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# I

JOHN KANDL

## The politics of Keats's early poetry

### "Delight" with "liberty"

To read the public dimension of Keats's early poetry, particularly the pieces published in periodicals such as Leigh Hunt's *Examiner* and then gathered into the 1817 *Poems*, is not only to experience the stirrings of power unleashed in the poems of 1819–20 but also to recover a more pronounced public and political register than some later works would suggest. This chapter, without promoting public or political over personal and aesthetic intentions, shows how brilliantly Keats could join these interests.

#### Keats in *The Examiner*

Keats's public career begins with Leigh Hunt's essay, "Young Poets," in his weekly reform-minded newspaper, *The Examiner*, which quoted in full the sonnet *On First Looking into Chapman's Homer* (1 December 1816). Hunt, the editor, injected Keats (along with Shelley and J. H. Reynolds) into an arena of political controversy: fresh from two years in prison for "libeling" the Prince Regent, he was undaunted in his attacks on Tory corruption, and not shy about enlisting his literary enthusiasms to the cause.<sup>1</sup> In the language of a manifesto, Hunt promotes this new "school of poetry" to "extinguish the French one that has prevailed among us since the time of Charles the 2nd": the neoclassical "school" of order and decorum favored by the Tory establishment and epitomized by Alexander Pope (1688–1744), whose poetry was virtually synonymous with the well measured "heroic couplet," whose recurring models of style and decorum were the court and aristocratic culture, and whose brilliance, wit, and range of accomplishment were such that the first half of the eighteenth century was regarded as the "Age of Pope." Paradoxically but pointedly, Hunt's "new school" returns to older, truer values, meaning "to restore the same love of Nature, and of *thinking* instead of mere *talking*, which formerly rendered us real poets, and not merely versifying wits, and bead rollers of couplets" (as if poetry were written with an abacus). This critique is of a piece with Hunt's political rhetoric, in which a

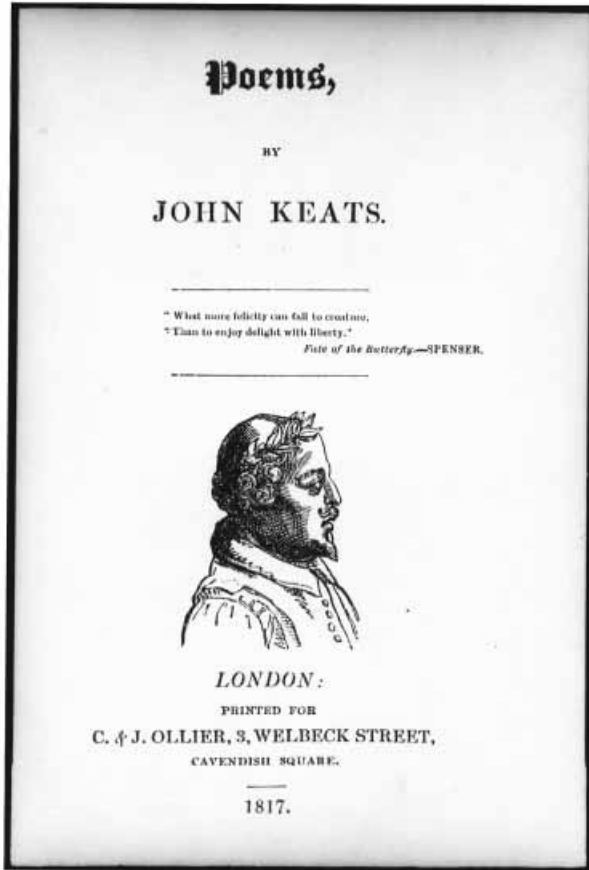


Figure 1. Title page of Keats's *Poems*, 1817. The identity of the profile has sustained a debate. Gregory Kucich reports that most of the early reviewers, noting the motto from Spenser, also took the head to be his, featured to announce Keats's reverence (*Keats, Shelley, & Romantic Spenserianism*, 145). Following this tradition, W. J. Bate still concedes some ambiguity: it "looks like a head of Shakespeare but is doubtless intended to be Spenser" (*John Keats*, 141). Stuart M. Sperry, Jr. means to resolve doubt, arguing that a "close inspection leaves no doubt [. . .] that the portrait was engraved after the Stratford monument bust of Shakespeare; and Woodhouse's underlined notation '*Shakespeare*,' directly beneath the head on the title page of his copy shows that he, at least, was under no misapprehension as to its identity" ("Richard Woodhouse's Interleaved and Annotated Copy of Keats's *Poems* [1817]," *Literary Monographs* 1, ed. Eric Rothstein and Thomas K. Dunseath [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967], 120–21, referring to the title page of Woodhouse's copy of *Poems* [plate, facing 128]) – a view endorsed by Jack Stillinger in *John Keats: Volume I: A Facsimile of Richard Woodhouse's Annotated Copy in the Huntington Library* (New York and London: Garland, 1985), 245. Even so, Woodhouse's apparent need to inscribe an identification, perhaps in reaction to the first reviews, confirms the informing ambiguity. Photograph by Jim Dusen.

more democratic and "Constitutionally" valid national past – pre-Restoration, usually read into the Elizabethan age or in figures such as Alfred the Great – is wielded against present corruptions. Although these ages were still monarchical, Hunt saw them as more populist-minded than the present Tory oligarchy. His "new school" issued more than an aesthetic challenge, then. It was a challenge to modern political authority, fronted in aesthetic terms.

Hunt prints *On First Looking into Chapman's Homer* as an illustration of his argument, and Keats returns the gesture, celebrating Chapman's Elizabethan translation of Homer, himself a touchstone of literary authority. Because it was Pope's Augustan translation, in tidy couplets, that was the celebrated standard, the political implication of arguing for Chapman's rougher, less courtly verse would be clear, as Hunt well knew. When Keats revised line seven for *Poems*, he strengthened the implication. In *The Examiner* this reads: "Yet could I never judge what men could mean"<sup>2</sup> – The occasion of the only fault Hunt could name, an awkward rhyme of "demesne" and "mean." Keats's revision, "Yet did I never breathe its pure serene," is not only an improvement, but one wrung and rung at the expense of a line from Pope's Homer – "When not a breath – disturbs the deep serene" – satirized by Hunt in *The Feast of the Poets* (1814).<sup>3</sup> To describe the new line as mere "translator-ese" (as Marjorie Levinson does)<sup>4</sup> is to miss this significance, for the translator-ese is originally Pope's, and Keats's revision (possibly Hunt's suggestion) is a sly parody, juxtaposing Pope's self-consciously "literary" diction against Chapman's more "natural" expression. Keats emphasizes the parody in shifting the verse from the patently literary metaphor, "breathing" (with its latinate punning on inspiration), to the more direct experiential language of hearing and speaking, conveyed as the high thin vowels of "breathe" and "serene" drop to sonorous "o"s in "loud" and "bold": "Yet did I never breathe its pure serene / Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold" (7–8).

Hunt's polemic for older values is matched by the way the ensuing sestet promotes images of discovery by pointing not to "new" realities, but to a newly gained consciousness of ancient and sublime "natural" wonders: "a new planet," "the Pacific" – geological equivalents of Homer, experienced through the ken of Chapman. Keats may even have intended "Cortez" as his beholder of "the Pacific" (11–12), which was already known by other explorers. Tennyson, in a schoolmasterly mood, thought this an error for Balboa (the first European to see the Pacific), but it is Cortez's "first looking" and not Balboa's unprecedented (from a Eurocentric view) discovery that shapes Keats's analogy. "Cortez," moreover, gilds the image with historical connotation – the imperialist power of the Spanish conquistador stalled in the Homeric sublime.<sup>5</sup>

The emphasis on who is surveying what “realms” – whether Pacific or Homeric – evokes a debate about political authority. Directly following “Young Poets” in *The Examiner*, Hunt placed an article by William Hazlitt (759) berating arguments in the Tory press for Royal “Legitimacy”: “this most barefaced of all impostures, this idiot sophism, this poor pettifogging pretext of arbitrary power, this bastard interpretation of divine right, – Legitimacy.” In the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars, with the impending restoration of monarchies throughout Europe, the question of “legitimate” poetic authority was inextricable from the political question. Both Hunt’s “new school” and Keats’s poem are situated within and thickened by this debate. Keats’s sonnet involves the question of political legitimation with his own most intense personal concern in 1816, his quest for poetic legitimation. Composed in a burst during a late night walk after reading Chapman with Charles Cowden Clarke, the poem must have felt like a revelation – a discovery of his own potential as a poet. Yet having made its debut in *The Examiner*, it was read less for this narrative than for its language of cultural and political reform.

“Young Poets” was the spur that goaded *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* to a series of articles titled “On the Cockney School of Poetry,” attacking first Hunt and then Keats, Hazlitt, Haydon (even, at times, Shelley and Byron, in so far as their poetry criticized or satirized the Tory regime). In the opening paragraph of its first “Cockney School” paper (October 1817), the author, signing himself “Z.,” “christens” Hunt’s “new school”:

It is strange that no one seems to think it at all necessary to say a single word about [a] new school of poetry which has of late sprung up among us. The school has not, I believe, as yet received a name, but if I may be permitted to have the honor of christening it, it may henceforth be referred to by the description of The Cockney School. Its chief Doctor and Professor is Mr. Leigh Hunt. [. . .] a man of little education. (38)

The slurs upon the Cockney lack of education, “vulgarity,” “effeminacy,” immorality, and inferior social class, are key moves in the Tory campaign to discredit the new school’s bid for cultural authority. As Z. would remind his readers in a later paper, “Keats belongs to the Cockney school of Politics as well as the Cockney School of Poetry” (August 1818, 524).

Before Z.’s first paper appeared, Keats was fueling Tory ire with other poems in *The Examiner*, also cast in the vocabulary of reform. His sonnet *To Kosciusko* (*Examiner* 16 February 1817) celebrates this Polish freedom-fighter in terms akin to those in Hunt’s “Political Examiner” editorials, which iconized Kosciusko as reformism in action, an antidote to political apostasy. In an article a few weeks before (12 January 1817), Hunt cele-



brated Kosciusko as the “head” of the “old lovers of freedom,” whom “We may expect [. . .] to speak and act again, if the world go on as it promises” (18). Keats's linking of Kosciusko to “Alfred” sustains Hunt's discourse of “old” liberties – his rant, for example in *The Examiner* of 2 March 1817, that “to have our liberties at the mercy of mere courtiers and official automations, with not an idea in their heads, is too humiliating to a nation that has had an ALFRED for a king, SHAKESPEARES and MILTONS for its poets, and SYDNEYS, MARVELLS and STEELES for its race of gentlemen” (129). Hunt derives political authority from poetic models, and Keats complements this by elevating political heroes with the language of poetic vision, treating them as a race of celestial sublimity:

Good Kosciusko! thy great name alone  
Is a full harvest whence to reap high feeling:  
It comes upon us like the glorious pealing  
Of the wide spheres – an everlasting tone:  
And now it tells me that in worlds unknown  
The names of Heroes, burst from clouds concealing,  
Are changed to harmonies, for ever stealing  
Through cloudless blue, around each silver throne.

To present these names “stealing” around a “throne” is more than celestial sublimity, however; it is political provocation. The final lines underscore the point:

Thy name with ALFRED'S, and the great of yore,  
Gently commingling, gives tremendous birth  
To a loud hymn, that sounds far, far away,  
To where the great God lives for evermore.

By this “commingling,” Keats consolidates a massive historical “authority” on behalf of the reform movement and gives it a sublime status. Invoking the music of the spheres and the “tremendous birth” of a “loud hymn” that reaches the ears of God – receding infinitely and eternally into the distance – Keats's roster not only steals a silver throne but more potently steals the thunder of the current “divine right” rhetoric. In this “tremendous birth,” the aesthetic sublime is inseparable from a political sublime.

### *Poems, 1817*

Published in advance of Z.'s first “Cockney School” paper, Keats's debut volume not only allies him with Hunt but also consolidates the claims Hunt made for him in “Young Poets.” Its construction is loosely symmetrical: two lengthy discursive poems bracket the volume, the untitled poem beginning

"I stood tip-toe upon a little hill" at the opening, and at the end (with a separate title-page), *Sleep and Poetry*, both in decisively non-Popian, "open" couplets.<sup>6</sup> In between are three sections: a set of poems invoking Spenserian romance and chivalry, a set of "Epistles" (announced by another internal title-page), then with another title-page, a sequence of "Sonnets" (some of these previously published in *The Examiner* and elsewhere). The opening and closing poems invoke and direct interpretive possibilities in these internal sections, even as they refer the collection as a whole to the aesthetic, erotic, and political heat of Hunt's *Story of Rimini* and the liberal-reformist editorials in *The Examiner* and *Champion*.<sup>7</sup>

The title-page and its sonnet of "Dedication" are the immediate public gestures and the most critically significant. "Practically every idea and motif in *Poems of 1817*," Jack Stillinger remarks, "can be seen as following from the opening proposition of the dedicatory sonnet 'To Leigh Hunt, Esq.'"<sup>8</sup> Stillinger notes the stylistic and ideological commitments of the opening line, "Glory and loveliness have passed away"; there is also political significance, of a piece with the title-page epigraph from Spenser (an early locus of glory and loveliness). This is from *Muiopotmos; or the Fate of the Butterfly*, a protest in behalf of "liberty," a political idea joined to a Huntian politics of "delight":

What more felicity can fall to creature,  
Than to enjoy delight with liberty.<sup>9</sup>

In *Muiopotmos*, these lines (209–10) voice a real question, for a "thousand perils lie in close awaite / About us dailie, to worke our decay" (221–22); indeed, in the last stanza, this free-ranging butterfly falls prey to a "tyrant" spider. Spenser's poem has been read as a political allegory, and Keats's epigraph pulls the potential references into Regency politics. But where Spenser was also concerned with constraints on liberty, morally desired and politically imposed, Keats was tweaking a Tory press all too ready to translate any brief for a "liberty" joined to sensuous "delight" as a front for licentiousness. "*License*," *The Quarterly* contended in reviewing Hunt's tale of adultery *Rimini*, is really what Hunt means when he "cries *liberty*" (January 1816; 474). Keats enlists Shakespeare in refuting the charge by placing an engraving of the laureled bard on the title-page just below Spenser's lines, blazoning the two Elizabethan poets against Tory aesthetic and political authority. The epigraph carried an additional political force in using Spenser to critique Wordsworth, now a political conservative, whose "Intimations" *Ode* (its revised version published in 1815) was ready to relinquish "Delight and liberty" as the "simple creed of Childhood," left behind in the growth of a "philosophic mind" (137–38) – a maturity that had given up political

reform in favor of spiritual equanimity. In retreat from the ideals of liberty and republicanism to which he was committed in the early 1790s, this "Wordsworth" was also in *The Examiner's* sights: Hunt often seemed to define his "new" school not just as a renaissance of the Renaissance but also, and more immediately, as a kind of pre-apostasy Lake School.

Keats's dedicatory sonnet not only trumpets Hunt's patronage but also his aesthetic and political objectives, infusing nature with classical mythology, the world of "Flora, and old Pan." The opening line, "Glory and loveliness have passed away," augments the title-page epigraph's potential reference to Wordsworth's *Ode*, which had lamented the passing of a metaphysical "glory" sensed only in earliest childhood. Keats's lament for lost "glory" is more publicly tuned, affiliated with a specific historical past and with the reform movement's rhetoric of a return to earlier Constitutional values. Any sounding of past glory, moreover – Keats's or Wordsworth's – would evoke the "Glorious" Revolution of 1688 and its summoning as a prime point of reference in the debates over the French Revolution in the 1790s.<sup>10</sup> Wordsworth philosophically mourns; Keats would reconstruct. His octave, ostensibly lamenting a death, revives as poetic personification the very ideals it misses:

GLORY and loveliness have passed away;  
For if we wander out in early morn,  
No wreathed incense do we see upborne  
Into the east, to meet the smiling day:  
No crowd of nymphs soft voic'd and young, and gay,  
In woven baskets bringing ears of corn,  
Roses, and pinks, and violets, to adorn  
The shrine of Flora in her early May.

Keats recreates what is "passed away" with a lushly imagined pagan religious offering, and in his sestet performs such an offering to Hunt:

But there are delights as high as these,  
And I shall ever bless my destiny,  
That in a time, when under pleasant trees  
Pan is no longer sought, I feel a free  
A leafy luxury, seeing I could please  
With these poor offerings, a man like thee.

For the lost world of glory and loveliness, Keats substitutes a modern fraternity of "free" aesthetics, inscribed in the enjambment of "free," the very syntax of liberty and delight. Keats's modest offering "To Leigh Hunt, Esq." is not just this poem but the "leafy luxury" of *Poems* itself. Such are the compensatory modern "delights" for which the poet blesses his "destiny,"

including the “delight with liberty” emblazoned on the title-page. Involving as well the libertarian associations of “Pan,” Keats’s “free” luxury combines reformist, erotic, and poetic implications.<sup>11</sup> Even his key words, “free” and “thee,” evoke a subtle field-rhyme with “Leigh” – indeed, all these associations concentrate in the signature “Leigh Hunt,” the Regency emblem of aesthetic, moral, and political liberty, and the name of the reformist values to which Keats eagerly dedicates his “destiny” and his book.

He makes good on these preliminaries with a host of Huntian stylistic practices that would soon be scorned as “Cockney” and that were conspicuously “modern.”<sup>12</sup> Keats does not employ these stylistics in a subtle manner but militantly out-Hunts Hunt. “A principle characteristic” of Keats’s early writing, stresses W. J. Bate, “is the extent to which he tries to exploit one device after another in order to depart from the various eighteenth-century norms of style. He does almost everything Hunt does, but he carries it further.”<sup>13</sup> Bate gives the inventory of Hunt’s signature style: Spenserian tropes of chivalry, open (non-Popian) couplets, “sentiment” conveyed with “easy sprightliness”:

Hence the coy terms (“a clipsome waist,” “with tip-toe looks,” “with thousand tiny hushings”); the distinctive way [Hunt] makes adjectives of verbs (“scattery light”), or adjectives of nouns (“flamy heart’s-ease,” “One of thy hills gleams bright and bosomy”); adverbs made of participles (“crushingly,” “tremblingly”); and the other mannerisms that Keats took over and used far more excessively than Hunt. There are also the stock words, usually nouns (“luxury”) or adjectives (“The birds to the *delicious* time are singing”). Finally there is what one can only call a certain would-be smartness that comes in the attempt to be colloquial, and is most glaring when the subject is serious.

(Bate, *John Keats*, 80)

The Huntian effects were palpable. Keats writes, “there crept / A little noiseless noise among the leaves, / Born of the very sigh that silence heaves” (“I stood tip-toe” 10–12). *The Quarterly* had nabbed “heaves” as one of Hunt’s favorites, citing twelve instances in *Rimini*. Critics then and now have lamented Hunt’s influence, or noted a few brilliantly original moments (the sonnets on Chapman’s Homer and on the Elgin Marbles), then moved quickly on to the later work, sometimes not even commenting on *Endymion* (1818).<sup>14</sup> While the association with Hunt made the conservative ridicule predictable, Keats’s style proved a strain even to favorably disposed readers: *Edinburgh Magazine* admired some of the *Poems*, but also regretted moments that seemed “perverse,” “common,” and “contemptuous.”<sup>15</sup>

Yet as Jerome McGann observes (noting this review), some of Keats’s contemporaries saw this poetry as “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." What later readers tended to despise as cloying sentimentality, Keats's contemporaries found innovative, even jarring.<sup>16</sup> For Keats, "experimental" meant a bold revision of traditional imagery, involving classical mythology, romance, and chivalry – all with Huntian connotations. As his dedicatory sonnet made clear, he shared Hunt's polemic for classical myth, not only for its sensual delight but also as a challenge to the authority of the Church of England. Keats and others knew that Hunt's sensual imagery of pagan nature worship (Hunt's religion of "chearfulness") was also intended as "a battering ram against Christianity" – so he wrote to Hunt himself in May 1817, referring to his editorial in *The Examiner* on 4 May (KL 1.137). In his "war with established power," Robert Ryan points out, Hunt matched his political attacks by fighting "with equal vigor, and sometimes with apparently greater relish, on the religious front"; "The *Examiner* regularly used 'Greek Religion' as a touchstone to suggest the moral and theological flaws in England's national religion."<sup>17</sup>

The other champion of classical mythology during the Regency was Wordsworth, and although he was no advocate of reform politics, his nostalgia for the imaginative vitality of the old myths impressed Keats, whose love of relevant passages in *The Excursion* prompted him to greet the poem (which had not been well reviewed when it appeared in 1814) as one of the three things to marvel at in the age (KL 1.203). What he admired and echoed in his own poetry were the passages of pagan enthusiasm for a "nature" informed with divine presences, an ancient pastoral realm in which humans communed with nature:

The nightly Hunter, lifting up his eyes  
Towards the crescent Moon, with grateful heart  
Called on the lovely wanderer who bestowed  
That timely light, to share his joyous sport:  
And hence, a beaming Goddess with her nymphs,  
Across the lawn and through the darksome grove,  
(Not unaccompanied with tuneful notes  
By echo multiplied from rock or cave)  
Swept in the storm of chase, as Moon and Stars  
Glance rapidly along the clouded heavens,  
When winds are blowing strong . . . (1814 text, 4.878–88)

What Keats didn't admire and was at pains to resist was Wordsworth's *modern* religion, a spiritual quietism too easily joined to political conservatism, if not an outright retreat.

The mythology of "I stood tip-toe" emerges from this ambivalence. It is at once nostalgically pagan but also pointedly modern and pointedly anti-Tory.

After an erotically charged recounting of mythological love affairs (Cupid and Psyche, Pan and Syrinx, Narcissus and Echo), Keats focuses intently upon the poetic intercourse of Endymion and Cynthia. This Endymion (not yet the hero of Keats's 4,000-line romance) is richly ambiguous. Keats presents him as a creation of poetry, born of a pagan poet's empathy for the lonely longings of the moon-goddess and a shepherd, but he is also a double for the modern poet – "He was a poet, sure a lover too" (193) – whose inspiration is the lovers' lack of liberty:

The Poet wept at her so piteous fate,  
Wept that such beauty should be desolate:  
So in fine wrath some golden sounds he won,  
And gave meek Cynthia her Endymion. (201–4)

The union of Endymion and Cynthia is poetically engendered, reflecting a poet's romance with the (natural) source of his inspiration. The action is also revolutionary: wrathfully breaking the Jovian edict that would keep Cynthia eternally chaste, this "Poet" releases not just these two but liberates a host of lovers from their states of isolation, oppression, or the repression that renders them the "languid sick" (223). The lovers awaken, gazing "clear eyed"

To see brightness in each others' eyes;  
And so they stood, fill'd with a sweet surprise,  
Until their tongues were loos'd in poesy (233–35)

This loosening inspires "poesy" with erotic liberty, while poetry itself is returned to its source in pagan myth, then projected as a communal emancipatory force:

Therefore, no lover did of anguish die:  
But the soft numbers, in that moment spoken,  
Made silken ties, that never may be broken. (236–38)

Keats's mythology is serenely earthbound; it is the healing, amatory, and generative powers of poetry and nature that he celebrates – with dramatically sexual resonances – imagining a kind of new millennium for lovers, healed through the bond of natural and imaginative forces. This is Hunt's poetry of cheerfulness in a Keatsian narrative of liberation from oppression.

In the final lines, wittily playing upon the erotic liberation of these "loos'd" lovers, Keats decorously acknowledges that he has taken Endymion and Cynthia as close to the actual sexual act as he prudently can: "Cynthia! I cannot tell the greater blisses, / That follow'd thine, and thy dear shepherd's kisses" (239–40). The immediately ensuing and often debated question – "Was there a Poet born?" (241) – puts a teasingly humorous emphasis on

the possible issue of the sexual union of this mortal and goddess, while seriously emphasizing the generative and regenerative potential of their symbolic fusion. The imaginative power of poetry is argued as transformative and implicitly revolutionary. Commenting on the Keatsian signature in this projection of love as a "communal bond," Paul de Man notes how "the union of Cynthia and Endymion spontaneously turns into a public feast, [a] kind of Rousseauistic brotherhood" of love widening into "a communal spirit of friendship with social and political overtones; something of the spirit of the French Revolution."<sup>18</sup>

Keats's final lines, however, shade these optimistic public resonances with anxiety over personal, poetic legitimacy. Its question – "Was there a Poet born?" – implicates Keats himself, as a poet potentially born of his own imagination. Yet "asked both *in* and *of* the tale," it is left open, suspended – "as a subject of speculation for reader and poet alike":<sup>19</sup> "Was there a Poet born? – but now no more, / My wand'ring spirit must no further soar. –" (241–42). One answer is spelled by the rest of the volume, which shows a poet at work and play. Moving from a sexually electrified classical mythology into poems of chivalry and romance, Keats summons another generic register. But it is no less contentious, for it also stamped by Hunt. The titles, *Specimen of an Induction to a Poem* and *Calidore. A Fragment*, advertise an experimental intent. Promising a revival of chivalric romance, Keats's poems are no "specimens" or "fragments" of medieval poetics; they are imitations of Spenserian romance in modern Huntian style. This is "Spenser" reconfigured for reformist purposes, shorn of his royalism and Christianity (still anti-Popian – only for this "Spenser" the Pope is Alexander).

Keats's "Spenser" is a talisman of "delight with liberty" – and as such his name becomes a public "crest" for the brotherhood defined by Keats and Hunt. In *Specimen*, Keats casts Hunt as Spenser's disciple, his "lov'd Libertas" (61) – the chivalric name honoring Hunt's courage in imprisonment and his status as a political prisoner and martyr of his political conscience.<sup>20</sup> As in the dedication and title-page, Spenser and Hunt are interfused with contemporary values of "liberty." Keats's *Imitation of Spenser* (in this same section) is also an imitation of Hunt. Huntian stylistics mark such phrases as "lawny crest" (3), "jetty eyes" (16), and "clouds of fleecy white" (27). As Andrew Motion points out, moreover, the peaceful Spenserian bower depicted is a political vision as well as a poetic retreat, "a miniature England that belongs to a specific historical context [. . .] the Peace between England and France, which was signed in Paris at the time it was written, and which Hunt also celebrated in an 'Ode to Spring' published in the *Examiner* in April 1814."<sup>21</sup>

Keats was aware that some of the poems of this section risked confusing

chivalric idealism with a mawkish sentimentality, especially *To Some Ladies; On receiving a curious Shell, and a Copy of Verses, from the same Ladies; To \*\*\**; and *To Hope*. Hence the disclaimer he inserts on the page after the dedicatory sonnet to Hunt: “The Short Pieces in the middle of this Book, as well as some of the Sonnets, were written at an earlier period than the rest of the Poems.” Even so, these poems, too, resonate with public issues. *To Hope* (which Keats dates at its end “February, 1815”) begins with a poet’s private, Coleridgean ruminations “by my solitary hearth,” but modulates into a public and political register:

In the long vista of the years to roll,  
 Let me not see our country’s honour fade:  
 O let me see our land retain its soul,  
 Her pride, her freedom; and not freedom’s shade. (31–34)

This broad view is politically specified in the next stanza:

Let me not see the patriot’s high bequest,  
 Great Liberty! how great in plain attire!  
 With the base purple of the court oppress’d,  
 Bowing her head, and ready to expire:  
 But let me see thee stoop from heaven on wings  
 That fill the skies with silver glitterings! (37–42)

The apostrophe to “Hope” that is the poem itself turns from private gloom and despondency with a burst of patriotic “Liberty,” fueled, as the stanza above shows, with an attack on the court – the plain attire of the patriots elevated over the the debased purple of an oppressive regime. In 1817, Keats knew his call to Hope would be heard as the voice of reform politics, a language in which private and public, aesthetic and political visions coalesce.

This interrelation is developed in the next section, the “Epistles.” Each is framed as a personal address to a friend about a shared concern with poetry and poetics; but “Epistle” is also a public genre, here addressed to the readers of *Poems*, construed as friends. Each epistle turns the personal letter at some point into a statement of a political commitment, privately validated. The first, *To George Felton Mathew*, celebrates a friendship between poets as a “brotherhood in song” (2), “brotherhood” evoking reform, indeed, revolutionary politics (“Liberty, Brotherhood, Equality” was the English translation of the French Revolutionary slogan). Keats does not amplify this implication but presents a battery of Italian, classical, and English pastoral associations, then modulates into a celebration of key poetic influences (Chatterton, Shakespeare, Milton), then a declaration of public poetic purpose:



## The politics of Keats's early poetry

We next could tell  
Of those who in the cause of freedom fell;  
Of our own Alfred, of Helvetian Tell;  
Of him whose name to ev'ry heart's a solace,  
High-minded and unbending William Wallace.  
While to the rugged north our musing turns  
We well might drop a tear for him, and Burns. (65-71)

The “brotherhood in song” publicizes its devotion to “the cause of freedom,” celebrating the Swiss and Scottish freedom fighters William Tell and William Wallace, as well as (again) Alfred the Great, and finally, Robert Burns, Scots patriot and champion of the French Revolution. Keats relates these inspiring figures to his courtship of the “Muse” and his pastoral fantasies, shaped with the early mythologies of “chaste Diana” and Apollo (72ff). This mythological turn is not a retreat from the political landscape, but a continuation of it in an aesthetic desire that artfully blends personal epistle into public declaration. The ideal of a “brotherhood in song” joins an intimately shared enthusiasm for poetry to a broad public purpose – underwritten by the sincere bonds of friendship.

This trope of privacy-in-public inhabits the next section, a set of sonnets, several cast as brief personal epistles, but by force of keeping company with the *Examiner* sonnets such as *Chapman's Homer* and *To Kosciusko*, acquiring some of this public energy. Some, moreover, have overt public reference and a political point. Sonnet III, *Written on the day that Mr. Leigh Hunt left Prison*, praises Hunt's attack on the Regent, the cause of his prison sentence. Keats renames the crime officially called “libel” as Hunt's daring “for showing truth to flatter'd state” (1), and he stresses the liberty of spirit that abided in the insulted state's apparatus of imprisonment. Hunt, like a modern-day Lovelace (for whom stone walls could “not a prison make”), has “In his immortal spirit, been as free / As the sky-searching lark, and as elate” (3-4). Hunt found in Spenser a way to enter “bowers fair, / Culling enchanted flowers,” and “he flew / With daring Milton through the fields of air” (9-11). Invoking Hunt's affection for and prison-reading of Milton and Spenser, the sonnet celebrates Hunt as a genius in their line and of their spirit: “To regions of his own his genius true / Took happy flights” (12-13). The State, Keats implies, might as well have (indeed, might have) imprisoned Spenser or Milton, and he closes with a direct, Huntian attack upon Hunt's appointed prosecutor: “Who shall his fame impair / When thou art dead, and all thy wretched crew?” (13-14). Addressing the Regent himself, the captain of that “wretched crew,” as “Minion of Grandeur” (5), and with Habeas Corpus just recently suspended (allowing indefinite imprisonment without trial), this is a bold charge for any young poet. It is as if Keats were

courting Huntian prosecution, Huntian punishment. The figurative joining of Milton and Spenser with Hunt, all “Culling enchanted flowers,” could be (and was) read by the Tory press only with disdain, as a Cockney attempt to claim these historical greats as honorary “Cockneys.”

To this visionary company, Sonnets XIII and XIV – *Addressed to Haydon* and *Addressed to the Same* – add the volatile Haydon, and even staid Wordsworth. Any poem naming Haydon would evoke his championing of the “Elgin Marbles” (the sculptural fragments Lord Elgin had removed earlier in the century from the Athenian acropolis, and which he wanted the state to purchase, at a considerable sum, for its “national” art collection). Byron had already attacked Elgin and Britain as pirates, robbing Greece of its treasures (*Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, Canto II), but others felt that Elgin deserved praise, the Greeks being unable to protect their treasures from Turkish vandalism, or worse, Napoleonic spoil. Others focused on the aesthetic (and relatedly, monetary) value: were these coarse refuse, or relics of former grandeur bearing the aura of ancient Greek Liberty? Keats joined the debate with two sonnets, not published in *Poems*, but concurrently in the journals, including *The Examiner*. His sonnets in *Poems* praise Haydon’s devotion to the Marbles, as well as his commitment as an artist to heroic subjects and heroic canvases. Keats celebrates him as “a stout unbending champion,” who “awes / Envy, and Malice to their native sty” (*Addressed to Haydon* 11–12) – “Envy” and “Malice” are epithets for Haydon’s opponents, derived from a current article in *The Quarterly*.<sup>22</sup> Keats reads Haydon’s triumph as a national plebeian victory: Haydon is the champion not only of the “Highmindedness” of “the great man’s fame” but also of its dwelling in “people of no name, / In noisome alley, and in pathless wood” (1–4) – those “Unnumber’d souls” who “breathe out a still applause, / Proud to behold him in his country’s eye” (13–14).

To make this point Keats quotes the phrase “singleness of aim” from Wordsworth’s *Character of the Happy Warrior* (*Poems*, 1815), subtly interpolating Wordsworth into this argument by reinforcing a public link between Haydon and Wordsworth recently forged by Wordsworth himself in his sonnet *To B. R. Haydon, Esq. (Champion)*, 1 April 1816). This link is strengthened in the companion sonnet, its first line, “Great spirits now on earth are sojourning,” not only echoing Wordsworth’s “Great men have been among us,” but also directly enlisting Wordsworth to first place on Keats’s roster:

He of the cloud, the cataract, the lake,  
Who on Helvellyn’s summit, wide awake,  
Catches his freshness from Archangel’s wing. (2–4)

Keats reclaims Tory Wordsworth for cultural reform. The next honoree is Hunt, "He of of the rose, the violet, the spring, / The social smile, the chain for Freedom's sake" (5–6), then Haydon, "whose steadfastness would never take / A meaner sound than Raphael's whispering" (7–8). Wordsworth's quasi-Miltonic visionary power, Haydon's defense of the Elgin Marbles, and Hunt's political martyrdom spell Keats's commitments, his ideology of greatness.

The name of Wordsworth was in play among both Tories and reformists. The *Quarterly* and *Edinburgh* reviewers, as well as Hunt, Hazlitt, and Shelley, alternately criticized and praised him; Haydon and Reynolds, Keats's most recent influences, worshipped him. Keats summons "Wordsworth" as validation for his project, closing "Great spirits" with the unlikely trio of him, Hunt, and Haydon as agents of change in what could be seen, in 1817, as a cultural and political challenge to a public sphere alive with discussions of "Secret Committee Reports" and the suspension of Habeas Corpus. All "Upon the forehead of the age to come," the trio is ready, Keats suggests, to advance aesthetic and political reform – and in the process, Britain's international prestige:

These, these will give the world another heart,  
And other pulses. Hear ye not the hum  
Of mighty workings? – –  
Listen awhile ye nations . . .

(11–14)

As with the conclusion of *Written on the Day that Leigh Hunt Left Prison*, a call such as this was a taunt to Tory reviewers – and it is to the challenge of Keats's Cockney "hum" that they brutally responded.

Keats amplifies and brings to a climax the "hum / Of mighty workings" in *Sleep and Poetry*. From a stance of neophyte modesty, "O Poesy! for thee I hold my pen / That am not yet a glorious denizen / Of thy wide heaven" (47–49), Keats outlines his poetic project, passing first through the pastoral "realm of Flora, and old Pan" (deities he invoked in his dedication), then to the epic realm of "the agonies, the strife / Of human hearts" (124–25). Keats laments the passing of the classical spirit, with a nod toward the Elizabethan bards, "The fervid choir that lifted up a noise / Of harmony" (173–74). "Ay," Keats complains, "in those days the Muses were nigh cloy'd / With honors" (178–79) and then, hitting his stride, he contrasts this lost glory to the present regime:

Could all this be forgotten? Yes a scism  
Nurtured by foppery and barbarism,  
Made great Apollo blush for this his land.

Men were thought wise who could not understand  
 His glories: with a puling infant's force  
 They sway'd about upon a rocking horse,  
 And thought it Pegasus. (181-87)

These lines became infamous in no small part because they reiterate Hunt's polemic, in "Young Poets" and elsewhere, for a return to truer values, and Keats is not shy about echoing Hunt's and Hazlitt's several criticisms of the school of Pope.<sup>23</sup> He sees hope in modern poetry, and its name is the Lake School. "Now 'tis a fairer season" (221):

for sweet music has been heard  
 In many places; – some has been upstirr'd  
 From out its crystal dwelling in a lake,  
 By a swan's ebon bill; from a thick brake,  
 Nested and quiet in a valley mild,  
 Bubbles a pipe; fine sounds are floating wild  
 About the earth; happy are ye and glad. (223-29)

Echoing the sentiments of Sonnet XIV ("Great Spirits"), these lines present the Huntian project as, once again, validated by Wordsworthian poetics.

Keats is also alert to the critiques of the Lake School, whose darker poems, along with Byron's, were heard as "strange thunders from the potency of song" (231), the product (as Hunt himself suggested) of "morbidity, as well as mistaken theories" (*Examiner*, 1 June 1817). To correct the error, Keats applies a Huntian view:

A drainless shower  
 Of light is poesy; 'tis the supreme of power;  
 'Tis might half slumb'ring on its own right arm.  
 The very arching of her eye-lids charm  
 A thousand willing agents to obey,  
 And still she governs with the mildest sway. (235-40)

Terms such as "supreme of power," "might," and all of 239-40, give a vision of politics as well as poetry: "the great end / Of poesy, that it should be a friend / To sooth the cares, and lift the thoughts of man" (245-47). Here is the most direct justification of the Keats's stylistic commitments. This is a poetry of health, cheer, and sensuous freedom: "delight with liberty." The image of potency in reserve ("might half-slumb'ring on its own right arm") employs the figure just as Haydon and Hazlitt had suggested – as a model for artists and statesmen.

Keats rejoices in Lake School poetics but does not want the increasingly reactionary politics associated with Wordsworth, Coleridge and, most vehemently, Poet Laureate Southey. The problem was to redeem the poetics and

counter the politics. His gesture is to transume Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey* into his own poetic credo. As critics often note, the stages of development Wordsworth describes (65–111) are echoed in *Sleep and Poetry* (85–162). What has not received sufficient attention is Keats's turning Wordsworth's "sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused" away from egoistical sublimity and into a general "idea" of "liberty," at once political and poetic:

yet there ever rolls  
A vast idea before me, and I glean  
Therefrom my liberty; thence too I've seen  
The end and aim of Poesy. (290–93)

At this point in his career, the "end and aim" is not the Wordsworthian solace of private, scarcely recoverable memory, but a present endeavor: the aesthetic, social, and political project associated with Hunt and *The Examiner*. Hence this summary poem honors Huntian imagery and stylistics, coming to rest in Hunt's home, "a poet's house who keeps the keys / Of pleasure's temple" (354ff). The final lines take the inventory: Huntian-rococo and pastoral influences, combined with classical imagery and Huntian diction in an extended ekphrastic depiction of Hunt's room, especially its icons, "Sappho," "Great Alfred," and patriot Kosciusko's face "worn / By horrid sufferance – mightily forlorn" (381–88).

### The reviews of *Poems*

Although *Poems* was a commercial failure, it did attract the notice of several major periodicals, and since most quoted extensively, Keats's poetry found audience here, too. But the payoff was divided. The liberal, reformist publications, such as *Champion*, and *Monthly Magazine*, without emphasizing political concerns, praised the poems, often commending the very features condemned by the Tory press. More moderate reviews, such as the *Edinburgh Magazine's*, struggle, without partisan points to make, with the "newness" of the poetry. The *European Magazine's* review, though mainly unsympathetic, tries to balance a concern for the moral, political, and religious resonances of this poetry with an appreciation of Keats's potential as a poet. But the Tory press, emphatically *Blackwood's Z.*, attacked Keats and the Cockneys personally – characterizing them as "low-born," "immoral," "uneducated," and using this discourse strategically to elide the kind of open, objective discussion evident in less partisan reviews. The Tory agenda was to dictate taste and values, not engage debate. What irritated *Blackwood's* and the Tory press in general was Keats's bold vocabulary of

political, aesthetic, and cultural reform, in the arena of the reformist press – this upstart graduate of Hunt’s new school issuing a liberal challenge to the prevailing social, political, and moral order. In the first actual review of Keats in *Blackwood’s*, Z. was exactly right, if not exactly appreciative, when he warned readers that Keats belongs to the “Cockney school of versification, morality, and politics.”<sup>24</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 Hunt’s prison term was earned by his derision of the Prince Regent as “a violator of his word, a libertine over head and ears in debt” (*Examiner*, 24 February 1812).
- 2 Quotations, here and following, are from the first published versions – either in *The Examiner* or in *Poems*; line numbers correspond to Stillinger’s edition.
- 3 *The Feast of the Poets, with Notes, and Other Pieces in Verse, by the Editor of the Examiner* (London, 1814), 35.
- 4 Marjorie Levinson, *Keats’s Life of Allegory: The Origins of a Style*, 13.
- 5 Tennyson’s comment is in Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury* (1861), 320. For a case for “Cortez,” see Susan J. Wolfson, *The Questioning Presence: Wordsworth, Keats, and the Interrogative Mode in Romantic Poetry*, 221 and her note on precedents. For the political implications of Cortez, see Daniel Watkins, *Keats’s Poetry and the Politics of the Imagination*, 26–31.
- 6 See William Keach, “Cockney Couplets: Keats and the Politics of Style.”
- 7 *The Story of Rimini* (1816) told of the “incest” of Paulo and Francesca, the lovers damned in Dante’s *Inferno*. *Rimini* was popular, and reviled as immoral and stylistically vulgar by *The Quarterly* and *Blackwood’s*. Like “Young Poets,” Hunt’s “Preface” to *Rimini* attacked Popian poetics and urged a return to the poetics of earlier eras. Keats repeats the attack in *Sleep and Poetry*, 181–206, and takes a line from *Rimini* (“Places of nestling green for Poets made”) as his epigraph for “I stood tip-toe.” These poems, as well as *Specimen of an Induction to a Poem* and *Calidore*, boldly echo *Rimini*’s non-Popian couplets, with Huntian style apparent throughout Keats’s volume.
- 8 Jack Stillinger, “*The Hoodwinking of Madeline*” and *Other Essays on Keats’s Poems*, 5.
- 9 For a further discussion of the politics of “liberty and delight” see Nicholas Roe, *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent*, 203–29. For a darker reading of the lines from Spenser, emphasizing a conflict between liberty and governance, see Gregory Kucich, *Keats, Shelley, and Romantic Spenserianism*, 164–65.
- 10 Richard Price’s *Discourse on the Love of Our Country* (1789) celebrates the 1688 revolution, polemically linking it to the American and French Revolutions, “both glorious.” For the imagery of “glory” and “light” in revolution-debates, see Ronald Paulson, *Representations of Revolution (1789–1820)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 38, 57–58.
- 11 On the politics of pagan myth and Pan-worship, see Roe, *Culture of Dissent*, 74–87, 208–12.
- 12 Recent evaluations have been more appreciative of Keats’s risks. Rodney Stenning Edgcombe calls the style Huntian “rococo” (*Leigh Hunt and the Poetry of Fancy*

- [Madison: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1994], 63–87); Jerome McGann sees Keats making a case for the “authority of sentimentality” (*The Poetics of Sensibility* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1996], 120–25); Richard Cronin and Elizabeth Jones describe a “poetics of suburbia” (Cronin, “Peter Bell, Peterloo, and the Politics of Cockney Poetry,” *Essays and Studies*, ed. Kelvin Everest [Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1992]; Jones, “Keats in the Suburbs,” *KSJ* (1996), 23–43).
- 13 Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats*, 77.
- 14 See, for example, Jack Stillinger’s unit on Keats for *The English Romantic Poets*, 4th edn. (New York: MLA, 1985), which devotes just two paragraphs to Keats’s first volume and *Endymion*, while later works warrant seven closely printed pages.
- 15 *Edinburgh Magazine*, October 1817, 236.
- 16 Jerome J. McGann, *The Beauty of Inflections: Literary Investigations in Historical Method & Theory*, 30–31.
- 17 Robert Ryan, *The Romantic Reformation: Religious Politics in English Literature, 1789–1824* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 154–55.
- 18 Paul de Man, *John Keats: Selected Poetry*, xviii.
- 19 Wolfson, *Questioning Presence*, 219–20.
- 20 See also *To My Brother George* (24) and *To Cowden Clarke* (44–45).
- 21 Andrew Motion, *Keats*, 63.
- 22 The article states that Elgin had been “traded by ignorance, envy and malice.” “Lord Elgin’s *Collection of Sculptured Marbles*,” *Quarterly Review*, January 1816, 514.
- 23 For Hazlitt, see *Examiner*, 20 August 1815.
- 24 “Cockney School of Poetry, No. IV” (August 1818), 521.