

MAGGIE HYSLOP

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## Body Work: The Representation of Labouring Bodies in John Keats's *Isabella; or, the Pot of Basil*

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The activities for which people use their bodies have a profound effect upon them, both in a physical sense and in the cultural perception and value of them as human beings.

This holds true for actions performed out of necessity, such as those entailed by employment, and those performed voluntarily. A person's occupation is largely indicative of his or her social position, and people who perform physical labour are relegated to a lower level in the social hierarchy. The portrayal of labouring bodies in John Keats's *Isabella; or, the Pot of Basil*, written in 1818 and first published in 1884, clearly illustrates the ways in which the body is marked by the labour it undertakes, and how that labour influences the perceived value of the body. Writing about the ways in which poverty and labour impede the ideals of rational self-government in "Of Riches and Poverty" (written in 1798; reissued in 1823), William Godwin had claimed that "the poor

are condemned to want of that leisure which is necessary for the improvement of the mind. They are predestined victims of ignorance and prejudice....Whatever be the prejudice, the weakness or the superstition of their age and country, they have scarcely any chance to escape it” (Godwin 146). Beyond the realm of occupational labour, the work that a person voluntarily undertakes also plays a role in the perceived value of his or her body. Keats’s *Isabella* contains many references to working bodies, and this paper will examine how the labouring body is represented based on both the class of the labourer and the nature of the work performed. The men who work for Isabella’s brothers, for example, are identified by the physical damage that their work does to their bodies; these working bodies are commodified to such an extent as to be represented as possessions belonging to the brothers. The brothers themselves are portrayed as self-interested capitalists, filled with pride for their possessions and contempt for their inferiors. The character of Lorenzo, who we eventually learn is one of the brother’s employees and the lover of their sister Isabella, is also marked by his position. This low social standing prompts the brothers to murder Lorenzo, an act that leaves its mark on their bodies as well. Isabella is a more complex figure than her male counterparts; though she enjoys a life of leisure and luxury, she suffers greatly after the murder of her lover and, as a result, devotes herself to a gruesome labour that ultimately ends in her own demise. Perhaps most telling in this poem is Keats’s personal opinion regarding the treatment and devaluing of labouring bodies, revealed in the ways that his poem varies from the source tale in Boccaccio’s *Decameron* with regards to the role and portrayal of bodies at work. *Isabella* reveals Keats’s own feelings regarding the perceived

inadequacies of the lower classes and the tyranny of those above them, represented in the portrayal of Lorenzo's relationship with the brothers, and with Isabella.

Isabella's nameless brothers are the most influential characters in *Isabella; or, the Pot of Basil*; their actions, either direct or indirect, as a result of negligence, lead to the bodily harm of almost every other person mentioned in the work. They murder Lorenzo, an action that inadvertently leads to Isabella being literally consumed by her grief, and they ultimately exile themselves when they learn their crime has been discovered.

However, it is not only through illegal activity that they harm others; their very livelihood is based on the expenditure of human capital and the commodification of human bodies. Stanzas 14 through 18 are often referred to as the "capitalist stanzas" (Heinzelman 16) or as "anti-capitalist" (Hoeveler 327) because of the way in which they depict the brothers' business practices. Although these descriptors may seem contradictory, they are both accurate: this section of the poem clearly outlines the capitalist ideal of the brothers, while at the same time reveals the anti-capitalist views of Keats himself. These stanzas detail the physically destructive labour that the brothers' fortune is built upon. Keats identifies these workers not by their names or roles, but refers to them using their damaged bodies:

And for them many a weary hand did swelt  
 In torched mines and noisy factories,  
 And many once proud-quivr'd loins did melt  
 In blood from stinging whip; - with hollow eyes  
 Many all day in dazzling river stood,  
 To take the rich-ored driftings of the flood. (105-12)

These employees are not individuals known to the brothers, or even to the reader, by name. Instead, they are identified by their working parts, their “weary hand,” and “hollow eyes,” and “loins” succumbing to the whip. The source of their value is also the source of their pain. The following stanza continues to catalogue the labouring bodies, although this time, significantly, the nationality of the labourer is included: “For them the Ceylon diver held his breath, / And went all naked to the hungry shark; / For them his ears gushed blood” (113-15). Again, they make their money off his broken body, but the added detail that he is from a foreign land serves to further remove the labourer from the social circle occupied by the brothers.

In *Monstrosities: Bodies and British Romanticism*, Paul Youngquist argues that the notion of a “proper body” involves “the direct interplay of...distinct discourses or practices,” and among these practices he includes free-market economics (xv). With regards to the free-market economy's role in the perceived value of the body, Youngquist argues that “As the aim of the possessive individual shifts from subsistence to accumulation, the appropriative capacity of labor turns increasingly abstract, until it becomes possible to value bodies according to the relative *physicality* of their labor” (xvii, emphasis Youngquist's). The brothers in Keats's *Isabella* are “enriched from ancestral merchandize” (106) and their continuing business ventures are not focussed on merely maintaining subsistence, but on accumulating more wealth. The labour being carried out in these “torched mines and noisy factories” (108) is intended to make the rich richer. That the labour is being performed for the brothers is reinforced by Keats's repetition of “for them” before any description of the physically taxing work:

For them the Ceylon diver held his breath

And went all naked to the hungry shark;  
 For them his ears gush'd blood; for them in death  
 The seal on the cold ice with piteous bark  
 Lay full of darts; for them alone did seethe  
 A thousand men in troubles wide and dark (113-18)

These men are not risking their bodies for their own purposes, and they are not reaping the benefits of this work either. Instead these labourers are essentially possessed by the brothers and are utilised as the brothers see fit. The brothers are the very picture of the self-interested capitalist, so engrossed in their own financial concerns that Keats asks the reader how it is possible that they could come to discover Isabella and Lorenzo's affair:

How was it these same ledger-men could spy  
 Fair Isabella in her downy nest?  
 How could they find in Lorenzo's eye  
 A straying from his toil? Hot Egypt's pest  
 Into their vision covetous and sly!  
 How could these money-bags see east and west? (137-42)

The brothers' are identified by their profession, referred to as "ledger-men" and "money-bags," not as human beings, but in spite of being literally absorbed by their work they are able to see the truth behind their sister's relationship. This is the only time in the poem that they are shown to acknowledge the lives of anyone else around them. For the most part the brothers' self-interested blindness extends to all people, preventing them from seeing anyone else's suffering, and "In their economic practice they act so entirely for

themselves that they literally permit no other interests but their own any place in the world” (Heinzelman 165).

These heavily charged stanzas regarding the labour conditions of the working class and the spoils of the capitalist employer are purely of Keats’s own invention; there is no mention of these labouring bodies in Boccaccio’s tale. In these stanzas Keats’s own opinion becomes evident; according to Heinzelman, Keats “launches into a four-stanza ‘digression’ that attacks the capitalistic exploitation practiced by Isabella’s brothers” that “‘vulgarity’ ...has historically entered into critical discussion of the poem” (161). These are not the only instances in *Isabella* where Keats represents the brothers in a negative light for the work that they do. The murder of Lorenzo is another defining moment in the characterization of these two men, both in their motivation for their crime and in its aftermath.

Lorenzo and Isabella's love affair is first introduced to the reader without any intimation of its scandalous or doomed nature; Keats holds off on revealing the class disparity until the love between them has been fully established, and only in stanza 18 does he reveal that Lorenzo works for the family. Although Isabella can apparently see past his profession and resists any value judgements that his employment might entail, the brothers cannot see Lorenzo as anything other than “the servant of their trade desgins” (165), and they are furious that he should presume to become involved with their sister. The very fact that murder is their solution to the problem is indicative of the brothers’ rage regarding the relationship. Later, when they have killed Lorenzo, they cover for their crime by telling Isabella that they have sent him away on business and that he will be gone indefinitely. Yet they never consider that scenario as an actual, viable

plan to end the relationship. They could have sent him far away to Ceylon to dive in shark-infested waters, or to the frozen poles to hunt for seals, but instead they choose to kill him themselves, with their own hands no less, and bury him in the woods relatively close to home. The reason for this violent overreaction is that the brothers do not simply wish to end the love affair, but “to make the youngster for his crime atone” (172): to make Lorenzo pay for the presumption and impudence of loving above his station. By romantically pursuing their sister, Lorenzo is essentially stealing from the brothers, taking away one of their possessions. The brothers attach an economic value to all the people around them, and this includes their sister, whom they intend to “coax...by degrees / To some high noble and his olive-trees” (167-68). Of course, they would benefit financially from her marriage to a rich landowner in at least two ways: first of all, to marry rich would increase her fortune and, by extension, the family fortune; and, second, any children to come from such a prosperous union would also be of the upper-class and would go on to increase both the wealth and the reputation of the family. If Isabella were to marry someone like Lorenzo, the brothers would lose out on both of these lucrative avenues: as one critic writes, “[Lorenzo] is not the kind of husband who will enhance [Isabella’s] social status in the material way [the brothers] desire” (Heinzelman 165). As Hoeveler puts it: “what appears to be at stake in Isabel’s [sic] romance with Lorenzo is property and children, both forms of exchange value for the brothers” (330) and, like all valuable things, not something the brothers are prepared to part with easily.

There is only one verbal exchange between Lorenzo and the brothers (in lines 180-192), but this brief interaction is revealing of the nature of both characters. The brothers open by expressing their regret at “invas[ing]” the “quiet of content” and “calm

speculation” of Lorenzo as he enjoys the morning sun, but they “pray” that he will accompany them on their trip into the woods. The reader knows at this point that they are planning to kill him, which makes the mock-politeness of their comments all the more disturbing, but, as Bradford Booth rhetorically asks, “Do we not, in fact, have here an excellent example of conscious irony? The brothers hope to lure Lorenzo out of earshot. They become very pleasant—too pleasant; but the guileless Lorenzo does not understand the glib and oily art of their dissimulation” (section 52). The brothers coat their request in sweetness because it is imperative to them that Lorenzo comply, and at the same time Lorenzo is shown to be so ignorant and gullible that he does not recognize the affectation and guise of their request. Whether Keats intended it or not, the poor, labouring character of Lorenzo is represented as mentally inferior to the rich brothers, further illustrating the ways in which manual labour effects the perceived value of the individual. There is also the suggestion, of course, that even if Lorenzo were to sense something off about the brothers’ invitation, he would be powerless to decline.

The idea of possession extends beyond the relationship of the brothers to their employees and includes Isabella as well. The possessive pronoun “their” is frequently used in reference to the relationship between brothers and sister, or the brothers and Lorenzo, for example:

These brethren having found by many signs  
 What love Lorenzo for their sister had,  
 And how she lov’d him too, each unconfines  
 His bitter thoughts to other, well nigh mad  
 That he, the servant of their trade designs,



Should in their sister's love be blithe and glad (161-66)

As we have seen, the brothers had every intention of marrying their sister off for profit, and they were capable of ordering Lorenzo about and dictating his daily events. The actual murder of Lorenzo and the subsequent cover-up further reveal the extent to which he was their possession and thus subject to their whim. The fate of Isabella is also determined by her brothers, although there is no certainty that she would not have been able to reject their choice of husband for her; the fact that they intended to “coax her by degrees” (167) suggests that, at the very least, they were not going to order her outright to marry the “high noble.” Regardless of whether or not they are bound by the brothers’ authority, both Isabella’s and Lorenzo’s bodies are economically valuable to the brothers. Youngquist argues that “bodies turn fungible in two ways, first by being divisible according to units of labor,” which is the case with Lorenzo and all the unnamed labourers, and “second by being exchangeable according to units of value” (xviii), which is their motivation in marrying Isabella to the “high noble.” The brothers view all people, at least those mentioned in the narrative, as a way for them to make money; the only value human bodies have for them is economic. The brothers are never shown to engage in relationships that are not economically driven, even when it comes to their sister. Although they display a slightly softer economic approach to her, being that she is not one of their employees, they certainly do not have a relationship that could be considered loving, or even familial; she is valued only for her marketable potential.

When the brothers become murderers rather than simply employers, it has a marked physical effect on their bodies, and this becomes evident even before the crime is committed, notably the only actual labour in which we see the brothers take part. Upon

entering the forest, the brothers' faces are described as looking "sick and wan" (213), contrasting sharply with Lorenzo's ignorant face, which is "flush with love" (215). The murder itself happens quickly in the poem, without any description of Lorenzo's suffering or damaged body, but the bodies of the brothers are mentioned indirectly. Upon completion of the terrible act, we are told that the brothers were "each richer by his being a murderer" (224), which is a line with a double-meaning. As we have seen, the brothers stood to profit financially from the marriage that they intend for Isabella, and, with Lorenzo out of the picture, it is likely that they will fulfill that dream. The sentence can be read another way if one defines "richer" in the sense of a dark colour or strong odour; the brothers are stained by their new role as murderers and their bodies bear the evidence of their crime. There is further reference made to the physical tarnishing of the brothers, where they are described as expressing their guilt audibly about the murder and how Lorenzo's absence has affected Isabella:

Their crimes

Came on them, like a smoke from Hinnom's vale;  
 And every night in dreams they groan'd aloud,  
 To see their sister in her snowy shroud. (261-64)

According to the Bible, in Jeremiah 7.31, Hinnom's Valley contained a high place where "they burn their sons and daughters in the fire"; the smoke that Keats uses to indicate the brothers' shameful feelings is generated by the burning corpses of children and is yet another reference to bodily destruction and murder in the poem. The final impact of the murder comes when the brothers discover the secret to Isabella's pot of basil and find Lorenzo's head inside. When faced, quite literally, with the fruit of their gruesome

labour, the brothers know they have been caught and they leave Florence “in a moment’s space, / Never to turn again. —Away they went, / With blood upon their heads, to banishment” (478-80). Keats once again describes the body of the brothers as being marked by their work, by their crime; obviously, at this point in time, no literal blood remains to reveal the murder committed, and yet the brothers still feel as if it stains them and gives them away. It is also significant that the blood is “upon their heads” and not upon their hands. The actual crime most likely left them with bloodied hands, but to refer to the blood on their heads is to identify them personally with the crime. The body is used for labour, but the head is the seat of the mind and the conscience: the brothers intentionally committed this murder, not out of obligation to an employer, but for their own capitalist purposes. They are responsible for the crime, and they are burdened with the guilt, hence the blood is on their heads. They exile themselves from the life that they were once so proud of in order to conceal the crime that they have committed, and through their self-exile—the physical removal of their bodies—they punish themselves.

In carrying out their macabre labour the brothers do not only impact their lives and that of Lorenzo, but their sister’s as well. The figure of Isabella is initially represented as a young woman of leisure, of the upper-classes, and therefore above the manual labour performed by lesser bodies. Following the death of her lover, however, she slips into a luxurious melancholy and wallows in her grief, gaining a kind of morbid pleasure that supplants the more genuine pleasure she derived from the love itself. Eventually, though, she dedicates herself to the task of nurturing her pot of basil with the secreted head of Lorenzo inside it and, like many of the other characters mentioned in the poem, she is consumed and destroyed by her labour. It is her macabre gardening that

reveals the most about her character, as she dedicates herself to work of her own design and purpose, not something forced upon her or in the service of another.

Isabella is wealthy and of a high social standing, although as a woman she does not reap quite the same benefits of these advantages as her brothers; she is still considered to be one of their possessions and under their control. Still, she enjoys a life of leisure and comfort. She is portrayed very much as a figure of the house, of the indoor, domestic sphere: she plays the lute and does embroidery, Lorenzo spies her through her chamber-window, he sees her at meals, and hears her “morning-step upon the stair” (24). But these are all glimpses of her in a relaxed, work-free environment. As relaxed as these tasks may be, her efforts all go towards her unspoken love, and eventually she becomes literally sick with love, growing pale and thin, unable to handle the flood of emotion, which suggests that it is not only dangerous or physically draining labour that can damage the body. Even after the lovers finally exchange promises, they must continue to dwell in largely separate spheres:

She, to her chamber gone, a ditty fair  
 Sang, of delicious love and honey'd dart;  
 He with light steps went up a western hill,  
 And bade the sun farewell, and joy'd his fill. (77-80)

Although Keats refrains from explicitly revealing the class differences between the young lovers, there are indications that, at the very least, Isabella functions in a different sphere, as she retires to her “chamber” while Lorenzo departs “up a western hill.” His house, wherever it may be, is not mentioned, and instead he is identified simply as going away from where she lives.

Isabella differs from her brothers in attitude, if not in class, for she falls helplessly in love with Lorenzo, and never mentions or even seems to fully acknowledge their societal differences. Keats does not portray Isabella as being in love with Lorenzo in spite of his profession or poverty, but rather fails to mention these things at all when referring to their blossoming love. From the perspective given to the reader, Isabella is able to fall in love with Lorenzo based purely on his merits as a man, and not as a commodity or a possession, which is the only value that her brothers see in him. There are some critics who would argue that Isabella is naive or careless in pursuing this relationship because, as Hoeveler argues, “She surely should have known that her brothers intended to use her in a marital arrangement whereby her body would be traded for ‘olive trees’”(329). Isabella must have been aware that her brothers would object to her romance with Lorenzo but, either through her own self-interested blindness, or Keats’s idealized romantic vision, it is not mentioned by the lovers. There is other evidence to support the idea that Isabella may just be too trusting of her brothers, and perhaps this gives weight to the idea that she may not have thought they would force her into a loveless marriage or deny her the right to marry whom she chose. After the brothers have murdered Lorenzo, they tell Isabella that they have sent him away on business, and she does not question this story. It does not strike her as odd that a man who, earlier that same day, could not bear the idea of being parted for three hours without saying good-bye first, would leave the country without sending a message back to her with her brothers. She did, after months of absence, finally ask her brothers, “what dungeon climes / Could keep him off so long?” (259-60), but “They spake a tale / Time after time, to quiet her” (261-62) and she does not get suspicious of them, despite the fact that they are haunted by their own guilt at this

point. We are told that, had it not been for a visit from Lorenzo's ghost, she would have "died in drowsy ignorance" (265) without ever suspecting that something bad had happened to Lorenzo or that her brothers were involved. She may have continued to pine away, luxuriating in her grief indefinitely.

The idea of luxury is one that is often brought up in relation to Keats's poetry. Critic E. F. Guy suggests that "though *luxury* in Keats may be difficult to define exactly, its frame of reference is to be approached as that of sensual pleasure" (92) and goes on to say that "*luxury* at its most significant use in Keats is to be understood as descriptive of, or equating a pleasure to a delight in, sensual activation" (94, emphasis Guy's). The notion of luxury makes its strongest appearance in the poem with regards to Isabella's grieving over Lorenzo's absence:

She weeps alone for pleasures not to be;  
Sorely she wept until the night came on,  
And then, instead of love, O misery!  
She brooded o'er the luxury alone. (233-36)

Misery is given a luxurious quality, as Isabella wallows in it and derives a pleasure from it that rivals her feelings of love. The suggestion here is that, though the grief is agonizing and torturous, it gives her feelings of sexual pleasure and delight. This idea of pleasurable sadness goes hand in hand with her naivety surrounding Lorenzo's disappearance: she almost seems to enjoy having this drama in her life. Had Isabella been of the same class as Lorenzo, and dependent upon him for her financial well-being, his absence would have been more upsetting and dangerous for her, but her life is essentially unaffected by his

departure. Yes, she loves him, and mourns for his absence, but she also has the advantage and ability to luxuriate in this grief and sadness without any retribution.

The reader, in the absence of any work performed by Isabella, knows very little about her at this point in the poem; she is shown to be a woman of passionate emotion, and her high social standing has been made evident, but almost nothing is known of Isabella herself. When the ghost of Lorenzo appears to her and reveals the circumstances of his death and the location of his grave, all that he asks is for her to “shed one tear upon [his] heather-bloom, / And it shall comfort [him] within the tomb” (303-04). He asks her for one tear, a token of her sadness, though she indulges in tears daily. The ghost goes on to admit to her that “thy paleness makes me glad” (318); he feels better, if a ghost can be thought to feel, because he knows that she mourns his death. This ghostly visit has a greater impact on Isabella than the ghost could have imagined, as it changes her worldview almost completely and shakes her from her position of luxury and leisure: “I knew not this hard life, / I thought the worst was simple misery” (329-30). At this point Isabella takes on the role of labourer for the first time in the poem, and one could assume for the first time in her life, and almost immediately a change in her physical body is reported. She begins to dig up Lorenzo’s grave “fervently” (368), on her hands and knees, using a knife as her only tool, until the nurse that she brought with her kneels to help her. Keats contrasts the delicate body of Isabella, her “veiling hair,” with the “locks all hoar” and “lean hands” of the old nurse (376, 380, 381); Isabella’s body is not accustomed to labour, but the nurse, whose “heart felt pity to the core / At sight of such a dismal labouring” (378-79) is clearly made for such work, despite her advanced age.

When the women recover the body of Lorenzo, Isabella makes the shocking

decision to retain a morbid keepsake of her lover: she cuts off Lorenzo's head to take home with her. With this action Isabella behaves closest to her brothers in their treatment of Lorenzo: she views him as her possession, something that she is able to keep with her. The ghost of Lorenzo did not ask to be beheaded; it did not even ask to have the grave dug up, but only that she shed a single tear to comfort the neglected dead. One can assume that Isabella's decision to make a souvenir of Lorenzo's head is not consciously motivated by their difference in class, but it is nonetheless an assertion of ownership and a commodification of his body: it has value for her, albeit emotional rather than financial, and she destructively uses it towards her own ends with no thought of Lorenzo's wishes or desires. Even in death Lorenzo's body is used for the purposes of those above him.

Gardening, especially of potted indoor plants, is not labour-intensive work; it is, in the context of the poem, like embroidery or the practice of musical instruments, women's work. Unlike the dangerous and destructive work that the nameless labourers in the brothers' employ perform, this work does not imply a devaluing of Isabella's body or a lowering of her class status. Rather, it is the way in which she devotes herself to the task, and the added twist of gruesome fertilizer that causes Isabella's body to be marked by her work. She no longer goes to chapel, and "seldom felt she any hunger-pain" (468), but spends all her available time "Beside her Basil, weeping through her hair" (472). Yet, despite the physically draining nature of her horticultural project, the work is redemptive of Isabella's character. As Anderson notes, "If labor ceases to be a calamity only when it becomes leisure, then, leisure, to gain value, must become laborious, or at least productive" (10). Isabella, for the first time, devotes her leisure time to a productive pursuit, although questionable in nature. She believes, rightly or wrongly, that her actions



are commemorating her lost love and somehow keeping a part of it/him alive, and she shows herself willing to sacrifice all for its benefit.

The specifics of Isabella's labour are interesting because she inverts the labour process that her brothers utilize: they work living bodies to death in pursuit of their own goals, while she is, figuratively at least, working a dead body to life. The tears that she continuously showers on her basil plant "resemble the blood and sweat that her mercantile brothers have been exacting from their operatives" (Heinzelman 166), and she is the one that "withers" (447) and bears "dead eyes" (453); hers is the body used by the labourious task. The work, beyond the stereotypical associations towards gardening, is uniquely women's work as she engages in "an act of female labor that is likened...to the process of giving birth" (Heinzelman 165). She labours to bring her basil plant into the world and, like a mother, deeply mourns its loss to the point of her own death: "And so she pined, and so she died forlorn, / Imploring for her Basil to the last" (497-98).

From Lorenzo's death Isabella brings forth new life, and in so doing she reforms her own character as well. Isabella's devotion to her basil plant illustrates how "activity generated by living bodies can redeem and renew the cycle of generation" (Hoeveler 332). In reference to another Keats poem, *The Fall of Hyperion*, Anderson argues that Keats "turns away from the radical potentialities of productive leisure to the more socially respectable formulation of salvation through work" (11), and I would argue that this assessment also applies to the representation of Isabella. She no longer wastes away her hours in leisurely and mindless pursuits, nor does she allow herself to luxuriate in the pleasures of overwhelming emotion. She is focussed and intent on her labour and, although it represents yet another instance of Lorenzo's lower class body being

commodified for the pursuits of her rich family, it is done with the best and purest of intentions. She sacrifices herself in the belief that she is giving life back to Lorenzo, and defines herself as more than a woman of her class is thought to be.

It is hard to read *Isabella; or, the Pot of Basil* without assuming that some of the class commentary reflects Keats's own opinion. First of all, although the poem is based on a tale from Boccaccio's *The Decameron* it differs significantly from the source text: Isabella's brothers kill Lorenzo because they discover that the young lovers are engaging in premarital sex, not because Lorenzo works for them, and there is no mention of the nameless labourers that suffer and toil on the brothers' behalf. The strongest areas of anti-capitalist sentiment are purely of Keats's own invention. Keats was a harsh critic of his own work and referred to this poem as "mawkish," "weak-sided," and as having "an amusing sober-sadness about it," but, as Hoeveler argues, "when Keats himself warns us away from his work...we know that the text contains material that was threatening to the poet for highly personal reasons" (321). His personal insecurities about class and status are reflected in the poem, through the characters of both Lorenzo and Isabella. The poem also contains indications of Keats's strong anti-capitalist ideals and his condemnation of societal hierarchies in the ways that he depicts the brothers' business practices and attacks their sense of pride.

Keats introduces a new element of tension to Boccaccio's story by making class the cause of Lorenzo's murder; whereas the original text sees him murdered for the sin of premarital sex, Keats makes it more personal by casting Lorenzo as a victim of class prejudice. In Boccaccio's tale the brothers kill Lorenzo because of an act that he committed, but Keats's brothers kill him for who he is as a person, something that he

cannot help or avoid. Keats's poem can thus be read as "enacting every class-conscious man's worst fantasy—I have powerful enemies based solely on my class and they will seek out and destroy me" (Hoeveler 329).

The character of Isabella is also representative of Keats's personal life, insofar as she is a woman whose life is dictated by the conventions of class. She is undoubtedly in love with Lorenzo and his profession as a labourer and the class judgements that accompany that work do not concern her; she loves him for who he is as a man, not what he does. Heinzelman argues that "Keats's translation of Boccaccio is a story about a woman whose chances for love and for an authentic selfhood are undermined by the dominant mode of production and by the way in which commodities are exchanged" (160). Isabella plays no part in her brothers' business, and yet the rules of that world dictate how she lives her life. It is in their best interest for Isabella to marry rich, and it is in their best interest to remove Lorenzo from the equation and prevent her from marrying someone beneath her social standing. Keats, who was in love with the girl next door, was also prevented from pursuing his romantic interests in part for financial reasons. Like Isabella, a circumstance beyond his control determined how he could live his life.

Keats reveals his personal views on capitalism in his apparent attack on the pride that the brothers derive from their luxurious lifestyle. Keats anaphorically frames this moment with the repeated rhetorical question: "Why were they proud?" (121, 123, 125, 127 and 128) and juxtaposes the brothers' decadent amenities with the suffering of their labourers. These comparisons are based on the physical bodies of the labourers, and contrasts physical pain with financial gain. The brothers' "marble founts" (121) are contraposed with the emotional outpouring of "a wretch's tears," (122) their tree-lined

orange groves, or “orange-mounts,” (123) are far more pleasant to walk than “lazar stairs,” (124) referring to hospitals specifically designed for lepers. Most importantly, their “red-lin’d accounts” (125) were of more value to them than any of the “songs of Grecian years” (126), a decided preference for capitalist ventures rather than the artistic or traditional way of life. Keats addresses the reader directly in these queries, and the stanza’s final line, “Why in the name of Glory were they proud?”(128) leaves little doubt about Keats’s opinion regarding the brothers’ capitalism. The use of rhetorical questioning suggests that Keats is trying to avoid being didactic and telling the reader outright that the brothers’ lifestyle is wrong, but the way in which the comparisons are organized clearly suggests that Keats feels there is no justifiable reason for the brothers’ pride. Heinzelman argues that this poem is a “narrative of the effects of self-interest” (165) and this is supported by the way Keats portrays the brothers throughout the poem: concerned only with their own well-being and ignorant or negligent of the suffering and desires of others.

The human body is the medium through which people interact materially with the world, and with which the body makes a living. Even if the labour is not physically intense, the body is still necessary in the performance of work. The nature of work, whether rightly or wrongly, determines the social status of the worker, and extends to apply a value to his or her body, and “bodies that perform the least physical labor warrant the most social prestige” (Youngquist xvii). *Isabella; or, the Pot of Basil* illustrates the impact of occupation on human bodies, through the description of physically destructive labour, and the depiction of the brothers’ treatment of their employees. The labouring body is also shown to bear the marks of activities performed by choice, such as the

murder of Lorenzo and Isabella's gardening, which damages the labourer no less than work carried out by necessity. Labouring bodies, regardless of the work they carry out or the motives and intentions involved, are inescapably marked and valued based on their labour.

#### WORKS CONSULTED

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