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The Unacknowledged Physicians of the World

Rifling through the archival evidence—correspondences, schedules, lecture admission tickets, notebooks—John Barnard, among others, has convinced us that John Keats maintained an active interest in his medical duties even as he gained entrance into the artistic circle of Leigh Hunt, Benjamin Haydon, and John Reynolds. Consequently, if our old picture of the fragile Keats, ill-suited for the blood and guts of medicine, no longer holds water, then we require a better account of his departure from medicine. This talk offers smallpox vaccination as this crucial explanatory context. By the early nineteenth-century, Dr. Edward Jenner’s miracle cure had revolutionized the idea of medical care. With this paradigmatic shift in mind, we are better equipped to answer the pressing vocational question: Why did Keats quit medicine? I argue that the end of disease “swims into his ken” as he imagines our newly immunized lives; the work of medicine was nearing its end, and poetry was left with the hard work of defining human life. In La Belle Dame Sans Merci, for example, Keats stages this work as an encounter between an uncomprehending physician and a misdiagnosed patient. In pitting the knight’s long-lived immunity against the baffled interlocutor, Keats paints a portrait of the artist as the unacknowledged physician of the new bio-political world. In this way, he dreams of an interdisciplinary culture that would be shaped not only by physicians like Jenner, Parkinson, and Pasteur, but also by poets like Blake, Wordsworth, and Keats himself.

Fuson Wang is assistant professor of English at CUNY, City College of New York, specializing in the literature and science of the long eighteenth century. He received his PhD from UCLA where he began his current book project, “Romantic Disease Discourse: The Radical Literary History of Smallpox Inoculation.” His essays have appeared in European Romantic Review, Nineteenth-Century Contexts, Eighteenth-Century Fiction, and Women’s Studies.