On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again

POEM TEXT

O Golden-tongued Romance, with serene Lute!
Fair plumed Syren, Queen of far-away!
Leave melodizing on this wintry day
Shut up thine olden Pages, and be mute.
Adieu! for, once again, the fierce dispute,
Betwixt Damnation and impassion'd clay
Must I burn through; once more humbly assay
The bitter-sweet of this Shaksperean fruit.
Chief Poet! and ye Clouds of Albion,
Begetters of our deep eternal theme!
When through the old oak forest I am gone,
Let me not wander in a barren dream:
But, when I am consumed in the fire,
Give me new Phoenix Wings to fly at my desire.

SUMMARY

Oh sweet-voiced Romance, with your calm lute! Beautifully feathered Siren, Queen of far-off lands! Stop your singing on this cold, wintery day; close the ancient pages of your book, and fall silent. Goodbye! For, once more, I must experience the searing, furious battle between cruel fate and passionate, mortal humanity. Once more, I must humbly taste the bittersweet beauty and pain of Shakespeare's play. Greatest of the poets! And clouds that hang over Britain! Makers of this deathless story! When I've gone into the old oak wood, don't let me wander aimlessly in a futile, bleak dream. Rather, when I'm burnt up, give me the wings of a resurrected firebird, so that I can fly toward my desires.

THEMES

THE BITTERSWEET POWER OF SHAKESPEARE'S KING LEAR

This poem's speaker—a voice for John Keats himself—contrasts Shakespeare's great tragedy *King Lear* with chivalric romances, legends, and fairytales. While such fantastical stories offer the speaker an escape into a pleasant dreamworld, the dark beauty of Shakespeare's play strikes him as more powerful and more meaningful. By capturing the "bitter-sweet" reality of life, *King Lear* transforms pain into something profoundly moving and even pleasurable. *King Lear* is special, the poem suggests, because it makes beauty out of life's senseless sufferings rather than merely offering a vacation from them.

Before he can sit down to "read *King Lear* once again," the poem's speaker must bid a firm "Adieu" to "Golden-tongued Romance"—a personification of fantastical medieval tales full of knights, ladies, and magic. Though this "Syren" (that is, an alluring musical spirit) has a lovely voice and the speaker has clearly spent some happy time with her in the past, he knows he doesn't want her company today.

Instead, the speaker wants the pleasure, pain, and challenge of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. This is the altogether unromantic story of a selfish old king who falls out of power and into a terrible madness. After much suffering, he's forced to face the fact that kings, like all other human beings, are just frail, fallible little animals at the mercy of an arbitrarily cruel universe. The argument "betwixt Damnation and impassion'd clay" (that is, between cruel fate and suffering mortals) the play presents is so grand and so awe-inspiring that the speaker can only approach it "humbly," hoping to learn something from it.

The speaker's desire to return to *King Lear* doesn't just come from a sober wish to confront the pain of life, however. This "Shaksperean fruit" isn't sour but "bitter-sweet," so beautiful and so truthful that (as Keats wrote in one of his letters) it makes artistic pleasure out of all-too-real horror.

The contrast the speaker sets up between "Romance" and *King Lear* ultimately suggests that the "far-away," escapist land of romance is delightful, but its pleasures only run so deep. *King Lear* holds a special place in the speaker's heart because it doesn't turn away from life's pain and misery. Rather, it confronts them and makes them into a work of art that's all the more beautiful *because* it faces ugliness.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

ARTISTIC AWE AND INSPIRATION

Keats's poem is a testament to Shakespeare's particular genius—and to the way one great artist can inspire another. This sonnet's speaker isn't just sitting down to read *King Lear*: he's sitting down to read *King Lear* "once again," revisiting a play he finds endlessly fascinating. In offering him an awe-inspiring vision of what literature can do, Shakespeare's tragedy makes the speaker aspire to such literary heights himself. Reading *King Lear*, to this speaker, is an

encounter with a kind of artistic greatness that he longs to achieve, but knows he'll have to strive and suffer to reach (if he can get there at all).

Keats's speaker doesn't sit down to reread *King Lear* lightly. He has to prepare himself for the experience, banishing all thought of "Golden-tongued Romance" and bracing as if he's about to undergo a trial by fire. In fact, a lot of the language he uses suggests that *King Lear* might just about set him aflame: this "fierce" play isn't something he can read, it's something he has to "burn through," and he in turn feels he'll be "consumed by the fire" as he reads. Both in its clear-eyed vision of the world's horrors and its sheer poetic greatness, *King Lear* makes the speaker feel as if he's facing an elemental force, awesome and dangerous.

That encounter, he hopes, will change him. After he's been through the exhilarating, tormenting experience of reading the play again, he prays, he'll earn "new Phoenix Wings." In other words, like the mythical phoenix, he'll burn up in the play's fires—only to arise again, better than new, ready to "fly at [his] desire," to write something as powerful as this play. Or at least, so he hopes: he prays, too, that he won't "wander in a barren dream" instead, just fooling himself, never reaching the creative heights he recognizes in Shakespeare (who is, after all, the "Chief Poet," the king of them all).

For an artist, this poem suggests, a relationship with a great (and a favorite) work of art can be both terrifying and inspiring. *King Lear* is at once a treasure and a challenge to the speaker: it shows him all that poetry can do, tempts him to burn himself up in pursuit of such poetry, and warns him that he might well fail. Spurred by his awe for the play and for Shakespeare, he seems ready to try nonetheless.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

O Golden-tongued Romance, with serene Lute!
Fair plumed Syren, Queen of far-away!
Leave melodizing on this wintry day
Shut up thine olden Pages, and be mute.

"On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again" begins, like plenty of poems before it, with an invocation to a muse (that is, an apostrophe to a spirit of artistic inspiration). This one is different than most, though. Rather than begging the personified figure of "golden-tongued Romance" to guide his pen, this speaker summons her only to shush her.

"Romance," here, doesn't mean "romantic love." Rather, the speaker alludes to a branch of literature that began in the Middle Ages: a fantastical genre that tells idealized tales of knights, damsels, quests, and magic. (One good example might be *The Faerie Queene*, Edmund Spenser's elaborate 16th-century allegory—a work Keats loved.)

The speaker depicts Romance as an elegant lady. The "Queen of far-away," she seems to emerge from fairyland itself. She plays a "serene Lute," strumming gentle ditties on an instrument that evokes the courtly music of Spenser's era—and if she's "golden-tongued," she sings beautifully, too.

The speaker still wants her to be quiet, though. There's a hint as to why in the backhanded compliment he gives her in line 2. When he calls her a "fair plumed Syren," he's pointing out that she might be as deceitful as she's lovely. Sirens (as they're now more often spelled) were treacherous figures from Greek mythology. Spirits with bird bodies and women's heads, they sang beautiful music to lure sailors toward rocks. This "Syren," then, might have a gorgeous voice and lovely plumage, but she isn't altogether trustworthy. Romance's song has something *deceitful* about it.

On this "wintry day," the speaker wants Romance to "leave melodizing" and "be mute"—to stop her seductive, dreamy, elegant singing so he can listen to a different kind of music. As the poem's title tells us, he's "sitting down to read *King Lear* once again"—and a romance, Shakespeare's great and terrible tragedy is not. This will be a poem about the speaker's longing to immerse himself in a richer, darker, more truthful kind of art than Romance can provide.

Keats will sing Shakespeare's praises in a sonnet—fitting, considering Shakespeare was a great sonneteer. Oddly enough, however, Keats won't write a *Shakespearean* sonnet (a.k.a. an English sonnet), which is built from three quatrains and a closing couplet. Rather, he picks the Petrarchan (or Italian) sonnet form, which begins with an eight-line stanza (or octave) and closes with a six-line sestet.

What both sonnet forms have in common is good old iambic pentameter, one of the most familiar and flexible meters in English poetry. Lines of iambic pentameter are built from five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. Here's how that sounds:

Shut up | thine old- | en Pa- | ges, and | be mute.

Keep an ear on Keats's meter as the poem goes on: this sonnet has some tricks up its sleeve.

LINES 5-8

Adieu! for, once again, the fierce dispute,
Betwixt Damnation and impassion'd clay
Must I burn through; once more humbly assay
The bitter-sweet of this Shaksperean fruit.

Having raised the beautiful, deceitful spirit of Romance, the speaker banishes her with a firm "Adieu!" Now, he turns to the true project of this "wintry day": it's time for him to reread Shakespeare's *King Lear*.

He seems to feel this rereading as a serious matter, even an ordeal, something he has to prepare for. He's not sitting down to this familiar play lightly; he feels he "must" read it again. *King Lear* presents him with challenges both emotional and artistic.

That's because *King Lear* is a painful play:

- The play's titular hero, Lear, suffers a terrible humbling. He begins as a mighty king and ends as "a very foolish fond old man" wandering half-crazed through the wildernesses of ancient Britain.
- His tragic flaw is his belief in his own inherent power as a king and as a father. As he learns after he gives his lands to his two villainous elder daughters and banishes the honest youngest child, he's really nothing more than a "poor, bare, forked animal," weak and mortal just like everyone else.
- His folly has terrible consequences: by the end of the play, few characters have survived, and Lear dies clutching the corpse of his youngest daughter. "Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life," he laments helplessly, "and thou no breath at all?"

To Keats (for whom this poem's speaker is a voice), *King Lear* was one of the greatest of Shakespeare's plays. What was so miraculous about it, he wrote, was its artistic "intensity," which could make "all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth." In other words, Shakespeare's sheer artistic *power*, his linguistic brilliance and his ability to truthfully mirror life, made this bleak tale into something beautiful, moving, profound.

This poem's speaker summarizes *King Lear* as the "fierce dispute / Between Damnation and impassion'd clay." In other words, this play is a way for humanity—nothing more than "impassion'd clay," walking, talking, emotional, suffering dirt—to stand up to what often seems like a cruel, godforsaken universe. Both *in* this play and *through* this play, human beings grapple with the problems of evil and pain.

One can see why the speaker would have to banish "golden-tongued Romance" before entering Lear's world again. A genre that tells tales of noble knights and justice triumphant might have many virtues, but an intense *truthfulness* is not among them. The "Syren" song of Romance offers beauty and sweet relief, but the speaker is looking for something else from art now: a taste of a "bitter-sweet [...] Shaksperean fruit" that will let him face pain, not simply forget it for a while. (Note that Keats's apparently unconventional spelling of "Shakspere's" name is actually closer to one of the ways that Shakespeare spelled his own name than the way we spell his name today—English spelling wasn't standardized in Shakespeare's time!)

The metaphor of the fruit also subtly juxtaposes something *organic* or natural in *King Lear* with Romance's artifice. Remember, the speaker presents Romance as an elegant lady strumming away at her artful lute. *King Lear*, on the other hand, seems to have grown from the earth. Keats once declared that poetry should "come as naturally as the leaves to a tree"; presenting *Lear* as a bitter-sweet fruit, he praises it as living, growing art.

The experience of reading the play is similarly elemental. The speaker can't just idly leaf through *King Lear*: he must "burn through" it, words that might suggest he's burning as much as he's being burned. He can only "humbly assay" this monument of literature, as you might "assay" (or attempt) an ascent of Everest.

LINES 9-10

> *Chief Poet! and ye Clouds of Albion,*
> *Begetters of our deep eternal theme!*

The speaker isn't just preparing to "humbly assay" *King Lear* in order to relish its "bitter-sweet" pleasures. He's also hoping that it will teach him something. He has his own artistic ambitions, and they're more in the field of Shakespeare than "golden-tongued Romance."

As the poem's concluding sestet begins, the speaker makes a second apostrophe—this time to the spirits he hopes *will* act as his muses:

> Chief Poet! and ye Clouds of Albion,
> Begetters of our deep eternal theme!

This is an unusual invocation in more ways than one:

- Traditionally, poets setting out on a project call on a muse or a spirit or a god (as Milton does in the opening lines of *Paradise Lost*, for instance). Asking Shakespeare himself to act as his muse (or his "Presidor," as Keats once wrote), the speaker shows he's a true writer's writer: he can think of no higher authority to call on than the "Chief Poet" of them all.
- He also connects Shakespeare with the "Clouds of Albion"—an ironically romantic way to describe the clouds that hang over Britain. These clouds, he says, are Shakespeare's collaborators, the joint "begetters" of the "deep eternal theme" that he wishes to write on. That theme is the nature of life itself, the same theme Shakespeare treats in *King Lear*.

The speaker's conjuring of the "Clouds of Albion" suggests there's something innately *English* about the kind of art the

speaker hopes to make as he follows in Shakespeare's footsteps. Calling on the long-dead poet and the everpresent clouds at once, he's drawing a connection between himself and Shakespeare through their shared homeland and their shared language. This speaker wishes to be not just a great poet, but a great *English* poet; the fact that he shares a tongue with Shakespeare is deeply important to him. Under the same clouds as Shakespeare, breathing the same air, speaking the same English (well, close enough), the speaker hopes to grow his own tree in the orchard of poetic "fruit" where Shakespeare is head gardener.

LINES 11-14

When through the old oak forest I am gone,
Let me not wander in a barren dream:
But, when I am consumed in the fire,
Give me new Phoenix Wings to fly at my desire.

Invoking Shakespeare and the "Clouds of Albion" together, the speaker hopes for something more than many poets do when they call on guiding spirits. Rather than merely begging for help with a particular *poem*, the speaker asks these great forces to help him become a particular kind of *poet*, one more like Shakespeare than the writer of a sweet romance.

He begs this favor in mysterious, metaphorical language. Rereading *King Lear*, he says, will be a journey through the "old oak forest"—words that perhaps suggest the famous scenes from *Lear* in which the king raves on a stormy heath.

Once again, there's something peculiarly English about this image: the oak is an old symbol of England. And once again, there's something ironically romantic about it, too. A solemn quest through a dark wood sounds a lot like something out of one of the "olden pages" of a "golden-tongued Romance." The speaker won't be guided by Romance anymore, but she's unobtrusively tagging along.

Once he's made this journey through the woods, the speaker prays:

> Let me not wander in a barren dream:

In other words, the speaker hopes that his journey through *Lear* won't prove to him that he's deceiving himself—that all his hopes of poetic greatness on a level with Shakespeare's won't prove "barren," empty, and futile.

Rather, he asks:

> [...] when I am consumed in the fire,
> Give me new Phoenix Wings to fly at my desire.

Once again, *King Lear* is a metaphorical fire here. Burning up in its terrible beauty, the speaker imagines that he might not simply die of mingled pain and awe, but instead be resurrected like the phoenix, a mythical bird that burns to ashes only to be reborn from its own ruins.

In other words, he's hoping to be *transformed* through this rereading: to die to his old poet-self and arise as a new poet-self, one who might hope to achieve something as great as Shakespeare did. Even the shape of the closing line—which uses an extra sixth iamb, becoming a line of hexameter instead of pentameter—suggests transformation. As the line reaches past the boundaries of the meter, the speaker hopes to reach past his own limits.

In that light, the rich metaphors of these closing lines—the forest and the firebird—might also suggest the speaker's *literal* death and his longed-for literary afterlife. Not for nothing is Shakespeare sometimes called the "Immortal Bard": he's dead, but his work isn't. That's the kind of triumph the speaker wants, too. By emulating Shakespeare's "close relationship with Beauty and Truth," he hopes to be "among the English poets after [his] death," to sit in the pantheon alongside his hero. (And so Keats does.)

Perhaps, as well, this longing is an answer to the pain that *King Lear* captures with such intensity. It is right and just, this poem suggests, to say that the world is sometimes so horrible that all you can do is howl. But through the alchemy of great art, a poet can transform a howl into beauty, profundity, solace.

SYMBOLS

THE PHOENIX

At the end of the poem, the speaker wishes for "Phoenix Wings"—a reference to a legendary creature that symbolizes rebirth and immortality. The phoenix was a mythical bird that was said to burn to death, then rise, resurrected, from its own ashes.

In this poem, the speaker alludes to the phoenix in the hopes that the pain and power of *King Lear* might burn him up and transform him into a brand-new *poet*—one who might aspire to make art as great as Shakespeare himself did, art that itself might turn out to be as deathless as a firebird.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-14:** "But, when I am consumed in the fire, / Give me new Phoenix Wings to fly at my desire."

POETIC DEVICES

APOSTROPHE

The speaker opens this poem with an apostrophe to an alluring figure: "Golden-tongued Romance" herself, a personification of

fantastical tales of chivalry and magic. A "Syren" (that is, a spirit of temptation) with a melodious voice, decked out in "fair plume[s]," Romance is both attractive and a little dangerous, threatening to lure the speaker onto the rocks of triviality. The speaker conjures her up only to banish her in favor of a darker, richer kind of poetry: the poetry of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. His vivid description of her, however, suggests he knows her pretty well. Romance has been his longtime companion, but he's ready to move on; even still, he sends her packing on a tide of praise for her beautiful voice.

He then makes a fresh apostrophe to the figures he hopes will guide him in his new works: Shakespeare himself (whom Keats saw as his "Presidor," his literary hero and forebear) and the "Clouds of Albion," the clouds that hang over Britain. These together, he says, are the "begetters of our deep eternal theme," the sources of the ideas that will inform his work now: ideas about the nature of life, the shape of the human soul, and the meaning (or meaninglessness) of suffering.

This "eternal theme," in other words, comes both from Shakespeare himself and from the English landscape Shakespeare and the speaker share across time. Praying to Shakespeare and the clouds at once, the speaker asks for support in becoming not just a great poet, but a great *English* poet, a master of his native language as well as the "deep eternal theme."

By framing these two ideas as apostrophes, the speaker draws on a grand old poetic tradition of calling on muses, gods, or spirits to guide one's pen. (See, for instance, the first lines of *Paradise Lost*, another work Keats held in special regard.) A writer's writer, this speaker can't think of a better muse than the immortal "Chief Poet" of them all.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-5:** "O Golden-tongued Romance, with serene Lute! / Fair plumed Syren, Queen of far-away! / Leave melodizing on this wintry day / Shut up thine olden Pages, and be mute. / Adieu!"
- **Lines 9-10:** "Chief Poet! and ye Clouds of Albion, / Begetters of our deep eternal theme!"

ALLUSION

"On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again" alludes to a play that Keats (and many others) considered one of Shakespeare's greatest:

- In this tragedy, a foolish, selfish old king decides that he'll retire by dividing his kingdom between his three daughters. He'll save the best portion of his lands, he says, for the daughter who persuades him she loves him most. And he's pretty sure he knows who that will be: his youngest and favorite daughter, Cordelia.
- But while Lear's elder daughters Goneril and Regan lavish him with insincere protestations of love, the brave and truthful Cordelia refuses to play any part in this manipulative charade. An outraged and humiliated Lear banishes his only honest daughter; catastrophe after catastrophe unfolds in consequence.
- By the end of the play, Lear's kingdom has almost fallen, nearly every character has been murdered—and Lear has been forced to reckon with the fact that he, like the scruffiest beggar who ever lived, is just a "poor bare forked animal" at the mercy of an inscrutable universe that seems indifferent at best, horrifically cruel at worst.

Keats loved this play both for its harrowingly truthful depictions of suffering and its reflections on the power of language. (At one point, for instance, a character persuades a blind man he's standing on the edge of a cliff by painting a haunting word-picture of the scene—even though they're on level ground, nowhere near any such cliff.) *King Lear*, to Keats, was both an *example* of what language could do and a *meditation* on what language could do.

In its intense truthfulness about life's pains and humanity's self-deceit, *King Lear* also stands in contrast to some of the other kinds of art and storytelling the poem alludes to. For instance, when the speaker describes "Romance"—that is, fantastical stories of chivalry, magic, and myth—as a "Syren," he's using the language of a romantic world to cast doubt on the form. A syren (or siren) is a mythological creature often depicted as a bird with a woman's face. Like mermaids, sirens sing beautiful songs to lure sailors toward treacherous rocks. As a genre, this allusion suggests, romance is awfully alluring, but maybe *misleading*, too.

The speaker, however, still hopes to go through a not unromantic transformation through his reading and rereading of *King Lear*. He prays to Shakespeare himself that, once he's "consumed by the fire" of the play's greatness, he'll rise with "new Phoenix Wings"—that is, the wings of the mythical firebird that burns up and resurrects from its own ashes. He hopes, in other words, that *King Lear*'s greatness might just destroy him, then remake him as a new and better poet.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 5-8
- Lines 13-14

JUXTAPOSITION

The speaker's juxtaposition between "Golden-tongued Romance" and the agonizingly beautiful world of *King Lear*

suggests that he wants to move away from art that's purely sweet toward art that grapples with all of life, sufferings and horrors included.

"Romance," in this speaker's eyes, is beautiful, charming, melodious, seductive—and maybe a little false. He describes this personified representation of fairytale and myth as a "Syren," a bird-spirit from Greek mythology who lures sailors onto the rocks with her beautiful singing. In other words, she's lovely, but she's liable to pull you off track. Something about her is *deceitful*. The genre of romance, the speaker's description hints, doesn't tell the whole truth about the world, and thus falls a little short of greatness. Romance is a sweet and pleasant distraction rather than a confrontation with reality.

King Lear, on the other hand, is "bitter-sweet": emphasis on the bitter. This play rubs your nose in the inescapable pain of life—and does it so richly and honestly that it somehow makes pleasure out of horror. In other words, its unflinching "intensity" (as Keats called it in a letter), its artistic truthfulness, makes it beautiful. The speaker can only creep up to such an achievement "humbly"; to read this play, for him, is to "assay" it—that is, to *try* to fathom it, to do his best to see how on earth Shakespeare could have done it.

This juxtaposition thus suggests that the speaker is entering a new realm of artistic ambition. His not unromantic images of *King Lear* as an "old oak forest" and a phoenixlike poetic rebirth, however, suggest that he can't and won't leave romance behind altogether; in some form, she'll come with him on this journey, even if she isn't choosing the path anymore.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8

METAPHOR

The poem's metaphors present literary romance as a lovely but disingenuous temptress—and *King Lear* as a force of nature.

The speaker begins with an address to the personification of Romance (the fantastical literary genre, that is, not romantic love). A "golden-tongued" singer who plays a "serene Lute," she's a figure who offers tranquility and musical pleasure. But she's also a "Syren"—a dangerous spirit whose song might just lure the speaker off course. Though the speaker addresses Romance respectfully and even affectionately, he knows she's not going to offer him a complete picture of life, either.

In her refinement and her delicacy, Romance stands in contrast with *King Lear*, a play the speaker depicts with powerful, earthy metaphors:

- As a "Shaksperean fruit," the play is nourishing, but "bitter-sweet." *King Lear*, this sensual metaphor suggests, is pleasurable because it's made so beautifully, not because it deals with pleasant events and happy endings (which it emphatically does not).
- As a "fire," *King Lear* is, well, a trial by fire—an endurance test for the speaker, who feels scorched by the play's awful tragedies and its overpowering genius alike.
- And as an "old oak forest," *King Lear* is a wild landscape fit for the speaker to make a pilgrimage through. It's a very English landscape, at that. The oak tree is an old symbol of England; making *Lear* into an oak forest, the speaker reminds readers that this play is a masterpiece of English poetry in particular.

All of these metaphors present the play as something *organic*, natural and powerful as the growth of trees or the crackle of fire. Romance, on the other hand, is more elegant and more artful: with her lute and her decorative plumes, she's a courtly, civilized lady.

King Lear also depicts *people* as more elemental and less refined. Its characters, the speaker says, are nothing more than "impassion'd clay": dirt that suffers. This metaphor is a *memento mori*, an "ashes to ashes, dust to dust" reminder of mortality and human frailty—themes that *King Lear* spends a lot of time with.

Facing *King Lear*'s terrible, earthy greatness makes the speaker hope he could achieve something as powerful in his own work. Perhaps if he allows the play's fires to "consume[]" him, he prays, he can become a poetic "Phoenix," a resurrected firebird prepared to live a whole new artistic life.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "O Golden-tongued Romance, with serene Lute! / Fair plumed Syren, Queen of far-away!"
- **Line 6:** "impassion'd clay"
- **Line 8:** "The bitter-sweet of this Shaksperean fruit."
- **Line 11:** "the old oak forest"
- **Lines 13-14:** "when I am consumed in the fire, / Give me new Phoenix Wings to fly at my desire."

ASSONANCE

Delicate assonance—always a hallmark of Keats's poetry—gives this poem its music.

For instance, listen to the first lines:

> O Golden-tongued Romance, with serene Lute!
> Fair plumed Syren, Queen of far-away!

The round, rich /oh/ and /oo/ sounds here help to make these lines sound as attractively melodious as Romance's song.

Later on, a long /ay/ sound links "Damnation and impassion'd

clay," underscoring the *King-Lear*-ish idea that humanity is locked in an eternal battle with suffering.

And listen to the patterns of assonance that appear in the poem's closing lines:

> But, when I am consumed in the fire,
> Give me new Phoenix Wings to fly at my desire.

There's an interplay of long /i/ and /ee/ sounds here. But the /eye/ sounds have it in the end: the speaker ends with an intense string of them, making his final prayer for wings feel specially fervent. This emphatic assonance also highlights a variation in the poem's meter: the last line is written in iambic hexameter (with six iambs to the line) rather than the traditional iambic pentameter of the rest of the poem. The assonance and the extra foot together stress the speaker's longing for artistic greatness (and the freedom to spread his wings).

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "O," "Romance," "Lute"
- **Line 2:** "plumed"
- **Line 3:** "day"
- **Line 4:** "Shut up," "Pages," "mute"
- **Line 5:** "Adieu"
- **Line 6:** "Damnation," "clay"
- **Line 8:** "sweet," "Shaksperean"
- **Line 10:** "deep," "theme"
- **Line 11:** "old oak"
- **Line 13:** "I," "fire"
- **Line 14:** "me," "Phoenix," "fly," "my desire"

VOCABULARY

Golden-tongued Romance (Line 1) - "Romance" here is a personified figure representing, not romantic love, but fantastical or magical stories, especially tales of knights and chivalry. Presenting Romance as a "golden-tongued" singer, the speaker suggests that she's a beautiful charmer.

Lute (Line 1) - A stringed, plucked instrument, rather like a proto-guitar.

Plumed (Line 2) - Feathered. This image might suggest three things:

- that this "Syren" (a mythological spirit with a dangerously sweet voice) is in the form of a bird with a woman's face, as they were often depicted;
- that she's an alluring lady wearing elegant clothes decorated with feathers;
- or, more subtly, that she's got a quill—that she writes her stories with a feather pen, a "fair plume" that tells sweet tales.

Syren (Line 2) - A female spirit from Greek mythology (also spelled "siren"). Rather like mermaids, syrens lure sailors to their destruction on the rocks with their beautiful singing.

Melodizing (Line 3) - Singing melodiously.

Thine (Line 4) - An old-fashioned word for "your."

Olden Pages (Line 4) - Ancient pages (as in a volume of romantic tales).

Dispute (Line 5) - Argument, debate.

Betwixt (Line 6) - Between.

Impassion'd (Line 6) - Full of intense feeling; suffering deeply. ("Passion" can mean both pain and strong emotion, as well as romantic love.)

Assay (Line 7) - Test, try, attempt.

Shaksperean (Line 8) - That is, Shakespearean. While this spelling might look odd to modern eyes, it's actually closer to one of the ways that Shakespeare wrote his own name than the way that we now spell his name is! (In Shakespeare's time, English spellings, even the spellings of names, weren't yet regularized.)

Ye (Line 9) - You.

Albion (Line 9) - A romantic, poetic name for Britain.

Begetters (Line 10) - Creators; parents.

Barren (Line 12) - Empty, desolate, bleak, unproductive.

Consumed (Line 13) - Burnt up.

Phoenix (Line 14) - A mythical bird often used as a symbol of resurrection: it was said to burn up at the end of its life and be reborn from its own ashes.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

Like all sonnets, "On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again" is a 14-line poem; like most sonnets, it's written in iambic pentameter. Surprisingly, though, this sonnet about Shakespeare isn't a Shakespearean sonnet! Rather, it's a Petrarchan sonnet, built not from three quatrains and a closing couplet (as a Shakespearean sonnet is), but from two parts: an eight-line octave rhymed ABBA ABBA and a six-line sestet rhymed CDCDEE.

Though Keats loved Shakespeare's sonnets, he more often reached for the Petrarchan form when he went to write a sonnet himself. Here, the form's two-part shape suits a two-part idea. Keats spends the opening octet banishing delightful "Golden-tongued Romance" in favor of the "bitter-sweet" of Shakespearean tragedy, and the closing sestet hoping that the searing, death-like intensity of the reading experience might remake him into a greater artist.

METER

Like the great majority of sonnets, "On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again" is written in iambic pentameter. That means its lines are built from five iambs—metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. Here's line 5 as an example:

> Adieu! | for, once | again, | the fierce | dispute,

Perhaps it would be odd to write a poem honoring Shakespeare in anything *but* iambic pentameter: he was the great master of this old, familiar rhythm. At the end of the poem, however, Keats introduces his own little metrical innovation. Listen to the poem's closing line:

> Give me | new Phoe- | nix Wings | to fly | at my | desire.

Readers might notice a couple of variations here. Keats starts the line with an emphatic trochee, the opposite foot to an iamb, with a DUM-da rhythm. More striking still, he gives the line an extra foot, making this into a six-foot line of iambic hexameter rather than pentameter. This rule-breaking line mirrors the speaker's longing to transcend his own poetic boundaries—and thus to earn artistic immortality.

RHYME SCHEME

"On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again" is a Petrarchan (or Italian) sonnet, so it uses one of several slight variations on a traditional rhyme scheme. All Petrarchan sonnets start with an octave, an eight-line stanza rhymed like this:

> ABBA ABBA

They conclude with a six-line sestet that can rhyme in a number of different ways. Here, Keats chooses this pattern:

> CDCDEE

In picking these rhymes for his sestet—and especially in choosing to end on a rhymed couplet—Keats tips his hat to the Shakespearean (or English) sonnet form, which is built from three four-line quatrains of alternating rhyme capped with a closing couplet. In other words, the rhyme scheme in this sestet could just as easily have come from the last six lines of an English sonnet as an Italian one. This choice mirrors one of the poem's themes: readers might see this as a movement from a "far-away" Italian romance to a drama rooted in "Albion" (that is, Britain).

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is a voice for Keats himself. When he wrote this poem in early 1818, Keats was coming to the end of his first major project: the book-length poem *Endymion*, a mythological tale about the love of the moon goddess for a mortal shepherd. He was feeling a little deflated about this poem, sure that it wasn't the best he could do. When it was published later that year, both friends and foes would agree with that assessment, more or less damningly. (Nonetheless, *Endymion* gives us one of the most famous opening lines in English poetry: "A thing of beauty is a joy for ever.")

In turning away from "Golden-tongued Romance" here, this poem's speaker reflects Keats's desire to move past the sparkling enchantments of his early work and try his hand at a differently ambitious kind of poetry—or even, as his image of the "Phoenix Wings" suggests, to become a new kind of poet altogether.

As he once wrote, Keats aimed at being "among the English Poets" someday, and he saw Shakespeare as "Chief Poet" of them all. *King Lear* in particular haunted Keats all through his life. Just a few months before he wrote this poem, he spoke of *Lear* as the greatest kind of art, a play whose "intensity" is "capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth." In other words, *King Lear*'s greatness is in its ability to depict horrors so fully and truthfully that they become artistically beautiful.

While the speaker now longs to achieve something similar in his own art, he doesn't leave "Golden-tongued Romance" behind without a fond look back: she may be a dangerously enchanting "Syren," but she's given him a lot of pleasure. And indeed, some of Keats's later work would return to the world of romance (though he'd peer at it through a darker glass).

SETTING

As the speaker sits and writes, it's a "wintry day" outside—no time for "Golden-tongued Romance" to warble her pretty melodies. No, this is a day to huddle by the fire and take another crack at *King Lear*, the most "bitter-sweet," beautiful, and daunting of Shakespeare's tragedies.

Preparing to approach the play, the speaker imagines it as a landscape, an "old oak forest" overhung by the dark "Clouds of Albion." Though the speaker claims to have banished Romance, this forest itself, a place of quest and pilgrimage, sounds not unromantic. The speaker imagines it as the setting of his own poetic trial by fire, hoping that his difficult, awe-inspiring journey through the play will burn him up and resurrect him like a "Phoenix," making him into a new and better kind of poet. He fears, too, that his journey might just as well leave him "wander[ing] in a barren dream," only fooling himself if he thinks he can approach Shakespeare's greatness.

If this forest is presided over by the "Clouds of Albion," it's also a specifically *British* place. *King Lear* is set in an ancient, legendary Britain, and Keats once wrote that he believed he'd earn a place "among the English poets" specifically. In following

Shakespeare through the old oak forest, this speaker wants to make his way toward not just any greatness, but *poetic* greatness—and that means being rooted in a particular language associated with a particular terrain.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

John Keats (1795-1821) is often seen as an archetypal Romantic poet: a dreamy, sensuous soul who died tragically young. But Keats was also a vigorous, funny writer, a working-class kid making inroads into a literary scene dominated by aristocratic figures like Lord Byron. He died obscure and poor, never knowing that he would become one of the world's best-loved poets. But he had a quiet faith in his own genius: in an early letter, he once declared, "I think I shall be among the English Poets after my death."

One of those "English Poets," William Shakespeare, was the foremost of Keats's great heroes. (Keats even printed a bust of Shakespeare on the title page of his 1817 collection *Poems*.) Keats loved all of Shakespeare, but confessed that *King Lear* in particular "haunted" him. This poem is a tribute to Shakespeare in more ways than one: as a sonnet, it follows in the artistic footsteps of Keats's "Presidor."

Keats was also among a notable crowd of English poets during his lifetime: he met or corresponded with most of his fellow Romantics. However, he never got too close to any of them. As a young writer, for instance, he was inspired by William Wordsworth, the granddaddy of English Romanticism—but was dismayed to find him pompous and conservative in person. ("Mr. Wordsworth," Wordsworth's wife Mary reprimanded the enthusiastic young Keats, "is never interrupted.") He had just one conversation with Samuel Taylor Coleridge (which seems to have felt more like a whirlwind than a friendly chat). And while Percy Shelley admired Keats's work, Keats never quite fell in with him and his elite clique; Byron, Shelley's close friend, was actively contemptuous of Keats. Keats's real circle was instead built from earthier London artists like Charles Lamb, Leigh Hunt, and Benjamin Haydon.

In spite of being something of an outsider in his time, Keats has indeed landed "among the English Poets" since his death. Ever since later Victorian writers like Tennyson and Elizabeth Barrett Browning resurrected his reputation, he's been one of the most beloved and influential of poets.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When Keats wrote this poem in January 1818, *King Lear* was soon to enjoy a strange renaissance on the English stage. Shakespeare's tragedy was first performed in 1606. It wasn't long before it was usurped: starting from the year 1681, the version that most people saw wasn't Shakespeare's! Rather, it was a modified version by a writer called Nahum Tate.

Tate regarded the ending of *King Lear* (in which Lear dies howling over the corpse of his beloved daughter Cordelia) as simply *too* awful. So he cheerfully rewrote the final scenes, rescuing Cordelia, marrying her off to the virtuous Edgar, and restoring Lear to his throne. This sentimental conclusion became wildly popular, and Tate's bowdlerized *Lear* soon supplanted Shakespeare's. Before the mid-19th century, if you went to see *King Lear*, it was Tate's version you saw.

Sitting down to *read* the play rather than to *watch* it, then, Keats was engaging with the original Shakespeare in defiance of a world too squeamish for the unflinching depiction of human suffering—precisely what Keats valued about the play. In this, Keats was part of a swell of Romantic thinkers who venerated Shakespeare and recognized the genius of *Lear*'s original ending. Two notable friends of Keats's, the essayists Charles Lamb and William Hazlitt, publicly criticized Tate's treacly modifications.

The Romantic-era theatrical world struck back against Tate, too. For instance, the legendary actor Edmund Kean (whose work Keats admired) would defiantly restore Shakespeare's version of *Lear* in an 1823 staging. The final scenes shocked his audiences so much that he was forced to revert to the Tate version after only a few performances. It wasn't until 1838 that the actor William Macready would put his foot down and commit to the Shakespeare version, at last meeting with a success that toppled the Tate version for good.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Keats-Shelley Museum — Learn more about Keats via the Keats-Shelley Museum (housed in Keats's final home in Rome). (https://ksh.roma.it/)
- Portraits of Keats — See images of Keats at the website of London's National Portrait Gallery. Many of these portraits were made by his close-knit circle of friends. (https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/person/mp02480/john-keats)
- The Poem in Context — Learn about what Keats was up to around the time he wrote this poem—and how his experiences might have reshaped his artistic ambitions. (https://johnkeats.uvic.ca/1818-01-22.html)
- Keats's Life and Work — Learn more about Keats via the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/people/john-keats)
- Keats on King Lear — Read one of Keats's most famous letters, in which he discusses King Lear as an example of Shakespeare's greatness. (http://mason.gmu.edu/~rnanian/Keats-

NegativeCapability.html)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER JOHN KEATS POEMS

- Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art
- La Belle Dame sans Merci
- Ode on a Grecian Urn
- Ode on Indolence
- Ode on Melancholy
- Ode to a Nightingale
- Ode to Psyche
- On First Looking into Chapman's Homer
- On Seeing the Elgin Marbles
- On the Grasshopper and Cricket
- On the Sea
- The Eve of St. Agnes
- This living hand, now warm and capable
- To Autumn
- When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be

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