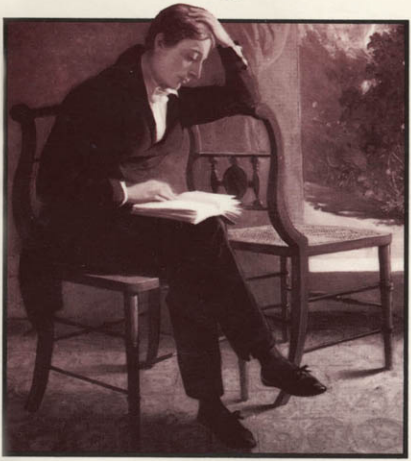
R S WHITE

KEATS
as a reader of Shakespeare



KEATS
AS A READER OF *SHAKESPEARE*

By the same author

'Let wonder seem familiar'
Endings in Shakespeare's romance vision

Innocent Victims
Poetic injustice in Shakespearean tragedy

R. S. WHITE

KEATS
AS A READER OF *SHAKESPEARE*

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Preface

John Keats acknowledged Shakespeare not only as one of his greatest literary models but as his 'good genius' guiding him in his own poetic enterprise. This book is an empirical and critical study of the evidence concerning the nature of Keats's understanding and admiration of Shakespeare's dramatic texts. Primarily, the intention is to use Keats's statements in his letters, annotations and markings upon his own texts of Shakespeare, and his clear affinity with the critical principles of his contemporary William Hazlitt, to build up a detailed account of what Shakespeare meant to Keats as a creative reader who happened also to be a great poet in his own right. Although not intentionally a 'source study', the treatment raises many new suggestions about how Shakespeare influenced Keats's own poetry both in broad terms and in specific lines. It may ultimately be impossible to define the elusive 'Shakespearean' quality which critics have always detected in Keats's poetry, but at least it should be possible to be clearer about what Keats himself thought 'Shakespearean' poetry meant to him. I hope the study will be helpful to scholars of Keats (who are not always as intimately knowledgeable about Shakespeare's words as about Keats's), as well as, incidentally, providing lovers of Shakespeare with a unique kind of 'anthology' of phrases and passages which have been selected by the inimitable taste and judgment of a compatible and sensitive poet. The nature of this taste, fashioned and demonstrated in the act of reading, is the central subject of the book. In this sense I am aware of the larger questions of literary theory concerning the act of reading a text and the nature of literary influence which are raised by the subject as a whole. Although it is outside the scope of this book to tackle these questions directly, I hope the information provided and the presentation of the problems will provoke literary theorists into developing notions of the text as a body of potential meanings which are activated by individuals in the act of reading.

It has been necessary to address certain questions of methodology

and I hope that a summary explanation of the approach adopted here will not be taken to imply that I cannot see the possibility of other modes of enquiry raised by the richness of the material. First there is the nature of the critical ethos in which Keats's thinking took place, a subject which must be dealt with without its being allowed to dominate discussion. Although Keats had no formal training in English criticism, he lived at a time of great changes in literary theory of which he was well aware. The proof of this lies in the undoubted, substantive similarity between some of his expressed ideas and those of Hazlitt, Keats's favourite critic. In this book the attitude is adopted that the public aesthetics and taste of Hazlitt provide some firm, analytical ground from which to build up a knowledge of the poet's assumptions. Keats was as much a child of his time as any other mortal, and his personal commitments were inextricably linked up with those of Hazlitt even though the personalities and modes of expression were as different as could be. It would be misleading to pretend that Keats existed in lofty isolation, communing directly with the dead dramatist in a perfect and 'universal' way. He had at least one mediator.

A more difficult problem surrounds the use of markings and marginalia on Keats's copies of Shakespeare. Sometimes he conveniently left us some general statement of interest in a letter which provides at least a starting-point when we look at the markings. However, it must frankly be admitted that certain questions about the markings cannot be answered. Usually the activity of marking cannot be dated. We cannot say what the precise intention was – whether to pick out passages for later attention or as an aid to memory, or whether they reflect the mood he happened to be in when he read the play. In the absence of definite evidence, the assumption adopted here (justified in the body of the text) is that it is still possible to say the markings are evidence of a selective attentiveness on the part of the reader which manifest his own taste in Shakespearean poetry, whatever that may mean in a particular context. This seems consistent with Keats's own attitudes. His theories of reading and writing outlined in Chapter 1 establish that the immediate 'intense' impression of a moment's concentrated reading is just as valuable as evidence of the imagination's predilections as the impression that survives through time. Keats's attitude towards Shakespeare changed from an idolatrous raptness in 1817 to the more wary distance held by the poet of 1819 who feared the inhibiting effect of 'influences', but this does not invalidate the earlier readings as important to his poetic memory throughout his writing career. To cut a long story short, I attempt to present the evidence of *what* Keats

chose to notice, where possible to consider this in the context of his more discursive statements, and to use my own critical judgment as supporting evidence rather than as a primary perception. Sometimes it is possible or necessary to suggest *why* Keats marked something, but I try not to speculate unless it seems profitable to do so, and in a way which I hope will not prevent readers from thinking along other, equally persuasive lines. By and large, the significance of one marking will never be the same as that of another, and analysis must tactfully reflect this fact. Moreover, what is interesting to one reader will not be so to another and I have tried to present as much of the evidence as possible to stimulate other readings. Once again, if the Keatsian attitude is legitimate that a text is a potential which each reader will fulfil in a unique way, I hope my own text will be received in the same way.

In dealing with the influence of Shakespeare on Keats's own poetry, my main aim has been to define some general areas of contact – shared themes, ideas and kinds of language – in order to establish broad lines of approach rather than making the discovery of specific sources a priority. Inevitably, however, I have felt encouraged to make new suggestions of sources for particular lines in Keats which supplement those listed, for example, in the notes to Miriam Allott's *Keats: The Complete Poems* (London, 1970) and the pioneering work of C.L. Finney's unpublished Harvard PhD thesis, 'Shakespeare and Keats' (1922), much of which is absorbed into his *The Evolution of Keats's Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass., 1936). In making these suggestions I have tried to exercise due caution and have relentlessly excised many of my wilder hunches. All the time, however, the stress is upon general facets of poetic compatibility, since it would be quite wrong to give the impression that Keats's sources can be mechanically isolated. Even when there is an obvious echo, Keats can magically create something new, a process which I tentatively analyse at the end of Chapter III on 'Shakespeare's Hieroglyphics'.

In order to do justice to the detail of the wealth of material, I have imposed other limitations. Clearly, Keats read voraciously and widely, and, however tempting, it would have been an awesome task to accommodate assessments of the lines from his poetry and letters leading to Spenser, Milton, Wordsworth, Drayton, Beaumont and Fletcher, and a host of others. By and large I have also excluded detailed consideration of the non-dramatic works of Shakespeare, which is substantial enough as a topic to fuel another book, although not, I hope, so different as to deny the conclusions reached in the present enterprise. There is enough in the drama itself, as received by Keats, to keep us

busy. There is a burning need for a complete study of Keats's influences, but in the present state of knowledge the attempt would be doomed to a certain superficiality.

All the problems gravitate around the special qualities of the two writers with whom we are dealing. Because Shakespeare is so diverse and wide-ranging in his field of reference, and because Keats is such a congenitally open-minded reader, capable of developing and even changing his thoughts, there is little that can be taken as fixed or solid except the very diversity of stimulus and response. One thing which I hope does not emerge is any great inconsistency, for even in complexity there can be substantial inter-relatedness. I take heart from Keats's own belief in identity expressed through fluctuating feelings and circumstances, in hoping that 'something of great constancy' emerges from the evidence.

R.S.WHITE

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I have been helped by a large number of individuals and some institutions existing as collections of friendly people. I must thank Mrs Gee for facilitating my use of the resources of the Keats House at Hampstead, Rae Ann Nager at the Houghton Library in Harvard, the University of Newcastle Upon Tyne for giving me research funds to visit these libraries, and the Humanities Research Centre at the Australian National University for providing me with an idyllic six months of scholarly companionship in Canberra when I wrote the first and most voluminous of the many drafts of this book.

One whose assistance I cannot repay in person is the late Professor David Bonnell Green of Boston, whose PhD thesis was a transcription of Keats's markings which allowed me to double-check quotations when I was frustratingly distant from Harvard. He intended to write a book on the subject and it is tragic that he did not complete his work. All I can hope is that his widow and his friends will find some satisfaction in seeing the project carried further. Professor Irene Harris of Boston helped create the link for me with David Green's papers in the spirit of open encouragement, an appreciation of which is the greatest reward of working with scholars. Her own work on Keats and Shakespeare is important and I have gained much from her own thesis.

I owe another huge debt to Professor Ian Donaldson who took great pains to coax from me a more adequate book, expressing enthusiasm and reservations with impeccable timing. I owe it largely to him that the book is completed, and I wish for his sake it could have been better.

Others I must thank with brevity but sincerity: Professor Francis Berry, Dr Barrie Bullen, Dr John Casey, Professor John Colmer, Dr Christopher Cordner, Cathy Davidson, Barbara Everett, Dr Desmond Graham, Professor Ernst Honigmann, Dr Paul Hamilton, Claire Lamont, the late Dr Peter Laver, Dr David Norbrook, John McGahern, John Pellowe, Dr Peter Regan, Trude Schwab, Professor

Gary Waller, Jane Whiteley, John Willett. These and many others, extended to me the kind of sympathetic magic which is constantly displayed by John Keats himself; or those 'little, nameless, unremembered acts Of kindness and of love' celebrated by Wordsworth.

By no means finally, I recall with some gratitude but more awe the earliest contribution made by the late James Maxwell. When I was planning the book at a very early stage, I met him perambulating the cricket field at Oxford and showed him, with some smugness, what I considered an exhaustive list which I had compiled of things written on the subject. Apparently taking a split second to read it he curtly said, 'Apart from Chatterjee and *Notes and Queries*, 1952, I think you've got the main ones' and abruptly turned away. With characteristic modesty he had neglected to say the second was by himself, a tiny piece, but one whose implications helped me to think the job was worth doing. More recently, Brian Southam and the editors at The Athlone Press have demonstrated remarkable tolerance and patience in dealing with a text which involves many publishing problems. Jonathon Bates's *Shakespeare and the English Romantic Imagination* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1986) appeared too late for consideration.

October 1985 R.S. WHITE

Note On Quotations

For reasons of consistency, and to enable the reader to find quotations readily, I have decided to quote throughout from the Alexander text of Shakespeare's plays, rather than reproducing the respective texts which Keats himself read. When a textual point is relevant, I shall mention the wording in Keats's text. I attempt to indicate the nature of Keats's markings on his texts by underlining and by side-marking, although the printed result implies a neatness and regularity which Keats's own dashes do not have. Quotations from Keats's poems are taken from *The Poems of John Keats*, edited by Jack Stillinger (London, 1978), and the letters are quoted from *The Letters of John Keats*, edited by Hyder E. Rollins (two volumes, Cambridge, Mass, 1958). Frequent reference is made to *Keats: The Complete Poems*, edited by Miriam Allott (London, 1970) and to Caroline Spurgeon, *Keats's Shakespeare* (Oxford, 1929).

– and why should there not be another species with two rough edges like a Rat-trap? I hope you will find all my long letters of that species, and all will be well; for by merely touching the spring delicately and etherially, the rough edged will fly immediately into a proper compactness, and thus you may make a good wholesome loaf, with your own leven in it, of my fragments –

Keats to Reynolds, 3 May 1818

Introduction

Keats's Shakespeare: Shakespearean Keats

Shakespeare may never have had such an attentive, perceptive and creative reader as John Keats. The very representation of Shakespeare's face acted as a kind of talisman for the young poet. When he came across it on the Isle of Wight he found instant kinship:

> In the passage I found a head of Shakspeare which I had not before seen – It is most likely the same that George spoke so well of; for I like it extremely – Well – this head I have hung over my Books ...[1]

Two years later, the portrait continued to delight him, tassels and all:

> I am sitting opposite the Shakspeare I brought from the Isle of wight – and I never look at it but the silk tassels on it give me as much pleasure as the face of the Poet itself ...[2]

In 1817, when he first saw the face, Keats was saturating himself in the words of Shakespeare and by 1819, his enthusiasm tempered but not abated, he was writing his own greatest poetry which is often called 'Shakespearean'. By the latter stage he had absorbed the influence so deeply that the word 'sources' is inadequate to describe the omnipresent but transformed ghost of Shakespeare's poetry and language. In his formative period we may identify with a degree of precision what attracted Keats in Shakespeare's plays, but at the time of his own mature poetry we can speak only of a general spirit and mode of expression which, although intimately related to what he found in Shakespeare, emerges in his own unique voice. These are our twin subjects: the aspects of Shakespeare which Keats most valued upon systematically reading the plays in 1817, and the Shakespeare which obliquely emerges from Keats's own poetry.

There is quite a lot of evidence we can use in the enterprise. Keats's letters are packed with quotations from Shakespeare and comments upon his words. We also have two copies of Shakespeare's plays owned by Keats, which he has copiously marked and occasionally annotated.

The first is a seven-volume edition edited by Johnson and Steevens, which he acquired in April 1817.[3] The other is a 'facsimile' of the First Folio, which came into Keats's possession also sometime during 1817.[4] The markings lead us not only to the 'immortal scraps'[5] of passages in Shakespeare which are universally admired and often anthologized, but also to corners of the dramatist's writings which are not so often noticed, and which are equally evidence of Keats's own taste or interest. In addition, as temporary dramatic critic for *The Champion*, Keats wrote a short but pregnant piece published on 21 December 1817.[6] Although primarily in praise of Kean's acting, and journalistic in tone, the review provides valuable evidence of some of Keats's ideas on Shakespeare. Next, Keats shows himself to be knowledgeable about currents of critical thinking in an age dominated by Coleridge, Hazlitt and Lamb, and one which was reacting strongly against the approach of Doctor Johnson. In particular, we have Keats's copy of Hazlitt's *Characters of Shakespear's Plays* (1817) which he has marked and annotated,[7] and which deserves detailed attention in a later chapter since Hazlitt certainly influenced strongly Keats's way of thinking about Shakespeare. Finally, of course, there is Keats's own poetry which demonstrates how he absorbed and transmuted into his own poetic voice many of the aspects which interested him in Shakespeare. We can never forget that Keats is, in his own right 'among the English poets',[8] and that he cannot be placed in the pale beside even Shakespeare since his verse springs

> from so strange influence
> That we must ever wonder how, and whence
> It came.[9]

Keats's reading of Shakespeare started well before he owned the copies which we now have. Before 1817 he has quoted in his letters from *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, he has mentioned Titania, Cordelia and (Shakespeare's?) Brutus in verse-letters, and as we shall see he draws on Shakespeare in 'I stood tip-toe' (December 1816). But there is little doubt that in 1817 Keats methodically saturated himself in Shakespeare. After April, when he acquired his copies of the plays, and up to December when he wrote his theatre review, his letters are peppered with allusions and quotations. By March 1818 he had quoted in letters or poems from all plays except *Titus Andronicus*, *1 Henry VI*, *The Comedy of Errors* and *Pericles*. (Of these, only *1 Henry VI* is completely unmarked in his texts.) In this one year, from April to April, then, it is quite likely Keats had read the *Complete Works*. Whether or

not the markings on his texts were made during this period we cannot tell, but it seems a fair assumption that most of them were. In the second half of 1818 and thereafter, the density of direct quotation in the letters decreases, although *King Lear* and *Hamlet* remain consistent points of reference. There is no reason to suppose, however, that Keats had retreated from his admiration of Shakespeare, since his poetry maintains a powerful Shakespearean presence, allusions and quotations fully absorbed into Keats's own poetic idiom but still traceable to their sources. *The Eve of St Agnes* and the great *Odes*, (February onwards, 1819) and *Otho the Great* (July-August 1819) are amongst the works which are most indebted to Shakespeare. The relative absence of quotation in the letters may simply mean that, having finished a first reading of the plays, Keats is not constantly encountering the words of the dramatist in an everyday fashion of noticing the precise wording, while his retentive, poet's memory has stored up what is creatively useful for his own work. John Middleton Murry in *Keats and Shakespeare*,[10] a book which remains helpful for its intuitive judgments rather than its scholarship, argues that Keats did lose interest in Shakespeare at the end of 1819 while he was composing the first version of *Hyperion* because 'Keats had fallen under the spell of Milton'.[11] I do not think the implicit conclusions drawn are inevitable. Certainly, Keats was reading and responding to Milton at this time as excitedly as he had to Shakespeare in 1817. Certainly the first *Hyperion* is a consciously Miltonic work. But it still contains enough Shakespearean allusion (as we shall see) for us to conclude that Keats was absorbing Milton into what he already knew about, rather than embracing Milton as a rejection of Shakespeare. The very evidence that Murry goes on to use, the fact that Keats returned shortly afterwards to a full employment of his Shakespearean resources in *The Eve of St Agnes* and the *Odes*, could be used to prove that he had never retreated from Shakespeare. None the less, Murry's overall thesis that *Hyperion: A Fragment* is less 'Shakespearean' than Keats's other great poetry, may not be wrong. However, when dealing with the revised though equally fragmentary *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream*, the argument presented towards the end of this book is that, in its attitudes and expression, the second *Hyperion* is profoundly influenced by the Shakespearean vision of tragedy.

There is some evidence, however, that Keats's attitude to Shakespeare did change, and that it changed in line with his deepening scrutiny of the moral content of poetry itself. The development in his thinking can be traced as a kind of internal dialectic between March

1819 when he sends a long quotation from Hazlitt's defence of his critique on *Coriolanus* to his brother George's family in America, and July-August of this year when he composed *Lamia*. Before this period, it seems certain that Keats revelled in poetry as an expression of beauty, and although he was concerned about 'the lore of good and ill',[12] his general assumption was that the beautiful must also be true in a moral sense, that if something is said with poetic 'intensity' it must also be ethically acceptable. If anything, one could call this a Spenserian assumption, and we should remind ourselves of Keats's almost equal fondness in his youth for Spenser's poetry. But the reason explaining why the greatest expression of this idea at the end of 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' is so commented upon, may be that Keats by this time did not entirely believe the sentiment, and that he is in the middle of a personal debate about it. In the 'Ode' he can only put the phrase 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty' in inverted commas rather than in his own, narrator's voice,[13] as an indication that the Urn's limitations of perspective should be closely examined when its words are applied to the world of human passion. Hazlitt's argument, which Keats in the letter reproduces in full and without comment,[14] is that in *Coriolanus* Shakespeare is in fact misusing the rhetorical effects of poetry to reinforce an authoritarian and potentially evil principle that the needs of ordinary people are not so significant as the neuroses of 'great men'. When we come to *Lamia* we find Keats himself questioning the doctrine that 'beauty is truth', for the beautiful Lamia is merely a deceitful image while the 'truthful' Apollonius is far from beautiful in his capacity to destroy rainbows. The problems are not resolved in Keats's poem, but are instead left suspended in paradoxes, and it is quite likely that this uneasy resolution of the conflicts mirrors Keats's own worries about the relationship between an aesthetic surface and a moral message. The one thing we need to say at this stage is that Keats has retreated from an uncritical and idolatrous acceptance of a 'chameleon' Shakespeare and that, in a wary mood that rejects not Shakespeare but his own earlier image of Shakespeare, he is carrying on his own, independent enquiry into the 'truthfulness' of art, influenced as much by Milton as by Spenser, and no less 'Shakespearean' than ever.

Middleton Murry's book, *Keats and Shakespeare*, is conceived rather as literary biography and a study of the nature of poetry than as an examination of what Keats found, appreciated and used in Shakespeare. He sums up his scope and aim by saying,

> Keats and Shakespeare are alike, because they are both pure poets, and pure poetry consists in the power so to express a perception that it appears at the same time to reveal a new aspect of beauty and a new aspect of truth.[15]

Caroline Spurgeon's *Keats's Shakespeare: A Descriptive Study Based on New Material*[16] is closer in its intention to the present enterprise. Spurgeon describes the two texts of Shakespeare marked by Keats, transcribes (mostly accurately) the markings on five plays, lists what she considers to be parallels between *The Tempest* and *Endymion*, and presents a fondly appreciative 'Introductory Essay' on the links between the writers. Her book is now difficult to obtain, and there are also reasons for producing a different kind of book using the material. Spurgeon reproduces only a small fraction of the markings, excluding the most interesting and important plays, *King Lear*, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, and her comments on these are necessarily brief. The interests of her generation of criticism are rather different from our own, and her approach is perhaps more anecdotal than truly exploratory. She does not attempt to place Keats's attitudes to literature and to Shakespeare in the context of contemporary concerns, such as the literary theory and criticism of Hazlitt who was undoubtedly crucial in helping Keats to formulate his own ideas. The present work is more comprehensive in its scope, more analytical in its approach.

Some criticisms of Spurgeon's book made by reviewers when it appeared focus the problems implicit in the task of analysing the markings on Keats's copies of Shakespeare. Nobody has ever challenged the supposition that they were made by Keats himself and inspection of the evidence reveals no reason to treat this as a problem. However, reviewers found more difficulty in accepting Caroline Spurgeon's general commentary. R.D. Havens made the following criticism:

> She makes no study of the notable words, phrases, and passages that Keats did *not* mark and apparently has not considered the probability that reasons quite apart from esthetics or even Shakespeare may have been responsible for some of the markings.[17]

Helen Darbishire, a little less trenchant in her tone, was also worried:

> Whilst most of her suggestions [about why Keats marked particular passages] are sound and she is never unduly dogmatic, yet the honest reader will protest that a number of other explanations would equally commend themselves.[18]

I have no magic solutions to these problems, and I must honestly admit them. There are, however, some things to be said in favour of the enterprise, and some caveats to be entered that might make an interpretation less vulnerable than was Spurgeon's. First, the existence of the markings in Keats's hand is in itself valuable evidence for any future study of the creative relationship between Keats and the words of Shakespeare. Even if there is room for many different interpretations from many different people, the evidence should be examined if we acknowledge the importance of Shakespeare to Keats. So long as we keep in mind the context of the letters and poems, the markings must at least give us valuable clues to Keats's mode of reading and his preferences. Secondly, to claim definitiveness in interpreting even the marks that are there, let alone (as Havens suggests) those that are not, would be unwise since the task is, frankly, impossible. There are too many unknowns and imponderables to make the attempt. The markings are not parts of a jigsaw that can be fitted together to give us a complete picture of what Keats found of value in Shakespeare, because often we discover important speeches (such as Hamlet's 'To be or not to be...') which are not marked but which are quoted in the letters. However, the body of material is a part of the evidence, and can contribute to our fuller (but never total) understanding of Keats's attitudes to Shakespeare. Thirdly, it is to be hoped that some things may be said which are not seeking speculatively for 'explanations' or reasons for the markings, but rather descriptive of the evidence. It may be of interest to know the *fact* that Keats chose to mark a phrase, since it may lead the reader to notice something in Shakespeare that one had never recognized before, or give a reason for linking up the information with something observed in Keats's own poetry. This is not the same as speculating upon why Keats marked a phrase, and in fact it is very rarely necessary to impute an intention on his part. For all these reasons, while admitting the theoretical difficulties, I believe it is worth proceeding with tact and imagination, in the knowledge that the intellectual dividends, in terms of our increased appreciation of both Shakespeare and Keats, are great enough in themselves. We can discover from the evidence of the letters and markings much of what Keats read, and what was significant to him. All this information often allows us to enhance our recognition of Shakespeare's poetic diversity since Keats is such a sensitive reader, and at other times it alerts us to words in Shakespeare which in some identifiable way have contributed towards his own poetry. In the final analysis the value of the enterprise lies in the amount of information

which it makes available, and the stimulus it can provide other readers towards making their own general judgments.

The further problems encountered in defining the influence of Shakespeare upon Keats's poetry are perhaps even more delicate and difficult. I certainly do not wish to provide a host of verbal 'sources' and reminiscences which would run the risk of turning Keats into little more than a derivative poet leaning on Shakespeare, nor do I wish in a literal-minded way to trace Keats's 'Road to Xanadu' through his readings inevitably back to Shakespeare. Instead, I shall concentrate upon *kinds* of influence, general, 'Shakespearean' areas where Keats found a stimulus to his own creative imagination: areas such as a special use of language, a range of attitudes towards love and nature, and more comprehensively an awakening conception of tragic experience as exemplified in works of literature. It is, in fact, peculiarly difficult to speak of Keats's 'sources' without (in the words of Robert F. Gleckner) 'oversimplification of what is essentially an extraordinarily complex fabric of association, echo, and allusion (and hence indebtedness)'.[19] It may seem odd, for example, that at one point in the commentary I locate Hamlet's words behind Keats's, while at another I find Lear behind the same passage, in the belief that both plays contribute some verbal stimulus (perhaps, for the sake of argument, also in tandem with words by Milton or Wordsworth). What is happening in such examples, I suggest, apart from the unique alchemy by which Keats makes a phrase his own,[20] is often the much more mysterious process of Keats actually finding a point of imaginative contact between diverse passages which have struck his attention. To discover such a level of richly lateral associativeness is rewarding, but it is far too subtle and intricate a matter on which to make bold pronouncements.

The largest problem raised by the subject-matter as a whole is also the most exciting. By interpreting the evidence of the ways in which Keats understood Shakespeare, we find ourselves in some limited but real way recreating the mysterious process of reading itself, as carried out by an unusually alert and sensitive poet. We are at least catching a glimpse of what Proust describes as the nature of reading, 'that fruitful miracle of a communication in the midst of solitude'.[21] For Keats, reading is by its nature not a single thing, nor does it alternate between active and passive facets of a single activity. Reading provides, paradoxically, a simultaneous continuum between passivity and active creation, between self-annulment and self-absorption. The words Keats is reading begin as a kind of potential, to be activated by the

reader's relationship with them, which may change from time to time even when the same reader reads the same text. Keats regards the relationship as a co-operative one, where reader and text become indissolubly united in a moment of creativity. In a wonderful image he implies that the experience may be shared mysteriously between like-minded readers of the same text. He writes to his brother George,

> You will remember me in the same manner – and the more when I tell you that I shall read a passage of Shakspeare every Sunday at ten o Clock – you read one at the same time and we shall be as near each other as blind bodies can be in the same room...[22]

In a comparable way, the unique relationship forged between Keats and the words of Shakespeare may in some measure extend to include us as we witness his experiences of reading.

I The importance of reading Shakespeare

One of Keats's readings of *King Lear* is well documented, enabling us to ascertain something of his attitude towards reading Shakespeare. In a letter to Bailey dated 23 January 1818, Keats describes how he began the reading:

> My Brother Tom is getting stronger but his Spitting of blood continues – I sat down to read King Lear yesterday, and felt the greatness of the thing up to the writing of a Sonnet preparatory thereto – in my next you shall have it There were some miserable reports of Rice's health...[1]

Earlier in the letter he had been brooding upon 'the deeps of good and evil', attempting to be philosophical about human suffering. The cluster of his concerns about misfortune and ill-health gathers around the act of reading *Lear*. He often comes to the play for understanding and for consolation or courage in times of mental pain suffered on behalf of others. In the special case of his brother's illness there is an added personal connection, for months later he is to return to the play and ring the words 'Poor Tom' in his Folio text, dating the mark 'Sunday Evening Oct. 4. 1818'. During this period and afterwards, Keats invariably refers to his brother in letters as 'Poor Tom'. It is also characteristic that Keats should find the reading of the play a creatively stimulating activity, 'up to the writing of a Sonnet'. On the same day as his letter to Bailey, he writes to his brothers George and Tom:

> I think a little change has taken place in my intellect lately – I cannot bear to be uninterested or unemployed, I, who for so long a time, have been addicted to passiveness – Nothing is finer for the purposes of great productions, than a very gradual ripening of the intellectual powers – As an instance of this – observe – I sat down yesterday to read King Lear once again the thing appeared to demand the prologue of a Sonnet, I wrote it & began to read – ...[2]

He then proceeds to transcribe a slightly revised version of the Sonnet that appears handwritten in the Hampstead Folio of Shakespeare's works, facing the first page of *King Lear*. The Folio version runs as follows:[3]

'On sitting down to read *King Lear* once again'

O Golden-tongued Romance, with serene Lute!
  Fair plumed Syren, Queen of far-away!
  Leave melodizing on this wintry day
Shut up thine olden Pages and be mute.
Adieu! for, once again, the fierce dispute,
  Betwixt Damnation and impassion'd clay
  Must I burn through; once more humbly assay
The bitter-sweet of this Shakespearean fruit.
Chief Poet! and ye Clouds of Albion,
  Begetters of our deep eternal theme!
When through the old oak forest I am gone,
  Let me not wander in a barren dream:
But, when I am consumed in the fire,
Give me new Phoenix wings to fly at my desire.
Jan. 22 1818

One would be hard pressed to decide whether the main subject of the Sonnet is *King Lear*, Shakespeare or the act of reading, but what is immediately noticeable is the tone of energetic optimism. The play represents for Keats some kind of personal purgation, and he must burn through the pain and suffering depicted in it to attain a new understanding and impetus towards action. The poet determines not to shy away from fiercely engaging with harsh truths. Rather than allowing himself to escape into a leisurely, far-away world of romance, he steels himself to live through severity and adversity. Shakespeare, 'Chief Poet', is the representative of the English poets who inherit 'our deep eternal theme' which may be misery and mortality. The experience is not, however, melancholy or depressing but exhilarating, a 'fierce dispute' which charges the reader with passion and energy, no matter how demanding the struggle. That Keats speaks of 'The bitter-sweet of this Shakespearean fruit' is significant, for it is the feeling for contrast, for light and shade, joy and melancholy, that Keats sometimes specifies as the quintessential, Shakespearean quality. When we come to examine the plays, we will notice that he often draws attention to oppositions, finding the undercurrent of sadness in a romantic com-

edy such as *As You Like It*, and the bright, lighthearted moments in the tragedies. In the epithet 'bitter-sweet', Keats is signalling his desire not to exclude any aspect of the Shakespearean experience, however disagreeble, uncomfortable or inharmonious.

The sonnet tells us a lot about Keats's habits of reading. He reads actively, energetically, involving himself totally in the concerns of the work. 'Must I burn through' is not only determined and positive but also holds a ring of passive submission, repeated in 'once more humbly assay'. He must be burned, as well as burn. 'Impassioned clay' has a wide reference to both reader and play. Perhaps invoking Lear's line as he wipes his hand, 'it smells of mortality' (IV.vi.133),[4] the phrase identifies the properties of both participants in the activity of reading. The reader is impassioned in at least two reciprocal ways: he is bringing his own feelings to bear on the play's actions, and in turn his feelings are modified or stirred by the words he is reading. Like clay, he is malleable under the influence of the dramatic action and the poetry, and after the violent modelling of his emotions has been carried out he is hardened as a fresh identity. Similarly, the play can be seen by the energetic reader as an almost living thing, projecting and eliciting emotion. It too is clay, under the hands of both playwright and reader in their respectively creative and re-creative functions. By a combination of active engagement and submissive receptivity, the reader finds himself present at the creative moment. As the play 'comes to life' in the mind and feelings of a reader, then the boundaries that are normally assumed to divide the writer, the play and the reader seem to dissolve, and this miracle may be repeated 'once again' at every new reading. Keats trusts and hopes that the experience of such a reading will not be a 'barren dream', divorced from his own personality and the reality in which he lives his own life. Instead, it will be a consuming fire which may destroy illusion, harden the clay, and allow the reader to emerge with a renewed spiritual wholeness, liberating him into a wider and more personal field of action: 'Give me new Phoenix wings to fly at *my* desire!' Keats, then, reads both actively and submissively, hoping to be changed by the experience, by approaching it with an accessibility which will enable him to live through it on his pulses. In another letter largely concerned with reading,[5] Keats draws a contrast between the energetic activity of the bee and the passive receptivity of the flower opening itself and there, as in the sonnet, he seeks to exemplify the properties of both. As a reader of *King Lear*, Keats risks the loss of one identity, in the hope that he will find another which will give him renewed hope in the face of destructive conflict. In the very