

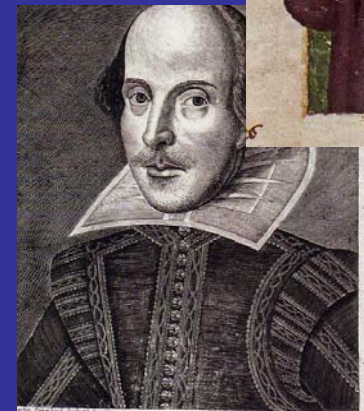
Five British Writers

Day 16



British Writers: Take Three

- Geoffrey Chaucer, 14th c.
- William Shakespeare, 16th c. ...
- Keats, 19th c.



What does it mean now to be “British”?

To be a “writer”?

To be... “a British writer”?



Keats and Chaucer

- Lines from the *Floure and the Leaf* are the epigraph to a long poem, *Sleep and Poetry*, in Keats's very first published volume of poetry (1817)—see p. 47 of your edition.
- The unpublished 14-line poem you read is probably also an early work.
- How does Keats position himself in terms of Chaucer's poem in this work? What is the significance of his poem's meter?

Keats and Shakespeare

- See p. xxv of Hirsch's introduction in your edition.
- William Hazlitt's Lectures on Shakespeare showed the early 19th c. admiration of Shakespeare precisely for his *lack* of individuality: Shakespeare was “nothing in himself” and instead embodied “all that others were, or that they could become.” The idea that Shakespeare “had only to think of anything in order to become that thing, with all the circumstances belonging to it” is directly picked up by Keats, and forms part of his idea of what a poet should be.

Eve of St. Agnes

- St. Agnes's Eve (January 20) commemorates St. Agnes, patron saint of virgins martyred because of her refusal to have sex. She is usually pictured with a lamb (*agnus* in Latin means 'lamb')
- Keats's poem is based on folklore that on St Agnes's Eve, a virgin might win sight of her future husband in a dream by going to bed supperless, silent and without looking behind her, and sleeping on her back with her hands on the pillow above her head.
- Two writers with whom Keats was very familiar mention the legend: the Elizabethan Ben Jonson in his play *The Satyr* and Robert Burton in the *Anatomy of Melancholy*. (Keats's personal copy of the *Anatomy*, with his notes in margin, still survives!)
- What does Keats add to the legend? aspects of *Romeo and Juliet*?
 - The hostile families of the plot,
 - the spiritual language of the lovers?

Keats: "St. Agnes' charmed maid" "a mission'd spirit" (192-3)

"a saint" "a splendid angel, newly drest, / Save winges, for heaven" "so pure a thing, so free from mortal taint" (222-225)

"a famish'd pilgrim,—saved by miracle" (339)

"hermit" "heaven" (277)

Shakespeare: the lovers' first meeting is a "holy shrine"

Romeo's lips are "two blushing pilgrims" and Juliet's lips are "immortal blessing"

Juliet is a "dear saint" a "bright angel" a "fair saint" and a "winged messenger of heaven"

"heaven is... Where Juliet lives" and Romeo is a "mortal paradise of... sweet flesh"

Eve of St. Agnes: Revision and censorship

“I do apprehend it will render the poem unfit for ladies, & indeed scarcely to be mentioned to them among the ‘things that are’ ”

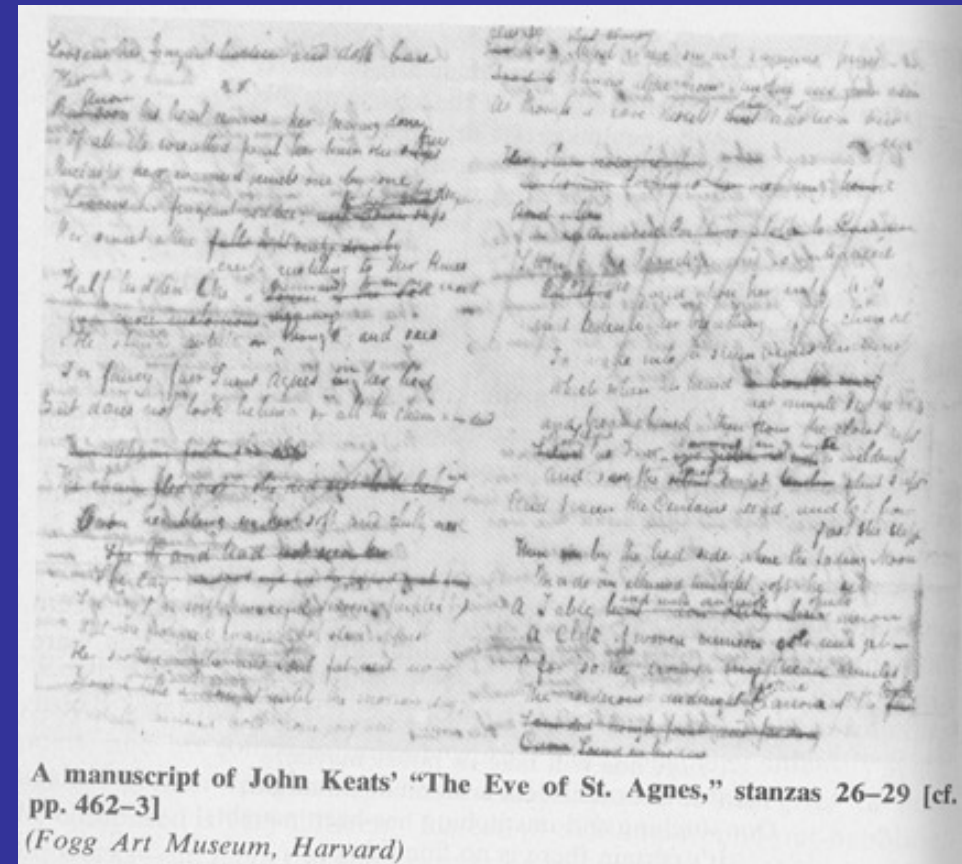
19 September 1819, reader Woodhouse wrote to publisher John Taylor.

Taylor refused to print the revised stanzas. Keats claimed that sexual consummation of the dream had always been part of the poem, and that he would “despise a man who would be such an eunuch in sentiment as to leave a maid, with that Character about her, in such a situation: & sho^d despise himself to write about it.”

In the margins of his copy of the *Anatomy of Melancholy*, Keats wrote: “there is nothing disgraces me in my own eyes so much as being one of a race of eyes nose and mouth beings in a planet call’d the earth who...have always mingled goatish winnyish lustfull love with the abstract adoration of the deity”

In July 1818, Keats wrote to a friend: “When I am among Women I have evil thoughts”

Let’s look at the two stanzas Keats couldn’t publish (in notes to your edition, pp. 544, 546-7)



The Sounds of Agnes

- Keats wrote the poem in Spenserian stanzas, named after Edmund Spenser, the 16th century poet whom Keats greatly admired (see introduction, p. xix).
- The Spenserian stanza is nine lines long, its first eight lines have five strong beats, and the last one six. The rhyme scheme of the stanza is ababbcbcc. This is a very difficult stanza because of its few rhymes—only 3 for nine lines.

Visions of Agnes

William Holdman Hunt, 1847-57

Spent 10 years working on this painting of the lovers' escape



Arthur Hughes, 1856

A triptych showing three scenes:
Porphyro's approach during
the banquet; his awakening
of Madeline; and the lovers' escape

The fourth verse of Keats's
poem appears on the frame,
as it was displayed in a Royal
Academy exhibition.

How do these paintings
emphasize the 'medieval'
aspects of the poem?



La Belle Dame Sans Merci

- One of Keats's best known poems!
- Looks back to *French* medieval verse
- But also looks back to Keats's own *Eve of St. Agnes*—remember, line 291-2? How does the pattern of rhythmic stress in *La Belle Dame* compare to the *Eve*?
- This poem is written in ballade measure: xaxa xbxb, etc. Let's read it aloud, emphasizing ballade measure.
- Let's look at how Keats changes the poem between its published form (in the *Indicator* on 10 May 1820) and its original form (in a letter to his brother George, 21 April 1819, see notes in your edition, p. 353).

La Belle Dame Sans Merci



Keats's Poem inspired a group of painters known as the 'pre-Raphaelites' (because they aimed to imitate the style of Italian painters before Raphael). The three paintings of the 'belle dame' shown here are by John William Waterhouse, Frank Cowper, and Sir Frank Dicksee.

Which do you think best represents the poem?

Next Class:

- Read one long poem—*Isabella; or, the Pot of Basil*—and two very short poems— “Bright Star, would I were stedfast as thou art” and “This Living Hand, now warm and capable.” We’ll talk about the relation between the first poem and the *Decameron* in class.
- Read the Selected Letters section in your edition.
- Think about (and post questions about) the connections between the opinions expressed in Keats’s letters and his poems. How do life and literature interrelate?