

CONVERSATIONS WITH KEATS – Paper and Lecture Abstracts

Lecture 1: Fanny Brawne and Criticism

Anahid Nersessian, University of California

Few minor characters in literary history have been subject to as much opprobrium as Frances "Fanny" Brawne and probably none have had their reputations as conclusively redeemed. This talk asks how Brawne's relatively thin presence in the historical record and, in particular, her legacy as a silent partner to the voluble Keats might be re-imagined as a form of critical response. It will consider, among other things, the notion of the muse, Brawne's interest in fashion and talent for sewing, the relationship between lyric apostrophe and epistolary address, and criticism as an applied art.

PANEL 1: KEATS AND ISABELLA

Dana Moss, University of Michigan, 'Keats' Amorous Basil; or, the Merits of Plant Desire'

How does one talk about basil amorously? In this paper, I will argue that Keats's 'Isabella' takes this question seriously as a provocation to expand our definition of love. My reading will position the basil as an agent in the triangulation of intimacy between it, Isabella, and Lorenzo, and invite us to speculate what plant desire might look like and how it brings into contention attributes we often associate with intimacy: mutuality, reciprocity, consent, consummation.

Gabrielle Zurlo, Independent Scholar, 'Pillow Talk: Keats's Evolving Discussions with His Dismembered Dead'

This paper examines Use of the Dead to the Living by Thomas Southwood-Smith as a symbiotic co-text alongside Isabella; or, the Pot of Basil with special attention to the effect public lecture and circulated arguments on this formative poem. Specifically, exploring the conversations of corporeal and incorporeal forms in Isabella and Southwood-Smith's pamphlet lecture on the indispensable role the dead body plays in teaching the physician-surgeon how to hear the dead in order to heal the living.

PANEL 2: KEATS'S TRAVELS

Claire Connolly, University College Cork, 'No laughing matter: Keats and the Duchess of Dunghill'

Keat's Northern walking tour truly formed a "prologue," prefacing as it did Keats's extraordinary outpouring of creative energy in 1819. James Chandler has shown the significance of America for Keats from late 1818 onwards, and a recent collection edited by Katie Garner and Nicholas Roe considers Keats's Northern walking tour in depth. The Irish leg of the Scottish tour though has been little discussed and remains a challenge to readers, for

reasons that I address here. I focus in particular on the ugly observations made by Keats concerning an old woman whom he met on the road out of Belfast.

Meiko O'Halloran, Newcastle University, "The watry horizon": Speaking to Severn'

This paper explores the watery fates and transformations that occupied Keats's thoughts in and between his conversations with Severn in the final months of his life. It was on their voyage on the *Maria Crowther* that Keats spoke to Severn about his desire to write an epic poem about Sabrina, the goddess of the river Severn in Milton's *Comus*. In this prospective epic—punning on his companion's name—Keats could face his own watery horizon.

PANEL 3: KEATS'S IMAGERY

Carly Stevenson, University of Sheffield, 'Consuming the Odes'

The question of whether the great odes of 1819 form 'a unified sequence' has long preoccupied Keats scholars. For example, 'the wine in Nightingale, the grape of Joy in Melancholy, and the last drops of apple juice in Autumn are transmutations of that elixir which also appears as transparent juice in The Fall of Hyperion'. This paper considers the gastronomical quality of Keats's 'image-transformations' in the odes and what his 'insistence on the palate' reveals about how the poems ought to be digested.

Vivien Chan, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 'The "Chameleonism" of Wine Drinking in "Ode to a Nightingale"'

This paper will interpret the oral character of 'Ode to a Nightingale' from an embodied perspective. I pay particular attention to Keats's consistent association of the nightingale with water imagery, and his extensive use of multisensory metaphors and image schemas in stanzas two and four of the ode. It also reconsiders the significance of ingestion as a vehicle for textually rendering the poetic gusto of 'continually in for and filling some other Body' (Letters I:387).

Liz Wan, University of Oxford, 'Prophecy, Contingency, and Determinism: Mary Shelley's "The Dream" (1832) in Conversation with Keats's The Eve of St. Agnes (1819)'

In Keats's *The Eve of St. Agnes* and Mary Shelley's "The Dream", the etiology of dreams is depicted as divine influence. This presentation argues that Keats and Shelley exhibit scepticism towards the notion of prophetic dreams by portraying the power of human intervention in altering the characters' fates, while demonstrating that any contingency and their effects are nonetheless predetermined by authorial authority.

PANEL 4: KEATS AND TEXTUALITY

Richard Marggraf-Turley, Aberystwyth University, 'Non-orientable textuality, Klein Bottles and *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* / *The Eve of St Agnes*'

This paper explores the concept of non-orientable textuality in Romantic Studies, specifically through the use of self-quotation in literature. Using the example of John Keats's 'The Eve of

St Agnes' and 'La Belle Dame sans Merci', I argue that the inclusion of an intra-textual 'ditty' ('La belle dame sans merci') creates an unbounded connection between the two works, defying traditional notions of linearity and unity. The paper also introduces the concept of the Klein jar, an unbounded, non-orientable topology, to further explore the idea of non-orientable textuality in Romantic lyric.

Ou Li, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 'The Epistolary "Ode to Maia": Keats's Conversation with His Poetic Forebears'

By placing 'Ode to Maia' back in its immediate context of Keats's 3 May 1818 letter to Reynolds, this paper suggests that although the ode is unfinished, the whole letter has an odic quality in its antithetical movement between a sense of awe in face of a dauntingly great tradition and a daring positioning of a modern poet against that tradition, thus having the making of the great odes of his own—'all in good time' (Letters I:278).

Michael Theune, Illinois Wesleyan University, 'The Perils of Negatively Capable Biography' Two recent Keats biographies employ negative capability as a methodology: Stanley Plumly's *Posthumous Keats* (2008) and Jonathan Bate's *Bright Star, Green Light: The Beautiful Works and Damned Lives of John Keats and F. Scott Fitzgerald* (2021). In each, however, the strong attraction of negative capability leads to distorted, distorting uses of the concept. My presentation will examine how and consider why negative capability can prove so enthralling that it leads these lives astray.

Lecture 2: On Sitting Down with John Keats

Heidi Thomson, Victoria University of Wellington

Keats invites me to sit down with him, just as Wordsworth prompts me to go for a walk. In this lecture I will focus on key moments of sitting down with Keats. Sitting down, in Keats's poetry and letters, has a range of connotations, none of them boring or static. These range from exercising individual, focused concentration on the task ahead, to enjoying companionable, shared creativity; from maintaining a certain bedside manner, to establishing a long-distance relationship with siblings; from reluctantly resigning oneself to an invalid existence, to summoning the resourceful energy to compose poetry. For Keats, the expression of sitting down points to the required stillness for the imagination to take flight in poetry, but it also features prominently in self-portrayals throughout his correspondence. This lecture will demonstrate how sitting down, for Keats, is a transformative act with far more dynamic connotations than is usually assumed.

PANEL 5: KEATS'S POETIC VOICE

Angus Graham-Bell, Eton College, 'A Camelion Voice - Keats's Writing to Women'

'I am certain I have not a right feeling about women.' 'I cannot speak or be silent.' This short paper explores Keats's 'camelion' shiftings of tone and content, and his wavering search for an appropriate language in his correspondence with some of the women in his life, from arch, too-clever-by-half posturings with the Reynolds sisters, through the agonising with Fanny

Brawne to his warm and inclusive conversations with his sister Fanny and Georgiana. This search for a true voice reflects a similar quest in the language of his poetry.

Rosie Whitcombe, University of Sheffield, 'Keats, Mountains, and Multidimensional Letters'
In a letter to Tom, written on 3 August 1818, Keats describes the summit of Ben Nevis in both prose and verse. Separately, these descriptions are unable to do justice to a landscape so vast and new to Keats. However, by crossing both forms in the letter, he develops a new way of navigating language to find adequate expression. Keats manipulates verse and prose in the letter to generate a means of expression that neither form could achieve alone.

Peter Phillips, Independent Scholar, 'Apostrophes and asides: Conversational styles in Keats's poetry'

This paper considers the development of conversational styles which Keats used in his poems. His 1817 collection featured four voices: Subjective, Apostrophe, Narrative, and Authorial Aside. It compares these with the fresh flavours of Authorial Aside we find in *Endymion* and in his 1820 collection: Apologising for what he considered his ineptitude as a poet and Addressing the characters in his story.

PANEL 6: KEATS AND THE AESTHETICS OF BEAUTY

Christopher Stokes, University of Exeter, "'Let me write down a line of glorious tone": the Poetics of the Keatsian Occasional Poem'

Occasional poems (e.g. 'written on X') foreground a self-doubling character – texts, but also actions. The mode is prominent in early Keats, before virtually disappearing. I suggests Keats exploits occasional writing to stand aside from a more burdensome ideal of 'the poem'. Fantasies of poetic richness and experiences of writer's block are increasingly succeeded by pieces tied to aesthetic objects. Arguably, their mounting confidence and complexity ultimately allows Keats to drop the occasional framing altogether.

Małgorzata Łuczyńska-Hołodys, University of Warsaw, 'In conversation with the Aesthetes: John Keats and the *fin de siècle* sensibility'

The present essay traces the points of contact between central ideas of British Aestheticism and concerns frequently voiced in John Keats's poems. I want to claim that Keats's poetry is not merely aesthetic (concerned with the creation and experience of beauty) but primarily aestheticist. I examine the complicated dialectic between temporality and permanence, numbness and heightened sensitivity in Keats's verse, the dialectic which is expressed persistently through language and images that Aestheticism will claim as its own a mere half-century after Keats's death.

David Lo, National Sun Yat-sen University, 'When the Bride Speaks: Anne Carson's *The Beauty of the Husband* in Conversation with Keats'

In view of the overt eroticism in Keats's "The Eve of St. Agnes," Woodhouse deemed the poem "unfit for ladies" but the Canadian poet Anne Carson finds such a quality otherwise. The presentation discusses how Carson juxtaposes and appropriates Keats's lines that capture sensuous, erotic moments to propel her narrative focalized through a woman. In doing so, Carson's conversations with Keats restore the obsolete, erotic sense of "converse," reversing the fitness of Keats's poetry for female readers.

PANEL 7: KEATS AND ROMANTIC ECONOMY

Lauren Cooper, Syracuse University, 'On Seeing the Price of Keats's Bread: Ruinous Stones, Broken Feet, and "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles"'

Situating "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles" within the climate catastrophe and subsistence crisis of 1816–1819 triggered by Tambora's infamous 1815 eruption, my paper argues the sonnet's broken rhythm stages the opportunity cost of expending public funds on ancient art during a climate-exacerbated economic crisis. This reading is driven home by placing it alongside an 1817 political cartoon by George Cruikshank that critiques the British Government's purchase of the Parthenon sculptures in precisely these terms.

Abigail Tetzlaff, Boston College, 'Keats in Conversation with Hampstead: Suburban Exile and Discontent in his 1819-1820 Poetry'

This talk highlights the poet's relationship to suburban Hampstead—and to poetry—in the last few years of his life. Through repeated features in his later poetry, a narrative of exile emerges, through which Keats expresses frustration with his limited literary career. What comes forth in such a reading is his discontent with his material and social circumstances, as well as his frustration with the commodified nature of poetry itself.

Winifred Liu, University of St Andrews, 'Keats and Coals'

Reading Keats's poems chronologically reveals that Keats's coal imagery gets increasingly afflicted over time. This paper will trace how Keats invoked coals throughout his poetic career and how the coals' Biblical dimensions might affect our reading of them. I also wish to provide suggestions as to why Keats described his affections for Fanny and his brothers as 'coals of fire' near the end of his life.

Lecture 3: Memorializing Keats: Severn, Headstones and Hyperion

Grant F. Scott, Muhlenberg College

For obvious reasons, Keats biographers have focused primarily on the last five months of the poet's life and on the subsequent making of his reputation in the later nineteenth century. But they have spent very little time on the two uncertain years that followed the poet's death when

his legacy, largely in the hands of Joseph Severn, hung in the balance. As Severn was recovering from Keats's death, he fought to establish his own livelihood as a painter and find an adequate means of memorializing his friend. He was preoccupied with two works of art, *The Death of Alcibiades* and the headstone for Keats's grave. In this lecture, I argue that the artworks represent complex expressions of Severn's grief and in this sense are both memorials, though *Alcibiades* disguises its aims in a conventional historical painting. In the strong reading of *Hyperion* embedded in the picture, Severn finds a way of coming to terms with the traumatic aftermath of Keats's death as well as the critical attacks on his poetry.

PANEL 8: KEATS'S CIRCLE

Judith Pascoe, Florida State University, 'John Keats, Jane Taylor, and Poetic Ambition'

On September 10, 1817, John Keats wrote to his sister Fanny, mentioning the poet Jane Taylor. I will argue that Keats's reference to Taylor's 1816 volume *Essays in Rhyme* helps illuminate the *Endymion* creation moment. Keats describes Taylor's book as "suitable" reading for Fanny, but it was also suitable reading for Keats at a moment of peak aspiration and anxiety.

Brain Rejack, Illinois State University, 'The Conversational Letters of Jane Campion's *Bright Star*'

This paper examines the role that letters play in Jane Campion's *Bright Star*, and particularly how the film shows letters and conversation being intertwined. Although many viewers have remarked upon the oddity of hearing lines from Keats's letters translated directly into dialogue, I nonetheless argue that, on the whole, the film effectively captures the social dynamics of letter-writing. It thus offers a compelling reminder to readers of those texts to attend to the traces of such social connections.

Sean Hughes & John Chalmers, 'Why did John Keats's judge John James Audubon a fool?'

George Keats accompanied by Georgiana sailed to America in 1818, settling in Henderson, Kentucky as paying guests of John Audubon the naturalist. Both men were conned into investing in a steamboat plying the Ohio River, which proved to be a scam. Later George was castigated by John's friends for not providing financial support. George however paid off Tom's and later John's debts. George's last commercial activity ended in disaster. Audubon went on to produce the *Birds of America*.