The Influences on John Keats:

Hellenism, Milton and Shakespeare

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Statement of Authenticity

I declare that this dissertation is original and entirely my own work. Works consulted during my dissertation have been indicated in the List of Works Cited.

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Name of Student            Date
Dedications

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Marisa and Peter Williams, who have helped and supported me throughout my life and to Mr. Andrei Vella Laurenti who first introduced me and instilled in me with a love for John Keats’s poetry.
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I would like to thank my tutor, Professor Peter Vassallo, for all his help, patience, support and invaluable advice which has been vital to the completion of this dissertation.
Abstract

This dissertation focuses on the different influences which shaped and formed John Keats’s poetry and theories on the poetic character. This study discusses three major influences on Keats’s poetry; Hellenism, John Milton and William Shakespeare, influences which were prominent throughout important stages in Keats’s poetic career. The paper makes use of Harold Bloom’s *Anxiety of Influence* as a theoretical framework throughout each of the different influences on Keats, particularly Bloom’s ideas of the dominance of strong literary figures and the urge of newcomers to attempt to emulate the great poets of the past.

The chapter on Hellenism features Martin Aske’s *Keats and Hellenism* as a main text, in order to locate and to trace Hellenistic elements in Keats’s poetry from his earliest poems to his great *Odes* written in 1819. The chapter on John Milton’s influence is traced particularly through Lynda Pratt’s paper *Epic*, Vincent Newey’s paper *Hyperion, The Fall of Hyperion, and Keats’s Epic Ambitions* and Greg Kucich’s *Keats and English Poetry* which look at the influence of Milton on Keats and at Keats’s attempts to write epic poetry inspired by Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. The Chapter on William Shakespeare’s influence on John Keats makes use of John Middleton Murry’s *Keats and Shakespeare* and Walter Jackson Bate’s *John Keats*. This chapter looks primarily at Shakespeare’s influence on Keats’s theories of Negative Capability and the Chameleon Poet, theories which are heavily used in Keats’s greatest poetry.

The dissertation also makes use of a biographical approach, tracing Keats’s encounters with these three major influences throughout his life. This is done by means of Nicholas Roe’s detailed biography: *John Keats: A New Life*. 
# Table of Contents

Statement of Authenticity ................................................................. ii

Dedications ............................................................................................. iii

Acknowledgments ................................................................................ iv

Abstract ................................................................................................. v

Introduction ............................................................................................. 1

Chapter 1: Keats and Hellenism ......................................................... 6

Chapter 2: Keats and Milton ................................................................. 16

Chapter 3: Keats and Shakespeare ....................................................... 26

Conclusion ............................................................................................... 38

List of Works Cited ................................................................................ 44
Introduction

Influence is a term which can be used to describe any poet or writer. For a poet must draw his creativity from a form of external experience, whether social, political or poetic. Poetic influence relates to writers who are influenced by their predecessors, the great dead poets and writers of literary history. However the term influence has different connotations to different scholars and critics. “Poetic Influence”, says Geoffrey Hartman, is “personal, seductive, perverse, imposing”1. Influence often seems to be seen as a necessary evil, a tool which cannot be avoided. It is ‘seductive’ to the poet however ‘imposing’ on the original, on the predecessors of authorship. Influence can be both desirable and destructive. It provides the newcomer with ideas, with inspiration but presents the daunting task of taking certain aspects of the original work and attempting to improve upon it. The challenge of writing is daunting primarily because of the knowledge of the great works which came before. According to T.S. Eliot: ‘No poet or artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone’2. Eliot notes that while people seem to value individuality and praise artists for their uniqueness ‘we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his [the poet’s] work may be those in which the dead poets, his

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ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously\(^3\). While different scholars have different views as to whether poetic influence is a positive or negative inheritance of poetic ancestors, it is agreed that it is inescapable. Poets and writers are inspired by their predecessors and attempt to emulate, recreate or react against the art that came before. The towering figures in the literary world, Homer, Shakespeare, Spencer, Milton to name a few, are both inspirational and imposing figures which decorate literary tradition and provide a fearful challenge for budding writers and poets. They are often the cause of what Harold Bloom calls the Anxiety of Influence.

Harold Bloom’s works on influence and intertextuality shall be used as a central theory throughout this dissertation. It is through this perspective that Keats and his relationship with his literary influences shall be examined. This dissertation shall be primarily concerned with Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence*. It is interesting to note that it is usually those writers who form part of Bloom’s *The Western Canon* which provide the anxiety of influence. Bloom claims that ‘Poetic history, in this book’s argument, is held to be indistinguishable from poetic influence and strong poets make that history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves’\(^4\). Bloom goes on to say that poets and writers read the great works which came before and are inspired by them. However their attempts to recreate their predecessor’s work results in a text of inferior quality. Simply put: ‘Poetry is the anxiety of influence, is misprision, is a disciplined perverseness. Poetry is misunderstanding, misinterpretation, misalliance’\(^5\). This is because the newcomer attempts to find a fault with the predecessor’s work, one which the newcomer aims to correct – one which does not necessarily exist. The newcomer attempts to emulate his or her precursor and in doing so fails to live up to the previous standard: ‘poetic

\(^3\) Ibid, p.12
\(^5\) Ibid, p. 95
influence need not make poets less original; as often it makes them more original, though not necessarily better. Bloom goes on to say that the death of poetry will be self-inflicted. The works of the present cannot compare to those which came before. It is interesting to note that Bloom uses the romantics to illustrate this point: ‘An implied anguish throughout this book is that Romanticism, for all its glories, may have been a vast visionary tragedy, the self-baffled enterprise not of Prometheus but of blinded Oedipus, who did not know that the Sphinx was his Muse’. The romantic poets, particularly Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats were themselves aware to an extent of the anxiety of influence, of the pressure of competing with one’s predecessors. However according to Bloom: ‘Keats, […] is […] peculiarly and overtly conscious of the anxiety of influence, even for a strong poet of the second Romantic generation’. Keats is used as an example throughout Bloom’s works, including his Anxiety of Influence. Through reading his letters one can trace Keats’s awareness of his own influence and his anxiety to be able to compare with the great writers that came before. An example of such anxiety can be found in one of his letters to John Taylor where Keats says ‘I have I am sure many friends, who, if I fail, will attribute any change in my life and temper to humbleness rather than pride – to a cowering under the wings of great poets, rather than to a bitterness that I am not appreciated’.

While I intend to use Bloom’s The Anxiety of Influence throughout the entire dissertation in order examine each of the three major influences on Keats’s work, I cannot but mention the criticism which this text has received. While The Anxiety of Influence was an innovative text which looked at influence through a new perspective, there have been many critics such as

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6 Ibid, p.7
6 Ibid, p.10
Northrop Frye who, according to Jonathan A. Allen, ‘in his notebooks remarked that Harold Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence* is “an embarrassing book to me, because it’s about him & not its subject, & I’m one of the influences he’s anxious about”’\(^\text{10}\). While Bloom looks at the poetic influences on a newer poet, Bloom does not consider any other influences such as social, political or biographical implications that can affect a poet’s writing. Bloom also states that Shakespeare is one of the only poets who are exempt from the anxiety of influence as he dominated over his predecessors. While I agree that Shakespeare was a strong poet who in many ways improved over his predecessors, I disagree with Bloom on the idea that Shakespeare himself had no anxiety of influence. I believe that Shakespeare was aware and influenced by literature which came before him but was able to overcome completely the anxiety of influence. Harold Bloom also does not consider influences which are not poetic; external influences such as the biographical, political, social, and historical impacts on the poet. While I am aware of such faults in Harold Bloom’s study, the short length of the dissertation prevents me from giving detailed insight into Keats’s biographical, social and political background which no doubt had a profound impact on Keats’s writings. I attempt to address such issues, although these discussions are by no means exhaustive, by means of Nicholas Roe’s detailed biography *John Keats*.

Keats’s awareness of his own influences meant that throughout his life and works, he highlighted the major poetic influences which shaped and characterised his development as a poet. This dissertation concerns itself with three of Keats’s major influences and so the following chapters are dedicated to each major influence.

Chapter One discusses how Hellenism inspired Keats throughout his poetic career, particularly in his early poetry. Keats’s Hellenistic influences can be traced in several of Keats’s best known poems like *On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer*, *Endymion*, *Lamia* and *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. This chapter is heavily centred on Martin Aske’s ‘*Keats and Hellenism*’.

Chapter Two is dedicated to the influence that John Milton had on Keats, an influence which resulted in Keats’s attempts at writing an epic poem. This chapter looks at *Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream*, Keats’s two failed attempts at writing the epic. This chapter uses Lynda Pratt’s paper, *Epic*, Vincent Newey’s article *Hyperion, The Fall of Hyperion, and Keats’s Epic Ambitions* and Greg Kucich’s paper, *Keats and English Poetry*.

Chapter Three is devoted to Shakespeare, the great influence on Keats who, more than any other poet, was a lasting inspiration, and whose techniques characterised Keats’s own great poems and philosophy: Negative Capability. The two main text for this chapter are John Middleton Murry’s *Keats and Shakespeare* and Walter Jackson Bate’s *John Keats*.

The last chapter concludes the paper with a brief discussion of the influences on Keats and also a debate on the writers and poets who were in their turn influenced by John Keats.

Keats is one of the most important writers in English literary history. He achieved more in his four-year long poetic career than most writers achieve in their entire lives. The three influences discussed in this paper are ones which continue to inspire generations after generations of poets, writers and scholars in their works. Many are influenced by the great dead poets of the past but few are able to overcome the anxiety of influence and write works which are as long lasting and profound as those written by Keats. It was Keats’s influences both social, political and poetic that made Keats one of the greatest poets in the English literary tradition.
Chapter 1

Keats and Hellenism

After the fall of Constantinople, the last outpost of the Roman Empire, the West re-encountered works; artistic, literary and philosophical, that had been previously thought lost. The renaissance, or rebirth of culture originated from the retrieval of such works and the new fascination of cultures which existed before the Roman Catholic rule even existed. The Romantic poets each were inspired and influenced in their own way by the rediscovery of this great source of culture: ‘Italy and Greece were the birthplaces of ancient pagan cultures which appealed to the Romantic writers as counters to the repressive established Church of England’\(^\text{11}\). John Keats was no exception. Hellenism had an undoubtedly profound impact both on John Keats’s life, his way of thinking, and his poetry. By the nineteenth century it was considered unfashionable for a poet to merely reproduce the style of a classical poet. Poets were expected to appropriate classical styles to their advantage. While it was mandatory for an educated man to study the classics, the poet was not expected to replicate them. The Romantics, who as a movement were massively inspired by classical works, attempted to put a new spin on them. In other words they

often used classical material in a modern form or context. Unlike his contemporaries, Keats did not attend a privileged school and was unable to go to university. Lord Byron inherited a title and fortune at the age of ten, attended Harrow School in his youth and then went to Trinity College, Cambridge. Percy Shelley came from a well off family and attended Eton College and then Oxford. Keats came from a more working class background. His father was a hostler, looking after horses for his father in law who owned an inn, The Swann and Hoop, and so Keats was unable to attend such prestigious schools where the classics were taught as a standard. Poetry was considered to be a gentleman’s calling; a calling meant for educated and upper-class men. It was customary for gentlemen to be educated at prestigious universities where the classics, Latin and Greek were taught as a standard. Both Lord Byron and Percy Shelley could read and write in classical Greek: ‘to be educated meant to be learned in the languages and literature of classical antiquity’\textsuperscript{12}. John Keats was unable to attend university. He was first educated at Clarke’s Academy, described by Nicholas Roe as ‘the most extraordinary school in the country’\textsuperscript{13}. It was a school which focused on the dissenting tradition of British culture, adopting a ‘radical tradition stemming from the seventeenth century republicans of the English Revolution: Milton, Hampden, Sydney and Vane’\textsuperscript{14} in favour of the classics. There Keats studied and was proficient in Latin; however he never learnt to read or write ancient Greek. Unlike other, perhaps more prestigious schools, poets such as John Milton were given a higher regard than the works in the original languages of the classics. Keats’s lack of understanding of the Greek language heavily influenced his style of writing. It was Charles Cowden Clarke, the son of the headmaster of Clarke’s Academy and Keats’s lifelong friend, who sparked Keats’s

\textsuperscript{13} Nicholas Roe, \textit{John Keats: A New Life} (Yale: University of Yale, 2012) p.20
\textsuperscript{14} Nicholas Roe, \textit{John Keats and the Culture of Dissent} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) p. 28
interest in the classics. It was Clarke who introduced Keats to a number of literary sources including Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, the translated writings of Tasso’s *Gerusalemme Liberata* from Italian and Chapman’s English translation of Homer’s *Iliad*. It was through Clarke that Keats first encountered Greek Classical literature, in a format which Keats could understand. Clarke also introduced Keats to mythological dictionaries such as John Lemprière’s *Bibliotheca Classica* among others, which listed different names, places, objects and other features of Greek mythology and Hellenistic culture and gave a definition and an explanation of each entry. These translations and dictionaries were as close as Keats came to experiencing what his contemporaries experienced first-hand. Since Keats could not read Greek in the original language he read translations which allowed him a glimpse of the wonder of the Hellenistic world. Keats was fascinated by Greek culture and myth and so used it abundantly throughout his poetry. Martin Aske points out ‘The common assumption of post-Romantic and modern criticism, as Larrabee points out, is that Keats was ‘the most “classical” and presumably the most “Greek” of the English Romantic poets’¹⁵. This is due to the number of references to classical and Hellenistic mythologies that Keats made use of throughout his works. However, Aske goes on to argue that Keats should perhaps be considered as the least Greek of the romantic poets since he was the only one of his contemporaries who could not read Classical Greek. He was fascinated by Greek culture and literature precisely because it was alien to him. It was perhaps this aura of mystery and mistiness which, to Keats, surrounded classical mythology that gave his works a dream like quality where enigma and mystique feature heavily throughout his life’s work.

Another major source of Keats’s fascination with Hellenistic culture was Lord Elgin’s removal of a set of carvings and sculptures from the Parthenon, which were put on display in the British Museum. Controversy surrounded Lord Elgin who retrieved these marble plaques from Greece and shipped them to Britain. Opinion was divided between those who were grateful for being able to experience Greek art in Britain and those who believed that Elgin had no right to remove the marbles from the Parthenon. Lord Byron wrote *The Curse of Minerva* in rebellion to what he considered to be Elgin’s desecration of the Parthenon. Keats first visited the marbles in 1816, early in his poetic career. The Elgin Marbles proved to be a major and immediate source of inspiration which resulted in the poem *On Seeing the Elgin Marbles*. It is believed that the Elgin Marbles are indirectly responsible for some of Keats’s best poetry. In particular, one can mention Keats’s *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, which is thought to have been based on different images of the Elgin Marbles. Keats is believed to have combined some of the images he obtained from the Elgin Marbles and imaginatively constructed an urn on which the poem is based.

One sonnet which sums up Keats’s fascination with Hellenism and Greek culture is his poem *On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer*. This poem was first published in *The Examiner* in 1816. According to Nicholas Roe ‘the sonnet magnificently marked his coming of age as a poet’16. The poem is considered to be one of Keats’s earliest triumphs. John Kandl states that the poem was his first publication in his poetic career17. Keats’s earlier poems such as *Sleep and Poetry* had problems due to inexperience; his early poems were often insipid and escapist, with Keats tending towards the self-indulgent. *On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer* can be described as Keats’s first early success as a poet. According to John Middleton Murry ‘that

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sonnet was prophetic: it was far in advance of the rest of his work at that moment – secure and masterly throughout, where his other poems were secure and masterly in parts only. The poem is about Keats’s initial reactions after having read Chapman’s translation of Homer’s *Iliad* for the first time. It is, in effect, the poetic outburst of a man who has encountered an accessible translation of one of the greatest works from Ancient Greece. The poem is clearly inspired by tales of discovery. Keats likens the discovery of new lands to his discovery and understanding of Hellenism and Greek mythology which he acquired through Chapman’s sixteenth century versed translation of Homer’s works. The imaginative and dream like quality, a characteristic of his best known poems, can be seen throughout this sonnet. The poem begins with ‘Much have I travell’d in the realms of gold, / And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;’.

While this statement could seem to refer to any form of travel, the meaning becomes clear when the reader realises that Keats never went abroad until he left for Rome in the last months of his life. The poem therefore refers to the imagination and to places which only now exist in the mind, places which Chapman’s translation has allowed him to see. ‘Here Keats allegorizes the Homeric poems as a “wide expanse”, whose “pure serene” he had never breathed, until he read Homer, not in Greek, but in seventeenth-century translation of the dramatist George Chapman. The first reference specifically to Greek myth and Hellenistic culture is a reference to Apollo: ‘bards in fealty to Apollo hold’. This reference to Apollo is significant as Apollo is the Greek god of the sun and poetry. Keats goes on to say: ‘Oft of one wide expanse had I been told / That deep-browed Homer ruled as his demesne; / Yet never did I breathe its pure serene / Till I heard Chapman

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Keats uses the poem in order to express his euphoria and wonder at this new found world which Chapman has made available to him. Keats emphasises the experience in relation to the senses, how he has ‘seen’ and how he ‘feels’ about this new discovery. He has been told of this world by others but it is only through Chapman that Keats is able to experience these sensations for himself. According to Martin Aske: ‘it is […], the very possibility of an originary poetic experience which the sonnet on Chapman’s Homer begins to question […] at the most obvious level these lines celebrate the excitement of “newness”, the chance discovery of hitherto unknown lands’. The poem ends with Keats’s description of how he feels now that he has finally understood what Homer’s *Iliad* is about ‘then felt I like some watcher of the skies / When a new planet swims into his ken; / Or like stout Cortez when eagle eyes / He stared at the Pacific’. Keats likens his discovery of Homer to Cortés’s discovery of Mexico. Keats intelligently contrasts the ancient classic text to the more modern notions of discovery of new lands and advances in astronomy and science. Middleton Murry describes this poem as Keats’s attempt to enter ‘into the companionship of men who were, in the main, moved by the same consuming and unselfish ambition which he felt, to seek out great literature and add to its treasures – to live in great company and be themselves worthy of it’.

Keats used Hellenism and ideas sourced from Greek mythology, throughout his poetic career. His long poem *Endymion* is a love story of Endymion a Greek shepherd and Cynthia, the Goddess of the moon. The poem is a reworking of the legend of Endymion. The poem was slated by contemporary critics and through its publication Keats was labelled as a member of the

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22 Ibid.
‘cockney school of poetry’\textsuperscript{26}, an upstart, over ambitious and uneducated man who had no right to practice the art of poetry, which was considered to be the male preserve of the privileged. Keats considered the poem to be a failure. Aske discusses Hazlitt, a critic contemporary to Keats, and his opinions regarding Endymion: ‘Hazlitt […] notices that Keats’s poem harbours an essential lack – “there is nothing tangible in it, marked or palpable”. This lack has to do with the absence of what Hazlitt call “the hardy spirit or rigid forms of antiquity”’\textsuperscript{27}. The poem does make use of a beautifully rich language, however according to Martin Aske Keats’s poem lacked a Grecian heroic centre. Keats, who may have been aware that something was missing, filled the poem with an overuse of images of flowers and flowery language. ‘Keats’s language of flowers compensates – indeed, overcompensates – for the sense loss felt at the disappearance of classical antiquity’\textsuperscript{28}. This richness of images, this extravagance is used as a tool to compensate for the inability to compare with his predecessors. John Barnard points out that this poem can also be interpreted as a critique of Keats’s contemporary society ‘Endymion’s celebration of “classical” simplicity is partly an indirect reflection on the constrictions of conventional morality and religion’\textsuperscript{29}. However Barnard goes on to point out that ‘the risk that Keats’s “dreams of art” were an evasion of actuality remains, and was a risk of which Keats was always sharply aware’\textsuperscript{30}.

Keats wrote \textit{Lamia} in 1819, when Keats was becoming a more experienced poet. The poem tells the story of Lamia, the serpent woman who, with the help of the God Hermes, is transformed into a woman. Lamia is in love with Lycius and plans are made for their marriage. On the day of their marriage, Lycius’s teacher Apollonius, a philosopher, attends the wedding


\textsuperscript{27} Martin Aske, \textit{Keats and Hellenism: An Essay} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) p.70

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid, p.49


\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
and exposes Lamia as a monster, a serpent. Upon this unveiling, Lamia withers away and Lycius dies heartbroken. The poem’s main morale or message is that over rationality is the death of the pleasures of the senses. ‘Do not all charms fly / At the mere touch of cold philosophy?’ Lamia is one of a number of femme fatale characters who feature in several of Keats’ poems such as La Belle Dame Sans Merci. The story of Lamia is rooted in ancient Greek myth, where in such stories a Lamia is a monstrous snake woman who devours children. In the poem, Keats presents Lamia as more human and less monstrous in nature. Her character is ambivalent and the reader may find it difficult to distinguish between an ordinary woman and the monster of legend. Martin Aske points out that Lamia’s description makes her seem to be ‘grossly overrepresented. Her parergonal finery would make her […] impure’. Lamia is presented in an ‘excess of detail’ which ‘does not facilitate but rather prohibits clarity of vision’. Martin goes on to say: that ‘perhaps it is the poet’s desire to represent (and so repossess) the images of the past which sullies their brightness (violates their innocence)’. According to Miriam Allott: ‘the story is chiefly remarkable both for its expression of the conflicting ideas and feelings characteristic of his thinking in 1819 and for its attempt to combine vivid pictorial detail with the dramatic presentation of human relationships’. As mentioned above, Keats’s early poetry was characterised by his tendency of being self-indulgent in the way he wrote his poetry. Lamia shows Keats’s characteristic world of sensations and colourful, rich images combined with restraint and temperance. As Keats remarked to Benjamin Bailey: ‘O for a Life of Sensations rather than of thoughts!’ Allott goes on to say that ‘the narrative has some bearing on [Keats’s]

33 Ibid, p. 133
preoccupation with the destructiveness of love, the contrast between the ideal and the actual, and the relative importance of “feeling”, and “thought” for the poetic imagination”\(^{36}\).

Keats made use of Hellenism throughout his career from his poem *On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer*, to *Endymion* to *Hyperion*, to *Lamia*, to his *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. However while he liberally used references to Grecian culture, Keats was constantly aware of his anxiety of influence. He was aware that he was using great works of art and so he knew that it would be difficult for him to compare to his poetic predecessors. Keats’s disadvantage of not being able to read the classics meant that he was aware that his interpretations were not ones which were as a result of direct contact with the culture that he so admired. Keats believed that the standards of poetry were on the decline and that the poetry being written in the nineteenth century would not be able to compete and to compare with the poetry that had preceded it. How can a poet who is incapable of reading or writing Greek be able to emulate a classical Greek style that will allow him to compare to his ancient predecessors? Richard Woodhouse, a lawyer and friend of Keats, states Keats’s own view of poetry: “there was now nothing original to be written in poetry; that its riches were already exhausted”\(^{37}\). Keats was aware of the decline of art and was anxious as to how he would compare with his predecessors. According to Martin Aske; “*On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer*” turns a promise of “firstness” into an acknowledgment of “lateness”. Keats’s poem surmises the impossibility of the belated poet finding liberty to reverse himself”. In other words Keats’s sense of new discovery is merely a discovery that has already been made. Keats is a latecomer to the poetic tradition. Aske goes on to add ‘No sooner does he enter the landscape of history than objects (poets, poetry, literature) begin to interfere and block his way.

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\(^{36}\) Ibid, p. 615

“I will have no more of Wordsworth or Hunt in particular” declared Keats impatiently: “Let us have the old poets”. However Keats’s fondness of historic literature is what brings on his anxiety of influence: ‘But his loyalty to the past could not prevent Keats from being forced into an awareness of his own irreversible modernity’\textsuperscript{38}. Homer’s ‘privilege of priority’\textsuperscript{39} makes him a poet to end all poets; none can contest him as he came first. Those who try to emulate him have to achieve more in order to garner the same respect that Homer receives.

Keats’s relationship with Hellenism is one that inspired Keats throughout his writing career. While Keats attempted to adopt styles and use ideas from other great poets which did not always succeed, the influence of Hellenism was one that infiltrated Keats’s poetry until the very end of his writing career. While his anxiety of his lateness in the poetic cannon was a subject which troubled Keats, it was his poetic relationship with Milton that perhaps caused him the most turmoil in his writings. Hellenism contributed to Keats’s dreamlike language and misty settings where the reader is left to wonder what is real or if the poem itself is a dream of a dream. Keats’s lack of ability to speak the Greek language was the source of his poetic style and only increased Keats’s fascination to the ancient culture and civilisation.

\textsuperscript{38} Martin Aske, \textit{Keats and Hellenism: An Essay} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) p. 43  
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid, p. 45
Chapter 2
Keats and Milton

The epic form of poetry can be traced to *The Epic of Gilgamesh* one of the oldest surviving works of literature, over four thousand years old. The epic style of poetry has been used throughout literary history for some of the most memorable poems such as Homer’s *Iliad* and his *Odyssey*, Virgil’s *Aeneid* and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Nowadays ‘the word “epic” is frequently used in a non-literary context, as shorthand for anything that is perceived as being extremely long’\(^{40}\). However the meaning of the word epic had different connotations and consequences for the romantics. Lynda Pratt discusses Adam Roberts’s features of the standard epic in *Romantic and Victorian Long Poems*. According to Pratt, Roberts states that an Epic poem:

‘should be divided into either “twelve or twenty-four books” and “written in the same metre and style throughout”, preferably in a “high” style. It should start “in media res” (“in the middle of things”). It should tell a continuous narrative of the “adventures of a heroic figure”, these should include “war… or lengthy travels or both”. It should have “supernatural machinery”; it should contain lists; it should include a visit to the underworld; and it should begin with an address to the muse’\(^{41}\).

\(^{41}\) Ibid, p. 333
The romantic poets were best known for writing shorter poems such as odes, lyrics and sonnets. However epics were regarded as the mark of a strong, accomplished poet and so many of the romantic poets wrote or attempted to write epic poetry. However due to ideas of emulating and improving on classical styles, the romantic poets were expected to put their own stamp on the epic genre. Lynda Pratt goes on to say: ‘The very different ways in which they approach the genre – Coleridge’s emphasis on the long, serious preparation needed to write one […] Byron’s playful dismissal of epic convention – remind us of how diverse and various their engagement with this was’.

The epic poem which romantic poets seemed to hold up as their ideal, their model was John Milton’s epic, *Paradise Lost*.

John Milton published his epic poem *Paradise Lost* in the year 1667. The poem is one of several which cemented Milton’s reputation as one of the greatest British poets and indeed one of the greatest poets in world history. The poem is without a doubt, Milton’s masterpiece; a poem epic in both style and content. The epic tells of the fall of Satan from heaven and his subsequent corruption of Adam and Eve. The poem makes use of a classical style, one that is often associated with ancient classical literature. However Milton uses the epic, a classical style, in order to tell a biblical story. The great poets from Homer, to the writers of Beowulf, to Virgil have made use of the epic style. By the romantic era, the epic was a mark of a great poet. All poets sought to write an epic poem, attempting to, like John Milton, put their own mark on it. William Wordsworth wrote *The Prelude*, a poem with himself as the epic hero. Lord George Gordon Byron wrote *Don Juan*, an anti-hero, loosely based on Byron himself. Percy Bysshe Shelley began writing *The Triumph of Life* a poem modelled in style on Dante’s *Divina Commedia*. John Keats began writing *Hyperion*.

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Keats first encountered Milton’s *Paradise Lost* through his friend Charles Cowden Clarke when he was still at school at Clarke’s Academy in Enfield. However, according to Greg Kucich, ‘Keats did not read *Paradise Lost* in depth until the autumn of 1817, when he studied it with his friend, theology student Benjamin Bailey’\(^{43}\). Within a few months, Keats began writing his attempt at an epic poem which he based on Milton’s own style, the iambic pentameter blank verse. After the failure of his poem *Endymion*, which received damning reviews, Keats was perhaps, more anxious to prove himself as a poet. In *Hyperion* Keats attempted to use Milton’s style, however he chose to distinguish his work by using his fascination for Ancient Greek mythology as the subject for his epic. Whereas many of Keats’s contemporaries used history or religion as a source for their epics; ‘the characters in *Hyperion* are taken from Greek Mythology, indicating that the classical world was still a potent resource for writers in the early nineteenth century’\(^{44}\) Keats made use of Milton’s framework of an epic but used characters from Greek myth instead of biblical characters: where Milton’s epic tells of the fall of Satan, Keats’s epic is about the fall of the Titans.

*Hyperion* is commonly regarded as an important step in Keats’s development as an accomplished poet. The poem tells the story of the fall of the Titans after Saturn’s son Jove, usurped his father’s power and began a new order of Gods. In Book One the fallen Titans mourn the loss of their power. The poem opens in *media res*, after the fall. Hyperion the God of the sun is one of the few remaining Titans who has not been vanquished. Hyperion travels to a council of the Titans whose debate and deliberation is written in Book two. The fallen Titans discuss their best course of action. The God Oceanus gives a speech which promotes peace. He argues that


they should not fight the new Gods as their ascension is an inevitable sign of progress. ‘We fall by course of Nature’s law, not force / Of thunder or of Jove’.

He also says that they should not fight the new Gods when they are more beautiful than they are. However Enceladus, the Titan of war argues that giving in is a sign of weakness and that the Titans should fight, that there is still hope as long as Hyperion remains strong. ‘Speak! Roar! Shout! Yell, ye sleepy Titans all! […] Victory, might be lost or might be won. / And be ye mindful that Hyperion, / Our brightest brother, still is undisgraced.’ Hyperion’s arrival sparks the rebellion of the Titans. In Book three, Apollo undergoes a ceremony which will make him God of the sun and song. At this point however, Keats abandoned the poem and so the story remains unfinished.

It is the anxiety of influence, or more accurately the anxiety of John Milton’s influence which led to Keats abandoning Hyperion. ‘It has been argued that Paradise Lost had a debilitating impact on the next couple of generations of poets, making them feel that there was nothing left to be achieved with the genre and that any poem they produced would inevitably compare poorly with Milton’s.’ In the beginning of Keats’s poetic career he struggled to find his own voice, one that was adequate enough for the poetry which he was writing. Endymion was criticised for being too flowery, of adopting a language of excess. In a letter to Benjamin Haydon, Keats compares his use of language and character creation in Hyperion with that of Endymion. He says to Haydon: ‘in Endymion I think you may have many bits of deep and sentimental cast – the nature of Hyperion will lead me to treat it in a more naked and grecian Manner.’ The tone used in Hyperion is considered to be more masculine, more of a commanding tone than that used in

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46 Ibid, p. 431 – 432
*Endymion*: ‘the later one is evidence of a move from Hunt to Milton’\(^49\). *Hyperion* was considered by contemporary critics such as Hazlitt, as a major breakthrough in Keats’s poetic career. However Keats felt that it was Milton’s voice that he was employing. That it was Milton who was indirectly responsible for Hyperion. By adopting Milton’s style of writing epic poetry, Keats felt that his voice was lost amidst the stronger voice of the older, more dominant and dominating poet. For Keats, Milton was both inspiring and intimidating; a poet who Keats wanted to emulate but found that he could not improve or change Milton’s style. As Paul Sherwin points out: ‘that Keats should want or need to augment that distance indicates that for him Milton was a dangerous center of power, at once cherished and dreaded’\(^50\).

In Harold Bloom’s *Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom highlights and exemplifies his theory of the anxiety of influence through Milton. Milton stands intimidatingly tall in the history of dead poets. Bloom states that ‘if one examines the dozen or so major poetic influencers before this century, one discovers quickly who among them ranks as the great Inhibitor, the Sphinx who strangles even strong imaginations in their cradles: Milton’\(^51\). Milton inspires other poets; however this inspiration comes at the price of the voice of the younger poet. Both Keats and Shelley wrote about how Milton’s influence caused problems with their writing. Keats went so far as to say ‘Life to him would be death to me’\(^52\). According to Bloom, Milton is one of the few poets in history who perhaps did not suffer from the anxiety of influence. This is because he is one of the few poets who outshone his predecessors, a feat which according to Bloom’s theories is a very rare occurrence. Poets who are born and are successful earlier in history are more likely

\(^{50}\) Paul Sherwin, ‘Dying into Life: Keats’s Struggle with Milton in Hyperion’, *PMLA*, Vol. 93, No. 3 (May, 1978) p. 384  
to be remembered due to their priority of past-ness, their ability to exert the anxiety of influence on newer poets who are intimidated by their predecessors. According to Bloom: ‘Hazlitt, in a lecture heard by Keats – an influence upon Keats’s subsequent notion of negative capability – remarked upon Milton’s positive capability for ingesting his precursors: “In reading his works, we feel ourselves under the influence of a mighty intellect, that the nearer it approaches to others, becomes more distinct from them’\textsuperscript{53}.

For Keats, Milton was a major influence on his works, but in many ways this influence was damaging to Keats’s work. For Keats needed to get out from under Milton’s vast shadow which suffocated any attempt Keats made at writing an epic. In July 1819, Keats began to write \textit{The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream}. This was Keats’s second attempt at writing an epic poem. Keats tried to free himself from Milton’s influence, choosing instead Dante Alighieri as a source of inspiration. ‘Keats felt the strain of competing with Milton and tried to reduce his presence in a reworked version of \textit{Hyperion}. \textit{The Fall of Hyperion} adapts a dream-vision structure from Dante, and employs far less Latinate phrasing’\textsuperscript{54}. While Keats maintained using the Miltonic verse; iambic pentameter blank verse, Keats ‘attempts to reduce the effects of Milton’s influence which he no longer welcomed’\textsuperscript{55}. While the plot is presumably the same as the first version of \textit{Hyperion}, for this reworking Keats abandoned the idea of drawing parallels from Milton’s \textit{Paradise Lost}. Where the first \textit{Hyperion} can be easily mapped on the plot of the first three books of \textit{Paradise Lost} (the fall of the Titans parallels the fall of Satan, Apollo can be seen as the equivalent of Adam), \textit{The Fall of Hyperion} takes on a whole new perspective. For this time Keats used Dante’s \textit{Divine Comedy}, particularly the \textit{Inferno} to map onto his poem. However due

\textsuperscript{53} Harold Bloom, \textit{The Anxiety of Influence} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) p. 35
\textsuperscript{55} Miriam Allott, \textit{The Poems of Keats} (London: Longman Group Ltd, 1970) p.655
to Keats’s failure to write more than one whole canto for this poem, it is largely uncertain just how much of Dante’s influence Keats was planning to use. According to Jerome McGann, “‘A Dream’ [is] based on Dante – […] he is telling the audience something that Dante does not tell: that Dante understood the pathos of Paolo and Francesca because he was a poet, and that only poetry has the power to reach such insights.” Some call The Fall of Hyperion a reworking of Keats’s first attempt at an epic poem; however this new poem is so drastically different from the first that others consider it to be an entirely new poem in its own right. The poem is more reflective in nature, a poet’s reflections on life and poetry and what it takes to be a strong poet. The poem begins with the poet describing a landscape, one which has been destroyed as a result of the war between the Titans and the Olympian Gods. The poet walks through this landscape and reaches a flight of stairs which leads to a temple. At the top of the stairs is a woman, Moneta, who challenges the poet to climb the stairs, for only the worthy poet can reach the top. This scene was inspired by Dante’s transition from Hell to Purgatory in The Divine Comedy, where Dante and Virgil must ‘climb along a topsy-turvy route "between the tangled hair [of Lucifer] and icy crusts [of deepest Hell]”.

The poet climbs these steps with great difficulty and finally reaches the top where Moneta grants the poet a vision of the fall of the Titans, a dream. According to John Barnard: ‘The Fall of Hyperion [is a] remodelling Dante’s Divine Comedy, [which] creates a purgatorial and redemptive pattern in which the modern poet is forced to question the limits and sufficiency of the imagination’s claims to the truth.” However, this version too, was abandoned after only two cantos. Despite the additional influence of Dante, Milton’s influence proved too dominant once again, and Keats gave up on writing the poem of

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Hyperion once and for all. Keats himself wrote to his friend John Reynolds ‘I have given up on Hyperion – there were too many Miltonic inversions in it – Miltonic verse cannot be written but in an artful, or, rather, artist’s humour. I wish to give myself up to other sensations’\(^59\). However while this was undoubtedly a major factor in Keats’s abandoning of *The Fall of Hyperion*, Keats’s own failing health was probably a contributing factor to Keats giving up on the poem, on the concept he had begun a year earlier. Miriam Allot also notes that the reasons Keats chose not to finish *The Fall of Hyperion* may be ‘based on his own dissatisfaction with […] it, but may have also been encouraged by the preference of his friends for the earlier unfinished *Hyperion*\(^60\).

While Keats did attempt to emulate Milton’s epic style, there are elements and traces of Keats’s own ideas, his own philosophies which can be found in both *Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream*. In the ‘Hyperion project’ it can be argued that like in so many other poems, Keats describes ‘the tension between ambition and static introversion’\(^61\). Keats’s tendency toward self-indulgence is once again evident throughout the two poems, particularly in *The Fall of Hyperion*. The story of Hyperion can also be seen to have parallels in the political world in which Keats lived in as well as direct parallels in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Both Milton and Keats wrote at times of political upheaval. In Milton’s time it was Oliver Cromwell who led a revolution which resulted in civil war and the execution of King Charles I. When Keats, along with the other second generation of British romantic poets, was writing, Napoleon was leading armies across Europe and the regency period was taking place in Britain. The political scenarios may be a reason why both poets chose the subject of revolt as the subject for their epic poems. For in *Hyperion* a reader may deduce that the dethroned, disgraced fallen King is a parallel of

Mad King George III and Jupiter, the usurper is King George IV who was made Prince Regent after his father was deemed unfit to rule his kingdom. Hyperion himself can be considered to be a poetic incarnation of Napoleon a ‘sunset figure’ who means well but does not succeed in his mission. *Hyperion* also seems to possess a more humanistic approach to the epic unlike his predecessors. In the first two books of *Hyperion*; ‘Keats’s poetry had empathised richly and powerfully with the fallen old gods, as if they were bearing his feelings for “the overpowering idea of our dead poets”’. However in Book three, Keats stopped writing and abandoned the poem ‘less than twenty lines after Apollo’s declaration of his immortality, Keats seems to have recognised that this poetry was not producing any “mighty poet of the human heart” […] especially compared to the poetry he had written for Saturn and Hyperion’. Unlike many preceding epic poems, *Hyperion* ‘is a poem concerned with gods who are preoccupied with their own affairs, not with humans whose affairs are shaped by acts of divine intervention’. While the protagonists are gods and so not human, they are seen in a more humanistic nature since they are dealing with other divine beings. Keats also made use of ‘Romantic displacement of epic conventions’ by moving the address to the muse asking for divine inspiration to Book three instead of at the beginning of the poem as was traditional.

‘Life to him would be death to me. Miltonic verse cannot be written, but is the verse of art. I wish to devote myself to another verse alone’. No other poet was to inspire such a deep and in some ways fatal bond with Keats. In both attempts to write an epic poem, Keats was unable to shake off the vast shadow which Milton cast over all who attempted to accomplish such a feat. It

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62 Ibid, p. 71
63 p. 78
65 Ibid, p. 346
is interesting to note that while Keats never completed these two poems, they are by no means considered failures. According to Ellen Brinks: ‘poetic failure can also be said to elevate their status to works that define a specifically Romantic ideology’.\(^{67}\) It seems a romantic trait that all the attempts of epic poems by the second generation of romantics were destined to remain unfinished. Lord Byron wrote sixteen cantos of *Don Juan* but died before he finished it, Percy Shelley had just begun *The Triumph of Life* when he drowned in 1822. For Keats it was this abandonment of the ‘Hyperion project’ that allowed Keats to really find his own voice as a poet. According to Newey; ‘death to Milton releases Keatsian poetic life’.\(^{68}\) For it was after his failed attempts at writing an epic that Keats wrote his great odes which are arguably some of the greatest poetry in English literary history. Poetry, which is largely inspired by the most dominant poet and writer to shape Keats’s own poetry: Shakespeare.


Chapter 3

Keats and Shakespeare

Of all the major poets and writers who influenced John Keats, it is fair to say that Shakespeare’s influence was the longest lasting, and the influence which Keats would constantly turn to for inspiration. Shakespeare influenced Keats in his writing style, his poetic character and his own philosophy. Nicholas Roe notes that Keats bought a copy of Shakespeare’s plays in April 1817, ‘Whittingham’s seven volume set of Shakespeare’s works – the edition was sold by Robert Jennings at 62 Cheapside. In the first volume, opposite an engraving of Shakespeare’s birthplace, he wrote “John Keats – April 1817”’. However it is clear that Keats had already encountered Shakespeare’s works. In 1812, ‘Clarke and Keats were […] rampaging enjoyably through Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream and Cymbeline’. Roe remarks on a heated discussion between John Keats, Percy Shelley, Benjamin Haydon and Leigh Hunt about Shakespeare’s Christianity or more accurately lack of such beliefs, which took place in March 1817. Roe states that ‘All of them were enthusiastic readers of Shakespeare’. According to Roe it was at this gathering where ‘Keats heard Haydon remark that “[n]othing can be gathered from

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70 Ibid, p. 50
71 Ibid, p. 141
what Shakespeare says”72, a statement which may have been the trigger to some of Keats’s most important poetical theories regarding the writing of poetry and the poetic character.

Keats was fascinated by Shakespeare, both his works and the man himself. In one of his letters to his brother George, John Keats wrote:

‘the fire is at its last click – I am sitting with my back to it with one foot askew upon the rug and the other with the heel a little elevated from the carpet […] These are trifles - but […] could I see the same thing done of any great Man long since dead it would be a great delight: as to know in what position Shakespeare sat when he began “To be or not to be.” Such things become interesting from distance of time to place’73.

In the introductory chapter of his book Keats and Shakespeare, John Middleton Murry states that ‘Keats was potentially, at least, our next greatest poet after Shakespeare and the only poet who is like Shakespeare’74. Murry points out the similarities between the lives of both Keats and Shakespeare. Both were great poets and writers of worth which are now studied and regarded among the best poets in the English language. Both Shakespeare and Keats had little schooling, Shakespeare having attended a grammar school in Stratford upon Avon and Keats’s attendance at Clarke’s Academy at Enfield; neither of them attended university. Both are considered to be of a more working class background than their relative contemporaries, Shakespeare was the son of a Glover and Keats, the son of a hostler. Neither Shakespeare nor Keats learnt classical Greek, and neither used the classics directly in their writings. John Middleton Murry points out that it is strange that people ask of Shakespeare ‘How […] could a

72 Ibid, p. 141
74 John Middleton Murry, Keats and Shakespeare (London: Oxford University Press, 1925) p. 4
grammar-school boy from the country, without contact with the university, without experience of the refinements of civilization, have written Shakespeare’s plays?’ when Keats ‘In four years […] achieved, with no advantages of education and against the dead-weight of a Cockney tradition, the opulent perfection of language, the living depth of poetical thought’\textsuperscript{75} is accepted by readers and critics alike as reality. It is strange that Keats’s history is accepted whereas Shakespeare’s is doubted, when Keats’s poetic career lasted only four years whereas Shakespeare’s lasted over thirty, even though both poets emerged from similar circumstances.

In \textit{The Anxiety of Influence}, Harold Bloom regards Shakespeare as the one poet who did not suffer from the anxiety of influence. Shakespeare’s greatness was such that he outshone all poets, writers and dramatists who came before him: ‘Shakespeare belongs to the giant age before the flood, before the anxiety of influence became central to poetic consciousness […] Shakespeare’s prime precursor was Marlowe, a poet very much smaller than his inheritor\textsuperscript{76}. It is interesting to note that while Shakespeare is considered here to be the greatest poet in history and the only poet who utterly outshone his predecessors, it is Milton who Bloom calls ‘the great Inhibitor’\textsuperscript{77} of poets. It is Milton who stifles creativity and not Shakespeare. This can be seen throughout Keats’s works, whereas his attempts to emulate Milton failed, Keats’s inspiration from Shakespeare allowed Keats to create his greatest poetry. While Keats still felt intimidated by Shakespeare ‘Was there anything left to say after Shakespeare?’\textsuperscript{78}, Keats still managed to draw inspiration from Shakespeare’s plays. ‘Keats always felt a profound affinity with

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid, p. 13
\textsuperscript{76} Harold Bloom, \textit{The Anxiety of Influence}, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) p. 11
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid, p. 32
Shakespeare’s genius, imagining him as an encouraging “Presider” (KL 1.142), and finding in his art an inexhaustible store of poetic riches’ 79.

Shakespeare’s influence on Keats can be considered ‘the hardest to define’ 80. Whereas most of Keats’s other influences can be traced in ‘turns of phrase or turns of thought’ 81 in both the style and the content of his poems; ‘Shakespeare’s influence was the widest, deepest and most lasting’ 82. When it came to Shakespeare, his influence: ‘permeated his whole being, and his influence is to be detected not in a resemblance of style, for Shakespeare can have no imitators, but in a broadening view of life, and increased humanity’ 83. John Middleton Murry notes that in some of his early poetry, Keats was greatly influenced by Shakespeare’s plays, King Lear in particular. However, even in these early poems, there are very few direct links which would alert the unwary reader of the influence of Shakespeare on Keats. Middleton Murry discusses a sonnet On the Sea which Keats wrote in a letter to his friend John Hamilton Reynolds in April 1817. In the letter, Keats discusses the impact of Shakespeare’s King Lear, particularly the scene where Edgar disguised as Poor Tom leads his father, the Earl of Gloucester to the cliffs of Dover where the father intends to commit suicide. Keats says ‘From want of regular rest I have been rather narvus – and the passage in Lear – “Do you not hear the sea?” – has haunted me intensely’ 84. It was this line that inspired the sonnet On the Sea which begins with the haunting line ‘It keeps eternal whisperings around’ 85. Middleton Murry encourages a discussion of the passage from Shakespeare in order to be able to fully appreciate the ‘connection between the “intense

79 Ibid.
81 Ibid.
82 Ibid.
83 Ibid.
haunting” of Keats’ mind by the phrase from Shakespeare which inspired the sonnet\(^8^6\). These are lines 5 to 23 of Act 4 Scene 6 of *King Lear*. Middleton Murry notes that the ‘only visible connection between them is the strange use of the word “eye-balls” in the sonnet’\(^8^7\) where Keats says ‘O ye who have your eye-balls vexed and tired, / Feast them upon the wideness of the sea!’\(^8^8\). This reference most likely alludes to Gloucester’s torture and blindness; blindness being a theme which is recurrent throughout the entire play. In the speech which inspired this sonnet, Edgar describes the scene ‘I’ll look no more, / Lest my brain turn and the deficient sight / Topple down headlong’\(^8^9\). This allusion, while both strong and thought provoking, is only possible if one reads Keats’s letter to Reynolds as there is no other direct reference to the play.

It is Shakespeare’s influence on Keats’s perception of the poetic character and his understanding of different states of humanity that shaped Keats’s poetry most profoundly. As discussed above; ‘Keats heard Haydon remark that “[n]othing can be gathered from what Shakespeare says”’\(^9^0\). Keats developed this core idea into theories of the Chameleon Poet and Negative Capability, theories and styles which later characterised and developed the way Keats wrote his poetry. On the 22\(^{nd}\) December 1817, Keats wrote a letter to his brothers, George and Thomas Keats. In this letter Keats, for the first time, pens his theories and his definitions of Negative capability. He writes: ‘what quality […] which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after the fact and reason’\(^9^1\). Keats noted how in Shakespeare’s plays it is impossible to read into Shakespeare’s own opinions and thoughts,

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\(^8^6\) John Middleton Murry, *Keats and Shakespeare* (London: Oxford University Press, 1925) p. 34
\(^8^7\) Ibid, p.35
\(^8^8\) John Keats, *The Poems of Keats* ed. Miriam Allott (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1970) p. 113
through those of his characters. In Shakespeare’s plays, there are no characters who are less believable or who clearly portray Shakespeare’s own opinions. In *Othello*, Iago is as evil as Desdemona is good; there is no moment where we are told that we should hate Iago. In *King Lear*, we understand Edmund even though he is the instigator of much of the violence within the play. Edmund’s speech in Act I Scene 2 about his being a bastard is one which we can all understand and relate to: ‘Why bastard? wherefore base? / When my dimensions are as well compact, / My mind as generous, and my shape as true, / As honest madam’s issue? Why brand they us / With base? With Baseness? With Bastardy? Base, Base?’\(^92\). Shakespeare’s understanding of a character such as Edmund is one that allowed Keats a deeper understanding of human nature. According to Walter Jackson Bate: ‘The theme of much of the greater poetry to come […] may be described as the drama of the human […] – a drama in which the resolutions are precarious, as in life itself’\(^93\). Keats uses this idea of Negative Capability throughout his works. It is what Bate describes as ‘habitual capacity for identification’\(^94\) which emerged back in his school days at Enfield. It is because of this technique that many of Keats’s poems have an ethereal dream-like quality to them. For Keats, Negative Capability meant being able to write poetry without putting too much of himself in his poems. It is a stance which he described in a letter to Richard Woodhouse in October 1818 as ‘distinguished from the Wordsworthian, or egotistical Sublime’\(^95\). Negative Capability seems to be almost targeted at William Wordsworth who famously wrote *The Prelude*, an epic poem with himself as the epic hero. It is in this letter that Keats introduces his concept of the ‘chameleon poet’ who ‘has as much delight in

\(^{94}\) Ibid, p.253  
conceiving an Iago as an Imogen." Keats goes on to describe what he believes the identity of the chameleon poet should consist of: ‘A poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence, because he has no Identity – he is continually in for and filling some other body.’ The chameleon poet is capable of assuming other personalities and diminishing his or her own in order to write poetry. This extraordinary claim is a feature that distinguishes and characterises Keats’s poetry, particularly his later poems. Keats also gleaned an understanding of humanity and human behaviour from reading Shakespeare’s works. According to Walter Jackson Bate; ‘What strikes us most in his capacity for sympathetic identification […] is its inclusiveness. This is not the volatile empathic range of even the rare actor.’ This understanding is one that reaches beyond Keats’s years, for he wrote his great odes at the age of twenty-three. Within these odes Keats contemplates mature themes such as death, beauty and his desire for an immortal poetic voice. Put simply: ‘he will “never be a Reasoner”; every point of thought quickly opens some further unexpected vista; and how could he be confident therefore of “the truth of my speculations”?’

Negative Capability can be traced in a number of Keats’s works throughout his poetic career, but it is arguable that the poems which feature Negative Capability most effectively are the poems which Keats wrote late in his career. Such poems are Keats’s great Odes and others like La Belle Dame Sans Merci. These poems were written during the year 1819, Keats’s last productive year of poetry after which Keats wrote fewer poems at a more irregular rate due to his illness. Keats had previously studied medicine as an apprentice to Dr Wilson before going on to study at Guy’s Hospital in London. Keats dropped out before qualifying as a doctor to become a

96 Ibid
97 Ibid
98 Walter Jackson Bate, John Keats (Massachuttes: Harvard University Press, 1963) p.253
99 Ibid, p. 242
poet, but his understanding of medicine probably meant that he knew that his illness was fatal and that he did not have much longer to live. *Ode to a Nightingale* is one of Keats’s most well-known poems and one of his crowning glories as a poet. The poem begins with the lines ‘My heart aches, and drowsy numbness pains / My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk’\(^{100}\). These opening lines set the tone of the entire poem, a hazy, unclear aura or mood which produces the uncertain air which cultivates Keats’s Negative Capability. The poem is largely concerned with death and remembrance. Tom, Keats’s brother, died in December 1818 despite John Keats’s attempts to nurse him back to health. It is considered by many the source of Keats’s own fatal illness. In the poem, Keats seems to be contemplating both his brother’s and his own mortality. Keats uses the poem as an escapist tool, using the nightingale to escape into the world of imagination: ‘Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget / What thou among the trees hast never known’\(^{101}\). Keats melds his character within the poem to that of the nightingale in the trees, using the nightingale to forget his own troubles ‘Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin and dies’\(^{102}\). It is only on the ‘viewless wings of Poesy’\(^{103}\), that Keats is able to escape his cruel reality. The vision deepens when he exclaims: ‘Thou wast not born for death, immortal bird! […] / The voice I hear this passing night was heard / In ancient days by emperor and clown’\(^{104}\). The nightingale song takes him from his current state, from reality, through history to ancient Rome and to the biblical figure of Ruth who felt homesick when she heard the nightingale’s song. As Keats escapes further into his imagination, he is recalled to reality when he uses the word ‘Forlorn’\(^{105}\). It is this word which severs Keats from the nightingale, and awakens him to reality. The poem’s

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\(^{101}\) Ibid, p.526
\(^{102}\) Ibid, p. 527
\(^{103}\) Ibid
\(^{104}\) Ibid, p. 529 – 530
\(^{105}\) Ibid, p. 531
ambiguous ending ‘Was it a vision, or a waking dream? / Fled is that music … Do I wake or sleep?’\textsuperscript{106}. The poem’s ending gives the entire poem an air of uncertainty. According to Miriam Allott, Keats ‘is left wondering which has the greater truth – the happiness of romantic reverie or the colder experience of everyday reality’\textsuperscript{107}. This is the product of negative capability; the poet himself is left to question his own experience. The reader is left in uncertainty as we do not have the comfort of knowing that the poet fully understands his own experiences. The poet retains the capability ‘of being in uncertainties’\textsuperscript{108} throughout the entire poem.

Keats uses a similar technique in his poem \textit{La Belle Dame Sans Merci}. The poem is narrative in style. Keats tells the story of a knight riding through the meadows. On his travels he encounters a woman, La Belle Dame Sans Merci who seduces him and attempts to make the knight her thrall. The knight falls asleep and dreams of ‘pale kings, and princes too, / Pale warriors, death-pale were they all; / They cried – “La belle Dame sans merci / hath thee in thrall!”\textsuperscript{109}. The knight awakens alone on the hillside left to wonder if his encounter with the woman was real or if it was a vision. Negative Capability is once again used in order to blur realities within fiction. At the beginning of the poem, Keats addresses the knight directly, presenting him as a separate entity from the narrator: ‘Oh, what can ail thee, knight-at-arms’\textsuperscript{110}. However, from the third stanza, the poem is told in the first person as though Keats has assumed the identity of the knight or perhaps the knight was Keats in truth all along. There have also been debates as to the true nature of La Belle Dame sans Merci herself. According to Robert Graves ‘That the Belle Dame represented Love, Death by Consumption (the modern leprosy) and Poetry all at once can be confirmed by a study of the romances from which Keats developed the

\textsuperscript{106} Ibid, 532  
\textsuperscript{107} Miriam Allott, \textit{The Poems of Keats} (London: Longman Group, 1970) p. 532  
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., p.501
Miriam Allott states that La Belle Dame may stand for Fanny Brawne ‘and is strongly influenced by memories of Spencer’s fatal enchantress in *The Faerie Queene*’. La Belle Dame is also often seen as representative of Keats’s ‘demon Poesy’, Keats’s attraction to self-indulgent and escapist forms of poetry. Keats’s use of Negative Capability means that the reader can never be sure if the character in the poem is a representation of Keats or a character that Keats created.

Another of Keats’s poems to heavily feature Negative Capability is *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. This poem is thought to have been based on the images of the Elgin Marbles which Keats visited in 1816. Keats describes and discusses the two images on the urn, the first depicts two lovers who are about to kiss, and the second depicts a sacrificial ritual. Throughout the poem, Keats is both impressed and envious of the characters depicted on the urn. He is envious of their immortality, of their permanence for they will never fade or die. While the lovers shall never enjoy the act of kissing, they shall forever enjoy their anticipation. The ode is characterised by questions which the narrator asks and is unable to answer which increase the sense of uncertainty that characterises the poem. ‘What leaf-fringed legend haunts about thy shape / Of deities or mortals, or of both, / What men or gods are these? What maidens loth? / What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape? / What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?’ The narrator discusses the images with no certainty and without attempting to answer any of his own questions. Keats shows his great understanding for human nature, understanding achieved through readings of Shakespeare, in his contemplations of the urn. His allure to a ‘life of

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114 Ibid, p. 534
sensations rather than of Thoughts’\textsuperscript{115}, his attraction to the imagination allows him to write statements such as ‘Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter: therefore, ye soft pipes, play on; / Not to the sensual ear, but endear’d’\textsuperscript{116}. Throughout he contemplates the frailty of human life, of living beauty which fades as opposed to the permanent beauty of the urn. This contemplation leads to one of Keats’s most well-known statements ‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty, -- that is all / Ye know on earth and all ye need to know’\textsuperscript{117}; a statement which has been the subject of much debate among critics, such as Keith D. White\textsuperscript{118}, as to its exact meaning.

Keats’s \textit{Ode to Autumn} is considered by many to be his most Shakespearean poem. The poem is described by John Middleton Murry as ‘pure Keats, uncontaminated and calm if ever a poem was’\textsuperscript{119}. The poem is tranquil and contemplative, describing a rural autumn scene. However the poem has underlying, melancholic tone. Autumn is the last season before winter, the last moment of sun, before the end of the year. Autumn seems to acknowledge that the best time has already passed and that the end is all that is left to come. In the poem Keats asks ‘Where are the songs of spring?’\textsuperscript{120}. This understanding, which goes well beyond Keats’s years, is knowledge Keats gleaned from reading Shakespeare. Middleton Murry goes on to describe the poem as ‘deeply Shakespearean […] in its rich and opulent serenity of mood. Shakespearean in its lively and large periodic movement, like the drawing of a deep, full breath […] it is the perfect and unforced utterance of the truth contained in the magic words: “Ripeness is all”’\textsuperscript{121}.

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid, p.537
\textsuperscript{119} John Middleton Murry, \textit{Keats and Shakespeare} (London: Oxford University Press, 1925) p.188
\textsuperscript{121} John Middleton Murry, \textit{Keats and Shakespeare} (London: Oxford University Press, 1925) p.189
Shakespeare provided Keats with the ability to write his greatest poems. It is the influence of Shakespeare on Keats that resulted in Keats’s creation and use of Negative Capability. It is Shakespeare’s influence which resulted in Keats’s heightened understanding of human nature which resulted in Keats’s greatest poems, such as his odes, when Keats was still at the age of twenty-three. While Keats was still subject to the anxiety of influence when he read and was inspired by Shakespeare, the cost of this influence was not as high as that generated by Hellenism or indeed Milton. Keats was able to write his best work while being inspired by Shakespeare. As John Middleton Murry exclaims ‘Shakespeare had triumphed in Keats’ soul’.

Ibid, p. 168
Conclusion

All writers and poets have external influences, whether political, social or poetic. All writers suffer the anxiety of influence to a greater or lesser degree. All writers and poets are faced with an intimidating blank page and the knowledge and inspiration of the great minds of the overpowering exceptional dead poets. Keats was influenced by the rich history that surrounds world literate, from Homer to Dante to Shakespeare and Milton. There are many other poets and writers who inspired and influenced John Keats, other than those discussed in this paper. However Hellenism, John Milton and William Shakespeare are among the most prominent sources of inspiration throughout Keats’s career. These are three influences which can be traced to prominent moments and breakthroughs throughout Keats’s poetic career, ones which led to great changes and milestones in his writing. Hellenism, Milton and Shakespeare are indirectly responsible for some of Keats’s greatest poetry and for the works which amounted to stepping stones in his career such as On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer, Hyperion and Keats’s Odes. Hellenism provided Keats with a rich classical content, one which filled Keats’s poetry with an aura of mystique and uncertainty. Keats’s indirect encounter with Ancient Greek was one which at the time may have been regarded as a key set-back; however, this encounter gave Keats’s poetry a unique angle which his contemporaries did not possess. Many of Keats’s poems
from the earliest to ones which he wrote later in his poetic career refer to Hellenism or to ancient Greek figures or philosophies. Milton inspired Keats to better himself, to try to write an epic poem, a feat only achieved by the very greatest poets. While Keats never did succeed in this task, it was noted by many of his friends, members of his literary circle that Keats’s poetry dramatically improved upon his writing of *Hyperion*: ‘some of Keats’s contemporaries appreciated the dissimilarity of the two poems, preferring what Thomas De Quincey described as “the majesty, the austere” beauty of *Hyperion* to the more decorative *Endymion*’¹²³. Shakespeare influenced Keats’s style and understanding from the very core, and made him able to write poetry with themes and understanding that went well beyond his years, to be able to appreciate humanity in a way that precious few others have ever been able to. Shakespeare’s influence is in all of Keats’s poetry, for it is the influence which Keats drew from the most. The traces of Shakespeare’s influence are the hardest to find because they are infused within all of Keats’s writings. It is the way which Keats wrote, both his style and his tone, which is indebted to Shakespeare rather than any particular form or content.

Keats lived during a remarkable age of English history; the war and conquest of Napoleon and his subsequent defeat, the Abolitionist Movement, which campaigned for the abolition of slavery between the eighteenth and early nineteenth century – however Keats did not live to see the Slavery Abolition Act pass in 1833 –, and the reign and death of King George III, who succumbed to madness and who lost the American colonies. This background is what formed Keats’s character both personal and poetic. It is this background which allowed Keats to write the way in which he did. Keats was also inspired by many other poets and writers from history and also from his own time. Keats is indebted to Dante and Spencer; poets who have had

lasting impacts on writers and poets since their own times. Spencer was a major influence on Keats, who Keats encountered through Charles Cowden Clarke while he was still at school in 1812. ‘Aware that Keats enjoyed poetry, Cowden Clarke had read to him Spencer’s “Epithalamion”, the long song-like poem in which Spencer celebrated his marriage’¹²⁴. Keats tried to emulate the Spenserian style throughout his early poetry ‘Keats was also impressed by how effortlessly Spencer had drawn in classical figure’¹²⁵. However Spencer’s influence soon gave way to that of Milton and Shakespeare, as Keats began to favour the Miltonic blank verse or the short poems such as the ode or sonnet instead. Dante proved to be an important influence on Keats’s *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream*. Dante may have proved to be of greater import if Keats had succeeded in finishing the epic. Keats read Dante’s *Divina Comedia*, ‘especially the *Purgatorio*, both in Carey’s translation and also in the original. K[eats] was teaching himself Italian in the summer of 1819’¹²⁶. Keats was also heavily influenced by his contemporaries, in particular William Wordsworth, Lord George Gordon Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley. Wordsworth was a poet who Keats greatly admired, particularly at the start of his career. As Keats’s poetic style evolved, he began to write in reaction to Wordsworth’s ‘I am a member […] distinguished from the Wordworthian, or egotistical sublime’¹²⁷. While Keats always admired Wordsworth, he developed his theories of Negative Capability in opposition of Wordsworth’s style of poetry. Lord Byron and Percy Shelley, along with Keats, became known as the second generation of the romantic poets. Keats was perhaps envious, particularly of Lord Byron who was enjoying great success as a poet, with popular poems such as *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* and *Don Juan*. Keats believed that Byron’s popularity stemmed from his position in nineteenth

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¹²⁵ Ibid.
century society rather than from his talent as a poet. Byron was all that Keats was not; wealthy, handsome and successful. In a letter to his brother George, Keats writes: ‘You speak of Lord Byron and me. There is this great difference between us: he describes what he sees – I describe what I imagine. Mine is the harder task’\textsuperscript{128}. While a rivalry, no doubt existed between the two poets, Byron came to recognise Keats’s talent. On the other hand, Shelley was an admirer of Keats, whom Keats admired in turn. Both Keats and Shelley moved within the same circle of friends; both wrote for and were sometimes published by Leigh Hunt in his Examiner. Upon hearing of Keats’s death in Rome, Shelley wrote \textit{Adonais}, an elegy to Keats. Keats was also heavily influenced by his circle of literary friends who, throughout his career, encouraged him and aided him in his poetry. Charles Cowden Clarke, Leigh Hunt, Benjamin Haydon, Joseph Severn and John Reynolds, to name a few, were all sources of inspiration for Keats. Charles Cowden Clarke introduced Keats to many of Keats’s major influences while he was a student at Clarke’s Academy in Enfield. Leigh Hunt was a revolutionary, the editor of \textit{The Examiner}, a great admirer of Keats who published many of Keats’s poems and who helped Keats reach the public eye. However it is most probably Keats’s association with Leigh Hunt, who was a known radical, which earned Keats the wrath of the critics, particularly the Quarterly Review who dismissed Keats as a member of the ‘Cockney School of Poetry’\textsuperscript{129}. Haydon and Severn were artists and friends of Keats throughout his life. Joseph Severn was Keats’s only friend to accompany him to Rome in 1821. Reynolds was a poet, a good friend and Keats’s early rival who encouraged Keats and whose correspondence resulted in many of Keats’s most profound and philosophical contemplations. Keats also kept several books which he constantly read and re-read finding new inspiration within their pages. Keats frequently referred to Lemprière’s

\textsuperscript{128} Ibid, 405
Bibliotheca Classica, for references to classical symbols or figures. Another of Keats’s bedside readings was his copy of Robert Burton’s The Anatomy of Melancholy, which provided Keats with the undertone of many of his poems which often have bitter-sweet traces of melancholia and sadness. Keats also frequently read C.H. Kauffmann’s Dictionary of Merchandize and Nomenclature in All Languages, a book which according to Nicholas Roe, Keats was given as a school prize, a book which provided Keats with ‘a treasure house of language and imagery’130.

Keats was inspired by many different poets and writers and artists throughout literary history. The well-read student of Clarke’s academy drew influence from many different sources including the greatest poets and writers in the history of English literature. Keats died of consumption in Rome in 1821, believing himself to be a failed poet. ‘He asked Sever that his gravestone should bear simply the words “Here lies he whose name was writ in water”’131, a statement which seems both sad and bitter. He believed that he would not be remembered; he thought that this one form of immortality was one that he would never achieve. However Keats did not die a failure; for he is now considered to be one of the best poets in English literature and one of the most iconic writers of the romantic age. He has joined the legacy of the great dead poets and has in turn inspired other writers and poets, who have over the years emulated or reacted against his style of writing. Keats has been an influence for some of the best writers and poets of the last one hundred and fifty years. Roe notes that: ‘The Pre-Raphaelites’ colourful highly marketable representations of antiquity came from Keats, who also opened the way for vernacular reinventions of classical myth by writers as diverse as Tennyson, Pound, Eliot, Joyce, Walcott and Heaney’132. Poets, artists and literary critics like Oscar Wilde, Wilfred Owen,

Matthew Arnold, W.B. Yeats, W.H. Auden, and Philip Larkin, to name a few, were all avid readers of Keats’s poetry, who have been inspired by Keats and who have put their own marks on the Keatsian poetic style and tradition within various forms of art. The Pre-Raphaelites used Keats’s poems as settings for their paintings; poets like Eliot and Owen and other post-war poets were inspired by Keats and the other romantics but used romantic influences in order to portray a fragmented, non-romantic theme. The romantic poet from a modest background has in turn become a source for the modern poet’s anxiety of influence, an intimidating predecessor who was in turn deeply influenced by the great dead poets of the past. In a letter to Hessey discussing the aftermath of *Endymion*, written in October 1818, Keats wrote ‘I was never afraid of failure; for I would sooner fail then be among the greatest’\(^{133}\). It is undoubtedly safe to say that Keats achieved his dream of being ranked among the greatest poets of English literature. Nicholas Roe notes that: ‘Keats’s friend Joseph Severn lived long enough to understand how the ‘modern arcadian world’ Keats had created from Lemprière’s dictionary formed the groundwork of English poetry in the mid-nineteenth century’\(^{134}\). The works of Keats have joined those of William Shakespeare, John Milton and Homer as works which are now enjoyed and celebrated by the enthusiasts of English literature.

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