



In Keats's Haggard Shadow- Reading *Dr Haggard's Disease* as a Postmodernist Comment on Keats and Keatsian Romanticism

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ABSTRACT: This article discusses how John Keats's biography and poetry exerted influence on the development of the plot, structure, protagonists and metaphorical framework of Patrick McGrath's novel *Dr Haggard's Disease* (1993). Furthermore, it contends that the novel does not simply aim to pay tribute to Keats or to function as a literary emulation or even mimicry of Keats's life and oeuvre. Instead, the novel suggests a postmodernist comment on Keatsian Romanticism as expressed in Keats's poetry. An interpretation of *Dr Haggard's Disease* as historiographic metafiction with an emphasis on the intertextual links between McGrath's novel and Keats's work makes clear that the novel's narrator and protagonist, Edward Haggard, by way of subversion and distortion devaluates the Keatsian dichotomies of real/ideal and Truth/Beauty.

KEYWORDS: Patrick McGrath; John Keats; *Dr Haggard's Disease*; Postmodernism.

Dr Haggard's Disease, like the majority of McGrath's novels, has so far mainly drawn scholarly attention from the field of Gothic (e.g. Ferguson, 1999; Zlosnik, 2011) and neo-Gothic studies (e.g. Bockting, 2012). They interpret the locations where the novel is set as "Gothic space" (Zlosnik, 2011: 72) and read the protagonist's obsession as a form of internal terror (Bockting, 2012: 52). At the same time, reviewers and scholars alike emphasized the narrator's obsessive intensity and his narrative unreliability (e.g. Quinn, 1993; Sims, 1998; Taylor, 1993), whereby the latter is a trademark of McGrath's fiction in general. Zlosnik remarks that McGrath's first four novels –including *Dr Haggard's Disease*– have "a postmodern parodic quality to them" (2011: 17), a quality that should be mainly understood in relation to Gothic literature.

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In addition, Anthony Quinn and Sue Zlosnik briefly refer to the poet John Keats and his relevance to *Dr Haggard's Disease*. Quinn identifies the name Fanny Vaughan as “a Keatsean allusion later echoed in the book” (1993: n. pag.) and Zlosnik suggests: “Fanny’s abrupt dismissal of her lover is a betrayal of the language of Keatsian romanticism through which they had conducted their affair” (2011: 72). The association between the life and poetry of Keats and *Dr Haggard's Disease*, however, is a lot stronger than these casual remarks seem to indicate. On the one hand, the novel’s intertextual links to Keats’s poetry shaped its metaphorical framework and the psychological portrayal of Haggard himself. On the other hand, Keats’s biography affected the structure, plot and protagonists of McGrath’s novel to such an extent that it could well be read as an instance of postmodernist historiographic metafiction.

The (implied) author of *Dr Haggard's Disease* charged nearly all of Keats’s biographical details and Keatsian poetical images with an additional dimension. This more often than not –by way of distortion and subversion– diminishes their original value until they become only, using Keats’s own words, a “shadow of a magnitude” (ed. Garrod, 1961: 376). First, Haggard’s life story and his consecutive obsessions with Fanny and James become but a twisted rendering in fiction, a “repetition with critical difference” (Hutcheon quoted in Zlosnik, 2011: 17) of Keats’s life and his consuming love for Fanny. Second, Haggard’s own poetic construction within the novel, namely the delusional creation of a disease that explains the perceived transmigration of souls, is nothing but the distorted intertextual manifestation of Keats’s poetry.

As such, *Dr Haggard's Disease* should not simply be read as a glowing tribute to Keats, or as an instance of literary mimicry or emulation, but rather as a kind of disenchantment of and a postmodernist challenge to the grand narrative of Keatsian Romanticism.

1. HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION: BIOGRAPHICAL SIMILARITIES

As will be demonstrated, Linda Hutcheon’s definition of postmodernism in fiction as “at once metafictional *and* historical in its echoes of the texts and contexts of the past” (Hutcheon, 1989: 3) is definitely relevant in a discussion of *Dr Haggard's Disease*. McGrath’s novel is not as decisively self-reflexive as, for instance, Hutcheon’s often-cited example *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Fowles’s novel at the same time explores and comments on Victorian literature and mores. However, considering that the protagonists of *Dr Haggard's Disease* are only thinly veiled fictional representations of John Keats and Fanny Brawne, the novel does exhibit a certain “self-conscious dimension” (Hutcheon, 1989: 3) when it emulates and distorts these characters specifically and Keatsian Romanticism in general.

This section of the text lays bare to what extent Keats’s biography influenced

McGrath's novel and how the novel then subverted that biography in order to –again in Hutcheon's words– create “repetition with critical difference” (Zlosnik, 2011: 17) and to destabilize the “factuality of historical knowledge” (Stephan, 2019: 24)¹. This destabilization in turn problematizes and even invalidates Keats's dichotomy of real/ideal (e.g. Motion, 2018: 389) as it questions the boundaries of ‘real’ itself by that very act of fictionalizing and distorting historical events.

1.1. Nomen est omen: Edward Haggard and Fanny Brawne

In December 1802, Keats's one year-old brother Edward died (Motion, 2018 (1997): 10). Keats, born in 1795, was himself still a child at the time. Even so, in his critically acclaimed biography, Nicholas Roe surmises that in adult age Keats's thoughts still “turned to his youngest brother, Edward, whose untimely death meant that he had never developed a distinct personality”² (2013 (2012): 315). It is obvious that this image of a Keats sibling, to all effects still a blank canvas, is attractive to a novelist who is attempting to create some kind of Keats *Doppelgänger*. The mere fact that the (implied) author did not use the poet's name, John, for the narrative's protagonist already announces that this novel is not purely imitation of historical facts. The choice for the name Edward, notably Keats's brother who died in infancy, might serve to foreshadow that Haggard's poetical career will never come to full maturity either.

Dr Haggard's surname, on the other hand, is extracted from Keats's poetry rather than from his family history. The second stanza of Keats's famous ballad “La Belle Dame sans Merci” reads: “O, what can ail thee, knight-at-arms / So *haggard* and so woe-begone” (ed. Garrod, 1961: 350 my emphasis). The word ‘haggard’ of course details Dr Haggard's general state of depression after Fanny's death. It also indicates that McGrath's protagonist is merely a pale reflection of the Romantic poet. The literary reference furthermore likens Dr Haggard to Keats's “knight-at-arms”³, who is seduced and then abandoned by his “belle dame”, a fate similar to Dr Haggard's, who is unceremoniously disposed of by Fanny Vaughan: “We had an affair. It's over now. Go away – get on with your life – get on with somebody else” (*Haggard*: 136). Claudia Busch interprets the literary pattern whereby the romantically experienced Fanny Vaughan betrays the innocent Dr Haggard as a reversal of the traditional plot of a loyal wife seduced by an experienced older man (2002: 92). On another fictional level this pattern moreover reflects the rather dim view that Victorian society took on the relationship between John Keats and Fanny Brawne: “The hardy Victorian legend was that of a dying poet consumed with unsatisfied love for a heartless flirt” (Bate, 1963: 421).

Apart from by name, McGrath's novel also equates Keats to Haggard by physical appearance. It describes Haggard as small in stature; Keats was “just five feet and three-quarters of an inch” with “hair long and curly” (Roe, 2013: 131), while Haggard depicts himself as “barely bigger than a child” (*Haggard*: 162). His hair is portrayed as wild (e.g. 58) and as a “great shock” “that spills down from [his] brow in the manner of the late Beethoven” (164).

Quinn (1993) alludes to the fact that the name Fanny Vaughan by homophony invokes
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the name Fanny Brawne. The surname Vaughan, however, is not merely linked to Keats's life story by rhyme. Initially, Keats wanted to publish his poem "The Cap and Bells" "under the feigned authorship of Lucy *Vaughan* Lloyd" (Motion, 2018: 482 my emphasis). Whereas the poem's contents itself bears little relevance to the plot of *Dr Haggard's Disease*, its subtitle "The Jealousies" (ed. Garrod, 1961: 316) clearly expresses Haggard's envy, a "spurt of antagonism" (*Haggard*: 55) toward Ratcliff Vaughan.

As in the case of Keats and Haggard, McGrath's novel describes Fanny Brawne and Fanny Vaughan's physical appearance along similar lines. Fanny Brawne appears in Keats's own words from a letter to his brother George in America: "She is about my height", "her nostrils are fine" and "her Profil is better than her full-face" (quoted in Roe, 2013: 287; Bate, 1963: 424) and from a description in Keats's play *Otho the Great* of which Andrew Motion implies that it indeed is a portrayal of Fanny: "lashes fine", "ebon brows", her "nostrils, small, fragrant, faery-delicate" (Motion, 2018: 325). In McGrath's novel, Fanny Vaughan is "a *tiny* gamine creature" (*Haggard*: 4 my emphasis) with "eyebrows fine and black" (4). Here the link is still somewhat tenuous, even though the colour of the brows and the small stature correspond. However, when Haggard recalls Fanny's "*delicate, paper-thin* nostril" and her "most exquisite *profile*" (40 my emphasis), the similarity takes on a more solid shape.

In McGrath's novel, the literary figure of Fanny is a compound image: she is not only composed of Fanny Brawne, of female characters in Keats's poetry (cf. *infra*), but also of Keats's mother, who was also named Fanny. Shortly after the death of Keats's father, Fanny married William Rawlings. When their business –along with their marriage– collapsed, Fanny "simply vanished" (Motion, 2018: 32). Only in 1809, when Keats was already thirteen years old, she returned to the family (36). By then she was ill, most likely consumptive (40), and Keats devoted all his attention to nursing her, sitting up all night, cooking her food, reading her novels and administering her medication (36). When Fanny died in 1810, Keats "gave way to 'impassioned and prolonged grief', often taking himself off to suffer in solitude" (40). Keats's almost incommensurate grief brings to mind Haggard's shock, sorrow and subsequent self-imposed solitude after hearing of Fanny Vaughan's death of the kidney disease nephritis (e.g. *Haggard*: 140).

Keats's mother and Fanny Vaughan are linked by name and disease, albeit displaced from lungs to kidneys, but also by the anxious attachment style that Keats and Haggard respectively present towards them. Some of Keats's later biographers –perhaps under the influence of attachment theory– drew attention to the impact of Keats's anxious attachment to his mother on his later life. Roe, for one, suggests that "the damage caused by his mother" obliterated "the idealised image of women he had cherished as a schoolboy and leaving him vexed and suspicious in female company" (2013: 35). Motion first mentions a love mixed with anxiety (2018: 21), and then affirms that Keats's traumatic relationship with his mother "created a pattern of possession and abandonment which runs throughout his poems" (42). In

this respect, Motion cites Keats's text *Endymion* and its hero's confusion of "sexual longing with the wish to be mothered" (42).

With this in mind it is interesting to note that to Patrick McGrath a possible psychoanalytical interpretation of *Dr Haggard's Disease* includes a classic Oedipal triangle formed by "the older pathologist and his wife and the younger doctor" (Falco, 2007: 64). Indeed, like Keats's *Endymion*, Haggard—who lost his real mother at a young age—adds to his sexual desire a yearning for motherly affection (cf. also Busch, 2002: 79). It is a maternal role that Fanny is remarkably keen to take on as she offers him advice on his medical career (*Haggard*: 70) and his health (39, 80). The novel even spells out this ambiguous relationship when Haggard last visits Fanny; she reacts as "a mother half-amused at the mischief of a favourite child" (136). Fanny and Haggard's sexual encounters are in their own right charged with overtones of maternal affection: after sex Fanny for example gives him rather motherly "little kisses" and "endearments, darling, sweetheart, precious Edward" (91) and soothes the crying Haggard with "little tender clucking noises" (94).

The novel's epigraph "We two being one, are it"—taken from John Donne's poem "The Canonization"—furthermore stands here as an image of a lost unity, not only of lovers, but also of the dual union of mother and child as Haggard himself expresses: "For what is sex after all but a cleaving together and a fusion? It is the making of the two into one, the recovery of a *lost unity*, and this is what I saw that night, that she and I were – are – two parts of a single whole" (63 original emphasis). In addition to the epigraph, McGrath underscores Haggard's yearning for a lost unity with his staple metaphor of the fur coat. Like in McGrath's earlier novels, *The Grotesque* (1989) and *Spider* (1990), it is exactly the character that wears the fur coat that elicits Oedipal emotions in the protagonist. Time and time again Fanny is described as wearing a fur coat (e.g. *Haggard*: 4, 39, 69), a piece of clothing that is even directly linked to sex when Fanny seduces Haggard in the hospital lobby: "still in the big fur coat she climbed into my lap" (94).

It is noteworthy that it is Haggard himself who dons the symbolic fur coat (e.g. 168, 174, 175) when he develops the notion that Fanny's soul has transmigrated into her son James. The reversal of this literary image emphasizes the delusions in Haggard's mind that urge him to take on a distorted Oedipal role – part father, part lover – with regards to James. The fact that the (implied) author shifts the epithet "knight-at-arms" from the narrator Haggard to the character James⁴ underlines the distortion of this Oedipal trope, making the characterization of Haggard Keatsian, but at one remove.

The coincidence of names corroborates the external similarities between Keats and Haggard on the one hand, and Fanny Brawne and Fanny Vaughan on the other. Concomitantly, it emphasizes the novel's postmodernist self-consciousness as it clearly invites the reader to a kind of Easter egg hunt that relies on "recognizable and authoritative facts" (Stephan, 2019: 27)⁵. The novel then undermines these facts "by deliberately falsifying them within a text" (2019: 27) and by forcing the conclusion: Haggard is not really Keats, but he desires to be

Keats. This difference makes it possible for Haggard to function as an (implied) authorial comment on Keats and Keatsian ideals. The fact that the (implied) author furthermore set in place a rather distorted and delusional Oedipal triangle as a substitute for Keats's poetically pure Romantic love emphasizes the notion that *Dr Haggard's Disease* is not merely a tribute to Keats in fiction.

1.2. Curriculum Vitae: Edward Haggard and John Keats

The similarities between Haggard and Keats extend beyond the superficiality of name, physical appearance and psychological morphology. They share a disease, an addiction, a profession, avocation to poetry and, finally, a similar way of death. Even more so than in the near congruity of names and appearance, these biographical facts equate Haggard and Keats, but never make them completely equal. In each instance, the novel takes great care to subvert and distort Keats's tragic –but at the same time exalted– example into something sordid and murky in order to comment on the unattainability of Keatsian Romanticism in the 20th century.

The titular disease in *Dr Haggard's Disease* has so far been explained as “protracted grieving over the disastrous love affair” (Carmel, 1998: 109), as “intensifying dementia of his erotic metempsychosis” (Ferguson, 1999: 239) or just simply as Haggard's own version of events, namely the undiscovered “disturbances of the pituitary gland that could cause changes in the body” (*Haggard*: 161). Most likely, however, the title merely refers to the obsessive intensity with which Haggard enters into his all-consuming love affair. Motion (2018: 500- 501) mentions that for a long time people believed there was a firm connection between consumption and obsessive love: “Love was both the symptom and the agent of consumption” (502). Ironically, the maxim “consumed by love” thus covers both Keats's and Haggard's condition. In Keats's era, part of the treatment for consumption was a strict diet; in Keats's particular case “an anchovy with a morsel of bread a day” (392), leaving him hungry and weak. It is no coincidence then, that the narrator of *Dr Haggard's Disease* insists that “since Spike I'd become a very light eater” (*Haggard*: 35).

In order to manage the pain caused by his obsession, physically manifested by “Spike”, the metal pin that holds his broken hip in place, Haggard takes recourse to the opiate morphia (e.g. *Haggard*: 121, 131). All of Keats's biographers agree that the physical manifestation of disease that troubled Keats during a large part of his final years was a debilitating sore throat (e.g. Motion, 2018: 413; Roe, 2013: 302). They, however, do not agree on the quantity and frequency of laudanum Keats used, nor are they of the same mind as to why he took opiates. Colvin, for example, cites Keats's friend Brown who admitted that the poet secretly took doses of laudanum “to keep up his spirits” (2011 (1887): 191). Gittings (1954: 198) and Ward (1963:355) reiterate this story and add that Brown intervened by extracting from his

friend a promise to give up the habit. More recently, Roe has suggested that the use of opium explains Keats's unstable mood and that the poet probably used opium more frequently than hitherto assumed, to stave off depression, but also as "a stimulant for his imagination" (2013: 308). In Keats's case—if Roe's conjecture holds water—, from this opium-driven imagination emanated several of the most famous poems written in English, whereas in Haggard's deluded mind, the morphia produces merely an imaginary disease based on a distorted set of symptoms.

Keats was a trained and licensed—albeit reluctant—surgeon and apothecary, who had studied and worked as a dresser at the London Guy's Hospital (e.g. Motion, 2018: 131). Keats lacked the required university education to be a full-fledged doctor, but he was nevertheless qualified to undertake simple surgical interventions. Haggard, on the other hand, is a doctor unsuccessfully striving to become a surgeon at the London St Basil's hospital. The change of the hospitals' names, from Keats's authentic Guy's to Haggard's fictitious St Basil's, is not a coincidence. The name Basil directly refers to one of Keats's longer texts, "Isabella, or the Pot of Basil"⁶. The poem recounts a sad love story adapted from Boccaccio about a woman who digs up her murdered lover's body and plants his head in a pot of basil. The first lines of the last stanza "And so she pined, and so she died forlorn, / Imploring for her Basil to the last" (ed. Garrod, 1961: 194) bring to mind Haggard's pining after the deceased Fanny until his ultimate death. Although Haggard does not literally exhume Fanny's body, he does (un)consciously try to bring her back to life by *planting* her soul into James. Considering that the herb basil is traditionally associated with love (e.g. Simoons, 1998: 37) it comes as no surprise that the climax of Haggard and Fanny's love affair takes place in the lobby of St Basil's hospital. It is a moment of "hasty passionate love" (*Haggard*: 94) that shows distinct references to a few lines in the last stanza of Keats's "Ode on Melancholy", also cited in McGrath's novel: "Ay, in the very temple of delight / Veiled Melancholy has her sovran shrine" (68). This transforms the lobby of St Basil's metaphorically into a "temple of delight" of a sexual nature. It also associates Fanny by way of the veil that she on this occasion wears ("tiny veiled figure" (93)) with Melancholy, as Fanny indeed proves to infect Haggard with neurotic and obsessive melancholia. This neurotic obsession, in other words a distorted kind of romantic love, obviously stands in stark contrast with Keats's love for Fanny Brawne, as it was recorded in his letters to her.

The tragic death of Haggard's patient Eddie Bell is another scene set in St Basil's that recalls a defining moment in Keats's life. The text relates in rather explicit detail Bell's final hours and his death of tuberculosis in Haggard's arms. It is a stark retelling in fiction of the demise of Keats's brother Tom, who had been a consumptive for a long time, before succumbing to the disease in Keats's care in 1818 (Bate, 1963: 386).

Although Keats and Haggard are trained as physicians, their real vocation lies elsewhere. After passing his final examinations in July 1816, Keats decided to travel to the then fashionable sea resort Margate where he started writing poetry in earnest (Bate, 1963: 67-

68). Soon after, he communicated to his ward Mr Abbey that he planned to pursue a career in literature. In McGrath's novel, Haggard follows closely in Keats's footsteps, albeit—as always—with some form of telling aberration. In contrast to Keats, Haggard fails to qualify as a surgeon. After having been released from hospital, he buys a medical practice in the coastal town Griffin Head. There he gradually loses interest in medicine, a sentiment he expresses towards the end of the novel in no uncertain terms: “*non serviam*” (*Haggard*: 150 original emphasis). This Biblical quote of course functions as a literary reference to Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, who, like Keats and Haggard, decides to lead an artist's life. At first sight, however, *Dr Haggard's Disease* offers no clue as to what can be construed as Haggard's literary output, or, in other words, his poetic creation. In an interview Patrick McGrath offers an explanation:

I think Dr Haggard is like an artist: here is this young man who comes to see him, and Haggard begins to imagine that he's turning into a woman, his mother, the woman Haggard loved. He wants it to be true, he wants to believe that the mother is coming to life in the body of her son. So he uses medical terminology, he talks about the symptoms and so on, but he sees what he wants to see. He's not seeing anything real, it's true only subjectively, and in that respect he's entirely creative” (McGrath quoted in Falco, 2007: 44).

In this respect, Haggard's artistic creation, i.e. the medical description of his deluded notion of transmigration of souls, is but a weak reflection of Keats's literary accomplishments. Haggard's perverted *ars poetica* puts into relief how the Romantic ideal of “imagination as a more comprehensive and inclusive faculty than reason” (Habib, 2008: 408) has degenerated into a distorted kind of pseudo-medical imagination. Whereas the Romantics perceived the poet “as a genius whose originality was based on his ability to discern connections among apparently discrepant phenomena and to elevate human perception toward a comprehensive, unifying vision” (Habib, 2008: 410), Haggard's deluded attempt to connect James's apparently discordant symptoms into a unifying disorder or syndrome utterly fails to convince his contemporaries.

Dr Haggard's Disease is set in the fictitious town of Griffin Head. As most of the protagonists' names, this composite name was not simply chosen at random. Although Griffin Head is, just like Keats's Margate, in the proximity of an RAF basis, its name is more relevant than its location. A griffin is a mythical creature of which the body and paws are those of a lion, but its wings and *head* are those of an eagle. On the one hand, the image of the eagle tunes in once more with a line from the third stanza of Donne's poem “The Canonization”: “And we in us find the eagle and the dove”. In *Dr Haggard's Disease*, the feminine dove then stands for Fanny, who is described as wearing “a beautiful dove-grey coat and skirt” (*Haggard*: 69-70), whereas the masculine eagle represents Haggard as he portrays himself as “some great bird tethered and pinioned to the earth too long” (24-25). It is surely no coincidence that one of Haggard and Fanny's regular haunts is a pub called the Two Eagles. On the other hand, the motif of the eagle yet again directly refers to Keats, who understood the eagle as a free creator,

a symbol for the poet himself: “Why should we be owls, when we can be Eagles?” (quoted in Bate, 1963: 296). Furthermore, the eagle brings to mind the fourth and fifth line of Keats’s poem “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles”: “Of godlike hardship, tells me I must die / Like a sick Eagle looking at the sky” (ed. Garrod, 1961: 376). The image of a sick eagle looking at the sky is first in direct analogy to that “great bird”, the deluded and crippled Haggard, “tethered and pinioned to the earth too long” (*Haggard*: 24-25) watching the Spitfires at the RAF base land and take off. Second is also an indication that Haggard – figuratively pinioned to the earth by his crippled wing – can never be a true Romantic poet in Keatsian sense.

Haggard’s house in Griffin Head is called Elgin. Zlosnik explains this name as “suggestive of both exile and colonialism in its echo of the ‘Elgin Marbles’” (2011: 138), whereas Falco links it to Keats’s poem “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles” and interprets the house as the incarnation of Haggard’s tortured spirit (2007b: 43). Although Haggard confirms: “as though Elgin were your own head” (62) and although there are indeed some similarities between the house and Haggard’s mind, both crippled and decrepit, with “an air of neglect” (*Haggard*: 7), it is here more pertinent to refer to the poem’s final phrase: “a shadow of a magnitude” (ed. Garrod, 1961: 376). The Elgin Marbles were taken from the Athenian Parthenon and other buildings of the Acropolis and exhibited in London. As such they became –as de Waal puts it in her analysis of Keats’s poem– “only a shadow of their original glory” (2016: 74). It is clear that in *Dr Haggard's Disease* this former magnitude, i.e. the Parthenon untouched, exemplifies Haggard’s original passion for Fanny, whereas Elgin stands for his obsessive pining and his deluded love for James, which are mere husks of that original glory. At the same time this phrase reveals that Haggard’s life story itself is but a pale retelling of Keats’s biography. In other words, the novel’s protagonist is only a haggard shadow of the poet Keats.

In the autumn of 1820 Keats travelled by boat to Naples and then on to Rome to start anew life, in the vain hope of recovering from his consumption (e.g. Bate, 1963: 660-661). It is a sea voyage obliquely recalled in *Dr Haggard's Disease*. On “the threshold of a new life” (*Haggard*: 132) in Griffin Head, Haggard stays at an inn called the Ship (132). Furthermore, in one of his opiate-induced dreams, Haggard sees “an eerie death ship about to cast off and carry [him] over a subterranean sea to some island of the dead” (123)”. Here the phrase “death ship” refers to the *Maria Cowther*, the vessel that transported two dying consumptives across the Mediterranean (compare “subterranean”) sea to Italy: Keats and a Miss Cotterell (e.g. Bate, 1963: 659).

On his deathbed, Keats is said to have held a gift from Fanny Brawne, a “small, oval, white carnelian” (Bate, 1963: 695), or alternatively, “a polished, oval, white cornelian” (Gittings, 1979 (1954): 409). Gittings claims it is a marble object used to cool the hands when sewing (409), whereas Pryor asserts it’s a semi-precious stone believed to cool fevers (2014:n. pag). Like Keats, Haggard carries in his pocket a gift from Fanny, a “piece of glass shaped like a pebble, flat on the bottom, with a fly inside it” (*Haggard*: 88). It becomes a treasured talisman and he touches it –as Keats his carnelian– in moments of great stress. The

fly⁷ inside the glass is once more a reference to a line from Donne's "The Canonization", that compares lovers to flies: "Call her one, me another fly" (Donne, 1633). In *Dr Haggard's Disease*, however, there is only one fly fixed in the glass, a sure sign that Haggard and Fanny's love affair will end badly. The fly-in-glass also confirms how fixed Haggard is in his obsession and how distinct from the ideal poet, the eagle of Keats's imagination.

A final similarity –but again of a distorted kind– between Haggard and Keats is their actual demise. Keats died while nursed by his friend Joseph Severn to whom at the very end he implored: "Lift me up – I am dying" (quoted in Motion, 2018: 566). In *Dr Haggard's Disease*, it is Haggard who holds the dying James: "And now you lie here in my arms", while he kills him "with needle and ampoule" (*Haggard*: 179). It is a euthanasia denied to Keats, as Severn handed the bottle of laudanum brought to Italy to that particular end to Keats's attending physician Dr Clark (Bate, 1963: 687). Again Haggard fails to live up to Keats's exalted standards; the poet seemingly peacefully drifts off, lifted up in Severn's arm. Haggard, on the other hand, explodes after having killed the object of his obsession.

2. INTERTEXTUALITY: ROMANTIC AND POETIC SIMILARITIES

In his book on intertextuality, Allen summarizes this –not exclusively– postmodernist notion succinctly as follows: "Meaning becomes something which exists between a text and all the other texts to which it refers and relates" (2011: 1). Although the term itself originates in the work of Kristeva (2011: 6), intertextuality is most often cited as a fundamental characteristic of postmodernist literature (e.g. Stephan, 2019: 6; Barry, 2009: 87). *Dr Haggard's Disease* may well be superficially read as a study of obsessive love, but it is only when viewed in its specific intertextual relationship with the poetry of Keats that the implied authorial comment on the impossibility of Romantic genius in the 20th century becomes apparent. As discussed before, some of the novel's attributes such as the protagonist's names or the –sometimes fictitious– setting unequivocally refer to Keats's poetry. However, especially the portrayal of Haggard's love affair and the explicit reference to Keats's poetry and other poetical work construct in McGrath's novel an interesting intertextual frame of reference.

The love between Keats and Fanny Brawne has been well documented and Keats's letters to Fanny have become famous in their own right as quintessential examples of epistolary literature. Although composed as an ode to Fanny/James, the tone of *Dr Haggard's Disease* at times clearly evokes that of Keats's letters⁸. As mentioned before, there are many similarities between Fanny Brawne and Fanny Vaughan, yet there are some noteworthy divergences as well, like their age, the fact that in Haggard's case Fanny's love is not wholeheartedly reciprocated and the notion that Haggard's relationship with Fanny has a clear sexual side to it. This asymmetry is not coincidental; as a literary character Fanny Vaughan is an

amalgamation of several women who played a crucial role in Keats's life or who, alternatively, appeared in his poetry.

There's Fanny Brawne and Keats's mother, as discussed before, but Fanny Vaughan also bears a distinct similarity to Isabella Jones, a woman Keats met in Hastings in the spring of 1817. She is said to have been "clever, talented, sociable, witty and tantalisingly enigmatic" (Roe, 2013: 169). Keats was attracted to her and this feeling seems to have been mutual, as he "warmed with her ... and kissed her" (quoted in Roe, 2013: 170). Although Keats's biographers are not clear on the exact nature or the duration of Keats's relationship with Isabella, they do not exclude the possibility that there might have been a sexual side to it. Like Fanny Vaughan, Isabella was several years older than Keats, in her late thirties at least (169). Also like Fanny, she finally kept her lover at a distance. Motion suggests Isabella might have been "a flirt and no more" (2018: 181), a description that recalls Fanny's cold words to Haggard: "We had an affair. It's over now" (*Haggard*: 137). Furthermore, Isabella exerted some kind of influence on Keats's poetry. She suggested he might write "The Eve of St Agnes" and "The Eve of St Mark" (e.g. Motion, 2018: 322, 337, 351). Fanny Vaughan's impact on Haggard's poetic creation is less candid, although her untimely death does engender Haggard's madness and so indirectly his deluded interest in metempsychosis.

As stated above, the novel's plot ties Fanny Vaughan to the fictional "full beautiful" (ed. Garrod, 1961: 350) lady in "La Belle Dame sans Merci" because they both seduce and – to a certain extent – betray their respective lovers. Similarly, McGrath's novel also associates Fanny Vaughan with Lamia, one of the protagonists of Keats's narrative poem of the same name, written not long after "La Belle Dame sans Merci". It tells the story of Lamia who is trapped in the body of a serpent, but, once transformed into human form, enters into a relationship with Lycius. As soon as Lamia's true form is revealed to Lycius, she vanishes "with a frightful scream" and Lycius dies of shock and grief: "no pulse, or breath they found" (ed. Garrod, 1961: 178). It is a grief replicated in Haggard, in whom it was caused by the revelation of Fanny's lukewarm emotions towards him, a grief that finally drives Haggard to delusion and death. Furthermore, in *Dr Haggard's Disease*, Fanny is often described with adjectives and nouns that start with the letter 's', for example "perfect skin, the slight slender figure in the shining sheath of satin" (*Haggard*: 21) or "skin soft as silk" (49), whereby the repetition of that particular letter generates the impression of a hissing snake, a clear reference to Lamia's true shape.

Keats portrays the snake Lamia as "full of silver moons" (ed. Garrod, 1961: 162). Indeed, lunar motifs are common to Keats's poetry (e.g. Roe, 2013: 51), so much so that Nicholas Roe even attempts to establish a link between the position of the moon and Keats's creativity. In *Dr Haggard's Disease*, the movement of the moon and its position with respect to the sea reflects by way of metaphor the progress of Fanny and Haggard's relationship. In his poem "To Fanny", Keats associates Fanny with a "silver moon" (361) and so in *Dr Haggard's Disease*, silver is the adjective that returns time and again in the description of Fanny Vaughan (Zlosnik, 2011: 67). This indicates that she stands for the moon, while Haggard is continuously

linked to the sea, when he is described as a “walrus” (*Haggard*: 60), a “crab” (62) and a “shrimp” (58, 79). In Haggard’s first night at Elgin, he sees that “the moon [hangs] low over the sea” (11). This is a position that expresses the closeness of the initial phase of the love affair. Later the sea is “a skin of rippled black satin, with the moonlight washing over it like golden oil” (59), a scene that represents the carnal consummation of the relationship. Finally, when Haggard goes down to the sea, the moon is “hidden beneath a patch of black cloud” (60). It is a final image that signals the abrupt end of their liaison.

Zlosnik noted that the (implied) author transfers the attribute ‘silver’ from Fanny to James (2011: 74): he uses a “silver-plated lighter” (*Haggard*: 2) and there is “a scrap of silver knotted about [his] throat” (177). Along with the reappearance of the descriptive attribute ‘silver’ returns “the moon over the sea” (168), a sure indication that Haggard has traded his obsession with Fanny for an infatuation with James. However, whereas Fanny is linked with ‘silver’ without qualification, James’s lighter is only silver-plated and the silver around his neck is a mere scrap. This illustrates that Haggard’s passion for James is of a deluded kind and is just a paltry reflection of his original, sterling passion for Fanny Vaughan, which in its turn is only a weak reflection of Keats’s passion for his Fanny. It is, yet again, but a –postmodernist– shadow of a magnitude (“On Seeing the Elgin Marbles”, ed. Garrod, 1961: 376).

In view of the similarities between Keats and Haggard, it is somewhat ironic that it should be Fanny Vaughan who presents Haggard with a volume of Keats (*Haggard*: 69), and not vice versa. When he opens it at random, he reads to her: “For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair” (71). It is the last line of the second stanza from “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, and its recitation is followed by a sign that to Fanny their affair is not as ardent as Haggard perceives it to be: “I lifted my eyes from the book and gazed at her; she turned her head aside” (71). The “thou” from this line of poetry refers to the man depicted on the Grecian urn who is unable to kiss his fair lover as they are both fixed on the urn. Keats implies, however, that they should not grieve considering that his love will never abate and her beauty will never fade. Again *Dr Haggard’s Disease* subverts this original Keatsian image of eternal love and ever-lasting beauty when Fanny wastes away of kidney disease and Haggard transfers his obsession from Fanny to James. The (implied) author furthermore negates Keats’s famous forewarning to the young lover “never canst thou kiss” (ed. Garrod, 1961: 210), when at the end of the novel Haggard kisses James: “I press my mouth gently to yours and probe for the flickering tongue with my own, probe with tiny darting flickers till I taste in your terrible burnt head the fresh sweet wetness of the living tongue within” (*Haggard*: 180). Haggard’s final kiss has been described as a homosexual image of Romeo embracing the dying Juliet (Falco, 2007b: 110-111) and as a scene that calls up the notion of necrophilia (Armitt, 2011: 139). In any case, Haggard’s final embrace is a disturbing image. With its overtones of vampirism and cannibalism⁹, it signals Haggard’s complete delusion and at the same time obliterates and

comments on the Romantic imagery with regards to beauty in Keats's ode.

Apart from these various warped intertextual references to Keats, the novel also alludes to and subverts other Romantic poetry. For instance, Haggard quotes from Goethe's *Faust*: "eternal womanhood leads us above" (*Haggard*: 150), whereby *das Ewig-Weibliche* stands for the quintessential image of womanhood. In *Haggard's Disease*, however, the female ideal of beauty is not eternal at all, as Fanny wastes away and dies. Although Haggard here refers to *Faust*, McGrath's novel on the whole, rather mirrors Werther's tragic idealization of the married Charlotte.

As discussed before, the novel's epigraph from Donne's "The Canonization" hints at the impact of this particular poem on McGrath's text. In support of the novel's assertion that beauty –be it Goethe's eternal womanhood or Keats's "fair" lady on the urn– does fade and love does degenerate, it is relevant to quote another line from Donne's poem: "We're tapers too, and at our own cost die" (Donne, 1633). Here the lovers' passion consumes them both at their own cost, whereas in *Dr Haggard's Disease* only Haggard is consumed by passion. Donne's image of passion's fire is furthermore deployed by McGrath's novel in order to construct a metaphor of light and warmth that –like Keats's lunar motif– tracks the development and closure of Haggard and Fanny's affair. When Fanny first sees Haggard at a party she "lean[s] forward into the flame of the match" (*Haggard*: 23) with which Haggard lights her cigarette. By leaning towards the flame Fanny indicates her attraction, literally kindled by Haggard. Whenever the lovers later meet, they are usually in the presence of fire (e.g. 39, 46, 69, 85), but when Fanny's love starts to falter, she wistfully remarks: "You don't even light my cigarettes anymore" (108). Towards the conclusion of their relationship, they are described as meeting "beneath a lamppost" (113), whereby the lamppost's artificial light is of course just a feeble reflection of the natural light of fire. McGrath's novel then transfers its metaphor of fire and light to Haggard's deluded affair with James. At the beginning of the novel, Haggard wants to light James's cigarette, but is unable to do so (2) because of the tremor in his hands. James then lights the cigarettes, an act that implies that James's visit to Elgin reawakens Haggard's passion, but that also functions as an omen of the novel's final scene, namely James and Haggard's death in a blaze of fire.

Just as Fanny Vaughan and Haggard read Romantic poetry, Keats and Fanny Brawne were recorded to have jointly read the fifth Canto of Dante's *Inferno* (Motion, 2018: 370), which narrates how Francesca and her brother-in-law Paolo fall in love while reading the story of Guinevere and Lancelot. Speaking in Girardian terms¹⁰, Francesca and Paolo's desire is of a mimetic kind, mediated by the story of Arthurian romance. The (implied) author of *Dr Haggard's Disease* takes great care to emphasize that the name of his female protagonist is actually short for Frances (*Haggard*: 101, 103), who –like her namesake Francesca– commits adultery with a colleague, i.e. a brother-doctor. This emphasis might imply that the Keatsian and other Romantic poetry that permeates McGrath's novel not only determines its plot and structure, but also functions as the mediator of Haggard's mimetic desire: he desires to be a Romantic poet and he desires Fanny exactly because of her name's obvious relation to Keats.

In other words, his predilection for Keats and Romantic poetry skews his worldview, contorts his social contacts and especially affects the eagerness with which he enters into this obsessive love affair with Fanny. In his delusion, Haggard once more takes his mimicry of Keats to the level where the idealized beauty of the original is left distorted.

3. CONCLUSION: KEATS'S HAGGARD SHADOW

In spite of the prevalent reading of *Dr Haggard's Disease* as a postmodernist Gothic text (e.g. Zlosnik, 2011), an interpretation of McGrath's novel as a historiographic metafictional re-telling of Keats's life and as a sustained intertextual reference to Romantic –especially Keats's– poetry seems more viable. The novel's plot, protagonists and their psychological framework are firmly linked to John Keats as they repeat and imitate, but at the same time self-consciously distort and comment on the poet's life and work.

First, Haggard derives his name not from the poet directly, but from John Keats's deceased brother, Edward. Second, Fanny Vaughan is not a forthright copy of Fanny Brawne, but rather a multi-layered and ambiguous literary character that gives rise to a distorted Oedipal interpretation of Keats's Romantic love. Third and most importantly, Haggard's poetic creation is not genuine and exalted poetry inspired by the imagination of a Romantic genius. Instead it is made up of a deluded set of symptoms awkwardly assembled in an imaginary physical disorder. Finally, *Dr Haggard's Disease* contorts Keats's love for Fanny Brawne into Haggard's neurotic and obsessive love for Fanny Vaughan and construes it as a mimetic type of desire, mediated both by Romantic poetry and Keats's biography.

Keats's fairly platonic notion that the Elgin marbles in London are but “a shadow of a magnitude”, located in a past “Grecian grandeur” (ed. Garrod, 1961: 376), exemplifies his focus in “Ode to a Grecian Urn” on the relationship between what is real and what is ideal (e.g. Motion, 2018: 389). As demonstrated, the discourse of McGrath's narrator trivializes and distorts this platonic idea until there is no real or ideal. There is only grotesque delusion left. In his “Ode to a Grecian Urn” Keats suggested the often quoted –and debated– lines: “Beauty is truth, truth Beauty” (ed. Garrod, 1961: 210), but *Dr Haggard's Disease* deliberately depreciates this tenet as follows: “no beauty is so flawless that from a certain angle, in a certain light, it cannot be rendered grotesque” (*Haggard*: 65). To all effects, finding this angle is exactly the accomplishment of *Dr Haggard's Disease*, as it becomes a postmodernist comment on the grotesqueness and non-viability of Romantic feeling and poetry in the 20th century, especially on the cusp of the Second World War.

NOTES

- ¹ While paraphrasing Linda Hutcheon on historiographic metafiction.
- ² This assumption is left largely unsubstantiated.
- ³ Transformed to “wretched wight” in an alternative version (Roe, 2013: 314).
- ⁴ “James, you were *my* knight, my gentle, parfit knight” (*Haggard*: 151-152 original emphasis).
- ⁵ While paraphrasing Linda Hutcheon on historiographic metafiction.
- ⁶ The addition of ‘St’ to St Basil’s, might be a reference to Keats’s poem “The Eve of St. Agnes”, a tale of nocturnal passion.
- ⁷ Perhaps also a reference to Keats’s poem “All gentle folks ...” about a gadfly, and particularly two lines that denote the pain of its sting: “The Gadfly he hath stung me sore - / O may he ne’er sting you!” (ed. Garrod, 1961: 446-447).
- ⁸ Especially when Haggard addresses James directly: e.g. “dear James” (*Haggard* 12), “darling boy” (4).
- ⁹ Both cannibalism and vampirism are recurrent factors in McGrath’s early fiction, cf. *The Grotesque* (1989) or “Blood Disease” (1988) and “The Boot’s Tale” (1988).
- ¹⁰ “Girard points out that the two did not fall in love spontaneously –as the romantic reading suggests– but rather simply imitated the desires of Lancelot and Guinevere” (Palaver, 2013: n. pag.).

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