Psychopharmacology and British Literature and Culture, 1780 to 1900, eds. Natalie Roxburgh and Jennifer Henke (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp.23-46.

Historicising Keats’ Opium Imagery Through Neoclassical Medical and Literary Discourses

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On 18 March 1819, John Keats was playing cricket when “disaster” struck, the ball conked him “dir[ectl]y on the sight” giving him “a black eye” (Keats 1958, 2: 78). In addition to applying “a lee[ch to] the eyelid to reduce the “infla[mm]ation”, in all probability, given its medical status as the most efficacious pain relief, Keats dosed himself with opium; his “indolent” mood the next morning certainly suggests that he was effected by the drug (Keats 1958, 2: 78; see Ober 1968, 872; Roe 2012, 308). Being the foremost poet-physician of the period, it is unsurprising that Keats’ professional knowledge filtered into his poetical imagery.[1] As this essay shows, Keats’ use of opium imagery was in line with neoclassical medical and literary understandings of opium. Thomas De Quincey, on the other hand, whose *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821) rendered him, practically overnight, a de facto opium expert in the eyes of the nation, felt frustrated at previous medical and literary accounts, denouncing “all that has been hitherto written on the subject of opium” as “Lies! lies! lies!” (De Quincey 1998, 39). Some have taken De Quincey’s account to be representative of historical attitudes towards opium, which obscures the neoclassical tradition inherited by Keats. This essay, therefore, attempts to recover what neoclassical medical and literary discourses conveyed about opium’s effects in the light of the way they later became obscured through the prevalence of De Quincey’s understanding in the 1820s and beyond. In so doing, it examines the interplay between poetic imagery alongside emergent therapeutic description, showing that imagery and diction about opium remained consistent across genres, both literary and medical.

As Andreas-Holger Maehle notes, there was “small psychopharmacological interest” in opium’s effects before the nineteenth century (Maehle 1999, 188; see Davenport-Hines 2004, 54). Eighteenth-century physicians, and other scientific experimenters, were principally interested in discovering, and understanding, opium’s pharmacological effects—so, for instance, whether opium operated on the nervous or cardiovascular system.[2] Any psychopharmacological or psychological effects that were noted were usually mentioned only incidentally (see Jones 1700, 21–24; Leigh 1786, 113–14; Crumpe 1793, 45–46). The lack of a methodological basis for result-gathering hindered psychopharmacological inquiry (Maehle 1995, 68). Vivisectional physiology had long provided a basis for somatic experimentation with opium—Samuel Pepys, in his diary for 16 May 1664, for instance, reports attending an experiment in which a dog was injected with opium inducing “a strange and sudden effect” (5: 151); while Robert Whytt, President of the Royal College of Physicians, in the mid-eighteenth century, details his “Experiments made with Opium on Living and Dying Animals” (1768, 309–27)—but there were yet not yet specific methods known to examine opium’s psychological effects beyond self-experimentation and anecdotes. Literary writers,

therefore, were in the same position as medical experimenters when it came to understanding opium's psychopharmacological effects.

This essay argues that classical conceptions of opium filtered into, almost without contestation, neoclassical perceptions, both in medicine and in literature. It historicises opium's qualities as a widespread pain-relieving drug in long-eighteenth-century culture, taken to soothe both physical and mental ills, and demonstrates that many writers depicted their everyday experiences of opium's effects in keeping with medical observations. Indeed, opium imagery aligns in a multitude of genres: from scientific medical disquisition, to poetry, to fiction. The chapter shows that Keats' imagery accords with earlier accounts of opium's psychopharmacological effects, especially in conceiving of opium as bodily and mental pain relief used primarily to procure sleep and drowsiness, to promote a dulling and lulling of sensation, to provide a pleasant oblivion and forgetfulness, and as a soothing balm; while acknowledging that it induces indolence, stupor and insensibility. These were terms used across medical and literary discourses. Thus Keats, along with a preponderance of post-1780 but pre-De Quinceyan writers, rejected 1780s Brunonian theory, which stood in opposition to the neoclassical account. Brunonian theory articulated that opium's "great" "virtue" is the "higher degree" of its "stimulant powers", that although there are some "circumstances in which opium produces sleep", primarily "it excites the functions of body and mind" (Brown 1795, 1: 282–85). De Quincey's Brunonian sympathies (Milligan 2007) are evident in his conviction that "the primary effects of opium are always, and in the highest degree, to excite and stimulate the system" (De Quincey 1998, 43–44). During lectures at Guy's hospital, Keats would have heard of the "Speciousness", "embarrassments" and "farther difficulties of [Brown's] doctrine" (Babington and Curry 1811, 21–22).

CLASSICAL PRECEDENTS FOR LONG-EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY CONCEPTIONS OF OPIUM

Homer's poetry contained the first reference in Greek literature to the opium poppy (Scarborough 1995, 4), an image which subsequently appeared in Virgil's *Aeneid*. Alexander Pope, in the *Odyssey* (1725–1726), translated Homer's image thus: "Bright *Helen* mix'd a mirth-inspiring bowl [...] / Charm'd with that virtuous draught, th' exalted mind / All sense of woe delivers to the wind" (Bk.IV, ll.302–08). "The conjectures about this cordial of *Helen* have been almost infinite", Pope commented in his footnote to the lines above, but "[t]he description of this *Nepenthes* agrees admirably with what we know of the qualities and effects of *Opium*" (9: 133 footnote). Centuries before the term *psychopharmacology* was coined, then, Pope described the effects of Helen's opium-poppy "drug" on "th' exalted mind"; it renders its imbibers "impassive and serene" as a "man entranc'd" (Bk.IV, ll.303–14). Helen uses the drug to make those at Menelaus' feast forget the pain, "All sense of woe", caused by the Trojan War. Millennia before medical and scientific experimentation on opium's psychopharmacological processes began, then, Homer had already described its effects on the mind: "a drug to quiet all pain and strife, and bring forgetfulness of every ill" (Murray 2014, 1: 135).

By the eighteenth century, opium was renowned for sending its imbibers to sleep; indeed, the poppy species' scientific classification, *Papaver Somniferum*—coined by Carl Linnaeus in the mid-eighteenth century, in *Species Plantarum* (1753)—translates from Latin as *sleep-*

inducing poppy. Its soporific qualities are, therefore, embedded within its very scientific identity. Linnaeus echoed Virgil, who documented the “soporiferumque papaver” in the *Aeneid*, when Dido recalls “a priestess” who performs “spells” and “magic arts” by “sprinkling [...] slumbrous poppies” (Fairclough 2014, 1: 454–55). Virgil’s image filtered into English vernacular through the neoclassical era’s translations: in 1697, into “Poppy-Seeds” that “sooth’d” “into sleep” (Dryden 1956–1989, 5: 475); into “drowsy Poppy’s Juice” (Trapp 1731, 2: 260); and into “poppy’s soporiferous grain” (Beresford 1794, 144).

In accordance with classical precedent, four English canon stalwarts— Geoffrey Chaucer, Edmund Spenser, William Shakespeare and John Milton—all used opium imagery in association with soporifics, drowsiness and mental soothing. As early as the fourteenth century, Chaucer, in the “Legend of Good Women”, used the image of “narcotyks and opies” to procure “slepe as longe as evere thee leste [‘please’]” (ll.2669– 70), and in the “Knight’s Tale”, Palamon drugs his jailer with “nercotikes and opie”, so “That all that nyght, thogh that men wolde him shake, / The gayler sleep; he myghte nat awake” (ll.1472–74).[3] Moving forward to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in the *Faerie Queene* (1590), Spenser wrote of the “Dead sleeping *Poppy*” by which “Wise *Socrates*” was “made to dy” (II vii st.52): as though opium elicits oblivion, even in the greatest of minds. In Shakespeare’s *Othello* (c.1603), Iago predicts that the “poison” he drips into Othello’s ear will sufficiently agitate Othello that even the most powerful opium would produce no rest:

> Not poppy, nor mandragora,
>
> Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world
>
> Shall ever medicine thee to that sweet sleep
>
> Which thou owed’st yesterday. (III iii ll.361–69)

Iago’s words are “poison” to Othello’s thoughts, against which even the “drowsy syrup” of “poppy” cannot “medicine” Othello. Meanwhile, in “Samson Agonistes” (1671), Milton described “death’s benumbing opium” as the “only cure” for the “torment” of “the inmost mind”, which no other “med’cinal liquor can assuage” (ll.606–30). As we progress through these four writers, the way opium is perceived changes. In Chaucer and Spenser, it is a poison with whose aid to harm others; by contrast, in seventeenth-century texts, opium is associated with therapeutic analgesics and assuaging mental torment. Crucially, seventeenth-century texts connect opium expressly with “medicine” and the “med’cinal”, referencing the period’s developing medical community (Ackerknecht 2016). Even as early as 1640, John Parkinson[4] defined opium as “*Narcoticke* medicine” (368).

HISTORICISING OPIUM AS MEDICINE

Pope’s Homeric description, of Helen’s “drugs, so friendly to the joys of life” (Bk.IV, l.315), differs markedly from Thomas De Quincey’s ultimately angst-inducing account, a century later, of “a mind debilitated by opium” (1998, 79). *Confessions* has since been considered the *locus classicus* of narcotic experience (Ober 1968, 862; Hayter 1968, 36), helping to contribute to Victorian anxieties about opium’s threat to Britain (Schmitt 2002). Yet before the nineteenth century, opium consumption was considered unremarkable, even mundane; despite its associations with the East, opium was not then framed as a threatening Other

(Milligan 1995; Leask 1992). Unlike Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Kubla Khan* (1816), De Quincey’s *Confessions*, and later texts which followed in the same vein, neoclassical writing tended to reflect the period’s popular discourse, which staged opium as ordinary, common and domestic (Freeman 2012). Opium sat in the medicine cabinets of vast swathes of the population, was valued for its pain-alleviating and sleep-inducing qualities, and was prescribed for all manner of complaints (Holloway 1995, 82). Alexander Philip Wilson’s observation, in *An Experimental Essay, on the Manner in which Opium Acts* (1795), that “most people have experienced [opium’s effects], indeed, in their own persons” indicates how prevalent opium consumption was (3). Opium was medicine, rather than, as subsequently, opium use being thought a reason to seek medical help (Berridge and Edwards 1987, 13–14). It was not until 1826, five years after *Confessions* first appeared, that the first modern experimental psychopharmacological text was produced, Pierre-Alexandre Charvet’s *De l’action comparée de l’opium* (Siegel and Hirschman 1983). Others have located the scientific beginnings of modern psychopharmacology later, in 1892 with the work of Emil Krae-pelin (Maehle 1999, 188). Those writing of opium’s psychological effects before then, from both a medical and literary perspective, had to rely for explanation on classical imagery, accounts from “*Eastern Nations*” (Jones 1700, 21), and/or self-experimentation, self-experience and anecdotal evidence.

Authors’ choices of diction in translating classical texts conform to the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century view of opium as medicine. Seventeenth-century renderings of Homer’s *Odyssey* referred to Helen’s nepenthe as “usefull med[i]cine” (Chapman 1616, 52), “this Med’cine” used “to appease all woe” (Ogilby 1665, 45) and “*Helens* Medicine” (Hobbes 1675, 41). A century later, the drug was still presented mainly in terms of its medicinal properties: Helen “medicated” the wine (Cowper 1791, 79), and administered “medicating drops” (Sotheby 1834, 3: 83). In later translations—those written after the Opium Wars of 1839–1842 and 1856–1858, when public disquiet over opium use increased—explic-itly medicinal terminology is omitted: they are deemed “cunning and excellent drugs” (Buckley 1851, 49); and the “anodyne” effect of Helen’s “potent drugs” is noted (Alford 1861, 55). The Victorian-period tendency not to characterise Helen’s opium-like drug as medicine continues in modern translations: Loeb terms them “cunning drugs” “of healing” (Murray 2014, 1: 137), while *Oxford World’s Classics* uses “cunning powerful drugs” (Shewring 1998, 35–54).

In addition to translations, descriptions by herbalists and physicians also evidence the neoclassical medicinal designations of opium: Nicholas Culpeper warned of laudanum, “have a care how you be too busy with such medicines lest you make a man sleep till dooms-day” (1649, 240); John Pechey refers to “Opiate Medicines” (Sydenham 1696, 140); Richard Mead discusses “the chief Virtues of this Medicine” (1702, 132); Thomas Cooper deems opium “a Medicine of great Power and Efficacy” (1766, 277); Alexander Monro refers to “powerful Medicines, viz. Opium” (1771, 292); Robert Hamilton declared it had a “deserved estimation in Medicine” (1790, 4). Even in texts that did not expressly refer to opium as a medicine, medical terminology was still deployed. Robert Burton’s influential *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), for instance, advises that one should “take” the “remedy” and “Physicke” of “opiats, syrup of Poppy” in order to “procure sleepe”, which would alleviate the “symp-tome[s]” of “dry braines” (2: 255). Importantly, Burton advocates opium for the cure of, what we now consider, mental unhealth: “continuall cares, feares, sorrowes [...] much crucifies melancholy

men, and must therefore bee speedily helped" (2: 225). Elsewhere, opium was seen as a curative for physical ailments, such as dysentery: in the 1660s, pioneering physician Thomas Sydenham had prescribed laudanum for the euphemistically named "*Bloody Flux*" (1696, 125–44).

Throughout the long eighteenth century, opium was described as being taken in "doses"—"a moderate dose of opium" (Mead 1702, 141; Hill 1751, 782; Wilson 1795, 3); "large doses of opium" (Kirkland 1780, 63); "an over-dose of Opium" (Crumpe 1793, 45)—reiterating the contemporary categorisation of it as medicine. Samuel Johnson, in his *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), defined "dose" in explicitly medical terms, as "So much of any medicine as is taken at one time", and the entry for "opium" referred repeatedly to "a dose of *opium*". A lecture on opium at Guy's hospital, which was part of Keats' training, refers to the "Extent and frequency of the dose most proper in general" (Babington and Curry 1811, 43). Even those in literary rather than medical circles referred to opium in "doses". Thomas Brown wrote jauntily, in 1685, of opium's sense-numbing effects: "How such a fit of Lethargy, / My Senses has possest, / As if a Dose of Opium / Had buried me in rest!" (Brown 1715, ll.1–4). An article by 'O' in the *English Review* (June 1785) referred to the "profound temporary lethargy, such as patients experience from large doses of opium" (5: 454). Similarly, Sara Hutchinson used imagery of medical prescription when she reported, in November 1815, that De Quincey was "often tipsey" because "[h]e doses himself with Opium" (88). De Quincey, however, disparaged such professional language: "the dose (to speak medically)" (1998, 44).

Self-medicating with opium was standard practice (Holloway 1995, 82). Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, in *Spectator* no. 573 (28 July 1714), could write blithely of a man who "composed himself with a Dose of Opium" (74). After a long day's travelling in 1798, Jane Austen's mother took "12 drops of Laudanum when she went to Bed, as a Composer" (1995, 16). By the nineteenth century, opium was "commonly and unselfconsciously bought and used" in "all levels of society" (Berridge and Edwards 1987, 49). Indeed, widespread opium use was sanctioned by the government, which kept its import duty low at 9 shillings per pound until 1826 (Wu 2015, 244). Through the long eighteenth century, then, opium became widely classified and endorsed as medication used to treat a multitude of maladies, bodily and mental, owing to known drug effects (even though opium's recognised effects were not yet physiologically chemically proven).

KEATS' OPIUM IMAGERY IN "TO AUTUMN"

Registered, in October 1815, as a Surgeon's Pupil at Guy's and St Thomas' hospitals, enrolling for lectures on "Chemistry, Practice of Medicine, Theory of Medicine and Materia Medica" (Ghosh and Roe 2017, 25), Keats received his certificate to practice medicine the subsequent year. Keats could not have avoided being cognizant of opium's effects. Indeed, a whole lecture, no. 155, on Guy's Practice of Medicine course, was dedicated to "OPIUM". Guy's physicians considered the "[a]bstract question of [opium] being *stimulant* or *sedative*, improper", because, in contrast to Brunonian excitability theory, "its power of allaying excessive action" is "incontestable": "Doctrines which inculcate its uniform operation as a stimulus, therefore, fallacious" (Babington and Curry 1811, 42).[5] Moreover, Keats had personal, as well as professional, knowledge of opium's effects. In September 1819, Keats

was “secretly taking” opium “to keep up his spirits” (Brown 1937, 63), perhaps as a remedy for his developing tuberculosis (see Babington’s and Curry’s lecture no. 439, which considered opium as a possible treatment). Charles Armitage Brown further remarked ominously that “[Keats] needed not to be warned of the danger of such a habit” (63). In neoclassical medical theory, opium was not taken in order to excite stimulation (Brunonianism), but rather to achieve mental relief by balancing spirits’ equilibrium: the supposed beneficial “*effects of Opium in lowness of spirits*” had long been noted—the physician George Young had observed in 1753 that giving a patient “his dose of opium [...] set his mind at ease” (101). Similarly, a character in Maria Edgeworth’s novel *Belinda*[6] (1801) could be described as having “completely repaired [...] her spirits with opium” (34).

“How beautiful the season is now”, wrote Keats to John Hamilton Reynolds, 21 September 1819—the very time that Brown had worried about Keats’ opium consumption—explaining how “this struck [him] so much” he “composed upon it” (2: 167)—the poem became “To Autumn”. The poem is infused with medical diction. In the original manuscript in his hand, Keats had initially written “Dosed with red[7] poppies”, which he scribbled out, and replaced with “Dos’d with the fume of poppies” (Hebron 2009, 143). Charles Armitage Brown transcribed “Dosed” in his copy (Keats 1978, 669). Jack Stillinger suggests that Keats’ and Brown’s “Dos’d/Dosed” were “probably variant spellings of ‘Dozed’” (Keats 1978, 670). Given Keats’ medical training, being medicated with opium to sleep—from “Dose” to “Doze”—makes sense, punning on “dos/ze”. In the same week as “To Autumn” was composed, Keats wrote to his brother George of his joy in “Pun-making” (Keats 1958, 2: 214). And two days after the poem’s composition, Keats wrote playfully to Richard Woodhouse, referring to his letter as a “dose” of himself, punning on Virgil’s *Eclogues*, and transcribing the relevant line in “To Autumn” as “Dased with the fume of poppies” (Keats 1958, 2: 169–70). Keats later settled on “Drows’d” for the published 1820 version (l.17). In Keats’ mind, then, a “Dose” of opium punningly moves between leaving one dozed, dazed and drowsed.

That Keats’ first resort in “To Autumn” was to “Dosed”, with its medical connotations, is consistent with the surrounding language, “asleep” and “slumberous”: “sound asleep / Dosed with red poppies; while thy reeping hook / Spares form some slumberous / minutes while warm slumbers creep” (Hebron 2009, 143). Being “Dosed” with poppies led naturally in Keats’ mind to being “Drows’d”; just as medically, one leads to the other. Autumn’s “careless” mood here (l.14) echoes Keats’ description of his own “supremely careless” post-opium “temper” the day after the cricket incident. Growing “careless” had long been considered an effect of opium-taking, noted, among others, by John Leigh (1786, 114).

In November 1820, a few months after Keats’ volume was published, Byron associated Keats’ poetry with “a Bedlam vision produced by raw pork and opium” (7: 226). But this is hardly apt to describe Keats’ opium imagery here, which does not connote mad hallucination, but rather the opposite: Keats’ poem is in keeping with opium’s neoclassical medical associations of lulling and sedation. Althea Hayter deems Keats’ use of opium imagery “mostly symbolic” (314), and his references to poppies unquestionably have literary symbolism. Nonetheless, they are also fully in line with neoclassical medical theory and practice. Indeed, the preoccupations we find repeated throughout Keats’ poetry—indolence; being embalmed from pain; sleep and drowsiness; dulling and lulling; oblivion and forgetfulness—arguably have their roots in eighteenth-century medical culture surrounding opium.

NEOCLASSICAL OPIUM IMAGERY

Indolence, Stupor, and Insensibility

The etymological root of *indolence* is the state of non-pain, mental and physical—in essence, to be un-doleful. Describing his condition on 19 March 1819, Keats declared: “My passions are all asleep”; opium’s chemical effects had “weakened [...] the fibres of the brain”, “with the rest of the body”, to make them “relaxed”, and his “temper indolent and supremely careless” (Keats 1958, 2: 78). Jones found that opium seized one “not unlike the gentle, sweet, *Deliquium* that we find upon our entrance into a most agreeable *Slumber*” (1700, 20), while Keats’ opium-induced “slumber” leaves “a delightful sensation about three degrees on this side of faintness” (Keats 1958, 2: 78).

Keats’ language describing the episode is steeped in medical terminology (Goellnicht 1984, 205). Physician-poet Samuel Garth[8] had, in his poem *Dispensary* (1699), similarly described someone “[w]ith *Poppys* [...] o’re him spread” as being in a “careless” state, with “His leaden Limbs at gentle ease,” and aligned with “The God of Sloth” (4–5). Another physician-poet, Erasmus Darwin, produced *Loves of the Plants* (1789), which was “design[ed]” “to inlist the Imagination under the banner of Science” (ix), by describing remedies literarily in the poem and medically in the footnotes. Garth’s poem had described the poppy-user who “supinely nods” “Upon a Couch of Down” in his/her “Abodes” (5); Darwin’s echoes Garth’s poem:

> Sopha’d on silk, amid her charm-built towers,
>
> Her meads of asphodel, and amaranth bowers,
>
> Where Sleep and Silence guard the soft abodes,
>
> In sullen apathy PAPAVER nods. (Darwin 1789, 69)

The decidedly poetic, neoclassic “asphodel” and “amaranth” suggest the mental ease and calm, the “charm[s]”, procured by opium, while the drug simultaneously induces bodily apathetic inactivity. In the footnotes, Darwin observed, partially in line with Brunonian theory: “In small quantities [opium] exhilarates the mind, raises the passions, and invigorates the body”, but he also warned, “in large ones it is succeeded by intoxication, languor, stupor and death”. Darwin’s footnotes use medical description while the poetry anthropomorphises Papaver, but both agree in their diagnosis of opium’s ultimately stupefying effects.[9]

Keats cannot decide if he is in a “state” of “languor” or “Laziness”, both of which had medical import: John Jones, in *Mysteries of Opium Reveal’d* (1700), cautioned that “a long and lavish Use of Opium” means “the *sensitive soul* becomes lazy, listless, and averse to all *Actions*” (245); while Wilson described “the effects of opium [...] when immediately applied to the brain” as “impaired sensibility, languor, sleep” (1795, 101). The same terms had seen earlier use too. As early as 1640, Parkinson warned that “Opium [...] is such a medicine, [...] the contin-uall use whereof, bringeth [...] an insensiblenesse or stupefaction” (368). Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*, a favourite of Keats, advised readers that “Opium [...] stupefies” (2: 214). Crumpe describes initial “cheerfulness [...] subsiding into a state of pleasing languor, [...] stupor, and disinclination to motion” (1793, 45–46). Literary works straightforwardly propagated this medical diction: Aphra Behn, in the poem “Of Plants” (1689), for instance,

could write casually of “Opium that binds the Nerves with Laziness” (1: 342); and in Mary Wollstonecraft’s novel *Mary: A Fiction* (1788), “the opiate produced a kind of stupor” (179).

Keats’ indolence was partially inspired literarily in “long[ing] after a stanza or two” of James Thomson’s *Castle of Indolence* (1748), which describes “lulling” and “drowsy” “Indolence” as having “that slumbrous influence kest, / From poppies breathed” (Canto I, l.27, l.34, ll.21–22). At the period when opium was De Quincey’s “elixir of pleasure”, he too looked to Thomson’s *Castle of Indolence* to express “happiness” (58–59). The term “indolence” was frequently used in medical texts to describe a person’s state after consuming opium. Mead, for instance, averred cheerily: “They who take a moderate Dose of *Opium* [...] are so Transported with the pleasing Sense It induces” that they “injoy so perfect an Indolence and Quiet, that no Happiness in the World can surpass the Charms of this agreeable Extasie” (1702, 140–41); while military surgeon Alexander Grant, in *Observations on the Use of Opium* (1785), observed of his patients, “with some indolency took place” (15). Jones had explained: “It causes Indolence, or exemption from Pain” and “a Relaxation of all the sensible Parts of the Body” (1700, 23). These accounts accord with Keats’ post-cricket-black-eye “relaxed” “indolence”.

In his post-opium state of “indolence”, Keats wrote in the letter of the dulling of both “pain” and “pleasure”: “Pleasure has no show of enticement and pain no unbearable frown” (2: 78–79). Keats’ medically inflected thinking in the letter directly works its way into his poetry (Keats 1958, 2: 79): “Ripe was the drowsy hour; / The blissful cloud of summer-indolence / Benumb’d my eyes; my pulse grew less and less; Pain had no sting, and pleasure’s wreath no flower” (“Ode on Indolence” ll.15–18). The anatomical description of “Benumb’d” “eyes” and a “pulse” becoming “less and less” is redolent of medical texts. John Hill, in *Materia Medica* (1751), warned that opium brought “Dimness of the Eyes” and “a Slowness of the Pulse” (783). In November 1803, F. Weber noted during his own self-experimentation that he suffered from “heavy uneasy eyes; contracted pupils and dimness of sight” (436).

Pain-Relief as a Balm

In its status primarily as a medicine, opium was described as a remedy and relief from pain of almost all varieties, both physical and mental. Sydenham, in the mid-seventeenth century, lauded opium as a heaven-sent analgesic. Translating Sydenham’s words, from Latin into English in 1696, John Pechey, himself a physician, rhapsodized: “[T]ruly I cannot here forbear mentioning, with Gratitude, that Omnipotent GOD, the Giver of all good Things, has not provided any other Remedy for the Relief of wretched Man, which is so able either to quell more Diseases, or more effectually to extirpate them, than Opiate Medicines” (140). Later, in the eighteenth century, Wilson assumes straightforwardly that readers will know from their own opium use that it brings “relief from pain” (1795, 3).

Johnson defined “balm” as “Any thing that sooth[e]s or mitigates pain”, and many eighteenth-century poems praised opium’s medicinal pain-quelling in the guise of being a “balm”.[10] The anonymous “Laudanum”, from the *London Magazine* (1735), refers to opium’s “downy balm” which “quells the body’s agonising pains” (l.22, l.6). “Orestes”, in “A Sonnet to Opium”, from the *European Magazine* (1796), apostrophised: “You can a balm infuse [...] [.] You can the shaft of anguish quick remove” (ll.8–11). Maria Logan, who suffered prolonged illness, praised opium’s balmy pain relief extensively in “To Opium” (1793): “Be mine the balm” to “still the throb of Pain”, exhorting the “friendly balm” to “blunt each

thorn" (ll.9–10, ll.23–27). In this light, Keats' "embalmed darkness", "as though" he had imbibed "some dull opiate", takes on enriched meaning in terms of being protected from experiencing worldly "sorrow" and "despairs", into a benumbed reverence "[t]o cease upon the midnight with no pain" ("Ode to a Nightingale" l.43, l.2, l.3, l.27, l.28, l.56).

Sleep and Drowsiness

Following in Virgil's footsteps, Burton (1621) advised taking "opiats" to "procure" "sleepe" (2: 255). Many eighteenth-century physicians followed suit, prescribing opium as a sedative. Hill declared that physicians should "prescribe Opium principally as an Anodyne and Soporific", arguing that "The great Intent with which we give Opium is to procure Sleep" (1751, 782–83). Wilson observed that "Opium [...] produces [...] a tendency to sleep" (1795, 35–36). That it was a culturally widespread notion to prescribe opium as a sedative to the ill is evident from two consumptive characters in Wollstonecraft's *Mary*: "Ann soon fell asleep, as she had taken an opiate"; "Henry was certain he could not live long; all the rest he could obtain, was procured by opiates" (1788, 70; 176). Indeed, opium's tranquilising effects were well-known enough that Samuel Richardson, in *Clarissa* (1748–49), at the novel's crucial moment, could have his anti-hero Lovelace drug the heroine with "an opiate", inducing a state of "*somnivolence*", so he could rape her (897).

Unsurprisingly given his profession, Garth's poetical imagery of poppy-crowned people aligns with his contemporaries' accounts of opium's medical effects, principally slumber: "When the still Night, with peaceful Poppies crown'd", "Sleep shakes its downy Wings o're mortal Eyes" (1699, 53). Identical diction was used in private poetical writing too: Mary Allanson, a member of a Yorkshire gentry family near Ripon, never published any poetry, but she did write in her private verse notebook an "Address to Sleep March 1775" when tending to her gouty father: "Gentle Sleep thy pinions spread" "shake thy poppies thro the air" (l.1, l.24). That it was not just public figures who used imagery associating sleep and opium poppies suggests how widely this belief was embedded in cultural norms.

Keats also elides imagery of opium and sleep. In "Sleep and Poetry", for instance, he figures "[s]leep, quiet with his poppy crown" (l.348), and in "Eve of St Agnes" Madeline is with "poppied warmth of sleep oppress'd" (l.237). As in "To Autumn", Keats had associated sleepiness and drowsiness with opium, so "drowsy numbness" indicates an "opiate" acting on the body in "Ode to a Nightingale" (l.1, l.3). Many eighteenth-century poets had done likewise. William Harrison's "In Praise of Laudanum" (1714) opens with: "I Feel, O *Laudanum*, thy Power Divine, And fall with Pleasure at thy slumb'ring Shrine" (ll.1–2); while Phanuel Bacon, in *Kite* (1722), states that a place of "sweet Repose" is where "the Drowsy Poppy grows" (4). The anonymous "Laudanum" begins: "The poppy [...] nodding waves its drowsy head" at "Som-nus", the Roman God of sleep, and the author worries he/she can "feel thy drowsy influence in my verse" (1735, ll.1–4, l.52). George Crabbe, another physician-poet, in *Inebriety* (1775), described "drowsy peace" as "[s]leep [...] sheds her poppies" (8). By the end of the eighteenth century, the term "drowsiness" was an established medical term for opium's effects (Leigh 1786, 114; Crumpe 1793, 46). Indeed, William Buchan's standard household guide *Domestic Medicine* (1769), which went through twenty editions by 1800, asserted: "Too great a quality of opium generally occasions great drowsiness, with stupor" (527).

Dulling and Lulling

Medical texts explained opium’s dulling psychopharmacological effects. Overuse of opium leads to a “dull, moapish, and heavy Disposition” (Jones 1700, 31), and “the mind becomes gradually dull and languid” (Crumpe 1793, 44). As well as dulling, opium also “lulls” its user: “It lulls, sooths, and (as it were) charms the Mind with Satisfaction, Acquiescence, Contention, Equanimity” (Jones 1700, 23).

Some poets of the period elaborate upon opium’s “lulling” effects in more personal terms. Harrison wrote blithely: “Lull’d by thy Charms I’ scape each anxious Thought, And every thing but *Mira* is forgot” (1714, ll.3–4). “*Mira*” derives from the Latin for wonder—the same derivation as “miracle”. In “Laudanum,” opium “Lulls all the boiling passions to a calm”, “And gently lulls into a soothing rest The swelling sorrows of a troubled breast” (1735, l.23, ll.7–8). Anna Seward’s “To the Poppy” (1810) describes opium as “lulling grief and pain” (l.12). Lady Caroline Lamb closes “Invocation to Sleep” wishing to “Lull, with thy poppy wreath, my soul to rest” (l.10).[11]

Like his predecessors, Keats used both “dull” and “lull” in association with opium. The “dull opiate” is recalled in the subsequent description of “the dull brain [that] perplexes and retards” (“Ode to a Nightingale” l.3, l.34). Elsewhere, Keats describes “A breeze” which, having “through the dancing poppies stole”, is “most softly lulling to my soul” (“Endymion” I:566–67). Written in mid-1819, at the same time as Keats’ Great Odes, “Sonnet to Sleep” looks forward to when “thy poppy throws / Around my bed its lulling charities” (ll.7–8); the description of the “soft embalmer of the still midnight” (l.1) echoes the “embalmed darkness” of “Ode to a Nightingale” (l.43).

Oblivion and Forgetfulness

Garth describes opium as inducing “dull oblivion”:

> No Passions interrupt his easie reign,
>
> No Problems puzzle his lethargick Brain.
>
> But dull oblivion guards his peaceful Bed,
>
> And lazy Fogs bedew his thoughtless Head. (1699, 5)

Likewise, Logan looks to opium to find an “oblivion” that “Relieves the weary’d mind” (ll.37–38). Seward notes “Kind dreams oblivious from thy juice proceed” (l.13). With the help of Sleep’s “poppy wreath”, Lamb sought to “Bind with Oblivion’s veil these wakeful eyes” (l.10, l.3). Drawing explicitly on the classical allusion of Homer’s Helen’s opium drug, Thomson’s “Indolence” drinks from “a fountain of Nepenthe rare: / Whence, as Dan Homer sings, huge pleasaunce grew, / And sweet oblivion of vile earthly care” (Canto I, ll.240–42). As Keats later would in “Ode to a Nightingale”, Henrietta O’Neill, in “Ode to the Poppy” (1792), described opium’s “soft Lethean power”, a “balsam for a broken heart”, in enabling one to forget (ll.45–46). Keats’ “dull opiate” renders the narrative voice “as though” it “Lethe-wards had sunk” (ll.2–4); a voice that wants to “[f]ade far away, dissolve, and quite forget” earthly “weariness”, “fever” and “fret” (ll.21–23). So accepted was opium’s ability to lead to mental “oblivion” that William Hazlitt, writing in *The Spirit of the Age* (1825), could elide oblivion and opium in describing Coleridge as “swallowing doses of oblivion” (11: 34).

METAPHORICAL AND FIGURATIVE USES OF OPIUM IMAGERY

The word opium thus became synonymous, symbolically, with sense-dulling. From the early seventeenth century, opium imagery was used figuratively as a literary metaphor divested of medical associations. In 1608, Thomas Morton could describe religious opponents as “Stupified with that *Opium* of implicit faith and blinde devotion” (33). An 1680s broadside poem, *Satyr Against Marriage*, attributed to the Earl of Rochester,[12] acerbically described marriage as “Opium to our Lustful Rage” (l.35). Pope considered “Dulness, the safe Opiate of the Mind, / The last kind Refuge weary Wit can find” (“Lines on Dulness” ll.1– 2). Keats similarly uses opium imagery metaphorically to suggest mental dulling in having Albert wish to “smother” his “mind” from “the wrong I’ve done” with an “opiate for the conscience” (“Otho the Great” I.ii.155–58). In the same verse-letter relating the cricket incident, Keats employs opium imagery figuratively to describe how he will seek “revenge” on an advisory: “I will be opium to his vanity” (2: 90–91).

Writers who accused others of dullness often did so through opium imagery. John Dryden, in “MacFlecknoe” (1682), accused Thomas Shad-well, an opium-eater who subsequently died from overdosing, of being the Prince of Dullness, whose “Temples last with Poppies were o’er-spread” (l.126). Pope, in the *Dunciad* (1743), adopts the same imagery as Dryden: “And Shadwell nods the poppy on his brows” (III: 22). Pope used opium imagery to describe bad poetry in *Peri Bathos* (1728): metaphorically, “*opiates* of *poesy*” produce a “*tranquillity of mind*” which is a “*method* [...] used by our authors in *managing* the *passions*” because it “is a better design to promote sleep than madness” (213). Pope’s *Dunciad*’s Goddess Dulness damningly has opium in her armoury: In “her own Guild-hall: / Here stood her Opium [...] The Goddess then o’er his anointed head, / With mystic words, the sacred Opium shed” so that “He sleeps among the dull” (I: 270–94). William Dodd took up Dryden’s image, in the *Gentleman’s Magazine* (1761), to criticise another poet, whose “insipidity of song” should be rewarded with “A wreath of *poppies* round thy temples” (ll.12–14). When Sir Robert Godschall petitioned the House of Commons in January 1742, Horace Walpole joked that his speech “proves so dull, one would think he chewed opium” (1: 163). By the eighteenth century, the image of opium as dulling was rooted in common parlance and image-making, beyond but coinciding with medical discourse.

So established in cultural convention was the imagery outlined above, within medical and literary genres alike—even despite the influence of prevalent alternative theories such as Brunonianism—that neoclassical conceptions of opium’s effects persisted into Victorian accounts. George Eliot, for instance, writing well into the nineteenth century in *Silas Marner* (1861), used precisely the same diction. Eliot describes the “wretched unbenumbed consciousness” of Molly Farren without her “one comforter” “Opium”: her “indolence” is assumed; she seeks “oblivion” in the drug, and once taken “she walked always more and more drowsily”, is overcome by “weariness” and has “the longing to lie down and sleep”, so much so that she falls into a “complete torpor” in a snowstorm and freezes to death (215–16).

Keats’ poetry, like Eliot’s conception in this episode, looks back to the neoclassical period’s collective acceptance of opium’s sedating and anaesthetising qualities, of both mind and body.[13] Following on from numerous neoclassical texts, Keats straightforwardly, at times, used opium imagery in conjunction with sleep: “Sleep”, the “Low murmurer of tender lullabies”, is “Wreather of poppy buds” (“Sleep and Poetry” ll.11–14). Elsewhere, Keats

alludes to opium’s dulling properties, and to the “drowsy numbness” one might experience having “emptied some dull opiate” into one’s veins (“Ode to a Nightingale” ll.1–3). Keats had, in fact, amended this phrase by adding “drowsy”, making it more akin to medical descriptions; he had initially written “painful numbness” (Hebron 2009, 137).[14] Opium can also lead “Lethe-wards”, to forgetfulness (“Ode to a Nightingale” l.4). As indicated above, medical terms and imagery, common to the era, are manifested in Keats’ poetry: with a “Dose” of “poppies” in early drafts of “To Autumn” (Hebron 2009, 143), and the description that his “pulse grew less and less” in “The blissful cloud” of post-opium “indolence” (“Ode on Indolence” l.15–17).

Scholars have seen De Quincey as exemplifying a Zeitgeist, according to which opium was an exotic means through which to attain mental liberation and concomitant imaginative spirit (Lefebure 1986, 51). The texts examined here, however, show that De Quincey’s perception was far from medical and/or literary hegemony. Most long-eighteenth-century writing reflected the dulling, rather than transcendental or stimulating, effects of opium-taking as rooted in quotidian experience.[15] Standard imagery within long-eighteenth-century literature represented opium in line with medical neoclassical consensus: as inhibiting perception, rather than unshackling the mind. It was literature in which, as medical texts agreed, a dose of poppies left one drowsed.

ENDNOTES

[1] Some critics, however, have overlooked Keats’ use of opium imagery in his poetry: for example, that Keats’ “writing does not indicate any particular interest in the drug” (Boon 2002, 31).

[2] For example: “*It is observed by all*, *that* [opium] *mainly affects the* Genus Nervosum, *and animal Spirits*, and not the *Bloud* and *Humors*” (Jones 1700, 24) and “Effects will all be heightened by the Mixture of the *Opiate* Particles with the *Blood*; Which is hereupon Rarefied, and Distends its Vessels, especially those of the Brain” (Mead 1702, 143).

[3] In both instances, Chaucer makes reference to opium explicitly, which his source material had not: Ovid’s *Heroides* 14 (Emerson 1919, 287) and Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Teseida delle nozze d’Emilia* (Chaucer 2008, 826). Ovid merely referred to wine’s soporific effects: “Yourself lay quiet in the grip of the sleep the wine had given you” (172–73). In *Teseida* (Book V), Palamon daringly escapes from prison by changing clothes with Alimeto, his physician. In Chaucer’s revision, instead of a physician assisting Palamon’s escape, opium enables the absconsion.

[4] Founding member of the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries (1617), apothecary to James I and Royal Botanist to Charles I.

[5] Although published in 1811, *Outlines of Lectures* remained in use during Keats’ time at Guy’s Hospital, evident from the inscription inside the front cover in King’s College London’s copy, “Robert Pughe 1817”.

[6] See essay in this volume by Joseph Crawford.

[7] See Stillinger (Keats 1978, 477) and Bate (2014, 183).

[8] Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians; George I’s physician-in-ordinary.

[9] Darwin’s later medical text, *Zoonomia* (1974–96), liberally prescribed opium for hundreds of ailments.

[10] By 1742, it was known, through Charles Alston’s experiments, that opium applied externally—i.e. in the manner we would today usually associate with the word *balm*—was ineffective (159).

[11] Lamb described “Invocation to Sleep” as “the first poem I ever wrote” (quoted in Douglass 2004, 27), and although it was published posthumously, in the *Keepsake* (1830), it is in keeping with pre-De Quinceyan conceptions of opium imagery.

[12] Though it may have been written by John Oldham or William Wycherley (Wilmot 1999, 490).

[13] N.B. the term *anaesthetic* itself did not materialise until the mid-nineteenth century.

[14] The poem’s opening line, “My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains”, was originally “My Heart aches and a painful numbness falls”.

[15] Some eighteenth-century poets had, in fact, bucked the trend by treating opium as a creative agent. Thomas Warton, for instance, “stealing sleep”, in *Pleasures of Melancholy* (1747), desired soaring dream-visions: “opiate dews” will “mystic visions send” “as Spenser saw” and “Milton knew” (7). Warton, ironically, differs from Spenser’s and Milton’s own opium-as-stupefying imagery mentioned above, but foreshadows De Quincey in consuming opium in order to unleash “his creative mind” and to be taken “thro’ bewild’ring Fancy’s magic maze” (7). But this was unusual. Indeed, in *Confessions*, De Quincey cites Shadwell (butt of Dryden’s mockery) as the only poet he can “remember” who had “eaten opium” in order to procure “splendid dreams” (1998, 72).

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