

JOHN KEATS

SELECTED POEMS

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# JOHN KEATS

## SELECTED POEMS



EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION  
AND NOTES BY  
JOHN BARNARD

PENGUIN BOOKS

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## Introduction

On 29 May 1815 church bells all over England rang out in celebration of the Restoration of Charles II. In the same year Napoleon had escaped from Elba, forcing Louis XVIII to flee France for asylum in London. There he was welcomed by huge crowds. Keats, then nineteen, denounced the nation-wide celebrations of the re-establishment of 'legitimate' kingship in a savage extempore. For him, Charles's Restoration, which led to the execution for treason of the 'republican' heroes Sir Henry Vane, Algernon Sidney and Lord William Russell, was Britain's 'direst, foulest shame', an infatuated rejection of the true patriotism betrayed by the Restoration. In what is now believed to be his last poem, 'In after-time, a sage of mickle lore', Keats prophesied the eventual defeat of tyranny and injustice by the combined forces of democracy and a free press in a mock Spenserian allegory. These pieces open and close this selection. Neither were meant for publication. They both reject the repressive rule of a Tory ministry which, threatened by social unrest, employed spies and the law in an attempt to prevent legitimate protest in print or at public meetings.

Keats, who was born in 1795 and died prematurely, of tuberculosis, in 1821, lived the whole of his life under the shadow of the Napoleonic wars and their immediate aftermath. Like Shelley, Leigh Hunt and Hazlitt he was a liberal in his political views, and, while not an atheist, had little time for Christianity. His poetry is frequently an indirect commentary on the conventional political and religious beliefs which governed his society. It also reacts against the growing forces of prudery in the Regency period. While Regency high society was notable for sexual excess and licence, the middle and lower-middle classes had a strongly demarcated view of male and female roles and a sexual double standard, clearly foreshadowing 'Victorian' attitudes. The virulent review in *Blackwood's* in August 1818 was, from a Tory

and culturally conservative viewpoint, right to see Keats as a lower-class 'Cockney', an 'ignorant and unsettled pretender' to culture, a writer of 'prurient and vulgar lines' unfit for the ladies, a 'bantling' who has 'already learned to lisp sedition', a poet who vulgarized classical poetry and mythology.

This is not to say that Keats was, like Shelley, a political poet. Throughout his life Keats always believed that true poetry was written for posterity, and that its 'realms of gold', whether created by Homer, Dante, Spenser or Shakespeare, existed in a sphere independent of the accidents of history. Keats is the one great English Romantic poet whose prime belief was in Art and Beauty. 'A thing of beauty is a joy for ever', the opening line of *Endymion: A Poetic Romance*, published in April 1818, is probably Keats's best known line. It suggests that his poetry inhabits a timeless world of Art, one endorsed by the Grecian Urn's conviction that 'Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty'. This was certainly the case for Keats's nineteenth-century critics, and an emphasis upon Keats as a poet preoccupied by the nature of the imagination and poetry continues to the present.

Yet *Endymion*, which Keats dismissed as immature even as he published it, is more than that. It is loosely structured, and its self-excited dreams of poetry, love and sexual satisfaction can easily be read as adolescent fantasizing, an escape from early-nineteenth-century realities to the supposed natural freedom of ancient Greece. But it is also the most ambitious long poem Keats completed. Its reanimation of Greek mythology is a serious effort to imagine a non-Christian religion based on animism and celebrating love. At the same time, it is an implicit criticism of conventional political, religious and sexual beliefs in the contemporary world. Keats himself thought that the opening of Book III was a clear expression of his attitude to the 'present ministry', and it was precisely this passage which led the *Blackwood's* reviewer to accuse him of sedition.

Keats's later re-telling of the classical myth of Hyperion leads first to an epic fragment based on an optimistically evolutionary view of history, and then to the intensely subjective self-examination of *The Fall of Hyperion*, which is at the same time a debate about the role of contemporary poetry, and about the nature of religion and myth.

Keats's poetry does seek to believe in and embody the 'dreams of art', but it also provides a critique of the claims of poetry and the imagination, and remains aware of human suffering.

One aim of this anthology, then, is to emphasize Keats's place as a second-generation Romantic. This has meant annotating *Endymion* and the two 'Hyperion' fragments more heavily than Keats's best known works, partly to explain the allusions to contemporary events and obscure allegorical passages, partly to explain what Keats was attempting to make of his material. In differing ways, Keats's neo-Hellenism is shared by Byron, Leigh Hunt and Shelley, as is his political stance. He also resembles them in his mixed reaction to Wordsworth. Wordsworth's achievement was undeniable but his active support of the Tory government was seen as a betrayal of his earlier radicalism, and his later poetry seemed to have retreated into gloomy subjectivity. It is significant that the older poet rejected Keats's 'Hymn to Pan' in Book I of *Endymion* as a 'Very pretty piece of Paganism'.

This focus has necessitated a highly selective approach to Keats's earliest poetry, and has also meant giving rather less space to his later unpublished verse than I would have liked. The problem is caused by the length of *Endymion*. Even when represented, as here, by Book I, followed by excerpts from the other three books, there are still two thousand lines of poetry. This abbreviated version, coupled with the commentary, attempts to give a sense of the poem's overall shape and meaning. *Endymion* calls for a sympathetic and generous reading (the main point made by Keats's published and unpublished Prefaces is right). Its diction can be uncertain, arch or coy. Its basic theme, a kind of sensual Platonism in which human love and poetry are manifestations of the same power, giving access to immortal truth, makes the allegorical level liable to slip over into fantasizing. Yet it is a remarkable achievement, more serious than it first appears, and essential to Keats's development as a mythological poet.

Of Keats's earliest unpublished verse, only the attack on the celebration of Charles II's Restoration and the sonnet 'Written in Disgust of Vulgar Superstition', which attacks conventional Christianity, are included. The remaining early poems are all taken from

those published in Keats's first volume. *Poems* (1817) is something of a rag-bag. Album verse, verse epistles to Keats's family and friends, Spenserian narrative fragments and a group of sonnets are all sandwiched between 'I stood tip-toe' and 'Sleep and Poetry'. The latter two, the most ambitious poems in the volume, have been given in their entirety. 'I stood tip-toe' is a catalogue of characteristic early Keatsian luxuries. 'Sleep and Poetry' announces Keats's self-dedication to poetry, and includes his assessment of the achievements and shortcomings of contemporary poetry. Both works are indebted to Leigh Hunt, a sonnet to whom ('Glory and loveliness have passed away') Keats placed as the dedication to *Poems* (1817). Otherwise, the early poetry is represented by a selection from the sonnets, notably by the rapt astonishment of 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer'.

*Poems* (1817) outlines Keats's ambitions and hopes, but goes little way towards fulfilling them. The extraordinary courage with which Keats committed himself to writing a full-scale allegorical work of 6000 lines was, on the evidence of his earlier work, remarkable to the point of foolhardiness. Yet Keats did succeed in drafting *Endymion* between April and November 1817 and found himself as a poet in the course of doing so. Without that experience he could not have attempted the epic scale of *Hyperion* the following autumn, nor would he have written the important speculative letters in 1817 and early 1818.

Keats's final volume, *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St Agnes, and Other Poems*, published in July 1820, contained most of Keats's mature poems with the exception of *The Fall of Hyperion*. It also printed some weaker pieces. The major odes and narrative poems were accompanied by the vapid medievalizing of 'Robin Hood' and the celebratory 'Lines on the Mermaid Tavern', both written in February 1818 when Keats was revising *Endymion*, and the two 'rondeaux', 'Fancy' and 'Bards of Passion and of Mirth', written late in 1818. Surprisingly, it did not contain 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' published a few months earlier in Leigh Hunt's *Indicator*, or the strange and powerful 'A Dream, after reading Dante's Episode of Paolo and Francesca', also published by Hunt.

It is not known whether Keats or his publishers were responsible for



the selection and ordering of the poems (a note by the publishers told the public that *Hyperion* was included against the poet's wishes, and Taylor and Hessey refused to print Keats's alterations to *The Eve of St Agnes* making it more sexually explicit. The selection probably represents a compromise between Keats's own uncertain critical taste and that of his publishers.

Keats's undependable sense of his own poetry reflected and was caused by the instability of literary standards evident in a new and growing reading public, of which he was himself a representative. The young Keats had shared the 'ladies' taste for 'romance' as his youth fantasies in 'Calidore', of Spenserian knights saving and serving 'lovely woman' show. But the Keats who wrote *Lamia* in 1819 no longer wished to appeal to the readers of that kind of poem. He told Richard Woodhouse that the changes to *The Eve of St Agnes* were made because 'he does not want ladies to read his poetry: that he writes for men . . .' The violence of Keats's reaction is precisely because one side of his poetic imagination shared the 'ladies' liking for romance. The medieval stories, *Isabella*, *The Eve of St Agnes* and 'La Belle Dame sans Merci', all deal with closely related plots – young lovers whose love is opposed by the real or everyday world. *Isabella* ends in madness and death but asks for the reader's pity. In *The Eve of St Agnes* the lovers escape but into a storm, and La Belle Dame is an ominous, possibly demonic, lover. All are about people possessed by love. Keats's final 'romance' poem, *Lamia*, has a classical setting, and is more self-knowing, ironic and objective. The result is unsettling and unsettled. *Lamia* seems to reject the possibility of romantic lover or the imagination functioning in the actual world. These poems can be read very differently, and some recent readers have seen in *The Eve of St Agnes* an ironic account of Madeline as foolish virgin, self-deceived by superstition. This seems to me wrong (the point of Keats's alterations was to introduce a mocking note): *The Eve of St Agnes* celebrates youthful love while perceiving its vulnerability.

Disagreements over the meaning of Keats's romantic narratives reflect his own ambivalence. *Lamia*, a critique of romantic love and the fancy, stands at the beginning of the 1820 collection: *Hyperion*, with its faith in progress and beauty, is placed at the end, an



affirmation of what the opening poem attacks. Keats's longing to believe in the consolation offered by poetry and the imagination is set against a suspicion of their insufficiency as an answer to human suffering. The major odes are invocations of, and powerful meditations upon, the subjects which preoccupy Keats's poetry – love, art, song, sorrow and the natural world. Each poses questions, but only 'To Autumn' seems to imply a resting point.

The poetry which Keats published during his lifetime is various, but is united by two features: it is uniformly 'poetic' and serious. His high conception of 'Poesy' and of 'Fame' has its constrictions. The sense of humour and the responsiveness to everyday language and life so evident in the letters are absent from the published poems. When Keats could forget the demands of high art, he was capable of a wider range of effects, from the light-hearted to the satirical. 'The Gothic looks solemn', written while he was working on *Endymion* in Benjamin Bailey's rooms at Oxford, is a quizzical look at the comforts of college life. The slight but charming 'To Mrs Reynolds's Cat' shows a talent for light verse. Keats also wrote sprightly nonsense verses in his letters to Fanny, his fifteen-year-old sister ('A Song about Myself', 'Two or three posies'). The 'Character of Charles Brown', written extemporaneously, is a good-natured private joke among friends, while a passage in the satirical 'Fragment of the "Castle Builder"' gives a vivid comic portrait of Covent Garden. Two other satirical pieces, 'And what is love? It is a doll dressed up' and 'Pensive they sit, and roll their languid eyes', mock the affectation of fashionable lovers. 'Nebuchadnezzar's Dream' is a strongly felt, if oblique, attack on George IV and his ministry.

This area of Keats's verse is most interesting when he is writing for himself or for friends. The long unfinished fantasy, 'The Cap and Bells', though written for amusement, seems to have been written in hope of eventual pseudonymous publication. The result is obscure and prolix. However, the disjointed and disturbed verse letter which Keats wrote to J. H. Reynolds on 24 March 1818, between finishing *Endymion* and starting *Isabella*, vividly describes a nightmare in which Keats saw 'too distinct' into nature's 'eternal fierce destruction'.

There is a final group of four poems. They are 'The day is gone, and

all its sweets are gone', 'I cry your mercy, pity, love – ay love', 'What can I do to drive away', and 'To Fanny'. All of these were written in late 1819 or early 1820, and reflect Keats's distraught and confused feelings towards Fanny Brawne. Keats was engaged but had no secure financial future, and 'To Fanny' was probably written when seriously ill and confined to bed, while living next door to her in Hampstead. None of these poems can be understood without reference to Keats's life, and all four belong to Keats's biography rather than his poetry. He was suffering not only from jealousy, but from an obsessional fear that love was incompatible with a career in poetry. Only one of these poems is given, 'What can I do to drive away', partly as an example, partly for the remarkable passage it contains on the New World, which Keats believed to be a waste region, empty of tutelary gods.

The penultimate piece, 'This living hand, now warm and capable', probably a dramatic fragment, seeks to reach out from the past. Its poignancy is matched by Keats's final unawareness of what he had achieved. The line which he dictated to Joseph Severn on his death-bed, and which he wished to have inscribed on his tombstone, reads –

'Here lies one whose name was writ on water.'

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### *Note on the Text*

Text and chronological ordering based on my edition of *John Keats: The Complete Poems* (1973; 2nd edition, 1988). Since first editing Keats in 1973 I was able to correct my edition against Jack Stillinger's *The Texts of John Keats* (1974) in 1977, and subsequently to make further minor corrections from his edition of the poems in 1987. I now believe that the 'Bright Star' sonnet was written earlier rather than later, and date it July 1819.

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## Chronology

- 1792 Shelley born.
- 1794 Blake, *Songs of Experience*. Fall of Robespierre.
- 1795 Keats born 31 October.  
Speenhamland system of poor relief introduced.
- 1796 Death of Burns.
- 1798 Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*. Battle of the Nile.
- 1799 Napoleon becomes First Consul.
- 1802 Scott, *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, I and II.
- 1804 Death of Keats's father, 16 April. Mother remarries, 27 June,  
and her four children are sent to live with their grandparents.  
Napoleon proclaimed Emperor.
- 1805 Scott, *Lay of the Last Minstrel*. Battle of Trafalgar, 21 October.
- 1807 Wordsworth, *Poems in Two Volumes*; Crabbe, *The Parish Register*.
- 1809 Byron, *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*; Coleridge, *The Friend*.
- 1810 Keats's mother dies mid-March, buried 20 March; Richard Abbey appointed guardian in July.  
Crabbe, *The Borough*; Scott, *The Lady of the Lake*.
- 1811 Keats leaves Enfield School and is apprenticed to Thomas Hammond, a surgeon in Edmonton.  
Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*. Shelley sent down from Oxford.  
Luddite riots.
- 1812 Byron, *Childe Harold*, I and II. Napoleon invades Russia.
- 1813 Byron, *The Giaour*; Shelley, *Queen Mab*. Southey made Poet Laureate.
- 1814 Wordsworth, *The Excursion*; Scott, *Waverley*. Napoleon abdicates.
- 1815 Keats writes sonnet on Leigh Hunt's release from prison,

- 2 February; enters Guy's Hospital as a student, 1 October.  
Byron, *Hebrew Melodies*. Battle of Waterloo; Napoleon exiled to St Helena.
- 1816 Keats's first poem published in the *Examiner*, 5 May. Completes medical education, 25 July. Completes 'Sleep and Poetry', December.  
Coleridge, *Christabel*, *Kubla Khan*; Shelley, *Alastor*.
- 1817 Keats's first volume, *Poems*, published by C. and J. Ollier, 1 March. Taylor and Hessey become his future publishers, c. 13 April.  
Plans to begin *Endymion*, 18 April.  
Shelley, *Laon and Cyntha*; Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*; Jane Austen dies.
- 1818 Keats attends Hazlitt's *Lectures on the English Poets*, January–February. Writes *Isabella* March–April. *Endymion* published c. 17 April. Walking tour, with Charles Brown, of Scotland, 24 June–18 August. Virulent review by 'Z.' in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, August 1818. Working on *Hyperion*.  
Death of Tom Keats from tuberculosis, 1 December.  
Byron, *Beppo*; Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*; Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, *Persuasion*.
- 1819 Keats writes *The Eve of St Agnes*, January; and the great spring odes. Summer spent working on *Lamia*, *Otho the Great* (a play jointly written with Charles Brown) and *The Fall of Hyperion*. Writes 'To Autumn', 19 September, and on 21 September gives up *The Fall of Hyperion*. By the end of December engaged to Fanny Brawne. 'Rather unwell' on 22 December.  
Byron, *Don Juan*, I and II; Wordsworth, *Peter Bell*; Crabbe, *Tales of the Hall*. Peterloo Massacre, 16 August.
- 1820 *Otho the Great* rejected by Drury Lane, January. Haemorrhage, 3 February. Offers to break off engagement, c. 13 February. *La Belle Dame sans Merci* published in Hunt's *Indicator*, 10 May. Corrects proofs of *Lamia* volume, c. 11 June. Attack of blood-spitting, 22 June. *Lamia*, *Isabella*, *The Eve of St Agnes*, and *Other Poems* published by Taylor and Hessey, July.  
Ordered to leave for Italy for his health, 5 July. Sails for Italy,

13 September. Eventually reaches Rome, 13 November.  
Relapse, 10 December.

Clare, *Poets Descriptive of Rural Life*; Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound*; Blake, *Jerusalem*. Accession of George IV.

(1821) Dies, 23 February. Buried in Rome's Protestant Cemetery, 26 February.

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