



bright star

Spring
Season
2010

Review by Philip French, *The Observer*:

Films about poets have a poor reputation, most of them – from Dennis Price as *The Bad Lord Byron* 60 years ago to Gwyneth Paltrow as Sylvia Plath six years back – being dull and risible, though a couple of performances have been rather good, most notably Rip Torn's exuberant Walt Whitman in the otherwise unremarkable *Beautiful Dreamers*. Jane Campion's *Bright Star* is in a different class and this is partly because it looks at John Keats from the viewpoint of Fanny Brawne, in the same way that Percy Adlon's remarkable *Céleste* looked at Proust through the eyes of his dedicated housekeeper.

The three-year relationship between Brawne (Abbie Cornish) and Keats (Ben Whishaw) – she was 18 when they met in 1818, he was 23 – is one of the great love affairs of English literature, but it didn't become public knowledge until a decade after her death in 1865 when some of his letters to her were published.

Using Andrew Motion's magisterial biography as her biographical source and Keats's poetry as her creative model, Campion has made what she calls "a ballad, a sort of story poem" about the relationship that begins with the beautiful, confident Fanny on her way with her young brother and sister and their mother to meet Keats and his devoted, well-off companion, poet Charles Brown, and ends with Fanny's terrible grief after receiving the news of his death in Rome in February 1821.

Campion resists the temptation to follow Keats to Italy. Instead, Brown reads a letter from painter Joseph Severn who'd accompanied Keats on his journey, and we see a brief, silent sequence of a coffin being carried down the Spanish Steps and a hearse driving off towards the Protestant Cemetery. There's some rather clumsy exposition in the opening scenes when we're told about Keats's humble background, his parents' deaths, his sickly young brother Tom and another brother's emigration to the States. But this is uncharacteristic of a movie that subtly follows an Austenesque process as it moves from playful banter and underlying tension into the true love and mutual reliance that springs up when John and Fanny become next-door neighbours in Hampstead. The only thing standing between their two beds at that point is the thin wall dividing the semi-detached houses.

Campion is a feminist film-maker, the heroines of her films usually oppressed by insensitive families or husbands, as in her two previous excursions into the 19th century, *The Piano*, her most fully achieved work until *Bright Star*, and *The Portrait of a Lady*, a fine but flawed film. So one becomes aware of an absence of what might be called assertiveness or aggression of a kind we might have expected from her. There are no conspicuous point-scoring sexual politics at work in *Bright Star* beyond the obvious recognition that women at that time were restricted in their social lives.

This is largely confined to the admirably handled conflict between Brawne and Brown. Brown, a conventional misogynist, regards women as objects for exploitation, display or distant adoration and believes it his duty to protect the vulnerable Keats from the distraction Fanny constitutes. He represents a different kind of love from the one Keats offers and ends up making a servant girl pregnant and marrying her without any intention of remaining faithful. He also lets down Keats, first by no longer being able to provide financial support, then in finding excuses for not going with him to Italy.

From the start, Brown mocks Fanny as a flirtatious clothes horse, attracting attention to the fancy outfits she designs and makes. But she comes across attractively as a proto-Coco Chanel, the couturier as artist, taking pride and pleasure in her creations. This prevents the film going in the direction of the conflicts between poets and their lovers tendentiously dramatised in *Tom and Viv* and *Sylvia*.

Fanny comes into Keats's orbit by wanting to comfort his ailing brother Tom and through her desire to understand his poetry. She is not seeking to become his muse (though she does) and isn't jealous of him (and indeed there's little in the way of professional success or social attainment to be jealous of). It is the man and his work that attracts her, and as played by Ben Whishaw he's an engaging figure: sociable but socially awkward, proud but not arrogant, a dreamer but not dreamy, and curiously vigorous despite the tuberculosis that so often drags him down and will soon kill him. What we inevitably miss is the larger social vision that Motion's biography reveals. Not surprisingly Mrs Brawne (Kerry Fox) thinks Keats a hopeless match for her daughter, but she is a kindly, thoughtful person and is prepared, for a mixture of reasons, for her daughter to become engaged, if only secretly.

At the heart of the film is a doomed love affair that moves gently, inexorably towards death through the seasons that the poet observes, and one thinks of *The Eve of St Agnes*, the great narrative poem Keats wrote in this period, which comes across like a scenario for a wonderful silent movie. Both Cornish and Whishaw inhabit their roles immaculately and there are magnificent moments when the emotions on

the screen are complemented in the verse spoken, most especially perhaps when the pair recite alternate couplets from "La Belle Dame sans Merci".

The film, most of it shot on location in Bedfordshire, is beautifully lit by Greig Fraser and it ends with a fine reading by Ben Whishaw of "Ode to a Nightingale" that begins after Fanny has walked across a wintry Hampstead Heath in a mourning dress of her own creation and accompanies the credits to the very end. So don't rush for the exit when the credits start rolling. Sit and savour this marvellous film until the lights come up.