

# The Muse in Chains: Keats, Dürer, and the Politics of Form

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With that, Medusa's ugly head he drew,  
His owne reversed. Forthwith, Atlas grew  
Into a Mountaine equall to the man.

—George Sandys's translation  
of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

## I

"If by Dull Rhymes" is one of the last sonnets Keats ever composed, and by critical consensus one of the most stylistically anomalous. Taken together, the three that followed in June, October, and November of 1819 constituted a return to traditional forms: "The House of Mourning" is roughly Petrarchan, and both "The Day Is Gone" and "I Cry Your Mercy, Pity, Love" are programmatically Shakespearean. If the form of these sonnets is conventional, their internal dynamics are anything but. The poems are syntactically garbled; they read like catalogues and lend the impression of being written rapidly and carelessly. The last sonnets strain at the edge of sense and indicate that by this time in his career Keats had exhausted the sonnet as a vehicle for expressing coherent poetic meaning. Indeed, they echo the free style of Keats's letters; one feels that the speaker of his earlier works has given way to the poet himself, who now speaks *in propria persona*.

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“If by Dull Rhymes,” one of Keats’s most carefully wrought and least-inspected sonnets, appears to function in precisely the opposite way. What emerges inside this sonnet is strictly controlled and arranged. Havoc is wreaked instead on its rhyme scheme, where the poet teases us with echoes of the Petrarchan and Shakespearean forms only to confound our expectations by jumbling the end rhymes into a slyly subversive nonpattern:

If by dull rhymes our English must be chain’d,  
 And, like Andromeda, the sonnet sweet  
 Fetter’d, in spite of pained loveliness;  
 Let us find out, if we must be constrain’d,  
 Sandals more interwoven and complete  
 To fit the naked foot of Poesy;  
 Let us inspect the lyre, and weigh the stress  
 Of every chord, and see what may be gain’d  
 By ear industrious, and attention meet;  
 Misers of sound and syllable, no less  
 Than Midas of his coinage, let us be  
 Jealous of dead leaves in the bay wreath crown;  
 So, if we may not let the muse be free,  
 She will be bound with garlands of her own.<sup>1</sup>

If we are anticipating Wordsworth’s comfortable “pastime,” the peaceful and reassuring space of “brief solace” that he delineates in his own manifesto on sonnets, “Nuns Fret Not” (1807; lines 10, 14), we will be sorely disappointed here. Where Wordsworth describes a happy capitulation to the sonnet form (even naturalizing its artificial structure by alluding to the bees in their “foxglove bells” [line 7]), Keats attempts to write his way out of the sonnet, as if it was indeed the prison Wordsworth so blithely denies it to be. Where Wordsworth retires to “the Sonnet’s scanty plot of ground” (line 11) as if it were a cottage or the peaceful confines of an English garden, Keats is far more ambivalent about the prospects of poetic structure. He appears to take up the sonnet only grudgingly (“If by dull rhymes our English *must* be chain’d” [italics mine]) and advocates experimentation and hard work. His rhyme scheme, *abcabdcabcdede*, is purposefully muddled, promising a Shakespearean beginning and a Petrarchan end, but deceiving us in both instances. The *abc* rhymes chase each other down the edge of the poem but never really amount to anything. The Shakespearean *f* and *g* rhymes are abandoned, and the concluding two lines confuse rather than sum up or enlighten. In fact, if we are looking for reassurance at line’s end, we will seldom find it.

Most of the sonnet's excitement happens inside and involves internal rhymes, half rhymes, echoings, alliteration, assonance, and consonance. The poem works by subtle similarities of sound, rather than by formal, "chiming" rhyme.<sup>2</sup>

What is interesting about the sonnet's critical history is the extent to which—guided by Keats's own gloss of the poem<sup>3</sup> in his letter to his brother George—readers have focused exclusively on the poem's technical experimentation and have embraced the line of criticism I have sketched above. Mesmerized by its form, they have consistently overlooked the poem's content, in particular its somber intimations of bondage, repression, and sadomasochism.<sup>4</sup> No one, to my knowledge, has considered the sublimation at work in the sonnet or its subtle claims for patriarchal control, nor have critics remarked its fetishization or its tacit insistence that inspiration derives from feminine bondage (a clear parallel here is the treatment of Oothoon in Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*).<sup>5</sup> If one of the prominent tropes in the sonnet concerns the body (the English language and the sonnet form are both figured as female), then a corresponding metaphor involves disfigurement. The sonnet, we learn, is like Andromeda who is "sweet / Fetter'd, in spite of pained loveliness" (lines 2-3). The speaker of the poem, in fact, becomes a disciplinarian—though by his own admission, a reluctant one—concerned with reforming the sonnet by subjecting it to a severe regimen of verbal exercise.

In the inspection of sound and syllable, then, the critic is discouraged from noting or investigating the progress of euphemism in the sonnet: the fact that "chain[s]" (line 1) turn into "fetter[s]" (line 3) then into "[s]andals" (line 5), and finally into "garlands" (line 14). Moreover, the smoke screen of technique conceals Keats's selective use of the Perseus myth, his permanent binding of Andromeda to the rocks (she is never rescued), and his careful elision of the myth's hero. The sonnet's seductive self-consciousness also dissuades us from inquiring about why Andromeda and Midas are included in the first place and what the rest of their peculiar histories might tell us about their presence here in a sonnet about sonnets, about artifice and form. Most of all, the poet's focus on technique prevents our interrogation of the last two lines, with their odd sense of displacement. How is it that the muse ends up binding herself? What has happened to the myth of Andromeda?

Clearly, there is a disturbing psychology at work in the poem's thematic investment—as well as in its distribution of images and metaphors—that calls for "attention meet." As I hope to show, the true character of this sonnet is most clearly revealed not through

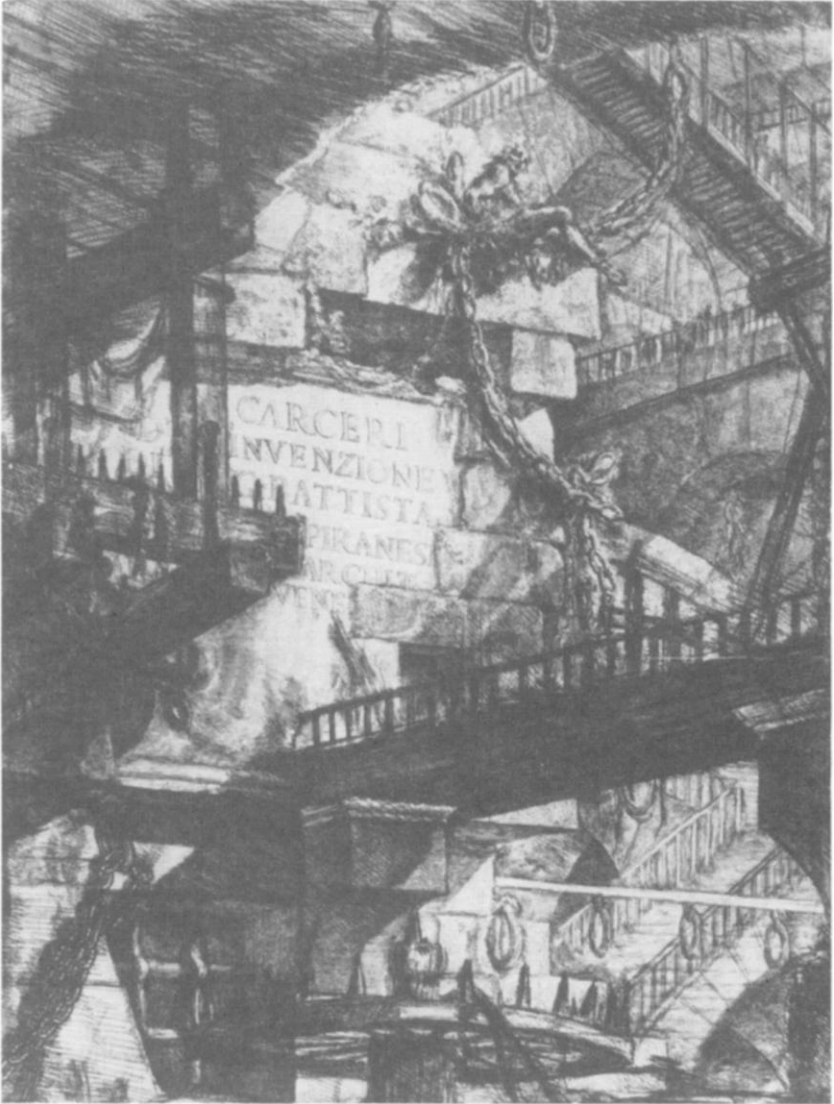


Figure 1. Piranesi, *Carceri*  
(Title Plate and first in a series of 14 etchings)

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City of New York

its form but through the battle of its two language systems: the language of rational control and inspection, a language redolent of Foucault's analysis of panopticism in *Discipline and Punish*,<sup>6</sup> and the thinly veiled language of distressed sexuality, a language of binding and sadism perhaps best exemplified in a visual representation of a similar theme, Albrecht Dürer's etching *Man Drawing a Reclining Woman* (1525). One level of the poem insists on a specific disciplinary decorum and on tradition ("our English" [line 1]), the other on desire and sexual taboo. To understand the sonnet's content we must employ both Foucault's incisive analysis of power and Dürer's study of scientific inquiry and gender roles.

## II

In articulating his notion of "panopticism," Foucault discovers a series of subtle connections between the architecture of Bentham's design for the Panopticon and the workings of power. He argues that implicit in the geometry of the Panopticon is an entire politics of space, a politics that depends on the subtle workings of surveillance and control. Individuals are isolated, caged, and uniformly observed: "Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (p. 201). To this end, the inmate becomes an object of observation and study, a "case." And this is where the discourse of the prison begins to shade into the discourse of the laboratory: "It is as if investigation and punishment had become mixed" (p. 41). The inmate becomes both a criminal and an "object of knowledge," a subject under reform and an object under investigation. But the inmate is never certain that he is being observed, nor is he certain who is performing the observation/investigation. The architecture of the Panopticon ensures the anonymity of power, its "automizat[ion]" and "disindividualiz[ation]" (p. 202).

If the Panopticon functions as "a kind of laboratory of power" (p. 204), it is not the case, as we might suspect, that this power is strictly hierarchical or unidirectional. The genius of the Panopticon, as Foucault sees it, lies not only in its administrative facility—the pragmatics of its geometry—but in its tendency to inscribe its own mechanism onto the consciousness of the inmate. Thus, inmates are "caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers" (p. 201); they enact and embody "the principle of [their] own subjection" (p. 203). Individuals are persuaded by the ideology of panopticism to observe themselves, to meditate on their own crimes and correct them. This sort of subtle dynamic of self-policing is also apparent in the high degree of self-consciousness intrinsic to the Panopticon's design. As

Foucault writes, "The Panopticon may even provide an apparatus for supervising its own mechanisms" (p. 204). The employees and the supervisors become themselves the subjects of monitoring and inspection; even the director of the prison does not escape scrutiny "enclosed as he is in the middle of this architectural mechanism" (p. 204). Power, then, permeates all levels of the Panopticon, subtly informing each relationship within its system.

In addition to the establishment of a space that acts both to reform and to investigate, panopticism, according to Foucault, "defines a procedure of subordination of bodies and forces that must increase the utility of power while practising the economy of the prince" (p. 208). Thus, panopticism "increase[s] the possible utility of individuals" (p. 210); it encourages useful projects and output as well as the aptitudes of inmates. What Foucault calls "the discipline-mechanism" (p. 209), then, is in reality a means of turning the laboratory of power, "the cruel, ingenious cage" (p. 205) into a workshop, a place not merely of brutal subjection but of increased productivity. In order to extract the most usefulness from the inmates, panopticism must establish "time-tables, collective training, exercises, total and detailed surveillance" (p. 220). In sum, the "disciplinary technology," caught up as it is in "perpetual assessment and classification" (p. 220), is composed of important procedures of control, procedures that not only inspect and weigh but also instruct and guide.

The discourse of the prison here begins to resemble (or appropriate) yet another discourse—that of the school. The prisoner is not only observed and investigated, but trained, examined—taught. Such a generic elusiveness may be what Foucault means when he speaks of "the swarming of disciplinary mechanisms" (p. 211). By his own admission, Foucault sees panopticism as a flexible concept, "polyvalent in its applications" (p. 205) and capable of being "transferred and adapted" (p. 211). As a model, the Panopticon is suggestive of the way other institutions operate; it adumbrates the instruments and modes of power and the ways in which power intervenes in governing and shaping the individual. Foucault ends his section with a rhetorical question: "Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?" (p. 228). We begin our own investigation by adding one more institution to the list—the sonnet (Figure 1).

### III

"If by Dull Rhymes," with its language of fetters and binding, its own peculiar "political anatomy," is a sonnet that explores the genre's close affiliation with the prison-house. As Wordsworth

repeatedly notes through the images of his own reactionary treatise, the sonnet is itself an enclosure, in Foucault's terms "a place heterogeneous to all others and closed in upon itself" (p. 141). In its strict patterns of rhyme, its highly prescribed form, its requisite partitioning of lines and syllables, the sonnet is architecturally analogous to the Panopticon: "It is the protected place of disciplinary monotony" (p. 141). Not only is every aspect of the sonnet constrained by the tacit rules of the genre, but those who would employ these rules are situated within the grand Panopticon of tradition, subject to and subject of those absent wardens whose gazes remain inscribed within its disciplinary machinery: Sidney, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton, not to mention Wordsworth. Keats was perhaps more conscious of this burden than other poets in his own crafting of the sonnet.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, his ambivalence about being imprisoned in the sonnet is apparent in his reluctant adoption of the form and his attempts to refashion it from within. In one sense, Keats's poetics—his masterful rearrangement of the sonnet's interior space—reflect his own writhings within the chains of tradition. These internal dynamics constitute his attempts at creative expression, his scribbles on the walls of the prison-house.

There are, of course, numerous other echoes of the Panopticon's structure in "If by Dull Rhymes." The sonnet perfectly replicates the self-conscious nature of the Panopticon. Not only does it "provide [the] apparatus for supervising its own mechanisms" (p. 204), but its self-reflection is doubled by Keats's accompanying remarks in his letter (see note 3) and by Monckton Milnes's later act of entitling (he calls it "On the Sonnet" in his 1848 edition of Keats's poems). Given this context, the sonnet's self-consciousness is in fact almost parodically overdetermined: Monckton Milnes supervises Keats who oversees the speaker who investigates the sonnet investigating itself. No one is free from surveillance in this sonnet, least of all this critic, who finds himself at a fearfully postmodern remove (his own meditations on the sonnet monitored by editors, referees, and tenure reviewers).

Less obviously, and perhaps more interestingly, "If by Dull Rhymes" investigates the subtle links between the various discourses that Foucault is so instrumental in unveiling. Allusions to the laboratory and the school hover just below the surface of the sonnet and force us continually to reevaluate its dominant metaphor of the prison.<sup>8</sup> The more closely we examine it, the more clearly "If by Dull Rhymes" reveals a space of rational inquiry and investigation as well as a rhetoric of instruction and reform. Like the Panopticon, "which could be used as a machine to carry

out experiments, to alter behaviour, to train or correct individuals" (p. 203), Keats's sonnet becomes a laboratory wherein the speaker brings to bear the discourse of investigation. He determines to "find out" new means of rhyming, to "inspect" the interstices of the form, and to "weigh" its sounding parts. The "attention meet" he focuses on the sonnet is that of the scientist with his microscope or the surgeon in a Thomas Eakins canvas probing with his scalpel into the anatomy of the body.

At the same time, of course, the speaker sets out to promote his unique version of the sonnet as a new and worthy type, to alter and reform the existing structure for his own purposes. Thus, his project is at once punitive, investigative, and didactic: he explores the form both by radically disfiguring it and by prescribing the very method that he is carrying out. The speaker appears simultaneously to fulfill a number of different roles, among them investigator/scientist, teacher, prisoner, and guard (not to mention voyeur). In this way, the poem emerges as a locus of at least three distinct discourses of knowledge. To take up Foucault's language, it represents a vortex where the various "swarming disciplines" collide and interpenetrate.

If the poet is the prisoner of the sonnet form, he is also its warden. Andromeda represents both a figure for the poet/speaker's condition and an outlet for his frustrated state, his enfeebling beholdenness to tradition. She exists as the poem's most overt spectacle of punishment and her body serves as the location for the ritual enactment of the sonnet tradition's power. Andromeda's body must be sacrificed if the speaker is to carry out his experiment with form. In this respect, the absence of Perseus is telling; the speaker banishes him from the poem, usurps his role, and appropriates Andromeda for himself. In this skillful, if decidedly selective rewriting of the myth, it is crucial that she remain captive, that she not be rescued, so that the speaker can displace his own embattled and bound condition onto her.<sup>9</sup> Both Andromeda and the English language are thus transformed into "objects of knowledge" (p. 28), that is, they become prisoners themselves and convenient surrogates for the speaker's own feelings of objectification and victimization.

In the steadily evolving language of euphemism in the poem, this displacement allows the speaker to obscure the process of binding, asking us to believe that the language itself is in chains rather than the speaker. Keats's own status as a belated poet under the powerful eye of the sonnet tradition is thereby meliorated by being abstracted and projected onto the English language, which is figured as feminine. The final act of euphemism



and displacement occurs not—as we might suspect—at the end, where the muse binds herself, but in the sonnet’s suppression of Medusa, whose name is echoed in “muse” (line 13) but never consciously summoned. She is the figure of ultimate violence and horror and underlies all the sonnet’s other euphemisms. It is her sadistic punishment, her own brutal decapitation at the hands of Perseus, that symbolizes a mutilation far more terrifying than that of Andromeda’s chains. Trapped as she is in the prison of her cave, Medusa is Foucault’s “case,” his prisoner par excellence. The difference, of course, is that she throws the panoptic gaze back at the male viewer, paralyzing him. Until Perseus cunningly dupes her (through the careful manipulation of his shield-mirror), Medusa represents the complete and horrifying inversion of the disciplinary mechanism embodied in the Panopticon—the prisoner transfixing and binding the warden.

Significantly, just as it is the list of fetishized objects—the sandals, the lyre, and the bay wreath crown—that embody the institution of “Poetry” in the sonnet and empower the poet, it is the apotropaic fetish of Medusa’s head that empowers Perseus and allows him to rescue Andromeda from the dragon and cement his subsequent reputation as a hero. Small wonder, then, that Medusa must be suppressed and silenced; the power harnessed from her disfigured body fuels the speaker-as-Perseus’s creative energy. In the light of this analysis, the speaker’s portrayal of himself as a reluctant disciplinarian (a penitent Perseus) comes to seem somewhat disingenuous. He complains of the sonnet’s fettering form, yet remains essentially complicit with the power of the institution: notice there is never a suggestion that we abandon the sonnet form altogether. The speaker’s oddly genteel use of the royal “we” (and the word “may” in the sonnet’s penultimate line) only confirms his pose as a reluctant disciplinarian. Keats’s persona launches a critique of the sonnet form, but he does so as an “insider,” as someone with privileged access to the sonnet canon.

There is an additional aspect of panopticism that we must examine before moving on to Dürer. One of the salient features of Bentham’s system is its simultaneous insistence upon discipline and utility. The rhetoric of the Panopticon conspires with that of the workplace. In fact, as Foucault suggests, the Panopticon encourages maximum productivity by its strict schedules and timetables. If there is a covert message in “If by dull rhymes” it is that the inspiration for the new sonnet comes from containment and from binding; to adopt the slogan of the fitness club industry: “no pain, no gain.”<sup>10</sup> Like Andromeda and the English language, the sonnet is “sweet / Fetter’d” (lines 2-3), and there is much to be

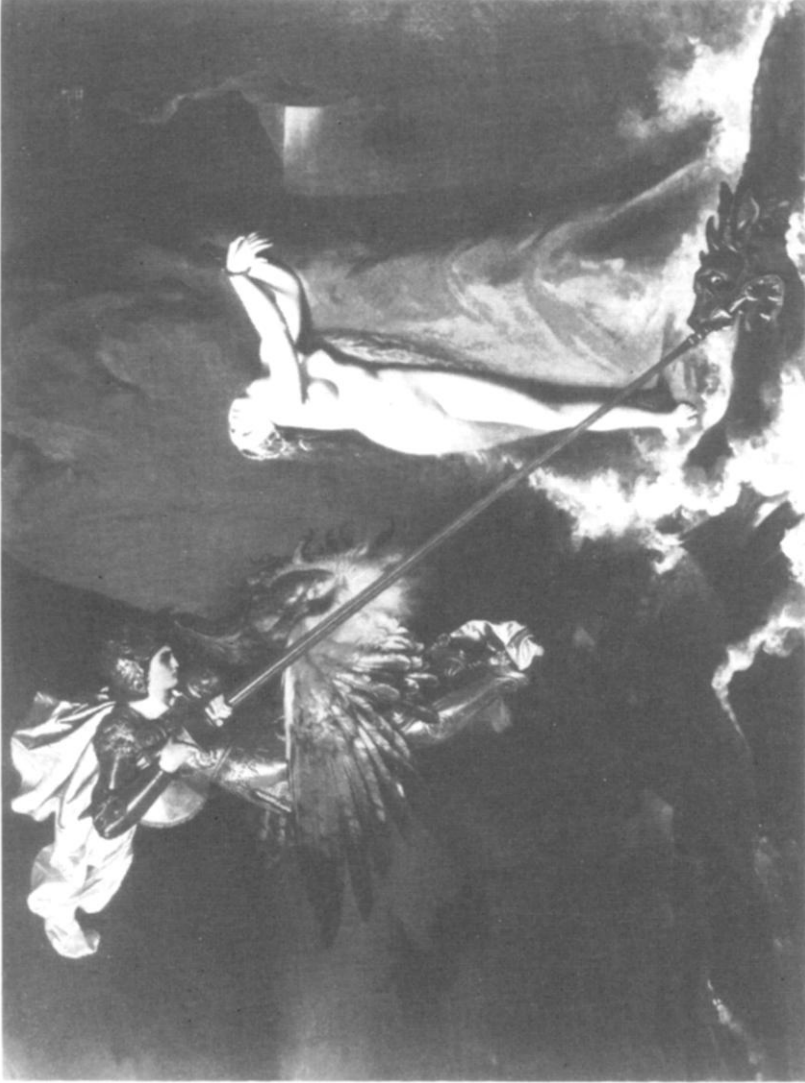


Figure 2. Ingres's *Ruggiero Freeing Angelica*

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“gain’d” (line 8) from the lovely torture of her vowels and chords; indeed, the sonnet’s existence absolutely depends on it. By the end of the sonnet, the muse is “bound with garlands of her own” (line 14), tying herself up for the eager gaze of the voyeur/poet. We see the visual equivalent of this kind of verbal disfigurement in Ingres’s painting *Ruggiero Freeing Angelica* (composed, like Keats’s sonnet, in 1819), where Angelica’s neck is unnaturally wrenched back in an effort to see Ruggiero (Figure 2).

It is instructive to pause here and recall what happens to the two other figures in Keats’s poetry who receive garlands. The knight provides the woman in “La Belle Dame sans Merci” with “a garland for her head” (line 17) as well as “bracelets” (line 18) and a “fragrant zone” (line 18). The result of this captivity is manifest a few lines later in “language strange” (line 27) as she says to the knight, or at least he thinks she says, “I love thee true” (line 28). Since the incident is reported to us by the knight, we never discover La Belle Dame’s version of the events, or whether she enjoys being bound and put on his “pacing steed” (line 21; her resulting “sweet moan” [line 20] echoes Andromeda’s “sweet / fetter’d” state, and like the weeping that follows in the grot, seems less a description of genuine female passion than a projection of male desire). In the event, La Belle Dame is characterized at the end of the poem as a femme fatale sans merci, though the knight appears to have her more “in thrall” (line 40) than she does him. Although she is regarded as dangerous, she is certainly his muse, and without her there would be no poem.

The heifer in stanza 4 of “Ode on a Grecian Urn”—“all her silken flanks with garlands drest” (line 34)—fares even worse. If she is being conducted to her own sacrifice, she is also a surrogate for the unravished urn itself and her impending slaughter may be, as some critics think, a form of revenge for the urn’s enigmatic silence.<sup>11</sup> After the heifer is exorcized in stanza 4, the speaker can successfully write the recalcitrant urn into a deft epigram, “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” (line 49). By the end, the coy, teasing urn has been disciplined, forced to speak by the ekphrastic poet, and like La Belle Dame, essentially ravished. Her silent image is made into language, and the process—euphemized and displaced in the heifer—is an inherently violent one. Importantly, neither La Belle Dame nor the urn is permitted to speak for herself. Instead, like Andromeda, these figures are ventriloquized by the male speaker and made to work in the service of language and poetry. All are busy in the production of words for the disciplinarian/poet, and this production is predicated upon varying degrees of bondage and mutilation.

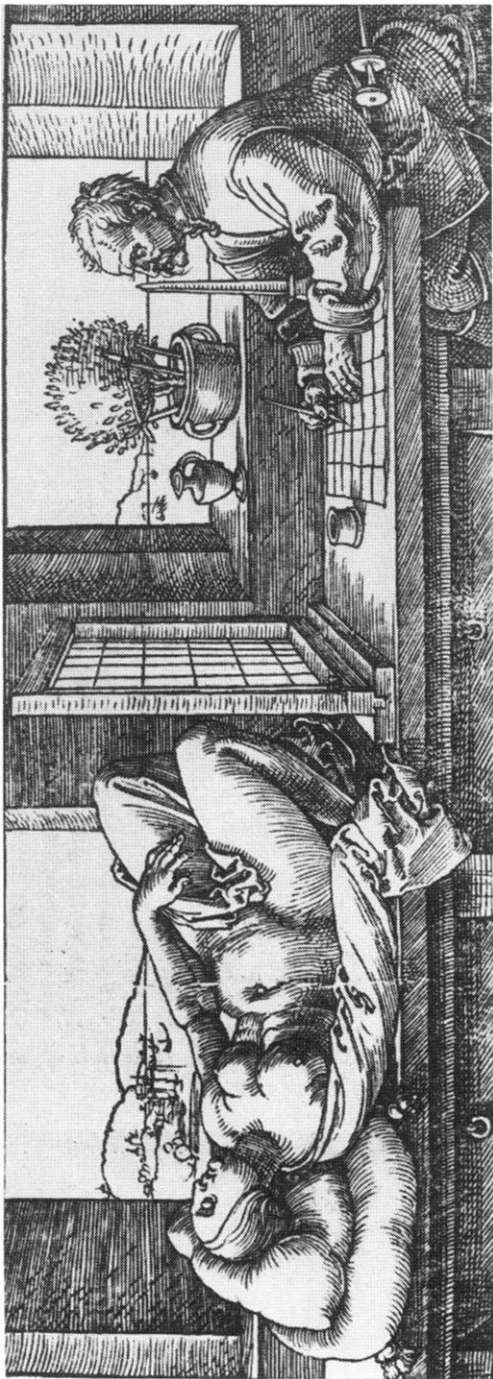


Figure 3. Dürer's *Man Drawing a Reclining Woman*.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Felix M. Warburg, 1918 (18.58.3)

## IV

Where Foucault is ingenious at uncovering the structural mechanisms of power and studying its larger effects, he is less persuasive in defining the subtle gradations of its application and in differentiating between the numerous types of power. As a number of critics have noted, Foucault's concept of power is vast, amorphous, and disembodied. He does little to account for the complex array of powers, particularly gender-related powers, constantly at work in any given system. As Isaac D. Balbus has argued: "His gender-neutral assumption of a will-to-power (over others) that informs true discourses and the technologies with which they are allied transforms what has in fact been a disproportionately male orientation into a generically human orientation."<sup>12</sup> Albrecht Dürer's wood engraving *Man Drawing a Reclining Woman* (1525) provides a corrective visual counterpart to the ideas embodied in Foucault's analysis of the Panopticon by specifically gendering the workings of his disciplinary regime (Figure 3). In its own peculiar geometry, its rigid spatial architecture, Dürer's image also acts as a compelling visual representation of Keats's "If by Dull Rhymes."

Part of a larger series of woodcuts entitled *The Art of Drawing*—designed as a manual or handbook for would-be designers and artists—Dürer's engraving pictures a diligent draftsman hard at work in transcribing a three-dimensional female model onto a one-dimensional paper grid. Whereas the man is fully conscious and alert, the model remains supine and passive, her eyes closed, apparently unaware that she is being so earnestly scrutinized. The engraving is sharply divided into two separate worlds by a central screen: her world of pillows and folded linens and fecundity; his world of scientific instruments, disciplined observation, and sterile containers. Similar to the poetical talismans evoked by the speaker in "If by Dull Rhymes," the draftsman equips himself with inkwell, pen, grid, and perspective device, utilizing these devices in the service of inspection and measurement. The discourse of empiricism, of scientific observation and analysis, could hardly be more obvious here.

Of course the object under investigation and under discipline is the female model, who is being surveyed intensely by the panoptic gaze of the draftsman. He is at once the scientific investigator diagramming her form and the penal disciplinarian restricting her to a confined space. Moreover, like the speaker in Keats's sonnet, he plays the part of the lewd voyeur spying directly at the model's crotch. As in "If by Dull Rhymes" and Ingres's *Ruggiero Freeing*

*Angelica*, Dürer's etching mobilizes a vast army of euphemisms—the most obvious of which is the erect instrument of surveillance—to mask the highly charged sexual spectacle under consideration (the sharp, pointed nature of this and the other instruments, like the wildly overextended lance in Ingres's painting, reveals an additional measure of sadism). Perhaps the most blatant of these euphemisms involves the concealment of a stark politics of power and control under the rubric of scientific inquiry. As Foucault reminds us, discipline enforces "a subtle, calculated technology of subjection" (p. 221); the various "sciences" attempt to lend to the procedures of control "a respectable face" (p. 223). It should not take us long to realize that the woman is placed in the position of birth and that the man, acting as a graphic midwife, is attempting at one level to supervise and control (if not usurp) the creation of life: it is her pelvic region that his pen is poised to diagram. The potted plant in the background of his space symbolizes precisely this process of control. The draftsman plays culture to the model's nature. She must be inspected, categorized, and brought into the cultural museum as artifact.

Like the sonnet, Dürer's engraving is about form, about framing, about fettering the female subject in a carefully prescribed area. One of the things that we notice is that the model is squeezed into an awkward disciplinary space: her knees are scrunched up against the screen and her body appears entirely too big for the table. While her head aligns itself with the picture's horizontal axis, her torso appears to be propped up against the plane of the picture, accommodating itself to the visual axis of the viewer. As Bryan Wolf has observed, "Her position . . . is the sum of two different and potentially incompatible perspectives: a lateral position that acknowledges both the artist and the viewer, and a propped up perspective that relates her strictly to us as viewers."<sup>13</sup> In its "pained loveliness" the model's body, in fact, becomes the contested site for the enactment of male power. Two disciplinary regimes, the gaze of the artist and the gaze of the apprentice-viewer, collide over her body and vie for its possession. In making her available both for the viewer and the artist, Dürer is forced to distort the laws of perspective and submit the model to considerable disfigurement. A simple illustration about the practice of drawing thus becomes a complex lesson about cultural and sexual hegemony.

As counterpart to the feminized "English" that must be chained in Keats's sonnet, the model too threatens to burst the boundaries of her captivity. At any moment she may fall out of her prison, and it is against this possibility that the draftsman assiduously

prepares. His job is not only to keep her confined to her space but to fix her on his page, just as it is the speakers' tasks in "If by Dull Rhymes" and in "Ode on a Grecian Urn" respectively to discipline the language and to write the silent urn into words. Dürer's model exists only insofar as she is created by the male gaze, whether it is the draftsman's or that of the sixteenth-century viewer. The draftsman retains the power to write the model into a grid. As Foucault would say, she is defined solely as an object-under-consideration, never as an autonomous being. Like her cousins, the urn, the Belle Dame, and Andromeda, Dürer's model is never permitted her own perspective; in fact, her eyes remain closed. She exists, then, only to school the apprentice draftsman, only to further the science of drawing and perspective and to serve the thinly disguised prurient interests of the viewer and artist. Like the prison in Foucault and the feminized sonnet form in "If by Dull Rhymes," the model's body serves as the site for experimentation and the rituals of male development.

If Dürer's engraving is about the uses of space and the effects of panopticism, it is equally about the silence of the model and her fictional complicity in her own condition. A closer look at the picture reveals that the woman's right hand is provocatively tangled in the gown, which anchors her to the table. We are made to feel that the model, like the muse, "is bound with garlands of her own" (line 14), that she conspires in her own confinement. This is the engraving's most sinister euphemism because it is the most alluring and seductive. The separate chambers, the clearly demarcated activities, the expressions of fierce concentration and indolent abandon, even the backdrops (hers a harbor, his the open sea)—all combine to persuade us that the roles played out in the woodcut are natural ones. Her silence appears as voluntary as his activity. But the model's silence is directly akin to that of Andromeda, the urn, and La Belle Dame; it is the enforced silence of Foucault's disciplinary regime. These feminine figures are made silent precisely because they are dangerous and threatening, like criminals intent on violating the laws of the state. They must be held captive because their silent forms have the power of silencing the male viewer; that is, they have the potential of Medusa, of enforcing their own (sexual) imprisonment on the gazer.

In "La Belle Dame" and the "Grecian Urn" as well as in "If by Dull Rhymes," the speakers are confronted with silent feminine forms; their task is to convert the powerful but enfeebling silence of these forms into a working language.<sup>14</sup> In each of these poems the process of conversion or translation necessitates a disfiguring of the feminine form as it is brought across media. What is lost in

this translation is both the physical integrity of the feminine object and the possibility of her voice.

Dürer's image offers us a nearly perfect visual counterpart to the dynamics of reinscription and feminization being played out in Keats's sonnet. Both representations—of the model and of Andromeda—involve the subtle redirection and reappropriation of power. The female objects are conveniently silenced so that the speaker/gazer can harness their power with impunity. The final deception (naturalized in the iconography of Dürer's design and the paraphernalia of "Poesy" in Keats's sonnet) is to make it appear to the viewer or reader that she has consented in her own bondage, that she has agreed to submission and that she enjoys it (and deserves it: the unravishable urn "tease[s] us out of thought" [line 44] as if callously flirting with us). As Foucault says of panopticism, its genius lies in subtly persuading prisoners to embody "the principle of [their] own subjection" (p. 203). What the muse wraps herself in at the end of "If by Dull Rhymes" are thus cultural garlands that are made to conceal a subtle ideology of subjection.

There is at least one crucial difference that emerges between Dürer's representation of the artist at work in his studio and Keats's study of the poet confined in his sonnet. As I have argued, the screen that divides the draftsman from the model emphatically establishes their different worlds. Nevertheless, the picture holds out the faint possibility of a union between these worlds, a possibility that is embodied in the strikingly ambivalent gesture of the model's left hand, which appears to be both reaching out to the draftsman—as if she desires to push through the screen, to unite the two worlds—and sliding inward, away from him and toward herself in what Bryan Wolf quite rightly reads as a masturbatory gesture. Dürer's visual allusion to the creation-of-life scene in Michelangelo's Sistine fresco is thus entertained only to be defeated. If we do read the model's hand as imploring his, it meets with no encouragement; tightly gripping his pen, the draftsman's hand offers no promise of contact, no touching into life, only reactive movements inward toward solipsism. All human compassion is forestalled by the intervention of gender-marked technologies: for him the grid, the pen, the optical device, for her the soft pillows and folded muslin clothing.

The speaker in Keats's poem, by contrast, is far less restricted by conventional gender roles than the draftsman. In fact what makes "If by Dull Rhymes" a more complex representation of creative inspiration is precisely the speaker's willingness to collapse the grid and identify with Andromeda's role as victim. As we have



seen, he too is bound—by tradition, by the sonnet form, by the cultural codes of masculinity that propel him into the shoes of Perseus and of chivalric savior—and so he empathizes with Andromeda's condition.<sup>15</sup> He keeps drifting across the cultural grid that separates his role as disciplinarian from hers as victim. Although Dürer's draftsman appropriates items that look like they belong in her part of the drawing, like the potted plant and the jug, we could never imagine him crossing over to her side, or trying on her garments. For Keats, however, this crossing over is a given. The speaker figuratively assumes Andromeda's bound state from the very beginning as he struggles within the sonnet form, pushing against its structure as she does against her steel bands. Although he is certainly aware of the dangers and anxious about the prospects of gender reversal, Keats's speaker seems far more willing to entertain the possibility of feminization than Dürer's artist.

## V

I would like to conclude what has been by design a narrowly focused essay by posing a series of questions that not only extend Foucault's arguments, but also suggest ways of historicizing my own observations. One of the questions that necessarily arises from the counterpointing of Keats and Dürer involves the relationship between the sonnet's form and Renaissance perspective. Is it a coincidence that the sonnet begins to flourish at the same historical moment as perspective drawing? Might there be a connection between the idea of disciplining the observable world—with lines, angles, vanishing points—and disciplining the word through octaves, sestets, rhyme, and meter? That is to say, might there be a correspondence between the new conception of space in the Renaissance and the extensive patterning and framing of the sonnet? If there is some connection, could we think of Keats's sonnet—with its radical rearrangement of interior space—as implicitly announcing the breakdown of this old order, heralding the beginning of a new, more impressionistic aesthetic?

We might also want to consider an even more obvious example of the sonnet's collaboration with the Foucauldian disciplinary regime, namely Wordsworth's notorious series of fourteen sonnets on capital punishment published in the *Quarterly Review* of 1841. In many ways, these sonnets constitute a logical extension, as well as a literalization, of the prison metaphor in "Nuns Fret Not." In them, Wordsworth argues in effect that "the death sentence unto which we doom / Ourselves no death sentence is": the condemned

are consistently “bound with garlands of their own” in the sequence, “[p]ass[ing] sentence on themselves.”<sup>16</sup> To Hartley Coleridge’s skeptical query—“Is [the] Sonnet a very good vehicle wherein to exhibit the Gallows?”—we might add a few of our own:<sup>17</sup> to wit, how does Wordsworth adapt the sonnet to the administration of state power? How does he use sentimentality to negotiate the slippery divide between humanitarian poet and tough-minded legislator? Is it possible that Wordsworth moves beyond the local euphemisms of Keats and employs the sonnet form itself (and the overarching fourteen-poem structure) as a vast, reassuring euphemism? In other words, could it be that the sonnet’s poetics and space—which in “Scorn Not the Sonnet”<sup>18</sup> “gave ease” (line 4) to Petrarch, “soothed” (line 6) Camöens, and “cheered” (line 10) Spenser—here rescue Wordsworth by mitigating the barbarity of the death sentence? Might this also explain why the State is consistently feminized in the series, why Wordsworth’s *Andromeda* reverses roles and becomes the disciplinarian?

And what are we to make of the speaker’s own ambivalent status within the sequence? There is no mistaking the deference to state authority, yet there are fleeting but powerful glimpses of the speaker’s difference from the state, moments where he (inadvertently?) places himself in the shoes of the condemned, as he does in surveying the “Lancastrian Towers” in the first sonnet on capital punishment, placing himself in the world’s “cold chain” in the last, and continually envisioning the plight of the condemned “alone within his cell” (sonnet 11, line 1) throughout the sequence. How are we to account for these ambiguities? Perhaps more importantly, what are we to make of the fact that Wordsworth’s series of sonnets was not originally published on its own or within a collection of verse, but as evidence within a polemical essay by Henry Taylor in a political magazine? These are important questions and deserve to be pursued in their own space.

I conclude with what I hope is a provocative juxtaposition of images, a short visual essay which is meant not only to extend the arguments developed here into our own century, but also to raise even more questions.



Dürer, "Man Drawing a Reclining Woman"( 1525)



Gilbert Brassai, "Henri Matisse—Paris—1939"



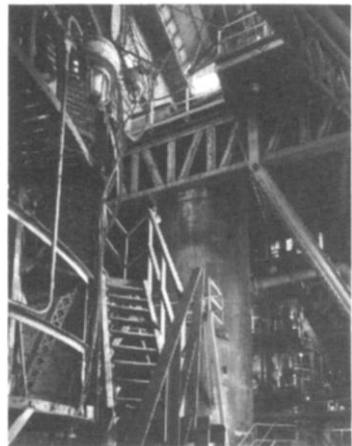
Ingres, *Ruggiero Freeing Angelica* (1819)

An advertisement for NordicTrack featuring a woman's legs and the text: "Legs. By NordicTrack, of course. The World's Best Aerobic. Functiner gives you a great body and great legs." It includes a phone number (1-800-441-7891) and a mention of "FREE video and flex bar".

Nordic Track Advertisement (1994)



Piranesi, *Il Carceri* (1745/1760)



Joseph Elliott, "No. 3 High House, looking up" (1990)

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>*The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1978), p. 368. All further references to Keats's poems are taken from this edition. For the sake of convenience, I include here Wordsworth's "Nuns Fret Not" (1807):

Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room;  
 And hermits are contented with their cells;  
 And students with their pensive citadels;  
 Maids at the wheel, the weaver at his loom,  
 Sit blithe and happy; bees that soar for bloom,  
 High as the highest Peak of Furness-fells,  
 Will murmur by the hour in foxglove bells:  
 In truth the prison, unto which we doom  
 Ourselves, no prison is: and hence for me,  
 In sundry moods, 'twas pastime to be bound  
 Within the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground;  
 Pleased if some Souls (for such there needs must be)  
 Who have felt the weight of too much liberty,  
 Should find brief solace there, as I have found.

Cited from *Wordsworth: Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989), p. 199. See also "Scorn Not the Sonnet," pp. 206-207.

<sup>2</sup>In line 2, for instance, *And* replicates itself in the beginning of Andromeda's name and appears three lines later buried in "Sandals"; the "meda" of Andromeda slides into "misers" and then into "Midas" only to be transformed finally into "muse"; the word "chain'd" at the end of line 1 rhymes with "constrain'd" (line 4), but also internally with "pained" in line 3, and so on. In sum, Keats does exactly what he prescribes in the sonnet; his poetic sandals are nothing if not "interwoven and complete."

<sup>3</sup>After copying out "Ode to Psyche" in the long letter of 14 February to 3 May 1819 addressed to his brother George and sister-in-law Georgiana, Keats sets the experimental and technical tone that will become a hallmark of the sonnet's reception: "I have been endeavouring to discover a better sonnet stanza than we have. The legitimate does not suit the language over-well from the pouncing rhymes—the other kind appears too elegai[a]c—and the couplet at the end of it has seldom a pleasing effect—I do not pretend to have succeeded—it will explain itself" (*The Letters of John Keats, 1814-1821*, ed. Hyder E. Rollins, 2 vols. [Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1958], 2:108).

<sup>4</sup>Persuaded by Walter Jackson Bate's biography, critics have assumed that in "If by Dull Rhymes" Keats is merely warming up for his later and grander stylistic triumph in the odes. As a result, the commentary has focused solely on the sonnet's technical aspects and in this light has consistently judged the poem a failure. Hence, M.R. Ridley's assessment in *Keats's Craftsmanship: A Study in Poetic Development* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1933) that "If by Dull Rhymes" is a "Miltonic experiment" that has "no structure at all" and "no right to pass under that appellation" (pp. 198-99); Claude Lee Finney's remarks in *The Evolution of Keats's Poetry*, 2 vols. (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1936) that "Keats was not successful in his experiments with the form of the sonnet. He gained freedom by violating form, but he lost the

subtle correspondence between thought and form" (2:609); and Walter Jackson Bate's own evaluation in *The Stylistic Development of Keats* (New York: Humanities Press, 1958) of the "laxity and 'elegiac' languor which characterizes [the] continual alternate-rhyming" found in the sonnet (p. 132). More recently, John Kerrigan has reaffirmed this view in an otherwise useful essay that compares Wordsworth's own developing application of the sonnet form to Keats's: "In itself, this sonnet . . . fails, because freedom can only be expressed in a 'stanza' as 'narrow' as the sonnet by a seemingly effortless over-riding of rules at least intimated" ("Wordsworth and the Sonnet: Building, Dwelling, Thinking," *Essays in Criticism* 35 [January 1985]: 45-75, 64). In *Andromeda's Chains: Gender and Interpretation in Victorian Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1989), Adrienne Munich mentions Keats's sonnet briefly (p. 11), but only in the context of the cultural shift she sees occurring in the transition from the Romantics' interest in Prometheus to the Victorians' obsession with Andromeda.

<sup>5</sup>One notable exception to this trend is Karen Swann, who in her short essay "Harassing the Muse" begins to probe the sonnet's content: "the sonnet as a whole suggests there's no escaping 'constraint' . . . The muse but also 'we' are seduced into constraining ourselves; like women, and through the enthralling power of feminized forms, poets come to love force" (in *Romanticism and Feminism*, ed. Anne K. Mellor [Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1988] pp. 81-92, 91). In her defiant sonnet, "I will put Chaos into fourteen lines" (1954), Edna St. Vincent Millay demurs, rewriting Keats's poem from a feminine perspective and subjecting the male "Chaos" (who replaces Andromeda) to "sweet Order" and "pious rape":

I will put Chaos into fourteen lines  
And keep him there; and let him thence escape  
If he be lucky; let him twist, and ape  
Flood, fire, and demon—his adroit designs  
Will strain to nothing in the strict confines  
Of this sweet Order, where, in pious rape,  
I hold his essence and amorphous shape,  
Till he with Order mingles and combines.  
Past are the hours, the years, of our duress,  
His arrogance, our awful servitude:  
I have him. He is nothing more nor less  
Than something simple not yet understood;  
I shall not even force him to confess;  
Or answer. I will only make him good.

Cited from Edna St. Vincent Millay, *Collected Poems*, ed. Norma Millay (New York: Harper, 1956), p. 728.

<sup>6</sup>Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979). For a persuasive application of Foucault's ideas to the early history of the novel, see John Bender's *Imagining the Penitentiary: Fiction and the Architecture of Mind in Eighteenth-Century England* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987).

<sup>7</sup>Keats felt the burden of the past more acutely than the other Romantics because of his ambivalent class position; for an excellent discussion of his class and gender anxieties, see Marjorie Levinson's *Keats's Life of Allegory: The*

*Origins of a Style* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), especially her brilliant explication of "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" (pp. 11-15).

<sup>8</sup>As an institution, the sonnet has traditionally served as the training site for students of poetry, as a practice ground for honing skills. Not only did Keats treat the sonnet as an exercise but he also wrote sonnets, as he did *Endymion*, according to a timetable. In addition, the sonnet for Keats became associated with competitions: "On the Grasshopper and Cricket," "On Receiving a Laurel Crown from Leigh Hunt," and "To the Nile" were all written speedily in sonneteering contests. Instead of Leigh Hunt or Shelley, Keats was vying with Milton and Shakespeare in "If by dull rhymes."

<sup>9</sup>For a useful discussion of Keats's tendency to project his own anxieties and fears onto women, particularly his fiancée Fanny Brawne, see Margaret Homans's illuminating essay "Keats Reading Women, Women Reading Keats," *SIR* 29 (Fall 1990): 341-70.

<sup>10</sup>In his reading of the Midas myth in E. Baldwin's *The Pantheon: or Ancient History of the Gods of Greece and Rome* (London, 1806) or George Sandys's translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, ed. Karl K. Hulley and Stanley T. Vandersall (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1970), Keats would have discovered that Midas earns his ambivalent reward by treating Silenus with "the utmost kindness and hospitality" (*The Pantheon*, p. 180). Silenus is found drunk in Midas's garden and brought before the king. When he is bound in garlands, he is enabled to sing and poeticize with great eloquence. See also Robert Graves: "The gardeners bound him with garlands of flowers and led him before Midas, to whom he told wonderful tales" (*The Greek Myths*, 2 vols. [Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1955], 1:281).

<sup>11</sup>See John J. Teunissen and Evelyn J. Hinz, "'Ode on a Grecian Urn': Keats's *Laocoön*," *English Studies in Canada* 6 (1980): 176-201.

<sup>12</sup>Isaac D. Balbus, "Disciplining Women: Michel Foucault and the Power of Feminist Discourse," in *After Foucault: Humanistic Knowledge, Postmodern Challenges*, ed. Jonathan Arac (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1988), pp. 138-60, 149. See also Jana Sawicki's "Feminism and the Power of Foucauldian Discourse" in the same volume, pp. 161-78.

<sup>13</sup>Bryan Wolf, "Confessions of a Closet Ekphrastic: Literature, Painting and Other Unnatural Relations," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 3 (Spring 1990): 181-203, 197.

<sup>14</sup>Wolf astutely sums up what is one of the woodcut's dominant concerns by analyzing the vessel that appears on the window in front of the draftsman:

Traditionally an emblem of female presence, the jar does not appear where we might expect to find it—in her half of the composition—but sits instead on *his* side next to the potted plant. . . . That an emblem of female fecundity should appear on the right side of the image suggests that she is present to him only as *represented*: she has been abstracted into language, transformed into a symbol, voided out as nature and returned as trope. . . . Her power, a power of the body and reproduction, has been rewritten—repossessed—as *his* power, and that is the power of representation.

(pp. 197-98)

<sup>15</sup>Keats himself was continually worried about his own masculinity, as Homans and others have shown, and extremely sensitive to what he perceived was his feminization: "I do think better of Womankind," he writes in a letter

to Bailey, "than to suppose they care whether Mister John Keats five feet high likes them or not" (*Letters*, 1:342). A much more obvious example of Keats's experimentation with gender roles occurs in the wonderfully rich and speculative letter he sent to Reynolds in February of 1818 where he asserts, among other things, that "we should rather be the flower than the Bee . . . passive and receptive" (*Letters*, 1:232).

<sup>16</sup>"Sonnets upon the Punishment of Death," 3, line 11, in *Wordsworth: Poetical Works*, p. 405.

<sup>17</sup>*The Letters of Hartley Coleridge*, ed. G.E. and E.L. Griggs (London: n.p., 1936), p. 258.

<sup>18</sup>*Wordsworth: Poetical Works*, p. 206.