

Jane Campion's Bright Star: The story of John Keats and Fanny Brawne

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"A Man in love I do think cuts the sorryest figure in the world," wrote the English poet John Keats in 1819 at the time of his love affair with Fanny Brawne. Born in 1795, he was 24; Brawne was 19 at the time. Based on the biography of Keats by Andrew Motion, New Zealand-born director Jane Campion's new movie *Bright Star* tells the story of their brief but intense relationship.

As Campion's film opens, it is the year 1818 in Hampstead, then north of London. Keats (Ben Whishaw) has recently returned from a walking tour of Scotland with his friend and fellow poet Charles Brown (Paul Schneider), who is a neighbor to the Brawne family.

The widowed Mrs. Brawne (Kerry Fox) has three children—18-year-old Fanny (Abbie Cornish), son Sam, 14 (Thomas Brodie-Sangster), and daughter Toots, 9 (Eddie Martin).

For Keats, it is a time of considerable financial difficulty. Brown is keeping him afloat, affirming that "Your writing is the finest thing in my life." While Keats is drawn to Fanny ("beautiful and elegant, graceful, silly fashionable and strange"), Brown has the opposite reaction. He disparages "the well-stitched Miss Brawne," accusing her of making "a religion out of flirting."

Brown resents Fanny's incursion, partly out of jealousy, but primarily because he thinks his friend's artistic soul is at risk, that the girl impedes Keats from making his mind "available for inspiration." In fact, Keats is gaining new artistic strength. He pens such exquisite works as *Ode to a Nightingale* and *Ode to Melancholy*. The loss of his brother to tuberculosis and the premonition of his own death mature his powers—"How astonishingly does the chance of leaving the world impress a sense of its natural beauties."

At the time Keats meets Fanny, his *Endymion* has just been published (with its famous opening lines, "A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:/Its loveliness increases; it will never/Pass into nothingness; but still will keep/A bower quiet for us, and a sleep/Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing"). The poem is met with several scathing reviews. But Fanny feels otherwise. In order to impress the writer, she launches herself

into Chaucer, Milton, and Shakespeare—Keats's literary idols—or at least pretends to.

Keats labors incessantly in his quarters at Hampstead in the winter of 1819, completing poems such as *The Eve of St. Agnes* and the ambitious *Hyperion*. In addition to these lengthier, more involved works, Keats writes his lovely sonnet to Fanny, *Bright Star*:

"Bright star, would I were steadfast as thou art—
Not in lone splendour 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 earth's human shores,
Or gazing on the new soft-fallen mask
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."

In one scene, Fanny and Keats read aloud from the iconic *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*. In the spring of 1819, Brown rents half of his house to the Brawnes. Only a thin wall now separates Keats and Fanny. But there are more pressing social and physical obstacles.

Keats's stolen moments with Fanny are frowned upon not only by Brown, but by Mrs. Brawne as well. No bright stars seem to grace his poverty-stricken horizon. In one moment of frustration, Fanny lashes out at her mother: "You taught me to love not only the rich." Illness strikes. Rather than cooling the romance, the task of nursing Keats deepens Fanny's love and enlarges her emotionally.

Keats wrote Fanny that he felt she cared for him "for my own sake," as opposed to those women "whom I really think would like to be married to a Poem and to be given away by a Novel." (To Brown he writes: "I should have had her when I was in health, and I should have remained well.") He tells Fanny how horrid is "the chance of slipping into the ground instead of into your arms." At death's door, Keats is dispatched by his friends

to Italy, because of its climate. The change comes too late. The poet expires tragically in February 1821 in Rome at the age of 25. “Here lies one whose name was writ in water,” is the inscription he chose for his tombstone.

The focus of Campion’s film is Brawne. Although Cornish and Whishaw are both strong, Keats is deliberately pushed into the background. Aiding the project is the fact that Campion’s screenplay draws heavily on Keats’s verse and letters, whose sensuous presence and humanity tend to overcome or at least moderate the director’s insistent feminism. This alone makes *Bright Star* a considerably better film than the director’s *The Piano* or her even less successful *Holy Smoke*, both of which, in their different ways treated the problem of “the sensitive, misunderstood, middle class female versus the brutish masses.” (WSWS review of *Holy Smoke*)

Possessed of obvious talent and skill, Campion (born in 1954), who was clearly quite moved by the tragedy of the Keats-Brawne affair, has created a work of unadulterated emotionalism. Remaining dry-eyed is difficult when *Ode to a Nightingale* (“Where but to think is to be full of sorrow/And leaden-eyed despairs”) is recited over Mozart’s “Serenade in Bb, K. 361, *Adagio*,” during the film’s closing credits, or during Cornish’s reading of *Bright Star* in a choked and sobbing voice.

In interviews, Campion claims also to have been tackling a sentiment she ascribes to Fanny in the film, that “Poems are a strain to work out.” In the end, *Bright Star* and Keats make clear that “If poetry does not come as naturally as leaves to a tree, then it isn’t poetry at all.”

Schneider as Brown anchors the film and gives a performance fitting for a figure who is credited with salvaging many of Keats’ poems—having literally retrieved them from the trash-bin. He is depicted as an earthy whirlwind, whose impregnation of a servant highlights the fact that while men at the time were allowed to cross class lines and return, women were less fortunate, even in enlightened households like the Brawnes’. There is a lack of sentimentality in his actions and observations.

“Is there another life? Shall I awake and find this all a dream? There must be. We cannot be created for this sort of suffering,” asks Fanny. Implied in the question is a condemnation of societal mores for their hypocritical and destructive nature. Why should relations between people be so hard?

But the magnanimity and largeness of Keats’s writing and Fanny’s character cannot vanquish all the movie’s weaknesses. Campion allows for few traces of the remarkable period in which Keats and Brawne lived and whose atmosphere they imbibed, the aftermath of the French Revolution and the decade-long Napoleonic wars: a convulsive time, which had powerful cultural reverberations in Britain.

By contrast, for example, the characters in Terence Davies’ *House of Mirth* (2000, based on the Edith Wharton novel), also a nineteenth century “period piece,” are constructed quite organically and naturally as social beings, living, breathing

people and also embodiments of class relations. Campion seems to see her characters, to a large degree, as present-day figures dressed in historical costume and herself as a director of contemporary stories whatever the time-frame.

One of the leading Romantics, part of its so-called “second generation,” Keats was not simply concerned with love and self-expression, as important as they may have been to him. As Keats was telling Fanny to “Withhold no atom’s atom or I die,” he was discovering the “principal of beauty in all things.” He wrote in a letter in 1818: “Poetry should be great and unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one’s soul, and does not startle or amaze it with itself but with its subject.” This was the time of the early Industrial Revolution, of innovation in the sciences and technology.

The WSWS critique of Campion’s *The Piano* noted: “On the part of its most heroic representatives, [Romanticism] was a doomed, but inspired, attempt to regenerate bourgeois society emotionally and intellectually, to make it ‘live up to’ the great democratic ideals of the French Revolution. The outcome of the 1848 struggles demonstrated to nearly everyone, artists included, the hopelessness of such an effort.”

There is much in Keats’s work that lends credence to this contention. In another letter from 1818, the poet writes: “Man should not dispute or assert but whisper results to his neighbour, and thus by every germ of Spirit sucking the Sap from mould ethereal every human might become great, and Humanity instead of being a wide heath of Furze and Briars with here and there a remote Oak or Pine, would become a grand democracy of Forest Trees.” (An image, or a conception, that finds an echo in Trotsky’s final sentence in *Literature and Revolution*: “The forms of life will become dynamically dramatic. The average human type will rise to the heights of an Aristotle, a Goethe, or a Marx. And above this ridge new peaks will rise.”)

Keats’s contribution to the vision of a “grand democracy” was acknowledged by Percy Shelley in one of his most remarkable works, *Adonais*, “An Elegy on the Death of John Keats.” In many editions, the poem is preceded by an epigraph from Plato that Shelley translated into English:

*Thou wert the morning star among the living,
Ere thy fair light had fled;
Now, having died, thou art as Hesperus, giving
New splendor to the dead.*



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