

Self-Fashioning in John Keats's Early Sonnets*

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Cheong, Seok Kweon. "Self-Fashioning in John Keats's Early Sonnets." *Studies in English Language & Literature* 43.4 (2017): 1-15. The purpose of this study is to explore how Keats's concern with the poetic career is figured in his early sonnet writing, and how he fashioned his poetic self by writing sonnets, and also how the specific use of the sonnet form allegorizes the poet's self-consciousness about his poetic career. The thesis of this study is that Keats, an apothecary with neither born nobility, nor acquired formal classical education, used the sonnet form as a vocational enclosure in which he could make a name for himself. In this study, the beginning stage of Keats's poetic career is examined by focussing on his early sonnets, and his interaction with the contemporary older poets, especially with Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Hunt. Influences, both conscious and unconscious, provides the early Keats models to copy, to transform, and/or to transcend. (Chonbuk National University)

Key Words: John Keats, self-Fashioning, sonnets, liberalism, Leigh Hunt.

I. Introduction

Richard Abbey, the Keats children's guardian, advised John Keats to set up as a surgeon and to drop the "inconsiderate Enterprise" of writing poetry as a profession.

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Keats, however, resisted strongly his guardian's advice with overly self-assertive tone: "My mind is made up. [. . .] I know that I possess Abilities greater than most Men, and therefore I am determined to gain my Living by exercising them" (Hyder Rollins 1: 308, 1: 307). The conjunction in Keats's statement, "therefore," suggests that Keats's project of poetic career is somehow based on the logic of capitalist economy: that is, in order to gain something, the necessary condition is to possess something, or to put it roughly, no possession, no gain.

Then, a question arises. What did Keats seek to gain by choosing the poetic occupation? Keats's conscious self-fashioning to be a poet is important, because not only he was so much preoccupied with being "among the English poets after my death" (Letters 1: 394),¹ but the hostile reviewers of Keats's early poetry carped on the "mawkishness" of his Cockney style learned from Leigh Hunt. Their stylistic criticism of Keats's poetry is class oriented and ideologically charged. The reviewers constantly reminded the readers of the vulgarity in Keats's desiring to be a poet without having nobility or acquiring formal education of classics like other major Romantic poets. More specifically, they charged Keats in flaunting the middle class aspiration to finery by a man who was just barely middle class (Cheong 166).

Keats's early sonnets, in which he tries to find a way to poetic success, reflect his politics of self-fashioning. Keat's fascination with the sonnet form comes in part from its formal compactness, which is able to, unlike less strictly poetic form like ode, identify the writer easily with the great poetic tradition: Dante, Petrarch, Shakespeare, Milton. Moreover, Keats, by using the sonnet form he could participate in the contemporary literary fashion, popularized by such poets as Coleridge and Wordsworth. In this way, Keats used the sonnet form as a canonical poetic form in the nineteenth century as a fit medium to legitimate his poetic identity.

¹ *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Hyder rollins (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1958). All references to Keats's letters will be to this edition.

II. Advantages of the Sonnet Form

Leigh Hunt, who exerted much ideological and aesthetical influence to Keats's early poetry, explained the advantages of the sonnet form in a very specific ways.

There is a combination of advantages peculiar to the sonnet. [. . .] These are, first that with the exception of one class of subjects, —the dithyrambical, which disdains all order and bounds, —there is none which is unsuitable to it—whether light or serious, the humblest or the most exalted. Second, that, being short, it occupies so much the less time either in reading or composing. Third, that its brevity adds to its force, and so makes it the easier to remember. Fourth, that , being restricted to certain limits, a sonnet complete in other respects, is of necessity complete in all, and thus gratifies the workman with a consciousness of his having done something finished, however little; and fifth and last, that a single sonnet, in consequence, may procure the writer a repute and even a duration [. . .] which circumstances beyond his control might otherwise have put out of the question. (5-6).

These advantages of sonnet form, as specified by Hunt, especially the fourth and the fifth (i. e. immediate gratification of the workmanship and hope for a durable fame) work as a sub-text for Keats's early sonnet writing. Hunt's argument for the sonnet writing is, curiously enough, similar to the desire for self-fashioning in the sixteenth century courtiers' ideology of writing love sonnets. Since Hunt was a poetic mentor to the early Keats, it is important to understand how Hunt is figured directly and indirectly in Keats's sonnet, how Keats's sonnets follow (or do not follow) Hunt's idea about sonnet writing. One of Keats's early poems which boldly manifests his politics of self-fashioning and which brought about the notorious attack by J. G. Lockhart in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, is the sonnet, "Written in the Day that Mr. Leigh Hunt Left Prison":

What though, for showing truth to flatter'd state,
Kind Hunt was shut in prison, yet has he,

In his immortal spirit, been as free
 As the sky-searching lark, and as elate.
 Minion of grandeur! think you he did wait?
 Think you he nought but prison walls did see,
 Till, so unwilling, thou unturn'dst the key:
 Ah, no! far happier, nobler was his fate!
In Spenser's halls he strayed, and bowers fair,
 Culling enchanted flowers, and he flew
With daring Milton through the fields of air:
 To regions of his own his genius true
 Took happy flights. Who shall his fame impair
 When thou art dead, and all thy wretched crew. (32)²

Lockhart italicized some phrases in the poem, and, by doing so, he seems to implicate “the absurdity of though” in grouping the Cockney poet Hunt (and his protege, Keats) with Spenser and Milton as the same kind (520).

Although rather malicious, Lockhart’s attack to Keats’s poem has its points. Through elated diction of the sonnet, Hunt who is shut in prison is represented as moving upward, figuratively (“as the sky-searching lark”), grammatically (“far happier, nobler”), and emotionally. This upward mobility is continued until Hunt becomes a monumentalized name (fame) just as Spenser and Milton. Hunt’s kindness (“Kind Hunt”) in line 2 is transformed into same kindness with Spenser and Milton through their shared “genius true.” Hunt actually composed *The Story of Rimini* in prison, and his act of writing is represented as an act of social climbing, above the pre-ordained status of one’s self, and furthermore as an act of inscribing one’s name beyond the threat of physical confinement.

The repetition of the possessive in line 12, “his own his” before “genius true” threatens and is threatened by “thou” and “thy wretched crew” in the last line. The precarious confrontation of “genius true” with the authoritative system suggests an

² *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Cambridge: Harvard UP., 1958). All references to Keats’s poems will be to this edition.

idea somewhat similar to that of David Bromwich's reading of the *Endymion*: "the idea of genius independent of worldly honors," and a liberal's "plea for the career open to talents" (201). As the title, "Written in the Day that Mr. Leigh Hunt Left Prison," indicates, its purpose is to commemorate the release of Hunt. Hunt was imprisoned on the ground that he libelled Prince Regent in *The Examiner*. The sonnet's use of prison metaphor allegorically suggests Keats's desire to get textual freedom out of social restraints, and his socio-political ideology through his "daring" poetic enterprise.

The prison metaphor in Keats's sonnet recalls William Wordsworth's sonnet, which as a meta-sonnet self-reflexively comments on the sonnet form:

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. . . . (286)

Wordsworth's sonnet was included in Leigh Hunt's sonnet anthology, *The Book of the Sonnet*. Hunt is critical of Wordsworth's representations of confined laborer's voluntary happiness. because "the spinning and the weaving are too often anything but voluntary, however cheerfully made the best of" (327). Hunt's criticism of Wordsworth's representation of the laborers' voluntary happiness on the grounds of their real working condition is similar to Karl Marx's critique of working condition in the bourgeois, industrialized society.

The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, in his work outside himself. He is at home when he is not working, and when he is working he is not at home. His labor is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is the forced labor. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it. (qtd. Michael Fisher 32-33)

The laborer's happiness and voluntaries in the Wordsworth sonnet is more ominous when we consider the industrialization of the cotton industry as a most important factor for the British Industrial Revolution. Thus the sonnet form enacts for Wordsworth as a poetic enclosure in which the unpleasant realities are blocked out for the temporary contentment in confinement.

Even though Keats and Wordsworth use the prison metaphor to represent the sonnet form, the problem of confinement in Keats's sonnet is more intensified, because it conflates the needs, means, and goals of escape at the same time. In Wordsworth's case, the sonnet writing can be the means of escape, but in Keats's case, it becomes the end-in-itself. To speak more bluntly, Wordsworth's pastime becomes Keats's "problem of earning a living" (Christopher Claudwell 119).

However, in Keats's case at this stage of his poetic career, defining and engendering his poetic identity is more urgent than "the problem of earning a living" because he has not yet begun the career. So that Keats's sonnet writing cannot be a mere aesthetic pastime, as Wordsworth puts it, is shown in the following sonnet Keats dedicated to Wordsworth himself, in which Keats calls Wordsworth one of the "Great Spirits":

Great Spirits now on earth are sojourning;
 He of the Cloud, the Cataract, the Lake
 Who on Helvellyn's summit, wide awake
 Catches his freshness from Archangel's wing. . . . (67)

Wordsworth, of course is the subject and object of this quatrain. Actually, the

beginning line of Keats's sonnet is a deliberate echo of Wordsworth's sonnet "Great men have been among us." In this poem, Wordsworth celebrates the seventeenth-century literary artists and political leaders such as "The later Sidney, Marvel, Harrington, Young Vane, and others who called Milton friend."

In fact, since Wordsworth read and praised Keats's sonnet, the sonnet succeeds in its politics of reception. The principal listener of the sonnet, Wordsworth was practically "dumb" in commenting on it, because of the way he is presented in it. Wordsworth wrote to Haydon, who is another object of praise in Keats's sonnet:

Your account of young Keats interests me not a little; and the sonnet appears to be of good promise, of course neither you nor I being so highly complimented in the composition can be deemed judges altogether impartial—but it is assuredly vigorously conceived and well expressed [. . .] the sonnet is very agreeably concluded. (qtd. G. M. Matthews 43)

Since himself is the object of praise, Wordsworth said he cannot be the impartial judge of the poem, except that it "well expressed" and "agreeably concluded." Wordsworth himself wrote sonnets praise to his fellow artists, and among others, he wrote one to R. B. Haydon, and made Haydon almost "dumb." Haydon wrote in his diary after receiving the sonnet from Wordsworth: "It is impossible to tell how I felt, after the first blaze of joy, feeling as it were lifted up in the great eye of the World. [. . .]" (Haydon 721-22)

In his sonnet to "B. R. Haydon," Wordsworth glorifies the artist's high calling:

High is our calling, Friend—Creative Art
 (Whether the instrument of words she use,
 Or pencil pregnant with ethereal hues,
 Demands the service of mind and heart,
 Though sensitive, yet, in their weaker part,
 Heroically fashioned—to infuse
 Faith in the whispers of the lonely Muse,
 While the whole world seems to adverse to detest. (340)

In the first line of the poem, Wordsworth introduces the artistic vocation as high calling, with religious overtones, in value-laden ideology-charged term. One might recall his definition of the poet in “preface” to *Lyrical Ballads*: “a man [. . .] endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind” (Wordsworth 603).

The artist’s special, high calling seems to come from the belief that “the principles on which the new society was being organized were entirely hostile to the necessary principle of art” (Raymond Williams 40). The hostile relation between the artist and society is further developed in Keats’s sonnet, “Great Spirits now on earth.” Especially in lines 5-6 when Hunt is introduced, the sentence is fragmented and composed only with the subject and complimentary/complementary nouns:

He of the Rose, the Violet, the Spring,
The social Smile, the Chain for Freedom’s sake: (67)

Hunt’s representation as “the chain for the freedom’s sake” is a repetition of Keats’s already introduced sonnet, “Written on the Day That Mr. Leigh Hunt Left the Prison.”

Lockhart regarded Keats’s sonnet as a representative poem of “Cockney school” and thought it as a poor work of “the rising brood of cockneys,” and attacked in this way:

In this exquisite piece it will be observed, that Mr. Keats classes together Wordsworth, Hunt, Haydon, as the three greatest spirits of the age, and that he alludes to himself, and some others of the rising brood of Cockneys, as likely to attain hereafter an equally honorable elevation. Wordsworth and Hunt! What a juxtaposition! The purest, the loftiest, and, we do not fear to say it, the most classical of living English poets, joined together in the same compliment with the meanest, the filthiest, and the most vulgar of Cockney poetasters. [. . .] The world has really some reason to look

to its foundations. ("Cockney School of Poetry" 520)

What Lockhart criticizes is neither the form nor diction of the poem, but the political ideology that is lurking behind Keats's sonnet. He is attacking Keats not in literary reason but in socio-political one. Lockhart suggests that by writing the poem Keats is upsetting the world's foundations.

Keats's politics of self-fashioning, not his poetry itself, is the target of Lockhart's attack. In other words, Keats's poetry is not bad in itself, but bad in its "foundations." The ominous and sinister matching of Wordsworth and Hunt (purest vs. filthiest, loftiest vs. meanest, classical vs. vulgar) emphasizes the subversive political background of Keats's sonnet, and the radical equation is the point that Lockhart maintains "Keats belongs to the Cockney school of Politics, as well as the Cockney school of Poetry" ("Cockney School of Poetry" 524).

Although many later readers and critics of Keats along with Karl Woodring considered that "Keats [. . .] evaded most successfully the impurities of political references" (77), Keats's evasions of political references (if it were) was not very successful to the contemporary reviewers as Lockhart's deeply political critique of Keats's sonnet testifies. Keats's use of literary pastiches and parodies are political in its origin and needs to be regarded as such, not as a pure escapism avoiding the socio-political matters of the contemporary society.

III. Politics/Poetics of Self-Fashioning

Keats's another sonnet "Nebuchadnezzar's dream" was problematic to the readers who tried to read Keats's poetry without considering socio-political relations. Amy Lowell, for example, regarded his sonnet as "a joke sonnet" without fun: "Since we have no clue to what the sonnet refers, we lose the joke" (1: 188). But when we consider the literary satire in the sonnet using the biblical allusion we can

understand the meaning of the joke. The biblical allusion along with brusque tone and colloquial style shows that Keats follows the tradition of political parody using biblical allusion:

Before he went to live with owls and bats
 Nebuchadnezzar had an ugly dream,
 Worse than a housewife's, when she thinks her cream
 Made a naumachia for that "good king of cats,"
 Young Daniel, who did straightway pluck the beam
 From out his eye, and said— "I do dot deem
 Your sceptre worth a straw, your cushions old door mats."
 An horrid nightmare, similar somewhat,
 Of late has haunted a most valiant crew
 Of loggerheads and chapmen;—we are told
 That any Daniel, though he be a sot,
 Can make their lying lips turn pale of hue,
 By drawing out— "Ye are the head of gold." (98)

According to Charles Brown's transcript, this sonnet was recorded as "circa 1817," and it alludes to biblical story in the book of Daniel. Nebuchadnezzar was a King of Babylon, and had a nightmare of an image made of gold, silver, brass, iron, and clay. He asked young Daniel to interpret the dream, and Daniel said "thou art this head of gold," and your kingdom will "break in pieces and bruise" in order to build the kingdom of God (Daniel 2: 38-40).³

In the first quatrain of the sonnet, the biblical allusion and modern domestic affairs are introduced together to make a comic/satiric effect. A King's deep anxiety over his and his country's future is dealt with same seriousness with a housewife's culinary concern over her food. The regality is further caricatured by a new satiric dimension through the mention of "naumachia," which is the mock war of the sea

³ All references to Bible will be to *The Holy Bible: Old and New Testament in the King James Version* (Camden, New Jersey: Thomas Nelson, 1970).

staged in order to celebrate the Victory of England over France. The radical contrast of high/low, large/small, old/new/ and serious/hilarious are brought together without any order to make a drastic effect of satirical burlesque. As everything is preposterous and upside-down, the sonnet form itself is used as a mock-epic to satirize the serious epic form. The sonnet's compact form is conventionally used to express a personal emotion, but, in Keats's sonnet, it is used as an effective device to poke fun at the triviality of government's en-enactment of an epic-sea battle and its display of chauvinism, using exaggerated colloquial and comic tone.

The parody using biblical allusion and literary pastiche is further enhanced in the second quatrain. The phrase "Good king of cats" is a quotation from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, and it is used by Mercutio to incite a fight with Tybalt. Although the incident recalls Daniel in the Old Testament, it also gives a subtly ironic turn to describe Daniel with the comic language used in the Shakespeare's play. Furthermore, Daniel's characteristics come from, rather than the story of the Old Testament, Christ's parable in the New Testament: "Thou hypocrite, cast out first the beam out of thine own eye, and then shalt thou see clearly pull out the mote that is in thy brother's eye" (Luke 6: 42). In addition to the Scriptural and Shakespearean pastiche mentioned above, Daniel's blunt answer to Nebuchadnezzar recalls lines from Keats's own poem, *Endymion*, the epic romance, in which Keats "learned to lisp sedition" according to the harsh reviewer Lockhart (524):

Ah, how all this hums,
 In wakeful ears, like uproar past and gone—
 Like thunder clouds that spake to Babylon,
 And set those old Chaideans to their tasks—
 Are then regalities all gilded masks? (3: 18-22)

as the Old Testament in the sonnet's first quatrain anticipates the New Testament in the second quatrain, the lines from *Endymion* and the sonnet seems to suggest that the downfall of Babylon prefigures the downfall of the present regime of England

led by the Prince Regent. Further, as Nebuchadnezzar was an archetype of royal tyranny, the allusion in the sonnet to the madness seems to refer to the madness of King George III.

England's political situation is turbulent at those times. In the years after Waterloo, due to the Tory government's oppressive policies such as establishing the Corn Law, extending Habeas Corpus, and prosecuting its critics for seditious libel, the workers demonstration increased following the lead of radical agitators and journalists: William Cobbett, Henry Hunt, Thomas Woller. Especially William Hone, editor of the radical journal, *The Reformer's Register*, had three trials in 1817, for publishing biblical parodies (of the Catechism, the Creed, and the Litany) to criticize the government's policy. Hone was tried on three charges for scandalous libel on 18-20 December 1817, and after a brilliant and witty self-defence, he was found not guilty. About this verdict, Keats wrote to his brothers as follows: "The verdict was followed by a tremendous burst of applause, which he [Lord Ellenborough, Lord chief justice, who presided the trial] could not even attempt to quell" (Letters 1: 192). In the same letter, Keats wrote: "you must find very amusing, & as Englishmen very <amusing> encouraging—his *Not Guilty* is a thing, which not to have been, would have dulled still more Liberty's Emblazoning—Lord Ellenborough has been paid in his own coin—Woller & Hone have done us as essential service" (Letters 1: 191). Keats enclosed with this letter *The Examiner* (December 21, 1817), in which a detailed account of Hone's trial and acquittal was printed.

The comic/aspect of the sonnet is meaningful only if we are aware of its socio-political context. If we read the sonnet in juxtaposition with the letter, the significance of the sonnet becomes more complicated, since the account of Hone's trial is immediately followed by Keats's "transcendental" aesthetics: "the excellence of every Art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their close relationship with Beauty and Truth" (Letters 1: 192). The sonnet obviously is not about evaporating "all disagreeables." Rather, it reveals and evaluates the "disagreeables" in a supposedly non-ideological poetic form.

The conflict of the sonnet comes from the gap between beauty and truth. Rather than solving the conflicts, the sonnet inflates the problem of the artistic representation and its reception in the world of “loggerheads and chapmen.” The pejorative term for the main hero as a “sot” “drawling out” apocalyptic words is self-reflexive and self-critical as one “who did straightway pluck the beam / From his eye.” The sonnet, in the end, is a very sharp satire, criticizing the contemporary repressive regimes, and, at the same time, calling its own mode of criticism into question.

IV. Conclusion

As we have seen thus far, Keats's early sonnets, as a socio-political statement, show an ideological manifestation of Keats's sympathies with the liberalism. And, as a self-reflexive poetic form, they reveal Keats's capacity and willingness to use the art, especially the sonnet form, as a space for his self-fashioning. Traditionally the critics and commentators of Keats have dismissed his early sonnets as “primarily exercises, bagatelles” (Curran 8). However, it is in these early sonnets that Keats identified his ideological orientation as a liberal, and posited his burgeoning politics of self-fashioning as a liminal figure.

Paul de Man's general assessment of Keats's work as “prospective rather than retrospective” is especially proper remark on the world of Keats's early sonnets (xi-xii). Even in the case when the subjects of the sonnets are retrospective, past poets and heroes, Keats tends to make formalized and yet liminal self on the verge of becoming another, different self. Keats's confrontation with the already firmly established sonnet tradition reveals that Keats regarded the encounter not as an agonizing battle between father and son but as a vivid performing stage of self-fashioning through stylistic appropriation. Keats considered the literary tradition as husbandry of materially present and real things such as textual properties and

artistic representations not as personification of abstract and callus past ideas, and thus he transformed the sonnet tradition as a harvest field to reap his poetic career.

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