

# The Discourse of Infatuation in John Keats's Letters and Poems to Fanny Brawne

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## ABSTRACT

*Seen from the vantage point of the Victorian sensibility, John Keats's letters to Fanny Brawne transgress the norms of respectability, being too personal, too passionate and too direct. Moreover, they define Keats as a sensuous, therefore effeminate poet who allows himself to be flooded by emotions and passion. After the publication of the letters in 1878, the perception of Keats as "feminine" became standard during the Victorian era. This paper proposes to look at chosen letters and poems which Keats wrote to Fanny Brawne in order to see how the problematic discourse of infatuation can account for the charges of effeminacy brought against the poet. Strikingly, although Keats expresses love and devotion in his letters and love poetry, at the same time he articulates much more ambivalent attitudes to femininity in general. Therefore, it can be suggested that the problematic relations between male and female characters in Keats's verse (where the woman is frequently figured as either the threatening femme fatale or the indifferent muse) can be better understood in the context of his conflicted views on gender matters. Finally, my interpretation facilitates the understanding of the "camelion Poet" concept, one of the chief ideas concerning Keats's poetic theory.*

## KEYWORDS

John Keats, Fanny Brawne, women, letters, infatuation, fear

When Keats's letters to Fanny Brawne were first published in 1878, an avalanche of outraged comments followed. Matthew Arnold and Charles Algernon Swinburne, in particular, were shocked by Keats's vocabulary of passion. Arnold lamented the want of "character and self-control", and claimed that the correspondence made an "unpleasing" impression<sup>1</sup>. Swinburne, in turn, suggested that these letters "ought not to have been written".<sup>2</sup> Seen from the vantage point of the Victorian sensibility, the letters express first of all a "vulgar excess", "disgracefully extreme",<sup>3</sup> and secondly, they mark Keats as a sensuous, and therefore effeminate poet who allows himself to be flooded by emotions and passion. These charges were made in the 1826 *Blackwood Edinburgh Magazine* attack on Keats in which he was famously described as an "infatuated bardling", while his poetry was claimed to be a product of some "eunuch's muse".<sup>4</sup> Since this time describing Keats as effeminate became standard for the rest of the Victorian era. Recently, a number of studies have focused on Keats's position according to the categories of gender and on the diverse ways in which Keats's own words – his verse, his correspondence and his poetic theory

1 Thomas Humphry Ward, ed., "The English Poets: Selections with Critical Introductions" (London: Macmillan, 1880) 4:427–37.

2 Jacqueline Shoemaker, "Female Empathy to Manliness: Keats in 1819", in *Victorian Keats and Romantic Carlyle*, ed. C.C. Barfoot, (Amsterdam: Rudopi, 2000), 80.

3 Andrew Motion, *Keats: A Biography* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1997), 415.

4 Blackwood's attack on Keats is cited in Anne K. Mellor, "Keats and Complexities of Gender" in *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*, ed. S. Wolfson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 214.

– classify him as “feminine”<sup>5</sup>. His letters, in particular, have been extensively used by his critics and biographers<sup>6</sup>, as they give insight to the poet’s mind at work as well as provide comment on his poetry.

This paper proposes to look at several letters which Keats wrote to Fanny Brawne, and see how the problematic discourse of infatuation used in those letters can account for the charges of effeminacy brought against the poet. Interestingly, a similar discourse can also be traced in such short lyric poems as “I cry your mercy, pity, love”, “To [Fanny]” and “Ode to Fanny”. Although Keats expresses love and devotion both in his correspondence and love poetry, at the same time he articulates much more ambivalent attitudes to femininity in general. Therefore it can be suggested that the problematic relations between male and female characters in Keats’s verse (where the woman is repeatedly figured as either threatening *femme fatale* or indifferent muse<sup>7</sup>) can be better understood in the context of Keats’s own conflicted views on gender matters.

Most frequently, love letters are the product of absence and they express both the wish for presence and the sensation of lack and longing. Roland Barthes thus explains the issue of gender in relation to love letters:

Historically, the discourse of absence is carried on by the woman. It follows that in any man who utters the other’s absence something feminine is declared: the man who wants and suffers from his waiting is miraculously feminized. A man is not feminized because he is inverted but because he is in love.<sup>8</sup>

Viewed from a historical and cultural perspective, it seems that the mere fact of articulating lack and longing in the context of love situates the poet on the side of female sensibility. As far as Keats’s letters are concerned, this characteristic becomes strengthened by the fact that his language practically overflows with passion and emotions, and the desire he experiences for his beloved seems to flood him. In a letter from October 13, 1819 he confesses to Fanny:

I should be exquisitely miserable without the hope of soon seeing you. I should be afraid to separate myself far from you. My sweet Fanny, will your heart never change? My love, will it? I have no limit now to my love (...). Do not threaten me even in jest. I have been astonished that Men could die Martyrs for religion – I have shudder’d at it – I shudder no more – I could be martyr’d for my Religion – Love is my religion – I could die for that – I could die for you.<sup>9</sup>

5 My line of thinking in the present article is indebted to a number of recent studies which pursue and analyze similar aspects of Keats’s work. The list includes but is not limited to Philip Cox, “Keats and the Performance of Gender”, *Keats-Shelley Journal* 44 (1995); Margaret Homans, “Keats Reading Women, Women Reading Keats”, *Studies in Romanticism*, 29 (Fall 1990); Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 171–86 and “Keats and Complexities of Gender”; Susan J. Wolfson, “Feminizing Keats”, *Critical Essays on John Keats*, ed. Hermione de Almeida (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1990).

6 See Ch. Ricks *Keats and Embarrassment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974); Andrew Bennett *Keats, Narrative and Audience: The Posthumous Life of Writing*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); John Barnard, “Keats’s Letters”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*, ed. Susan Wolfson., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Andrew Motion *Keats: A Biography*.

7 Keats employs the topos of the woman as *femme fatale* in “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”, “Lamia” and *Endymion*; the woman as muse can be found in “The Eve of Saint Agnes”, *Endymion* (Cynthia as opposed to Circe), and *The Fall of Hyperion*.

8 Quoted in Catherine Maxwell, *The Female Sublime from Milton to Swinburne: Bearing blindness* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press), 91.

9 Robert Gittings, ed., *Letters of John Keats* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 334.

Apart from an almost unbearable intensity of feeling and a desire which controls thought and refuses to be subordinated by will and reason, Keats's letters can be characterised by a cluster of what Karla Alwes calls "sexually connotative terms", such as "enthral", "entrammel", and "ensnare", which convey the magic and subversive power of the female and give the impression of simultaneous attraction and repulsion on the part of the male.<sup>10</sup> In his letters, in his love poetry as well as in his most famous verse such as "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" and "Lamia" Keats records his ambivalent attitude to femininity: alluring and desired, the longed-for relationship can quickly change and become threatening, destructive and ultimately emasculating. He expresses his distinct disease in the presence of women in his letter to Benjamin Bailey:

Is it not extraordinary? When among Men I have no evil thoughts, no malice, no spleen – I can listen and from every one I can learn – my hands are in my pocket I am free from any suspicion and comfortable. When I am among Women I have evil thoughts, malice, spleen – I cannot speak or be silent – I am full of Suspicions and therefore listen to no thing – I am in a hurry to be gone.<sup>11</sup>

Female company, Keats confesses, is the source of anxiety and tension. Surprisingly, he appears to have quite an insightful view on the problem, and he does not blame women, but locates the "evil thoughts, malice, spleen" within himself. He is also aware that, being "full of Suspicions", he is not receptive to what he might hear (and maybe learn?) from the women he meets. Similarly, some of his male protagonists actively construct their unhappy fate (even if they blame the women) and they are equally deaf to what the female figures want to express. Keats's unfortunate knight will never give ear to voices other than those that whisper that La Belle Dame sans Merci has him in thrall.

At the same time, the conviction that any intensity of emotional, physical and spiritual experience can be dangerous, as it often leads to the destruction of the self, is a recurrent motif in Keats's love letters. If his words communicate infatuation and adoration, his discourse at the same time evidences fear. In the letter to Fanny of 13<sup>th</sup> October 1819 Keats wrote:

This moment I have set myself to copy some verses out fair. I cannot proceed with any degree of content. I must write you a line or two and see if that will assist in dismissing you from my Mind for ever so short a time. Upon my Soul I can think of nothing else – The time is passed when I had power to advise and warn you again[s]t the unpromising morning of my Life – My love has made me selfish. I cannot exist without you – I am forgetful of every thing but seeing you again – my Life seems to stop there – I see no further. You have absorb'd me. I have a sensation at the present moment as though I was dissolving [...] You have ravish'd me away by a Power I cannot resist: and yet I could resist till I saw you; and even since I have seen you I have endeavoured often "to reason against the reasons of my Love." I can do that no more – the pain would be too great – My Love is selfish – I cannot breathe without you.<sup>12</sup>

10 Karla Alwes, *Imagination Transformed. The Evolution of the female character in Keats's Poetry*. (Carbondale, Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), 3. Other words used in a similar context, such as "ravish", "enchant", "imprison" and "thrall" can be also added to the list, which is by no means exhaustive.

11 Gittings, *Letters*, 136.

12 Gittings, *Letters*, 334.

Additionally, in an earlier letter dated 16<sup>th</sup> August, the reader encounters a similar, yet still more extreme statement: "It seems to me that a few more moments of thought of you would uncrystallize and dissolve me."<sup>13</sup>

Keats's experience of love has reached such an unbearable intensity that in truth it borders on self-annihilation. The passages above abound in negative expressions evidencing the lack of will or a power to resist – such words as "cannot", "no further", "nothing else" and "no more" suggest that the speaker of these lines has been overcome by desire, lost his subjectivity and now only can allow things to happen to him; his decisiveness and agency are gone. Furthermore, the infatuation is stifling, possessive, threatening, absorbing and stripping of identity – it results in the melting and dissolving of the self. It is vital to remember that in the gender theory which was relevant in Keats's times the masculine self was to have strong autonomous ego boundaries, while the feminine self was more malleable, less definite and firm<sup>14</sup>. The question of gender in relation to Keats was also raised by Hazlitt in his essay of 1822 "On Effeminacy and Character", where he defines effeminacy as "a prevalence of the sensibility over the will", "a want of fortitude" as opposed to "manly firmness and a decision of character" and concludes that Keats's poetry is characterised by a "deficiency in masculine energy of style". Keats poems have "beauty, tenderness, delicacy", but there is "a want of strength and substance".<sup>15</sup>

Thus, when Keats writes about the threat of "dissolving" and "uncrystallizing", he in fact records his loss of masculine identity. Another interesting gender question arises at the same moment, as here Fanny acts as a ravisher, while Keats imagines himself as being absorbed and ravished. Traditional male and female roles become reversed. Additionally, his love is clearly an affair of his heart, not his mind – despite his rational efforts to control his feelings through logic, they still hold him captive. It is as if he himself had no control over his emotional side of personality at all. Clearly, the opposition reason – heart is at work here and it can be seen in gender terms: the heart (feminine) gets priority over reason (masculine). The process of feminization is almost complete.

In May 1820 Keats continued:

I wrote a Letter for you yesterday expecting to have seen your mother. I shall be selfish enough to send it though I know it may give you a little pain, because I wish you to see how unhappy I am for love of you, and endeavour as much as I can to entice you to give up your whole heart to me whose whole existence hangs upon you. You could not step or move an eyelid but it would shoot to my heart – I am greedy of you – Do not think of any thing but me.<sup>16</sup>

Love equals suffering, pleasure indicates pain, and one is a condition of the other. Suffering and unhappiness are mutual – when the speaker feels misery, he wishes to inflict it. As much as he is absorbed, he wishes to absorb – "do not think of anything but me" Keats implores. His phrasing also expresses almost total dependence on the beloved person. As in the previous letter he confesses the inability to breathe – to go on living – without his love, so here his existence hangs on, or is conditioned, by her. Words such as "enticing", "greedy", "selfish", "unhappy", and "pain" characterise his infatuation.

13 Gittings, *Letters*, 279.

14 Cf. Alan Richardson, "Romanticism and the Colonization of the Feminine" in *Romanticism and Feminism*, ed. A. Mellor (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988).

15 William Hazlitt, "On Effeminacy of Character", in *Table-talk; or, Original Essays on Men and Manners* (1821–1822, 1824), *The Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe, 21 vols. (London and Toronto: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1930), viii, 254–255.

16 Gittings, *Letters*, 375.

From emotional the threat evolves into physical: in a letter written in June 1820, when Keats's health was already very delicate, he reports his anxieties about whether or not he should visit Fanny in such words:

I am strong enough to walk over-but I dare not. I shall feel so much pain in parting with you again. My dearest love, I am afraid to see you, I am strong but not strong enough to see you.<sup>17</sup>

The contact with the person he desires so much becomes a literal threat to his physical well-being: emotionally demanding, it might prove too destructive. Seemingly, the strength of his feelings could sap his life out of him. Keats consistently talks about love in extreme, all-or-nothing, love-or-death terms. Just before his leaving for Italy, in utter despair, he says:

Every hour I am more and more concentrated in you; every thing else tastes like chaff in my Mouth [...] I wish I was either in your Arms full of faith or that a Thunder bolt would strike me.<sup>18</sup>

Keats's love poems written to Fanny record similar states – his longing to become completely absorbed, to be lost in passion without being conscious of anything else. His infatuation borders on obsession, and it seems that his very existence – his life – is conditioned by reciprocity of response, by Fanny's communicating not standard devotion, but a similar need to annihilate her own self in love. In his short poem "I cry your mercy, pity, love" Keats passionately exclaims:

Oh, let me have thee whole – all, all, be mine!  
That shape, that fairness, that sweet mirror zest  
Of love – your kiss, those hands, those eyes divine,  
That warm, white, lucent, million-pleasured breast;  
Yourself – your soul – in pity give me all,  
Withhold no atom's atom or I die!<sup>19</sup>

Keats proclaims love to be his religion. It is perhaps not beside the point to recall William Blake's "The Divine Image", a poem in which Blake talks about his vision of God as incarnated in man, whose essence are four virtues: mercy, pity, peace and love. Keats uses the same virtues in his love worship with the exception of peace. His religion does not need peace. On the contrary, it is defined by anxiety and unrest, the feeling of being – and staying – insatiate. His love thrives on the impossibility of total possession and complete fulfilment. Similar tones surface in his longer poem, entitled "Ode to Fanny", where the merge of delight and pain, the bitter-sweetness of love is best expressed in the following stanza:

Ah, dearest love, sweet home of all my fears,  
And hopes, and joys, and panting miseries,  
To-night, if I may guess, thy beauty wears  
A smile of such delight,  
As brilliant and as bright,  
As when with ravished, aching, vassal eyes

17 Gittings, *Letters*, 379.

18 Gittings, *Letters*, 385–6.

19 John Keats, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Miriam Allott (London: Longman, 1970), 5–10.

Lost in soft amaze,  
I gaze, I gaze!<sup>20</sup>

Keats straightforwardly presents himself in a relationship of total dependence, in which he occupies the lower, more dependent, more inferior position. His love makes him a vassal and results in his loss of agency and autonomy, while Fanny's beauty gives him both pain and delight, taking him as if by force and ravishing him. His compulsion to view her beauty communicates a hunger which cannot be satiated. The male gaze does not connote power, but powerlessness. The speaker's infatuation is fuelled by his suffering as much as by his hopes and joys. Pain is as vital for his love as pleasure. He becomes mesmerised by Fanny's beauty, "lost in soft amaze", similarly to the unfortunate Lycius in "Lamia" who when he lost his grip on reality "from amaze into delight he fell"<sup>21</sup> and could not take his eyes off his lover or quench his thirst of her<sup>22</sup>:

And soon his eyes have drunk her beauty up,  
Leaving no drop in the bewildering cup,  
And still the cup was full [...]<sup>23</sup>

Keats's view of an ideal relationship, thus, is a fantasy of total absorption. The closest that he ever gets to describe it is in a passage from "The Eve of Saint Agnes", the only poem apart from *Endymion* figuring a romance with a happy ending.<sup>24</sup> The stanza describing the consummation of love between Madeline and Porphyro is what Keats wishes for but cannot achieve in real life:

Beyond a mortal man impassion'd far  
At these voluptuous accents, he arose  
Ethereal, flush'd, and like a throbbing star  
Seen mid the sapphire heaven's deep repose;  
Into her dream he melted, as the rose  
Blendeth its odour with the violet,  
Solution sweet [...]<sup>25</sup>

In this passage readers can admire what is undeniably one of the most luscious and erotically loaded scenes in Romantic literature. The union between Porphyro and Madeline is rendered in terms of the fusion of different colours and different scents, a total, unconditioned merge, resulting in "solution sweet". Porphyro, in the narrative associated with the colour purple, amorously flushed and throbbing, unites with the silvery and blue Madeline. Porphyro and Madeline stand respectively for mortality and

20 Keats, *The Complete Poems*, 9–16.

21 Keats, *The Complete Poems*, 1.324.

22 The allusion to "Lamia" is particularly pertinent here, as in this romance the love and presence of Lamia is the condition of the life and well-being of Lycius. When Lamia is unmasked as a snake woman (or as an illusion) and disappears, Lycius dies.

23 Keats, *The Complete Poems*, 1.251–253.

24 This is a common view of the poem; for a different reading see Jack Stillinger "Hoodwinking of Madeline: Skepticism in *The Eve of Saint Agnes*", in *English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. M.H. Abrams, (London, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), an essay in which the idealistic interpretation of the text (which views the union of Porphyro and Madeline as a reconciliation of contraries) is strongly put into question. Stillinger argues that the union of the protagonists does not figure the allegorical blending of carnality and spirituality, but is a result of violation, almost a rape.

25 Keats, *The Complete Poems*, 1.316–322.

immortality, passion and innocence, body and soul. In their union Keats achieves a *consortia oppositorum*, the total absorption where the outlines of separate identity cannot be distinguished – in short, an ideal unachievable in real life.

It cannot be forgotten, however, that such an ideal merge also entails the fusion of the feminine and the masculine. In her chapter on Keats and gender Anne K. Mellor notes that “Keats challenged the existence of fixed, stable boundaries between the sexes. He did so in two ways: by occupying the position of a ‘woman’ in his life and in his writings, and by blurring the distinction between femininity and masculinity”.<sup>26</sup> Keats famously longed for “a life of sensations, rather than of thoughts”<sup>27</sup> and described his ideal of the “poetical Character” as the “camelion poet”, without stable ego boundaries. In a letter to Richard Woodhouse (26<sup>th</sup> October 1818) he thus defines the nature of the poet:

As to the poetical Character itself (I mean that sort of which, if I am any thing, I am a Member; that sort distinguished from the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime; which is a thing per se and stands alone) it is not itself – it has no self – it is every thing and nothing – It has no character – it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated – It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the camelion Poet. It does no harm from its relish of the dark side of things any more than from its taste for the bright one; because they both end in speculation. A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity – he is continually in for – and filling some other Body.<sup>28</sup>

Unlike “wordsworthian or egotistical sublime” who fills poetry with his own self and filters everything through the I (and his own eye), Keats’s camelion poet has no identity in the sense that he feels for and empathises with everything around him to such an extent that he becomes what he sees, identifying with the object of contemplation. He clearly juxtaposes himself as a poet with Wordsworth, the poet of a strong and pervasive ego, the “masculine” writer as we may say. Another of Keats’ well-known poetic theories, “negative capability” – defined as a state when “a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason”<sup>29</sup> – can be understood in a similar vein, as a state of heightened receptivity to surrounding reality, a lack of irritable need to comprehend everything with reason, an acceptance of contradictions inherent in experience, and an awareness that joy and pain are not always mutually exclusive. Critics have long identified this definition as showing affinities with the feminine, not the masculine gender<sup>30</sup>.

Using the discourse of passion and desire in his letters Keats proclaimed his own lack of control over his emotions and presented himself in the throes of passion.

26 Mellor, *Complexities*, 215.

27 Gittings, *Letters*, 37.

28 Gittings, *Letters*, 157.

29 Gittings, *Letters*, 43.

30 Margaret Homans is here a notable exception. In her article “Keats Reading Women, Women Reading Keats” she objects to the view proposed by other feminist critics of Keats (such as Anne Mellor and Susan Wolfson) according to whom the “camelion poet” theory pertained to weak ego boundaries and justified allocating his position and sensibility as feminine. Homans, in turn, argues that some of Keats’s propositions (e.g. Imagination as Adam’s dream) are thoroughly masculinist, and that Keats “equates his imaginative project, then, not only with male sexual potency but also with the masculine appropriation of the feminine” (333–4). She also describes Keats’s resistance and hostility to female readership, recounting how in his letters Keats talks about bluestockings as “Devils”, “sublime petticoats” and “a set of Women, who having taken a snack or Luncheon of Literary scraps, set themselves up for towers of Babel in Languages Sapphos in Poetry” (347).

Thus, in the context of the gender theories of the 19<sup>th</sup> century he consciously allied himself with what was deemed feminine rather than masculine. Yet, this was not done without ambivalence: the fear of losing his masculine identity clearly surfaces in his poems and letters as the discourse of anxiety. Hence the simultaneous attraction and repulsion towards femininity distinctly audible in his writing: whatever is feminine, is on the one hand alluring, challenging and seductive, on the other also potentially dangerous.

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