

1819

ODE ON INDOLENCE

John Keats

Keats, John (1795-1821) - Widely regarded as the most talented of the English romantic poets, Keats, whose work was poorly received during his lifetime, could not have foreseen his later recognition. Ironically, he wrote for his own epitaph: "Here lies one whose name was writ in water." Ode on Indolence (1819) Keats based this poem on a passage in an earlier letter to his brother. Opening lines: One morn before me were three figures seen, / With bowed necks, and joined hands, side-faced; ...

ODE ON INDOLENCE

They toil not, neither do they spin.

I

One morn before me were three figures seen,
 With bowed necks, and joined hands, side-faced;
 And one behind the other stepp'd serene,
 In placid sandals, and in white robes graced;
 They pass'd, like figures on a marble urn
 When shifted round to see the other side;
 They came again, as, when the urn once more
 Is shifted round, the first seen shades return;
 And they were strange to me, as may betide
 With vases, to one deep in Phidian lore. -

II

How is it, Shadows! that I knew ye not?
 How came ye muffled in so hush a masque?
 Was it a silent deep-disguised plot
 To steal away, and leave without a task
 My idle days? Ripe was the drowsy hour;
 The blissful cloud of summer-indolence
 Benumb'd my eyes; my pulse grew less and less;
 Pain had no sting, and pleasure's wreath no flower:
 O, why did ye not melt, and leave my sense
 Unhaunted quite of all but-nothingness? -

III

A third time came they by;- alas! wherefore?
 My sleep had been embroider'd with dim dreams;
 My soul had been a lawn besprinkled o'er
 With flowers, and stirring shades, and baffled beams:
 The morn was clouded, but no shower fell,
 Though in her lids hung the sweet tears of May;
 The open casement press'd a new-leav'd vine,
 Let in the budding warmth and throstle's lay;
 O Shadows! 'twas a time to bid farewell!
 Upon your skirts had fallen no tears of mine. -

IV

A third time pass'd they by, and, passing, turn'd
 Each one the face a moment whiles to me;
 Then faded, and to follow them I burn'd
 And ach'd for wings because I knew the three;
 The first was a fair Maid, and Love her name;

The second was Ambition, pale of cheek,
 And ever watchful with fatigued eye;
 The last, whom I love more, the more of blame
 Is heap'd upon her, maiden most unmeek,
 I knew to be my demon Poesy. -

V

They faded, and, forsooth! I wanted wings:
 O folly! What is love! and where is it?
 And for that poor Ambition! it springs
 From a man's little heart's short fever-fit;
 For Poesy!- no,- she has not a joy,
 At least for me,- so sweet as drowsy noons,
 And evenings steep'd in honied indolence;
 O, for an age so shelter'd from annoy,
 That I may never know how change the moons,
 Or hear the voice of busy common-sense! -

VI

So, ye three Ghosts, adieu! Ye cannot raise
 My head cool-bedded in the flowery grass;
 For I would not be dieted with praise,
 A pet-lamb in a sentimental farce!
 Fade softly from my eyes, and be once more
 In masque-like figures on the dreamy urn;
 Farewell! I yet have visions for the night,
 And for the day faint visions there is store;
 Vanish, ye Phantoms! from my idle spright,
 Into the clouds, and never more return! - -

THE END