

## The Pre-Raphaelites and their Keatsian Romanticism: An Analysis of the Renderings of *The Eve of St Agnes* and *Isabella*

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**Abstract.** This research examines the influence of Romantic poet John Keats on the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, a Victorian artistic and literary movement. The aim of this paper is to prove how Keats became, moreover, a major connecting link between Romanticism and the Victorian era, thus enabling the continued existence of certain Romantic aesthetic features until the beginning of the twentieth century. In that sense, we will explore how this influence took shape and we will analyse Pre-Raphaelite works of art which have as source of inspiration some of Keats's well-known poems ("Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil" and "The Eve of St. Agnes"). This examination will allow us to perceive the manner in which these artists devised their pictorial style based on Keatsian pictorialism in poetry, with a special emphasis on the significance of medievalism, and the beauty and sensuousness of his verses, and how they were transferred into their canvases.

**Keywords:** Pre-Raphaelites, Keats, poetry, art, aesthetics.

### [es] Los prerrafaelitas y su romanticismo keatsiano: un análisis de las representaciones de *The Eve of St Agnes* e *Isabella*

**Resumen.** Esta investigación examina la influencia del poeta romántico John Keats en la Hermandad Prerrafaelita, un movimiento artístico-literario. El objetivo de este trabajo es demostrar la manera en que Keats, además, llegó a convertirse en el nexo de unión entre el Romanticismo y la época victoriana, lo que permitió, por tanto, la permanencia de ciertas características estéticas hasta principios del siglo XX. En ese sentido, se explorará aquí cómo dicha influencia tomó forma y se analizarán las obras de artes prerrafaelitas que tienen como fuente de inspiración algunos de los célebres poemas de Keats ("Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil" y "The Eve of St. Agnes"). Este análisis nos permitirá comprender la manera en la cual estos artistas crearon su estilo pictórico basado en el pictorialismo de Keats en su poesía, con especial énfasis en la importancia del medievalismo y la belleza y sensualidad de sus versos y cómo estos se transfieren en sus lienzos.

**Palabras clave:** Prerrafaelitas, Keats, poesía, arte, estética.

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### 1. Introduction

The confluence between literature and art is a well-established notion. Writers and poets have been inspired by works of art throughout history, yielding to what we call ekphrasis. On the other hand, in a reversal of this notion, many artists' creative imaginations have been sparked by literature. And that is how we have a sisterhood of arts, which is the primary notion behind this article. Thus, the aim of this paper is to demonstrate that John Keats was one of the strongest poetic influences on the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, which attests to the aesthetic continuities between the (late) Romantic and Victorian periods. We will analyse the impact of English poet John Keats on the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, since "[i]t was over Keats that the Pre-Raphaelites bonded" (Armstrong 2012: 20). On the basis of the thesis that Keats was one of their major sources of inspiration, a model, and a linking influence for the Brotherhood, we will explore key Pre-Raphaelites' works of art derived from Keatsian poetry, focusing mainly on "The Eve of St. Agnes" and "Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil", in order to see how this influence materialised in their paintings. In other

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words, the present paper will involve an exploration of how they translated his words into a pictorial style. Keats's visual poetry constituted the perfect source of inspiration for these artists, who transformed verbal representation into a visual representation; therefore, constituting a reversal of ekphrasis, of which we have an example in Keats's very own "Ode on a Grecian Urn".

This research has been mainly based on the analysis of John Keats's poetry, especially those poems featured in depth in the corpus, as well as a keen observation of the paintings by the Pre-Raphaelites and the reading of extensive bibliography in order to provide more background. We will examine relevant literary themes and motifs in Keatsian poetry, such as sensuality and medievalism, or important concepts, such as the notions of beauty or imagination, which permeated into the Pre-Raphaelites' style and ideals. The analysis of specific paintings will accompany this study and it will be presented comparatively with the Keatsian poems that served as major sources of inspiration.

## 2. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood as an Artistic Movement

### 2.1. Features of Pre-Raphaelite Art

Pre-Raphaelitism is a Victorian artistic and literary movement formed mainly by young artists with avant-garde ideas which "constitute Britain's first modern art movement" (Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde). Jan Marsh and Pamela Gerrish Nunn in their book *Women Artists and the Pre-Raphaelite Movement* point to the longevity of the style, which survived "over fifty years [...] adopted and adapted by succeeding generations of artists" (1989: 13). That is why, for the purpose of our dissertation, we shall consider the different generations within the movement and those artists later associated and influenced by this style. This artistic movement is, moreover, considered to be the first avant-garde art movement by some scholars such as Barringer or Prettejohn.

The works of the Pre-Raphaelites, whether literary or artistic, share certain characteristics, which can be summarised in William Michael Rossetti's following words:

- 1, To have genuine ideas to express;
- 2, to study Nature attentively, so as to know how to express them;
- 3, to sympathize with what is direct and serious and heartfelt in previous art, to the exclusion of what is conventional and self-parading and learned by rote;
- and 4, and most indispensable of all, to produce thoroughly good pictures and statues. (Rossetti 1895: 135)

These precepts share much with Romantic axioms, such as the antipathy against traditional conventions, as well as their stress on the imagination, the individuality of the artist, and the importance of remaining true to nature; no other poet could infuse these notions better in them than John Keats. For these reasons, they decided to draw inspiration from different times, and from Romantic sources, as we shall see later, in their attempt to contravene the Royal Academy and their precepts. As a matter of fact, the Pre-Raphaelites expanded the revolution already initiated by the Romantics in literature, thus distending it all throughout the nineteenth century.

As a matter of fact, art and literature strongly intertwined in these Pre-Raphaelite artists; one of their most striking traits is perhaps the importance they conceded to Romantic and Victorian literature, a controversial step, for the Royal Academy and the artistic conventions they encouraged highly valued classical or historical subjects, which means that mythological topics would be the standard, as well as Biblical scenes; but to draw inspiration from obscure or contemporary writers was a daring move for a group of young artists in the middle of the nineteenth century. Therefore, this passion for literature became for them a defining trait that would characterise their compositions.

This is a highly relevant feature to take into account when considering Pre-Raphaelitism. As the paragraph above suggests, no other artistic movement was ever as much influenced by literature as the Pre-Raphaelites, arguably neither previously nor after. For the Pre-Raphaelites literature was a milestone in the shaping of their aesthetics and style as an artistic movement, and most of their works of art were based or inspired by literature, although it should not be overlooked that Pre-Raphaelitism was also a literary movement in many senses. Several Pre-Raphaelites, such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Morris, were poets and authors themselves and their literary works also share some of the main features of the artistic movement such as sensuality, symbolism, and medievalism, among others. The importance they conceded to Romanticism attested to the continuation of several of the aesthetic elements and their incorporation into Victorian aesthetics. In this sense, this movement intended to continue the revolution already started by the Romantics; William Morris pointed out how the Pre-Raphaelites revolted too against "Academicism in Literature as well as in Art. In Literature the revolt had taken place much earlier", referring to Romantic poets. Now we will focus on drawing connections between the Romantic and Victorian periods to assess the sense in which we could consider Pre-Raphaelitism partly as a Neo-Romantic movement, having John Keats as the predominant influence.

Conversely, John Keats was still pretty much unknown in the time of the Pre-Raphaelites. To an extent, it could be argued that this group of artists helped to rescue Keats from almost complete oblivion in their time by painting themes taken from his poems and by bringing him to the forefront. William Holman Hunt was the first to exhibit a

painting inspired by Keats, an event of great relevance, for thanks to this painting, Rossetti approached Hunt, and, thus, with Millais, they later associated themselves as the Brotherhood. That is how Keats acted as one of the main bonds thanks to which the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was founded. In fact, no other poet would unite the Pre-Raphaelites as Keats did.

### 3. John Keats as a Predominant Influence on Pre-Raphaelitism

#### 3.1. From the Cockney School to the PRB

First, it is interesting to note some similitudes between the Cockney School of poetry and the PRB's manifesto in order to see the continuation of some late Romantic doctrines in Victorian times and in order to fully comprehend Keats's influence on Pre-Raphaelitism beyond his poetic verses. The Cockney School was formed by a group of different London-based writers in the beginning of the nineteenth century, among which ranks Leigh Hunt, William Hazlitt, and John Keats. The term is in itself a contemptuous epithet applied in a series of articles in *Blackwood's Magazine* which mocked their poetry and politics, Leigh Hunt and Keats being the main targets.

Leigh Hunt and his associates in poetry did in their time something very similar to what the Pre-Raphaelites would do decades later in the artistic movement. They advocated for "a freer spirit of versification" (Leigh Hunt, "Preface" 1816: XV) and a "new school of poetry" which would "restore the same love of Nature, and of *thinking* instead of mere *talking*" (Leigh Hunt, "Young Poets" 1816: 761, emphasis in original). On the one hand, this means that they wanted to go back in time before the eighteenth century, that is, before neoclassical style imposed itself and became the rule of the aristocratic; this type of poetry, whose greater representative was the poet Alexander Pope, lacked feeling, emotion and imagination. On the other hand, we see how Leigh Hunt celebrated those poets in his age that went "directly to Nature for inspiration" (Young Poets 1816: 761). Hence Leigh Hunt's aim can remind us of the PRB's manifesto and their intention to look back before the rules dictated by the Academy and established since the eighteenth century, as well as the importance they stressed on their return to nature, two key features of Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics.

As we have already seen, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood bonded over their revolt against the Royal Academy, its teaching practices, and its high regard for Renaissance art. Moreover, the Academy stressed the importance of idealising the paintings and their subjects, as well as ascribing the highest value to genre painting. The Pre-Raphaelites decided, on the one hand, to look back before the time highly valued by the Academy, and, on the other hand, to reject idealisation, of topics and of models. They wanted to inject a realistic sense into their art.

It is no wonder, then, that the paintings of the Pre-Raphaelites did not meet the approval of the critics, even less so when they came chiefly from middle-class backgrounds. On the contrary, few were those who congratulated their works and it would be easy to mention them; art critic John Ruskin, for instance, was one of the very few who acknowledged the importance of what they were doing, of their innovations and dedication, and commended them in a couple of letters to *The Times*. As Oscar Wilde said in his lecture "The English Renaissance of Art" in 1882, there are "three things that the English public never forgives: youth, power and enthusiasm" (2013: 77) and they had all three. Thus, the public was very much horrified at their archaism, the flatness of the figures and the pietism bordering Catholicism.

#### 3.2. Key Themes to Unravel Keatsian Aesthetic Impact

##### 3.2.1. Beauty, Truth and Imagination

Creative imagination is another feature with strong relevance both for Romanticism and for Pre-Raphaelitism. On the one hand, Romanticism emphasised the power of the emotions and the imagination of the artist, for they were unburdened of all constraints in order to express their individuality. Turner, "the painter of light", and William Blake, with his imaginative "composite art", are good examples of the power of the imagination. In addition, Romantic poets delighted in the supremacy of imagination and the power of the sublime; that is why for them imagination played a key role, since without it there is no poetry. They aspired to overthrow all kinds of repression, whether artistic, political, and religious, and exercised their individualism through imagination. On the other hand, Pre-Raphaelites created their own worlds by stressing the importance of their imaginations, following thus the precepts of John Ruskin, who always highlighted creative imagination in the figure of the artist.

All these concerns can be found in Keats too. The poet wrote to a friend of his, Benjamin Bailey, in a letter dated 22 November 1817, that he was "certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination" (Keats, "To Benjamin Bailey" 2009: 489); he goes on to say that "[w]hat the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth", which reminds us of his last lines in "Ode on a Grecian Urn" ("Beauty is truth, truth beauty", l. 49). For him, imagination was supreme and that is why he values it so highly in his poetry. Examples of this can be found on his "Ode on a Grecian Urn" ("Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter", ll. 11-12), in "Fancy" ("Ever let the Fancy roam, / Pleasure never is at home", ll. 1-2), or in his "Ode to Psyche", whose final stanza shows

the creation of a temple to praise poetic imagination (“Yes, I will be thy priest, and build a fane / In some untrodden region of my mind”; “A rosy sanctuary will I dress / With the wreath’d trellis of a working brain”, ll. 50-51, 59-60). Leigh Hunt, in his review of Keats’s poems in 1817, praised, in fact, the poet’s “fancy and imagination at will, and an intense feeling of external beauty in its most natural and least expressible simplicity” (Poems by John Keats 1987: 130). John Ruskin admired too the poet’s “exquisite sincerity” and imaginative power (2009: 73).

Keats also wrote frequently about the importance of beauty, as his many letters demonstrate and as his poetry shows in practice. Unsurprisingly, Wilde referred to him as “a Priest of Beauty slain before his time” (qtd. in Raby 1988: 5). Keats noted down how he felt “assured [he] should write from the mere yearning and fondness ... for the Beautiful” (Keats, “To Richard Woodhouse” 2009: 501) in a letter to Richard Woodhouse on the 17<sup>th</sup> October, 1818, since beauty, related to the power of imagination, becomes a great force within poetry itself. Previously, he had written to his brothers George and Tom in the late December of 1817 that “with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration” (Keats, “To George and Tom Keats” 2009: 492). In this same letter, he says: “the excellence of every Art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty & Truth” (“To George and Tom Keats” 2009: 491-492). We see again, thus, the proximity between beauty and truth for the poet, which can be linked to the Pre-Raphaelites. They did not believe in the false idealisation of the Grand Style of the Royal Academy, but rather on “truth to nature”; in that sense, their paintings are full of minute details of great accuracy which seem almost photographic. That is why, at first, critics were very harsh with PRB’s paintings, calling them repulsive, when what they did was to highlight natural beauty.

Going back to Keats’s letter to his brothers, he exemplifies his claim with *King Lear*, meaning that art should have an intensity capable of transcending all repulsiveness of the subject and that was the same aim of the Pre-Raphaelites. In this sense, their works of art about contemporary topics can prove good examples (*The Awakening Conscience* by Hunt or *Found* by Rossetti, to name only two), since these paintings illustrate moral issues and real-life contemporary problems which would be considered as repugnant topics for works of art. Let us take *The Awakening Conscience* by William H. Hunt as an example to illustrate this argument. This painting presents a fallen woman –more precisely, a kept woman– in a room full of symbolism about the situation. The critical reception of the oil on canvas was not kind, since it was considered too repulsive for the public. Again, only Ruskin would celebrate and encourage this new art and the significance of what the Pre-Raphaelites were striving to achieve with their truthfulness and devotion.

### 3.2.2. Medievalism

Furthermore, some of Keats’s poems are full of medievalism, gothic details, architectural and colour descriptions, symbols; in short, a highly sensual world that inspired the imagery of the PRB. The Pre-Raphaelites delighted in this medievalism, for it partook of the qualities which these artists sought, and transferred that atmosphere onto their paintings. The Pre-Raphaelites’ chivalric medievalism finds its roots in the Arthurian Cycle and the ballads which had already influenced Romantic poets, in illustrated manuscripts, as well as in later poets such as Keats and Tennyson, among others. For his part, Keats had been much influenced by Chaucer and his medieval atmospheres, as we shall see now. John Keats’s most medieval settings can be found especially in the following poems: “Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil”, “The Eve of St. Agnes”, “The Eve of Saint Mark”, and “La Belle Dame sans Merci”. At this point, we will allude to medievalism in his “Eve of Saint Mark”. As “The Eve of St. Agnes”, this poem is based on a medieval superstition and it has a surrounding atmosphere of quietness and cold. Keats transports us into a dreamlike vision of medieval times full of magic wonder, where he describes the bells of the town cathedral and its architecture: the “arched porch, and entry low” (l. 19), the garden-wall, the window-panes, etc.; even Bertha’s illuminated book is full of medieval resonances, where Keats includes a fragment in Middle English, under the influence of Chaucer, in order to evocate medieval language, just as he creates a medieval visual space.

This fascination with the medieval was further developed during the second generation of Pre-Raphaelitism, with the figures of Rossetti, Morris, and Burne-Jones, for whom all “things mediaeval [...] became a kind of second nature [...]” (Treuhertz 1984: 163). John Ruskin, also a Keatsian admirer and a Romantic in his views, together with the Pre-Raphaelites – above all, Rossetti –, advocated for a medievalism that would shape the Victorian imagination and even up to the dawn of the twentieth century, as Waterhouse’s paintings attest.

In that sense, the story of “The Eve of St. Agnes”, one of Keats’s finest and most appreciated poems, proved to be the perfect point of departure. The imagery of the poem captivated artists such as the Pre-Raphaelites, due to its theme (romantic love against society) and its medieval setting, but, above all, because it is a very visual poem, full of rich details, settings, descriptions, and even colours, what Texte calls the “poésie du vitrail” (1889: 426) or a sort of pictorialism; for instance, Keats describes Porphyro’s “pained heart made purple riot” (ll. 137-138), Madeline’s “blue affrayed eyes” (l. 296) or her “azure-lidded sleep” (l. 262), the red of the “shielded scutcheon blush’d with blood of queens and kings” (l. 216) or the “warm gules on Madeline’s fair breast” (l. 218). As Texte wrote, “The Eve of St. Agnes” “reste une œuvre unique par la nouveauté et le brillant des images” (1889: 427). In fact, the poem feels like a long and continuous ekphrasis.

As an example, we have a triptych by Arthur Hughes, associated with the Brotherhood, dated from 1856. On the left side, Porphyro is seen in the darkness of the night coming to Madeline’s castle. In the middle of the painting, the

largest part shows Porphyro kneeling down beside Madeline's bed and the woman waking up from her dream. On the right, we have a similar scene to that already portrayed by Hunt: Porphyro and Madeline, close to each other and holding hands, are trying to escape, without disturbing those asleep by the drunkenness; in this case, there is only one man lying on the floor –the porter. Another difference is that of the dog; here we only have one dog, but already in front of the lovers, before Madeline, almost blocking their way.

Hughes was not only inspired by Keats's poem, but also by Hunt's rendering of the subject, as can be seen in its colours, details and moonlight. As such, it is an interesting painting, for Hughes has absorbed both sources of inspiration and his influence is hence mediated through the work of a different artist. This becomes very clear in the figure of Madeline and Porphyro on the right side of the triptych, which echoes Hunt's rendering; Madeline is even wearing purple and green clothing, just as Hunt's Madeline. Nevertheless, Hughes seems to be more faithful to Keats in rendering the sensuousness of his poetry into the work of art, as compared to Hunt, whose painting, as we shall see, is more sober and moralist.

Overall, this is a highly accomplished painting with great richness, which can be clearly observed in the moonlight, shadows, or the stained glass. Through this richness and brightness of colour, he attempted to convey the sensuousness of the poem, for, as William Michael Rossetti wrote, the power of this poem "lies [...] in making pictures out of words" (2010: 138). Keats's descriptions are highly meticulous and present a myriad of lavish images of texture and colour in the objects and architecture, most especially in Madeline's chamber. With the aim of transferring that pregnant atmosphere, Hughes uses strong colours –purple, green, blue, red– contrasting with each other, and fills his painting with minute details. Additionally, just as Keats's verses transpire sexuality and suggest sexual consummation ("Into her dream he melted, as the rose / Blendeth its odour with the violet", ll. 320-321), so does Hughes's painting with Porphyro's sword in the middle scene and Madeline's purple clothes in the last scene, or in the fact that the artist chooses to depict Madeline in her bed, where she has been dreaming about Porphyro and where they will consummate their love –a consummation, which, as has been noted by Grant Scott (qtd. Ringel 2004), is expressed by Keats in terms of colours (and odours) blending– at the moment when he approaches her and kneels "pale as smooth-sculptured stone" (l. 297). It is interesting to note that if there is one colour which stands out in the composition, it is purple, commonly used by Hughes in his paintings (*The Long Engagement* and *April Love* are two clear examples); this purple colour, which denotes sensuality, also features prominently in Keats's poetry and is the Greek origin of the name of Porphyro (Schulkins 2016: 101). Furthermore, the artist makes clear contrasts of light and darkness in his composition, preserving, thus, Keats's play with images of cold and warmth, and light and dark throughout the poem.

The composition retains too the medieval qualities of Keats's poem: Madeline's castle with the beautifully detailed Venetian Gothic arches, the clothing the figures are wearing, the curtains and embroidered drapery; in this sense, Madeline's chamber deserves special attention because of its exquisite details that refer us back to Keats's poem. The glow of the "wintry moon" (l. 17) over Madeline and her bed is highly accomplished and reminds us of the moment before in Keats's narrative when the lady is disrobing and, consequently, fills the depicted scene with the same sensuousness; the splendid stained glass in her room is rich in details and colours, just as Keats describes his:

... garlanded with carven imageries,  
Of fruits and flowers, and bunches of knot-grass,  
And diamonded with panes of quaint device,  
Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes,  
As are the tiger-moth's deep-damask'd wings;  
And in the midst, 'mong thousand heraldries,  
And twilight saints, and dim emblazonings,  
A shielded scutcheon blush'd with blood of queens and kings. (ll. 208-216)

This demonstrates how Keatsian pictorialism found its utmost expression in Pre-Raphaelitism. This stanza contains such countless images of rich texture and colourfulness in that stained-glass window that it is unsurprising that Hughes felt compelled to represent that scene, which for him, as a Pre-Raphaelite artist, held so much potential.

We will go back now to the importance of medievalism both for Keats and for the Pre-Raphaelites. These artists were reactionary towards the Industrial Revolution in general, for they strongly believed that industrialisation brought about several political and social ills, but they saw these as worthy subjects for their art. In that sense, *The Awakening Conscience* by Hunt and, to a lesser extent, *Found* by Rossetti, which were previously mentioned, illustrate how these artists took contemporary moral issues as a means of denouncing such a reality provoked by industrialisation and urban society, which had led to the loss of the innocence attributed to former rural life. But even with that purpose in mind they sometimes resorted to –mostly modern– literary sources. It is somehow as if by reflecting previous periods of time they could accentuate the loss of certain values in their generation, while yearning, at the same time, for them.

In this sense, Romanticism was also a movement of reaction against this Industrial Revolution. There was a return to Gothic architecture –Gothic Revival–, which lasted until Victorian times; there was a medievalism developed in

poetry too, where Keats stands as a clear example, as we have seen. For its part, Pre-Raphaelitism also tended to look to the past in this sense and ascribed high value to medievalism and Gothic elements. In these, both movements saw an antithesis of industrialisation and its resulting problems; as such, both Ruskin and later William Morris with Morris & Co. advocated for true craftsmanship as in medieval times with the guilds as a means to restore art and to improve the lives of the working-class people, linking, therefore, artistry with a social purpose, for they held a moral view of art.

In that respect, Millais painted his *Lorenzo and Isabella* based on Keats's "Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil", which is a great example of the medievalism we are talking about. Millais invented a scene to portray the family and Lorenzo, which does not appear directly in Keats's poem and whose exquisite details remind the viewers of medieval banquets, as well as Flemish paintings of interiors. The artist represents the first stanza of the poem, but, at the same time, is full of hints and symbols of what is to come, which was a common artistic practice of the Pre-Raphaelites, in a similar style to the narrative poem which serves as source of inspiration.

As in the poem, Millais accentuates here Keats's criticism against mercantilism and class conflict in society, where the table serves as a dividing line between the cruel brothers and the gentle lovers. The cruelty and violence of the brothers is evident in their faces and actions. There is an attack, thus, on materialism and mercenary marriages, for the brothers' iniquity comes from their status (Keats calls them "money-bags"). There is even a hawk on the left of the picture, a symbolic image that points to the true avarice of Isabella's brothers, since Keats refers to them as "hawks of ship-mast forests" (l. 133) and harshly condemns their rapacity in stanzas XVI, XVII, and XVIII.

Another example can be found in Hunt's *The Flight of Madeline and Porphyro during the Drunkenness Attending the Revelry (The Eve of St. Agnes)*. In fact, this painting was the first of the PRB to be exhibited in public in 1848 and, as we have seen, it was the reason the PRB first got together. Hunt portrays the penultimate stanza with those "sleeping dragons all round", asleep in their drunkenness. Hunt chose to convey a very intense moment full of psychological tension, as well as a very intense and dynamic moment in terms of action; that tension is palpable in these lines of the poem:

They glide, like phantoms, into the wide hall;  
Like phantoms to the iron porch they glide,  
Where lay the Porter, in uneasy sprawl,  
With a huge empty flagon by his side:  
The wakeful bloodhound rose, and shook his hide,  
But his sagacious eye an inmate owns:  
By one, and one, the bolts full easy slide: –  
The chains lie silent on the footworn stones;  
The key turns, and the door upon its hinges groans. (ll. 361-369)

However, the portrayal is not merely related to this penultimate stanza. As Codell affirms (1995: 351), the anxiety evident in Madeline and Porphyro's faces are described in the previous stanza ("beset with fears", l. 352). Likewise, the revelry at the back is finished already by the penultimate stanza, since in the previous stanza Keats says "in all the house was heard no human sound" (l. 356), but we still see the ongoing celebrations in Hunt's portrayal. Therefore, in this painting, more than one scene is depicted at once in order to give a more dramatic tension, changing the chronology of events in the poem.

Hunt takes a special interest in offering a clear contrast between the lovers and the celebrations at the back, as well as with those already intoxicated in the festivities at the door. All that inebriety and revelry is compared to the sobriety and temperance in the figure of Madeline. Therefore, Hunt conveys a moral message in his personal interpretation of the poem. As the artist wrote about it, this painting "illustrates the sacredness of honest responsible love and the weakness of proud intemperance" (Hunt 1905: 85).

Conversely, the artist has taken real care in reproducing the medieval atmosphere of Keats's poem: the colours, the dresses, the curtains, the arches and furniture, even the stained glass at the very back, which could evoke Keats's powerful description of the window in Madeline's room; moreover, as in Millais's *Isabella*, there is arguably here a touch of Flemish influence –paintings of interior– that can remind viewers of Flemish Primitives such as Jan van Eyck or Robert Campin in the minute details or in the use of the background scenes which can be seen through a window.

To summarise, then, Keats largely inspired the visual and poetic works of the Pre-Raphaelites, not only inspiring the composition of certain works of art, but also being part of the inspiration behind the new imagery that would become a paramount aspect of the works of the Brotherhood and those associated with them. In that sense, we need to take into account that Keats's aesthetics were modern, but also provoking, for they were the beginning of "the artistic renaissance of England" (Wilde, "The English Renaissance of Art" 2013: 76). These Pre-Raphaelite artists absorbed Keats's Romanticism and his palpable lush language, and translated his verses into a frenzy of colour, minute details, and lavish symbolism. All these renderings, thus, constitute a sort of tribute to Keats's and his poetic power to inspire and stir our imaginations. As Texte said:

Chacun de ces vers veut être pesé et savouré à part. Chacun est comme chargé de couleurs et d'éclat. C'est un art nouveau, qui fait du poète l'émule du mosaïste, de l'émailleur, du verrier. De fait, il serait curieux de montrer comment c'est de Keats que date cette confusion des arts plastiques et de la poésie, qui a caractérisé depuis tant d'écrivains en vers, notamment les préraphaélites. (Texte 1889: 427)

Texte attributes to Keats this “confusion” of the arts, which we will analyse later in section 3.2.4. There is here a sisterhood of the arts, in which poetry and art combine and confuse with one another: Keats's verses are full of pictorial elements, they are infused with brilliant colours and fine details, his words evoke pure paintings, becoming a “fore-runner” of the Pre-Raphaelite movement (Wilde, “The English Renaissance of Art” 2013: 76); the Pre-Raphaelites will expand and explore this relationship, they will find inspiration in these pictorial poetry but they will translate poetic elements into their works too and, in addition, their poetry will present the same characteristics which will build a firm connection between both sister arts. Poetry, in Keats, is full of sensations, of images. Pre-Raphaelite artists will use this to convert their works of art into something new too, poetic images which transmit a world of sensations.

### 3.2.3. Sensuality

As a matter of fact, sensuousness was a predominant feature in Keats's poetry too; he was very concerned with this quality, and so were the Pre-Raphaelites. That is the reason why several critics point to the Keats's aesthetic as a prelude to Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poetry and also as a precursor of the Aesthetic Movement, without undermining the influence of other poets, for Keats remained a constant source of inspiration all throughout Rossetti's life. Let us think about Keats's well-known phrase, “O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts” (To Benjamin Bailey 2009: 489), and how he seems to value our senses and sensations over other things such as “thoughts”. As a poet, he tends to express throughout his verses sensory experiences, as in *Endymion*, “Isabella”, “Lamia”, or “The Eve of St. Agnes”, among others, as we will see later.

This research explores this quality in some of Keats's poems in relation to Pre-Raphaelite paintings. However, we can bring forward again “The Eve of St. Agnes” as a clear example of that loaded sensuality, which would be transferred into canvas by Millais or Hughes, among others, as well as other paintings based on poems such as “La Belle Dame sans Merci” or “Lamia”. As a matter of fact, this sensuality will not only be explored in Pre-Raphaelite art, but also in their poetry, where Christina and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, as well as Swinburne stand out as epitomes of Keatsian influence in the language of sensuality. Returning to Keats, nonetheless, more examples can be offered in respect to his sensuous language. In this case, we will look closely at his “Ode to Psyche”, where the poet again glorifies the realms of imagination, another of his great themes, with a very sensual imagery. His language transpires sensual and natural experiences; in that sense, he uses a rich imagery to describe nature by his “gardener Fancy” relying all the time on the senses:

In deepest grass, beneath the whisp'ring roof  
Of leaves and trembled blossoms, where there tan  
    A brooklet, scare espied:  
'Mid hush'd, cool-rooted flowers fragrant-eyed,  
    Blue, silver-white, and bidden Tyrian,  
They lay calm-breathing on the bedded grass;  
    Their arms embraced, and their pinions too;  
    Their lips touch'd not, but had not bade adieu (ll. 10-17)

Keats, therefore, calls upon all our senses through a language rich in natural imagery and suggested eroticism in this poem, where nature, sensations and poetic imagination become the focus of attention.

As we have already talked about Hughes' representation of “The Eve of St. Agnes”, now we will focus on Millais's oil on canvas, dating from 1862-1863. Millais did three different versions of this theme, based either on Keats's or Tennyson's poem. In this one based on Keats's, the painter portrays an earlier scene of the poem, that of Madeline undressing before going to bed; we see how her blue and greenish clothes fall from her body. She is “half-hidden, like a mermaid in sea-weed, pensive awhile she dreams awake” (l. 231), her dreamy portrayal perfectly matching this description. The moonlight shines upon the exact spot where she is, wrapping her, as Keats describes: “Full on this casement shone the wintry moon / And threw warm gules on Madeline's fair breasts” (ll. 217-218). Before this painting, Millais had already done a drawing based on Tennyson's poem, but this painting is more sensual than its predecessor. The clothes falling from her, her long flowing hair and long neck, the moonlight shining through the window, are all aspects that point to the eroticism conveyed in the painting, because as Pointon explains: “Represented thus ... the figure of Madeline is highly provocative ... [T]he act of divesting the clothing is an act of avowal in the physical, a declaration of the body” (1989: 114); that is why, Chesneau points to the “wanting of delicacy” that some spectators might have found in the picture (qtd. in Bryden 1998: 95).

All these details –the light, the delicacy of the fair lady, etc.– are poetical in themselves. In his personal trajectory, this canvas belongs to Millais's later style, where all the details are concentrated on Madeline, as well as the focus of

the light on her, while the rest of the room is somehow blurred, without detail, as in the background, thus, directing our gaze straight to the young lady. This is a striking indication, since we know that Pre-Raphaelites delighted in painstaking details and, thus, this painting is an exponent of how Millais's style transmuted throughout the 1860s, a change already started with *Autumn Leaves* in 1856, already away from the first Pre-Raphaelitism, but at the same becoming an early influence in the later Aesthetic Movement. The French art historian and critic Ernest Chesneau, nonetheless, wrote at the time when this painting was exhibited that Keats's words were "most faithfully followed out and rendered by the artist"; as such, it could be "almost unintelligible to any one who is not acquainted with the poem" (qtd. in Bryden 1998: 94-95). However, not all critics were so kind. Some accused Millais of making too many amendments and changes deviated from the original source. And the fact remains that anyone observing this painting in the decade of 1860s would probably think that this was a mere beautiful young lady, without any background or narrative behind the beauty of the painting in itself. In that sense, we need to bear in mind that the Aesthetic Movement was in its beginnings at that time and it would not have been Millais's first painting without a subject, as we have previously stated. This trend towards Aestheticism, which placed beauty above everything else, could be felt all throughout British art and a clear example of it can be found in Rossetti and his representations of beautifully sensuous women at this time.

On the other hand, it should also be noted that this painting represents the scene observed by Porphyro himself:

Anon his heart revives: her vespers done,  
Of all its wreathed pearls her hair she frees;  
Unclasps her warmed jewels one by one;  
Loosens her fragrant boddice; by degrees  
Her rich attire creeps rustling to her knees: (ll. 226-230)

Nonetheless, we do not see Porphyro hiding, which means that the painter, Millais, is Porphyro in this case and he invites us, spectators, to experience the scene as he does. This painting, thus, does not illustrate Keats's poem, but it is rather an interpretation of the poem by the artist: there is none of the medieval or pictorial qualities of Keats's verses here, although Millais preserves the sensual atmosphere of the original, but enclosing Madeline in our gaze and, therefore, oversexualising her figure. Hence, we see the different methods and translating devices used by the Pre-Raphaelites in their renderings. In this case, Millais invites his spectators to feel and see the scene that Keats renders with multisensory detail: we feel the young lady's "warmed jewels" (l. 228), we smell her "fragrant boddice" (l. 229), we hear how "her rich attire creeps rustling to her knees" (l. 230).

### 3.2.4. Sister Arts

Another point to examine is the sisterhood of arts in Keats and the Pre-Raphaelites, which has already been mentioned. Both arts, poetry and painting, were profoundly connected for the PRB. For Rossetti and for those who were influenced by him (Burne-Jones, Morris, Waterhouse and many others), the painting had to have a poetic nature, as a sort of reversal of *ut pictura poesis*. As a rule, late Romantic authors showed interest in art and in their interrelationship, but "none was more obsessed by it than John Keats", according to critic Grant F. Scott (qtd. in Gillet 2013: 381). As a matter of fact, Keats himself painted sometimes, and a proof of that is the vase he drew of his poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn". Furthermore, he was a close friend of painter Joseph Severn and other artists. No wonder, then, that Rossetti wrote, "next, Keats can only be a painter" (qtd. in Gillet 2013: 381), for his interest in both sister arts is even manifest in the pictorial qualities of his verses, in what seems an attempt to reconcile both poetry and art in a natural way.

In that sense, his poem "On seeing the Elgin Marbles", as well as the aforementioned "Ode on a Grecian Urn", is very illustrative about his enthusiasm for art. For that reason, Wilde would call him the "poet-painter of our English Land" in his poem "The Grave of Keats" (Wilde 2000: 71). In this respect, many of Keats's poems feature ekphrastic elements, demonstrating that art had such a relevant impact in his poetry that its influence can be traced in all of his poetry, since several of those instances are not properly ekphrasis *per se* of real objects, but his descriptions and images achieve the same purpose. A good example of this can be seen throughout the poem "The Eve of St. Agnes", where Keats's exquisite use of language and imagery appeals to all our senses.

Let us see first his fascinating account of Glaucus's cloak in *Endymion*, which looks like an ekphrasis of a real work of art, in a similar style to renowned classical references such as Homer when he describes Achilles's shield and Virgil in his description of Dido's temple to Juno or, more appropriately, of Cloanthus's cloak. In these lines the poet pictures with great skill the imagined magic cloak, which comes alive with the symbols and images representing the ocean and its creatures with painstaking details that remind us of the thorough care of the greatest visual artists:

A cloak of blue wrapp'd up his aged bones,  
O'erwrought with symbols by the deepest groans  
Of ambitious magic: every ocean-form



Was woven in with black distinctness; storm,  
 And calm, and whispering, and hideous roar,  
 Quicksand, and whirlpool, and deserted shore,  
 Were emblem'd in the woof; with every shape  
 That skims, or dives, or sleeps, 'twixt cape and cape.  
 The gulphing whale was like a dot in the spell,  
 Yet look upon it, and 'twould size and swell  
 To its huge self; and the minutest fish  
 Would pass the very hardest gazer's wish,  
 And show his little eye's anatomy. (III. 197-209)

Keats certainly had a striking talent when attempting to make his poetry visual. He plays with imagery and colours in his lively language and this is exemplified in numerous of his verses, as in his fragment of "The Castle Builder", where he fully describes a room "rich and sombre" (l. 26), with "Greek busts and statuary" (l. 55), paintings by Salvator, Titian and Haydon, and many other objects which come to life when reading these verses.

In that sense, we have two clear examples of this sisterhood of arts, apart from the sensualism we have also seen, in the two representations of "Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil". Hunt and Waterhouse, in 1867 and 1907 respectively, depict Isabella embracing the pot. It is, as in the poem, a static scene, which could at first seem easy to portray, but which, on the contrary, is a bold choice, since it involves the "representation of the invisible" (Gillet 2013: 387). Lorenzo's head is "shut from view" inside the pot, which, though invisible, is at the same time the very centre of the scene. Thus, the contemplation of the work of art becomes an act of deciphering for the spectator, a common feature in Pre-Raphaelite art. In that sense, we could argue that Waterhouse was very much influenced by Hunt in the approaching of this technique as they represent similar incidents. The following lines serve as the source of inspiration of both paintings, since they describe Isabella's inhibition from the world and her attitude towards her treasured pot:

And she forgot the stars, the moon, and sun,  
 And she forgot the blue above the trees,  
 And she forgot the dells where waters run,  
 And she forgot the chilly autumn breeze;  
 She had no knowledge when the day was done,  
 And the new morn she saw not: but in peace  
 Hung over her sweet Basil evermore,  
 And moisten'd it with tears unto the core. (II. 417-424)

It is a very dramatic scene. The Isabella portrayed in both paintings conveys suffering and melancholy; Waterhouse's Isabella is even kneeling down beside the precious pot. And that depicted pain is what somehow makes visible –or visual– the invisible. The setting changes, however; while Hunt depicts an interior scene, Waterhouse takes the spectator out in the open, to the garden mentioned by Keats in his poem, perhaps in an attempt to distance himself from Hunt's painting and his setting inside a room. This sort of garden reminds us of a graveyard because of its trees, dark colours and that skull directly below the pot. Moreover, the grief of Isabella and her tears moistening the basil are accentuated through the effect of her clothes and hair, both of them very long and elongated, as if falling like a cascade.

In addition the garden is flourishing with foliage and flowers, where green figures prominently, so that spectators can be reminded of Keats's poems and his lush descriptions of nature. As a matter of fact, Leigh Hunt admired Keats's "close observation of nature" (Poems by John Keats 1987: 131) and highlighted his "ardent grappling with Nature" (Young Poets 1816: 761). Keats mentions the colour green up to four times in his "Isabella": two of them could be said to describe decomposition and the process of decay (the "green church-yard" of line 353 and Lorenzo's face "vile with green and livid spot" in line 475), and the other two the opposite, to depict fragrant life (the basil growing "green, and beautiful" in line 426 and again in line 458). And that is exactly the aim Waterhouse achieves in his work, even with the use of his typical lively and glowing brushwork: the garden infuses its spectators with the same aromatic sense as Keats does with his verdant descriptions, where he emphasises smells and the olfactory gains force in lines such as "the inward fragrance of each other's heart" (l. 76), and, above all, the following lines that are precisely the subject of Waterhouse's depiction –note the emphasis on the verdant life and its odour:

And so she ever fed it with thin tears,  
 Whence thick, and green, and beautiful it grew,  
 So that it smelt more balmy than its peers  
 Of Basil-tufts in Florence; for it drew  
 Nurture besides, and life, from human fears,  
 From the fast mouldering head there shut from view:  
 So that the jewel, safely casketed,  
 Came forth, and in perfumed leafits spread. (II. 425-431)

Another allusion to the dark nature of the meaning behind the beauty of the painting can be found in this garden: those red poppies that stand out and accompany the figure in her distress. In fact, the symbolism of flowers is one of the characteristic features of Pre-Raphaelitism. In this case, the red poppy, already used by Millais in his well-known depiction of *Ophelia* or by Rossetti in his *Beata Beatrix*, is a symbol of sleep but also of death. Although not in this poem, Keats does refer to the red poppy three times in his previous long poem *Endymion* in lines 128, 555, 566 and 682.

Returning to Hunt, his Isabella is represented in her exoticised room, with an Italian touch which points us to his Orientalism. The spectator's attention is directly drawn to Isabella and the pot, signifying also the union between Isabella and Lorenzo and their separation from everyone and everything else. Everything about Isabella and her surroundings point to her melancholy and neglect, as expressed in Keats's verses. This is an image in which there is a juxtaposition of beauty and sorrow, of beauty and the ugliness of her act – treasuring the severed head of her lover in a pot; but it is exactly the beauty and the fine imagery of the painting that exude here, as well as in Keats's poem, where we are drawn to its pleasing descriptions and rich language, which prevent us from feeling repulsed by the grotesqueness of the act itself.

In addition to this, Hunt seems to convey the luxuriant and rich imagery of Keats's poem into the objects surrounding Isabella, which are full of photographic details: the “inlaid furniture, brocade cloths, and marble floors” (Codell 1995: 361). All her room is charged with details, as thorough as Keats's imagery when describing Isabella's “soiled glove, whereon / Her silk had play'd in purple phantasies” (ll. 369-370), the “silken scarf – sweet with the dews / Of precious flowers pluck'd in Araby” (ll. 409-410) with which Isabella wraps Lorenzo's head, or the sweet basil which “smelt more balmy than its peers / Of Basil-tufts in Florence” (ll. 427-428). Nonetheless, his thriving and robust Isabella differs from Keats's withering “like a palm / Cut by an Indian for its juicy balm” Isabella (ll. 47-48). In sum, we have seen how these Pre-Raphaelites' renderings focus on different aspects which are always full of emotional tension and how these artists present their depictions with a touch of medievalism and an imagery rich in colour and symbolic details in order to render visual Keats's sensory words. It is precisely that medievalism and pictorialism in Keats's poem which captivated the Pre-Raphaelites, for they accorded with their artistic interests. Furthermore, Isabella becomes a very appealing character for these artists due to opportunity she offers to explore sensualism, as well as the portrayal of her emotional distress juxtaposed with the grotesqueness of her behaviour.

#### 4. Conclusion

Throughout this article we have seen the extent of Romantic influence in the PRB's manifesto; their style and aesthetics based themselves on certain key ideas, namely, truth to nature, the revolt against idealisation and artistic conventions, and the free play of imagination. We have also seen how Pre-Raphaelite visual culture mainly had a literary source of inspiration. For this movement, poetry and art went hand in hand and they sought to merge both sister arts. In that sense, John Keats became a strong bond among the members of the Brotherhood. Pre-Raphaelite imagination, thus, would partly find its roots in Keats's luxurious poetry and this enabled the transposal of qualities such as medievalism, the stress on individuality and imaginative power or the relevance of sensuality or the grotesque.

We cannot deny the ability of Keatsian poetry to transpose its readers to a different era. Additionally, he had a keen eye for details, which made his poetry pictorial, and almost photographic. His verses are pregnant with a luxurious atmosphere of lavish images, scents, sounds, which make readers see, smell, feel, hear, and taste what the poet describes; that is to say, his imagery and style can be entirely felt by all our senses as readers. No wonder that the Pre-Raphaelites found his poetic luxury and medievalism to be a perfect point of departure for their works, although always alluding somehow to the present. Through the poet's influence and his sensuous details, they created a symbolic visual language for their art, bestowing it with an equal rich atmosphere and an explosion of visual effects. In brief, the Pre-Raphaelites made Keats's overflowing emotions visual.

As we have seen, the works analysed are active renderings of Keats's poems, offering new insights into his words and purposes, and, therefore, providing interactions with the source. The intensity, purity, and plasticity of Keats's poetry were a springboard for these artists to represent contemporary subjects through a distant past. That is to say, through Keats and by remaining faithful to him, they incorporated their own visions and preoccupations in their works of art, therefore, expressing their feelings in a very Romantic conception of the individuality of the artist. Consequently, trying to understand the Pre-Raphaelite's works of art and their aesthetic without the direct influence of Keats is unconceivable. To a large extent, he shaped their artistic characteristics and provided for them an endless source of inspiration through which to interpret their reality. In this manner, Keats somehow ensured the continued existence of Romantic aesthetics into the Victorian period, acting as a bridge between both times.

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