JOHN KEATS

From Endymion

From Book IV

O SORROW

“O Sorrow,
Why dost borrow
The natural hue of health, from vermeil lips?—
To give maiden blushes
To the white rose bushes?
Or is it thy dewy hand the daisy tips?

“O Sorrow,
Why dost borrow
The lustrous passion from a falcon eye?—
To give the glowworm light?
Or, on a moonless night,
To tinge, on siren shores, the salt sea-spray?

“O Sorrow,
Why dost borrow
The mellow ditties from a mourning tongue?—
To give at evening pale
Unto the nightingale,
That thou mayst listen the cold dews among?

“O Sorrow,
Why dost borrow
Heart’s lightness from the merriment of May?—
A lover would not tread
A cowslip on the head,
Though he should dance from eve till peep of day—
Nor any drooping flower
Held sacred for thy bower,
Wherever he may sport himself and play.

“To Sorrow,
I bade good-morrow,
And thought to leave her far away behind;
But cheerly, cheerly,
She loves me dearly;

1. The lines reprinted here are part of a remarkable lyric sung by the Indian maid, which expresses Keats’s repeated theme of the inseparability of sorrow from the height of human enjoyments, and the divided attitude which in fact sometimes makes us cling to sorrow as to a joy. See his Ode on Melancholy.

2. Sea spray.
She is so constant to me, and so kind:
I would deceive her
And so leave her,
But ah! she is so constant and so kind."

In Drear-Nighted December

1
In drear-nighted December,
   Too happy, happy tree,
Thy branches ne’er remember
   Their green felicity:
   The north cannot undo them
   With a sleety whistle through them;
   Nor frozen thawings glue them
   From budding at the prime.¹

2
In drear-nighted December,
   Too happy, happy brook,
Thy bubblings ne’er remember
   Apollo’s² summer look;
   But with a sweet forgetting,
   They stay their crystal fretting,
   Never, never petting³
   About the frozen time.

3
Ah! would ’twere so with many
   A gentle girl and boy!
But were there ever any
   Writhed not of passéd joy?
   The feel of not to feel it,⁴
   When there is none to heal it
   Nor numbéd sense to steel it,
   Was never said in rhyme.

1. The earliest period; hence, spring.
2. I.e., the sun’s.
3. Complaining.
4. This version of line 21, from a recently discov-
On the Sonnet

If by dull rhymes our English must be chained,
   And, like Andromeda, the Sonnet sweet
Fettered, in spite of painéd loveliness;
Let us find out, if we must be constrained,
   Sandals more interwoven and complete
To fit the naked foot of poesy;
Let us inspect the lyre, and weigh the stress
Of every chord, and see what may be gained
   By ear industrious, and attention meet;
Misers of sound and syllable, no less
Then Midas of his coinage, let us be
   Jealous of dead leaves in the bay-wreath crown;
So, if we may not let the Muse be free,
   She will be bound with garlands of her own.

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1. In a letter including this sonnet, Keats wrote that “I have been endeavoring to discover a better sonnet stanza than we have,” objecting especially to the “pouncing rhymes” of the Petrarchan form and the inevitable tick of the closing couplet in the Shakespearean stanza. This and the two following poems exemplify Keats’s experiments with variations upon these conventional sonnet patterns.
2. Andromeda was chained to a rock in order to placate a sea monster, but was rescued by Perseus.
3. Lyre-string.
4. King Midas was granted his wish that all he touched should turn to gold.