

JOHN KEATS

1795–1821

John Keats's father was head stableman at a London livery stable; he married his employer's daughter and inherited the business. The poet's mother, by all reports, was an affectionate but negligent parent to her children; remarrying almost immediately after a fall from a horse killed her first husband, she left the eight-year-old John (her firstborn), his brothers, and a sister with their grandmother and did not reenter their lives for four years. The year before his father's death, Keats had been sent to the Reverend John Clarke's private school at Enfield, famous for its progressive curriculum, where he was a noisy, high-spirited boy; despite his small stature (when full-grown, he was barely over five feet in height), he distinguished himself in sports and fistfights. Here he had the good fortune to have as a mentor Charles Cowden Clarke, son of the headmaster, who later became a writer and an editor; he encouraged Keats's passion for reading and, both at school and in the course of their later friendship, introduced him to Spenser and other poets, to music, and to the theater.

When Keats's mother returned to her children, she was already ill, and in 1810 she died of tuberculosis. Although the livery stable had prospered, and £8,000 had been left in trust to the children by Keats's grandmother, the estate remained tied up in the law courts for all of Keats's lifetime. The children's guardian, Richard Abbey, an unimaginitive and practical-minded businessman, took Keats out of school at the age of fifteen and bound him apprentice to Thomas Hammond, a surgeon and apothecary at Edmonton. In 1815 Keats carried on his medical studies at Guy's Hospital, London, and the next year qualified to practice as an apothecary-surgeon—but almost immediately, over his guardian's protests, he abandoned medicine for poetry.

This decision was influenced by Keats's friendship with Leigh Hunt, then editor of the *Examiner* and a leading political radical, poet, and prolific writer of criticism and periodical essays. Hunt, the first successful author of Keats's acquaintance, added his enthusiastic encouragement of Keats's poetic efforts to that of Clarke. More important, he introduced him to writers greater than Hunt himself—William Hazlitt, Charles Lamb, and Percy Shelley—as well as to Benjamin Robert Haydon, painter of grandiose historical and religious canvases. Through Hunt, Keats also met John Hamilton Reynolds and then Charles Wentworth Dilke and Charles Brown, who became his intimate friends and provided him with an essential circumstance for a fledgling poet: a sympathetic and appreciative audience.

The rapidity and sureness of Keats's development has no match. Although he did not begin writing poetry until his eighteenth year, by 1816 in the bold sonnet "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" he had found his voice. Later that same year he wrote "Sleep and Poetry," in which he laid out for himself a program deliberately modeled on the careers of the greatest poets, asking only

for ten years, that I may overwhelm
Myself in poesy; so I may do the deed
That my own soul has to itself decreed.

For even while his health was good, Keats felt a foreboding of early death and applied himself to his art with a desperate urgency. In 1817 he went on to compose *Endymion*, an ambitious undertaking of more than four thousand lines. It is a rich allegory of a mortal's quest for an ideal feminine counterpart and a flawless happiness beyond earthly possibility; in a number of passages, it already exhibits the sure movement and phrasing of his mature poetic style. But Keats's critical judgment and

aspiration exceeded his achievement: long before he completed it, he declared impatiently that he carried on with the "slipshod" *Endymion* only as a "trial of invention" and began to block out *Hyperion*, conceived on the model of Milton's *Paradise Lost* in that most demanding of forms, the epic poem. His success in achieving the Miltonic manner is one of the reasons why Keats abandoned *Hyperion* before it was finished, for he recognized that he was uncommonly susceptible to poetic influences and regarded this as a threat to his individuality. "I will write independently," he insisted. "The Genius of Poetry must work out its own salvation in a man." He had refused the chance of intimacy with Shelley "that I might have my own unfettered scope"; he had broken away from Leigh Hunt's influence lest he get "the reputation of Hunt's élève [pupil]"; now he shied away from domination by Milton's powerfully infectious style.

In sentimental, later nineteenth-century accounts of "poor Keats," 1818 was cast as the year in which this rising genius, already frail and sensitive, was mortally crushed by vicious reviews. Percy Shelley helped initiate this myth in *Adonais*, which describes Keats as "a pale flower." Byron, who did not like Keats's verse, put it unsentimentally: Keats, he wrote, was "snuffed out by an article." It is true that the critics were brutal to Keats, those associated with the Tory journals especially. (On the new power and hostility of the reviewers in Keats's day, see "Self-constituted judge of poesy": Reviewer vs. Poet in the Romantic Period" in the NAEL Archive.) For these critics his poetry proved an irresistible target precisely because it had been promoted by the radical Hunt. *Endymion* was mauled in the *Quarterly Review*, and one of the articles on "the Cockney School of Poetry" that appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine* condemned Keats as hopelessly vulgar, a writer who wanted to be a poet of nature but thought, as a social-climbing, undereducated Londoner would, that nature was "flowers seen in window-pots." "It is a better and wiser thing to be a starved apothecary than a starved poet," the reviewer scolded: "so back to the shop Mr John." Keats had for his own part the good sense to recognize that the attacks were motivated by political prejudice and class snobbery, and he had already passed his own severe judgment on *Endymion*: "My own domestic criticism," he said, "has given me pain without comparison beyond what *Blackwood* or the *Quarterly* could possibly inflict." More important was the financial distress of his brother George and his young bride, who emigrated to Kentucky and lost their money in an ill-advised investment. Keats, short of funds and needing to supplement the family income, had now to find ways to make money from his writing; he turned to journalism and began planning plays. His brother Tom contracted tuberculosis, and the poet, in devoted attendance, helplessly watched him waste away until his death that December. In the summer of that year, Keats had taken a strenuous walking tour in the English Lake District, Scotland, and Ireland. It was a glorious adventure but a totally exhausting one in wet, cold weather, and he returned in August with a chronically ulcerated throat made increasingly ominous by the shadow of the tuberculosis that had killed his mother and brother. And in the late fall of that same year, Keats fell unwillingly but deeply in love with Fanny Brawne, the eighteen-year-old girl next door. They became engaged, knowing, though, that Keats's poverty and worsening health might well make their marriage impossible.

In this period of turmoil, Keats achieved the culmination of his brief poetic career. Between January and September of 1819, masterpiece followed masterpiece in astonishing succession: *The Eve of St. Agnes*, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," all of the "great odes," *Lamia*, and a sufficient number of fine sonnets to make him, with Wordsworth, the major Romantic craftsman in that form. All of these poems possess the distinctive qualities of the work of Keats's maturity: a slow-paced, gracious movement; a concreteness of description in which all the senses—tactile, gustatory, kinetic, visceral, as well as visual and auditory—combine to give the total apprehension of an experience; a delight at the sheer existence of things outside himself, the poet seeming to lose his own identity in a total identification with the object he contemplates; and a concentrated felicity of phrasing that reminded his

friends, as it has many critics since, of the language of Shakespeare. Under the richly sensuous surface, we find Keats's characteristic presentation of all experience as a tangle of inseparable but irreconcilable opposites. He finds melancholy in delight and pleasure in pain; he feels the highest intensity of love as an approximation to death; he inclines equally toward a life of indolence and "sensation" and toward a life of thought; he is aware both of the attraction of an imaginative dream world without "disagreeables" and the remorseless pressure of the actual; he aspires at the same time to aesthetic detachment and to social responsibility.

His letters, hardly less remarkable than his poetry, show that Keats felt on his pulses the conflicts he dramatized in his major poems. Above all, they reveal him wrestling with the problem of evil and suffering—what to make of our lives in the discovery that "the world is full of misery and heartbreak, pain, sickness and oppression." To the end of his life, he refused to seek solace for the complexity and contradictions of experience either in the abstractions of inherited philosophical doctrines or in the absolutes of a religious creed. At the close of his poetic career, in the latter part of 1819, Keats began to rework the epic *Hyperion* into the form of a dream vision that he called *The Fall of Hyperion*. In the introductory section of this fragment the poet is told by the prophetess Moneta that he has hitherto been merely a dreamer; he must know that

The poet and the dreamer are distinct,
Diverse, sheer opposite, antipodes,

and that the height of poetry can be reached only by

those to whom the miseries of the world
Are misery, and will not let them rest.

He was seemingly planning to undertake a new direction and subject matter, when illness and death intervened.

On the night of February 3, 1820, he coughed up blood. As a physician he refused to evade the truth: "I cannot be deceived in that colour; that drop of blood is my death warrant. I must die." That spring and summer a series of hemorrhages rapidly weakened him. In the autumn he allowed himself to be persuaded to seek the milder climate of Italy in the company of Joseph Severn, a young painter, but these last months were only what he called "a posthumous existence." He died in Rome on February 23, 1821, and was buried in the Protestant Cemetery, where Mary and Percy Shelley had already interred their little son William, and where Percy's ashes, too, would be deposited in 1822. At times the agony of his disease, the seeming frustration of his hopes for great poetic achievement, and the despair of his passion for Fanny Brawne compelled even Keats's brave spirit to bitterness and jealousy, but he always recovered his gallantry. His last letter, written to Charles Brown, concludes: "I can scarcely bid you good bye even in a letter. I always made an awkward bow. God bless you! John Keats."

No one can read Keats's poems and letters without sensing the tragic waste of an extraordinary intellect and genius cut off so early. What he might have done is beyond conjecture; what we do know is that his poetry, when he stopped writing at the age of twenty-four, exceeds the accomplishment at the same age of Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton.

The texts reprinted here are based on Jack Stillinger's edition, *The Poems of John Keats* (1978).

On First Looking into Chapman's Homer¹

Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold,
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
Round many western islands have I been
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.

5 Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne;²
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene³
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:

10 Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;⁹
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
He star'd at the Pacific—and all his men
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

view

Oct. 1816

1816

From Sleep and Poetry¹

[O FOR TEN YEARS]

O for ten years, that I may overwhelm
Myself in poesy; so I may do the deed
That my own soul has to itself decreed.
Then will I pass the countries that I see
100 In long perspective, and continually
Taste their pure fountains. First the realm I'll pass
Of Flora, and old Pan:² sleep in the grass,
Feed upon apples red, and strawberries,
And choose each pleasure that my fancy sees;
105 Catch the white-handed nymphs in shady places,
To woo sweet kisses from averted faces,—
Play with their fingers, touch their shoulders white
Into a pretty shrinking with a bite

1. Keats's mentor Charles Cowden Clarke introduced him to Homer in the robust translation by the Elizabethan poet and dramatist George Chapman. They read through the night, and Keats walked home at dawn. This sonnet reached Clarke by the ten o'clock mail that same morning. Readers have often assumed Keats got history wrong in this sonnet's sestet and confused Balboa, the first European explorer to see the Pacific, with Cortez, the conqueror of Mexico. But as Charles Rzepka pointed out in 2002, there is strictly speaking no reason to suppose Keats is concerned with original discoveries here (his Cortez stares at, rather than discovers, the Pacific): the sonnet overall is centrally concerned with sublime ambitions that are poignantly belated, and Cortez, who reached the Pacific two decades after Balboa did, is an apt vehicle for that concern.

2. Realm, feudal possession.

3. Clear expanse of air.

1. At the age of twenty-one, Keats set himself a regimen of poetic training modeled on the course followed by the greatest poets. Virgil had established the pattern of beginning with pastoral writing and proceeding gradually to the point at which he was ready to undertake the epic, and this pattern had been deliberately followed by Spenser and Milton. Keats's version of this program, as he describes it here, is to begin with the realm "of Flora, and old Pan" (line 102) and, within ten years, to climb up to the level of poetry dealing with "the agonies, the strife / Of human hearts" (lines 124–25). The program Keats set himself is illuminated by his analysis of Wordsworth's progress in his letter to J. H. Reynolds of May 3, 1818 (p. 1019).

2. I.e., the carefree pastoral world. Flora was the Roman goddess of flowers. Pan was the Greek god of pastures, woods, and animal life.

As hard as lips can make it: till agreed,
 110 A lovely tale of human life we'll read,
 And one will teach a tame dove how it best
 May fan the cool air gently o'er my rest;
 Another, bending o'er her nimble tread,
 Will set a green robe floating round her head,
 115 And still will dance with ever varied ease,
 Smiling upon the flowers and the trees:
 Another will entice me on, and on
 Through almond blossoms and rich cinnamon;
 Till in the bosom of a leafy world
 120 We rest in silence, like two gems upcurl'd
 In the recesses of a pearly shell.

And can I ever bid these joys farewell?
 Yes, I must pass them for a nobler life,
 Where I may find the agonies, the strife
 125 Of human hearts: for lo! I see afar,
 O'er sailing the blue cragginess, a car°
 And steeds with streamy manes—the charioteer³
 Looks out upon the winds with glorious fear:
 And now the numerous tramplings quiver lightly
 130 Along a huge cloud's ridge; and now with sprightly
 Wheel downward come they into fresher skies,
 Tipt round with silver from the sun's bright eyes.
 Still downward with capacious whirl they glide;
 And now I see them on a green-hill's side
 135 In breezy rest among the nodding stalks.
 The charioteer with wond'rous gesture talks
 To the trees and mountains; and there soon appear
 Shapes of delight, of mystery, and fear,
 Passing along before a dusky space
 140 Made by some mighty oaks: as they would chase
 Some ever-fleeting music on they sweep.
 Lo! how they murmur, laugh, and smile, and weep:
 Some with upholden hand and mouth severe;
 Some with their faces muffled to the ear
 145 Between their arms; some, clear in youthful bloom,
 Go glad and smilingly athwart° the gloom;
 Some looking back, and some with upward gaze;
 Yes, thousands in a thousand different ways
 Flit onward—now a lovely wreath of girls
 150 Dancing their sleek hair into tangled curls;
 And now broad wings. Most awfully intent,
 The driver of those steeds is forward bent,
 And seems to listen: O that I might know
 All that he writes with such a hurrying glow.

155 The visions all are fled—the car is fled
 Into the light of heaven, and in their stead

3. The description that follows recalls the traditional portrayal of Apollo, god of the sun and poetry, and represents the higher poetic imagination, which bodies forth the matters "of delight, of mystery, and fear" (line 138) that characterize the grander poetic genres.

A sense of real things comes doubly strong,
 And, like a muddy stream, would bear along
 My soul to nothingness: but I will strive
 160 Against all doubtings, and will keep alive
 The thought of that same chariot, and the strange
 Journey it went.

Oct.—Dec. 1816

On Seeing the Elgin Marbles¹

My spirit is too weak—mortality
 Weighs heavily on me like unwilling sleep,
 And each imagined pinnacle and steep
 Of godlike hardship tells me I must die
 5 Like a sick eagle looking at the sky.
 Yet 'tis a gentle luxury to weep
 That I have not the cloudy winds to keep
 Fresh for the opening of the morning's eye.
 Such dim-conceived glories of the brain
 10 Bring round the heart an undescribable feud;
 So do these wonders a most dizzy pain,
 That mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude
 Wasting of old time—with a billowy main°—
 A sun—a shadow of a magnitude.

Mar. 1 or 2, 1817

From Endymion: A Poetic Romance¹

"The stretched metre of an antique song"

INSCRIBED TO THE MEMORY OF THOMAS CHATTERTON

Preface

Knowing within myself the manner in which this Poem has been produced, it is not without a feeling of regret that I make it public.

1. Lord Elgin had brought to England in 1806 many of the marble statues and friezes that adorned the Parthenon at Athens. In 1817 Keats, along with his artist friend Haydon, viewed the marbles at the British Museum, which had just purchased them, an acquisition that was and remains controversial. Keats's sonnet first appeared on the same day in both Leigh Hunt's *Examiner* and, through Keats's friend Reynolds, *The Champion*, and then was reprinted in Haydon's magazine *Annals of the Fine Arts*.

1. This poem of more than four thousand lines (based on the classical myth of a mortal beloved by the goddess of the moon) tells of Endymion's long and agonized search for an immortal goddess whom he had seen in several visions. In the

Indian maid who had been abandoned by the followers of Bacchus, god of wine and revelry. To his utter despair, he succumbs to a sensual passion for her, in apparent betrayal of his love for his heavenly ideal. The conclusion to Keats's "romance" offers a way of resolving this opposition, which runs throughout the poem, between the inevitably mortal pleasures of this world and the possibility of delights that would be eternal: the Indian maid reveals that she is herself Cynthia (Diana), goddess of the moon, the celestial subject of his earlier visions.

The verse epigraph is adapted from Shakespeare's Sonnet 17, line 12: "And stretchèd metre of an antique song." Thomas Chatterton (1752–1770), to whom *Endymion* is dedicated, and who is the "miserable Bard" of Keats's "Bardic

What manner I mean, will be quite clear to the reader, who must soon perceive great inexperience, immaturity, and every error denoting a feverish attempt, rather than a deed accomplished. The two first books, and indeed the two last, I feel sensible are not of such completion as to warrant their passing the press; nor should they if I thought a year's castigation would do them any good;—it will not: the foundations are too sandy. It is just that this youngster should die away: a sad thought for me, if I had not some hope that while it is dwindling I may be plotting, and fitting myself for verses fit to live. This may be speaking too presumptuously, and may deserve a punishment: but no feeling man will be forward to inflict it: he will leave me alone, with the conviction that there is not a fiercer hell than the failure in a great object. This is not written with the least atom of purpose to forestall criticisms of course, but from the desire I have to conciliate men who are competent to look, and who do look with a zealous eye, to the honour of English literature.

The imagination of a boy is healthy, and the mature imagination of a man is healthy; but there is a space of life between, in which the soul is in a ferment, the character undecided, the way of life uncertain, the ambition thick-sighted: thence proceeds mawkishness, and all the thousand bitters which those men I speak of must necessarily taste in going over the following pages.

I hope I have not in too late a day touched the beautiful mythology of Greece,² and dulled its brightness: for I wish to try once more,³ before I bid it farewell.

Teignmouth, April 10, 1818

From *Book 1*

["A THING OF BEAUTY"]

A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:
Its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
5 Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.
Therefore, on every morrow, are we wreathing
A flowery band to bind us to the earth,
Spite^o of despondence, of the inhuman dearth
Of noble natures, of the gloomy days,
10 Of all the unhealthy and o'er-darkened ways
Made for our searching: yes, in spite of all,
Some shape of beauty moves away the pall
From our dark spirits. Such the sun, the moon,
Trees old, and young sprouting a shady boon

despite

beckons

tion and Independence," wrote a number of brilliant pseudoarchaic poems that he attributed to an imaginary 15th-century poet, Thomas Rowley. Keats described him as "the most English of poets except Shakespeare."

2. In 1820 an anonymous reviewer of Keats's final volume of poems cited this phrase and, in a complaint that suggests the political charge that the poetic use of classical mythology could carry at this time, wrote disparagingly of "the nonsense

that Mr. Keats . . . and Mr. Percy Bysshe Shelley, and some of the poets about town, have been talking of 'the beautiful mythology of Greece'; "To some persons . . . that mythology comes recommended chiefly by its grossness—its alliance to the sensitive pleasures which belong to the animal."

3. In *Hyperion*, which Keats was already planning.

15 For simple sheep; and such are daffodils
With the green world they live in; and clear rills^o *small streams*
That for themselves a cooling covert make^o
'Gainst the hot season; the mid forest brake,^o *thicket*
Rich with a sprinkling of fair musk-rose blooms:
20 And such too is the grandeur of the dooms^o *judgments*
We have imagined for the mighty dead;
All lovely tales that we have heard or read:
An endless fountain of immortal drink,
Pouring unto us from the heaven's brink.

25 Nor do we merely feel these essences
For one short hour; no, even as the trees
That whisper round a temple become soon,
Dear as the temple's self, so does the moon,
The passion poesy, glories infinite,
30 Haunt us till they become a cheering light
Unto our souls, and bound to us so fast,
That, whether there be shine, or gloom o'er-cast,
They always must be with us, or we die.

Therefore, 'tis with full happiness that I
35 Will trace the story of Endymion.
The very music of the name has gone
Into my being, and each pleasant scene
Is growing fresh before me as the green
Of our own vallies. * * *

[THE "PLEASURE THERMOMETER"]

"Peona!⁴ ever have I long'd to slake
770 My thirst for the world's praises: nothing base,
No merely slumberous phantasm, could unlace
The stubborn canvas for my voyage prepar'd—
Though now 'tis tatter'd; leaving my bark bar'd
And sullenly drifting: yet my higher hope
775 Is of too wide, too rainbow-large a scope,
To fret at myriads of earthly wrecks.
Wherein lies happiness? In that which beck^s
Our ready minds to fellowship divine,
A fellowship with essence; till we shine,
780 Full alchemiz'd,⁵ and free of space. Behold
The clear religion of heaven! Fold
A rose leaf round thy finger's taperness,
And soothe thy lips: hist,^o when the airy stress

listen

4. The sister to whom Endymion confides his troubles. Of lines 769–857 Keats said to his publisher, John Taylor: "When I wrote it, it was the regular stepping of the Imagination towards a Truth. My having written that Argument will perhaps be of the greatest Service to me of anything I ever did—It set before me at once the gradations of Happiness even like a kind of Pleasure Thermometer, and is my first step towards the chief attempt in the Drama—the playing of different Natures with Joy and Sorrow." The gradations on

the way to what Keats calls "happiness" (line 777)—his secular version of the religious concept of "felicity" that, in the orthodox view, is to be achieved by a surrender of oneself to God. For Keats the way to happiness lies through a fusion of ourselves, first sensuously, with the lovely objects of nature and art (lines 781–97), then on a higher level, with other human beings through "love and friendship" (line 801) and, ultimately, sexual love.
5. Transformed by alchemy from a base to a precious metal.

Of music's kiss impregnates the free winds,
 785 And with a sympathetic touch unbinds
 Eolian⁶ magic from their lucid wombs:
 Then old songs waken from enclouded tombs;
 Old ditties sigh above their father's grave;
 Ghosts of melodious prophecyings rave
 790 Round every spot where trod Apollo's foot;
 Bronze clarions awake, and faintly bruit,⁷
 Where long ago a giant battle was;
 And, from the turf, a lullaby doth pass
 In every place where infant Orpheus⁸ slept.
 795 Feel we these things?—that moment have we stept
 Into a sort of oneness, and our state
 Is like a floating spirit's. But there are
 Richer entanglements, enthrallments far
 More self-destroying, leading, by degrees,
 800 To the chief intensity: the crown of these
 Is made of love and friendship, and sits high
 Upon the forehead of humanity.
 All its more ponderous and bulky worth
 Is friendship, whence there ever issues forth
 805 A steady splendour; but at the tip-top
 There hangs by unseen film, an orb'd drop
 Of light, and that is love: its influence,
 Thrown in our eyes, genders⁹ a novel sense,
 At which we start and fret; till in the end,
 810 Melting into its radiance, we blend,
 Mingle, and so become a part of it,—
 Nor with aught else can our souls interknit
 So wingedly: when we combine therewith,
 Life's self is nourish'd by its proper pith,⁹
 815 And we are nurtured like a pelican brood.¹
 Aye, so delicious is the unsating food,²
 That men, who might have tower'd in the van^o
 Of all the congregated world, to fan
 820 And winnow from the coming step of time
 All chaff of custom, wipe away all slime
 Left by men-slugs and human serpentry,
 Have been content to let occasion die,
 Whilst they did sleep in love's elysium.^o
 825 And, truly, I would rather be struck dumb,
 Than speak against this ardent listlessness:
 For I have ever thought that it might bless
 The world with benefits unknowingly;
 As does the nightingale, upperched high,
 And cloister'd among cool and bunched leaves—
 830 She sings but to her love, nor e'er conceives

6. From Aeolus, god of winds.

7. Make a sound.

8. The musician of Greek legend, whose beautiful music could move even inanimate things.

9. Its own elemental substance.

1. Young pelicans were once thought to feed on

their mother's flesh. In a parallel way our life is nourished by another's life, with which it fuses in love.

2. Food that never satiates, that never ceases to satisfy.

How tiptoe Night holds back her dark-grey hood.³
 Just so may love, although 'tis understood
 The mere commingling of passionate breath,
 Produce more than our searching witnesseth:
 835 What I know not: but who, of men, can tell
 That flowers would bloom, or that green fruit would swell
 To melting pulp, that fish would have bright mail,
 The earth its dower of river, wood, and vale,
 The meadows runnels, runnels pebble-stones,
 840 The seed its harvest, or the lute its tones,
 Tones ravishment, or ravishment its sweet,
 If human souls did never kiss and greet?

"Now, if this earthly love has power to make
 Men's being mortal, immortal; to shake
 845 Ambition from their memories, and brim
 Their measure of content; what merest whim,
 Seems all this poor endeavour after fame,
 To one, who keeps within his stedfast aim
 A love immortal, an immortal too.
 850 Look not so wilder'd; for these things are true,
 And never can be born of atomies^o
 That buzz about our slumbers, like brain-flies,
 Leaving us fancy-sick. No, no, I'm sure,
 My restless spirit never could endure
 855 To brood so long upon one luxury,
 Unless it did, though fearfully, espy
 A hope beyond the shadow of a dream."

Apr.—Nov. 1817

On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again!

O golden-tongued Romance, with serene lute!
 Fair plumed syren,² queen of far-away!
 Leave melodizing on this wintry day,
 Shut up thine olden pages, and be mute.
 5 Adieu! for, once again, the fierce dispute
 Betwixt damnation and impassion'd clay
 Must I burn through; once more humbly assay^o
 The bitter-sweet of this Shakespearean fruit.
 Chief Poet! and ye clouds of Albion,³
 10 Begetters of our deep eternal theme!
 When through the old oak forest I am gone,
 Let me not wander in a barren dream:

3. I.e., in order to hear better.

1. Keats pauses, while revising *Endymion*: A Poetic Romance, to read again Shakespeare's great tragedy. The word *syren* (line 2) indicates Keats's feeling that "Romance" was enticing him from the poet's prime duty, to deal with "the ago-nies, the strife / Of human hearts" (*Sleep and Poetry*, lines 124–25).

2. Syrens (sirens) were sea nymphs whose singing lured listeners to their deaths.

3. Old name for England. *King Lear* is set in Celtic Britain.

But, when I am consumed in the fire,
Give me new phoenix¹ wings to fly at my desire.

Jan. 22, 1818

When I have fears that I may cease to be¹

When I have fears that I may cease to be
Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain,
Before high piled books, in charactry,²
Hold like rich garners the full ripen'd grain;

5 When I behold, upon the night's starr'd face,
Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,
And think that I may never live to trace
Their shadows, with the magic hand of chance;

10 And when I feel, fair creature of an hour,
That I shall never look upon thee more,
Never have relish in the faery power
Of unreflecting love;—then on the shore
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think
Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.

Jan. 1818

To Homer

Standing aloof in giant ignorance,
Of thee I hear and of the Cyclades,¹
As one who sits ashore and longs perchance
To visit dolphin-coral in deep seas.

5 So wast thou blind;—but then the veil was rent,
For Jove uncurtain'd heaven to let thee live,
And Neptune made for thee a spumy tent,
And Pan made sing for thee his forest-hive;

10 Aye on the shores of darkness there is light,
And precipices show untrodden green,
There is a budding morrow in midnight,
There is a triple sight in blindness keen;
Such seeing hadst thou, as it once befel
To Dian, Queen of Earth, and Heaven, and Hell.²

1818

4. The fabulous bird that periodically burns itself to death to rise anew from the ashes.
1. The first, and one of the most successful, of Keats's attempts at the sonnet in the Shakespearean rhyme scheme.
2. Characters; printed letters of the alphabet.
1. A group of islands in the Aegean Sea, off Greece. Keats's allusion is to his ignorance of the Greek language. Schooling in Greek was a badge

of gentlemanly identity in the period.
2. In late pagan cults Diana was worshiped as a three-figured goddess, the deity of nature and of the moon as well as the queen of hell. The "triple sight" that blind Homer paradoxically commands is of these three regions and also of heaven, sea, and earth (the realms of Jove, Neptune, and Pan, lines 6-8).

1838

The Eve of St. Agnes¹

1
St. Agnes' Eve—Ah, bitter chill it was!
The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold;
The hare limp'd trembling through the frozen grass,
And silent was the flock in woolly fold:
Numb were the Beadsman's² fingers, while he told
His rosary, and while his frosted breath,
Like pious incense from a censer old,
Seem'd taking flight for heaven, without a death,
Past the sweet Virgin's picture, while his prayer he saith.

2
His prayer he saith, this patient, holy man;
Then takes his lamp, and riseth from his knees,
And back returneth, meagre,^o barefoot, wan,
Along the chapel aisle by slow degrees:
The sculptur'd dead, on each side, seem to freeze,
Emprison'd in black, purgatorial rails:
15 Knights, ladies, praying in dumb^o orat'ries,^o
He passeth by; and his weak spirit fails
To think³ how they may ache in icy hoods and mails.

3
Northward he turneth through a little door,
And scarce three steps, ere Music's golden tongue
Flatter'd^o to tears this aged man and poor;
But no—already had his deathbell rung;
The joys of all his life were said and sung:
His was harsh penance on St. Agnes' Eve:
25 Another way he went, and soon among
Rough ashes sat he for his soul's reprieve,^o
And all night kept awake, for sinners' sake to grieve.

4
That ancient Beadsman heard the prelude soft;
And so it chanc'd, for many a door was wide,
From hurry to and fro. Soon, up aloft,
30 The silver, snarling trumpets 'gan to chide:
The level chambers, ready with their pride,^o
Were glowing to receive a thousand guests:

1. St. Agnes, martyred ca. 303 at the age of thirteen, is the patron saint of virgins. Legend has it that if a chaste young woman performs the proper ritual, she will dream of her future husband on the evening before St. Agnes's Day, January 21. Keats combines this superstition with the Romeo and Juliet theme of young love thwarted by feuding families and tells the story in a sequence of evolving Spenserian stanzas. The poem is Keats's

first complete success in sustained narrative romance. For the author's revisions while composing stanzas 26 and 30 of *The Eve of St. Agnes*, see "Poems in Process," in the NAEL Archive.
2. One who is paid to pray for his benefactor. He "tells" (counts) the beads of his rosary to keep track of his prayers.
3. I.e., when he thinks.

lean

silent / chapels

charmed

salvation

ostentation