

Ode on Melancholy

'I could always find an egg shell for Melancholy'ⁱ

For Keats as trained physician and self-proclaimed poet, melancholy was both a malady and a muse, with a capacious and ancient medical and cultural history. In early humoral medicine it covered a gamut of afflictions reputedly caused by an imbalance of 'black bile', multiple states which we now classify as psychological and emotional illnesses – everything from depression, anxiety and love sickness to religious mania, despair and suicidal thoughts. Most importantly to Keats as poet, saturnine melancholy was regarded as a stimulus to artistic creativity, in what Shakespeare described as the 'fine frenzy rolling' of 'the lunatic, the lover and the poet'. Shakespeare also contributed two notable melancholics, Hamlet and Jaques (As You Like It).

Robert Burton's quirkily encyclopaedic *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) was Keats's favourite reading in 1819 when he was writing the Odes, 'Lamia' and 'Eve of St Agnes'. Burton, in his mélange of serious medical expertise and sprightly literary wit, voluminously catalogued the symptoms of hurt minds, and prescribed remedial 'seeds, spices, herbs, roots' as cures and painkillers.

Keats was as aware of melancholy's serious side as of its decline in the Romantic age into being regarded as a cult and affectation of poets, satirically skewered by Peacock (whom Keats met at least twice) in his hilarious novella *Nightmare Abbey* (1818). This stereotype was parodied by Keats himself, in an opening stanza to the poem which he discarded as a false start, drawing on ghoulish imagery from gothic novels like those of Ann Radcliffe. Instead, as in his other Odes (indeed most of his poems), Keats uses the eponymous subject to meditate on the sources and nature of poetry and art. 'Ode on Melancholy' beckons us into a goddess's 'shrine' where pleasure and pain coalesce into a heightened creative and therapeutic experience. It anticipates the contemplation of the poet as healer in the unfinished *The Fall of Hyperion. A Dream*, an epic which Keats was struggling to compose while preparing for publication his magisterial 1820 collection containing the Odes.

The first stanza of 'Ode on Melancholy' recalls the botany classes at Guy's Hospital in which Keats had studied as an apothecary student, detailing the properties of poisonous plants which could both cause and (in minimal doses) cure pathological melancholy – strong narcotics like 'wolf's bane' (aconite or blue monkshood), hemlock (the opiate conium), and aptly named 'bittersweet' or woody nightshade, the 'ruby grape of Proserpine'. Such a concoction was probably like the 'distilled liquor' prescribed by Shakespeare's Friar to induce Juliet's death-in-life state.

But the speaker resists such a temptation to escape the pain of melancholy by drifting painlessly into 'easeful Death' ('Ode to a Nightingale'). 'No, no, go not to Lethe' in this drugged fashion, he urges, but instead confront and embrace in full consciousness the 'wakeful anguish' caused by 'sorrow's mysteries', for they are the very element we inhabit and the secret to beauty. 'When the melancholy fit shall fall', then focus fully on the psychic pain caused by an acute awareness of the painful transience of experience. The rose and 'globed peonies' bloom and die in a morning, and a rainbow upon the shoreline sand fades in an instant, but each glimpsed epiphany holds its own *raison d'être* as pleasure caused by pain. If your lover 'some rich anger shows', then feast upon her 'peerless eyes' at their most excitedly animated. These are the conditions of 'Beauty that must die; And Joy ...', for these passing moments are ones of 'aching Pleasure / Turning to poison while the bee mouth sips'. The poet in particular is capable of such an active and anguished pursuit, as 'one whose strenuous tongue / Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine' in an initiation into 'the very

temple of Delight' where 'Veiled Melancholy has her sovran shrine'. In submitting to 'the sadness of her might', such a one will inevitably end up among the goddess's 'cloudy trophies hung', but also richly aware of the bitter-sweet pain that constitutes a poem encapsulating the experience of living intensely in the moment.

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ⁱ Letter to John Hamilton Reynolds 13 July 1818. Letters i, 324. Keats is alluding to As You Like It, II, v, 12-14.