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 Excerpt
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CHAPTER I

*Life and times***To be a Poet, a poet among Men**

“O Poesy! for thee I grasp my pen / That am not yet a glorious denizen / Of thy wide heaven” – so pledged John Keats, ardently, energetically, as he hazarded a vocation.¹ It was a good time to be a poet. By the nineteenth century, English poetry was a celebrated heritage and ready for modern inspirations. Everyone was reading it, talking about it, even imagining poets as the voice of England. “Great spirits now on earth are sojourning,” Keats began a sonnet after visiting Benjamin Robert Haydon’s art-studio in November 1816. Haydon’s epic canvases (and epic self-confidence) fired Keats with a sense of a cultural momentum, inspiring a sonnet:

These, these will give the World another Heart
 And other Pulses — hear ye not the hum
 Of mighty workings? — — — — —
 Listen awhile ye Nations and be dumb!²

Haydon suggested the expressive dash, and he promised to send the sonnet to Wordsworth himself. Thrilled at the prospect, Keats wrote out a fresh draft (Haydon cadged it, sending a copy to Wordsworth). Wordsworth wrote back on 20 January 1817, jesting that the praises did not allow him and Haydon to be “deemed judges altogether impartial,” still thought it “vigorously conceived and well expressed,” especially the conclusion – all in all “good promise” in “young Keats.”³ Keats was over the moon. At Haydon’s studio, he had recited lines lovingly memorized from Wordsworth’s *Excursion*, about the “expansive and animating principle” of the old mythologies (IV.846–82), a passage that Haydon’s friend Hazlitt had praised (in these terms) in a review for *The Examiner*.⁴ Keats had Wordsworth’s 1815 *Poems* with him during his medical studies at Guy’s Hospital. When he met Wordsworth (who visited London early in 1818), he eagerly recited the “Hymn to Pan” from *Endymion* Book I to him. A “very pretty piece of Paganism,” said Wordsworth. Haydon thought this “unfeeling,” but

Wordsworth had more than once expressed a feeling for Paganism.⁵ In the sonnet that begins “The world is too much with us” (1807 *Poems*) Wordsworth yearns for nurture in a Pagan creed of a nature vital with spirits, and the passage in *The Excursion* speculates more fully on what it was like to live in such a world. Wordsworth kept his eye on Keats after this meeting, even writing to Haydon in January 1820 (congratulating him on his painting *Christ’s Entry into Jerusalem*, where Haydon had put him in the crowd, just below Keats): “How is Keates, he is a youth of promise too great for the sorry company he keeps” (i.e. Hunt, Hazlitt, and maybe Shelley).⁶

It was altogether a good time to be a poet. Publishers in London and Edinburgh had growing lists and paid popular poets well; regional publishers were taking risks; circulating libraries were multiplying; monthly magazines were welcoming. A career was possible. Robert Bloomfield’s *Farmer’s Boy* (1800) sold 25,000 copies in two years, prompting an advance in 1804 of more than £4,000 for another collection. Walter Scott made a fortune in poetry: in 1810 *The Lady of the Lake* sold over 20,000 copies (priced upscale, at two guineas, no less). *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, a “Romance” wandering with theatrical world-weariness, propelled Lord Byron to overnight fame in March 1812; in February 1814, his pirate-romance, *The Corsair*, sold 10,000 hot off the press, 20,000 within a fortnight.⁷ Notwithstanding Byron’s titled Lordship and his respect for eighteenth-century poets and poetics, the new poetry was eclectic and democratic, untethered from traditions of rhyme and meter, no longer the preserve of the elite or university culture. In 1818 Hazlitt, who also offered public lectures, introduced his series on English poetry (attended by Keats and everyone in London, it seems) by hailing a general franchise:

Many people suppose that poetry is something to be found only in books, contained in lines of ten syllables, with like endings: but wherever there is a sense of beauty, or power, or harmony, as in the motion of a wave of the sea, in the growth of a flower that “spreads its sweet leaves to the air, and dedicates its beauty to the sun,” — *there* is poetry in its birth.⁸

Keats could dream. “Hazlitt’s depth of taste,” he said, was a thing to “rejoice at.”⁹

Keats could also rejoice at the liberal wit of Hazlitt’s mapping eighteenth-century poetics as an *ancien régime* primed for a revolution of “something new and original”:

Our poetical literature had towards the close of the last century, degenerated into the most trite, insipid, and mechanical of all things, in the hands of the followers of Pope and the old French school of poetry. It wanted something

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to stir it up, and it found that something in the principles and events of the French revolution . . . The change in the belles-lettres was as complete, and to many persons as startling, as the change in politics, with which it went hand in hand. There was a mighty ferment in the heads of statesmen and poets . . . all was to be natural and new. Nothing that was established was to be tolerated . . . rhyme was looked upon as a relic of the feudal system, and regular metre was abolished along with regular government.¹⁰

While this was satiric hyperbole, it caught the revolutionary spirit of the 1790s for poets in 1818. How pleased Keats must have been to see *Endymion* advertised on the volume's back-page of "Books just published," third in a list dated "May 1, 1818." His first volume (1817) had been noticed for a style "vivacious, smart, witty, changeful, sparkling, and learned, – full of bright points and flashy expressions that strike and even seem to please by a sudden boldness of novelty."¹¹ One novelty Keats enjoyed was the "romance couplet." The neoclassic couplet was a symmetry of meter, syntax, and rhyme: "True ease in writing comes from art, not chance, / As those move easiest who have learn'd to dance" (so Pope's *Essay on Criticism* [1717] advised). The romance couplet was a liberal confection, flaunting varied meters, "feminine" rhymes (on an unstressed syllable), and enjambment (syntax "striding over" a line-end). You can see all this in Keats's "I'd wander / In happy silence, like the clear meander / Through its lone vales" (*Sleep and Poetry*, 73–75) – with a nice mimesis in wandering and meandering.

Hazlitt's satire of the new poetry as a wing of the French Revolution did not come out of left field. Or it did. He was jesting at the late-Toryism of "the present poet-laureat and the authors of the Lyrical Ballads" (*Lectures*, 320): Southey, Coleridge, and Wordsworth, former champions of the Revolution in 1789 and now post-Waterloo monarchists. France's revolution became a bloody civil war by 1792; Britain and France declared war in 1793, and soon after, Britain's security became the alert for suppressing civil liberties, hunting out treason, raising taxes, and relentlessly drafting young men into dangerous military service. Keats's generation grew up in the catastrophes and retrenchments of a long war. Even after its emergence as premier world-power after Waterloo (1815), Britain fortified itself with new controls and repressions, its conservative institutions policing anything that looked like opposition, even in arts and letters.

Hazlitt's poetry-politics was more than stand-up wit. It was a barometer of the prevailing review-culture. *Lyrical Ballads* was published anonymously in 1798 because of Coleridge's toxic reputation in political activism. Beyond this stigma, any poetry dignifying the grievances of commoners, peasants, shepherds, convicts, and children could be thought subversive of social

privileges and hierarchal stability.¹² On any scent of suspicion, political or literary, the conservative press rained down abuse. A prime target in Keats's day was Leigh Hunt, fearless editor of the liberal opposition weekly, *The Examiner*, published by his brother John, both of them fined and jailed for anti-government agitation. Also abused (just in print) was Hunt's friend Shelley: scion of the aristocracy, disciple of anarchist-philosopher William Godwin, expelled from Oxford for his pamphlet *The Necessity of Atheism* (a critique of the un-Christian Church of England), with fresh notoriety from *Queen Mab*, a poem that denounced "Kingcraft" and "Priestcraft."

In this political climate Keats debuted. Hunt's *Examiner* hosted his first publication, in May 1816.¹³ Then in the 1 December issue, an essay by Hunt introduced "Young Poets," the generation breaking away from the eighteenth-century regime: Shelley (whose first volume under his own name, *Alastor &c.*, had appeared in January and needed a boost); J. H. Reynolds, a publishing poet since 1812 (to whom Haydon had also shown Keats's "Great Spirits"); and the newest and youngest – "His name is JOHN KEATS." Hunt printed entire "On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer."¹⁴ It was only Keats's second publication, and a hearty cheer for the *Poems* due in March 1817 from publishers in Hunt's circle. Hunt fanned the promise with two more sonnets in February issues. Yet Hunt's wing was also a lightning-rod, and Keats was singed. The first reviews of *Poems* (beyond Hunt's circle) were uneven, and the most consequential ones came in 1818, in the wake of *Endymion* (Keats's major bid). The assailants were high-profile: a newcomer out to make a name with a bite, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, and the elder establishment *Quarterly Review*, published by John Murray, prime player in London's literary world (Byron, his star author) and Tory ally of Church and Crown.¹⁵

Keats's too happy paganism was interpreted politically, as a coded rebuke to established religion. (John Hunt put an excerpt of "Hymn to Pan" in *The Yellow Dwarf*, a brief-lived weekly of oppositional journalism.¹⁶) *Blackwood's* branded the counter-cultural insurgency "Cockney," a cover-term for political opposition, heresy, lower-class vulgarity, unmanliness, immaturity, poetic license, and moral licentiousness. In the launch of a series, in October 1817, reviewer "Z" had arraigned Leigh Hunt as headmaster of the "Cockney School of Poetry" and the "Cockney School of Politics," citing his protégé in a snarky epigraph promising more on

HUNT, and KEATS,
 The Muses' son of promise, and of what feats
 He yet may do.¹⁷ (2:38)

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The Muses' son of promise was pared to Hunt's scion of promise. Meanly paired, meanly rhymed, Keats registered the forecast. Writing to his friend Benjamin Bailey with a rueful punning on "*Endinburgh*," he pressed "Magazine" into a military arsenal:

There has been a flaming attack upon Hunt in the *Endinburgh Magazine*—I never read any thing so virulent . . . These Philipics are to come out in Numbers—call'd 'the Cockney School of Poetry' There has been but one Number published—that on Hunt to which they have prefixed a Motto . . . Hunt and Keats in large Letters—I have no doubt that the second Number was intended for me. (3 November 1817; *K* 67)

Keats braced himself, while a challenge to Z for a duel of honor was sent to *Blackwood's* from *The Examiner's* publisher. Z blew this off, but Keats felt that were Z to serve him such "abuse," he would have to "call him to an account – if . . . we might possibly meet" (*K* 68). In June 1818 he replayed the November-jest to Bailey: "the *Endinburgh Magasine* in another blow up against Hunt calls me 'the amiable Mister Keats'" (*HK* 1.31.109).

He had to wait for "Cockney School IV," September 1818 (dated "August") for the aim of attack, now also naming "the Cockney School of Politics, as well as the Cockney School of Poetry" in the indictment (3:524). Z had a fresh arrow for his quiver from an unwitting Bailey, who, when he met Z that summer, hoped to endear him with the story of Keats's dedication to poetry amid his medical apprenticeship. Bailey was mortified to see it turned to satire. Keats was not only assailed as a proxy for Hunt but ridiculed for his aspirations, with contempt for manifold deficiencies: a no-count apothecary's apprentice, no title, no university degree, no family connections. If not the politics, Keats's "vulgar" style remained a focus in other reviews, and the "Cockney" brand held: loose poetics, erotic indulgences, pretentious classical allusions, and aspiration of parity with the great men of poetry, Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, even Wordsworth.

No less than the gatekeeping were the diminutions regularly applied to "Johnny Keats." He was acutely conscious of his small stature, and the way it could signify of unmanliness – this was one of the implications of the slur "Cockney." Keats was a beautiful boy, and a good looking young man, with large animated eyes, a great head of curly chestnut hair, and physically vigorous (until he began to fail from tuberculosis). But he was short, and so cartoonable: "Mr John Keats five foot high," he ironized himself ruefully in that letter to Bailey in the summer of 1818 (*L* 1:342). "You see what it is to be under six foot and not a lord," he grumbled early in 1819 on hearing himself described as "quite the little Poet," implying

Lord Byron's exemption (*L* 2:61; Byron had a half a foot on him). One of the first descriptions he gave of Fanny Brawne is that "she is about my height" (*L* 2:13), a self-measuring in more than inches.

The biggest flash in December 1816, however, was not Hunt's parade of "Young Poets." It was that under-six-foot celebrity lord – more particularly, Murray's white-hot sale of Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Canto III (electric sequel to the fame-maker of 1812). Hunt paused in this very essay for a remark of "delight" at Byron's "real feeling for numbers" (meters) inspired by "Nature" rather than rule-books (*Examiner* 761). Canto III sold about 7,000 copies right out the gate – and Byron wasn't even resident in England. A jealous Wordsworth took pains with friends to explain why the "nature" he described in *Tintern Abbey* was more authentic than his Lordship's Alpine operatics (*MY* 2:385). But he could weather the rivalry on the ground of an established career: two volumes in 1793, four editions of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798–1805), a two-volume *Poems* in 1807, *The Excursion* in 1814, and in 1815, a new romance, and a two-volume collected *Poems*. *Lyrical Ballads* may have seemed insurgent in 1802, but by 1818 Z could praise both "illustrious Lord" Byron and Wordsworth's "dignified purity," "noble compositions," and "patriarchal simplicity," to wield as a cudgel against Keats and Hunt.¹⁸

A further drag on Keats's aspiration to "man of letters" was his genre-set: not manly epic, tragedy, or edgy satire, but sonnets, lyrics, album verse, picturesque fancies, dreamy musings, and a dream-charged Romance, *Endymion*. Well into 1819 he was pegging redemption on the credit of a tragedy: "My name with the literary fashionables is vulgar – I am a weaver boy to them – A Tragedy would lift me out of this mess," he sighs to his brother and sister-in-law (*L* 2:186). No help to his mess was a new gender for the lighter genres, "female poetry." Although Hazlitt's lectures gave this poetry short, ungentle shrift, it was out there, far and wide. Charlotte Smith's most successful venture, from the 1780s into eight editions by 1800, was *Elegiac Sonnets*. Keats's Regency contemporary, "poetess" Felicia Hemans, was an international celebrity by 1818 – under Murray's imprint, no less. Keats, sensitive to the gender borders, could in some tempers camp it up, or launch extravagances too sensual to be "feminine" – all those luscious nymphs and burning lads in *Poems* and the patent lovemaking in *Endymion*. But it's telling that his poetry also, repeatedly (in *Endymion*, too), figures female powers as perils to young-manly self-possession: goddesses seductive and stern, enchanters alluring and fugitive, suspect modes, such as "Romance" and "Fancy," marked feminine. About actual women, Keats's letters show him by turns adoring, sympathetic, defensive, or hostile

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(especially about their claims as readers, writers, and arbiters). Surging with poetic genius, adolescent uncertainty, social anxiety, and cultural prejudice, Keats is a case study in gender-edginess.

His famous master-simile for human life as a progress through a “Mansion of Many Apartments” has a legible gender-track into manly maturity. Keats lays this out for Reynolds in a letter of 3 May 1818. We begin in an “infant or thoughtless Chamber”; then, “imperceptibly impelled by the awakening of [the] thinking principle,” we move into “the Chamber of Maiden-Thought,” a virginal feminine. Full of “pleasant wonders” and “delight,” this stage can’t last, and as thinking matures and sharpens, it mans up. Among the effects that thought “is father of,” says Keats, is a sharpened “vision into the heart and nature of Man – of convincing ones nerves” that the world is not full of delight but “Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness and oppression” (*K* 129–30). In this morphing from Maiden to Man, women remain creatures of simplicity, or, if not, look like shams. About their exercise of literary judgment, especially over matters of literary taste, Keats clubs with the guys, sneering at “Women, who having taken a snack or Luncheon of Literary scraps, set themselves up for towers of Babel in Languages Sapphos in Poetry” at the cost of “real feminine Modesty” (*K* 59). Writing a bitter sonnet “on Fame” (1819, not for publication) Keats satirizes fame-seeking as the courtship of a heartless girl, a promiscuous flirt. The “generallity of women,” he writes in October 1818 just after he met the love of his life, Fanny Brawne, strike him “as children to whom I would rather give a Sugar Plum than my time,” and no inducement to matrimony.¹⁹ Looking back in 1841, his friend, manly social and sexual adventurer Charles Brown, thought that this remark sounded a lot like Byron (*KC* 2:79). “He says he does not want ladies to read his poetry: that he writes for men,” Richard Woodhouse reported of Keats in September 1819 to his publisher, John Taylor, who was distressed that Keats seemed to be truckling in verse that “can only be read by Men” (*L* 2:163, 2:182).

Wanting to make his mark among literate, urbane men, Keats needed an ambitious genre-credential. No sooner did *Poems* appear in spring 1817 than he set *Endymion* as a “test, a trial of my Powers.”²⁰ “I have asked myself so often why I should be a Poet more than other Men,” he told Hunt as writing was underway, and gave eager answer: “What a thing to be in the Mouth of Fame” (May 1817; *K* 50). The real test and trial would not be so much writing *Endymion*, however, but weathering those first reviews. Hot on the heels of *Z*, *The Quarterly* twisted its barb: not that this poet lacks “powers of language, rays of fancy, and gleams of genius – he has all these,” it granted, winding up to a snide query if “Mr. Keats . . . be

his real name, for we almost doubt that any man in his senses would put his real name to such a rhapsody.” Here were rhymes, diction, and meters as ludicrous as its fantasy, all hallmarking a “disciple of the new school of what has been somewhere called Cockney poetry.”²¹ This was disingenuous; *The Quarterly* reviewer heard the call of *Blackwood’s*, and liked the unmanly slur of “Cockney.” “Damn them who could act in so cruel a way to a young man of undoubted Genius” for “imputed political Opinions,” fumed the publisher of *Endymion*, John Taylor, to another young talent he was encouraging, the rural poet John Clare.²²

For his part, Keats assured Taylor’s business partner, J. A. Hessey, “My own domestic criticism has given me pain without comparison beyond what Blackwood or the Quarterly could possibly inflict” and moreover, “no external praise can give me such a glow as my own solitary re-perception & ratification of what is fine” (8 October 1818; *K* 206–7). He devised the word *re-perception* for this accounting – a nice invention, in line with Keats’s neo-Shakespearean genius for devising words to become part of the English language.

Becoming Keats

John Keats (b. 31 October 1795) was the eldest of four children, their father the proprietor of a suburban London livery-stable, owned by his wife’s father. The siblings were George (b. 1797), Tom (b. 1799), and Fanny (b. 1803). Though not gentry, the family was able to send the boys to a progressive boarding school, Enfield Academy, Keats entering at age eight. But in April 1804 (Keats not yet nine), Mr. Keats died from injuries in a riding accident, and two months later, Mrs. Keats sent the children to her mother, quickly remarried, then disappeared from this second husband. Her affection for John was as doting as it was erratic, and he was devastated.

Enfield became a remedial home. Unlike many schools, it did not countenance corporal punishment or the terrors of hazing and bullying. The headmaster fostered a family culture, with progressive, interactive pedagogy, a care for arts, and a climate of civil and religious liberty. He subscribed to *The Examiner*, which Keats began reading, heroizing Hunt well before he met him. The headmaster’s son and assistant, Charles Cowden Clarke, was a generous mentor – one of many older men (Clarke was eight years senior) with a fraternal affection and lifelong support for beautiful, brilliant, engaging, endearing Keats. Everyone loved him (recalled Clarke) “for his terrier courage . . . his high-mindedness . . . his generosity.”

Keats was an insatiable reader, burning through every book in the library, with a passion for poetry, mythology, history, and the classics. To encourage adventures beyond assignments, the headmaster gave a prize for “the greatest quantity” and

such was Keats’s indefatigable energy for the last two or three successive half-years . . . he took the first prize by a considerable distance. He was at work before the first school-hour began, and that was at seven o’clock; almost all the intervening times of recreation were so devoted; and during the afternoon holidays, when all were at play, he would be in the school – almost the only one – at his Latin or French translation and so unconscious and regardless was he of the consequences of so close and persevering an application, that he never would have taken the necessary exercise had he not been sometimes driven out for the purpose by one of the masters.²³

Keats won one prize for translating the first book of Virgil’s *Aeneid*. He also loved Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Virgil’s *Eclogues*, Lemprière’s *Classical Dictionary*, and especially Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*. Clarke was astonished that when he lent Keats the first volume, he went through it “as a young horse would through a spring meadow – ramping!” (126). Reading was a world in which to lose himself: “In Spenser’s fairy land he was enchanted, breathed in a new world, and became another being,” recalled Brown; Keats “was entirely absorbed” when he read.²⁴

Four long years after she had vanished, Keats’s mother returned, racked with consumption. Barely into his teens, Keats managed her care and watched her die when he was fourteen. His grief was intense and prolonged, at times driving him to nook up under the headmaster’s desk. The emotional turbulence – deep love, abandonment, wounded grievance – would infuse his poetry with refuges and retreats, and haunt it with rapturously desired, inconstant women, iconic in the title *La belle dame sans merci*. There was further distress the next year, 1811, when the guardians appointed by his grandmother pulled fourteen-year-old Keats out of school and apprenticed him to a surgeon in the village of Edmonton – his life for the next five years. The loss of his mother had been partly assuaged by the secondary caring family at Enfield, and now this was extinguished, too.

Clarke had introduced him to art and music, contemporary literature and theater. Keats kept up the friendship, kept reading, kept translating the *Aeneid*. In October 1815 he began studies at Guy’s Hospital in south London, with lectures by leading scientists and physicians alternating with a grim world of physical distress, pain, and sad mortality. In March 1816 he became a dresser to the surgeons, ever more intimate with the mortal

body. From the squalor of London and Guy's horrific operating theaters, Enfield and the country seemed like paradise lost. That summer, always the adept student, and proficient in Latin, Keats aced a newly rigorous apothecary licensing exam. The next stage in his career would have been surgical training.

But his heart was in poetry – reading it, writing it, dreaming of being “a poet.” Along with his school-days’ enthusiasms, he was now reading Shakespeare, Chatterton, and the contemporaries, Hunt, Wordsworth, and Byron, even glancing at Katherine Phillips (seventeenth-century Anglo-Welsh poet) and his near contemporary poet Mary Tighe (who wrote an epic in Spenserian stanzas on Psyche – and so close to Keats’s bone). Responsive to beauty, curious about the world, alive to sensations, Keats had begun writing poems at age nineteen, during his apprenticeship. His first, 1814, was *Imitation of Spenser*, a jewel in skillfully crafted Spenserian stanzas. By 1815, amid medical studies in London, he was affecting “the poet” (recalled a fellow-student) “à la Byron” (*sic*), disdaining neckwear for a casual collar and ribbon, and occasionally sporting a moustache (*KC* 2:211). By 1816, encouraged by Clarke, he was writing in earnest: sonnets and lyrics, verse-epistles (to a friend, a mentor, and a brother), prospective pieces, romance sketches, and longer ventures of local description, mythological fancies, poetic aspirations. Clarke introduced him to Hunt and his dynamic circle of writers and artists. At legal adulthood on 31 October, cheered by friends and brothers, Keats gave up medicine for a gamble on poetry, innocently confident of a safety-net from his grandmother’s estate: £9,000 had been settled on the Keats children. But his guardian and the courts kept the bequest tied up for years, until after Keats’s death even. The brothers could have managed comfortably on the interest alone. Each child at age twenty-one would have had at least £3,000; invested at the usual return of 5 per cent, the annual income of £150 would have been comfortable in itself, and pooled, enough to secure modest independence from necessary employment. In May 1817, George, always more business-minded and aggressive in inquiry, informed John that “Money Troubles are to follow us up for some time to come perhaps for always.” In 1818 he decided to emigrate, with his new wife, to the US frontier state of Kentucky in search of a living, and this is where he spent the rest of his life.²⁵

Through Hunt, Keats soon met Haydon, who introduced him to the rough, grand sculpture-fragments known as the Elgin Marbles. These had been rescued/exported/pirated/plundered (depending on whom you ask): the removal of these sculptures from the Parthenon in Athens to Great Britain was a national controversy, and Haydon was a passionate