

## Keats's Life and Works

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### ABSTRACT

*John Keats, son of an ostler, was initially drawn towards medicine, which he gave up soon after being introduced to Cowden Clarke. Clarke introduced him to the intellectual circle of his time. In his early phase, Keats engaged with short poetic forms — verse-letters, epistles, sonnets, and ballads — before turning towards his longer works. After the composition of Endymion and The Eve of St. Agnes, he went on to produce his famous odes, which remain the crowning achievements of his literary career.*

**Keywords:** *Verse-letters; Epistles; Sonnets; Ballads; Odes*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In order to understand what John Keats contributed to English Romantic poetry, a survey of his life and works is essential.

John Keats was the son of Thomas Keats, a West Country head ostler employed at a livery stable. He was born on 29 October 1795 at Finsbury, London. His father was a man of business and his mother a woman of fond and vivacious temperament. As the eldest child, Keats was surrounded by his siblings — his brothers Tom and George, and his sister Fanny, among others. His schooling began at a Dame School, from where he went as a boarder to Clarke's School in Enfield, near London. At school Keats did not show much interest in intellectual pursuits; being high-spirited and skilled in outdoor activities, he was known more for fighting than for study. In the summer of 1811 he was apprenticed to an apothecary, Thomas Hammond, with whom he quarrelled over a matter of loco parentis in 1813. Despite this dispute, he continued his apprenticeship. On 1 October 1815 he joined Guy's Hospital, London, as a student. His teachers found him assiduous, dedicated, and a highly promising student of medicine. He had, however, already begun writing poetry, in part to distract himself from the appalling conditions of his daytime activities at the hospital, and in part as a response to Clarke's encouragement. Keats had also studied Aesculapius, a pupil's guide to Guy's, which gave him a glimpse of the ethos, life, and ideas he was likely to encounter there. It was between mid-1816 and the spring of 1817 that he realized he could not continue with medicine, finding it difficult to follow the professional paradigms it demanded. He therefore decided to give it up and become a professional poet.

As chance would have it, Cowden Clarke arrived in London. It was he who introduced Keats to the literary circle of which Leigh Hunt was the leading spirit. Others whom Keats came to meet through Hunt were Wordsworth, Charles Lamb, Shelley, and others. Another valuable friend was the painter Haydon, who revealed to him the beauty of Greek sculpture — the Elgin Marbles. During the last two years at school, Keats had developed a great taste and love for literature, a love that did not diminish even during his four years of apprenticeship. In his leisure hours he devoted himself to reading and to translating Virgil's Aeneid into English prose; he also translated

a large portion of Homer. Keats was a voracious reader who read all the books that came his way. He had a great relish for the stories of the Greek gods and goddesses and for mythology in general. Cowden Clarke also introduced him to Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, which proved to be a powerful ideal of beauty for the young poet. As Legouis says: "Beauty was his Pole-Star — beauty in Nature, in Mankind, and in Art. He seized upon beauty wherever it had been plentiful on earth — in Greek mythology, in medieval legend, in great poetry." (p. 290). In Keats's own words: "A thing of beauty is a joy for ever."

## 2. EARLY POETIC FORMS: EPISTLES, SONNETS, AND BALLADS

In the early phase of his literary career, Keats was drawn towards two short poetic forms — verse-letters or epistles, and sonnets. Epistles had been popular since the time of Horace, the Roman poet, who wrote verse-letters to his patron. During the Renaissance, Thomas Wyatt, Donne, and Ben Jonson made ample use of this form. The eighteenth century was considered the heyday of verse-epistles in England; Pope's *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* is a major contribution to the art of this well-known verse-form. During the Romantic period, Coleridge used this form on several occasions: "The Eolian Harp" (written to Sara Fricker), "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison" (to Charles Lamb), and "Frost at Midnight" (to his infant son Hartley) are celebrated examples. Following this tradition, Keats wrote an epistle addressed to George Felton Mathew. As Dr. White says: "The content of this verse-letter to G.F. Mathew tells us clearly that Keats is saturating himself in Renaissance poetry itself as a collaborative activity rooted in the spirit of friendliness — a 'brotherhood of song' conveying a loving heart, a feeling of all that is high, great, and good." (p. 45). The poet also wrote a verse-letter to Cowden Clarke in gratitude for Clarke's steadfast support.

Keats's involvement with short poetic forms was not limited to verse-epistles. With even greater enthusiasm he turned to the sonnet form and wrote as many as sixty-four sonnets. Notable among these are "Much Have I Travell'd in the Realms of Gold," "The Human Seasons," "Bright Star," "To Sleep," and "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer." Around the eighteenth century the sonnet had fallen out of favour with poets, but the Romantics remained enamoured of it, and Keats no less so. His sonnets unite him with the Renaissance poets, including Shakespeare. His early sonnets are preoccupied with poets, or with pictures, sculpture, or rural solitudes. The sonnets impress the reader by their varied character: the earlier ones are mostly Italian in form, while in the later ones the Shakespearean form predominates. Most of the early sonnets are occasional, reflective, or dedicatory poems. White elaborates on the purpose of the sonnet for Keats in the following words:

*"Keats and his circle were to use the tradition of the sonnet with a new function: to celebrate sociability and friendship. Keats seems to do so consciously, with an original insight into what he sees as the form's potential raison d'être. He regards the sonnet not as a vehicle for the personal expression of praise or love, as it had been in its Petrarchan heyday, but above all as an exercise in poetic form and control which can reflect the tight structure of a circle of friends. He peels away the Renaissance layer of fictiveness implicit in the sequence based on personae or*

*characters, and instead draws attention to the sonnet as a technical manipulation of rhymes and organizational rules.” (p. 64)*

Keats makes use of the sonnet in a distinctly original way. Here is his sonnet about the sonnet itself:

*If by dull rhymes our English must be chain'd,  
And, like Andromeda, the Sonnet sweet  
Fetter'd, in spite of pained loveliness;  
Let us find out, if we must be constrain'd,  
Sandals more interwoven and complete  
To fit the naked foot of Poesy:  
Let us inspect the Lyre, and weigh the stress  
Of every chord, and see what may be gain'd  
By ear industrious, and attention meet;  
Misers of sound and syllable, no less  
Than Midas of his coinage, let us be  
Jealous of dead leaves in the bay-wreath crown;  
So, if we may not let the Muse be free,  
She will be bound with garlands of her own.*

Here the poet examines the problem of the traditional sonnet form. According to him, the sonnet has dwindled to mere “dull rhyme.” It is “fetter'd,” having been enslaved by the Renaissance conventions of sonnet writing — the Petrarchan and the Shakespearean. Although the sonnet treats of “loveliness,” it is shackled by certain formal constraints and has become little more than a manipulation of sound and syllable. Keats tries to free himself from such limitations and to express social unity. The Renaissance “I” of the impassioned persona is replaced by the Romantic “We,” and the scope of the sonnet is thereby enlarged.

Keats also adopted the genre of the ballad. His “La Belle Dame sans Merci” is a compact ballad that encapsulates his ambiguous attitudes towards women and sexual love. Keats wrote this ballad in the heat of his passion for Fanny Brawne. Some critics have argued that the poem reveals the poet’s masculinist and misogynistic distaste for powerful women who seduce and then betray innocent men.

### 3. LONGER WORKS

Among Keats’s longer works, *Sleep and Poetry* holds an important place. In it the poet attempts to formulate his poetic ideals. It is his realization that poetry is a higher form of art — one that represents the human mind awakened to life’s mysteries and reveals the profoundest truths of existence. He declares his future course of action in the following lines:

*First the realm I'll pass  
Of Flora and old Pan: sleep in the grass,*

*Feed upon apples red, and strawberries,  
And choose each pleasure that my fancy sees...*

It is true that he loves sensuous pleasures, but he is certain that a serious poetic career means more than celebrating the pastoral landscape. “He wonders,” says Graham Hough, “whether he can ever bear to give up the sensuous ecstasies, but realizes in the same breath that they are only a stage in his progress.” It is no wonder, then, that he makes his ‘nobler choice’:

*Can I ever bid these joys farewell?  
Yes, I must pass them for a nobler life,  
Where I may find the agonies, the strife  
Of human hearts...*

#### 4. ENDYMION

Keats wrote *Endymion* in 1817 with a view to testing his poetic powers. “It will be a test,” he wrote to his brother in the spring of 1817, “a trial of my powers of imagination and chiefly invention — which is a rare thing indeed — by which I must make four thousand lines of one bare circumstance and fill them with poetry.” He came to realize, however, that the work was tainted by immaturity and that “the foundations are too sandy” (Preface to *Endymion*). When *Blackwood’s Magazine* and the *Quarterly Review* came down heavily with harsh reviews of this long poem, Keats, too, came to regard it as “slipshod *Endymion*,” and was driven to promise to “write independently and with judgement hereafter.”

The theme of *Endymion* is one endemic in Romantic literature: the pursuit of ideal love, glimpsed in a dream. Keats makes use of the Greek fable of Diana’s love for *Endymion*, a mortal shepherd. The stress is placed on *Endymion*’s love for Diana rather than hers for him. The goddess visits *Endymion* in his sleep, and when he wakes he resolves to seek her throughout the world. Keats structures this narrative into four books. The first is introductory, depicting the puzzlement of the love-sick *Endymion* as he appears at a festival of his people in honour of the god Pan. In the second book he sets out in search of the celestial visitor. The third book is concerned with the fates of others who claim his sympathy. In the fourth book *Endymion* passes through a series of adventures that seem to carry allegorical meaning, culminating in his reunion with his celestial mistress. *Endymion* is, in essence, Keats himself in his pursuit of ideal beauty.

Keats lays no claim to originality in the creation of *Endymion*, which is based partly on Drayton’s *The Man in the Moon* and partly on Fletcher’s *The Faithful Shepherdess*. The poet tells the story of a lovely youth kissed by the moon goddess and develops this myth into an intricate and flowery narrative. At its heart, the poem returns to the idea that love of beauty, like other passions, cannot exist fruitfully in isolation — it can only be fulfilled through participation in the actual conditions of human life. It is under such conditions that “a thing of beauty is a joy for ever.”

## 5. ISABELLA, OR THE POT OF BASIL

Isabella, or The Pot of Basil was written after Endymion and belongs to the same emotional phase. In one sense it attempts more than Endymion, for it tries to present grief and passionate love. Keats wished to do something closer to breathing human passion than the love of a mythical shepherd for a goddess.

Isabella is a narrative poem adapted from Boccaccio's Decameron. Its verse-form is ottava rima, a natural choice for a poem with an Italian setting. It tells the tale of a wealthy young woman whose family intends to marry her to some "high noble" with vast olive groves, but who falls in love with Lorenzo, one of her brothers' servants. Once the brothers discover this, they lure him away, murder him, and bury his body. The ghost of Lorenzo appears to Isabella in a dream and reveals what happened. She exhumes his body, severs the head, and returns with it concealed in a pot of basil, which she tends obsessively until her death.

The poet's own opinion of this poem does not diverge greatly from that of the critics. Keats described it as "a weak-sided poem with an amusing sober-sadness about it." Critics have considered The Pot of Basil a mawkish work and, for some, a near-total failure in execution.

## 6. LAMIA

Lamia is another narrative poem, based on a tale in Robert Burton's The Anatomy of Melancholy. It was written in the wake of the adverse reviews of Endymion, and in a tighter form of rhyming couplet reminiscent of Dryden's. The narrative is more controlled and less sprawling. In it Keats attempts to bring together both human life and mythological experience. It portrays the love affair of Lamia, a serpent-woman, and Lycius, set in a pastoral landscape, and is richer in imagery and pictorial vividness than its predecessors. Here is Lamia in a typical Keatsian mode:

*She was a gordian shape of dazzling hue,  
Vermilion-spotted, golden, green, and blue;  
Striped like a zebra, freckled like a pard,  
Eyed like a peacock, and all crimson-barr'd;  
And full of silver moons, that, as she breathed,  
Dissolv'd, or brighter shone, or interwreathed  
Their lustres with the gloomier tapestries —  
So rainbow-sided, touch'd with miseries,  
She seem'd, at once, some penanced lady elf...*

A greater display of Keats's descriptive power is to be seen in the passages depicting the transformation of the serpent, the entry of Lycius, the descriptions of the Fairy Hall, and Lamia's withering under the critical gaze of Apollonius. Lamia is an extraordinary poetic work, though critics note that it lacks the unity of impression of The Eve of St. Agnes and the human interest of Isabella.

## 7. THE EVE OF ST. AGNES

The Eve of St. Agnes, Isabella, and Lamia are three short narrative poems by John Keats. Of these, The Eve of St. Agnes holds the most distinguished place in the Keatsian oeuvre. It is a romance-poem based on a medieval legend connected with St. Agnes, the patron saint of virgins. According to this legend, a maiden is granted a vision of her future husband in a dream if she undergoes certain rituals — going to bed supperless and lying on her back on the Eve of St. Agnes. In the poem, the maiden is Madeline, who performs these rituals, and her would-be husband and lover Porphyro materializes before her. Keats creates an atmosphere of romance in consonance with the spirit of medieval superstition. The two characters who embody the theme of chivalrous love are Madeline and Porphyro, who belong to two hostile houses, as in Romeo and Juliet. Porphyro's love-adventure parallels that of a medieval knight, beset with dangers, as shown below:

*For him those chambers held barbarian hordes,  
Hyena foemen, and hot-blooded lords,  
Whose very dogs would execrations howl  
Against his lineage....*

In the bitter cold, while merry music plays in the castle hall, Porphyro — with his “heart on fire” — has come across the moors to catch a glimpse of his beloved and is hiding in Madeline's chamber. Were his presence discovered, a hundred swords would storm his heart. But nothing so violent or thrilling occurs.

What is noteworthy is that Keats recreates a medieval atmosphere of romance and chivalry, and yet concentrates on human passions rather than on thrilling or violent action. The hero, whom Jack Stillinger provocatively calls “a villainous seducer,” does not fight his enemies; on the contrary, he makes a timely escape with his beloved. As a sensuous poet, Keats delights his readers with evocations of exquisite imagery and felicitous phrasing, mostly visual, as the following stanza illustrates:

*Full on this casement shone the wintry moon,  
And threw warm gules on Madeline's fair breast,  
As down she knelt for heaven's grace and boon;  
Rose-bloom fell on her hands, together prest,  
And on her silver cross soft amethyst,  
And on her hair a glory, like a saint;  
She seem'd a splendid angel, newly drest,  
Save wings, for heaven: — Porphyro grew faint:  
She knelt, so pure a thing, so free from mortal taint.*

## 8. HYPERION: A FRAGMENT

Keats did not know Greek and had nothing of Greek culture in his heritage. Yet he was irresistibly drawn to many things Greek, above all to its mythology. It was this love of Greek mythology that led him to take up an epic theme for Hyperion. Initially he conceived of Hyperion as a romance, but later changed his approach to a blank-verse epic in the Miltonic manner. His purpose was to describe the primeval struggle between the old race of Greek gods — Saturn and Hyperion — and the younger divinities such as Apollo. Keats singled out one episode of this warfare: the dethronement of the sun-god Hyperion and the assumption of his kingdom by Apollo. He places this scene on earth to overcome some of the difficulties presented by the supramundane character of the conflict. Hyperion is brought down to earth, where the other fallen gods are already wandering.

Hyperion exists in two versions. The first, *Hyperion: A Fragment*, was written before the odes; the second, *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream*, was written after them and constitutes a revised version of the first, with the addition of a long Induction. In Book I, Saturn and the other Titans grieve over their fall and debate how they might regain their lost kingdom, concluding that only Hyperion — still undeposed — can help them. In Book II, the Titans come to realize the futility of repining. Oceanus warns:

*...there exists  
Another race, who do tower above us all  
In beauty, and must reign in right thereof;  
For 'tis the eternal law that first in beauty  
Should be first in might...  
(Book II, 226–229)*

The second version is narrated as a dream. The poet finds himself in a luxuriant garden where he drinks an elixir of life that induces a vision. He then proceeds to a vast domed monument, which grants him access to the Shrine of Moneta. It is the Olympian priestess Moneta who describes to him the fall of Hyperion and the advent of the new godhead, Apollo.

## 9. THE ODES

After the composition of *Endymion* and *The Eve of St. Agnes*, Keats was occupied with his unparalleled creations famously known as the Odes. These odes are distinct from the roundelays of the maiden in Book Four of *Endymion* and, unlike the odes of the past, seem to evoke the lyric passion of Shelley while remaining distinctly Keatsian in texture and sensibility. It is by virtue of their uniqueness that they have drawn the highest praise. Robert Bridges wrote of them: “Had Keats left us only his odes, his rank among the poets would not be lower than it is, for they have stood apart in literature.”

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