

**SELECTIONS FROM THE
POEMS OF
JOHN KEATS AND
PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY**

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Selections from the poems of John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley by Richard Wilson & John Keats & Percy Bysshe Shelley

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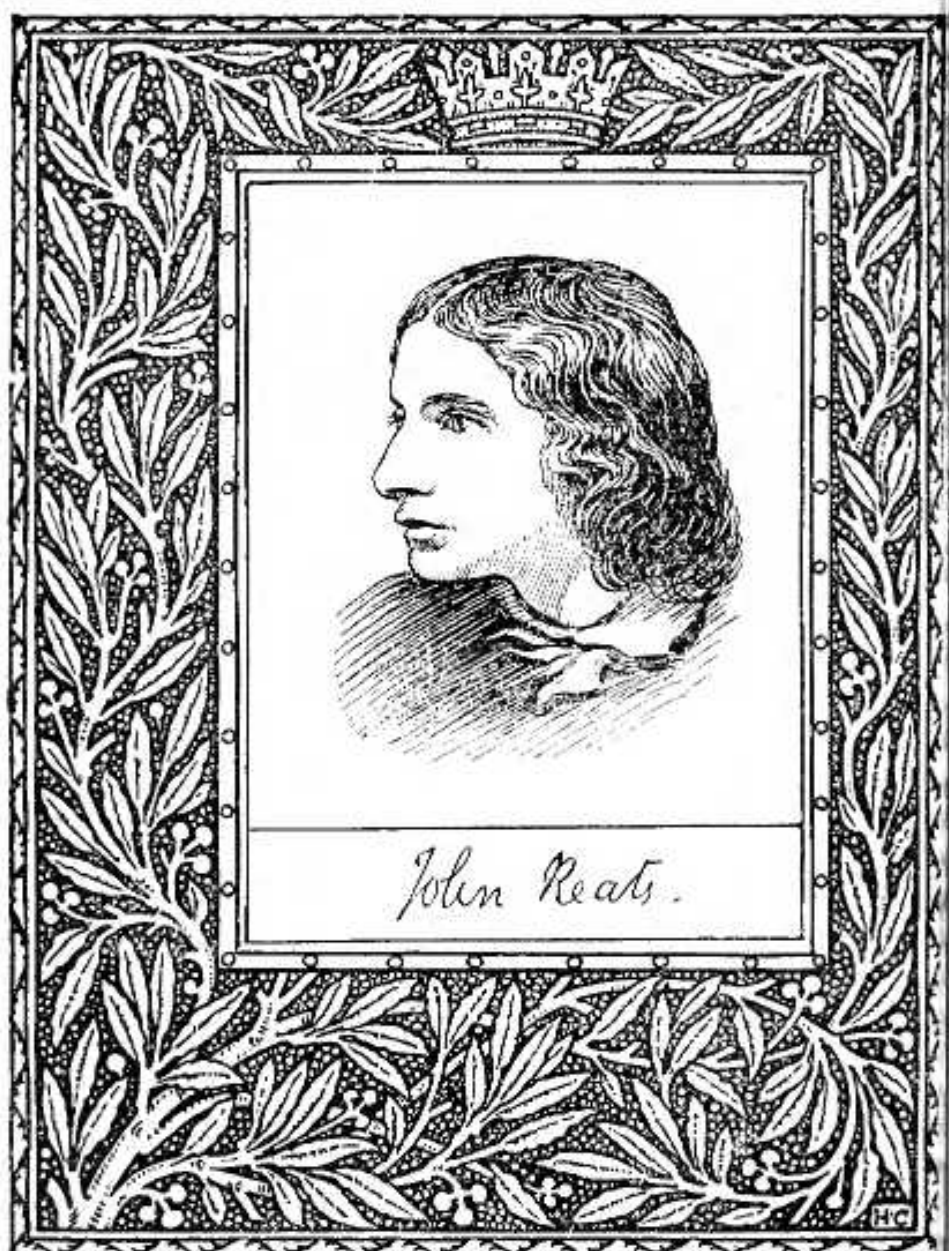
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RICHARD WILSON & JOHN KEATS & PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY


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John Keats.

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SHELLEY



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A decorative rectangular frame with ornate, scrollwork-like borders. Inside the frame, the word "INTRODUCTION" is written in a simple, serif, all-caps font, centered horizontally and vertically.

INTRODUCTION

WHEN we read a play or a story poem we do not usually concern ourselves about the writer unless he is an actor in his own story. But when we read a lyric (*i.e.* a song poem), or an ode or elegy we usually gain more or less insight into the mind and emotions of the poet. It matters little that we know only a few facts about Shakespeare, but we want to know as much as possible about Keats and Shelley and the times in which they lived, for these two poets write very largely about themselves.

JOHN KEATS

John Keats was born in 1795, his father being manager of a livery stable at "The Swan and Hoop," Finsbury Pavement, London. The father has been described as a man of "common sense and native respectability," was said to be a West-Countryman and was killed by a fall from his horse when John, the eldest of a family of five, was about nine years old. The mother, "tall, vivacious, talented, and pleasure-loving, resembled John in the face and apparently favoured him and was passionately loved by him." She survived her husband only six years and the orphans were put under the care of guardians.

The three boys went to school at Enfield, and the

son of their schoolmaster, Charles Cowden Clarke, became Keats's friend, though he was older by seven years. "By him and other contemporaries the boy was remembered as a favourite at school, handsome, vivacious, high-minded, generous, fearless, of an ungovernable temper and fond of fighting, but very tender with passions of tears and of outrageous laughter."¹

At the age of fifteen he was apprenticed to an Edmon-ton surgeon, but his real life was spent in the land of romance. He read eagerly the works of poets, historians, travellers, studied classical myths,² tried his hand at translation and wrote verse which was more or less doggerel. Meanwhile he studied at the great London hospitals and qualified for an appointment as dresser at Guy's, where he performed his duties with credit but without distinction. The real bent of his mind is shown by the following incident. One night in 1815, he and Cowden Clarke sat together until morning reading Chapman's translation of Homer. Then Keats went home and wrote the sonnet printed on page 42 of this book, entitled *On Reading Chapman's*

¹ Edward Thomas.

² He read much in classical dictionaries, which may appear, at first sight, to be a barren field. "In Lemprière's classical dictionary," writes Thomas, "he would read how Orion rid Chios of wild beasts in order to gain the king's daughter Hero, and how the king made him drunk and put out his eyes as he lay asleep on the seashore, and how Orion, putting a man on his back to guide him, went to where he could turn his eyes towards the east, and how the rising sun gave him back his sight. Keats, merely for a comparison, made the lines:

Like old Deucalion mountain'd o'er the flood,
Or blind Orion hungry for the morn."

Homer, which was sent to his friend in time for breakfast. "This sonnet is perhaps the finest," writes a critic, "almost certainly the loftiest, of all poems having a book for their subject and confessedly inspired by reading."

After that the lancet was forsaken for the pen. The young poet roamed freely about the country and travelled in Scotland, always with congenial friends, gathering impressions of "man and Nature and of human life," which he expressed in the most musical and beautiful of language. Even when writing some classical story his mind's eye is full of the beauty of English woods, meadows, streams and moorlands, trees, blossoms, birds and fishes. His metaphors and similes are drawn from the same sweet source.—"The open sky," he writes in one place, "sits on our senses like a sapphire crown; the air is our robe of state; the earth is our throne, and the sea a mighty minstrel playing before it."

The poet was, however, no brooding visionary. He had the great gift of friendship and delighted to share with his two brothers, his sister Fanny and his many friends, his exquisite enjoyment of the sights and sounds of the English countryside.—"O there is nothing like fine weather, and health and books, and a fine country, and a contented mind, and a diligent habit of reading and thinking, and an amulet against ennui—and please heaven a little claret wine cool out of a cellar a mile deep—with a few or a good many ratafia cakes—a rocky basin to bathe in, a strawberry bed to say your prayers to Flora in, a pad nag to go you ten miles or so; two or three sensible people to chat with; two or three spiteful folks to spar with; two or three odd fishes to

laugh at; and two or three numskulls to argue with—instead of using dumb-bells on a rainy day:—

Two or three Posies
 With two or three simples—
 Two or three Noses
 With two or three pimples—
 Two or three wise men
 And two or three ninnys—
 Two or three purses
 And two or three guineas . . ."

The shorter poems of Keats are full of reminders of his friendships—with Leigh Hunt, the painter B. R. Haydon, who was the means of England acquiring the Elgin Marbles, Mungo Park, the African traveller, Landseer, the painter of the "lower animals," Wordsworth, Charles Lamb, Tom Hood, the artist Joseph Severn, and especially John Hamilton Reynolds, an insurance clerk, but a wit and a poet of no mean order. Another friend was William Hazlitt, while he had some acquaintance with Coleridge.

The first book of poems was published in 1871, when the poet was twenty-one. It did not attract much attention, except among his relatives and friends, but it contained such things as the sonnets on Chapman's Homer and the Elgin Marbles. Meanwhile he had begun something more ambitious. He was a deep admirer of *The Faerie Queene*, *Paradise Lost*, and *The Excursion*, and thought no one worthy of the name of poet who had not a long narrative poem to his credit. So he wrote *Endymion*, which, however, became not a narrative poem but a kind of spiritual allegory of the