

Unlike Byron and Shelley, who were both aristocrats, John Keats was from a humble, though not a poor background; his father managed a prosperous livery stable. He was educated at the Clarke School in Enfield and set to take up the profession of surgeon and licensed apothecary, which he gave up for poetry. His first volume of *Poems* was published in 1817. Keats made the acquaintance of the poet and journalist Leigh Hunt and his circle of friends, including the artist B. R. Haydon and fellow poet John Hamilton Reynolds. Keats's work was championed by Leigh Hunt in the pages of the *Examiner* and from this association Keats became one of the members of what the Tory *Quarterly* and others described as the 'Cockney School' of poets, a pejorative term suggesting a middle-class, suburban and metropolitan kind of writing. His first major work was the long, poetic romance *Endymion* (1817) which tells the story of the shepherd with whom the moon goddess Cynthia falls in love (among other myths and legends). The poem was written in loose, flowing heroic couplets and in a sensuous style. It was vilified by the conservative reviewers of the *Quarterly*, *Blackwood's* and the *British Critic*. In 1819, known as Keats's *annus mirabilis*, he produced much of the poetry that he is best-known for. He began work on his projected Miltonic epic *Hyperion* which recounts the story of the battle between the failing Titans and the rising Olympian gods which he would abandon to rework as the visionary poem *The Fall of Hyperion* later in the year. In February he completed the medieval romance, *The Eve of St Agnes*, with its complex and ambiguous tale of star-crossed love written in Spenserian stanzas, as well as the ballad-like poem 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'. In the spring of 1819 Keats wrote what many consider as his greatest works, and ones which have become synonymous with Romanticism: the Odes 'To Psyche', 'To a Nightingale', 'On a Grecian Urn', and his last extended narrative, *Lamia* (revised in 1820). He famously died of consumption at the age of twenty-five.

Women Romantic poets

Women wrote and published huge amounts of poetry in the Romantic period. Much of their writing was extremely popular and influential. Because their work does not so easily fit into the aesthetic of 'Romanticism', as it has been traditionally defined, and also because their periods of activity do not dovetail so neatly with the traditional periodisation of Romanticism, it is helpful to discuss their work under the separate heading; however, it is important to understand that women writers were publishing at the same time as their male counterparts, and often in creative dialogue with them, and that any sense of grouping of male and female writers has to remain hesitant.

Anna Laetitia Barbauld was a prominent dissenter, the daughter of John Aikin, a schoolmaster at the Warrington Academy. In 1773 she published her *Poems* and her *Miscellaneous Pieces in Prose* to great acclaim. Establishing herself as a teacher, she published *Lessons for Children* (1778) and *Hymns in Prose for*

Children (1781). From the late 1780s she wrote pamphlets on political subjects such as the slave trade and the war with France, as well as an important verse 'Epistle to William Wilberforce' (1791). Her last published poem, the powerful satire, *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* (1812) presented an apocalyptic view of the consequences of the current war. The poem was unpleasantly criticised as unpatriotic and Barbauld never published poetry again. Mary Robinson was an actress, courtesan, poet, novelist and memoirist. Known as 'Perdita' after her performance in David Garrick's adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, she became the mistress of the Prince of Wales. Her first volume of poems was published in 1775 and her two-volume *Poems* in 1791–3. Her sonnet sequence *Sappho and Phaon* appeared in 1796, the same year as Coleridge's *Poems on Various Subjects*. The fine late ballad 'The Haunted Beach' from her *Lyrical Tales* (1800) is a response to 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and her 'Poem to Coleridge' to his 'Kubla Khan'. A major novelist of the period as well as a poet, Charlotte Smith's important collection of poems of sensibility, the *Elegiac Sonnets*, was first published in 1784. Her affective perception of nature and her strong sensibility influenced Coleridge, Keats and Wordsworth. The *Sonnets* combined a powerful poetry of sensibility with a strong Gothic tone, as well as a fine feeling for the natural world. The collection was an immediate success but, faced with expensive legal battles concerning her father's will and the separation from her husband, Smith turned increasingly to the novel to provide literary earnings to support her family. At the time of her death she was completing the collection *Beachy Head with other Poems* (1807), the title poem being an evocation of her childhood which has been compared with Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey'. Anna Seward, or 'the Swan of Lichfield', was a largely self-educated poet and letter-writer, known for the ornateness and sentimentality of her verse. Seward disliked Smith's experimentation with the sonnet, preferring the form of the 'epic elegy' which her friend Erasmus Darwin credited her with inventing, including her *Elegy on Captain Cook* (1780) and her *Monody on the Death of Major Andre* (1781). Seward, unlike many woman writers of the time, was aggressively competitive and a noted public critic of Samuel Johnson.

Helen Maria Williams was a poet and novelist who published a number of poems of sensibility in the 1780s. Writing from Paris, she became, from the 1790s onwards, a key political commentator on the Revolution in France. The most popular poet of the period from 1820–35, after Byron, was Felicia Dorothea Hemans. Known, in particular, for her depiction of domestic subjects and manners, Hemans wrote to help with her household expenses. She published her first volume of poetry at the age of fourteen, wisely rejecting the subsequent offer of correspondence with an admiring Shelley. Hemans published prolifically, notable among her many works are her *Tales and Historic Scenes* (1819), 'Songs of the Cid' (1822), the tragedy, *The Siege of Valencia* (1823), and *Records of Woman* (1830). Numerous of her lyrics, including 'Casabianca', 'The Homes of England' and 'The Graves of a Household', were memorised by schoolchildren,

and her focus on domesticity ensured her substantial popularity with a later Victorian audience and the reprinting and anthologising of her work. Almost as popular and prolific as Hemans was Laetitia Elizabeth Landon (known as 'L.E.L.'). She published a number of novels and volumes of poetry; the most significant are *The Fate of Adelaide* (1821), *The Improvisatrice* (1824), *The Troubadour* (1825), *The Golden Violet* (1827) and *The Venetian Bracelet* (1829), in which she often assumed the persona of the innocent but rejected lover. Other notable works by female poets of the period include Mary Blanchford Tighe's *Psyche; or, The Legend of Love* (1805), an allegorical retelling of the story of *Cupid and Psyche* which may have influenced Keats; Mary Russell Mitford's romance based on the *Bounty* story, *Christina, or the Maid of the South Seas*, and her series of sketches of rural life, *Our Village*, published between 1824 and 1832; Eleanor Porden's scientific romance, *The Veils: or Triumph of Constancy* (1815); and Ann and Jane Taylor's numerous collections of verse for children including *Original Poems for Infant Minds* (1804) which contains Jane's poem 'The Star', or 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star' as it is more commonly known.

Labouring poets

Romantic poets often wrote about rural nature, but also popular in their day, though since excluded from the canon of 'high' Romanticism, were poets actually identified as 'peasant' or labouring. This category of writer was a fixture of the literary culture of the day and functioned as an acceptable, though heavily circumscribed, opportunity for working people to be published and address a wider public. Patrons desirous of unearthing authentic and unschooled creative genius were ever on the look-out for promising candidates. Robert Burns was packaged as a poetical ploughman absorbed on the poetical minutiae of his local rural world in the 1786 Kilmarnock edition of his *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*, though he was clearly a highly sophisticated and intellectual writer. Burns published two further volumes of poetry in 1787 and 1793. James Hogg, known as the 'Ettrick shepherd', was also a rural labouring-class poet who worked as shepherd until his mid-thirties. Hogg, known mainly for his powerful Gothic fiction *Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), published substantial amounts of poetry for *Blackwood's*. His *Poetic Mirror* (1816) also revealed him as a gifted parodist of mainstream Romantic poetry. John Clare was similarly represented as the 'Northamptonshire Peasant Poet' and marketed as such by his publisher John Taylor in a series of collections, including *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* (1820), *The Village Minstrel* (1821), *The Shepherd's Calendar* (1827) and the *Rural Muse* (1835). Clare, like Burns, was a major poet who found the limitations imposed upon him as a 'peasant poet' crippling. Robert Bloomfield, known as the 'Farmer's Boy' (actually by then a shoemaker) produced rural poetry; his first volume of poems sold 40,000 copies. Ann Yearsley, known as 'Lactilla' or 'the Bristol Milkwoman', was championed by Hannah More as an example of a working