

Susan J. Wolfson, *Reading John Keats*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. 174. £12.99. ISBN 9780521732796.

The third installment in a new *Reading Writers and their Work* series from Cambridge University Press, following Saree Makdisi's *Reading William Blake* and Emily Steiner's *Reading Piers Plowman*, is Susan J. Wolfson's *Reading John Keats*.

There is perhaps no scholar better suited to the task of reading Keats's poetry and letters than Wolfson. Alive to the puns and word play, the literary allusions and biographical associations, Wolfson weaves these elements elegantly into her readings of individual poems as she narrates the poet's artistic development. As an introduction to Keats's poetry for undergraduate students or the casual reader, the book is useful not only for its fine readings but also for the way it models how subtle readers can make the most compelling writers. For Wolfson's own prose inherits the sparkling quality of Keatsian word play; she characterizes the poet's ceaselessly interrogative, self-reflective temper, for instance, as 'leaving no tone unturned' (19). Such turns of phrase underscore the work of reading itself as immersion in and performance of imaginative play.

In ten short chapters, Wolfson takes us from the earliest aspirations to the latest poems, and she concludes with a brief sketch of the legacies shaped by readers of Keats from Percy Shelley to Adrienne Rich. As in *The Cambridge Companion to Keats* (2001), which Wolfson herself edited, we find here both a list of the poet's memorable statements and phrases culled from his letters, and a chronology situating the poet's activity in the context of the historical events of the age and the lives and works of his friends and contemporaries. Each of these offerings, the memorable phrases and the chronology, is more abridged in *Reading John Keats* than in the *Companion*, but refers us to the *Companion* for the fuller selection. At moments, the book reads like a refined version of Spark Notes, such as when a fairly thorough plot summary of *Endymion*, book by book, precedes the poetic analysis. But Wolfson's study is obviously more sophisticated and ambitious than that. It includes, for instance, a number of significant archival images, such as a manuscript page for *The Eve of St. Agnes* in which we see the very texture of the poet's 'work[ing] hard to get the blend of spirit and sense just right, arriving at *warm* gules after trying out *red* and then *rich*' (76). In this respect, Wolfson convinces us that she thinks like a poet by making visible the very progress and logic of Keats's poetic thinking. Wolfson's work is at its finest when it draws suggestive connections between the language of Keats's poems and that of his reading; among many such instances, she notes the relation between Lamia's 'beauteous wreath' and the 'wanton wreath' of Satanic seduction in *Paradise Lost*, words that Keats underlined in that text (112).

For the study of a poet who, as such, claimed to have 'no self,' 'no Identity' (cited by Wolfson, 147), one might expect that the introduction of biographical information as a source of poetic illumination would be accompanied by methodological reflection, but *Reading John Keats* does not open that self-reflexive critical door. Considering Keats criticism of the last thirty years or so, one might even say that Wolfson's new study remains in the 'Chamber of Maiden Thought' (*Letters of John Keats*, ed. Rollins, 1: 280). A symptom of that lingering appears in the selections for Further Reading, which include almost no critical book or article from the twenty-first century. That is to say, as brilliant as Wolfson's insights are throughout the entirety of this study, they only consolidate and bring to a pitch critical work of the mid- to late-twentieth century; *Reading John Keats* neither opens up a new way to read, nor brings its various methods of engagement into conversation with recent critical debates, such as those concerning distant

The BARS Review, No. 48 (Autumn 2016)

reading, surface reading, slow reading, and so on. Nevertheless, teachers of poetry competing with a multiplicity of media for the attention of a young generation of readers will no doubt welcome this loving and lively book.

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