

**KEATS**  
**POEMS PUBLISHED IN 1820**

**EDITED WITH INTRODUCTION AND**

**NOTES BY**

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**PREFACE.**

The text of this edition is a reprint (page for page and line for line) of a copy of the 1820 edition in the British Museum. For convenience of reference line-numbers have been added; but this is the only change, beyond the correction of one or two misprints.

The books to which I am most indebted for the material used in the Introduction and Notes are *The Poems of John Keats* with an Introduction and Notes by E. de Sélincourt, *Life of Keats* (English Men of Letters Series) by Sidney Colvin, and *Letters of John Keats* edited by Sidney Colvin. As a pupil of Dr. de Sélincourt I also owe him special gratitude for his inspiration and direction of my study of Keats, as well as for the constant help which I have received from him in the preparation of this edition.

M. R.

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## LIFE OF KEATS

Of all the great poets of the early nineteenth century—Wordsworth, Coleridge, Scott, Byron, Shelley, Keats—John Keats was the last born and the first to die. The length of his life was not one-third that of Wordsworth, who was born twenty-five years before him and outlived him by twenty-nine. Yet before his tragic death at twenty-six Keats had produced a body of poetry of such

extraordinary power and promise that the world has sometimes been tempted, in its regret for what he might have done had he lived, to lose sight of the superlative merit of what he actually accomplished.

The three years of his poetic career, during which he published three small volumes of poetry, show a development at the same time rapid and steady, and a gradual but complete abandonment of almost every fault and weakness. It would probably be impossible, in the history of literature, to find such another instance of the 'growth of a poet's mind'.

The last of these three volumes, which is here

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reprinted, was published in 1820, when it 'had good success among the literary people and . . . a moderate sale'. It contains the flower of his poetic production and is perhaps, altogether, one of the most marvellous volumes ever issued from the press.

But in spite of the maturity of Keats's work when he was twenty-five, he had been in no sense a precocious child. Born in 1795 in the city of London, the son of a livery-stable keeper, he was brought up amid surroundings and influences by no means calculated to awaken poetic genius.

He was the eldest of five—four boys, one of whom died in infancy, and a girl younger than all; and he and his brothers George and Tom were educated at a private school at Enfield. Here John was at first distinguished more for fighting than for study, whilst his bright, brave, generous nature made him popular with masters and boys.

Soon after he had begun to go to school his father died, and when he was fifteen the children lost their mother too. Keats was passionately devoted to his mother; during her last illness he would

sit up all night with her, give her her medicine, and even cook her food himself. At her death he was brokenhearted.

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The children were now put under the care of two guardians, one of whom, Mr. Abbey, taking the sole responsibility, immediately removed John from school and apprenticed him for five years to a surgeon at Edmonton.

Whilst thus employed Keats spent all his leisure time in reading, for which he had developed a great enthusiasm during his last two years at school. There he had devoured every book that came in his way, especially rejoicing in stories of the gods and goddesses of ancient Greece. At Edmonton he was able to continue his studies by borrowing books from his friend Charles Cowden Clarke, the son of his schoolmaster, and he often went over to Enfield to change his books and to discuss those which he had been reading. On one of these occasions Cowden Clarke introduced him to Spenser, to whom so many poets have owed their first inspiration that he has been called 'the poets' poet'; and it was then, apparently, that Keats was first prompted to write.

When he was nineteen, a year before his apprenticeship came to an end, he quarrelled with his master, left him, and continued his training in London as a student at St. Thomas's Hospital and Guy's.

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Gradually, however, during the months that followed, though he was an industrious and able medical student, Keats came to realize that poetry was his true vocation; and as soon as he was of age, in spite of the opposition of his guardian, he decided to abandon the medical profession and devote his life to literature.

If Mr. Abbey was unsympathetic Keats was not without encouragement from others. His brothers always believed in him whole-heartedly, and his exceptionally lovable nature had won him

many friends. Amongst these friends two men older than himself, each famous in his own sphere, had special influence upon him.

One of them, Leigh Hunt, was something of a poet himself and a pleasant prose-writer. His encouragement did much to stimulate Keats's genius, but his direct influence on his poetry was wholly bad. Leigh Hunt's was not a deep nature; his poetry is often trivial and sentimental, and his easy conversational style is intolerable when applied to a great theme. To this man's influence, as well as to the surroundings of his youth, are doubtless due the occasional flaws of taste in Keats's early work.

The other, Haydon, was an artist of mediocre

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creative talent but great aims and amazing belief in himself. He had a fine critical faculty which was shown in his appreciation of the Elgin marbles, in opposition to the most respected authorities of his day. Mainly through his insistence they were secured for the nation which thus owes him a boundless debt of gratitude. He helped to guide and direct Keats's taste by his enthusiastic exposition of these masterpieces of Greek sculpture.

In 1817 Keats published his first volume of poems, including 'Sleep and Poetry' and the well-known lines 'I stood tiptoe upon a little hill'. With much that is of the highest poetic value, many memorable lines and touches of his unique insight into nature, the volume yet showed considerable immaturity. It contained indeed, if we except one perfect sonnet, rather a series of experiments than any complete and finished work. There were abundant faults for those who liked to look for them, though there were abundant beauties too; and the critics and the public chose rather to concentrate their attention on the former. The volume was therefore anything but a success; but Keats was not discouraged, for he saw many of his own faults more clearly than did his critics, and felt his power to outgrow them.

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Immediately after this Keats went to the Isle of Wight and thence to Margate that he might study and write undisturbed. On May 10th he wrote to Haydon—'I never quite despair, and I read Shakespeare—indeed I shall, I think, never read any other book much'. We have seen Keats influenced by Spenser and by Leigh Hunt: now, though his love for Spenser continued, Shakespeare's had become the dominant influence. Gradually he came too under the influence of Wordsworth's philosophy of poetry and life, and later his reading of Milton affected his style to some extent, but Shakespeare's influence was the widest, deepest and most lasting, though it is the hardest to define. His study of other poets left traces upon his work in turns of phrase or turns of thought: Shakespeare permeated his whole being, and his influence is to be detected not in a resemblance of style, for Shakespeare can have no imitators, but in a broadening view of life, and increased humanity.

No poet could have owed his education more completely to the English poets than did John Keats. His knowledge of Latin was slight—he knew no Greek, and even the classical stories which he loved and constantly used, came to him almost entirely

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through the medium of Elizabethan translations and allusions. In this connexion it is interesting to read his first fine sonnet, in which he celebrates his introduction to the greatest of Greek poets in the translation of the rugged and forcible Elizabethan, George Chapman:—

*On first looking into Chapman's Homer.*

Much have I travelled 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.  
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told

That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne;  
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene  
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:  
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies  
When a new planet swims into his ken;  
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes  
He stared at the Pacific—and all his men  
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—  
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

Of the work upon which he was now engaged, the narrative-poem of *Endymion*, we may give his own

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account to his little sister Fanny in a letter dated September 10th, 1817:—

'Perhaps you might like to know what I am writing about. I will tell you. Many years ago there was a young handsome Shepherd who fed his flocks on a Mountain's Side called Latmus—he was a very contemplative sort of a Person and lived solitary among the trees and Plains little thinking that such a beautiful Creature as the Moon was growing mad in Love with him.—However so it was; and when he was asleep she used to come down from heaven and admire him excessively for a long time; and at last could not refrain from carrying him away in her arms to the top of that high Mountain Latmus while he was a dreaming—but I dare say you have read this and all the other beautiful tales which have come down from the ancient times of that beautiful Greece.'

On his return to London he and his brother Tom, always delicate and now quite an invalid, took lodgings at Hampstead. Here Keats remained for some time, harassed by the illness of his brother and of several of his friends; and in June he was still further depressed by the departure of his brother George to try his luck in America.

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In April, 1818, *Endymion* was finished. Keats was by no means satisfied with it but preferred to publish it as it was, feeling it to be 'as good as I had power to make it by myself'.—'I will write independently' he says to his publisher—'I have written independently *without judgment*. I may write independently and *with judgment* hereafter. In *Endymion* I leaped headlong into the sea, and thereby have become better acquainted with the soundings, the quicksands, and the rocks, than if I had stayed upon the green shore, and piped a silly pipe, and took tea and comfortable advice.' He published it with a preface modestly explaining to the public his own sense of its imperfection. Nevertheless a storm of abuse broke upon him from the critics who fastened upon all the faults of the poem—the diffuseness of the story, its occasional sentimentality and the sometimes fantastic coinage of words,<sup>[xiii:1]</sup> and ignored the extraordinary beauties of which it is full.

Directly after the publication of *Endymion*, and before the appearance of these reviews, Keats started with a friend, Charles Brown, for a walking tour in

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Scotland. They first visited the English lakes and thence walked to Dumfries, where they saw the house of Burns and his grave. They entered next the country of Meg Merrilies, and from Kirkcudbrightshire crossed over to Ireland for a few days. On their return they went north as far as Argyleshire, whence they sailed to Staffa and saw Fingal's cave, which, Keats wrote, 'for solemnity and grandeur far surpasses the finest Cathedral.' They then crossed Scotland through Inverness, and Keats returned home by boat from Cromarty.

His letters home are at first full of interest and enjoyment, but a 'slight sore throat', contracted in 'a most wretched walk of thirty-seven miles across the Isle of Mull', proved very troublesome and

finally cut short his holiday. This was the beginning of the end. There was consumption in the family: Tom was dying of it; and the cold, wet, and over-exertion of his Scotch tour seems to have developed the fatal tendency in Keats himself.

From this time forward he was never well, and no good was done to either his health or spirits by the task which now awaited him of tending on his dying brother. For the last two or three months of 1818,

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until Tom's death in December, he scarcely left the bedside, and it was well for him that his friend, Charles Armitage Brown, was at hand to help and comfort him after the long strain. Brown persuaded Keats at once to leave the house, with its sad associations, and to come and live with him.

Before long poetry absorbed Keats again; and the first few months of 1819 were the most fruitful of his life. Besides working at *Hyperion*, which he had begun during Tom's illness, he wrote *The Eve of St. Agnes*, *The Eve of St. Mark*, *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, and nearly all his famous odes.

Troubles however beset him. His friend Haydon was in difficulties and tormenting him, poor as he was, to lend him money; the state of his throat gave serious cause for alarm; and, above all, he was consumed by an unsatisfying passion for the daughter of a neighbour, Mrs. Brawne. She had rented Brown's house whilst they were in Scotland, and had now moved to a street near by. Miss Fanny Brawne returned his love, but she seems never to have understood his nature or his needs. High-spirited and fond of pleasure she did not apparently allow the thought of her invalid lover to interfere much with her enjoyment of life. She would not, however,

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abandon her engagement, and she probably gave him all which it was in her nature to give. Ill-health made him, on the other hand, morbidly dissatisfied and suspicious; and, as a result of his illness and her limitations, his love throughout brought him restlessness and torment rather than peace and comfort.

Towards the end of July he went to Shanklin and there, in collaboration with Brown, wrote a play, *Otho the Great*. Brown tells us how they used to sit, one on either side of a table, he sketching out the scenes and handing each one, as the outline was finished, to Keats to write. As Keats never knew what was coming it was quite impossible that the characters should be adequately conceived, or that the drama should be a united whole. Nevertheless there is much that is beautiful and promising in it. It should not be forgotten that Keats's 'greatest ambition' was, in his own words, 'the writing of a few fine plays'; and, with the increasing humanity and grasp which his poetry shows, there is no reason to suppose that, had he lived, he would not have fulfilled it.

At Shanklin, moreover, he had begun to write *Lamia*, and he continued it at Winchester. Here he

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stayed until the middle of October, excepting a few days which he spent in London to arrange about the sending of some money to his brother in America. George had been unsuccessful in his commercial enterprises, and Keats, in view of his family's ill-success, determined temporarily to abandon poetry, and by reviewing or journalism to support himself and earn money to help his brother. Then, when he could afford it, he would return to poetry.

Accordingly he came back to London, but his health was breaking down, and with it his resolution. He tried to re-write *Hyperion*, which he felt had been written too much under the influence of Milton and in 'the artist's humour'. The same independence of spirit

which he had shown in the publication of *Endymion* urged him now to abandon a work the style of which he did not feel to be absolutely his own. The re-cast he wrote in the form of a vision, calling it *The Fall of Hyperion*, and in so doing he added much to his conception of the meaning of the story. In no poem does he show more of the profoundly philosophic spirit which characterizes many of his letters. But it was too late; his power was failing and, in spite of the beauty and interest of

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some of his additions, the alterations are mostly for the worse.

Whilst *The Fall of Hyperion* occupied his evenings his mornings were spent over a satirical fairy-poem, *The Cap and Bells*, in the metre of the *Faerie Queene*. This metre, however, was ill-suited to the subject; satire was not natural to him, and the poem has little intrinsic merit.

Neither this nor the re-cast of *Hyperion* was finished when, in February, 1820, he had an attack of illness in which the first definite symptom of consumption appeared. Brown tells how he came home on the evening of Thursday, February 3rd, in a state of high fever, chilled from having ridden outside the coach on a bitterly cold day. 'He mildly and instantly yielded to my request that he should go to bed . . . On entering the cold sheets, before his head was on the pillow, he slightly coughed, and I heard him say—"that is blood from my mouth". I went towards him: he was examining a single drop of blood upon the sheet. "Bring me the candle, Brown, and let me see this blood." After regarding it steadfastly he looked up in my face with a calmness of expression that I can never forget, and said, "I know the colour of that blood;—it is arterial

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blood; I cannot be deceived in that colour; that drop of blood is my

death warrant;—I must die."

He lived for another year, but it was one long dying: he himself called it his 'posthumous life'.

Keats was one of the most charming of letter-writers. He had that rare quality of entering sympathetically into the mind of the friend to whom he was writing, so that his letters reveal to us much of the character of the recipient as well as of the writer. In the long journal-letters which he wrote to his brother and sister-in-law in America he is probably most fully himself, for there he is with the people who knew him best and on whose understanding and sympathy he could rely. But in none is the beauty of his character more fully revealed than in those to his little sister Fanny, now seventeen years old, and living with their guardian, Mr. Abbey. He had always been very anxious that they should 'become intimately acquainted, in order', as he says, 'that I may not only, as you grow up, love you as my only Sister, but confide in you as my dearest friend.' In his most harassing times he continued to write to her, directing her reading, sympathizing

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in her childish troubles, and constantly thinking of little presents to please her. Her health was to him a matter of paramount concern, and in his last letters to her we find him reiterating warnings to take care of herself—'You must be careful always to wear warm clothing not only in Frost but in a Thaw.'—'Be careful to let no fretting injure your health as I have suffered it—health is the greatest of blessings—with *health* and *hope* we should be content to live, and so you will find as you grow older.' The constant recurrence of this thought becomes, in the light of his own sufferings, almost unbearably pathetic.

During the first months of his illness Keats saw through the press his last volume of poetry, of which this is a reprint. The praise which it received from reviewers and public was in marked

contrast to the scornful reception of his earlier works, and would have augured well for the future. But Keats was past caring much for poetic fame. He dragged on through the summer, with rallies and relapses, tormented above all by the thought that death would separate him from the woman he loved. Only Brown, of all his friends, knew what he was suffering, and it seems that he only knew fully after they were parted.

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The doctors warned Keats that a winter in England would kill him, so in September, 1820, he left London for Naples, accompanied by a young artist, Joseph Severn, one of his many devoted friends. Shelley, who knew him slightly, invited him to stay at Pisa, but Keats refused. He had never cared for Shelley, though Shelley seems to have liked him, and, in his invalid state, he naturally shrank from being a burden to a mere acquaintance.

It was as they left England, off the coast of Dorsetshire, that Keats wrote his last beautiful sonnet on a blank leaf of his folio copy of Shakespeare, facing *A Lover's Complaint*:—

Bright star! would I were steadfast as thou art—  
Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night,  
And watching, with eternal lids apart,  
Like Nature's patient, sleepless Eremite,  
The moving waters at their priest-like task  
Of pure ablution round earth's human shores,  
Or gazing on the new soft-fallen mask  
Of snow upon the mountains and the moors—  
No—yet still steadfast, still unchangeable,  
Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,  
To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,

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Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,  
Still, still to hear her tender taken breath,  
And so live ever—or else swoon to death.

The friends reached Rome, and there Keats, after a brief rally, rapidly became worse. Severn nursed him with desperate devotion, and of Keats's sweet considerateness and patience he could never say enough. Indeed such was the force and lovableness of Keats's personality that though Severn lived fifty-eight years longer it was for the rest of his life a chief occupation to write and draw his memories of his friend.

On February 23rd, 1821, came the end for which Keats had begun to long. He died peacefully in Severn's arms. On the 26th he was buried in the beautiful little Protestant cemetery of which Shelley said that it 'made one in love with death to think that one should be buried in so sweet a place'.

Great indignation was felt at the time by those who attributed his death, in part at least, to the cruel treatment which he had received from the critics. Shelley, in *Adonais*, withered them with his scorn, and Byron, in *Don Juan*, had his gibe both at

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the poet and at his enemies. But we know now how mistaken they were. Keats, in a normal state of mind and body, was never unduly depressed by harsh or unfair criticism. 'Praise or blame,' he wrote, 'has but a momentary effect on the man whose love of beauty in the abstract makes him a severe critic on his own works,' and this attitude he consistently maintained throughout his poetic career. No doubt the sense that his genius was unappreciated added something to the torment of mind which he suffered in Rome, and on his death-bed he asked that on his tombstone should be inscribed the words 'Here lies one whose name was writ in water'. But it was apparently not said in bitterness, and the rest of the inscription<sup>[\[xxiii:1\]](#)</sup> expresses rather the natural anger of his friends at the treatment he had received than the mental attitude of the poet himself.

Fully to understand him we must read his poetry with the

commentary of his letters which reveal in his character elements of humour, clear-sighted

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wisdom, frankness, strength, sympathy and tolerance. So doing we shall enter into the mind and heart of the friend who, speaking for many, described Keats as one 'whose genius I did not, and do not, more fully admire than I entirely loved the man'.

## FOOTNOTES:

[\[xiii:1\]](#)

Many of the words which the reviewers thought to be coined were good Elizabethan.

[\[xxiii:1\]](#)

This Grave contains all that was Mortal of a Young English Poet, who on his Death Bed, in the Bitterness of his Heart at the Malicious Power of his Enemies, desired these Words to be engraven on his Tomb Stone 'Here lies One Whose Name was writ in Water' Feb. 24th 1821.

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**LAMIA,**  
**ISABELLA,**

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