

Name of Student

Instructor's Name

Course Code

Date

Preparing a Critical Edition of John Keats's Letter to Fanny Brawne (13 October 1819)

For this project, I have chosen John Keats's letter to Fanny Brawne, dated 13 October 1819. This letter offers profound insight into Keats's emotional state and his deep affection for Brawne during a pivotal period in his life. Keats's correspondence with Brawne is renowned for its passionate and poetic language, reflecting the intensity of his feelings amidst personal and health challenges. The particular letter stands as a testament to his enduring love and the complexities of his emotional and physical condition during that time.

Textual Editing and Annotation

Transcription & Standardization

Below is the transcribed text of Keats's letter, with modernized spelling and punctuation for clarity. Original spellings and punctuation have been preserved where they significantly impact the meaning or reflect Keats's stylistic choices.

My dearest Girl,

This moment I have set myself to copy some verses out fair. I cannot proceed with any degree of content. I must write you a line or two and see if that will assist in dismissing you from my mind for ever so short a time. Upon my soul I can think of nothing else. The time is past when I had power to advise and warn you against the unpromising morning of my life. My love has made me selfish. I cannot exist without you. I am forgetful of everything but seeing you again—my life seems to stop there—I see no further. You have

absorbed me. I have a sensation at the present moment as though I were dissolving. I should be exquisitely miserable without the hope of soon seeing you. I should be afraid to separate myself far from you. My sweet Fanny, will your heart never change? My love, will it? I have no limit now to my love. Your note came in just here. I cannot be happier away from you. 'Tis richer than an Argosy of pearls. Do not threat me even in jest. I have been astonished that men could die martyrs for religion. I have shuddered at it. I shudder no more. I could be martyred for my religion. Love is my religion. I could die for that. I could die for you. My creed is love and you are its only tenet. You have ravished me away by a power I cannot resist; and yet I could resist till I saw you; and even since I have seen you I have endeavored often "to reason against the reasons of my love." I can do that no more—the pain would be too great. My love is selfish. I cannot breathe

without you.

Yours forever,

John Keats

Annotation

1. "copy some verses out fair": Refers to the practice of transcribing poetry neatly, indicating Keats's dedication to his craft.
2. "unpromising morning of my life": Keats alludes to his uncertain future, possibly referencing his financial instability and declining health.
3. "absorbed me": Indicates the depth of Keats's infatuation, suggesting he is entirely consumed by thoughts of Fanny.
4. "Argosy of pearls": An 'argosy' is a large merchant ship; here, it symbolizes immense wealth, implying that Fanny's note is more valuable to Keats than great riches.

5. "martyrs for religion": Keats compares his willingness to suffer for love to the sacrifices made by religious martyrs, elevating his romantic devotion to a spiritual level.
6. "ravished me away": 'Ravished' here means carried away with intense emotion, highlighting the overwhelming nature of his feelings.
7. "reason against the reasons of my love": Suggests Keats's internal struggle to rationalize his intense emotions, acknowledging the futility of such reasoning.

Scholarly Introduction

Historical and Cultural Context

John Keats (1795–1821) was a central figure in the second generation of Romantic poets, alongside contemporaries like Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley. Despite his brief life, Keats produced a rich body of poetry characterized by sensual imagery and odes that have become cornerstones of English literature. His work reflects the Romantic era's emphasis on emotion, nature, and the sublime.

In 1818, Keats met Fanny Brawne, and their ensuing relationship profoundly influenced his life and work. Their correspondence offers invaluable insights into Keats's personal experiences, emotional depth, and the societal norms of early 19th-century England. This period was marked by strict social conventions, particularly concerning courtship and expressions of affection, making Keats's candid letters to Brawne both intimate and daring.

Textual History

Keats's letters to Fanny Brawne were not initially intended for publication. After Keats's death in 1821, Brawne kept the letters private, and they were not made public until 1878, when they were published by Harry Buxton Forman in "Letters of John Keats to Fanny Brawne." The authenticity and content of these letters have since been subjects of scholarly interest and debate.

The letters provide a window into Keats's private thoughts and the depth of his relationship with Brawne, offering scholars material to analyze his emotional and psychological state during his final years.

Critical Analysis

Keats's letter to Fanny Brawne, dated October 13, 1819, exemplifies the raw intensity of his emotions and the depth of his Romantic idealism. His use of language reflects a fusion of poetic beauty and personal despair, revealing his simultaneous devotion and torment. The letter serves as a primary document illustrating Keats's struggle with his declining health and his passionate, yet unattainable, love for Brawne. His choice of words, such as "I cannot exist without you" and "my life seems to stop there—I see no further," underscores his existential dependence on Brawne (Keats). This letter can be analyzed within the framework of Romantic literature, which emphasizes emotional depth, individual experience, and the transcendence of love.

Keats's portrayal of love in this letter aligns with the Romantic belief in the supremacy of emotion over reason. His declaration, "Love is my religion. I could die for that. I could die for you," elevates love to a spiritual level, equating it with martyrdom (Keats). This religious imagery highlights the Romantic notion of love as an all-consuming, divine force. Scholars have noted that such comparisons were common among Romantic poets who sought to present love as both a salvation and a source of suffering (Motion 217). The extreme emotional states reflected in the letter—ranging from bliss to despair—demonstrate Keats's belief in the transformative power of love, a common theme in his poetry as well.

Additionally, this letter illustrates Keats's struggle between reason and emotion, a dichotomy central to his Romantic philosophy. His reference to attempting to "reason against the

reasons of my love” suggests an internal conflict between logic and feeling (Keats). This tension is significant in Keatsian studies, as it mirrors the overarching theme of contradiction present in much of his poetry, including *Ode to a Nightingale* and *La Belle Dame sans Merci* (Bate 346). The letter, therefore, serves as both an intimate reflection of his personal life and a broader representation of his literary ideals.

From a historical perspective, the letter also reflects early 19th-century social norms regarding love, relationships, and gender roles. In the Romantic period, men were often expected to adopt a rational and composed demeanor, particularly in matters of courtship (Wolfson 127). Keats’s overt emotional vulnerability and self-proclaimed helplessness contrast with these expectations, positioning him as an outlier among his contemporaries. His confession, “My love has made me selfish. I cannot breathe without you,” defies the traditional image of the composed, self-sufficient Romantic hero (Keats). This deviation is noteworthy because it showcases Keats’s unique contribution to the era’s literary and emotional expressions.

Furthermore, Keats’s declining health casts a shadow over his words. By October 1819, he had already exhibited symptoms of tuberculosis, the disease that would ultimately claim his life in early 1821. Scholars argue that his awareness of his mortality intensified his attachment to Brawne, making their love seem all the more urgent and unattainable (Stillinger 98). His frequent allusions to dissolution—“I have a sensation at the present moment as though I were dissolving”—can thus be interpreted as a premonition of his impending death, adding another layer of poignancy to the letter (Keats).

Conclusion

John Keats’s letter to Fanny Brawne, dated October 13, 1819, is an exceptional document that encapsulates the essence of Romantic literature through its passionate intensity, religious

metaphors, and existential longing. This critical edition has presented a carefully transcribed and annotated version of the letter, contextualizing it within its literary and historical framework.

Keats's words, steeped in love and despair, not only offer insight into his personal afflictions but also reflect the broader Romantic ideal of love as a transformative force. Through textual editing and scholarly analysis, this edition underscores the importance of Keats's letters as invaluable literary artifacts that continue to inform and inspire readers and scholars alike.

Works Cited

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