



Keats, Modesty and Masturbation

Rachel Schulkins

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Examining John Keats's reworking of the romance genre, Rachel Schulkins argues that he is responding to and critiquing the ideals of feminine modesty and asexual femininity advocated in the early nineteenth century. Through close readings of *Isabella; or the Pot of Basil*, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, *Lamia* and 'La Belle Dame sans Merci,' Schulkins offers a re-evaluation of Keats and his poetry designed to demonstrate that Keats's sexual imagery counters conservative morality by encoding taboo desires and the pleasures of masturbation. In so doing, Keats presents a version of female sexuality that undermines the conventional notion of the asexual female. Schulkins engages with feminist criticism that largely views Keats as a misogynist poet who is threatened by the female's overwhelming sexual and creative presence. Such criticism, Schulkins shows, tends towards a problematic identification between poet and protagonist, with the text seen as a direct rendering of authorial ideology. Such an interpretation neither distinguishes between author, protagonist, text, social norms and cultural history nor recognises the socio-sexual and political undertones embedded in Keats's rendering of the female. Ultimately, Schulkins's book reveals how Keats's sexual politics and his refutation of the asexual female model fed the design, plot and vocabulary of his romances.

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