

“Soft Embalmer of the Still Midnight”: Keats and the Science of Embalming

The *Balm* and *Eastern Odours*, you employ,  
 The Noxious *Vapours* of the *Vault* destroy;  
 You reconcile us to the Things we loath,  
 We feel the *Flesh* is firm, the *Features* smooth;  
 We see, we smell, by e’ry *Sense* we try  
 Your *Skill*, and are no more afraid to *Die*  
 J. Oldmixon<sup>1</sup>

Eighteenth-century writer J. Oldmixon’s contention that the skill of the embalmer makes one “no more afraid to die” finds striking parallel with the pivotal fifth stanza of John Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale” (1819) where, following the slow extinguishing of all the senses, the speaker finds himself in “embalmed darkness,” a state which leads him to declare: “Now more than ever seems it rich to die / To cease upon the midnight with no pain.”<sup>2</sup> Both Oldmixon’s early eighteenth-century tribute to the surgeon-embalmer Thomas Greenhill’s *Nekrokēdeia, or, The Art of Embalming; Wherein is Shewn the Right of Burial, and Funeral Ceremonies, Especially that of Preserving Bodies After the Egyptian Method* (1705), and Keats’s nineteenth-century poem represent embalming as an edifying process that replaces the dread of death with an acceptance of and a desire for, the oblivion of death. These textual echoes draw attention to the numerous references made to embalming in Keats’s poetry both as a process that he understood from his medical training as necessary for the acquisition of anatomical knowledge, and as a means of achieving poetic immortality through textual embalming.

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<sup>1</sup> Oldmixon, J. “To the Ingenious Surgeon Thomas Greenhill.” In *Nekrokēdeia, or, The Art of Embalming; Wherein is Shewn the Right of Burial, and Funeral Ceremonies, Especially that of Preserving Bodies After the Egyptian Method*, by Thomas Greenhill. London: printed in the year 1705.

<sup>2</sup> Keats, John. “Ode to a Nightingale” *Complete Poems*. Ed. Jack Stillinger. Belknap Press of Harvard. 1978. 279-81. 55-56.

The epigraph, a passage from J. Oldmixon's "To the Ingenious Surgeon Thomas Greenhill," is a verse puff for the latter's popular early eighteenth-century text which makes the case that embalming only be performed by surgeons (rather than undertakers). Greenhill's *Nekrokēdeia*, solicits public acceptance of embalming by recounting the history of the practice from medical and religious perspectives. In Oldmixon's poem, the surgeon-embalmer's skills are validated by the community who view his handiwork, and their ability to feel—specifically to feel that corporeal decomposition has been reversed and the body has been restored to life—eliminates their fear of death by making it more aesthetically pleasing. Oldmixon's textual description of the embalming process makes death desirable by eliminating the sensory unpleasantness associated with it, just as in "Ode to a Nightingale" the suspended, embalmed state brought about by the contemplation of the nightingale's immortal song increases the speaker's desire for the richness of death. The evocation of embalming in these two texts, one a lyric ode, the other a verse endorsement of a medical-historical text on embalming, sheds new light on the ways in which this method of preservation often functions in Keats's poetry not as a mode of transcending the corporeal—the "life of Sensations"—but instead makes known, via the study of anatomy, the very material conditions and neural pathways which produce those sensations. In so doing Keats asserts the affectivity of the poetic form, or rather, the peculiar ability a poem has to make felt what is no longer present.

The theme of material, bodily, preservation is made most explicit in the aforementioned "Ode to a Nightingale" as well as in Keats's experimental sonnet "Sonnet to Sleep" (1819), which figures sleep as an embalmer tending to the restless, consciousness-plagued speaker who begs to be put to sleep. Indeed, this practice is alluded to throughout Keats's corpus, including in

“Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil” (1820), where the eponymous heroine embalms her lover Lorenzo’s decapitated head with her tears in an affective, albeit unconventional, act of embalming. The inadequacy of Lorenzo’s burial is alluded to when Keats writes, “young Lorenzo in warm Indian clove / was *not* embalm’d” but later notes that “the truth is not the less.”<sup>3</sup> Isabella’s later discovery of Lorenzo’s “forest tomb” and actions of exhuming his head and carefully combing his hair and washing the soil from “each eye’s sepulchral cell” strongly recall the actions of an embalmer preparing a corpse.<sup>4</sup> The head subsequently gets wrapped in a “silken scarf” that is “sweet with the dews / Of precious flowers pluck’d in Araby.”<sup>5</sup> The flower essences recall the “Eastern balms” of Oldmixon’s poem and the association that both poets make of embalming spices with the east serve as a reminder of British Empire’s acquisition of Egyptian mummies and the resulting cultural fascination with the process of embalming practices by this ancient culture in addition to medical associations with embalming. The pot of basil in which she entombs her lover further strengthens this connection to the death traditions of ancient Egypt, as basil was an embalming herb.

There are also indirect references made to embalming in Keats’s poetic romance *Endymion* (1818). Even the famous opening declaration of the immortality of “A thing of beauty” that only increases in loveliness with the passage of time can be read as implicitly engaging with the scientific and social discourses surrounding the preservation of the dead

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<sup>3</sup> John Keats. “Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil.” *Complete Poems*. Ed. Jack Stillinger. Belknap Press of Harvard. 1978. 187.101-102

<sup>4</sup> John Keats. “Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil.” *Complete Poems*. Ed. Jack Stillinger. Belknap Press of Harvard. 1978. 187: 275 and 196: 404.

<sup>5</sup> John Keats. “Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil.” *Complete Poems*. Ed. Jack Stillinger. Belknap Press of Harvard. 1978. 196: 409-410.

through embalming in the latter half of the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> As a scientific and aesthetic object the embalmed corpse is a “thing a beauty”, an object not subject to decay, a commodity whose value, it seems, increases as the years pass insofar as the longer the corpse remains intact.

While most critics agree that the sensual steeping of the body with aromatics is a central feature of Keats’s poetry, and is often accompanied by deathly overtones and Keats’s relationship to medicine has been widely documented in critical studies, none have probed this relationship between sensuality and preservation or expressly linked Keats’s medical training to the anatomical spectacle of the embalmed body.<sup>7</sup> As a medical student at Guy’s Hospital in the era of body snatching, Keats would have taken anatomy classes that used techniques of embalming in order to preserve specimens for dissection and display developed by John and William Hunter. In fact, Keats’s mentor, the famed surgeon Astley Cooper, was once a student of John Hunter. Additionally, Keats, as part of the radical dissenting network of Guy’s Hospital, would have had access to the work of the Hunters and their nephew, Matthew Baillie, who refined some of the Hunters’ embalming techniques.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> John Keats, “Endymion: A Poetic Romance.” *Complete Poems*. Ed. Jack Stillinger. Belknap Press of Harvard. 1978. 65: 1.

<sup>7</sup> For more on the sensual steeping of the body in “Ode to A Nightingale” see Helen Vendler, *The Odes of John Keats*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1983. For more on Keats’s relationship to medicine see: Stuart Sperry. *Keats the Poet*. Princeton U.P. 1973; Donald C. Goellnicht, *The Poet-Physician: Keats and Medical Science* U. Pittsburg Press, 1984; Hermione de Almeida. *Romantic Medicine and John Keats*, Oxford U.P., 1991. More recent studies include: R.S. White. *John Keats: A Literary Life*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010; Hrileena Ghosh. *John Keats’ Medical Notebook: Text, Context & Poems*. Liverpool UP, 2020; John Barnard. “The Busy Time”: Keats’s Duties at Guy’s Hospital from Autumn 1816 to March 1817” *Romanticism* 13.3 (October 2007): 199--218.

<sup>8</sup> For more on the radical dissenting network see Alan Richardson, *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind*. Cambridge U.P, 2001. 116-17.

In addition to his medical training, Keats would have become familiar with ancient Egyptian practice of bodily preservation through his trips to the British Museum, where he would have encountered mummies, among other artifacts. He also might have heard of the popular display featuring the embalmed corpse of Mrs. Martin Van Butchell, the wife of an eccentric dentist who commissioned William Hunter to preserve her body after death. Mrs. Van Butchell's corpse was later displayed at the Hunterian Museum and then the Royal College of Surgeons. Embalming was also frequently referenced in accounts of the funeral of Princess Charlotte Augusta following her death in childbirth in November in 1817, which were widely published in London-based periodicals read by Keats. Considering these facts, this essay argues that the knowledge that Keats gained of the process of embalming during his time at Guy's Hospital, as well as the cultural attitudes regarding this practice, deeply informs his *poiesis*, providing a model of poem-making rooted in the empirical experimentation of British anatomists during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Keats develops the idea of a poem as an object whose value is dependent upon the ability to preserve, in some form or another, the life of the poet.<sup>9</sup>

An embalmed body, drained of blood and infused with fragrant spices, no longer registers the sensations of affect, yet in the transformation from thinking, feeling, organism to artificially preserved object, the corporeal form retains the ability to be affecting, although it is no longer capable of internally registering experiential states of being. An object of contention in the medical and philosophical debates concerning the immateriality of the soul, and a source of

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<sup>9</sup> For a thorough account of Romanticism and the practice of writing for posterity see Andrew Bennett's *Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity*. Cambridge UP, 1999.

public anxiety and fascination regarding the care and disposal of the dead (particularly royal personages like Princess Charlotte), the embalmed body becomes a central figure and trope in the discursive fields of medicine, literary culture, and dissenting politics in England from the eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century.

The improvement of methods of preserving the dead during the latter part of the eighteenth century, as Erin Goss has suggestively argued, associate embalming with the perfection of scientific knowledge.<sup>10</sup> In his 1803 “On the Embalming of Dead Bodies” Baillie writes: “When anatomy...had attained a considerable degree of perfection, and anatomists had advanced somewhat in the art of making preparations, it is highly probable that they would attempt to embalm dead bodies.”<sup>11</sup> For Baillie, embalming is intimately linked not only with the acquisition of knowledge of the human body but also with the perfection of that knowledge. His description of the preparation of a corpse as an “art”, an act which requires considerable thought and skill, aligns him with surgeons like Greenhill who sought to valorize the practice. Baillie also describes how the eighteenth-century Dutch anatomist Frederik Ruysch prepared dead bodies. He writes of how the process of embalming transformed the bodies so “that they seemed rather to be asleep than without life, and to have preserved them in this state.”<sup>12</sup> The reference to Ruysch further aligns bodily preservation with the creation of a beautiful object since Ruysch

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<sup>10</sup> Erin Goss. *Revealing Bodies: Anatomy, Allegory, and the Grounds of Knowledge in the Long Eighteenth Century*. Bucknell U.P, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew Baillie. ““On the Embalming of Dead Bodies.” *Transactions of a Society for the Improvement of Medical and Chirurgical Knowledge* 3 (1812): 12.

<sup>12</sup> “On the Embalming of Dead Bodies.” *Transactions of a Society for the Improvement of Medical and Chirurgical Knowledge* 3 (1812): 12.

often arranged his specimens artfully, so that the skeletons or embalmed objects like fetuses or bladders appeared in his preparations alongside embalmed flowers or plant life. For example, in one of Ruysch's specimens two fetal skeletons are holding handkerchiefs crafted from human membranes sitting on a log in a woodland setting. Baillie's observation that the embalmed body gives the appearance that the person is asleep, not dead, connects the perfection of scientific knowledge with the preservation of life, and of a specific state of consciousness. Advancements in the art of preserving the dead could serve to further attachment the bereaved feels towards the corporal form of the deceased. The bereaved then come to view their lifeless bodies not as a reminder of life's transience and the body's susceptibility to decay, but as objects of affection.

In his training as a surgeon, Keats would have encountered putrid corpses as well as human specimens embalmed in jars. "Sonnet to Sleep" (1819) reflects the advances in medicine that have made it possible to preserve the body as well as the shifting perceptions of the dead. The poem is addressed to sleep, who is figured as an embalmer, responsible for the preservation of the corpse. The first quatrain describes the task of the embalmer who begins his task by closing the eyes of the deceased. The eyes of the dead are "gloom-pleased" suggesting that a kind of pleasure is found in darkness and sorrow. Although the poem does not mention flowers, the word "embower'd" that Keats uses to describe the retreat from consciousness that sleep brings is suggestive of being wreathed or surrounded by foliage.<sup>13</sup> Keats is known for his lush bowers, the most famous of which appears in the fifth stanza of "Ode to a Nightingale" written only a month after "To Sleep" (composed April 1819). In "Ode to a Nightingale" the speaker is

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<sup>13</sup> John Keats. "Sonnet To Sleep" *Complete Poems*. Ed. Jack Stillinger. Belknap Press of Harvard. 1978. 275: 3.

similarly enveloped in a sightless state, declaring, “I cannot see what flowers are at my feet, / Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs, / But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet / Wherewith the seasonable month endows.”<sup>14</sup> The presence of flowers that cannot be seen but whose odor can be perceived calls to mind an embalmed corpse, its cavities stuffed with spices, which are not visible to the mourners but which serve to mask the odor of decay. The suspension of the speaker in “embalmed darkness” could be interpreted as darkness which has been steeped in sweet fragrance by unseen flowers, rather than a literal embalming. However, the declaration in the following stanza that “Now more than ever seems it rich to die, / To cease upon the midnight with no pain”<sup>15</sup> foregrounds the presence of death. In both poems the embower’d speakers are less like the detached limbs and heads suspended in the embalming liquid in the Hunterian Museum, and more like the art objects of Ruysch’s preparations.

In contrast to contemporary views of surgeons that allied them with body snatchers and butchers, Keats’s surgeon, Sleep, in “Sonnet to Sleep” is “careful” and “benign.”<sup>16</sup> Even the association of sleep with an embalmer serves to ease the anxiety surrounding the process of preservation. The poetic speaker has such faith in the embalmer that he gives him the power to close his “willing eyes” at any time, even if it is “in the midst of this thine hymn.”<sup>17</sup> That the power to control when the poem ends is surrendered to Sleep, connects the process of embalming to poetic composition. This is furthered when the speaker implores Sleep to close the eyes before

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<sup>14</sup> John Keats. “Ode to a Nightingale” *Complete Poems*. Ed. Jack Stillinger. Belknap Press of Harvard. 1978. 280: 41-44.

<sup>15</sup> John Keats. “Ode to a Nightingale” *Complete Poems*. Ed. Jack Stillinger. Belknap Press of Harvard. 1978. 281: 55-56.

<sup>16</sup> John Keats. “Sonnet To Sleep” *Complete Poems*. Ed. Jack Stillinger. Belknap Press of Harvard. 1978. 275: 2.

<sup>17</sup> John Keats. “Sonnet To Sleep” *Complete Poems*. Ed. Jack Stillinger. Belknap Press of Harvard. 1978. 275: 6-7.



the poppy wreaths the speaker's head with "its lulling charities."<sup>18</sup> Here Keats is making an important distinction between a sleep which preserves thoughts from decay and the kind of distorting hallucinogenic sleep that opium brings. The speaker implores Sleep to "save" him from "curious conscience" or else the "passed day will rise."<sup>19</sup> Here "save" could suggest an escape from consciousness or the speaker's plea could be coaxing Sleep to continue the process of embalming. "Save me" could be literally read as "preserve my body" or "keep me" from the past which threatens to corrupt or contaminate. If the body is not embalmed, decay will set in, just as if sleep does not carefully shut the eyes of the poetic speaker, thoughts from yesterday will "rise" on the poetic speaker's pillow, "breeding many woes."<sup>20</sup> Consciousness here is figured as a kind of disease, reproducing sorrow by infecting the air. The only thing which prevents these thoughts of woe from becoming airborne is if Sleep tightly seals the body and thus prevents consciousness from harmful thoughts.

What the speaker desires is not oblivion but to be preserved in sleep and kept safe from contagion. Consciousness is "burrowing like the mole" in the poem, suggesting an unearthing of the poetic speaker's body, which has been carefully preserved by sleep.<sup>21</sup> The final two lines of the poem re-emphasize Sleep's role: to embalm, to preserve the poetic speaker from oblivion by turning the key and thereby to "seal the hushed casket of [the] soul."<sup>22</sup> Here the body becomes a casket or container for the soul, suggesting that the soul does not leave the body after death but instead preserves it. Sleep, in his role as embalmer, must "seal" the corporeal casket that contains

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<sup>18</sup> John Keats. "Sonnet To Sleep" *Complete Poems*. Ed. Jack Stillinger. Belknap Press of Harvard. 1978. 275: 7-8.

<sup>19</sup> John Keats. "Sonnet To Sleep" *Complete Poems*. Ed. Jack Stillinger. Belknap Press of Harvard. 1978. 275: 9-10.

<sup>20</sup> John Keats. "Sonnet To Sleep" *Complete Poems*. Ed. Jack Stillinger. Belknap Press of Harvard. 1978. 275: 11.

<sup>21</sup> John Keats. "Sonnet To Sleep" *Complete Poems*. Ed. Jack Stillinger. Belknap Press of Harvard. 1978. 275: 12

<sup>22</sup> John Keats. "Sonnet To Sleep" *Complete Poems*. Ed. Jack Stillinger. Belknap Press of Harvard. 1978. 275: 13-14.

the soul, just as an embalmer must seal the cavities of the body to complete the embalming process. Baillie also describes how this is done with a powder “composed of camphor, resin, and niter [chemical compound for potassium nitrate].”<sup>23</sup> As in Keats’s poem the eyes receive special attention in Baillie’s embalming process. He describes how: “the humours of the eyes are also let out, so that the eyes sink back into the sockets. Some powder is to be placed between the eyes and the eyelids, and the two eyelids are to be brought in contact with each other.”<sup>24</sup> In this particular embalming process the eyes are essentially destroyed and carefully sealed, just as Sleep deliberately closes the eyes of the speaker, echoing Isabella’s careful tending of Lorenzo’s eyes in Keats’s earlier work. The similarities in the ways that the eyes are treated in the embalming process and the ways that Keats describes them are indicative of his interest in aestheticizing and poetically representing the embalming process.

If as Baillie suggests, the carefully embalmed body represents the culmination of anatomical knowledge to an almost perfect level, then Keats uses the process of embalming as a means through which he strives for poetic immortality. The embalmed speaker in “Ode to a Nightingale” feels no pain and has transcended into an immortal realm and it is the sensuousness of the poem’s imagery that has precipitated the ambiguous, contingent, disembodied state between waking and dreaming. The final lines of the poem: “Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?” attest to the interrelation between idealism and materiality in the poem and in Keats’s

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<sup>23</sup> Matthew Baillie. “On the Embalming of Dead Bodies.” *Transactions of a Society for the Improvement of Medical and Chirurgical Knowledge* 3 (1812): 15-16.

<sup>24</sup> Matthew Baillie. “On the Embalming of Dead Bodies.” *Transactions of a Society for the Improvement of Medical and Chirurgical Knowledge* 3 (1812): 16.

larger corpus.<sup>25</sup> Like Oldmixon's poem which endorses the skill of the embalmer by *feeling* the life of an object that no longer possesses the vital principle which animates the human form, Keats's accomplishments as a poet are realized in his ability to fool the senses, to give the appearance of life to something that no longer contains it. In this sense, Keats's poetry gives its subjects posthumous life through scientific and affective modes of knowing.

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<sup>25</sup> John Keats. "Ode to A Nightingale." *Complete Poems*. Ed. Jack Stillinger. Belknap Press of Harvard. 1978. 281. 80.

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