

## Ode to Psyche

'Ode to Psyche' was written towards the end of April 1819, the first of the sequence of odes that Keats wrote in that marvellous Spring. Keats transcribed it in a long letter he sent to his brother George and sister-in-law in America, disarmingly singling it out among his poems as 'the first and only one with which I have taken even moderate pains'. The pains he took were largely to do with the demands of its unusual form: the poem is cast in irregularly rhymed verses, with lines of varying length, creating an impression of that unpremeditated spontaneity which the age associated with the 'ode'. Keats seems to have been aware that the poem was the beginning of something new: 'This I have done leisurely', he reported: 'I think it reads the more richly for it and will I hope encourage me to write other things in even a more peaceable and healthy spirit'. Keats may have come across the subject of his poem earlier in the month while reading Richard Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, in which the beautiful figure of Psyche is mentioned in passing as 'the glory of her age' and the object of rapt devotion. Her story had been treated in Mary Tighe's long poem *Psyche, or the Legend of Love* (1805), which Keats would have known; but it had its most notable outing in *The Golden Ass*, a spirited and rambling story of enchantment and adventure by the second century Roman writer Apuleius, which Keats knew in the Elizabethan translation by William Aldington. According to Apuleius, young Psyche's beauty was so great as to overshadow Venus herself, and the goddess, naturally piqued, instructed her son Cupid to pair the girl off with a hideous serpent. But Cupid falls in love with her instead, visiting her bedchamber nightly, his identity kept secret under cover of darkness. Eventually, with the help of an oil lamp, Psyche discovers the truth and, struck by his sheer loveliness, embraces him passionately; but Cupid, cross to be discovered, and burned by the lamp as well, abandons her. She undergoes various ordeals devised by his mother while Cupid's wound heals: he remains as deeply in love with her as ever and, once restored, he petitions Jupiter, who grants Psyche immortality and marries her off to Cupid in a sumptuous ceremony at which Apollo provides the music.

It is striking how all the trouble of this tale is quite left out of Keats's poem. Keats's interest seems, at first, to lie with the picture of 'two fair creatures, couchèd side by side', a scene which he has happened to glimpse while wandering through an enchanting forest: only at the end of the first verse do we learn that they are Cupid, the 'wingèd boy' and 'His Psyche true'. There is nothing fraught or clandestine about Keats's lovers. What seems quite as important as their loveliness is their location: they are curled up in 'deepest grass, beneath the whispering roof / Of leaves and trembled blossoms', clearly a charming and cosy spot but not the splendid temple that one might have expected for such dignitaries. There is a point to this: as part of his research, Keats seems to have looked up the story in *Lamprière's Classical Dictionary*, where he would have read that 'Psyche' actually meant 'soul', and that regarding Psyche as a person (as Apuleius and Burton do) rather than a metaphysical entity, was a relatively late development. Thanks to this lack of personification, Keats told his brother and sister-in-law, Psyche had acquired no religious followers in the ancient world: 'No voice, no lute, no pipe, no incense sweet / From chain-swung censer teeming', as he puts it; and this is the omission which, in its own way, his poem seeks to rectify. 'I am more orthodox than to let a he[a]then Goddess be so neglected': the poem presents Keats offering his services to this neglected deity, as principal worshipper and one-man choir, and also as architect, though the temple that will arise to service his new cult religion is not built out of stone but a much more exciting and precious material – the poet's consciousness. 'Yes, I will be thy priest, and build a fane / In some untrodden region of my mind': the making of poetry, 'branchèd thoughts, new grown with pleasant pain', is his new act of reverence. The poem ends with an anticipatory Psyche on her own, her lamp now serving as a sign of encouragement to her warm lover, awaiting Cupid's arrival by 'a casement ope at night'. It is a nice additional detail that the poem was probably written in Keats's study at Wentworth Place, from which at night he would have been able to see Fanny Brawne's lit windows next door, separated by the thickness of a wall:

this is 'the setting of Ode to Psyche', as Robert Gittings pointed out, 'with its hint of love always impending, just round the corner'<sup>ii</sup>.

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<sup>i</sup> Letter to George and Georgiana Keats 30 April 1819. Letters ii 105-6

<sup>ii</sup> Robert Gittings John Keats: The Living Year. London: Heinemann (1954) 128