

Rachel Schulkins, *Keats, Modesty, and Masturbation*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2014. Pp. 190. \$109.95. ISBN 9781472418791.

In *Keats, Modesty, and Masturbation*, Rachel Schulkins attempts to connect Keats's poetry to discussions about sexuality in the Romantic period. Lord Byron's well-known sneer, that Keats was "f-gg-g his imagination" (quoted 1) comes immediately to mind, and Schulkins takes Byron seriously. For Schulkins, Keats's work counters conservative ideals of sexual restraint and feminine virtue: 'The inclusion of the solitary pleasure into the poetry...counters the image of the asexual female advocated by a wider group of conservative readers and critics around this time' (3). Keats's attitude toward female masturbation is part of his political project, what she calls at one point his 'radical eroticism' (43). She outlines the indignation with which writers of the period lambasted masturbation, and points out that 'anti-masturbatory literature continuously emphasized the close connection between masturbation and the private pleasures of the imagination' (61). For Schulkins, Keats endorses female masturbation as a refuge but castigates male masturbation for its solipsism; Keats criticizes his male protagonists for the 'masculinist, masturbatory, and selfish perception of the female' (60).

In subsequent chapters, Schulkins offers corrective readings of well-known poems with the context of Keats's attitudes toward masturbation as a focus. While the cultural context delineated in the introduction and first chapters is competent, if not particularly new, it is in the readings of Keats's major works that Schulkins really surprises – in weird and inconsistent ways. (Why would Keats have such different views of male and female masturbation, when both were condemned at the time? And how exactly can we intuit any idea of his view of masturbation at all?)

Schulkins censors *Isabella* – she calls it 'a masturbatory romance' (73) – and offers a disturbing and peculiarly moralistic reading that finds everyone in the poem guilty of masturbation, as if we were on the worst kind of witch hunt: 'both the lovers and Isabella's brothers are trapped in the engulfing and blinding force of excessive desire, distorted to masturbatory and antisocial behavior that eventually leads to their downfall ... The characters of the poem appear to be in a sort of masturbatory trance' (73). The loving couple gets judged and found wanting: Isabella for her moaning over the dead Lorenzo, which exhibits 'her tendency to invoke Lorenzo's figure for the mere purpose of self-gratification' (82); while Lorenzo fares no better: 'he is a mere greedy ghost ... an incubus that derives his strength from Isabella's expiring life and her masturbatory imagination' (83). That Schulkins should feel the need to be a policewoman of the senses, to sit in judgment of the sexual practices of characters in poems, even as we are unlearning most of these judgments in our own time, is certainly eccentric. Most importantly, the whole subject of love – Isabella's for Lorenzo and vice-versa – is completely elided, as Schulkins has little sympathy for the bereft Isabella and her 'masturbatory' imagination.

Though Schulkins clearly disapproves of sexuality as it is represented in *Isabella*, she condones it in *The Eve of St Agnes*. I am not sure anyone would disagree that 'St. Agnes comes to negotiate, through the characters of Porphyro and Madeline, between erotic dreams and their realization' (90). But Schulkins is determined to moralize this complexity. The Eve's charming custom (or 'superstition', as Schulkins labels it) becomes 'no more than a romantic dream, a solipsistic world of love and sex for the sake of...private pleasure' (93). Porphyro's presence in her bedroom interrupts the 'masturbatory dreamer' that Madeline is about to become; he initiates her into sexuality because he wishes to 'integrate her innocence and sexuality into one' (105).

His affection for her is not addressed: here Porphyro acts as a sex therapist, not a lover. Nevertheless, because the relationship is consummated and ‘natural’, ‘a social act’ (107), Schulkins gives it her approval. One wonders what her criteria are for ‘natural’ sexuality.

The last two chapters use her anti-masturbatory model to construct unconvincing and certainly unexpected readings of ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’ and *Lamia*. In Schulkins’s eyes, the male protagonists of the poems cause their own dilemmas. ‘La Belle Dame’, she writes, ‘deals with the excessiveness of romantic idealisation and desire, distorted to a masturbatory love’ (112). The Belle Dame ‘resists’ the knight’s romanticisation; being left on the cold hill side is all his fault. This surprising reading overlooks the Belle Dame’s own actions (singing, bending, and lulling). Part of what makes the poem so powerful is Keats’s ambivalence about the femme fatale: the poem does not fully confirm that the Belle Dame is evil or monstrous. But Schulkins flattens that intricacy into a search for blame. Even the famous ‘kisses four’ get explained as part of the Knight’s ‘erratic and insane behaviour’ (120).

Similarly, in her reading of *Lamia*, Schulkins oversimplifies the workings of the title character. Keats certainly intends the reader to feel some sympathy with Lamia even as she deceives. I would not disagree with the author here: ‘Keats endeavours to reclaim Lamia’s humanity through her complex character’ (129). But Schulkins elides this complexity even as she praises it; the narrative results merely from Lycius’s ‘failure’: ‘he fails to see her [Lamia] as she truly is’ (130). *Lamia*, then, is ‘about...men’s failure to accept women as sexual beings’, though Lamia’s sexuality is part of what attracts Lycius in the first place.

The contradictory nature of Schulkins’s claims should be apparent. In the end, the book as a whole is unfortunately hampered by its brand of moralism: one that combines anti-masturbatory ideologies and popular feminism.

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