And did not know it,—no, they went about,
Holding a poor, decrepit standard out
Mark'd with most flimsy mottos, and in large
The name of one Boileau![1]

late 1816 1817

COMPANION READINGS

John Gibson Lockhart: from *On the Cockney School of Poetry*[1]

While the whole critical world is occupied with balancing the merits, whether in theory or in execution, of what is commonly called THE LAKE SCHOOL,[2] it is strange that no one seems to think it at all necessary to say a single word about another new school of poetry which has of late sprung up among us. This school has not, I believe, as yet received any name; but if I may be permitted to have the honour of christening it, it may henceforth be referred to by the designation of THE COCKNEY SCHOOL.[3] Its chief Doctor and Professor is Mr Leigh Hunt,[4] a man certainly of some talents, of extravagant pretensions both in wit, poetry, and politics, and withal of exquisitely bad taste, and extremely vulgar modes of thinking and manners in all respects. He is a man of little education. * * *

One feels the same disgust at the idea of opening Rimini,[5] that impresses itself on the mind of a man of fashion, when he is invited to enter, for a second time, the gilded drawing-room of a little mincing boarding-school mistress, who would fain have an *At Home* in her house.[6] Every thing is pretence, affectation, finery, and gaudiness. The beaux are attorneys' apprentices, with chapeau bras and Limerick gloves[7]—fiddlers, harp teachers, and clerks of genius: the belles are faded fan-twinkling spinsters, prurient vulgar misses from school, and enormous citizens' wives. The company are entertained with lukewarm negus,[8] and the sounds of a paltry piano forte.

1. Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux, French poet and literary critic whose verse-treatise *L'Art poétique* (1674) was a neoclassic primer; Keats is most likely referring to him by reputation rather than from personal study.

1. Lockhart's essays appeared in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, founded as a conservative Tory antidote to the liberal *Edinburgh Review*. In 1817 Lockhart (1794–1854), a Scots-born, Oxford-educated lawyer, began publishing a series of articles over the signature "Z." on a literary culture he dubbed "The Cockney School of Poetry," led by Hunt and joined by Keats, Hazlitt, and even Shelley, who qualified by radical politics (aristocratic lineage notwithstanding). To attract readers, Z. was deliberately caustic and derisive. Lockhart married Sir Walter Scott's daughter in 1820, became his official biographer, and from 1825 to 1853 edited *The Quarterly Review*, the leading Tory journal of London.

2. The catchy name given two months earlier by *Blackwood's* rival, *The Edinburgh*, to Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey (in his youth), all of whom lived in the Lake District of northwest England.

3. "Cockney" is a politically inflected class slur, implying vulgarity, lack of classical education, immature masculinity, even effeminacy.

4. Leigh Hunt (1774–1859), editor of the radical weekly, *The Examiner*, knew just about everyone in the progressive political and cultural world of London. He and his brother John, sons of a clergyman in the West Indies and his Philadelphia Quaker wife, were strong advocates of abolition, prison reform, religious tolerance, and political reform—positions sometimes charged with libel and sedition when they appeared in print. An attack in 1811 in *The Examiner* on the Prince Regent as a spendthrift libertine earned them both a two-year sentence in prison; Leigh rose to the occasion by applying flowered wallpaper to his cell, bringing in rugs, a piano, busts, books, and furniture, and receiving visitors in the manner of a salon.

5. Hunt's first serious poem, *Story of Rimini* (1816), elaborates a story made famous in Dante's *Inferno:* Francesca's adulterous affair with her husband's brother Paolo, of the powerful family of Rimini. Her husband killed them both. Hunt's extravagant sympathy with the lovers outraged the Tory reviews, already primed by antipathy to his politics, and his sensuous poetic style was reviled as moral depravity.

6. Upper-class term for a party hosted for friends and acquaintances.

7. Inexpensive hats and gloves.

8. An inexpensive mixture of wine, hot water, sugar, and flavorings—a drink for nondrinkers (by implication, feminine, childish).

John Gibson Lockhart: from *The Cockney School of Poetry*[1]

———of Keats,
The Muses' son of promise, and what feats
He yet may do, &c. *Cornelius Webb*[2]

Of all the manias of this mad age, the most incurable, as well as the most common, seems to be no other than the *Metromanie*.[3] The just celebrity of Robert Burns and Miss Baillie has had the melancholy effect of turning the heads of we know not how many farm-servants and unmarried ladies; our very footmen compose tragedies, and there is scarcely a superannuated governess in the island that does not leave a roll of lyrics behind her in her band-box. To witness the disease of any human understanding, however feeble, is distressing; but the spectacle of an able mind reduced to a state of insanity is of course ten times more afflicting. It is with such sorrow as this that we have contemplated the case of Mr John Keats. This young man appears to have received from nature talents of an excellent, perhaps even of a superior order—talents which, devoted to the purposes of any useful profession, must have rendered him a respectable, if not an eminent citizen. His friends, we understand, destined him to the career of medicine, and he was bound apprentice some years ago to a worthy apothecary in town. But all has been undone by a sudden attack of the malady to which we have alluded. Whether Mr John had been sent home with a diuretic or composing draught[4] to some patient far gone in the poetical mania, we have not heard. This much is certain, that he has caught the infection, and that thoroughly. For some time we were in hopes, that he might get off with a violent fit or two; but of late the symptoms are terrible. The phrenzy of the "Poems" was bad enough in its way; but it did not alarm us half so seriously as the calm, settled, imperturbable drivelling idiocy of "Endymion." We hope, however, that in so young a person, and with a constitution originally so good, even now the disease is not utterly incurable. Time, firm treatment, and rational restraint, do much for many apparently hopeless invalids; and if Mr Keats should happen, at some interval of reason, to cast his eye upon our pages, he may perhaps be convinced of the existence of his malady, which, in such cases, is often all that is necessary to put the patient in a fair way of being cured.

The readers of the Examiner newspaper were informed, some time ago, by a solemn paragraph, in Mr Hunt's best style, of the appearance of two new stars of glorious magnitude and splendour in the poetical horizon of the land of Cockaigne. One of these turned out, by and by, to be no other than Mr John Keats.[5] This precocious adulation confirmed the wavering apprentice in his desire to quit the gallipots,[6] and at the same time excited in his too susceptible mind a fatal admiration for the character and talents of the most worthless and affected of all the versifiers of our time. One of his first productions was the following sonnet, "*written on the day when* Mr

1. This, the fourth of Lockhart's essays, appeared in August 1818. In addition to *Poems*, Keats by now had published *Endymion* (April 1818)—a long poem undertaken in a self-conscious bid for poetic fame.
2. Either a serious eulogy, now lost, by Cornelius Webb (?1790–?1848), or verse invented by Z. and satirically attributed to Webb, a member of the Hampstead set.
3. French coinage for a mad passion for writing poetry.
4. Sleeping potion.
5. In an article titled *Young Poets* in *The Examiner* (December 1816), Hunt heralded three: Shelley, Keats's friend J. H. Reynolds, and Keats, whom he introduced by printing *On First Looking into Chapman's Homer*. "The Land of Cockaigne," satirically punning on "Cockney" pretensions, is a country in medieval fable famed for luxury and idleness.
6. Apothecaries' pots; also the apothecaries.

Leigh Hunt left prison."[7] It will be recollected, that the cause of Hunt's confinement was a series of libels against his sovereign, and that its fruit was the odious and incestuous "Story of Rimini." * * *

Mr Keats classes together WORDSWORTH, HUNT, and HAYDON, as the three greatest spirits of the age,[8] and that he alludes to himself, and some others of the rising brood of Cockneys, as likely to attain hereafter an equally honourable elevation. Wordsworth and Hunt! what a juxta-position! The purest, the loftiest, and, we do not fear to say it, the most classical of living English poets, joined together in the same compliment with the meanest, the filthiest, and the most vulgar of Cockney poetasters. No wonder that he who could be guilty of this should class Haydon with Raphael, and himself with Spencer. * * * At the period when these sonnets were published, Mr Keats had no hesitation in saying, that he looked on himself as "*not yet* a glorious denizen of the wide heaven of poetry,"[9] but he had many fine soothing visions of coming greatness, and many rare plans of study to prepare him for it. The following we think is very pretty raving. [Quotes *Sleep and Poetry*, lines 96–121.] Having cooled a little from this "fine passion," our youthful poet passes very naturally into a long strain of foaming abuse against a certain class of English Poets, whom, with Pope at their head, it is much the fashion with the ignorant unsettled pretenders of the present time to undervalue. Begging these gentlemens' pardon, although Pope was not a poet of the same high order with some who are now living, yet, to deny his genius, is just about as absurd as to dispute that of Wordsworth, or to believe in that of Hunt. Above all things, it is most pitiably ridiculous to hear men, of whom their country will always have reason to be proud, reviled by uneducated and flimsy striplings, who are not capable of understanding either their merits, or those of any other *men of power*—fanciful dreaming tea-drinkers, who, without logic enough to analyse a single idea, or imagination enough to form one original image, or learning enough to distinguish between the written language of Englishmen and the spoken jargon of Cockneys, presume to talk with contempt of some of the most exquisite spirits the world ever produced, merely because they did not happen to exert their faculties in laborious affected descriptions of flowers seen in window-pots, or cascades heard at Vauxhall;[1] in short, because they chose to be wits, philosophers, patriots, and poets, rather than to found the Cockney school of versification, morality, and politics, a century before its time. After blaspheming himself into a fury against Boileau, &c. Mr Keats comforts himself and his readers with a view of the present more promising aspect of affairs; above all, with the ripened glories of the poet of Rimini. [Here follows a lengthy abuse of *Endymion*.] We had almost forgot to mention, that Keats belongs to the Cockney School of Politics, as well as the Cockney School of Poetry.

It is fit that he who holds Rimini to be the first poem, should believe the Examiner to be the first politician of the day. We admire consistency, even in folly. Hear how their bantling has already learned to lisp sedition.[2] * * * We venture to make one small prophecy, that his bookseller will not a second time venture £50 upon any thing he can write. It is a better and a wiser thing to be a starved apothecary than a starved

7. Published in *Poems*, the volume itself dedicated to Hunt, honoring his political courage; Z. quotes the sonnet, ridiculing the "absurdity" of its praise.
8. Referring to another sonnet in *Poems*, "Great spirits now on earth are sojourning."
9. "O Poesy! for thee I hold my pen / That am not yet a glorious denizen / Of thy wide heaven" (*Sleep and Poetry* 47–49).

1. Musical concerts at the public gardens on the south bank of the Thames.
2. Z. quotes the attack on monarchies at the opening of *Endymion* III, a passage, like the one from *Sleep and Poetry*, that courted animosity. Bantling: baby, and in its German origin, bastard; sedition: illegal incitement of resistance to established authority.

poet; so back to the shop Mr John, back to "plasters, pills, and ointment boxes," &c. But, for Heaven's sake, young Sangrado, be a little more sparing of extenuatives and soporifics in your practice than you have been in your poetry.[3]

Z.

August 1818

On Seeing the Elgin Marbles[1]

My spirit is too weak—mortality
Weighs heavily on me like unwilling sleep,
And each imagined pinnacle and steep
Of godlike hardship, tells me I must die
Like a sick eagle looking at the sky.
Yet 'tis a gentle luxury to weep
That I have not the cloudy winds to keep
Fresh for the opening of the morning's eye.
Such dim-conceived glories of the brain
Bring round the heart an undescribable feud;
So do these wonders a most dizzy pain
That mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude
Wasting of old time—with a billowy main° *sea*
A sun—a shadow of a magnitude.

1817 1817, 1818

On sitting down to read King Lear once again[1]

O Golden-tongued Romance, with serene Lute!
Fair plumed Syren![2] 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[3]
Must I burn through; once more assay[4]
The bitter-sweet of this Shaksperean fruit.
Chief Poet! and ye Clouds of Albion,[5]

3. Sangrado is a medical quack in Le Sage's novel *Gil Blas* (1715–1735); extenuatives are pain-easers; soporifics are sleep-inducers.

1. Keats viewed these sculptural fragments from the Athenian Parthenon with Haydon, a champion of Lord Elgin's purchase of them in 1806 from the Turks, then occupying Greece. Elgin (hard *g*) was motivated both by admiration for their powerful beauty and a desire to preserve them from erosion and the further peril of supplying mortar and target practice for Turkish soldiers. Their aesthetic value was debated (some found them crude and even inauthentic), and their purchase by the British government in 1816 for deposit in the British Museum (they are still there) was (and still is) controversial. Keats's sonnet appeared in *The Examiner* in 1817 (the text used here) and in Haydon's *Annals of the Fine Arts* in 1818. For Haydon's enthusiasm, see page 500.

1. The emphasis on reading is critical, for Keats would not have been able to see Shakespeare's play in its true form. It was being staged in a version by Nahum Tate, who in 1681 recast this searing tragedy into the genre of "Romance": Lear doesn't die but regains the throne, then abdicates to newlyweds Edgar and Cordelia (she doesn't die either), and happily retires with Gloucester (ditto) and Kent. Keats disciplines his own attraction to "Romance" by rereading Shakespeare straight.

2. Temptress and seductress; the Sirens of myth seemed women from the waist up but were really birds of prey, whose singing lured men to destruction.

3. The body and its mortal limitations; in *Childe Harold III* (1816), Byron described man as "clay" that inevitably "will sink / Its spark immortal" (14). In another draft, Keats wrote "Hell-torment" instead of "Damnation."

4. Analyze the contents of, more specifically, the gold content of ore.

5. An old Celtic name for England, frequently used in Romance literature but also alluding to *King Lear*, set in the Celtic era.