

Introduction to Keats's 1819 Odes

Matthew Coulton's superb readings of Keats's six odes were specially commissioned and recorded in 2019 by the Keats Foundation, in collaboration with Keats House, Hampstead, to celebrate the bicentenary of the poet's most creative year.

During 1819 Keats composed some of the greatest poems in the language, including 'The Eve of St Agnes', 'La Belle Dame sans Merci', 'Lamia' and his famous 'Bright Star' sonnet. He made progress with his epic *Hyperion*. And at the heart of Keats's writing during these momentous months were his six odes, read here with passion, tenderness, and pathos by Matthew Coulton as if we are overhearing the poet himself reciting these words for the first time.

Readers have often wondered whether Keats's odes should be read in a sequence, forming six lyrical reflections on the Shakespearean themes of life, beauty and art, time, transience and mortality. It is possible that the first to be composed was 'Ode on Indolence', followed in spring and early summer by 'Ode to Psyche', 'Ode to a Nightingale', 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' and 'Ode on Melancholy' (all composed at Wentworth Place, Hampstead – now Keats House), with 'To Autumn' as a later lyrical impulse dating from September at Winchester. All the poems grew out of Keats's experiments with sonnet forms, constituting independent yet interwoven meditations with similarities of theme, style, and phrasing.

With little internal evidence from the poems or from Keats's letters, chronological sequencing of the poems (apart from 'To Autumn') is inevitably conjectural. But we do have one clue as to how Keats wished his odes to be arranged and read: this is the running order that he devised for five of them in his final 1820 collection of poems, *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems*. Here, Keats sequenced his poems in two groups: 'Ode to a Nightingale', 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', 'Ode to Psyche' form a lyrical trio, followed a few pages later by 'To Autumn' and 'Ode on Melancholy' paired together. Perhaps this arrangement allows us to hear a melancholy undersong that links the poems, entwining joy with sorrow and gathering towards the 'cloudy trophies' with which 'Ode on Melancholy' concludes.

All readers agree that Keats's 1819 odes established his place among the English poets, and numerous poets from Tennyson to Owen to Heaney have been fascinated by the poems' formal mastery and haunting verbal music. 'Ode to a Nightingale' and 'To Autumn' may now have most appeal for readers. Yet it is perhaps the enigmatic 'Ode on Indolence' – a poem that seems to have been suggested by an opium-induced dream – that carries us furthest into the mystery of Keats's creativity to encounter its terrifying, troubling presiders: Love, Ambition and, lurking darkly in the shadows, his 'demon Poesy'.

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