

ONCE MORE THE POET:
KEATS, SEVERN, AND THE GRECIAN LYRE

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No one who visits the Protestant Burial-Ground in Rome is unaffected by the “most delicious melancholy” of the place, as Joseph Severn, deathbed companion of Keats, called it in the summer following his friend’s demise on 23 February 1821.¹ Of all the memorials in the combined cemeteries, new and old, many consider the most pathetic to be that of the “Young English Poet,” which is otherwise anonymous by the dying wish of Keats himself. Appreciation is heightened when one learns what changes of fortune have threatened the poet’s rest, most notoriously a new highway to be constructed over the old Ground—an ignominious fate narrowly averted by the intervention of Queen Victoria herself.² A less brutal, but more insidious, peril was the continual efforts of Severn, later in life, to replace the original stone with a more ostentatious monument of his own design, which, he felt, would better accord with the poet’s growing fame. We may be grateful to Charles Armitage Brown, Keats’s closest friend at the time of his death, for the firm opposition that preserved the personal and touching marker that Severn erected at the end of 1823.³

There are three obvious elements to the stone’s epigraphy. The poet wished to pass through this middle earth without a trace. He sent to his publisher, John Taylor, a “last request that no mention be made of him in any manner publically—in Reviews, Magazines or Newspapers—that no Engraving be taken from any Picture of him.”⁴ Keats then required Severn to inscribe no name upon his tombstone but only the words HERE LIES ONE WHOSE NAME WAS WRIT IN WATER.⁵ This epitaph derives from an ancient proverb, bitterly self-applied, about the inconstancy of promise. Many earlier exemplars of the sentiment have been identified in Greek,

This paper was inspired by a visit to the grave in 2001 with Michael J. Putnam, Rosanna Warren, Stephen Scully, and Richard Taransky. I wish to thank the staff of the Keats-Shelley Memorial House, Rome, for their very friendly assistance in this research: Catherine Payling (curator), Allegra Bennet, Lovisa Stephenson, and Georgina Stephens; Christina M. Gee MBE, former curator of the Keats House, Hampstead, for information about Brown’s copy of *Endymion*; Kevin Sheahan of the same for confirming the existence of the lyre therein; Louisa Petais for walking there to make an excellent drawing of figure 3 while the book was on display and could not be photocopied or scanned; Ian Jenkins, senior curator at the British Museum, for information about the Elgin lyre; Arnold Schmidt for general advice about romantic poetry; Christina Huemer, librarian of the American Academy in Rome, for archival advice; Susan Halpert, reference librarian at Harvard’s Widener Library; Amanda Castleman for

scanning and proofreading. Last, but far from least, I thank the anonymous referee for calling my attention to the lyre seal used by Keats.

¹ Severn to William Haslam, 5 May 1821 (Rollins 1965, no. 116, 1:238–239).

² This is chronicled by Rodd 1913.

³ For an overview of correspondence regarding the stone, both before and after it was erected, see Gay 1913.

⁴ Severn to John Taylor, 24 December 1820 (Rollins 1965, no. 85, 1:184).

⁵ “Among the many things he has requested of me to-night, this is the principal one, that on his grave-stone shall be this,” etc., Severn to Brown, 14 February 1821 (Rollins 1965, no. 166, 2:91 = Sharp 1892, 89–90).

Latin, and English;⁶ to these one may add another handful.⁷ That the expression often referred to the vows of a (male or female) lover might lend some credence to the view, espoused by Severn and many others following the eventual publication of the poet's correspondence with the flirtatious Fanny Brawne, that the cause of Keats's death was actually heartbreak—tuberculosis only a secondary complication.⁸

The older belief, held by most of Keats's friends and strongly reinforced by Shelley's preface to his panegyric *Adonais*, was that Keats had died rather at the hands of his critics—inviting the well-known quip from Byron, "Tis strange the mind, that very fiery particle, / Should let itself be snuffed out by an article."⁹ This view was contested from the first by Fanny Brawne and Charles Cowden Clarke.¹⁰ But Brown was sufficiently convinced of its truth to compose the tombstone's second element, which was to explain the poet's final words:¹¹

THIS GRAVE
CONTAINS ALL THAT WAS MORTAL,
OF A
YOUNG ENGLISH POET,
WHO
ON HIS DEATH BED,
IN THE BITTERNESS OF HIS HEART,
AT THE MALICIOUS POWER OF HIS ENEMIES,
DESIRED
THESE WORDS TO BE ENGRAVEN ON HIS TOMB STONE

It remains most probable that Keats knew the antique *sententia* not from the Greek and Latin authors but rather a number of older English models, especially Beaumont and Fletcher, and of course Shakespeare;¹² the consciously archaic "writ" is enough to show his familiarity with at least some of the English passages cited. The general terms of Beaumont/Fletcher and Shakespeare suggest that Keats's epitaph was prompted not solely by love unfulfilled or vicious critical opposition but by a more profound sense of betrayal at a life of promise cut short.

The subject of this paper is the stone's third element: the Greek lyre (fig. 1). The image, which has received little attention, is the subject of several unresolved ambiguities in the evidence and has not yet been fully apprehended as to authorship, intention, and meaning.

⁶ See Morris 1913; Blunden 1925, 79; Rollins 1965, 2:291 n. 72; Lahr 1972; Woodman 1975, correcting some of Lahr's identifications. These authors have collected the following. GREEK: Soph. fr. 811 Radt; Pl. *Pbdr.* 276C; Men. *Mon.* 26 Jäkel; *Antb. Pal.* 5.8.5 (Meleager); Philostr. *Imag.* 2.8; Niceph. Greg. *Hist. Byz.* 19.1.2; Georgid. *Gnomol.* in Boissonade *Anecdota* 1.5. LATIN: Catull. 70.3–4; August. *De civ. D.* 19.23.1, translating from Greek. ENGLISH: Bacon "Poem on Life" 5 ("But limns on water or but writes in dust"); Shakespeare *Henry VIII* 4.2 ("Men's evil manners live in brass; their virtues / We write in water"); Donne *Elegy* 15.9–12 ("Are vows so cheap with women, or the matter / Whereof they are made, that they are writ in water / And blow away with wind?"); Beaumont and Fletcher *Philastes* 5.3 ("all your better deeds / Shall be in water writ, but this in marble"); Chapman *Revenge for Honour* 5.2–5 ("Of what frail temper is a woman's weakness! / Words writ in waters have more lasting essence / Than our determinations"). For the possibility

that Keats intended "on water," instead of "in water," see Brock 1973, 21.

⁷ GREEK: Lucian. *Catapl.* 21; LATIN: Cic. *Fin.* 2.22.72; Prop. 2.28.8; Ov. *Am.* 2.16.45; Erasmus in *Chiliad.* p. 149. Other Latin sources mention wind but not water.

⁸ See Graham 1898, 98–121.

⁹ Byron, "Don Juan" 9.60.7–8; cf. the letters from Byron to John Murray (26 April 1821, 31 July 1821, and 7 August 1821). **AU: source of letters?**

¹⁰ Clarke and Clarke 1969, 147–148.

¹¹ See Brown 1937, 25–35, 90–91.

¹² See Morris 1913; Woodman 1975.



Fig. 1. Keats's gravestone (photo author).

In a letter to William Haslam, about ten weeks after the poet's death, Severn wrote:

A number of English Artists here have offered their services to make a grave stone. . . . I have proposed to introduce a Greek Lyre—very simple [*sic*]¹³—with four of the strings broken—this was Keats's idea a long time back in England—Brown will find a drawing of mine in his Copy of Endymion—done at Keatss [*sic*] request.¹³

The emblem's explicit attribution to Keats, proclaimed here explicitly, would seem incontrovertible. And yet on later occasions, Severn is found making such statements as “the design I have made is this.”¹⁴ Or, “this stone is to have simply the Greek Lyre, with half the strings not tied. . . . I say it is to have these, but it is only my own idea.”¹⁵ Or again, in describing “a present to poor Miss Brawne” that he had designed, Severn wrote: “I have thought of a little conceit . . . to make a Broach in form of my Greek Lyre, and make the strings of poor Keats's hair, but I cannot find any workman to do it.”¹⁶ These conflicting indications have led scholars to conclude that Severn, known by many other signs to be “the most inventive and unreliable witness of all,”¹⁷ has blundered here yet again. Thus Robert Gittings wrote, circumspectly, that

¹³ Severn to Haslam, 5 May 1821 (Rollins 1965, no. 116, 1:242).

¹⁵ Severn to Brown, 26 October 1822 (Sharp 1892, 119–120).

¹⁴ Severn to Haslam, 12 July 1821 (Rollins 1965, no. 121, 1:252).

¹⁶ Severn to Brown, 1 January 1822 (Sharp 1892, 119).

¹⁷ Gittings 1968, 168.



Fig. 2. Tassie seal with broken lyre
(from Lowell 1925, title page).

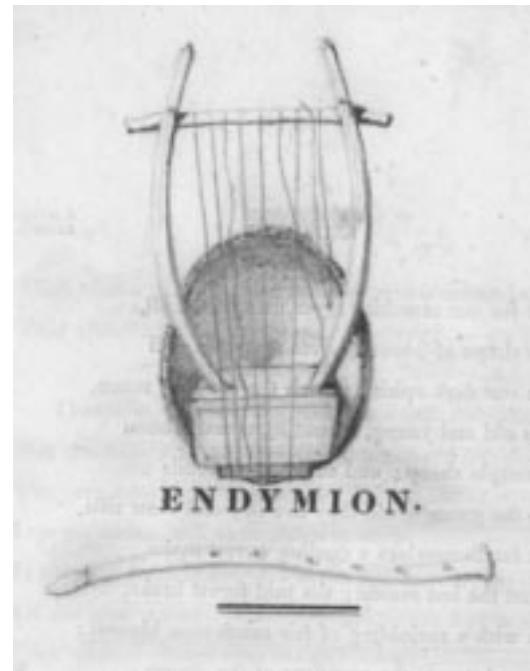


Fig. 3. Severn's sketch of a lyre and oboe in Brown's copy of
Endymion. London, London Metropolitan Archives
(photo London Metropolitan Archives).

Severn “first said it was Keats’s wish . . . but then treated the idea as his own.”¹⁸ A more recent biographer goes so far as to accuse Severn of actually *stealing* Keats’s idea.¹⁹

Related to this puzzle, as Aileen Ward noticed, is that Keats possessed a Tassie gem—one of the seals with devices and mottoes, often of classical derivation, that were extremely popular at that time—showing a lyre with four strings, several of which were broken or untied (fig. 2).²⁰ The first impression is found on a letter to Fanny Keats dated 30 December 1818, the seal then appearing twice as often as any of the several others that the poet possessed. Ward argues that this was a Christmas gift to Keats from Fanny Brawne, with whose family the poet passed the 1818 holiday. The motto, “Qui me néglige, me désolé”—“By neglect, thou ruinnest me” (as it was translated in the 1820 Tassie catalogue)²¹—“seems especially appropriate for a flirtatious young lady to pick out for a standoffish young man.”²² Despite Keats’s silence about this day, his intimacy with Fanny Brawne was certainly deepened by the occasion; as she confessed to Fanny Keats in later years, it was “the happiest day I had ever then spent.”²³ According to

¹⁸ Gittings 1968, 434–435.

¹⁹ Coote 1995, 325: “The emblem, which he had once said was Keats’s idea and then claimed as his own, represented a Greek Lyre with half its strings broken or untied.” On the subject of appropriation, Coote’s dependence on Gittings is shown by the italicized words, which repeat Gittings 1968, 434–435 verbatim and without attribution.

²⁰ Ward 1961, 21–24; cf. Ward 1986, 237. The seal is re-

produced on the title page of Lowell 1925, from which my figure comes. There is also a photograph of one of the seal’s actual impressions in Jack 1967, pl. IXd (after 104). On the popularity of Tassie gems, see the contemporary remarks of Raspe 1791, lx; Gray 1894, 13–15.

²¹ Tassie 1820, no. 319 (no. 1164 in the 1830 catalogue).

²² Ward 1986, 237.

²³ Edgcumbe 1936, 41.

Ward, the lyre became for Keats a symbol of their love—"though in another two years the device was to take on a very different meaning";²⁴ and this was the mysterious object, noticed by Severn, that the poet kept fingering on his deathbed—"his only consolation, the only thing left him in this world clearly tangible."²⁵ Thus, as Ward interprets Severn's letter to Haslam quoted above, Keats requested Severn to mark his tomb with Fanny's seal—which was then buried along with him. Severn's drawing, executed "a long time back in England," may therefore be dated before May 1820, when Keats departed Wentworth Place; it demonstrates (as Ward argued influentially) how early Keats began to lose hope and plan his own burial.²⁶

There is, however, good evidence that Keats's interest in the motif of a lyre with broken or untied strings preceded his introduction to Fanny Brawne. In exploring this earlier chapter of the emblem's history, we can exonerate Severn of the charge of theft and attempt to understand the true significance of "Keats's idea."

The drawing "done at Keats's request" is still extant in Brown's copy of *Endymion*, just as Severn stated (fig. 3). This volume is held by the Keats House, Hampstead,²⁷ where the lyre has been misidentified as the work of Brown (a natural mistake, as Brown was himself known to sketch—somewhat to his friends' amusement).²⁸ One notes immediately the differences between Severn's first depiction and that on the gravestone: the shape of the shell-resonator and arms, as well as the presence in the sketch of four further strings that dangle, broken or untied. These may have been too expensive a frill for the impecunious young artist, who struggled to raise money for the monument; that this detail was perfectly possible is shown by the stone of Sarah D. Greenough in the New Cemetery, where a lyre with broken, dangling strings makes a conscious allusion to Keats's. This must remain only a possibility, however, for, as Severn tells us, he wished the engraving to be executed from other drawings, no longer extant, of "the beautiful Lyre" at the British Museum.²⁹ This can only have been the Elgin lyre, a less-celebrated item in the collection whose prize was, of course, the Parthenon marbles (for the acquisition of which Benjamin Robert Haydon had vigorously campaigned).³⁰ These works of the great Phidias inspired Keats's sonnet "On First Seeing the Elgin Marbles"—a sophisticated engagement with the conventions of ephrastic poetry and "a meditation on the mortality of aesthetic form."³¹ And yet it is clear that, whatever motivated Keats to request the original drawing, Severn's first model was not the very different Tassie seal but the selfsame Elgin lyre, doubtless seen on one of Keats's and Severn's many trips to the British Museum. For Lord Elgin's trove also contained two *auloi*, or Greek oboes,³² and just such an instrument, also broken, appears below the chordophone in Severn's sketch.

²⁴ Ward 1986, 25–26.

Gittings 1968, 332.

²⁵ Severn to H. Buxton Forman, 30 November 1877, in Forman 1933, 14; cf. Ward 1961, 25.

²⁹ Severn to Brown, 26 October 1822 (Sharp 1892, 119–120): "This delay has been occasioned by the want of the drawings of the Greek Lyre. I could not proceed without them—they are accurate outlines I made from the beautiful Lyre in the Museum of London, and they have at last arrived" (cf. Sharp 1892, 112, 178).

²⁶ This is the view of Ward 1961, 25; Ward 1986, 400. Thus Bush 1966, 200 speaks of Keats's "early loss of hope"; cf. Jack 1967, 101; Motion 1997, 564.

²⁷ Accession number KH 54. It is reproduced on the title page of Ward 1986.

³⁰ See first the account of Haydon himself, Elwin 1950, 241–244, 270–282.

²⁸ See, for instance, Keats to Charles Wentworth Dilke, 4 March 1820; the letter from Severn to H. Buxton Forman, 30 November 1877, in Forman 1933, 16; cf.

³¹ See now Scott 1990, 149; cf. Scott 1994.

³² See Burrow 1817, 168.

There is no evidence that Severn himself ever saw the Tassie gem. Had it been in Keats's hand when he died, Severn would surely have mentioned the fact in his correspondence about the gravestone design. The artist's notoriety as an unreliable witness is due principally to his later reminiscences, which are often distorted by sentimentality and pride at his friendship with the great poet. The evidence in question here, however, is contemporary. It is possible, of course, that, unbeknownst to Severn, Keats placed the seal in the purse made for him by Fanny Brawne, which was buried with him. But if Keats actually did request his friend to engrave a Greek lyre or if Severn did find the Tassie seal, one would have to suppose that the latter deliberately lied about the matter to Brown. And to what end—to take credit for but one of Keats's several dying wishes? Fortunately, a better explanation is possible.

In a letter to Severn of 21 August 1821, Brown writes "I like your idea of the lyre with broken strings" and then refers again to "your emblem of a Grecian Lyre."³³ To this we may add the implicit testimony of Charles Wentworth Dilke, Leigh Hunt, and Thomas Richards, all of whom, according to Brown, had approved his inscription.³⁴ The design of the tombstone was therefore being passed around Keats's circle.³⁵ That this information included the proposed instrument is shown by Shelley's *Adonais* and the fragment on Keats, which reveal knowledge not only of the epitaph but also the "silver lyre unstrung"—whereas Shelley drowned on 8 July 1822, *before* Severn succeeded in raising the stone.³⁶ And yet we cannot suppose, if Keats had ever stated, "a long time back in England," a wish for the lyre to appear on his tombstone, that only Severn, and no one else in the circle, knew of it—least of all Brown and Hunt, who had nursed their friend from his first hemorrhage on 3 February 1820 until his departure for Italy in September. (Severn was not an especially close friend but was the only one at liberty to accompany Keats on his journey.) Thus Brown, by not caviling at Severn's phraseology, becomes the best witness on behalf of the artist's honorable intentions toward Keats's intellectual property.

The only way to harmonize the evidence is to conclude that, while the broken lyre may have been one of Keats's poetic conceptions, it was Severn's inspiration that the image should be "introduced" to the gravestone alongside the poet's epitaph: that is, it was Keats's "idea" but not a dying "wish." Severn is acquitted of an accusation of paltry maliciousness that would be entirely at odds with what is otherwise known of his simple-hearted nature. Rereading the letter to Haslam (quoted above) in this light, there is nothing to connect "Keats's idea" with a gravestone ornament. On the contrary, Severn states clearly that this was his own proposal, while the only hints of intentionality on Keats's part are related somehow to the *Endymion*. Severn is thus acquitted of a crime constructed by critics.

Severn's phrase, "a long time back in England," encourages us to seek as early a date as possible for the drawing. It cannot have been before late August 1818, when Keats returned from his walking tour of Scotland with Brown; for the first copies of *Endymion* had not yet

³³ Sharp 1892, 111–112.

284), no. 631 (2:297); Hunt 1862, 1:158, 163.

³⁴ Sharp 1892, 131–132.

³⁵ For the circulation of information about the dying Keats, see Rollins 1965, xv, no. 81 (1:173), no. 82 (1:174), no. 88 (1:186), no. 89 (1:187–189), no. 90 (1:192), no. 92 (1:195–197), no. 96 (1:206), no. 98 (1:208), no. 100 (1:201–202), no. 101 (1:213); Jones 1964, no. 621 (2:283–

³⁶ Shelley *Adonais* 36.8–9, "the song / Whose master's hand is cold, whose silver lyre unstrung"; Fragment on Keats: "Here lieth one whose name was writ in water / But, ere the breath that could erase it blew, / Death, the immortalizing winter, flew / Athwart the stream, / and time's mouthless torrent grew / A scroll of crystal, emblazoning the name / Of Adonais."

reached his friends when he and Brown set out in mid-June.³⁷ From his return until the death of his brother Tom on 1 December, Keats was in no mood to socialize and saw little of his friends until he took up lodgings that very week with Brown at Wentworth Place. Shortly afterwards, early in 1819, Severn returned from the Royal Academy, having incurred the envy of his fellow students over a Gold Medal in painting, to live at home in Hoxton; this made visits to Hampstead easier, and the artist claimed to have had almost daily contact with Keats at that time. By contrast, in the summer and autumn of that year Severn and Keats did not see each other.³⁸ The drawing may therefore be dated to the first half of 1819.

Although it must remain a real possibility that the event has left no trace in our evidence, there is a letter of Keats that is worth noticing: on 15 March, he and Brown “had to dinner Severn and Cawthorn, the Bookseller and print-virtuoso.”³⁹ This occasion has several things to recommend it. In the first place, it is the only time that the conjunction of Keats, Severn, and Brown at Wentworth Place is explicitly attested; and though the poet was not shy about marking his friends’ books while they were absent,⁴⁰ the presence of Brown at least makes it a more probable opportunity. Perhaps Keats showed the book to Cawthorn and together the group discussed its design and production; as I shall argue, the drawing may be understood in light of such considerations. Keats goes on to relate that, the next morning, “Severn and I took a turn round the museum”: might it not be that, in trying to sketch the Elgin lyre from memory, Severn suddenly desired to see the instrument again and to begin the more accurate sketches that we know he eventually made? Finally, in a letter to his sister just two days earlier, Keats had held up his broken lyre as an especially desirable example when he offered to buy her some seals from Tassie’s shop in Leicester Square.⁴¹

Thus Severn made the sketch several months after Keats is supposed to have received the broken lyre as a Christmas gift. And yet it appears from verses composed *before* his introduction to Fanny Brawne that the poet was already familiar with the motif of this and a number of other seals. Tassie did not create his collection, which comprised 20,000 items by 1816, to be used merely for such frivolities as letter-sealing and personal adornment. It was intended to be, and was widely regarded as, a corpus of antique reproductions useful for study and inspiration. As R. E. Raspe wrote in his annotated catalogue of 1791:

To the studious artist . . . this collection is an inexhaustible supply of ideas. . . . Mr Tassie’s collection, thus arranged, answers, in its objects of art and *vertu*, nearly all the ends of properly arranged libraries, which are useful only in proportion as they are public and accessible to every one.⁴²

It was not uncommon for the educated and cultured to have a sizable collection of these gems, which could be used variously to suit the tone of a letter or a writer’s relationship to its recipient. At 2s 6d and less each, Shelley’s request for two pounds’ worth of seals would have yielded sixteen or more.⁴³ Before December 1818, Keats himself owned at least nine, which

³⁷ See Brown 1937, 48; Gittings 1968, 218, 230.

⁴⁰ See, e.g., Owings 1978, ix, 19, *passim*.

³⁸ Sharp 1892, 28–29, 40.

⁴¹ Rollins 1958, no. 151, 2:45.

³⁹ Rollins 1958, no. 159, 2:67–68. There is some uncertainty over this date, which may have been 1 March; see Rollins 1958, 2:68 n. 9.

⁴² Raspe 1791, lxiv; cf. Gray 1894, 53.

⁴³ Jones 1964, no. 615 (2:276–277); cf. Jack 1967, 102.

included portraits of Milton, Shakespeare, and King Alfred.⁴⁴ Already in March 1817, just before he began work on *Endymion*, Keats had composed the poem “On a Leander Gem which Miss Reynolds, my Kind Friend, Gave Me.”⁴⁵ According to Woodhouse, in a marginal note to his transcription of this poem, “it was once Keats’s intention to write a series of M. S. sonnets & short poems on some of Tassie’s gems.”⁴⁶ Keats never carried out the project in this form, but it is clear that he engaged creatively with these images.⁴⁷

In the *Endymion*, this takes the form of several miniature ecphrases. Note first that Endymion and Diana were themselves shown in several seals.⁴⁸ But it is Keats’s use of lyre imagery that is most relevant here. Listed already in Raspe’s essay of 1786, lyres were one of the more popular Tassie motifs.⁴⁹ *The Indicator* for 17 November 1819 specifically mentions lyres among the principal themes of the corpus.⁵⁰ Raspe’s catalogue of 1791 lists dozens of depictions of Apollo *musicus*, Cupids playing lyres, and various instruments that appear alone or in quasi-allegorical compositions.⁵¹ Keats had clearly seen some of these seals. At *Endymion* 2.418–421, for instance, we find one of the many Cupids:

hard by,
 Stood serene Cupids watching silently.
 One, kneeling to a lyre, touch’d the strings,
 Muffling to death the pathos with his wings.

Another seal is described by William Tassie as “Cupid seated, playing on the Lyre, and a Dove flying with an Olive-branch. ‘Paix et Harmonie.’ ‘Peace and Harmony.’”⁵² With this compare *Endymion* 2.865–869:

The lyre of his soul, Aeolian-tuned,
 Forgot all violence, and but communed
 With melancholy thought. Oh, he had swooned
 Drunken from pleasure’s nipple, and his love
 Henceforth was dove-like.

The seal described as “A Palm-branch and Lyre. ‘Paix et Harmonie.’ ‘Peace and Harmony’”⁵³ could have been expanded to yield *Endymion* 3.791–800:

A noise of harmony, pulses and throes
 Of gladness in the air . . .
 Delicious symphonies, like airy flowers,
 Budded and swelled, and, full-blown, shed full showers
 Of light, soft, unseen leaves of sound divine.

⁴⁴ See Lowell 1925, 1:115, 490; Ward 1961, 23–24; 1986, 434.

⁴⁵ For the date of the Leander poem, see Allott 1970, 116; Finney 1936, 1:192.

⁴⁶ Cf. Lowell 1925, 1:115, 490; Finney 1936, 1:192; Ward 1961, 24 n. 36; Jack 1967, 105.

⁴⁷ See Jack 1967, 100–105.

⁴⁸ Raspe 1791, nos. 2162–2164.

⁴⁹ Raspe 1786, 30.

⁵⁰ Quoted in Jack 1967, 101–102.

⁵¹ See Raspe 1791, nos. 2909–2999, 3032–3044, 6888–6899.

⁵² Tassie 1820, no. 315.

⁵³ Tassie 1820, no. 316.

Finally, there is a seal described by Raspe as “Apollo leaning his right hand upon a vine, holds in the left his lyre, upon which is a butterfly. At his feet is Cupid. An allegory to express that Love and Wine animate the genius of the poet and musician.”⁵⁴ Compare *Endymion* 3.927–937:

And plundered vines, teeming exhaustless, pleached
New growth about each shell and pendent lyre,
The which, in disentangling for their fire,
Pulled down fresh foliage and coverture
For dainty toying. Cupid, empire-sure,
Fluttered and laughed
In harmless tendril they each other chained,
And strove who should be smothered deepest in
Fresh crush of leaves.

Raspe lamented that he could not provide more expansive interpretations of these allegorical seals. But, as one can see from these passages, this deficiency gave Keats the freedom to range far beyond the terse catalogue descriptions.⁵⁵

On the basis of these parallels, it is no great surprise to find that Keats also knew of the lyre with broken or loosened strings. Already in “Apollo to the Graces,” probably written in January 1818—that is, during the composition of *Endymion* but before meeting Fanny Brawne—we find “And thy lyre shall never have slackened string” (5.13). The Graces’ pledge of dedication to Apollo is very close to the motto “By neglect, thou ruinst me,” with which the Tassie seal was inscribed. These verses are allied to the Leander poem, which they follow in Woodhouse’s Book of Transcripts, in that they were recovered “from the original in Miss Reynolds’ possession.”⁵⁶

The broken lyre is also found in *Endymion*, and with this we may return to Severn’s sketch and the tombstone. It is clear that the artist did not fully grasp the significance of “Keats’s idea.” In his proposals to introduce the lyre, Severn states his view clearly: “A delicate Greek Lyre with half the strings broken—signifying his Classical Genius—left unfinished by his early death.”⁵⁷ But if it is right that Keats did not devise the broken lyre for his own grave, this cannot have been the original meaning of the emblem.⁵⁸ Here the location of the drawing, on the upper half of the poem’s first page, is suggestive. At one time Taylor and Keats had wanted Haydon to provide an illustration of some episode of *Endymion* that could be used for the frontispiece. Despite all-around enthusiasm, however, the project was abandoned for some reason.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Raspe 1791, no. 2949.

⁵⁵ Raspe 1791, lxvi: “I could have wished indeed to remove a little the darkness which hangs over the mythological and allegorical part of ancient Iconology, and which makes it not only puzzling, but almost useless to most of the modern artists.”

⁵⁶ Allott 1970, 116, 290.

⁵⁷ Severn to Haslam, 12 July 1821 (Rollins 1965, no. 121, 1:252); cf. Severn to Haslam, 1 June 1823 (Rollins 1965, no. 130, 1:273): “a Greek Lyre in Basso relievo—with only half the Strings—to show his Classical Genius cut off by death before its maturity.”

⁵⁸ One should note here that an ancient source for the Tassie seal might be a fragment of Sophocles (fr. 244.1 Radt), “breaking the harmony of the chord-stretched lyre” (ῥηγνύς ἀρμονίαν χορδοτόνου λύρας), which concerns the Thamyris myth. It is curious, but probably coincidence, that both the broken lyre and “writ in water” may be connected with Sophoclean fragments. Also worth mentioning is the Greek conceit of the harmony of the human body, broken by death: see, e.g., *Anth. Pal.* 7.383 (Philip); 7.472.7–8 and 7.480.1–2 (Leonidas).

⁵⁹ See Rollins 1958, no. 56, 1:213 “[Taylor] seemed more than satisfied with it [sc. *Endymion*], & to my surprise proposed publishing it in Quarto if Haydon would make a drawing of some event therein, for a Frontispiece. . . .

Could it be that, during the convivial gathering on 15 March 1819, Brown brought out his copy of the poem so that Keats could show Cawthorn what he had had in mind; and that this led Severn to sketch, “at Keats’s request,” an impromptu surrogate frontispiece? For the broken lyre may be securely related to a scene in the poem.

During the submarine adventures of book 3—not far from two of the lyre ecphrases quoted above—the ancient Glaucus, in fulfillment of the prophesied reanimation of the Host of Lovers, instructs Endymion (3.764–768):

“Now, Carian, break
This wand against yon lyre on the pedestal.”
’T was done: and straight with sudden swell and fall
Sweet music breathed her soul away, and sigh’d
A lullaby to silence.

The Elgin lyre might serve as an object of which the poem is in some sense ecphrastic, just as the marbles had inspired the sonnet; the two poems are further allied by several allusions to the sculptures in *Endymion*, as well as the famous image of the poet as eagle.⁶⁰ This is not to say that the whole composition is simply a meditation on the lyre; in this poem especially, one must resist searching for too consistent an allegory. But all critics accept a close relationship between Endymion and the author; according to Keats himself, “the very music of the name has gone / Into my being” (1.36–37), while Shelley observed that “everything seems to be viewed by the mind of a poet which is described in it.”⁶¹ By this identification, Endymion’s search for divine Love, with all its Platonic details, comes to symbolize the poet’s own quest for truth and enlightenment through the medium of poetry.⁶² Although a continuous union with the divine, a “melting into its radiance,” is not granted in this world, terrestrial beauties (as Plato taught in the *Symposium*) may lead one to glimpse “the orb’d drop / Of light” (*Endymion* 1.806–807). Of these psychagogic agents, one of the most powerful is music—the material of poetry—and to this extent the instrument illustrates, and is illustrated by, a key theme of the poem.

The breaking of the lyre brings to culmination an association of music and death, a *Liederstod*, which is developed throughout the poem.⁶³ In the most important of these passages, Keats presents the Aeolian harp—a favorite *topos* of the romantic poets⁶⁴—as an example of how music may presage a higher union (1.783–797):

when the airy stress
Of music’s kiss impregnates the free winds,

[Haydon] said he would do anything I liked, but said he would rather paint a finished picture, from it, which he seems eager to do.” Cf. Blunden 1936, 43; Gittings 1968, 185.

⁶⁰ *Endymion* 1.319, 405; 2.255–259, 635.

⁶¹ Shelley to Charles Ollier, 6 September 1819 (Jones 1964, no. 513, 2:117).

⁶² See, e.g., Murray 1955, 168–169; Allen 1957.

⁶³ 1.115–116 “a faint breath of music, which ev’n then / Fill’d out its voice, and died away again”; 1.143–144 “Let

his divinity o’erflowing die / In music”; 1.950–951 “with many a dying tone / Of sadness”; 2.364–365 “O did he ever live, that lonely man, / Who loved—and music slew not?”; 2.420–421 “One, kneeling to a lyre, touch’d the strings, / Muffling to death the pathos with his wings”; 2.682–685 “And must they wane / Like melodies upon a sandy plain, / Without an echo? Then shall I be left / So sad, so melancholy, so bereft”; 2.914–915 “Or they are but the ghosts, the dying swells / Of noises far away?”; 3.421–422 “How sweet, and sweeter—for I heard a lyre, / And over it a sighing voice expire.”

⁶⁴ See, e.g., Grigson 1947, 24–26.

And with a sympathetic touch unbinds
 Aeolian magic from their lucid wombs:
 Then old songs waken from enclouded tombs;
 Old ditties sigh above their father's grave;
 Ghosts of melodious prophesyings rave
 Round every spot where trod Apollo's foot .
 . . . that moment have we stept
 Into a sort of oneness, and our state
 Is like a floating spirit's.

But the oneness that comes through the concord of sounds is only one manifestation of “the chief intensity” (1.800) of Celestial Love; for what would give “the lute its tones, / Tones ravishment, or ravishment its sweet, / If human souls did never kiss and greet?” (2.840–842). This power, after one of Endymion's meetings with the moon goddess, leaves “the lyre of his soul Aeolian tuned / . . . So temper'd, out he stray'd / Half seeing visions” (2.866, 873–874). He becomes receptive to celestial sound, his soul vibrating at the touch of nature: “to his capable ears / Silence was music from the holy spheres” (2.674–675). When one can hear this “very tune of love” (2.765), a physical instrument is no longer needed: “a song of love,” as Keats would write in *Lamia*, is “too sweet for earthly lyres” (1.299). The “lyre unstrung” stands for revelation that, against the “deadly yellow spleen” (*Endymion* 2.917) of mortal existence, has come through poetry. Thus the broken lyre, like the Elgin marbles, revealed the evanescence of the artist's medium against the infinitude of his subject—Truth and Beauty.

The internal evidence of *Endymion* provides abundant clues for understanding Keats's idea of the broken lyre; there is no need to look beyond this for an explanation. Given its motto and sudden appearance on the poet's letters, the hypothesis that the seal itself was a Christmas gift from Fanny Brawne is indeed quite persuasive. Perhaps she recognized the image from his poem, and this influenced her choice of gift. And if, as Ward believes, the seal became an emblem of their love, this may in turn have inspired Keats's selection of which scene Severn should illustrate at the dinner with Cawthorn. It must remain possible, however, that the sudden appearance of the seal in late December 1818 is only apparent, an illusion of the surviving evidence. In any event, “Keats's idea” was originally unrelated to Fanny Brawne.

Keats had not yet received his death warrant when he expanded allegorically on the broken lyre motif. The death of music as leading to ultrasonic enlightenment belongs to an earlier, brighter time in the poet's life. Thus a fourth element to Keats's gravestone has lain dormant, the voice of Keats in 1818–1819, described by Brown as “beaming (at that time) with hope and joy.”⁶⁵ The counterpoint, between the composition as it has been understood from Severn and the broken lyre as Keats first devised it, carves new meaning into the stone and posthumously grants Severn's wish for a more optimistic monument. Beyond the “Bitterness of his Heart” at a life “left unfinished by his early death,” it is now a memorial to Keats's poetic attainment of Truth and Beauty.

In this it really does fulfill a dying wish of the poet. When, shortly before his death, Severn described to Keats where he was to be buried,

It was a real consolation to him that he was to be laid in so lovely a place of rest, and in the companionship of so many sons of misery like himself, men of genius and enterprise who had found an early grave at Rome. This was the only theme on which he tried, in

⁶⁵ Brown 1937, 44.

the midst of his anguish, to be once more the poet . . . though on this he spoke only with his eyes.⁶⁶

Yielding to the sentimentality that besets one at the poet's grave, we might imagine a sort of spiritual collaboration between Keats and Severn in the execution of this last unspoken poetic desire. For Keats, even in death, continued to exert a profound influence on his friend, whom he had once described as "a most astonishingly suggestive innocent."⁶⁷ In May, Severn wrote that at the cemetery there was "no other sound than a few simple sheep and goats with their twinkling bells"⁶⁸—"a faint breath of music" (*Endymion* 1.115) being a favorite Keatsian motif. By July, when Severn's grief had somewhat subsided, he described to Brown how "sometimes a delightful glance of his life about the time when I first knew him will take possession of me and keep me speculating on and on to some passage in the 'Endymion'."⁶⁹ And then there is Severn's curious "vision" of the Roman shepherd asleep in the moonlight, which, even if mainly true, was considerably revised in the telling through the lens of *Endymion*.⁷⁰ Clearly, the artist's postmortem experience was strongly modulated by the mind of Keats. As his own words suggest, Severn was all but possessed after the passing of the poet. "He cannot be dead," he would still remark as an old man, for "how could a dead thing influence one like this?"⁷¹

It was in this suggestive state that Severn, meditating on *Endymion*, struck upon his own idea of resurrecting the Grecian Lyre he had once drawn for Keats. Nor was he entirely oblivious to the emblem's meaning as Keats had first intended; he once wrote of his friend that "just as his mind was attuned with the divine harmony, so he was in his bodily self a melody of humanity."⁷² Yet, at the same time, one feels clearly the lyre's effect as Severn himself wished, symbol of a life cut short. And it seems right that the faithful Severn should have marked his own feelings on the occasion; for a tomb inscription "must necessarily be considered as the act of the deceased's friends and not of the deceased himself," as Brown once justified his own addition to Keats's laconic epitaph.⁷³ By the sensitive introduction of Keats's idea in a new and appropriate context, Severn created a striking monument that is at once artistically and poetically successful—a fitting memorial to "one I had known so long in the constant and sincere communion of our two arts of Poetry and Painting."⁷⁴

In the open air of the Old Cemetery, the graven lyre now stands as an Aeolian harp from which "ghosts of melodious prophesyings" arise, like a final poem, to "sigh above their father's grave."

⁶⁶ Severn to Brown, 3 March 1821 (Sharp 1892, 96).

⁶⁷ Sharp 1892, xxxiv.

⁶⁸ Severn to Haslam, 5 May 1821 (Rollins 1965, no. 116, 1:238–239).

⁶⁹ Sharp 1892, 106.

⁷⁰ Sharp 1892, 125: "Among many visits I made to Keats's grave at Monte Testaccio was one of a very striking nature. In the twilight of the full moon I found a young Italian asleep, his head resting against the gravestone, his dog and flock of sheep about him, with the full moon rising beyond the Pyramid of Caius Cestius. One long

moonbeam stole past the Pyramid and illumined the outline of the young shepherd's face, and to my eye realised the story of Endymion. . . . [W]hat would Keats have said had he seen this Endymion vision?" Severn eventually set himself to paint this scene; see Severn 1863, esp. 407.

⁷¹ Graham 1898, 120.

⁷² Sharp 1892, 19.

⁷³ Brown to Severn, 21 August 1821 (Sharp 1892, 111–112).

⁷⁴ Sharp 1892, 94–95.

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