

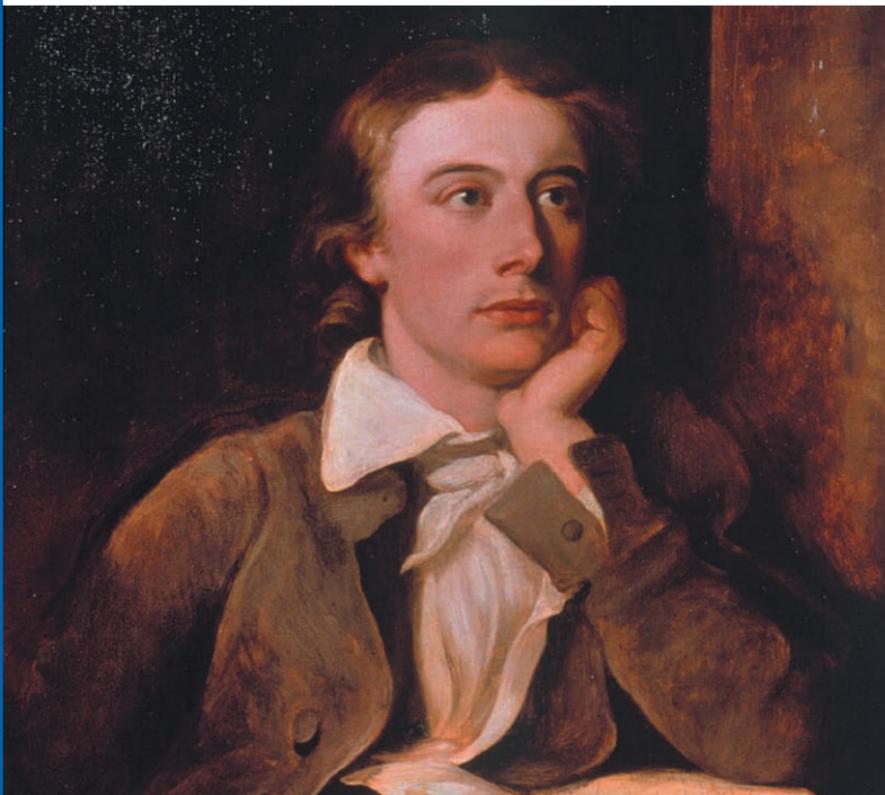


Realms of Gold

Letters and Poems of John Keats

Read by **Samuel West** with **Matthew Marsh**

POETRY



NA243712D

1	Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold	6:42
2	To Benjamin Haydon, 20th November 1816	0:12
3	Great Spirits now on Earth are sojourning:	1:05
4	To John Reynolds, 17th and 18th April 1817 Carisbrooke, Isle of Wight	3:26
5	On the Sea	1:05
6	To Benjamin Bailey, 22nd November 1817	1:40
7	Wherein lies happiness?	4:33
8	To George and Tom Keats. Hampstead, Sunday 21st December, 1817	2:04
9	To George and Tom Keats, 23rd, 24th January 1818	0:44
10	On Sitting Down to read King Lear once Again	1:17
11	To J. H. Reynolds, Teignmouth, May 3rd 1818	3:41
12	To Benjamin Bailey, 10th June 1818	1:23
13	To Tom Keats, 25th June, 1818. Endmoor, Cumbria	2:59
14	Bright star! Would I were steadfast as thou art –	4:03
15	To Tom Keats, 29th June, 1818. Keswick	0:28
16	To Fanny Keats, 2nd July, 1818. Dumfries	0:50
17	Old Meg	1:13
18	To Benjamin Bailey, Inverary, 18th July	2:21
19	To Richard Woodhouse, 27 October 1818	2:54
20	Deep in the shady sadness of a vale	4:25
21	To George and Georgiana Keats, 14th October 1818	6:09
22	To George and Georgiana Keats, 16th December 1818, 2-4 January 1819	4:19

23	A casement high and triple-arched there was	1:27
24	To Fanny Keats, 1st May 1819 Wentworth Place, Saturday	0:48
25	Ode to a Nightingale	5:10
26	To George and Georgiana Keats, Friday 19th March 1819	2:30
27	Ode on Melancholy	4:45
28	Why did I laugh tonight? No voice will tell:	2:11
29	La Belle Dame Sans Merci	3:01
30	To George and Georgiana Keats, Friday 19th March 1819 (cont.)	6:42
31	Ode on a Grecian Urn	4:07
32	To Sleep	1:34
33	Ode to Psyche	4:41
34	To Fanny Brawne, 1st July, 1819 Shanklin, Isle of Wight	3:50
35	To Fanny Brawne, 25th July 1819. Sunday Night	1:35
36	To Fanny Keats, Winchester, 28th August 1819	3:03
37	To John Taylor, 5th September, 1819	0:42
38	A haunting music, sole perhaps and lone	1:45
39	To J. H. Reynolds, 21st September, 1819. Winchester	1:34
40	To Autumn	2:03
41	To Fanny Brawne, 13th October, 1819. College Street/To Fanny Keats, 20th December 1819 Wentworth Place	3:26
42	To Fanny Brawne, 4th February 1820	1:21
43	To Fanny Brawne, February 1820	2:12
44	To Fanny Brawne, February 1820	2:20

45	To Fanny Brawne, March 1820	3:54
46	To Fanny Brawne, May 1820 Wednesday morning	
47	This living hand, now warm and capable	0:32
48	To Fanny Keats, 23rd June 1820. Friday Morning	1:03
49	To Fanny Keats, 5th July 1820 Wednesday	1:15
50	To Fanny Keats, 22th July 1820	1:40
51	To Fanny Brawne, August 1820	3:38
52	To Fanny Keats, 13th August 1820 Wentworth Place	1:33
53	To Percy Bysshe Shelley, 16th August 1820	3:31
54	To Fanny Keats, dictated, 11th September 1820	1:27
55	To Charles Brown, 30th September 1820. The 'Maria Crowther', off Yarmouth, Isle of Wight	5:08
56	To Mrs. Samuel Brawne, 24th October 1820 Naples Harbour	3:39
57	To Charles Brown, 1st November 1820	4:14
58	To Charles Brown, 30th November 1820	2:56
59	When I have fears that I may cease to be	2:17

Total time: 2:37:21

Realms of Gold

The Letters and Poems of John Keats

The Life

John Keats was born in London on the 31st October, 1795. Two brothers, George and Tom, and a sister, Fanny, followed during the next eight years. Their father, Thomas Keats, helped in the management of his father-in-law's stables and tavern; their mother, Frances Jennings, was from a well-to-do business family, and seems to have been an intelligent, well-educated and forceful woman.

Young John was himself, by all accounts, of a passionate, possessive, even wilful character: 'violent and ungovernable', said a family servant in later years. When he was eight, John began to attend a school in Enfield run by the sympathetic and imaginative John Clarke; but, within a year, the first of the many domestic tragedies which were to afflict the family occurred – his father was killed in a riding accident. A mere two months later, and apparently to the displeasure of John and his siblings, their mother remarried. Before long, the children went to live with their grandmother in Edmonton. In 1810, when John was barely fifteen, his mother, now

abandoned by her husband and living in poverty, died.

1814 saw the death of his grandmother, Mrs Jennings, and in the following year Keats entered Guy's Hospital as a student, qualifying as an apothecary in July 1816. This was the year when his passion for poetry – and for politics, philosophy and the arts in general – truly took hold of him. His circle of acquaintances rapidly enlarged to include such radical thinkers and artists as Leigh Hunt, Hazlitt and Benjamin Haydon. By December, Keats had abandoned medicine in order to pursue his vocation as a poet.

Barely five years of life remained to him, but within that time he was to live with an intensity, a gusto and a creative urgency which would lead directly to the extraordinary poems and letters we have today.

By the time of our first letter – dated 20th November, 1816 – Keats was enjoying the first excitement of an independent, if insecure, literary life. The remaining years were to be dominated by the poetry, of course, but also by a consuming interest in

the value and purpose of poetic composition and the nature of the poet himself. At the same time, Keats enjoyed travelling the length and breadth of the British Isles, often walking huge distances in a day; continuing his education by reading everything he could lay his hands on; developing radical political views in a post-war England dominated by timidly conservative attitudes; and, finally, falling in love.

Yet hanging over all this intense pursuit of pleasure, self-knowledge and poetic perfection was the cloud of the 'family' illness – tuberculosis, or consumption as it was then known. His beloved brother Tom died of the disease in December 1818 after a long illness, during the latter stages of which Keats had patiently nursed him. The agony of this loss must have been intensified by the absence of his other brother, George, who had married and emigrated to America earlier in the same year. Within another year, Keats himself had begun to show the first symptoms of tuberculosis. He had now to confront the real possibility of his own death within a few years – or even months – his emotional turmoil infinitely complicated by the simultaneous ripening of his love for Fanny Brawne into an engagement, probably in December 1819.

Not long after the onset of the disease, Keats' poetic composition began to falter, the last of his major poems – 'To Autumn' – being written in September 1819: he found the activity of writing emotionally exhausting, perhaps disturbing, especially as he tried to come to terms with the apparent impossibility of sustaining the relationship with Fanny, whom he could no longer see – unless it were by arrangement, when she would greet him through the window from the garden of Wentworth Place. This distance had become necessary after the crisis of February 1820, when Keats had returned to Hampstead on the outside of the coach: he staggered home to Wentworth Place, both chilled and feverish, and coughed blood as he got himself to bed. With extraordinary calmness, Keats asked his friend Brown to bring a candle by which he could inspect the discharge, and then announced: 'I know the colour of that blood; it is arterial blood. I cannot be deceived in that colour. That drop of blood is my death-warrant. I must die.'

Keats' last hope seemed to lie in a kinder climate, and to that end he set sail for Italy in September. His last known letter was written from Rome in November 1820: he died on 23rd February, 1821, at 26 Piazza di Spagna.

The Letters and Poems

Many of the letters contain first drafts of poems by Keats, sometimes close to the version which would eventually be published, at other times less so: I have generally used the version of the poem with which readers are familiar. Poems marked **(L)** in the notes below were included by Keats himself in the letters. Elsewhere, I have inserted poems where Keats has made reference to them, or to an idea or image important to them – an example would be *To Autumn*, which Keats specifically mentions in his letter of 21st September, 1819: ‘How beautiful the season is now...this struck me so much in my Sunday’s walk that I composed upon it.’

The Poems

CD1:1 *On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer*

In this sonnet Keats uses the metaphor of geographical exploration to convey the excitement of ‘discovering’ Homer in the 16th century translation by George Chapman.

*And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
Round many western islands have I been
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
That deep-brow’d Homer ruled as his demesne;
Yet never did I breathe its pure serene
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
He star’d at the Pacific – and all his men
Look’d at each other with a wild surmise –
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.*

CD1:3 *Great Spirits Now on Earth are Sojourning (L)*

Another sonnet, this time expressing Keats’ optimistic belief that society stood on the threshold of a new age – an age of visionary idealism derived from Nature (represented by ‘he of the cloud, the cataract, the lake’ Wordsworth), and of political freedom (embodied by Keats’ friend, Leigh Hunt).

*Great Spirits now on Earth are sojourning:
He of the Cloud, the Cataract, the Lake,
Who on Helvellyn's summit, wide awake,
Catches his freshness from Archangel's wing:
He of the Rose, the Violet, the Spring,
The social Smile, the Chain for freedom's sake:
And lo! – whose steadfastness would never take
A Meaner Sound than Raphael's Whispering.
And other Spirits are there standing apart
Upon the Forehead of the Age to come;
These, These will give the World another heart
And other pulses – hear ye not the hum
Of mighty Workings in a distant Mart?
Listen awhile ye Nations, and be dumb!*

CD1:5 On the Sea (L)

Keats invites us to escape from the vexations of worldly concerns and to lose ourselves in the 'wideness' and 'eternal' qualities of the sea. This, too, is a sonnet.

*It keeps eternal Whisperings around
Desolate shores, and with its mighty swell
Gluts twice ten thousand Caverns; till the spell
Of Hecate leaves them their old shadowy sound.
Often 'tis in such gentle temper found
That scarcely will the very smallest shell
Be moved for days from whence it sometime fell
When last the winds of Heaven were unbound.
O ye who have your eyeballs vext and tir'd,
Feast them upon the wideness of the Sea;
O ye whose Ears are dinned with uproar rude,
Or fed too much with cloying melody –*

*Sit ye near some old Cavern's Mouth and brood,
Until ye start, as if the Sea Nymphs quired!*

CD1:7 Wherein Lies Happiness?

In this extract from Book 1 of 'Endymion', Keats' first attempt at a long 'philosophical' poem, he argues that true happiness is that which leads 'our ready minds to fellowship divine': a sense of beauty is ultimately indistinguishable from a moral sense.

*Wherein lies happiness? In that which becks
Our ready minds to fellowship divine,
A fellowship with essence; till we shine,
Full alchemiz'd, and free of space. Behold
The clear religion of heaven! Fold
A rose leaf round thy finger's taperness,
And soothe thy lips: hie, when the airy stress
Of music's kiss impregnates the free winds,
And with a sympathetic touch unbinds
Aeolian magic from their lucid wombs:
Then old songs waken from encloused tombs;
...Feel we these things? – that moment have we
stepped
Into a sort of oneness, and our state
Is like a floating spirit's. But there are
Richer entanglements, enthrallments far
More self-destroying, leading, by degrees,
To the chief intensity: the crown of these
Is made of love and friendship, and sits high
Upon the forehead of humanity...*

CD1:10 *On Sitting Down to read King Lear once Again (L)*

Keats' re-reading of *King Lear* compels an awareness that mature poetry must tackle the difficult and demanding themes of human suffering: reading a play like *King Lear* is akin to an experience of death and rebirth – like the mythical phoenix which is born out of its own ashes. Another sonnet.

*O golden tongued Romance with serene Lute !
Fair plumed syren, Queen of far-away !
Leave melodizing on this wintry day,
Shut up thine olden pages and be mute:
Adieu ! for, once again, the fierce dispute
Betwixt damnation and impassioned Clay
Must I burn through; once more humbly assay
The bitter-sweet of this Shakespearian fruit:
Chief Poet ! and ye clouds of Albion,
Begetters of our deep eternal theme,
When through the old oak Forest I am gone,
Let me not wander in a barren dream,
But, when I am consumed in the Fire,
Give me new Phoenix wings to fly at my desire.*

CD1:14 *Bright star! Would I were steadfast as thou art –*

In this sonnet Keats envies the 'steadfast' north star which gazes eternally down upon the world of man and nature: he himself would like to be forever 'pillow'd upon [his] fair love's ripening breast' – or, perhaps,

'swoon to death' rather than return to the suffering world.

*Bright star! would I were steadfast as thou art –
Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night,
And watching, with eternal lids apart,
Like Nature's patient sleepless Eremite,
The moving waters at their priestlike task
Of pure ablution round earth's human shores,
Or gazing on the new soft-fallen mask
Of snow upon the mountains and the moors –
No – yet still steadfast, still unchangeable,
Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,
To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,
Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,
Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,
And so live ever – or else swoon to death.*

CD1:17 *Old Meg (L)*

Keats included this light-hearted evocation of a gipsy's life, written while he was travelling in Scotland, in a letter to his young sister, Fanny.

*Old Meg she was a Gipsy,
And liv'd upon the Moors:
Her bed it was the brown heath turf,
And her house was out of doors.
Her apples were swart blackberries,
Her currants pods o' broom;
Her wine was dew o' the wild white rose,
Her book a churchyard tomb*

*Her Brothers were the craggy hills,
Her Sisters larchen trees –
Alone with with her great family
She liv'd as she did please.*

*No breakfast has she many a morn,
No dinner many a noon,
And 'stead of supper she would stare
Full hard against the Moon.*

*But every morn of woodbine fresh
She made her garlanding,
And every night the dark glen Yew
She wove, and she would sing.*

*And with her fingers old and brown
She plaited Mats o' Rushes,
And gave them to the Cottagers
She met among the Bushes.*

*Old Meg was brave as Margaret Queen
And tall as Amazon:
An old red blanket cloak she wore;
A chip hat had she on.
God rest her aged bones somewhere –
She died full long agone!*

CD1:20 From *Hyperion*

These are the first lines of Keats' great (but unfinished) epic poem. Keats eventually abandoned its composition because of what he felt was an excess of Miltonic influence,

but there can be few more powerfully evocative openings in English literature. The theme of the poem is the evolution of human sensibility and creativity, symbolised in the narrative by the legend of the new Olympian race of gods defeating and taking over from the Titans. Their downfall is both tragic and necessary. Saturn is the King of the Titans. Thea, who attempts to comfort him, is married to Hyperion, the only Titan yet to be overthrown...

*Deep in the shady sadness of a vale
Far sunken from the healthy breath of morn,
Far from the fiery noon, and eve's one star,
Sat gray-hair'd Saturn, quiet as a stone,
Still as the silence round about his lair;
Forest on forest hung about his head
Like cloud on cloud. No stir of air was there,
Not so much life as on a summer's day
Robs not one light seed from the feather'd grass,
But where the dead leaf fell, there did it rest.
A stream went voiceless by, still deadened more
By reason of his fallen divinity
Spreading a shade: the Naiad 'mid her reeds
Press'd her cold finger closer to her lips.
Along the margin-sand large foot-marks went,
No further than to where his feet had stray'd,
And slept there since. Upon the sodden ground
His old right hand lay nerveless, listless, dead,
Unseptred; and his realmless eyes were closed;
While his bow'd head seem'd list'ning to the Earth,*

*His ancient mother, for some comfort yet.
It seem'd no force could wake him from his place;
But there came one, who with a kindred hand
Touch'd his wide shoulders, after bending low
With reverence, though to one who knew it not.
She was a Goddess of the infant world;
By her in stature the tall Amazon
Had stood a pigmy's height: she would have ta'en
Achilles by the hair and bent his neck;
Or with a finger stay'd Ixion's wheel
Her face was large as that of Memphian sphinx,
Pedestal'd haply in a palace court,
When sages look'd to Egypt for their lore.
But oh! how unlike marble was that face:
How beautiful, if sorrow had not made
Sorrow more beautiful than Beauty's self.
There was a listening fear in her regard,
As if calamity had but begun;
As if the vanward clouds of evil days
Had spent their malice, and the sullen rear
Was with its stored thunder labouring up.
One hand she press'd upon that aching spot
Where beats the human heart, as if just there,
Though an immortal, she felt cruel pain:
The other upon Saturn's bended neck
She laid, and to the level of his ear
Leaning with parted lips, some words she spake
In solemn tenour and deep organ tone:
Some mourning words, which in our feeble tongue
Would come in these like accents; O how frail
To that large utterance of the early Gods!
'Saturn, look up! – though wherefore, poor old
King?*

*I have no comfort for thee, no not one:
'I cannot say, "O wherefore sleepest thou?"
'For heaven is parted from thee, and the earth
'Knows thee not, thus afflicted, for a God;
'And ocean too, with all its solemn noise,
'Has from thy sceptre pass'd; and all the air
'Is emptied of thine hoary majesty.
'Thy thunder, conscious of the new command,
'Rumbles reluctant o'er our fallen house;
'And thy sharp lightning in unpractised hands
'Scorches and burns our once serene domain.
'O aching time! O moments big as years!
'All as ye pass swell out the monstrous truth,
'And press it so upon our weary griefs
'That unbelief has not a space to breathe.
'Saturn, sleep on: – O thoughtless, why did I
'Thus violate thy slumberous solitude?
'Why should I ope thy melancholy eyes?
'Saturn, sleep on! while at thy feet I weep.'*

CD1:23 From *The Eve of St Agnes*
These stanzas describe Madeline's chamber. Porphyro, her lover, spies upon her as she prays, warmly illuminated by the moonlight shining through the stained-glass window. This narrative poem brilliantly conveys the idea of human love triumphing over hostile forces: 'Romeo and Juliet', perhaps, with a happy ending...

*A casement high and triple-arched there was,
All garlanded with carven imageries
Of fruits, and flowers, and bunches of knot-grass,*

*And diamonded with panes of quaint device
Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes,
As are the tiger-moth's deep-damask'd wings;
And in the midst, 'mong thousand heraldries,
And twilight saints, and dim emblazonings,
A shielded scutcheon blushed with blood of
queens and kings.*

*Full on this casement shone the wintry moon,
And threw warm gules on Madeline's fair breast
As down she knelt for heaven's grace and boon;
Rose-bloom fell on her hands, together pressed,
And on her silver cross soft amethyst,
And on her hair a glory, like a saint.
She seemed a splendid angel, newly dressed,
Save wings, for heaven. Porphyro grew faint;
She knelt, so pure a thing, so free from taint...*

CD1:25 *Ode to a Nightingale*

One of the great series of odes written in May 1819. Keats, caught up by the seductive beauty of the nightingale's song, is led into an impassioned meditation upon human suffering and mortality, imagining ways in which he might escape them. Eventually he is compelled to acknowledge the necessity of returning to the 'real' world, still unable to resolve the competing claims of beauty and truth...

*My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains*

*One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:
'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,
But being too happy in thine happiness,
That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees,
In some melodious plot
Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,
Sings of summer in full-throated ease.*

*O, for a draught of vintage! that hath been
Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth,
Tasting of Flora and the country green,
Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!
O for a beaker full of the warm South,
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
And purple-stained mouth;
That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
And with thee fade away into the forest dim:*

*Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou among the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs,
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.*

*Away! away! for I will fly to thee,
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy,*

*Though the dull brain perplexes and retards:
Already with thee! tender is the night,
And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays;
But here there is no light,
Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown
Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy
ways.*

*I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet
Wherewith the seasonable month endows
The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;
White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;
Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves;
And mid-May's eldest child,
The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.*

*Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath;
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy!
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain –
To thy high requiem become a sod.*

*Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down;*

*The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for
home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
The same that oft-times hath
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the
foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.*

*Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf.
Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades
Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep
In the next valley-glades:
Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music: – Do I wake or sleep?*

CD1:27 Ode on Melancholy

Keats rejects the temptation of escaping 'the melancholy fit' by retreating into unconsciousness, and instead proposes that our wisest course is to *embrace* sorrow: sorrow, after all, 'dwells with beauty', since all beautiful things are doomed to die. Intensely pleasurable experience is inevitably bound up with the grief of transience and loss...

No, no, go not to Lethe, neither twist
Wolfs-bane, tight-rooted, for its poisonous wine;
Nor suffer thy pale forehead to be kiss'd
By nightshade, ruby grape of Proserpine;
Make not your rosary of yew-berries,
Nor let the beetle, nor the death-moth be
Your mournful Psyche, nor the downy owl
A partner in your sorrow's mysteries;
For shade to shade will come too drowsily,
And drown the wakeful anguish of the soul.

But when the melancholy fit shall fall
Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud,
That fosters the droop-headed flowers all,
And hides the green hill in an April shroud;
Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose,
Or on the rainbow of the salt sand-wave,
Or on the wealth of globed peonies;
Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows,
Emprison her soft hand, and let her rave,
And feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes.

She dwells with Beauty – Beauty that must die;
And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips
Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,
Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips:
Ay, in the very temple of Delight
Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine,
Though seen of none save him whose strenuous
tongue
Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine;
His soul shall taste the sadness of her might,
And be among her cloudy trophies hung.

CD1:28 *Why did I Laugh Tonight?* (L)
Keats finds himself almost irresistibly drawn
towards death. 'Verse, Fame and Beauty' all
have their appeal, but death is 'intenser' –
'death is life's high meed'.

*Why did I laugh tonight? No voice will tell:
No God, no Demon of severe response
Deigns to reply from heaven or from Hell.
Then to my human heart I turn at once.
Heart! thou and I are here sad and alone;
Say, wherefore did I laugh? O mortal pain!
O Darkness! Darkness! ever must I moan
To question Heaven and Hell and Heart in vain !
Why did I laugh? I know this being's lease
My fancy to its utmost blisses spreads:
Yet could I on this very midnight cease,
And the world's gaudy ensigns see in shreds;
Verse, Fame and Beauty are intense indeed,
But Death intenser-Death is Life's high meed.*

CD1:29 *La Belle Dame sans Merci* (L)
Written in the form and style of a medieval
ballad, this simple yet powerful poem seems to
express Keats' ambivalence towards women:
they are both intensely alluring and intensely
threatening.

*O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
Alone and palely loitering?
The sedge has withered from the lake,
And no birds sing!*

*O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
So haggard and so woe-begone?
The squirrel's granary is full,
And the harvest's done.*

*I see a lily on thy brow,
With anguish moist and fever-dew,
And on thy cheeks a fading rose
Fast withereth too.*

*I met a lady in the meads
Full beautiful, a faery's child,
Her hair was long, her foot was light
And her eyes were wild.*

*I made a garland for her head,
And bracelets too, and fragrant zone;
She looked at me as she did love
And made sweet moan.*

*I set her on my pacing steed,
And nothing else saw all day long;
For sidelong would she bend, and sing
A faery's song.*

*She found me roots of relish sweet,
And honey wild, and manna dew;
And sure in language strange she said,
'I love thee true'.*

*She took me to her elfin grot,
And there she wept, and sighed full sore,
And there I shut her wild wild eyes*

With kisses four.

*And there she lulled me asleep,
And there I dream'd – Ah woe betide!
The latest dream I ever dreamed
On the cold hill's side.*

*I saw pale kings, and princes too,
Pale warriors, death-pale were they all;
They cried – 'La belle dame sans merci
Hath thee in thrall!'*

*I saw their starved lips in the gloam
With horrid warning gaped wide,
And I awoke, and found me here
On the cold hill side.*

*And this is why I sojourn here,
Alone and palely loitering,
Though the sedge is withered from the Lake
And no birds sing.*

CD2:2 Ode on a Grecian Urn

Keats muses on the idealised beauty of a Grecian urn and its 'brede of marble men and maidens'. The story which this decoration tells is, of necessity, 'frozen' at a certain moment, and the poet at first envies this permanence and immunity to change. But he also recognises that human life is both more satisfying and more painful: the urn is indeed a 'friend to man', but, although art

can enhance life, it cannot replace it.

*Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape
Of deities or mortals, or of both,
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?*

*Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:
Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not
leave
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal-yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!*

*Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;
And, happy melodist, unwearied,
For ever piping songs for ever new;
More happy love! More happy, happy love!
For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,
For ever panting, and for ever young;*

*All breathing human passion far above,
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,
A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.*

*Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Leadst thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?
What little town by river or sea shore,
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?
And, little town, thy streets for evermore
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.*

*O Attic shape! Fair attitude! With brede
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
With forest branches and the trodden weed;
Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,'-that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.*

CD2:3 To Sleep (L)

With 'lulling' softness, Keats evokes the allure of sleep which can 'save [him] from curious Conscience', and prays that it will 'seal the hushed casket of [his] soul'. A sonnet.

*O soft embalmer of the still midnight,
Shutting, with careful fingers and benign,
Our gloom-pleas'd eyes, embower'd from the
light,
Enshaded in forgetfulness divine;
O soothest Sleep! if so it please thee, close
In midst of this thine hymn my willing eyes,
Or wait the amen, ere thy poppy throws
Around my bed its lulling charities.
Then save me, or the passed day will shine
Upon my pillow, breeding many woes.
Save me from curious Conscience, that still lords
Its strength for darkness, burrowing like a mole:
Turn the key deftly in the oiled wards,
And seal the hushed Casket of my Soul.*

CD2:4 Ode to Psyche (L)

Keats wishes to be the poetic disciple of Psyche, hitherto unsung goddess of the soul. The workings of his imagination ('Fancy', in this instance) will be dedicated to her.

*O Goddess! hear these tuneless numbers, wrung
By sweet enforcement, and remembrance dear,
And pardon that thy secrets should be sung
Even into thine own soft-conched ear!
Surely I dreamt to-day; or did I see
The winged Psyche, with awaken'd eyes?
I wander'd in a forest thoughtlessly,
And on the sudden, fainting with surprise,
Saw two fair Creatures, couched side by side
In deepest grass, beneath the whispering roof*

*Of leaves and trembled blossoms, where there ran
A Brooklet scarce espied:*

*'Mid hush'd, cool-rooted flowers, fragrant-eyed,
Blue, silver-white, and budded Tyrian
They lay, calm-breathing on the bedded grass.
Their arms embraced, and their pinions too;
Their lips touch'd not, but had not bid adieu,
As if disjointed by soft-handed slumber,
And ready still past kisses to outnumber,
At tender eye-dawn of aurorian love.
The winged boy I knew:
But who wast thou, O happy, happy dove?
– His Psyche true!*

*O latest born, and loveliest vision far
Of all Olympus' faded Hierarchy!
Fairer than Phoebe's
sapphire-region'd star,
Or Vesper, amorous glow-worm of the sky;
Fairer than these, though Temple thou hast none,
Nor Altar heap'd with flowers;
Nor virgin choir to make delicious moan
Upon the midnight hours;
No voice, no lute, no pipe, no incense sweet
From chain-swung Censer teeming;
No shrine, no grove, no Oracle, no heat
Of pale-mouth'd Prophet dreaming.*

*O Brightest! though too late for antique vows,
Too, too late for the fond believing Lyre,
When holy were the haunted forest boughs,
Holy the air, the water and the fire:*

*Yet even in these days so far retir'd
From happy Pieties, thy lucent fans,
Fluttering among the faint Olympians,
I see, and sing, by my own eyes inspired.
So let me be thy Choir, and make a moan
Upon the midnight hours;
Thy voice, thy lute, thy pipe, thy incense sweet
From swung Censer teeming;
Thy shrine, thy Grove, thy Oracle, thy heat
Of pale-mouth'd Prophet dreaming!*

*Yes, I will be thy Priest and build a fane
In some untrodden region of my Mind,
Where branched thoughts new grown with
pleasant pain,
Instead of pines shall murmur in the wind:
Far, far around shall those dark-cluster'd trees
Fledge the wild-ridged mountains steep by steep,
And there by Zephyrs, streams, and birds, and bees
The moss-lain Dryads shall be lulled to sleep.
And in the midst of this wide quietness
A rosy Sanctuary will I dress With the wreath'd
trellis of a working brain:
With buds, and bells, and stars without a name,
With all the gardener Fancy e'er could feign,
Who, breeding flowers, will never breed the
same –
And there shall be for thee all soft delight
That shadowy thought can win; A bright torch,
and a casement ope at night,
To let the warm Love in!*

CD2:9 From *Lamia*, Book 2 (L)

The youth Lycius has fallen in love with the beautiful but deceiving Lamia, a serpent-enchantress. This extract describes preparations for the wedding which Lycius has insisted upon, but which she fears. Her fears are justified when Lycius' old teacher, the philosopher Apollonius, exposes her true nature before the horrified bridegroom and guests...

*A haunting music, sole perhaps and lone
Supportress of the faery roof, made moan
Throughout, as fearful the whole charm might
fade.*

*Fresh carved cedar, mimicking a glade
Of Palm and Plantain, met from either side,
High in the midst, in honour of the bride:
Two palms, and then two plantains, and so on,
From either side their stems branch'd one to one
All down the aisled place; and beneath all
There ran a stream of lamps straight on from wall to
wall.*

*So canopied, lay an untasted feast
Teeming with odours. Lamia, regal drest,
Silently pac'd about, and as she went,
In pale contented sort of discontent,
Mission'd her viewless Servants to enrich
The splendid cornicing of nook and niche.
Between the Tree stems, marbled plain at first,
Came jasper panels; then, anon, there burst*

*Forth creeping imagery of slighter trees,
And with the larger wove in small intricacies.
Approving all, she faded at self-will,
And shut the chamber up, close, hush'd and still,
Complete and ready for the revels rude,
when dreadful guests would come to spoil her
solitude.*

*The day came soon , and all the gossip rout.
O senseless Lycius! Madman! Wherefore flout
The silent-blessing fate, warm cloister'd hours,
And show to common eyes these secret
bowers?...*

CD2:11 *To Autumn*

This is Keats' last major poem. He had been staying in Winchester and enjoying beautiful late summer and early autumn weather: the poem's exquisite serenity and restraint reflect a mood of quiet acceptance.

*Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,
And still more, later flowers for the bees,
Until they think warm days will never cease,
For Summer has o'er-brimm'd their clammy cells.*

*Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?
Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,
Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;
Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep,
Drows'd with the fume of poppies, while thy
hook*

*Spares the next swath and all its twined flowers:
And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep
Steady thy laden head across a brook;
Or by a cyder-press, with patient look,
Thou watchest the last oozings hours by hours.*

*Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are
they?*

*Think not of them, thou hast thy music too, –
While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,
And touch the stubble plains with rosy hue;
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
Among the river shallows, borne aloft
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft
The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.*

CD2:18 *This Living Hand*

This extraordinarily powerful fragment seems to express something of the almost paranoid jealousy from which Keats began to suffer concerning Fanny Brawne as the tuberculosis took hold. He dramatises such

punitive feelings with vivid concreteness:
'thou would wish thine own heart dry of
blood/ So in my veins red life might stream
again...'

*This living hand, now warm and capable
Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold
And in the icy silence of the tomb,
So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights
That thou wouldst wish thine own heart dry of
blood
So in my veins red life might stream again,
And thou be conscience-calmed-see, here it is –
I hold it towards you.*

CD2:30 *When I have Fears that I may Cease to
Be*

Another sonnet. Although written some time before Keats' death, the poem seems to express with uncanny foresight his increasing sense that he would die before fulfilling himself either as a writer or as a lover.

*When I have fears that I may cease to be
Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain,
Before high piled books, in charact'ry,
Hold like rich garners the full-ripen'd grain;
When I behold, upon the night's starr'd face,
Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,
And think that I may never live to trace
Their shadows, with the magic hand of chance;*

*And when I feel, fair creature of an hour!
That I shall never look upon thee more,
Never have relish in the faery power
Of unreflecting love! – then on the shore
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think,
Till Love and Fame to nothingness do sink.*

The Letters

Keats' letters are justly famous for their range, intelligence, passion and humanity. They communicate an extraordinary spontaneity because they are written apparently without premeditation; yet, at the same time, there is almost always a sense of energy and compression as Keats follows a train of thought, or relates an anecdote, with sustained excitement. The surviving letters cover a period of just over four years, but within that apparently narrow scope we probably learn more about him than we can hope to discover about any other pre-20th century English writer, at least through their correspondence. Miraculously, Keats' correspondents seem to have realised immediately the value of the letters they were receiving and to have preserved them with care.

The letters are addressed to fellow-writers – men like John Reynolds and Benjamin Bailey, now only remembered for their association with Keats – to members of his family, his brothers George and Tom, his schoolgirl sister Fanny – and, finally, to Fanny Brawne, the woman to whom he was engaged at the time of his death. Their subject matter is wide and varied, reflecting Keats' intense interest in his craft and in his fellow-men, but one may distinguish certain

recurrent themes which are of special interest.

First, there is a continuing debate concerning the nature of the poet and of poetry itself. Within his short career, Keats repeatedly returns to the question of growth and maturity in a writer, proposing (for example) the theory of life as 'a vale of Soul-making': 'Do you not see how necessary a world of pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul? A Place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways!' This, given Keats' early experience of family illness and bereavement, is no empty theorising: for him, the writer must find a way of reconciling his acute sense of the beauty and promise of life with its darker side – pain, mortality and transience. The letters, in fact, are full of ideas and phrases which have passed into the critical language: 'negative capability', 'the holiness of the heart's affections', 'the chameleon poet', and the repeated reflections on the subject of 'Beauty and Truth'. Even so stern a critic as T.S. Eliot was forced to acknowledge the vivid brilliance of Keats' thought: 'There is hardly one statement of Keats about poetry, which, when considered carefully and with due allowance for the difficulty of communication, will not be found to be true...'

Yet Keats brings an equal energy to the discussion of the personal and the domestic. He writes with amazing candour about (for example) his feelings for women: in one of his long journal-letters to his brother George and his wife in America, he vividly describes an encounter with Isabella Jones in which she asks him home; in a letter to Bailey, Keats confides that 'I am certain I have not a right feeling towards women...Is it because they fall so far beneath my Boyish imagination?'

This question of his 'feeling towards women' came to the fore in the last two years of his life when he fell in love with Fanny Brawne. The letters he wrote her are honest, ardent, compelling and, in the last

months of his life, almost unbearably moving. When he can no longer face the emotional pressure of writing to her directly, he talks of her thus in a letter to Charles Brown: 'the thought of leaving Miss Brawne is beyond every thing horrible – the sense of darkness coming over me – I eternally see her figure eternally vanishing...' In fact, these last letters of Keats are so painful that some earlier editors left them out. One is reminded of Samuel Johnson's inability to read the closing scenes of *King Lear*: the difference, of course, is that the story of Keats' life is no fiction.

Notes by Perry Keenlyside

The music on this recording is taken from the NAXOS catalogue.

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Cover picture: John Keats by William Hilton after Joseph Severn.
Courtesy of The Bridgeman Art Library



Samuel West was widely praised for his performance as Leonard Bast in the Merchant Ivory film, *Howard's End*. Other film credits include *Carrington* and *Reunion*, and he has been seen on TV in *Persuasion* and *Heavy Weather*. Theatrical roles have included Valentine in *Arcadia* and Algernon in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. He also reads *Great Narrative Poems of the Romantic Age*, *Great Speeches in History*, *Peter Pan*, and Lord Windermere in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, for Naxos AudioBooks



Matthew Marsh has appeared in several theatre productions, including the RSC and Royal National Theatre, including the West End run of *Copenhagen*. He is an extremely versatile actor with many television credits from *As Time Goes By*; *A Certain Justice*; *Heartbeat* and *A Touch Of Frost*. For film: *Miss Smilla's Sense of Snow*. For Naxos AudioBooks he also features on *Naked She Lay: An Anthology of Classic Erotic Verse*.

Realms of Gold

Letters, and Poems of John Keats

Read by **Samuel West** with **Matthew Marsh**

Keats' letters paint an unforgettably vivid and moving picture of the richly productive but also tragic final years of the poet's life. As he ponders on the nature of the writer's craft, he must first confront his brother's death from tuberculosis and then the imminent prospect of his own, tormented by the fear that he will not live to consummate his relationship with Fanny Brawne.

This general selection also includes many of his finest poems, versions of which often appeared for the first time within the letters themselves.

Among them are: 'Ode to Melancholy', 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', 'Old Meg', 'Ode to a Nightingale', 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' and 'To Autumn'.

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