

# Shakespeare the President

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In Keats's 1815 *Ode to Apollo* Shakespeare occupies a place alongside Milton and Spenser, Homer and Tasso as one of his poetic forefathers:

Thou biddest Shakespeare wave his hand,  
And quickly forward spring  
The Passions – a terrific band –  
And each vibrates the string  
That with its tyrant temper best accords,  
While from their Master's lips pour forth the inspiring words.  
(ll. 24-29)<sup>1</sup>

It was only two years later that Shakespeare's role was to become central to Keats's poetic development, though the main features of Shakespearean power are already expressed in this poem. It is well known that Keats had a large number of 'inspirers', but his

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<sup>1</sup> John Keats, *The Complete Poems*, ed. John Barnard, London, Penguin, 2006 [1973], p. 44. All quotations of Keats's poems are from this edition. Henceforth only the lines of the poems will be indicated in the text.

relationship with Shakespeare, as this brief study aims to show, was of a very specific nature.

In 1987 Robert White wrote the book *Keats as a Reader of Shakespeare*<sup>2</sup>, which remains, in my view, the most exhaustive and convincing study on the topic, and this definition seems to me the most appropriate way to define such a connection, since Keats appears to be most of all a reader, a reader who is powerfully affected and inspired by his contact with Shakespeare's works, and not one who attempts interpretations. This does not mean that Keats does not offer what we could define as critical comments; in his letters, in reviews or even in some of the annotations on his own copy of Shakespeare's plays – particularly interesting I believe are, for instance, his reactions to Dr Johnson's commentaries on the plays which appeared in one of the editions owned by Keats, to which we will return. But he is not a Hazlitt or even a Coleridge; we can certainly speak of reactions rather than analyses.

Goethe maintained that "a dramatic talent of any importance could not forbear to notice Shakespeare's works and [...] must be aware that [he] has already exhausted the whole of human nature in all its tendencies, in all its heights and depths"<sup>3</sup> and therefore there is nothing left for him to do. He is, in Goethe's words, *der Nachkömmling*, the 'aftercomer'. This could lead one to think that those who chronologically follow Shakespeare may be (unconscious) victims of what Harold Bloom termed the "anxiety of influence"<sup>4</sup>, a sense which implies an often aggressive or defensive confrontation with precursors, a sense of inadequacy<sup>5</sup>. But, as Jonathan Bate points out, the German word implies not just he who comes later, but also the descendant, one who may accept the precursor and in fact feel him as a benevolent presence<sup>6</sup>. Rather

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<sup>2</sup> Robert White, *Keats as a Reader of Shakespeare*, London, The Athlone Press, 1987.

<sup>3</sup> Johan Peter Eckermann, *Conversations with Goethe*, trans. John Oxenford, Cambridge, Mass., Da Capo Press, 1998 [1836 in German], 2 January 1824, p. 31.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 1997 [1973].

<sup>5</sup> For the problem of influence and intertextuality see Marco Canani, "Reweaving the Tapestry of Intertextuality: Keats's Dialogue with Shakespeare and the Italian Translations of *When I Have Fears*", *The Keats-Shelley Review*, 28:2 (2014), pp. 117-32.

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Bate, *Shakespeare and the English Romantic Imagination*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989, p. 2.

than producing anxiety then, it may create confidence, as when Keats famously said in his letter to the painter Haydon that he had felt a “good genius” presiding over him – and asks himself whether it is too daring to “fancy Shakespeare this presider”<sup>7</sup>. There are moments when Keats appears to associate with Goethe’s stance, such as when he asserts that Shakespeare “has left nothing to say about nothing or anything” (letter to Reynolds, 22 November 1817, about the *Sonnets*), or when in *Endymion* he states that “the count / Of mighty poets is made up” and “the sun of poesy is set”<sup>8</sup>, but quotations, allusions and, mostly, Shakespearean echoes privilege the munificent inspirer or even more, as we shall see, witness to a Shakespeare who is something akin to nature itself. In a letter to Jane Reynolds, in fact, after having said that the ocean’s music is an enjoyment not to be put into words, he asks, “Which is the best of Shakespeare’s plays? I mean in what mood and with what accompaniment do you like the sea best?” (14 September 1817). A further indication of Shakespeare as a ‘natural experience’ occurs in a letter to his brother George who is living in America and to whom he feels the need to be close:

You will remember me in the same manner – and the more when I tell you that I shall read a passage of Shakespeare 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, 29, 31 December 1818)

Shakespeare is also a consolation: he writes to his brothers that, feeling lonely on his way to the Isle of Wight, he unboxed a Shakespeare and thought “There’s my comfort” (15 April 1817), quoting Caliban when he expressed his desire to seek refuge in alcohol (*The Tempest*, II.ii.55<sup>9</sup>). In the same letter where he mentions the “presider” he says “I never quite despair and I read Shakespeare” (10 May 1817).

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<sup>7</sup> References are from *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Hyder E. Rollins, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1958, rpt. 2002, 2 vols, vol. I, 10 May 1817, p. 128. Henceforth only the date of the letters will be indicated in the text.

<sup>8</sup> *Endymion*, Book II, ll. 723-24, 729, p. 153.

<sup>9</sup> All quotations from Shakespeare are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974.

Keats's fascination with Shakespeare emerges almost everywhere in his work, from precise references in the letters to direct and indirect allusions in his poetry. The markings on his copy of the plays have been carefully examined in Caroline Spurgeon's 1928 book titled *Keats's Shakespeare*<sup>10</sup>, though there are unmarked passages which appear in Keats and marked ones which do not. If, as has frequently been observed, the rise of Romanticism and the growth of Shakespearean idolatry occur together, it is not surprising that plays such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest* have a privileged place for the poet given the pivotal role played by imagination, although, as Robert White notes, by March 1818 Keats had quoted from all the plays but four<sup>11</sup>. It is mostly images, rhythm, poetic expressiveness, single words, the relationship between sound and sense, which appeal to Keats and, like Hazlitt, who had provided the first guidelines to Keats's growing interest for Shakespeare, he views characters as having a life beyond the plays<sup>12</sup>. Shakespeare becomes for Keats an archetype of the power of imagination and at the same time indistinguishable from Nature itself: "Things real", he writes to Bailey, "such as existences of Sun Moon and Stars and passages from Shakespeare" (13 March 1818). Significantly he speaks of passages rather than scenes or plays as a whole; similarly he exclaims, with reference also to Milton, "I look upon fine Phrases like a lover" (15 August 1819), phrases rather than poems. Single striking images or groups of words are soaked up by the poet and emerge, modified, in the poems. Shakespearean references and allusions in Keats's works are numberless and the choice made here is aimed at highlighting instances which exemplify in what manner this relationship emerges through the poems.

One of the plays which haunts Keats and is the most marked in Keats's folio edition, is *King Lear*; in most of Lear's speeches every line is underlined, as are similes, metaphors and epithets. Keats also adds a long note in which he states "self-will and pride and wrath are taken at a rebound by his giant hand and mounted to the Clouds

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<sup>10</sup> Caroline Spurgeon, *Keats's Shakespeare: A Descriptive Study Based on New Material*, Redditch, Worcestershire, Read Books, 2011 [1928].

<sup>11</sup> See Robert White, p. 16.

<sup>12</sup> Keats himself identifies with them, with Falstaff (letter to Reynolds, 17 March 1817), with Troilus (letter to Fanny Brawne, July 1820).

– there to remain and thunder eve[r]more”<sup>13</sup>. Furthermore, in a letter to his brothers, he claims: “The excellence of every art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth. Examine ‘King Lear’ and you will find this exemplified throughout” (26 December 1817); this conflation of aesthetics and ethics was of course to mark Keats’ poetics. Shelley too was to define *Lear* as the “most perfect specimen of the dramatic art existing in the world”<sup>14</sup>, but Keats is again struck mostly by “passages” and images. He feels the need to write “a prologue” to the play as he tells his brothers, and produces the sonnet *On Sitting Down to Dead King Lear Once Again* (1818). The reading of the play has made the poet aware of the fact that suffering must be endured in order to gain a new impulse towards action rather than abandoning himself to the world of romance; he must taste “The bitter-sweet of this Shakespearean fruit” (l. 8). The bitter/sweet opposition marks Keats’s interest in contrasts, in dualities and in oppositions, which he identifies and admires in Shakespeare, here defined as “Chief Poet” (l. 9), as well as his need to absorb experiences in their entirety, their negative aspects together with the positive ones. The understanding of the play has, however, given the poet new strength, and he wishes to have “new Phoenix wings to fly” (l. 14) at his desire: it has spurred him to forge a new identity. The sonnet inspired by the reading of *Lear* is one of the typical examples of Keats’s reactions to Shakespeare, who is perceived as ‘an experience’, a liberating one which allows the poet to regain spiritual wholeness and renewed hope. The writing of the sonnet is in itself an act of creation and refashioning of the material he has read, and re-read, and has affected him as do “Sun Moon and Stars”.

One of the “passages” which most enchanted Keats in *King Lear* is that of Edgar’s description of the invented cliff to his blinded father Gloucester (he had described himself as “one who gathers samphire – dreadful trade”<sup>15</sup> in a letter to Haydon, 10/11 May 1817, indicating his own insignificance compared to the poets of the past)

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<sup>13</sup> Spurgeon, p. 50.

<sup>14</sup> Percy B. Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, in *Essays, Letters from Abroad, Translations and Fragments*, ed. Mrs. Shelley, London, Edward Moxon, 1840, 2 vols, vol. I, p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> The quotation is from *King Lear* (IV.vi.15).

which begins with the Shakespearean quote “Do you hear the sea?” (IV.vi.3). These lines, combined with his own vivid experience of nature (he was staying on the Isle of Wight, enjoying walks down to the sea and admiring the cliffs), gave rise to the sonnet *On the Sea* (1817) which contains references, or rather echoes, of this passage and of other instances in the play: the “eternal whisperings” with which the sonnet opens that hark back to the “murmuring surge” (IV. Vi. 20) described by Edgar and the “smallest shell” which “scarcely will [...] Be moved” (ll. 6-7) recalls “the idle pebble” (IV.vi.21). The reference to “ye! who have your eyeballs vexed and tired” (l. 9) calls forth the figure of Gloucester, the recipient of Edgar’s words who has had his eyeballs ripped out, whilst “vexed” may evoke the word used by Cordelia earlier, when describing Lear as “as mad as the vex’d sea” (IV.iv.2). All these lines are underlined in Keats’s edition of Shakespeare, as are those concerning “poor Tom” which clearly remind him of his suffering brother. Like Edgar’s description, the sonnet evokes an imaginary landscape displayed through “Shakespeare’s own sea-music”<sup>16</sup>. In his copy of Hazlitt’s *Characters of Shakespear’s Plays* the references to the analogies of Lear’s mind and the tempestuous sea are also marked; the sonnet then, though not Shakespearean in form, may also be seen as a response to *King Lear* as a whole – as previously pointed out, the whole of Shakespeare, one may say, was identified with the sea. Middleton Murry writes: “At this moment of intense creative excitement Shakespeare, poetry and sea become knit together in a single thought and feeling”<sup>17</sup>. The Shakespearean debt becomes formal as well as thematic in *When I Have Fears That I Might Cease to Be* (1818), in this case inspired by Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*. As Bate remarks, it can only be described as “an imitation or highly accomplished pastiche of a Shakespearean sonnet”<sup>18</sup>. We find here a rumination on the themes of love, fame and time; as in Shakespeare’s sonnet 12 (“When I do count the clock that tells the time”) and 64 (“When I have seen by Time’s fell hand defaced”), each Keatsian quatrain begins with the same temporal clause –

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<sup>16</sup> White, p. 190.

<sup>17</sup> John Middleton Murry, *Keats and Shakespeare*, London, Oxford University Press, 1926, p. 35.

<sup>18</sup> Bate, p. 182.

“When I have fears that I might cease to be” (l. 1), “When I behold upon the night’s starred face” (l. 5) etc. From sonnet 12 (one he had quoted in a letter to Reynolds just a few months earlier) he also takes the main cluster of images, “rich garners”, “full ripen’d grain” (l. 4), which will emerge again when writing *To Autumn*. The connection then occurs in subject, vocabulary and rhetorical structure, but the whole poem is ‘Shakespearean’ with regard to patterns of alliteration, assonance, repetition and antithesis.

It is not surprising that some key phrases from *Hamlet* were marked in Keats’ pocket edition, though markings in general are fewer than those in other plays; after falling in love with Fanny Brawn late in 1818, his love for Shakespeare appears heightened by the feeling that they are undergoing the pain of a similar experience, a passionate and all-consuming love to which parts of themselves must react, and so Shakespeare becomes not only the supreme artist, a source of magical language and images, but also the “miserable and mighty poet of the human heart” (letter to Miss Jeffrey, 9 June 1819), one who has felt Keats’ same pain but has come out of it regenerated. In the same letter he writes: “The middle age of Shakespeare was all clouded over; his days were not more happy than Hamlet’s who is perhaps more like Shakespeare himself in his common everyday life than any other of his characters”. And it is to Shakespeare and to Hamlet once more that he turns when, anguished by jealousy and uncertainty, he writes to Fanny again: “Shakespeare always sums up matters in the most sovereign manner. Hamlet’s heart was full of such misery as mine is when he said to Ophelia ‘Go to a nunnery, go, go’”<sup>19</sup> (8 August 1820). *Hamlet* occupies an important place in Keats’s life; he frequently mentions the play in his letters, mostly whilst building up ideas and often during his discussions on everyday affairs: he believes the Danish prince is the result of personal experiences, and it is only by going through the same experiences that one can hope to fully understand the character. But *Hamlet* appears in some form also in a poem such as *Ode to a Nightingale* (1819); there are more than a dozen phrases reminiscent of *Hamlet* here, and we might say the poem is literally haunted by the language of the play. From the very first “My heart aches” we are brought into the atmosphere of

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<sup>19</sup> *Hamlet*, II.i.149.

the play with the “The heartache and the thousand natural shocks / That flesh is heir to” (III.i.61-62) of the ‘To be’ soliloquy. “Lethewards”(l. 4) may recall the “Lethe wharf”(I.v.34) evoked by the ghost in the first act, and the poisonous hemlock echoes the poison poured in Hamlet senior’s ear. The desire to “fade away” (l. 20) with the nightingale at the end of the second stanza reminds us of the ghost who “faded on the crowing of the cock” (I.i.157), and when it is picked up again at the beginning of the third “Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget” (l. 21), we are immersed in Hamlet’s desire for his flesh to “melt / Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew” (I.ii.129-30). Many more examples occur throughout the ode, closing with the “Adieu! Adieu!” (l. 75) to the bird, echoing the triple “adieu” and “remember me” (I.v.91) of the ghost to Hamlet. According to Bate, we can interpret the farewell “to be that of Shakespeare, leaving Keats to face the waking world [...] however, with the implied injunction ‘Remember me’. Keats is left enriched by the voice of Shakespeare, the ‘immortal bird’”<sup>20</sup>. As at the end of the *Lear* sonnet the poet returns from Shakespeare refreshed – with “new phoenix wings” (l. 14) – we can say that *Hamlet* and *King Lear* represent two related aspects of Keats’ absorption in Shakespearean poetry.

In a review written on the 28<sup>th</sup> of December 1817 in *The Champion* about the actor Kean in *Richard Duke of York* (a play which included the three parts of *Henry VI*) we find an important distinction. Keats writes that historical dramas (like the one he has seen) are written “with infinite vigour, but their regularity tied the hand of Shakespeare [...] the poetry is for the most part ironed and manacled with a chain of facts, and cannot get free [...] the poetry of Shakespeare is generally free as is the wind – a perfect thing of the elements, winged and sweetly coloured. Poetry must be free”. Then he continues stating that the poetry of *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* is the poetry of Shakespeare’s “soul – full of love and divine romance. [...] The poetry of *Lear*, *Othello*, *Cymbeline* etc. is the poetry of human passions and affections, made almost ethereal by the power of the poet”. Once again, the emphasis is on a need for freedom of verse, which is necessarily limited by adherence to historical facts; a play like *Hamlet* comes from the soul, a play like

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<sup>20</sup> See Bate, pp. 195-97.

*Lear* is more the expression of limitless passion revealing the power of the poet. Kean who, as Bate notes, can be seen as one of the three 'intermediaries' (with Hazlitt and Haydon) between Keats and Shakespeare, expresses through his acting something similar to what Keats feels as a 'reader': "Other actors are continually thinking of their sum-total effect throughout the play", Keats observes, "Kean delivers himself up to the instant feeling, without a shadow of a thought about anything else"<sup>21</sup> – the "instant feeling", the spontaneous expression of particular moments are elements which Keats finds in himself and which he learned to appreciate through Hazlitt. The admiration for the vitality and imaginative interpretation of the actor is in a sense the counterpart of Keats's condemnation of Johnsonian criticism; as mentioned, his Shakespeare edition contained some commentaries by Johnson to which Keats would append thoughts of his own, often in the form of adaptations from quotations of the play (as well as scribbling over the words), as if to say that it is only through a true impressionistic reading and in the same language that one can intervene; in fact after Johnson's analysis of *As You Like It* he writes "is criticism a true thing?"<sup>22</sup> – a denigration of the classical, rationalistic attitude, from a poet who is not searching for universal truths but rather for moments of heightened sensation. Kean instead had a natural, spontaneous self-awareness which led Keats to say that Kean's acting was "Shakespearean", and his reviving of Shakespeare, combined with some of Hazlitt's ideas, may have determined a response which contributed to the formulation of the idea of Negative Capability. As Stephen Hebron notes<sup>23</sup>, it is characteristic that Keats should come up with the expression without lengthy theorizations but rather in a letter to his brothers recalling a conversation with his friends Charles Wentworth Dilke and Charles Brown (he was never to repeat the expression in other letters): Keats famously affirms that the main quality that went into forming a "Man of Achievement [...] and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously" is Negative Capability, that is being

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<sup>21</sup> *The Champion*, 21 December 1817.

<sup>22</sup> Spurgeon, p. 29.

<sup>23</sup> Stephen Hebron, "John Keats and 'negative capability'" (publ. 15 May 2014), <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/john-keats-and-negative-capability>

capable of remaining in uncertainty and doubt without “any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (21 December 1817), something Coleridge, for instance, lacked. Clearly, for Keats, central to poetic talent is an intuitive appreciation of the beautiful rather than a conjecture reached through reason. This idea was possibly prefigured in a letter to Bailey in which Keats asserts that he cannot imagine how anything can be known through reasoning, concluding with his renowned “O for a life of sensations rather than of thoughts” (22 November 1817). An annotation in Hazlitt’s *Characters of Shakespear* alongside *Lear* can also be seen as prefiguring this idea, in some ways explaining it: “If we compare the passions to different tuns and hogsheads of wine in a vast cellar – thus it is – the poet by one cup should know the scope of any particular wine without getting intoxicated”<sup>24</sup>; the poet then must be satisfied with a taste of the passions, so as to know their extent without becoming inebriated. Shakespeare presented characters who find themselves in a position of doubt, who are not comforted by certainties and are brought to life without interference from their author. This idea of humility and impersonality of course leads to Keats’s other famous formulation, that of the chameleon poet, an empty vessel which absorbs and is filled by different emotions: the poetical character has “no self, it has everything and nothing. It has no character [...] it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor [...] it has as much delight in conceiving a Iago as an Imogen [...] A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no identity he is continually filling some other body” (letter to Richard Woodhouse, 27 October 1818). ‘Gusto’ is borrowed from Hazlitt to explain artistic power and passion; identity and personal opinions would impede complete freedom for the characters created. This evidently applies supremely to the protean-like Shakespeare, whose creations are famously autonomous and whose opinion can never be discerned. I would however agree with Bate who maintains that the impersonality afforded to Shakespeare is rarely available to Keats, both because he is a lyrical poet and because of his own self-consciousness<sup>25</sup>. The

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<sup>24</sup> H. B. Forman, ed., *The Poetical Works and Other Writings of John Keats*, New York, Scribner’s, 1938-39, vol. V, p. 286.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Bate, p. 173.

idea of impersonality, I think, is implied also in Keats's reflections on allegory: he claims that it is "shallow people who take everything literally" and "Man's life of any worth is a continual allegory, and very few eyes can see the Mystery of his life [...]" Shakespeare led a life of Allegory: his works are the comments on it" (letter to George Keats, 14 February 1819). In a 1995 article by William Flesch on Keats and Shakespeare, the critic notes that "allegorical figures are what they are, rather than experiencing what they are"<sup>26</sup>; resorting to Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* he gives, amongst others, the example of Eros, observing that he alone is not *in* love because he *is* love. Similarly, Shakespeare as an allegory once again brings us back to the idea of Shakespeare as natural verity: the sea, the sun and moon, the chameleon poet having no identity but filling in other bodies other selves. A presider and an arouser to whom Keats turns at crucial points in his life and whose works emerge at times 'unintentionally', not necessarily through borrowings but as moods or atmospheres.

The question of impersonality in artistic creation was, as is known, explored by T. S. Eliot who in the second part of his famous essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent"<sup>27</sup> provides an analogy of the ideal poet's mind with a platinum filament, a catalyst whose presence enables a chemical reaction, in fact whose presence is the condition upon which that reaction can occur, but which not only remains unaffected itself but also leaves no trace in the newly formed acid. The mind of the poet, Eliot says, is the shred of platinum operating on the experience of man: "the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material"<sup>28</sup>. Eliot's idea – which has had its detractors – is of course that the ideal poet's mind should take in experiences and transform them into poetry without leaving any trace of himself. If I may stretch the analogy, it seems to me that in some way Shakespeare, for Keats, represents *both* the raw material and the catalyst mentioned in

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<sup>26</sup> William Flesch, "The Ambivalence of Generosity: Keats Reading Shakespeare", *ELH*, 62:1 (1995), pp. 149-69: 154.

<sup>27</sup> T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), in *Selected Essays*, London, Faber & Faber, 1953.

<sup>28</sup> Eliot, p. 18.

Eliot's correlation. He provoked in Keats's mind certain 'reactions' which indeed transmuted the fabric of his own experience into his poetry, but at the same time Shakespeare was for Keats an experience, one in which he was steeped: his mind created also thanks to the absorption of Shakespearean poetry. Unlike the platinum filament however, which being a surface catalyst leaves no traces in the new substance, Shakespeare functions instead like some organic catalysts which indeed enable the reaction to take place but inevitably leave some trace in the new product. Unlike Prospero's unsubstantial pageant, Shakespeare in Keats has indeed left more than a rack behind.