

Bright Star

Jane Campion's recent bio-pic of the poet John Keats, *Bright Star*, begins with a close-up of a woman's fingers sewing. Even before we have moved through the title sequence, it is apparent that passion or romance is here to be measured by the inarticulate, but speaking gestures of the hands of the lovers. Indeed, the success of the film lies in its disciplined and selective focus. Its perspective on Keats, it could be argued, is most tellingly portrayed through the hands rather than the eyes of Fanny Brawne, played here by Abbie Cornish. That *Bright Star* belongs to Fanny, has already been pointed out by many critics, but in this choice of focus it offers a democratic and distinctly visual sense of Keats's attention to 'the holiness of the heart's affections'. This is the laudable medium through which the film understands romance and through which it approaches Keats's poetry. At its close, as the credits are rolling, we are treated to the voice of Ben Whishaw (who plays Keats) reading the whole of 'Ode to a Nightingale'. Unfortunately, in the cinema I visited in Leeds, the audience had begun to leave or at least resume its actual or electronic conversations by the time this took place. What for some of us might have been thought of as constituting the 'main event' behind the film – the writing of poems – was thus simply ignored or upstaged by this visually insistent medium. Even when the film offers the extraordinary event of reading a

whole poem, it failed, in my venue at least, to receive its due attention. To position it at this point in the screening might itself be thought of as an admission of defeat. One can appreciate the difficulty in getting a wider, contemporary audience to listen to or to read Keats's poetry. And, despite its moving attachment to the intensity of romance, *Bright Star* is haunted by an anxiety about reading poetry out loud even though it nobly and bravely includes it at the heart of its enterprise.

The film's intensity derives from its concentration on the period of Keats's lodging in Hampstead, including the time also of his most astonishing months of creativity in the spring and early summer of 1819 when he composed his most famous odes. In Campion's film we rarely move out of Hampstead save for a couple of outdoor London scenes and a sudden, stark removal to Rome for Keats's funeral. There are some overly picturesque, but pertinently seasonal, pastoral scenes which use the nearby Heath to some effect. There are also occasional extravagant bursts of a more surreal visual kind, including Keats lying cruciform on top of the blossoming canopy of an apple-tree in the garden and Fanny and her sister nurturing and releasing tropical butterflies. But the film is at its best when it allows the constrained and sparsely furnished interiority of the domestic space of Wentworth Place to articulate its representation of frustrated passion; and it measures this passion through inanimate objects and the teasing proximity of Fanny and John. It is also measured through proxies: Fanny's young sister 'Toots' and the family cat become the visually telling, but linguistically

inarticulate forms through which we can access the hurt of unrequited or at least thwarted passion. At the high point of this form of the film's expression Fanny's fingers run across the plaster of the wall which, she knows, is all that separates her from her lover in the adjacent room next door.

In Campion's film the internal conflict of their love – the conflict for Keats between romance and his poetic ambitions – is largely removed from Keats himself and transferred to his friend Charles Brown who becomes, somewhat unfairly, if one is to judge simply by the historical record, the repository of male aggression and the over-zealous protector of his friend from the perceived threat of female passion. Instead of being seen to embody conflicted appetites and ambitions the young poet is immediately made earnest by this manoeuvre. Whereas Brown migrates towards a somewhat macabre and grotesque sexual predator, Keats becomes rather straightforwardly moral. There is a fleeting glimpse of the performative extrovert Keats when he dances a Scottish jig for the family at Christmas, but even the quotations from his extraordinarily creative and playful letters, which here are often removed from writing to form actual speech, are characterised by earnest declaration. We witness little of the linguistic daring and, most tellingly and disappointingly, the wit which inhabits his correspondence. It seems that the figure of the poet in this most contemporary of portraits must be one of earnestness and include moral and sexual integrity. The creative homosocial context of Keats's friendship group is largely removed or at least significantly pared down here and so we lose both its humorous and its disturbing possibilities.

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Access to the poetry is from the outside and is provided by Fanny's naïve curiosity which itself has been triggered by romance and by her perceptive recognition that poetry and romance might contain or at least accommodate each other. To this end, she begins a course of reading in order to break into the creative activity taking place next door. For this, she is savagely mocked and tricked by Brown, but the scenes in which she reads poems out loud – slightly halting, without confidence, but suffused with wonder – could be said to upstage Whishaw's reading of 'Ode to a Nightingale' which movingly closes the film.

A few weeks later while browsing in Waterstone's in a pause from Christmas shopping my eye was drawn to a new Vintage Classics edition entitled *Bright Star: The Complete Poems and Selected Letters of John Keats* edited by Jane Campion. On reading her introduction I was surprised to find the following somewhat extravagant and culturally – dare one say, generically – over-confident statement: 'No-one really reads poetry any more.' The 'really' here can obviously be interpreted differently depending on whether you're a filmmaker or the editor or reader of a specialist poetry magazine. From both perspectives there is certainly a challenge to extend significantly the numbers of those who 'really read poetry'. Leading a more general audience to Keats's poetry through Fanny's ambivalently motivated curiosity might, tactically, be the right way to do it. At least, the assumption behind Campion's dangerous over-statement is, I would suggest, written into (or stitched deeply into) the fabric of her film.

John Whale

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