

*Fanny Brawne and Other Women**Heidi Thomson*

When John Keats died of tuberculosis in February 1821, he was not yet twenty-six and had been suffering intermittently from ill health for the last three years. Unlike Wordsworth, Coleridge and Blake, he was not married, and unlike Shelley and Byron, he did not have a richly documented track record of various relationships with women. Instead, Keats had much experience of nursing, an activity usually delegated to women. The awareness of his own vulnerability and mortality was exacerbated by the premature deaths of his mother and his brother Tom. Keats's youth, early death, his poetics of empathy and the sensuality of his early poetry all combined into a characterisation of delicacy and effeminacy which lasted throughout the nineteenth century: 'We see in him the youth, without the manhood of poetry.'¹ Some twentieth-century critics have read Keats's poetry in terms of his supposed misogyny.² Recent scholarship offers a more contextual approach, reading Keats as a great poet, as well as a mercurial young man in developmental throes.³ At the moment of his death Keats was consumed by love for Fanny Brawne, but the full record of his life and work also points to many, more harmonious, reciprocal relationships with women of all ages. Keats's sympathetic interactions with, appreciation of and apprehensive anxiety about women inform his poetry throughout.

The first woman in Keats's life was Frances Jennings Keats who bore him a year after her marriage to Thomas Keats in 1794. Three more surviving siblings followed with whom Keats was to develop very close relationships, particularly in the wake of their father's death in April 1804 which was followed, only two months later, by their mother's re-marriage after which she mysteriously disappeared from the children's lives for a number of years. Frances' reputation as a lusty woman who re-married too soon was fuelled by Richard Abbey who alleged, as reported by John Taylor, that she 'must & would have a Husband; and her passions were so ardent, he said that it was dangerous to be alone with her' (*KC* 1, 303). By the end of 1809, her second marriage a failure, Frances was terminally ill and she died in March

1810 at the age of thirty-five, having been nursed by her fourteen-year-old son over the Christmas holidays. Back at school in Enfield by the time of her death, Keats was devastated, withdrawing 'into a nook under the master's desk'.⁴ Her death, compounded by her earlier disappearance, affected Keats deeply. His loving care had failed to save her, and her premature loss would be tied up with thoughts about transience and the threat of cruelty or, as in 'La Belle Dame sans Merci', abandonment by women. He did not refer to his mother in his correspondence apart from in this postscript which also revealed his devotion to Fanny Brawne: 'My seal is mark'd like a family table cloth with my Mother's initial F for Fanny: put between my Father's initials. You will soon hear from me again. My respectful Compts to your Mother' (*L* 2, 133).

The principal woman during Keats's childhood and adolescence was Alice Jennings, the maternal grandmother with whom the Keats siblings lived during the decade between their father's death in 1804 and her own death in December 1814 at the age of seventy-eight. Keats commemorated this beacon in the children's lives in a Petrarchan sonnet written about five days after her death (*P* 4–5, 418). While this elegy consigns the dearly loved woman to 'realms above, / Regions of peace and everlasting love' (4–5), it also concludes on an early expression of the bittersweet quality of human experience: 'Wherefore does any grief our joy impair?' (14). Prompted by the loss of his beloved grandmother, Keats anticipated what became in the *Epistle to Reynolds* the 'flaw in happiness to see beyond our bourn' (82–3) and in 'Ode on Melancholy' the awareness that 'in the very temple of Delight / Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine' (25–6). Keats's fond memories trickled into the graphic, largely sympathetic characterizations of old women as mediators for young people. In 'Isabella', the heroine's 'aged nurse' (343) wonders at the young woman's desperate digging but 'her heart felt pity to the core / At sight of such a dismal laboring, / And so she kneeled, with her locks all hoar, / And put her lean hands to the horrid thing' (378–81). Angela, Madeline's nurse in *The Eve of St. Agnes*, is described in her interaction with Porphyro who looked upon her face '[l]ike puzzled urchin on an aged crone / Who keepeth clos'd a wond'rous riddle book, / As spectacl'd she sits in chimney nook' (129–31). Without her, Porphyro would not have been able to fulfill his 'stratagem' (139). Despite her 'busy fear' (181) and worry that Porphyro 'must needs the lady wed' (179), Angela, herself on the threshold of death, promotes new life in the union of the young lovers.

The resilience of old women is also humorously celebrated in 'Old Meg she was a gipseey' with Meg 'brave as Margaret Queen / And tall as

Amazon: / An old red blanket cloak she wore; / A chip hat had she on' (25–8). Even Mrs Cameron, 'the fattest woman in all inverness shire' (*P* 450), is admired for her grit in 'Upon my life, Sir Nevis, I am piqu'd'. The letters of the Scottish Tour are full of observations of women of all ages, from the 'Duchess of Dunghill' to the 'two ragged tattered Girls' who carried her 'sadan' (*L* 1, 321). In July 1818, he admits to 'thinking better of Womankind than to suppose they care whether Mister John Keats five feet high like them or not' (*L* 1, 342) and resolves to 'conquer my passions hereafter better than I have yet done' (*L* 1, 351).

Keats befriended the sisters and wives of his mostly older friends, the mother of his girlfriend Fanny Brawne, and, tellingly as an instance of familial loyalty, his brother's mother-in-law, Mrs James Wylie. In the wake of George and Georgiana's emigration to America, Keats wrote to Mrs Wylie: 'I should like to have remained near you, were it but for an atom of consolation, after parting with so dear a daughter. My brother George has ever been more than a brother to me, he has been my greatest friend, & I can never forget the sacrifice you have made for his happiness' (*L* 1, 358). And when Keats could no longer bring himself to write to Fanny Brawne herself, he still wrote to her mother and confided in her: 'I dare not fix my Mind upon Fanny. I have not dared to think of her' (*L* 2, 350).

Among Keats's relationships with younger women, the earliest and most important one was with his sister Fanny. Richard Abbey, under whose guardianship Fanny was placed after their grandmother's death, did not approve of visits between the siblings. Keats compensated for this by writing long, solicitous letters. On 10 September 1817, he urged Fanny to write frequently 'for we ought to become intimately acquainted, in order that I may not only, as you grow up love you[r] as my only Sister, but confide in you as my dearest friend' (*L* 1, 153). In that same letter he summarised the plot of *Endymion*, and explained how the Moon 'was growing mad in Love with [Endymion] – However so it was; and when he was asleep on the Grass, she used to come down from heaven and admire him excessively [for] a long time; and at last could not refrain from carrying him away in her arms to the top of that high Mountain Latmus while he was a dreaming' (*L* 1, 154). *Endymion* also featured the tempering presence of the sympathetic 'midnight spirit nurse' Peona, Endymion's 'sweet sister: of all those, / His friends, the dearest' (l. 413, 408–9). Peona was also inspired by Georgiana Wylie, his brother's future wife to whom, already in December 1816, he had written a dedicatory sonnet 'To G. A. W.' at the request of his brother. Shortly after the young couple's departure for America, in June 1818, he celebrated Georgiana in an acrostic, 'Give me your patience, sister, while

I frame', and also included the poem in a journal letter on 18 September 1819 because the original letter was returned (*L* 2, 195). To Benjamin Bailey he defined her as 'the most disinterested woman I ever knew', and his letters to her are unfailingly witty and appreciative (*L* 1, 293).

Keats's platonic friendships with women he thought of as sisters were offset by unease and mistrust about women as lovers: 'I am certain I have not a right feeling towards Women ... Is it because they fall so far beneath my Boyish imagination? ... When I am among Women I have evil thoughts, malice spleen' (to Bailey, 18 July 1818, *L* 1, 341). Self-consciousness about his short stature played a part in these feelings, and when he first described Fanny Brawne to George and Georgiana in the journal letter of 16 December 1818, he started off by saying that she was 'about my height' (*L* 2, 13). But we certainly cannot attribute his unease to physical squeamishness. Keats was not yet fifteen when he was apprenticed to surgeon Thomas Hammond in August 1810, the beginning of a medical education which would extend for another six years, including training at Guy's Hospital, and which would expose him to women's bodies in various states of suffering. He would have assisted with delivering babies and alleviating the pain of ill and injured women of various ages, and this awareness transpired in his poetry. Isabella's madness as she plots to sing a 'latest lullaby' (340) to her dead lover Lorenzo is associated with maternal psychosis: when she finds Lorenzo's glove in a shallow grave she 'put it in her bosom, where it dries / And freezes utterly unto the bone / Those dainties made to still an infant's cries: / Then 'gan she work again; nor stay'd her care, / But to throw back at times her veiling hair' (372–6).

Keats infuses grief and suffering into impressions of female beauty, as in the roundelay 'O Sorrow' in Book 4 of *Endymion* (146–81). In *Hyperion*, Thea's sculptured, stoic strength is qualified by misery: 'But oh! how unlike marble was that face: / How beautiful, if sorrow had not made / Sorrow more beautiful than Beauty's self' (1. 34–6). The nightingale's song finds its way into 'the sad heart of Ruth' who 'stood in tears amid the alien corn' (67–8). La Belle Dame is 'full beautiful', but she also 'wept' and 'sigh'd full sore' (14, 30). Lamia's metamorphosis from snake to woman reverberates with searing 'scarlet pain' (1. 154), while her sad disaffection during the preparations for her doomed wedding to Lycius speaks from her movements in a 'pale contented sort of discontent' (2. 135). Moneta in *The Fall of Hyperion* symbolises eternal suffering, with her face 'bright blanch'd / By an immortal sickness which kills not; / It works a constant change, which happy death / Can put no end to; deathwards progressing / To no death was that visage' (1. 257–61). This poem also features another

appearance of Thea who, compared to Moneta, is 'in her sorrow nearer woman's tears' (l. 338).

In August 1814, a few months short of nineteen, Keats wrote his first extant poem about the need for 'sweet relief' to erotic frustration. Triggered by the sight of a woman 'ungloving her hand' at Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens, 'Fill for me a brimming bowl' expresses the tension between the embarrassment and vulnerability of 'lewd desiring' and the rapturous passion for the 'melting softness of that face—/ The beaminess of those bright eyes—/ That breast, earth's only paradise' (14–16).⁵ The same woman brought 'grief unto [the] darling joys' (14) of the speaker who was 'snared by the ungloving of thy hand' (4) in 'Time's sea hath been', and may also have been the 'fair creature of an hour' (9) who inspired the loss of 'unreflecting love' (12) in the 'When I have fears' sonnet. Various flirtatious, occasional poems between 1815 and 1817, are inspired by, and addressed to, sisters and cousins of friends: Caroline and Ann Mathew, cousins of close friend George Felton Mathew; Richard Woodhouse's cousin Mary Frogley; J. H. Reynolds' sisters Jane, Mariane, Eliza and Charlotte. In October 1818, the cousin of the Reynolds sisters, Jane Cox, impressed him with 'the Beauty of a Leopardess' (L 1, 395).

In May 1817, Keats met Isabella Jones, 'clever, talented, sociable, witty and tantalizingly enigmatic', and her significance as a sexual mentor propelled his poetry into a more confident erotic dimension.⁶ On 24 October 1818, he writes to George: 'I have met with that same Lady again,' and, 'I passed her and turned back – she seemed glad of it; glad to see me and not offended at my passing her before' (L 1, 402). He manages to turn a potentially self-indulgent account of the rejection of his renewed sexual advances into a generous tribute to a woman he placed alongside Georgiana in disinterested affection: 'As I had warmed with her before and kissed her – I though[t] it would be living backwards not to do so again – she had a better taste: she perceived how much a thing of course it was and shrunk from it – not in a prudish way but in as I say a good taste – She cont[r]ived to disappoint me in a way which made me feel more pleasure than a simple kiss could do' (L 1, 403). As a result, he professes: 'I have no libidinous thought about her – she and your George [Georgiana] are the only women à peu près de mon age whom I would be content to know for their mind and friendship alone' (L 1, 403). This warming with Isabella Jones inspired the passion of Endymion in Book One, while her free-spirited independence in 1818 may have inspired *Fancy*: 'Oh, sweet Fancy! let her loose; / Everything is spoilt by use: / Where's the cheek that doth not fade, / Too much gaz'd at?' (67–70). The conventional 'carpe diem' love lyrics of the

summer of 1817, 'Unfelt, unheard, unseen', 'Hither, hither, love', and 'You say you love; but with a voice', may also reflect Keats's relationship with Isabella Jones. More specifically, the 1818 lyric 'Hush, hush, tread softly; hush, hush, my dear' stages a secret tryst and implores 'sweet Isabel' to be quiet because 'the jealous, the jealous old baldpate may hear' (3–4), while it also serves as an early instance of how much Keats himself was prone to sexual jealousy, '[f]or less than a nothing the jealous can hear' (8).

According to Richard Woodhouse, Isabella Jones suggested the topic of *The Eve of St. Agnes*, which became Keats's most sexually controversial poem (P 454). A shocked Woodhouse insisted that the poem would be 'unfit for ladies' unless the consummation of Madeline and Porphyro's love were made less explicit, to which Keats reportedly responded that he 'does not want ladies to read his poetry' (P 455). Keats wrote for men and women, not ladies and gentlemen, and he often attributes a strong sense of agency to women in his love poems. Already in a February 1818 letter to Reynolds he wondered 'who shall say between Man and Woman which is the most delighted' (L 1, 232), and the need for required reciprocity permeates his mature poetry about sexual or erotic encounters. Keats categorised 'Love' in the letter of 13 March 1818 to Bailey, among things 'semireal', because they 'require a greeting of the Spirit to make them wholly exist' (L 1, 243), and this included mutual affection and effort: 'as the rose / Blendeth its odour with the violet, – / Solution sweet' (*The Eve of St. Agnes*, 320–1). Madeline's response to her lover's rendition of 'La belle dame sans mercy' is to implore him to 'Give me that voice again, my Porphyro' (312). Unlike the 'fairy's child' (14) who remains an indefinite spectre of the knight's imagination in 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci: A Ballad', Madeline and Porphyro flee together.

In *The Eve of St. Mark*, the unfinished companion piece to *The Eve of St. Agnes*, Bertha forgoes real life in favour of reading about the 'fervent martyrdom' of Saint Mark (116). Her frustrated status as a pent-up 'poor cheated soul' (69) is highlighted and gently satirised by the shadow of the parrot's cage and the fire screen picture of animal life, riotously evoked but arrested all the same like the figures on the Grecian Urn (76–82). In contrast, Keats's luxurious catalogue of the objects and creatures in Isabella Jones's 'tasty' sitting room, a possible inspiration for the description in *The Eve of St. Mark*, creates a scene for potential seduction with 'Books, Pictures a bronze statue of Buonaparte, Music, aeolian Harp; a Parrot a Linnet – A Case of choice Liquers &c &c' (L 1, 402). The memory of Isabella Jones's 'choice Liquers' and gifts of grouse and game, sensual pleasures, also emerges in the oriental 'delicates' which Porphyro 'heap'd with

glowing hand / On golden dishes and in baskets bright / Of wreathed silver' in *The Eve of St. Agnes* (272–3).

Isabella Jones may, or may not, have been the 'widow of Lieutenant William Jones, killed on Nelson's *Victory* at Trafalgar on 21 October 1805'.⁷ She would have been 'around thirty-eight years old when Keats met her, under the protection of the [Irish aristocratic] O'Callaghans as the widow of a war hero. For them, her liaison with a twenty-one-year-old poet who published in *The Examiner* would have been unthinkable.'⁸ Jones's scathing response to Joseph Severn's sentimental account of Keats's final weeks gives us an incontrovertible sense of her loyalty to Keats's memory in this letter to John Taylor of 14 April 1821: 'Of all the cants, in this canting world the cant of sentiment is the most disgusting and I never saw better specimens than these letters afford – they are extremely well got up and will impose upon the most literate – but do let me flatter myself that, *we* carry a test in the true feeling of *our* hearts, that exposes all such hollow pretensions – *His* own letter to Mr. B. – with all its quaintness and harmless conceit is worth a wagon load of Mr. Egotist's productions' (italics in original).⁹

Fanny Brawne (1800–1865), whom Keats met and fell in love with in Hampstead at the end of 1818, combined the erotic attraction of a lover and the domestic familiarity of a sister. Keats first describes her in the journal letter to George and Georgiana of 16 December 1818 as 'beautiful and elegant, graceful, silly, fashionable and strange' (*L* 2, 8). She was, in some ways, a 'maiden most unmeek', not unlike the 'demon Poesy' in 'Ode on Indolence' (29, 30). Keats found it difficult to reconcile his desperate passion for her with his declining health and uncertain prospects, and already from mid-1819 his letters from the Isle of Wight and Winchester were marred by outbursts of jealous possessiveness and resentment at having his own freedom 'destroyed' (*L* 2, 123). Both *Otho the Great* and *The Jealousies* feature mismatched, jealous lovers, while Queen Maud in *King Stephen* is a powerful belle dame sans merci. Yet, he also believed in her love for him: 'I love you the more in that I believe you have liked me for my own sake and for nothing else' (*L* 2, 127). Keats's complete infatuation with her inspired the great, bittersweet poems of 1819, in which eros and thanatos are never far apart. Her frustratingly seductive proximity, quite literally next door during his illness in 1820, teased him out of thought. Many of the 1819 poems have a cruel streak of desperate suffering in them, with 'maidens loth' trying to escape bold lovers who cannot kiss them anyway, arrested as they are on the Grecian Urn (8). All ideal beauty transcends the pathology of human passion that 'leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd, / A burning forehead, and a parching tongue' (29–30). There is a somewhat sadistic

delight in the 'rich anger' of the mistress when the speaker 'emprison[s] her soft hand, and let[s] her rave' ('Ode on Melancholy', 19–20). Similarly, Lycius' ensnaring cruelty to Lamia mirrors Keats's self-conscious mood swings in his letters to Fanny Brawne:

Besides, for all his love, in self despite,
 Against his better self, he took delight
 Luxurious in her sorrows, soft and new.
 His passion, cruel grown, took on a hue
 Fierce and sanguineous as 'twas possible
 In one whose brow had no dark veins to swell.
 (2.73–7)

The agony of helpless frustration and remembrance is expressed in 'The day is gone, and all its sweets are gone', in 'I cry your mercy – pity – love! – aye, love' ('withhold no atom's atom or I die') (10), and in 'What can I do to drive away' (374–6). In 'To Fanny' he implores her to 'keep me free / From torturing jealousy' (47–8), but the dream he invokes through 'Physician Nature' has nightmarish qualities: 'Who now, with greedy looks, eats up my feast?' (17). 'How illness stands as a barrier betwixt me and you!' he writes to her in February 1820 (*L* 2, 263).

Keats transcribed 'Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art' in a volume of Shakespeare 'when he was aboard ship on his way to Italy' where he would die four months later (*P* 460). He would never again have a chance to rest upon his 'fair love's ripening breast, / To feel for ever its soft swell and fall' (10–11). Her image haunted him throughout the excruciating journey to Rome: 'I cannot bear to leave her. Oh, God! God! God! Every thing I have in my trunks that reminds me of her goes through me like a spear. The silk lining she put in my travelling cap scalds my head. My imagination is horribly vivid about her – I see her – I hear her. There is nothing in the world of sufficient interest to divert me from her a moment' (*L* 2, 351). Fanny Brawne bore 'the signs of her widowhood' until 1827.¹⁰

On 18 September 1820, Fanny Brawne began a correspondence with Fanny Keats, because Keats had 'expressed a wish that I should occasionally write to you'.¹¹ She added: 'You see I have been quite intimate with you, most likely without you ever having heard of my name.'¹² Keats wrote to Brown on 30 September 1820 about these two young women: 'The one seems to absorb the other to a degree incredible' (*L* 2, 345). By setting up their correspondence, Keats brought the women he loved most, his lover and his sister, together in the 'richer entanglement' of friendship's 'steady splendour' (*Endymion* 1. 798, 805).

Notes

- 1 William Hazlitt, 'On Effeminacy of Character', in *Table Talk*, ed. Catherine Macdonald Maclean (London: Dent, 1959[1822]), p. 255.
- 2 See, for instance, Karen Swann, 'Harassing the Muse', in *Romanticism and Feminism*, ed. Anne K. Mellor (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. 81–92.
- 3 See, for instance, Nicholas Roe's *John Keats: A New Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).
- 4 Roe, *John Keats: A New Life*, p. 40.
- 5 Roe, *John Keats: A New Life*, p. 60.
- 6 Roe, *John Keats: A New Life*, p. 169.
- 7 Roe, *John Keats: A New Life*, p. 171.
- 8 Roe, *John Keats: A New Life*, p. 172.
- 9 Robert Gittings, *John Keats: The Living Year* (London: Heinemann, 1954), p. 232.
- 10 Joanna Richardson, *Fanny Brawne: A Biography* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1952), p. 112.
- 11 *Letters of Fanny Brawne to Fanny Keats*, ed. Fred Edgcumbe (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), p. 1.
- 12 *Letters of Fanny Brawne to Fanny Keats*, pp. 1–2.