

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.¹ 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

JOHN KANDL

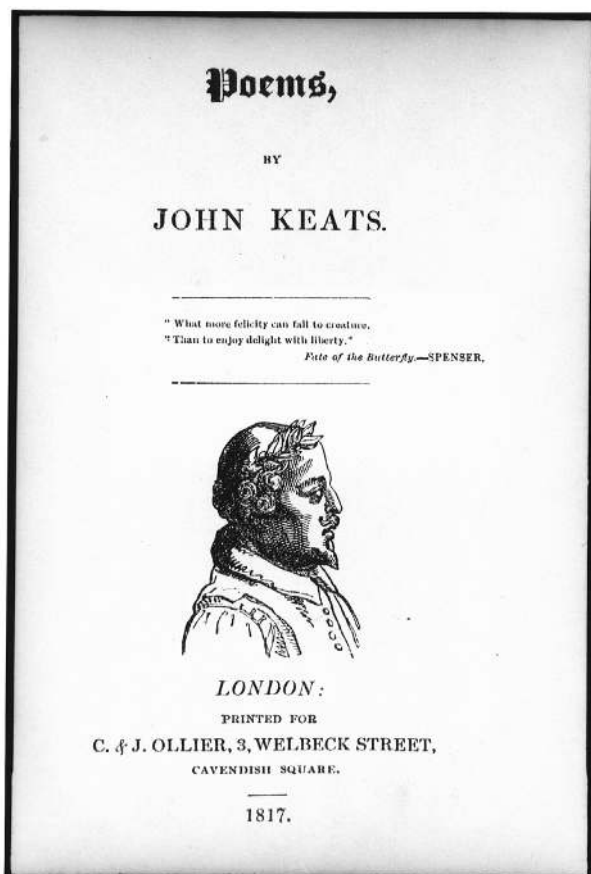


Figure 1. Title page of Keats's *Poems*, 1817. The identity of the profile has sustained a debate. Gregory Kuchich reports that most of the early reviewers, noting the motto from Spenser, also took the head to be his, featured to announce Keats's reverence (*Keats, Shelley, & Romantic Spenserianism*, 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.

The politics of Keats's early poetry

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”² – 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).³ To describe the new line as mere “translator-ese” (as Marjorie Levinson does)⁴ 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.⁵

JOHN KANDL

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-

The politics of Keats's early poetry

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

JOHN KANDL

“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.⁶ 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 “Sonnetts” (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*.⁷

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.’”⁸ 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.⁹

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

The politics of Keats's early poetry

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.¹⁰ 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,”

JOHN KANDL

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.¹¹ 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.”¹² 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.”¹³ 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).¹⁴ 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.”¹⁵

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

The politics of Keats's early poetry

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.¹⁶ 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 “cheerfulness”) 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.”¹⁷

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.

JOHN KANDL

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