



The Keats-Shelley Review

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/yksr20>

The Sacrosanct Status of the Graves of Keats and Shelley in the Twentieth Century

Nicholas Stanley-Price

To cite this article: Nicholas Stanley-Price (2021) The Sacrosanct Status of the Graves of Keats and Shelley in the Twentieth Century, *The Keats-Shelley Review*, 35:1, 64-79, DOI: 10.1080/09524142.2021.1911183

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09524142.2021.1911183>



Published online: 23 Jun 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

ARTICLE



The Sacrosanct Status of the Graves of Keats and Shelley in the Twentieth Century

Nicholas Stanley-Price

Advisory Committee, Non-Catholic Cemetery for Foreigners in Rome

ABSTRACT

The sacrosanct status of the graves of John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley in Rome was acknowledged in formal decisions taken in the 1880s and 1890s. In the twentieth century, their depictions in art and literature differed from those of the previous century. Requests 'to be buried near the poets' in this active cemetery have affected Shelley's grave more than Keats's. It was rather the latter's condition following WWII bombing of the cemetery that the press unfairly criticized. Reinforced by regular commemoration ceremonies, the continuing sanctity of the poets' graves has survived despite various attempts to 'improve' them.

KEYWORDS

John Keats; Percy Bysshe Shelley; Rome; Protestant cemetery; poet's grave; sanctity; Romanticism

Her daughter Elizabeth Woodridge Phelps
knowing her mother's devotion to literature
is glad to carry out her wish
to be buried near the poet Shelley.¹

It took almost two and a half years for the graves of John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley to be marked by gravestones in the Protestant cemetery at Rome. Keats had died in February 1821 but a stone was not raised until late May or early June 1823. In the meantime, the cremated ashes of Shelley, drowned in July 1822, had been buried the following January – until Edward Trelawny moved them and installed a stone a few months later. Visitors were few in the early years but steadily increased, especially once guidebooks such as Murray's *Handbook for Travellers in Central Italy* (first edition, 1843) mentioned the cemetery as a worthwhile destination.² The grave of Shelley in the New Cemetery underwent little change; the plants around it were substituted from time to time and in winter mould could obscure the inscription. But the flat ledger-stone remained essentially as it had been installed.

The grave of John Keats was in a very different situation. The Old Cemetery where it lay was closed only eighteen months after his death. A very few exceptions were made for later burials, the most significant being the transfer in 1882 of the body of Joseph Severn to lie at Keats's side. That the Old Cemetery was no longer in use (or 'abandoned' as its critics would assert) rendered it vulnerable to demolition when the new capital city

CONTACT Nicholas Stanley-Price ✉ nstanleyprice@tiscali.it

¹From the epitaph for Elizabeth Stiles Phelps (1813–1894), grave at Zone V.6.6, Non-Catholic Cemetery, Rome.

²Nicholas Stanley-Price, 'Shelley's Grave Revisited', *The Keats-Shelley Journal* 65 (2016): 53–69; idem, 'The Grave of John Keats Revisited', *The Keats-Shelley Review* 33 no. 2 (2019): 175–93.

expanded after 1870. The presence of the poet's grave saved it from this fate, but only after the intervention of British and German heads of state and tortuous negotiations between diplomats of those nations and the Mayor of Rome. On an earlier visit to the city, the German foreign minister Herbert Bismarck reported that Kaiser Wilhelm was encouraged to learn that the Comune di Roma had been able to acknowledge 'British sentiment' towards the poet Keats, and would not disturb his grave.³

This intervention in 1888 demonstrated in a quite unexpected way that the grave of Keats was widely considered 'sacrosanct'. Shelley's grave had acquired a similar esteem, evident in the decision in 1891 not to instal on it Onslow Ford's monumental sculpture of the dead Shelley. I use 'sacrosanct' in the sense of 'not to be changed or interfered with or trespassed upon'. Characteristic of graves with this status – one originally ascribed to the burial places of saints in the medieval church – are the frequency of visitors (pilgrims), the bringing of offerings and the taking away of souvenirs (relics), and a desire for one's own burial nearby.⁴ The graves of Keats and Shelley have fully met these criteria. As early as 1830 a visitor wrote that he had made a 'pilgrimage' to the graves of Keats and Shelley.⁵ The habit of removing flowers or leaves as souvenirs also started early and continues today.⁶ This continuing reverence for the graves is substantiated in the literature and art of the twentieth century which is where I start my discussion. I then review how their sanctity has been enhanced by ceremonies of commemoration but also questioned in the light of perceived neglect. Finally, I consider the extent to which it was potentially compromised by those wishing 'to be buried near the poets'.

The Two Graves in Twentieth-Century Literature and Art

The two graves featured in the literature and art of the twentieth century but not in the same way as in the previous eighty years. In general, the numerous travellers' memoirs and diaries published in the nineteenth century gave way to commercial guidebooks and 'celebrations' of the city of Rome. The postwar period of the 1950s and 1960s saw the publication of several now considered classics.⁷ They all pay tribute to one or both of the poets' graves in a cemetery that was recommended as a worthwhile sight in the city. The emotional reactions recounted in many nineteenth-century memoirs found no place in the more sober guidebooks and celebrations of the city. Some Italian authors, however, confessed to being moved by their visits.⁸ Gabriele D'Annunzio too had described evocatively in *Il Piacere* (1889) the

³Wolfgang Krogel, *All'ombra della Piramide: storia e interpretazione del Cimitero acattolico di Roma* (Rome: Unione Internazionale degli Istituti di Archeologia, Storia e Storia dell'Arte in Roma, 1995), 202, n. 57.

⁴The burial-places of non-believers too may qualify: the grave of Karl Marx has been viewed as a 'sacred site' and a 'site of pilgrimage', with 'the graves of comrades gathered as if his were the tomb of a saint': Walter Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains* (Princeton and London: Princeton University Press, 2015), 19–20.

⁵R. Chenevix Trench, *Letters and Memorials*, vol. 1 (London, 1888), 51–2.

⁶Jessica Roberson, 'Shelley's Grave, Botanical Souvenirs, and Handling Literary Afterlives in the Nineteenth Century', *Victoriographies* 6 no. 3 (2016): 276–94.

⁷Elizabeth Bowen, *A Time in Rome* (London: Longmans, 1960); Eleanor Clark, *Rome and a Villa* (New York: Doubleday, 1952; rev. ed. Harper Collins, 1974); H. V. Morton, *A Traveller in Rome* (London: Methuen & Co, 1957, much reprinted); Georgina Masson, *The Companion Guide to Rome* (London: Collins, 1965, much reprinted).

⁸R[omolo] Brigiuti, 'Il Cimitero degli acattolici e la tomba di Shelley in Roma', *Tribuna illustrata* 3 no. 51 (18 dicembre 1892): 690–1; Mario Pratesi, Il cimitero protestante, in *Figure e paesi d'Italia* (Turin-Rome: Casa Editrice Nazionale, 1905), 145–55; Artur Jahn Rusconi, 'Il cimitero dei poeti', *Emporium* 28 no. 167 (November 1908): 352–66; Nicola Moscardelli, *Visita a Shelley e a Keats, in L'Aria di Roma, Prose* (Turin: Buratti, 1930).

graves' setting, a passage more familiar to anglophone readers after 1949 and Neville Rogers's new translation of it.⁹

The two poets' graves had inspired an unparalleled number of poems during the Victorian era.¹⁰ If this effusion has declined since 1900, it has been offset by a growing number of novels that refer to them. Keats's grave has proved especially attractive, acting as an unusual point of rendezvous for assignments either romantic or sinister. Authors include Antal Szerb, Gore Vidal, Patricia Highsmith, Charles McCarry, James Salter and – coming up to date – Delia Ephron.¹¹ In his early writings James Joyce alludes often to Shelley's work. On his arrival in Rome in 1906, Joyce found the commemorative plaque to Shelley on Palazzo Verospi right across the road from the bank where he was employed. A reference to 'Shelley's grave in Rome' in his notes to *Exiles*, written in 1913, seems to confirm that he did visit the grave during his miserable stay of seven months in the city.¹² Pier Paolo Pasolini too stood there when composing his tribute to Antonio Gramsci, buried nearby,¹³ and the Beat poet Gregory Corso (1930–2001) achieved the ultimate honour of burial adjacent to Shelley's grave. Corso had first visited the spot in late 1958, when he plucked clover leaves there and sent them to his fellow-beat Allen Ginsberg in San Francisco.¹⁴ The previous year Ginsberg himself had reacted emotionally on seeing the two poets' graves, also taking a clover from Shelley's as a souvenir. When years later Bob Dylan remarked that he wished to lie in an unmarked grave, Ginsberg told him about Keats's grave in a beautiful 'American' cemetery in Rome.¹⁵ Corso also introduced the cemetery to the artist Willem de Kooning (1904–1997) who, fifteen years later, gave a title of *Whose Name Was Writ in Water* to one of his fluid late paintings (1975; Guggenheim Museum, New York).

Artists whom the graves inspired were in fact far fewer in the twentieth century than in the previous one. Paintings of Shelley's grave in the twentieth century are rare (if not absent) in public collections and those of Keats's grave are far from common. The latter's scarcity is due in part to the high wall built around 1900 immediately in front of the grave. This rendered impossible a panoramic view such as that made by Ettore Roesler Franz. In his well-known watercolour (1886) depicting the Old Cemetery in front of the pyramid of Gaius Cestius, the graves of Keats and Severn stand prominently at the left margin. The artist has gone to the trouble of inscribing in pencil below them the complete text of Keats's epitaph, an indication of the importance that Franz attached to the poet.¹⁶

⁹Gabriele D'Annunzio, *The Protestant Cemetery, Rome 1889* (trans. Neville Rogers) in Rogers, *Keats, Shelley & Rome*, 4th edn (London: Johnson, 1970), 41–2.

¹⁰Samantha Matthews, *Poetical Remains: Poets' Graves, Bodies, and Books in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 115, n.8.

¹¹Antal Szerb, *Utas és holdvilág*, 1937; trans. Len Rix as *Journey by Moonlight* (London: Pushkin Press, 2000); Gore Vidal, *The Judgement of Paris* (New York: Dutton, 1952); Patricia Highsmith, *Ripley Underground* (London: Heinemann, 1970); Charles McCarry, *The Years of Autumn* (1974; repr. London: Duckworth, 2009); James Salter, *Light Years* (1975; repr. London: Penguin Classics, 2007); and Delia Ephron, *Siracusa* (New York: Blue Rider Press, 2016).

¹²Carla de Petris, « Exiles or Emigrants, » in *Joyce in Rome. The Genesis of Ulysses*, ed. Giorgio Melchiori (Rome: Bulzoni, 1984), 86–90, 94–6; John McCourt. *James Joyce in context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 205.

¹³Pier Paolo Pasolini, 'Le ceneri di Gramsci' (1954) in *Le ceneri di Gramsci* (Rome: Garzanti, 1957); Alexander Booth, 'In whose shadow? Pasolini, Gramsci and Shelley in the Non-Catholic Cemetery', *Newsletter, Friends of the Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome* 10 (Spring 2010): 3.

¹⁴Peter Orlovsky, *A Life in Words: Intimate Chronicles of a Beat Writer*, ed. Bill Morgan (Routledge: Abingdon, New York, 2016), 97.

¹⁵<https://allenginsberg.org/2013/12/allen-ginsberg-bob-dylan-at-the-grave-of-jack-kerouac/> accessed 29 September 2020.

¹⁶*Landscapes of Memory. The Roman Watercolours of Ettore Roesler Franz, 1876–95*, exhib. cat., Rome: Museo di Roma in Trastevere (Florence: Mandragora, 2007), 237–8 and pl. 31; Nicholas Stanley-Price, Mary K. McGuigan and John F. McGuigan Jr., *At the Foot of the Pyramid: 300 Years of the Cemetery for Foreigners in Rome*, exhib. cat. (Rome: Edizioni Askl, Casa di Goethe/Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome, 2016), 92–3. Of similar date in the 1880s must be the recently discovered oil painting by Charles Earle entitled *Keats's grave, Rome* (see *Newsletter, Friends of the Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome* 54 (Spring, 2021).

Closer views of Keats's gravestone similar to those made by W. Bell Scott, Walter Crane, George Howard and Lady Gregory, almost disappeared from the record after 1900. An artist now had to operate within the confined space created by the new wall while also contending with a decorative iron fence erected between the wall and the graves. The Japanese artist Yoshio Markino (1869–1956) overcame these obstacles in his evocative watercolour of 1908, one of the few paintings of the grave in the twentieth century.¹⁷ The atmospheric watercolour (1901) by Edward Clifford (1844–1907) avoided the problem by inventing a dramatic chiaroscuro setting for Keats's and Severn's tombstones.¹⁸ Another solution, adopted by the American artist Charles Erskine Scott Wood (1852–1944), was to view the graves from the side.¹⁹

Photographers often did the same, emphasizing the graves' position in the corner formed by the boundary walls (Figure 1).²⁰ In the early- to mid-twentieth century most of the views available for sale were reprints of old photos, distributed by dealers such as Anderson and Alinari. Published images of Keats's grave often date from many years prior to the date of publication. For instance, the centenary of the poet's death in 1921 was illustrated in one magazine with a photo of his grave dating from the short period 1875–1882, that is, forty years earlier.²¹ Photographs produced by Ernesto Richter at the turn of the century were still on sale as postcards after World War II. There was very little competition from new photographs, not even from new products in colour. Nor were Italian painters attracted to the poets' graves. Artists such as Francesco Trombadori (1886–1961), Giuseppe Micali (1860–1944) and Filippo Anivitti (1876–1955) all painted inside the Old Cemetery, but for them the Pyramid of Gaius Cestius was the dominant interest.

In summary, the poets' graves were often mentioned in guidebooks and in other literature celebrating the city, and – in the second half of the century – became an unusual destination used in works of fiction. On the other hand, compared with the nineteenth century, few artists seem to have attempted to paint them and high-quality older photos prevailed over more contemporary views.

Commemorating the Poets and Answering the Critics

In 1906 the newly founded Keats–Shelley Memorial Association (KSMA) undertook to care for the graves of Keats, Shelley, Severn and Trelawny, a commitment that continues today.²² Following a hiatus in its activities during World War I, the KSMA marked the centenary of Keats's death in 1921 with events held at the House in Piazza di Spagna and at the grave. Organized by Robert Underwood Johnson, Sir Rennell Rodd (respectively, the current American and former British Ambassadors) and Harry Nelson Gay, the speakers at the House included the British author Kenneth Grahame who was then

¹⁷Olave Muriel Potter, *The Colour of Rome, Historical, Personal and Local, with illustrations by Yoshio Markino* (Toronto: Musson, 1910), fig. 11; reprod. in *Spellbound by Rome: the Anglo-American Community in Rome (1890–1914) and the Founding of the Keats–Shelley House*, exhib. cat. (Rome: Palombi, 2005), no. 64.

¹⁸Carmen Casaliggi and Paul March-Russell, *Legacies of Romanticism: Literature, Culture, Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 46 and fig. 2.4. The painting, RF155 at The Ruskin, University of Lancaster, had probably belonged to Arthur Severn.

¹⁹C.E.S. Wood, *Keats's Grave*, watercolour (1924), The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens, no. 85.44.10.

²⁰Also, photo ACA-F-028700-0000 in the Alinari Archive, Florence.

²¹Stanley-Price, 'Keats Revisited', 190, n.75; *The Graphic* 26 February 1921: 248.

²²Sir Rennell Rodd, 'The Preservation of the Graves of Keats and Shelley', *Bulletin and Review of the Keats–Shelley Memorial, Rome* 2 (1913): 68.



Figure 1. The 'Keats corner' after construction of the wall on the left, with gravestone of Arthur Severn centre foreground (photo: Marcello Piermattei, 1920s; Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome, archives).

visiting Rome.²³ The Committee of the KSMA issued a formal invitation to attend at the old Protestant Cemetery of Testaccio at 11.00 am 'on Friday the 25th of February, the centenary of the burial of Keats'.²⁴ Among the wreaths laid at the grave were one from the City of Rome and another from the Royal Society of Literature, as noted by the French writer H. Buriot Darsiles (1875–1944) who saw the grave two months later.²⁵

At a similar commemoration in July 1922 at Shelley's grave, there were present the British Ambassador, Sir Ronald Graham, the recently elected Mayor of Rome, Filippo Cremonesi, Harry Nelson Gay (KSMA), Vernon Bartlett, foreign correspondent of *The Times*, and other city officials (Figure 2).²⁶ The large wreaths of the type installed around Shelley's grave had provoked Buriot Darsiles to protest on viewing Keats's grave the previous year. In his view, such traditional wreaths were a well-intentioned but clumsy gesture that succeeded only in spoiling the grave being honoured: a few flowers – or,

²³Johnson to Harrison Morris, 1 February 1921 in Catherine Morris Wright, 'The Keats–Shelley Association: A Personal History', *Keats–Shelley Journal* 31 (1982): 46–7; Matthew Dennison, *Eternal Boy: The Life of Kenneth Grahame* (London: Head of Zeus, 2018), 235.

²⁴He was in fact buried on 26 February 1821. Printed invitation in Box 76, Keats–Shelley House, Rome, archives.

²⁵Henri Buriot-Darsiles, 'Au cimetière du Testaccio', *Nouvelle Revue d'Italie* 9 no. 5 (1921): 591–2.

²⁶Nicholas Stanley-Price, *The Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome. Its History, its People and its Survival for 300 Years* (Rome: The Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome, 2014), III. 84.

better, purchasing a few copies of the poets' works and donating them to public libraries – would be the best homage that one could pay.²⁷ No less constructive was another proposal floated at the 1922 commemoration that Via Marmorata, the road used by all visitors to the cemetery, should be re-named 'Via Shelley'.²⁸

These events, with their illustrious participants, reinforced in the public mind the aura that surrounded the poets' graves. A recurring preoccupation, however, was their proper maintenance and care. On his retirement from the diplomatic service in 1919, Rennell Rodd divided his time between Rome and London, assuring a continuity in the affairs of the British committee of the KSMA. Harry Nelson Gay, living in Rome, did the same for the American committee, assuming principal responsibility for the KSMA's work in Italy. The KSMA 'graves fund' could maintain the graves so long as it was regularly replenished. In 1925 Gay reported that the Memorial was in a very strong financial position, and attendance was breaking all records.²⁹ Less than two years later the devaluation of the lira had left the 'graves fund' short of money, with a consequent deterioration in their appearance: 'if the fund were larger, we could subsidize some of the cemetery gardeners to remove the dead flowers. These complaints crop up every two or three years, after the visits of self-advertisers who are lucky enough to call at the cemetery on a hot day when flowers that have been laid by loving hands on the graves have withered . . .'.³⁰ The finances of the Association were again 'in a first-rate condition' when Gay died in Monaco in August 1932.³¹ He was buried there too even though his friends, Johnson in particular, felt that he deserved to be buried near Keats and Shelley in Rome and the cemetery's Committee of Ambassadors had already given its consent.³² A sprig of laurel from Keats's grave was felt to be appropriate for the burials abroad of Gay and, in 1948, of Harrison Morris of the KSMA in the United States.³³

Gay's successor in Rome for the KSMA American committee was Hale Benton, business manager at the American Academy in Rome. Appropriately enough, Benton's father Dwight (1834–1903), a successful landscape painter who lived for many years in Rome, was known for his paintings of the tombs of Keats and Shelley.³⁴ On the outbreak of war Hale Benton stayed in Rome as the resident custodian of the Academy; but the Keats–Shelley House in common with most foreign cultural institutions had closed.³⁵ With the Allies' arrival in June 1944, soldiers of all ranks sought out the Keats–Shelley House and the poets' graves, a striking confirmation of the 'sacred' nature popularly attributed to them. Armand Guibert, a French poet who was teaching in Rome that year, was surprised to see at

²⁷Darsiles, 'Au cimetière', 592, n.1.

²⁸Livingstone Phillips, 'Il centenario della morte di Shelley', letter to the Editor, *La Tribuna* 8 July 1922, clipping in P.B. Shelley burial file 1823/3, Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome, archives.

²⁹Gay to Morris, 27 January 1925 in Wright, 'Personal History', (1982) 48.

³⁰Gay to Morris, 16 November 1926 in Wright, 'Personal History', (1982) 51.

³¹Wright, 'Personal History', (1982) 55.

³²Johnson to Morris, 14 August 1932 in Wright, 'Personal History', (1982) 54–5; Johnson, letter to the editor, *New York Times* 17 August 1932, in Box 76, Keats–Shelley House, Rome, archives; Ruth Milles burial file 1941/4-2345, Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome, archives.

³³Wright, 'Personal History', (1982) 57 and (1983) 39.

³⁴Lilian Whiting, *Italy, the Magic Land* (Boston: Little, Brown and co., 1907), 222. The present whereabouts of these paintings are unknown.

³⁵Neville Rogers, 'The Memorial 1940–44, 1944–46' in *Keats, Shelley & Rome*, 67–71; Vera Cacciatore, 'The House in War-Time', in *Keats and Italy: A History of the Keats–Shelley House in Rome* (Rome: Il Labirinto, 2005), 68–71; G. Goldstein (Lieutenant), 'Keats's Grave', *TIME magazine*, 7 August 1944.



Figure 2. Wreaths in honour of Shelley, 1922 (photo: Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome, archives).

Keats's grave four or five dozen '*fidèles*', most of them in khaki uniforms, despite there being a large military parade in progress in the city centre.³⁶ The annual

³⁶Guibert, 'Sur la tombe de Keats', *Poésie* 45, 24 (avril-mai 1945).

wreath-laying at the grave that had to cease in 1940 was then renewed in February 1945.³⁷

In the aftermath of the war, the Keats–Shelley House recovered under the direction of Vera Cacciatori, appealing for funds through its committees. British subscribers paid for the repair of the graves.³⁸ The cemetery as a whole, though, was in deep financial trouble. The consequent delay in repairing war damage led to charges of ‘neglect’ that were reminiscent of those levelled in the nineteenth century. In both cases, critics tended to concentrate on the two graves of most concern to them without considering their broader context – the difficult position of an active cemetery under private management and with a limited budget. The decade 1945–55 saw a series of appeals for funds which were eventually successful despite having to rebut ill-informed criticism in the press.

The grave of Keats suffered only superficial scars during bombing in WWII. Three bombs fell on the Old Cemetery in March 1944, collateral effects of the Allies’ targeting of the marshalling yards of the Ostiense station.³⁹ The administrative committee of ambassadors immediately appealed for help in December 1945, since the cemetery lacked money to repair the many damaged monuments near Keats’s grave. Before the war it had invested its funds in German bonds but the German bank (Nast-Kolb) had failed. For some time the cemetery director, Marcello Piermattei, was paying the gardeners’ wages from his own pocket. A second appeal for the Testaccio Cemetery launched in 1949 by the British Ambassador, Sir Victor Mallet, was widely publicized in the British press.⁴⁰ It also reached a large American audience after a correspondent visited the cemetery and interviewed the director.⁴¹ By June 1950 the Poetry Society of America had raised 1400 USD to fund the rehabilitation of the bomb-damaged area near Keats’s grave. One of its members, Prince Alexis Droutzkoy, then met the expense of infilling the moat between the wall and the graves’ fence.⁴² On a visit in summer 1953, Droutzkoy and the Society’s president found the grave and its environs in good condition.

The press, however, was determined to find fault. The president of the Keats–Shelley Association, Ruth Draper, responded to ‘misleading claims’ made by ‘leading newspapers’ (she must have had the *New York Times* article in mind) over the condition of the graves. It was the overall state of the cemetery that was worrying, she clarified; she had found the graves in excellent order.⁴³ Italian journalists had taken a different tack: why, they asked, were the Americans sending donations for the care of two tombs (those of Keats and Shelley) that had not been damaged?⁴⁴ The *Momento Sera* newspaper resumed its criticism four years later when its columnist ‘Mercurio’ (pen-name of Vincenzo Talarico) wrote that Keats’s tomb had been in a deplorable state of abandonment for

³⁷ *Manchester Guardian* 24 February 1945; ‘Salute to Keats’, *The Stars and Stripes*, 21 February 1945, clippings in Box 76, Keats–Shelley House, Rome, archives.

³⁸ Wright, ‘Personal History’, (1983) 41.

³⁹ Stanley-Price, *Non-Catholic Cemetery*, 113–4; *Newsletter, Friends* 28 (Autumn 2014): 1 and 29 (Winter 2014): 3–4.

⁴⁰ *The Times* 2 July 1949; *Daily Herald*, 14 July 1949; and *Daily Telegraph* 18 July 1949.

⁴¹ Camille M. Cianfarra, ‘Historic cemetery in Rome seeks aid. Tombs of Keats and Shelley lie in neglected grounds – war damage is unrepaired’, *New York Times* 1 March 1950.

⁴² Gustav Davidson in Mabel A.E. Steele, ‘Keats’s Grave’, *The Keats–Shelley Journal* 5 (Winter, 1956): 9. An inscription at the site records his gift.

⁴³ ‘Notes news’, *Keats–Shelley Journal* 1 (1952): 118, confirmed on another visit in 1953, *Keats–Shelley Journal* 2 (1953): 115–6.

⁴⁴ Sandro Svalduz, ‘I dollari superflui,’ (Superfluous dollars) *Momento Sera* 15 June 1950; Gino Visenti, ‘Inutili dollari per un “dolce luogo”, (Useless dollars for a ‘sweet place’) *Corriere della sera* July 16, 1950.

some time and that some Roman scholars (unnamed) wished to see at least a perpetual flame burning at the tomb (a common Catholic custom).⁴⁵ Piermattei immediately alerted Vera Cacciatore to the embarrassment that would result if this newspaper column were read abroad by benefactors such as the KSMA and the Poetry Society of America. He was too late. Another widely-read columnist in England ('Peterborough', the pen-name then of W.F. Deedes) had picked up Mercutio's criticism and repeated it, contrasting the supposedly poor state of their graves with the honour paid the poets in the memorial recently unveiled in Westminster Abbey.⁴⁶ The following year it was the Keats–Shelley Association's turn to reject renewed criticism in the United States of the 'neglect' of the graves, criticism again ignoring their context within a historic and active cemetery.⁴⁷

These exchanges were in part a result of Piermattei, desperate to resolve the postwar crisis at a cemetery to which he was devoted, having invoked the names of Keats and Shelley to publicize its dire financial situation. The simple tomb of Shelley provided little scope for criticism; so journalists focused on Keats's grave, situated in an unused cemetery in which, until repairs were made, there were war-damaged monuments. Their concern – and the Roman scholars' wish to instal a perpetual flame – did at least reflect a continuing reverence among Italians for the poets, as did a celebration held in 1954 at Shelley's tomb by the Associazione Nazionale del Libero Pensiero 'Giordano Bruno', an association of freethinkers.

The fractious critiques of the 1950s gave way to a quieter period leading up to the 150th anniversary of Keats's death in 1971. The KSMA played its usual role in organizing commemoration events. The guests of honour for readings at the House and for a ceremony at the grave were the British Poet Laureate, Cecil Day-Lewis (1904–1972) and his second wife, the actress Jill Balcon.⁴⁸ For a recital at the House on this occasion, the poet paid tribute with a new sonnet 'Keats, 1821–1971'. But while at the grave he must have recalled his previous inspection with Balcon that gave rise to *An Italian visit*.⁴⁹ There he had written sardonically of the setting of 'Keats' shabby mound' and Shelley's grave:

Here is one corner of a foreign field
That is for ever garden suburb. See
in their detached and smug-lawned residences
Behind a gauze of dusty shrubs, the English
Indulge their life-long taste for privacy.

Their visit in 1952 to 'Keats' shabby mound' occurred when both poets' graves were coming in for criticism. But, as with the recurrent complaints of 'neglect' in the nineteenth century, the critics ignored context, in this case the postwar financial crisis of the cemetery. As Ruth Draper had pointed out, it was its overall condition that was at risk; the two poets' graves were well looked after. The critics saw what they wished to see. The foreign authors of guidebooks to Rome in the 1950s made no such criticisms. One of

⁴⁵'Gazzettino Romano' column in *Momento Sera* 12 September 1954.

⁴⁶Peterborough, 'Keats in two Capitals,' *Daily Telegraph* 13 September 1954, and response from Chair of the KSMA in England, the Marchioness of Crewe, *Daily Telegraph* 20 September 1954.

⁴⁷Steele, 'Keats's Grave'; Stanley-Price, 'Keats Revisited', 175–6, 184.

⁴⁸Louis B. Fleming, *Los Angeles Times* 24 February 1971; Costanzo Costantini, *Il Messaggero* 26 February 1971.

⁴⁹Day-Lewis, 'An Italian visit (1953)', in *The Complete Poems of C. Day-Lewis* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 443–4, 735.

them who had travelled widely observed that ‘it must be the most beautiful cemetery in the world, and certainly the best tended’.⁵⁰

The Wish ‘To Be Buried near the Poets’: Percy Bysshe Shelley

The sanctity of any grave can be diminished as other burials are made in its vicinity. In this respect, the fortunes of both poets’ graves have fluctuated, in different ways, over the past 200 years. In hindsight, Trelawny’s choice of ‘the only interesting spot’ in the New Cemetery for Shelley’s ashes was a shrewd one for guaranteeing its future security. He had sought a distinguished location for them, replacing the one amid the ‘five or six common vagabonds’ whom he had unjustly denounced.⁵¹ The niche of the tower set it apart but it nevertheless came under pressure from foreigners dying in Rome or abroad who wished to be buried ‘near the poets’ – burial near Keats was not possible in the closed Old Cemetery. To what extent was the distinct status of Shelley’s grave eventually diminished by its neighbours? The cemetery custodians and the responsible foreign diplomats respected the values attributed to it. One of them, Rennell Rodd, alluded to them when discouraging Lady Shelley from installing Onslow Ford’s sculpture on the poet’s grave: it would involve ‘an alteration to the familiar aspect of a spot, *consecrated* by association and for so long an object of *pilgrimage* to lovers of the poet’s memory’ (emphasis added). The Call-Shelley agreement of 1891 formalized this claim in declaring that ‘no such alteration or addition to or interference with the said Tombs shall at anytime hereafter be made by any person or persons whatsoever’.⁵²

Other than Trelawny’s unscribed stone alongside Shelley’s, the niche inside the tower remained unchanged for twenty years. The large Bertie-Mathew monument of 1844 altered irrevocably its aura, but very few nineteenth-century visitors seem to have noticed it. Outside and to the left and right of the niche the Story family’s monuments stood closest to Shelley’s, the first one from 1853; but not until the 1960s did a monument (to Belinda Lee) obstruct the direct access path (Figures 3 and 4). The low occupancy of ground near Shelley’s grave in a cemetery repeatedly short of space reflects a longstanding desire not to encroach upon it.

Why did William Wetmore Story in 1853 choose this spot for the grave of his little boy Joseph? His admiration for Shelley’s poetry was well known but it may have been his close friend Robert Browning who was responsible.⁵³ That Story had been thinking of moving with the family to Florence argues against any motive at that time to secure a block of family concessions in the Roman cemetery. Their little boy’s grave in fact helped to keep them in Rome since they ‘hated to leave him’.⁵⁴ The exception to what became the Story family’s almost-exclusive access to this front-line zone was the burial next to Joseph Story of John Addington Symonds (1840–93), a biographer of Shelley. His

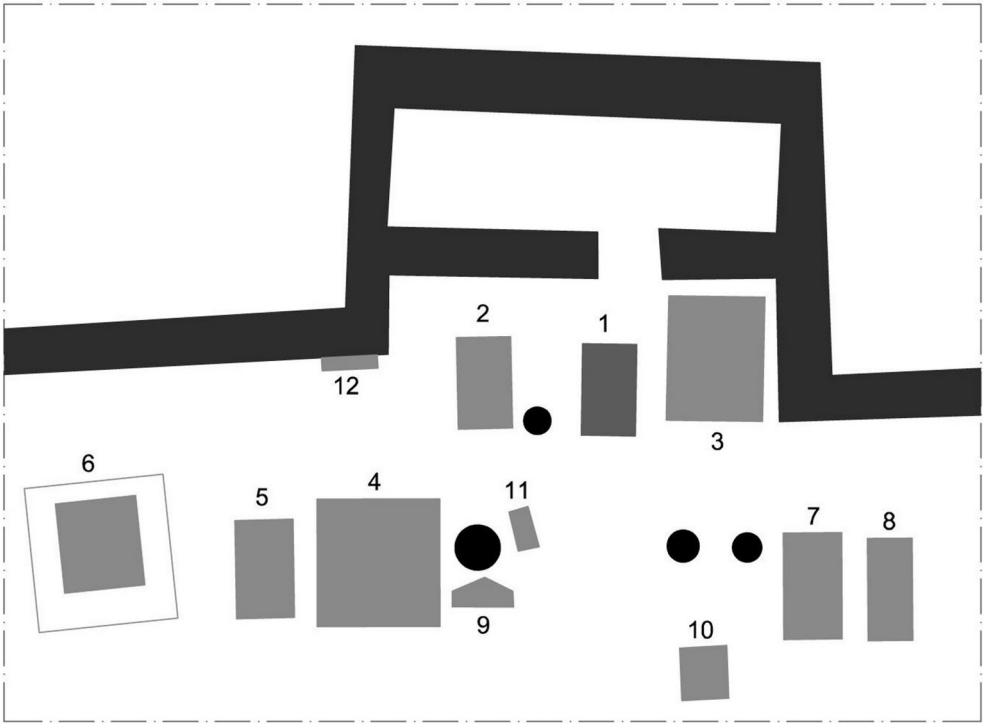
⁵⁰Morton, *A Traveller in Rome*, 245.

⁵¹Stanley-Price, ‘Shelley Revisited’, 55–7.

⁵²Rodd, ‘The preservation’, 66–7; Rodd to Harold Boulton, 8 June 1906, cited in Stephen White, ‘The Call-Shelley agreement about Shelley’s and Trelawny’s graves’, *The Keats–Shelley Review* 4 (1989): 96.

⁵³The Brownings had arrived in Rome the day before Joseph died. ‘Robert chose the place ... close to Shelley’s grave in the cemetery’, Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Arabella Moulton–Barrett, Rome [28–29 November 1853]. <https://www.browningscorrespondence.com/correspondence/3599/?rsId=51533&returnPage=1#D3292-00T00012> accessed 1 October 2020.

⁵⁴Kathleen Lawrence, ‘The significance of Florence in the life of William Wetmore Story and his family’, paper presented to ‘The Americans in Florence’s ‘English’ cemetery, IV’ conference, 2008. <http://www.florin.ms/CBVd.html> accessed 1 October 2020.



KEY

- 1. Percy Bysshe Shelley (re-buried April 1823)
- 2. Edward Trelawny (d. 13 August 1881)
- 3. Bertie Bertie-Mathew (d. 19 November 1844)
- 4. Joseph Story (d. 23 November 1853)
Maud Story (d. 4 February 1889)
- 5. John Addington Symonds (d. 19 April 1893)
- 6. Emelyn Story (d. 7 January 1894)
William Wetmore Story (d. 7 October 1895)
- 7. Mary Broadwood (d. 14 June 1920)
Elsa Pfafferott (d. 30 June 1978)
- 8. Ada Broadwood Story (d. 25 February 1932)
- 9. Herbert Norman (d. 4 April 1957)
- 10. Belinda Lee (d. 13 March 1961)
- 11. Gregory Corso (d. 17 January 2001)
- 12. Plaque to Frederic Myers (d. 1901)
- Cypress tree

Figure 3. Graves near Shelley's today.



Figure 4. Graves near Shelley's: from l to r, Symonds, Joseph Story, Norman (with lectern), Corso, Lee and Bertie–Mathew. Trelawny's grave arrowed (photo: author).

daughter Margaret with whom he was then travelling and his own biographer later implied that it was Symonds's choice to die in Rome: 'he was coming to Rome to die'.⁵⁵ One of his sonnets from ten years earlier begins:

A View of Rome with Violets in the Foreground.
A bunch of violets plucked from Shelley's grave,
Or from that lowlier resting-place where lies
The dust of Adonais 'neath blue skies,

Brown saw this as 'pre-figuring his own last resting-place'.⁵⁶ These comments were made with hindsight, however, and Symonds, still busily researching Michelangelo, was planning after the stay in Rome to visit Janet Ross in Tuscany. He had not, it seems, foreseen his burial in Rome. Even so, for a biographer, his grave 'within a pace of Trelawney's, and a hand touch of Shelley's *Cor Cordium*'⁵⁷ could not have been more appropriate.

During the 1930s a donor helped to secure the atmosphere of this area by guaranteeing that historic gravestones were not replaced or added to by new concessions.⁵⁸ The small stone memorial to the Canadian diplomat Herbert Norman assumed a higher profile when a commemorative lectern was added to it in the year 2000, but it was still discreet compared with the monument to the actress Belinda Lee erected in 1961 (Figure 4). Neither of them had specifically wished for burial near Shelley, merely 'in Rome'. Gregory Corso, an ardent admirer of Shelley's poetry, died in the USA but was granted the grave near the poets that he had once hoped for. Less distinguished applicants, such as

⁵⁵Horatio Brown, *John Addington Symonds, a Biography*, 2nd. ed. (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1903), 474; also 471, 475.

⁵⁶*Letters and Papers of John Addington Symonds*, coll. and ed. Horatio Brown (London: J. Murray, 1923), 269.

⁵⁷Brown, *John Addington Symonds*, 479.

⁵⁸Stanley-Price, 'Shelley Revisited', 62–3.

Elizabeth Woodridge Phelps cited in the epigraph to this article, had to be content with a plot some 30 m distant from the poet.

The Wish 'To Be Buried near the Poets': John Keats

Long before its demolition was proposed in the 1880s, the exceptional status of Keats's grave was recognized even by those who in all good faith wished to 'improve' it. All suggestions to amend the epitaph that many regretted or to erect a more substantial monument over the grave came to nothing. A lack of consensus coincided with general reservations based on the reverence due to it. The aura of sanctity changed (some would say it diminished) when in 1882 gravestones to Joseph and Arthur Severn were erected alongside Keats's. The current arrangement of the three gravestones, together with their epitaphs, has contributed to misreadings of Severn's relationship to Keats. The 'parents' gravestones standing side-by-side and the infant Arthur's between and behind them can give the impression that Severn was married to Keats, or at least that Keats was 'an honorary uncle' (Figure 5).⁵⁹ Today's visitors sometimes seize upon the 'death-bed companion' words in Severn's epitaph as they audibly speculate about the relationship between him and Keats. In fact, as Scott carefully noted, Arthur's remains were found as expected where his father's new grave was dug. They were moved a little to the side of it and marked with a small gravestone. The stone is visible in this location in early photographs (e.g., Figure 1).⁶⁰ In short, today's triangular representation of the 'symbolic marriage' was not devised in the 1880s. When was Arthur's gravestone moved to its present position? It was still at the foot of his father's grave in 1921.⁶¹ The first securely dated proof of its current position behind the Keats and Severn graves, but obscured by a box hedge, is Anthony Collins's photo of August 1944.⁶² Relocation of the stone to a spot half-hidden behind a hedge betrays a cemetery director's wish to 'tidy up' the area, not a conscious portrayal of a 'symbolic marriage'.⁶³

The closure of the Old Cemetery in 1822 had in principle ruled out the possibility of others being buried next to Keats. Permission for the five burials made in the 'closed' cemetery between 1822 and 1837 seem to have been secured by the Prussian legate, C.C.J. Bunsen.⁶⁴ Only Arthur Severn's qualifies as having been made deliberately 'near the poet'. The request of Severn's surviving sons to transfer their father's body to Keats's side stated that Severn had always hoped for this outcome, and the general public expected it.⁶⁵ It was on that basis that permission was given. No subsequent burials have been made near the Keats-Severn plot. The six new burial plots for 'distinguished personalities' (Mead, Stahl, Milles, Munthe, Osborne and Bauer) and various memorials that were authorized in the twentieth century were made at a distance from it and had no direct

⁵⁹ *Joseph Severn. Letters and Memories*, ed. Grant F. Scott (Aldershot: Ashgate 2005), 2; Sue Brown, *Joseph Severn, a Life: the Rewards of Friendship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 345.

⁶⁰ Also, Stanley-Price, 'Keats Revisited', fig. 7, a photo datable to the 1880s.

⁶¹ Darsiles, 'Au cimetière', 591 n.1 who also transcribes the epitaph.

⁶² *Keats and Italy*, fig. 14.

⁶³ The relocation of the stone therefore preceded the filling of the moat in 1951 and the removal, probably in the early 1960s, of the decorative iron fence.

⁶⁴ Stanley-Price, 'Keats Revisited', 187; idem, 'The Old Cemetery for foreigners in Rome, with a new inventory of its burials', *Opuscula* 13 (2020), 201.

⁶⁵ Brown, *Joseph Severn*, 341.



Figure 5. The three Keats and Severn gravestones today (photo: author).

connection with Keats.⁶⁶ A proposal made in 1969 to add a further fourteen new grave plots along the walls near Keats's grave came to nothing.

The grave of Keats has therefore retained the status attributed to it – despite the addition of the two Severn graves. Its immediate environment has changed as trees and bushes have grown and been removed, and as protective measures such as box hedges, railings and kerbstones have come and gone (Figure 6).⁶⁷ But the gravestone has survived, withstanding earlier initiatives to revise the epitaph's wording, to instal a bust of the poet or, after Severn's death, to erect a commemorative medallion.⁶⁸ It also survived the whim of Lord Houghton, the poet's biographer, of having his own grave next to Keats.⁶⁹ The failure of all such proposals reveals a general reluctance to diminish in any way the atmosphere of the spot.

⁶⁶Sebastian P.Q. Rahtz, J. Dunk and J. Giorgi, 'The Monuments of the Parte Antica', in *The Protestant Cemetery in Rome: the 'parte antica'*, ed. Antonio Menniti Ippolito and Paolo Vian (Rome: Unione Internazionale degli Istituti di Archeologia, Storia e Storia dell' Arte in Roma, 1989), 208, Table 9 and Figure 2(c), plus Heinrich Bauer (buried in 1993).

⁶⁷For changes around Keats's grave, compare Figures 1, 6 and 7 here with Stanley-Price, 'Keats Revisited', Figures 3, 5 and 7 and *ibid*, *The Graves in Rome of John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley* (Rome: The Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome, 2020), ills. 12, 14 and 17.

⁶⁸Vincent Eyre proposed a black and white medallion surmounted by a cross showing the dying Keats in Severn's arms, to be erected between the two graves. Brown, *Joseph Severn*, 342.

⁶⁹'Keats would have lain very pleasantly between his friend and his biographer'; Brown, *Joseph Severn*, 345, citing an undated letter from Houghton to Walter Severn.



Figure 6. Setting of Keats's grave in 1966; compare [Figure 5](#) (photo: Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome, archives).

Conclusion

The graves of John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley were soon considered sacrosanct sites, by the pilgrims who sought them out and hence by the cemetery authorities. Located in a functioning cemetery with finite space, the tomb of Shelley was potentially under greater pressure than that of Keats, situated in a mainly inactive burial-ground. Trelawny's choice of the plot inside the tower-niche was instrumental in limiting encroachments on it. The cemetery's policy of controlling new concessions near his grave, already evident in the nineteenth century, was maintained in the twentieth thanks in part to a benefactor's gift that made it economically viable.

The limited extent of burial activity in the Old Cemetery since Keats's death has impinged only a little on the reverence felt for his grave. In its first sixty years as a freestanding monument, the grave survived proposals for amending its epitaph and for adding a more substantial memorial. Its aura took on a different form with the erection of the two Severn gravestones, a form that has influenced interpretations of Keats's final months. None of the burials in the twentieth century resulted from a specific wish to be buried near the poet. In ways not dissimilar to Shelley's grave, its sheltered position following construction of the neighbouring walls has favoured its preservation and continuing sacrosanct status.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Amanda Thursfield (Director, Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome), and to Giuseppe Albano (Curator) and Luca Caddia (Assistant Curator) at the Keats Shelley House in Rome for permission to quote from archives in their charge and to reproduce photographs.

Notes on contributor

Nicholas Stanley-Price is a member of the Advisory Committee for the Non-Catholic Cemetery for Foreigners in Rome and has written extensively about its history and management. His *The Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome. Its history, its people and its survival for 300 years* (2014) is published also in Italian and German, as is the catalogue of the exhibition that he curated in 2016 (*At the foot of the Pyramid: 300 years of the cemetery for foreigners in Rome*, with Mary K. McGuigan and John F. McGuigan Jr).