

## The posthumous lives of Joseph Severn's portrait of John Keats and the autograph manuscript of 'Ode to a Nightingale'

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**Abstract:** *When the twenty-five-year-old John Keats died, his lungs completely destroyed by consumption, it would have been entirely reasonable to assume that the poet and his work would quickly be forgotten by all but 'the dozen people who believed in his genius'.<sup>1</sup> During his lifetime, the sales of his poetry had been disappointing, and the literary establishment had written excoriating reviews of his work. These have been described as 'the most notorious critical attacks on a living poet in British literary history'.<sup>2</sup> John Lockhart described 'Endymion' as 'imperturbable drivelling idiocy' and condescendingly dismissed Keats as 'a young Cockney rhymester'.<sup>3</sup> John Croker described Keats's poetry as 'the most incongruous ideas in the most uncouth language'.<sup>4</sup> In the last few years of his life, Keats suffered as he witnessed the death from consumption of his mother and brother; he was weary from constant financial worries, his own health had deteriorated rapidly, and his heart ached from unrequited love for Fanny Brawne. It was little wonder that he said to Joseph Severn on the night of his death in Rome, 'I am dying...thank God it has come'.<sup>5</sup> At last 'easeful death' would permit him 'to cease upon the midnight with no pain'.<sup>6</sup> This essay examines a portrait of Keats painted by Joseph Severn and the original autograph manuscript of Ode to a Nightingale. It assesses their contribution in rescuing Keats from what seemed inevitable obscurity to become one of the most loved and celebrated among the English poets. Keats predicted that after his death he would be recognized among the English poets and expressed this in a letter to his brother.<sup>7</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Kenyon West, 'Keats in Hampstead' in *Century Illustrated Magazine 1881-1906*, 50.6 (October 1895), 898 <ProQuest> [accessed date].

<sup>2</sup> Kelvin Everest, 'John Keats', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, < <https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2102/10.1093/ref:odnb/15229> > [accessed 17 December 2021].

<sup>3</sup> John Gibson Lockhart, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 3.17 (1818), 519-524.

<sup>4</sup> John Wilson Croker, *The Quarterly Review*, 19 (1818), 204-208.

<sup>5</sup> *Life, Letters, and Literary Remains of John Keats*, ed. by Richard Monckton Milnes, (New York: George P. Putnam, 1848), p. 246.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Gittings, *The Odes of Keats & their Earliest Known Manuscripts*, (London: Heinemann, 1970), p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> Letter from Keats to his brother George dated 14 October 1818, quoted in Milnes, p. 153.

Severn painted this highly romanticised portrait (Figure 1) of John Keats in 1834, and at the base of the frame, there is a tiny glass window containing a lock of Keats's hair. The portrait is a whole-length right view of him in his parlour at Wentworth Place, Hampstead. Keats is seated on a cane-seated chair of the Trafalgar pattern, which was popular in the Regency period.<sup>8</sup> He has an open book on his knee, thought to be a copy of the works of Shakespeare, his left elbow leans against the back of an identical chair, and his left-hand rests on his head. The painting is very similar to an earlier version painted by Severn in Rome between 1821 and 1823, which is now in the National Portrait Gallery ("NPG"). Keats is wearing formal dress, a white shirt, cravat, black waistcoat, double-breasted coat, pantaloons or trousers and black flat-soled evening pumps. The coat and trousers appear to be in good quality fine wool cloth. The clothing is typical for someone from a reasonably wealthy or middle-class background in London during that time. The stylised clothing is evidence of Severn's romantic approach to the subject. In contrast, Samuel Taylor Coleridge records that he had met Keats in Highgate in 1819 and described him as 'a loose, slack, not well-dressed youth'.<sup>9</sup> Severn has painted Keats's reddish-brown centre-parted hair as described by Leigh Hunt being 'remarkable for its beauty' and 'long, thick, exquisitely fine, and running into ringlets'.<sup>10</sup> On the left wall is a bookshelf and, on the rear wall, a framed mezzotint portrait of Shakespeare. In the right background, French windows open out over the wooded garden on what appears a fine spring day. A red and blue patterned fitted carpet, a recent development in the early nineteenth century that indicates a relatively wealthy owner.<sup>11</sup>

Severn wrote to Charles Brown in 1821 that he had started painting 'a small whole-length of my poor Keats; it is from a recollection of him at your house'.<sup>12</sup> Unlike many biographers and critics who dismiss the portrait as a fancy painting made from memory rather than life, Herford

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<sup>8</sup> Ralph Fastnedge, 'A Manual for Georgian Chair Makers', *Country Life*, 10 June 1965, pp. 1440-45.

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Specimens of the Table Talk* (London: John Murray, 1852), p. 195.

<sup>10</sup> Leigh Hunt, 'The Wishing-Cup', *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, 2 (January 1833), p. 441.

<sup>11</sup> The author thanks Jenny Lister, Curator, Fashion and Textiles 1800-1900 at the Victoria & Albert Museum, for her comments on the clothing and furnishings. Email to the author 15 October 2021.

<sup>12</sup> William Sharp, *The Life and Letters of Joseph Severn* (London: Sampson Low, Marston & Company, 1892), p. 107.



Figure 1. *Portrait of John Keats at Wentworth Place on the day of his composing 'Ode to a Nightingale'*, 1834, Joseph Severn (1793-1879), 59.7 cm. x 44.5 cm., oil on canvas. © Christie's, London (reproduced with permission).

argues that the painting should be taken seriously.<sup>13</sup> Severn wrote to his friend the painter George Johann Scharf that immediately after Keats had died, he 'made an effort to call up the last pleasant remembrance in this picture which is posthumous'.<sup>14</sup> Severn recounted that he had visited Keats on the very day that he had written *Ode to a Nightingale* and found him sitting with the two chairs as in the painting and, how he had been 'struck with the first real symptom[s] of sadness in Keats so finely expressed in that Poem'.<sup>15</sup> Severn had asked Brown to assist him with his painting by doing a drawing of the room and chairs. Severn believes that after that morning, Keats 'lost his

<sup>13</sup> Oliver Herford, 'John Keats by Joseph Severn: On Likeness and Life-writing', *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 42.4 (December 2013), p. 318.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 320.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 320.

cheerfulness & I never saw him like himself again'.<sup>16</sup> Herford notes that the first painting in the NPG has Keats's head inclined over the book and that the viewer can only see 'his lowered eyelid and not the eye it covers', whereas this portrait has Keats's head slightly raised and the open eye is plainly visible.<sup>17</sup>

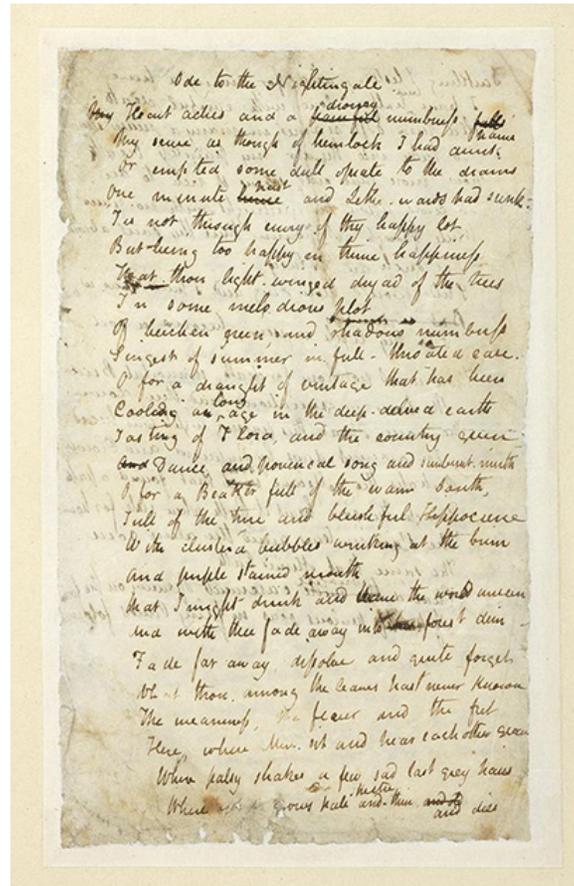


Figure 2. *Ode to a Nightingale*, 1819, John Keats (1795-1821), 30.5 cm. x 21.5 cm., autograph manuscript ink on paper. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (reproduced with permission).

The manuscript (Figure 2) is believed to be the original draft of *Ode to a Nightingale* and is the only surviving copy in Keats's handwriting. The manuscript consists of two half sheets of cheap wove paper, with the watermark of Ruse & Turner and dated 1817. The pages appear to be from a

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 320.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 321.

notebook which has damage to the edges typical of pages sewn in and subsequently torn out. The Fitzwilliam Museum website states that the pages ‘have all the hallmarks of a very first draft’ and appear to have been written ‘in the full flood of concentrated inspiration’.<sup>18</sup> Robert Gittings believes that the false start, ‘Small, winged Dryad’ on the second page and the ‘cluster’d bubbles’ changed to ‘beaded bubbles’ in the second stanza are evidence of the manuscript being a first draft.<sup>19</sup> The order of the stanzas with the first page comprises two and a half stanzas and the second, which has been turned upside down to avoid the false start, has a further two and a half stanzas. Stanzas six and seven are on the verso of sheet one, and stanza eight is on the verso of sheet two. Gittings believes that *Nightingale* became a longer poem than Keats had initially anticipated, but rather than return to the house for more paper, he wrote on the backs of the two sheets so as not ‘to break the continuity of what seemed more and more a fluent process of creation’.<sup>20</sup>

Charles Brown, who lived with Keats at Wentworth Place, provided some years later a description of the act of poetic inspiration in May 1819.<sup>21</sup> According to Brown, a nightingale was nesting near the house, and Keats ‘felt a tranquil and continual joy in her songs’. One morning Keats took a chair from the breakfast table into the garden and sat under a plum tree for two or three hours. When Keats returned to the house, Brown witnessed him thrusting four or five scraps of paper behind some books. After asking Keats what he was doing, the two arranged the many ‘not well legible’ scraps that contained Keats’s poetic feelings on the nightingale’s song. Brown concludes that this poem ‘has been the delight of everyone’.

The portrait first belonged to relatives of Keats, and Helen Watts states that the painting was presented by them to John Hunter in gratitude for persuading Lord Jeffrey, editor of the *Edinburgh*

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<sup>18</sup> Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, MS 1-1933, ‘Ode to the Nightingale’ <<https://data.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/id/object/238722>> [accessed 13 December 2021].

<sup>19</sup> Gittings, pp. 65-6.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>21</sup> Charles Brown, *Life of John Keats* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), pp. 53-4. First delivered as a lecture at the Plymouth Athenaeum on 29 December 1836 and later published.

*Review*, to write a kinder review of Keats's last collection of poems.<sup>22</sup> Jeffrey wrote of Keats's 'genius' and 'the spirit of poetry' and praised specifically *Ode to a Nightingale* for its 'harmony and feeling'.<sup>23</sup> Richard Monckton Milnes, who wrote the first biography of Keats, dedicated the volume to Jeffrey for helping to rescue the early genius of Keats from 'obloquy or oblivion'.<sup>24</sup>

The painting was later acquired from a direct descendant of Hunter by Roy Davids at Bonhams in 2005 and then sold at Christie's in December 2020. The earlier painting, in the NPG, had been sold to Samuel Smith Travers on condition that Severn could be permitted to use it in doing another picture, such as with the eye open and raised from the book.<sup>25</sup> Travers gave it to the NPG in 1859. Many other versions of the painting were done by Severn 'to the commission of, or to oblige, admirers of the poet'.<sup>26</sup> John Linnell and Edmund Dyer made copies of the portrait in the NPG; one is now at the Keats House Museum in Hampstead. The later versions and copies show Keats's right eye open and looking upwards. It is purely speculation, but this may be because Severn wanted to suggest that Keats had been distracted from his reading by the nightingale singing again 'of summer in full throated ease'.<sup>27</sup>

*Ode to a Nightingale* was first published anonymously in *Annals of the Fine Arts* in July 1819 and the following year in the volume *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St Agnes and other Poems*.<sup>28</sup> Keats gave the two-sheet manuscript to his friend John Hamilton Reynolds. It was handed down through generations of his family until it was included in a 1901 auction sale of autograph letters belonging to Henry Towneley Green, a nephew of Reynolds. This was the era of the American 'Gilded-Age'

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<sup>22</sup> Helen Watt, *John Hunter; the Forgotten Tenant of Craigcrook* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Extra-Mural Association, 1979), p. 76.

<sup>23</sup> Francis Jeffrey, 'Endymion: A Poetic Romance and *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St Agnes* and other Poems', *The Edinburgh Review*, 34.67 (August 1820), 203-13.

<sup>24</sup> Milnes, p. 3.

<sup>25</sup> Herford, pp. 320-21.

<sup>26</sup> William Sharp, 'The Portraits of Keats, with Special Reference to those by Severn', *The Century Illustrated Magazine*, n.s., 49 (November 1905 to April 1906), 547.

<sup>27</sup> Gittings, p. 19.

<sup>28</sup> John Keats, *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes and Other Poems*, (London: Taylor and Hessey, 1820).

when newly-wealthy collectors were buying European artworks, rare books and manuscripts. It was feared that a foreign collector might buy the manuscript, and Sydney Colvin, the Fitzwilliam director, persuaded the Marquess of Crewe to buy the manuscript for its 'almost unequalled literary interest'.<sup>29</sup> In 1932 Sydney Cockerell, the then director of the Fitzwilliam asked Crewe to lend the manuscript to the museum and the following year, Crewe converted his loan into a gift. Suzanne Reynolds traces the history of the manuscript, which she describes as: the story of a tightly defined, largely male network of friends, collectors, curators and conservators who over the last two centuries have preserved, treasured and conserved this remarkable document.<sup>30</sup>

Two hundred years after his death, Keats 'has the stature as one of the greatest English poets' and, to many people, has a reputation as a romantic poet of beautiful verses written during his tragic life and before his early death.<sup>31</sup> The symbiotic forces that resulted in the reappraisal of Keats's work after his death are, first, the creation and perpetuation of the cult of the romantic poet killed by savage criticism, of which the portrait is an example. The second is the widespread recognition by later poets, artists, and scholars of the genius of Keats's poetry and letters, of which the autograph manuscript is a pre-eminent example.

Immediately after Keats died, the small group of his friends began the process of creating a narrative of the handsome young poet who had lived such a tragic life, and a central theme was the belief that the savage criticism of his poetry had been responsible for his death. Severn arranged for a death mask to be made of Keats and for casts to be taken of his hands and feet, and he took several cuttings of Keats's hair. The reverence in the nineteenth century for the *memento mori* of poets has been written about extensively by Samantha Matthews and Deborah Lutz.<sup>32</sup> Objects such as hair

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<sup>29</sup> Suzanne Reynolds, 'Some Scraps of Paper: The Autograph Manuscript of *Ode to a Nightingale* at the Fitzwilliam Museum', *The Keats-Shelley Review*, 33.2 (2019), p. 150.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

<sup>31</sup> ODNB.

<sup>32</sup> Samantha Matthews, *Poetical Remains, Poets' Graves, Bodies and Books in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), and Deborah Lutz, *Relics of Death in Victorian Literature and Culture*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

samples were thought to have auratic qualities and provided a conduit through which people might sense an individual's identity both when alive and after their death. The hair was often worn next to the owner's body, fashioned into jewellery such as a locket or bracelet. Keats had given a lock of his hair to Fanny Brawne before he departed for Rome as a memento of him. Later Fanny gave some of the hair to Keats's sister, and it was kept as a family heirloom until acquired by a collector who had it set in a ring and donated it to the Bodleian in 1904. Severn designed a gold brooch in the shape of the lyre on Keats's headstone and strung with strands of the poet's hair. A replica brooch is now in Keats House, Hampstead. Leigh Hunt collected locks of hair of leading English literary figures including Milton, Swift, Johnson, Coleridge, Wordsworth and Shelley. Hunt believed that hair was one of 'the most touching, the most beautiful...[and]...most lasting of keepsakes'.<sup>33</sup> The Ranson Center in Texas now holds the Hunt collection, which includes two locks of Keats's, and a further lock of his hair is in the collection of the Morgan Library and Museum in New York.

On hearing of Keats's death, Percy Bysshe Shelley dedicated his elegiac poem *Adonais* to him.<sup>34</sup> In the preface, Shelley wrote that the savage criticism of *Endymion* had agitated Keats and caused 'the rupture of a blood vessel in the lungs' that resulted in the consumption which killed him.<sup>35</sup> Whilst acknowledging Keats's 'transcendent genius', Shelley believed that he 'never was, nor never will be, a popular poet'.<sup>36</sup> There was little love lost between Keats and Lord Byron, with the latter describing Keats disdainfully to his publisher John Murray as belonging to 'the second hand school of poetry' with his 'Cockneyfying and Suburbing'.<sup>37</sup> However, Byron included a stanza in *Don Juan* which referred to Keats being 'killed off by one critique' and 'snuffed out by an article'.<sup>38</sup> Milnes continued to perpetuate this narrative, stating that Keats was 'all but universally believed to have

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<sup>33</sup> Hunt, p. 440.

<sup>34</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Adonais, an elegy on the death of John Keats, author of Endymion, Hyperion, etc.* (Pisa: Didot, 1821).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>36</sup> Milnes, pp. 250-51.

<sup>37</sup> *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron with Notices of His Life*, 2 vols, ed. by Thomas Moore (New York: J. & J. Harper, 1831), I, p. 317.

<sup>38</sup> George Gordon Byron, *Don Juan*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958), stanza 60, p. 372.

been killed by a stupid, savage article in a review'. The compassion generated by his 'untoward fate' made him a figure of 'certain personal interest'.<sup>39</sup>

Before his death, Keats had expressed his wish that his gravestone should read-only 'Here lies one whose name was writ in water'.<sup>40</sup> However, Severn and Brown defied these instructions. They added a preamble that includes emotive wording stressing Keats's 'youth', 'the bitterness of his heart' on his death bed, and the 'malicious power of his enemies' (see Fig. 3). Keats's grave quickly became a site of literary pilgrimage for Victorians. Many of the visitors removed cuttings of the flowers that grew over the grave, often pressing them in books. Thomas Hardy visited Keats's grave and picked some violets that he sent to Edmund Gosse in an act of veneration.<sup>41</sup>

Keats was to have a considerable influence on Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the pre-Raphaelites, who appropriated him as a kindred radical spirit, and these artists have been described as coming together 'in part because of their shared appreciation for Keats's poetry and life, which they knew from the Milnes biography'.<sup>42</sup> Poems including *The Eve of Saint Agnes*, *Endymion*, *Isabella* and *La Belle Dame sans Merci* were the inspiration for Sir Edward Burne Jones, Walter Crane, William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais, John William Waterhouse and George Frederick Watts. These paintings further enhanced the romantic image of Keats, and Lutz believes they were 'instrumental in spreading Keats's ideas and poetry (not to mention his relics) to a broad Victorian audience'.<sup>43</sup>

The unique manuscript of *Ode to a Nightingale* is tangible evidence of Keats's genius at work. It is remarkable as it appears a first draft, written in 'the full flood of concentrated inspiration' in a couple of hours, and contains so few minor changes from its final form.<sup>44</sup> The evolving critical

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<sup>39</sup> Milnes, p. 9.

<sup>40</sup> Sharp, p. 89.

<sup>41</sup> Lutz, p. 14.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>43</sup> Lutz, p. 44.

<sup>44</sup> Reynolds, p. 142.

approach to Keats's poetry is examined in a series of essays in *John Keats in Context*.<sup>45</sup> In the Victorian period, he was generally regarded as a poet of great unfulfilled promise and possessing genius thwarted by his premature death and only admired by a small group of poets and artists. In the twentieth century, a wider audience admired his poetry, and Keats is now one of the most loved English poets. Milnes believed that 'any man of literary accomplishment' who read at random any part of *Endymion* or 'the later and more perfect poems' would feel that 'the whole range of literature hardly supplies a parallel phenomenon'.<sup>46</sup> Keats's reputation was enhanced by the growing appreciation of his works by poets such as Robert and Elizabeth Browning and Lord Alfred Tennyson. John Sterling described Keats and Tennyson as 'two most true and great poets'.<sup>47</sup> Felix Grendon has explored the influences of Keats on the early poetry of Tennyson, and he notes in particular that in *In Memoriam*, the portrayal of death and the ongoing reminders of mortality are similar in manner to that of Keats in *Ode to a Nightingale*.<sup>48</sup> Swinburne considered the *Odes* as close to absolute perfection, and 'the most radiant, fervent, and musical is that *to a Nightingale*'.<sup>49</sup> To John Ruskin, there were two orders of poets the first creative such as Shakespeare, Homer and Dante, and the second reflective or perceptive, which included Wordsworth, Keats and Tennyson.<sup>50</sup> More recently, T.S. Eliot thought Keats, a great poet and regarded his letters as 'certainly the most important written by any English poet'.<sup>51</sup>

The lock of Keats's hair in the portrait's frame creates a literary reliquary combining the idealised image of the poet and a fragment of his bodily person. As such, it represents an important object that has helped to create the narrative of what has become the popular concept of the tragic romantic poet. Both Christina and Dante Gabriel Rossetti wrote poems about Keats's grave, which provide

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<sup>45</sup> *John Keats in Context*, ed. by Michael O'Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

<sup>46</sup> Milnes, p. 252.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 254.

<sup>48</sup> Felix Grendon, 'The Influence of Keats on the Early Poetry of Tennyson', *The Swanee Review*, 15.3, (July 1907), 285-296.

<sup>49</sup> Swinburne, Algernon Charles, *Miscellanies* (New York: Worthington Company, 1886), p. 211.

<sup>50</sup> E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, *The Complete Works of John Ruskin*, 39 vols (London: George Allen, 1904), III, p. 205.

<sup>51</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1935), p. 100.

evidence of the Victorian fascination with death and the emphasis on remains, graves and relics.<sup>52</sup> It is as if seemingly the literary pilgrimages to Keats's homes in Hampstead and Rome, and his grave are pre-requisites to an appreciation of his poetry. These pilgrims want to connect sensorily with Keats's aura through sharing the spaces where he lived, breathed, died, and is buried. The *Nightingale* manuscript may provide a similar sensory experience, as it is the paper on which Keats wrote, it is his handwriting, and these are the sheets of paper he thrust among the books. However, these fragments of paper do more than just provide some form of visceral sensation; this object is evidence of the spontaneous act of creation of arguably his best-known and most-appreciated poem. The manuscript confirms resolutely that after Keats death he would, as he predicted to his brother, be among the English poets. The document allows us a glimpse into the poet's creative process, and the spontaneity of its creation provides evidence of his genius.

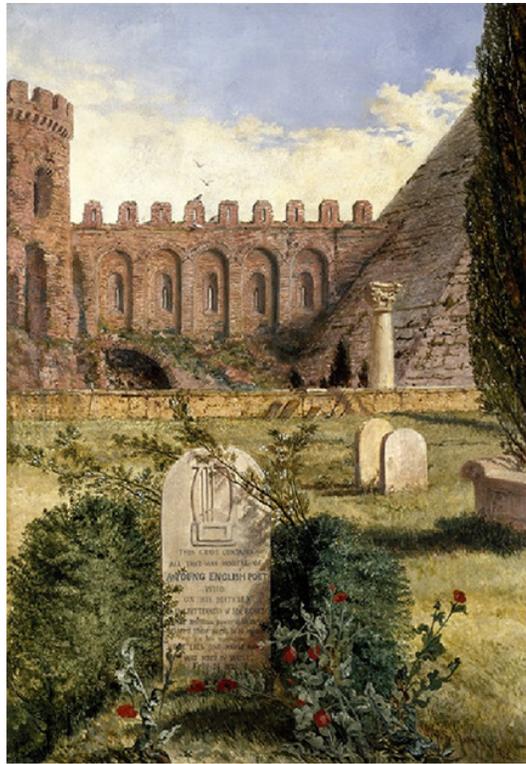


Figure 3. *Keats's Grave*, 1873, William Bell Scott (1811–1890), 48.8 cm. x 33.4 cm., oil on canvas. © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford (reproduced with permission).

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<sup>52</sup> Lutz, p. 44, 86.

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