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Fanny Brawne: her relationship with and influence upon John Keats

R. Gregory Sutcliffe
Lehigh University

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FANNY BRAWNE: HER RELATIONSHIP WITH
AND INFLUENCE UPON JOHN KEATS

by

R. Gregory Sutcliffe, Jr.

A THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Faculty
of Lehigh University
in Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Arts

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May 25, 1961
Date

J. Burke Saver
Professor in Charge

J. Burke Saver
Head of the Department

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Preface

When John Keats met Fanny Brawne he had already written On First Looking into Chapman's Homer, Endymion, Isabella, and part of Hyperion. From the time of their meeting until the cessation of poetry because of his ill health, Keats wrote every other poem by which he is best known. This, of course, is not to say that had Keats not met Fanny he would not have become a highly regarded poet. Certainly Keats had the poetic genius within him necessary to achieve immortality. The point at issue is not ability, but rather, inspiration and direction. It is to those two points which we shall direct ourselves in the following pages as we investigate the life of this certain Fanny Brawne and her love for John Keats to and even beyond his premature death.

Who and what was this Fanny Brawne? The answer to this question has changed greatly in the last few decades. This girl, once maligned even to the point of being blamed for Keats's death has risen from the depths of historical shame to a peak of respect and even praise. In fact, some of the very harshest critics of this girl have by now completely reversed their stand regarding her character and personality. An outstanding example is certainly John Middleton Murry. In 1925 Mr. Murry wrote¹: "Fanny Brawne was beautiful and young and small. She liked Keats; perhaps she liked him chiefly for

1. J. Middleton Murry, Keats and Shakespeare, (London, 1925), pp. 112-113.

liking her. She liked to be liked, and to be liked by someone whom their mutual friends were inclined to think a poet of genius was very pleasant to her. She wanted to be admired by everybody.

"There are thousands of Fanny Brawnes in the world today: in one class of society they talk of their various 'boys', and they say, and feel, that one is 'a nicer boy' than the others, but in all classes the thought, though not the speech, is the same. Keats was 'a nice boy' to Fanny Brawne; she really liked him. She may sometimes have thought that it was rather a pity he could not afford to marry her; and then again she thought it was just as well, on the whole rather better, for if she were to be married to him then she supposed she would have to give up flirtations and parties too if he wanted it, as he probably would. But until she was married to him, and that would take a conveniently long while, she could not be expected to give up these things, could she? And the thousands of Fanny Brawnes that are in the world to-day, and a good many thousands of others, will agree with her in replying: No, she could not be expected to. They are substantially right, but for the wrong reason. If she had felt for Keats what he felt for her, then her gaieties and her stylishness and her flirtations would have fallen from her naturally; they would have become intolerable to her. Since she did not feel for Keats what he felt for her, it was better that she should not have pretended."

This description of Fanny Brawne in the light of today's scholarship is not only mistaken but also unfair. She appears as the most common of creatures with certainly none of the attributes that endeared her then to Keats and today to the entire literary world. How could this impression of her exist; what changed the picture so suddenly? Mr. Murry explains the answers to these questions best himself¹.

"Keats and Shakespeare was written in 1924, and published in 1925. On the evidence then available, which was almost wholly confined to Keats's own letters, the portrait I drew of Fanny Brawne was not unreasonable. Certainly I might, even then, without actually forcing the evidence have taken a more favourable view of her. But nothing in the then existing evidence compelled me to do so; and, taking the evidence at its face value, as I did in 1924, it seems to me that my portrait of Fanny Brawne was not an unfair one. Nor did it occur to any critic at that time that it was."

We notice the use of "at that time" in Mr. Murry's explanation and we comment that this phrase seems to explain the situation and explain the error. However, far more important is the fact that this little phrase at once indicates the extent to which Keatsian scholarship has changed and

1. J. Middleton Murry, The Mystery of Keats, (London, 1949), pp. 11-13.

progressed in a few short years. Times have changed and with the changing times comes new evidence brought to light between the publication of the two books in question. Mr. Murry goes on to discuss the new evidence. "But a portrait that seemed just in 1925, became demonstrably unjust in 1936. For in that year was published the series of Fanny Brawne's letters to Fanny Keats, which had previously been unknown." Mr. Murry does not mention it by name, but, of course, he is referring to The Letters of Fanny Brawne to Fanny Keats edited by Fred Edgcumbe. This invaluable little work has indeed changed the "Victorian" view of Fanny Brawne and brought her out into the world of light where she truly belongs.

Mr. Murry goes on: "In any case my book was written, and the proofs corrected, before even these fragmentary and mysterious excerpts from Fanny Brawne's letters had appeared. When I wrote it not a single letter of Fanny Brawne's was known to be in existence, and practically the whole of the trustworthy evidence for forming an estimate of her character was contained in the writings of Keats himself, and, in particular - for this most deeply influenced me against her - in the unbearably painful letters he wrote to her in the summer of 1820 from Kentish Farm."

Mr. Murry then apologizes to his readers while admitting

his own mistake and his now recent effort to correct a false impression that he, as well as most other scholars of the time, left in the minds of casual readers and younger Keats scholars alike. "Had I looked more carefully I should have found in the evidence of Keats himself, good reason for mistrusting the picture of Fanny which he gave in his tormented letters, and I should have been able with a good conscience to give her the benefit of every doubt. I did not, and I am sorry. In this book I try to make amends."

This is not the place to discuss the book itself at length, or the amends that Mr. Murry makes, but the point that should be raised here is that he does make amends both sufficiently and properly to correct the mis-impression created years earlier. This correction is vital. It brings to light the true Fanny Brawne as well as setting forth the value of her letters and their importance in the over-all picture of Keatsian scholarship. Congratulations were certainly due Mr. Murry for his courage in exposing his own error and his dedication in setting the record straight.

In the pages that follow we shall see the real Fanny Brawne as she has been revealed in the light of more recent scholarship, and we shall see that earlier impressions of her were indeed mis-impressions. Fanny Brawne's letters to Fanny Keats, which Mr. Murry has already mentioned, will

play a vital role in our discussion of the effect of this certain Miss Brawne upon John Keats's life, love, and poetry as well as her own reputation to the present time.

Chapter I

On Saturday, August 9, 1800, Samuel Brawne's first child was born on the Brawne farm in the hamlet of West End. By her father's decision, this girl was called Frances after her mother.

Fanny Brawne entered the world as a member of a distinguished family, as a brief check of her father's family tree will prove¹. Her mother was born Frances Ricketts², whose family had been administrators of some distinction in the West Indies at the end of the eighteenth century. On November 1, 1800 Fanny was christened in Hampstead. By early 1807 the Brawne family had moved to Hampstead even though Samuel still held property in West End. However, at the age of thirty-five, in the middle of April, 1810, Samuel Brawne was dead of tuberculosis. How strange that the father of John Keats's future sweetheart should die of the same disease that was later to take him. It is not strange, perhaps, when one considers the prevalence of tuberculosis in England (indeed, the world) at that time and especially not strange when one considers that this disease took John's brother, Tom, as well as Mrs. Brawne's sister, Lucy³. In fact, young

1. Joanna Richardson, Fanny Brawne (Norwich, 1952), p. 2.

2. Ibid., p. 3.

3. Ibid., p. 7.

Samuel Brawne, Fanny's brother, was already afflicted with the disease¹.

Therefore, at thirty-nine, Mrs. Brawne was left a widow with three children, the oldest of which, Fanny, was not yet ten. This, certainly, was anything but a rosy glass through which to view the future. However, in April, 1816, John Ricketts, Fanny's uncle, died leaving an estate to each of his three sisters plus a trust fund for the three Brawne children. For this reason, from the spring of 1816 on the future of the Brawnes' looked more rosy. And so it was that in 1818 they took Charles Brown's half of Wentworth Place in Hampstead for the summer².

When the Brawnes arrived in Hampstead in 1818 road work was being completed on Downshire Hill at the top of the lane, and, where the two roads meet, St. John's Chapel was being erected. Hampstead was increasing in popularity, and the society therein was varied and attractive, especially for a girl not yet eighteen who was also attractive. As a result, Fanny almost at once moved into the society. It was not long before the Brawnes had become the closest friends with the Dilkes who occupied the other half of Wentworth Place. Especially between Mrs. Brawne and Mrs. Dilke there was a

1. On March 28, 1828, he died of tuberculosis at the age of twenty-three.

2. Brown, a bachelor, was in the habit of renting his side of the house for the summer.

growing and lasting friendship based on the fact that they found many interests in common. The Brawnes had never lost their affection for Hampstead from their previous visit, and now, by new and growing friendships, their affection had become even greater and more enduring.

Fanny first met John Keats at the Dilke home in late August or early September 1818, shortly after his return from a walking trip in Scotland because of his ill health. As Fanny Brawne wrote to Fanny Keats on September 18, 1820¹: "... I have known your brother for two years - am a great friend of Mrs. Dilke." Add to this the fact that Dilke himself commented years later that Keats was there "every day" after his return from his walking trip and one can readily see that, with the close association long existing between Keats and the Dilkes, and with the intimacy of the two halves of Wentworth Place, Keats must have seen and met Fanny, in fact the whole Brawne family, late in August or early in September 1818.

Love and marriage seem to be very much in the mind of young John Keats by early autumn 1818. Witness his letter to Reynolds on September 22 of that year congratulating him, for the second time, on his coming marriage². "Indeed I am grieved on your account that I am not at the same time happy

1. Fred Edgcumbe (ed.), Letters of Fanny Brawne to Fanny Keats (New York, 1937), p. 3.

2. J. Buxton Forman (ed.), The Letters of John Keats, (London, 1952), pp. 216-217.

but I conjure you to think of nothing but pleasure 'Gather the rose etc.' - Gorge the house of life. I pity you as much that it cannot last forever, as I do myself now drinking bitters. Give yourself up to it - you cannot help it - and I have a consolation in thinking so. I never was in love - yet the voice and the shape of a Woman has haunted me these two days...There is an awful warmth about my heart like a load of Immortality. Poor Tom - that woman - and Poetry were ringing changes in my senses."

One would be in no way stretching his imagination or the facts if he were to conclude that the voice, the shape, the warmth, and the woman were indeed Fanny Brawne, the girl whom he had so recently met at Wentworth Place.

Mrs. Dilke had, of course, described Keats to the Brawnes prior to their meeting so that Fanny at once recognized his somewhat unconventional appearance. She was attracted to him, it seems, almost at once and took delight in his mind, his conversation, and his humor. In addition to his immediate capture by Fanny's beauty (at least to him) Keats was also attracted to Mrs. Brawne as a woman who seemed to fill his long felt need of a mother's care and attention¹. She returned this attention and readily began to invite him to the Brawne home. Keats's immediate, and, indeed, continued interest in Fanny seemed to stem from a physical attraction.

1. Keats's mother had died in 1810 of tuberculosis.

In a letter to his brother George and George's wife Georgiana in late December, 1818, Keats described Fanny's every feature¹.
"...Shall I give you Miss Brawne? She is about my height - with a fine style of countenance of the lengthen'd sort - she wants sentiment in every feature - she manages to make her hair look well - her nostrils are fine - though a little painful - her mouth is bad and good - her Profile is better than her full-face which indeed is not full but pale and thin without showing any bone. Her shape is very graceful and so are her movements - her Arms are good, her hands bad-ish - her feet tolerable - she is not seventeen² - but she is ignorant - monstrous in her behaviour, flying out in all directions, calling people such names - that I was forced lately to make use of the term Minx - this is I think not from any innate vice but from a penchant she has for acting stylishly. I am however tired of such style and shall decline any more of it...."

The criticism contained in this letter certainly deludes no one. It had been written around Christmas time and the (mutual?) affection had already ripened into love. Keats felt a burning passion for Fanny; her beauty became his single thought and concern. She recoiled from this singleness of thought in her lover's mind and often begged him to place

1. Clarence Thorpe (ed.), John Keats: Complete Poems and Selected Letters, (New York, 1935), p. 590.

2. Keats erred here. Fanny had already passed her eighteenth birthday.

less emphasis upon her physical being. He wrote to her:
"Why may I not speak of your Beauty, since without it I could never have loved you. I cannot conceive any beginning of such love as I have for you but Beauty. There may be a sort of love for which, without the least sneer at it, I have the highest respect and can admire it in others: but it has not the bloom, the full form, the enchantment of love after my own heart."¹

Since mid-December Keats had been living with Brown at Wentworth Place. He intended to follow Brown to Chichester for Christmas, but his recurrent sore throat led him to abandon the journey, and, as a result, Mrs. Brawne invited him to spend Christmas day at Elm Cottage, where the Brawnes were now living for the winter. Friday, December 25, 1818, was, according to Fanny "the happiest day I had ever then spent."² Many people have interpreted this remark of Fanny's in her letter to Fanny Keats to indicate that she and Keats were engaged on this "happiest day." No one doubts her word that it was such a happy day, but it is more logical to conclude that the happiness sprang from some mutual assertion of love and devotion rather than an actual engagement. Whereas the interpretation of Fanny's "happiest day" as meaning an engagement is merely an interpretation and not a fact, we

1. Letter of July 8, 1819.

2. Fred Edgcumbe (ed.), Letters of Fanny Brawne to Fanny Keats (New York, 1937), pp. 54-55, letter of December 13, 1821.

have as a fact Fanny's letter of May 23, 1821, to Fanny Keats¹.
"-Soon after your brother Tom died [December 1, 1818], my dear John wrote to him [George Keats] offering him any assistance or money in his power. At that time he was not engaged to me and having just lost one brother felt all his affection turned towards the one that remained..." As we can see from Fanny Brawne's own statement in the letter, they were not engaged shortly after Tom's death. Now, we can take "shortly" all the way up to January 3, 1819. Keats began a journal letter to his brother George on December 16, 1818, the letter in which he tells of Tom's death and Fanny Brawne's description, and which ends on January 3, 1819. There is no indication of betrothal in the letter whatsoever. Therefore, taking Fanny's statement and Keats's lack of statement, we can see that they were engaged sometime after January 3, 1819. When George Keats returned to England to collect money in January, 1820, they were engaged². Therefore, the engagement took place sometime in 1819, most probably in October 1819, for reasons which we shall discuss later.

The affair, however, had its darker side. Keats had little if anything to offer a girl such as Fanny. Forgetting his diminutive size and his perhaps unmanly appearance, as Fanny most certainly did, we arrive at the serious problem of

1. Fred Edgcumbe (ed.), Letters of Fanny Brawne to Fanny Keats (New York, 1937), p. 33.

2. J. Middleton Murry, The Mystery of Keats (London, 1949), p. 28.

Keats's position in life. What advantages could or would be gained for Fanny by their union? The answer, of course, is none. Here was a young man with little or no money who had left the safe and perhaps even lucrative practice of medicine to devote his life to poetry. Here was a young man frequently ill who came from a family with a history of illness. Here was a young man who could not yet use his brother's estate and who could not live on his own. As a result, Mrs. Brawne decided, wisely, we believe, to let time run its course and neither sanction nor try to prevent this currently blooming love affair. After all, wasn't her daughter but eighteen? Couldn't all this be mere infatuation? Therefore, unless the low fortunes of Keats began to show some real promise, or, if things remained as they had been and he waited for three years, the affair was not to reach its culmination.

On January 1, 1819 Keats was again at Elm Cottage. He wrote to George concerning the party held there; he described it as uneventful; he made no mention of betrothal; but he did include a little rondeau he had written earlier.

O the Ravishment - the Bliss!
Fancy has her there she is -
Never fulsome, ever new,
There she steps! and tell me who
Has a Mistress so divine?

Fanny had indeed become the mistress of John Keats's heart and the guiding light of his life.

Chapter II

Readers and critics alike have never ceased to be amazed by the sudden productivity of Keats beginning in January, 1819, with The Eve of St. Agnes. Following upon this we find La Belle Dame Sans Merci, the Ode to a Nightingale, the Ode on a Grecian Urn, the Ode to Psyche, the Ode on Melancholy, and the Ode on Indolence. Why this sudden burst of creative power after a seeming vacancy of inspiration? The answer, it seems can be none other than the love, now reciprocated, for Fanny Brawne.

The Eve of St. Agnes was the first poem in which Keats was inspired by his love for Fanny Brawne. During the latter part of December 1818, he was with her at least some part of every day and the mutual affection was rapidly ripening into love. If, as Finney believes¹, The Eve of St. Agnes was a spontaneous expression of genius, then we surely have Fanny Brawne to thank for the spontaneity. Certainly his love for her determined both the form and the content of The Eve of St. Agnes. The composition of this poem is in the sensuous, romantic style of Spenser's Faerie Queene instead of in the Grecian style of Milton's Paradise Lost used in Hyperion². The Eve of St. Agnes has all the romantic spirit, the sensuous imagery, and the subtle, intricate stanza of Spenser's Faerie Queene, but undoubtedly

1. Claude L. Finney, The Evolution of Keats's Poetry (Cambridge, Mass., 1936), II, p. 540.

2. Ibid., p. 547.

its most striking element is its intensity of sensuous imagery.

The sensuous temperament in which Keats found himself at this time made him true master of his poetic skills, and who else but Fanny Brawne could have led him into this sensuous temperament and sensuous enjoyment of life? Brief though this joy and passion may have been for this man already dying, the year 1819 was certainly the period of supreme sensuousness in his poetry and supreme brilliance in his style. However, even in the midst of this joy and love, Keats expressed his belief that happiness is but a transient moment in a world of unhappiness. Therefore, The Eve of St. Agnes is a grim interpretation of love as well as a sensuous romance¹. The romance begins on a note of bitter cold.

St. Agnes' Eve - Ah bitter chill it was!
The owl, for all his feathers was a-cold;
The hare limp'd trembling through the frozen grass,
And silent was the flock in wooly fold:

The very description of the beadsman includes coldness, age, and even death. Even in the first flush of love, it seems, Keats had doubts about its outcome and durability.

We may, with some degree of surety, even suppose that the Ode to Fanny was written about this time². We know that Keats was forced to remain inside because of his throat; certainly this produced the line: "Beckon me not into the wintry air."

1. Claude L. Finney, The Evolution of Keats's Poetry, (Cambridge, Mass., 1936), II, p. 550.

2. Amy Lowell, John Keats, (Cambridge, Mass., 1925), II, p. 149.

Apparently Fanny was going out to a dance. Keats writes further: "...do not turn
The current of your heart from me so soon."

He then makes his plea: "...keep me free
From torturing jealousy."

If, as we believe, the love between the two had been confessed and expressed on Christmas day, then this ode was written in late December 1818, or early January 1819. The influence of his love and concern for it are clearly evident.

St. Agnes eve occurs on January 20, which, it so happened, was about the date on which Keats left for Chichester. It seems quite reasonable, then, that as he was about to say good-bye to Fanny for a while, the legend of a maid dreaming of her future husband might enter his mind. This legend might well have been forgotten by the world had it not been for Keats and his use of it. Today it and the eve itself remain for all and undoubtedly will never be forgotten.

Porphyro's love for Madeline certainly seems to be Keats's idealized version of his own love for Fanny. Madeline "trembling in her soft and chilly nest" is indeed the goddess who has now taken a home in his mind and heart: that goddess, of course, is his Fanny.

In February Keats was back at Wentworth Place now suffering from his recurring throat difficulties. In fact, his throat was now so bad that he was forced to remain indoors. Fanny visited him; in so doing she occasionally met his friends. She met

Severn, but he, calling her "a cold and conventional mistress"¹ was not at all impressed with her. However, sometime later at Rome he found a picture of which he wrote: "There is a beautiful portrait of Miss Brawne by Titian in the 'sacred and profane Love'... this figure always delighted me..."²

It was only natural that Fanny should be admired by and popular with the young men of the society of the area. She received many invitations and often attended dances and parties with army officers. Keats was ill, far too ill ever to go out, much less escort her to social gatherings. Out she went, however, and Keats remained home to brood upon her and his love for her. Jealousy and anguish burned within him as hot as the illness that was slowly consuming him. In the early spring of 1819 he put at least some of his feelings upon the subject into poetry in the form of his Ode to Fanny.

Physician Nature! let my spirit blood!
O ease my heart of verse and let me rest;
Throw me upon thy Tripod, till the flood
Of stifling numbers ebbs from my full breast.
A theme! a theme! great nature! give a theme;
Let me begin my dream.
I come—I see thee, as thou standest there,
Beckon me not into the wintry air.

Ah! dearest love, sweet home of all my fears,
And hopes, and joys, and panting miseries, —
To-night, if I may guess, thy beauty wears
A smile of such delight,
As brilliant and as bright,
As when with ravish'd, aching, vassal eyes,

1. Joanna Richardson, Fanny Brawne, (Norwich, 1952), p. 31.

2. Ibid.

Lost in soft amaze,
I gaze, I gaze!

Who now, with greedy looks, eats up my feasts?
What stare outfaces now my silver moon?
Ah! keep that hand unravish'd at the least;
Let, let, the amorous burn—
But, pr'ythee, do not turn
The current of your heart from me so soon.
O! save, in charity,
The quickest pulse for me.

Save it for me, sweet love! though music breathe
Voluptuous visions into the warm air,
Though swimming through the dance's dangerous wreath;
Be like an April day,
Smiling and cold and gay,
A temperate lily, temperate as fair;
Then, Heaven! there will be
A warmer June for me.

Why, this—you'll say, my Fanny! is not true:
Put your soft hand upon your snowy side,
Where the heart beats: confess—'tis nothing new—
Must not a woman be
A feather on the sea,
Sway'd to and fro by every wind and tide?
Of as uncertain speed
As blow-ball from the mead?

I know it—and to know it is despair
To one who loves you as I love, sweet Fanny!
Whose heart goes fluttering for you every where,
Nor, when away you roam,
Dare keep its wretched home,
Love, love alone, his pains severe and many:
When loneliest keep me free,
From torturing jealousy.

Ah! if you prize my subdued soul above
The poor, the fading, brief pride of an hour;
Let none profane my Holy See of love,
Or with a rude hand break
The sacramental cake:
Let none else touch the just new-budded flower;
If not—may my eyes close,
Love! on their lost repose.

As one reads the ode, it becomes very apparent that Keats was indeed racked by jealousies, tortures, and fears. He begs not to be beckoned into the wintry air (Stanza I), the wintry air that would be so painful and damaging to his burning throat and lungs. His love is the home of all his fears, hopes, joys, and miseries (Stanza II), Such was Fanny to him; she was his hope and yet his fear, his joy and yet his misery, and especially, it seems, on this night. The dual nature of her being to him was ever so present as he sat in the confines of his room. The greedy look (Stanza III), came from some other man at the dance, but she must save her love for Keats when he will be up and about in "a warmer June" (Stanza IV). Keats is lost in love for her and as a result cannot control his jealousy at this time (Stanza VI), but if she really loves him, she will keep herself and her affection only for him (Stanza VII).

On February 13, while probably still in poor physical condition, Keats began his Eve of St. Mark¹. It is, as we know, a fragment. Incomplete though it may be, it is based upon an old legend that those who keep watch at a church door on April 25 will see the ghosts of all who are to die within a year, and that those who rake the ashes in a fire will find the footprints of the doomed upon them next morning². Perhaps if it had been completed Keats would have included both omens in his poem. Also, perhaps if it had been completed Keats would

1. Joanna Richardson, Fanny Brawne, (Norwich, 1952), p. 33.

2. Ibid.

have used the poem to show the fear that his love might not be fulfilled. This, at least, was the theory of Dante Rossetti¹.

In March of the same year Keats wrote his sonnet Why Did I Laugh To-night? He was moody and lifeless; certainly it must have been difficult for Fanny to understand him. In April the Dilkes moved to London; in the same month the Brawnes moved into Wentworth Place again. This time, of course, they moved into the Dilke half of the house. Naturally, Keats and Fanny saw each other during the Spring, and Brown observed the lovers with his usual interest and gaiety. The two often walked away from the eyes of others, however, and sought the peace and solitude of the nearby countryside².

In mid-April Keats decided to move to Westminster. He had come to realize that he could not concentrate on his poetry with Fanny ever so near. He had begun to fear a poetic sterility because of her constant distraction. The move must have had its effect, for on April 21 in the midst of a letter to George and Georgiana Keats he wrote La Belle Dame Sans Merci. Perhaps in this poem could be heard the echo of his own servitude to love and his maid. At any rate, the servitude seemed to be temporarily laid aside. By the end of the month in his journal letter to America there were six poems. This list included the sonnet To Sleep and the first of the series of great odes, Ode to Psyche.

1. Joanna Richardson, Fanny Brawne (Norwich, 1952), p. 33.

2. Ibid., p. 35.

In May he wrote the Ode to a Nightingale and the Ode on a Grecian Urn. There is no reference to Fanny in any of the odes, but there is certainly the suggestion of passion, of beauty, and of unchanging love. One cannot help noting that these odes were all written within a very short period of time after Fanny's arrival at Wentworth Place. Whether she was with him when he wrote the odes we do not know; it is not important. What is important is the fact that he wrote his great odes during the time when he was near to her, could see her whenever he wished, and was reasonably sure of her love for him. Her influence, then, although not written as such in his poems, certainly was felt in every aspect of his life as John Keats entered the finest weeks of his poetic life and reached the height of his poetic career.

Sir Sidney Colvin has classified La Belle Dame Sans Merci as a "masterpiece of romantic and tragic symbolism on the wasting power of Love."¹ This, it would seem, coincides with the opinion of Kenneth Muir that "on the surface Keats's poem is concerned with a knight's seduction by a witch or fairy; but it clearly symbolizes the destructive effects of sexual passion."² With these opinions in mind we must then remember a letter Keats wrote to Fanny Brawne on July 8, 1819, saying in part: "I never knew before, what such a love as you have made me feel, was;

1. Sidney Colvin, John Keats (New York, 1917), p. 350.

2. Kenneth Muir, "Essays in Criticism," IV (Jan. 1952), 435.

I did not believe in it; my Fancy was afraid of it, lest it should burn me up."¹ Therefore, says Pettet: "This emotion, and its poetic crystallization in the ballad in no way invalidates his love for Fanny, for of course he was deeply in love with her; it merely expresses those warring contradictions we have already traced in his attitude."² If his attitude were not already complex enough, let us consider for a moment his words in a letter to Fanny of July 25, "I have two luxuries to brood over in my walks, your Loveliness and the hour of my death. O that I could have possession of them both in the same minute."³

The vague doubts, shadows, and fears that had marginally crept into the Eve of St. Agnes cannot be found in Keats's Ode to Psyche⁴. For this reason and because of the general tone of the poem, Pettet regards To Psyche as Keats's "epithalamion" to Fanny Brawne. If this is so, the poem seems to follow the pattern of the idyllic relationship between Keats and Fanny between April and June that many writers have pictured because of the two living in different parts of the same house. This, then, is what we should expect. However, the four odes

1. Maurice Buxton Forman (ed.), The Letters of John Keats (London, 1952), p. 355.
2. E. C. Pettet, On the Poetry of Keats (Cambridge, Eng., 1957), p. 216.
3. Clarence Thorpe (ed.), John Keats: Complete Poems and Selected Letters (New York, 1935), p. 621.
4. E. C. Pettet, On the Poetry of Keats (Cambridge, Eng., 1957), p. 222.

immediately following this one show Keats still suffering from his old doubts, fears and tortures¹.

It should be quite obvious from a reading of the four odes following To Psyche (To a Nightingale, On a Grecian Urn, On Indolence, On Melancholy) that Middleton Murry must be wrong when he states: "It was when he had to part from Fanny at the end of June 1819 that 'the hateful siege of contraries' began in Keats's being."² The "contraries", it seems, never began; they were a fundamental part of the very emotional make-up of Keats. They were there always, but his love for Fanny brought them to the fore. "Love is my religion" - Keats wrote³ - "I could die for that. I could die for you. My creed is Love and you are its only tenet. You have ravished me away by a Power I cannot resist... I cannot breathe without you." He had breathed, indeed, lived, before he had met her, but now she had become the mistress of his soul, his fate, his life. The complications within himself flowed forth in this all too complicated (for him) affair.

If the complications of Keats's own nature as represented in his love affair baffle us, then we should not be too surprised

1. E. C. Pettet, On the Poetry of Keats (Cambridge, Eng., 1957), p. 222.

2. J. Middleton Murry, The Mystery of Keats (London, 1949), p. 17.

3. Maurice Buxton Forman (ed.), The Letters of John Keats (London, 1952), p. 435.

to find ourselves baffled by some of the problems in his poetry. We find, for instance, that Lamia is a baffling poem in regard to our acceptance or rejection of it as a veiled autobiography with Lycius, Lamia, and Apollonius standing for Keats, Fanny Brawne, and Charles Brown. Of course, when we stop to realize that this is a poetic reflection of the turmoil in Keats's own feelings about love in general and Fanny in particular we remove at least some of the baffling elements from the poem and begin to appreciate the nature of the personal conflict behind Lamia. Indeed, Lamia has become for Keats another incarnation of the Fatal Woman, so her disguise may not really hide Fanny Brawne from the eyes of the reader after all. In reality, it matters little whether we see Lamia as Fanny Brawne in particular, or the fateful woman of sexual love in general. His attitude and its inherent complications are surely there to be seen.

Each day brings its own change of events, however, just as each month seemed to bring its change of heart to John Keats. He was a man who could not live with or without love, and, similarly, he was a man who could not doubt his love forever. A brief summary of the time and situation is perhaps best stated by Pettet¹. "The return to Fanny in early October was decisive, and had it not been for his illness Keats would certainly have married her sometime in the following year. Apart from the

1. E. C. Pettet, On the Poetry of Keats (Cambridge, Eng., 1957), p. 245.

three ecstatic letters to Fanny immediately following their reunion, there is nothing in his surviving correspondence for the rest of the year that throws much light on his attitude. But the 1820 letters, especially those written at the time of his illness in the spring, show us that he had at last convinced himself that Fanny's love was as deep and genuine as his own. Whatever the consequences to his poetry, as a man he could not live without her, and though the 1820 letters are filled with an anguish that makes them almost unbearable to read, this agony is the prospect of another parting and of the death that will take Fanny away forever. He is no longer harrowed by doubts about love itself."

We now have John Keats tortured by doubts and fears far greater than those which previously made his existence such an unhappy experience. The man was not far from death and the love of his life, although now trusted and certain could no longer save him.

Chapter III

As great as the peak may have been to which Keats soared, time did not treat him kindly. No sooner had he reached his zenith than it was over. Brown would soon rent his house for the summer, and Keats would once again be forced to seek summer lodgings elsewhere. During June he was undecided what to do, and strangely enough for that time of year, his sore throat was returning. His love, if anything, grew stronger. He began to feel, however, that he was being selfish in asking Fanny to be faithful to a man who could promise nothing and offer little. As a result, he told her a few days before he left that he would not return unless he had found better fortune somewhere along the way. By June 27 he was on his way to the Isle of Wight and, for the first time in his life, was leaving Fanny for an undetermined period of time.

In the first week of July he wrote to Fanny expressing his longing and a touch of fear about the trap into which he had fallen¹. "Ask yourself my love whether you are not very cruel to have so entrammelled me, so destroyed my freedom. Will you confess this in the letter you must write immediately and do all you can to console me in it - make it rich and a draught of poppies to intoxicate me - write the softest words and kiss them that I may at least touch my lips where yours have been. For

1. Joanna Richardson, Fanny Brawne (Norwich, 1952), p. 38.

myself I know not how to express my devotion to so fair a form:
I want a brighter word than bright, a fairer word than fair.
I almost wish we were butterflies and lived but three summer
days - three such days with you I could fill with more delight
than fifty common years could ever contain."

The summer wore on with frequent exchanges of letters
between the two. Keats's mind began to dwell more and more upon
the thought of death and his receiving death from and with
Fanny. On the twenty-fifth of July he wrote to her: "I have
two luxuries to brood over in my walks, your Loveliness and the
hour of my death. O that I could have possession of them both
in the same minute. I hate the world: it batters too much the
wings of my self-will, and would I could take a sweet poison
from your lips to send me out of it. From no others would I
take it..."¹

We can only imagine what the reaction of an eighteen year
old girl would be to such words. We know that she wrote to him
and asked for no more letters of that type². His next letters
certainly were not that type; but they were certainly not of
the love-letter type either. Keats attempted to explain the
reason for this. In August he wrote to Fanny: "I am not idle
enough for proper downright love-letters - I leave this minute
a scene in our Tragedy and see you (think it not blasphemy)

1. Clarence Thorpe (ed.), John Keats: Complete Poems and Selected Letters (New York, 1935), p. 621.
2. Joanna Richardson, Fanny Brawne (Norwich, 1952), p. 41.

through the mists of Plots, speeches, counterplots and counter speeches - The Lover is madder than I am - I am nothing to him - he has a figure like the Statue of Meleager and double distilled fire in his heart."¹ Here he is referring to Otho the Great and his inability to switch from it to the theme of a love letter. However, his mind was undoubtedly still dwelling upon Fanny so that much of his writing, perhaps even subconsciously, was colored by his thought of her. For this reason, much of what Otho has in common with Lamia springs from the same personal experience². As Buxton Forman, in his edition of the letters has said: "Probably a good deal of the torture which that wretched prince (Ludolph) is depicted as undergoing was painfully studied from experience."³ Gittings adds to this: "It is likely that Ludolph's picture of his unfaithful bride in the last scene of the play is a picture of Fanny Brawne drawn in exact physical detail; he also echoes the tone and words of Keats's letter to her on August 16."⁴

We may rightly conclude that Gittings has probably gone a bit too far in the realm of speculation. An "exact physical

1. Maurice Buxton Forman (ed.), The Letters of John Keats (London, 1952), p. 366.
2. E. C. Pettet, On the Poetry of Keats (Cambridge, Eng., 1957), p. 240.
3. Maurice Buxton Forman (ed.), The Letters of John Keats (London, 1952), footnote p. 366.
4. Robert Gittings, The Living Year (Cambridge, Mass., 1954), p. 162.

description" is surely not to be found. However, the emotional condition of Keats at this time as demonstrated in his letters readily leads even the most cautious observer into speculation as to Fanny's ever present influence upon him and therefore upon all that he did, thought, and wrote. She hoped he could and would return to Hampstead in time for her birthday. He never arrived. He was making the supreme effort of staying away from her and trying his best to drive her from his mind. However, on September 10 he set out for London in hope of getting some money for George, who had almost gone bankrupt. Keats wanted to publish The Eve of St. Agnes in order to raise money. Taylor and Hessy advised him against it. Keats now revised this poem written in January¹ and in so doing changed certain passages into expressions of greater passion and desire. Interesting comments on and objections to this revision are to be found in Woodhouse's letter to John Taylor of September 20, 1819. Among other things Woodhouse says: "...Keats was in town the day before I left. He came into 93 unexpectedly while I was in the midst of a recapitulation to Hessy of the strong points of the matter between yourselves and the Capt... K. came about his Chancery Suit that is to be: or rather that is not to be, if he succeeds in the object of his journey to London; which is to dissuade some old aunt from going into that Court. - He

1. In a letter to John Taylor written September 5, 1819, Keats had said: "...I have finished Lamia, and am now occupied in revising St. Agnes's Eve, and studying Italian."

took his breakfast with me on the Sunday, and remained with me till I stepped into the coach for this place at 3 o'clock. I was much gratified with his company. He wanted to publish the Eve of St. Agnes & Lamia immediately: but Hessy told him it could not answer to do so now. I wondered why he said nothing of Isabella: & assured him it would please more than the Eve of St. Agnes - He said he could not bear the former now. It appeared to him mawkish. This certainly cannot be so. The feeling is very likely to come across an author on review of a former work of his own, particularly where the objects of his present meditations are of a more sobered & unpassionate character. The feeling of mawkishness seems to be that which comes upon us where anything of great tenderness & excessive simplicity is met with when we are not in a sufficiently tender & simple frame of mind to bear it: when we experience a sort of revulsion, or resiliency (if there be such a word) from the sentiment or expression. Now I believe there is nothing in the most passionate parts of Isabella to excite this feeling. It may, as may Lear, leave the reader far behind: but there is none of the sugar & butter sentiment, that cloyes & disgusts. He had the Eve of St. A. copied fair. He has made trifling alterations, inserted an additional stanza early in the poem to make the legend more intelligible, and correspondent with what afterwards takes place, particularly with respect to the supper & the playing on the lute. - he retains the name of Porphyro - has altered the last 3 lines to leave on the reader

a sense of pettish disgust, by bringing old Angela in (only) dead stiff & ugly. He says he likes that the poem should leave off with this change of sentiment - it was what he aimed at, & was glad to find from my objections to it that he has succeeded. - I apprehend he had a fancy for trying his hand at an attempt to play with his reader & fling him off at last - I sho'd have thought he affected the 'Don Juan' style of swinging up sentiment & sneering: but that he had before asked Hussy if he co'd procure him a sight of that work, as he had not met with it, and if the E. of St. A. had not in all probability been altered before his Lordship had then flown in the face of the public. There was another alteration, which I abused for "a full hour by the Temple clock." You know if a thing has a decent side, I generally look no further - As the Poem was origi'y written, we innocent ones (ladies & myself) might very well have supposed that Porphyro, when acquainted with Madeline's love for him, & when 'he arose, Etherial flush'd &c. &c. (turn to it) set himself at once to persuade her to go off with him & succeeded & went over the 'Dartmoor black' (now changed for some other place) to be married in right honest chaste & sober wise. But, as it is now altered, as soon as M. has declared her love, P. winds by degrees his arm round her, presses breast to breast, and acts all the acts of a bonafide husband, while she fancies she is only playing the part of a wife in a dream. This alteration is of about 3 stanzas; and tho' there are no improper expressions

but all is left to inference, and tho' profanely speaking, the Interest on the reader's imagination is greatly heightened, yet I do apprehend it will render the poem unfit for ladies, & indeed scarcely to be mentioned to them among the 'things that are.' He says he does not want ladies to read his poetry: that he writes for men - & that if in the former poem there was an opening for a doubt what took place, it was his fault for not writing clearly & comprehensibly - that he sh'd despise a man who would be such an eunuch in sentiment as to leave a maid, with that character about her, in such a situation: & sh'd despise himself to write about &c. &c. &c. - and all this sort of Keats-like rhodomontade. - But you will see the work I dare say..."

One can almost imagine the reaction of Taylor to this letter. This is his reply¹.

"Bakewell Sat 25th Sep 1819

My Dear Dick,

Your welcome Letter has just reached me, having been forwarded in a parcel from Retford, which place I left last Tuesday. - I sit down to reply to it, more perhaps to express my regret at what you tell me of the Changes in the Eve of St. Agnes, than for any deliberate purpose of saying my say on things in general. - This Folly of Keats is the most Stupid piece of Folly I can conceive. - He does not bear the ill

1. Amy Lowell, John Keats (Cambridge, Mass., 1925), II, pp. 321-322.

opinion of the world calmly, & yet he will not allow it to form a good opinion of Him & his writings. He repented of this Conduct when Endymion was published as much as a Man can repent, who shows by the accidental Expression of Disappointment, Mortification & Disgust that he has met with a Result different from that which he had anticipated - Yet he will again challenge the same Neglect or Censure, & again (I pledge my Discernment on it) be vexed at the Reception he has prepared for himself. - This Vaporing is as far from sound Fortitude, as the Conduct itself in the Instances before us, is devoid of good Feeling and good Sense. - I don't know how the Meaning of the new Stanzas is wrapped up, but I will not be accessory (I can answer also for H. I think) towards publishing anything which can only be read by Men, since even on their Minds a bad Effect must follow the Encouragement of those thoughts which cannot be raised without Impropriety. -

"If it was so natural a process in Keats's Mind to carry on the Train of his Story in the way he has done, that he could not write decently, if he had that Disease of the Mind which renders the Perception too dull to discover Right from Wrong in Matters of moral Taste, I should object equally then as now to the Sanctioning of the Infirmary by an act of cool Encouragement on my part, but then he would be personally perhaps excusable - As it is, the flying in the Face of all Decency & Discretion is doubly offensive from its being accompanied with

so preposterous a Conceit on his part of being able to overcome the best found Habits of our Nature. - Had he known truly what the Society and what the Suffrages of Women are worth, he would never have thought of depriving himself of them. - So far as he is unconsciously silly in this Proceeding I am sorry for him, but for the rest I cannot but confess to you that it excites in me the Strongest Sentiments of Disapprobation. - Therefore my dear Dick if he will not so far concede to my wishes as to leave the passage as it originally stood, I must be content to admire his Poems with some other Imprint, & in so doing I can reap as much Delight from the Perusal of them as if they were our own property, without having the disquieting Consideration attached to them of our approving, by the 'Imprimateur,' those Parts which are unfit for publication. -

"You will think me too severe again. Well then; I will suspend my Judgment till I see or hear more, but if these my present Views are shown to be no Illusion I must act as I have described - How strange too that he should have taken such a Dislike to Isabella - I still think of it exactly as you do, & from what he copied out of Lamia in a late Letter I fancy I shall prefer it to that poem also. - The Extract he gave me was from the Feast: I did not enter so well into it as to be qualified to criticise, but whether it be a want of Taste for such Subjects as Fairy Tales, or that I do not perceive true Poetry except it is in Conjunction with good Sentiment I cannot tell but it did not promise to please me. - "

Proper or improper though the lines may have been, the fact still remained that Keats had to make a living. On September 21 he sent Woodhouse his Ode to Autumn. He had decided to write for periodicals as a means to this much needed income, and so he wrote to Dilke asking him to find rooms. In his usual faithful manner Dilke assisted his friend and found lodgings at 25 College Street, Westminster. On October 8 Keats was in London. This day was a Friday. That Sunday (October 10) Keats visited Hampstead¹. An era in the life of John Keats had ended. He had reached his zenith; his period of greatness was over.

Once again Keats's passion took hold of him, and, once again he found himself lost in devotion to the girl he had almost resolved to forget during the summer. Finney believes that the very night of this reunion, perhaps after having returned to his lodgings from Hampstead, Keats wrote the sonnet The Day Is Gone in pleasant memory of this wonderful day². We can neither prove nor disprove this date of composition, but certainly our knowledge of the man's own temperament and his feelings for this girl argue in favor of Finney's theory. At least from this time on Keats gave of himself wholeheartedly to love and never again complained of the enslavement of it. Intensely jealous though he remained of her and his love, now,

1. Joanna Richardson, Fanny Brawne (Norwich, 1952), p. 45.

2. Claude L. Finney, The Evolution of Keats's Poetry (Cambridge, Mass., 1936), II, p. 723.

at least, he submitted to the fire that had been burning within him for almost a year.

Ironic would be the only word to describe the fact that now that Keats was once again with his loved one he could produce nothing. The presence of the girl who had inspired his greatest moments in poetry now seemed to sap his very poetic strength. Keats had gone away from her; he had attempted to put her out of his mind. While away he had devoted himself to poetry much as a fanatic would. The passion burned within, however, and now it seemed that he could not quench the fire. Poetry, although not forgotten, was now secondary. His whole mind and being seemed absorbed by the one he yearned for so fiercely. His poetic spirit had fled; he was indeed enslaved by the love he had tried so desperately to escape.

Chapter IV

However, devoted to love as he now was, Keats was nevertheless quite unhappy. In addition to the jealousies that continuously crossed his mind, Keats was now torn with an additional fear that Fanny did not love him as much as he loved her. This, of course, led to the fear that she would soon love someone else. Therefore, he more and more mistrusted her social life and the affairs it involved. This compounded mental and emotional difficulty greatly reduced his poetic ability and productivity. While in this torment Keats composed the sonnet beginning: "I cry your mercy..." as a plea to Fanny to free him from his doubts and fears. Although there is no proof, scholars have dated this sonnet in November or December 1819 because of the nature of its content¹.

I cry your mercy - pity - love! - aye, love!
Merciful love that tantalizes not,
One - thoughted, never-wandering, guiltless love,
Unmask'd, and being seen - without a blot!
O! let me have thee whole, -all -all - be mine!
That shape, that fairness, that sweet minor zest
Of love, your kiss, - those hands, those eyes devine,
That warm, white, lucent, million-pleasured breast, -
Yourself - your soul - in pity give me all,
Withhold no atom's atom or I die,
Or living on perhaps, your wretched thrall,
Forget, in the mist of idle misery,
Life's purposes, -the palate of my mind
Losing its gust, and my ambition blind!²

1. Amy Lowell, John Keats (Cambridge, Mass., 1925), II, pp. 376-377.

2. Clarence Thorpe (ed.), John Keats: Complete Poems and Selected Letters (New York, 1935), p. 380.

During this same period Keats also expressed his agony in the blank verse lines: "This living hand..." Finney has summed up this poetical year in Keats's life by saying that "Since the sonnet 'I cry your mercy' and the verses 'This living hand' were composed in November or December 1819 while Keats was in the midst of the composition of The Cap and Bells, the final stanzas of The Cap and Bells were the last verses of poetry which he composed."¹

George arrived from America early in January 1820², and while he was in England there was much entertainment at Wentworth Place. On January 28 George left once again for America³. On February 3 John went to London⁴. He returned home around eleven o'clock in the evening. Brown mentions his apparently poor condition at that moment and adds: "On entering the cold sheets, he slightly coughed, and I heard him say, 'That is blood from my mouth... Bring me the candle, Brown; and let me see this blood.' After regarding it steadfastly, he looked up in my face, with a calmness of countenance that I can never forget, and said - 'I know the colour of that blood; - it is arterial blood...that drop

1. Claude L. Finney, The Evolution of Keats's Poetry (Cambridge, Mass., 1936), II, p. 740.

2. Amy Lowell, John Keats (Cambridge, Mass., 1925), II, p. 380.

3. Ibid., p. 387.

4. Ibid., p. 389.

of blood is my death-warrant; - I must die."¹ So it was that slightly more than one year before his death the epitaph of the poet whose name was "writ in water" was written in blood.

The knowledge of the situation, of course, in no way helped Keats's spirits. He spent many hours brooding over his condition. His state of mind was naturally reflected in his love affair even though Fanny did all that she could to cheer him, including coming over to Brown's side of the house in the mornings with her sewing. It was at this time that she gave Keats a ring engraved with both their names². On March 6 Keats had a heart attack. The doctor ordered complete rest and quiet.

1. Joanna Richardson, Fanny Brawne (Norwich, 1952), p. 53.

2. Ibid., p. 57

Chapter V

As April arrived Keats began to tell people, at least, that he was feeling better. The thought of having to leave his home once again for the summer hung over him, and this in no way encouraged his recovery. In early May he moved to Kentish Town¹. On May 7 he took a brief boat trip with Brown and then returned to 2 Wesleyan Place, Kentish Town, his new temporary residence². On May 15 Keats said to Brown: "...I have continued much the same, and am well enough to extract much more pleasure than pain out of the summer, even though I should get no better."³ It is difficult to believe that anyone was deceived by this seemingly casual remark.

It is certain that Keats did not deceive himself with such pretended hope. He wrote to Fanny: "I have been a walk this morning with a book in my hand, but as usual I have been occupied with nothing but you I wish I could say in an agreeable manner. I am tormented day and night. They talk of my going to Italy. 'Tis certain that I shall never recover if I am to be so long separated from you; yet with all this devotion to you I cannot persuade myself into any confidence of you. Past experience connected with the fact of my long separation from you gives me

1. Amy Lowell, John Keats (Cambridge, Mass., 1925), II, p. 411.

2. Ibid., p. 412.

3. Ibid., p. 414.

agonies which are scarcely to be talked of. When your mother comes I shall be very sudden and expert in asking her whether you have been to Mrs. Dilke's, for she might say no to make me easy. I am literally worn to death, which seems my only recourse. I cannot forget what has pass'd. What? nothing with a man of the world, but to me dreadful...When you were in the habit of flirting with Brown you would have left off, could your own heart have felt one half of one pang mine did. Brown is a good sort of Man - he did not know he was doing me to death by inches. I feel the effect of every one of those hours in my side now... and I will never see or speak to him until we are both old men, if we are to be... I have heard you say that it was not unpleasant to wait a few years - you have amusements - your mind is away - you have not brooded over one idea as I have, and how should you? You are to me an object intensely desireable - the air I breathe in a room empty of you is unhealthy. I am not the same to you - no - you can wait - you have a thousand activities - you can be happy without me. Any party, any thing to fill up the day has been enough. How have you pass'd this month? Who have you smil'd with? All this may seem savage in me. You do not feel as I do - you do not know what it is to love - one day you may - your time is not come... I appeal to you by the blood of that Christ you believe in: Do not write to me if you have done anything this month which it would have pained me to have seen. You may have altered - if you have not - if you still behave in dancing rooms

and societies as I have seen you - I do not want to live - if you have done so I wish this coming night may be my last. I cannot live without you, and not only you but chaste you; virtuous you. The sun rises and sets, the day passes, and you follow the bent of your inclinations to a certain extent - you have no conception of the quantity of miserable feeling that passes through me in a day. - Be serious! Love is not a play-thing - and again do not write unless you can do it with a crystal conscience. I would sooner die for want of you than -"1

This letter, and others, had a profound effect upon Fanny. She was deeply disturbed both by the attitude and the condition of Keats. Apparently she understood that the attitude was caused by the condition.

The summer was drawing to a close; the fall was approaching; but this was to be no ordinary autumn. Even if his doctors had not told him, Keats undoubtedly would have known that he could not live through another winter in England. In a few short weeks Keats would be on his way to Italy. Fanny was all too well aware of the imminence of John's parting. If the decision had been only hers to make, Fanny would have married Keats at once regardless of his health². Fanny's mother, however, realizing that her daughter was not yet of age, promised that upon Keats's return they should

1. Maurice Buxton Forman (ed.), The Letters of John Keats (London, 1952), pp. 496-497.

2. Joanna Richardson, Fanny Brawne (Norwich, 1952), p. 70.

be married and live at the Brawne home¹. Fanny mentions this fact in a letter to Fanny Keats²: "...and had he returned I should have been his wife and he would have lived with us."

Keats was now gravely ill. His weakness was on the increase. During his last weeks in England he was nursed by Fanny and Mrs. Brawne. For once he was, though dangerously ill, happy. Fanny Brawne wrote Keats's farewell to his sister Fanny for him in September so that he would not have to exert himself³. On Monday, September 18, 1820, she began her first letter to Fanny Keats saying: "Your brother on leaving England expressed a wish that I should occasionally write to you;..."⁴ After an exchange of tokens and gifts including his giving to her his folio Shakespeare and his miniature by Severn, they said goodbye. It was September 13, 1820. On the following Monday Keats set sail with Severn never again to see his native England. Fanny Brawne took this occasion to write to Fanny Keats. This first letter began not only a series of letters, but also a friendship of lasting importance. In Fanny Brawne's letters to Fanny Keats we get an

1. Joanna Richardson, Fanny Brawne (Norwich, 1952), p. 70.
2. Fred Edgcumbe, (ed.), Letters of Fanny Brawne to Fanny Keats (New York, 1937); pp. 27-28.
3. Ibid., footnotes pp. 5-6, "Keats dictated a letter to his sister (Letters, p. 517), dated Sept. 11th, 1820: 'It is not illness that prevents me writing, but as I am recommended to avoid every sort of fatigue I have accepted the assistance of a friend (Fanny Brawne) who I have desired to write to you when I am gone and to communicate any intelligence she may hear of me: Both letter and signature are in Fanny Brawne's handwriting.'"
4. Ibid., p. 3.

accurate picture of the heart and soul of the girl who loved John Keats. From this picture of the real Fanny we are able to dispel the many false theories and statements that have arisen about her and see the real, true Fanny and understand the real, true love and affection she held in her heart for John Keats.

The importance of this first letter cannot be overestimated. Not only is it extremely important for the feeling it displays in regard to the often misunderstood affair between Fanny and Keats, but it is most important for the series of letters it begins. This series in itself is the foundation stone upon which the defenders of Fanny Brawne may now construct their case. For these reasons this letter is here given in its entirety¹.

"My dear Miss Keats

Your brother on leaving England expressed a wish that I should occasionally write to you; a wish with which I feel the greatest pleasure in complying, but I cannot help thinking I require some kind of introduction, instead of which I must inform you of all my claims to your correspondence and I assure you I think them no slight ones, for I have known your brother for two years, am a great friend of Mrs. Dilke's who I believe you like, and once sent you a message, which I do not know whether you received by a lady who had then never seen you but who expected to do so, a Mrs. Cornish. Besides which I have several times invited you to stay with me during the last time your brother George

1. Fred Edgcumbe (ed.), Letters of Fanny Brawne to Fanny Keats (New York, 1937), pp. 3-5.

was in England, an indulgence which was not granted me. You see I have been quite intimate with you, most likely without you ever having heard of my name. Besides this your brother has been staying with us for the last six weeks of his being in this country and my Mother has nursed him. He left us last Wednesday but as the ship waited a few days longer than we expected, he did not sail from London till 7 o'clock yesterday morning. This afternoon we have received letters from two of his friends who accompanied him as far as Gravesend; they both declare his health and spirits to be better than they could have expected. I do not enclose you the letters or send you all the particulars because Mr. Halsam said he would call on you very soon and he may have seen you before you receive this note; if that should not be the case, you will be pleased to hear that he went part of the way with him: his kindness cannot be described. As he was uneasy at your brother's travelling by himself he persuaded a friend to go with him, and in a very few weeks Mr. Brown, who you probably know by name will follow him. I cannot tell you how much every one have exerted themselves for him, nor how much he is liked, which is the more wonderful as he is the last person to exert himself to gain people's friendship. I am certain he has some spell that attaches them to him, or else he has fortunately met with a set of friends that I did not believe could be found in the world. May I hope, at some time to receive a letter from you? Perhaps you have an objection to write to a stranger. If so, I

will try not to be very much disappointed if your objection is too strong to be overcome. For my own part I have long ceased to consider you a stranger and though this first letter may be a little stiff - because I wish to let you know what a time I have been acquainted with you, it will not be the case again, for at any rate I shall write once more whether you answer or not, as soon as letters are received from your brother, which I hope will not be for some time, for writing agitates him extremely. In Mr. Halsam you will see the best person in the world to raise your spirits, he feels so certain your brother will soon recover his health. What an unconscionable letter. I remain yours, allow me to say, affectionately

Frances Brawne "

It is neither necessary nor proper to dwell upon the inaccuracies in this letter. Fanny either had or wanted to convey a spirit of optimism perhaps as much to herself as to Fanny Keats. Her concern for Keats, however, cannot be hidden even in this first letter to his sister. As her series of letters unfolds, we see clearly the genuine concern in her heart at that time and the desperate grief in her soul after Keats's death. Whether she ever expected to see him again after his departure from England is a question we shall never answer.

When the ship on which Keats and Severn sailed, the Maria Crowther, was off the Isle of Wight Keats wrote in his copy of Shakespeare's poems opposite A Lover's Complaint a final version

of a sonnet that Fanny had loved¹.

Bright Star! Would I were steadfast as thou art-
Not in lone splendor hung aloft the night
And watching, with eternal lids apart,
Like nature's patient, sleepless Eremite,
The moving waters at their priestlike task
Of pure ablution round the earth's human shores,
Or gazing on the new soft-fallen masque
Of snow upon the mountains and the moors.
No - yet still steadfast, still unchangeable
Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,
To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,
Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,
Still, still to hear her tender - taken breath,
And so live ever - or else swoon to death.

On October 21 Keats and Severn arrived at Naples. Keats did not write to Fanny; he could not. He did write his first and only letter to her mother².

"My dear Mrs. Brawne,

... I dare not fix my Mind upon Fanny, I have not dared to think of her. The only comfort I have had that way has been in thinking for hours together of having the knife she gave me put in a silver case - the hair in a Lockett - and the Pocket

1. Aileen Ward, "The Date of Keats's 'Bright Star' Sonnet", SP, LII, (1955), 75-85 gives the following information of importance here: "The first date assigned to this sonnet - September 28, 1820 - held for almost a century. When Milnes printed the poem in 1848 from the copy which Keats made for Severn on board the Maria Crowther, he repeated Severn's account of the sonnet which implied that Keats had composed it that very day, his last on English soil. The story of his 'last poem' - 'a beautiful and consolatory circumstance,' as Colvin described it - was discredited when Colvin came across an earlier version transcribed by Charles Brown and dated 1819."
2. Clarence Thorpe (ed.), John Keats: Complete Poems and Selected Letters (New York, 1935), p. 646, letter of Oct. 24, 1820.

Book in a gold net¹ - Show her this. I dare say no more...

My Love again to Fanny - tell Tootts I wish I could pitch her a basket of grapes - and tell Sam the fellows catch here with a line a little fish much like an anchovy, pull them up fast...

Good bye Fanny: God bless you."

It was, indeed, a good-bye. The news of Keats's worsening condition was kept from Fanny. Whether this was good or bad from a humanitarian point of view no one can say for certain. Fanny was no fool; she must have known of the gravity of Keats's condition. Surely, in her own heart she was prepared for the worst. On February 23, 1821, the worst came. Spring was well under way in Rome, but the beauty and gaiety of this season that once was the delight of John Keats were unable to stem the flow of life from the poet's body. Attended only by Severn he died. It wasn't until March 17 that the tragic, and yet not unexpected, news reached Wentworth Place².

1. All these items were gifts from Fanny to John at this departure.

2. Joanna Richardson, Fanny Brawne (Norwich, 1952), p. 86.

Chapter VI

Fanny clad herself in the typical dress of the day as she and her entire family went into mourning. Her physical condition rapidly changed. She grew pale and thin and gave every appearance of an actual widow¹. Understanding as her family might try to be, they could not really understand Fanny's grief. Perhaps believing that only one person could really understand her grief and know her heart, she soon wrote, once again to Fanny Keats. In the letter of March 27, 1821 she says: "I know my Keats is happy, happier a thousand times than he could have been here, for Fanny, you do not, you never can know how much he has suffered. So much that I do believe, were it in my power I would not bring him back. All that grieves me now is that I was not with him, and so near it as I was."² She then goes on to say: "...the Doctors were ignorant and unfeeling enough to send him to that wretched country to die, for it is now known that his recovery was impossible before he left us, and he might have died here with so many friends to sooth him and me with him."³

It is quite evident from the last lines quoted that Fanny was well aware of Keats's condition and the gravity of it despite

1. Joanna Richardson, Fanny Brawne (Norwich, 1952), p. 87.
2. Fred Edgcumbe (ed.), Letters of Fanny Brawne to Fanny Keats (New York, 1937), pp. 25-29.
3. Ibid.

the well-intentioned efforts of her mother and Brown to keep her in ignorance¹. It is also quite evident from her letter of May 23, 1821 to Fanny Keats that she did not wish to discuss John Keats or their love publicly or even with her own family². "To no one but you would I mention him. I will suffer no one but you to speak to me of him. They are too uninterested in him to have any right to mention what is to you and me, so great a loss. I have copied a letter from Mr. Severn giving an account of the last days of his life. No one knows I have it but you, and I had not sealed it up as I thought you might wish to see it, but if you do, you must prepare for great pain, if you would rather not make yourself again unhappy, do not read it. I think you will be wise. It took me a long time to write. I have not looked at it since, nor do I mean to do so at present, but I mention it to you because though it gives pain, it also gives a certain kind of pleasure in letting us know how glad he was to die at the last." And now comes Fanny's reasoning behind her statements earlier in this letter. "Dear Fanny no one but you can feel with me - All his friends have forgotten him, they have got over the first shock, and that with them is all. They think I have done the same, which I do not wonder at for I (have)

1. Sidney Colvin, John Keats (New York, 1917), pp. 514 ff., relates that Brown would read only portions of Severn's letters to the Brawne family and that Mrs. Brawne would follow the same practice in regard to Severn's letters to her.
2. Fred Edgcumbe (ed.), Letters of Fanny Brawne to Fanny Keats, (New York, 1937), pp. 30-35.

taken care never to trouble them with any feelings of mine, but I can tell you who next to me (I must say next to me) loved him best, that I have not got over it and never shall -"

Never is a long time, but Fanny was indeed sincere in what she felt. She wore her clothes of mourning for John Keats for six years; she did not marry until after twelve years from the time of Keats's death; and she wore the gold ring he had given her until her own death.

On June 15, 1833, Fanny Brawne married Louis Lindo (later Lindon) at St. Marylebone Parish Church¹. She was thirty-two years old at the time; he was but twenty-one. Keats had been dead over twelve and a quarter years. Fanny Llanos (formerly Fanny Keats) did not attend the wedding². She was unable in her own mind to forgive Fanny Brawne for what she was doing. To us today this is a very narrow point of view. Surely even the most severe critics would not condemn Fanny Brawne for having found happiness once again after twelve years of loneliness and sorrow. Even in her new-found joy, Fanny never forgot her first love. She had been married seven or eight years before her husband was told anything about Keats's love for her, and that information was revealed only when Louis asked about the portrait (of John Keats) in her room³. True as she was to Louis Lindo(n), Fanny carried

1. Joanna Richardson, Fanny Brawne (Norwich, 1952), p. 127.

2. Marie Adami, Fanny Keats (London, 1937), p. 137.

3. Joanna Richardson, Fanny Brawne (Norwich, 1952), p. 126.

the memory of John Keats to her grave symbolized by his ring still on her finger. And so it was that, after a full and happy married life during which she bore three children, in December of 1865 Fanny Brawne Lindon passed quietly from the world she had entered sixty-five years¹ before. To the world of 1865 the death of a Mrs. Frances Lindon meant little. To the world almost one century later it meant the passing of the greatest source of inspiration John Keats ever knew, the one woman he loved and who, in return, truly loved him.

1. Joanna Richardson, Fanny Brawne (Norwich, 1952), p. 126.

Epilogue

Almost a century has passed since the death of Fanny Brawne. The years have brought their changes in the world in general and in the places Fanny and Keats knew in particular. Wentworth Place is now a museum dedicated to Keats, his life there, and his everlasting memory. The years have even brought their changes in Fanny. Obviously, the woman herself never changed; the world's opinion and evaluation of her has, however. Undoubtedly Fanny would have been very surprised, even shocked, had she been able to read the criticisms of her printed through the first quarter of this century. Today, fortunately, we seem to have finally reached the truth. Certainly we nor anyone else will ever know all there is to know about Fanny. We can only surmise her inner thoughts and feelings. Unfortunately we have none of her letters to Keats, but we now have the tangible evidence of what sort of woman she was. We now know the sincerity, the depth, and the endurance of her love for Keats. We now know her love for him was real, and we no longer need question her motives or plans. Had our present evidence been available from the very day of her death much needless and useless material written in criticism could have been avoided. Perhaps one of the difficulties that stood between the scholars and the truth was the reticence on Fanny's part to discuss Keats and her love for him after his death. This obstacle, of course, was removed with the publication of her letters to Fanny Keats, the only person, apparently,

with whom she was willing to discuss such matters. Her lack of faith in other people would seem to be the reason for this situation.

After her lover's death Fanny led a quiet life retired from society. During his lifetime, of course, she enjoyed a full social life including parties and dancing. This, of course, was the natural life for a girl of her age. She was an avid reader, especially of novels, although she spent little time with poetry. Later in life she did some writing for Blackwood's magazine. Her general outlook was toward the brighter side. This quality, it seems, would have served her excellently as the wife of Keats. A contrast to his often depressed state of mind would have been excellent. This, of course, is a pleasant way of rewriting history. Keats was often depressed, to be sure, but the question remains, would he have been so were he in good health? The answer seems no. The point, then, is that Fanny's nature would probably have served as a compliment to Keats's rather than a contrast had he lived and had they married.

Fanny appreciated Keats's work and even tried to encourage him in the fulfillment of it. Unlike her lover, she was practical in worldly affairs and had a good sense of humor. She had the beauty, charm, and grace to serve him well as his wife. Her qualities would have stood in pleasing contrast to his under existing circumstances, and her love for him would have soothed the wounds in the delicate and sensitive temperament of her mate.

Her love did not fail him even after his death. She never was one to reveal her feelings about her love, but, as we have noted earlier, on May 23, 1821 she wrote to Fanny Keats: "All his friends have forgotten him, they have got over the first shock, and that with them is all. They think I have done the same, which I do not wonder at, for I have taken care never to trouble them with any feelings of mine, but I can tell you who next to me (I must say next to me) loved him best, that I have not got over it and never shall - It's better for me that I should not forget him but not for you, you have other things to look forward to - and I would not have said anything about him for I was afraid of distressing you but I did not like to write to you without telling you how I felt about him and leaving it to you whether the subject shall be mentioned in our letters..."¹

It was not until twelve years after his death that she married; she wore his ring until her death. Fanny was not the woman to forget. Even in her married and family life she kept alive the now distant memory of her first love. A fine summary of her growth of character comes from M. Buxton Forman². "She was a girl when she first met Keats; she may have been a 'minx'; she became a woman when she said goodbye to him at Hampstead on Wednesday the 13th of September 1820." And, it should be added,

1. Fred Edgcumbe (ed.), Letters of Fanny Brawne to Fanny Keats (New York, 1937), p. 30.

2. Ibid., Preface, vii.

she remained a woman of common sense and a good and faithful heart throughout her adult life.

In the way of conclusion it is most interesting to note the words of Walter A. Wells, M. D., speaking on the subject of the love affair between Keats and Fanny¹. "Think what one may about the general misfortune of this unfortunate love affair, it is nevertheless certainly true that this first twelve-month period² corresponded with the period of his greatest poetical creations."

However, the doctor does not smile kindly upon the possibility of the two having become married. "The sad story of Keats as a victim of inherited tuberculosis is well known. Less known is the fact that there existed a strong inherited tendency of the same kind in the family of Fanny Brawne. By a remarkable coincidence, like Keats, she had lost a parent and a brother, struck down by the same dread disease; a father (like Keats's mother), in the early thirties, an only brother, Sam, at the early age of seventeen, two years younger than John's brother, Tom. A union such as the one proposed could but portend a biologic catastrophe. The cards certainly would have been stacked against them. It is significant in this connection that tuberculosis cropped out in the family of George, Keats' only married brother and his wife Georgiana, living in America. The danger would have been multiplied

1. Walter A. Wells, A Doctor's Life of John Keats (New York, 1959), p. 187.

2. The period referred to here is the year 1819.

a thousandfold in the case of John Keats and Fanny Brawne."¹

Mention was made of the prevalence of tuberculosis in both families as well as in many other families of that era early in this paper. Medical comment was reserved until now, however, as a fitting conclusion to the entire affair that never did reach a point of culmination. Fate, it seems, in its awful cruelty often casts light upon its decisions long after the effects of the events it caused have vanished from the scene. This opinion is in no way intended to argue that it was inevitable for Keats to die before he could marry Fanny or that Fanny was fortunate to have her first lover die at so young an age. As time usually heals its own wounds, it seemed to do so in the case of Fanny. Although much later in life, Fanny did marry, apparently happily, and she did bear healthy, normal children. The medical profession has raised the question whether this could have been so had she married Keats. A question it is, and a question it will always remain, but it would have been tragic indeed if the life of the two lovers together had been blackened by increased disease. In retrospect we can be thankful that the two did meet, did love, and, especially, that Fanny did inspire Keats to the poetic heights he was able to reach just before his disease finally conquered both body and mind.

1. Walter A. Wells, A Doctor's Life of John Keats (New York, 1959), pp. 189-190.

Although long deceased, neither Keats nor Fanny is really dead. They live on together in the memory of scholar and casual reader alike. The important point so far as we are concerned is that they live "together"; time can never separate them. We cannot think of Keats without Fanny. This, in itself is sufficient tribute to the one love of Keats's all too brief life. As he lives on, so does his love for Fanny Brawne and the great effect it had upon him, his poetry, and his life.

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Vita

Born: July 31, 1931, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Parents: Richard G. Sutcliffe
Emma T. Sutcliffe

Education: Germantown Academy - (1937-1949)
Muhlenberg College - (1949-1953) A. B.
Lehigh University - (1957-1961)

Professional Experience:

Perkiomen School, Pennsburg, Pennsylvania
Language Department - (1953-1961)
Head of Language Department - (1959-1961)
Assistant Dean - (1958-1959)