

John Barnard, ed., *21st-Century Oxford Authors: John Keats*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. 720. £95. ISBN 9780199660872.

John Keats is a poet who has been extremely well served by his editors. In relatively modern times, volumes by Hyder E. Rollins, Miriam Allott, Jack Stillinger, John Barnard, Nicholas Roe, Elizabeth Cook, Jeffrey Cox, Grant Scott and others have given us meticulously edited and annotated versions of the poetry and letters. John Barnard, already the editor of a fine *Complete Poems* and an equally distinguished *Selected Letters*, has in this latest edition managed triumphantly to reshape significantly our understanding of Keats's writings.

He does so principally through two things: first, the quality of his editing of individual works, which displays a pervasive care and accuracy; second, through his deployment of one of the key weapons in the editor's armoury, that is, decisions about the ordering of his or her materials. In keeping with the – to my mind, invaluable – overall aim of the series (as the editor in it of a forthcoming Coleridge volume I should declare an interest), Barnard prints the writings in chronological order of publication (where that occurred) or composition (as is the case with unpublished writings, including some of the poems and all of the annotations and letters).

The result is continually to sharpen one's understanding of sequence and juxtaposition. I found it instructive to have drawn to my attention the fact that journal publication of the two Elgin Marbles sonnets, in the second of which the poet is overwhelmed by 'an undescribable feud' (10) of feelings, preceded the publication of the 1817 *Poems*, with, in *Sleep and Poetry*, the quasi-sculptural depiction of 'poesy' as 'the supreme of power; / 'Tis might half slumbering on its own right arm' (236-7). Aesthetic storm here ushers in Apollonian calm. We meet the *Poems* version of 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer' having already encountered, much as Keats's contemporaries would have encountered, the poem's initial periodical publication in December 1816. Barnard's decision to print both versions means that we can watch the poem's evolving life, noticing for example the key change (in both senses) in line 7 from 'Yet could I never judge what men could mean' to 'Yet did I never breathe its pure serene'.

Again, the ordering reminds one that composition of the inventive imaginings of *Endymion* (finally published in late April or early May 1818) accompanies letter after letter in which Keats breaks new speculative ground about the nature and purpose of poetry. The letters are familiar and justly famous, yet one reads them with refreshed eyes and ears when they're put intimately into connection with the poetry. On 8 October 1817, Keats, with *Endymion* in mind, asserts: 'Besides a long Poem is a test of Invention which I take to be the Polar Star of Poetry, as Fancy is the Sails, and Imagination the Rudder' (92); on 22 November, he writes to Bailey that 'The Imagination may be compared to Adam's dream – he awoke and found it truth' (96); in late December, he formulates his notion of '*Negative Capability*' (103). It is amusing to see this highpoint of Romantic poetics immediately followed by a sonnet 'To Mrs Reynolds's Cat', in which living in 'uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts' (103) takes the form of impish questioning: 'How many mice and Rats hast in thy days / Destroy'd?' (2-3), where the enjambed verb falls with mock-heroic yet proto-Darwinian force. It is also stimulating to note that the next item is Keats's marginalia to his copy of Shakespeare's First Folio in which Shakespeare's imaginative gift with language receives delighted praise, as when the phrase 'maturity blowne up' from *Troilus and Cressida* elicits the following hyper-sensitive comment: 'One's very breath when leaning over these Pages is held for fear of blowing this line away – as easily as the gentlest breeze Robs dandelions of their fleecy Crowns' (105).

Such a sentence is literary criticism as a mode of prose poetry, a mode apparent also in the marginalia to *Paradise Lost*. This marginalia was also undertaken in the months before

the publication of *Endymion*, reminding one that serious engagement with Milton took place some while before Keats turned his creative energies towards *Hyperion*. An attractive feature of the volume, as of the series, is the inclusion of photographs of title pages and other materials, including, here, the first page of Book IV of Milton's epic, with Keats's comments on it, beginning 'A friend of mine says this Book has the finest opening of any' (133), a reminder that Keats's creative development owes much to his relations with others (here Bailey or Dilke). That these relations could be fraught as well as benign is brought out by Barnard's discussion of the decision, against Keats's initial wishes, to include *Hyperion* in the 1820 volume. One assumes that Keats saw the poem in proofs of the volume, and to that degree acquiesced in the decision to include it, and, overall, Barnard's judgement that 'The relation between K[eats] and his editors was a fruitful one based on collaboration and negotiation' (610) carries conviction.

That comment typifies the excellent good sense and balance evident in the succinct, highly apposite annotation. John Barnard also supplies a compelling Introduction, which notes (for example) that 'An impatience to move on to the next challenge is a recurrent feature of Keats's writing life' (xxviii); a detailed Chronology; a note on the volume's editorial principles and procedures; a guide to classical names; and pertinent information about the poet's correspondents and acquaintances. The volume is an editorial tour-de-force that breathes revivifying energy into our grasp of Keats's writings as it 'creates' what the editor calls 'a double time scheme', placing 'the poetry by which Keats was known to the reading public in his lifetime within the extensive biographical context provided by his unpublished poems and letters' (xxxv-xxxvi). It is an editorial achievement of the first importance.

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