

Lucasta Miller. *Keats: A Brief Life in Nine Poems and One Epigraph*.
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On the 23rd of February 2021 the English-speaking world commemorates the sad two-hundredth anniversary of the death of their beloved poet “whose name was writ in water” as John Keats described himself on the tombstone in the Protestant cemetery in Rome where he was buried. One of many official websites dedicated to the celebration of John Keats’s bicentenary of his premature death opens with a heart-rending quotation of an excerpt from the letter to his beloved fiancée Fanny Brawne: “‘If I should die,’ said I to myself, ‘I have left no immortal work behind me—nothing to make my friends proud of my memory—but I have lov’d the principle of beauty in all things, and if I had had time I would have made myself remember’d’” (February 1820). Instead Keats died of tuberculosis on 23 February 1821 in Rome at the age of 25 leaving for posterity six great odes, two dozen sonnets, the same number of miscellaneous poems and three longer poetic tales as well as four collections of letters. Not unexpectedly, with such sparse literary output Keats remains one of the most thoroughly researched British poets with a myriad of books about his poetry published in different languages all over the world. What is surprising, however, is that despite great popularity of the poet among ordinary readers of verse and his high acclaim among the scholars and students of English literature, Keats’s bicentenary did not result in the publication of volumes of books both scholarly and popular which would celebrate the poet’s life and work. Of course the internet websites dedicated to English literature as well as British newspapers and magazines took notice of the event and described the preparations to mark the anniversary. In its feature article, for instance, *The Guardian* announces a project organized by The Keats-Shelley Memorial House in Rome in which a rock star Bob Geldof, who is Keats-Shelley ambassador, is narrating a video “The Death of Keats”.

It consists of a tour of the House and a reading from Keats's letters at the time when he resided there and spent the last days of his life. Similarly, several literary associations and societies prepared various activities, like The Poetry Society and The Keats House Hampstead which commissioned major poets, like Ruth Padel and others, to write their own versions of poems inspired by Keats' literary output and perform them in public presentations. Likewise, dramatic forms such as Angus Graham-Campbell's play *Writ in Water* or Pele Cox's *Lift Me Up for I Am Dying*, both based on the events from the last days of Keats' life were broadcast both on BBC Radio and performed in public.

However, if we have a look at various publications printed so far, we find a handful of volumes of which the most interesting book published in the year 2021 intended to commemorate Keats's anniversary is a full-length monograph written by Lucasta Miller which she entitled appropriately for the occasion *Keats: A Brief Life in Nine Poems and One Epigraph*. The author is a renowned scholar and expert on the nineteenth-century literature, which she investigates from a metabiographical perspective. She has already published two seminal studies, one on the Bronte sisters *The Bronte Myth* (2001) and the other on the infamous and virtually forgotten "female Byron"—Letitia Elizabeth Landon as *L.E.L.: The Lost Life and Scandalous Death of Letitia Elizabeth Landon, the Celebrated Female Byron* (2019). In her book on Keats, Miller follows a similar methodology as she chooses nine most popular poems of the poet with the intention to "excavate their backstories" and uses them in separate chapters "as entry points into telling [Keats's] life story" (9). Like all books written by Miller this one is not intended as one more monument of Keats's poetic and personal greatness. Far from it, she does not refrain from dealing with controversial issues like Keats's "radical and heterodox political and religious opinions" (9) or health problems which he had to cure with medication not as we might expect for tuberculosis but for syphilis. Like all good biographies, Miller's book is full of "detailed, time-specific, personal information about John Keats" (11). And this is not only due to the meticulous research supported by "Picture Section" in which we may see the life mask of the poet, several sketches and portraits of him at different stages of his life, manuscripts of his poems as well as the photographs of the places of his residence and finally Keats' gravestone in Rome. Every page of this absorbing study is full of contextualizing details all of which shed light on the composition of otherwise monumental poems. We learn, for example, that "according to Keats's housemate Charles Armitage Brown, *Ode to a Nightingale*

was written one spring morning after breakfast in ‘two or three hours’ in the garden at Wentworth Place under a plum tree in which a nightingale had built a nest” (191) and his ode *To Autumn* was composed “in a field just outside Winchester ... on Sunday 19 September 1819” (232) or that Keats’s sonnet commemorating the Polish patriot Tadeusz Kościuszko was in fact inspired by the portrait which “was displayed in Leigh Hunt’s sitting room.” (241)

Admittedly, an interesting although controversial to some angle from which Miller writes the poet’s biography, may be her tendency to view Keats’s poems in the light of contemporary literary criticism. See, for instance, how she views Keats’ ode *To Autumn* in terms of contemporary ecocriticism: “In fact, recent trends in criticism might be seen to be moving away from readings which root the poem within the political complexities of 1819 towards a more future-looking approach. *To Autumn* is ripe to become a key text in what’s now called “ecocriticism”, that seeks to read the nature poems of the past to address current anxieties about the planet while charting how literary culture has represented the relationship between humans and the natural world. The truth is that Keats achieves such multifaceted poetic mastery that his ode, though he did not know it at the time, has proved fertile enough to be ever meaningful in new contexts.” (244) In my opinion, however, such a reading of the Romantic poet’s verse casts a new and fresh light on sometimes stale interpretations of Keats’s canonical poems and proves their timeless universality.

Miller’s book is also fascinating in the way she combines facts from Keats’ life with her own poetic sensitivity and interpretative skills. For instance, while reporting the last months of the poet’s life, Miller contends that Keats was absolutely convinced that he was going to die in Italy. As proof of the fact she quotes a note, which as a matter of fact became an informal will Keats left to his publisher John Taylor: “In case of my death this scrap of Paper may be serviceable in your possession. All my estate real and personal consists in the hopes of the sale of books publish’d or unpublish’d. Now I wish Brown and you to be the first paid Creditors – the rest is in nubibus [in the clouds], but in case it should shower pay my Taylor the few pounds I owe him. My chest of books I divide among my friends” (279). In this unceremonious note Miller is able to discern not only details of an informal legal notice but she hears primarily Keats’ idiosyncratic voice “notable for its casualness and brevity, for its nature metaphor of cloud and rain, its conversational use of Latinism...” (279). In a similar manner, Miller discusses Keats’s letters, a form of writing which according to her has “come to be

regarded not simply as an adjunct to his poetry, but an *oeuvre* in themselves” (169). She compares their “unfiltered quality” and “self-conscious delight in playing with language” (169) to notorious experiments of Laurence Sterne in his unrivalled in its linguistic hybridity novel *Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*. To Miller, it is precisely this kaleidoscopic amalgam of elements which makes Keats’s letters so unique. She points especially to the “flexible way in which they move between prose and verse, between gossipy news and philosophical speculation, between the slangy and the high-flown, between the tragic and the comic, between self-analysis and concern for others” (169).

Equally thought-provoking are Miller’s comments on other letters written by John Keats to specific people, although intended, it seems, to be understood as more general reflections on language as a medium of expressing individual emotions. Especially noteworthy is her reading of fragments of the “Scottish letters” written by Keats on 1 July 1818 after his chance encounter of Scottish dancers he had seen one day: “they kickit & jumpit with mettle extraordinary, & whiskit, & fleckit, & toe’d it, & go’d it, and twirld it, & wheel’d it, & stampt it, & sweated it, tattooing the floor like mad” (170). Miller very appropriately observes in the manner this letter was written that “with the rhythms replicating the beat of the dancers’ feet, and even the appearance of the words on the page mimicking the jerky repetitions of the dance, this is a comical reprise of Keats’s grander poetic project: to use the abstract medium of language to bring body and soul together” (170). Such observations make it possible for us to see Keats in the line of those great poetic experimenters who, culminating with the avant-garde Modernist poets, considered all arts as one powerful medium which creatively combined sound, rhythm and visual pattern for its total evocative effect.

Indeed, the strongest point of Miller’s book on Keats is the way in which she combines biographical and historical data with poetic texture of the greatest poems of Keats’s poetic *oeuvre*. Moreover, she refrains from current critical jargon and tries to be maximally informative as well as richly anecdotal and entertaining. This ambitious, dual perspective of amalgamating factual biography with idiosyncratic, imaginative interpretation of poems appears to be a double-edged weapon as it simultaneously addresses both the mind and the heart. Therefore, some readers may find Miller’s study on Keats a bitter-sweet intellectual experience where loads of meticulously researched historical and biographical evidence/data collides with the analyses and interpretations which not always meet the reader’s expectations or turn out to be one-sided over-interpretations. Yet, this slight methodological limitation is but a minor

shortcoming and, to be honest, valid only for most demanding and often biased critical readers. A long list of recently published reviews of the book dispels all such worries as we read in them that Miller's monograph is "outstanding as Miller's knowledge of all things Keatsian is formidable" (*Sunday Times*), and as "a wittily perceptive introduction to (or reminder of) the poet and his work, her book is unlikely to be surpassed any time soon" (*Financial Times*), and although "this excellent book enters an already crowded market of Keats biographies, but earns its place through its firm basis in precise reading" (*Spectator*), to observe finally that "Lucasta Miller's brilliant life of Keats, told through a close reading of nine poems and one epitaph [is] a timely and fresh re-appropriation of Keats satisfying, engaging and accessible" (*New Statesman*).

Therefore, it is only to be desired that books of such intellectual caliber, filled with such an abundance of contextual data be written more often to satisfy the needs of both academics and admirers of (Romantic) poetry the world over.

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