



Home

Editorial

Note to
Publishers

Authors'
Responses

Guidelines
For
Reviewers

About Us

Masthead

A GREETING OF THE SPIRIT: SELECTED POETRY OF JOHN KEATS WITH COMMENTARIES

By **Susan J. Wolfson**
(Belknap / Harvard, 2022) xv + 457 pp.
Reviewed by **Robert S. White** on 2023-04-22.

[Click here for a PDF version.](#)

[Click here to buy the book on Amazon.](#)

This handsomely produced and very hefty volume is destined to become required reading for all Keats lovers, students, and scholars. Drawing on a lifetime's research and erudition, Susan Wolfson fulfils three interrelated functions.

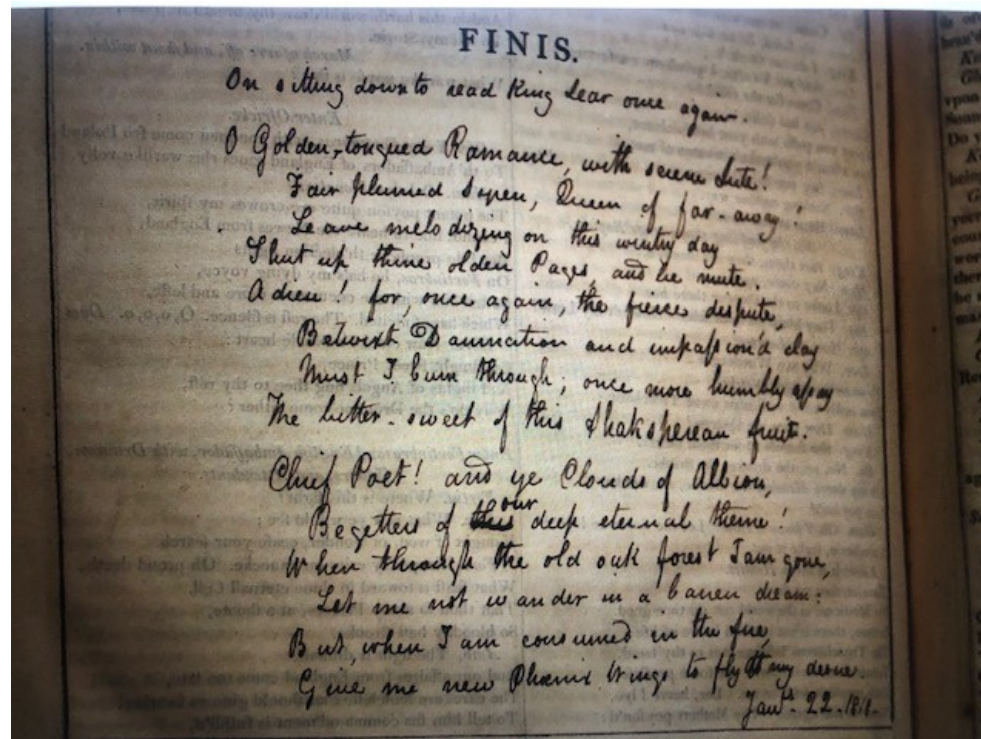
First, drawing on recorded events and letters as contexts for the poems, *A Greeting of the Spirit* provides a succinct and roughly chronological biography of Keats. Reading this book sequentially is like taking a bird's eye view of his tragically short life but also regularly swooping down to zoom in and view each poem with a microscope. A list of "Time-Lines" at the end gives key dates in Keats's life and times.

Secondly, this book offers a generous anthology of virtually all the shorter poems and selected passages from the longer ones, freshly edited and often accompanied by plates showing Keats's manuscripts, transcriptions in his letters, and early printed copies. This arrangement allows us the holistic reading pleasure of browsing here and there, as Keats himself thought we should:

Do not the Lovers of Poetry like to have a little Region to wander in where they may pick and choose, and in which the images are so numerous that many are forgotten and found in a second Reading: which may be food for a Week's stroll in the Summer? (To Benjamin Bailey, 8 October 1817)

Thirdly, on each poem and extract we are given astute, illuminating, and always lively textual and critical commentary by an unrivalled critic and scholar of Romanticism. Along the way we are reminded of the poet's indebtedness to Hazlitt as

well as to passages in Shakespeare and Milton (the latter drawing on [Beth Lau's edition of the *Paradise Lost*](#) that Keats annotated, marked, and echoed in his own poetry. Among its other virtues, this book is a study in intertextuality.



As an example of the tripartite presentation, my eye lights randomly on the sonnet, "On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again." The section begins with a letter in which Keats tells his brothers that he has finished the first of four books of *Endymion*. Lifting his eyes from the arduous and exhausting task he has set himself, he sat down to read *King Lear* once again, but since this act "appeared to demand the prologue of a Sonnet," he wrote one, which he transcribes. Next comes a facsimile of the neatly handwritten draft that he wrote in his own folio copy of Shakespeare beneath the printed word "FINIS" at the end of *Hamlet* (see above). The sight of this helps to bring us into a collaborative intimacy with a writer caught in the act of composing a poem that twins acts of (re-)reading and excited composition.

In her ensuing commentary, Wolfson glances at Shakespearean phrases underlined in Keats's folio copy of the plays and teases out the internal rhymes ("golden" and "olden") and multiple verbal echoes within the sonnet. Uncertain what is designated by the line "When through the old oak forest I am gone," she briefly notes what other scholars have suggested but leaves the forest up to us to decode, placing her readers in the creative continuum of "re-reading". If the sonnet itself suggests a wish for tragic relief from the kind of romance he is struggling through, it may not be entirely optimistic, since he still had three more books of *Endymion* to pen. But at least he allows himself some "refreshment" (Wolfson's word) from the task, and points towards his own future poetic explorations of tragedy in "Isabella" and the *Hyperion* fragments, the debate "Betwixt Damnation [*Macbeth*?] and impassion'd clay" (evoking Lear's "it smells of mortality"?).

On the Shakespearean link, I offer a small caution. Wolfson seems to assume the markings on the text of the Sonnets were by Keats, but this is disputable and probably wrong. Reynolds loaned to Keats *The Poetical Works of William Shakespeare* (1806), which Keats returned, but he was later gifted the volume by Reynolds in 1819. In turn Keats gave it to Severn in January 1820 (if in fact it was the same book). Spurgeon (on whom Wolfson relies throughout) thought "the greatest amount of the marking is by Keats" but others, including Robert Gittings, conclude that "The markings are by Reynolds, not Keats," though Gittings agrees with Spurgeon that "they probably show the mutual taste of the two friends" (Gittings, *John Keats* (1971), 280n).

In a gesture of convivial democracy, Wolfson fully contextualizes and meticulously explicates each poem in turn, whether it be "To Autumn" or a playful sonnet addressed "To Mrs. Reynolds's Cat." She respectfully celebrates even the more unsung and often disregarded verses Keats has left us. While this procedure seems to prioritize the short, comic, and occasional poems over the more acclaimed ones, it also reveals the sheer breadth of Keats's craft and the complexity of his temperament in ways not done by stratified anthologies of his "major" and "minor" poems. If the longer poems are thereby given shorter shrift, we might recall Keats's own whimsical debate for naming rights to the Isle of Wight, which he thought should be called "Primrose Island" if agreeable to "the nation of Cowslips" whose "diverse Clans [are] just beginning to lift up their heads (letter to Reynolds, 17, 18 April 1817). Away with hierarchies based on bulk and reputation, and let a hundred flowers bloom. It is moving to see the haunting and enigmatic "This Living Hand" given full and fond attention as the closing section in the book.

Highlighting the texts themselves in a spirit of "close reading," Wolfson eschews in her commentaries any attempt at modish theoretical approaches or advancing some grand narrative of the poet's life. Her brilliant perceptions and searching stylistic insights pay handsome dividends, always enhancing our understanding and appreciation of Keats's dazzling poetic artistry, seen anew with fresh eyes. Reaching always for "richer entanglements," Wolfson's noting of Keats's fondness for puns and word-play in the letters allows us to detect the same linguistic inventiveness and verbal musicality in the poems. "The forms that his poetry breeds," writes Wolfson, "are lively word-plays: 'puns, visual figures, cues, quips, and parodies, for evermore Keats's brand'" (350).

Nevertheless, the critic's fertility sometimes threatens to distract rather than illuminate. Apropos "Ode on Indolence," for instance, Wolfson writes, "*careless* has a subtractable suffix; *indolent*, a subtractable prefix" (314). Or consider this comment on the unusual word "alway" in "They alway must be with us or we die" (*Endymion* 1:33): "Keats wants this literary torque of the more normal word *always*, to display the root (*all + way*), refresh the archaism, and gain a front-line rhyme-chime with *They*" (94). Yes, but it takes a few re-readings of the sentence to get it. Does it draw as much attention to the poet's instinctive, finely tuned ear as it does to the critic's ingenuity? Every now and then we find ourselves in danger of being pulled into technical micro-awareness of verbal lacing and away from the surface meaning. But the sonic concentration pays dividends in the analysis of the densely allusive "Ode to a Nightingale" and "To Autumn": "a poetry of soundscape as much as visual imagination" (404).

In general Wolfson writes beautifully and with infectious delight for her subject, but one thing does grate. Although the book should certainly be recommended to students (many of Wolfson's own are acknowledged for original insights), since the contextualised readings will be richly to their benefit, appeals made to them through modern colloquialisms are at times irritating. These might work in conversation but sometimes pall on the page: "slut-worthy ... riffing" (106), "dicey scrim" (105), "Keats blew his stack" (274), "a song to die for" (281), "Keats's retro interior décor for his miss is flagrantly psychedelic" ("Ode to Psyche", 326), "campy" ("Ode on a Grecian Urn", 347), "bluesy" (190, 281), "I don't think *selfpity* is

Keats's groove" (350), "reboots" (421), and (somehow inevitably in 2023) "unwoke" (358). These locutions seem incongruous when they pop up in the midst of the elegant professional prose. Nothing wrong with lightening the tone and writing for a twenty-first century audience, of course (and Keats himself was not backward in using slang of his time, at least in the letters, not so often in poems), but such interpellations may not travel well beyond the oral interchanges of an American seminar room.

Since readers can follow up the "tasters" to the longer poems and elsewhere embark on the whole of *Endymion*, "Isabella" and others, overall this volume gives most of the materials we could wish for. We accompany Keats through the vicissitudes of his life and his consummate verbal art, guided by a sensitive and expert mentor who offers us "a greeting of the spirit" in multiple ways. "Keats becomes what he reads" (295) writes Wolfson on "A dream, after reading Dante's Episode of Paolo and Francesca," and much the same could be said for her own empathetic, re-creative readings of Keats in the spirit of Keatsian Negative Capability.

Robert White is Professor Emeritus in the School of Humanities at the University of Western Australia.

Leave a comment on Robert S. White's review.

Name:

Email:

Comments:



I'm not a robot

reCAPTCHA
Privacy - Terms

Submit

[About Us](#)

Copyright © Dartmouth College, 2008-2020