / And then the prize was all for Isabel" (401-402). Instead of fear, Lorenzo's head demonstrates Isabella's knowledge of her brothers' crime. If separating her from Lorenzo was their goal, then his head represents their failure. Isabella's excitement in finding the grave is made explicit to the reader when her nurse asks, "What feverous hectic flame / Burns in thee, child?—What good can thee betide, / That though should'st smile again?" (348-350). Even though it is her dead lover's corpse in the ground, Isabella is overjoyed at the prospect of collecting her "prize." When Isabella and her nurse find Lorenzo's body buried in the forest, digging into the unmarked grave actually causes Isabella to feel physical strength: "Upon the murderous spot she seem'd to grow / Then with her knife, all sudden, she began / To dig more fervently than misers can." (365-368). What Hoeveler calls "the trace" is actually what Isabella takes back from the enemy; it is the work that she exhausts herself hiding from others and the production that she dies mourning. The plant is cultivated into a regeneration of Lorenzo's memory. Aside from Isabella, the poem never tells us of anyone looking for Lorenzo's body or even grieving his absence. His death is

remembered and memorialized only through the basil leaves. Even if others do not recognize that the plant holds Lorenzo's head, it is a tangible connection to his death that is visible to others. He is taken from the grave, changed, and reborn as a head. He becomes famous to readers through the regeneration that the basil pot provides and Isabella's song. In the same vein, Boccaccio's work certainly was not dead, but Keats took it upon himself to memorialize Boccaccio, to rebirth one of his stories, and to reinforce the idea that art allows for regeneration and recreation through the observance of its source.

CHAPTER IV– ISABELLA’S PRODUCT

Scholars have described the prized head as an extension of Isabella herself, but her devotion to the basil plant implies that the plant is a symbol of artistic production. Both Aileen Ward and Diane Hoeveler read Isabella’s decision to decapitate Lorenzo and keep his head as a solution to the devastating fact that she will never have children with her partner. These readings are compelling; there are lines of the poem that explicitly compare Isabella to a mother bird “on wing to breast its eggs again / And, patient as a hen-bird, sat her there / Beside her Basil, weeping through her hair” (470-473). Just as a mother bird must protect her nest, Isabella feels she must protect and bring up the basil plant as healthy and strong as possible. However, while the maternal likeness is evident, Keats would have seen this kind of attentive care as Isabella’s solution to loss itself and creation as the self-fulfillment that allowed her to heal. Rather than watering the plant occasionally, as Elisabetta does in Boccaccio’s tale, Isabella labors and physically contributes to the growth and regeneration of the plant, just as a mother contributes to her offspring. As Hoeveler notes, Keats’s reader is faced with the acknowledgement of creation, of life surrounding death: “And so we have a kernel in a pot, a seed in a pod, a child in a perpetually growing womb” (334). In this sense, the plant is like a child in that it is created by both Isabella and Lorenzo’s bodies, but while Hoeveler refers to the pot as an “abject fetus,” I believe that Isabella’s relationship to the pot makes the poem a recognition of art and its regenerative potential.

On the rare occasion that she leaves the plant, her work, Isabella hurries back “as a bird on wing” for two reasons. First, she becomes obsessed with the growth and proliferation of the plant’s leaves, and she becomes anxious when she is away from that

work for too long. At its core, the basil pot is part of a corpse. While the plant that Isabella uses exists before it is repotted with Lorenzo's head, it flourishes more "thick, and green, and beautiful... /...more balmy than its peers" because its caretaking stems from a circumstance of death, longing, and sadness (426-427). With Keats's biography, the source of inspiration, of creativity and therefore proliferation, was a lifetime of tragedy. Second, Isabella behaves "as a bird on wing" because she fears that the plant, her work and property, will be stolen. To compare Isabella and the pot to a mother bird and her offspring implies the pot becomes an extension of her, an implication confirmed when we told Isabella becomes "incomplete" after its disappearance. Her name is actually conflated with the Pot of Basil. The poem is titled *Isabella; or the Pot of Basil*—not *Isabella and the Pot of Basil*. Isabella becomes what she has created in both a metaphorical and textual sense. Metaphorically, she is tied to the plant because of the time, energy, and tears she has put into its upbringing. Textually, her story is permanently the pot's; she's immortally tied to it, even after the plant is stolen and she is physically separated from the basil. The fame of her story exists because of the pot's creation and abduction, as the pot's exists from her own creation. Once more, Keats frames her as the artist permanently tied to their work.

Isabella's initial parental relationship and the same excessive, exhaustive caretaking aid scholars in a biographical reading of Isabella, especially with regard to Keats's obsessive tendencies and mental health. Keats, too, claimed he was "incomplete" without daily dedication to poetry. As he writes to J.H. Reynolds on April 17-18 of 1817: "I find that I cannot exist without poetry—without eternal poetry—half the day will not do...I had become all in a Tremble from not having written anything of late—the Sonnet

over leaf did me some good” (*Letters* I:133). Keats expresses that he feels physically ill and anxious from his lack of poetic production. Additionally, the word leaf in this context draws attention to material proliferation. Just as Isabella’s care for her basil plant calms her, Keats’s inscription of a “Sonnet over leaf” brings him peace. That is, an obsessive nature brought him a sense of peace. Like Keats, Isabella becomes anxious when separated from the work she cultivates: “For seldom did she go to chapel-shrift...And when she left, she hurried back” (467, 469). Here, the speaker acknowledges that Isabella turns away from religious devotion in order to devote herself to the basil plant. Instead of kneeling to pray at an altar or to a religious figure, Isabella endures “hung over” the pot in worship of her basil plant. At this point in the poem, Isabella has moved beyond a maternal obsession; she actually compromises her own morality and soul in order to generate and cultivate a tangible, immortal memory of Lorenzo and their relationship.

The anxiety that Isabella feels when separated from her plant has been discussed by scholars in terms of madness. As previously mentioned, for Keats, that obsession stemmed from a fear that he would have no artistic legacy to leave behind. During Keats’s lifetime, a disorder called monomania was said to develop from periods of solitude or overwork and was characterized by obsessive tendencies or prolonged focus on a specific task. Anxiety, insanity, depression, and other mental concerns frequently appear in Keats scholarship because so many of his poems and letters reflect on death and mortality. For example, Kathleen B. Rogers’s recent essay, “Breeding Scorpions in the Brain: Obsession in Keats’s *Isabella, or the Pot of Basil*,” discusses, as I do, the relationship between Isabella and the basil plant itself; however, Rogers reads *Isabella* as a poem about obsession, or monomania, and the potential medicinal implications from

Keats's choice to make the plant a basil plant: "Considering Keats's medical education, it is not surprising that Isabella's mind is intentionally represented by a plant connected with obsession...*Isabella* is a text about obsession, or what Keats's contemporaries would have referred to as monomania" (34). Indeed, *Isabella* does portray obsessive tendencies. As *Isabella* is consumed by the caretaking of her plant, Keats was known for his obsessive devotion to poetic composition and the creative process, and I tend to believe *Isabella*'s devotion is largely an act of creative self-fulfillment, even if her behavior is compulsive. *Isabella*, "sighing all day," cries over her basil plant in order to contribute to Lorenzo's memory in the most tangible way possible (487). Even though Lorenzo asks her to only "shed one tear," she feels she's doing his memory justice by perpetually "weeping through her hair" into the plant (472). The labor itself is compulsive *because* it fulfills that loss and allows *Isabella*, the artist, to place her energy on something productive instead of grief. More importantly, the proliferation of leaves, the end product and goal of her labor, allows her to maintain that focus.

CHAPTER V– ISABELLA, KEATS, AND LABOR

The type of distraction that Isabella finds in labor is something Keats discussed often in his letters. For example, in a letter to his friend and literary critic, Charles Wentworth Dilke, Keats calls the labor of poetic composition a compulsive but palliative act: “I am obliged to write and plunge into abstract images to ease myself of his [Tom Keats’s] countenance...I live now in a continual fever. It must be poisonous to life, although I feel well.” (*Letters* I: 369). These confessions cause Keats’s actions to seem all the more peculiar, because he was so aware of his strange habits. Keats was convinced his life would be brief, and his brother’s death only reinforced that belief. Fearing he did not have much time, he worked diligently to create a body of work to be remembered by. He knew these habits were potentially psychologically unhealthy, and he cultivated them anyway, because the work and production of poetry allowed him both a distraction and an opportunity. After his work in medicine, Keats produced poetry in a “continual fever.” As Hoeveler states, Keats “dabbled in herbs; he assisted in amputations; he fled into poetry” (322); that is, like Isabella’s focus on her plant, the more Keats focused on poetry, the more he was able to utilize the reality of his situation as a means of motivation. On September 23, 1819, Keats wrote to his friend Charles Brown that, despite the reputation based on his family history, he was “as far from being unhappy as possible”:

Imaginary grievances have always been more my torment than real ones...
imaginary woes are conjured by our passions...Real grievances are
displacers of passion. The imaginary nail a man down for a sufferer, as on
a cross; the real spur him up into an agent. (*Letters* II:181)

If this is true, then we can assume Keats felt the most agency when he composed poetry. Keats used these “real grievances” as a means of motivation; his tragic situation became a sense of inspiration to cultivate verse and grow his legacy. As the agent of his own production and work, he felt he was then at least contributing toward his future legacy. Likewise, Isabella’s initial frenzy comes from the overwhelming loss of her lover, but she takes agency over his memory by placing his head into the basil pot. She concerns herself only with growing the plant strong and healthy—a matter to which she would not have to attend if she had left the plant in the garden and Lorenzo in the ground. Additionally, when she removes him from the ground and chooses not to bury him in a traditional manner, Isabella gains control over how others are able to memorialize him, as well. He receives no gravestone or funeral, but Lorenzo’s story, alongside the basil and Isabella’s, becomes immortal through her “sad ditty.” Moreover, Isabella’s actions persuade readers’ reception of the story; she encourages readers to accept her actions and relationship to the corpse and to decay. The poem’s repetition of Isabella’s actions naturalizes the head in the pot; that is death, amputation, and decapitation are naturalized alongside the larger goal of Isabella: to expand and grow the basil plant. The attention to the corpse is naturalized through Isabella’s obsession with it, just as Keats’s obsession with poetic production felt instinctive and peaceful to him.

In her own “continual fever,” consumed by the care of her plant and the leaves it produces, Isabella wastes away at the basil pot but “seldom felt she any hunger-pain.” (468). Isabella “plunges” herself into the cultivation of what we should regard as her labor. The speaker repeats the words “she forgot” in the first four lines of the fifty-third stanza and lists some of the things Isabella has forgotten to reinforce her lack of focus on

reality itself. For example, among the things forgotten are “the stars,” “the moon,” and “the dells where waters run,” (416-20). Her obsession becomes even more unhealthy as it pulls her from nature itself. For the Romantics in general and Keats in particular, this separation from nature was considered both physically unhealthy and potentially damaging to the artistic mind and imagination. Keats acquired inspiration from nature nearly as often as death, more particularly in its ability to influence and generate art.⁹ By separating the plant from the earth, by uprooting it and placing it into a pot, Isabella is must constantly give it attention that would not be necessary in the soil of a garden or in nature. Lorenzo’s “forest tomb” would have allowed his body to decompose naturally, but Isabella must tend to the basil plant to keep her unnatural deed hidden. Finally, in the stanzas last lines, Isabella is left with “no knowledge [of] when the day is done... but in peace / Hung over her sweet Basil evermore / And moisten’d it with tears unto the core” (421-424). In what would have been an example of insanity or monomania during Keats’s lifetime, Isabella focuses intently on the leaves in front of her, because they enclose the buried head that she cannot see, and, in the process, she forgets her very surroundings. Like Keats, Isabella does not care that her obsession is “poisonous to life.” In the same stanza, Isabella is unaware of “the new morn” but persists “in peace” so long as she is crying into her basil pot (422). The instances of peace that Isabella mentions are

⁹ For example, in a June 27, 1818, letter to Tom, Keats describes the landscapes he experiences while in Scotland. He goes on to express the artistic inspiration and responsibility those landscapes cause him to feel: “I shall learn poetry here and shall henceforth write more than ever, for the abstract endeavor of being able to add a mite to that mass of beauty which is harvested from these grand materials, by the finest spirits, and put into ethereal existence for the relish of one’s fellows” (*Letters* I:301).

similar to those that Keats found in writing. Keats found solace in the creative process, but he also felt the significant weight of his potentially limited time.

CHAPTER VI– DECAY AND REGENERATION

While Keats had previously been interested in the concept of mortality, the popularity of gothic romance allowed him to explore his fascination with the corpse and other grotesque imagery. Combined with his financial pressures and his own worsening health, producing a text that both explored and encouraged proliferation would have made sense. *The Eve of St. Agnes*, the last collection Keats published, appears to be his own attempt at those gothic themes he saw succeeding in the literary market. In an 1820 letter to Charles Brown, Keats discusses its upcoming publication: “My book is coming out with very low hopes, though not spirits on my part. This shall be my last trial; not succeeding, I shall try what I can do in the Apothecary line” (*Letters* II: 298). Keats’s last effort became a poem about art’s regenerative potential. Riddled with tragedy and the awareness his own life would be short, Keats spent as much time with those “abstract” and dark images as he could in order to complete his poetry. Keats simultaneously acknowledges the responsibility of the poet and a pragmatic and realistic outlook on the human corpse, first, by acknowledging that he puts Isabella’s story into “modern rhyme” and second, by describing those instances of decay like Lorenzo’s head, “vile with green and livid spot” (475). Isabella must spend time with the darkest aspect of life in order to memorialize Lorenzo, his story is only spread through the growth and dissemination of the basil plant and its story of his tragic death. Keats, himself a consumer of his contemporaries’ work on mortality, was forced to digest the loss of a loved one and was immersed in those literary works concerned with mortality—a topic with regenerative potential and the very thing his readers were in the current practice of consuming.

Because Keats took Hazlitt's advice, readers can infer that Keats recognized that it was his responsibility as a poet to address aspects of his predecessor's work if he was to revise them for modern verse and keep a story like Boccaccio's alive. Even if scholars address the anxieties and obsessions within the poem's subtext, we are still saddled with Keats's comment that "few would look to the reality" of *Isabella*. Because *Isabella* is a recreation of a Decameron story, Isabella's "sad ditty" becomes a yet more positive metaphor for growth and regeneration after death rather than a poem only concerned with mortality and the human corpse. The Decameron focuses on a group of people who flee Florence in order to escape the Black Death; that is, their stories exist because of the Black Death—a concept that would have certainly held Keats's interest. Again, Keats uses the death and rebirth of stories to create a positive allegory through the poem. Narratives that can be recreated and outlive their concurrent works hold a timeless effect on the reader and create a longing for the "eternal poetry" that Keats spoke of. In the same letter that Keats claims a poet's life should be "a life like the scriptures, figurative," he notes the enduring qualities of an author who constructs those allegorical verses as opposed to one who does not: "Lord Byron cuts a figure—but he is not figurative—Shakespeare led a life of allegory; his works are the comments on it."¹⁰ While I don't necessarily agree with Keats when he claims Byron lacked allegorical quality within his

¹⁰ The rivalry between Lord Byron and John Keats is a famous one within Romantic studies, and the two made far harsher comments about one another than this. It is likely Keats was only using this opportunity to make a rude comment about the other's work. A few months later, again in a letter to George, Keats takes another opportunity: "You speak of Lord Byron and me. There is this great difference between us: he describes what he sees, I describe what I imagine. Mine is the hardest task" (*Letters II:200*).

work, we can infer Keats meaning: authors who speculate on their own lives through allegory appeal to a more universal quality and are whose work endures the longest. Shakespeare's works are acknowledged, recreated, and regenerated under separate circumstances and across artistic mediums. That is the proliferation that the plant implies through the cultivation of its leaves and the positive message *Isabella* creates through the perpetuation of her song. It is the recreation of Elisabetta's story that allows Isabella's to be told and so on.

CHAPTER VII– *ISABELLA'S* AFTERLIFE

Isabella's own material afterlife is a testament to the same regenerative power of a story. The poem's perpetual inspiration for art, literature, and scholarship would imply Keats made the right decision in publishing the poem. The amount of art created mere decades after Keats's death proves his predictions about his own life being cut short and the poem's posthumous success were both correct. He became "among the English Poets" very soon after his death and *Isabella's* own "leafits," the art inspired by her story, were created around the same time Keats could have died, had he lived a more normal and full life. These works are exactly the kind of proliferation that Keats would have hoped for. First, they are invariably tied to his legacy; in fact, most of them are titled after *Isabella's* story and not *Elisabetta's*. Second, they represent death as a regenerative and positive circumstance as Keats did.

The retelling of *Isabella's* "burthen song" is often told from a positive viewpoint and she is portrayed as a model of devotion and cultivation, rather than a "sad ditty." While the poem has been most frequently adapted by painters, it has also been referenced and recreated into song lyrics and films. "The Bramble Briar," "The Merchant's Daughter," and "In Bruton Town" are all variations of the same British folk song based on the tale. While some sources claim the song is older than the publication of Keats's story, no version was professionally coined before 1900. In some of those versions, *Isabella's* "sad ditty" ends with revenge, and she pushes her brothers into the ocean to drown.

The poem was particularly popular among pre-Raphaelite painters. William Holman Hunt (1868); Keats's own friend, Joseph Severn, (1877); John William

Waterhouse (1897); John White Alexander, (1897); and Henrietta Rae, (1905); are just a few of the artists who have immortalized *Isabella* through their paintings. In most of the paintings depicting *Isabella*, she is tending to her plant with a peaceful and thoughtful look on her face. Hunt's work, in particular, portrays Isabella's cultivation as a near religious experience. Just as Isabella misses church to worship over her basil in the poem, Hunt places the pot on an altar instead of the ground. In the same painting, there are skulls carved into the basil pot. A symbol of death, the skulls represent death and the human corpse once again as a source of inspiration. Isabella's inspiration derives from death and grief, but her devotion and production hold a much more positive focus. The basil leaves in this instance are not only growing around a decapitated head, they are growing from an object that literally aestheticizes death. Jessie Marion King, Riccardo Meacci, and Paul Henry are among other famous artists who have immortalized their own versions of the story onto canvas. Henry actually depicts Isabella and her nurse seeking Lorenzo's body in the forest. Moreover, these paintings represent the hopes for cultivation and dissemination Keats held. These adaptations of *Isabella or The Pot of Basil* allow us to bring the poem's allegories full circle. By choosing images of Isabella "in peace / Hung over her Basil evermore," they show readers the peace that Keats claimed was possible through artistic cultivation. They demonstrate that Keats's work does not necessarily have to be discussed solely in terms of his own life or only in regards to the melancholy topics he so often addresses. The basil plant represents what so much of these adaptations show us. They are the material evidence of a story's immortality, perpetually spreading their own influence and Isabella's story.

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