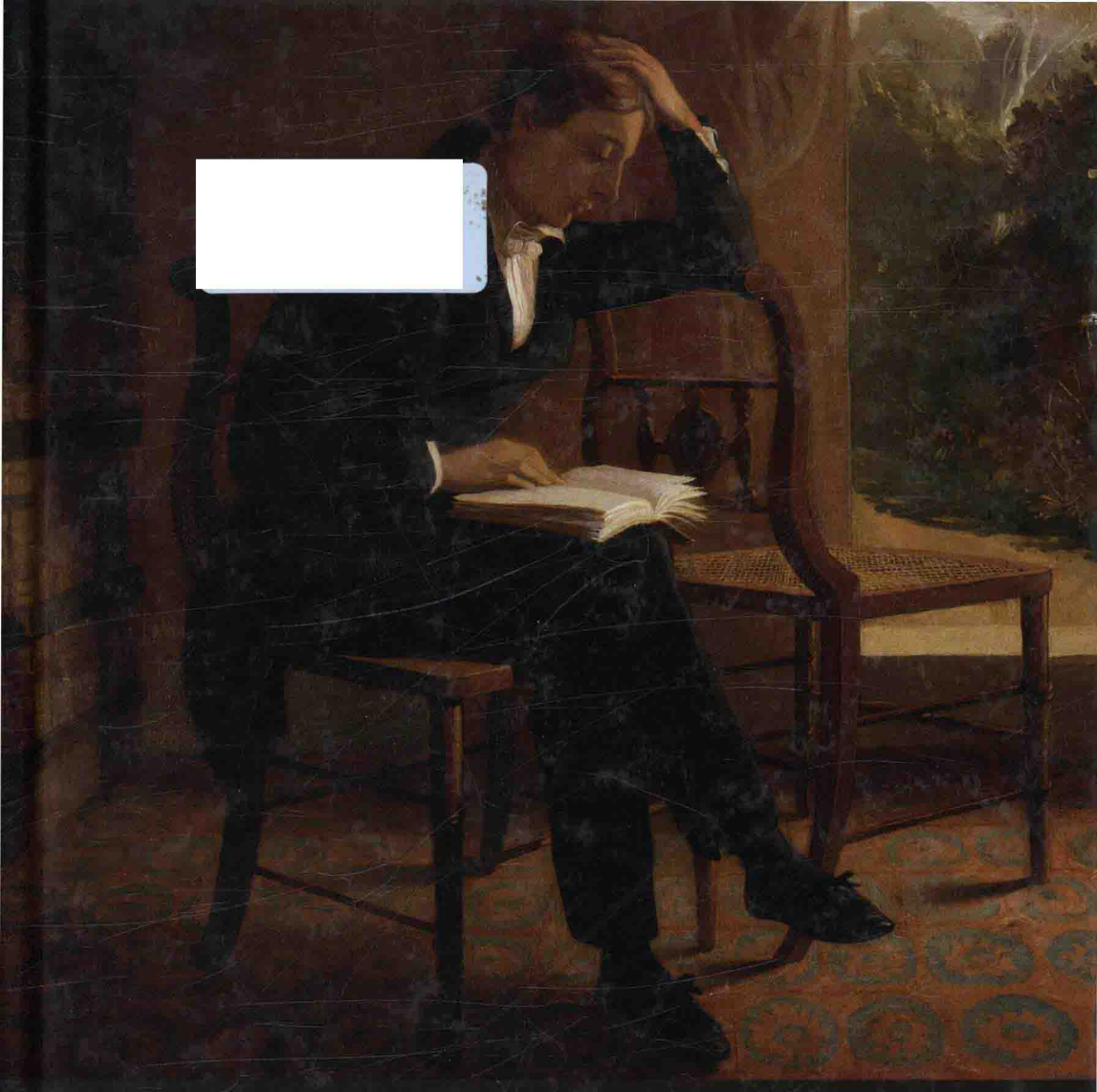

READING JOHN KEATS

Susan J. Wolfson

"*Reading John Keats* is so alert to John Keats' reading that we feel as if we're looking over the poet's shoulder in Wolfson's uncannily keen sense of what he takes from the literary tradition – and gives, so memorably, back. After decades of biographical and exegetical commentary, brilliantly distilled here, these definitive and elating chapters may end up being the favored account of Keats's stylistic and poetic evolution. They are certainly irresistible in their own verbal intuition and wit."

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Michael Wood

Cover image: [detail] *John Keats* by Joseph Severn, oil on canvas (posthumous 1821–23), dated 1821, NPG 58 © National Portrait Gallery, London.

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READING JOHN KEATS

John Keats (1795–1821), one of the best-loved poets of the Romantic period, is ever alive to words, discovering his purposes as he reads – not only books but also the world around him. Leading Keats scholar Susan J. Wolfson explores the breadth of his works, including his longest ever poem *Endymion*; subsequent romances, *Isabella* (a Boccaccio tale with a proto-Marxian edge admired by George Bernard Shaw), the passionate *Eve of St. Agnes*, and knotty *Lamia*; intricate sonnets and innovative odes; the unfinished *Hyperion* project (Keats's existential rethinking of epic agony); and late lyrics involved with Fanny Brawne, the bright (sometimes dark) star of his last years. Illustrated with manuscript pages, title-pages, and portraits, *Reading John Keats* investigates the brilliant complexities of Keats's imagination and his genius in wordplay, uncovering surprises and new delights, and encouraging renewed respect for the power of Keats's thinking and the subtle turns of his writing.

SUSAN J. WOLFSON, Professor of English at Princeton University, is widely published in the fields of English Romanticism and poetic theory, including Keats-inspired sonnets in *Literary Imagination* (2010) and her books: *The Romantics and Their Contemporaries* (co-edited with Peter Manning, 2010), *Romantic Interactions: Social Being and the Turns of Literary Action* (2010), *Borderlines: The Shiftings of Gender in British Romanticism* (2006), *John Keats, A Longman Cultural Edition* (2006), *The Cambridge Companion to John Keats* (2001), and *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (1997).

Charcoal sketch of John Keats by Charles Brown, 1819.
© National Portrait Gallery, London. Not published until the twentieth century, Charles Brown's sketch of Keats in 1819 renders a handsome "young poet," big-fisted, contemplative, self-possessed, the pose conscious of Richard Westall's famous profile of Lord Byron (1813, after the overnight success of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*).

for Jack Stillinger
my Keats teacher before he knew it and ever since

Preface

"The poetry of earth is never dead," wrote Keats in the dead of winter.[1] Let's say the same about the poetry of John Keats (1795–1821). It flourishes in edition after edition, on the walls of libraries and reading rooms, in book titles and popular songs, and in phrases we all know: "A thing of beauty is a joy for ever"; "tender is the night"; "alien corn"; "Beauty is truth; truth Beauty"; "season of mists and mellow fruitfulness"; "fanatics have their dreams." What if this talented young man had had the means to attend a university? He would have been a star student: vigorously underlining and annotating, eager to talk about his reading, rereading constantly, and probably petitioning for an interdisciplinary program in literature, philosophy, and medicine. Keats was a voracious reader, lived in books he said, had read *Hamlet* forty times (from his ease of reference, it's clear he had much of Shakespeare by heart). His letters bristle with his reading, not only in reports but in their very metaphors, figured as books, passages, and reading itself ("dark Passages"; the heart as a "horn-book"). He began writing poetry in his teens, with *Imitation of Spenser* (he read the entire *Faerie Queene*, a feat few professors today may claim); one of his first publications was a sonnet written after an all-nighter with George Chapman's 1616 translation of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. To firm up his vocation, he sat down to reread Shakespeare's fiercest tragedy, *King Lear* – and wrote a sonnet on this event, too. Keats's poetry often pivots on events of reading – by turns, passionate, careful, interpretive, skeptical. Great literature, Keats knew, is intellectual vigor with aesthetic complexity, and it always rewards concentrated reading.

Keats-the-reader is also a critical rereader, and the lively density of his own poetry repays such attention. In *Reading John Keats* I attend to the actions of Keats's language and to how these activate our reading. *Reading John Keats* provokes us to reflect on what it is to read, fail to read, misread, reread, read better. Keats's favorite term for this energetic concentration is "intensity." He works out his most important thoughts and passions

in the formings of language, in sentences, phrases, words, even syllables and letters. At these sites meanings accumulate, bear down, dovetail, and radiate anew. The Keats-archive includes his letters, a cache of correspondence serious and playful, thoughtful and reflective, full of affection for his brothers, sister, and his friends, his excitement about what he's been reading, his feel for solitude as well as society, his candor and intimacy, his views of the world, and his ironizing self-regard. The letters are often as well written as his poetry. Here Keats also found a medium for speculative thinking and critical formulations that are now part of our vocabulary – most famous of all, "negative capability."

Keats would be gratified by his fame today as a "poet's poet." Yet this emerged in no burst of éclat, but rather from a life of struggles and aspirations, and quite soon over – a career spanning little more than half a decade. When Keats proposed to his brother, "I think I shall be among the English poets after my death," he wasn't boasting, but braving a battery of bad reviews.[2] It would take a couple of decades even to glimpse the fame that is secure today. And it would take a couple of generations for decisive vindication. At the start of a "Lecture on the English Renaissance" (9 January 1882), Oscar Wilde declared that "it is in Keats that one discerns the beginning of the artistic renaissance of England. He was the forerunner of the pre-Raphaelite school, and so of the great romantic movement."[3] Wilde had already extended the line beyond this nineteenth-century arc. "It is a noble privilege to count oneself of the same race as Keats or Shakespeare," he had said in 1877.[4]

The pairing was getting credit. Matthew Arnold placed Keats "in the school of Shakspeare" in his "perfect treasure-house of graceful and felicitous words and images . . . vivid and picturesque turns of expression, by which the object is made to flash upon the eyes of the mind, and which thrill the reader with a sudden delight."[5] In 1884 Arnold's nephew introduced his edition of Keats by hailing the "phenomenon" of

> work produced in the brief twenty-six years of a young man's life, but which nevertheless has at its best reached a point of perfection which compels one critic to say that its author "is with Shakspere," and another great master of our tongue to confess that "I have come to that pass of admiration for him, that I dare not read him, so discontented he makes me with my own work."[6]

In 1883 Poet Laureate Tennyson gave Keats's "among" an upgrade: "He would have been among the very greatest of us if he had lived. There is something of the innermost soul of poetry in almost everything he ever

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wrote." He was willing to say (more than once) that Keats "promised securely more than any English poet since Milton."[7]

Such currency, such fame, was no lock in Keats's lifetime, when the most influential reviews ridiculed a "vulgar Cockney poetaster" reveling in "the most incongruous ideas in the most uncouth language."[8] This was partly political crossfire, and partly a reaction to the nexus in Keats's poetry of sensual intensity, poetic extravagance, and skeptical, ironic modernity. Some contemporaries (poets J. H. Reynolds and Leigh Hunt, painter B. R. Haydon, publisher John Taylor) were sure of his genius, and poet Shelley was warmly (if a bit patronizingly) supportive. Yet England's two leading poets, William Wordsworth and Lord Byron, though seeing some spark, were mostly cool to cruel. Wordsworth, flattered as he was by an early sonnet praising him as one of the age's great spirits, was terse when he met Keats and didn't even look into the 1817 *Poems* Keats sent to him, warmly inscribed "To W. Wordsworth, with the Author's sincere Reverence." Byron disliked "all the fantastic fopperies of his style," teased Shelley about the dreamy idioms and sensual gushing, fumed at the "depreciation of Pope," believed the fable of his collapse from fatal reviews, and ridiculed "Johnny Keats" for all these faults.[9] The tide of opinion did begin to shift in 1820 with Keats's last, best volume (including *Hyperion*, which Byron did like, and *Ode to a Nightingale*, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, *Ode on Melancholy*, *To Autumn*); but even this brilliant publication was remaindered within a few years.

A poetic vocation was scarcely an open call to Keats. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley: they all had university educations and connections (Cambridge and Oxford); Felicia Hemans, Keats's near contemporary, was home-schooled by a devoted mother and her early efforts at poetry were encouraged by family and friends. While Keats did enjoy a liberal education at the progressive Enfield school, with a generous mentor and friend in the headmaster's son, he had no formal study in literature, and this whole world came to an abrupt end in 1811 when his grandmother died (his parents already no more). His legal guardian yanked him out of school and apprenticed him to an apothecary (general medical practitioner), training followed by study at Guy's Hospital in London. Always the good student, Keats ably earned his apothecary's license, but his passion was poetry – reading and talking about it, and soon writing it. When he came of age in October 1816, he gambled on the vocation, dismaying his guardian but certain that this was "the deed / That my own soul has to itself decreed." "O for ten years, that I may overwhelm / Myself in poesy" was the petition of the capstone poem in his first volume.[10]

The deed proved exceedingly short: 1814–20. In his lifetime, Keats published just fifty-four poems, forty-five in his books, the rest in the periodicals (five of those forty-five also in this media). Usually work before age twenty-five would be classed as "juvenilia" or "early." Compare Keats to some of the English poets among whom he hoped to be counted. At twenty-four Chaucer and Spenser had yet to write anything, Shakespeare was known only (if at all) by a few early works, and Wordsworth had two slender volumes of descriptive poetry (thirty-four and fifty-seven pages respectively), known today mostly by specialists (*Lyrical Ballads* came at age twenty-eight). The first publication of Victorian sage Thomas Carlyle, born just weeks after Keats and surviving him by six decades, came in 1824, on the cusp of thirty, and it was a translation (Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*). "Books of poetry by young writers are usually promissory notes that are never met," quipped Wilde, but added that now and then "one comes across a volume that is so far above the average that one can hardly resist the fascinating temptation of recklessly prophesying a fine future for the author."[11] Though he meant W. B. Yeats's *Wanderings of Oisin*, at age twenty-four, it's an apt review of Keats's 1820 volume, published before he turned twenty-four. A fine future for Keats was never to be, but it's tempting to speculate. What if he had had Carlyle's full span (or Yeats's mere seventy-three years)? Would he have stayed with poetry, having hit his stride in 1819? Would he have followed his aspiration in drama and become a modern Shakespeare? With his sharp ear for conversation and wry regard of friends and acquaintances, would he have turned novelist? His letters suggest this skill, as well as a talent for personal essays, in company with Charles Lamb and William Hazlitt, who made their names in this genre. Or (Keats considered this) would his political passions have joined him with Leigh Hunt and William Hazlitt (political progressives and anti-monarchists) as a journalist for the liberal press?

The fascination of guesses testifies to what Keats did accomplish in a short life: in effect, a major "career" on a range of challenges, from the sonnet, the ballad, the ode, doggerel, songs, a romance epic, Miltonic epic, a dream-vision. All those now famous odes published in 1820, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, the sonnets on Chapman's Homer and "Bright Star," are now at the core of the movement we call English Romanticism, at the core of English poetry itself. Elizabeth Barrett Browning gave this tribute in 1856 to Keats's "strong excepted soul":

> the man who never stepped
> In gradual progress like another man,

> But, turning grandly on his central self,
> Ensphered himself in twenty perfect years
> And died, not young, – (the life of a long life
> Distilled to a mere drop, falling like a tear
> Upon the world's cold cheek to make it burn
> For ever;) (*Aurora Leigh* Book I)

Though shortening the life by more years yet, her sense of a long life distilled into a burning drop is fair biography, beautifully figured in the sphered typography of parentheses.

"Reading John Keats" gives a verb for our attention and a definitive adjective for this poet. *Reading John Keats* is for everyone with interest in Keats's creative temper and practical art. Here is a poet eager for challenges and productive conflicts, capable of witty self-regard and serious self-consciousness, and ever alive to words. You'll see Keats discovering his purposes within and against literary traditions, within and against his modern times. Featuring the best-known poetry, I take a few turns to some fascinating lesser-knowns (except by professionals): *Endymion: A Poetic Romance* (his longest poem ever), *Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil* (a Boccaccio-tale with a proto-Marxian edge that G. B. Shaw admired), *Hyperion* (an existential reforming of Milton's epic of mortality), *The Fall of Hyperion* (a revision, with an acute focus on a poet's capability), and some late lyrics occupied with Fanny Brawne, the bright (sometimes dark) star of his last years. While Keats's poetry requires no decoding from biography, it's clear that Keats's life leverages meaning into his poems. The most arresting passages of his letters can feel like poetry. I've been reading, writing about, and teaching Keats for decades, but my every return brings surprises, new delights, new respect for the power of his thinking and the complexities of his writing. What Keats said to a friend about reading Shakespeare – each time there is something "rather new . . . notwithstand[g] that we read the same Play forty times – for instance, the following . . . never struck me so forcibly as at present" (*K* 49) – I'm happy to say of Keats (even in rereading for this book), and to relay to you.

SUSAN J. WOLFSON

Acknowledgments

My happy debts are to generations of editors (especially Jack Stillinger on the poetry and Hyder E. Rollins on the letters), scholars, biographers, and critical interpreters – many of these items listed in "Further reading." Garrett Stewart's work on *Lamia* is so woven into my own that citations are hopeless; I refer to his groundbreaking essay for my debts and your pleasure. Citations of critical studies in my chapters are (of necessity in the Press's series genre) selectively brief, incommensurate with the wealth of interpretations and the range of approaches that Keats's writing has drawn, for which see (selectively here, too) the "Further reading." My career of publications on Keats and the Romantic era (several times with Cambridge) is reflected throughout and noted in "Further reading."

I've had great resources at Princeton University Library, especially its rare books and manuscripts, and all kinds of practical support in the Department of English. I'm especially grateful to Kevin Mensch for generous technical expertise, moral support, and friendship, too. AnnaLee Pauls, librarian at Special Collections is a model of extraordinary efficiency, good humor, and generosity. The open-access, on-line Keats Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University, is free, fascinating, invaluable. Leslie Morris is a resource unto herself, and Mary Haegert is a model of efficiency and positive capability.

I thank Linda Bree for inviting, encouraging, and advising this project. Garrett Stewart's extraordinary level of friendship and attention is inestimable. Christopher Rovee's scrupulous review was characteristically generous and acute. And always Ron Levao.

SJW

Princeton, New Jersey, 2014

Note on the texts

Keats's poetry: the lifetime publications that Keats supervised, supplemented by his manuscripts; otherwise, Jack Stillinger's unrivalled edition (*P*) or my selected (*K*). Keats's titles are in italics; for poems he did not title, I follow the tradition of using the first words, in quotation: e.g., "I stood tip-toe"; "When I have fears." Line numbers for *Endymion* follow the 1818 publication; other numberings are my additions. I follow the first publications in styling of Keats's subtitles: Book I, Book II, Book III; Part I, Part II; Canto I, Canto II, when I refer to these units in the body of my discussion. When my purpose is just a parenthetical location in a text, I forgo the clutter of roman numerals and use arabic numerals for Book, Part, or Canto, followed by line number(s). For instance a quotation from *Hyperion* would be identified (2.380). For stanza-references for *Isabella* and *The Eve of St. Agnes*, and for sonnets in *1817* identified by roman numerals (e.g. Sonnet IX), I follow Keats's style and use roman numerals.

For letters, I transcribe the most legible autograph manuscripts in Harvard's Keats collection; otherwise, I use print sources, as indicated. I retain Keats's idiosyncratic punctuation, style, and spelling (e.g., but not alone, "camelion"). I don't interpolate in brackets apparently dropped letters (*s*, *i*, *l*, and especially *r*); my study of the manuscripts convinces me that Keats used a bold down-stroke as shorthand for two letters. I give him this benefit.

Quotations of Shakespeare and references to Keats's markings are based on his copy of *The Dramatic Works of William Shakespeare*, 7 vols. (London: Chiswick Press, 1814), in the Harvard Keats collection: *EC8 K2262 Zz814s. Quotations of *Paradise Lost* follow, whenever possible, Beth Lau's expert edition of Keats's 1808 text, which he marked up in 1818–19.

Abbreviations

1817	*Poems*. London: C. & J. Ollier, 1817
1820	*Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems*. London: Taylor & Hessey, 1820
1848	Richard Monckton Milnes (Lord Houghton), *Life, Letters, and Literary Remains of John Keats*. 2 vols. London: Edward Moxon, 1848
&c [in a citation]	and other publishers or booksellers
&c [in a title]	and other poems
BLJ	*Byron's Letters & Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973–82
CCK	*The Cambridge Companion to John Keats*, ed. Susan J. Wolfson. Cambridge University Press, 2001
FQ	Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*
HK	Houghton Library John Keats Collection, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA http://www.hcl.harvard.edu/libraries/houghton/collections/modern/keats. Citations are to series 1 (Keats's letters) or series 2 (Keats's manuscripts), then letter number. For example: HK1.18.62 indicates: series 1, letter 18, page 62. References are often followed by a reference to published editions, *K* or *L*
K	*John Keats, A Longman Cultural Edition*, ed. Susan J. Wolfson. New York: Pearson, 2006
KC	*The Keats Circle: Letters and Papers*, ed. Hyder E. Rollins, 2 vols. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965
L	*The Letters of John Keats, 1814–1821*, ed. Hyder E. Rollins. 2 vols. Cambridge, MA: Harvard

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