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WARTON LECTURE ON ENGLISH POETRY

KEATS'S 'ROBIN HOOD', JOHN HAMILTON REYNOLDS, AND THE 'OLD POETS'

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MUCH of this lecture will be taken up with an exposition of the important letter which Keats sent, with two accompanying poems, to John Hamilton Reynolds on Tuesday, 3 February 1818. Two larger points are involved. First, Keats's individual letters, even more perhaps than has been realized, need to be read in the fullest possible assembly of the texts, both prose and poetic, which generate them, and with attention to their effect on subsequent Keatsian texts. In the case of the letter to Reynolds this evidence happens to be particularly fully preserved. Second, Keats's own unsure taste, coupled with that of the poetry reading public's, was further enforced by the vulnerability of a youthful writer faced by the achievements of his older contemporaries. Keats's letters to Reynolds at this particular point in his development provided an insulated space for exploration and 'private' experiment. The *letter* to Reynolds is, like all of Keats's most important letters, a private *locus* in which different texts compete with one another. In that space Keats's own poetic texts already have an audience of one, but they can hardly be said to be fully published. Indeed they may remain semi- or partly private, even if printed by Keats in his lifetime.

'Robin Hood', which Keats chose to publish in his final volume *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems* (1820), dates back to February 1818 when he was copying out the second book of *Endymion*. The poem, like the three other 'rondeaus' with which it is printed in the 1820 volume, now seems markedly inferior to the other poetry in the book. Yet one of the first readers of the volume, the *Eclectic Review*'s critic, praised the 'light and sportive style' of both 'Robin Hood' and 'Fancy'.[1] The anonymous reviewer

[1] Reprinted in *The Young Romantics and Critical Opinion 1807–1824*, ed. Theodore Redpath (1973), p. 506.

characterizes 'Fancy', the first of the 'rondeaus' accurately enough, and is right, up to a point, about 'Robin Hood'. What the reviewer misses is a level of seriousness in the latter poem. That is not at all surprising. 'Robin Hood', as its sub-title 'To a Friend' indicates, belongs to a larger exchange, much of it private, which was necessarily excluded from the volume published by Taylor and Hessey in the summer of 1820. The background to the lines explains why Keats published this poem and 'Lines upon the Mermaid Tavern' next to one another in 1820, and demonstrates the signal importance of Reynolds's poetic friendship to Keats at this stage in his career.

Morris Dickstein, the lone modern critic to admire the 'fine lines' on 'Robin Hood', is quite right to read the poem as a critique of capitalist society, offering a jocular parallel to the more famous attack in stanzas 14 to 16 of *Isabella*.[2] The Robin Hood of Keats's poem has a political dimension. Robin Hood's liberation from the popular tradition of broadsheets and garlands began with Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* in 1765. However, the rehabilitation of the folk hero was, essentially, the scholarly work of Joseph Ritson in his *Robin Hood: A Collection of all the Ancient Poems, Songs and Ballads, now extant, relative to that celebrated English Outlaw* published in 1795. As R. B. Dobson and J. Taylor say, Ritson not only believed in the existence of an historical Robin Hood, but was 'the first writer to convert Robin Hood into a thoroughgoing ideological hero'.[3] Ritson, a Jacobite who, remarkably, became a Jacobin, published his work during the highly politicized years of the 1790s. Robin Hood was, for Ritson,

> ... a man who, in a barbarous age, and under a complicated tyranny, displayed a spirit of freedom and independence, which has endeared him to the common people, whose cause he maintained, (for all opposition to tyranny is the cause of the people,) and, in spite of the malicious endeavours of pitiful monks, by whom history was consecrated to the crimes and follies of titled ruffians and sainted idiots, to suppress all record of his patriotic exertions and virtuous acts, will render his name immortal.[4]

Dobson and Taylor note that Ritson was 'one of the few Englishmen to adopt the French Revolutionary calendar', and that

[2] *Keats and his Poetry: A Study in Development* (Chicago, 1971), pp. 159–61.

[3] R. B. Dobson & J. Taylor, *Rymes of Robyn Hood: An Introduction to the English Outlaw* (1976), p. 55. See also J. C. Holt, *Robin Hood* (1982). Holt refers to Keats's poem (pp. 185–6).

[4] *Robin Hood* (1795), Vol. 1, pp. xi–xii.

Ritson's sentiments were those of the Revolution and of Paine. They also note that the two main novels concerned with Robin Hood, Scott's *Ivanhoe* and Peacock's *Maid Marian*, were written in 1818. The first did not appear until 1819, and it is unlikely that Keats knew of Peacock's work, not published until 1822, but the motif was one which seems to have been in the air.[5] The publication of Keats's poem in July 1820 probably prompted Leigh Hunt to publish his four poems on Robin Hood in the *Indicator* in November 1820. These celebrate the greenwood outlaw's fight against oppression both of church and state, as well as the good living in the natural forest. They give a clear, if simplistic, expression to Hunt's political feelings.

Keats wrote to Reynolds from Hampstead on Saturday, 31 January 1818, sending him several poems including an 'old song' 'O blush not so, O blush not so'.[6] When he next wrote to Reynolds, who was staying in Little Britain, Keats acknowledged the receipt of two sonnets on Robin Hood, included his answering poem along with the 'Lines on the Mermaid Tavern', and arranged to meet at four o'clock the following day, when he hoped to show Reynolds the newly copied Book II of *Endymion*. 'Robin Hood' was clearly written before he turned to his letter. 'Lines on the Mermaid Tavern' were composed a few days earlier.

Reynolds's sonnets were printed, along with an additional sonnet, shortly after in *The Yellow Dwarf* on 21 February 1818, and reprinted in 1821 in his *Garden of Florence*. *The Yellow Dwarf*, a short-lived liberal periodical, was edited by John Hunt, the brother of Leigh Hunt. The first *published* text of the two poems sent to Keats was as follows:

TO A FRIEND, ON ROBIN HOOD

The trees in Sherwood forest are old and good,—
The grass beneath them now is dimly green;
Are they deserted all? Is no young mien,
With loose slung bugle, met within the wood?
No arrow found,—foil'd of its antler'd food,—
Struck in the oak's rude side?—Is there nought seen,
To mark the revelries which there have been,
In the sweet days of merry Robin Hood?
Go there with summer, and with evening,—go
In the soft shadows, like some wandering man,—

[5] Ibid., p. 57.

[6] *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Hyder E. Rollins (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), Vol. 1, pp. 219–22.

And thou shalt far amid the Forest know
The archer-men in green, with belt and bow,
Feasting on pheasant, river fowl, and swan,
With Robin at their head, and Marian.

J.H.R.

TO THE SAME

With coat of Lincoln green, and mantle too,
And horn of ivory mouth and buckle bright,—
And arrows wing'd with peacock-feathers light,
And trusty bow, well gathered of the yew,—
Stands Robin Hood:—and near, with eyes of blue
Shining through dusk hair, like the stars of the night,
And habited in pretty forest plight,
His greenwood beauty sits, young as the dew.
Oh, gentle tressed girl! Maid Marian!
Are thine eyes bent upon the gallant game
That stray in the merry Sherwood? Thy sweet fame
Can never, never die. And thou, high man,
Would we might pledge thee with thy silver can
Of Rhenish, in the woods of Nottingham.

J.H.R.

Reynolds's two sonnets are part of an exchange between two young poets trying to establish their own voice. Taken together Reynolds's sonnets and Keats's letter and poem form part of a continuing conversation between the two men.

Reynolds's sonnets are really a nostalgic lament for a lost past, but the first sonnet, which begins by asking whether Sherwood Forest has lost the era of Robin Hood irrecoverably, ends by claiming that if the reader goes to the forest he or she will 'know' the 'archer-men ... / Feasting ... / With Robin at their head, and Marian'. The second describes Robin and Maid Marian, claims that their fame can never die, and concludes by wishing that 'we might pledge thee [Robin] with thy silver can/ Of Rhenish. ...' The first poem believes that the spirit of Robin Hood and his company lives on for those with imaginative sympathy, and both sonnets try to recreate their lost world. There is one important difference between the copy of the second sonnet sent to Keats and the printed version. The printed version describes Maid Marian as 'His greenwood beauty ... young as the dew' (1.8): in the manuscript which Keats received the last phrase read 'tender and true'.

Keats's answering poem was written and sent off on the day he received Reynolds's sonnets, Tuesday, 3 February. Woodhouse

notes that these arrived 'by the 2^{dy} [twopenny] post'. Keats sent his letter, including copies of his two poems, that same day, in the hope that Reynolds might read his 'Scribblings' in the evening.[7]

When the poem was published in 1820 it was titled 'Robin Hood To a Friend'. The letter is more specific (as are the extant manuscripts), 'To J. H. R. In answer to his Robin Hood Sonnets'. The text of the poem sent to Reynolds differs both from Keats's first draft and that finally published (a point to which I shall come back). In what follows I shall quote from the version of 'Robin Hood' (and that of 'Lines on the Mermaid Tavern') which Reynolds actually received.

Keats's poem is indeed an answer to Reynolds's sonnets: it is also less sentimental and more political. Keats begins by denying that it is any longer possible to call up the past:

> No! those days are gone away,
> And their hours are old and gray,
> And their minutes buried all
> Under the down-trodden pall
> Of the leaves of many years ...

The stanza concludes by placing Robin Hood in a distant pre-capitalistic past:

> Many times have winter's shears,
> Frozen north, and chilling east,
> Sounded tempests to the feast
> Of the forest's whispering fleeces,
> Since men [paid no Rent and] leases.
>
> (ll. 6–10)[8]

In addition to attacking the cash nexus and property Keats may also be reminding Reynolds that his new profession, the law, was antipathetic to poetry (as indeed proved the case). Keats later pictures how Robin Hood and Maid Marian would respond to the modern world if they were to see it—

> She would weep, and he would craze:
> He would swear, for all his oaks,
> Fall'n beneath the dockyard strokes,
> Have rotted on the briny seas;

[7] Ibid., Vol. 1, pp. 223–5.

[8] *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Cambridge, Mass., 1978), p. 228. All further quotations of Keats are based on this edition. Square brackets mark the readings of the earlier versions of the two poems sent by Keats to Reynolds.

She would weep that her wild bees
Sang not to her—strange! that honey
Can't be got without hard money!

(ll. 42–8)

Keats is attacking both the navy and commerce here, but in opposition to Reynolds's sentimentality, he insists that the modern world is irrevocable—'So it is!' All that the contemporary poet can do is to honour the past in a catalogue of their names and attributes (ll. 50–60). The last two lines turn to Reynolds, and their exchange of poems—

Though their days have hurried by
Let us two a burden try.

Keats's vision of 'outlawry' is clearly related to that of Ritson (though there is no evidence that he had read Ritson). It also echoes the tradition which linked the greenwood world of Robin Hood with the classical Golden Age. The description of the Golden Age at the beginning of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* could indeed be a source for some of the details in Keats's poem. Ovid like Keats looks back to a time preceding man-made laws, and prior to the exploitation and cultivation of nature:

Aurea prima sata est aetas, quae vindice nullo,
sponte sua, sine lege, fidem rectumque colebat.
poena metusque aberant, nec verba minantia fixo
aere legebantur, nec supplex turba timebat
iudicis ora sui, sed erant sine iudice tuti.
nondum caesa suis, peregrinum ut viseret orbem,
montibus in liquidas pinus descenderat undas,
nullaque mortales praeter sua litora norant;
nondum praecipites cingebat oppida fossae;
non tuba directi, non aeris cornua flexi,
non galeae, non ensis erant: sine militus usu
mollia securae peragebant otia gentes.
ipsa quoque immunis rastroque intacta nec ullis
saucia vomeribus per se dabat omnia tellus,
contentique cibis nullo cogente creatis

(I. 89–103)

(In the beginning was the Golden Age, when men of their own accord, without threat of punishment, without laws, maintained good faith and did what was right. There were no penalties to be afraid of, no bronze tablets were erected, carrying threats of legal action, no crowd of wrong-doers, anxious for mercy, trembled before the face of their judge: indeed, there were no judges, men lived securely without them. Never

yet had any pine tree, cut down from its home on the high mountains, been launched on the ocean waves, to visit foreign lands: men knew only their own shores. Their cities were not yet surrounded by sheer moats, they had no straight brass trumpets, no coiling bass horns, no helmets and no swords. The peoples of the world, untroubled by any fears, enjoyed a leisurely and peaceful existence, and had no use for soldiers. The earth itself, without compulsion, untouched by the hoe, unfurrowed by any share, produced all things spontaneously, and men were content with foods that grew without cultivation.)[9]

The men of Sherwood Forest are their own soldiers, and they spend their time in leisure 'Idling in the "grenè shawe"' (l.36)[10] with their 'fair hostess Merriment' (l.29). This is clearly related to Keats's dislike of standing armies and soldiers ('The scarlet coats that pester human-kind').[11] He had told Reynolds in April 1817 of his 'disgust' at the presence of a military barracks, 'a Nest of Debauchery', in 'so beautiful a place' as the Isle of Wight.[12]

Further, Keats's letter makes explicit the connection with Shakespeare's *As You Like It* where the Duke and his 'merry men ... live like old Robin Hood of England ... as they did in the golden world' (I. i). Shakespeare's comedy identifies Robin Hood and his greenwood world with *As You Like It*'s own pastoral. So Keats links the great 'old' Elizabethan poets with Robin Hood's England, the values of both of which were, in his view, denied by the modern world—and by modern poetry.

This context gives Keats's letter a clear shape. As always, he writes with a particular correspondent in mind, but this high-spirited letter, even more than usual, assumes mutual sympathy and an intimate knowledge on Reynolds's part of Keats's current thinking. When Keats signs himself, 'Y^{r} sincere friend and Coscribbler', he means it. They are 'Coscribblers' in that they share the same poetic values, are both as yet unsuccessful poets standing outside the dominant modes of contemporary poetry, and both look back to a lost 'English' past.

The letter begins indeed with a greenwood compliment which is part of an involved running joke. In April 1816, almost two years earlier, Reynolds had mocked William Lisle Bowles's sonnets, picturing Bowles as 'laboriously engaged in filling fourteen

[9] I am grateful to Hermione Lee drawing my attention to the broader context of Keats's *topoi*. See her *Willa Cather: A life Saved Up* (1989), p. 203.

[10] The quotation from Chaucer's *Friar's Tale* seems to be decorative rather than functional.

[11] 'To My Brother George', l.130 (*Poems*, edn cit., p. 59).

[12] 17–18 April 1817, *Letters*, edn cit., Vol. 1, pp. 131–2.

nut-shells'. Keats's request on 31 January 1818 for Reynolds to send 'a refreshment' (that is, some poetry) with his next letter led to the first two Robin Hood sonnets, which themselves took leave from Keats's references to the outlaw in 'Lines on the Mermaid Tavern'.[12a] Hence Reynolds's sonnets are 'Filberts' because they are as full of real poetry as a nut (unlike Bowles's), yet cheap because carried by twopenny post:'

> My dear Reynolds,
> I thank you for your dish of Filberts—Would I could get a basket of them by way of desert every day for the sum of two pence—Would we were a sort of ethereal Pigs, & turn'd loose to feed upon spiritual Mast & Acorns—which would be merely being a squirrel & feed[ing] upon filberts. for what is a squirrel but an airy pig, or a filbert but a sort of archangelical acorn.

Keats's bantering opening immediately picks up a key pastoral theme. The forest has no cash economy: its herds of swine feed on the mast (or nuts) provided by the forest-trees. At the same time, Keats self-mockingly inverts proverbial wisdom. 'Pigs might fly' indeed! The joke opposes wishful thinking against actuality, fiction against fact. An 'airy pig' is as improbable as an archangelical acorn: if so, where does that leave the 'etherial' status of poetry? But the joke is also a form of modesty on behalf of himself and Reynolds, for Keats *does* believe in the value of Reynolds's sonnets. He immediately goes on to use the accurate archery of Robin Hood and his men to praise the 'ready drawn' simplicity of Reynolds's poetic archery:

> About the nuts being worth cracking, all I can say is that where there are a throng of delightful Images ready drawn simplicity is the only thing.

Keats then gives his comments on the two sonnets. These reveal Keats's taste and suggest what he himself was trying to do in his own poem (and the related 'rondeaus').

> ... the first [sonnet] is the best on account of its first line, and the 'arrow—foil'd of its antler'd food'—and moreover (and this is the only word or two I find fault with, the more because I have had so much reason to shun it as a quicksand) the last has 'tender and true' [i.e., l.6]—We must cut this, and not be rattlesnaked into any more of the like—...

Keats, as he had from the beginning of his career, sees 'a throng of delightful Images' as a sign of true poetry, but he particularly

[12a] See Leonidas M. Jones, *The Life of John Hamilton Reynolds* (Hanover, Vt., and London, 1984), pp. 138–9, and *Letters*, edn cit., Vol. 1, p. 219.

values 'simplicity'. This is represented in Reynolds's poetry by the monosyllabic directness of the opening line of the first sonnet, 'The trees in Sherwood Forest are old and good', while the image of the arrow 'foil'd of its antler'd food' is presumably praised because it unexpectedly takes up the arrow's viewpoint. Keats's objections to 'tender and true' seems to have some personal reference: what that was is unclear, though 'tender' is a favourite word in Hunt's poetry. Sentimentality is surely his target here (and Reynolds followed Keats's advice, changing the phrase to 'young as the dew' in the printed version).

At this point Keats introduces modern poetry itself as a subject. This topic occupies the long middle of the letter, until Keats concludes by copying out his two poems for Reynolds and arranging to meet him the next day. Quite clearly, he sees Reynolds's poems and his own as opposed to what is taken as serious poetry by his contemporaries. The middle section is an effort to claim space for their aims, and to align support for their kind of work against modern poetry, specifically modern pastoral poetry:

> It may be said that we ought to read our Contemporaries. that Wordsworth &c should have their own due from us. but for the sake of a few fine imaginative or domestic passages, are we to be bullied into a certain Philosophy engendered in the whims of an Egotist—Every man has his speculations, but every man does not brood and peacock over them till he makes a false coinage and deceives himself—

Throughout what follows Keats famously contrasts Wordsworth (and later Hunt) with the Elizabethans, setting Elizabethan simplicity against what he regards as the subjectivity of modern poetry, which, he believes, tyrannizes over its readers and their 'speculations' ('false coinage' damningly picks up the attack on 'rents and leases' in 'Robin Hood'). As the subsequent discussion of 'Two April Mornings' proves, 'the fine imaginative or domestic passages' are those in Wordsworth's poems depicting everyday incidents. In them Keats feels that Wordsworth, an 'Egotist' who has developed his own 'Philosophy', denies the possibility of alternative interpretations. Yet every man, whether Sancho Panza or Keats, has his own speculations and 'halfseeings', which could be written down:

> Many a man can travel to the very bourne of Heaven, and yet want confidence to put down his halfseeing. Sancho will invent a Journey heavenward as well as any body.

Wordworth's poetry denies truth to anyone but himself. Keats then makes one of his best known remarks about poetry, 'We hate

poetry that has a palpable design upon us—and if we do not agree, seems to put its hand in its breeches pocket'. But when he goes on to say that 'Poetry should be great & unobtrusive' he maintains the pastoral imagery, setting the Elizabethans and the Robin Hood world against modern poets:

> Poetry should be great & unobstrusive, a thing which enters into one's soul, and does not startle it or amaze it with itself but with its subject.—How beautiful are the retired flowers! how would they lose their beauty were they to throng into the highway crying out 'admire me I am a violet! dote upon me I am a primrose!' Modern poets differ from the Elizabethans in this. Each of the moderns like an Elector of Hanover governs his petty state, & knows how many straws are swept daily from the Causeways in all his dominions & has a continual itching that all the Housewives should have their coppers well scoured: the antients were Emperors of vast Provinces, they had only heard of the remote ones and scarcely cared to visit them.—I will cut all this—I will have no more of Wordsworth or Hunt in particular—

Keats, since there is no reason to believe he was flattering Reynolds, must have thought that Reynolds's sonnets were examples of objective poems taken up only with their subject. Certainly they draw no moral, are made up of statements and images, avoid the first person, and enjoin the reader to participate in creating the experience. Reynolds in his turn thought of Keats as an objective nature poet. Reviewing Keats's first volume in *The Champion* on 9 March 1817 he had written, 'He relies directly and wholly on nature. He marries poesy to genuine simplicity'. (Yet Reynolds's demonstration of his point is based on the belief that 'In the simple meadows [Keats] has proved that he can

> "– See shapes of light, aerial lymning,
> And catch soft floating[s] from a faint heard hymning."'
> [*Sleep and Poetry*, ll. 33–4][13]

These are precisely the kind of visions which Reynolds's sonnets try to evoke, and which Keats's 'Robin Hood' denies.)

The reference to the modern Elector of Hanover places Wordsworth and Hunt in the role of petty tyrants (and given Hunt's power as a publicist and editor, there is a real point here). If this seems far-fetched the very next sentence reinforces the possibility:

> Why should we be of the tribe of Manasseh, when we can wander with Esau?

[13] Reprinted in *The Young Romantics and Critical Opinion 1807–1824*, p. 451.

Esau is linked with Robin Hood: both are hunters, and Esau shot 'venison' with his bow for his father (Keats passes over the negative aspects of Esau's story—unless he thought, as well one might, that Esau was cheated of his birth-right). The reference to the tribe of Manasseh must in the first place be to the elder but less important of the tribes of Israel descended from Joseph which provided men for Gideon's defeat of the Midianites. But Keats is likely also to be thinking of Manasseh, the seventh century king of Judah.

> His reign of fifty-five years was marked by a reaction against the reforming policy of his father, and his persistent idolatry and bloodshed were subsequently regarded as the cause of the destruction of Jerusalem and of the dispersion of the people.[14]

The poetry of Keats and Reynolds, then, is on the side of freedom and against tyrants: it speaks for true English rights denied by both the present day government and by the various dominant literary tastes.

At the same time Keats conceives of true poetry as reaching a higher level of truth: the pursuit of the 'ethereal' remains a theme:

> ... why should we kick against the Pricks, when we can walk on Roses? Why should we be owls, when we can be Eagles? Why be teased with 'nice Eyed wagtails,' when we have in sight 'the Cherub Contemplation'?—Why with Wordworths 'Matthew with a bough of wilding in his hand' when we can have Jacques 'under an oak &c'—

The contrast is between the natural richness of Shakespearian creativity and the limitations and constricted achievements of modern poets. Leigh Hunt uses the phrase 'the nice-eyed wagtails' in 'The Nymphs', a poem which Keats had seen in manuscript in May 1817,[15] and which was to be published in *Foliage* in 1818. Keats's reference to the 'cherub Contemplation' in Milton's *Il Penseroso* (l. 54), where the cherub is the chief of the muses 'Guiding the fiery-wheeled throne' of poetry, sets the seventeeth-century greatness of Milton looking to heaven for his inspiration, against the limited ambitions (and false diction) of Leigh Hunt, satisfied with a wagtail for his muse. Similarly, Wordsworth's didactic anecdotes of modern life are set against the creativity and richness of Shakespeare. The greenwood pastoral of *As You Like It*, in which Jacques's meditations 'Under an oak' on the dying

[14] *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 11th edn (1911).

[15] Letter to Hunt, 10 May 1817, *Letters*, edn cit., Vol. 1, p. 139. For the quotation, see *Foliage: or, Poems Original and Translated* (1818), p. xxxiii.

deer are at once richly comic and moving, has a range and complexity entirely missing in modern poetry.

Keats's dislike of Wordsworth's 'The Two April Mornings' is consistent with his attitude elsewhere. Wordsworth's poem reports a meeting with a now-dead village schoolmaster, Matthew, whose only daughter died in childhood, and ends by recalling him holding a 'bough/ Of wilding in his hand'.[16] The cause of Keats's antipathy is made clear in the account of the poem which follows:

> The secret of the Bough of Wilding will run through your head faster than I can write it—Old Matthew spoke to him some years ago on some nothing, & because he happens in an Evening Walk to imagine the figure of the old man—he must stamp it down in black & white, and it is henceforth sacred. ...

Keats's objection is that Wordsworth's 'forest' pastoral (signalled by 'the Bough of Wilding') imposes Wordsworth's reading of the incident on the reader and excludes other interpretations. I suspect that he also disliked the fact that the poem dwells on death, is about contemporary rural society, and finds no explicit way of transcending or accommodating its pathos: it is far from being 'joyful' in any Keatsian sense.

Keats goes on to allow the achievement of Hunt and Wordsworth before reiterating his belief in the 'old Poets' and giving himself the opportunity to attack another subjective modern poet, Byron:

> I don't mean to deny Wordsworth's grandeur & Hunt's merit, but I mean to say we need not be teazed with grandeur & merit—when we can have them uncontaminated & unobtrusive. Let us have the old Poets, & robin Hood Your letter and its sonnets gave me more pleasure than will the 4th Book of Childe Harold [published April 1818] & the whole of any body's life & opinions.

Keats's claims for the two sonnets by Reynolds are then that they are 'uncontaminated', 'unobtrusive' and objective. These, therefore, are the qualities which he is pursuing in his own poetry. 'Old poetry', like Robin Hood, is also on the side of freedom.

The letter then moves towards its conclusion with a return to woodland imagery:

> In return for your dish of filberts, I have gathered a few Catkins, I hope they'll look pretty.
>
> To J. H. R. In answer to his Robin Hood Sonnets. "No, those days are gone away &c"—

[16] *William Wordsworth: Poems*, ed. John O. Hayden (Harmondsworth, 1977), Vol. 1, p. 383.

I hope you will like them they are at least written in the Spirit of Outlawry.—Here are the Mermaid lines
"Souls of Poets dead & gone, &c"— ....

Keats's two poems are 'catkins' because, unlike Reynolds's compact sonnets, they dangle down the page, and because hazel catkins fertilize filberts. The 'Spirit of Outlawry' places Keats and Reynolds outside the differing kinds of poetic taste represented by Hunt and Wordsworth, or indeed Byron, and indicates Keats's political stance.

Keats's letter concludes with practical arrangements:

I will call on you at 4 tomorrow, and we will trudge together for it is not the thing to be a stranger in the Land of Harpsicols. I hope also to bring you my 2^{d} book—In the hope that these Scribblings will be some amusement for you this Evening—I remain copying still on the Hill

Y^{r} sincere friend and Coscribbler
John Keats.

The reference to the 'Land of the Harpsicols [harpsicords]' is probably to a musical evening at the Novellos', but while Keats writes dismissively of his 'Scribblings' it is clear that for him and for his 'Coscribbler' Reynolds, these ideas about Robin Hood and the 'old Poets' were a serious matter, and ones which gave a vantage point allowing them to elude the pressure exerted by contemporary poetic taste. It will also be clear that in placing these two poems together in the middle of *Poems* (1820) Keats was making a statement about his poetic and political allegiances as well as demonstrating his technical and tonal variety.

Keats's admonition was taken seriously by Reynolds, and prompted the third (and best) sonnet published by Reynolds in *The Yellow Dwarf*, 'To E—, with the foregoing Sonnets'. 'E—' is probably Eliza Drewe, Reynold's future wife.

Robin, the outlaw! Is there not a mass
Of freedom in the name? It tells the story
Of clenched oaks, with branches bow'd and hoary
Leaning in aged beauty o'er the grass:—
Of dazed smile on cheek of border lass,
List'ning 'gainst some old gate at his strange glory;—
And of the dappled stag, struck down and gory,
Lying with nostril wide in green morass.
It tells a tale of forest days—of times
That would have been most precious unto thee,—
Days of undying pastoral liberty!
Sweeter than music of old abbey chimes,—

Sweet as the virtue of Shakespearian rhymes.—
Days, shadowy with the magic greenwood trees!

J. H. R.

This is more a reply to Keats's letter and poem than a sonnet addressed to Reynolds's fianceé. It shows Reynolds learning from Keats's letter and poem, and makes more explicit Keats's stance. The phrase 'undying pastoral liberty' is an optimistic formulation of the values which Keats wishes to support.

Reynolds's three sonnets appeared one and a half years before Keats chose to publish his Robin Hood poem. It is worth noting that *The Yellow Dwarf* published very little poetry. Most of its space was given over to politics. It did, however, show an interest in literary politics. Coleridge's lectures on Shakespeare were reported in the issue for 21 February 1818, in particular Coleridge's claim that Caliban was 'an original and caricature of Jacobinism'. In reply Coleridge was violently attacked for his own earlier Jacobinal views, and for criticizing Maturin's *Bertram* because his own drama, *Zapolya*, had failed: as to Caliban, he 'is so far from being a prototype of modern Jacobinism, that he 'is strictly the legitimate sovereign of the island, and *Prospero* and the rest are usurpers ...'[17] It is easy to see why Reynolds's sonnets might appear in *The Yellow Dwarf*. The appearance of the Hymn to Pan from *Endymion*, over seventy lines of verse, in the issue for 9 May 1818, less than two weeks after the poem was published, may reflect John Hunt's wish to help the sales of his brother's protégé. It also gave further support to the contemporary Tory reviewers' recognition that *Endymion* had a bearing on contemporary religion and politics. Wordworth's negative reaction to the Hymn, like that of the Tory reviewers of the poem as a whole, was a response to Keats's serious effort to imagine a 'natural religion'.[18]

When Keats wrote his letter to Reynolds on 3 February 1818 and when he composed 'Robin Hood' he was still working on *Endymion*, copying out the final draft. Only four days earlier he had sent his publisher, John Taylor, the very important new opening lines to the 'Pleasure Thermometer' passage (I. 777–81):

Wherein lies Happiness? In that which becks
Our ready Minds to fellowship divine;
A fellowship with essence, till we shine

[17] *The Yellow Dwarf*, pp. 60–1.

[18] *The Keats Circle: Letters and Papers*, ed. Hyder E. Rollins (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), Vol. 2, p. 144.

Full alchymized and free of space. Behold
The clear Religion of heaven—fold—&c.—[19]

The ambition apparent in these lines—*Endymion* hoped to describe no less than 'the clear Religion of heaven'—is as remarkable as the slightness and apparent flippancy of 'Robin Hood' when it appeared in *Poems* (1820). One explanation of 'Robin Hood's' tone is obvious: the prolonged commitment to *Endymion*'s 4,000 lines had taken up all Keats's energies. But the poem, like 'Lines on the Mermaid Tavern', deals with themes close to the heart of Keats's poetry, and their slightness is a form of self-defensiveness.

The 'Lines' were composed extemporaneously during an evening spent with Horace Twiss and Horace Smith at the tavern, and Keats is reported as saying that 'Reynolds, Dilke, and others, were pleased with this beyond any thing I ever did.[20] This awkward little poem celebrates the 'old Poets' and their conviviality, a conviviality firmly linked to 'bold Robin Hood', Maid Marian and venison pies: 'Souls of poets dead and gone' cannot have known any 'elysium' superior to that of the Tavern. The second verse turns on a comic version of Keats's belief (explored at length in *Endymion*) that poets write stories which somehow inscribe themselves in the heavens, and are then available for later poets to draw on:

I have heard that on a day
Mine host's sign-board flew away,
Nobody knew whither, till
An astrologer's old quill
To a sheepskin gave the story,
[Says] he saw you in your glory,
Underneath a new old sign
[L]ipping beverage divine,
And pledging with contented smack
The Mermaid in the zodiac.

The discovery among the observations of an ancient astrologer of an additional 'new old' constellation in the Zodiac, provides the dead Elizabethan poets with an appropriate, if fanciful, Elysian hostelry: their 'beverage divine' is a heavenly version of the *Nightingale*'s 'true' and 'blushful Hippocrene'.

[19] 30 January 1818, *Letters*, edn cit., Vol. 1, p. 218.

[20] *Letters*, edn cit., Vol. 1, p. 225, from E. F. Madden, *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, IV (1877), 361. Madden reports that he was shown the letter by George Keats's daughter, Mrs Philip Speed.

In sending these two poems, which he claims were 'at least written in the Spirit of Outlawry' to Reynolds, Keats knew that they would find a sympathetic reader. And Keats's two poems can now be most fully and sympathetically understood within the friendly argument conducted between Reynolds's and Keats's texts, and their struggle against competing texts written by previous poets and by their contemporaries. Both poems need, that is, the assistance given by Keats's letter of 3 February 1818 and by Reynolds's sonnets: equally, the letter cannot be properly understood without also listening to the alternative texts and voices which it invokes.

Yet, while Keats and Reynolds needed one another's poetic companionship and support at this time to free them from the pressure of Hunt's influence and status, the distinction between what they were doing and Hunt's poetry is a necessary fiction. When Keats remarks 'I will have no more of Wordsworth or Hunt in particular' he may refer to both poets equally, or more particularly to Hunt. The difficulty for both Keats and Reynolds was that their own taste had been formatively influenced by Hunt, and remained very close to his. Indeed, Keats and Reynolds had met through Hunt by October 1816, and both shared Hunt's admiration for Greek mythology, the poetry of Boccaccio, Chaucer, Spenser, and the Elizabethans, as well as being political liberals. Consequently, when Reynolds and Keats tried in the course of 1817 and 1818 to separate their work from Hunt's, the differences are not, seen retrospectively, particularly well-marked. As Keats himself told Reynolds on 9 April 1818 when responding to the anxiety caused by the original preface to *Endymion*, 'I am not aware there is any thing like Hunt in it, (and if there is, it is my natural way, and I have something in common with Hunt) ...'.[21] The parenthesis is essential to an understanding of Keats's difficulties. In so far as he learnt from Hunt, the older poet was likely to have preoccupied Keats's ground. The same was true for Reynolds, older than Keats, but younger than Hunt.

Indeed, Hunt's *Foliage*, probably published between 4 February and 10 March,[22] a little after Keats's and Reynolds's exchange,

[21] *Letters*, edn cit., Vol. 1, p. 266.

[22] Hunt's sonnet, 'The Nile', written in competition with Keats and Shelley

must have been particularly threatening to Keats. 'The Nymphs', the first poem, was, like *Endymion*, a modern reusing of classical mythological figures. Not only had Keats's diction been heavily influenced earlier by Hunt, but Hunt's Preface develops, at far greater length, his own version of Keats's attack on the French school published a year earlier in 'Sleep and Poetry' (ideas Keats had learnt from Hunt in the first place). Hunt also notes the 'revived inclination for our older and great school of poetry' (the Elizabethans), and uses exactly the same phrase, the 'beautiful mythology of Greece',[23] which Keats was to use in his revised preface to *Endymion* in early April. Further, *Foliage*, although it has no Robin Hood poems, is cast in a greenwood mode. *Foliage, or Poems Original and Translated* is divided into two parts. The first is called 'Greenwoods, or Original Poems' with a separate title page which contains 'greenwood' and other retirement epigraphs from Ben Jonson, Shakespeare, Lorenzo de Medici and Ludovico Paterno (sig. B1[a]). The second part is entitled 'Evergreens; or Translations from Poets of Antiquity ...'(sig. 2A1[a]). Hunt's volume clearly claims as its direct poetic forebear Ben Jonson's division of his poems into 'The Forest' and 'The Under-wood'. It also seems that from at least 1815 Hunt preferred his books to be bound in green, 'the colour of the fields'.[24] Keats cannot but have been aware of Hunt's interests. Keats's letter to Reynolds needs to

(see *Letters*, edn cit., Vol. 1, pp. 227–8) was printed in *Foliage* (1818), p. cxxxiv. Mary Shelley reports that the Shelleys left London for the Continent on 12 March 1818 after seeing the Hunts on 10 March (*The Journals of Mary Shelley, 1814–1844*, ed. Paula R. Feldmann & Diana Scott-Kilvert (1987), Vol. 1, p. 197). Shelley wrote to Hunt from Lyons on 22 March 1818 congratulating him on *Foliage*, and calling 'The Nymphs' a 'delightful poem' (*The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Frederick L. Jones (Oxford, 1964), Vol. 2, p. 2). Shelley went so far as to call 'The Nymphs' 'truly poetical'. The timing suggests that Shelley must have taken the printed volume with him. Mary Shelley's *Journal* does not record when Shelley read Hunt's book.

[23] *Foliage*, (1818), p. 220.

[24] See Charles & Mary Cowden Clarke, *Recollections of Writers* (1878), pp. 193–4, which quotes a letter dated 7 November 1815 in which Hunt complains that the binder has, contrary to instructions, bound a gift copy to Clarke of *The Descent of Liberty* and *The Feast of the Poets* in red instead of green. Clarke records that he was played the same trick when *Foliage* was bound in 'bright *blue*' instead of green. However, Clarke's copy, now in the Brotherton Collection (Novello-Cowden Clarke Collection) is now a greeny-blue. Its binder was W. Hickley, 4 Upper James Street, Golden Square, according to the label inside the front cover.

misrepresent the close relation between Hunt's example and their own poetry, and to claim a difference which is hard to justify except as a manœuvre to create the imaginative space essential to the two younger writers.

In the privacy of his letter to Reynolds, Keats gives unambiguous expression to his poetic antagonism to Hunt. Yet the two men were meeting regularly. The day after Keats wrote to Reynolds, the very day on which he hoped to hand over the fair copy of Book II of *Endymion*, Keats took part with Hunt and Shelley in a competition to write a sonnet on the Nile in fifteen minutes.[25] More than that, Keats must have brought the original draft of 'Robin Hood' with him, either giving it to Hunt or leaving it at his house—Shelley's draft of his sonnet 'To the Nile' is actually written on the same piece of paper as Keats's draft of 'Robin Hood'.[26] It is hard to believe, in consequence, that Keats had not brought the draft poem for Hunt's inspection, despite what he and Reynolds were saying to one another in private.

In effect, Keats's poem has its genesis in a private exchange with Reynolds, but the subsequent textual history of 'Robin Hood', like that of 'Lines on the Mermaid Tavern', is of early manuscript circulation among the Keats circle, accompanied by a process of revision spread over the next year and a half. If 'Lines on the Mermaid Tavern' were originally inspired by an evening with Twiss and Horace Smith and 'Robin Hood' by Reynolds's sonnets, the original drafts of both were subsequently revised by Keats—in the case of 'Robin Hood' later the same day when he copied them into his letter. In January 1820 George Keats took copies of both poems back to America, 'Lines on the Mermaid Tavern' being copied out fair in his notebook by Keats himself.[27] However, the published texts of both poems follows no extant manuscript. Both poems, then, were first 'published' in manuscript copies for a select group of readers including Reynolds, Charles Dilke, Charles Brown, George Keats, and (probably) Hunt.[28] The texts of the *poems* were, strictly speaking, never private. Rather Keats used his friends as sounding-boards at this early stage in their existence. The final version of both poems

[25] See *Letters*, edn cit., Vol 1, pp. 227–8.

[26] Jack Stillinger, *The Texts of Keats's Poems* (Cambridge, Mass., 1974), p. 166. The manuscript is now lost, but was described by Forman.

[27] Ibid., p. 168.

[28] Ibid., pp. 166–9, and *Poems*, edn cit., pp. 228–31, 592–4.

printed in the 1820 volume derives from a fresh look at the poems by Keats, or his publishers, or by both together.

The uncertainty of Keats's own poetic taste seems implicit in his disarming description of them as pretty 'Catkins'. Even after revision, the poems stand apart from most of those in the 1820 volume. They stand out because they are, along with the two other 'rondeaus', the poems most directly related to the tastes of Reynolds and Hunt.

The distinction between Keats and Hunt lies in the seriousness which led Keats to undercut Reynolds's sentimentality, denying that the 'archer-men' of Robin Hood's band can be 'known' by the modern visitor to Sherwood Forest. But, for all that, *Endymion* had tried to make Greek myth work again in modern poetry, and had used it for 'speculation'—as he assured Taylor, 'when I wrote [the 'Pleasure Thermometer' passage], it was a regular stepping of the Imagination towards a Truth'.[29] Keats's seriousness is absent from both Reynolds's and Hunt's verse: Robin Hood, nymphs, goddesses and fairies are, for them, in the end, no more than a poetic *façon de parler*, no more than fanciful.

The closeness and ultimate distance between Keats and Reynolds is evident in the self-mocking introductory verse Reynolds wrote for *The Garden of Florence and Other Poems* (1821), when he had given up 'drawling verse for drawing leases':

> There is some talk of fairies in my book,
> (Creatures whose bodies have doubtful title)
> I once believed in them—and oft have shook
> My boyish heart with thoughts that made me sigh, till
> Years stood like shadows in each leafy nook,
> To parcel out the wilds in rood and pightle;
> There is some talk, I must confess, of fairies,—
> I knew no better,—boys will have vagaries.
>
> (p. vii)

Reynolds's is a witty, and in the circumstances, sad, farewell to poetry. The free forest world of his 'boyish' poetic fancies has been parcelled out, measured, and disowned by his adult lawyer's mind. Keats, however, in a sense held on to the 'boyish' beliefs which he had taken from fashionable poeticizing, ultimately fusing Huntian diction and poetic fancies into the yearning scepticism of his later woodland pastoral, the 'Ode to a Nightingale':

[29] *Letters*, edn cit., Vol. 1, p. 218.

> Already with thee! tender is the night,
> And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
> Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays;
> But here there is no light ....

That imaginative 'vision' is able to accommodate, as Hunt and Reynolds could not, the admission that the 'elf' of imagination might be a cheat:

> Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
> As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf.

Fancy's 'elf' may be no more than the product of wishful thinking, may be, in the end, an 'airy pig'.