Activity 4 - Keats and Medicine

Keats came from an ordinary background – his father owned a coaching inn, which shows us that he was not poor; he was a man of property, even if he wasn’t very high up the social scale. But Keats’s father died when Keats was just eight, his mother very quickly remarried, and then Keats’s grandfather on his mother’s side died, and things started going downhill, as arguments over wills split the family. At school, Keats was hard-working, liked fighting, and – you won’t be surprised to hear – was especially determined to win the literature prizes, which he did. But, leaving school in the aftermath of his mother’s death, and with a living to make, Keats was apprenticed to an apothecary – a kind of tradesman-pharmacist. It was not a high-status career, but it entailed significant medical training.

The medical profession in the early eighteen hundreds was extremely hierarchical. There were three kinds of ordinary medical practitioners. The highest-status of these was the physician, who was considered to be a gentleman and had a university education, normally at Oxford or Cambridge, which meant that he was well-read in the Classics, ancient Latin and Greek, as well as knowledgeable about a lot of the theories of medicine. One writer at the time said that “the character of a physician ought to be that of a gentleman, which cannot be maintained with dignity, but by a man of literature”. Physicians were expected to be well-read, cultured and dignified. However, the flip side of their highly theoretical university education was that trainee physicians didn’t always have much opportunity to practise on real sick people.

In contrast, the medic on the middle rung of the medical hierarchy ladder was the surgeon, who was trained on-the-job in a hospital. This vocational training did include some theory, but the focus was on the practicalities of the job in hand – which meant in practice that surgeons were looked upon as being inferior in social status and medical skill to physicians.

The apothecary (a bit like a pharmacist) was at the bottom of this hierarchy. Trained as an apprentice, rather than in any formal/theoretical way, the stereotype was of a greedy, almost mercenary tradesman who would roam around trying to sell his medicines, rather than as a medical man chiefly interested in making people well. So as well as three different routes into medicine, this history shows us a range of views on what kind of a skill medical practice is. The university-educated physicians saw medicine as a profession, to be practised by literate and cultured professionals. In contrast, the vocational training of surgeons and apothecaries implied that medicine was less a profession than a craft, to be learned and honed. Ambitious apothecaries frequently made the jump to the next stage on the career ladder by undertaking the hospital-based surgeon training. And this is precisely what Keats did, becoming an apothecary-surgeon and training under Astley Cooper, who was literally the best surgeon in England at the time.

With so much sickness in his family, Keats had first-hand experience of the way that different medical practitioners operated. He was confident that his hospital training prepared him well to care for his brother. But his letters show that he was also keenly aware of his tenuous social position as an apothecary-surgeon.

Keats’s apothecary apprenticeship and hospital training lasted for six years; he passed the exams required to practise medicine – difficult exams, requiring detailed medical knowledge – and was listed as a certified apothecary in the London Medical Repository. He worked for two years at Guy’s Hospital in London as a trainee surgeon, including one year as a ‘dresser’, which was a position of considerable responsibility, since it meant that he had to
look after any patients with wounds in the hospital – a very important job, before the invention of antibiotics, since any small infection could be deadly. As well as cleaning injuries and applying dressings, he would have practised vaccinating people, setting broken bones, pulling out rotten teeth, applying leeches, taking blood, and making up healing poultices. Keats’s notebooks show that he also took theoretical courses in physical sciences, anatomy, physiology, materia medica, and chemistry. He was exposed to the most up-to-date medical information, including the kinds of theoretical ideas which physicians would have learned about at university, all within the practical, hospital setting. In other words, by Christmas 1816, Keats really knew his stuff, medically speaking. But all the time that he was doing that training, Keats’s circle of friends was becoming increasingly literary and Keats’s poems were getting more and more attention. Having passed his exams, he took a step which shocked his family and friends: he gave up his medical career, to pursue a much more economically uncertain life as a poet.

But the Hyperion poems make me wonder whether maybe this wasn’t such a big step as it sounds. ‘Hyperion’ and ‘The Fall of Hyperion’ both deal with the question of how poetry can help people survive in a painful and frightening world. And, as I’ve suggested, they give us different ways of understanding the figure of the poet and how they can bring healing.

Apollo’s song is both life and death to Clymene; it drowns her ears even while it keeps them alive. As an Olympian god, Apollo is obviously high-status. His healing music is overwhelmingly beautiful – but does he really understand the suffering of the people who hear it? In Book III lines 86-136 of ‘Hyperion’ we see him coming into his full divinity by gaining knowledge of the world when Mnemosyne visits him. But did you notice how passive he is in the process? ‘Knowledge enormous makes a god of me’; ‘Names, deeds, grey legends, dire events, rebellions… / Pour into the wide hollows of my brain and deify me’: in both of those examples Apollo is the object of the clause; knowledge is happening to him, rather than him actively seeking or working to acquire it. And the poem makes clear that he is physically far away from the suffering of the Titans – he might as well be in a different world from the ‘nest of woes’. We might see Apollo, then, as representing the university-educated physician, who comes from a different class of life from most of his patients; who knows about what is making them sick and will work to alleviate that suffering, but who isn’t vulnerable to the same kinds of pains – physicians might have visited their poorer patients in their unsanitary homes, but they would themselves have lived somewhere very different, far away from the dangerously infectious overcrowding which was the cause of so much illness.

In contrast, we might take the mortal poet-speaker of ‘The Fall of Hyperion’ to represent the apothecary-surgeon, living and suffering in the world of the people he works to heal – whether through medicine or through poetry. Did you notice how often he himself goes through the pain that the Titans were experiencing in ‘The Fall of Hyperion’? If you look carefully at ‘the Fall of Hyperion’, Canto I lines 118-131, you might notice some parallels with ‘Hyperion: a fragment’ (look back at Book 1 lines 17-20, 92-93 and 256-263: notice any similarities?). He actively seeks the understanding of the world which Mnemosyne’s vision gives him, and he suffers alongside those he sees suffering – he is susceptible to the same diseases and pain which afflict them.

So what? You might well ask. Well, we’ve already seen that Keats’s apothecary-surgeon training identified him as socially inferior as a medic, compared with his physician colleagues. But he was also ridiculed during his lifetime for being socially inferior as a poet: some high-profile critics tore him to shreds in their reviews simply because he hadn’t been to university and couldn’t read ancient Greek. In one particularly devastating review, John Gibson
Lockhart described him as ‘only a boy, of pretty abilities, which he has done every thing in his power to spoil’ and gave him this piece of advice: 'It is better and a wiser thing to be a starved apothecary than a starved poet; so back to the shop Mr John, back to “plasters, pills, and ointment boxes.”' (You can read the whole review here and see the way that, for the snobbish Lockhart, Keats’s poetry was an offence against what he saw as the proper hierarchies of English society: http://lordbyron.cath.lib.vt.edu/doc.php?&choose=JoLockh.1818.Cockney4.xml)

By giving up on the version of the poem where Apollo takes up the role of ideal poet, and trying again with an ordinary mortal in this position instead, it might be that Keats was offering a response to the prejudiced judgement of critics like Lockhart. After all, he puts it very clearly in the opening of ‘The Fall of Hyperion’

For Poesy alone can tell her dreams,  
With the fine spell of words alone can save  
Imagination from the sable charm  
And dumb enchantment. Who alive can say,  
‘Thou art no Poet; may’st not tell thy dreams’?  
Since every man whose soul is not a clod  
Hath visions and would speak, if he had loved,  
And been well nurtured in his mother tongue.  
Whether the dream now purposed to rehearse  
Be poet’s or fanatic’s will be known  
When this warm scribe, my hand, is in the grave.  

(‘The Fall of Hyperion’, Canto I, lines 1-18)

‘Every man whose soul is not a clod / Hath visions and would speak’, Keats writes; nobody has the right to say ‘Thou art no Poet’. Moreover, the speaker insists that the question of whether or not he is a true poet will be decided by future generations – ‘when this warm scribe, my hand, is in the grave’. Only time will tell, Keats suggests, implicitly rejecting Lockhart’s criticism of him and denying his authority. Go Keats!