

Keats, John, 1795-1821  
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Article Text:

John Keats was born 31 October 1795 at the Swan and Hoop in Moorfields, London; his father was the livery-stable keeper there who had married the daughter of his employer. These were, as can be imagined, not very auspicious beginnings for a poet of these times and his political enemies later used these facts to their advantage, indignant at his presuming to write poetry. In 1804, his father was killed in a riding accident. His mother married again but unhappily and the family went to live with her mother, who had recently come into money. His mother died in 1810 from tuberculosis and thereafter he lived with his two brothers, George (1797-1842) and Thomas (1799-1818), and his sister Fanny (1803-1889) in his maternal grandmother's house.

Nicholas Roe has recently uncovered more about the kind of education Keats would have received at Enfield School, which he attended from 1802. The school was run by John Clarke, whose son Charles Cowden Clarke was one of Keats's lifelong friends. At Enfield School, Keats received a progressive education in line with the radical political ideas of its founder, John Collett Ryder. Roe's examination of the history of the school reveals that Keats was taught, in the dissenting tradition, reformist and even republican ideas. Compared to other contemporary poets who had attended public school, Keats was taught very different subjects, such as astronomy, chemistry, materialist philosophy and English grammar, each of which can be linked to various radical agendas. Importantly, Keats left the school with some knowledge of Latin but none of Greek, a staple of public school education. He later wrote one of his most famous poems on his excited reading of a translation of Homer rather than the original. Even while this poem celebrates the joy of reading Homer, it acknowledges that Keats has come to Greek literature from the perspective of the uninitiated, what his biographer, Andrew Motion, has called the position of an 'outsider' (Keats, Faber and Faber, 1997).

After his parents' deaths, Keats's future life and profession was decided by the

tea seller Richard Abbey, one of the legal guardians his grandmother had chosen for him. Despite the money his grandmother left for him, much of which the remaining family remained unaware of, Keats was never financially secure. In 1811, aged fifteen, Keats left Enfield school and became apprenticed to Thomas Hammond, a surgeon in Edmonton. He was taken on as Hammond's apprentice for five years, though the agreement only actually lasted until 1814. His grandmother died in this year and Keats went to live in London. Here he studied to be a surgeon at St Thomas's and Guy's Hospitals. Surprisingly early, Keats was appointed as a dresser to William Lucas, one of the principal surgeons of the hospital. This was a time when there was no anaesthetic and operations were only carried out reluctantly, more often than not with fatal consequences. 'Mad Billy' Lucas is reported to have been an inept surgeon and the cause of more pain and harm than he relieved, though the reality of this reputation has been questioned. As his dresser, Keats would have been expected to follow him on his rounds, restrain patients while Lucas operated on them and dress wounds. It was deemed to be a privileged role; there was only one dresser to each surgeon, while as many as seventeen students crowded round the bed trying to watch what was going on. In 1816, under the new laws passed in the 1815 Apothecaries' Act, he passed his examination to become an apothecary.

By this point poetry interested him more than medicine; like Wordsworth, he was convinced that poetry was his vocation in life. Unlike Wordsworth, Keats never experienced financial security. Keats's early influences were Renaissance writers; he had been writing poetry since his time at Enfield school where he had been taught the republican writings of Milton and Sidney. Some of his early poems were overtly political, commenting on contemporary events. In 1813 Leigh and John Hunt had been imprisoned for libelling the Prince Regent, and Keats's 1815 poem, 'Written on the day that Mr. Leigh Hunt Left Prison', celebrates Hunt's release. His first published poem, 'O Solitude' appeared in Hunt's journal, *Examiner*, in 1816. His friendship with Leigh Hunt was of tremendous importance; at his house, in the Vale of Health in Hampstead, Keats was introduced to other budding and successful writers and artists, including Benjamin Robert Haydon, John Hamilton Reynolds, Horace Smith, Mary and Percy Shelley, and his first publishers, Charles and James Ollier.

In 1816 Hunt had written an essay called 'Three Young Poets', discussing Keats, Shelley and Reynolds. Hunt clearly felt that there was a new kind of poetic school emerging, which was motivated by his political influence. The society Keats had been introduced to by Hunt was one that openly condemned authoritarian and oppressive government and questioned religion. Keats's friendship with Haydon developed independently of Hunt and through him Keats met William Hazlitt, whose writing and ideas of poetry had a great

impact on Keats' own. Jeffrey N. Cox has recently examined the circle of poets, which centred around Hunt, and to which Keats was an important member in much greater detail: 'The visionary company of Shelley , Byron , Keats, Hunt , Reynolds , Smith , Hazlitt , and others may never have formally incorporated itself, but it was defined both internally and externally as a group working to reform culture and society.' ( Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School: Keats, Shelley, Hunt and their Circle , Cambridge University Press, 1998)

In March 1817 Keats published his first collection of poems, *Poems by John Keats* , dedicated to Hunt . The dedication was a declaration of his allegiances and a red rag to conservative critics. By deciding to publish with the radical publishers who also produced Shelley's poetry, Keats was also making clear to which camp he belonged. For the time being though, Keats was considered such small fry that he was ignored for the most part. His *Poems* went largely unnoticed, despite the admiration of his circle of friends and family. Criticism of the collection commented on the derivative nature of a few of the poems and the obvious affiliation with Hunt , which could be seen in both Keats's language and his politics, was noted.

*Poems* contained some of Keats's best work to date, including 'I stood tip-toe', the sonnet on Chapman 's Homer and 'Sleep and Poetry'. The latter poem gives a history of poetry through the ages, following what Keats saw as its decline from the Elizabethans to the eighteenth century. Keats criticises the 'rocking horse' of the Augustan heroic couplet, whose practitioners were 'closely wed / To musty laws lined out with wretched rule'. His own poetry experiments with verse forms and metre and he is acutely aware of the difference which contemporary poetry offers. 'Now 'tis a fairer season' in comparison to the musty poets of the last century: 'sweet music has been heard / In many places'. 'Sleep and Poetry' explores an idea which runs through Keats's later poems where poetic inspiration is likened to a state of reverie or trance. The poem announces Keats's ambitions as a poet, while it acknowledges his sense of his immaturity and inadequacy to the 'task' of poetic composition as he defines it. Keats's sense of the worth and responsibility of poetry also comes through in this poem: the 'great end of Poesy' was 'that it should be a friend / To soothe the cares and lift the thoughts of men'.

To celebrate the publication Haydon took Keats to see the Elgin Marbles, recently secured by Lord Elgin; they were the source of contemporary debate over whether they were genuine and, if so, whether the government should buy them. The effect of seeing the marbles was described in two sonnets published in the *Examiner* ; the poems testify not only to Keats's appreciation of Greek art but also the insecurity felt in the face of such greatness. Keats is alive not only

to 'Grecian grandeur' but also to the 'Wasting of old time'; the burden of such magnitude was to be felt again when he gave up on the Fall of Hyperion because of its oppressive 'Miltonisms'.

In the spring of 1818 Keats negotiated the publication of his next book of poetry with Taylor and Hessey, breaking with the Olliers acrimoniously. Taylor and Hessey continued to publish his work, supporting him despite its adverse critical reception. He had met Richard Woodhouse in the previous year, who would prove a valuable friend, lending him money and never losing faith in his abilities. Keats had already begun his epic poem Endymion by 1817 while he was in the Isle of Wight; he began it as a 'test, a trial of my Powers of Imagination, and chiefly of my invention'. He soon exceeded his conception of the poem, though it grew in fits and starts, interrupted by periods of his own and his brother Tom's illness. Endymion has been seen as a reply to Shelley's recently published Alastor ; like this poem it concerns itself with the possibility of uniting the ideal and the real. Keats used the classical mythology he had found in second-hand sources, as his critics soon recognised, labelling him the 'Cockney Homer'. The poem shows the influence of Shakespeare, whom Keats had been reading closely during the period of the poem's composition. Though the poem is generally thought to lack consistency, Keats was particularly pleased with some parts of it. The famous opening line 'A thing of beauty is a joy for ever' relates to an idea he was beginning to explore in his letters, the relationship between truth and beauty.

If you can tell the dangerousness of a person by the nastiness of criticism against them then Keats was a very dangerous man indeed. A severe hatchet-job was made on Keats's reputation, revealing in turns the snobbish, conservative and hysterical nature of the prevailing critical attitude at this time. While Keats was still writing Endymion the first of a series of articles published in Blackwood's Magazine attacked Hunt, as the leader of the 'Cockney school of poets'. The fourth of these articles published in August 1818, signed by 'Z', alias John Lockhart, was reserved for the poetry of 'Johnny Keats'. The deliberate feminisation of his name was part of a vicious plot to smear his reputation; he was made to seem feeble and immature, a mere mouthpiece for Hunt's political views. The article concentrated on his birth and lowly origins; no-one in Lockhart's opinion was good enough to be a poet if they had not had a classical education, and on his profession of apothecary, urging him to give up poetry and go 'back to the shop Mr. John'. Other hostile reviews of Endymion were published in The Quarterly Review (April 1818) and The British Critic (June 1818). Though his friends published their outraged replies to the barely hidden political antagonism masquerading as a poetic review, the image of 'poor' Keats, 'our youthful poet', stuck, and even today's critics have to battle with it on

occasion.

After publishing *Endymion* Keats wrote *Isabella, or a Pot of Basil*, a poem which can be seen as a critique of capitalism. Keats published it in a volume called *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St Agnes, and Other Poems* published in 1820 with some of his most well-known poems. The intervening years had witnessed great change in Keats's private life; his brother Tom had died on 1 December after being looked after by his elder brother; George, his other brother, had married and left England for America; Keats himself was unwell with a recurrent sore throat and had become secretly engaged to Fanny Brawne.

Keats's theories of poetry are to be found in his letters. He argued, 'A poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence, because he has no identity, he is continually in for -- and filling -- some other body.' Often in Keats's poems the poet figure identifies with the beautiful, whether this is a nightingale or a Grecian urn, and participates in that beauty. This ability to lose oneself in the other, the ability of the 'camelion poet', defines his kind of poetry in opposition to that demonstrated by Wordsworth, in which the self is imposed on the other. This latter type of poetic experience Keats called the 'Wordsworthian or egotistical sublime'. This did not mean that he was attempting to escape the real world into an imaginative one. Continually in his poems the poet is drawn back from the trance-like state to recognise the reality of the beauty he has experienced: this beauty is not separate from but involved in the misery of the mortal world. His poetry is concerned with the senses as well as the sensual, and empirical observations of touch, sight and sound locate Keats's writing in the here and now of the material world. The Odes deal with some of the concepts that Keats had been most preoccupied with since beginning to write poetry: the relationship between art and history, between reality and ideals, pain and pleasure, social responsibility and imagination.

Since a walking tour in the Lake District and Scotland in 1818 Keats had been plagued by a sore and ulcerated throat. On 3 February 1820 he coughed up blood and diagnosed himself as dying of tuberculosis. He was persuaded to travel to the warmer climate of Italy with his friend Joseph Severn. He died in Rome on 23 February 1821. Keats described himself as having led a 'posthumous existence', remaining convinced of his abilities despite the criticism his published poetry had encountered: 'I think I shall be among the English poets after my death'.

For a time Keats's friends did as much harm to his reputation as his enemies. Shelley's elegy to Keats, *Adonais*, fostered the image of a weak and feeble Keats, 'snuff'd out by an article' as Byron mercilessly put it in *Don Juan*.

Victorian readers and writers were quick to pick up on the overtly sentimental versions of Keats's life and work. Biographies came out throughout the nineteenth century which capitalise on the image of a doomed poet, too sensitive for the misery of this world. Keats was an important inspiration for the painting of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, who painted scenes from some of Keats's most famous poems. Extravagantly praised and censured during his life as well as after his death, there has been an attempt in the last decades of the twentieth century to set the record straight. The work of such critics as Andrew Bennett, Nicholas Roe and Andrew Motion has tried to reinstate the sense of Keats's political agenda and to fix him more firmly in his historical and political times rather than see him as an ethereal and sickly child, unable to cope with the horrors of real life. In fact Keats continues to emerge as a red-blooded and healthy sort, though the undoing of some centuries of misunderstanding will take some time yet.

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