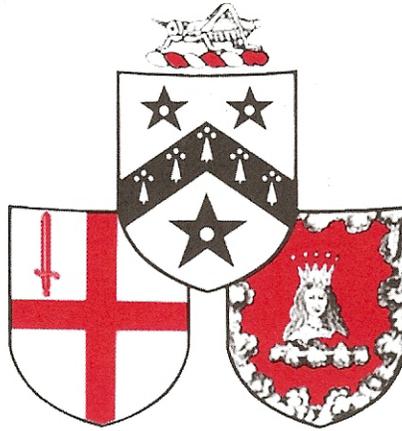


G R E S H A M

C O L L E G E



Reproduction of this text, or any extract from it, must credit Gresham College

**LITERARY
LONDONERS
II**

**A Series of Lectures given in
February 1996**

CONTENTS

LITERARY LONDONERS

William Blake
Peter Ackroyd

Page 1

John Keats
Dr Elizabeth Cook

Page 11

Charles Dickens
Professor Michael Slater

Page 21

JOHN KEATS

Dr Elizabeth Cook

October 1816. John Keats, who will be twenty-one at the end of the month, has gone to visit his old schoolmaster, Charles Cowden Clarke, who at present lodges with his brother-in-law at Warner Street, just off Rosebery Avenue. The master-pupil relationship with Clarke, just seven years senior to Keats, has developed into friendship. Clarke's great role in Keats's life is that of one who shows - an opener of doors and windows into new areas of thought: music, literature, politics. On this particular evening Clarke has just been lent a very beautiful folio copy of Chapman's translation of Homer. This is an opportunity. Up to this point they have known Homer only through Pope (to whom Keats and so many of his contemporaries are deaf). Later Clarke described their evening: "To work we went, turning to some of the famousst passages... One scene I could not fail to introduce to him - the shipwreck of Ulysses in the 5th book of '*Odysseis*', and I had the reward of one of his delighted stares, upon reading the following lines:

Then forth he came, his both knees faltering, both
His strong hands hanging down, and all with froth
His cheeks and nostrils flowing, voice and breath
Spent all to use, and down he sank to death.
The sea had soakt his heart through; all his veins
His toils had rackt t'a labouring woman's pains.
Dead weary was he."

Moving from passage to passage, thrilling with discovery, the two men stay together talking and reading till dawn - about 7.30 in mid-October. Keats then walks back to his lodgings at 8 Dean Street, off Tooley Street, in the Borough, a street now lost in the lines of London Bridge Station. The walk would take him down Hatton Garden, along Holborn Hill, past Newgate Prison to Newgate Street, then along Cheapside (where his brothers were living and where he would shortly join them), and the Poultry, across London Bridge, a forty-minute walk perhaps. By 10 o'clock, when Clarke, who has evidently had a little sleep, comes down to breakfast, there is a letter from Keats waiting for him on the breakfast table. Enclosed is the sonnet "On First Looking into Chapman's *Homer*":

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.
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 star'd at the Pacific - and all his men
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise -
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

Keats was, of course, a Londoner, and shaped by that experience. He was born at the Swan and Hoop livery stables by Finsbury Pavement, where his father worked as an ostler. To his detractors in the Tory press who disguised their political opposition as social disdain, he was 'Cockney Keats'. But it's also important to remember that for Keats, to an exceptional degree, his literal, bounded, physical existence was extended by intense imaginative experience. Reading Chapman's *Homer* that night in Clerkenwell transported him in an almost instantaneous way ("Already with thee!") into a new kind of air. "They are very shallow people who take every thing literal. A Man's life of any worth is a continual allegory," wrote Keats in 1819. In this lecture I don't want to look only at the literal facts of Keats's life but at the interconnectedness of his physical and imaginative existence, including his sense of companionship with one who may not have existed in any literal sense, and with a contemporary whom Keats never met.

In order to have delivered his sonnet on Chapman's *Homer* back at Warner Street before 10 o'clock on that October morning, Keats must have done most of the composition on the hoof. Walking played a large part in his life, larger even than for the average Londoner in the early 19th Century before the bicycle and the railway. In the summer of 1818 he elected to go on a 630 mile walking tour of Scotland and Ireland with his friend and landlord, Charles Brown, a man who regularly spent his summers walking. Keats's temperament was naturally active and energetic: "If I am not in action mind or body I am in pain." In him one often has a sense of muscular and mental action being complementary: that bodily life is not antagonistic to imaginative life but one form of its expression. He conceived of his first (and longest) long poem, *Endymion*, as a "trial of [his] powers of imagination". At the outset he planned to write about 4,000 lines at the rate of about 50 lines a day. It is as if he were planning a kind of distance running to build up his imaginative stamina. He writes about the imagination as if it were a muscular phenomenon - of trying himself "with mental weights", of his imagination "strengthening" - and it is curious to see that during the months of *Endymion*'s composition he was physically always on the move: from the Isle of Wight, to Margate, to Canterbury, to Hampstead, to Oxford, to Burford Bridge. It is as if the coverage of a great many pages needed to be matched by some kind of topographical mileage. 22 November 1817 (to Benjamin Bailey): "At present I am just arrived at Dorking to change the Scene - change the Air and give me a spur to wind up my Poem, of which there are wanting 500 lines."

It may be that the insecurity of Keats's early life generated a kind of inner restlessness, a fear of the stultification that repose and stability might bring. (To his fiancée Fanny Brawne in 1819, "God forbid we should what people call *settle* - turn into a pond, a stagnant Lethe - a vile crescent, row of buildings. Better be imprudent moveables than prudent fixtures.") When Keats was eight his father was killed in a riding accident. Two months after this traumatic event his mother re-married, to a man whom she would shortly leave, and with him (because of the Married Women's Property Act) was property she had inherited from her first husband. John Keats, his two surviving brothers (the youngest, Edward, had died aged one) and his sister, were packed off to live with their grandparents at Ponders End, Enfield where Keats first met Charles Cowden Clarke at the school run by Cowden Clarke senior. A year later, after the death of the grandfather, the family moved to Lower Edmonton. In March 1810, when Keats was fourteen, his mother died. His immediate reaction to this was to curl up and cram himself into a nook under his schoolmaster's desk. Later Keats was to write, "My love for my Brothers from the early loss of our parents and even from earlier Misfortunes has grown into an affection 'passing the Love of Women.'" The strength and vitality of personal affections in Keats's life (he was a great *friend*, and from this springs the communicative ardour behind his

wonderful letters) seems directly related to the relentless process of loss in his early life. So too is the intensity and ardour of his imaginative life. By the time he had left school he had translated the whole of the *Aeneid* - an astonishing feat for a vital and energetic adolescent. In 1817 he writes to his friend, the painter Benjamin Robert Haydon, "difficulties nerve the Spirit of a Man - they make our Prime Objects a Refuge as well as a Passion." These prime objects were not just the living friends and relations whom he loved but the worlds and inhabitants of those worlds that literature and art opened out to him - so that Shakespeare, Spenser, Virgil, Homer, the Elgin Marbles provided him with more sustaining, and less cramped, refuge than the space under Cowden Clarke's desk. Very early on, Keats developed the capacity to live in more than one world.

In 1811, still in Edmonton, he was apprenticed to the surgeon Thomas Hammond (against whom at some point he clenched his fist). This was the first part of a medical training which was to culminate in 1816 - the year of the Chapman's *Homer* sonnet - when he sat and passed his exams in Apothecaries' Hall and became one of the first generation of qualified apothecaries, the forerunners of today's GPs. He had returned to London to study at Guy's in 1815 - the Old Operating Theatre in St Thomas's Street which you can visit now was built in 1821, just after Keats's death. It very closely resembles the place where he would have assisted William Lucas, the bungling surgeon who took Keats on as a dresser. He doesn't think much of the Borough - "a beastly place, in dirt, turnings and windings" - but at least it is within walking distance of friends, theatres, fights - all the urban stimuli that he enjoyed at least as much as nightingales.

"On First Looking into Chapman's *Homer*" tells of Chapman speaking out "loud and bold". It also marks the moment when Keats's voice as a poet first sounds clear. It was not his first published poem. In May 1816, Leigh Hunt, the poet and radical journalist to whom Keats had been introduced by Clarke, published a sonnet about solitude in his periodical, *The Examiner*. But it is the Chapman sonnet which, in Hunt's words, "completely announced the new poet taking possession". The poem not only describes a breakthrough into a new kind of air, new vistas of experience; it marks an inner breakthrough: a moment of clear self-discovery. On 31 October, when Keats came of age, he became legally entitled to practise the profession he had successfully trained and qualified in. His birthday also brought him the right of self-determination which he used to abandon this profession in favour of a career as a poet. It was a decision requiring considerable mental energy. Richard Abbey, the tea-brokering guardian in charge of the orphaned and grandparentless Keats children, greeted the decision with dismay and derision - "called him a Silly Boy, and prophesied a speedy Termination to his inconsiderate Enterprise." Later Keats was to write, "In no period of my life have I acted with any self-will, but in throwing up the apothecary profession."

This is not strictly accurate, though he clearly felt it to be so. Reading Keats's letters, one becomes aware of a nature which is forcefully self-determining. "I am determined to spin;" "I will clamber through the clouds and exist;" "I must choose between despair and Energy; I choose the latter." The clichéd image of etiolated languor which has attached itself to Keats would have baffled his friends who knew him by qualities of energy and vigour, combativeness and humour. An old schoolfriend, Edward Holmes, remembered that at school his "penchant was for fighting... He was a boy whom any one from his extraordinary vivacity and personal beauty might easily have fancied would become great - but rather in some military capacity than in literature."

In fact Keats's views were anti-militaristic, but the impression he made on others (who speak of his "dauntless expression", the "grave manliness" of his demeanour) was of self-conviction and boldness - qualities which belong to the heroic figures whom Keats admired. The Chapman's *Homer* sonnet connects the experience of reading with the exhilaration of discovery in the physical world. His experience as reader links him with the virile and heroic figure of stout Cortez (historically it should have been Balboa - but Keats's slip gives the added sense of "stout heart").

For Keats, reading, writing, the experience of the imagination, did not involve a turning away from physicality; there was a direct continuity between them. He prepared himself for writing as if he were going out - as in a way he was - and needed to look and feel his best for the encounter: "I rouse myself, wash and put on a clean shirt and brush my hair and clothes, tie my shoestrings neatly and in fact adonize as I were going out - then all clean and comfortable I sit down to write." Reading involved Keats in an energetic engagement. Clarke describes how at school Keats had "ramped" through *The Faerie Queene*, "like a young horse turned into a spring meadow". That night when the two of them sat up reading Chapman's *Homer* they read out loud. "He sometimes shouted," said Clarke.

The lines of poetry which elicited his shouts and delighted stares tended to be ones which convey the pressure of the physical: "the sea-shouldering whale" of *The Faerie Queene*; "the sea had soak'd his heart through" (from Chapman's *Odyssey*); or, rather oddly, "see how the surly Warwick mans the wall" from *Henry VI.iii* ("What passage of Shakespeare is finer than this?").

"Real" was one of the most positive words in Keats's vocabulary. He writes gratefully to a friend who forebore to send a dejected letter, "It was to me a real thing"; of a face, "swelling into reality". What was real to Keats was not necessarily limited to objective material existence. It was a question of energy: both energy emitted and the energy summoned in response. "As Tradesmen say every thing is worth what it will fetch, so probably every mental pursuit takes its reality and worth from the ardour of the pursuer - being in itself a nothing - Ethereal things may at least be thus real, divided under three heads - Things real - things semireal - and no things - Things real - such as existences of Sun Moon and Stars and passages of Shakespeare - Things semireal such as Love, the Clouds etc which require a greeting of the spirit to make them wholly exist - and Nothings which are made great and dignified by an ardent pursuit." Those objects or individuals who make it into Keats's pantheon of the real may not all be living in the contemporary sense - many may never have lived at all in a biographical way - but they are all marked by an energy and an intensity of being which has summoned from Keats (like attracting like) a greeting of the spirit. Being alive, on its own, was not enough to pass muster. "Manners and customs long since passed whether among the Babylonians or the Bactrians are as real, or even more real than those among which I now live." The men of Devonshire don't quite make it in Keats's view: "Were I a Corsair I'd make a descent on the South Coast of Devon, if I did not run the chance of having Cowardice imputed to me... Had England been a large Devonshire we should not have won the Battle of Waterloo... A Devonshirer standing on his native hills is not a distinct object - he does not show against the light - a wolf or two would dispossess him... Homer is very fine, Achilles is fine, Diomed is fine, Shakespeare is fine, Hamlet is fine, Lear is fine, but dwindled Englishmen are not fine."

There was nothing dwindled about Keats, though he was conscious of not being tall: "I never feel more contemptible than when I am sitting by a good-looking coachman - One is nothing -

Perhaps I eat to persuade myself I am somebody.” He particularly liked the figure of Achilles (fine in a way that Devon men are not) and in his copy of Shakespeare he had underlined and triple-scored in the margin these lines from *Troilus and Cressida*: “The large Achilles, on his press’d bed lolling/ From his deep chest shouts out the loud applause.” The words “large Achilles” have a double underlining.

Keats’s love for Achilles was not of a literary or scholarly kind so much as a strong, companionable, emulative, admiration. “I feel more and more every day, as my imagination strengthens, that I do not live in this world alone but in a thousand worlds. No sooner am I alone than shapes of epic greatness are stationed around me, and serve my Spirit the office which is equivalent to a king’s body guard... According to my state of mind I am with Achilles shouting in the trenches or with Theocritus in the Vales of Sicily.” (October 1818)

In Achilles the energy of the consummate warrior and the energy of the best teller of tales are one. Achilles’s verbal prowess is something active, of a piece with his martial brilliance. In Act III of *Troilus and Cressida* Shakespeare, anachronistically and with brilliant characterisation, has Ulysses reading: an instant means of conveying interiority - a separate and inaccessible inner life. “He interrupt his reading,” says Achilles. The situation could not be reversed. Achilles, the supreme teller of tales, has no identity separate from his actions. He does not have Ulysses’s capacity for duplicity and calculation. His actions are who he is.

Keats’s commitment to poetry was, emphatically, not a turning away from life. Poetry was to him a form of action, as healing and as necessary to the world as the medical profession he had trained in (and worked in as an apprentice); as interventionary - he hoped - as a life of political activism. It was Milton’s combination of engaged republicanism and poetic strength which made him so powerful a figure for Keats; which made him “an active friend to man in his life and since his death.” I don’t think Keats felt that Milton’s work as a poet and his political engagement were entirely separate matters. Good poetry - any good art which, like the Grecian urn, crosses time and space to show us our shared nature - can be as much a friend to man as any champion of popular freedom.

In September 1819 Henry Hunt, chief speaker at the reform meeting in Manchester, which had been turned into the Peterloo Massacre by armed and mounted government troops, arrived in London where he was arrested and sentenced to two and a half years imprisonment. An estimated 200,000 lined the streets; “they appeared to consist of nearly the entire population of the metropolis” (*Monthly Magazine*). “The whole distance from the Angel Islington to the Crown and Anchor (in the Strand) was lined with Multitudes,” writes Keats, who was among them to cheer Hunt on. A month later he writes to his friend Haydon: “I have done nothing - except for the amusement of a few people who refine upon their feelings till anything in the ununderstandable way will go down with them - people predisposed for sentiment. I have no cause to complain because I am certain any thing really fine will be felt. I have no doubt that if I had written *Othello* I should have been cheered by as good a mob as Hunt.”

At that point, exactly three years after his poetic arrival with the Chapman’s *Homer* sonnet, he had written most of the work that we know him by - “Isabella”, “The Eve of St. Agnes”, “Lamia”, all the great odes including “To Autumn”. His diffidence is unwarranted. But his conviction “that any thing really fine will be felt” shows a confidence in popular judgement which is linked at this point with his aggressive impatience towards a merely literary audience. He assumes that *Othello* is fine in a way which is commensurable with Hunt’s championing of

unfranchised labourers; he assumes that a great play is friend to man in a way that can be compared to the work of a popular reformer.

The London theatre certainly touched a wider cross-section of the population than poetry did. Keats loved it. According to his spiritual-monetarist principle that a thing is worth what it will fetch - that value is bestowed by the energy that rises to greet it - the theatres of central London - Covent Garden and Drury Lane - were worth a good deal to Keats. He and his brothers had moved to Hampstead in March 1817, as tenants of a postman in Well Walk. In December 1818, after Tom's death, he moved into the house now known as Keats House, then Wentworth Place, as tenant of his friend Charles Brown. Hampstead was then, as now, attractive to the well off. Before the advent of the railway, commuting from there to central London - and particularly returning - was an arduous business because of the hill. Many of those who lived in Hampstead ran their own carriages. But Keats did not belong to this category. There was a public coach service, but Hampstead was less well served in this way than other parts of Greater London. If Keats wanted to go to the theatre he often had to leg it. And this he very frequently did.

He quotes a friend of his as saying, "A poor man who wants a guinea cannot spend his 2 shillings better than at the theatre." In the early 19th century, an afternoon or evening at the theatre would almost always include more than one item, so that if Colly Cibber's reworking of *Richard III* (the source of 'off with his head!') didn't engage you, then the pantomime or comedy that followed might. Keats's immersion in theatre and his relish of it - pantomime and melodrama included - is evident, for example, in his description of the progress of claret through the brain: "The more ethereal part of it mounts into the brain, not assaulting the cerebral apartments like a bully in a bad house looking for his trull and hurrying from door to door bouncing against the wainscot; but rather walks like an Aladdin about his own enchanted palace so gently that you do not feel his step." The language of melodrama enters "The Eve of St. Agnes" at several moments: ("Hark! 'tis an elfin-storm from faery land, / Of haggard seeming, but a boon indeed.")

Keats was a good mimic - sometimes almost an involuntary one. He used the phrase "chameleon poet" to describe the imagination's self-transforming, self-annihilating powers - the poet "continually in for and filling some other body" - but he himself had the capacity which a good actor has of almost literally changing his shape and appearance. Michel Saint-Denis, the French director, describes in his book, *Training for Theatre* (1982) how he will ask a student "to find ways of transforming himself into a person whose nature, temperament and physique are as far removed from his own as possible... if he is short he should attempt to make himself tall; if thin, he should become fat; if delicate, full-blooded." He cites Olivier as an actor whose "body shrinks or stretches according to the role he has to act" and Alec Guinness as "often absolutely unrecognisable."

Keats, though small, could "seem like a tall man in a moment", especially when roused by any kind of oppression. He also had the ability to become what he was describing. He once told Clarke of an incident at a bear-baiting at which some young spark kept intervening: "his concurrent personification of the baiting, with his position - his arms and legs bent and shortened till he looked like Bruin on his hind legs, dabbing at his fore paws hither and thither, as the dogs snapped at him... now and then acting the gasp of one that had been suddenly caught and hugged - his own capacious mouth adding force to the personification." His talents in mimicry extended to taking the part of a musical instrument in the 'Concert parties' he and his friends enjoyed.

The best mimic of the day was Charles Mathews. In one of his letters Keats copies out a long and misogynistic passage of grotesque from Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, and then says, "I would give my favourite leg to have written this as a speech in a Play: with what effect could Mathews popgun it at the pit!" But the only actor he really admired was Edmund Kean, who incidentally did a very good imitation of a bassoon. (Lord Broughton recalled a dinner party with Byron and Kean and others, at which Kean "imitated the bassoon so wonderfully that we looked around to see if there were not someone playing that instrument in the room.") One of Kean's obituarists in 1833 described him as "a species of dramatic Napoleon". There was something heroic about his commitment to his roles: "He not only feels what he utters, but imparts his feelings to every spectator, & through the magic of sympathy transforms them into the being he is rather than represents." His energy, when he was healthy, was extraordinary. In one night, he told Lord Broughton, "he acted Shylock, danced on a tight rope, sang a song called The Storm, sparred with Mendosa, & then acted Three-Fingered Jack."

Keats never met Kean in a personal way, though he would have loved to do so. In a letter of 1817 he tells his brothers about a ghastly literary dinner party he'd attended, full of pseudo-clever, fashionable chat: "These men say things which make one start, without making one feel... they all know fashionables; they have a mannerism in their very eating and drinking, in their mere handling a Decanter - They talked of Kean and his low company. Would I were with that company instead of yours said I to myself!" Keats and Kean shared much more than initials, an enthusiasm for boxing and a propensity to imitate bassoons. Keats's love of Kean - whose response to Shakespeare was as intimate as his own - is full of a recognition which is ultimately self-recognition: "Other actors are continually thinking of their sum-total effect throughout a play. Kean delivers himself up to the instant feeling, without the shadow of a thought about anything else." John Donne's words about Magdalene Herbert ("That one might almost say, her body thought" ["The second Anniversarie"]) have been appropriated to describe both Keats and Kean.

Gesture for Keats was a way in to being. In September 1819, nine months after his brother Tom's death, he wrote to his remaining brother George, who had left for America with his wife fourteen months earlier: "our friends say I have altered completely - am not the same person - Our bodies every seven years are completely fresh materiald... We are like the relict garments of a Saint: the same and not the same: for the careful Monks patch it and patch it for St Anthony's shirt... 'Tis an uneasy thought that in seven years the same hands cannot greet each other again. All this may be obviated by a wilful and dramatic exercise of our Minds towards each other." That dramatic exercise of mind to mind is present in gestural, performative moments in the poetry ("This living hand... see here it is / I hold it towards you" - "this warm scribe my hand"); it is there again and again in the letters. In one he gives his brother and sister-in-law a minute description of his posture: "the fire is at its last click - I am sitting with my back to it with one foot rather askew upon the rug and the other with the heel a little elevated from the carpet." He tells them what books he has around him and asks them to give "a like description of yourselves, however it may be when you are writing to me - Could I see the same thing done of any man long since dead it would be a great delight: as to know in what position Shakespeare sat when he began 'To be or not to be'." Gesture, and physical placement - what is where and in relation to what - is as central to his poetry as it is to the work of a dramatist.

The gesture of Isabella, who has been digging fervently with her knife into the grave of her murdered lover Lorenzo and has stopped to kiss and tuck into her bodice the soiled glove she

has found in the grave: "Then 'gan she work again; nor stay'd her care, / But to throw back at times her veiling hair."; the careful placing of the dreamer-narrator and Moneta in "The Fall of Hyperion" show Keats's regard for what he called 'stationing' - something he admired very much in Milton. He loved Shakespeare - his relationship with Shakespeare was joyful, exhilarated, the most unfailingly vital of all his literary relationships. His study of Shakespeare included a dramaturgical interest in stage directions and bye-writing. He underlined almost all the stage directions in his copy of *The Tempest* and of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Given the nature of Keats's temperament, the physicality of his imagination, it is almost inevitable that he was drawn to writing for the theatre. "One of my Ambitions is to make as great a revolution in modern dramatic writing as Kean has done in acting; the other is to upset the drawling of the blue-stocking literary world." Again it is clear that his ambitions in theatre are linked to aggressive and disruptive feelings towards the sensitive reading public. He wrote this in August 1819 when he was being quite wilfully harsh towards his own most tender feelings. Almost everything had happened to him in the previous nine months: Tom had died of T.B. in December; he had fallen in love with Fanny Brawne, written "The Eve of St. Agnes", four odes and started "The Fall of Hyperion". Now he was in serious financial difficulty, and his hopes of marriage were consequently receding. In a mood of reckless despair he considered resuming his medical career as a ship's surgeon (a dreadful life in those days, as Barry Unsworth has shown). Less grandly, but more practically, he considered making a solitary living as a theatre critic. But play-writing might also be lucrative. Charles Brown, his landlord at Wentworth Place, had experience of this. In 1814 he had received £300 for a comic opera, *Narensky, or the Road to Yaroslav*, which had played at Drury Lane for ten nights (giving Brown a house ticket to that theatre in perpetuity). Bowing to Brown's superior know-how, Keats collaborated with him during the summer of 1819 on the tragedy *Otho the Great*. Its subject is the Hungarian uprising of 953 - the attempt to overthrow Otho I by Conrad and Otho's son Ludolph. It is not clear whether the choice of subject came from Brown or Keats - it was probably more Brown's project - but if it was Keats who decided on a rebellion as his subject it would be in keeping with the role that theatre writing played in his own life: a way of upsetting "the drawling of the Blue-stocking literary world". They worked together in a fairly unpromising way: Keats, never knowing what was going to happen from one scene to the next, would be given a set of events and characters by Brown and have to write it up as verse drama. Only when he got to the fifth act did Keats break away, saying Brown's outline was too full of incident and melodrama.

He didn't think that much of the end-product: workmanlike rather than the source of great pride. "Mine I am sure is a tolerable tragedy." But he did have practical hopes for it: "it would have been a bank to me." These hopes were dashed by the news that Kean, whom he had depended upon to play the part of Ludolph, had gone to America: "There is not another actor of Tragedy in all London or Europe."

Though nothing came of Keats's playwriting he was right to see that his gifts were naturally dramatic. In November 1819 he writes to his publisher John Taylor, "The little dramatic skill I may as yet have however badly it might show in a Drama would I think be sufficient for a Poem." He mentions "The Eve of St. Agnes". "Two or three such Poems, if God should spare me, written in the course of the next six years, would be a famous gradus ad parnassum altissimum - I mean they would nerve me up to the writing of a few fine Plays." Two months later, on 3 February 1820, on returning to Hampstead from central London by stage coach (he had travelled on the outside to save money) he suffered his first tubercular haemorrhage. The following September, on advice that another English winter would kill him, he leaves England,

Fanny Brawne - all that is dear to him. He tells John Taylor, "I shall endeavour to go through it... with the sensation of marching up against a Battery." "Nothing is so bad as want of health," he writes to his sister, "it makes one envy Scavengers and Cinder-sifters." A final glimpse of the London streets he was about to leave for ever.

In Rome, where he died on 23 February 1821, an English doctor lent him the works of Jeremy Taylor and procured a horse for him to ride to get some air. It is the first one hears of Keats's horse-riding - it may be that his father's fatal accident had put him off. In his last letter written to Charles Brown on 30 November 1820, he tells of his weakness of mind, but also reveals its still persisting vitality: "I am so weak (in mind) that I cannot bear the sight of any hand writing of a friend I love so much as you. Yet I ride the little horse - and at my worst, even in Quarantine, summoned up more puns, in a sort of desperation, in one week than in any year of my life."

© Elizabeth Cook