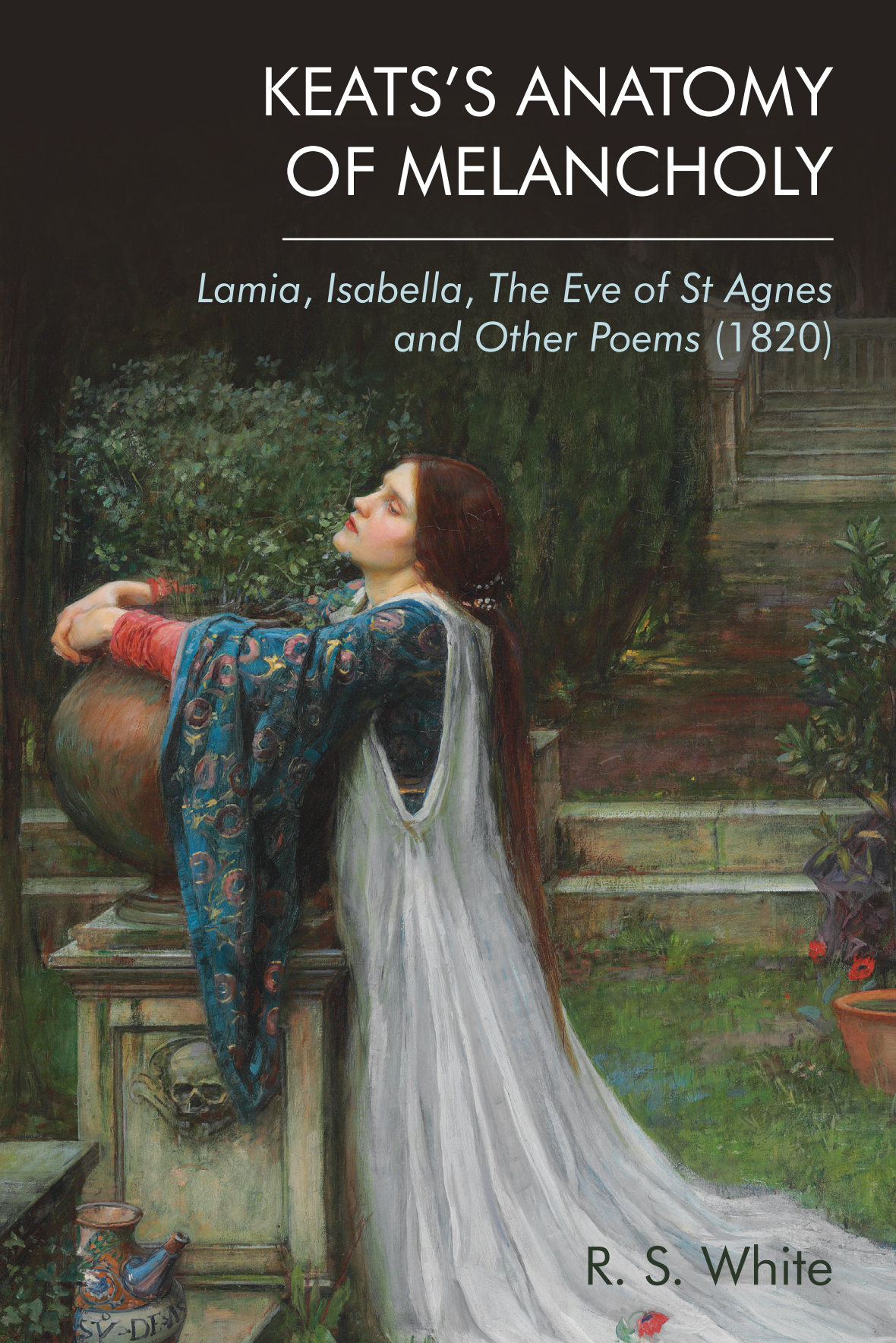
KEATS'S ANATOMY OF MELANCHOLY

Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St Agnes and Other Poems (1820)



R. S. White

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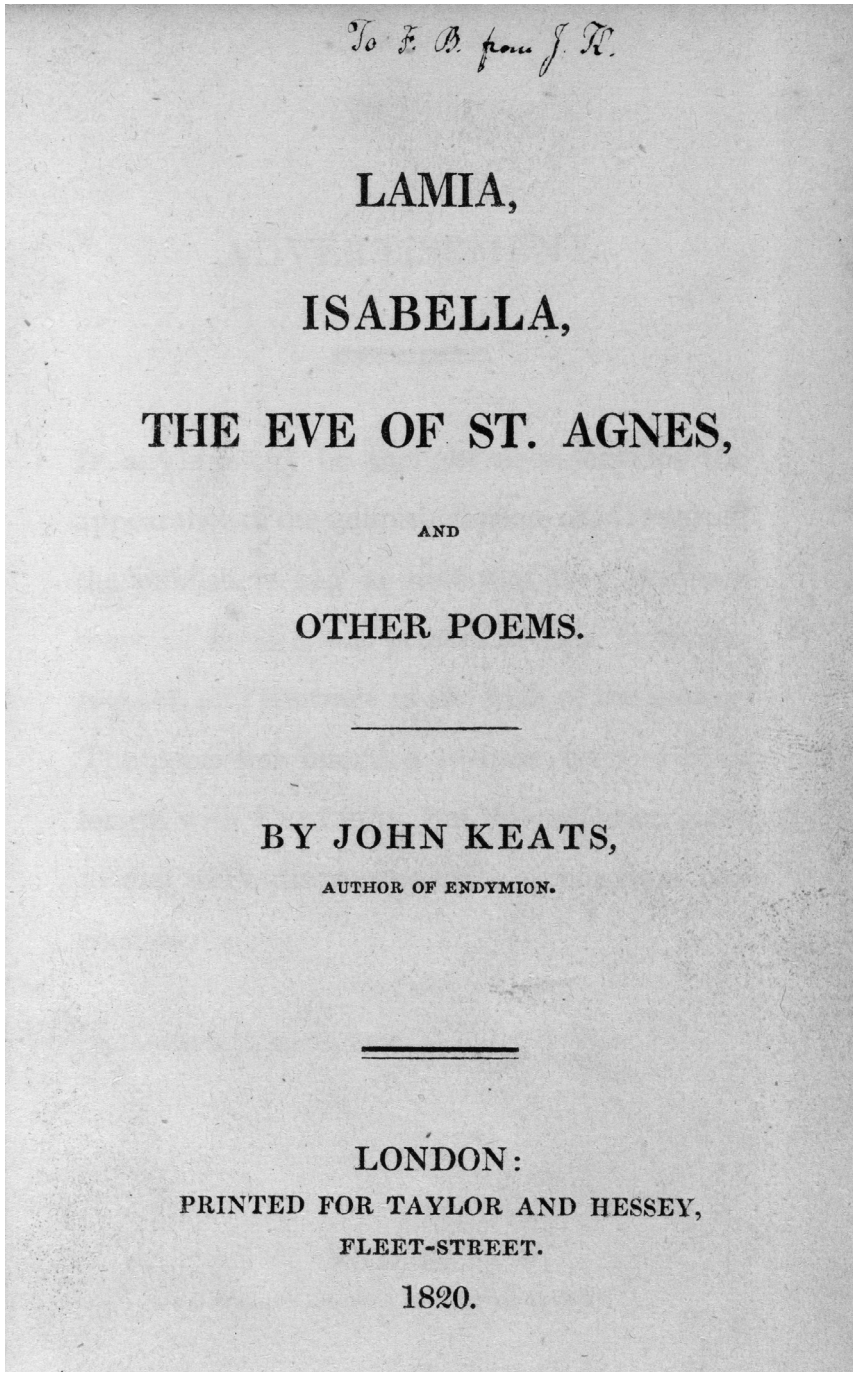
Unity


To F. B. from J. K.

LAMIA,

ISABELLA,

THE EVE OF ST. AGNES,

AND

OTHER POEMS.

BY JOHN KEATS,

AUTHOR OF ENDYMION.

LONDON:
PRINTED FOR TAYLOR AND HESSEY,
FLEET-STREET.
1820.

1.1 Title page of the copy inscribed to Fanny Brawne from John Keats, Houghton Library at Harvard University, citation number Keats *EC8.K2262.820 l(F).

Chapter 1

Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St Agnes, And Other Poems (1820) as a Unified Volume

The historic significance of Keats's volume of poems published in 1820 under the title *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St Agnes, And Other Poems* is hardly in doubt. Walter Jackson Bate in 1963 described the collection as 'in many ways perhaps the most remarkable single volume to be published by any poet during the past century and a half, if we leave aside collected works published by poets in their old age . . .'.[1] However, Bate's biographical interest lay not in following up this insight but in tracing the chronology of Keats's poetic development poem-by-poem in the light of his life story. More recently, Kelvin Everest in the entry on Keats in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* has written, 'This collection is now recognised as among the most important works of English poetry ever published'. Yet it has still only rarely been analysed in these terms as a single collection, and although 'The Eve of St. Agnes' and the odes are justly famous and well-loved, they are usually encountered by readers as individual poems in anthologies. In most editions of Keats's poetry, they are divorced from the context of the collection as a whole and presented chronologically in a progress from 'juvenilia' to triumphant 'maturity'. In the case of this, Keats's second collection, it may paradoxically be the memorable brilliance of individual poems which has distracted attention from their inclusion in a single-authored anthology, despite the fact that this consideration provides facets of subtle interrelatedness between the poems which reveal new meanings. Recontextualised by keeping company with each other, rubbing shoulders with poems other than just the universally celebrated ones, and arranged by author and publishers in a considered order, the whole is greater than the parts. The one important qualification whose importance I shall argue for, is that evidence suggests that Keats intended 'Ode on Melancholy' to be the final poem in the collection, and that the inclusion of 'Hyperion. A Fragment' was a publisher's decision which he resisted. This, I suggest, makes a very significant

difference to the structure intended by Keats. In other words, Keats's collection in a sense has never been presented as he wished.

An important thread, which I intend to follow through the volume as at least one of its major thematic concerns, is the persistent emphasis on different shades and types of melancholy, an ancient, major medical condition and changing literary preoccupation in Renaissance and Romantic poetry. This affective condition was considerably richer and more complex before and during Keats's time than is suggested by today's paler meaning of the word 'melancholy'. As a dominant passion in the Renaissance, it could include a spectrum of emotions ranging from suicidal despair to manic hilarity, and many in between, including artistic exhilaration, different kinds of love, and excessive religious enthusiasm. In this design, the clinching closure to the 1820 volume comes with 'Ode on Melancholy', which attributes value to the emotional state and embraces it as a form of creative inspiration. The theme of melancholy, as I hope to show, reached Keats from different cultural perspectives offered by his life circumstances and temperament, his medical training, and his reading of literature, including eighteenth century graveyard poetry and Gothic novels. More specifically, during 1819 when Keats wrote and collected the bulk of poems in *1820*, he was also enthusiastically reading Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, a quirky, encyclopaedic and gigantic study, which was written as a Renaissance contribution to medical knowledge but had been revitalised by Romantic literary figures. Viewed in this way, Keats's 1820 volume stands as a celebration and personal analysis of a major, longstanding Western cultural and medical tradition which was close to the poet's heart. It is his own, brief 'anatomy of melancholy'. Keats spoke of the artist's stance as one that 'does no harm from its relish of the dark side of things',[2] and this volume demonstrates his contemplative, 'camelion' ambivalences, turning subjects this way and that to inspect their dark and light sides, melancholy and joy, states which are by turns contrasted, explored, and synthesised.

One impediment to considering the context and framework of the whole volume that Keats envisaged, as pointed out recently by Grant Scott,[3] has been the modern critical 'tyranny' to value above all the 'sacred unity of the odes', to the neglect of the other poems.[4] It is an emphasis which Keats himself may not have anticipated. Edmund Blunden may have been the most influential in transmitting the pre-eminence of the odes, since his (admittedly brief) *Writers and their Works* study of Keats mentions only the odes from the 1820 volume.[5] Midcentury critical works by Earl Wasserman and Helen Vendler[6] in particular, consolidated the emergence of a modern canon of 'Keats's

Major Poems' giving prime consideration to the odes, in particular 'Ode to a Nightingale', 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' and 'To Autumn', and (in Wasserman's case) 'The Eve of St Agnes' and 'Lamia', though even the latter has slipped down in critical estimation. The other poems in the 1820 volume were silently relegated to a rank less than 'major'.

Changes in taste have meant that romance *epyllia* such as 'Lamia' and 'Isabella' have long since fallen out of fashion, despite their celebrity in Romantic times, although 'The Eve of St. Agnes' has fared better. They were in vogue particularly in the circle of Leigh Hunt, John Hamilton Reynolds, 'Barry Cornwall' (Bryan Procter), and Robert Merry's Della Cruscan group, but the fashion did not last long. It is significant that in the title to his book Keats highlighted the longer poems, indicating that his ordering is at least partially based on genre. Romantic narratives are followed by *Other Poems* including odes and *rondeaux*, and if we include the 'Hyperion' fragment, a portion of an epic. Perhaps the order indicates an intention to foreground the longer poems as a potential selling point with a particular audience in mind. The modern emphasis on the odes would not necessarily have occurred to Keats himself, and it may distract and mislead us when considering his collection as a whole. It is noteworthy that self-evident supremacy of the odes seems not to have been the verdict of either Keats himself or his contemporary readers, since reviewers at the time, whether sympathetic or critical, do not prioritise them. Attention was focused mainly on the three romances in the title, and on the 'Hyperion' fragment, which contemporaries, including Shelley and Byron, singled out for admiration but regarded as different from the other poems in the volume.[7] If they had been able to read the later, completely revised fragment, which was not published until long after Keats's death in 1848 under the name *The Fall of Hyperion. A Dream*, they would have found their impression justified, that the fragmentary draft points towards a future, different and compelling epic in its own right, which was also never brought to completion by Keats. Although the inclusion of 'Hyperion. A Fragment' may have compromised the integrity of the collection as Keats envisaged it, yet in some ways, especially in the depiction of the Titans' despondent state, it can be seen as consistent with the volume's overall spirit of melancholy, which in itself is not surprising, since Keats was working on it on-and-off before and during the same period as he was putting together the collection and reading Burton.

In addition to the problems of interpretation raised by the later celebrity given to the odes, and by the inclusion of the fragment, many modern editions tend to obscure the unity of the volume further by rarely republishing *1820* as a volume in its own right. Instead, it is

much more common to find the individual poems presented according to dates of composition, which is not the order adopted in *1820*. There has been one photographically reproduced facsimile reprint without annotations, now held in the Bodleian Library (shelfmark Don.f.100), of *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St Agnes, And Other Poems*, which is used for quotations here.[8] The volume was also reproduced, again without annotations, explanations, or even an Introduction, in a short-lived 'Penguin First Editions' series, which included anthologies by Rupert Brooke, Robert Burns, A. E. Houseman, D. H. Lawrence, Wordsworth and Coleridge, and W. B. Yeats.[9] Apart from these, only one (very lightly) annotated single volume text of *1820* was published, as long ago as 1909.[10] Meanwhile, the major, standard annotated editions of the 'complete poems', such as those by Douglas Bush, Miriam Allott, John Barnard (in his earlier Penguin edition), and Jack Stillinger, reprint the poems in order of presumed composition rather than retaining the order of the 1820 volume, a practice which places the emphasis on Keats's development as a poet rather than on the collection. There are exceptions in some 'complete works', such as John Barnard's most recent 'Oxford Twenty-first Century' edition, Jeffrey N. Cox's 'Norton Critical' edition, and Edward Hirsch's Random House edition, which at least preserve the order of poems in the anthology. But again, the footnotes and annotations emphasise the dates of composition, and there is little sustained analysis of the poet's chosen organisation of his collection. Jack Stillinger was certainly aware of the 'volume' approach since, as we shall shortly see, he was keenly aware that the poems in Keats's first collection in 1817 had been thematically connected and arranged, and he also offers pithy comments on the ordering of *1820*. But in his role as editor, he once again chose the model of presenting the individual poems in chronological order. Meanwhile, Keats's major biographers, Walter Jackson Bate, Robert Gittings, and Nicholas Roe understandably also focus mainly on the poet's development. Gittings devoted his book *John Keats: The Living Year* to the composition of the individual poems, most of them written during 1819, but considering them individually and out of the context of the 1820 volume.[11] This may seem to both editors and biographers an obvious and illuminating strategy, but, I argue, is interpretatively incomplete, since the poems can be reinterpreted in the light of their selection and placement in the volume.

There is a wealth of evidence, both biographical and intrinsic to the volume, suggesting that Keats took pains to place these apparently 'occasional' poems into a sequence which is interconnected stylistically and thematically, and it was not his design to present simply his 'best poems' in either random or chronological order. This has consequences for a

reader in interpreting the volume as a whole and as it stands. Each poem is illuminated by the others in turn, and by the overarching existence of the volume as a whole. Moreover, the common editorial methodology overshadows other open questions. Why, for example, does the volume include earlier poems that were not part of the undisputed flowering of Keats's poetry in 1819, works such as 'Isabella' (Keats had reservations about its quality), 'Lines on the Mermaid Tavern' and 'Robin Hood' both written early in 1818 as epistolary jokes in correspondence with Reynolds? And why did Keats not include 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', while at one stage seriously weighing up including the very lightweight 'Song of Four Faeries'? It would seem that the contents and their ordering in the book have significance and raise questions beyond the biographical.

As in editions and biographies, so in critical studies, the unity of *1820* is rarely considered. However, on the general question of a poetic collection having an internal coherence which surpasses the individual poems, I take encouragement from two brief but suggestive precedents. Stillinger, in his chapter 'The Order of Poems in Keats's First Volume' in *The Hoodwinking of Madeline and Other Essays on Keats's Poems*, argues for a planned, thematic integrity in Keats's earliest volume, *Poems* (1817):

> While it should not surprise anyone that poets do frequently give serious thought to the arrangement of their poems, the fact is that we almost never consider either their intentions or the effects critically . . . [critics] seldom suggest why Keats printed one poem before or after another. The readiest explanation for this neglect is that biographers and biographically oriented critics, naturally unwilling to discuss the poems twice – at both composition and publication – have almost universally chosen to treat the poems chronologically according to composition.[12]

He suggests that Keats's preoccupation in *Poems* (1817) was with 'poetry itself, with a centring on the question of whether he can and should be a poet'.[13] *1820* is, however, altogether darker, focusing on confronting emotional adversities, loss, and consolation. Stillinger did not go on in any detail to apply his logic to the infinitely richer 1820 volume, perhaps sensing the job would be considerably larger and more complex than for the 1817 one. But he does offer some suggestive *obiter dicta* about the order in which Keats chose to present the poems in *1820*, especially the odes: 'And whatever the explanation, it is surely no accident that *Ode to a Nightingale* and *Ode on a Grecian Urn* were printed before instead of (as they seem to have been written) after *Ode to Psyche*, in the same volume' (p. 2). Stillinger's overall interpretation of the volume mirrors his reading of Keats's poetic development as a whole: 'Arranged as they

are, the poems show a progressive abandonment of the ideal and acceptance of the natural world, and a gradual movement from irresolution to resolution' (p. 116); from Lycius's involvement in 'an illusory ideal' through to 'the two final odes, 'To Autumn' and 'Melancholy', with their focus on the natural world and unequivocal acceptance of it' (pp. 116–17). Meanwhile, Neil Fraistat in a fine chapter of his book, *The Poem and the Book*, suggests that the 1820 collection shows 'sophisticated organization' and that the 'poems are positioned without reference to their chronological order of composition'.[14] This he argues by comparing a number of poetic collections published between 1790 and 1830, showing that such systematisation is not at all uncommon in Keats's period. His chapter-length study of Keats's *1820* finds stylistic links between the poems, in arguing for a complex, detailed ordering in *1820*:

> as the reader moves sequentially from the opening "Lamia" to the concluding "Hyperion," he discovers a complex system of verbal echoes, transitional links, and thematic progressions through which each poem revises the meaning of its predecessor.[15]

Fraistat goes on to examine each poem in order, tracing 'verbal echoes, transitional links, and thematic progressions'. The dominant theme, he proposes, is a repeated sequence of enchantment and disenchantment in each poem. I am grateful to have Fraistat's pioneering chapter to build upon, but hope to foreground another theme, melancholy, which I believe is just as prominent and has many subtle consequences for the collection as a whole and the ordering of the poems in it. That Fraistat and Stillinger were 'on the same page' in their approaches to poetic collections was shown when Stillinger reviewed Fraistat's book favourably, arguing again that,

> The constructing of books of poems, involving choices of contents, arrangement, and format, is a topic that has occupied poets and publishers a great deal but scholars hardly at all. In traditional study of the English Romantics we routinely place poems in such biographical, historical, and literary contexts as the life of the author, the chronology of the author's work, the whole body of the author, the traditions and genres and conventions of the time (and earlier and later), and so on and on. Only rarely do we consider what might be thought the most obvious context of all, the original collections in which the poems were presented to the public.[16]

This remains broadly true today regarding Keats's 1820 collection.

The Significance of Poetic Collections

Fraistat has separately compiled a set of scholarly essays on significant anthologies by mainly non-Romantic authors from Virgil and Ovid to Sylvia Plath.[17] Michael Gamer has followed up in his recent book on the phenomenon of the Romantic 're-collection', which he defines as 'the authorized, transformational reprinting of works that have appeared earlier in some form' for commercial purposes. Gamer does not include Keats's *1820* in his analysis since it is not a 're-collection' in the strict sense because, with the exceptions of 'Ode to a Nightingale' and 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', the poems had not already been published. However, similar general points can be made about Keats's activity in putting together the 1820 volume:

> Sometimes adding new material to previously published works and sometimes not, a re-collection is never merely a new edition of an older book. Rather, it gathers its component parts and presents them in new ways, transforming the assembled contents – through combination and juxtaposition, revision and re-ordering, repricing and repackaging – so as effectively to produce a new work . . . [offering] a chance to produce a more capacious account of literary production and reception by shifting our critical gaze from initial composition to what comes after.[18]

Gamer coins the phrase 'self-canonization' to describe what the author is attempting in anthologising his or her work. His phrase might perhaps complement Stephen Greenblatt's notion of 'self-fashioning' in the Renaissance, a literary equivalent of how an author wishes to be read and remembered.[19] The distinctive genre of a poetic collection is, in Gamer's words, the author's attempt to provide 'at once a calculated publishing venture and a constitutive monument in progress'.[20] In Keats's case, *1820* was intended as a step towards his own ambitious aspiration: 'I think I shall be among the English Poets after my death'.[21] His statement bears at least two senses, that his volume will sit on bookshelves beside those of Spenser, Shakespeare and Milton, and that his poems will in turn be anthologised in such popular series as John Bell's *Poets of Great Britain* (1776–82).[22] A chapter in Gamer's *Romanticism and Self-Canonization* demonstrates how numerous and popular were such anthologies from the 1770s onwards, citing Keats's hope as 'arguably the most suggestive statement regarding standard collections'.[23] But first, Keats realised, he needed to produce an anthology of his own works as a step towards fulfilling his prophecy, necessarily aiming at the judgment of posterity since such collections, by convention, did not include living poets. At the least, the 1820 volume was

surely conceived as one 'constitutive monument' towards his longer goal, which was certainly reached 'after [his] death'.

There are a handful of single-authored collections whose status as unified entities has been widely accepted as surpassing in significance the individual works they contain within their covers. In these, the effect of the whole is acknowledged to be greater than, and different from, the constituent poems. Historically, publication of such a volume is identified in retrospect as an 'event' in the history of the book. Among these we might include sonnet sequences tracing a love affair, such as Dante's *La Vita Nuova* (1294), Sidney's *Astrophel to Stella* (1580s), and Spenser's *Amoretti* (1595) which traces the events of a single year of 365 days, and series of interconnected quasi-narrative 'tales' such as Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (1380s) and Crabbe's *The Village* (1783) and *The Borough* (1810), building up a social environment through various characters. George Herbert's *The Temple* (1633) provides the clearest example of a structure based on a specific concept completely divorced from the (unknown) order of composition, following as it does the sequence of Christian rituals during the year: Advent, Nativity, Ash Wednesday, Lent, Holy Week, Easter, Ascension, Whitsun and others.[24] Other 'landmark', iconic collections are recognisably based on different principles of selection and ordering such as themes or concepts, amongst them Charlotte Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets* (1783), Burns's *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (1786), Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* (1798, and 're-collected' in 1800[25]), Yeats's *Responsibilities* (1914) and *The Tower* (1928), T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land and Other Poems* (1922), and Plath's *Ariel* (1965). In each case the significant 'occasion' is the publication of the collection, surpassing and superseding the sequence of 'mini-occasions' on which the poems were written, usually (so far as we know) in a different order from the one presented in the collection. Fraistat has explained further:

> the book – with all of its informing contexts – is the meeting ground for poet and reader, the 'situation' in which its constituent texts occur. As such, the book is constantly conditioning the reader's responses, activating various sets of what semioticians call 'interpretive codes' A fundamental assumption of such an approach is that the decisions poets make about the presentation of their works play a meaningful role in the poetic process and, hence, ought to figure in the reading process. Studied within the context of their original volumes, poems reveal a fuller textuality, which is to say, an *inter*textuality.[26]

In the same book, Earl Miner uses the term 'integrated collections' to describe such volumes.[27] Milton's *Poems* (1645), which contains his sonnets and other shorter works, including *Comus* and *Lycidas*, presents a different variation. The poems were written over a twenty-year period,

and Milton changed the order of sonnets in his three editions of the volume, offering proof that he was consciously thinking about the issue of internal development in the volume.[28] This was routinely the practice also of Wordsworth who, in Stephen Gill's words, 'altered the presentation of his poems from edition to edition'.[29] The most famous case of a poetic collection is also the most intriguing. A whole scholarly industry has been built on the question whether or not Shakespeare planned, executed, and authorised his *Sonnets Never Before Imprinted* (1609) as a unified volume, a genuine narrative sequence, randomly selected, or by the publisher and not the author.

Critical works have been devoted exclusively to such volumes as a whole. Dylan Thomas's pithy 'Note', prefacing his volume *Collected Poems*, suggests one principle of selection, based only on quality: 'This book contains most of the poems I have written, and all, up to the present year [1952], that I wish to preserve'. The order does not seem to matter so much as the presumed excellence of each poem. D. H. Lawrence made different authorial decisions, as he explains in his own 'Note' in 1928.[30] *Rhyming Poems* and *Unrhyming Poems* suggest selection on grounds of form, while other volumes comprise 'sequences' on certain subjects, such as *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, and *Pansies*. Lawrence's *Last Poems* indicates a biographical principle, while *Uncollected Poems* suggests the simple criterion is that these ones have not previously been included in a collection. There are, then, many different principles of selection but in his 'Note' Lawrence justifies also a chronological ordering in each 'collection' to 'make up a biography of an emotional and inner life' of the author. This in turn illuminates Lawrence's view of the relation between his life and his creativity, since his usual practice was to develop in either poetic or novel form his thought processes as a spontaneous recording of a 'soul biography', until the particular vein of writing was exhausted, or until he turned to another subject, style or theme. This philosophy appears not to be the case in Keats's 1820 volume, since its ordering is not chronological.

Looking beyond collections made by individual poets, there are 'landmark' volumes of poems by sundry writers, selected by an editor who adopts a curatorial role, whose preferences and taste provide the main principle of selection, as in an art exhibition. *Golden Treasury of English Songs and Lyrics* collected by Francis Turner Palgrave, known universally as 'Palgrave's Golden Treasury' (1861–91), is an example. Looking beyond poetry, there are prose collections of short stories, where again the significance of the whole is regarded as greater than its component parts, for example, Edgar Alan Poe's *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* (1840). In his Preface Poe proposes as his 'thesis', 'terror

of the soul'. Collections by Guy de Maupassant such as *Contes du jours et de la nuit* (1885) and James Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914), announce in their very titles thematic concentration and principles of selection inviting guided readings. All these examples raise their own questions about why the contents are presented in a certain order, and by asking such questions and providing a range of answers, scholarship has opened up a variety of potential readings which enhance our understanding. The main point is that they are accepted as autonomous and significant publishing 'events'. The courtesy has not yet been extended to Keats's *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St Agnes, And Other Poems* (1820), which belongs in this distinguished company of historically important anthologies, even while the immense influence of its individual poems has commanded sustained critical analysis.

The importance of context for literary interpretation might be illustrated by considering 'Ode to a Nightingale'. Charles Brown's story of its apparently automatic composition under the plum tree in the Wentworth Place garden is a colourful and perhaps apocryphal tale, destined to illustrate romantic inspiration in spontaneous composition. Relying on a twenty-year old memory, Brown recounts how Keats entered the house from a morning spent under the plum tree in the garden with 'scraps of paper in his hand, and these he was quietly thrusting behind the books', revealing them only one by one with apparent reluctance.[31] When read with this scenario in mind, the ode acquires a part of its meaning from the myth, created from an anecdotal biographical revelation of the post-compositional diffidence of a genius unaware of the importance of his poem. The story has been doubted by textual scholars, but persists in colouring readings of the poem. Another historical context is Joseph Severn's famous painting, *Keats Listening to a Nightingale on Hampstead Heath*. Created in about 1845, over twenty-five years after the event, this adds different nuances to readings of the poem. Here the poet sits rapt and transported, eyes gazing upwards, an open notebook at his side. Crucially, Severn removes Keats from Brown's domestic morning setting, and places him instead in the windswept landscape of Hampstead Heath against a sky of dramatically scudding clouds, while a full moon peering through the branches denotes twilight. The poet is memorably placed in a wilder version of romantic nature than Brown's homely description evokes, creating quite different associations. Closer to the time (1823–5), Severn had painted Keats reading in the drawing room, recalling that occasion in ways that add yet another layer of context:

> This was at the time he first felt ill & had written the Ode to a Nightingale ^1819^ on the morn[ing] of my visit to Hampstead – I found him sitting

> with the two chairs as I have painted him & I was struck with the first real symptom[s] of sadness in Keats so finely expressed in that Poem. –[32]

An emotional state, 'symptoms of sadness' and awareness of illness, add more projected meanings on the poem. It must be added that Severn was writing even longer after the event than Brown, in an 1859 letter (22 December) to George Scharf, founder of the National Portrait Gallery, indicating that hindsight is another interpretive frame.

Keats published the ode some months later in *The Annals of Fine Art* (July, 1819), which suggests that he himself at this stage placed it in a context that adds a different range of potential meanings altogether. This context suggests that it should be read not primarily as a 'nature poem' nor as wholly emotionally expressive, but that its primary subject is art. Finally, Keats placed it in *1820*, where it acquires yet more reflected associations from the company it keeps, and by the light it sheds itself on the adjacent and surrounding poems, as we shall see in Chapter 6. The 'Ode' is also replete with allusions to other writers, mainly Shakespeare, and if these are noticed, yet more layers of intertextuality and contexts are revealed. As in the case of repeated performances of *Hamlet*, can we confidently claim 'Ode to a Nightingale' is the 'same work' on each reading or performance, irrespective of context? In interpreting the volume, it is necessary to draw upon different areas of scholarly expertise, those of biographer, textual scholar, literary historian, and literary critic, in dealing with an apparently 'static' text, yet one that 'moves' in response to varying perspectives, through time, occasions, conscious ordering, and new critical readings.

When dealing with works such as those by Shakespeare and Keats there are no single or final interpretations. Analysis must shift according to changing perspectives, cultural and literary contexts. David Harlan, intellectual historian, describes such works as 'indeterminate', 'multi-dimensional, omni-significant, inexhaustible, perpetually new . . .'.[33] More recently and speaking of Shakespeare's works, Stephen Greenblatt draws on the phrase, 'the cunning of uncertainty',[34] used by historian of science Helga Nowotny to characterise such scientific fields as genetic engineering, big-data culturomics, economic modelling:

> it is a concept that perfectly characterises the fascination of Shakespeare and, specifically, the elusive and astonishing flexibility of the Shakespearean text. Each of his great plays is an adaptive, open system, complex, unfixed, and unpredictable. Shakespeare was the master of creative uncertainty and hence of ongoing, vital cultural mobility.[35]

Much the same applies to Keats. It is in this light, and with these terms in mind, that I wish to present Keats's *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St*

Agnes, And Other Poems (1820) as a 'multi-dimensional', unified work, At a more general level, I hope to show how, in a remarkable volume of poetry, the whole can exceed and enrich the constituent poems, revealing creative links between composition and publication, thus offering more general insight into the complex nature of creativity itself through the example of a poet consciously aware of his own 'self-canonisation', as one who claimed, 'that which is creative must create itself'.[36]

Melancholy: First Thoughts

I hope to show in Chapter 3 that there are various unifying stylistic and thematic elements which underly *1820*. In Chapters 4, 5 and 6, one overall theme in particular will be pursued. Analysis of the choice and ordering of poems, the collection can be read as mapping many paradoxical facets of the emotional ailment, melancholy. Deriving from its classical, Graeco-Roman roots, melancholy in the Renaissance was considered a serious and complex medical condition, inextricably connecting body and mind. It has not completely disappeared, since the clinical terrain of Renaissance melancholy has, in modern times, been transferred into psychology, incorporating mental conditions pathologised as anxiety, depression, mania, suicidal tendencies and a host of other serious disorders previously classified as facets of melancholy. In the eighteenth century it survived as a source for 'graveyard poetry' and Gothic novels, and for Romantics it became a fashionable poetic pose, which in Keats's time was rapidly palling in popular taste. All of these associations were known to Keats, and I hope to show in Chapter 6 that he drew upon each.

The existence of such a medically related preoccupation in *1820* is not surprising, since Keats was qualified as a surgeon-apothecary. Many scholars have shown how his training continued as a major influence on his poetry, providing references to specific medical states and remedies from the traditional and ever-expanding *materia medica* as a required course of study when Keats was a student.[37] He was also reading with great enthusiasm Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* during the period when he was putting together the collection, and this book was one of his favourites. It is recognised by Robert Gittings as a major influence on Keats's poetry in 1819.[38] The poems reveal a new set of interrelated meanings when seen as sequential reflections on different aspects of Renaissance and Romantic constructions of melancholy. It does not really matter to the argument whether Keats consciously planned this, since there is ample evidence that melancholy had long been at the

forefront of his mind, both before and during the time when he came to plan the collection. From childhood, he also suffered from mood swings and bouts of melancholy himself.

Such a thematic approach to the 1820 volume seems also consistent with Keats's evolving, secular philosophy of the meaning of emotional suffering in a person's life, developed just at the time in April 1819 when he was writing some of the poems in the volume. He sees the journey of life as a 'vale of Soul-making' with the purpose of schooling the mind and intelligence into a soul as 'the seat of human Passions':

> Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul? A Place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand ways? . . . This appears to me a faint sketch of a system of Salvation which does not affront our reason and humanity –.[39]

'Circumstances' of adversity and personal experiences are the key to an individuating process of 'Soul-making':

> I mean, I began by seeing how man was formed by circumstances – and what are circumstances? – but touchstones of his heart – ? And what are touchstones? – but proovings of his heart? – and what are proovings of his heart but fortifiers or alterers of his nature? And what is his altered nature but his soul? . . . And how is the heart to become this Medium but in a world of Circumstances? –

Keats is using 'proovings' in the contemporary medical sense (and still used thus in homeopathy), meaning 'testing, trialling' a drug to ascertain its effect on the mind or body.[40] It also bears a religious reference, to describe temptation as a formative test of faith, and part of Keats's aim is to construct a secular 'system of Salvation' as an alternative to the Christian 'vale of tears' (*valis lacrimarum*, *Psalm* 84 in some translations), excluding any presumption of original sin as the cause for human suffering. Keats's optimistic, humanistic view may have been forged in reaction against Wordsworth's bleaker allegory of growing away from the light: 'We Poets in our youth begin in gladness; | But thereof come in the end despondency and madness' ('Resolution and Independence', ll. 48–9). The word 'circumstances' in Keats's lexicon does not mean neutral, random occurrences in what he describes as 'the wide arable land of events', but a tangle of significant affective events, interspersing pleasure and pain, joy and melancholy, as he says in the same letter:

This is the world – thus we cannot expect to give way many hours to pleasure – Circumstances are like Clouds continually gathering and bursting – While we are laughing the seed of some trouble is put into [the] wide arable land of events – while we are laughing it sprouts is [it] grows and suddenly bears a poison fruit which we must pluck – . . .[41]

This personal theory had roots in Keats's medical training. He is thinking and writing as a 'poet physician', though Brittany Pladek has advanced an important qualification, that he is also placing himself as 'patient as physician', generalising from his own personal experiences of emotional pain and suffering, viewed in the light of his medical training and his reading.[42] It is a subsidiary part of this book's design to suggest that the 1820 volume can be read as a poetic equivalent of the 'vale of Soul-making', where the poems themselves can be seen as 'circumstances' or 'proovings', stepping-stones through a vale of melancholy towards acceptance of its necessity in forming a unique soul, and in this case a unique volume.

Notes

1. Bate, *John Keats*, p. 650.
2. To Woodhouse, 27 October, 1818, *The Letters of John Keats 1814–1821* (hereafter *LJK*), 1, p. 387
3. Scott, 'Keats's American Ode', pp. 205–24.
4. Scott, 'Keats's American Ode', p. 206.
5. Blunden, *John Keats*, pp. 28–30.
6. Wasserman, *The Finer Tone: Keats' Major Poems* and Vendler, *The Odes of John Keats*.
7. Matthews, *Keats: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 123–32.
8. *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St Agnes 1820*. Facsimile.
9. Penguin Poetry First Editions, *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St Agnes and Other Poems*, with 'Note on the Text' by Michael Schmidt.
10. *Keats: Poems Published in 1820*, ed. M. Robertson.
11. Gittings, *John Keats: The Living Year.*
12. Stillinger, 'The Order of Poems in Keats's First Volume', pp. 1–13, 3.
13. Stillinger, *The Hoodwinking of Madeline*, p. 5.
14. Fraistat, *The Poem and the Book*, p. 98.
15. Fraistat, *The Poem and the Book*, p. 99.
16. Stillinger, 'Review', *Modern Philology*, 84 (May, 1987), pp. 436–7.
17. Fraistat (ed.), *Poems in Their Place: The Intertextuality and Order of Poetic Collections*, pp. 95–140.
18. Gamer, *Romanticism, Self-Canonization, and the Business of Poetry*, p. 2.
19. Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare.*
20. Gamer, *Romanticism, Self-Canonization, and the Business of Poetry*, p. 41.
21. To the George Keatses, 14–31 October, 1818, *LJK,* 1, p. 394.
22. This suggestion is offered by John Barnard in *John Keats: Selected Letters*, p. 246 fn.
23. Gamer, *Romanticism, Self-Canonization, and the Business of Poetry*, p. 33.
24. Tuve, *A Reading of George Herbert*, p. 152.
25. Gamer, *Self-Canonization, and the Business of Poetry*, ch. 4. See also Martz,

'George Herbert: The Unity of *The Temple*', which has in turn generated other studies along the same lines.

26. Fraistat, *Poems in their Place*, p. 1.
27. Earl Miner, 'Some Issues for the Study of Integrated Collections', in Fraistat, *Poems in their Place*, ch. 2.
28. *Milton's Sonnets,* ed. E. A. J. Honigmann, pp. 59–75.
29. Gill, *Wordsworth's Revisitings*, p. 14.
30. *The Complete Poems of D. H. Lawrence*, ed. Vivian de Sola Pinto and Warren Roberts, pp. 27–8.
31. *The Keats Circle* (hereafter *KC),* 2, p. 65.
32. Quoted from National Portrait Gallery archives, by Oliver Herford, 'Joseph Severn: On Likeness and Life-Writing', p. 320.
33. Harlan, 'Intellectual History and the Return of Literature', p. 598.
34. Nowotny, *The Cunning of Uncertainty*.
35. Greenblatt, 'King Lear, a difficult play, not helped by sloppy analysis'.
36. To James Hessey, 8 October, 1818, *LJK* 1, p. 374.
37. There are many studies of this subject, cited in Chapter 4.
38. Gittings, *John Keats: The Living Year*.
39. To George and Georgiana Keats, 21 April 1819, *LJK,* 2, p. 103.
40. For information about methods of distillation of medicines see Stuart Sperry, *Keats the Poet*.
41. *LJK,* 2, p. 79.
42. Pladek, *The Poetics of Palliation: Romantic Literary Therapy*, pp. 164–5.