

"Ode on a Grecian Urn"

By John Keats

*Transcription, correction, editorial commentary, and
markup by Students and Staff of the University of Virginia*

Ode on a Grecian Urn

1.

1 Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,
2 Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,
3 Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
4 A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
5 What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape
6 Of deities or mortals, or of both,
7 In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
8 What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
9 What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
10 What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

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2.

11 Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
12 Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
13 Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,
14 Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:
15 Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
16 Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
17 Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
18 Though winning near the goal — yet, do not grieve;
19 She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
20 For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

3.

21 Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
22 Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;
23 And, happy melodist, unwearied,
24 For ever piping songs for ever new;

25 More happy love! more happy, happy love!
26 For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,
27 For ever panting, and for ever young;
28 All breathing human passion far above,
29 That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,
30 A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

4.

31 Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
32 To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
33 Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
34 And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?
35 What little town by river or sea shore,
36 Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
36 Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?
37 And, little town, thy streets for evermore
37 Will silent be; and not a soul sto tell
38 Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

5.

39 O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede
40 Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
41 With forest branches and the trodden weed;
43 Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
43 As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
44 When old age shall this generation waste,
45 Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
46 Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
47 Beauty is truth, truth beauty", ^{Beauty}--that is all
48 Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

Footnotes

Beauty This closing couplet is a famous example of a situation where an important part of a poem exists in two different versions, versions that can lead to very different interpretations. In the version of "Ode on a Grecian Urn" that was published *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes and other Poems*, which is the version that we include in our anthology, Keats puts the phrase "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" in quotation marks, which makes it seem as though the speaker of the line might be the urn itself. But in the version that he published in the journal *Annals of the Fine Arts* in 1819 (depicted here), Keats did not, which makes it seem as if the speaker is the voice of the poet himself. Neither version is better or more authentic than the other; Keats never explained the why he added the quotation marks in 1820. But how we think about the poem can be quite different depending on which version of this closing couplet we are reading.