

THE SRPR REVIEW ESSAY:
TAKING JOY IN KEATS, THE COMEDIAN POET

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A Brighter Word Than Bright: Keats at Work
Dan Beachy-Quick
University of Iowa Press, 2013
184 pages; cloth, \$24.00

How to Make a Soul: The Wisdom of John Keats
Eric G. Wilson
Northwestern University Press, 2015
176 pages; paper, \$21.95

One of my favorite documents from Hyder Edward Rollins's *The Letters of John Keats*, still the standard scholarly edition of the poet's letters, is not a letter written *by* Keats but *to* him. It was sent on 17 August 1820 from the East Lothian Bank in Dunbar, Scotland, about thirty miles east of Edinburgh. The letter writer, John Aitken, was an employee at the bank and also an avid reader of Keats's poetry. After several sentences lauding the young poet ("I have watched over your dawning genius as warmly as if you had been my brother"), he gets to the point: he invites Keats to travel north so that he can live with Aitken and his sister, where the two of them will care for Keats as he attempts to convalesce.¹ Aitken is a stranger to Keats, and yet he feels such fraternal closeness to him, merely from reading his three volumes of poetry, that he offers this remarkable invitation out of the blue. But he goes further. He moves from hypothetical affect ("as if you had been my brother") to an expression of his genuine feelings in the moment: "In short I love you—(as you ~~will~~ must of necessity do me)—for yourself alone."² One witnesses Aitken writing himself into

¹ *The Letters of John Keats 1814–1821*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), 2:324–25. Hereafter abbreviated LJK.
² *Ibid.*, 2:325.

a bizarre conviction that his love for the poet will be returned to him, as he strikes through “will” and replaces it with “must.” And by the end of the letter, after imaging the scene of Keats’s arrival—“you will find me on the watch, as impatient to meet with you as if you were a young Lady”—he admits that “I have almost persuaded myself that you will in earnest visit me.”³

As far as we know, Keats never sent a reply, and who could blame him given that he was at that moment attempting to settle his affairs before sailing to Italy the next month. What matters here, though, is that long before Keats’s mythos as the poet cut down in his prime, fated to die in Rome disappointed in life and love, could be built up to such a magnitude that he would become one of the most lauded English poets, he already inspired the kind of intense devotion that we see on display in Aitken’s remarkable letter of August 1820. Yes, plenty of Keats love was expressed immediately after his death and in the years following, but that tended to come from those who knew him, like Percy Bysshe Shelley in his famous elegy, *Adonais*. Later decades certainly saw plenty of Keats love expressed by those who never knew him, but we can credit Aitken with perhaps the earliest effusion of this sort conveyed by someone whose knowledge of the poet came through nothing more than the poetry itself.

Keats love today is alive and well, perhaps even stronger than ever. This love manifests in some strange ways and in strange venues, such as *White Men Can’t Jump*, a film more famous for the line, “we goin’ Sizzler,” but which was preceded by another notable phrase: “‘A thing of beauty is a joy forever.’ My man John Keats said that. John Keats, that’s my man.”⁴ The internet has no shortage of quotations from Keats (and misquotations, and misattributions) circulating on image-sharing sites and elsewhere. The business guru/self-help writer Tom Asacker published in 2016 a book oddly titled *I am Keats: Escape Your Mind and Free Your Self**, which seems to take a bit too seriously Keats’s notion of the “camelion poet” having no identity itself, but rather the ability to occupy other bodies, selves, and objects.⁵

3 LKJ, 2:326.

4 *White Men Can’t Jump*, directed by Ron Shelton (1992; Twentieth Century Fox, 2002), DVD.

5 Tom Asacker, *I am Keats: Escape Your Mind and Free Your Self** (CreateSpace, 2016); LJK, 1:387.

In poetry and scholarship, of course, Keats fandom is likewise strong. Ann Wierda Rowland and Paul Westover term the phenomenon, not limited to Keats, as “author love,” which they analyze through a transatlantic lens in their edited collection.⁶ Rowland’s essay on Keats focuses on the “Keats lovers” centered in Boston around the turn of the twentieth century.⁷ Deidre Shauna Lynch identifies the nineteenth century as a particularly important moment in the cultural history of the “love” of literature, which commonly intersects with love for those who produce it.⁸ Jeffrey Robinson’s *Reception and Poetics in Keats* looks, in part, at how the reception of Keats across the last two hundred years has been filtered through and amplified by poets expressing their love for Keats, especially in the form of tribute poems.⁹ And of course the cult of the author benefits from biographical treatments, of which there is no shortage when it comes to Keats. Three landmark biographies—by Walter Jackson Bate, Aileen Ward, and Robert Gittings—were published in the 1960s. At least three more major biographies have followed since then: Andrew Motion’s, R. S. White’s, and, most recently, Nicholas Roe’s.¹⁰ Few other poets can lay claim to being the subject of six major literary biographies in the last half century or so.

Keats has also, especially recently, been the subject of nontraditional biographical works. Denise Gigante adopts the approach of

6 Paul Westover and Ann Wierda Rowland, eds., *Transatlantic Literature and Author Love in the Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

7 Ann Wierda Rowland, “Loving, Knowing, and Illustrating Keats: The Louis Arthur Holman Collection of Keats Iconography,” in *Transatlantic Literature and Author Love in the Nineteenth Century*, eds. Paul Westover and Ann Wierda Rowland (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 267–92.

8 Deidre Shauna Lynch, *Loving Literature: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

9 Jeffrey C. Robinson, *Reception and Poetics in Keats: “My Ended Poet”* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998).

10 Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963); Aileen Ward, *John Keats: The Making of a Poet* (New York: Viking, 1963); Robert Gittings, *John Keats* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1968); Andrew Motion, *Keats* (London: Faber & Faber, 1997); R. S. White, *John Keats: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Nicholas Roe, *John Keats: A New Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

a dual biography, examining together the lives of the Keats brothers, John and George, the latter of whom emigrated to Louisville, Kentucky, in 1818, and quickly became a prominent figure in the developing frontier town.¹¹ Poets have seemed particularly drawn to unconventional treatments of Keats's life. Both Amy Clampitt's "Voyages: A Homage to John Keats" and Tom Clark's *Junkets on a Sad Planet: Scenes from the Life of John Keats* refract the life through their lenses of poetic reimaginings.¹² More recently, one finds Stanley Plumly embarking on what he calls "a personal biography," with each chapter focused on "a single image, theme, or object relative to Keats's vulnerabilities as an individual and his strengths as an artist."¹³ That approach emerged from Plumly's conviction that "The power of Keats's story is so wrapped up in his young, drawn-out, painful death that it is almost impossible to separate that fact from the power of the poems."¹⁴ The third component of Plumly's approach—after the imagistic, fluid form and the constant focus on mortality—is intense devotion, even love: "Keats is not a poet one reads in half-portion, nor a man one comprehends without love."¹⁵

What, then, to make of this long history of loving Keats the man and making sense of Keats the poet through love for his short life? And perhaps more importantly, why does loving Keats always of necessity require an obsession with his death? In this essay I put forward some reasons why we should try to tell other stories about Keats, along with some instances of what those different tales have to say. There is much to gain from continued investment in life writing (and life reading?) as a mode of inquiry. I do not think we ought to avoid clear expressions of emotional investment in the human beings responsible for producing work to which we as scholars, poets, teachers, or others devote our own energies, even our own loves. Examinations of the love

¹¹ Denise Gigante, *The Keats Brothers: The Life of John and George* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

¹² Amy Clampitt, "Voyages: A Homage to John Keats," in *What the Light Was Like* (New York: Knopf, 1985); Tom Clark, *Junkets on a Sad Planet: Scenes from the Life of John Keats* (Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1993).

¹³ Stanley Plumly, *Posthumous Keats: A Personal Biography* (New York: Norton, 2008), 18.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

we feel toward authors and their works ought to enable us to reach a broader audience than the traditional (and small) academic one, and they ought also to help create intersections among and engagements between the work of academics and poets (while recognizing, of course, that those two categories often overlap). But haven't we killed off Keats enough times by now? If we are to make valuable the work of loving literature (and particularly by embracing a version of "strategic presentism," a term I return to and define further on in this essay), then with respect to Keats, we need to remember the joy as well as the sorrow, the comic as well as the serious, and the life over and above the death. In a manner similar to Mary Ruefle's call for a moratorium on Keats's term "negative capability," itself often allied with seriousness and death, I call for us to take a break from killing Keats for a while.¹⁶ Let's instead take joy in Keats without always nodding to the reaper lurking in the wings.

The two books which have helped me come to these conclusions are both works I admire greatly: Dan Beachy-Quick's *A Brighter Word Than Bright: Keats at Work* and Eric G. Wilson's *How to Make a Soul: The Wisdom of John Keats*. They each offer models for how the work of reading, writing, and thinking about poetry can intersect with forms of affective investment which we traditionally seek to abandon in the name of disinterest. But they both also end up much more than half in love with Keats's death, at times in ways that owe less to Keats's life and works than to the constructed narratives about them which have calcified over the last two centuries, such that assertions like Plumly's about the overriding force of mortality on Keats's poetic career are accepted without question. To think through ways of loving *living* Keats over the *dying* one, I turn at the essay's conclusion to Keats's late poetry, which typically reinforces a focus on the latter over the former. As I argue, there are many strands of Keats's late poetry which suggest that comedy remained an important through line in the development of his work as a poet.

Beachy-Quick's *A Brighter Word Than Bright* adopts "two comingling methods: a set of portraits that privilege allegorical accuracy within a biographical frame, and a chronological reading of Keats's

¹⁶ Mary Ruefle, "On Fear," Poetry Foundation (June 1, 2012): <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/69815/on-fear>.

poems and letters, from 1816 to 1820, attending to the ways in which singular concerns grow adhesive, alter, and confound themselves as the man matures into the poet" (xvii). The latter method is, more or less, the prevailing tactic of conventional biographies of the poet. Walter Jackson Bate's *John Keats* arguably remains the most influential of the biographies from the last half century, and its influence is perhaps strongest in the way that it poses Keats's life as a narrative of poetic progress: the (boyish) man becoming the poet as his early failures develop into more fully realized late successes. Keats himself was deeply invested in allegory (his first poet-hero was Edmund Spenser), and particularly its applicability for making sense of the life of a poet. He famously wrote in a letter in February 1819 that "A Man's life of any worth is a continual allegory," and that Keats's second poet-hero, Shakespeare, "led a life of Allegory; his works are the comments on it—."¹⁷ It's tempting, of course, to treat Keats's own life as an allegory as well, especially since the story lends itself so well to it—it's full of tragic turns, heroic feats, and moments fraught with symbolic potential.

The narrative to which allegory always alludes in Beachy-Quick's analysis is what leads to the creation of the poem: to the poem as work, and the work of the poet to create it. Take his first allegorical portrait, that of "Young Keats, Weeping Beneath the Desk" (1). It concerns the first victim of the Keats family disease, tuberculosis (then known as consumption, among other names), which claimed the life of Keats's mother before it came for the three brothers: Tom (in 1818), John (in 1821), and George (in 1841)—only the youngest sibling, Fanny Keats, escaped the same fate, living to the age of eighty-six. Long before that, when John was fourteen years old, his mother, Frances Jennings Keats, succumbed to consumption, after having been nursed by her eldest son throughout much of 1809. When she died in March 1810, Keats was away at the Enfield School, and when he heard the news, he took refuge underneath the schoolmaster's desk.

Beachy-Quick's opening portrait uses this moment in Keats's "life of Allegory" to link the mourning of the boy with the burgeoning of the poet. In many ways, Keats's schooling, as one might expect, played a crucial role in setting him on the path to a literary life (there

¹⁷ LJK, 2:67.

he learned his love of poetry, he was schooled in the progressive politics that would help determine his early reception, and he gained an important mentor in Charles Cowden Clarke, the son of the schoolmaster).¹⁸ For Beachy-Quick the space under the schoolmaster's desk, and by extension the space of the school itself, becomes a nurturing "bower" for the mind of the boy who will become poet (1). It is also "a maternal housing" for his grief, with the "dark enclosure mimic[ing] the womb" and his "weeping below the desk prefigur[ing] a rebirth in which the man will sit before it and write those poems whose long concerns include what the relation of a mortal life is to beings immortal" (1). The eyes of the reader viewing this allegorical scene thus "see the young Keats mourning in the desk's dark cavern" as well as "the mature Keats reading at a desk, writing at a desk; those eyes also see that the grief-stricken child, and the poet gleaning from his mind the poem, do the same work at the same time" (2). In other words, Keats weeping under the desk is the originary scene of poetic work, where grief burrows into the soul and later blossoms into poetry.

It's a lovely account, and it's not wrong (could an allegorical portrait be "wrong," per se?). But what does this allegory tell us about Keats the poet? It certainly captures Keats's sense of the importance of melancholy, or "how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul."¹⁹ This is the Keats we've known for centuries, but it obscures another side of the poet that we ought to bring more consistently into the light. The origin of this story comes from Edward Holmes, a schoolmate of Keats who remained friendly with the poet until his death (although he was not one of the more intimate members of his social circle). Holmes's account was written late in 1846 and provided to Richard Monckton Milnes, who, armed with retrospective accounts such as Holmes's, published the first full biography of Keats in 1848. The anecdote about Keats's reaction to the news of his mother's death comes amidst a narrative pitched in a much less tragic key. Holmes seeks to amend a narrative touching on Keats's schooling which Charles Cowden Clarke had written for Milnes. Contra Clarke, Holmes explains that while Keats

¹⁸ *On the importance of Keats's education at Enfield*, see Nicholas Roe, *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

¹⁹ LJK, 2:102.

did eventually devote himself to diligent study of literature, he began his time at Enfield as a rough-and-tumble lad who “was noted for his indifference to lessons.”²⁰ Indeed, Keats, before the year surrounding his mother’s death, was a fighter: “His *penchant* was for fighting. He would fight any one—morning, noon, and night.”²¹ Holmes, who was “some years his junior,” found himself drawn to the “generosity & daring of his character” and sought to “woo his friendship,” which required “[fighting] several battles.” For Holmes, then, Keats was characterized in his youth by “pugnacity and generosity of disposition—in passions of tears or outrageous fits of laughter always in extremes will help to paint Keats in his boyhood.”²² What’s missing from Beachy-Quick’s portraiture is precisely this vitality and humor of young Keats. Of course, we shouldn’t ignore the grieving child proleptically summoning poetic resources he will harvest years later. We also shouldn’t ignore the wild boy laughing his head off.

I would argue that this particular aspect of young Keats would still be an important part of his poetic life even if he only ever operated in tragic emo mode once he began properly devoting himself to poetry around 1815–16. That, however, is not the case. Throughout the years during which he wrote the poems that would eventually find him “among the English Poets,” as he predicted, Keats was consistently enamored of humor, laughter, play, and joy.²³ With respect to these qualities, Eric G. Wilson spills more ink on them than does Beachy-Quick. From the beginning of *How to Make a Soul*, Wilson describes Keats as “elastic, funny, charitable, vivacious, brilliant,” along with the melancholic seriousness often associated with his success as a poet (x). Like Beachy-Quick, Wilson espouses the value of allegory in his approach to analyzing Keats’s life and work. The primary difference is that Wilson’s book is part biography, part memoir—Wilson intersperses his analyses of Keats’s life with reflections on his time leading a study abroad program in London,

20 The Keats Circle: Letters and Papers and More Letters and Poems of the Keats Circle, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 2:164.

21 *Ibid.*, 2:163–64.

22 *Ibid.*, 2:165.

23 LJK, 1:394.

which allowed him to teach Keats's poetry while visiting sites associated with the work. He admits that his original approach was a more traditional memoir "about how these experiences [i.e. visiting places connected with Keats] transformed me" (ix). Keats's commitment to "inhabit[ing] imaginatively the being of another," which Wilson calls "the most animated poetic and ethical state," is what convinced him to adopt a different approach, whereby Keats's life of allegory becomes a key to understanding Wilson's: "I discovered that I would best understand my connection to Keats, and to the world, if I negated, as best I could, my ego: let Keats be, and so, *be* Keats, and thus, and here the paradox, *be more* myself" (ix). In the process of using Keats's life to illuminate his own, Wilson hopes that the book will serve as a sort of poetic, philosophical guidebook to leading the good life: "I trust that the Keatsian wisdom that so enlivened me will vitalize you, that in the glass of this allegory you will see your most loved and hated parts newly, and reform what you will, and become refreshed" (x).

At the core of Wilson's appreciation of Keats is the insistence on empathy as the key to "soul-making," and also the necessity of "a World of Pain and troubles" to cultivate the empathetic imagination.²⁴ But part of Keats's wisdom, according to Wilson, also comes from Keats's "uses of irony and comedy" (x). Indeed, there is at least one extended section devoted to the topic early in the book. Wilson discusses Keats's criticism of the egotism of poets, especially his comments in a letter to his friend John Hamilton Reynolds that "We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us," as if the poems were like flowers "crying out 'admire me I am a violet! dote upon me I am a primrose!'"²⁵ There is also a brief mention of Keats's preference for "humor" over "wit," which Wilson glosses as choosing "a more robust form of comedy, funniness with affect: the belly laugh, not the chuckle" (37). But Wilson's invocation of irony and comedy mostly serves as a way to pivot toward that most nebulous (and serious) of Keatsian concepts: negative capability, which Keats coins in the same letter in which he distinguishes between humor and wit. Admirably, Wilson recognizes that we ought to connect Keats's humor/wit distinction

²⁴ LJK, 2:102.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:224.

with the “dispute” / “disquisition” one that leads to the sudden recognition which becomes named negative capability (Keats writes of his realization, “I had not a dispute but a disquisition with Dilke... & at once it struck me...”).²⁶ Wilson notes that “disquisition” is “the ‘wit’ of the philosophical realm... overly formal, removed from the unpredictable shifts of actual thinking,” while “dispute” belongs to humor, to “improvisation, openness, exuberance” (37). After making this assertion, however, Wilson typically ends up back at a reading of negative capability that dispenses with those qualities. It becomes preparation for “the poet to empathize with the muddled world” (37); an acceptance of “nothingness” (46); or a “quivering in doubt” (140). All fine and good, but whither the exuberance and the belly laugh? All too often it seems that such qualities in Keats are merely preludes to the main event: tragedy, sorrow, death.

It is true that death tends to come after, say, life. One can certainly understand the allure of joy / life / pleasure narratively preceding their opposites. The problem is when we keep introducing death so early and insistently in Keats’s allegorical chronology. Both Beachy-Quick and Wilson devote significant space to a period in Keats’s life which happens to fall exactly two hundred years ago from this reviewer’s writing. Let’s use that bicentenary occasion to see what sort of life (and, of course, death) they create for Keats in their narratives. If you were to rely primarily on their accounts, you’d not be remiss in assuming that Keats was already in summer 1818 not only knocking at death’s door but closing it behind him, hanging his hat, and putting on his slippers. From the end of June until early August, Keats and his friend Charles Brown traveled throughout northern England and Scotland, and it was certainly a difficult trip marked by exactly the kind of privations one might expect from traveling over 600 miles on foot (and another 400 via other means). There were sore feet, worn-out coats, less-than-ideal accommodations, unsatisfying meals, cold and rainy days, excessive amounts of whisky, and far too many gadflies.²⁷ Towards the end of July, Keats came down with a

²⁶ LJK, 1:193.

²⁷ *One of Keats’s comic poems from the trip is a song upon the ever-present gadfly, in which he imagines all the other people who deserve its sting more than he does.*

sore throat that lingered for a while, and it *may* have been connected with the mycobacteria tuberculosis that *may* have already been latent in his body. But here is how Beachy-Quick reads the situation: “His sore throat comes to him almost as an abstract prophecy, warning him his days are dwindling” (74). Wilson takes it to a further extreme of definitiveness: “John Keats is *certain* he is going to die soon” (63). In support of their assertions, both authors cite this comment from a letter Keats wrote from Scotland in late July 1818 to his friend Benjamin Bailey: “more than once I intend to pass a whole year with George [Keats’s brother, who had just emigrated to America] if I live to the completion of the three next.”²⁸ One questions how Keats’s “if” so easily becomes Wilson’s “*certain*.” If Keats had lived beyond those three years, would we ascribe such certitude to what is a momentary offhand comment? Similarly, would we declare, as Beachy-Quick does, that “a presentiment was upon him” when reading Keats’s opening line of his sonnet written while visiting Robert Burns’s birthplace—“This mortal body of a thousand days”—if that body had more than another 959 days left when it wrote the poem? (54). All too often, we use the fact of Keats’s early death to lend greater significance to any hint of awareness of his own mortality he may have experienced years earlier.

In the case of Keats’s sonnet in which he refers to himself as a “mortal body of a thousand days”—which, by the by, could be interpreted in other ways than as a prediction of his remaining days as a living body—Keats himself didn’t make much of the poem. He mentions it in two different letters, but only to say, both times, it’s too bad to include therein (“I wrote a sonnet for the mere sake of writing some lines under the roof—they are so bad I cannot transcribe them”; “I was determined to write a sonnet in the Cottage—I did—but it is so bad I cannot venture it here”).²⁹ That’s also true of several other things he wrote during summer 1818. Beachy-Quick and Wilson both discuss some of Keats’s more serious attempts from this period, poems which Keats thought little of. I’ve got nothing of making a mountain out of a poetic mole-hill, but let’s pay attention also to the comic ones. One of Keats’s best comic poems, in this

²⁸ LJK, 1:324.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:324, 332.

writer's estimation, comes from a letter to his younger sister Fanny on 3 July 1818: "There was a naughty Boy."³⁰ Like "This mortal body of a thousand days," written a week later, Keats disowns the poem after copying it, writing to his sister, "My dear Fanny I am ashamed of writing you such stuff."³¹ He blames it on his fatigue from walking all day, which then leads him into another comic outburst, this time in prose, explaining that he's "so fatigued that when I am asleep you might sew my nose to my great toe and trundle me round the town like a Hoop without waking me."³² Hardly the image of a dying poet who knows he's dying and who Beachy-Quick compares to "another poet descending into hell" (54). (It's true: Keats brought with him a translation of Dante—although not just *Inferno*, but *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* as well.) Nor does Keats rolling around town as a human Hula-Hoop resemble someone who will soon experience "his mortality's apocalypse," as Wilson puts it (68). That is not to say that Keats did not think about his own mortality during this trip. He certainly did! But he also spent much of his time, as far as we can tell from his writings, living his best life: joking with his pal Brown, climbing mountains, drinking whisky, admiring country folk dances, hearing bagpipes (OK, he wasn't crazy about that one), and, as he writes in his last letter from the trip, being "*werry* romantic indeed, among these Mountains & Lakes."³³ He and Brown are young adventurers seeking, and finding, physical exertion (recall the 600-plus miles walked), poetic inspiration ("I shall learn poetry here and shall henceforth write more than ever"), playful ribaldry ("Here's Brown going on...he says 'The Lady of the Lake went to Rock herself to sleep on Arthur's seat and the Lord of the Isles coming to Press a Piece and seeing her Assleap remembered their last meeting at Cony stone Water"), and committing to continue living such a life ("Things like these [i.e. love of friends and family], and they are real, have made me resolve to have a care of my health.")³⁴ In the accounts of Keats's trip by Beachy-Quick and Wilson, this

30 LJK, 1:312–15. Often anthologized as "Song of Myself."

31 *Ibid.*, 1:315.

32 *Ibid.*, 1:315–16.

33 *Ibid.*, 1:360.

34 *Ibid.*, 1:301, 333, 325.

vivacity, this playfulness, and this devotion to living are nowhere to be found.

After the summer of 1818 it is true that Keats would go on to experience serious challenges to living a joyful life. His brother Tom dies in December 1818, and although Keats spends almost two years with his beloved Fanny Brawne, that time is marked by the impossibility of their circumstances, with Keats's finances and ailing health preventing their marriage. But throughout this period, Keats continues to invest in the necessity of both melancholy *and* joy, and while it may seem from accounts like Beachy-Quick's and Wilson's that the latter half of that occasion disappears, there are good reasons to keep emphasizing the extent to which even Keats's late work is marked by humor, vitality, and joy. The great odes are often read as meditations on the commingling of joy and sorrow, and I would certainly have to forfeit my claim to being a card-carrying Keatsian if I disagreed with that assertion. Those are not Keats's only poems from the period, though. Many of his comic poems are not published during his lifetime, but even if we first limit ourselves to published ones, one finds a surprising amount of comedy in Keats's final volume of poetry, *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems* (1820). In addition to the odes which account for much of Keats's poetic reputation, this volume also included several lighter verses: "Fancy," "Ode" ("Bards of passion and of mirth"), "Lines on the Mermaid Tavern," and "Robin Hood."³⁵ If the five "great odes" from the 1820 volume get all the attention, then we overlook Keats's inclusion of almost as many poems in that same book which are pitched in a higher, more playful key.

Even the volume's narrative poems, which, for good reason, tend not to be associated with comedy or levity, nonetheless all have moments of humor and joy. There is the macabre humor of *Isabella*, with the grisly and self-consciously over-the-top image of the eponymous heroine combing the hair of the disembodied head of her lover easily counting as the most macabre moment. But much of the comedy in all three of the narrative poems comes in the form of satire. In *Isabella* we witness Keats's fierce attack on the greed of capitalist accumulation,

³⁵ *The four poems were printed together in that order, following "Ode to Psyche" and preceding "To Autumn."*

embodied in Isabella's brothers, the "ledger-men" who are "Each richer by his being a murderer."³⁶ Their direct slaying of Lorenzo in order to prevent him, a mere pauper, from marrying their sister is just another piece of their industriousness, akin to all the other laborers who toil or die in their service ("for them many a weary hand did swelt / In torched mines and noisy factories" [107–8]). *Lamia* and *The Eve of St. Agnes* also have subtle strains of satire which at times surface more directly. The final stanza of the latter poem has always struck me as oddly biting in its sudden rejection of romance (the genre, but also romantic love). The two lovers, Madeline and Porphyro, flee the castle to get married and live their life together after Porphyro "hoodwink[s]" (70) Madeline into having sex with him, and then Keats suddenly declares, "storytime's over, everybody!" Turns out that all happened "ages long ago," and in the aftermath all of Madeline's family "Were long be-nightmar'd"; her nursemaid, Angela "Died palsy-twitch'd, with meagre face deform" (370, 375, 376); and the "Beadsman" who began the poem "all night kept awake," praying "for sinners' sake" (27) ends doing much the same, and to no avail: "The Beadsman, after thousand aves told, / For aye unsought for slept among his ashes cold" (377–78). Like *Isabella*, *The Eve of St. Agnes* could easily, with a few tweaks, morph into a belly-laughter-inducing poem, as opposed to the awkward-laughter-inducing one that it is.³⁷

In *Lamia* we see even more of an inclination on Keats's part to use the poem to elicit some laughs. It opens with another tense situation revolving around sexual economy. In this case, the god Hermes has left Olympus "bent warm on amorous theft" (Part 1, line 8). The object of his desire is a nymph whom the titular character has hidden from view with a magic spell. When *Lamia* encounters Hermes, she essentially trolls him! She knows that Hermes has come in search of the nymph

36 The Poems of John Keats, ed. Jack Stillinger (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1978), 250, 253. Hereafter abbreviated PJK. All references to Keats's poetry are to this edition, with citations to line numbers in parentheses to follow unless otherwise noted.

37 Keats's proposed change to this final stanza, which his publishers talked him out of, represents an even stronger shift of tone toward the darkly comic: "Angela went off / Twitch'd by the palsy: — and with face deform / The Beadsman stiffen'd — 'twixt a sigh and laugh, / Ta'en sudden from his beads by one weak little cough" (PJK, 318).

whom Lamia herself has made it impossible for anyone to see, and she coyly asks of the god, “hast thou found the maid?” (1, 80). Well of course he hasn’t, thanks to Lamia: “by my power is her beauty veil’d / To keep it unaffronted, unassail’d / By the love-glances of unlovely eyes” (1, 100–2). She merely uses Hermes’s blinding desire to her own advantage, essentially trading access to the nymph in exchange for Hermes transforming Lamia back into the form of a woman (by the way, she begins the poem in snake form—forgot to mention that).

The poem’s interest in satirizing male desire, and also analogizing that desire with aesthetic consumption, continues in the narrative proper, in which Lamia “entangle[s], trammel[s] up and snare[s]” young Lycius (2, 52–3). The pair spend a while embowered in bliss, until Lycius decides it’s time to show off his treasure: “What mortal hath a prize, that other men / May be confounded and abash’d withal, / But lets it sometimes pace abroad majestic, / And triumph” (2, 57–60). Of course, it’s throwing pearls to swine (in her snake form, Lamia “had a woman’s mouth with all its pearls complete” [1, 60]), but Lycius nonetheless demands they display their love in public. Here’s how Keats describes the behavior of their sophisticated wedding guests:

And, as the pleasant appetite entic’d,
Gush came the wine, and sheer the meats were slic’d.
Soft went the music; the flat salver sang
Kiss’d by the emptied goblet,—and again it rang:
Swift bustled by the servants:—here’s a health
Cries one—another—then, as if by stealth,
A Glutton drains a cup of Helicon,
Too fast down, down his throat the brief delight is gone.
“Where is that Music?” cries a Lady fair.
“Aye, where is it my dear? Up in the air”?
Another whispers “Poo!” saith Glutton “Mum!”
Then makes his shiny mouth a napkin for his thumb.³⁸

Keats ended up cutting this section from the poem (sorry to trick you momentarily!), but it nonetheless demonstrates Keats’s inclination toward experimenting with a more outwardly funny style. The mouth-as-napkin bit is a particularly clever way of poking fun at an infantile glutton with no real taste. We might even read the “Lady

³⁸ PJK, 470. *These excised lines also appear in LJK, 2:159.*

fair" inquiring after "that Music" as a bit of self-parody, given the similarity to the closing of "Ode to a Nightingale." Unlike the more serious speaker of that poem, here we have funny Keats cutting and hashing these epicureans, with whom he at times grouped himself (think of his many paeans to claret).³⁹ We see in this moment from *Lamia*, ultimately excised, the allure of comic poetry for Keats, and his readiness to employ it even in the context of what we typically read as one of his more serious poems. Although readers usually view as evidence of Keats's rejection of satire that he read Byron's *Don Juan* with disgust as he sailed toward Italy, we might also ascribe to his reaction a modicum of jealousy that he had yet to find that particular kind of voice in his own poetry (also, a poem detailing a shipwreck and the ensuing cannibalism is probably not the best choice of text to read while at sea).

The strongest evidence that Keats was invested in comedy at the end of his poetic career, when his premonition about his imminent death was much firmer than it would have been in 1818, is the last poem he worked on: the unfinished work sometimes referred to as *The Cap and Bells*, at other times *The Jealousies*, or as Keats liked to term it, his "Lucy Vaughn Lloyd," after the pseudonymous figure supposed to have written it.⁴⁰ As James Najarian points out, "no one is putting Keats's comic poems as his last utterance: it disturbs any extant reading of Keats biography."⁴¹ But we ought to disturb that reading. Marjorie Levinson famously claimed that had Keats lived he would have given up on writing poetry.⁴² I'd offer a slightly different prediction of Keats's lost future: had he lived, he would have turned to comic poetry. He had already done so in earnest, if one can earnestly write comic poetry, with his efforts on "Lucy Vaughn Lloyd." As far as we can tell from what we know about his composition history, he never

39 *One such paean: "now I like Claret whenever I can have Claret I must drink it. — 't is the only palate affair that I am at all sensual in"* (LJK, 2:64).

40 *He refers to the poem in this manner twice in letters.* LJK, 2:299, 316.

41 *James Najarian, Victorian Keats: Manliness, Sexuality and Desire (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 18.*

42 *Marjorie Levinson, Keats's Life of Allegory: The Origins of a Style (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 295. In her book's final sentence, Levinson "conjecture[s] for Keats, had he lived, a movement beyond writing."*

took up another project after he abandoned it. Or rather, he never returned to the project because he had no life left.

What he did produce with his final long poem is often dismissed as unsuccessful. One encounters a brief defense of it here and there. Nicholas Roe devotes a few pages to it in his biography of Keats, and he notes that it “had terrific potential.”⁴³ Richard Marggraf Turley in *Keats’s Boyish Imagination* uses it as an example showing that what he calls “maturational critique[s]”—readings of Keats’s poetic career as one of linear progression from juvenile and bad to mature and good—have to ignore significant features of that career which resist a purely progressive narrative.⁴⁴ Ralph Pite’s essay “Keats’s Last Works and His Posthumous Existence” is the most sustained criticism on the poem, which, he argues, represents an important shift in Keats’s approach to poetry which he never had time to fully develop.⁴⁵ And so, rather than dwelling again and again on Keats’s death and its significance to understanding his poetry, let’s instead try to imagine alternative futures that never came to pass. We’ve had enough of death. Pick up Keats’s last work and read his comic future therein.

And here’s the thing: Keats’s last poem is *funny*. It’s about the impending marriage of two immortal fairies, the Emperor Elfinan and the Princess Bellanaine. But they are both in love with mortal humans! The drama begins to unfold, with obvious satirical overtones addressing the Prince Regent’s habits, as we learn about Elfinan’s healthy sexual appetite for “maidens fair, / Whose lips were solid, whose soft hands were made / Of a mould and beauty, ripe and rare, / To pamper his slight wooing, warm yet staid” (5–8). Since mortal-on-immortal action is “forbidden by the law” (10), the clergy worry constantly: “They wept, he sinn’d, and still he would sin on, / They dreamt of sin, and he sinn’d while they slept” (15–6). Other topics are ripe for satire as well: Keats touches on publishing and publishers (“those sly compeers / Who rak’d up ev’ry fact against the dead” [88–9]),

⁴³ Roe, *John Keats*, 359.

⁴⁴ *Richard Marggraf Turley, Keats’s Boyish Imagination: The Politics of Immaturity* (London: Routledge, 2004), 7.

⁴⁵ *Ralph Pite, “Keats’s Last Works and His Posthumous Existence,” in Victorian Keats and Romantic Carlyle: The Fusions and Confusions of Literary Periods*, ed. C. C. Barfoot (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), 63–78.

modern urban travel ("Polluted jarvey! Ah, thou filthy hack!" [227]), and even some of his own poetical friends (the soothsayer *Hum*, who is "getting quite poetical!" [559] is a nod toward Leigh *Hunt*). We also encounter a section that calls to mind Keats's travel narrative from summer 1818—as Elfinan's minister Crafticant travels to retrieve the bride-to-be Bellanaine, he records a journal detailing their adventures. Like Keats, he spends plenty of time discussing the fare that supports them on their journey, although the Scottish oatcake is replaced by more appropriate food for fairies:

'Five minutes before one—brought down a moth
With my new double-barrel—stew'd the thighs,
And made a very tolerable broth—
Princess turn'd dainty, to our great surprise,
Alter'd her mind, and thought it very nice:
Seeing her pleasant, tried her with a pun—
She frown'd; a monstrous owl across us flies
About this time,—a sad old figure of fun;
Bad omen—this new match can't be a happy one.' (649–57)

The silliness of a fairy making a moth-broth after shooting it down with his new shotgun would have fit perfectly in a letter from Keats to his sister in July 1818. But here we encounter it in the final poem of his life, written at the end of 1819 and revisited in early 1820. The Keats who we so easily love to kill off—not, as Byron suspected, by one nasty "critique," but rather with many narratives of adulation—was perhaps made of sterner stuff. It's also worth noting that, like Crafticant on his international travel with Princess Bellanaine, Keats turned his attentions to punning on his final journey to Italy in late 1820. When his ship was kept in quarantine for ten days upon arrival in Naples, he cast away what by that time probably was fairly certain resignation about his fate and instead "summoned up more puns, in a sort of desperation, in one week than in any year of my life."⁴⁶ Yes, the desperation is there, and it is devastating, surely for Keats himself and for us who read about it later. But the puns were always ready to go too.

Lastly, then, why should we make such a fuss about saving Keats from a *Groundhog Day*-like series of deaths via our loving critical as-

⁴⁶ LJK, 2:360.

assessments? Keats is dead. He doesn't care. It's about what effect it has on us who remain living. Here I'm inspired by recent calls for "strategic presentism" in what we do as scholars, writers, thinkers, teachers. There is good reason to use our contemporary frames of reference to dictate how we historicize the past.⁴⁷ One simple way of putting the matter is that in 2018 we can't afford not to attend to the present. Given the seriousness of the state of the world right now, it might seem strange to advocate for a departure from dwelling on tragedy, suffering, and pain. But I'm suggesting we should do so within the realm of Keats studies. Do we still need to hear about the suffering of a young white dude from 200 years ago? Wouldn't it perhaps be wiser to hear the voices of others whose suffering hasn't been aired as consistently over that time period?

I also have a strategic presentist mindset governing my insistence of the necessity of joy, humor, and comedy. We've heard enough about Keats's suffering. But we can still learn about his humor as a tactic of resistance to dominant forms of power, control, and oppression. Keats recognizes that power in his negative capability letter, when he comments upon the victory of William Hone, who at the end of 1817 had been tried for blasphemy and emerged from court victorious. The trials Keats referred to as "very amusing" and "very encouraging," since "his *Not Guilty* is a thing, which not to have been, would have dulled still more Liberty's Emblazoning."⁴⁸ The victory for free speech makes sense as something "encouraging," but why "amusing?" Hone's defense strategy consisted of reading out loud in court from texts which engaged in precisely the same form of parody for which he was charged with blasphemy (parodying the language of the liturgy). Some of those already existing parodies had been written by members of the current government which was prosecuting Hone. The courtroom repeatedly erupted in laughter as Hone read the texts,

⁴⁷ For a valuable overview of some recent calls for strategic presentism over the last few years, see Wai Chee Dimock, "Historicism, Presentism, Futurism," *PMLA* 133.2 (March 2018), 257–63. Dimock glosses the perspective's fundamental principle as such: "Refusing to accept the past as a foregone conclusion, presentism refuses to accept the present as inevitable" (258). It thus represents an intellectual position which can help us to historicize better, and to do so with an eye toward how we might imagine and forge a better future.

⁴⁸ LJK, 1:191.

and the judge in the case, Lord Ellenborough, repeatedly and unsuccessfully tried to quell the unrest in the galleries. As Keats coins his seemingly most serious poetic concept, negative capability, he also has in mind the resources of comic writing for challenging power. To suggest that he would have given up "serious" poetry for "comic" poetry is not to suggest that his efforts would have been unserious. They just would have been funny while still doing the vital work of poetry. It's our job to make sure that such work continues today, and if we want Keats to help us do so, by all means let's keep writing works like Beachy-Quick's and Wilson's which merge the critical and the creative, the personal and the professional, the contemporary and the historical. But let's also do so while remembering the Keats who played practical jokes, punned for his life, and saw the potential of comic writing to make change in the world.