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John Keats's Sonnets on the Aesthetic Experience: Consumption and Consummation*

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Cheong, Seok Kweon. "John Keats's Sonnets on the Aesthetic Experience: Consumption and Consummation. *Studies in English Language & Literature* 45.4 (2019): 93-108. This study aims to explore how Keats's sonnets on the aesthetic experience figuratively represent his concern with the poetic career, that is how his consumption of aesthetic objects figures in his sonnets as his consummation of being a poet. Keats's sonnets of aesthetic experience are in many ways allegorical, and they in subtle ways reflect on his poetic career. In a subversive way, Keats's sonnets on aesthetic experience hybridize the poetic genres, and allegorize consumptive reading. They self-reflexively represent Keats's capable negativity which confers art a fictional vantage point from which it criticizes the actual world. And they also self-critically reflect the translative consumption that his sonnets on aesthetic experiences consummate in a finer tone. (Jeonbuk National University)

Key Words: John Keats, sonnets, aesthetic experience, consumption, consummation.

I

From "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer," "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles,"

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to "On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again," Keats seems to consider his aesthetic experience, textual or otherwise, as metaphorical space to write his sonnets 'on.' And his gesture of representing his access to art-works by writing 'on' them and by reproducing art-works in the process of consumption, seems to invite readers' similar engagement with his sonnets. Keats's practice of reproducing art works in the process of consumption suggests that Keats regarded the aesthetic experience as cultural husbandry, harvesting tangible, materially real things, and engendering the career he created for himself—the vocation of poet. Instead of becoming self-consuming artifacts, the poetry in this case becomes a diachronical and dialogical reciprocation of consumption, consummation, and re-production. It is legitimate to ask, then if Keats valorized the artifacts (artistic production, or re-productions and translations in most cases) as writerly space, what kind of value Keats accorded his own poetic career in the sonnets of aesthetic experience. What kind of aesthetics/ethics is involved in the act of consuming others to fashion one's self?

By tracing evolving aesthetics of consumption in several sonnets, we can find answers to the questions which Lawrence Lipking poses in the preface to *The Life of the Poet*: "How does an aspiring author of verse become a poet? How does a poet, once established, face the challenge of refreshing and deepening his work instead of being content to write the same poem over and over? What is the legacy that a poet leaves?" (viii) Lipking's exemplary poem showing "how a poet is born" is Keats's "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer," through which, according to Lipking, "Keats has found Keats," the supreme fiction of poetic self, "a cipher that stands for the whole of the poet's career" (3, 4).

But the question remains how the poem about reading a translation can be an expression of career-initiation. To Keats, who could not read Greek, the means of "looking into" Homer was only through translation. "Looking into," then, is an accurately modest way of describing Keats's access to Homer. Hitherto all Keats knew of Homer was the rather refined, heroic-couplet version of Alexander Pope,

whom Keats thought a "dismal soul'd" handicraftsman, "swaying about upon a rocking horse, / And thought it Pegasus" ("Sleep and Poetry," 11. 196-97).[1] Thus Keats's first encounter with Chapman's Elizabethan version of Homer offered him an opportunity to show not only a "vivid expression of the emotions of literary discovery"(Finney 1: 122.), but an allegorical representation of an inheritance of literary history and a subversive will to poetic career.

II

Before any further explication of the sonnet's significance in Keats's career, a full quotation of the sonnet is in order:

> Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold,
> And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
> Round many Western islands have I been
> Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.
> Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
> That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne;
> Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
> Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
> Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
> When a new planet swims into his ken;
> Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
> He star'd at the Pacific—and all his men
> Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—
> Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

Marjorie Levinson italicizes hyperbolic adjectives in the first quatrain ("Much"[1],

[1] *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Cambridge: Harvard UP,, 1958). All references to Keats's poems will be to this edition.

"many goodly"[2], "many"[3]) in order to call our attention to the "fulsome claim to literary ease," which undermines "the premise of natural authority and euridition" (12). Surely these extravagant qualifiers make the tone of the poem aggressively authoritative and awkwardly confident. But, before assuming any authorial role, the poem begins by assuming the fictional voice of a Renaissance explorer of the New World, with such deliberately archaic dictions as "realms," "fealty", "demesne" and "ken." This fashioning of original self through archaism/anachronism is parallel to the practice of Keats's two model poets; Spenser, who used archaic diction in *The Faerie Queene* to fashion an authorial self, and more temperamentally akin to Keats, Thomas Chatterton, who created reproductions of medieval texts through his persona, Rowley. Keats's speaker in the poem is more presumptuous and precarious, since the claimed authority comes from directly taking the role not of an author but of an adventurer, imperialist, and opportunist.

The language of the first quatrain, as Carl Woodring points out, denotes "travel westward after 1492," and "the persona half-assumed—more precisely, the persona metaphorically imagined—is a seaman who has gone on voyages of exploration in the New World" (15). The metaphorically imagined seaman and his realms of gold may be merely figurative at the beginning, but they become materially precise at the end as the imperialistic exploration of Mexico/Central America by the Spanish conquistadors takes place.

The "realms of gold", to be sure, metaphorically represent not only the heritage of the Golden Age but also the new world of El Dorado that lured adventurers hungry for both fame and gold. "What animated these adventurers, William and Edmund Burke wrote in "An Account of the European Settlements in America" at the same time that it fixes a stain upon all their characters and designs, is that insatiable thirst of gold, which ever appeared uppermost in all their actions" (Qtd. Woodring 7).

Lawrence Lipking adds another, "more literal" interpretation of the phrase, "realms of gold": "those gold-embossed books into whose interior every reader travels" (7). Not 'every' reader, however, but readers of certain social, economic class enjoy the

privileged possession of and leisurely excursion into that golden realm. Keats never owned any gold-embossed books. The 1616 folio edition of Chapman's Homer, with sumptuously engraved heads of Homer and Chapman in the title pages, that Keats "looked into," was a copy lent to Charles Cowden Clarke by a Mr, Alsager who conducted the money-market department in *The Times* (Charles Cowden and Mary Cowden Clarke 128-29). The folio edition itself was a treasure, "which only a wealthy man could own and only a trusted friend could borrow" (Johnson 6). As the title of the sonnet accurately tells us, Cowden and Keats spent one night not even reading through, but hurriedly "looking into" this golden realm to find "some of the 'famousest' passages, as [they] had scrappily known them in Pope's version" (Clarke 129).

Keats said, "the Genius of Poetry must work out its own salvation in man: it cannot be matured by law & precept, but by sensation & watchfulness in itself" (Letters 1: 374)[2]. "The Genius of Poetry" signals Keats's changing attitude toward the poetic genius and poetic self-fashioning. In this somewhat ambiguously formulated poetics, the poet is not maker of his poem; rather, "the genius of poetry," "that which is creative," creates the poem, and the poem fashions the poet. Keats's emphasis on "sensation & watchfulness" acknowledges his un-patriarchal way of participation, especially in his sonnet writing.

Indeed, the "sensation and watchfulness" are motive power in Keats's "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer." There are three sentences in the sonnet: The first is about visual sensation ("seen"); the second, auditory ("been told" and "heard"); the third, composite of emotion and will ("felt"). Interestingly enough, including the voyeuristic "looking into" of the title, the verbs of sensation in the octave are secretive and passive. He has "seen" (instead of "looking at") many goodly states and kingdoms; he had been "told of" one wide expanse till he "heard" Chapman speak out (instead of "listened to"). The word "then," signals a subtle yet radical

[2] *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Hyder rollins (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1958). All references to Keats's letters will be to this edition.

transformation of the speaker's attitude.

Like a star-gazer who names a newly discovered star, or even more like an adventurous explorer who claims the right of the land he first sighted, the sonnet transforms the passive receptacle of sensation in the octave into the possessive logic of "to see is to have" in the sestet. In the sonnet, the passive and static sensations are transformed through "sensation & watchfulness" into an active and kinetic experience. Although the revelation is full of "wild surmise," the wildness (signifying the romantic freedom from the "law and precept" as well as the distance from the cultured authority) itself makes the discovery all the more exhilarating.

The seventh line in the first draft was as follows: "Yet could I never tell what men could mean." Then, before he made the final draft, Keats substituted "judge" for "tell": "Yet could I never judge what men could mean" (Finney 1: 124). The verb "tell" in the first draft seems to be Keats's direct admission of his lack of Greek language, so Keats thought the line was "bald, and too simply wondering" (Clarke 130). Keats wanted to be bald and show his "wondering" but not "too simply." The changed word "judge" suggests that Keats could not "judge" independently Homer's "demesne," because he had access only to the translation by Pope. The ability to "judge," then, alludes Keats's own faculty of judgment on poetry. 'Judge' is a key-word in Keats's poetic development, as Keats wrote after he published *Endymion*: "I have written independently without Judgement－I may write independently & with judgement hereafter" (Letters 1: 374). The 'judgement' here also refers to the public (dis)approbation of his work, and the emphasis on the judgement reveals Keats's growing concern with the readers' response.

One may have judgement through the contextual understanding of poetry, but in the poetic discourse one cannot have perfect independence. Referring to the rhyming of "demesne" and "mean," Leigh Hunt commented, "there is one incorrect rhyme, which might be easily altered, but which shall serve as a peace-offering to the rhyming-critics" (Qtd. Lewis M. Schwartz 56). Easily or not, Keats altered the seventh line to the present form, making "demesne" rhyme with "serene." As if the

rhyming itself has independent power of composition, the revised seventh line becomes something obtrusive in the rest of the sonnet. The grammatical catachresis "pure serene" along with the evasive verb "breathe" is so artificially constructed as to invite many commentators' effort to find the source from other texts. Of course the word "breathe" suggests the traditional metaphor for poetic inspiration, what Lipking calls inhalation of "poetic oxygen" (7), or in M. H. Abrams' words, "the metaphorical wind of inspiration" (33). Within the specific context of the poem, however, breathing the translation of Homer as "pure serene" makes the respiration not so purely inspirational but filtered through layers of intertextuality and self-reflexivity.

While Keats tried to revise the "incorrect rhyme" words that Hunt pointed out ("demesne" and "mean"), he altered only line 7, from "mean" to "serene," and kept "demesne." Keats's preservation of "demesne," could be significant beyond the level of formal decorum. The principal meaning of "demesne" is "an estate possessed": more specifically, it means "land possessed or occupied by the owner himself, and not held of him by any subordinate tenant" (*OED*). All the previous nouns of territorial designation are culminated in the word "demesne." Homer, as the ruler of his own "demesne," needs and owes no fealty, unlike other rulers of "goodly states" and "kingdoms." The mystified self-sufficiency of Homer justifies Keats's mode of consuming the original through translated intertextuality. In a sense, translation for Keats becomes a transformation of values: from disadvantage to advantage, from want to possession, from mis-appropriated consumption to creative consummation, and from center to margin. Once Keats wrote J. H. Reynolds that he wanted to "feast upon" Homer by not knowing Greek: "I long to feast upon old Homer as we have upon Shakespeare. . . . [I]f you understood Greek, and would read me passages, now and then, explaining their meaning, it would be, from its mistiness, perhaps a greater luxury than reading the thing one's self" (Letters 1: 274). Translative and indirect reading, not reading "the thing one's self," becomes a "feast," a communal consumption and a derivative yet original self-fashioning.

III

Like the bibliophile's treasure, Chapman's Homer, the Parthenon sculptures which Lord Elgin brought to England made Keats write a sonnet reflecting on his poethood. But unlike Chapman's Homer, the Elgin marbles are said to have caused "a most dizzy pain" instead of "a wild surmise." Besides, there is a vexed socio-political history in the transporting of the Elgin marbles to England. Since Lord Elgin brought the marbles from Athens to England after his ambassadorial stay, there has been hot debate over aesthetical, economical, ethical, and political problems concerning the marbles themselves and their transportation.

Benjamin Robert Haydon's remark upon first seeing the marbles is typical of many British artists' unqualified Philhellenism: "I feel as if a divine truth had blazed inwardly upon my mind and I knew that they would at last rouse the art of Europe from its slumber in the darkness" (67). A politically more influential figure than Haydon, however, Richard Payne Knight viewed the marbles less enthusiastically. According to Knight, the marbles are not Greek, but Roman re- productions of the time of Hadrian, hence "second class" of art. Further, "they are so mutilated . . . [that] they are but of little value, except from having been part of the temple" (Theodore Vrettos 179-80; B. F. Cook, 62). After a long and controversial discussion, British government's Select Committee, largely under the influence of Knight, decided to buy the marbles from the financially distressed Elgin for less than half the price he estimated. Lord Elgin's grand total of expenditure was £74,240, but the Select Committee's recommended price was £35,000－the figure named by Lord Aberdeen. Elgin, though greatly disappointed, accepted the offer out of his urgent financial necessity (Clair 250).

More poignant than the debate over the aesthetic and economic status of the marbles were the political and ethical questions concerning the transportation of marbles from Greece. It is Byron who first questioned the validity of making the "grand Saloons of general mart For all the mutilated blocks of art" (1:260). Byron

further satirizes the aesthetic imperialism of the transportation in his contemporary best-seller, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*.

The question became not what class of art were the marbles but "what right had Elgin to remove the precious remains of a weak and proud nation, what right had he to raise his hand against a building that had stood for over two thousand years" (Clair 189). Influenced by Byron's sarcastic view of Elgin and his marbles, many people criticized Elgin's abuse of ambassadorial power to acquire the sculptures from the Parthenon temple, and called Elgin's activity "a very flagrant piece of injustice," "insensate barbarism," "wanton devastation" and "avidity for plunder" (Clair 182). Amidst this socio-political turmoil on the merits/demerits of the Elgin Marbles, Keats went to the British Museum with Haydon, who had argued for official recognition of the authenticity of the marbles, and campaigned for the acquisition of them by the nation.

If Chapman's Homer sonnet is about reading/writing, the Elgin Marble sonnet concerns the poet's being/self-hood. As Keats read Homer in a translated version, he saw the Grecian sculptures translated and mutilated by "the rude Wasting of old Time":

My spirit is too weak—mortality
Weighs heavily on me like unwilling sleep,
And each imagined pinnacle and steep
Of godlike hardship tells me I must die
Like a sick Eagle looking at the sky.
Yet 'tis a gentle luxury to weep
That I have not the cloudy winds to keep
Fresh for the opening of the morning's eye.
Such dim-conceived glories of the brain
Bring round the heart an undescribable feud;
So do these wonders a most dizzy pain,
That mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude
Wasting of old time—with a billowy main—
A sun—a shadow of magnitude.

The figure of "eagle eyes" "with a wild surmise" in Chapman's Homer sonnet has been changed to "a sick eagle" with "a most dizzy pain." The sonnet traditionally has been received as an expression of Keats's "lack of ability to do justice to the subject, every where his own insufficiency," or of "the thought of his inadequacy, the almost comic sense of his limitations" (Gittings 116; Bate 147). But E. B. Murray argues that "the poem was. for Keats, a 'stepping stone' away from self and towards the 'objective poetry' which distinguished him from poets of egotistical sublime because it illustrates his ability to lose himself and his subjective personality in the object he contemplated" (23). Emphasizing also the dramatic aspect of the poem, William Crisman asserts that the sonnet is character study of an observer who is 'too weak' in the sense that he can barely see the Marbles themselves through his own posturing self-inspection" (48).

It is the elusive, almost evasive description of the marbles that made critics uncertain about the nature and identity of the speaker in the poem. The uncertainty of the speaker's attitude is not surprising since the poem's intended object is not *ut pictura poesis*, but expression of "undescribable feud" in the heart. The surprising thing is, however, that no critic has pointed out, or even alluded to the curious suppression/absence of the socio-political context of the Elgin Marbles in the sonnet, the context which was manifested by Byron's "English Bards and Scotch Reviewers," *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (Canto II), and *The Curse of Minerva,* and repeated in many Cartoons, articles, and satirical poems of the contemporary magazines (Clair 187-202).

The mutilated sculptures that Elgin brought to England are the translated text of suppressed and silenced European history. They were originally dedicated to Athena in the fifth century B. C., then later turned into the Christian church, and transformed into a mosque after the Turkish conquest of 1456. In 1687, the Turks ruined the structure of temple when Athens was besieged by Venetian artillery. When, in the early nineteenth-century, Lord Elgin, Ambassador to Turkey, bought the marbles from the Turks and brought them over to England, the marbles were

already the repeatedly ravished "bride of quietness" with their heavily mutilated figures: nose-less faces, face-less heads, and head-less bodies.

It goes without saying, then, that the poem stays in the uneasy gap between the silence and sound in order to describe "an undescribable feud." The poem generates a strange "mingling" of the Grecian grandeur and the observer's identity. In the beginning, the observer is consumed by the object and loses the identity, but in the end the observer consumes the identity of the object in a self-reflective and marginalized way as "a shadow of magnitude." Hence, as Marjorie Levinson notes, "The pronounced weakness of the opening line is the effect of anaesthetic consumption, itself the condition for aesthetic production" (248). The silent gap is filled up with the specular imagination in which the object translucently intermingles with the subject and vice versa.

The desire for the conflation of incompatible contraries such as subject and object, or ideality and reality, is characteristic of Romantic poetry (Andrew Cooper 35), and Keats calls it enigmatically "negative capability," which takes place only "when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason" (Letters 1: 193). The problem of this "negative" formula is that it could mean the "disinterested," sympathetic imagination which William Hazlitt, a literary critic whom Keats admired highly, argued for (1: 1049), but it could also mean the empathic projection which is somewhat similar to what Keats calls "wordsworthian or egotistical sublime" (Letters 1: 397). The speaker in the Elgin Marbles sonnet, consuming and being consumed by the marbles, is and is not, Keats. The result of this doubling is troubled indetermination, or what Friedrich Schlegel called, Romantic irony, in which the subject "hover[s] at the midpoint between the portrayed and the portrayer . . . on the wings of poetic reflection" (174).

IV

Two months after he had composed the Elgin Marbles sonnet, Keats wrote to Haydon, reflecting again on his poetic career: "I am one that gathers samphire[,] dreadful trade, the Cliff of Poesy Towers above me" (Letters 1: 141). This is a direct quotation from *King Lear*. When Edgar leads blind Gloucester to the supposedly "chalky bourn" (4. 6. 58) of the cliff, he describes the scene:

> How fearful
> And dizzy 'tis to cast one's eyes so low!
> The crows and choughs that wing the midway air
> Show scarce so gross as beetles. Halfway down
> Hangs one that gathers samphire, dreadful trade!
> (*King Lear* 4. 6. 11-15)

Samphire is a European plant which grows on rocks of the seaside, and its leaves are used to make pickles. Edgar says that the samphire-gatherer he pretends to see is engaged in a fearful trade since he clings half way down a cliff to earn his living. Keats's allusive linking of himself and the samphire-gatherer is significant in multiple contexts. First of all, though the landscape is the figment of Edgar's imagination, the scene is so real to the blind Gloucester that he throws himself over the imagined cliff to die. The "chalky" cliff is Edgar's "white" lie to act out his father's suicidal wish. The product of imagination in this case is more real and powerful than the reality. In a literal sense, the scene is written by Shakespeare to be read and performed. Thus, Keats's identification of himself with the imaginative character's imagination reveals his way of consuming literary work: a ripened fruit of the labor to be consumed as a materially real thing. Further, the samphire gatherer's labor allegorically represents Keats's own poetic labor hanging on the halfway down "the Cliff of Poesy." Keats's use of the samphire-gatherer as a poetic figure reveals his ambivalent attitude toward his own poetic career, suffering to link

romance and reality, disinterestedness and selfishness, at the risk of falling down into barren desire.

Keats's "On Sitting down to Read King Lear Once Again" is, as he calls it, a "prologue of a Sonnet" at the realization that "Nothing is finer for the purpose of great productions, than a very gradual ripening of the intellectual powers" (Letters 1:214). The poem, pivoting on the central trope in King Lear, "Ripeness is all," evinces Keats's using the sonnet form as a critical device for representing himself standing on a threshold in the process of ripening as well as evaluating that representation:

> O golden-tongued Romance, with serene lute!
> Fair plumed siren, queen of far-away!
> Leave melodizing on this wintry day,
> Shut up thine old pages, and be mute.
> Adieu! for, once again, the fierce dispute
> Betwixt damnation and impassion'd clay
> Must I burn through; once more humbly assay
> The bitter-sweet of this Shakespearean fruit.
> Chief Poet! and ye Clouds of Albion,
> Begetters of our deep eternal theme!
> When through the old oak Forest I am gone,
> Let me not wander in a barren dream:
> But, when I am consumed in a fire,
> Give me new Phoenix wings to fly at my desire.

The sonnet claims that *King Lear* is a tangible and even edible product as "The bitter-sweet of this Shakespearean fruit." Further, it suggests that reading the work "again" is an ingestive process for "a gain" to his ripening as a professional poet. The metaphor of consumption is developed in the final, Shakespearean couplet of this otherwise Petrarchan sonnet, into that of fiery consummation, in which the "sick eagle" in the Elgin Marbles sonnet burns through in order to have "new Phoenix

wings." And as if to show the "furl'd wings" (Letters 2: 323) are extended to fly, the sonnet ends in the Alexandrine line of iambic hexameter.

The final line is stretched thematically as well as metrically. The speaker's "desire," in "to fly at my desire," is a burden not only for the preceding iambic pentameter lines but also to the Phoenix's consummated, disinterested flying. The desire, ambiguously represented as equipment, method, and destination of flying ("at my desire"), makes the whole sonnet's project wishful thinking, dream vision, or "golden tongued romance," to which the poet wants to say good-bye. The "new Phoenix wings," instead of enabling the speaker to fly away, are, to use Keats's own words, "stationing" the desire, so that the poet can see "Beauty on the wing, pounce[s] upon it and gorge[s] it to the producing his essential verse" (qtd. Forman 5: 304).

William Fitzgerald interprets the sonnet as "a deliberate act of self- dedication to a new sense of his poetic task, based on a rejection of romance" (59). While I agree with the first part of Fitzgerald's judgment, I am not so sure about the second part. Of course the first quatrain expresses the desire to leave the world of romance once and for all. The desire, however, remains a desire, and "the farewell to romance," as Patricia Parker remarks, "remains an attempt to say farewell" (167). As for the title of the sonnet itself is about one's desire to get inspiration from reading a Renaissance drama, and the final exertion of will to fly at one's desire is a translated version of romance story. A sonnet about these desires, therefore, is, less a clear-cut "rejection of romance" than a parody of romance in an unexpected poetic form—in other words, a romance writ small.

Even the extended last line of the sonnet recalls the metrical pattern of Spenserian stanza in *The Faerie Queene*, which is the transformation of romance by the heroic mode, and called "heroic romance," or "romantic epic" (Fowler 167). Keats's use of the sonnet form to bid farewell to romance ironically turns out to be a hybridization or re-appropriation of romance, of "old oak Forest" in a lyric form, to produce an anti-sonnet/anti-romance. The whole project of writing sonnets "on" the works of the

golden age and participating in that space comprises a belated literary romance in the age of gold.

As the form of romance writ small, Keats's sonnets of aesthetic experience are essentially allegorical, and can be defined as a form, to use Frederic Jameson's terms derived from Heidegger, "in which the worldness of world reveals or manifests itself, in which, in other words, world in the technical sense of the transcendental horizon of our experience becomes visible in an inner-worldly sense" (167). In a subversive and perverse way, Keats's sonnets on aesthetic experiences hybridize the poetic genres, and allegorize consumptive reading. Keats's sonnet writing self reflexively celebrates capable negativity, the "negative knowledge of the actual world" that confers "art a vantage-point from which it can criticize actuality" (Adorno 160), and self-critically reflects the translative consumption that his sonnets on aesthetic experiences consummate in a finer tone.

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